

# Introduction

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The twenty-nine essays collected here were contributions to the twenty-third ASNEL conference that was held in Aachen and Liège from 31st May to 4th June 2000. The theme of the conference was "Towards a Transcultural Future: Literature and Society in a 'Post'-Colonial World." During five days some 200 papers and talks were given by creative writers as well as critics on various post-colonial topics. The present volume offers a selection of the essays dealing with Caribbean Literature which is understood here in its widest sense, ie, as referring to authors living in the Caribbean, but also to writers of Caribbean heritage part of its diaspora, whether based in Britain, Canada or the United States.

The genesis of this book, *Bridges Across Chasms*, undoubtedly accounts for its consistency and the recurrence in its pages of such notions as transculturality, hybridity and creolization, which clearly echo the central theme of the conference. More precisely, its Caribbean focus relates to two underlying preoccupations which interact in a fruitful tension and, as this collection testifies, trigger reflection, either creative or critical, or both. One of these is the obsession with the very real disruptions that were caused by colonization, slavery, and exile and whose effects are still with us today. The other brings to light possibilities of healing, reconciliation, and belonging, never fully achieved but an always present goal. In most contributions this tension initiates a transformative process, a crossing between a devastating past experience and perspectives of improvement in the future. This perception of the post-colonial condition as an ongoing passage provides a first explanation for the choice of "bridges across chasms" as the title of this collection. This phrase, borrowed from Wilson Harris and used by Maria Cristina Fumagalli in the title of her own essay on Derek Walcott, seems to fit this volume for other reasons discussed below.

In spite of their unquestionable thematic unity, the papers in this volume present a wide array of topics and methodologies. Creative writing feeds the critics' work, and it is in recognition of this debt that this volume opens with the contributions of imaginative writers. Wilson Harris, Caryl Phillips and Lawrence Scott share with us their visions of cross-culturality, and are followed by a theatre practitioner, Tone Brulin, whose adaptation of Wilson Harris's *Jonestown* was performed in Aachen during the conference. As can be seen from the table of contents, many of the papers in the collection are studies of major Caribbean novelists, poets or playwrights, not only Wilson Harris and Caryl Phillips, but also Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Michelle Cliff, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Paule Marshall, V.S. Naipaul, and Derek Walcott, to mention just the most famous among them. In the last fifty

years, the Caribbean and its diaspora have produced an exceptionally innovative and challenging literature which has been honoured by countless literary prizes (among which two Nobel Prizes), but also by an increasingly wider and devoted readership. One could say without exaggerating that this volume tackles the major developments of this literary tradition still in expansion. Starting from the exile novels of George Lamming, Sam Selvon, and Andrew Salkey discussed in John Ball's paper it covers writing from the 1970s and 1980s to finally concentrate on the recent production of such writers as Cristina Garcia, Edwidge Danticat and Neil Bissoondath presented in Mari Peepre's article. While some papers centre on a textual analysis of one or two writers, others combine this with a more theoretical reflection on concepts like the Black Atlantic (Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi), the diaspora (Mari Peepre), postmodernism and metafiction (Pétra Tournay), the representation of hybridity (Isabel Hoving), the question of subjectivity (Margarete Keulen and Donald Wellman), or creolization (Gordon Collier). The history of literature is present too in Ian Dieffenthaller's essay, which provides a survey of West Indian British poetry through a portrait of one of its representatives. Finally, papers on drama by Valérie Bada and Núria Casado and on detective fiction by Bruce King draw our attention to two genres that have perhaps been neglected in recent criticism but which clearly deserve closer attention.

Whatever their topics, all the essays seem to keep true to the idea of bridge building, not only by discussing texts which, in Valérie Bada's words, "attempt to bridge the gap of historical and cultural divisions through imaginative remembering" or through creativity, but also by enacting this gap crossing at the level of their own critical practice. Andrew Jefferson-Miles's paper suggests an interaction between the philosophy of Wilson Harris and his own painting. In her discussion of religion in Trinidad, Maarit Forde brings anthropology and literature together. This interdisciplinary approach is also obvious in Marlies Glaser's and Claudia Eppert's pieces which call respectively upon traductology and philosophy in their exploration of transculturality. A similar crossing is enacted in the papers that connect writers belonging to different traditions, whether linguistic or cultural. Whereas Eimer Page and Kathleen Gyssels bring anglophone and francophone writers together, other papers span various cultures: Anne-Julia Zwierlein links Derek Walcott with the seventeenth-century poet John Milton, Bénédicte Alliot does the same with V.S. Naipaul and Japanese art, and Wilson Harris unites Amerindian myth and Greek mythology. Finally, the idea of crossing also defines the paper of Gemma Robinson who brings Wilson Harris and Martin Carter into dialogue in spite of their political divergences.

Even though the papers in this volume dwell on the crossing and act as ceaseless bridge-throwers themselves, there is nothing 'pontifical' in the way they perceive these bridges. Quite the contrary, for they conceive of

the way to transculturality not in terms of being, but of becoming, which entails ambivalence, precariousness, provisionality,<sup>1</sup> and even risks of entrapments as Paget Henry points out in relation to neo-colonization. Caryl Phillips's choice of the Atlantic Ocean as a fluctuating home, a sort of elastic bridge between his plural selves, may provide an illustration of the flexibility necessary in approaching the transcultural future. The contributors to this collection therefore repeatedly question, each in their own way, such absolutes as independence (Ulla Rahbek), wholeness (Margarete Keulen), or hybridity (Maarit Forde). Even in-betweenness, as Donald Welmann writes in his paper on the transgressive text, "is likely to become congealed or normalized [...] unless experiences of quotidian realities also embrace psychological realities." This is why several papers remind us to be wary of rigid theoretical concepts and to listen instead to individual voices, whether the characters of the literary texts or their writers. One of these voices is Amryl Johnson's, who, thanks to Christine Pagnoulle, posthumously brings this anthology to a close.

In conclusion, the bridge metaphor also applies to this book as a whole, which is particularly appropriate for a volume on Caribbean Literature because Caribbean people are, for historical and geographical reasons, experienced bridge-builders, gifted with an almost compulsive need to 'cross the river', as Caryl Phillips's novel *Crossing the River* brilliantly demonstrates.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Caribbean literature and culture cannot be conceived of in isolation but require to be examined in the context of their truly global ramifications. Appropriately, *Bridges Across Chasms* brings together contributors from seventeen different countries, both established writers and newcomers to the field. It is now up to the readers to discover how they interact with each other and thereby throw more bridges, which are virtually limitless in number.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Wilson Harris for the ideas of "provisionality" and "precariousness" which he uses to describe cross-cultural bridges. See Wilson Harris, *Selected Essays: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*, ed. Andrew Bundy (London/New York: Routledge, 1999): 211, 239. See also the recurrence of the bridge metaphor in Wilson Harris's fiction.

<sup>2</sup> Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993).