

Andrea Schwieger Hiepko

A Caribbean Travesty of the Odyssey: Antonio Benítez Rojo's Atlantic Triangle. An Interview

A. S. H.: In your trilogy which consists of a historical novel, *Sea of Lentils*, a collection of short stories, *A View from the Mangrove*, and a literary study, *The Repeating Island. The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, you are attempting to construct a Caribbean meta-archipelago by blending Caribbean literature, culture and performance with European poststructuralist projects and theories of fractal mathematics. You are drawing on French philosophers such as Deleuze /Guattari, Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard and the premises of chaos theory in order to find new visions of the Caribbean as an open and unending creolizing movement. With this trilogy and especially *The Repeating Island*, you had great success in the US book market and the postcolonial field in general. What do you think are the main reasons for this success?

A. B. R.: It was important that the book was written as a literary exercise, as a literary piece. I didn't use, let's say, a theoretical approach when I was writing the book. It was like writing a novel. It has some chapters actually that have the structure of fiction. There are two or three chapters that I have written in the same mood as I am writing fiction. And I think that was important because at that time usually that kind of books depended on the use of theoretical language like the language used by Derrida, for instance, which was very much in fashion. So it was not expected that this kind of

approach was narrated in this particular kind of language. But at the same time it was more accessible to students or non-intellectuals. So I think that was perhaps one of the reasons for its success.

Relating Caribbean history

A. S. H.: You told us that the story of the Caribbean has been written by white men. That is perhaps one of the reasons why Caribbean literature is now very often an historical fiction. In your writing you include beliefs, myths, and cultural manifestations such as music and rhythm and the folkloric of the Caribbean. Do you consider yourself as an historian narrating Caribbean history? What makes for the complexity of the Caribbean culture?

A. B. R.: Let's say that history and particularly Caribbean history is very appealing for. One reason is that Caribbean historiography was written by Creole historians (local, white historians). They didn't know much about and were not very interested in the sociology of slavery. They didn't know what it felt like to be a slave abducted from the African continent and shipped over the entire Atlantic, the problems and the kind of life they had. But slavery was so important for the Caribbean. And it remained without a voice to tell the story on how they coped with their situation and their aspirations. So I think that especially in the 18th century, before abolition, a very important part of that history got lost. You have the history that was written by people who were educated in London, Paris or Madrid. And their main concern was to write about their own class and how they evolved into an autonomous population that wanted independence from their respective colonial powers. So I think that it is a very interesting field for writers, and that's the

reason why we have so many of them dealing with slavery and the Caribbean in the US. The other thing is that there are very attractive themes. Can you imagine what a history of piracy throughout the Caribbean would look like? And there are so many interesting things about how the pirates attacked the Spanish fleet, smuggler stories. Then again you have the slave trade and you have also a region which is known for its hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanoes: huge catastrophes that are inspiring subjects you can write novels about. On the other hand, the Caribbean for many years was like the courtyard of Europe. As a matter of fact very important admirals like Nelson began their careers in the Caribbean. There is also the fact that the islands were switching from one colonial power to the other. First, Trinidad was a Spanish colony, then it turned out to be French, and 20 years later it was a British colony. So you have this kind of instability and at the same time a richness giving shape to a very dense Creole culture. At the end of the slave trade, depending on what particular colony you are referring to, there was a huge amount of immigrant servants from Asia that came to the Caribbean. In the case of Cuba, my home country, we had a huge invasion of Chinese coolies coming to the island in the 1850's. They represented about 5% of the Cuban population in the 80's. In other countries like Guyana or Trinidad the East Indian immigration was very important. So all this contributed to the density of Caribbean culture and Caribbean literature. The whole conquest and colonization of the Americas began in the Caribbean. The islands of Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, and Cuba were the base of the conquest of Mexico, for instance. Hispaniola served as a base for the conquest of Central America, like Panama and Colombia. So, at the very beginning the Caribbean was a very

important strategic region connecting the New World to Europe and to Africa. Later you have the interest of the US in the Caribbean: interventions, occupations, the Spanish-American war and the input of American culture in the region. In sum, we are going to have a conglomerate of people having to do technically with the whole world. Not to mention the huge amount of tourists that go to the Caribbean beaches and contribute to this cultural density as well. A literary subject as a whole. However, in order to get rid of the ethnocentric implications that the scientific field of history implicates I rather prefer to intermingle different genres in order to let this narrative knowledge come out, and to represent the collective unconscious in a kind of mediated memory perpetuated by literature, religion and music.

Binary oppositions, postmodern theory and the "butterfly effect"

A. S. H.: You describe the state of art at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century as a network of cultures in chaotic motion, whose actions are unforeseeable and aimless. First, you appropriated concepts like the machine, vanishing lines, fragmentation and chaos to contrast them with Caribbean concepts like hybridity, syncretism or acculturation. Then you obtained a postcolonial theory and semiotics of culture which should be a possible key to understand situations of change and globalization in general. When did you come in contact with those concepts that led you to a new vision of the Caribbean?

A. B. R.: Well, if I have a vision of the Caribbean, it was initiated by pure chance. Years ago, when I arrived in the United States and I was employed by Amherst College, I had to write a book in order to get tenure, and I was very disappointed

with myself because I couldn't write an essay dealing with racial issues in the Caribbean without using binary oppositions. It was like a forbidden thing to do. Everybody was concerned with dismantling binary oppositions here and there. But I couldn't talk about a social and cultural area like that without racial conflicts. The other problem was that I was very familiar with Afro-Cuban religions and beliefs. I would say that 80% of the Cuban population believe in *santería*. For them society is a really different thing. I was really concerned about what Jean François Lyotard called "narrative knowledge" which I am dealing with in *The Repeating Island*. I couldn't describe Caribbean culture without mentioning this narrative knowledge as a very important part of the society. On the other hand, at that time postmodernity was already in fashion. There were certain concepts like the impossibility to get to the origin of things, or to conceptualize a social phenomenon in terms of a dialectic that will eventually produce a synthesis. So, what was happening is that I was feeling like somebody who had three personalities. One was believing in some postmodern concepts, another part of me was concerned about binary oppositions like the racial struggle or differences, and thirdly there was something that postmodernity was not taking into account, which was this narrative knowledge. And so far both, postmodernity and modernity, claimed the presence of scientific thought. I really didn't know what to do because the time for my tenure was getting closer. But all of a sudden a very unusual incident made me turn in a new direction. I have to admit, I am afraid of lightning and of thunder. I was about to give a lecture in Vanderbilt University, and I was crossing the smokey mountains in my car. There was an electric storm. I could see lightning hitting the trees, and I

was so nervous that I decided to turn on the radio. It turned out that there was an interview with a man named James Gleick. This man was talking about something which would eventually be the topic of an important book. Its title was: *Chaos*. While he was talking I realized that I could assemble all my thoughts and concepts under the umbrella of chaos theory. But you have to take into account that I was an economist in Cuba, that was my professional formation. I knew mathematics and it was very easy for me to get acquainted with chaos theory. At that time people would call it chaos, and later it became complexity theory. In any case I couldn't find the answers to several questions relating to the Caribbean region. For example, there was no satisfactory answer to the question: Why are 30% of the Cuban population black although Cuban culture is much more africanized than, let's say, that of Barbados where the population is 95% black? This is an example of where I could use chaos theory. There is one principle: the butterfly effect. It refers to very small, insignificant forces that can grow extremely fast and in a relatively short period of time become a huge force. It can grow much faster than the others. And as a result I came up with something that *santeros*, without any scientific knowledge, used to tell believers. That the important thing for conserving *santería* was the percentage of free blacks in the population. Cuba had a large percentage of free blacks. In the 1850's the population in Havana was about 70% black. If you look at Martinique or Puerto Rico you will find that only 1 or 2% were free blacks. What was happening is that free blacks were like a bridge. They were able to transmit culture such as their Yoruban beliefs in this case. They were cultural agents able to communicate their culture to the regular population, the white population. That was not

the case in the plantation system which was like a concentration camp. Slaves didn't have any contact with the world outside. So this is an example of how chaos theory served me as a tool in order to translate certain Caribbean traits or phenomena.

From a repeating island to a triangular Atlantic network

A. S. H.: At the conference in Lugano you first enlarged your concept of a repeating island to a more global concept that you call the triangular Atlantic network. Is the vision of a triangular Atlantic network the indispensable consequence of the repeating island, or does it point into a completely different direction?

A. B. R.: When I wrote *The Repeating Island* I was exposed to a Caribbean which was overflowing the Caribbean sea. It was impossible to analyze the otherness of the Caribbean because all the information was totally dispersed. That is why I think that we are probably the first people affected by globalization. In many ways you can say that we are the avantgarde of globalization. It is like a permanently open macrosystem, whose origins are impossible to uncover. Caribbeaness is scattered throughout America, Europe, Africa and Asia. I knew that, but hadn't conceptualized it at that time. Five months ago I read a book by Duncan J. Watts, titled *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age*. "Six degrees" means that you or I are separated by six handshakes from any other person in the world. That means, in order to understand it scientifically, we need a science of networks. After reading it I felt so enthusiastic about it that I immediately tried to figure out all kinds of Caribbean connections. Then I started to sketch the lines of the colonial trade upon a world map. When I had drawn the principle

lines of navigation, as you can imagine, the result was a triangular network of criss-crossed lines that marked the voyages from Europe to Africa, Africa to America and America to Europe. So while in *The Repeating Island* my main interest focused on the Antillean plantations, it now turned to a wider geographical space: the Atlantic. Because the slave plantation system is more than a Caribbean phenomenon, it is an Atlantic phenomenon. There have been books about this before. What was probably new was the possibility of the system of a triangular literature, let's call it an Afro-Atlantic literature. So that was my first thought about the consequences of the slave trade, and I began connecting the system of novels to the system of the Atlantic trade. I realized that the first abolitionist novels that were written in England, France, Spain and the US were written by women. And that all of these women were in contact with slavery. In England, there was Aphra Ben. She worked at Suriname and visited plantations there. There was Claire Duras from France, who visited Martinique, and there were the women writers in the United States like Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. You even have Madame de Staël with a short story called "Mirza", written before 1789, criticizing slavery. And not only did they deal with abolition, but they were also somewhat criticizing colonial institutions and administrations. And I think it is possible to find in these novels a protofeminist thought. So that was something promising in terms of finding out about the possibility of the existence of an Afro-Atlantic literature. So if you are from a Caribbean island, let's say Cuba, the first step would be to know the other islands, of course. And the next step would be to work on this triangle and to find the relationship between Africa, Europe and the Americas. That is exactly what I am doing now.

Documentary or fiction: The Woman in a Battle Dress

A. S. H.: Talking about the triangular literature, could you tell me something about the development of your latest novel, *Mujer en traje de batalla*? When did you have the idea to write about this woman and her legal case? How long did you need to prepare for and write the work? It appears more like a profound research work than like a fictional work.

A. B. R.: First of all, when I wrote it, I had this triangular system already in my head, but didn't design the narration out of a principle purposely. It seems to be, in my case, that I am developing theoretical principles out of my fiction. When I began to write I was in Cuba. My collection of short stories was very much concerned with what was happening in Cuba at the time. I was working in "Casa de las Américas" in Cuba and they had a very good library on the subject of the Caribbean. But it also has to do with my childhood. I spent it partly in Panama and partly in Havana. In Panama I was very impressed with the old stories about fortresses, castles and hurricanes. I grew up being very curious about colonial history. I was leaving Cuba to go to the US and Haiti, and then I wrote *El mar de las lentejas*. It had to do with the 16th century. It was the century that gave birth to the Caribbean. And then I had to learn a lot of European history. So I was leaving Cuba behind at the same time that I was writing about Cuba. A book appeared with the name *Crónicas de Santiago de Cuba*. The author, Emilio Bacardí Moreau, by the way, is the founder of the rum brand Bacardi. In six books he wrote about the important things that were happening there, year after year. When I got to 1823, I read about a woman named Enriqueta Faber. This woman passed for many years as an official male surgeon. She worked in Baracoa

for three years after which another woman, Juanita, denounced her and said that she was a woman. It was a huge scandal. She was taken to court and was first sentenced to ten years in prison. After she appealed to a higher court, she had to serve four years in a women's hospital in Havana. But she was forbidden to go out of the hospital. Finally, she was expelled from Cuba and sent to New Orleans. I only had that information so far. I wasn't aware about the faith of that woman. But I wanted to write a novel about her. The second piece of information that I found about her was in a biographical dictionary. She was born in Lausanne and was an orphan. She was living with her uncle who was a surgeon. She decided to study medicine and, of course, was not allowed to go to the University of Paris at that time. So she dressed up as a man and went to university and studied medicine for four years in disguise. In Paris she fell in love with another female medical student, who was also posing as a man. They became attached and lived together. Then Enriqueta did her last year in Moscow and consequently was recruited by the French army to serve as a surgeon in Spain. She was captured in a decisive battle, and as a prisoner of war was forced to serve in a British hospital. And for some reason, after the amnesty, she didn't decide to go back to France but instead went to Cuba, where she continued to work in a hospital. Then she was sent to Baracoa, where she met Juanita. My third research began here. I was able to find the papers relating to her process in Cuba, her testimonies and the speech given by her lawyer. I learned about a Cuban writer's novel in which Enriqueta's case is mentioned. In the novel, my main character, Henriette, is writing her memoirs in 1870 in New York. But after some pages she realizes that she is beginning to write the stories of different people she knew. So her stories became fictional due to a lack of

memory on her part. Then she decided to write a novel instead. This describes at the same time my process of implementing both historical and fictitious events within a novelistic text. My research of the historical data brought me to Spain, where I visited one of the hospitals she worked in. I visited many places in Paris, where she had studied. So in my research I experienced a lot of what she had gone through. But it is also a Caribbean novel. It has to do with my new interest in the sense of a triangular literature. But, of course, the idea for the novel came first.

A. S. H.: Basing the novel on a real person and real facts, did you want to create a documentary work, perhaps even a feminist document? Was it your intention to stay as close as possible to reality or just be inspired by an outstanding biography?

A. B. R.: Both things. But its nearly impossible to do historiography in the Caribbean. Nevertheless, there is what is called the New Historical Novel. Critics say it is new because it is based on real persons and facts but still deals with ambiguity in not being able to represent reality. It keeps turning out to be fictional. I think I fit into this category in a way. But it has been called a postmodern novel as well. There are different episodes with different characters and narrative streams. There is a love story, a war story, an episode of a theatre troop traveling from one city to another, and then again the political implications of Enriqueta's studies. There is a variety of novelistic models, though I always use the same language. So you won't see a rupture in it. I love to do research and I want to make the reader believe that the novel deals with a particular time and space, although I know that it remains a fictional text.

A. S. H.: Although the story mainly takes place in Russia, the US and Europe, in what sense do you consider *Mujer en traje de batalla* to be a Caribbean Novel? The

Caribbean does not play a very important role in the text. Are there special categories that you would apply to it in terms of form and content? In the novel one can see more of a revision of 19th century European history, in the form of an episodic novel, rather than the creation of Caribbean history.

A. B. R.: You will read about creolization without using the word. You will see that the characters have a particular kind of culture which is in fact creolized. Although, I can't conceive a Caribbean novel without dealing with black people. In my novel the Haitian part is very important. The husband of one of my characters, named Maryse, is a black man from Saint-Domingue. They talk about Voodoo, Haitian politics and slavery. And it is also understood, that it happens in a community of black and mixed people. This is a "must" since it is the only thing that talks about the complexity of the Caribbean.

Creolizing Europe

A. S. H.: Do you think that the terminology you are working with in Caribbean literature and culture could be transmitted to Europe, with its problems of transformed identities, with exile, and the fear of losing their own culture and national heritage on the way to becoming a European unity?

A. B. R.: Presently, Europe is divided and at the same time united. European cultures are actually multicultural. You can even see it in Germany in the differences between the south and the north. This is a challenge. But you have to realize that what we call a national culture actually is an illusion. And I remember the first book that dealt with that terminology, it is called *Imagined Communities*. But illusionary or not, you really believe in a national culture. What is French culture, for example? Champagne produced by the monks,

cheeses, wines, what else? What you call national culture is the seal for centres far away from the periphery. In Cuba you have Santiago de Cuba with their famous dish “congris”, which is rice with red beans. If you move to Havana they have “moros y cristianos”, which is black beans and white rice. Both are considered genuine Cuban dishes. As a matter of fact, black beans came from Mexico and red beans came from Haiti, and there they are called “congo-riz”. What we call national culture doesn’t belong to us. Perhaps in Europe, in some places, you can find some originals. But mainly what we call French, Spanish or German culture is a mixture. This kind of creolization or transculturation or cultural syncretism happens everywhere. Only in the Caribbean is where it is extreme. I call it supersyncretism. It is very dense and continues to expand. This is not so in Europe. From the times of Charlemagne up to the present, through many wars and millions of dead people, the borders of Europe have remained more or less the same. There is a reason why Spain has to remain Spain, France has to remain France; and Germany, which is a special case since it is made up of small entities, but you still speak the same language and you have a lot of things in common. For example, for the Basque country to be separated from Spain is not suitable. They would die as a state. And although 90% of the Basque population don’t want separation, ETA still continues with its useless struggle. In regards to Catalonia it is much more profitable for the community to be part of Spain and by that means influence the centre of the government from the periphery. But who knows what the situation will look like 30 to 100 years from now? In Italy, if you compare Milan, Naples and Sicilie, they have nearly nothing in common. But the people deserve the illusion of an Italian nation. There is nothing detrimental in nationalism unless

you take that feeling too far and want to be acknowledged as a chosen people. But otherwise I think it is very convenient to have a national identity. And even in Latin-America it is very healthy. Sometimes it is the only thing that people have in order to hold their self-esteem up high. Economically speaking, there is no country that can really subsist by itself. You have to see what they have in common and what differentiates them. Or you study it like a group of differences, like I did in the Caribbean. Why not talk about the European Union? Those countries have a lot of things in common. Why not relate certain parts of Europe to Latin-America or to the Caribbean where they had important colonies. Is it possible to detach Latin-America from Spain or the Caribbean from the Americas? Or to detach all the former British colonies from England? It is totally impossible. Not to mention the French, who were giving up their colonies in order to integrate them as “Départements d’outre mer”.

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Antonio Benítez Rojo has published, with numerous reeditions and translations, a large amount of books; selected titles in Spanish:

Tute de reyes (1967)
Los inquilinos (1976)
El mar de las lentejas (1979)
Estatuas sepultadas y otros relatos (1984)
La isla que se repite (1989)
Paso de los vientos (1999)
Mujer en traje de batalla (2001)

Andrea Schwieger Hiepkö studied French, Spanish and Latin-American literature in Paris, Barcelona and Berlin. Her main area of work is Caribbean Literature and Cultural Theory, and the relationship between Caribbean culture and postmodern theories.