

On the Impossibility of All Possibility in Caribbean Theory

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ABSTRACT: Silvio Torres-Saillant's passionate defense of Caribbean intellectual traditions is far from being "an intellectual history of the Caribbean." Nevertheless, this is an indispensable book, both for what it says and for the Antillean passion that drives the author's argument, as well as for its silences, errors, and innumerable paths of deviation and reflection that it opens. The work is a truly Caribbean contraption, combining autobiography, philosophical argumentation, certain features of the political manifesto, and various modalities of criticism with a good deal of historical narrative and discursive inventiveness.

Silvio Torres-Saillant's passionate defense of Caribbean intellectual traditions against the hegemony of what he terms the "Western intellectual industry" is one more and meritorious attempt to enunciate the elusive movement and dispersed geography of Caribbean thought.¹ In a performative way the book is a sort of treaty on the subject. It is also a militant censure and, some would claim, an anti-academic denunciation of the perceived frivolity and political levity of what is otherwise known as critical theory. However, contrary to what is claimed by the title, it is far from being "an intellectual history of the Caribbean." The book fails to establish and defend the possibility that it announces as a given, which is to trace the development of "Caribbean discourse" as it "yields its own chronology" somewhere "outside the rigid inexorability of Western histories of ideas" (149). That would, of course, be a colossal undertaking, and Torres-Saillant's work, with its many and important gaps and silences, is primarily limited to twentieth-century literary and political references, leaving aside a corpus of work and experience that had an explosive development half a millennium ago and has since affected and conditioned cultural and intellectual developments the world over and well

1. Silvio Torres-Saillant, *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 7. Hereafter, page references to this book are in parenthesis within the text.

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Torres-Saillant is to be commended for his boldness and bravery as he sets out to slay the dragon of "theoretical" unintelligibility, academic political disengagement, and intellectual simulacra. His position is anchored to the clear realization of knowing himself to come from a world where new concepts and doctrines have always been tested in real space and praxis. In the world of Caribbean thought, ideas have always been required to prove their validity by being able to move the body in a seductive, sustainable, and continuous action that is far from the rigid posture of Saint Jerome in his studio. Still, for all its provocation, *An Intellectual History* often falls short—and some times back—in the prosecution of its case. Torres-Saillant embarks on a crusade against the "prodigious growth of 'post-colonial cultural studies'" (43), denouncing not without reason this school of thought as a neo-imperialist undertaking in which the children of the British Empire scramble to position themselves ever closer to the ideal of Britannia, writing back in the conqueror's language and showing to have learned well the use of the former master's whip. Yet, his quest seems to drift off course, driven by the seemingly inescapable need to accept and adhere to the discourse of otherness and alterity, which is as pervasively perverse and Eurocentric as the practices he wants to combat in the name of "intellectual self-defense" (105). Moreover, while he calls for metaphors that speak to the region's inheritance, he falls back, yet one more time, on the myth of Caliban. Unable to escape, like so many others before him, the storm in a teacup that characterizes much of the corpus of critical "subaltern" studies revolving around the last play of an author he describes as "the Western poet par excellence" (200), Torres-Saillant concludes by promoting the Shakespearean character as the very embodiment of the Caribbean spirit and praising its protean attributes of versatility and instability as they are manifest in the ideological unpredictability and physical—dare we say racial?—mutation of the island peoples (223).

Not surprisingly, he also falls back on the most common explanations for the temperament and character of the natives of the region. The emphasis on the catastrophic beginnings of the Antillean world (7), and on its geographic confinement to a zone where life unfolds under the permanent threat of natural disaster, is the intellectual equivalent of the stereotypes propagated by the tourism industry: the sunny beaches and palm trees, clear waters and dark native servants, archetypes that all go back to *Robinson Crusoe* and Columbus's *Diario* in the history of conquest and foreign exploitation of the Antilles. What dubious glory or perverse pleasure can be derived from proclaiming, yet again to the four winds, to be the wretched children of one of Earth's most treacherous geographic and historical landscapes? Is that not