

KAMAU BRATHWAITE “CARIBBEAN CRITICS” (1969)

Here, Brathwaite takes to task a book edited by Louis James (an Englishman) called The Islands in Between, the “first full-scale work of West Indian literary criticism” (111). He criticises it partly because it is a “book of unlinked comments on individual writers” (111) and partly because, more importantly, it creates the illusory impression that “West Indian writers, despite their local concerns, and despite the presence in their work of ‘other’ elements” (112) are made to appear to be “part of the English / European tradition” (112). In particular, Brathwaite argues, “there is no clear demonstration of the nature of their participation in it” (112) and “if and how they add to or modify it” (112). In other words, for Brathwaite, the book was a missed opportunity to serve as the first literary history of the Anglophone West Indies (whereby writers are not studied in isolation of each other) and to delineate the distinctive traits which make up that tradition.

Brathwaite takes particular exception to the views advanced that “although the great majority of West Indians have an African background, the peculiar circumstances of Caribbean history . . . have all been within the European system” (113) and that the “concept that ‘European’ culture has a nationalist identity in opposition to that of the Caribbean has the dangerous elements of racial mythology” (113). Brathwaite argues that James et al. have offered in so saying a “terrifyingly simple and Eurocentric view of the matter” (114), one substantiated by “its selection of writers” (114) for study and the “critical methods used in discussing them” (114) on the part of a “body of critics of trained to respond almost exclusively to European influences” (117). Brathwaite’s thesis is that the mind should be left open to the “possibility that the Caribbean, in spite of the operation upon it of ‘the European system,’ in spite of--indeed because of--‘the peculiar circumstances’ of its history, contains within itself a ‘culture’ different from, though not exclusive of Europe” (114).

To support his argument, Brathwaite begins by tackling the definition of culture which informs the book by James et al. They assume ‘culture’ to mean, Brathwaite argues, “some kind of unified, articulate system with a clearly defined and identified ‘voice’” (114). This is, he contends, an “‘establishment’ view of culture--culture as an agreed on and imposed pattern” (114) which, when applied to the West Indies which is a “(post-)colonial society without recognised autochthonous centres of its own” (114), “can only lead to the discovery of no West Indian culture. Only Europe appears to be present” (114). Rather, Brathwaite suggests that we should define culture as a “complex of voices and patterns held together by geography, political force and social interaction” (114). From this point of view, “each culture becomes definitive not only in itself, but in relation to others on which it impinges” (115). From this perspective, West Indian culture is “identifiable in relation to the culture, say, of Latin America, of North America, of West Africa, of Western Europe; but it also exists as West Indian in terms of its social structures, its politics, its deposits of history and the life of the *people* as seen to be persisting separately, often, from the life of the elite” (115). There is “no ‘one West Indian voice’” (115) because it is a

complex of imposed ‘establishment’ tongues (Standard English, French, Dutch, etc.) and the mainly submerged patterns of the ‘folk’--the peasants and illiterates who carry within themselves a transformed but still very real and essentially non-European tradition of Africa, Asia and the Amerindians. ‘West Indian culture’ is the expression of these interacting traditions, making their way out of a broadly ex-African base. . . . (115)

In other words, West Indian culture “must be defined in terms of creolisation” (116). Moreover, Brathwaite argues, it is a “wilful destruction of history to dismiss the cultural influence of slavery in the Caribbean, or to stress only its negative effects” (115-116). Europe, he argues, contributed the plantation framework of slavery in the region and much to the “degradation involved” (116) but little to the “spiritual energy, the social forms, or the dichotomous sense of destiny that came out of it” (116). Creolisation, he asserts, must be understood “against its background of slavery” (116).

Accordingly, Brathwaite contends, to illustrate the “artistic skill and significance” (116) of the writers in question, one must demonstrate “not only their authors’ use of European elements, but their use and transformation of their own logical raw material” (116). But James’ book is of little use in this regard because its contributors “appear to have worked with a cultural context and definition where the writer appears as an artistic *individual*, rather than an angel or agent of his *society*” (116). West Indian literature is the “means through which the complex pattern of West Indian culture has expressed itself”

(117) as a result of which the writers “have abjured individualism” (117) by exploring the “communal nature of their environment” (117) and liberating the “consciousness of the submerged ‘folk’” (117). This is why the “speech of the folk--dialect--has played a crucial part not only on the surface, but within the very structure of the West Indian novel” (117). Writers like Lamming and Harris “working through a mainly non-European, non-establishment vision of the ‘folk,’ have transfigured the conventional novel of narrative and character” (119), something which is not apparent when “Eurocentric cultural norms in the King / James sense” (119) are applied wily-nilly.

Another aspect of James’ book annoys Brathwaite: the treatment of Africa by several of the critics. In particular, he claims that whenever “‘Africa’ appears in The Islands in Between it is immediately set off against a countervailing and favourable European influence” (119). He does not deny the “presence of this dichotomy” (120) in the literature but criticises the “valuation” (120) given to the “African constituent” (120) of the “Africa / Europe polarisation” (120). Brathwaite’s point is that James et al. view “‘Africa’ in the West Indies as a ‘survival’--a shame and a shambles--in relation to a European cultural norm against which it is also, somehow, in opposition” (122). Brathwaite contends, however, that it is not Africa but colonialism which is the cause of the problems in the Caribbean. Moreover, the real choice in the Caribbean is not between Europe and Africa but between “Africa and its debasement . . . through the nature of its creolisation” (122). Last but not least, what matters is not whether the folk in fact derive “their ‘rationalism’ their ‘law’ and their ‘purity’ from Europe and the opposites of these from Africa” (122) but whether “West Indian novelists think they do” (122).

Brathwaite finally turns his attention to the sole essay in James’ book of which he approves: Gordon Rohlehr’s on Naipaul, the novelist who has been most critical of the West Indies. Naipaul, Rohlehr perceives, is a writer “intimately engaged with his West Indian experience” (123) who “bitterly despairs of the colonial process, and implicitly rejects the colonial experience” (123). What differentiates Naipaul from others like Lamming who similarly reject colonialism, according to Brathwaite’s summary of Rohlehr’s argument, is that where “black West Indians . . . attempt to replace this colonial experience with aspects of ex-African experience” (123), Naipaul the “Caribbean East Indian individualist” (123) can “neither contemplate the acculturation of his people to debased colonial forms, nor yet condone their perpetuation of a false East Indianness” (123). This results in a “lonely position which ‘expresses itself in irony and in contempt for all things West Indian’” (123). However, in the “very process of rejecting West Indian society, Naipaul . . . embraces and examines it most intensely” (124). This, Brathwaite contends (relying on Rohlehr), is the “literary expression of a deeply rooted cultural dichotomy. The apparently Eurocentric East Indian remains a West Indian” (124) whose work cannot be read “without a consideration of the *society* he writes about” (124).

All in all, Brathwaite’s point is that “West Indian writing, as a collective regional enterprise, has been unambiguously concerned . . . with an examination of West Indian society” (125), one conducted not “mainly in a spirit of antithesis, a polar choice between Europe and Africa, metropolitan and folk, in which, in the end, the metropolitan wins out” (125) or in the “spirit of the artist’s lonely struggle against his society” (125). Rather, what West Indian writers are “concerned with is constructing an *alternative* to their imposed and inherited condition. This, in terms of their art, means the development of alternative forms--dialect, rather than ‘standard’ speech, ‘folk’ rather than middle class characters” (125-126). This, in a nutshell, is how Brathwaite’s conceptualises West Indian literary history.