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The Ethical Imperative of Caribbean Diasporic Writers in *Market Aesthetics*

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Elena Machado Sáez, *Market Aesthetics: The Purchase of the Past in Caribbean Diasporic Fiction*. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 249 pp.

Over the last decades, Caribbean diasporic authors increasingly have been incorporated in a variety of literary canons and some of them have reached bestseller lists in the global reading market. Partially the result of the institutionalization of multiculturalism, various questions emerge from this market trend. Who is the intended audience of Caribbean diasporic writing? How does market success or scholarly criticism shape the ethical and creative impulses of these writers? Elena Machado Sáez's *Market Aesthetics: The Purchase of the Past in Caribbean Diasporic Fiction* poses and answers these questions and others by exploring the ethical imperative of Caribbean diasporic writers of historical fiction.

Market Aesthetics gives new insights to how Caribbean diasporic writers seek to communicate with readers who consume their historical fiction. Machado Sáez and Raphael Dalleo's *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of post-Sixties Literature* (2007) examined the metaphor of consumption as a mode of reading that highlights a problematic and uneven multiculturalist process in which the Latino/a subjects are most often not the consumers, but the consumed. *Market Aesthetics* extends the consumption metaphor by presenting an ethical imperative that is actually shared between writer and reader. Thus, the term "market aesthetics" refers to "the ways in which style and content of historical fiction articulate a conflict between the pedagogical ethical imperative [of the author] and the market lens of the reader" (1). Machado Sáez's study covers the works of contemporary authors who altogether form a broad pan-ethnic Caribbean scope: Julia Alvarez, Robert Antonio, Dionne Brand, Marlon James, Andrea Levy, Michelle Cliff, Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz, Marlon James, Andrea Levy, Ana Menéndez, and Monique Roffey.

What links these writers, according to Machado Sáez, is an apprehension of being or becoming agents of commodification of Caribbean culture and history. Their popularity and exoticization can emerge in different market niches, such as academia or the larger entertainment industry. By taking into account the discomforts they face when marketed as the authentic English-language cultural agents of their respective islands, Machado Sáez locates their vantage perspective: a double inheritance of Caribbean and diasporic contexts from which they can view the multiple layers of Caribbean history. In the end, "the writers claim a

certain cultural authority in order to narrate these histories, yet they fear that exoticizing lenses will transform their authority into stereotype” (22). Regardless of the niche they belong to (or are placed in), Machado Sáez sees these authors as self-conscious “teacherly writers” who refuse to solely present historical facts and rather offer a narrative of the past that the readers can access but cannot just passively consume. The ethical imperative of narrating the past is shifted to the readers as they are incited to become “researcher readers.” With this, Machado Sáez does not mean an academic reader—the scholarly critic or student reader in a literature classroom—but rather any reader that chooses the challenge of engaging with the product: understanding its origins and the mode in which its components are arranged. This is a reader who lets go of his/her colonizing gaze and dares to face the uncomfortable histories being told.

With the exception of the first chapter, “Mixed Blessings,” which provides a critical context for understanding the market niches of Caribbean diasporic fiction, all chapters offer comparative close readings of contemporary Caribbean diasporic novels by examining pedagogical imperatives both within the narrative of the text and extra-textually in structure and form. For example, in Chapter 2, “Kinship Routes,” Machado Saéz effectively analyzes how oppressive cultural educations, or lack thereof, propel the protagonists to embark on investigative journeys of their origins. The chapter compares how the protagonists in Andrea Levy’s *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999) and David Chariandy’s *Soucouyant* (2007) reflect on their fragmented identities growing up respectively in England and Canada. Whereas Levy’s protagonist, Faith, grows up with only a very vague knowledge of how her family ended up in England from Jamaica, the narrator in *Soucouyant* desires to find his older brother and unravel his amnesiac mother’s diasporic route from Trinidad to Canada. In both cases, institutional education functions as a form of repression that simplifies their Afro-Caribbean diasporic identities, discouraging them from exploring them further.

Chapter 3, “Writing the Reader,” presents different modes of narrating and reading comparative approaches to the Caribbean’s complex multi-ethnic and transnational history by turning to Paulo Freire’s “banking” and “problem-solving” pedagogical models. While the banking method is content-driven and based on lecture or memorization, the problem-solving method aims at student participation and collaboration. For Machado Sáez, the structure of Julia Alvarez’s *In the Name of Salomé* (2000) can be better understood through Freire’s banking analogy. While including scenes in which the characters engage in problem-solving approaches, Alvarez ultimately aims at educating her readers through the banking model by providing, for example, a family tree at the beginning of the novel or explicit references to historical setting at the beginning of each chapter. As indicated by Machado Sáez, “the novel does not structurally engage the reader as ‘coinvestigator’ in the project of historical revisionism” (91).

Similarly, in Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise* (1993), Miss Carey, the protagonist's schoolteacher, requires all students to memorize and recite texts. While within the narrative Miss Carey follows a banking pedagogy, later in the novel the protagonist and the reader both realize the value of Miss Carey's exercise: to sustain the decaying practice of transmitting the African diasporic experience orally. With strategies like this one, according to Machado Sáez, Cliff leaves much more room for the reader to actively engage with and piece together the narrative. Lastly, Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* (2009) deals with the ethical imperative to depict a history of slavery "without falling into the pitfalls of flattening out or reinforcing its violence" (111). To that end, the reader takes on the view of Lilith, the protagonist, who is taught how to read by Homer, the female head house slave. Although Homer's intention seems to be to impart freedom through literacy, Machado Sáez examines how Lilith rejects her proposal in fear of the sexual power dynamic it may create. These three novels, with characters directly invested in the work of education, explore the desires and politics of learning. The authors, as agents of education themselves, work out those same desires and politics between their own pedagogy and the readers they teach.

Machado Sáez extends the allegory of pedagogy between writer and reader to one of intimacy, drawing from Doris Sommer's *Proceed with Caution* (1999), which demonstrates how "ethnic works" call for more cautious engagements on the part of the readers. Machado Sáez consistently detects various characters' "secreto abierto" or open secret of sexuality, as developed by Rosamond King in *Island Bodies* (2014). For example, Alvarez's protagonist Camila writes a letter to her past female love interest and, between the lines, the reader becomes complicit in Camila's queer desires. Chapter 4, titled "Messy Intimacies," features the often-silenced voices of women in the male-dominated rhetorical legacy of anticolonialism in the Caribbean, by examining three romantic narratives: Ana Menéndez's *Loving Che* (2003), Dionna Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here* (1997) and Monique Roffey's *White Woman on the Green Bicycle* (2009). While the first two novels portray female characters that nostalgically seek to carry on with Che Guevara's revolutionary vision by engaging with his writings, Roffey's novel portrays a white male reporter who reshapes his investigations after discovering his wife's secret love letters to the late Eric Williams. The presences and absences of the actors in these literary love affairs destabilize narratives that deny both women's sexuality and women's role in Caribbean independence, asking readers to reconsider their assumptions about these iconic male leaders.

Chapter 5, "Dictating Diaspora," remains with questions of gender and sexuality by comparing Junot Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2005) and Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2004). While both novels aim

at “educating” the reader about the dictatorships of Trujillo and Duvalier, Machado Sáez argues that the authors are also self-conscious of their almost absolute power as narrators of these histories. As put by Díaz, “In dictatorship, only one person is really allowed to speak. And when I write a book or a story, I too am the only one speaking, no matter how I hide behind my characters” (quoted in 160). Thus, it is again up to the readers to read between the lines: to attempt to recover the voices that continue to be censored by the sexist and heteronormative legacies of dictatorships, which are akin to fictional dictation. In this respect, Machado Sáez offers a queer reading of Yuniór, the narrator of *Oscar Wao*. When first proposed, this interpretation seems ambitious—almost forced. Yet after being presented with a wealth of textual evidence, the reader of *Market Aesthetics* is incited to re-read Díaz’s novel in order to catch more of Yuniór’s indirect articulations, that is, Yuniór’s own secreto abierto. In a nutshell, Machado Sáez convinces readers that intimacy is “the ambivalent goal” of Caribbean diasporic writers given their self-consciousness as the inevitable cultural representatives of their respective islands of origin, who simultaneously “aspire to transforming the social consciousness of the reader” (195).

The ideal readers of Caribbean diasporic fiction of the present and future are discussed in the conclusion: they are the audience envisioned by Robert Antoni with his open-source novel *As Flies to Whatless Boys* (2013) or the community of readers that contribute to or consult the website *The Annotated Oscar Wao*, a semi-anonymous enterprise launched in 2008. Machado Sáez ends her study with another brilliant close reading and anecdotes about how both novels require a new kind of engaged and collaborative readership. This, indeed, is the problem-solving and co-investigative reading/learning model she presents in previous chapters.

Market Aesthetics will surely provoke scholars from various fields—Caribbean studies, literary studies, history, education—to reflect on why they are interested in their object of study. From a broader perspective, Machado Sáez’s book asks readers of Caribbean historical fiction to evaluate their goal as they invest themselves in a reality and a past that they cannot experience first hand. In the end, Machado Sáez thoughtfully reminds us that we—as scholars or readers—will never cease to question our ethical imperative because we are also part of a market that endeavors to label us one way or another.

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