
Sandra Pouchet Paquet. *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002. 345p.

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Sandra Pouchet Paquet, a native of Trinidad, has skillfully drawn upon years of scholarship in the area of Caribbean autobiography to produce this well-researched text. She has incorporated some previously published material, and in the preface explains that revisions of former writings exhibit a “continuing interest in the constitutive forms of Caribbean autobiographical culture” as well as “a heightened appreciation of the dynamics of the genre in respect to variables of Caribbean personality and presence” (ix). Her purpose is to examine how different and distinct types of autobiographical texts can be related, and to explore how these works might be useful in better understanding the challenges of diaspora and intercultural identity. In her analyses of the narratives, she takes into account “environment and history, race and culture, class and caste, gender and sexuality, and language and theory” (7).

The book is part of the Wisconsin Studies in Autobiography series, which is edited by William L. Andrews. It is divided into four parts: 1) Gender, Voice, and Self-Representation; 2) The Estranging Sea; 3) Birthrights and Legacies; and 4) Autobiography, Elegy, and Gender Identification. In the first part Paquet discusses the nineteenth-century narratives of four women: Anne Hart Gilbert, Elizabeth Hart Thwaites, Mary Prince, and Mary Seacole. The Hart sisters each wrote a spiritual autobiography based on their respective experiences with the Methodist church. Mary Prince, a household slave, dictated her history, and Mary Seacole, a free black Jamaican woman, wrote a text which is both a travel narrative and autobiography. Part 2 shifts to the twentieth century and to an analysis of the masculine voice, and discusses the writings of Claude McKay, George Lamming, C.L.R. James, and Derek Walcott. In this section Paquet “explores links between geography and being, exile and otherness” (9). In the third part, she mixes gender and presents the contrasting works of four writers: V.S. Naipaul, Anna Mahese, Yselt Bridges and Jean Rhys. She focuses on the concepts of “group identification” and “cultural localization” (176) by discussing the complexity of genealogies in Caribbean autobiographical narratives and the quest to find space and place in the Caribbean community. Finally, in Part 4, Paquet presents the elegies of Kamau

Brathwaite and Jamaica Kincaid and explains how “both writers internalize the deceased other” (9). She also delves into “cross-gender indentifications” (9).

Paquet successfully brings together a diverse and vast array of autobiographical work in an organized and coherent manner. Each of the four major parts of the book opens with an introductory section which explains the theme of that particular part and situates various writers in that theme. Almost every chapter focuses on one writer (sometimes two), which enables her to discuss that person’s work in some detail. Yet throughout the chapter, she draws comparisons and integrates work of other authors presented. Furthermore, she consistently draws upon the theory and ideas of other scholars to explain, support, and work through her own analyses. Some of the names she cites are familiar: Bakhtin, Bhabha, Césaire, Clifford, Davies, Eagleton, Fanon, Foucault, Freud, Glissant, Gramsci, Jameson, Kristeva, Lejeune, Said, and Spivak, to name a few. She excels as a mediator of a variety of perspectives, opinions, experiences, and discourses, and integrates the parts to create a whole in the final product of her book. Furthermore, she does so with a degree of literary finesse as is found in some alliterative passages. See, for example, “communicates the calculated cruelty of Captain” (40), “culture, where class, color, and colonialism combine” (75), “supremacy of the white standards against a similar structure” (145), “Mountain-Mother, magical and mysterious, whose life was marked by loyalty to her male consort” (238), “Mrs. Drew as a devourer and destroyer of her children, who would deny her daughter” (250), and “political and poetic principle of gay men’s poetry in particular” (252).

In addition, the striking cover in variegated turquoise-blue, with an image of a solitary shell, is appropriate to the theme of the book: Caribbean autobiography. The rich, cool colors are reminiscent of the sea, and invite the reader into a part of the world where the ocean is not only significant, but is also common to all the islands. The cover seems to be a visual representation of a liquid link between a diverse population that is multiethnic, multiracial, [and] polyglot” (141). In the introduction Paquet acknowledges a desire to analyze the “fluidity” and “reciprocity” (8) found in the wide range of autobiographical writings presented. Towards the end of the text, she states: “The defining element in this study, not surprisingly, is *fluidity* rather than systematic coherence” (258, my emphasis). Yet the sea, which connects, can also physically divide and separate. This is illustrated in the title of Part 2, “The Estranging Sea.” So the single shell which so strongly depicts life by the sea, can also represent the loneliness and isolation than can result from separation from one’s homeland. The same shell can also portray a human being or even a group striving for self-identity. Paquet writes that “What might appear

chaotic about the *fluidity* and multiplicity” of the various narratives selected, “may in fact be the measure of an individually and/or collectively drawn selfhood that is straining against constraints of established models” (8-9, my emphasis).

In terms of suggestions, there are minor errors in the book which do not detract from its overall excellence, which I point out for the future use of the University of Wisconsin Press. For example (and the emphasis in the excerpts is mine), on page 179, “Text, *Testmony* and Gender” should be “Text, *Testimony* and Gender.” In the endnotes on page 279, “public sphere of *it* own,” in note 6 should be “public sphere of *its* own.” These are the only two typographical errors that I found. Then there are citations which are not exact. For example, in a passage from Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother*, Paquet quotes: “*in* her stone heap,” “setting them alight,” and “would not be strange” (245). In the actual text, Kincaid writes: “*on* her stone heap,” “*then* setting them alight,” and “would not be *so* strange” (197). These, as mentioned, are not significant mistakes, and other references checked were quoted perfectly.

This book is well worth reading, and would be of value to scholars in a variety of areas such as autobiography, memoir, Caribbean literature, colonial/postcolonial studies, gender studies, women’s studies, and African American studies. It could be used for pedagogical purposes as well as for personal research. Enjoy the colorful cover, and allow yourself to be drawn into the world of the Caribbean, with its tropical island ambience. However, this is no vacation, for you will read of suffering, slavery, poverty, prejudice, loss, alienation, exile, oppression, and death. Don’t let this discourage you, because you will also encounter nostalgia, personal growth, pride, commitment, creativity, success, heroism, and joy. Paquet takes the reader by the hand and navigates the way through narratives of both struggle and triumph in *Caribbean Autobiography*. ✱