



Vol. 4, No. 1, Fall 2006, 183-190

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review / Reseña

Silvio Torres-Saillant, *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean*
(Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave, 2005)

Caliban Revisited: Caribbean Scholars and Postcolonial Studies

Angel A. Rivera

Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Certainly, *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* will awaken furious and intense debates about the nature and future of Caribbean studies, about the heritage of postcolonial discourses and how they have shaped our understanding of the region. Torres-Saillant's criticism and interpretive effort is inserted in a debate that has been taking place among many Caribbean and Latin American scholars for a long time now.

Such debate has been centered on notions of identity, the viability of nationalist discourses, the production of authentic local

knowledge, and the tensions around the center and the periphery or the imperial centers vs. the colonies. However, Torres-Saillant's book contends, as its author explains, that as a region the Caribbean is a differentiated "civilizational" zone produced by the encounter of multiple cultures and by contending political and economic interests. This region, according to him, has produced an autonomous and vast body of knowledge about itself. Nevertheless, "Caribbean intellectual history is not implicitly expressed in Western chronicles of the movement of ideas even when Western thinkers may have influenced particular cadres of Caribbean intellectuals" (5). Torres-Saillant claims that Western discourses about the Caribbean, represented in postcolonial studies, have been inimical to the Caribbean people.

Torres-Saillant argues that in recent years the postcolonial studies approach, based upon European and North American academic thinkers, has been adopted by many Caribbean scholars. Such approach, according to him, has removed the Caribbean from its centrality as the producer of autonomous and independent knowledge. His main theoretical stance is that the Caribbean has already produced the body of knowledge that should allow native intellectuals to produce a counterinterpretation of its regional cultural and artistic phenomena. However, due to modern and fashionable trends in the North American and European academia, recent Caribbeanists have favored the knowledge produced by those two imperial regions, namely postcolonial studies, therefore ignoring the former history of autonomous and rebellious knowledge. This attitude springs from the concept of *ethnic reader*: "an emancipated intellect who recognizes her colonial upbringing, the preponderance of Western notions in his own formation, but who does not buy into the epistemological monopoly of Eurocentric formulations" (86). In other words, his intellectual history resonates within a classical political approach to Caribbean societies and cultures assumed by

native intellectuals during the first half of the twentieth century, which is based on an impetus of self-affirmation.

Related to this impulse, another important intellectual component of the book is his interest in interpreting the Caribbean region as pivotal in the development of world politics and economics: “The Caribbean, as these details show, matters enormously to an understanding of the modern world, the global outcome of the colonial transaction” (18).

In order to put forth his argument, Torres-Saillant organizes the book, firstly by discussing the geography of the Caribbean, then by analyzing the colonial enterprise and how it reshaped world politics and economics. Interestingly, this first introductory section ends with an argument on the importance of music, establishing a parallel between the rise and marketing of Caribbean music and a diminishing or lack of intellectual self-confidence. His interest in demystifying popular notions of an inherent liberating power of music is particularly appealing. In fact, music is considered in his introduction as not exempt from being squashed by multinational corporations, which have the power “to flatten subversive meaning and to depoliticize forms of communication” (39). Consistent with this argument, he complains that the Caribbean is not any longer at the forefront of the world’s intellectual community.

As an example of the above-mentioned trend, those West Indian intellectuals who have achieved global recognition have accomplished this by reneging or downplaying “their cultural specificity as speakers grounded in the Caribbean experience” (42). Using a moral and political tone, he indicates that he favors writers such as Samuel Selvon who said that the greater responsibility of the West Indian writer is to make “his country and his people known accurately to the rest of the world” (42). Again, this is pitted against what Torres-Saillant considers the angst characteristic of postmodern thought: “The postcolonial project, whose champions

owe their authority to their dexterous handling of the teachings of Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Kristeva, Bourdieu, Lyotard, and the like, reaffirms the epistemological centrality of Western critical theory” (44). Knowledges produced by postcolonialists repackage or “resignify paradigms that the Caribbean had long developed” (44). Torres-Saillant considers this to be an “epistemological self-annihilation” (53). He urges intellectuals to consider always the terrain of the social vs. the professionalization of literary discourse.

Using this approach as a platform, he continues with a very clever and consistent analysis of cultural and literary phenomena through the Caribbean, ranging from migration and intellectual awakening, to the centrality of Haiti and the Black experience of the Caribbean, to a very good analysis of the myth of Caliban. In this analysis he insists that Caliban, although problematic due its legacy, is still very much a “signifier of the tensions existing at the core of the human experience of the Caribbean” (200). This chapter, entitled “Caliban’s Dilemma: A Disabling Memory and Possible Hope”, delves into the Haitian experience, the betrayals, and hopes of the revolutionary process represented by Caliban. He makes use of the opportunity to accuse Caribbean leadership (and many intellectuals as well) of moral ambivalence, as represented in the negative traits of the Dominican hero, Enriquillo (who, as a native, in the end betrays the uprising against the Spanish conquerors by catering to their demands) [223].

The final statements of *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* are focused on the experience of the diaspora. From that experience, Torres-Saillant concludes, Caliban will be reformed, or there will be effectuated in him a political rebirth, since the diasporic experience also has the potential to encourage regional solidarity. Through this optimistic vision the author argues that diaspora forces the traveler to “revise the ideologies and cultural myths that have fostered intra-Caribbean divisions and ensured the impunity of failed

leaders” (234). Again he argues “against the writings produced under the aegis of postcolonial studies” since they “have seldom shed meaningful new light on historical, cultural, or political dynamics of the regions” (238). Basically, he warns Caribbean scholars about the lures of fame and accommodation within the established intellectual world represented by the North American and European academia. For that reason diaspora, and its experience of strangeness, can question the leadership of Caliban. The political experiences gained in diaspora may give the advantage to criticism and skepticism about Caliban and his betrayals, but it can also introduce new demands for leadership and responsibility. Torres-Saillant concludes these arguments with an ethical and political statement about the need to reeducate Caliban, to make him vow that he will seek to repair the damage caused by his duplicity of disloyalty. Along the same lines, he urges Caribbean intellectuals to “restore cultural self-confidence and historical possibility” (239)

Apart from the long list of authors discussed (implicitly offered to readers as an anthology of Caribbean writers), one of the book’s prominent features is what I considered to be a stance of *resistance reading* of recent cultural and intellectual phenomena. This is what he described as the “ethnic reader.” Torres-Saillant deals with the issue of being defiant thanks to his personal experiences, as exposed in the chapter entitled “Colonial Migration and Theoric Awakening”. For example, in spite of his father’s personal defects he indicates that his “father’s nonchalance toward figures with power or fame already instilled in me [him] a sense of emotional wakefulness and psychological alertness in dealing with big names” (71). Evidently, the father figure becomes crucial in his learning process and in his attitude of resistance to the lures of fame and power.

This resistance is expressed in his concerns about the present “effort to affirm the intellectual legacies of non-white ethnic

minorities” (93) since “the advent of U.S. and British universities of influential trends in the organization of literary and cultural knowledge that favor a movement away from the ethnic, the national, the local, stressing rather the cross-cultural, the transnational, the global” (93). Evidently his stance, at this point, has a clear leaning to a revalorization of identity as politics, the nation and its nationalisms, as means of resistance. However, the issues of nationalism and its problems, as well as recent theories on identity politics, are not something fully discussed or explored in this book. Nevertheless, the topic and theories of nationalism have been deeply and extensively debated elsewhere.

With respect to the cultural and literary characteristics of the Caribbean, *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* can be praised as a very well researched book. I find the author’s interest in bringing Haiti and the Dominican Republic to the center of any discussion about the Caribbean particularly appealing. In the same fashion, his interest in including countries such as Belize, Costa Rica, and Surinam is of equal importance. In this sense, his book is an endeavor that is particularly difficult, because of the enormous complexity of the Caribbean as a cultural region, and the immense wealth of writers and intellectuals that the region—including the countries aligned in its periphery—has produced.

In his book, Torres-Saillant brings to the fore many important female writers, however, one of the main flaws of this essay is the lack of analysis of feminist and queer studies discourses and how they relate to his theory of intellectual dependency on European or North American intellectual trends or his theory on “ethnic reading.” It is my impression that in following his line of thinking (and here I am venturing a bit) the results may not be necessarily favorable to feminism and queer studies. Nevertheless, feminism and queer studies have been deeply critical of paternalism, patriarchy, nationalism, hard definitions of identity, and the erasure of the

existence of alternative ways of interpreting culture. Both feminism and queer studies have been important contributors to a sound intellectual history of the Caribbean.

In spite of recognizing the ethnic, racial, and cultural complexities of the Caribbean, because of his political arguments, the author seems to polarize and simplify that complexity he correctly indicates. Torres-Saillant reverts to an “us vs. them” approach, to the West vs. everyone else, to the imperial vs. the colonized, to the victim vs. the victimizer scheme. There is no question about the evils of racism and abuse on behalf of the imperial powers, but also the Caribbean has produced its share of racist discourses, including many of its native and leading intellectuals independent of any European or North American influence. Postcolonial studies cannot be monolithically accused of fostering racist attitudes or put-downs of the Caribbean, Latin America, or Asia. In the same fashion, throughout this interesting book, it is my general impression that Torres-Saillant simplifies the complex phenomena of postcolonial studies. As a matter of fact, I find that this very central aspect of his book is not fully developed or exhausted. He seems to argue that every Caribbean scholar who has ever used Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, etc. in his or her analysis of the region’s literary, social, or political endeavors, is irresponsible and has committed a crime of the intellect. This is hard to defend, although I understand other problems that may arise from utilizing uncritically contemporary, literary, and sociological developments without proper contextualization.

Although the author persuasively argues about his notion of “ethnic reading,” I have my doubts about dismissing the efforts of many Caribbean intellectuals who had made use of postcolonial discourses or postmodern analysis. For Torres-Saillant, that approach falls into some sort of intellectual banality, political betrayal, or cultural assimilation. My initial response is that the

Caribbean cultural history, up to today, is so complex and challenging that it gladly accepts multiple, and contradictory or even opaque approaches that may not necessarily and directly push agendas of liberation. Also, many doubts have been raised by numerous scholars about political actions that remain exclusively within the circles of identity and identity politics. Evidently, Torres-Saillant's proposals stand against that background. Deconstruction, Derrida, Foucault, Feminist analysis, Queer studies, Agamben, Bourdieu, Žižek, Nancy, etc, could yield interesting results that may not necessarily coincide with a knowledge that has been produced locally. In any case, the local vs. the foreign production of knowledge (represented in the postcolonial) is a division that could be debated and questioned.

As it may be expected, in the past decades, especially at the turn of the century, many young and innovative cadres of writers have appeared throughout the Caribbean. Those writers, many established in the Islands, have developed strong ties with the diaspora (either because they have traveled extensively or because they have interacted with intellectuals in the diaspora), therefore unfolding the range of possibilities of the Caribbean *Being* and complicating even more issues of identity, gender, and politics. The range of topics discussed by more recent writers, including Mayra Santos-Febres or Rita Indiana Hernández, present perspectives that challenge earlier notions of identity, nation, nationalism, and the colonial vs. the colonized.

In spite of the difference I may have with this book, I have to say that I find the warnings that *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* presents worth considering. His intention of viewing the Caribbean as a whole, of understanding the region as a complex entity that spills beyond the shores of the islands do raise an important point that remind us of the efforts of the recently departed Antonio Benítez Rojo and of the seminal scholar Edouard Glissant.