



Donette Francis. *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 200pp. ISBN: 978-0230619876

– Elena Machado Sáez

Embodying the Archive

Looking at the cover of *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature*, one already begins to engage the critical questions that Donette Francis prompts us to consider: whose voices and experiences do we find, and *not* find, articulated within the Caribbean historical archive? In what ways do narratives of gender and sexuality encode archival silences, and how can we decode what is suppressed or censored in order to imagine Other narratives? The book's cover art, "Amelia" by Roshini Kempadoo, depicts a confident young woman standing at attention in a classroom, next to a chalkboard with a typewritten message explaining how her image and name had to be invented because Amelia is "not on record." Francis returns to this artwork in the conclusion or "Coda" to her book, explaining that Kempadoo's piece serves as example of how Caribbean women artists are challenging traditional forms of historiography to posit an alternative record, that of the embodied experience of Caribbean women. *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* takes as its primary focus the novels of Patricia Powell, Nelly Rosario, Edwidge Danticat, Elizabeth Nunez and Angie Cruz in order to argue that these women writers highlight the "politics of intimacy" (2) at work within the Caribbean "historical signposts" of "emancipation, indentureship, and US military intervention in three different national contexts" (20).

In order to formulate a pan-Caribbean "regional aesthetics" (15), Francis pairs each novel with a particular archive. On the one hand, this move allows her to historically contextualize the contemporary novels, directing the reader to historical sources and legal documents that can illuminate these revisionary histories. On the other hand, Francis shows us





how these writers render visible the silences and absences in those archival sources. For instance, Powell's *The Pagoda* (1998) is placed in dialogue with US and British immigration laws in order to compare different modes of documenting history, even contrasting the archival authority of letter writing with census practices. Francis reveals how the novels view the process of historiography with "skepticism" (10), emphasizing the ways that public archives work to silence certain experiences, while also investing some hope in alternative means of documenting the histories of women of color. The writers consequently structure their novels to engage certain narrative traditions—for example, postcards in Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* (2002) and newspapers in Nunez's *Bruised Hibiscus* (2000)—or depict moments where archival fragments are discovered or recovered—as in Cruz's *Soledad* (2000), where a tin box holds the secrets of Olivia's past as a sex worker. Ultimately, Francis argues that Caribbean women writers see the female body itself as a repository for history that must be attended to in order to initiate a healing process for the subjection and violence encountered by the Caribbean female citizen and reinforced by the public archive. For instance, Francis convincingly makes the case that Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) depicts political rape as a weapon of control used by both the US occupation and postcolonial state that becomes translated into the domestic violence of testing.

By emphasizing the productive work that literature can accomplish in countering stereotypes as well as mapping processes of recuperation and reconciliation, Francis is in dialogue with recent work in Caribbean and Women's Studies, which include Myriam Chancy's *Searching for Safe Places: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile* (1997), Gay Wilentz's *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-ease* (2000), Meredith M. Gadsby's *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival* (2006), Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (2010), and April Shemak's *Asylum Speakers: Caribbean Refugees and Testimonial Discourse* (2010). *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* similarly addresses women's artistic production as a form of literary activism on questions of social justice, offering a nuanced





approach for interpreting these Caribbean historical fictions. Francis ascribes a transformative power to literature and storytelling while also remaining critical of academic trends that are blinded by an overly “celebratory focus” on agency and resistance (10). Francis’s interest in “challeng[ing] the dichotomy that posits the diaspora as empowering ‘elsewhere’ of sexual liberation versus home as a space of sexual oppression” echoes the concerns of critics such as Kezia Page who in *Transnational Negotiations* (2011) calls for “a rethinking of the diaspora” (1) that challenges established “polarities, chiefly between diaspora and exile, transnationality and provinciality, the local and the global” (2). Francis explicitly connects her work to that of Sarah Ahmed, Kamau Brathwaite, Paul Gilroy, Saidiya Hartman, Ann Stoler, and Doris Sommer, but her most productive contribution lies in her concept of the “antiromance” as an alternative to the binary of anticolonial romance and postcolonial tragedy articulated by David Scott in *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004).

Francis explicitly takes issue with Scott’s definition of coloniality and postcoloniality in terms of historiographic genres: “Embedded in Scott’s narrative genealogy and use of romance and tragedy are assumptions that occlude women and others not invested in a story that charts a linear anticolonial progression culminating in disappointment with the failed promises of independence” (144). Francis utilizes the antiromance genre by Caribbean women writers in order to offer a different genealogy “that demonstrates variations of the changing same, with openings and closures, losses and gains for Caribbean females” as opposed to imagining the postcolonial present as “a moment of tragedy, exhaustion, or nightmare” (144). The literary chronology shifts away from Scott’s progression of anticolonial romance into postcolonial tragedy and towards a transformation of imperial romance into anticolonial nationalist romance into antiromance. Caribbean women writers are shown to offer antiromances that rewrite the heterosexual plots of the previous genres via an unsentimental bildungsroman narrative, undermining master narratives about national identity by emphasizing sexual politics, and rewriting canonical histories by offering counter-archives (7).





Fictions of Feminine Citizenship could be said to offer a scholarly version of an antiromance in that Francis also refuses to participate in the (ironically) master narrative of subaltern agency that motivates much work of literary criticism. By *dwelling*, as Francis puts it, on the mundane, everyday, embodied experience of Caribbean women, “the novels under consideration temper any overevaluation of resistance” (11). Refreshingly, Francis’s work also follows the fictions’ model of “sustained examinations” that provides a complex picture of how these women writers speak back to the archive, even while these examinations are delimited by the fictional boundaries of their work (11). As Francis herself reminds us, these novels offer us blueprints for healing sexual traumas but also teach us that “agency is not a fixed destination to which one arrives with the originating act forever completed, but rather it is a continuous series of maneuvers to be enacted and reenacted” (12).

The concept of antiromance offers a rich and genuinely intriguing mode of interpreting contemporary Caribbean historical fiction that invites more elaboration. Francis argues that the critical counter-impulse of Caribbean women’s writing lies in their refusal to conclude the novels with “normative couplings” (6): there are no representative heterosexual relationships that stand in for or symbolize a unified nation-state. I wonder, however, to what extent these novels, as much as they function as anti-nationalist antiromances, perhaps also operate as feminist romances? In other words, to what extent do feminist narratives of healing have a romantic appeal and consolidating impulse of their own? I don’t think that the market for feminist narratives necessarily undermines the “textual healing” that the writers seek to perform, but what role do market trends or readerships (for example, the Oprah Book Club or feminist presses) play in shaping feminist narratives of overcoming? One of the unique elements that Francis ascribes to the antiromance genre is the presence of “unnarratable” interracial unions (9), specifically those between black men and white women. It would be interesting to consider how these representations titillate or frustrate the desires of a “mainstream” female book reader. There are some productive implications here for a number





of more recently published Caribbean historical novels such as Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* (2009) and Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010), both of which imagine a romance between a white overseer and black enslaved woman, or Monique Roffey's *White Woman on a Bicycle* (2011), which imagines a romance between a white colonial and Eric Williams—and these novels also conclude by undermining any potential happy ending for such unions. More broadly, what implication do these “feminist poetics” of antiromance have for contemporary male writers of the same generation as those discussed by Francis (143)? Do male writers also participate in the trend of “textual healing”? Is it possible for them to enter into this feminist discourse of counter-archives? In her introduction, Francis places Dany Laferrière's romances in the category of nationalist writing pursued by Lamming and Naipaul (9), but is it possible that postcolonial male writers are writing about gender and citizenship in different ways than their predecessors?

Donette Francis' *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* makes a welcome contribution to the field of Caribbean literary studies by highlighting the ways that Caribbean women's writing challenges our ideas about how the historical and literary archive is created and maintained. This scholarly work feeds into the field's renewed interest in the Caribbean archive, reminding us that contemporary literature also can speak back to that archive. The timeliness of Francis' work was especially evident to me as I watched the unfolding of the Dominique Strauss-Kahn case, and the way that the media rendered the (in)visibility of Nafissatou Diallo's body and her narrative of violation. Even as the dynamics of sexual citizenship replay themselves in the public sphere, there is important work being done to identify what Francis calls “counterarchival sources” (11). The Digital Library of the Caribbean (DLOC), in collaboration with the Caribbean International Resource Network (IRN) and Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (JFLAG) celebrated in June 2011 the acquisition and digitalization of the Jamaica Gay Freedom Movement's (GFM) documents. First organized in 1974, GFM is viewed as the first LGBT rights movement in the Anglophone Caribbean. Such are the





“cumulative experiences and sustained examinations” (11) that Caribbean artists and scholars are performing in order to rewrite Caribbean history and transform the present. Donette Francis’ *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* stands as another wonderful example of the positive directions of archival research in literary studies as well as gender and sexuality studies.



Patricia Powell. *The Fullness of Everything*. Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2009. ISBN: 978-1845231132.

Michael A. Bucknor

Patricia Powell’s fourth novel *The Fullness of Everything* is a deeply engaging analysis of traumatic intimacies. A bold breaking of silence on male abuse—physical, emotional and sexual-- the novel explores the ways in which violence is a marker of hegemonic masculinity and the source of the traumas inflicted on an entire family. Although it is the violent beating of the patriarch’s son, Winston, that is the proverbial “straw that breaks the camel’s back” and that leads to his pained separation from his family, it is the father’s psychological/emotional abuse of his wife via his sexual infidelity and his subsequent sexual abuse of a teenage girl that is really the catalyst for exposing the family trauma. These sexual indiscretions and violations are linked to the father’s gender insecurities made fragile by hegemonic residues of race and class in post-colonial Jamaica. Even though Powell begins with the impact of paternal abuse on Winston’s ability to negotiate intimate relationships, no one in the family is immune to this psychological damage. Powell’s ability to expose traumatic pain through a kind of telescopic or x-ray vision of the emotional body of her characters is one of the most moving aspects of this narrative: “somewhere inside the crevices of his abdomen, he feels things shifting and breaking” (29).

In this exploration of psychological trauma—the “shifting and breaking” hearts of the story, she is also interested in healing. Confronting





Notes on Contributors

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