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Celia Britton, *Perspectives on Culture and Politics in the French Antilles. Selected Essays 4*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2018. x + 149 pp. Bibliography and index. £75, \$99, €85 (hb). ISBN 978-1-78188-561-1.

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According to the short explanatory introduction to *Selected Essays* curated by Susan Harrow (University of Bristol), each title of the series—of which Celia Britton’s book is the fourth installment—“presents influential, but often scattered, papers by a major scholar in the Humanities” (p. iii). As such, each volume is meant to chart the development of an important scholar in the field by providing a coherent body of writings as a tool for future research. Britton’s book is the second publication in the series that pertains specifically to French-language writings and the first to focus on the French Antilles. Nine of the twelve chapters were previously published (between 2008 and 2017) as articles or book chapters; in terms of new material, the volume contains an introduction and three chapters (chapters six, eight and twelve).

Having published extensively on French Caribbean literature over the past thirty years, Britton has in particular written voluminously on Martinican writer and theorist Édouard Glissant, whom she refers to as “the foremost thinker of the French Antilles” (p. 64) and to whom she has previously devoted a book—*Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance*—and near countless articles and book chapters.[1] Consequently, it is of little surprise to note that ten of the twelve chapters of *Perspectives* make some mention of Glissant, all but two of which (chapter three on Michel Leiris and chapter four on René Ménil) entailing prolonged and central discussions of his thought and works. In this vein, the bulk of Britton’s contribution to the *Selected Essays* series offers a range of in-depth analyses of specific aspects of Glissant’s writings that can loosely be placed into two categories: they are either examinations of key Glissantian concepts and themes such as Relation (chapter one), globalization and political action (chapter five), opacity and the obscurity of language (chapter seven), and the textualization of place in his novel *Mahagony* (chapter thirteen),[2] or proposed “dialogues” of sorts whereby texts by Glissant are read alongside those of other writers as a means to elucidate their respective positions on particular issues, as in the case of the French ethnographer Michel Leiris and Relation (chapter two), the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy and the idea of community (chapter six), Guadeloupean Ernest Pépin and the specificity of Antillean society and culture (chapter nine), and novelists William Faulkner and Maryse Condé and the theme of ancestral crime (chapter eleven). The remaining third of the chapters, either touching on Glissant in passing or not at all, are devoted primarily to other topics and

writers: departmentalization and Michel Leiris (chapter three), “double consciousness” in Martinican René Ménénil’s works (chapter four), social hierarchies in the short stories of Martinican Joseph Zobel (chapter eight), and sexual and racial politics in Guadeloupean Condé’s *La Belle Créole* (chapter twelve).[3]

As Britton explains in the brief Introduction, the driving methodology behind the various articles comprising the collection is that of close textual readings. Hence, whether it be with regard to the theory-based, non-fictional texts examined by and large in the first half of the book or the novels to which she turns her attention in the final chapters, the arguments presented are often supported with historical context and ample citations that allow the reader to appreciate on a textual level the much broader conclusions to which Britton’s analyses often lead, often with respect to the evolution of Glissant’s thought or, more generally, issues of cultural, political and literary identity in the French Antilles. Notably, Britton’s close readings also extend to the work of her fellow critics. As such, on more than one occasion (cf. for example chapter five, discussed below), she undermines the plausibility of an existent critical interpretation by demonstrating the inconsistent or incomplete manner with which her peers have cited a text. The fine eye and impressive breadth of knowledge that Britton brings to her readings thus not only results in insightful, compelling arguments but proves just as informative in terms of the process itself by which a critical claim is rendered convincing—or, without sufficient context, ineffective. Indeed, while each of the articles in Britton’s *Perspectives* is well conceived, cogently crafted and proves interesting in its own right, the fact that select individuals (in addition to Glissant) and themes relating to French-Antillean identity reappear in various chapters throughout the book provides welcome traces of a cohesive thread that ties the otherwise diverse collection of essays together as a whole.

If *Perspectives* has a shortcoming, it is due to what is at times the tenuous nature of the book’s overall cohesion and resulting lack of more sustained analyses and argumentation. This is in many regards, I imagine, no fault of Britton herself but rather the unfortunate consequence of a series whose premise consists in compiling a representative sample of papers penned by a foremost scholar in his or her field. An editorial effort has clearly been made to provide some thematic flow between the different articles and book chapters included in the volume, but very little has been done on a narrative level to connect the ensemble of disparate contributions. No transitions have been added to previously published works in order to provide links between chapters, although the order in which they have been arranged—especially toward the beginning of the volume—appears to reflect a deliberate attempt to offer some logical progression to the line of argumentation and/or subject matter. Seemingly aware of the somewhat disparate nature and flow of the chapters, Britton devotes several paragraphs in the Introduction to identifying recurring themes that emerge in different chapters. Ultimately, however, the value of the book lies in the focus and scope of each individual chapter more so than as a monograph that frames a particular debate in detail and advances a single thesis in systematic, concerted fashion. And whereas, as mentioned above, the description of the *Selected Essays* series acknowledges the “scattered” format of its titles’ structure and presentation, it would surely be of interest to readers to have an original, formerly unpublished conclusion to the book as a whole (there is none), by which the author might be given the opportunity to develop the major veins of inquiry presented therein and reflect at further length on the future of the field(s) she has examined over the course of her career thus far.

As a means of illustrating the clarity and concision of Britton's writing as well as where the volume as a whole comes up short in terms of its conception, I will turn to a somewhat more detailed summary of three chapters. As I will demonstrate, the precise order and development of ideas in chapters two and three allow them to read like those of a monograph, whereas the lack of such progression subsequent to chapter five proves lacking. Chapter two focuses on the ethnographic work of Michel Leiris and how his conception of ethnography evolved, in particular as a result of his trip to and subsequent friendships with intellectuals of the French Antilles starting in the late 1940s. Britton demonstrates how the self-serving phantasy that tinged Leiris's initial attempts at and advocacy for subjective ethnography in *Afrique phantôme* (p. 19) are sublimated in his later writings, as he determines means of more fully participating in the culture he is investigating by way of his commitment to the anticolonial cause.[4] Thanks to the solidarity he discovers in his new-found political commitment, Leiris is "release[d]" (p. 21) from the earlier feelings of alienation provoked by his yearnings to be able to identify directly and participate with the subjects of his ethnographic studies. In this context, Britton brings to light the dialogue that emerges between Leiris and Glissant—not only between teacher and student, but with respect to Glissant's critical recognition of and praise for the relational aspect of ethnographic activity between cultures that Leiris comes to articulate in his later works, in particular *Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et en Guadeloupe*. [5]

Chapter three provides a cogent and highly intriguing counter-point of sorts to Britton's apparent conclusions in chapter two regarding Leiris's *Contacts* (1955). Whereas chapter two develops the "Relation" between cultures as the emerging focus of Leiris's subjective ethnography and establishes why Glissant was drawn in particular to this aspect of Leiris's thought, the introduction to chapter three might well leave readers puzzled as to why Glissant wrote so highly of *Contacts*. After all, as Britton illustrates, the text can essentially be understood as an apology of the newly instituted *départementalisation*, the 1946 French law of assimilation for its former colonies whose ultimate failings were surely evident to Leiris when he returned to Martinique in 1952—as they were to his friend and *député* Aimé Césaire. The question as to why Glissant would not be more critical of a work that clearly promoted a (neo)colonial system of assimilation notwithstanding, the crux of the chapter examines how Leiris himself, who had in "L'ethnologue devant le colonialisme" insisted on the need for a balanced perspective of cultural awareness, could so emphatically praise "the inculcation of French cultural and social norms into the Antillean population" (p. 32). [6] Britton's answer to this question finds its roots in returning to the "subjective impulses" that, in Leiris's early writings, demonstrated his desires "to escape the limits of his own selfhood through contact with radically different cultures" (p. 37). As Britton evidences in a lecture entitled "Antilles et poésie des carrefours" that Leiris gave in Haiti in 1948, Leiris was attracted to the ambiguous collective identity of the Antillean people. Britton thereby explains Leiris's motives along psychological lines, suggesting that his attraction to the virtues of departmentalization can be explained in light of the mixture of foreignness and familiarity that he experiences in Martinique—an inside/outside ambiguity that the critic likens to the Freudian uncanny.

In chapter five, Britton takes issue with two critics' conclusions with respect to the evolution of Glissant's thought, in particular as pertaining to the idea—or, more precisely, feasibility—of political action. Whereas the author's early works focused primarily on Martinique, his later writings, embracing the like-minded notions of "Relation," "Tout-monde," "créolisation," "mondialité," and "chaos-monde," propose a far more encompassing perception of the world.

How then does the concept of national politics—and the acutely identitarian struggle it suggests—fit into Glissant’s ever-broadening concept of Relation without reverting to the essentialist, “root-identity” positions that are anathema to his thought? In other words, how is pointed conflict as a means of advocating for “a defence of human rights and opposition to deprivation and inequality” (p. 61) envisaged as viable and necessary given the at once unpredictable and relational complexity of (globalized) human existence? Examining in turn Chris Bongie’s *Islands and Exiles* [7] and Peter Hallward’s *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific*, [8] Britton argues that neither critic has correctly assessed the implications of Glissant’s evolving position with regard to political action, and subsequently demonstrates that, the “‘global consciousness’ dimension” (p. 62) of the author’s writings notwithstanding, Glissant’s idealist position does in fact have a transformative potential at the level of concrete, local situations. Defined in cultural as opposed to economic terms, the antiracist politics that Glissant articulates in his later works advance principles that, Britton suggests, are capable of forming the basis of effective political action in a globalized world.

Britton’s close readings of Bongie’s and Hallward’s critique of Glissant are both insightful and well argued, and clearly drive her argument to where she wants it to go—namely, what she presents as a more nuanced understanding of Glissant’s ever-evolving (yet unwavering) political thought and, just as importantly, why it should be considered viable today. To support her position, Britton turns in her conclusion to two texts published in the late 1990’s (*Introduction à une poétique du divers* [9] and *Traité du Tout-monde* [10]) before calling our attention, in the final paragraph of the chapter, to three more recent works by Glissant published in the 2000’s—*La Cohée du Lamentin*, [11] *Une nouvelle région du monde*, [12] and *Quand les murs tombent* [13]—as a means of underlining Glissant’s growing disillusionment with respect to the positive effects of globalization and his resulting return to “a more overtly militant political perspective” (p. 63). This further evolution in Glissant’s writings is undoubtedly critical when it comes to Britton’s argument regarding the relevancy of his later articulations of political action, and given her preliminary remarks to this effect Britton appears well poised to tackle the issue. Hence, it is regrettable that she immediately thereafter concludes the chapter, explaining that a “lack of space” prevents her from “discussing these recent texts in any detail” (p. 63). After all, whereas the lack of space must clearly refer to the limitations the author encountered when crafting the article for its initial publication in *Small Axe* in 2009, its reprint in *Selected Essays* seems like the ideal opportunity to address this vital (and final—Glissant passed away in 2011) component of the author’s thought in terms of its viability for political action. The subsequent chapter six is also on Glissant but, in juxtaposing his idea of community to that of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, the argumentation is only loosely tied to that of chapter five and is for all intents and purposes not meant to be a continuation of Britton’s argument.

In conclusion, the premise of the *Selected Essays* series is at once comprehensible and somewhat incomplete. On the one hand, it is beneficial to have a dozen articles and book chapters of a prominent critic such as Britton compiled into a single volume, since those who admire the scholar in question or happen to be interested in a given region, theme, or group of authors have the advantage of finding a collection of somewhat related texts united under a single cover. On the other hand, as the title of the series suggests, these are at best a “selected” number of essays which, as a result, are not complete and thus have potentially two somewhat considerable flaws in their conception: not only can the contributive essays be “scattered” in

their approach and focus (the series synopsis reads as a disclaimer to this effect), but there are inevitably writings by the author that might reasonably have been included in the volume but, for reasons left unsaid, are not. Hence, whereas the overall focus on cultural, political and literary identity in the French Antilles does come across as incongruous and wide-sweeping at times, there are articles penned by Britton (as recently as 2014, for instance) that are not included in the collection and yet—if they had been added to the book—would make the collection as a whole a more concentrated, in-depth analysis of what is the central topic at hand, i.e. a study of evolving approaches to French-Antillean cultural identity as relating to Glissant and his work. One wonders in this respect why Britton’s articles, “La Parole du paysage: Art and the Real in *Une nouvelle région du monde*” [14] and “Philosophy, Poetics, Politics,” [15] were not chosen for inclusion in the collection, since they relate directly to the central discussions of relational identity and political discourse, respectively, that prove to be the most prominent themes in the volume (pp. 15-16). These structural and conceptual considerations aside, it is a delight to read Britton’s work and a well-deserved honor for her to be chosen as one of the first critics featured in the *Selected Essays* series.

## NOTES

[1] Celia Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999).

[2] Édouard Glissant, *Mahagony* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987).

[3] Maryse Condé, *La Belle Créole* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2001).

[4] Michel Leiris, *Afrique phantôme* [1934] (Paris: Gallimard, 1981).

[5] Michel Leiris, *Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et en Guadeloupe* (Paris: Gallimard/UNESCO, 1955).

[6] Michel Leiris, “L’ethnographe devant le colonialisme” [1950], in *Cinq études d’ethnologie*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 83-112.

[7] Chris Bongie, *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature* (Stanford, Cal: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[8] Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

[9] Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).

[10] Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

[11] Édouard Glissant, *La Cohée du Lamentin* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

[12] Édouard Glissant, *Une Nouvelle Région du monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006).

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[13] Édouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau. *Quand les murs tombent: l'identité nationale hors-la-loi?* (Paris: Galaade/Institut du Tout-monde, 2007).

[14] Celia Britton, "La Parole du paysage: Art and the Real in *Une nouvelle région du monde*," in *Language and Literary Form in French Caribbean Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), pp. 154-68.

[15] Celia Britton, "Philosophy, Poetics, Politics," *Callaloo* 36.4(2013): 841-47.

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