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Caribbean-Latin@s: A Crisscrossing and Dislocating Narrative

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Vanessa Pérez Rosario, editor, *Hispanic Caribbean Literature of Migration. Narratives of Displacement*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 247 pp.

Vanessa Pérez Rosario's volume stands at the crossroads of two fields that remain insufficiently connected: Caribbean studies and Latin@ studies. "Caribbean Latino Literature," as Pérez Rosario asserts in her introduction, evokes not only the distinctive experience of U.S. Latinos of Caribbean descent as opposed to those of Central or South American origins, but also the commonalities resulting from a Pan-Caribbean experience, which have outlasted the political twists separating the national histories of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic from each other, and from the rest of the Antilles. Pérez Rosario's focus on "displacement" echoes the interest in movement itself among U.S.-Latino scholars in the last decade, fueled by the growing incidence of circular migration and also standing as a metaphor for the continuous negotiation of multiple identities that replaced assimilation as a paradigm of incorporation to the United States. However, the constant "vaivén" (Duany 2002) marking the experience of Latin@s today has been from its very birth the defining experience of the Caribbean territory and its population. Nurtured by "a culture of multiple and heterogeneous migration" (Martínez-San Miguel 2003), Caribbean writers have endlessly elaborated on the wandering of their people, representing and even celebrating the rootlessness of Caribbean subjects and the "impurity" of their origins. The insights resulting from this long engagement with the experience of being without—and beyond—belonging or "arriving," are precisely what Caribbean narratives bring to the understanding of the Latin@s experience.

The articles included in *Hispanic Caribbean Literature of Migration* elaborate deftly on the ruptures and continuities marking Hispanic Caribbean migration, and illustrate the variety of strategies that both writers and critics have developed in response to the material and symbolic challenges of living on the move. By tracing the presence of Hispanic Caribbean writers in the United States back to the nineteenth century, Pérez Rosario's book suggests the connections between the Caribbean culture of migration and the more fluid sense of subjectivity palpable in contemporary Latino writers and their criticism, frequently credited to the multicultural *ethos* of the "post-minorities age" in the United States. The scope of the collection commendably illustrates another expression of the tensions inherent to both Caribbean and Latin@ studies, the mutual intervention of national narratives and the transnational discourses that

emerge from the new alliances shaping the everyday lives and the self-definition of migrant subjects and their writing.

The four parts of the collection address different yet concomitant types of displacement. In the first two parts, “Migrating Narratives” and “Dislocated Narratives,” the critics study the contributions to both their homeland national discourses and the unity of “Latinos” from Latin Americans moving to the States at the end of the nineteenth century and up to the 1950s (the Cuban José Martí, the Dominican Juan Bosch, and the Puerto Rican Julia de Burgos), and from canonical U.S.-Latino contemporary writers (the Dominican-Americans Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz, and the Cuban-American Achy Obejas). The chapters included in the third and fourth parts explore internal displacements that defy both the seemingly static national accounts of identity and their transnational counterparts: “gender crossings” and “racial migrations.”

Pérez Rosario’s introduction to the intellectual genealogy of Caribbean Latinos sets the spotlight on the continuities marking the history of Latin Americans writing from the United States. The editor underlines the role of intellectuals publishing in U.S.-based newspapers and presses in contesting imperial oppression in their home countries, across Latin America, and among migrants to the U.S. Next to emblematic figures such as José Martí, Pérez Rosario places less-known authors from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, emphasizing the contributions of female figures: the Puerto Rican union leader and feminist writer Luisa Capetillo; the unknown sister of the Dominican brothers Pedro and Max Henríquez Ureña, Salomé Camila (1894-1973), also an essayist and a professor; and the Cuban fiction writer Virginia de Peña de Bordas (1904–1948). Laura Lomas follows this line of inquiry in the first chapter of the book by documenting the resistance from within of Latin Americans in New York writing in Spanish. Lomas locates Martí’s work during his fourteen years living in the United States as the keystone to a tradition of “infiltrative translation” based on the “aesthetic and dialogic engagement with a minor language (Spanish)” (24). Setting the tone for more contemporary assertions of the cultural legacy of the “gente latina”—as he calls it—Martí refuses the assimilation to a single language and culture. The untranslatability of the physical and metaphysical meanings of “la voz” and “la lengua” synthesizes the excess of Spanish capitalized by Martí’s followers—Bernardo Vega, Francisco Pachín Marín and Julio Ramos Otero. Although these writers stress their belonging to a literary subculture, they also dialogue with the host culture, in which they strive to intervene through the incorporation of the orality and materiality of the migrants’ experience in their work. As Lomas convincingly argues, this aesthetic revolt works both as an “anti-colonial vengeance,” and as the authors’ claim of an alternative space of expression for the silenced diasporic people.

The editor's own chapter explores the trajectory of Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos, attesting to her commitment to both Puerto Rico's political independence and the empowerment of Puerto Ricans in New York. Pérez Rosario situates de Burgos as a bridge between the island's writers of the 1930s and the Nuyorican writers of the 1970s. In spite of sharing the concern of her cohorts with Puerto Rican sovereignty, De Burgos rejected their class-and race-blind cult of the "jíbaro" as an emblem of national identity and their compliance with traditional gender roles. Moreover, migrating to New York exposed her to the realities of Puerto Ricans and other Latin Americans in the States. De Burgos actively addressed their queries in her contributions to the newsletter *Pueblos Hispanos*, including essays promoting solidarity and awareness of a common history of oppression, which she believed were essential to counteract the cultural alienation of Latinos in the U.S. The critic interprets de Burgos' shift to English in her latest poems as the result of her anticipation of the rupture with Spanish among new generations of Puerto Ricans in New York, and contends that such nod towards her succeeding readers lies in tension with the despair emphasized in the myths surrounding her life and death. This gesture is further assessed through the exploration of the poet's legacy to contemporary Puerto Rican women writers both on the island and its diaspora. Pérez Rosario ends by exploring de Burgos' imprint on Rosario Ferré, Esmeralda Santiago, Sandra María Estévez and Mariposa, inspired by the poet's dignity, her concern with social justice, and her commitment to professional writing as a path to the freedom that she found in poetry.

Moving half a century ahead, in the second part of the book Vivian Halloran takes an unusual approach to the work of the Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez, whose critics have mostly focused on her account of political exodus and the predicaments of living between languages and cultures. Halloran concentrates on the effects of class belongings on both the lastingness of the attachment of Alvarez's protagonists to the island and their formation of new bonds in the United States. The critic unveils the paradox posed by the coexistence of the author's diasporic perspective with the more individualistic "exiled consciousness" of the majority of her characters, who do not get involved in Dominican or Latino communities in the United States. Halloran compares the meanings of traveling back to the island for migrants of the older generations, informed by nostalgia for a nation defined by their class belonging, and for the daughters, the post-Trujillo generation, who feel estranged by the sense of superiority implicit in the Dominicanness practiced by both the elders and their family in the island. Arguing for the alliance to family as the key factor in the self-definition of these characters, Halloran illustrates how family is both the unit they attempt to reproduce and expand through their new alliances in the U.S.—with neighbors or spouses, and also the link to the stories of other migrant

characters—such as the maids—that move to assist the protagonists in remaining connected to the Dominican Republic and keeping their social status in their new country. Alvarez’s and Halloran’s insistence on the prevalence of kinship as the core factor in these characters’ ability to negotiate displacement echoes the realities of many Dominican migrants across classes, whose major strategy for legal immigration to the United States has been family reunification.

Deepening the contrast of Alvarez’s protagonists with most of the Dominican diaspora, Ylce Irizarry’s chapter on Junot Díaz illustrates how the pressures of acculturation and nostalgia are both heightened by poverty and marginalization. Irizarry explores the effects of circular migration on the aesthetics of Caribbean Latinos, identifying a shift from the trope of social mobility as a way of “arrival” towards a “narrative of fracture,” fueled by the desire and actual possibility of returning “home.” “Unending physical migration” leaves characters in a perpetual becoming, in a space beyond both exile and arrival that Díaz utilizes to expose dominant narratives about immigration, cultural integration and belonging in both the Caribbean and the United States. Díaz’s protagonists are “drawn” because of their illusory expectations of escaping poverty in the United States, but also because of the hierarchies rooted in the island’s own gender and racial dynamics, which subjugate their identities and jeopardize their capacity to contest their marginalization in the United States. Therefore, Irizarry argues, the recognition of internalized machismo and racism becomes the liberating path for the few characters that manage to reshape both their consciousness and their idea of home. Juanita Heredia’s article on Díaz’s re-articulation of race—in the fourth part of the book—complements Irizarry’s by further stressing the possibilities of the development of a Pan-African consciousness of Dominicans in the United States. Heredia illustrates how in returning to the island, Díaz’s work, just as his characters, “strikes back” (Flores 2007) with a new perspective that both stresses the contributions of the African diaspora to Dominican culture and challenges its deeply entrenched racial schizophrenia.

Among the interventions that Irizarry attributes to Junot Díaz’s “new ethics of Spanish Caribbean migration,” the critic emphasizes the rupture with the representation of the States as a “highly desirable place for migration” and the interrogation of the “American dream” from a gendered and racialized perspective (94). The “newness” attributed to this ethic is, however, debatable. A Pan-Caribbean reading of Díaz may illuminate the reminiscences of his alternative portrayal of Caribbean migration to Luis Rafael Sánchez’s “airbus” or trace the antecedents of his critique of racism to the works of Piri Thomas (*Down these Mean Streets* 1967) and the claims against the traps of the American Dream to the Nuyorican poets. Not to mention the “Macondian” overtones of the *fukú* allegedly

pushing the tragic end of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and that of several generations of his family.

Queerness is the central “displacement” explored in the third part of the book. Ana Belén Martín Sevillano studies the role of literature in making visible homosexual subjectivity in Cuba. The critic sketches a genealogy of the contemporary social discussion of homosexuality on the island, going back to writers who suffered the internal exile of having to conceal their identity (Lezama Lima), endured their peers’ rejection of their sexual orientation (Virgilio Piñera), or left the island and went into exile (Severo Sarduy, Reinaldo Arenas). The critic adeptly illustrates the imprint of each of these writers’ ethics and poetics on contemporary authors writing openly about homosexuality in Cuba such as Pedro de Jesús López and Ena Lucía Portela. Martín Sevillano’s demonstration of the reincorporation of the exiled literary corpus to the national canon suggests the need for further reflection on the overlapping of national and transnational narratives exposed by the practices of diasporic writers and their readers.

Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s piece focuses on how Caribbean fiction responds to the construction of the region as the “Most Homophobic Place on Earth.” Tinsley cleverly connects the press and legal discourse around two asylum cases involving queer subjects who alleged political persecution in their home countries, Cuba and Jamaica, to the revival of the historical cross-dressing pirate Anne Bonny by contemporary writers Zoé Valdés and John Farley. Bonny’s Caribbean, as portrayed by Valdés and Farley, becomes a space where the pirate engages in a variety of explorations of sexuality that allow her to rework gender and racial identities. By adding a Cuban chapter to Bonny’s historical itinerary, Valdés entertains a utopian egalitarian society where race and gender differences are dissolved honoring an Afro-Cuban epistemology. Meanwhile, Farley recreates the tensions around Bonny’s criminal prosecution in Jamaica, stressing not only the racist but also the homophobic condition of the colonial regime, eager to “excise queerness to stabilize heteropatriarchal imperial dominations” (166). Both Valdés’ and Farley’s portrayal of the Caribbean as a heaven for queer explorations results, as Tinsley herself admits, in an ambivalent picture. Despite their attempt to frustrate the self-asserting “fantasies of the global Northern”—aimed to claim for itself the “Most LGBTQ Friendly Place in Earth” award—their narratives feed wider global fantasies on the Caribbean and the unraveling sexuality of its people.

From a similar comparative and trans-linguistic approach, in the final section of the book Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel analyzes the scenes of “metropolitan discovery” of being “black” narrated by the Martinique-born philosopher Frantz Fanon and the Nuyorican novelist Piri Thomas. Taking further the most common readings of these authors’ racialization in France and the United States, Martínez-San Miguel emphasizes the duality that renders them

both citizens and marginal subjects in light of their condition as “intracolonial” migrants—coming from a non-sovereign territory associated to their new country. By recounting their reflections on their own status as “intimate strangers,” Fanon and Thomas subvert the equivalence of legal citizenship to subjectivity, making visible how actual integration to a nation—both in the islands and in the metropolitan spaces—remains tied to fixed notions of racial and ethnic identity. As Martínez-San Miguel brilliantly concludes, “their texts can be read as narratives about the limits of an incomplete postcoloniality that interrupts the master narrative of a global, post-minoritarian and post-racial society, interrogating a metropolitan fantasy that crumbles beneath the undeniable embodiment of otherness depicted by these Antillean narrators” (199).

Martínez-San Miguel’s words are emblematic of the fertility of the conflicts embodied by both the studied authors and the critical readings collected in this book. Among the volume’s accomplishments it is worth stressing further how its historical scope manages to expand the life of “Latinidad” in the United States, and how the articles illuminate the contributions of literature to both sustaining national alliances beyond displacements and incorporating the transnational experience of diasporic subjects to national narratives. It is however worth mentioning the absence of the noninsular Hispanic Caribbean Latinos, a trend of the literary criticism about the Caribbean in the United States that also invites further reflection. Our field may learn some lessons on the commonalities of the Greater Caribbean, including its continental and isthmic sections, from disciplines such as History as well as from the writers, musicians and other actors of popular culture who continue to document and expand these connections.

As Pérez Rosario pinpoints by borrowing Edward Said’s characterization of exiled consciousness as “contrapuntal,” juggling—and bridging—simultaneous realities is not only the burden but also the art of migrant subjects. Delving into the tensions at the core of both Caribbeanness and Latinidad, *Hispanic Caribbean Literature of Migration* fruitfully underlines their meeting points while still honoring dissonance. This is the gift of Caribbean “contrapunto,” translating the violence behind the never-ending displacement and transmuting its concomitant clashes into creative force and endless movement.

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