

*The Caribbean Novel Since 1945: Cultural Practice, Form, and the Nation-State*

Michael Niblett

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As a comparatist, I have become skeptical of books that offer to analyze a literary topic in a “pan-Caribbean” manner. However, upon delving into Michael Niblett’s *Novel Since 1945: Cultural Practice, Form, and the Nation-State* I was delighted to discover that this work does live up to the comparative promise. Niblett has been extremely judicious in the selection of texts from such a linguistically and politically diverse region. He sets up an extremely ambitious research agenda and acquits himself elegantly and convincingly.

After the Introduction, Niblett’s book is divided into five densely packed chapters developed more or less chronologically in order of the publication dates of the novels he analyzes. Works studied in depth or alluded to range from Jacques Roumain’s 1944 *Gouverneurs de la rosée* to the 2008 *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. Niblett examines a number of factors relevant to these works, including their evolution and that of the thought processes of several authors; how they have incorporated cultural practices such as stickfighting, Carnival, Myal, and the use of Creole; how the form and styles of the novels have developed; and, most significantly, how the notion of nation-state has changed in the face of global economic pressures. Through its various chapters, *The Caribbean Novel Since 1945* traces and explores the dynamic interplay among writers Édouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, Earl Lovelace, and Wilson Harris, among others.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus informs the theoretical framework. According to Niblett, during colonialist times “corporeal practices manifest a habitus coexistent with but different from that structured by the colonial regime” (10). He seeks to answer the following questions: How do ruptures and reconstructions manifest themselves in the novel? How does the Caribbean novel articulate modernity? How has the “nation” been mediated in literary form? He also brings into play Frederic Jameson’s ideas about modernity and archaeologies of the future and questions postcolonial-poststructuralist theorists who have disavowed all forms of nationalism.

The *modus operandi* for each chapter includes an initial encompassing view of several authors and works, mostly Francophone and Anglophone, but without neglecting Spanish-speaking authors, who are very wisely and impressively situated within the larger Latin American context. He then focuses his attention on two or three central figures. For example, in Chapter One, “The Promise of National Independence: Modernity, Allegory, and Sacrifice,” which examines

novels of the 1940s and 1950s, Niblett examines Jacques Roumain, Jacques-Stéphen Alexis (*L'espace d'un cillement*), and Sam Selvon (*A Brighter Sun*). Nevertheless, Niblett buttresses his thesis of the central tragic figure (as a national allegory of the colonial state) that needs to be sacrificed for the good of the community through a thorough examination of Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo*, George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, Édouard Glissant's *La Lézarde*, and Roger Mais's *The Hills Were Joyful Together* and *Brother Man*. In Chapter Two, "'The People Living a Life Every Man for Himself': Problems in the Postindependence Body (Politic)," Niblett furthers this analysis with novels that focus on rejuvenating the community and highlighting the feminine, arguing that they "suggest [...] a potential for moving away from patriarchal and social models" (95).

In Chapter Three, "Literary Deliriums: Cultural Expression, Commodity Fetishism, and the Search for Community," Niblett argues for the examination of a dialectical link that "could exist between the subaltern classes and those representing them [...], one that will be subject to constant critique and recalibration" (124-5), as seen in Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnifique* and Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*. The analysis moves through the late 1970s and 80s and addresses the unique political situation of Puerto Rico. Consistent with the structure of the other chapters, Niblett pays critical attention to Wilson Harris's *The Far Journey of Oudin* and Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*.

Chapter Four, "From Breakdown to Rebirth: Ritual Reconfiguration of the Nation-State," is pivotal in so far as Niblett continues to explore the idea of a dialectical link. He notes, however, that authors in the 1980s and 1990s strive to work a "dialectical image [that] would not only capture the reality of [the] divided condition, but also articulate its unity, to reveal its nonsynchronous modalities to be nevertheless synchronous insofar as they are the product of a total, unitary, historical process" (134). Niblett gives Edna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* a close look in terms of her use of ritual forms. He furthers the argument with a discussion of Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, in which the ego collapses as the text cannibalizes other discourses (e.g., the epic form, Saint-John Perse) and, in so doing, "consumes the past, rebirthing it, as it were, in the service of rethinking the present and the future" (154).

These arguments bring us to a challenging Chapter Five, "'No Pain like This Body': Race, Gender, and Sexuality in a Time of Crisis," in which Niblett questions postcolonial-poststructuralist critics who have dismissed the nation-state idea. Astutely, he brings to the foreground lesser-known Francophone Indo-Caribbean novelists. In keeping with the title of this chapter, Niblett systematically documents the role, first, of female characters and, second, of female novelists in all of the preceding chapters. From Alexis's *La Niña*, through Brodber, to Narmala Shewcharan (from Guyana), just to mention a few, he signals women's importance in the nation-state and how often a "masculinist" nationalist project has subsumed issues of gender and sexuality.

Although Niblett's study is inclusive, Cuban works are mostly left out. Carpentier appears in the first chapter, but the next Cuban author to be discussed appears only in Chapter Five, largely because Cuba "did delink itself from the global capitalist economy and suffered retribution in return" (194). To his credit, Niblett also compares Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's *Trilogía sucia de La Habana* (1998) and Edmundo Desnoes's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (1967). Here Cuba's anachronistic ideal of the New Man serves as a contrasting backdrop to other nation-states grappling with how to represent nonsynchronous realities in novel form. It nevertheless would have been interesting to consider Cubans residing abroad, since, by Niblett's own admission, "this emphasis on the nation-state does not preclude or lessen the importance of the international context, nor of the impact of migration or diaspora" (203).

The various crises affecting the Caribbean in the late 1990s and into the new millennium have made texts such as Margaret Cezair-Thompson's *The True History of Paradise* appear to abandon the notion of the nation-state in favor of postcolonial conceptions of migrancy, liminality, hybridity, and multiculturalism. Niblett refers us to Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), in which the nation-state remains important albeit reconfigured "along the axis of sexuality and gender" (202). In an effort to further illustrate this point, Niblett then turns his critical attention to Brodber's *Myal* as an example of a novel which has received little attention in postcolonial studies because it continues to be concerned with "nationalism and the nation, with locality and emplacement" (203).

I respect Niblett's assessment of the importance of the notion of the nation-state in this era of globalization, because, as he states in his book, it is integral to "the construction of genuinely progressive forms of transnational solidarity—to internationalism, in other words" (207). Niblett's elegant style and clear arguments, paired with some substantial and well-researched notes, provide fertile ground for further debates.

*The Caribbean Novel Since 1945* is a must read for those interested in viewing the novel in a pan-Caribbean context. Niblett's painstaking documentation, thorough analyses of so many different novels in different languages, and his methodical countering of postcolonial critics who disavow the notion of the nation-state make for a worthwhile, informative, and illuminating read.