

SARGASSO 2007-08, II
Urban Art and Community Art In Puerto Rico and Beyond

Sargasso, a peer-reviewed journal of literature, language, and culture edited at the University of Puerto Rico, publishes critical essays, interviews, book reviews, and some creative works. *Sargasso* particularly welcomes material written by/about the people of the Caribbean region and its multiple diasporas. Unless otherwise specified, essays and critical studies should conform to the style of the *MLA Handbook*. Book reviews should be kept to no more than 1,500 words in length. All correspondence should include one S.A.S.E. For electronic submission, write to: sargasso@uprrp.edu.

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Introduction

Urban Art? Cultural Agency? Community Creativity and Activism?

Three years ago, when the idea of an "urban art" issue began to be discussed, we were thinking more in terms of plastic arts, dance, and music—the subterranean youth cultures and creative expressions associated with spray-paint graffiti, hip-hop music and cultural styles, and the explosion in the Caribbean and its communities abroad of *reggaetón*. But that idea began to evolve and transform itself as the materials began to arrive. In one sense, the focus "aged" because it fell increasingly on those artists—many still young, such as poet Michael Reyes from Chicago or the Papel Machete collective in San Juan—whose work assumes a position of activism—cultural, educational, ecological, political—within urban communities. Furthermore, we discovered that many of the activist artists—painter Rafael Trelles, creative theater directors such as Rosa Luisa Márquez and Maritza Pérez, and the ecological political daredevil Alberto de Jesús ("Tito Kayak")—have dedicated decades of their lives to urban and community creativity and remain at its forefront by working with and training new generations of artists. Not unsurprisingly, in the collecting and editing process the focus also increasingly fell on Puerto Rican art and artists both on the Island and in the US. The Batey Urbano on the El Paseo Boricua, Division Street, Chicago is one such focal point; María Domínguez's murals in the Bronx and elsewhere in New York City become another. Because part of what we were receiving was already known or at least available in Spanish and in Puerto Rico, we also sensed a need to cross language and cultural barriers and move beyond a Puerto Rican "comfort zone" by breaking *Sargasso's* usual bilingual policy of publishing in the original language of the submission. Thus everything that appears here is printed in English. That more labor intensive process accounts, in part, for the delays in getting the finished text to the press.

The issue is more a hybrid than originally anticipated in another way as well. We received a new interview with Derek Walcott that we definitely

and supersede the lingering experience of enslavement and hypocritical respectability," inventing what "would be a world of actualized and actualizable imaginings" (153). In some of the book's most evocative writing, Gibson articulates that which is beyond articulation: "Even so, the performance is not contained either in what the audience sees or in what the performer may consciously know. There are also preconscious levels of performance, that more numinous theater in which we play within a logic we cannot yet ourselves articulate" (163). And he writes of the "push beyond history, beyond lived memory and into myth, mas, manifestation, and the recesses of spiritual maroonage, to which earthbound power has no access" (164).

This is a sampling of the rich offerings the collection provides, whether readers seek out one article, or the whole book. The overall effect, casting a wider net in the ongoing spirit of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1992), is a view of the greater Caribbean, including the US South, as a constellation of temporal and geographical circuits, rather than as discrete island nations or of US national exceptionalism. The purpose is not necessarily to diminish national configurations, but to comparatively bring to the fore what the seams and borders of nations, language traditions, and the disciplines traditionally structured along such lines reveal in terms of mutual exchange and cultural phenomena on an enlarged, pervasive, scale, as well as how such exchanges constitute these cultures.

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Marie Chauvet. *Love, Anger, Madness*. Trans. Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokur. New York: Modern Library. 2009. 416 pp.

Since the 2004 bicentennial of Haiti's independence, Caribbean studies has seen a resurgence of work on the hemisphere's second independent nation, with important new publications including Laurent Dubois' *Aveugers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (2004), Sybille Fischer's *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (2004), and Nick Nesbitt's *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution*

and *Radical Enlightenment* (2008). At the same time, Anglophone audiences have had little access to literary voices from Haiti; the eager reception that Edwidge Danticat's work has received shows the demand for Haitian writing, but only highlights how few other Haitian writers are available to a wide international readership. In this context, the translation of Marie Chauvet's masterpiece, available in English as *Love, Anger, Madness*, will undoubtedly cement Chauvet's status as one of the most important Caribbean writers of her generation, allowing readers to see how her work fits in with and departs from the work of the mid-twentieth century boom in Caribbean writing that made Alejo Carpentier, Aimé Césaire, Derek Walcott and others the cornerstones of a Caribbean literary tradition.

The challenges Chauvet has faced in joining this literary tradition—both as a Haitian and as a woman—are nowhere clearer than in the publication history of this trilogy.¹ First released by Editions Gallimard in Paris in 1968, the trilogy was suppressed by her family, ostensibly for fear of retribution by the Duvalier regime which her writing obviously and incisively attacks; the equally brutal representation of spousal and familial relations has led many critics to suggest that her husband and children may have also felt uncomfortable with the disturbing representation of female sexuality in the trilogy. The text became almost immediately unavailable in French, remaining out of print and with copies scarcely available until its recent reissue in 2005; at the same time, unauthorized translations into English began to circulate, but went unpublished as Chauvet's family refused permission. Fortunately, the trilogy has finally been allowed to circulate more widely, with new editions available in French as well as an English version from the talented team of Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokur, best known for their award-winning translations of the work of Patrick Chamoiseau.

The trilogy's troubled history ironically reinforces its major theme, the uncertain place of literature and the writer in contemporary Caribbean society. *Love, Anger, Madness* depicts a world in which that society has come to be dominated by a brutal state, leaving artists and writers persecuted and excluded from the public sphere. While her 1957 novel *La danse sur le volcan* depicts the coming to consciousness of the committed artist able to overcome

¹ Joan Dayan cites Dany Laferrière's description of how the trilogy, "once printed, remained in warehouses for twelve years" (Dayan, *Haiti* 119); also see Ronnie Scharfman for more on the publication history.

society's racial and class divisions amidst the backdrop of the Haitian revolution, the novellas of the 1968 trilogy revolve around the impotence and degradation suffered by characters who hope to be writers and heroic actors but are condemned to almost complete failure in their attempts—in this way, Chauvet dramatizes the crisis of Caribbean intellectuals also presented in the work of her contemporaries like George Lamming and Martin Carter.¹ In all three sections of Chauvet's trilogy, these aspiring literary intellectuals come into conflict with a militarized secret police supported by complicit doctors, lawyers, and government functionaries. The solidarity between sensitive writers and the folk hoped for by the anticolonial generation has been replaced by a different set of alliances between other segments of the middle and lower classes.

The trilogy begins in 1939 and frequently flashes back to earlier periods. Critics have emphasized how despite this earlier setting, the trilogy is meant most directly to reflect on the Duvalier regime: Joan Dayan states that "dates do not matter for the story is the same: blacks and mulattoes fight it out in Port-au-Prince, and the peasants continue to suffer [...] What begins as the most personal of memoirs ends up a chronicle of Haiti as Duvalier consolidates his totalitarian state" ("Reading Women" 234). While the connection to Duvalier is undeniable, the dates do matter. A major effect of drawing the connection between 1939 and Chauvet's present is to call attention to the postcoloniality of her context: the trilogy emphasizes the ways in which 1939 is the aftermath of the U.S. occupation which ended in 1934 and that the hopelessness of the present comes out of the crisis of the anti-occupation nationalism expressed in many of the flashbacks. In mourning as well as critiquing the discourse of anticolonial nationalism, *Amour, Colère, Folie* fits into the tradition of postcolonial writing.

As the trilogy proceeds, the postcolonial present of the writer becomes darker and darker. "Love" shows Claire's secret dreams to take heroic public action alongside her obsessively private diary-writing, only in the novella's last pages allowing her to unite these two activities in an act whose efficacy remains uncertain and ambivalent. "Anger" transforms those aspirations into Paul's exaggerated and unfulfilled promises to protect his violated sister as well as her own courageous but disturbing decision to be complicit in this violation to save her family. By the time the trilogy reaches "Madness," the

¹ I write about how Lamming and Carter represent the crisis of the anticolonial intellectual in my essay, "Authority and the Occasion for Speaking in the Caribbean Literary Field: George Lamming and Martin Carter."

ideal of the poet as leader of the people or even public actor has been rendered not only dangerous but absurd by the totalitarian state. The trilogy ends in a postcolonial abyss, with little hope for restoring the anticolonial vision of possibility for a better future.

While *Love, Anger, Madness* thus belongs to a certain moment in Haiti's history as well as the region's—a moment in which productive opposition to oppression and exploitation seems particularly difficult to imagine—Chauvet's work continues to speak to today's Caribbean in which the issue of renewing the progressive intellectual project still resonates. Chauvet's work has recently begun to occupy an important place in Francophone studies, where she is recognized along with Jacques Roumain, Jacques Stephen Alexis, and René Depestre as one of the most productive and important Haitian writers of the twentieth century. But she remains virtually unknown in other parts of the region. Her omission from the rest of the region's understanding of Caribbean literary history can now be remedied with the publication of *Love, Anger, Madness*.

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