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## Women, Rereading and the Fracturing of National Canons

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## Women, Rereading and the Fracturing of National Canons

Curdella Forbes, Howard University

Patricia Joan Saunders, *Alien-Nation and Repatriation: Translating Identity in Anglophone Caribbean Literature*. (Lanham, New York, Toronto and Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2007), 180 pp.

Patricia Saunders' densely woven interrogation of the gaps in Anglophone Caribbean conceptions of the relationship among woman, nation and the writing of nation enters a particularly exciting debate field. In recent years, several scholars (Evelyn O'Callaghan, Leah Rosenberg, and Kezia Page, among others) have radically questioned the epistemic paradigms and historical trajectories through which the Caribbean literary "canon" has been formulated and read. Saunders adds her voice by taking issue not only with the ways the nationalist trajectory in anti-colonial, post-emancipation discourse ultimately "foreclosed" on women, but more particularly with two aspects of criticism: the epistemic lenses that governed (and continue to govern, by reification) the reading of the foundational literary narratives of nation, and the lenses through which we read the narratives of women writers, whose response to the discourse of nation is insufficiently theorized.

Saunders' interrogation "reads against the grain" in order to "make the absences in our current [reading] practice audible and to argue for new interpretative models" (81) in our approach both to women's texts and to the male-authored fictions of the nationalist canon. Her point of departure is that in the project of writing post-emancipation Caribbean histories, women emerged as the nation's "abject Other" (113), to the extent that they must still confront the "political and existential dilemmas [of] historical subjects caught between colonialist and nationalist discourses that negate their presence" (10). But *Alien-Nation and Repatriation* equally challenges much feminist reading of the nationalist canon. Such readings all too often take a flattened and reductive view on what Saunders' acute analyses reveal to be a complex representational field where women's bodies and subjectivities, far from being erased or absent, are deployed in the service of the nation even as their "existence" is denied.

Indeed, Saunders argues, the Caribbean nation has always, foundationally, been narrated through the bodies and sexualities of women; its earliest representations in particular reveal that women's bodies played a major role in counter-discursive strategies such as creolization, self-government, and, by a curious presence-absence, the Prospero-Caliban trope. Anglophone women's literature emerging in diasporan/transnational locations, has initiated a dialogic relation to the foundational narratives, so that women's representation of themselves is seen to perform intersections, reversals, challenges, ruptures, divergences and threats to "the discursive performances on which the idea of nation depends" (131). Caribbean women writers then continue to be preoccupied with the issues of "alienation, repatriation and the patriarchal privilege implicit in most forms of nationalism" (131).

That is to say, the central ideas, absences and erasures that emerged when we first began to speak of a Caribbean identity in the context of the region's historical experience of displacement and forced (re)location, re-emerge in new mutations with new imperatives for women's constructions of Self in new locales. Saunders deploys astute analyses of NourbeSe's *She Tries Her Tongue*; Erna Brodber's *Louisiana*, Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and Elizabeth Nunez's *Beyond the Limbo Silence*. Through these analyses, which not infrequently instantiate her strategy of "reading against the grain," Saunders demonstrates how women writers have crafted different approaches to the issue of identity by positioning themselves "in between" the spaces of slippage in Caribbean nationalist (and feminist) discourse. Their work, she reveals, does not re-make the nation-state, but rather troubles its ontological and epistemic vocabularies. Women's experience of alien-nation bars them from the privileges (pleasures) inherent in the discourse of exile; for them, then "repatriation" is not a return to the nation-state but citizenship in the house of self-representation and Being. This has major implications for their approach to genre, location and the knowledge-forms that they deploy.

Saunders' intervention highlights the power, privilege and enduring, indeed almost metaphysical presence that "nation" continues to exert over the framing of Caribbean literary discourse even within the context of twenty-first century preoccupations with global community and transatlantic, transpacific diasporas. *Alien-Nation and Repatriation* productively mines the fields of contradiction occupied by these latter concepts, which emerge under the shadow of histories, rooted in the colonial encounter, that they seek to supplant. As Saunders puts it, in the

Caribbean “Quarrel with History,” “History [to which the nation-state is inextricably linked] circulates and is represented as an authorizing discourse within Caribbean literary traditions” (7).

One of the book’s most productive aspects is its philosophical framing: Saunders examines how the foreclosure of reading around fixed epistemes operates as abrogations of acts of creative imagination, with implications for Being and non-being. Reading, in other words, is not only an epistemic positioning or a form of discourse, but an act that produces or inhibits ontological “be(com)ing” in a very material way. In this respect, Saunders’ focus on women’s *bodies* (as opposed to women’s silence and men’s voices) in much of her discussion is strategic, giving a materiality to the woman-as-subject whose existence, Saunders argues, is often obscured by the preoccupation with history as the space within which the subject is circumscribed (7).

In chapter 1, “The Trinidad Renaissance: Building a Nation, Building a Self,” Saunders revisits the *Beacon*, the emblem of the Trinidad Literary Renaissance, and the much lesser-known *Trinidad* (which died an early death after one year). Here, Saunders challenges three major planks of traditional response to the literary magazines of the 1920s-40s. First, she argues, the perspectives espoused in these journals are “distinctly different” from the Caliban-Prospero, and other canonized discourses we have associated with the flowering of West Indian literature. Second, these journals provided an important commentary on what a national literature could potentially have meant for the largely peasant population of Trinidad and Tobago—suggesting then that, contrary to the popular view, the later literature did not contribute to an elevation of the folk—and indeed Saunders goes on to argue that the replacement of the magazine short story with the novel form marked the foreclosure of open possibilities for women and the folk in the project of national representation. Thirdly, through a reading of two stories, “Triumph” by C. L. R. James and “Her Chinaman’s Way” by Alfred Mendes, Saunders demonstrates how short stories published in these journals highlighted women’s bodies and sexuality as a trope for national resistance. More specifically, in different local spaces (the barrack yard and the urban store-front), women’s sexual practices, in different ways, became the sign of the unruly colony resisting the exploitative labor practices of the colonial establishment.

Women in these stories perform agency (self-government) in a space between the establishment’s forced commoditization of their sexual bodies (the colony as economic currency), and their own redefinition of sex as a form of capital through which freedom and goods can be acquired. What Sylvia Wynter (1992) calls the cultural law of value is shifted in

such a way that the unidentified masses of the laboring poor acquire cultural value. Saunders' critique also, significantly, shifts children from their role as mouthpieces for adult themes in literary criticism. She reads children as part of a matrix of shifting colonial economic relations in the context of the urban storefront, as poor women entered into cross-race sexual liaisons with shopkeepers and other businessmen in pursuit of upward mobility. In this scenario, having children became the collateral for economic success. This compares with abortion or childlessness, the collateral for survival in the barrack yard. Saunders goes on to examine how the treatment of motherhood in Mendes' story, which came out later than James', participates in a form of ideological ambiguity where a shift towards "a more socially responsible narrative of resistance"—the colony moving towards self-government—is apparent. Ironically, this shift heralds the suppression of the woman's scope of freedom, as her sexual/ized body came to be represented as "the purview of the nation-state" (63).

This chapter is groundbreaking for its archival work on the journal *Trinidad*, which gains a fuller place in conceptions of the period alongside the *Beacon*, *Focus*, *BIM* and *Kyk-over-al*. Equally important is Saunders' contention that sexuality, far from being a marginal issue until the 2000s, was an integral part of the *aesthetics* of the literary magazines and the representation of women's role in the nation. This discussion invites comparison with pre-1950s novels such as James' *Minty Alley* and McKay's *Banana Bottom*, in which the relation between women's sexual bodies and the recalcitrant colony evinced equally radical poetics. It resonates with Rhonda Cobham's (1990) discussion of the vast differences between women's roles in Jamaican literature before and after independence; Leah Rosenberg's (2007) exposé of the fractures in the nationalist discourse during this period; and Kezia Page's (2011) reading of sexual intercourse as pivotal to forms of diaspora in Lamming's and Selvon's 1950s novels.

Chapter 2, focusing provocatively on Lamming's most and least read texts, *The Pleasures of Exile* and *Water with Berries*, situates itself in the discursive gaps left by the inordinate attention given to his Prospero-Caliban trope until the 2000s. Reading instead Lamming's crucial but remarkably unacknowledged statement (*Pleasures*) that the discourse of nation is unfinished until we hear from Sycorax and Miranda's mother, Saunders highlights Lamming's acute awareness of women's marginalization in Caribbean nationalist discourse even as she recognizes his contradictory role in that problematic. Saunders argues that "the silent spaces in *Water with Berries* are extremely important as they speak to the gender politics of Caribbean nationalisms,

and the refusal to adopt Caliban as a paradigm for colonial resistance by many Caribbean women writers” (64). She shows how rape and “things of darkness” in the novel become a way of speaking about how “both black and white men [are implicated] in staging nationalist violence upon women’s bodies (both black and white) in the name of resistance and conquest” (73).

Chapters 3 to 5 use the four women writers to demonstrate how women portray their experiences and construct their Selves against the backdrop of nationalist imaginings. Saunders draws on Belinda Edmondson’s (1999) controversial distinction between the canonical male writers’ self-representation as *exiles* in England, and female writers as *immigrants* in North America. The implicit suggestion is that as they more fully unmoor from enabling myths of privilege and power than their male antecedents, immigrant women must negotiate identity and belonging in more fluid spaces and more complex permutations between home nation (which is already an exilic space), and diasporic dis/location (which may also become home or change the epistemic and ontological bases of what “home” may mean).

Saunders places NourbeSe’s image-shattering, genre-bending work alongside the women in the *Beacon* and *Trinidad* stories, who “exhibit a wayward willfulness that tramples every social institution of Victorian colonial society in the interest of women’s self-preservation” (92-3). Her superb reading of how NourbeSe *torments* the body of words on the page to trouble our certainties about genre, left-right reading formats, the logic of language, how we produce meaning, illuminates the radical theoretical space that NourbeSe opens in-between the already unconventional conventions of Caribbean literary aesthetics. These formal disruptions speak as much to the tortured experience of being black and female in the context of colony, nation and migration, as to the creative work of accepting and reshaping this entire, conflictual heritage into ontological houses of Being. The close relationship between NourbeSe’s formal poetics and her sense of women’s “real” experience in their bodies, elucidates fresh possibilities for representing and emplacing women in the body of the Caribbean across borders, national and otherwise.

Saunders goes on to show how NourbeSe’s concept of the space/place between, becomes a fruitful epistemic position from which to read the other three texts. The book’s best contribution to the well-established discussion of Brodber as a writer who is more interested in re-gathering peoples and cultures across the African diaspora than in re-inscribing nationalisms, is the grounded research it brings to bear on *Louisiana*. Brodber’s main character Louisiana parallels African American writer Zora Neale Hurston: both were ethnographers, both went to

Barnard College, Hurston did research in the Caribbean, including Jamaica, under the same 1930s Roosevelt initiative as the fictional character. Add to all this the historical connection between New Orleans and the Caribbean, and Brodber's own similarity to Hurston as a novelist-sociologist-ethnographer, and we see how both writers produce narratives that go "beyond the limited scope of defining 'Self' in relation to the State" (114). As Saunders puts it, they position themselves in the "spaces in-between home and diaspora" (114) and favor "new performances of black, female subjectivity that transgress the boundaries of the nation-state" (114). Beyond the cultural and spiritual relationships that Hurston's, Brodber's and Louisiana's journeys initiate (or instantiate) across national divides, Saunders invites us to consider Brodber's protagonist as an answer to the sexualized female body in unequal nationalist representations. Louisiana, the "childless" seer "sired" by women, both fictional (Mammy and Lowly) and real (Brodber and Hurston), replaces the (disregarded yet required) reproductive labor of her body with the spiritual and narrative labors by which she reconnects African diasporan women to the representation of their own houses of Being.

Examining how the ideological scaffolding of race fractures imaginations of "national difference" in the United States, chapter 5 places Marshall's and Nunez's novels against the backdrop of the tardy government response to the disaster of Hurricane Katrina and the narratives of de-terrorialization and alien-nation that Katrina produced for the United States' predominantly black, poor victims. The experience of Katrina's victims, among whom women often featured as the ones bearing the brunt of the disaster, parallels the fictional experience of Marshall's and Nunez's immigrants who find "multiple histories (writ small) within the larger historical narratives of nation states" (140). Marshall's text complicates Duboisian double consciousness in light of the national in-betweenity of the female offspring of first generation Bajan migrants to the United States; Nunez's produces "mistranslations" through which we see "the intersecting interests in white American revisionist narratives of independence" (146), and the class snobbery by which West Indians divide women's interests. In both texts, women's bodies and sexuality are signified upon as threats to "the foundation of the entire structure of national identity" (136) which requires rebuilding "from the foundation up" (136). This was the least satisfying chapter in terms of the claim for fresh interpretative models/epistemes of reading. NourbeSe's and Brodber's bold formal and epistemological innovations allow Saunders to show these two writers reshaping the space/place of *genre* away from the teleologies aligned with the

nation-state, more easily than apparently Nunez and Marshall's work does. In this light, a fuller theorization of Marshall and Nunez's texts would have been helpful.

In its interrogations of literary history, *Alien-Nation and Repatriation* productively highlights the virtues of reading (from) the margins. Especially important are its re-readings of the early literary magazines and the retrieval of *Trinidad* in particular; its keen insights into the role of sexual violence in Lamming's poetics as well as Lamming's own deliberate troubling of his Prospero-Caliban trope; and its elucidation of NourbeSe's too little noticed contribution to theories of Caribbean writing. Saunders makes a solid contribution to Caribbean discourses on women, sexuality, identity, nation and location.

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