

Giovanni Quessep:

a poet with a
multidivided soul

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Resumen

Este ensayo analiza la poética de Giovanni Quessep, escritor del Caribe Colombiano nacido en San Onofre (Sucre), desde una perspectiva post-occidental. El trabajo se basa en el uso de preceptos epistemológicos de académicos y performers caribeños tales como el de diáspora, el de rizoma y el de deconstrucción del canon para problematizar el espacio dialógico de la literatura postcolonial caribeña y para entender las claves simbólicas de la poesía de Quessep. El trabajo rastrea, igualmente, los elementos de la vida del poeta que programan trayectos de sentido en su obra y establece relaciones intertextuales con otros poetas del Caribe.

Palabras clave: diáspora, rizoma, deconstrucción del canon, post-colonial, post-occidental.

Abstract

This essay studies the poetics of Giovanni Quessep, a Colombian Caribbean writer born in San Onofre, Sucre, from a post-occidental standpoint. The paper uses the concepts of Diaspora, rhizome, and canon deconstruction in order to question the dialogical space of postcolonial Caribbean literature and to help to explain the symbolic keys of his poetry. The paper also traces the events in the poet's life that throw light on the meanings of his work and sets links with other Caribbean poets.

Key words: diaspora, rhizome, canon deconstruction, post-colonial, post-occidental.

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Giovanni Quessep, a Colombian Caribbean poet born in 1939, is the archetype of the poet with a multidivided soul in the region. His poetry wanders between different spaces, literary traditions and influences, and worlds of references. He is a symbolist like Baudelaire, a romantic like Keats, a modernist like Silva and Neruda, an existentialist like Sartre, and an antiprosaic poet but none of them. Quessep is, in fact, a post occidental poet. A poet that seeks his multiple heritage roots and an artist whose poetry intends to account for the dialogical space where various epistemological discourses lie.

Due to the lack of literary bonds among their poetics, the group of Colombian poets that came right after the Nadaist movement has been hard to set within Colombian literary historiography. In each particular case—and Quessep is far from being the exception—the fact that each of them does not embrace a particular literary trend or movement but feature all sort of distinct poetic views and worlds of references, has made this task even harder. As Cobo Borda (2003: 417) puts it: “Los poetas que vienen después del auge nadaísta y que comienzan a publicar sus primeros libros a fines de la década de los setenta adoptan, como hemos visto, una actitud distinta. No grupo sino individualidades, en muchos casos aislados”.

This essay aims to present an analysis of Quessep’s poetry from a post-colonial scenario since the sociological and aesthetic concepts of western literary criticism will not account for a poetics tightly connected with the socio-cultural background where it arises from. I will study his poetics using three key concepts that produce most of the meaning in his work: The concept of Diaspora, Glissant’s concept of rhizome identity (2002), and my own of “canon deconstruction” (Caballero: 2008). These terms will trace the process that goes from the dialogical space where post-colonial epistemological forces, types of knowledge and histories struggle, to their verbalization in the equally dialogical textual space of Quessep’s poems. I will also take into account some events in his life that influenced some of his aesthetic choices and, hence, reveal some meanings in his poems. Thus, I will be able to set Quessep within the literary tradition of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Quessep: a Diaspora poet

Let me first define the concept of Diaspora that will help me to illustrate Quessep’s symbolic keys. Sarah de Mojica (1999: 63-64) claims that “El

término diáspora se refiere hoy a comunidades étnicas minoritarias que coinciden en las ciudades metropolitanas y establecen lazos de solidaridad a partir de su experiencias de expatriados”. The basic concept of this notion is a psychological one: The dual feeling of not-belonging and belonging. The members of the Diaspora feel like foreigners and local people of a land that has traveled with them, a land that lives in their very soul.

The Diaspora is not to be simply considered as a group of migrants who feel tightly connected due to cultural and racial bonds, but as an ideological condition that some groups of colonial subjects experience as a result of his “multiracial” nature. The Caribbean man’s mind is in an ongoing Diaspora that intends to shape those multiple traditions, ethnic ties and spaces that live within it. Thus, what happens when the Caribbean man migrates to a metropolitan center is that his Diaspora-like mind tunes up with those of his fellow men. It is obvious then that that collective Diaspora differs from the individual Diaspora that he carries on his mind. Even when the Caribbean being is in his native land he is experiencing that mental Diaspora. Torres-Saillant (1997: 32) has called Caribbean man “an existential migrant” “an itinerant being”. Gerald Guinness (1993) has expressed this idea through the dichotomy of “Here and Elsewhere” taken from Walcott’s *The Arkansas Testament* in which Here stands for the “local”, for the Caribbean space, and Elsewhere for the “alien”, for the Metropolitan, western space. Guinness (xii) points out that: “To live Here, physically or in one’s imagination, and yet to have to cope with the constant push and pull of Elsewhere concentrates the mind wonderfully.”

Having said this, I can describe Giovanni Quessep’s poetry as “packed” with a mental Diaspora. His poems are characterized by the coexistence of competing claims of different cultural traditions and different spaces.

Quessep is both a physical and a mental migrant. He is a wanderer and a globe trotter. He has traveled all his life both willingly and forcefully. As a child, he and his family were driven away from San Onofre, their native town, by the mid fifties political violence. They settled in Sincelejo, the capital city of Sucre and a place close to Cartagena where he attended high school. Then, he moved to Bogota to go into college. Wanting to know the hometown of Divina Comedia’s author, the book that had impressed him the most, he traveled to Italy where he took some courses on Renaissance

poetry and Dante's work. Back to Colombia he traveled to Popayan to work as a university professor.

But Quessep is also a mental wanderer. His poems stage the rhizome identity of Caribbean men together with the poet's ongoing mental Diaspora. Quessep's poetics features a speaker full of thoughts of traveling and uncertainty, and a "naked migrant" (see Glissant: 2002) in search of his languages, his histories and his cultural heritage. This naked migrant seems to be in an unending quest.

The multiple spaces, or the "Here and Elsewhere", are basically represented by natural symbols. The snow represents the western world he experienced when he lived in Italy. It represents the unreal: "déjame oír tu mágico/ embeleso por los caminos de la nieve (Quessep: 2008: 43)¹, and it also means solitude "con tristeza de pájaro caído en la nieve" (*PI*: 44), "El hombre solo habita/ Una orilla lejana/ Mira la tarde gris cayendo / Mira las hojas blancas" (*PI*: 24). The patio, the trees and the sea stand for his native Colombian Caribbean. All of them bring back happy childhood memories: "si eres el cuerpo amado / ven entre árboles, entre canciones." (*PI*: 46), ¡Oh infancia en la penumbra del solar / que me das el naranjo y la serpiente" (*PI*: 65). They mean the good: Vas solo con tu alma, barajando / canciones y presagios/ que hablan del bosque donde la hierba es tenue, / lejos de la desgracia que en ti se confabula." (in Procultura: 1986: 60). They also represent the poet's homesickness: "Medianoche, no encuentro/ los caminos que dan al patio, / ni al pozo de agua viva / donde bajan las nubes y el pasado (...) y no me hallo / sino en el patio que daba al cielo / y en el agua del pozo y el naranjo." (*PI*: 51), "Si suena un caracol/ sólo fantasmas hay y un viejo puerto." (*PI*: 65); and it evidences the fact that he, as many Caribbean poets of the Diaspora, carries his home on his back like a shell: "Nada podrías llevarte/ si me persigue el mar de piel manchada;" (*PI*: 64). Here, the racial connotation is evident. The Caribbean Sea is black and Quessep's recurrent image of the European snow is the archetypal of whiteness. San Onofre lies in the Sabana de Sucre region characterized by the settlement of Afro descendents and Syrian-Lebanese migrants.

It is "Gabriel Chadid Jattin" (*PI*: 60) the poem that best embodies the spatial dichotomy of "Here and Elsewhere":

¹ All the references to this book will be introduced by the initials PI followed by the page number.

Azul desesperanza
 Solo encuentra el viajero que retorna
 A su perdido patio después de tantos años
 De errar entre los cactus y las dunas
 Ardientes de un desierto sin estrellas

The patio is the symbol of the longed dwelling, the lost paradise, the Caribbean of his childhood. The desert is its opposite, the non-Caribbean. It is described in a negative way. That is why it does not have stars, it does not have light. The desert is full of cactuses and dunes as opposed to the idyllic patio full of trees. And this opposition gives the title to his ninth book *Un jardín y un desierto*.

In addition, Quessep's poems feature a speaker with a wandering soul, a speaker that is always in search of something. They, hence, convey a mood of uneasiness, of unrest, even of despair:

Tuve todo en mi casa,
 El cielo y la raíz, la rama oculta
 Que hace las estaciones
 Y el vuelo de los pájaros. No había
 Nada que no viniera hasta mis manos;
 Pero yo nada quise, y me fui lejos
 Por caminos, por insulas extrañas en busca de los ojos
 Del tigre y el rumor
 De una fuente que no era de mi mundo.
 En el atardecer lo deje todo
 Por una sombra y un alcázar, y hoy
 Perdido en un amargo laberinto de hojas, (...) (PI: 52-3).

Something similar is described in "Quiero apenas una canción" (PI: 38): "No sé qué camino seguir / ni a quién decirle que me ame, / mis ojos miran la floresta / y estoy cansado y se hace tarde/".

But his wanderings are not only a way to set a mood; they are the strategy to mix, to put together those locations. These locations become one in his soul. As Duchesne (1998: 140) has argued: "La errancia no ignora los polos, sino que los integra y los prolifera más allá de las estrictas dualidades. Es por eso una forma de multiplicar los mundos imaginarios". In "Callar es bello" (PI: 42) this integration of imaginary worlds is explicit: (...) "y

oir apenas esa música / de los jardines en desvelo, / mientras caen las hojas / que nos llevan, insomnes, a otro tiempo.” Time and space obviously blend and become one. That other time in the poem is another place, too.

Finally, the Here and Elsewhere structure is also supported by the use of the oxymoron and by the opposition of fantasy / fiction vs. reality, very much like the Cortazar and Borges way. The use of the oxymoron is persistent throughout his works: “rosa de salitre”, “rosa demoníaca”, “luto azul”, “lo oyó contar a su padre al borde del fuego mientras la nieve”, “miró llegar una blancura de leves sombras”, “la música de un blanco país que te amara en la sombra”.

Likewise, fantasy / fiction vs. reality are a recurrent opposition in Quessep’s work. They also blend and the borders between one and the other are not clear: “Así comenzaría desde la primera letra del tiempo/ A contarlo de nuevo/ A nombrar la leyenda y transformar la fábula en el mundo real” (*PI*: 19), “Cuento de lo real donde las manos / Abren el fruto que olvidó la muerte / Si un hilo de leyenda es el recuerdo / Bella durmiente” (*PI*: 34). Children stories, fairy tales and the woods are part of Quessep’s world of references. They are opposed to real items such as the patio and the pit where people get water, very common in the Colombian Caribbean rural homes. The former ones challenge the western concept of reality: “- ¿la vida, cuándo fue de veras nuestra?, / ¿Cuándo somos de veras lo que que somos?” (*PI*: 67). Through them Quessep wonders what is really true: “tal vez nunca existió lo que nos quema” (*Ibid*). Like romantic writers, he believes that life is poetry, that fiction is what really exists and that reality is not real: “Cerrado el libro se nos va la vida / y se entra en un dibujo o luna inmóvil” (*Ibid*).

Quessep’s poetry: an ongoing search of an identity

The quest for identity is a common feature of Caribbean performers. It is basically characterized by racial and cultural considerations. Due to the various ethnic mixtures, the Caribbean man feels the urge to define his true being. Giovanni Quessep, a descendent of Lebanese immigrants who was born in a region inhabited mainly by afro descendants [San Onofre was one of the towns in the Caribbean region in which a Palenque² was

² A town of marooned African slaves that was free from the European authority.

settled (Zambrano Pantoja, 2000: 41)], seems to be obsessed with defining his being.

Quessep's being is always staged in relation to others beings. His soul is in the Caribbean and elsewhere. It is rooted and at the same time it is open. He is always screening his various sources of heritage and his histories together.

His relation to the homeland is not of a first inhabitant as the Western pattern has imposed but it is that of a "relational complicity" (see Glissant, 1990:48). In other words, what ties him to the land is not a mythical account of the beginnings (in which the gods have given the natives the territory) but tight spiritual bonds set during long cohabiting. The Caribbean space keeps Caribbean man's histories, colonial wounds and cultural essence like a book. Whenever he takes a glance at it, he sees everything overlapping. And Caribbean man has shaped that space to get by, as maroons did. He has confided his deeper feelings to it. That is why he carries it wherever he goes as we have pointed out above.

Caribbean man has become one with his surroundings. They are tightly together and therefore he lives forever in it. Quessep states this in "Parábola del siglo XVIII":

Al que no necesita de la piedra para
durar
Porque sus huesos duran como las aguas del Lu
A aquel que reposa en el bosque vedado
Y nunca será polvo entre los pinos (*PI*: 12).

The patio is for Quessep, as it is for many other Colombian Caribbean poets like Rojas Herazo and Burgos Cantor, the symbol of that tight connection:

Azul desesperanza
solo encuentra el viajero que retorna
a su perdido patio después de tantos años
de errar entre los cactus y las dunas
ardientes de un desierto sin estrellas (*PI*: 60).

In addition, the search for the rhizome identity is led by the awareness of being in unending wanderings. This keeps Caribbean man from fixing its

root since it is not fixed as the western root. Mental traveling is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. Glissant illustrates this in *Le Tout Monde* (1993: 32): “(...) pero eso era porque / él portaba en sí mismo otro tiempo, que él erraba / ...dilataba en sí otros espacios, y perdido en el / espacio del momento presente.” Here we can see the fusion between time and space that I described at the beginning of this paper. This fusion lets us understand why the Caribbean environment stores the histories of his men, as Quessep describes it:

Sólo entonces comenzaría a olvidar
A deshacer la historia de su vida y la de los demás
La historia de la nieve y la piedra
Del dragón y la mariposa
Del hermano o el enemigo
A destejer el destino como quien deshace un dibujo
Grabado por agujas milenarias en la carne torturada
Hasta olvidar su nombre y el nombre de todo ser
Así comenzaría desde la primera letra del tiempo
A contarlo de nuevo (...) (*PI*: 18-19).

This excerpt contains two leif motifs of Caribbean literature: the naming of colonial wounds and the re-historization of the region (For information on the treatment of history by Caribbean performers see Ileana Saenz, 1999: 131-140). The latter is very common in Walcott's and Brathwaite's poetry and VS Reid's and Lamming's narrative, for instance.

The Caribbean man's identity and culture is to be thought taking into account a dialogical stance and the concepts of hybridization and syncretism. The relationships among its different components are to be deemed as interacting and coexisting without hierarchies. The Caribbean man in Quessep's poetry is, therefore, always an outsider. He does not have a fixed identity or a single dominant cultural heritage. On the contrary, his identity is movable and undetermined, and the different sources of cultural heritage relate, converge and diverge freely. His poetry explores all of them including the Eastern blood that runs within him, as Quessep (1999) himself admits it: “Ya la poesía oriental, la china y la árabe, y el mundo trovadoresco movían la rueda de mi fortuna. Hoy sigo por el mismo sendero descubierto, hallado como en sueños, internándome cada vez más por regiones desconocidas, hasta las ínsulas extrañas (...).”

The image of the outsider, of the strange, persists throughout his work: “Escucha al que descende por el bosque / De alados ciervos y extranjera luna” (*PI*: 36), (...) y me fui lejos / por caminos, por ínsulas extrañas” (*PI*: 52), “Extranjero de todo / La dicha lo maldice / El hombre solo a solas habla” (*PI*: 24).

Quessep also explores his rhizome identity by questioning himself about it: “¿Qué caminos son estos, qué río de violetas me persigue?” (*PI*: 26), “¿De qué país de dónde de qué tiempo / Viene su voz la historia que te canta? “¿y quién podrá salvarte, / quién te daría lo que buscas entre hadas?” (In *Procultura*: 62).

The search for aesthetic identity: Canon deconstruction

Another urge Caribbean performers feel is that of deconstructing the western canon. Most of them are “compelled” to analyze the authors and the most outstanding works of their mother colonies literary traditions so as to get rid of their influence and to identify those elements that are part of their own aesthetic views. As a matter of fact, they need to trace back those literary traditions and to break into pieces the canonical texts that they have been often imposed to read.

This strategy generates, at the same time, a process of elaboration of the idea of The Caribbean and of a Caribbean aesthetic. This aesthetic is based on the revision of the literary typology of genres and on the way of seeing the relationship between fiction and reality.

In Quessep’s case, the strategy of canon deconstruction is both aesthetic and physical since he voluntarily traveled to Italy to study the work of Dante. There he took the *Lectura Dantis* course during two years to study *La Divina Comedia*, the main source of his poetry. Del Rocío Hernandez (2010) points out that:

La recreación de algunos elementos de la cultura, tanto artística como religiosa y literaria, nos hacen pensar en un sentimiento y un pensamiento acerca de la poesía que la privilegia entre todas las artes. Cuestión que nos recuerda la relación profunda de la poética de Giovanni Quessep con la visión dantesca acerca de la poesía. Se recuerda al respecto las palabras de Dante al reconocer a Virgilio en el infierno de la *Comedia*.

Quessep's assumed Dante's view of poetry as a universe of words that could be interpreted literally, allegorically and anagogically. That is why his work is full of symbols, myths and legends from all sources. This also explains why he aims to create a whole new universe by means of poetry, a universe parallel to the real universe. He even attempts to challenge the degree of reality of the real world we know and to appoint the poetic universe as the real one as I have pointed out.

Two of *Divina Comedia's* symbols that Quessep taps into are the woman as the door to Paradise and the rose. Beatrice, Dante's beloved one, whose name means "happiness giver", "the beatific one", is waiting for him on God's side. Quessep's Claudia is also the symbol of heaven Paradise:

Jardín de Claudia como por el cielo
Claudia celeste
Nave y Castillo es él en tu memoria
El mar de nuevo príncipe abolido
Cuerpo de Claudia pero al fin ventana
Del paraíso

In Dante's poems Paradise is made of a huge rose. However, in Quessep's work the rose is always introduced next to a word with a negative connotation such as "rosa atroz" or the ones I have mentioned above. This is probably related to Quessep's way of deconstructing the western canon.

Overall, Quessep's poetry seems to set up a notion of "Aesthetic Relation" among the different aesthetic texts he explores in it. That is to say, he believes that the distinct aesthetic views that underlie them share something despite being different. Hence, they can coexist without rejecting one another.

Quessep, for instance, features several Greek myths together with accounts of other cosmogonies. In "Divertimento final", for example, the Greek mythological character of Sarón who drowned in the sea is presented together with the mythological character of a golden horned deer that is found in the Indian Ramayana and in the Colombian Zenú aboriginal community accounts, as stated by Zapata Meza (1996: 37) when describing one of their legends:

Mientras Pedro de Heredia con sus huestes asciende por un río
de aguas brillantes y escamosas como gusano erizado bajo el sol,
Golosina corre corriente abajo en un río seco de arenas cortantes
persiguiendo a un venado con cuernos de oro.

But Quessep goes a step beyond that limit. He makes use of all the different meanings a myth has and, at the same time, combines it with other myths and symbols from the same culture and from other cultures. That's the case of the Greek myth of the lotus flower which takes on two different connotations: the one given by Homer in *The Odyssey* as the item that makes men forget about their lives, and the one related to the account of the Greek goddess who fought hard during centuries after drowning in a place called Lotus, and that came to stand for triumph after a long struggle. In "Parábola" we read:

Oyó contar a los soldados del rey
Historias que brotaban del tiempo
O se perdían en la penumbra
Donde la Flor de Loto confabulaba con su
Blancura
Para tejer el olvido
Que habría de salvarlos de la ignominia y la
Guerra (...) (*PI*: 16)
(...)Solo existía una posibilidad de que naciera la Flor
De Loto
En cualquiera de los jardines
O en el más apartado de los bosques
Solo una posibilidad de salvación (...) (*PI*: 18)

In the same poem there are allusions to symbols of the Eastern culture such as the dragon, and allusions to the Caribbean notion of revisiting and retelling history. It also contains references to one recurrent Greek symbol in Quessep's poetry: the character of Penelope as the representation of the alteration of the linear flow of time: "A destejer el destino como quien deshace un dibujo / Grabado por agujas milenarias en la carne torturada / Hasta olvidar su nombre y el nombre de todo ser / Así comenzaría desde la primera letra del tiempo (*PI*: 18-9).

Furthermore, Greek mythology is presented together with other European cultural and literary traditions and with allusions to European modern writers:

Ya te olvidas Penélope del agua
 Bella durmiente de tu luna antigua
 Y hacia otra forma vas en el espejo
 Perfil de Alicia
 Dime el secreto de esta rosa o nunca
 Que guardan el león y el unicornio (*PI*: 35).

The allusions to children classical stories are very recurrent. They were one of the first texts that Quessep read and that interested him in literature. They also gave him that insight of fantasy as the real reality and so he uses the references to them to build that concept:

(...) que hay un reino lejano donde nadie
 Vive, ni muere nadie, y un alcázar
 Con una puerta que abre los bufones.
 Nos dijo alguien que la vida es bella
 Y existen caballeros, piedras, duendes
 Que tejen el destino y nadie sabe
 Cómo turbar su antigua pesadumbre; (*PI*: 66).

And this is probably why Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is also a recurrent reference of his poetry. Quessep adopts Carroll's ironic style of playing with logic and with the fine line between reality and fantasy: "(Vagas por un país donde las maravillas / a tu lado persisten y la estación del tiempo / no recuerda en tu mano la luna de los sueños / o el polvo de la luna del que una vez soñara" (*PI*: 28). Like Carroll, Quessep plays with the concepts of logic and reality and with language. Thus, sometimes poems seem rather like a riddle. In "Poema para recordar a Alicia en el espejo" the topic of fantasy and reality is expressed in a much straightforward way. Perhaps that is why the poem is written in a less poetic way. Indeed, it is one of his few poems written in a prosaic style:

Aquí lo legendario y lo real
 Nuestra historia resulta semejante
 A la de esa muchacha maravillosa que penetró en el espejo
 Estuvo siempre a punto de desaparecer
 Pero ninguna pronunció la fórmula que la devolviera al polvo
 Ni Tweedledum ni Tweedledee ni la Reina ni el Rey Rojo
 Que lo único que tenía que hacer era despertarse

Tal vez somos un cuento
 Tal vez sin que nunca nos percatemos
 La nave de Ulises
 O el ruiseñor de Keats (...)

(In Cobo Borda, 1980: 165-66).

From his study of Carroll's greatest work Quessep created his paradigmatic concept of the garden as the recipient for a parallel reality full of fantasy. The garden is mentioned in almost each of his poems and his ninth and his last book are named: *Un jardín y un desierto y Metamorfosis en el jardín*.

The adoption of the theme of reality and fantasy also resulted from Quessep's liking for *Las mil y una noches*. From this one he adopts the oral as one of the main characteristics of non western literatures and the resulting dialogue of the oral and the scribal in them (The poem "Monólogo de Sherazada" shows the adoption of this feature). This characteristic is present in most Colombian Caribbean poets in different ways ranging from Obeso's use of dialect and Rojas Herazo's use of scatological discourse to Gomez Jattin's and Buitrago's use of nasty language.

In Quessep the use of the oral is closest to Alvaro Miranda's proposal: The emphasis on the telling of histories and stories through oral means. This can be seen in "Parabola del siglo XVIII" where he also stages the western, the eastern and the Caribbean worldviews together. The word 'tell' is repeated twice to emphasize the oral character of the history. The scribal character of the history is also stated explicitly:

Cuenta Li Po desde su exilio en la ciudad de
 Yehlang
 Que en el palacio imperial de Uu (...)
 Al lado de las armas está escrita la historia del
 Guerrero (...)
 También cuenta Li Po que todo esto no recuerda ni
 Conmemora
 Sino al otro al que atraparon vivo en la batalla (PI: 11)

The Eastern concept of honor is exposed here together with the static concept of history of western society carved in stone, and the more dynamic concept of history characteristic of the Caribbean: "(...) Al que no necesita

de la piedra o el bronce / para durar / Porque sus huesos duran como las aguas del Lu” (*PI*: 12).

The notion of “Aesthetic Relation” that I have coined to describe Quessep’s poetry is, nevertheless, not used throughout all his work. His first poems feature a dual, antagonistic view of the relationship between western and Caribbean aesthetic. This is characteristic of the initial Caribbean aesthetic movement that intended to account for the intrinsic features of Caribbean aesthetic production and opposed the African heritage to the European one. That is the case of Césaire’s “Negritude” that argues the Caribbean is characterized by having an African soul and claims to accept the fact that Caribbean men are black and must accept the destiny of being black. They, therefore, must adopt black history and culture.

“La alondra y los alacranes”, a poem of Quessep’s first book of poems *Duración y leyenda*, introduces this antagonistic structure:

Acuérdate muchacha
Que estás en un lugar de Suramérica
No estamos en Verona
No sentirás el canto de la alondra
Los inventos de Shakespeare
No son para Mauricio Babilonia
Cumple tu historia suramericana
Esperáme desnuda
Entre los alacranes
Y olvídate y no olvides
Que el tiempo colecciona mariposas (*PI*: 14)

The lark represents the western world and stands for delicateness, musicality and aesthetics. The scorpion symbolizes the Caribbean and stands for the opposite: rusticity, danger, ugliness. Shakespeare, the center of the western canon is opposed to García Márquez, the center of Caribbean and Latin American canon.

Quessep’s poetics, on the other hand, relies heavily on the biblical references. The poet reproduces the biblical discourses repeatedly: “Oh tú que reinas en la noche” (*PI*: 43), “Alguien me niega, otro / que desgarrar mi túnica” (In *Procultura*, 1986: 62). The poems are also full of allusions to

different biblical books and episodes: “Si pudiera / darte una manzana / sin el edén perdido” (*PI*: 58). ¿Cuándo veré tu rostro / que guardan siete sellos / de la melancolía? (*PI*: 65).

There exist other sources of reference in Quessep’s poetry. Romantic writers like Keats and Blake, the American modernism through the symbol of the tower in which the poet secludes himself, Borges and Cortazar, and Baudelaire and Rimbaud, among others.

Giovanni Quessep and his Caribbean poetry

Understanding Quessep’s poetics implies necessarily understanding the socio, historical and cultural scenario from which his work emerged. This, therefore, requires the use of Caribbean post-colonial epistemological concepts since the western episteme fails to account for an object it was not devised for. Trying to set Quessep within the literary tradition of Latin American without taking into account the Caribbean aesthetic trends has resulted in the lame statement that he belongs to the post-European isms borrowed for Latin American historiography to classify its literary production.

There is some work yet to be done on the study of how Quessep deconstructs the western canon to elaborate a poetics that is deeply rooted in those social, historical and cultural structures of the Caribbean. I believe that his use of the “Relational Complicity” and the “Mental Diaspora” notions sets clear links with other performers and literary traditions in the Caribbean whose study might throw light on Quessep’s symbolic keys, too.

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