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Review

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Robyn Cope, *The Pen and the Pan: Food, Fiction and Homegrown Caribbean Feminism(s)*. Kingston: University Press of the West Indies, 2021. x + 260 pp. (Cloth US\$45.00)

In *The Pen and the Pan*, Robyn Cope draws on the intimately connected cultural practices of writing and cooking/eating (pen and pan) to mount some new critical readings of the food-based writings of a range of Caribbean women writers: Guadeloupeans Maryse Condé and Gisele Pineau, Haitian Edwidge Danticat, and Indo-Trinidadians Lakshmi Persaud and Shani Mootoo. While the field of literary food studies has become a more prominent and sophisticated area of academic enquiry in the last 20 years or so, critics have been slow to focus on it in a Caribbean context. This is all the more surprising given the richness of the food-based writing (short stories, novels, fictional autobiographies, culinary memoirs) coming out of the region and its diasporas. Cope demonstrates considerable skill in drawing together her chosen texts (all published between 1990 and 2015), arguing that “in this body of writing, food practices and food discourses are put forward as woman-centred potential avenues for countering hegemonic (neo)colonial structures [as well as patriarchal] discourses” (p. 4). Instead of the male archetypes of “rebel and ... maroon,” we encounter in these woman-centered writings “the quietly courageous domestic servant and the cook; the maternal grandmother, not the paternal *conteur* ... the manly *marqueur de paroles* is replaced as oral historian by the female narrators” (p. 9). This matters, argues Cope, since who gets to tell their story, to “record and reflect upon the Caribbean past and present” also gets to “imagine and shape the Caribbean future” (p. 9).

The “visionary” status Cope claims for Caribbean women writers links to the idea of “homegrown feminism”: culturally specific and locally-based Caribbean ideological formations and material practices which Cope never quite manages to define in any cohesive way (which may well be the point; they are heterogeneous and manifest differently in different historical and cultural contexts). Similarly, the concept of culinary “authenticity” is repeatedly invoked but there is little sense of the problematic and contractedness of this concept. Cope is stronger in demonstrating sensitivity to the specificities of each writer and her island and/or diasporic context, such as Shani Mootoo’s characters navigating the vagaries of intersecting intergenerational gender expectations and experiences of racism and homophobia in a Canadian context (where Mootoo now lives and works), or Giselle Pineau’s writing on the “myth of Guadeloupe’s non-separation from France” as a French département and the feelings of unbelonging experienced by herself and her fictional characters in both the cosmopolitan metropolis of Paris and “back home” in Guadeloupe.

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The book's final chapter traces Maryse Condé's emergence as a scholar, creative writer, and activist through her self-professed love of cooking (eccentrically, without recipe books) and her food-based writings, including her moving fictional autobiography, *Victoire: My Mother's Mother* (2006), and her culinary memoir, *Of Morsels and Marvels* (2015). Cope demonstrates Condé's reclamation of voice and agency for her fictional female subjects through food links to a wider movement to assert autonomy and post-colonial sovereignty in the French Antilles.

Unlike several recent studies of food and Caribbean writing (such as Valerie Loichot, *The Tropics Bite Back*, Carl Plasa, *Slaves to Sweetness*, Sarah Lawson Welsh, *Food, Text and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean*), *The Pen and the Pan* is pan-Caribbean (including both Anglophone and Francophone writers). Although ample space is given to close readings of the chosen texts, Cope's thesis is capacious and generous enough to address wider issues such as colonial power structures and neocolonial food practices, the legacies of colorism and homophobic colonial-era laws in the contemporary Caribbean, as well as the real-life implications of political, ethnic, racial, religious, and intergenerational differences in the Caribbean. Throughout it all is the shared thread of the commitment of these writers to woman-centered writing and activism, whether in terms of specific concerns (such as sexual citizenship in the Caribbean and its diasporas, as in Shani Mootoo's case), or in terms of continued striving for female agency as part of a wider postcolonial sovereignty.

The book ends with a reflection on the timely issue of food security in the Caribbean, the region's overreliance on exports from the United States rather than locally produced food, and in many places the continued reliance on tourism for its livelihood, an economic vulnerability most recently exposed during the global Covid pandemic. One might add to this the pressing environmental challenges that the Caribbean now faces, which Caribbean leaders like Barbados's Mia Mottley are increasingly making vocal on the world stage. Cope argues that it is urgent now for "intra-regional solidarities, across all manner of divides," concluding that women will be crucial and "Caribbean women's lived experiences will be the best yardstick for measuring success" (p. 204).

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