

December 2015

Determining the Difficult: Sheri-Marie Harrison's *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects*

Kelly Baker Josephs

York College, CUNY, kjosephs@york.cuny.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium>

Recommended Citation

Josephs, Kelly Baker (2015) "Determining the Difficult: Sheri-Marie Harrison's *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects*," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol12/iss2/7>

This Dialogue is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

Determining the Difficult: Sheri-Marie Harrison's *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects*

Kelly Baker Josephs, York College/ City University of New York

Sheri-Marie Harrison, *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects: Negotiating Sovereignty in Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Criticism*. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014), 192pp.

During my first year of graduate school, I discovered *The Routledge Reader on Caribbean Literature*. The anthology contained abridged versions of Sylvia Wynter's "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman'" and Carolyn Cooper's "Writing Oral History: Sistren Theatre Collective's *Lionheart Gal*." Published within a year of each other, these two essays presented distinct linguistic performances by Jamaican cultural critics. Wynter used never-ending sentences that wound around themselves, requiring the reader to move slowly and carefully, retreading and rethreading her verbal contortionism; while Cooper brazenly employed patois as the language of criticism, segregated from but still existing alongside a demonstration of her dexterity with academic jargon. I remember wanting to write something about these female scholars' manipulation of the critical essay genre, about how the form of their essays was integral to their argument, but given my nascent graduate study career, I didn't yet have the language to articulate a substantial connection between the essays.

Reading Sheri-Marie Harrison's monograph, *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects*, brought back the generative excitement and confusion of "discovering" Wynter and Cooper. Not merely because in any complete study of contemporary Jamaican literature these two writers necessarily make an appearance but because Harrison both delves into the question of Caribbean literary criticism and provides language for thinking through "difficult" texts. Having recently reviewed Samantha Pinto's *Difficult Diasporas*, I am increasingly intrigued by the implications of this term, *difficult*. What does it mean to call a text *difficult*? Specifically, what space does this create in our Caribbean literary canon for these texts deemed *difficult* and what does it mean for other texts not categorized as difficult but also considered (potentially) canonical? More broadly, what does this mean for Caribbean literature in larger categories/canons such as feminist, postcolonial, or world Anglophone?

Though the term *difficult* may seem at first read limiting, in her study, Harrison demonstrates how it may open spaces of discussion for these texts previously

ignored allows for additional perspective. She notes early on that there is precedent for her use of the term in connection with the texts she reads in her study; she cites Alison Donnell's *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature* as particularly influential in the selection of texts for *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects*. However, Harrison's aim is not literary "recovery" or canonical "expansion." Rather, she wishes to look at subjects that remain marginal even as the texts they inhabit may already be lauded as seminal. For Harrison, *difficult* is not a free-floating, permanent identifier; it is situated and contextualized by "the politics which at each historical juncture render [subjects] difficult" (15). Thus the subjects discussed may not always be (or have been) considered difficult. That is, they could be rendered not difficult at a different historical juncture. This mutability lies at the heart of Harrison's approach. She enters her argument via a focus on literary criticism and its relationship to the shift she contends is taking place (or rather, has taken place) in twenty-first century literature. Harrison opens with an anecdote about her "personal experience of reading *John Crow's Devil* (2005) by Marlon James for the first time" (1). Her utter frustration with the novel may be familiar to many of us, not just in response to James' book, but in reading several other twenty-first century Caribbean literary texts. For Harrison, *John Crow's Devil* "is among a new cohort of novels written in the twenty-first century that challenge the ways we read West Indian literature and reflect how the demands criticism must meet have changed" (25-26).

This challenge to Caribbean criticism is what most intrigues me most about Harrison's project. In addition to the James novel mentioned above, the primary texts in *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects* include Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron, The Harder They Come* (both film and novel), *Lionheart Gal* by the Sistren Collective, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*. As promised in the title, all the texts feature Jamaica in some way (though *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an odd fit, as it is neither written by a Jamaican nor primarily set in Jamaica). Borrowing from David Scott's articulation of the "new demand on postcolonial criticism" created by a shifting "problem space," Harrison frames her book around the question: "If our critical impulse isn't to recoup or include, but rather to understand how agents interrelate, what new frameworks become available for understanding the oppositional politics of contemporary West Indian realities?" (18). With three of the four chapters in *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects* pairing texts to develop her argument, Harrison seeks to model these "new frameworks" in her own critical practice.

In the introduction, Harrison methodically lays out the motivations for her study in "five sections that cumulatively make the case for shifts in our literary practice" (2). Most helpful for reading the following chapters is the first of these

sections, which briefly presents an overview of Caribbean literature since the mid-twentieth century, organizing the literary production and the political demands of/on literary criticism into four waves (modeled on Donette Francis's theorizing of four waves in Caribbean Women's writing). This chronology is especially key in grounding Harrison's argument for a new criticism to meet the "oppositional politics" of what she identifies as fourth-wave writing.

Chapter 1 reads Sylvia Wynter's only novel, *The Hills of Hebron*. It is possible that literary critics now read this novel less for itself than for the fact that it is the only published attempt by one of our foremost critics to work out some of her theories through fiction (which Harrison notes may also have been the reason it was ignored for so long). Wynter's work, including her novel, has been receiving some well overdue attention of late, in both Caribbean literary studies and in Caribbean studies more broadly.¹ In part, this has to do with the way in which Wynter (and her contributions to Caribbean cultural criticism) is now firmly established in a Caribbean intellectual tradition. Thus, her novel is currently read from a different problem space in criticism, one in which she has a significantly more prominent position as a theorist than a novelist or playwright. Her novel, then, cannot but be read via her theoretical writings. Harrison argues that despite the relatively recent "recovery" of *The Hills of Hebron* in Caribbean literary studies, critics have avoided the character Isaac because he does not fit well with either black nationalist or feminist perspectives. According to Harrison, ignoring Isaac results in a missed opportunity to read his pivotal role in various relationships in the novel, particularly the redeemed and redeeming relationship between Obadiah and Rose, because it is via such triangulated relationships that the complexities of sovereignty are realized.

In Chapter 2, Harrison again focuses on a less popular character – Elsa in both the film and print versions of *The Harder They Come* – arguing that this focus "enables a consideration both of how discourses of resistance in the first wave of writing inscribed a gendered hierarchy and of how gender and sexual politics are themselves linked to nationalist politics" (75). Working through David Scott's theorization of the ruud bwai figure, Harrison shifts the critical focus from Ivan to Elsa to discuss the significance of the latter's "bad gyal self-fashioning and actualization" (76). To more fully build this conceptual space for working-class Jamaican female agency, Harrison briefly engages two additional texts: *Lionheart*

¹ See for example, the reissue of Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron* by Ian Randle in 2010; *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle* (2006) by Katherine McKittrick; *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* edited by Katherine McKittrick (2014); and *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014) by Alexander G. Weheliye.

Gal and the film *Dancehall Queen*. Her comparative readings of these latter narratives prove more supportive of her argument than the lengthy leaning on Scott earlier in the chapter, primarily because the gendered distinctions of class and national politics are more readily discussed with these two texts that center Jamaican women.

Lionheart Gal returns in Chapter 3, which also features a sustained reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Continuing her attention to Jamaican subjects that have proved difficult for literary critics to grasp, Harrison begins Chapter 3 with an argument for the significance of the two testimonies by non-black women in *Lionheart Gal*. Her use of Honor Ford-Smith's 1997 essay about the problems the Sistren Theater Collective faced internally and externally is a highlight of this portion of the chapter. Ford-Smith recognizes the absence of the type of interclass conversation that Harrison contends is also lacking in West Indian literary criticism more broadly and articulates the lack of a language for addressing the problems Sistren faced in their classed and raced structure (ironically, she is quite eloquent in her discussion of this lack of language). Before close reading the two testimonies in *Lionheart Gal*, however, Harrison detours via Rhys's novel. As mentioned above, *Wide Sargasso Sea* seems the odd one out in this study of "Jamaican subjects" because Rhys herself is Dominican (or British, depending on whom you ask) and only a small portion of the novel is set in Jamaica. The key scene that Harrison reads – that between Antoinette and Tia as young girls in part one of the novel – does take place in Jamaica, but to hinge a reading on only that relationship once again centers the black Jamaican subject in a manner that Harrison cogently argues against throughout the chapter. The impetus to place *Wide Sargasso Sea* in this lineage of Jamaican literature is understandable, however, as Rhys's novel is seductively useful for the argument Harrison makes here (in connection with *Lionheart Gal*) for thinking inter-race/interclass relationships rather than individual subjectivities when "addressing the problems of gender, race, class, language, and power" that can derail female coalition. But, in effect, the Rhys portion of this chapter works more to undermine than support Harrison's choice to focus only on Jamaican subjects.

In the final chapter we arrive at two novels from the fourth wave of Caribbean writers that Harrison identifies as her motivation for this project. Although, as Harrison notes, "[r]epresentations of nonheteronormativity or queerness have appeared with varying degrees of prominence in West Indian literature for almost a century," *John Crow's Devil* and *The Pagoda* each serve as examples of how fourth wave Caribbean writers plumb the complexities of these representations. Harrison deftly weaves together work on queer theory from both within and outside Caribbean studies to create a framework for reading these novels. In doing

so, she illustrates how these novels suggest that “the establishment of sovereignty is no longer as simple – indeed, never was as simple – as thinking about who is included or excluded and then trying to incorporate everyone into some equitable sense of an already existing community” (179). This chapter perhaps best achieves Harrison’s earlier stated objective of not so much recovering for the canon, but asking how and why some subjects prove difficult for Caribbean literary critics.

In *Jamaica’s Difficult Subjects*, Harrison successfully identifies a problem area in contemporary Caribbean literary criticism and, in her categorization of writing into four chronological waves, she suggests the roots of this problem lie in shifting foci for both critics and writers. More so than her modeling of a new critical practice in her reading of the individual texts, I found Harrison’s theorizing about the state of Caribbean literary studies thought-provoking and enlightening. As critics, we have been so involved in making space for ourselves and the texts we read – related to those literary “recovery” and canonical “expansion” objectives – that we have rarely taken the time to assess our critical tradition. Such work does exist, notably in portions of Alison Donnell’s monograph, *Twentieth-century Caribbean literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (2006), and parts of *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (2011), the anthology Donnell co-edited with Michael Bucknor; but we still have a ways to go in positioning Caribbean literary studies itself an object of study.

Indirectly, *Jamaica’s Difficult Subjects* raises the question: Has Caribbean literary criticism grown enough to merit such close study? Citing a comment by Sylvia Wynter in her well-known interview with David Scott, Harrison assures us that “Today there is little over half a century’s worth of Caribbean literary and cultural theory that I would argue now itself constitutes an ‘orthodox body of knowledge’ of its own, one which contributes significantly to what it means at the current (postcolonial) historical juncture to be human and West Indian” (17). Thus, the field is now established enough for us to begin examining what Caribbean literary criticism – alongside rather than in lieu of close reading of fiction and poetry – reveals about ourselves. Admittedly, criticism can prove a *difficult* subject because the lure of the primary text is quite strong; Harrison herself frequently offers a reading of the subjects rather than their difficulty for critics. But her modelling of how we might shift our focus in these readings productively gesture toward the ways in which we, as twenty-first century Caribbean literary scholars, might deliberately and mindfully turn a critical lens on our practices and patterns of criticism.

Bibliography

- Bucknor, Michael, and Alison Donnell, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*. London: Routledge, 2014.
- Cooper, Carolyn. "Writing Oral History: Sistren Theatre Collective's *Lionheart Gal*." *The Routledge Reader on Caribbean Literature*. Donnell and Welsh 483-86.
- Donnell, Alison. *Twentieth-century Caribbean literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Donnell, Alison, and Sarah Lawson Welsh, eds. *The Routledge Reader on Caribbean Literature*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Francis, Donette. *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- , ed. *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. Durham: Duke UP, 2014.
- Weheliye, Alexander. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke UP, 2014.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground.'" Donnell and Welsh 476-82.
- . *The Hills of Hebron*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2010.