



small axe a caribbean journal of criticism

Journals and Cultural Trajectories in the Caribbean

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Journals and magazines have traditionally served as a space for encounters. For this reason, the cultural institution Casa de las Américas organized the Encounter of Caribbean Magazines in 2009—the first event of its kind—in order to promote a historical survey of the emergence and circulation of journals throughout the insular and continental Caribbean and the scattered diasporas of the region. Publications of various forms—academic, cultural, and artistic, among others—participated in Encounter in order to create a space for dialogue among Caribbean publications, and in what was an unprecedented event in the cultural history of the region. Encounter was organized by the journal *Anales del Caribe*, one of the five publications of Casa de las Américas, which founded the iconic journal *Casa de las Américas* just a few months after the institution's own creation in 1959.¹ By publishing authors' texts in their own languages, *Anales del Caribe* launched a specialized forum for the region among institutional publications and an openness to Caribbean multilingualism. Although entailing great editorial effort, this endeavor has made it possible to show the Caribbean in all its richness, since, in leafing through the journal's pages, one not only follows a trajectory of texts from the region itself and beyond but also undergoes a linguistic immersion defined by diversity.

¹ The other publications are *Conjunto* (1964), *Boletín de Música* (1970), *Arte América* (2003) and *Anales del Caribe* (1981). There is also a digital portal that disseminates information about Casa de las Américas throughout the world (www.casadelasamericas.org), and *La Ventana*, which issues a weekly newsletter (laventana.casa.cult.cu).

Before the emergence of *Anales*, which came into being with the Center for Caribbean Studies created by Haydée Santamaría in 1979, the journal *Casa de las Américas* devoted memorable issues to the Caribbean, such as the examination of the Anglophone West Indies or the issue that compiled the texts of the First Conference of Intellectuals during the celebration in Havana of CARIFESTA in the same year.² In attending to the publishing itineraries of the new millennium, a significant presence of works by Caribbean authors is seen in both the “Ideas” and “Literature” sections, providing a telling contribution to cultural studies in the region. An event that defined an important moment for the journal *Casa* (as those of us who follow it call it familiarly) was the bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution, to which a special issue of the journal was dedicated.³ The journal honors its own documentary past to the extent that it has gathered texts appearing in its pages in the collection *Cuadernos Casa* and, during the International Year for People of African Descent, when it republished the iconic issue from 1966 that explored in detail the imprint of Africa on our continent, which, of course, in the Caribbean has a major presence as a living legacy in contemporary societies, a founder in turn of living traditions embedded in expressions of thought, culture, and the arts.⁴ The journal *Anales del Caribe* therefore had an important antecedent in the journal *Casa* and its Caribbean themes. Both journals maintained a running dialogue on these themes, which is why Encounter of Caribbean Magazines was held to mark the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of *Anales* and the fiftieth of *Casa de las Américas* and its flagship publication.

Encounter of Caribbean Magazines was, in addition, an outstanding opportunity to promote a historical-cultural evaluation of Caribbean journals in the twentieth century and to reflect on their future projections in the twenty-first century. Journals from Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Barbados,

² Haydée Santamaría was the founder of *Casa de las Américas* and its first president. The Center for Caribbean Studies supports research on and promotion of the cultural diversity of the Caribbean and its corresponding diasporas from an interdisciplinary point of view and through active dialogue with important artists, academics, researchers, and cultural promoters in the region. The issues of the journal mentioned are *Casa de las Américas*, no. 96 (May–June 1976) and *Casa de las Américas*, no. 118 (January–February 1980).

³ *Casa de las Américas*, no. 242 (January–March 2006).

⁴ *Casa de las Américas*, nos. 36–37 (May–August 1966).

Guyana, Mexico, Colombia, the United States, Trinidad and Tobago, Spain, and Cuba were present, among other countries. The event exceeded all expectations as a result of the significant participation of authors, readers, publishers, and journal editors and through the great richness of the conference program, which included lectures, reports, panels, meetings with editors and designers, and exhibitions by illustrators and publications. All these events fostered exchanges between the producers of the journals and the audience that filled each working session in the iconic Che Guevara Hall of Casa de las Américas during an intense week of work.⁵

Caribbean Journals: Connection and Communication

For the Caribbean, the historical setting of so many missed encounters (*desencuentros*), journals have provided an important alternative for connecting and communicating, for overcoming distances and bringing together concerns, for building cultural trajectories and mobilizing a dynamic of relationships often made up of intellectual links enabled and stimulated by the journals at various points in the region's history of cultural production. In this way, journals circulated via friendship tours and cultural exchanges and at book festivals and fairs. In this way, they traveled from one island to another, and from there, far beyond. Their circulation exceeded, in their routes and crossings, the distribution and dissemination systems that—although limited—were more favorable between the islands and the continents than among the islands themselves, owing to historical distances that cannot be seen on maps. Thus, the convergence on Casa de las Américas of journal producers and contributors, arriving from various latitudes with their journals to present and exhibit, was a great moment for joining forces and exchanging and developing new projects: an option for building platforms for reflection and debate, a site for transmission and openness.

⁵ Details can be found on the Encounter of Caribbean Magazines page of the Casa de las Américas website: www.casadelasamericas.org.

Because of their nature as compendia, journals have been spaces of inclusion and diversity for the Caribbean region. At the same time, discourses from multiple sources of knowledge are created and organized within them. In this regard, the journals have been very useful for increasing the public visibility of an emerging culture in many fields and have enabled the region to display itself in all its multiplicity, albeit with problems of interference and instability, given the fact that many journals could survive only for as long as the tenacity and will of their creators lasted. With a lack of resources in many cases, and with limited institutional support and a lack of publicity, editing a journal on the islands of the Caribbean Sea was an act of determination and individual and collective resolve, insofar as the journals were nuclei of group and generational interests.

In view of this coming and going of publications, more or less ephemeral, more or less lasting, the act of creation and the expressive need of the region's intellectuals and artists can be appreciated. For many of these artists and intellectuals, one of the first public-oriented acts was to found a journal, to set out the foundations of their thought in a published corpus, and to trace a network of relations in the journal's pages. These relations were not limited to the place where the publication emerged but pursued broader cultural trajectories in the spaces and history of the Caribbean, braiding connections and laying the polemical foundations necessary for fruitful debate.

This is why, in reviewing the journals' tables of contents, one comes across key names and topics. The cultural history of this region could not be written without its journals, in which a vision of Caribbeanness is structured and revealed via parallels and triangulations constructed between islands and from those islands outward to the larger land masses of continents both near and far. These trajectories proved to be transversal and developed around the journals the first nuclei of common concerns in a region defined by distances and isolated territories.

And yet, how difficult it is to appreciate the panorama in its richness and wholeness. How much dispersion prevails among these documentary sources essential to current and future studies. A fundamental part of the work of the postgraduate Interdisciplinary Program of Caribbean Studies at the Center for Caribbean Studies, which helped develop the theoretical and methodological underpinnings for organizing and hosting the 2009 Encounter of Caribbean Magazines, consisted in gathering the information that would allow the team of researchers, and in particular Vilma Díaz, who acted as coordinator of this project, to construct a historical sequence of Caribbean publications, especially those in the twentieth century. This monumental task may inspire much new research and the development of valuable reference documents to forge new paths in studies of the region, since, from a conceptual standpoint, the journals have been implicated in a Caribbean spirit, one constructive of many questions and affirmations. To follow the trajectory of the journals is to discover as well a longed-for universe of self-expression born from within insular circumstances and with its own cultural dynamics of existence. Schools of thought and cultural movements have been founded by the journals; the latter have been part of a commitment of intellectuals to their time and because of this, in essence, have been able to transcend it. The journals reveal, in this sense, moments of great importance for studies of the region.

When the universe of journals in the Caribbean was even more limited and the publishing houses were almost nonexistent, and those who took an interest in Caribbean writing in the metropolises were also few in number, journals were—and continue to be—an essential resource for disseminating the culture and arts of the Caribbean. In other words, they were the means for the creation and circulation of the literature and thought of writers and researchers. Journals were a space for the creative initiative of the zealous and the nonconforming; through publishing, these actors teamed up with others to meet the expectations of the many interested readers and to activate potential audiences.

Because the periodic nature of a journal securely holds the attention of those who follow it, journals encourage a kind of “magazine addiction” that creates expectancies and favors group relations and circulation networks. The friends of a journal are the other essential part of their existence. Journals fill up the shelves of libraries, which complicates their storage and preservation, an issue that is of the utmost importance for the documentary heritage of the region. Sometimes journals have limited print runs or are created with minimal financial means, which also reduces the physical quality of the print medium and its ability to last over time. An extremely important issue for today and for the future is how to preserve this heritage that is a shared cultural treasure.

The Caribbean in Its Journals

It is not hard to imagine what all this means in a region that did not exist until the best minds overcame the metropolitan fragmentation of the multilingual islands to identify a cultural dimension exceeding the geographical balkanization, and penetrating down into the roots and fibers of shared processes within the region’s diversity.⁶ The journals’ itinerary reveals a local birth that led gradually to an Antillean vocation for overcoming—also gradually—the insular arc, and going beyond the geographical entity to comprehend the region in its identity: the Caribbean.

One of the first magazines to adopt this term in its title was the *Gaceta del Caribe*, founded by the Cuban Nicolás Guillén in 1944, when he had already traveled with his verses through the fecund Antilles and had defined, from an observant, critical perspective in his poetry collection *West Indies Ltd.*, an overarching dimension of the islands historically bound to a shared past of plantations and slavery. Guillén had traveled to Haiti accompanied by his close friend—prematurely deceased—Jacques

⁶ Antonio Gaztambide, “La invención del Caribe a partir de 1898 (Las definiciones del Caribe, revisitadas),” *Tierra Firme*, no. 82 (April–June 2003), www2.scielo.org.ve/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0798-29682003000200004&lng=en&nrm=i; Yolanda Wood, “Repensar el espacio Caribe,” *Revista Universidad de La Habana*, no. 236 (September–December 1989): 67–80.

Roumain, who, inspired by the profound sensibility of his people and their social conflicts, wrote the important novel *Masters of the Dew* (1944), which he did not live long enough to see printed and published. The *Gaceta del Caribe* featured contributions from prominent Cuban intellectuals such as Wifredo Lam, Alejo Carpentier, Virgilio Piñera, Mirta Aguirre, and José A. Portuondo; and, even though it had a short lifespan (six issues), it was a monthly journal of great rigor in its choice of essays and literary texts.

The use of the term *Caribbean* began to appear more frequently in the titles of journals in an effort to give a name and recognition to a region that was increasingly acquiring greater visibility in matters of twentieth-century history and in the voices of its most important literary figures. The journals came into existence in a given country; then many expanded to a linguistic region, with some early on achieving regional influence, such as *Caribbean Quarterly*, which emerged in Jamaica in 1949. According to Humberto García Muñiz and Betsaida Vélez Natal, this magazine very quickly developed a regional vision:

Most of the articles in *Caribbean Quarterly* consisted of literature and descriptive works by authors such as the Jamaican historian W. Adolphe Roberts, and dealt with José Martí, Toussaint Louverture and other Caribbean historical figures. Articles from other disciplines by authors who in time would become very well-known, such as the Jamaican anthropologists Edith T. Clarke and M. G. Smith and the Caribbean literature scholar Dr. Gabriel Coulthard were also published. . . . Innovative for its time was the journal's colorful covers featuring artwork and prominent Caribbean locations. *Caribbean Quarterly* is today a must-read journal for Caribbean Studies.⁷

⁷ Humberto García Muñiz and Betsaida Vélez Natal, "En el cincuentenario de *Caribbean Studies*: Algunas notas sobre las Universidades del Caribe y sus revistas académicas," *Caribbean Studies* 39, nos. 1–2 (2011): 19.

Other journals continued to give personality to the region, as happened with *El Caribe Contemporáneo* (Mexico, 1980), *Caribbean Studies* (Puerto Rico, 1961), *Del Caribe* (Cuba, 1983), and *Anales del Caribe* (Cuba, 1981). Some developed more specialized profiles, an example being *Caribe Arqueológico* (Cuba, 1996).

In following the historical-cultural itinerary of the journals born in the Caribbean during the twentieth century, one distinguishes significant moments that formed the basis of the conference's professional program. Attention was given to those journals that inaugurated a new discourse and school of thought responsive to cultural change in the face of prevailing contexts. Among these, two publications that emerged—coincidentally—in the year 1927, *Revue Indigène* and *Revista de Avance*, in Haiti and Cuba, respectively, stood out. Both journals were associated with movements for national recognition and artistic renewal. *Revue Indigène* and *Revista de Avance* offered a critical platform for the intellectual thought of the new Haitian and Cuban generations who found themselves in different circumstances but thinking about common questions: in Haiti, they were reflecting on the Indigenous movement, founded by Jacques Roumain, during the process of the US occupation; in Cuba, they were reflecting on a national art and literature with great interest for cultural renewal.

A chronological knot in the trajectory of Caribbean journals was defined by the appearance of certain highly significant publications in the 1940s in all of the different linguistic regions, producing a closeness among the journals of the region that had never before existed. Recognized as iconic in this regard are *Bim* (Barbados, 1942), *Kyk-Over-Al* (Guyana, 1945), *La Poesía Sorprendida* (Dominican Republic, 1944), *Tropiques* (Martinique, 1941), *Orígenes* (Cuba, 1944), *Focus* (Jamaica, 1940), *Revista del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña* (Puerto Rico, 1945), *Conjonction* (Haiti, 1946), and the abovementioned *Gaceta del Caribe* (Cuba, 1944) and *Caribbean Quarterly* (Jamaica, 1949), among others. The most important thing to note is that behind the names of these journals one encounters essential figures of Caribbean art and

literature of the last century, some of whom continue to play a role. From the 1960s up to the present day, the panorama expands and the journals specialize in areas of knowledge, in themes, and content, to generate a wide range of publications that, with different publishing schedules and stability, offer a true openness to diverse Caribbean problematics.

The Future of Journals

Since the late 1990s and especially in the twenty-first century, we have witnessed the emergence of digital publications on the Web. Of particular significance are certain flagship collections made available to readers, such as, for example, the *Revista del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña*, signaling an expansion of the informational field for disseminating documents on the Caribbean and Caribbean Studies, and which should continue to grow as a valuable alternative for circulation, as well as for teaching and scientific activity.⁸ The presence of journals with Caribbean themes outside the Caribbean and the thematic inclusion of the Caribbean in journals that are not specifically related to the region are also important.

In the workshop “¿Qué revistas para el Caribe del siglo XXI?” (“What Journals for the Twenty-First-Century Caribbean?”), attended by specialists and editors such as Rupert Lewis, Luisa Campuzano, Gloria Serrato, Kim Robinson-Walcott, Basilio Belliard, Alberto Abello, Jaime Darbouze, and Annie Paul, all participants expressed an interest in holding future meetings of the Encounter of Caribbean Magazines in a variety of locations. The multilingual character of the publications and digitization processes were of great concern. In this regard, the presentation of the thirty-year history of *Anales del Caribe* in an interactive, multimedia version circulated among the attendees was very well received. The idea that online journals should not be a replacement for publication in traditional formats and the importance of

⁸ Other examples are *Caribbean Quarterly* and *Small Axe*. Please see issuu.com/revistaicp, www.uwi.edu/cq/home.aspx, and smallaxe.net.

viewing this variant as another alternative for circulation in order to reach a larger readership was emphasized. Also supported was the idea of expanding Caribbean networks for sharing journals and exchanging publications, especially through university libraries and the services of information centers.

There was collective concern regarding the problem of storage and preservation of the journals, therefore lending support to projects to digitize all these sources as a means to their preservation, considering that they represent a cultural heritage of incalculable value for current and future generations. Also debated was the important idea of creating compendia and facsimile editions of iconic publications from the Caribbean, which might consist of introductory studies and special editions and might stimulate—in the domain of university research—the writing of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral theses on Caribbean journals, aiming for the cross-disciplinary approach so necessary to these studies and including the work of translation, an essential contribution to the dissemination of Caribbean writing and thought that has played, and continues to play, an important role in the publications of Caribbean journals.

Thus, the journal producers of our times put a temporary halt to the intensity of their editorial labors in order to examine the trajectory of Caribbean publications, to pay tribute to the memory of the founders, to distinguish the creative potential that the journals have contributed to the history of thought, culture, and the arts, and to develop new and richer connections among authors, editors, and readers, with a communicative purpose of great value for the transmission of knowledge about the peoples living in the Caribbean islands and basin. It is well worth the effort required for the urgent task of preserving this legacy with imagination and by all possible means, in accordance with the capabilities of current science and technology, and in the service of lending new dimensions to the cultural and humanistic values of the Caribbean journals.

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