LIMBO, LITERATURE AND ALL THAT JAZZ: CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

Presentation for the Teaching Caribbean Diversity Initiative

By Heather Russell, Ph.D.
CARIBBEAN LITERATURE: The Archipelago
The Caribbean Archipelago

- Derek Walcott’s (St. Lucia) description for Caribbean geospatiality in which individual island-states are reconceived as a group – and term is metonymic for Caribbean peoples who are themselves navigating national/regional configurations and identities.

- For Antonio Benitez-Rojo (Cuba) the Caribbean is conceived as a “repeating island” – a meta-archipelago which has no center/periphery and hence reconfigures conventional conceptualization of colonial paradigms: center-margin, core-periphery, metropole-outpost. The Caribbean is thus polyrhythmic – or like “a ray of light with a prism.”
“THE SEA IS HISTORY”

Nobel Laureate (1992)
DEREK WALTICK
(St. Lucia)

From: THE STAR-APPLE KINGDOM (1979)

THE SEA IS HISTORY

“Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, in that grey vault. The sea. The sea has locked them up. The sea is History.”
THE LIMBO GATEWAY

- THE MIDDLE PASSAGE IS THE SITE WHERE NEW WORLD IDENTITIES ARE BORN: FORMER AFRICAN IDENTITIES BECOME DISASSEMBLED AND NEW WORLD AFRICAN IDENTITIES GET REASSEMBLED.
- WILSON HARRIS CALLS THIS THE LIMBO GATEWAY.
- CARIBBEAN LITERATURE IS THUS PRODUCED BY THE LIMBO IMAGINATION.
Countries by Language

- **Anglophone**: Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, St. Kitts and Nevis, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, St. Lucia, Grenada, Belize, Anguilla, Cayman, British Virgin Islands, U.S. Virgin Islands, Guyana, The Bahamas

- **Hispanophone**: Cuba, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico

- **Francophone**: Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana
Colonial History: Contact Zones:

Mary Louise Pratt’s definition of contact zones: “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power such as colonialism, slavery and their aftermaths.”

Colonial Values

- English/Spanish/French
- Protestant/Catholic
- Reality v. Fantasy/Myth
- Fact v. Fiction
- History: linear, causal
- Literature: 7 elements: Meaning, Form, Narration, Tone, Character, Use of Language, Structure

Caribbean Values

- Nation Languages: creoles
- Vodoun, Santeria, Myalism/Obeah
- Magical Realism
- Storytelling
- Historiography: Great Time
- Literatures
LITERARY COMPARISON of ELEMENTS

Colonial Literature
- Meaning: fixed, clear, identifiable
- Form: genre identifiable
- Narrative Voice: principle narrating subject (epic)
- Character: archetypal, fixed
- Use of Language: consistent
- Structure: parallelism, linearity, etc.

Caribbean literatures
- Meaning: flexible, indeterminate
- Form: mixed genres
- Narrative Voice: multiple narrating subjects (jazz)
- Character: unstable, fluid
- Use of Language: mixed
- Structure: hybrid, asymmetrical, disruption of linearity
CARIBBEAN “QUILTED DISCOURSE”:
Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido’s concept of the “quilted structure” of Caribbean women’s writing as a reconfiguration of fragmentation (modernist angst) and linearity (phallocentricity).

MICHELLE CLIFF
(Jamaica)

FROM: “A Journey into Speech”
“We are a fragmented people. My experience as a writer coming from a culture of colonialism, a culture of black people riven from each other, my struggle to get wholeness from fragmentation while working within fragmentation, producing work which may find its strength in its depiction of fragmentation, through form as well as content.”
The truck struggled on up through the Cockpits. Its side was painted with the motto…NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN. How these words had come to him [the owner] they did not know…NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN. No Voice to God. A waste to try…the motto suited them…Depression. Downpressions. Oppression. Recession. Intercession. Commission. Omission. Missionaries…all the same t’ing mi dear.
We is in Babylon. Yes mi dear Bredda. NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN. Maybe the line it is engaged and God can’t boddor wid de likes of we. God nuh mus’ be Hinglish...But how could Massa God be their enemy? The seawater which hid their history was not at fault. The moon which lit the sea...the blue mountains. The black widow. The brown widow. The thick stands of Black Mangrove.

None of these were the enemy.

They were tired of praying for those that persecuted them. (17)

*NO TELEPHONE repetition like a jazz riff; Blended prose-poetic form; Platform English/Jamaican blended
JAZZ AND THE WEST INDIAN NOVEL

Kamau Brathwaite (Barbados)

FROM: “Jazz and the West Indian Novel

“The jazz novel in the normal course of things, will hardly be an epic. Dealing with a specific, clearly-defined, folk-type community, it will try to express the essence of this community through its form.”
“It is not language, but people who make revolutions.

I think however, that language does really have a role to play here, certainly in the Caribbean. But it is an English [French/Spanish] that is not the standard, imported, educated English, ... It is what I call, as I say, nation language. I use the term in contrast to dialect. ... Dialect is thought of as “bad” English. Dialect is “inferior” English. Dialect is the language when you want to make fun of someone. Caricature speaks in dialect...
...Nation Language on the other hand, is the submerged area of that dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English, but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues” (266).
A “JAZZ” NOVEL

Earl Lovelace
(Trinidad)

FROM: Salt (1997)

“‘Watch the landscape of this island…and you know they coulda never hold people here surrendered to unfreedom.’ The sky, the sea, every green leaf and tangle of vines sing freedom.”
“Four hundred years it take them to find out that you can’t keep people in captivity. Four hundred years! And it didn’t happen just so. People had to revolt. People had to poison people. Port-of-Spain had to burn down. A hurricane had to hit the island. Haiti had to defeat Napoleon. People had to run away up the mountains. People had to fight. And then they agree, yes. We can’t hold people in captivity here.

But now they had another problem: it was not how to keep people in captivity. It was how to set people at liberty” (7).

*History v. Historiography; Excerpt provides BOTH alternative/resistant history to conventional narrative of Slavery and Emancipation and alternative/resistant historiography: through its form.*
MIGRATION STORIES

Home

- Developing nations: post-independence, post-industrial, globalization
- Political upheavals: political instability, economic instability
- Colonialism’s legacies: class/color stratification
- Cultural homogeneity: religious syncretism, creoles/nation languages, music, dance, food, customs, sports, national pride

Adopted Country

- Developed nation: free market, economic alienation for many immigrants: credit system, legal status issues, underemployment
- Political stability: high numbers of non-citizenship, limited representation
- Racism, ethnocentrism
- Cultural diversity: cultural enclaves, nostalgia, displacement, cultural memory, border crossings
Migration Story 1:

Angie Cruz  
(Dominican Republic)

FROM:  Let it Rain Coffee (2005)

“The more she bought, the more insatiable she became. -God, can you help me out here? she asked, hoping he’d help her win the lottery she played on Sundays. Within days of her prayers, she found a letter in the mail. Esperanza Colon: You have been preapproved. After working as a home health attendant for five years, Esperanza
was eligible for a credit card, her very own five-hundred-dollar credit card...Days later another latter arrived. You have been preapproved for up to 1,000 dollars. Preapproved. Esperanza mouthed the words in front of the mirror...it felt good to get some approval for once...When the bills came, Esperanza put them in a drawer. She planned to pay them when she had extra money...And when she reached the credit card’s limit...she filed the credit card itself in the drawer, expecting to pay it all one day, little by little” (33-4).
Migration Story 2:

Edwidge Danticat
Haiti

FROM: Breath, Eyes, Memory (1994)

“My mother came forward...She tried to lift my body into the front seat but she stumbled under my weight...She did not look like the picture Tantie Atie had on her night table...she had dark circles under her eyes...her fingers were scarred and sunburned. It was a though she had never stopped working in the cane fields after all...
“...Am I the mother you imagined?”...as a child, the mother I imagined for myself was like Erzulie, the lavish Virgin Mother. She was the healer of all women and the desire of all men...” In the mirror...new eyes seemed to be looking back at me...a new face altogether. Someone who had aged in one day, as though she had been through a time machine, rather than an airplane. Welcome to New York, this face seemed to be saying: Accept your new life. I greeted the challenged as one greets a new day. As my mother’s daughter and Tantie Atie’s child” (59;49)
For our exile will never end until we free
of those who teach only the whip and rope.
And black man still can’t live in him own
black land without facing the drawn bayonets
of those who exact lives as payment, who
disown
with a kiss our martyrs, our prophets.
so we end in the hot and homeless cities
of the South to be free of them.
The last dry months, like bitter molasses.
Tired of dreams, New Jerusalems.
South Florida Caribbean Poets cont...
Donna Aza Weir-Soley
(Jamaica)
First Rain (2006)

From :“Migratory Patterns”
It’s natural for birds to fly south in winter but we fly north in every season leaving warmth in search of dreams that sometimes leave us cold.
Like birds of a feather we fly in formation, vulnerable at hunting season yet do not stop or break our ranks when one of us falls victim to the hunters’ need for feathery trophies…
…It is natural for birds to fly south in winter, But Caribbean people fly north in every season Leaving the warmth of familiarity and family In search of dreams that sometimes leave us freezing in the snow.
“History [with a capital H] ends where the histories of those peoples once reputed to be without history come together.”

“I am in a car with friends, and one of them suddenly says: “What a great country.” Meaning that we do not cease to discover it within ourselves.”

“The struggle against a single History for the cross-fertilization of histories means repossessing both a true sense of one’s time and identity: proposing in a new unprecedented way a revaluation of power”