Transnational romance: The politics of desire in Caribbean novels by women

Writers in the Caribbean, like writers throughout the postcolonial world, return to colonial texts to rewrite the myths that justified and maintained colonial control. Exemplary of a widespread, regional phenomenon that begins at mid-century, writers such as Aimé Césaire and George Lamming take up certain texts such as Shakespeare’s The Tempest and recast them in their own image. Postcolonial literary theory reads this act of rewriting the canon as a political one that speaks back to power and often advocates for political and cultural independence. Towards the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Caribbean women writers begin a new wave of rewriting that continues in this tradition, but with certain differences, not least of which is a focused attention to gender and sexuality and to the literary legacies of romance. In the dissertation I consider a number of novels from throughout the region that rewrite the romance, including Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), Maryse Condé’s La migration des coeurs (1995), Mayra Santos-Febres’s Nuestra señora de la noche (2006), and Dionne Brand’s In Another Place, Not Here (1996). Romance, perhaps more than any other literary form, exerts an allegorical force that exceeds the story of individual characters. The symbolic weight of romance imagines the possibilities of a social order—a social order dependent on the sexual behavior of its citizens. By rewriting the romance, Caribbean women reconsider the sexual politics that have linked women with metaphorical constructions of the nation while at the same time detailing the extent to which transnational forces, including colonization, impact the representation of love and desire in literary texts. Although ultimately these novels refuse the generic requirements of the traditional resolution for romance (the so-called happy ending), they nonetheless gesture towards a reordering of community and a revised notion of kinship that recognizes the weight of both gendered and sexual identities in the Caribbean.