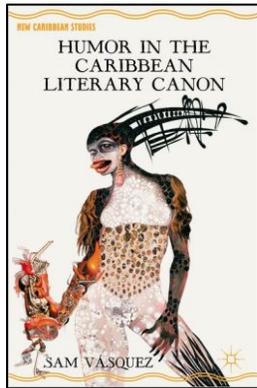


*Humor in the Caribbean Literary Canon.*  
By Sam Vasquez. New York: Palgrave, 2012. 212 pp.

*Reviewed by*  
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Caribbean literature and culture has always been awash in buoyant, creative humor that has taken on new forms as it spreads from island to island. Although based in African traditions, the constant cultural circulation of the region has stirred up a hybrid comic convention of great originality. Unfortunately, Caribbean humor has mostly been ignored by scholars, who have understandably been preoccupied with issues of colonization, decolonization, nationalism, race, diaspora, and so on. When the academy has looked at folk culture itself, carnival has taken pride of place. Humor, however, is absolutely central to every aspect of our lives, and it runs like a bright thread through all the “heavier” subjects and discourses I have just enumerated. Now, at last, we have a substantial foundation for an investigation of Caribbean humor in Sam Vasquez’s short but densely packed study.

To her credit, Vasquez conceptualizes the area “beyond the islands,” as the four main writers she considers here bring Florida’s Zora Neale Hurston together with Jamaica’s Louise Bennett, Martinique’s Aimé Césaire, and St. Lucia’s Derek Walcott. As she points out, Hurston did extensive anthropological work in the Caribbean and wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in Haiti. Her other masterwork, however, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, configures the Bible’s titan as an African conjurer, drawing in a rich skein of references to the African *Iwas*.

Each of the four discrete chapters has a secondary focus; Vasquez elects to concentrate her intriguing discussion of *Moses* on Miriam, the patriarch’s sister. Carefully and effectively focusing on the humorous dialogue, idioms, and trickster strategies Hurston employs, Vasquez shows us many of the key strategies she employs to revivify Biblical myth. This chapter, however, to my mind is the weakest one in the book, as it almost totally ignores Moses and Aaron to concentrate on Miriam, who I have argued elsewhere, could and should have been given more prominence by Hurston.

The great poet Louise Bennett gets her comic due here as Vasquez conjures up superb line by line readings of her poetry, carefully delineating between her salty, bawdy, but also subversive lyrics, as well as the more obscene variations others have rendered of the Ment musical tradition that Bennett employs. Along the way, we learn of the various ways that musical forms, oral traditions, and Jamaica’s unique folklore (concentrated on the trickster anancy figure, an Ashanti contribution to the New World) contribute to Bennett’s work. Foregrounding her discussion with observations by earlier theorists, such as Roger Abrahams and Daniel Neely, Vasquez goes on to differentiate between the two types of mento—calypso and culture—forms that find expression in the many clubs on the island, and more recently, in popular recordings. The male and female uses of risqué body humor receive bodacious readings here, but Vasquez also shows how Bennett satirizes unfair judicial practices in Jamaica. The links between folk humor and the African religion of Obeah contrast strongly with the divide between the comic and the religious in white Protestant traditions of both the U.S. and the West Indies. While Vasquez excels in showing the subversive qualities of mento traditions, she also reminds us that trickster, by breaking patterns in cultures, also thereby *defines* those traditions.

Vasquez rightly situates Bennett in the tradition of great vernacular poets such as Robert Burns, but she claims that Bennett transcends the master with the “vigorous linguistic swagger” her comic inventiveness generates. Throughout this section, and often in the remainder of the book, Vasquez leans on Heather Russell’s notion of literary crossings, fixing this notion to the mythic Esu-Elegba, orisha/trickster god of the crossroads. She concludes her examination of Bennett’s poetry by noting her legacy for contemporary Caribbean women writers who have similarly mined the resources of the island’s always evolving musical traditions, from ska to rocksteady, from reggae to dancehall.

The final two chapters both concern drama, as Vasquez moves to Césaire’s *A Tempest*, a comic signification on Shakespeare that employs spirituality, sexuality, and questions of identity. This chapter also usefully places these literary texts in relation to the crucial political events of the twentieth century, when many Caribbean islands became independent, against the backdrop of racial revolution in the United States. Here trickster figures employ signification much more frequently, since Césaire was profoundly influenced by African and diasporan comic conventions, and indeed, along with Senghor, invented *negritude*. This discussion valuably points

out how these comic inventions of the Caribbean enable us to look beyond domination and exploitation to consider the resilience of the subject population, which created a “counter symbolic order.”

This becomes evident as Vasquez presents the comic ruptures of the new characters the playwright introduces to Shakespeare’s island - The Master of Ceremonies, Eshu, Malcolm X, and MLK. Vasquez excels in revealing the comic potency of the play’s masking strategies; she further invigorates and validates this discussion through employment of prior myth/culture critics such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Femi Euba, and Robert Farris Thompson, and the gender theory of David Eng. Vasquez also makes us recognize the African elements in the play’s Ariel and Caliban figures, who are refashioned by Césaire to satirize contemporary racial and political issues. The discussion of the comic uses of MLK and Caliban as a kind of anti-colonialist comic team shows that revolutionaries *can* and *do* employ humor to shake up platitudes.

*The Tempest*, of course, has been inverted, satirized, and analyzed endlessly by Caribbean scholars and writers. The work that has proved a close second in this regard, *Robinson Crusoe*, has been most memorably skewered by Derek Walcott, whose plays have often taken second place in critical work to his magnificent poetry. Vasquez’s chapter offers a needed correction to this trend, proving that the St. Lucian’s dramatic gifts can be equally inventive and powerful. Walcott’s *Pantomime* was written partly out of his love for Jamaican culture and was certainly influenced by Louise Bennett. Jamaica’s richly figured colloquial language and African retentions take a central role here, and Vasquez reminds us that the play’s title comes from the theatre company Bennett and Ranny Williams founded at mid-century. Many works that came out of that creative vortex combined British pantomime traditions with Caribbean street theatre, and Vasquez shows us, in her detailed readings, how productive that “marriage” became. She also explores the uses of mimicry and what she calls “calypso laughter,” employing Homi Bhabha’s theories but usefully warning against that theorist’s definition of “hybridity.” *Pantomime* wickedly reverses the roles of Friday and Crusoe, by having the British playwright Harry and his servant Jackson Phillip (a retired calypso artist) take on servant and master roles, respectively. Harry, of course, winds up dictating what Jackson as master must do, thereby providing the ground for comic subversion, signification, and general tricksterism. Because this play concentrates more than the other works do on the central issues of colonialism, this chapter, more than the others, teases out a pattern of comic conventions that have proved crucial in critiques of colonialism.

Vasquez complements her discussion by providing parallels with some of Walcott’s other plays, and by once again placing the work in context with contemporary political and cultural events. The discussion of language here, as a result, is one of the most detailed in the study, second only to the readings of Bennett’s poems. To her credit, Vasquez critiques the highly masculine nature of the play, which it shares with *The Tempest*; the two final chapters thus stand in counterpoint to the feminine humor displayed in the first part of the book.

A concluding section offers tantalizing glimpses of more contemporary writers who have profited from the work of the four literary tricksters examined in the text proper. One wishes for more here on the work of Junot Diaz, who has moved to the fore of Caribbean trickster literature with his magnificent fiction. *Humor in the Caribbean Literary Canon* would be stronger if it employed more humor theory; while Bakhtin is mentioned, there are many more applications of his theories possible with these texts. Mahadev Apte, Christie Davies, and Daryl Dance, to name just a few critics, could brace up the argument, particularly in regard to ethnic humor, a field that Vasquez largely ignores, although one could argue that at least in terms of the hemisphere, Caribbean humor has been folded into that tradition in virtually every country involved in the Caribbean diaspora. Still, Vasquez has offered a brave, thoughtful, and invigorating survey of a dazzling comic tradition, one that continues to sustain and structure both everyday life and the struggle for individual and communal identity.

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