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Jason Herbeck. *Architextual Authenticity: Constructing Literature and Literary Identity in the French Caribbean*. Liverpool UP, 2017; 2020.

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Abstract

Review of Jason Herbeck. *Architextual Authenticity: Constructing Literature and Literary Identity in the French Caribbean*. Liverpool UP, 2017; 2020. x + 330 pp.

Keywords

Caribbean, architecture, Patrick Chamoiseau, Maryse Condé, Raphaël Confiant, Édouard Glissant, Yanick Lahens, Daniel Maximin, Jacques Roumain, Évelyne Trouillot

Jason Herbeck. *Architextual Authenticity: Constructing Literature and Literary Identity in the French Caribbean*. Liverpool UP, 2017; 2020. x + 330 pp.

Literature and literary identities, like houses, villages, and cities, must be constructed. In the French Caribbean, writers make use of materials and ideas that are indigenous, imported, borrowed, imposed, retrograde or old, and, frequently, novel. African, Amerindian, Asian, and European cultural motifs and structures combine to form the symbolic building blocks for the literature of the region. Jason Herbeck astutely draws attention to the profusion of architectural descriptions found in Caribbean novels, plays, short stories, and theory. Through close readings of a range of texts from Guadeloupe, Haiti, and Martinique, Herbeck demonstrates how these physical structures inform debates around two key elements of literary life in the Caribbean: notions of literary authenticity and the “architextual” or metatextual foundations of French Caribbean letters. Considering the number of authors studied—Patrick Chamoiseau, Maryse Condé, Raphaël Confiant, Édouard Glissant, Yanick Lahens, Daniel Maximin, Jacques Roumain, Évelyne Trouillot—the span of literary time (1940s-2012) as well as the depth of the readings Herbeck performs, this impressive book will help readers of Caribbean literature start to notice (literary) architecture everywhere.

Immediately following the introduction, Herbeck opens with two chapters that consider how Caribbean spaces interact with and alter architectural structures, such as the French Victorian Gingerbread houses in the Haitian cities of Cap-Haïtien, Jacmel, Jérémie, and Port-au-Prince and the fictional, fortress-like *Maison de la Source* in Édouard Glissant’s 1958 novel *La Lézarde (The Ripening)*. Since neither one of these structures is indigenous to the Caribbean, Herbeck explores how the Caribbean landscape, specifically urban Haiti and rural Martinique, integrates these edifices into physical space. In doing so, he illustrates the link between language and architecture, showing how authors articulate new “vernacular architectures” (33). From this analytical standpoint, these architectural forms not only become incorporated into a Caribbean environment, interacting with other Caribbean constructions like the *case créole* ‘creole shack’ or the *lakou* ‘the yard’, but they are also absorbed into the linguistic and cultural foundations of French Caribbean literature.

Another laudable feature of *Architextual Authenticity* is how, in addition to accentuating the presence of built spaces, Herbeck provides a generative analysis on the metatextual construction of the French Caribbean literary canon. In chapter three, Herbeck places three foundational texts in productive tension—Jacques Roumain’s *Gouverneurs de la rosée (Masters of the Dew)*, *Traversée de la Mangrove (Crossing the Mangrove)* by Maryse Condé, and *Éloge de la créolité (In Praise of Creoleness)* by Jean Bernabé, Raphaël Confiant, and Patrick Chamoiseau—to show how opposing notions of French Caribbean authenticity

expose the unstable foundations of the literary canon. At the same time, these texts feature intertextual and metatextual fragments that tie the three together (such as a passage from *Gouverneurs* that Condé quotes in the thirteenth chapter of *Traversée*). By revisiting canonical texts in this way, Herbeck demonstrates how narratological approaches to French Caribbean literature reveal archipelagic literary connections between Guadeloupe, Haiti, and Martinique.

The final chapters focus on the architectural and architextual ties between a series of works by Daniel Maximin and Yanick Lahens. In a way, chapter four is the culmination of the work in chapters two through four as Herbeck illustrates the metatextual antecedents at play in the final volume of Maximin's trilogy novels: *Soufrières* ('*Soufrières*'), *L'Isolé soleil* (*Lone Sun*), and *L'Île et une nuit* ('*The Island and One Night*'). At the same time, Herbeck emphasizes the influence of physical, built structures on the narrative, such as the *Maison des Flamboyants* ('*House of the Flame Tree*'), which shelters the protagonist, Marie-Gabriel, from a hurricane. While Herbeck's analyses reveal the important role of metatextuality in Maximin's novel, the sheer length of the chapter—69 pages—clouds some of the most exciting insights. In the subsequent chapter, Herbeck focuses on what he terms "literature of reconstruction" in the wake of the January 2010 earthquake and how two works by Haitian writer Yanick Lahens (*Failles* '*Faults*' and *Guillaume et Nathalie* '*Guillaume and Nathalie*') provide insights into the past, present, and future of Haitian literature (239). While *Failles* has drawn the attention of critics before, Herbeck produces an innovative analysis of Lahens's 2013 novel *Guillaume et Nathalie*, a book that has been largely overlooked by critics after Lahens won the Prix Fémina for *Bain de lune* (*Moonbath*) the following year.

The astute details Herbeck provides are impressive, but the greatest strength of this study is that it serves as an opening, a new way of thinking about the interconnectedness of the literature and traditions from the French Caribbean. Herbeck compiles thought-provoking, generative, and generous analyses of French Caribbean literature that invites other scholars to regard familiar and unfamiliar works in a novel way. For example, there is a moment in the final chapter where Herbeck mentions three seldom examined Haitian novels—*Impasse Dignité* ('*Dignity Street*') by Emmelie Prophète, *Les Immortelles* (*The Immortals*) by Makenzy Orcel, and *Corps mêlés* ('*Entangled Bodies*') by Marvin Victor—and how they all revolve around crumbled structures (a neighborhood, a brothel, and a house). While Herbeck does not have the space to fully develop these connections, he generously offers these comparisons in the hopes that others will examine them more closely. There are other moments, too, where Herbeck's analysis of literary genres (like the detective novel) invites scholars to consider the ways in which Caribbean genres such as the *conte créole* 'creole tale' or Haitian form *lodyans* 'storytelling' constitute separate "building blocks" of French Caribbean literature. It is an appropriate text for advanced seminars at the undergraduate level and

graduate seminars on Caribbean literature as well as literary theory or history. And, one hopes that future generations of scholars will pick up where Herbeck leaves off, building a corpus of criticism attuned to local and Pan-Caribbean architecture and architectures.

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