Healing Cultures

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Healing Cultures

Art and Religion as Curative Practices
in the Caribbean and Its Diaspora

Edited by
Margarite Fernández Olmos
and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

palgrave

HEALING CULTURES

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*To the memory of my father,
Peter Fernández,
who knew and practiced the healing power of love.*

[MFO]

and

*To the memory of my dear friends,
Carlos Yorio and Gil Watson,
cherished lives lost to AIDS.*

[LPG]

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Archipelago

For Lynette Wilson

1

This geography opened with a fan of macaw tails,
Flung her vertebral necklace wide with frond and fin
To show her flowering pulp that leapt from the bark
With her breasts full of panthers' eyes . . .

Clear seasons, the taste of soft clouds and curling salt
Recur around her waist; kisses of round clouds descend sweet;
The ears among her sands blossomed, quivered, caught
In pubescence the first draught of alcohol from conquering
beards . . .

Beyond her plumed forehead, beyond her fine objects of fine earth
They plunged with prow and anchor, with cannon, with flag
Into her navel of revolving waters.
O Mayas, skies of saffron, of living gold. Crushed anthill!

Witness their caged Ibises. Flocks of ghosts on the edge
of a scarlet cloud.
Reduced to history and entertainment, their lost hieroglyphs,
an only cluster
Of fossilised bird-feet Arawak and Carib, the simplest traces
of mnemonic bush,
Heads without their Gods, spilled suns wear their fire like mud.

The diarist thumbs the log, unfurls the surrounding sea,
calculates . . .
Each fallen star, each sweet island . . .

. . . Fallen trees, gardens left agape; scorched
Earth, smoke; alligators, gnarled breasts with feathers;

Cracked bells; temples vacated by their gods; stampedes;
Lice-shredded nights; days to come more numerous than sand.

2

Sterner west, the musketeers held no remorse.
Long lost were his fine art of wife grazing sheep on the Lee.
Waste no time to enter pleas where the ear sours.
Each tide crashed with a taste of broken bronze . . .

And then, its waiting ports, its whips, its scales, its chains.
Choice died. Denial became privilege. Promise was prayer
With wayward wings. And so with backward-turned feet
He entered his landscape laughing with each his deaths.

History pretends amnesia here, though faces smile
From rocks their careful etchings of defeat. A last
House slave, tuxed'n spats, glares from hooded eyes,
circumspec', jokes under a crisp Sunday's unwaning architecture.

3

The first look I had of these islands
Was one green morning in Dada's spacy grin
We chased whales over de whole "ocean-sea"
From de Bahamas to out dey in de Gulf
Coming up through de Serpent's Mouth.

A rainbow opened with his wings, and a child heard
Seagulls dive down his eyes, the silent plash
Of bittersweet between beak and fin, the salt
Falling backwards, the gentle fleeting curve

From wave to sky-droning kites.
Putting me down, he stood into his full height.
The whole ocean laughed from his shoulders, now
Fish were leaping from his one hand to the other!
Grouper, shark, barracuda, mackerel, leaping

Carite, moonshine, power and cro-cro;
Saparte, red snapper and pampadores . . . O Sauteurs!
He held the rainbow, this Vincentian fisher, casting
Its net. From his stories the ports rose baptised
Like sails of starched winds.

The real Cuba, with its iguanas, its khaki, stitched
By their own hands, their guitars and the burning

Fingers of Guillén and Macandal, the real Cuba
With a sword in a peg-legged buccaneer's
Throat, that fisher saw a bird on the stern . . .

Saw the sea-swell, stirred by his own oar
In a mighty womb, the quick shudder of a harpooned whale
The barracuda in his retreat, the white clouds
Of water, the spurt of red from the nostril he carved
Of flesh and salt and wind and current . . .

Their bodies writhed black and wet like his catch. Haiti,
Clamour of gongs, and drums in the groundswell
Of dethroned Gods, around that citadel where starved dogs
Of our soul eat their tails. Under the Dawn, bespectacled Houngans
Lift their glasses of clairin to a string of corpses . . . feet first!

Puerto Rico, Barbados and de Bahamas
Proliferate of rape and gamble . . .
Candles, incense, spices burn in breasts
Of St. Vincent, St Kitts, St Lucia . . .
From Cesaire's lice-poxed Martinique of maidens
The lizards cast shadows on water of blue, bluer
Than blue and mist-congealing infinite green
Where Antigua-Grenada weeps, the children weep:
Sauteurs, again, Sauteurs!

To the furthest leaf South, the Atlantic windfall of sailors
Drunk on the main drags . . . bastard oil . . .
Bastard cane . . . bastard banana, bastard me,
You, Guyana, Guatemala
And their own mother too!

Crumpled rainbow
From Haiti to Trinidad and Tobago . . .

To my task of broken mirrors,
My archipelago!

4

Those were the days, father said,
When the hunter sat to rest on snakes
That were huge tree trunks that devoured cattle, whole . . .
And those waves he swam were taller
Than the tales that washed away the sins against him.

How clearly I see him among the vast currents
Alone, above the undertow, for he was a good swimmer;
The early voyager sees Mountains, steady above the crest;
Sees the stark beach thin its thread to a lost heartbeat.

He embraces the bay, the smallest laughter of spilled surf,
And those little friends,
'Who had not even missed me!'
Cavorting among the sand.

A good swimmer knows how to float
And how to go against the current, and, he said:
That is why I am alive to tell the tale today.

LeRoy Clarke, Douens (1981)

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[LPG]

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Preface

The Spanish expression *la cultura cura* (culture heals) is understood, in the context of Caribbean culture, as an affirmation of the potential healing power of a variety of cultural practices—religion, art, music, literature, folklore, the vernacular language—that together constitute the ethos of the various peoples of the region. What happens, however, when cultures themselves are in jeopardy? What occurs when cultural practices come under siege as they enter the debate over national identity in colonial and postcolonial societies? What are the antidotes for an ailing culture?

Healing Cultures examines a broad range of belief systems—among them Haitian Vodou,¹ Cuban Santería, Puerto Rican Espiritismo, Jamaican Obeah—from a variety of disciplines—anthropology, literature, film, cultural and religion studies—addressing these far-reaching questions via scholarly research and personal interviews in an attempt to bring to life the various cultural practices that have sustained the peoples of the Caribbean through colonialism, the impact of slavery and its concomitant racial and class hierarchies, economic underdevelopment, and the Caribbean diaspora to various metropolitan centers. Powerful repositories of inner strength and cultural affirmation, the Caribbean's African-derived syncretic religious and healing practices have penetrated to the very core of cultural development in the region, leaving deep imprints on every cultural manifestation of significance.

This collection arises from a previous volume, *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, which we published in 1997. As a result of the research undertaken for *Sacred Possessions*, it became clear to us that more attention needed to be paid to the healing aspect of these important religious systems and their impact on the “well-being” of cultures. Among the broader aims of this work, therefore, is an in-depth exploration of the types of knowledge and spectrum of healing practices in the region and their contribution to the development of Caribbean societies. *Healing Cultures* is divided into two broadly defined areas: the curative practices derived from Caribbean religious traditions and the “healing” arts, including the survival through art and literature of cultural healing practices in the Caribbean diaspora. With the exception of Espiritismo (which originated

in European Spiritualism), the religious systems from which these practices derive are the Caribbean “diasporan religions”—as Joseph Murphy has coined them—that share a common West African or Central African heritage, and gods, rituals, and theologies easily traced to common roots. These are, their similarities notwithstanding, dynamic practices that differ from each other in significant ways.

Vodou, the oldest and perhaps least understood of all Afro-Caribbean belief systems, was born in the Dahomean, Congolese, and Nigerian regions of West Africa and filtered through Roman Catholic symbolism and liturgical traditions. The deities of Vodou, the *loa* (or *mystères*), are generally divided into two main rites, or “nations”: the *Rada* pantheon of Dahomean or Yoruban origin, and the *Petro*, Creole loa originating principally in Haiti. A complex practice of myths and rituals linking the devotees to the divine entities and to the community, the cornerstone of the Vodou belief system is the possession of believers by the loa.

The syncretic nature of *Vodou* (and other belief systems of the region) originated in the demand, during the colonial period, that slaves relinquish their gods for those of their masters. When Catholic missionaries displayed lithographs displaying the symbolism associated with the lives of the Christian saints, slaves linked this iconography to the representation of their own gods. Thus Erzulie, the beautiful water goddess of love in Dahomey became the Virgin Mary, and Legba, the guardian of the gates of the underworld, Saint Peter. Syncretism is the outcome, therefore, of a process of accommodation, preservation, and cultural resistance.

Cuban Santería, also known as *la Regla de Ocha*, or the belief system of the *orichas*, is the consequence of a similar process: the convergence of Yoruban rituals and practices honoring the orichas, or deities, with the obligation to worship Roman Catholic saints (*santos*). In like fashion, true membership in the Santería spiritual community involves unconditional dedication, rigorous discipline, and lifelong commitment to a particular deity or spirit.

In the English-speaking Caribbean, Obeah, defined by George Simpson as a Jamaican conjuring practice closely linked to witchcraft, differs from Vodou and Santería in that its beliefs and rituals are not centered on the participation of the community but involve secret individualized consultations aimed at fostering specific ends.² The term “Obeah” (from the Ashanti word for witch or wizard, *obayifo*) can be traced to the Ashanti tribes from the African Gold Coast, heavily represented in the slave populations of the British colonies. The practice involves the “putting on” and “taking off” of “duppies” or “jumbees” (ghosts or spirits of the dead) for good or evil purposes. Obeah is analogous to Vodou and Santería, however, in the vital cultural role it has played throughout the English-speaking Caribbean as a repository of the African folk’s cultural heritage.

Despite important differences, the diverse practices examined in *Healing Cultures* can be said to coincide perfectly in two significant respects: their promotion of a union of humankind with the spirit world (a commonality they share with Espiritismo) and the notion of "service." As observed by Joseph Murphy, the reciprocity between community and spirit is expressed in music, word, and movement to summon the spirit, who in turn empowers the congregation. "Diasporan ceremonies are thus services *for* the spirit, actions of sacrifice and praise to please the spirit. And they are services *of* the spirit, actions undertaken by the spirits to inspire the congregation. . . . It is 'service,' in all its elegant multiple meanings, that shows the active quality of the spirituality of the African diaspora."³

The service Murphy refers to encompasses a variety of cultural elements. In Haitian Vodou, for example, it comprises individual practices and creeds, a structure for community justice, a fertile oral tradition, a rich iconography that has nourished Haitian art, a wealth of metaphors of political affirmation, as well as a complex system of folk medicine. Cuban Santería has similarly inspired a rich tradition in literature and the arts and in healing; herbalism and ritual cures are fundamental components of practices that have sustained their communities for centuries despite vilification and condemnation by the dominant culture. It should be recalled that Vodou, Santería, Obeah and the other religions discussed here were repressed and persecuted partly as a result of their practitioners' reputed skills in the preparation of spells and cures.

Healing Cultures argues for a different focus: the beneficial aspects of these practices as seen from within the communities in question. With the reevaluation of traditional curative practices taking place worldwide, we would appeal for a reconsideration of the healing methods used by peoples accustomed to adaptation and reinvention; alternative and integrative strategies have been the tools of survival in these creative Caribbean societies, as the following essays will demonstrate.

These essays also attest to the importance of the discourse of illness and healing in addressing issues of colonialism and dependency in the Caribbean region. Beginning in the nineteenth century, illness, as a metaphor for the Caribbean islands' condition of colonial inferiority, becomes a central concept for both pro- and anticolonial groups. The symbolic representation of Caribbean colonies/natives as diseased bodies—inferior in race, deficient in intellect, indolent in body, insalubrious in climate—presupposes the need for superior, industrious, rational European colonizers whose influence can be brought to bear in seeking to ameliorate these geography- and race-bound conditions. The discourse of illness, in its many forms, seeks to justify colonial control. Adopted by Creole elites of European extraction, it also serves to uphold racialist class structures imposed by slavery and the plantation.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the many examples derived from nineteenth-century Caribbean literature that posit illness as endemic to native peoples and culture—and miscegenation as contributing to racial “weakness” and propensity to disease—in which the European-educated white Creole doctor emerges as the cultural hero working to achieve some degree of health. Among these, the most salient example, that of Puerto Rican Naturalist writer Manuel Zeno Gandía, author of a series of novels intended as a *Crónica de un mundo enfermo* (*Chronicle of a Sick World*), reveals the degree to which the representation of disease as symbolic of Caribbean colonial and racial realities had taken hold in the literary imagination. Zeno Gandía can write thus about the Puerto Rican peasant as weakened by racial mixture, deprived through ignorance, hunger, and predisposition of the faculty to reason and develop intellectually, in need of the wisdom of the white planter and doctor to survive. His analysis, characteristic of the paternalistic approach to the examination of society and culture of the liberal Puerto Rican elite of the end of the nineteenth century, will find its way eventually to Antonio S. Pedreira’s more conservative view of the Puerto Rican mulatto population as a collective body weakened and degraded by miscegenation. Pedreira’s *Insularismo* (1934) will seek to articulate, using biology and illness as points of departure, how the negative aspects of mixed racial inheritance and an insalubrious environment, together with what he describes as a sad lack of direction in their spiritual culture, have left Puerto Ricans adrift, requiring “white” guidance.

Not surprisingly, Caribbean writers and intellectuals, faced with a discourse of illness stemming from the most conservative defenders of the colonial and postcolonial status quo, have turned to the discourse of healing—particularly that of healing through African-derived religious and cultural practices—to articulate a contestatory discourse of cultural and political liberation. The healing metaphor—as a counterargument to the metaphor of illness—has become perhaps the most frequent and most effectively deployed weapon against colonial discourse. One has only to recall the names of the many authors whose work relies on a representation of the individual’s power to heal his/herself through an affirmation of belonging to the Afro-Caribbean folk and the acceptance of African-derived folk wisdom—Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Pluie et vent sur Telumée Miracle*, Erna Brodber’s *Myal*, Ana Lydia Vega’s “Otra maldad de Pateco,” Mayra Montero’s *Como un mensajero tuyo*, the poetry of Derek Walcott and Edward Kamau Brathwaite—to be conscious of the importance of the healing discourse to the development of Caribbean thought.

The healing metaphor, as some of the essays in this book suggest, has gained considerable strength as a tool of literary and essayistic representation among Caribbean writers and artists in the Caribbean diaspora, where it has indeed emerged, in the last two decades, as a most salient theme. Caribbean

migrants living in formerly colonial metropolitan centers have shared common ills: in the threat to the strong bonds of family; the discovery of the racial self in the eyes of the Euro-American “Other”; the debilitating loss of culture and the concomitant forfeit of identity; rootlessness and urban decay; violence as a test of manhood for ghetto youth; early death and prison stays; and generational clashes and conflicts over gender roles that have been the product of migration. Essential in the representation of these concerns have been the recurring metaphors of illness and healing. Nervous breakdowns, madness leading to suicide, deadly infections caused by treacherous Caribbean *microbios*, evil possessions, insidious cases of diabetes with roots in miscegenation, drug addiction as lingering self-destruction, and AIDS are all called upon to attest to the destructive aspects of Caribbean migration and acculturation in the United States, Canada, England, or France, as the case may be. They become the embodiments of the threat to psyche, body, and culture posed by assimilation, and spawn a converse metaphor, that of healing as the recovery of self and culture, of the reclaiming of memory as the remedy for rootlessness, of the elaboration of myth as a cure for historylessness at the core of these emerging diasporan cultures. Readers of diaspora writers like Jamaica Kincaid, Edwige Danticat, Oscar Hijuelos, Pedro Juan Soto, Julia Alvarez—to name only a salient few—have come to associate healing as a central response to alienation.

The essays collected in this book seek to engage the many ways—and the many disciplines—through which the theme and process of healing have become of central importance to Caribbean peoples. We should note here our gratitude to the artists and scholars who so generously and enthusiastically contributed their talent to creating this work. Some indeed discovered that sharing their vision of these healing cultures—the creative process itself—became for them a healing modality. We hope that the antidotal effects will be shared by our readers.