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Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival by Meredith M. Gadsby (Book Review)

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Meredith M. Gadsby. *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2006. 240 pp. \$39.95.

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The folk will tell you that salt can either save you or destroy you. Toni Cade Bambara's Velma of *The Saltaters* realized that her survival depended on learning "the difference between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning into salt, succumbing to the serpent." The lesson of similar folk wisdom is the subject of Meredith M. Gadsby's *Sucking Salt*, where she proposes as a new framework for the examination of Caribbean women's writing the survival techniques implied in "sucking salt," techniques suggested in her aunt's reflections on people she knew. Tantie expounded: "Little salt won't kill yuh. . . . Them people came up hard, with nuthin'. But sometimes you just have to suck salt until you can do better" (1). Gadsby describes

"sucking salt" as a survival skill that carries a "simultaneously doubled linguistic sign of adversity and survival" (3). Her two-part goal, she declares, is to examine the significance of salt in the Caribbean and to explore "creative resistance to systems of oppression" experienced by those who migrated to Great Britain, Canada, and New York City (4). She frames much of this study in the travels of women in her own family and their wrestling with issues of migration, identity, and silencing—personal anecdotes that have a poignant relevance to her exploration of the literature. Indeed, this intimacy is one of the great strengths of the book, weaving as it does autobiography (her family's and her own), history, sociology, folklore, and literature. Reading this study I was as often fascinated by Tantie and Delilah Rose as I am by Paule Marshall's Avey Johnson and Selena Boyce!

The issue of "sucking salt" offers the metaphor for Caribbean women's writing, migration, and survival, according to Gadsby's title. Throughout there is informative discussion of images of salt in the folklore and the literature. Within the book, however, there is some question about organization and a sense that Gadsby has not quite decided whom and what to include and where to include it. Is the guiding principle of this book the image of salt—or other images such as the sea and the kitchen? Is it Caribbean women writers who have migrated? Is it one of the folk items that enter the picture (the Flying African, the Soucouyant)? Is it the themes that are critical here (resistance, migration, language, silencing, space, motherhood, etc.)? Is her focus on novels, as she suggests in her introduction, when in fact she includes analyses of autobiography, essays, folk forms, and a variety of other genres?

Sometimes there is almost as much attention to the literature and folklore of African American women and Caribbean men as there is to that of Caribbean women; this double focus is especially apparent in Chapter 2, "The Salience of Memory: The Cultural and Historical Significance of Salt in the Caribbean." Here her exploration of the significance of salt in the folklore, the written literature, and cultural studies, includes a number of sources in the US and Africa. Critical to this chapter is the work of such Caribbean male authors as Earl

Lovelace, Fred D'Aguiar, and Edouard Glissant; African American writers such as Toni Cade Bambara and Toni Morrison; and the tales in African American and Caribbean folklore of the flying Africans.

Chapters 4, "Harvesting Salt: Caribbean Women Writers in England and the Philosophy of Survival," and 5, "I Suck Coarse Salt: Caribbean Women Writers in Canada—Language, Location, and the Politics of Transcendence," focus on Caribbean women writers in England and Canada, respectively, and Gadsby provides enlightening commentary on the works of writers in both areas. The only problem is that the issues she treats in each chapter (gender, racial abuse, the sense of racial beauty, and the return home in Chapter 4; and language, location, and transcendence in Chapter 5) are important issues for writers treated in the other chapter—and they are important issues for writers in the US and the Caribbean as well. Chapter 6, "Refugees of a World on Fire: Kitchen Place and Refugee Space in the Poetics of Paule Marshall and Edwidge Danticat," highlights individual writers in the US rather than the area, and extensive treatment is given to Marshall, who is often discussed elsewhere. Given Gadsby's focus on Caribbean women and on the themes she emphasizes throughout, it is disappointing that in her discussion of Caribbean women writers living in the US, she never mentions Jamaica Kincaid and gives no discussion of the works of Michelle Cliff, both of whom were (unlike Marshall) born in the Caribbean and migrated to the US.

While Gadsby treats some male writers who, like Lovelace, have for the most part remained in the Caribbean, she gives no attention to Caribbean women writers who write from that base, with the exception of the calypsonians. Such a chapter would have balanced her focus on Caribbean women writers in England, Canada, and the US. All of those Caribbean women writers based in the Caribbean have also experienced migration, but they have also returned (an issue that she raises in her chapter on England). Nowhere is the imagery of the sea more prominent than among some of these writers. The subject matter and themes of this book beg for some mention of Erna Brodber, Velma Pollard, Lorna Goodison, Olive Senior, Merle Hodge, and Louse Bennett (some of whom have, since their major writings, made their home in Canada or the US).

A final illustration of Gadsby's apparent indecision about organization can be seen in the repetition in Chapter I, "Postscript," and "Literature Review." The opening chapter, "Little Salt Won't Kill You: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and the Politics of Survival," sets out her thesis, and provides a brief overview of feminist studies of Caribbean literature by women, one that is expanded at the end of the book in a section called "Literature Review." Here, as in her "Postscript" she comes back to her goals in the study and also repeats all too much of what she has already provided in the opening chapter.

Despite my quibbles about organization, there is much to applaud in this work. In addition to her concentration on such highly acclaimed writers as Paule Marshall and Edwidge Danticat, Gadsby offers useful criticism of a number of lesser-known writers, including Dionne Brand, Beryl Gilroy, Joan Riley, and Dorothea Smartt. Chapter 3, "'It Sweeter Than Meat' Saltfish, Sexual Politics and the Caribbean Oral Imagination," deserves special mention for its noteworthy treatment of representations of sexuality and women in oral forms, especially the calypso, with an emphasis on many texts in which the smell of saltfish is mistaken for a woman's intimate organs. This discussion reminds us again of the play between the kitchen and the bedroom, both of which are domains of the power of women. Though Gadsby argues that the calypso, generally regarded as a male form, probably originated with women, the calypsos that she most frequently cites here are by males. She provides a brief overview of the history of women calypsonians and their assertion of power through song, focusing partic-

ularly on the power of the soucouyant, a blood-sucking female spirit. Here, as elsewhere, the personal account provides a superb introduction as she recalls an instance on a flight when the passengers were annoyed by a rancid smell and one male passenger shouted, "Is who din' wash dey saltfish today?"

Finally, Gadsby is to be applauded for her efforts to go beyond the "mainstream" theoretical formulations and to look to Caribbean culture for this innovative approach to Caribbean literature. *Sucking Salt* is an important addition to the recently expanding field of critical studies of Caribbean women writers.