

Market Aesthetics: The Purchase of the Past in Caribbean Diasporic Fiction

Elena Machado Sáez

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Reviewed by Shane Graham, Utah State University

Unpacking the title of Elena Machado Sáez's book requires nearly as much care as understanding her argument. To work backwards from the end of the title: with the term "Caribbean Diasporic Fiction," she defines the scope of her study as historical novels by authors with Caribbean backgrounds living in the UK, USA, and Canada. The list of authors includes Andrea Levy, David Chariandy, Julia Alvarez, Michelle Cliff, Marlon James, Ana Menéndez, Dionne Brand, Monique Roffey, Junot Díaz, and Edwidge Danticat. The phrase "purchase of the past" has two senses: Machado Sáez asks how the past has currency and resonance for contemporary Caribbean diasporic fiction, through its investigation of the problems and possibilities of diaspora, history, and memory; and she interrogates what happens when narratives of the past are "purchased" by a global book-buying public—that is, when they are subjected to the "market aesthetics" that give her book its title.

For Machado Sáez, Caribbean diasporic historical fiction must negotiate between the decontextualizing imperatives of globalization and multiculturalism, and the ethical and pedagogical obligations of contesting official history and cultural amnesia: "first, their work expresses a postcolonial ethics of historical revision, and second, it struggles with the marketability of ethnicity" (2). One method the author uses to expose the workings of market aesthetics is to survey the critical reception of the novelists' previous books, and then to show us how the two or three novels under consideration in each chapter implicitly respond to the expectations and criticisms conveyed through the reviews. What this method helps us see, as in Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women*, is that the Caribbean diasporic historical novel "negotiates between the demands to entertain and teach, to simplify and complicate, to make history both palatable and challenging" (111). In response to these competing pressures, "Caribbean diasporic fiction self-consciously frames itself as a commodity in order to propose a postcolonial ethics of reading history" (19). It does so chiefly through author-doubles and reader-doubles dramatized within the text, and through figures of intimacy and sexuality: "These author- and/or reader-doubles espouse a postcolonial vision of history that the novel aims to teach to the reader," yet the "ethical vision becomes fractured by the irreconcilability of sexuality" (34).

One of the key tropes Machado Sáez identifies is the figure of "el secreto abierto"—the "open secret" of homosexuality known but not openly acknowledged—that most effectively allegorizes the tension

between the ethical and marketing imperatives of historical fiction: “The mandate of *el secreto abierto* entails a tension between knowing and not knowing that speaks to the delicate balance that the historical novel strives to maintain with its ethical imperative: educating the audience about Caribbean history but resisting the readerly impulses to access and categorize Caribbean interiority” (41). She gives one example in Alvarez’s *In the Name of Salomé*, which gives us an author-double in the figure of Camila the teacher, and whose narrator “expresses misgivings about translating Camila’s closeted sexuality for a contemporary audience. . . . The fracturing of this historical fiction’s pedagogical imperative frames the market and historiography as rhetorical spaces that cannot imagine a *sexual* queer woman as an ethical agent of history” (97). Similarly, Michelle Cliff’s novel *Free Enterprise* expresses “doubts about whether the reader will be able to make sense of the structural and symbolic gaps in knowledge and context” that the novel dramatizes (101). And in Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the narrator Yunior erases Oscar’s homosexuality out of his own preoccupation with conforming with the standards of masculinity as imagined by the Caribbean diasporic self-image: “What Yunior succeeds in doing is merely reinstating the very standards of masculinity and Dominicanness that alienate Oscar and himself” (175). From this, Machado Sáez concludes that “the novel is a testament to the dangerous lure of beautiful endings” (175)—dangerous because the beauty results from exclusion and selective memory.

I quote so liberally in my summary above partly because Machado Sáez’s argument is abstract and elaborate, and not easily encapsulated in a brief paraphrase. Parts of her argument are carefully laid out and buttressed; I find particularly compelling the etymological link she explores between “dictation” and “dictatorship” in her last chapter, on Díaz and Danticat. *Oscar Wao* and *Dew Breaker*, the author argues, both regard diasporic cultural production “as relying upon models of dictation inherited from postcolonial authoritarian regimes” (155); both writers, then, “posit a critique of their unusual and exemplary roles as cultural ambassadors—if one voice is chosen to represent a diasporic community, how many are silenced?” (156).

Other parts of Machado Sáez’s argument are murkier. In particular, the fourth chapter, entitled “Messy Intimacies: Postcolonial Romance in Ana Menéndez, Dionne Brand, and Monique Raffey,” formulates its claims about the novelists’ use of romance in opposition to what she terms “male historiography.” My complaint here has to do with the imprecision of this term: does she mean historiography written by men, or a masculinist historiography that privileges the role of men in history? Sometimes she qualifies the term with adjectives: “prevailing” (131), “leading” (133), and “prominent male historiographies” (152). Just as often, though, Machado Sáez pits the work of women novelists against a seemingly monolithic “male historiography.” She does, granted, give three examples, in books by David Scott, Juan Flores, and Michael Eric Dyson; and she convincingly argues that these three books position women as “silent

witnesses to, or victims of, history”: “Heteronormativity is implicitly the code for relating women to the Great Men of history” (127). Without, however, defining more clearly the larger group she regards these historiographies as belonging to, Machado Sáez risks basing the whole chapter’s argument on a convenient straw man and an overly reductive binary.

No book can account for all prior scholarship in its field, and it seems churlish in a review to catalogue omissions from the bibliography. But some of the opportunities that Machado Sáez misses are sorely felt, opportunities to engage important recent scholarship in ways that would enrich her own argument. In chapter 4, for instance, when she asserts that romance serves in Caribbean diasporic fiction “as a genre that facilitates a feminist revision of anticolonial movements while also tackling the rhetorical shortcomings of revolutionary discourse” (129), my mind immediately went to Yogita Goyal, who argues that in black Atlantic literary texts, “the realist narrative of the nation is interrupted by the romance of the diaspora” (9). Referring to the role that black literature must perform “of both history and prophecy,” Goyal claims that “Romance fits the elasticity and semantic openness required for such activities of cultural reconstruction and remembrance, but also for its ability to signal the freedom of possibilities beyond the degraded reality of the present” (13). Machado Sáez’s point—that Caribbean diasporic literature at the same time self-consciously and ambivalently critiques the limitations of such a process of community reinvention through romance—usefully extends and complicates Goyal’s reading of “black Atlantic” writing. But Goyal’s more detailed account of the rhetorical and symbolic mechanisms through which that reinvention takes place is far richer than Machado Sáez’s, and her book would benefit from the conversation.

Another text I was surprised to see omitted from Machado Sáez’s bibliography was Alison Donnell’s *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*. In its critique of the “canonization” of Caribbean literature around “a cluster of issues—anti-colonialism, nationalism; migration and diaspora; the centrality of African Caribbean ethnicity; the concept of women as doubly colonized and the marginalisation of sexuality and homosexuality” (5), Donnell’s argument would seem to pose a challenge to the fundamental premises that organize Machado Sáez’s own book, which emphasizes three of those four clusters. Addressing Donnell’s challenges directly would only strengthen Machado Sáez’s argument. What is more, Donnell’s focus on “those texts and literary moments that no longer feed into the current set of critical demands” (1), including literature by people who stayed on their islands and wrote about local concerns, would provide both a complement to and a sort of control experiment for Machado Sáez’s attempts to identify a Caribbean diasporic literary identity.

Despite these disappointing omissions and minor shortcomings in its argument, *Market Aesthetics* gives us a framework for reading Caribbean diasporic literature that has both flexibility and explanatory power. In reading it, for example, I found myself thinking of Claude

McKay's *Banjo*, which surely must be regarded as an ur-text of Caribbean diasporic fiction, though not a historical novel: it contains an author-double, in the figure of the Haitian writer Ray, and its representation of a homosocial community of black male workers and vagabonds in Marseille is full of what Machado Sáez calls "visible silences [which serve] to allegorize the challenges of historical recovery" (110). McKay's novel precedes the period that Machado Sáez is recounting, when globalization and multiculturalism were the major influences on the publishing industry's market aesthetics, and yet *Banjo* features many of the tendencies that she ascribes to those forces. This raises fascinating questions for future investigation. And then, in reading her second chapter, on Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*, I also found myself thinking of Levy's most recent novel *The Long Song*. Levy here again gives us an author-double in the figure of July, who narrates her life as a slave in Jamaica over the constant interruptions of her son, who owns the printer that will publish her book. From the very beginning, then, July feels pulled between the ethical imperative to tell the truth about slavery, and the market aesthetics symbolized in her son.

The fact that Machado Sáez's argument lends itself so readily to interpreting texts that are both more recent than its scope, and much older, is testament to how fruitful and illuminating the lens she brings to bear on the Caribbean diasporic novel is. In her conclusion, she further extends her investigation into the realm of the Internet, where "the shaping forces of market aesthetics can be seen . . . in the shift from print to digital" (197). Her study of the online "paratexts" around Diaz's *Oscar Wao* and Robert Antoni's *As Flies to Whatless Boys* logically extends her earlier methodology of surveying reviews of the authors' previous fictional works and their implicit responses, and suggests a provocative methodological model for future scholars of contemporary literature to adopt. I look forward to reading the scholarship that this book should inspire, by Machado Sáez and others, for many years to come.

Works Cited

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