Tuesday, 29 December
479. Rethinking Foundational Fictions of Caribbean Literature

1:45–3:00 p.m., Loews Philadelphia

A special session

Presiding: Leah Reade Rosenberg, Univ. of Florida

1. “José Martí’s Foundational Failure,” Keja L. Valens, Salem State Coll.
2. “The Taming of Miss Lou: Gentrification and ‘Dialect,’” Belinda J. Edmondson, Rutgers Univ., Newark
3. “Writing Indianness into the Caribbean Canon,” Lisa Outar, Saint John’s Univ., NY

ABSTRACTS

1. “José Martí’s Foundational Failure,” Keja L. Valens, Salem State Coll.

   Intimacy destroys, warns the original title of José Martí’s only novel, *Amistad funesta (Fatal Friendship, 1885)*, later re-titled *Lucía Jerez*. Martí dedicated his life to the foundation of a free Cuba, yet while romances knit nations in other nineteenth century Caribbean novels, in *Amistad funesta / Lucía Jerez* menaced and menacing love ravages public and private projects. Something about Lucía Jerez, about the quality of her femininity, the nature of her desire, and the power of her attraction run the national (heterosexual) romance inexorably off course.

   According to Martí’s *Lucía Jerez* was to have been “la novela hispanoamericana que se deseaba” (“the Hispanoamerican novel that was desired”; LJ 109), a story where “mero[s] […] amores” (“mere love affairs”) became infused with “mas altas empresas” (“higher ventures”; LJ 110). But Martí’s preface is staged as an apology, an admission of defeat. Either this novel or the novel erode the foundation faster than they can pour it.

   In this paper I ask: does *Lucía Jerez* present a set of fears and failures peculiar to Martí, or might it illuminate the tenuous foundations of the national romance in the Caribbean? A close look at fissures in Doris Sommer’s *Foundational Fiction* model plays off close readings of Martí’s hopes and fears for modernismo, for shifting gender and sexual norms at the turn of the century, and for an independent Cuba.

2. “The Taming of Miss Lou: Gentrification and ‘Dialect,’” Belinda J. Edmondson, Rutgers Univ., Newark

   Forty-odd years ago, V.S. Naipaul wryly noted that Caribbean dialect poetry and prose, while wildly popular at home, was objectionable to Caribbean populations as an international export. Naipaul’s observation is a challenge to the current view that it is critics, not readers, who are responsible for the two-tiered system of Caribbean literature that prevails. (In this ranking, internationally published literature outranks local
literature.) So, too, does the career of Jamaican poet and folklorist Louise Bennett, which reveals the politics of class as does perhaps no other Caribbean writer.

Louise Bennett died recently and received a state funeral. “Miss Lou” (as she was best known) was almost single-handedly responsible for legitimizing the use of Jamaican Creole, or "dialect", in the island's schools and arts. Her career is both representative and singular; representative, in that it embodies the terminal trajectory of the local dialect writer; singular, for its length and its not-insignificant part in the reification of Creole into a global signifier of Caribbean originality. Dialect poetry and prose has been a popular staple of Caribbean newspapers and the Caribbean theater since the 19th century. Miss Lou is only the best-known of a welter of obscure Caribbean "dialect" poets-cum-folklorists, writers and actors who came to local prominence in the 1950s onwards. Usually comic radio personalities or newspaper columnists, these writers were—and are—beloved quotidian presences in the lives of the Caribbean middle classes, but emphatically and distinctly not for international consumption.

The significance of these popular performers lies in the way in which their renditions of Creole speech and their visions of Caribbean life have been so seamlessly integrated with state interests in the post-colonial Caribbean. Wearing an anachronistic Madras "head-tie" and peasant dress, the iconic image of Miss Lou reflects a vision of "authentic" Jamaica that, curiously, disturbs neither the Jamaican government's vision of an independent Creole nation, nor nostalgic tourist visions of a land of pleasant peasants, nor the old plantocracy's version of a colonial state. While working-class spoken word poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson and Mutabaruka acknowledge the influence of Miss Lou’s dialect poetry on their own work, middle-class Jamaican writers like Marlon James and Colin Channer reject her work as evidence of a colonial mentality. What to make of such distinctly opposed views of the cultural legacy of Louise Bennett? By way of answer, I would like to sketch the trajectory by which Miss Lou became Establishment and yet Not.


This paper points out the paradoxical role that the Indo-Caribbean figure occupies in creolization discourses and other dominant narratives of national and cultural identity in the Caribbean. In particular, I examine the less-considered sites of the Francophone Caribbean where Indians negotiate varying and competing constructions of ethnic, national, regional and colonial identities. I note here similarities and differences between the Francophone and the Anglophone Caribbean. I alternately employ and discard the nationalist lens in considering Indian claims, made within the non-independent French Caribbean, of creole identity as well as of French citizenship which elides racial difference.

I move between looking at literary representations of Francophone Indo-Caribbeans (by both Indian and non-Indian authors) and at contemporary debates around the place of Indians within Francophone Caribbean society. In particular, I do close readings of Ernest Moutoussamy’s *A la Recherche de l’Inde Perdu*, Raphael Confiant’s *La Panse du Chacal* and Maryse Conde’s *Crossing the Mangrove* as well as assess the celebration of Indian Arrival Day in Guadeloupe and the forms that commemorations of the 150th anniversary of Indian presence on the island took in 2004.
My central argument is that the Indo-Caribbean occupies a paradoxical space within discourses which attempt to celebrate the creole nature of the Caribbean. Markers of ethnic distinctiveness are shown to be both praised as part of the colorful fabric of the creole nation and feared as disrupting the unifying form of creole identity articulated by the Créolistes and others.

4. “The Literary Intellectual and the Nationalist Middle Class: Martí, McKay, Roumain,” Raphael Dalleo, Florida Atlantic Univ

The final paper asserts that the literature of nascent nationalisms in Cuba, Haiti, and Jamaica centered on a rivalry within the middle classes—Could the intellectual or the technocratic elite best represent the nation and the working classes? Contemporary reassessments of anticolonial nationalism often focus on how the middle class identity of these movements led to the postcolonial betrayal of the lower classes. However, Raphael Dalleo contends, this focus elides the heterogeneity of the middle class itself. Examining works by writers from the three major language groups of the Caribbean—José Martí’s “Nuestra América,” Claude McKay’s Banana Bottom, and Jacques Roumain Gouverneurs de la rosée, Dalleo illustrates that each makes writing a crucial part of the anticolonial project by privileging the figure of the literary intellectual, who can listen to and thus speak for the people. The professional segment of the middle class, with its allegiance to materialism and instrumental reason, is thus presented as a less viable ally to the lower classes. However, each also reveals that the tensions between the rationalizing objectives of the writer and the chaotic energies of the folk appear most difficult to resolve. The contradictions between the valorization of manly action and the ideology of the literary as something removed from instrumentality contributed to the crisis of anticolonial writing as nationalist movements came to power.