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Elusive Origins: The Enlightenment in the Modern Caribbean Historical Imagination (New World Studies)

Paul B. Miller

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Although the questions of modernity and postmodernity are debated as frequently in the Caribbean as in other cultural zones, the Enlightenment?generally considered the origin of European modernity?is rarely discussed as such in the Caribbean context. Paul B. Miller constellates modern Caribbean writers of varying national and linguistic traditions whose common thread is their representation of the Enlightenment and the Age of Revolution in the Caribbean. In a comparative reading of such writers as Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), C. L. R. James (Trinidad), Marie Chauvet (Haiti), Maryse Condé (Guadeloupe), Reinaldo Arenas (Cuba), and Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá (Puerto Rico), Miller shows how these authors deploy their historical imagination in order to assess and reevaluate the elusive and often conflicted origins of their own modernity.

Miller documents the conceptual and ideological shift from an earlier generation of writers to a more recent one whose narrative strategies bear a strong resemblance to postmodern cultural practices, including the use of parody in targeting their discursive predecessors, the questioning of Enlightenment assumptions, and a suspicion regarding the dialectical unfolding of history as their precursors understood it. By positing the Cuban Revolution as a dividing line between the earlier generation and their postmodern successors, Miller confers a Caribbean specificity upon the commonplace notion of postmodernity.

The dual advantage of Elusive Origins's thematic specificity coupled with its inclusiveness allows a reflection on canonical writers in conjunction with lesser-known figures. Furthermore, the inclusion of Francophone and Anglophone writers in addition to those from the Hispanic Caribbean opens up the volume geographically, linguistically, and nationally, expanding its contribution to a nonessentialist understanding of the Caribbean in a Latin American, Atlantic, and global context.

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