Andrea L.T. Peterson interviews

ELLEN HART

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RIGOBERTO GONZÁLEZ

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LAMBDA LIBROS

New Books by

THOMAS GLAVE, JOHN MORGAN WILSON,
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GERRI HILL, GREG HERREN, STEPHANIE GRANT,
CATHERINE FRIEND, SCOTT POMFRET,
DAVID FRANCIS, and MANY MORE
OUR CARIBBEAN
A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles
Edited and with an Introduction by
Thomas Glave
Duke University Press / $24.95
Reviewed Ricardo L. Ortiz

The award-winning Jamaican-American essayist and fiction writer Thomas Glave’s most recent project is Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles. Glave brings together thirty-seven pieces, including one he penned himself, representing an impressive array of voices and experiences, and extending across an equally impressive geographical (and hence trans-cultural, and trans-national) terrain.

The writing stretches from the pre-Castro Cuba of Virgilio Piñera’s short story “The Face,” to very contemporary dispatches from the sexual, cultural, and political struggles for queer visibility and queer rights ongoing in such disparate sites as the Trinidadian, Jamaican and Surinamese homelands and their (primarily North American) diasporas.

For this reason alone, the collection makes a welcome contribution to the emerging bodies of work that remaps the contours of what we take to be the unfolding and proliferating processes of transnational and diasporic becoming, queer and otherwise, across places and moments that no longer conform so readily to the traditional categories (“Caribbean,” certainly, but also “African,” and “Latin,” and “American”).

Clearly, Glave has cast Our Caribbean, in the first-person possessive plural, to echo the famous 1890’s invocation by Cuban national hero José Martí of an “Our América,” an alternative, Latin America that Martí hoped to counter to the rising Anglo superpower to the north. Glave perhaps skewers his axis a bit, resisting the north-south binary by demonstrating that these geographic designations mean, and guarantee, far less in terms of conceptual clarity than they used to: the “writing” might all be said to hail “from the Antilles” in spirit, but much of it was written either in the US or in Canada, in already well-established Caribbean-diasporic enclaves like Haitian New York (in Assotto Saint’s piece), Cuban Chicago (in Achy Obejas’) and Barbadian Toronto (in Rinaldo Walcott’s). Glave’s anthropological practice might thus be said to “queer” the “archipelago” in part by resisting its strictly geographical function, and offering readers instead a textual, cultural and historical formation that reveals a solidly anchored grounding in the common legacies of survival of communities having lived past the systematic and murdering violence(s) of slavery, racism, colonialism, class and gender exploitation, exile, and homophobia.

In approaching so crowded a gathering, a reader might be a little hard-pressed to identify pieces most suited to his or her liking, and on one level Glave’s decision to arrange the pieces alphabetically by the last names of the writers might be taken as a positive invitation on his part to allow the reader to select freely which pieces to read and why: One might therefore decide to concentrate, for example, on just the poetry (by Raine Arroyo, Jesús Barquet, and Faizal Deen), or just the pieces of Trinidadian narrative (by Dionne Brand, Erica Doyle, and Shani Mootoo), or just the pieces performing as forthright political manifestoes (by Ochy Curiel, Helen Klonaris, and Lawson Williams), and these would be but a fraction of the possible other strategies for planning one’s readerly itinerary across so expansive and richly representative a volume. On the other hand, one can also begin by sampling the pieces by the better-known of the writers Glave has selected, if only to remind oneself of the substantial pleasures to be found in reading literary artists like Reinaldo Arenas, Michelle Cliff, Audre Lorde and Glave himself, and from there begin to explore lesser-known, rising talents like Marilyn Bobes, Pedro de Jesús and Leonardo Padura Fuentez (all currently writing in Castro’s Cuba), as well as Glave’s Jamaican sister-writer, Patricia Powell.

Thomas Glave certainly must be credited with a profound generosity of vision in having brought together and given voice to all of the writers and all of the histories, individual and collective, included in this volume. As much as the collection is a gift to those writers who otherwise would not attract this kind of exposure, the collection is equally a gift to that audience, who might now for the first time come to know the Caribbean, and Caribbean America, for the first time, and through a queer lens. While some of the pieces seem to replicate each other at times, and while some important national traditions (Haitian, Dominican, Puerto Rican) seem less-than-proportionately represented. Our Caribbean’s strengths certainly exceed its minor weaknesses, and it certainly deserves to inspire future writers and artists to build on and expand from its important and vital foundational work.

New From Lambda Award Winner Thomas Glave

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