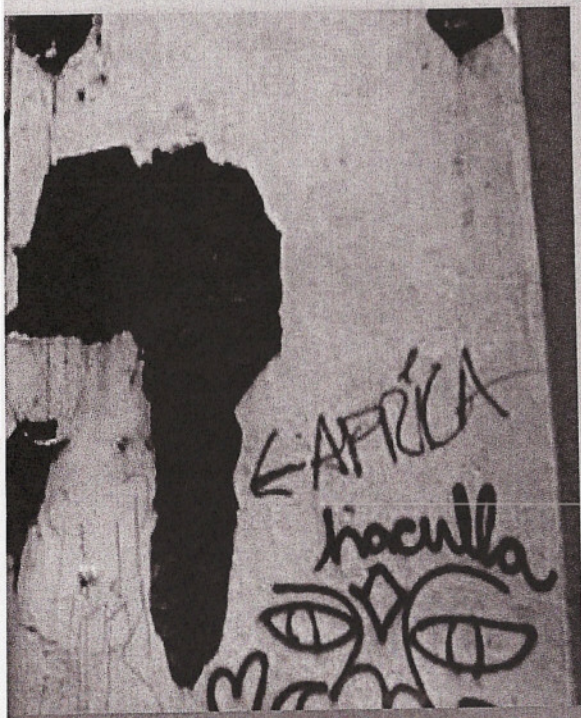

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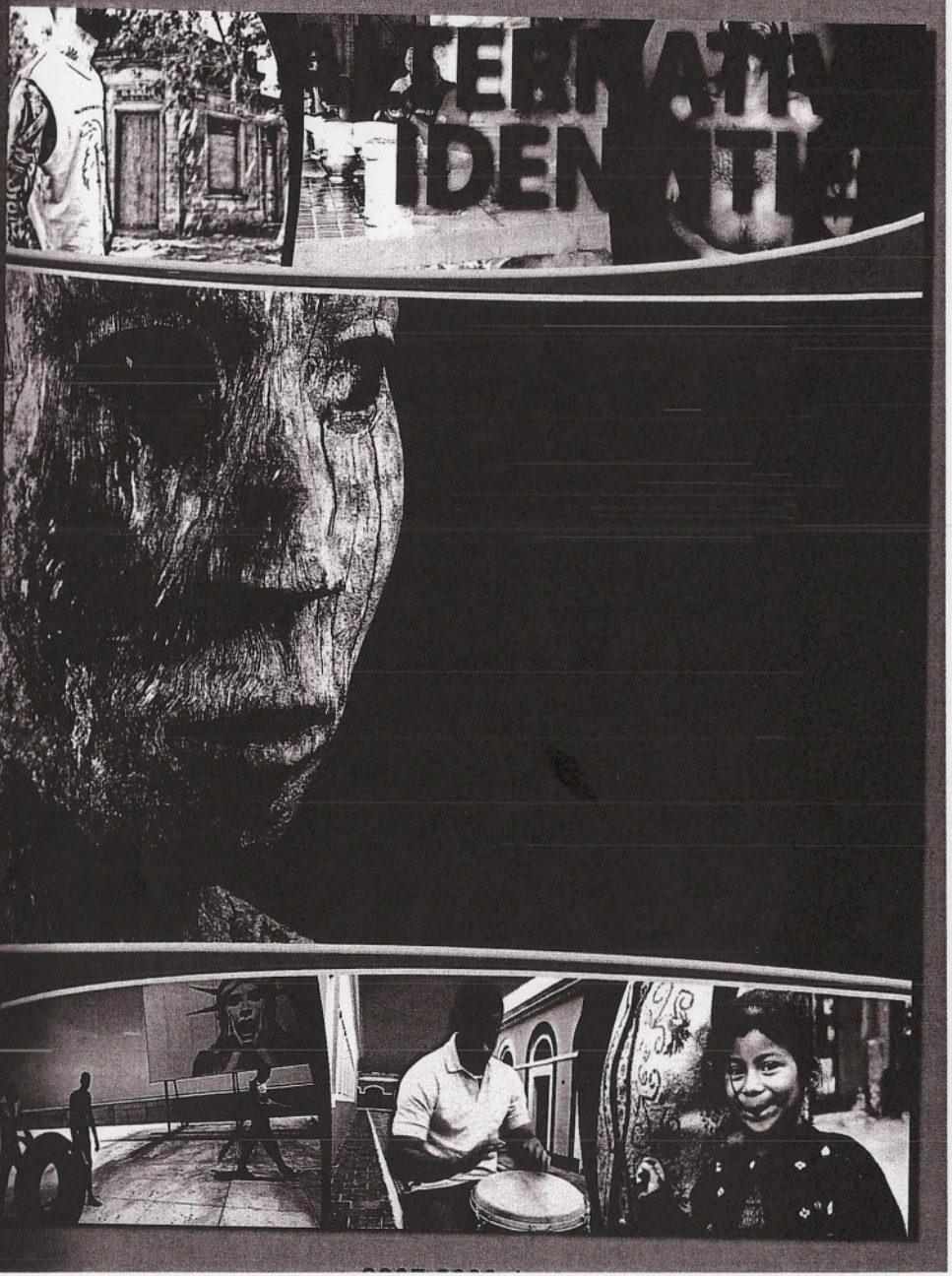

On the Question of Caribbean National Allegories

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Why would the most important recent text bridging the gap between Postcolonial and Caribbean Studies, Shalini Puri's *The Postcolonial Caribbean* (2004), relegate to the margins the central debate around which both fields collided and were transformed two decades ago? Puri's text, an otherwise excellent book on the role of hybridity in Anglophone Caribbean cultural production, coyly avoids tackling the debate between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad in *Social Text*. This debate was spurred by Jameson's statement that "all Third World texts are necessarily [. . .] allegorical [. . .]. They are to be read as what I will call *national allegories* (69)." Given Puri's reliance on Jameson's *Postmodernism* and *The Political Unconscious*, the halfway hidden nod to Jameson's troubling statement in the endnotes (250) is puzzling. Puri's skirting around the controversy becomes more apparent in her only other reference to it, where she seeks to redeem Jameson's comment by highlighting a less problematic concept:

> Without making claims for the general applicability of Fredric Jameson's controversial account of First and Third World allegories in "Third World Literature," in the specific cases I address in this chapter, I have found very suggestive his observation that national allegorical structures are not so much "absent from first-world cultural texts as they are *unconscious*." (27)

In order to understand the alternative identity and space of the Jameson/Ahmad debate in *The Postcolonial Caribbean*, I believe that it is important to revisit this important controversy, to trace the various global and Caribbean responses to the accusation of "allegory," and to end by considering Jameson's latest commentary on his provocative statement.

This central assertion of Jameson in the essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multi-National Capitalism" is based on his belief that the relationship between the personal and the political in the First World is organized in a very different way than in the Third World. Jameson says: "One of the determinants of capitalist culture, that is, the culture of the western

realist and modernist novel, is a radical split between the private and the public (69)." Jameson sees this division as being non-existent —or as he puts it, "inverted"— in the Third World, where "psychology, or more specifically, libidinal investment, is to be read in primarily political and social terms (72)." For Jameson, the personal is, by definition, political in the Third World, whereas, in the First World, the personal and the political cannot meet due to an epistemic split between the two.

As could be expected, the reception of Jameson's broad and essentialist claims were, overall, perceived as being very presumptuous:

> Jameson is manifestly a systematizing thinker, if scarcely a systematic one. But so reckless and so grandiose were his claims on this particular occasion that they seemed positively to beg to be criticized. And criticized they have been: the "Third World Literature" essay has been very widely read by scholars in the field of colonial discourse; few if any of them have had a good word to say about it. (Lazarus 374)

One of the many who criticized Jameson's essay was Aijaz Ahmad. In his article, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" Ahmad's single most important challenge to Jameson's sweeping claim lies in his calling into question the monolithic notion of the "Third World." Though valid, Ahmad's claim ignores Jameson's awareness of the problematic nature of the term "Third World" and his rational, even laudable, attempt at working with a very tangible, even if loosely defined, historical division of resources and power in the globe:

> A final observation on my use of the term "Third World." I take the point of criticisms of this expression, particularly those which stress the way in which it obliterates profound differences between a whole range of non-western countries and situations [. . .] I don't, however, see any comparable expression that articulates, as this one does, the fundamental breaks between the capitalist First World, the socialist bloc of the second World, and a range of other countries which have suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism. (67)

Moreover, Ahmad's effort suffers with respect to two other important points. First, an engagement with the theoretical notion of allegory is completely absent from his text. Many of his few references to the notion of allegory aim to explain its non-existent status in texts of Urdu literature that

he chooses to outline in the essay. Second, when he mentions the allegorical nature of feminist and "black American" [sic] literature in order to prove allegory's presence in First World literature, he unwittingly and unconsciously lends credence to Jameson's thesis. By recognizing the predominance of allegory in minority literatures within the First World, Ahmad actually underscores Jameson's connection between allegory and his notion of "Third World." As Jameson points out in his counter-response to Ahmad: "U.S. literature also includes its own Third World cultures" (26).

Jameson's bold claim that "all Third World texts are [. . .] what I will call national allegories" demanded the type of challenge that it received from Ahmad and others who took issue with its essentialism. Attacking Jameson's response sounds like the necessary, if not the right thing to do, considering the long-standing colonial tradition of mis-representation of cultural products from poorer nations in the wealthy metropolitan centers of the world. Jameson utilizes examples from African and Chinese literature to illustrate his point. Ahmad then uses examples of Urdu literature to prove Jameson wrong. What should the Caribbean response be? To what do we owe Puri's silence on the matter? Can the Caribbean really follow the instinctual impulse to resist Jameson's statement when, upon closer inspection, it appears that the most important literary texts of the region, in fact, establish an allegorical connection between the subject and the nation?

Unlike Shalini Puri, Allison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, the editors of *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*, voice this natural, visceral response in their interpretive choice of Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*:

> The standard critical response to this text and others which cover childhood narratives in the Caribbean is to equate the growth of the individual with that of the island and to draw out examples of colonial oppression in the processes of schooling and socialization [. . .]. However, we wish to foreground instead the ways in which Kincaid resists narratives which can be reduced to national allegories. (372)

The great effort required to locate these sites of resistance in the Caribbean novel is a very commendable enterprise, but the amount of ammunition provided by the Caribbean novel might not be sufficient to completely invalidate and "resist" Jameson's claim. It can be difficult to accept the interpretation that a significant portion of a literature subscribes to a formulaic pattern, but do such formulaic patterns transcend counter-readings?

Donnell's and Lawson's counter-readings and Puri's silences are not the only option. A more enabling response is to acknowledge the strong allegorical strain in the Caribbean novel in order to re-appraise its complexity and also to expose how the former colonial centers continue to control the representation of what once constituted their peripheral regions. It is important to highlight the dialectical relation between the metropole and the Caribbean in this situation because Caribbean literature is largely a literature of exportation to the large European and North American reading audiences, as in the Caribbean itself "we are occupied by foreign fiction" (Hodge 496).

If Third World literature is largely allegorical, as Jameson surmises, is it not reasonable to think that this is so largely due to the First World's control of the publication industry which makes Caribbean literature available to the reading public? In *The Politics of Home* Rosemary George notes the relationship between the publishing industry and Third World allegory when she sets out to analyze "fiction from the 'Third World' that cannot be read as national allegory and that is therefore in danger of not being read and sometimes in danger of not being published at all" (108). Ahmad comes closest to seeing this relationship between allegory and the publishing industry in his comments on translation of Third World texts:

> [. . .] the enormous industry of translation which circulates texts among the advanced capitalist countries comes to the most erratic and slowest possible grind when it comes to translation from Asian or African languages. The upshot is that major literary traditions. . . remain, beyond a few texts here and there, virtually unknown to the American literary theorist. Consequently, the few writers who happen to write in English are valorized beyond measure. . . [and are] immediately elevated to the lonely splendour of a "representative"—of a race, a continent, a civilization, even the "Third World." (5)

Ahmad is right when he says that the translation industry impedes the accessibility of "Third World" texts. What Ahmad's analysis misses, however, is an acknowledgement of the ways in which the translation industry operates as a mechanism of First World control over the representation of the Third World through its *careful selection* of texts to be translated and, therefore, made available to the rest of the world. Moreover, restrictions on the texts available in English are not only dependent on "the few writers who happen to write in English," as Ahmad says, but on the ways in which these

writers from poorer Anglophone countries —who are, in fact, quite numerous-- are socialized through education, disciplined through the publishing industry, and rewarded by their audience for *allegorizing* their experience. In this sense, it becomes necessary to be mindful of poststructuralist theorization on the location of allegory —particularly in the work of Stanley Fish and Paul de Man. For these critics, allegory does not so much reside within the text but exists as part of the interpretive apparatus of the reader. For the Caribbean writer, this implies that he or she produce texts that while not overtly allegorical, at least provide the constitutive elements that can elicit such an interpretation, especially among First World readers. In short, the First World ensures that the literary representation of the Third World be allegorical through choices in interpretation, translation, limitations on accessibility and availability of texts, as well as through the hegemonic regulation of the types of narratives which are elicited from its writers, who are expected to write as *l'ecrivain engagé*. Often such writers are strongly discouraged from writing in less overtly political-allegorical genres like detective fiction, romance novels, and science fiction, for example.

In order to illustrate the natural and unconscious way in which these allegorical expectations are enacted, it becomes interesting to note how Ahmad's piece is itself a fine example of Third World allegorical writing:

> But, then, when I was on the fifth page of this text (specifically the sentence starting with "All Third World text are necessarily [. . .]." etc.), I realized that what was being theorized was, among many other things, *myself* (3-4). [emphasis mine]

How can Ahmad contend with Jameson's statement and at the same time establish an allegorical relation between the Third World and himself in such a direct way? Ahmad's assuming that statements about the Third World are ultimately about himself lends support to Jameson's belief in "the primacy of national allegory in Third World culture" (84) and its corollary: "in the Third World situation the intellectual is always in one way or another a political intellectual" (74). As such, Ahmad's allegorization of his own experience works alongside his comments on black and feminist writing to undermine his own argument in favor of Jameson's.

Ahmad's rejection of the allegorical nature of Third World writing expresses a deep anxiety, also present in the statement by Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, in which allegory is disavowed, through their refusal

to consider it a mode of Third World writing, and simultaneously avowed, through their perceived need for counter-readings and their own replication of allegorical rhetorical tropes. Also evident in Puri's sidestepping of the controversy, this anxiety stems from the association of allegory with the idea of "simplicity," in its worst connotations. Jameson writes:

> This new mapping process brings me to the cautionary remark I wanted to make about allegory itself—a form long discredited in the west and the specific target of the Romantic revolution of Wordsworth and Coleridge, yet a linguistic structure which also seems to be experiencing a remarkable reawakening of interest in contemporary literary theory. (73)

Apart from being helpful in explaining deeply-felt anxieties over implied charges of "simplicity," Jameson's statement also allows an understanding of how the channeling and containment of Third World narratives in the realm of allegory is linked to the genre's depreciated status and the First World's investment in maintaining the representation of the Third World as undervalued and inferior. Jameson continues:

> We [in the First World] have been trained in a deep cultural conviction that the lived experience of our private existence is somehow incommensurable with the abstractions of economic science and political dynamics. (69)

The differences which Jameson outlines for the First World as private vs. public and the Third World as allegorical only serve to re-articulate a developmental discourse that plots the Third World within a backward stage of barbarism in which the basic structures of human societal organization have not yet been sufficiently established as to allow for the free and disencumbered creative spirit of the subject to narrate its "inner truths" without recourse or parallel to the public, the communal, or the national. In short, the First World possesses an investment in maintaining the Third World's association with allegory in order to assure its own First World representational superiority.

The charge of essentialism against Jameson's claim that "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public Third World culture and society" (69) is perfectly legitimate: the division he makes between the First and Third World is questionable and so is the flat, reductionist, one-to-one correspondence he sometimes makes between the subject and the nation. In short, it appears like a revived form of

cultural colonization in which the cultural production of the Third World is defined as "immature," to use developmental language, by the First World.

However, the emergence of allegory in the Third World need not necessarily imply a belated recapitulation of First World literary forms, for Latin American and Caribbean histories utilize non-linear historical strategies. Glissant's "Retour/Détour" and García Canclini's "entrances and exits to Modernity" can thus be used to understand this allegory as part of the cyclical and meandering genealogies that characterize the Third World. Rather than rejecting or ignoring allegory, I find it more useful to extend Jameson's argument through an examination of literature from a particular location within the Third World—the Caribbean—in order to investigate the validity of the national allegory claim and to understand the nature of national allegories themselves, their political implications, and their social functions. As such, this essay is founded on the idea that the experience of slavery and indentureship under the plantation system is responsible for the literary re-assertion of the self in the cultural production of the Caribbean. Throughout the area the political drive for independence and redefinition of colonial status during the 1950s deployed the re-assertion of this denied subjectivity in the political realm. Responding to the Jameson/Ahmad debate from a Caribbean perspective, I sketch a theoretical genealogy of the self and its collusion with the idea of the nation in order to argue that this re-analysis concerning the denial of subjectivity found voice in the form of allegorical autobiography throughout the Caribbean in the 1950s and has continued to dominate its literature and criticism since.

Across languages, Caribbean literature deals largely with the plantation system and its effects. While not all Caribbean territories were settled for agricultural purposes—there was mining, salt extraction, raising of livestock, storing and transportation of goods—the defining representation of the region has remained that of the plantation because it was the most dominant economic system in the region as a whole during the early colonial period. Whether it was sugarcane, bananas, cotton, pineapples, or rubber, the plantation produced a reign of inequality that exploited large numbers of workers for the profit of a numerical minority of European descent. The massive re-location of peoples to run this economic system, the new identities arising from these re-locations and ethnic mixtures, the social inequity inherent in Caribbean plantocracies and its legacy in present systems of government, the idea of liberation, colonialism and de-colonization, are important themes in

Caribbean literature arising from common Caribbean histories as plantation societies. In the words of Antonio Benítez-Rojo:

> I believe that beyond their nature —sugar, coffee, etc.—, beyond the colonizing power that set them up, beyond the epoch in which the dominant economy in one or another colony was founded, the plantation turns out to be one of the principal instruments for studying the area, if not indeed the most important. (39)

For Benítez-Rojo, the plantation's centrality for the Caribbean accounts not only for the cultural similarities between the different territories; it also accounts for the particularities that make each island distinct: "The differences that existed among the Caribbean colonies, and even the differences that we now perceive, were created in large part by the epoch in which the plantation took over within each" (63).

Perhaps the most profound mark of the plantation system in Caribbean culture and one of the most salient themes in its literature involve the denial of subjectivity of the enslaved and indentured masses. According to *Le Code Noir* (1685), for example, the slave was technically a non-being, a piece of merchandise to be transported, sold, bought and utilized as if s/he were an inanimate object. Orlando Patterson furthers this understanding of the slave as property by elaborating the concept of slavery as a form social death:

> My objection to these definitions is not that I do not consider slaves to be property objects. The problem, rather, is that to define slavery *only* as the treatment of human beings as property fails as a definition, since it does not really specify any distinct category of persons. (21)

Citing the institution of marriage as an example, Patterson argues that proprietary claims are made in a variety of human relations that are different from slavery. Instead of the property model, Patterson advances the idea that, across cultures, slaves are constructed as socially dead through a process that he calls "natal alienation." According to Patterson "natal alienation" produced "the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations [. . .] the loss of native status, of deracination" (7). As a result of this alienation from familial lineage, Patterson believes that "the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master" and "became a social nonperson" (5).

Turning now to the literary re-assertion of this denied subjectivity, the publication of Joseph Zobel's *La Rue Cases-Nègres* (1950) is the first of a series of

autobiographical novels published in the decade that defined the genre for subsequent writers. Closely followed by George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), René Marqués' *La Víspera del Hombre* (1957), and by close to two dozen noteworthy novels since, Zobel's *La Rue Cases-Nègres* is an integral part of the foundation of a large corpus of Caribbean texts in which a child-protagonist's maturation and growth becomes a discursive mechanism for the articulation of ideas concerning the construction of the self and the connection and reliance of this self with communal compositions such as the nation.

The insufficiencies of the term *Bildungsroman* for Caribbean coming-of-age narratives and the need for a more appropriate appellation for this genre has been noted by Caribbeanists, particularly feminist Caribbeanists. Dorothy Denniston argues that the term applies to Goethian texts in which the individual fights to break free from his society and that this is not the case in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Browstones*, "a text about individual development that is inseparable from the development of the collective body" (7). Geta Leseur also observes the limitations of the term Bildungsroman in her reading of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* when she notes that "Selina's quest for identity is distinct in its complex focus from the conventional western male-oriented *Bildungsroman* theme" (123). Writing on Kincaid's *Annie John*, Adlai Murdoch also notices how "the concatenation of sex and race, geography and culture, tends to cause the novel to diverge somewhat from the white, male, European tradition of the *Bildungsroman* (326).

Lucy Wilson sees the inapplicability of the term to the coming of age narratives of Caribbean women, which she examines as existing in tension with the *Bildungsroman's* historical and geographical origins:

> [. . .] the historical and cultural roots of the *Bildungsroman* and the courtship novel in nineteenth century bourgeois European society are philosophically incompatible with the depiction of characters whose existence is premised on hundreds of years of oppression and exploitation by those same European societies." ("Relational Autonomy" 283)

Like Denniston, Wilson notices how the Bildungsroman is predicated on Enlightenment ideas of the self's autonomy, notions uncharacteristic of Caribbean coming of age narratives in which there is an integration between the self and the community.

While the Bildungsroman's hero saw his surrounding society as alienating and his maturation process as one of breaking free from constraints,

the Caribbean coming of age heroine sees herself as a representative of and spokesperson for her society. This literary re-assertion of the self enacts a discursive emancipation from the denial of subjectivity imposed by slavery and indentureship. The communal quality of this subjectivity identifies it allegorically with the idea of the nation, addressing the key issue of the Jameson/Ahmad debate.

The Postcolonial context of Ahmad's critique and the extension of this critique to elucidate problematics in Caribbean cultural production foreground the uneasy tension between the fields of Postcolonial and Caribbean Studies. As Puri notes throughout *The Postcolonial Caribbean* there has been reticence towards Postcoloniality among some Caribbeanists, who have perceived it as a totalizing construction with the ability to erase the specificity of Caribbean culture and history. Alison Donnell foreshadows Puri's argument when she speculates on the future of Caribbean literature in the Academy:

> There appears to be a serious question mark over the survival of Caribbean literature given the generalizing and homogenizing tendencies of "Post-Colonial Studies." The Caribbean, like all other post-colonial cultures, has several unique features which can be erased in this larger conceptual framework; these include the absence of alter/native languages, and of a common pre-colonial culture, as well as the extraordinary cultural admixture. There is also an immense diversity within the Caribbean region which necessitates detailed analysis that is often difficult to achieve within an over-arching theoretical model. Indeed, although the post-colonial umbrella has enabled the academic recognition and widespread teaching of many formerly marginal literatures and writers, it can function according to a rather reductive agenda of resistance, rewriting and revisionism which irons out the cultural specificity of the different regional writings. (Donnell 438-9)

Donnell's critique is not unfounded. The presence of Caribbean texts discussed in Postcolonial Studies is negligible and there is an evident erasure of the geographical context of the few Caribbean texts which are in fact utilized by prominent Postcolonial theorists. For instance, one of the pillars of Postcolonial theory, Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, relies heavily on *The Black Jacobins*—a work by Trinidadian cultural critic C.L.R. James on the Haitian revolution. Despite its dependence on James' book, *Culture and Imperialism* avoids any commentary on Trinidad, Haiti, or other places in the Caribbean region for that matter. Gayatri Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* contains a chapter entitled "Literature" that includes a

reading of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*—one of the most widely recognized Caribbean texts—without mentioning anything about Jamaica or Dominica which would frame the work within its regional context. These readings expose a Postcolonial tendency to invoke Caribbean texts without framing and contextualizing them geographically and socially. Spivak rejects Caribbean scholarship outright in her appraisal of Retamar's "Calibán" when she notes: "I will refer to a passage from Roberto Fernandez Retamar's "Calibán," although as I hope will be clear by the end of this book, I myself do not think that the postcolonial should take Calibán as an inescapable model" (117). Spivak's rejection of Retamar's analysis and, most importantly, her exclusion of Shakespeare's Caribbean native from Postcolonial Studies mark an important divide between Caribbean and Postcolonial Studies.

In short, the absence of the Caribbean in Postcolonial theoretical discourse and the de-contextualized readings of the Caribbean texts they purport to discuss betray the representation and expectation of Postcolonial theory addressing the cultural and political concerns of the de-colonized and de-colonizing world in an egalitarian manner. Spivak and Said's works demonstrate that there is ample evidence to support the claim that the "practice of regulating the postcolonial proper has led not only to a narrow construction of Caribbean writers and texts, but also to the exclusion of certain works" (Donnell 440).

At the underlying level, however, perhaps the fundamental issue dividing Caribbean Studies and Postcolonial Studies can be traced to the geographical orientation of the originary work of Postcolonialism: Said's *Orientalism*. Said spells out the project of *Orientalism* when he states that "this books tries to demonstrate. . . that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3). Said's vision of "The Orient" as the singular locus of alterity for Europe ignores the Caribbean's important role in the formation of European subjectivity from the early Renaissance and onwards. Further ignoring the duration and profitability of European slavery for sugar production in the Caribbean, Said's project is most questionable to Caribbeanists when he declares: "The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies" (1).

In synthesis, the Caribbean dissatisfaction with the Postcolonial stems from the fact that, in the spirit of Said's *Orientalism*, Postcolonial Studies' geographical orientation has been towards the East Indies rather than to-

wards the West Indies. As a result the few Caribbean writers who are invoked in Postcolonial discussions, such as Fanon and C.L.R. James and Césaire, are not read within their Caribbean context but are utilized by theorists such as Bhabha and Spivak to theorize about the Middle East or South Asia. Moreover, with the Caribbean constituting a pre-Enlightenment colonization and the "Orient" being a post-Enlightenment colonization, the temporal differences between the two colonization projects make the subsumption of the Caribbean and the "Orient" under a single organizing label problematic. As the *œuvre* of Sylvia Wynter reiterates, the Enlightenment concept of "Man" enacts an epistemic split between pre-Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment colonization. Furthermore, tension between ethnic South Asians and people of African descent —particularly considering the history of East Indian indentured servitude and migration to the Caribbean during and after Emancipation— have often prevented greater dialogue between Postcolonial and Caribbean Studies.

While the relevance of Postcolonial Studies to an understanding of the Caribbean is undeniable, one must be suspicious of the field's current totalizing tendencies. This Caribbean response to the Jameson/Ahmad debate on national allegory attempts a re-inscription of the Caribbean with the Postcolonial and in so doing seeks a re/*Orient*/ation of the field towards the colonized lands of the Western Hemisphere and their cultural production.

Jameson's thinking has evolved since the publication of the *Social Text* articles and has refined the limiting notions of nation and "Third World" in "Literary Import-Substitution," a more recent article that once again revisits the issue of autobiographical narratives. Here, Jameson theorizes that the commonality and point of confluence between contemporary First and Third World literary subjectivities can be found in the shared feature of "anonymity," which "here means not the loss of personal identity, of the proper name, but the multiplication of those things" (185-6). For Jameson this anonymity implies "the passing of the older psychic subject" (189), which in the Third World is exemplified by a multiplication of selves through collectively authored testimonies, communal stories and in the First World through the questioning of authorship evidenced by the disappearance of the notion of personal style and the pervasiveness of the collage. For readers of Puri's *The Postcolonial Caribbean*, this "anonymity" functions as an updated version of Jameson's "unconscious" role of allegory in the First World. While maintaining a distinction between First and Third Worlds, the theorizing of them

jointly responds to the emergence of diasporic novels that cannot be easily classified as belonging to only one of these categories. The preference this time for a vocabulary of "community" and "collectivities" rather than "nation" appears to signal the re-evaluation of questions about belonging that diasporic texts generate.

The opposition of prominent Postcolonial critics such as Ahmad to Jameson's claim was grounded in the association of allegory with narrative simplicity. By avoiding a confrontation with the specter of allegory, Shalini Puri's *The Postcolonial Caribbean* misses an important opportunity to re-evaluate the potentially rebellious and resistant possibilities of the genre. I have proposed a re-consideration of the notion of allegory as a complex literary form grounded in a history of Modernity which considers seriously the implications of Africans, Asians, Amerindians, and Europeans meeting under the highly asymmetrical power dynamics of the colonial project. The denied subjectivity of the enslaved emerges unfettered in the decolonization moment of the mid-twentieth century, forging a link between the maturing self and the independent nation through allegory—thus becoming an important constitutive element of Caribbean literary production. Far from being a simplistic genre pronouncing literature from the area as elementary, allegory functions as a powerful anti-colonial discursive mechanism producing alternative identities throughout the Caribbean and its multiple diasporas.

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