Book Review

Callaloo vol. 21 no.3 (1998), special issue on Caribbean literature from Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, Aruba and the Netherlands.

Callaloo, sponsored by the University of Virginia and published by Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, is subtitled "a journal devoted to creative works by and critical studies of black writers in the Americas and Africa ... studies of life and culture in the black world, and visual art." The name is that of a tasty West Indies stew. This issue is devoted to literature and art from the Dutch colonies in the Caribbean, and it is certainly rich and satisfying. It is an important presentation of the literature (there are reproductions of art work also, but I will concentrate on what I can judge) of a region that has received too little attention in the English-speaking world, simply because Dutch is spoken by fewer people than English, Spanish or French.[1] For the Netherlandicist it offers an excellent introduction to an incompletely known part of the literature produced in the Dutch-speaking world - *extra muros* and in some cases *intra muros* as well, for some of these authors moved to the Netherlands. Since the 1950s, to be sure, the Dutch have read some of the literary works by their Caribbean colonials, as now they read works by economic immigrants from places like North Africa.

The issue is almost 300 pages long and has 93 contributors: authors, interviewers, critics and more than twenty translators. As Hilda van Neck-Yoder of Howard University says in her editorial, we have here translations of many first publications: the first text in a given vernacular language, the first written in a given colony, the first expression of anger at the exploitation of a people. Although these explorations began early in the century, many of them occurred only after World War II; indeed, most of these texts date from after 1980. The regular editor of *Callaloo*, Charles H. Rowell of the University of Virginia, has contributed several interviews which he conducted in Curaçao and Amsterdam in 1988.

The contents have deliberately not been put in the order of a course manual, which would group the theoretical matter at the beginning where it would form a barrier to keep out the interested lay person. They are instead grouped by author, but the authors are not in any discernible order. The poetry is in the original language with an english translation beside it, while the prose is in English only. Interspersed with the literary material are articles on literary relations among the places in the area, Caribbean literature in Dutch, Surinam vernacular literature, and the literature of St. Maarten (which is in English). The Table of Contents lists poetry, prose fiction, interviews, art work and critical articles in separate sections, with the authors in alphabetical order in each section, but this is solely for the convenience of the readers following one particular strand. It is more fun to ignore the table and either open the volume at random or else read it from cover to cover; either way, there is a surprise on every page.

The fact that Dutch is the lingua franca of these Caribbean colonies may hide the fact that the language situation there is extremely complex. When the Dutch

conquered these places, they were the home of Carib Indians, whose languages disappeared under the invading one and are barely represented in the literature of the area. If one of them, Ancient Trio, is represented here at all, it is thanks to the efforts of one person, Cees Koolewijn, who has recorded the oral traditions of its speakers. Here is a song inspired by a plane passing low overhead (all the following extracts are songs or poems, since all prose in these colonies is written in Dutch):

Jehsinatëkë, jeponëhtëkë, sekanmeta manatirë
jekanawaimë meneti
jarëtonrë mëërë
jarëtono jënëtono
katoponpë mëe
(Weep and wail, listen to me now.
You see the giant canoe?
It's coming to take you away, to carry you off,
to carry you off and gobble you up.
Just as things used to be) (p.511)

In the 17th and 18th centuries the conquerors imported slaves and later indentured labourers, and there were of course contacts with neighbouring countries. As a result, the Dutch islands off South America (Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao) have a Spanish- and Portuguese-based language called Papiamento, which Frank Martinus Arion says began as a Portuguese creole among the slaves from the Cape Verde Islands:

I den fondo leu ayá
lamá di dignidat a seka.
Nos ta hunga 'tapa kara'
hasi bergwensa ta pa Dios.
(And in the distance far away
the sea of dignity has run dry.
We play together blind man's buff
and pass the shame onto the Lord) (p.576)

The mainland colony of Suriname has a variety of languages. Aukaans is spoken by the descendants of escaped African slaves and shows vocabulary from various languages superimposed on its syntax:

abiti moo
abiti moo lafu an sa lafu moo
buka ku tanda o feekete tiipa
woyo puuma o teeme
(just a moment
just a moment and they will not laugh any more
mouth and teeth will forget the stomach
the eyebrows will tremble) (p.575)

Sarnami, based on Hindi and Urdu, is the speech of the largest segment of the population, those whose ancestors were brought there as indentured labourers from India:

dhire dhire maiyá
calte-calat pervan ke
picche biná ferfi karal
gharvá pahcán leis
prási nariyar ke boklá
kuttá bhonkat daural áil
(slowly she walked
heavy through the heat
and finally recognized
behind trees an unpainted house
in the yard coconut shells lay around
dogs ran barking to meet us)(p.521)

Sranan and Saramakaans (or Saramaccan) are based on English. Bahasa Indonesia is also spoken (again, by the

descendants of imported labourers) but unfortunately there are no texts here written in that language. It would be interesting to see how local influences have changed it from the standard language, as they have done to standard Dutch. Here is a passage in Sranan:

> Ondro wan bon
> wan burukaw e buku
> wan man trowe.
> Mi eri skin e gro.
> Brudu didon so lala
> tapu grasi.
> (Beneath a tree
> a bull slams
> a man down.
> It makes me freeze.
> The blood still flowing freely
> on the grass) (p.514)

Readers who expect (in any language) stories of happy people dancing under palm trees may be disappointed. Frequently the authors speak out against the poverty and humiliation inflicted on ordinary people, against oppression and military or police brutality, whether at the hands of the colonial powers or since independence, notably the military coup in Suriname in 1980 and the subsequent murder of the new dictator's opponents.These events have their impact on women, who also have their own battles to fight, trying to hold families together despite errant and brutal husbands or boyfriends. Men as a group are not singled out for blame, however; the authors are in solidarity with all their people, beyond gender and even beyond their own cultural group, and strive to help nations express their people's sorrows and worries and find their cultural voice.

Writers also speak for their class or ethnic group and pioneer the use of its language for literary expression, sometimes in order to save that language from extinction. (The colonial authorities introduced Dutch-only education at the beginning of the 20th century, arguing that local languages were too primitive for official use, but the texts I have quoted above should dispel the view of them as primitive). Frank Martinus Arion talks in an interview here of his fight to restore Papiamento as the official language of education and government on Curaçao. He himself realised that even when he wrote in Dutch, "I was looking for Papiamento." But if poetry is written in the variety of languages we encounter in this anthology, prose is still all written in Dutch. The result is the growth of local varieties of Dutch which use more or less of the syntax of the local languages, and the same thing is happening to Bahasa Indonesia among the Javanese in Surinam.

We also, of course, hear about the experience of Antilleans who move to the Netherlands. In Europe, says Anil Ramdas (p.524), the immigrant is seen as the ultimate postmodern person, culturally disoriented and left with a fragmented identity, but it is not much help to be the object of academic fashion "when a disoriented skinhead attacks you with a baseball bat." (I don't know if baseball bats are common in the Netherlands or if the speaker or the translator is adopting a cultural referent suitable for a North American audience).

Mini-cv's of the contributors are given at the end of the issue; there is also a ten-page bibliography of available English translations. It is striking how much of the

list consists of one or two poems published in a little magazine and - with the exception of a few authors well established in the Netherlands - how few of the items are full-length books. This issue has rescued a lot of material from oblivion, and we may be grateful to the editors for doing so.

BASIL D.KINGSTONE
University of Windsor.

NOTE

[1] Frank Martinus Arion contends here (p.447-52) that there is no sense of a unified Caribbean literature: writers are confined to the area where "their" colonial language is spoken. Kathleen Gyssels ("La migration des mots et le néerlandais comme 'langue mineure' dans la mosaïque linguistique caribéenne," *TTR* XIII, 2 (2000) p.179-202) agrees, and adds that if Dutch Caribbean authors move to the Netherlands for their education, they stay there in order to be published in Amsterdam and thus become known. Let us praise here the man who did so much to publish them in Amsterdam, the late Jos Knipscheer.