

THE ANGLO-CARIBBEAN MIGRATION NOVEL: WRITING FROM THE DIASPORA

M^a Lourdes López Ropero

San Vicente del Raspeig: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alicante, 2004.

(by Bárbara Arizti. University of Zaragoza)¹

129

María Lourdes López Ropero's monograph on Caribbean migratory movements and their impact on literature is a noteworthy contribution to the emerging field of diaspora studies. In the opinion of Edward Said, himself a diasporic intellectual, mobility and migration are the markers of our time. This human reality has found an echo in the critical world, particularly in the postcolonial area, where the word diaspora has become a potent critical concept. The different peoples that inhabit the Caribbean region have been affected by experiences of displacement of very varied nature. These include the expeditions of the colonisers, the coming of European settlers, the Middle Passage of African slaves and the more recent journeys to the ex-metropolis that characterised the second half of the twentieth century, to mention a few. López Ropero restricts the focus of her study to the effect of migration in the work of contemporary Anglo-Caribbean authors of African descent. The only exception is Indo-Trinidadian Samuel Selvon, who is included in the work on the grounds that "his upbringing was not particularly Indian" (37), and, perhaps more importantly, because he "considers himself mostly Trinidadian and Caribbean rather than aligning himself with a specific racial group" (37-38). Although perfectly understandable due to the vastness and the complexity of the field, López Ropero's decision to limit her focus precludes the fundamental contributions of authors such as V.S. Naipaul and Jean Rhys, traversed both by Caribbeanness and diaspora. Neither did the latter, incidentally, feel completely at home with her specific racial group, the white Creoles.

The book is divided into five main sections: an Introduction, three central chapters and the Conclusions. Chapter I maps post-war Caribbean migration to Britain and exemplifies it with reference to the London novels of Samuel Selvon and Caryl Phillips. Chapter II focuses on the Caribbean diaspora in the United States and illustrates it with the works of Paule Marshall. Chapter III –perhaps the author’s most innovative contribution– deals with Caribbean migration to Canada.

One of the main assets of López Ropero’s monograph is its twenty-page introduction. In it the author outlines in a very clear way the different critical approaches to the diasporic phenomenon, first in general terms and then focusing on the Caribbean region. Two maps –of the Anglophone Caribbean and of the Anglo-Caribbean diaspora– offer readers a first insight into the topic. López Ropero explores the connections between a new conception of nations as *imagined communities*, in the words of Benedict Anderson, and the new prominence of the term diaspora in the field of postcolonial studies. The author goes beyond classical definitions of the term, which rest on an essentialist conception of the nation and stress the catastrophic side of that phenomenon. She aligns herself with more recent contributions, like Robin Cohen’s, which account for more ambiguous cases of diaspora, such as that of the Caribbean peoples, and lay an emphasis on the positive side of diasporic developments. López Ropero is concerned with stressing the ambivalence of diaspora identities, which, she affirms, are “characterised by a constant negotiation between roots and routes” (20). In line with Caribbean diasporic intellectual Stuart Hall, she understands diaspora as intimately connected with the concept of hybridity. López Ropero then moves on to offer a well-documented delineation of the history of the West Indies, particularly of its long-standing migration tradition. She convincingly challenges the arguments against the existence of a specific Caribbean diaspora one by one, points out the multi-centred nature of the phenomenon and briefly analyses its different strands. The last part of the Introduction speaks of the author’s intention to study imaginative renderings of Caribbean diaspora experiences and shows her awareness of what is going on in the field by revising a series of recent works written on related topics.

The three chapters that make up the core of the volume follow roughly the same pattern: in the first place, they contextualise in great detail the particular branch of Caribbean diaspora they are concerned with; in the second, they provide valuable analyses of the writers and the novels selected.

Chapter I, entitled “Britannia’s Offspring in the Metropolis: the London Novels of Samuel Selvon and Caryl Phillips”, starts by expounding the evolution of immigration practices and policies in Great Britain in the post-war years. The large numbers of Caribbean immigrants, sometimes referred to as “colonization in reverse”, were increasingly seen as “a reminder of Britain’s declining role as a world

power” (35), which led to “the rebirth of English nationalism in the form of racism” (35). López Roperó chooses the novels of Selvon and Phillips to illustrate the development of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora in London. Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, published in 1956, is concerned with the growing hostile atmosphere towards Black immigration and its mixed consequences. On the one hand, hostility and racial discrimination brought about personal frustration, but on the other they encouraged the formation of a strong group consciousness in the Caribbean community. *The Lonely Londoners* is above all, López Roperó states, “an affirmation of the value and resilience of Caribbean culture and identity in the diaspora” (51). The novel also reveals the immigrants’ mistaken expectations with regard to Britain and debunks powerful myths surrounding the mother country. Far from being “paved with gold”, a notion, as López Roperó says, “ironically fostered by colonial indoctrination” (47), the streets of London prove to be a rather hostile environment for the Caribbean immigrant. The idea of ‘home’ some of the immigrants hold is questioned as well. In the opinion of López Roperó, Moses, the novel’s main character, idealises life in Trinidad as simple, natural and peaceful: “The Trinidad he wishes to return to is a fictional construction of his mind, an ahistoric and metaphoric image of the homeland” (60). *Moses Ascending*, published almost two decades later, updates English racial politics, which have now become tighter, and puts emphasis on the progressive creolisation of the metropolis through new diasporas and on the radicalisation of black nationalism in the Black Power Movement. López Roperó provides a very brief analysis of *Moses Migrating* (1983), conceived as a sequel to *Moses Ascending*, mainly concerned with the dialectics of identification with both motherland and homeland. The last section of Chapter I is devoted to Caryl Phillips and his first novel *The Final Passage* (1985), a work that describes the Caribbean diasporic phenomenon of the 1950s through the prism of the second generation of immigrants. This study discloses a continuity of concerns –displacement, rejection, wrong assumptions, and so on– as well as some of the peculiarities of the second generation, who usually provide a bleaker outlook. Most pertinent is her analysis of how diaspora experiences differ according to gender. It is Leila, the protagonist’s wife, “who appears to suffer more isolation and hardship in London” (91). In the opinion of López Roperó, Phillips is here “touching upon the gender politics of Caribbean society, where women play a ‘minimal’ role” (92).

In Chapter II, “Caribbean New York in the Works of Paule Marshall”, the author explores the formation of a West Indian diaspora in the USA and the different impact of North-American cultures on Caribbean migrants. Some of the distinctive features López Roperó identifies are the preservation of strong familial and cultural links with the homeland due to geographical proximity and a more racially diverse host society with a less rigid class structure. The ambivalent

relationship between the native black community and the Afro-Caribbeans is tackled in great detail. The author sees in the work of Paule Marshall an emblematic portrayal of the black Caribbean community in New York. Marshall, who has a foot in both camps and responds to Black American culture as well as West Indian culture, touches upon the commonalities between the African-American and the West Indian experiences (102). López Roperó, however, highlights the distinctively Caribbean features of her novels, which are, she affirms, “crucially concerned with Caribbean diasporic groups and individuals in the USA” (103). The author is also interested in exploring the connections between Paule Marshall and the black feminist movement, although she opts to detach herself from traditional feminist readings of Marshall’s work. Her analysis focuses mainly on two of her novels: *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and *Daughters* (1991). She places special emphasis on themes such as social mobility, the cohesion of the Caribbean immigrant community, the development of a materialistic ethic and its destructive impact on human lives, the complex interactions between Afro-Caribbeans and other diasporic communities, mainly African-Americans and Jews, and actual and imaginary returns to the homeland. For the analysis of *Daughters* López Roperó draws upon Edward Said’s contrapuntal approach to displacement and diaspora and on the concept of *transnationalism* as defined by Linda Basch.

132

Chapter III, “Shattering Canadian Myths: The Caribbean-Canadian Encounter in Austin Clarke’s Toronto Novels”, tackles a branch of the Caribbean diaspora often neglected by critics. This is, López Roperó admits, a smaller and more recent phenomenon than the other two formations analysed in previous chapters. The circumstances that West Indian immigrants find in Canada are somewhat similar to the USA, both being settler multiethnic societies. By and large, West Indian migrants have felt more at ease with North American culture than with British culture. But, what are then the idiosyncrasies of this particular strand? To the particularities of Canadian immigration policies, López Roperó adds the issue of institutional multiculturalism and its malcontents. In 1971, the government adopted multiculturalism as a federal policy and Canada was declared a bilingual and multicultural nation (157). This has proved, nevertheless, a somewhat elusive concept and, as the author puts it, “its public policies have not been enough to eradicate racial discrimination in Canada” (159). Despite the fact that Canadians consider themselves more tolerant than their American neighbours, they are, according to recent surveys, very similar in terms of their treatment of minorities. Significantly enough, the first Canadian literary canon, established in the 1970s, did not reflect the multicultural character of Canadian society. In *The Meeting Point* (1967), his first Toronto novel, Austin Clarke “takes a very critical stance on Canada as a North Star, as well as on its alleged cultural harmony” (173) and reveals the gap between multicultural legislation and everyday practices. In his

second Toronto novel, *The Bigger Light*, published in 1975, Clarke further calls into question the “romanticised idea of Canada as a racial haven” (185). The final pages of this third chapter are devoted to Dionne Brand, a Caribbean-Canadian author who considers herself part of the new wave of Canadian writing and who writes back to the Eurocentric literary tradition from which she finds herself excluded. López Roperero concludes the section on a positive note: “Even though Brand’s views on Canadian society are predominantly negative, her fiction does not preclude the possibility of an enriching life in the diaspora” (197).

“Constructing a taxonomy of diasporas is a highly inexact science”, admits Robin Cohen in his 1997 book *Global Diasporas*. Cohen’s statement makes María Lourdes López Roperero’s contribution to the field stand out: a serious, well-documented and conscientious attempt at systematising West Indian migratory movements and their representation in literature. *The Anglo-Caribbean Migration Novel: Writing from the Diaspora* appears as a useful critical tool for the beginner as well as the specialist. Finally, some minor drawbacks must be mentioned: a few misprints, the fact that there is no name index and the fact that the author misses out the original date of publication of some books included in the Bibliography.

Notes

1. The research carried out for the writing of this review has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology (MCYT) and the European Regional

Development Fund, in collaboration with the Aragonese Government (no. HUM200400344 /FIL).