

Daryl Cumber Dance, Editor. *New World Adams: Conversations with West Indian Writers*  
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Captain Bernardo de Vargas Machuca. *The Indian Militia and Description of the Indies*, edited  
by Kris Lane and Translated by Timothy F. Johnson. Durham NC: Duke University Press  
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Although published nearly 400 years apart, the 2008 editions of *New World Adams: Conversations with West Indian Writers* and *The Indian Militia and Description of the Indies* foreground similar concerns and survey, in one way or another, parts of the area generally known as the Americas. Furthermore, both raise – purposely and inadvertently – issues regarding the practice behind the edited scholarly book. If the latter seems to draw attention outside of the books at hand and toward socio-cultural aspects of the Americas in general and the Caribbean particular, it should not be a surprise. Kenneth Ramchand (1988), a foundational name in Caribbean literary study, once complained that scholarship in his field was “almost indistinguishable from the sociology of literature.” Yet as Daryl Cumber Dance argues at the outset of her introduction to *New World Adams*, a degree of sociology is indispensable to literary research. “Throughout my study and teaching of literature,” Dance writes, “I have found a necessary component in the study of a work to be a consideration of what the author has to say about that work – even when his statement cannot be taken at face value” (11). I would take Dance’s position further given the context of the Caribbean. With much of its formative literature written around the era of independence movements, it seems fundamentally disingenuous to ignore concerns with history and society when reading the poems of Louise Bennett or the novels of George Lamming.

Dance’s caution toward the veracity of an author’s statement proves valuable, though. Her interview with Sam Selvon, a Trinidadian who immigrated to London in 1950 whose work is often seen as lighthearted and humorous, transpires in a manner that would not surprise readers familiar with his public persona. Dance asks the author of *The Lonely Londoners* who he read during his early years of writing, and Selvon immediately recognizes the real question she seeks to ask:

Selvon: Here is a strange thing – because I think I know what you are daring...

Dance: Influences – that terrible word!

Selvon: ...to ask here is: am I being influence by any writer? OK. No matter how you couch it I know what you mean (251).

Selvon, always resistant to categorization, characteristically seeks to position himself away from any lines of affiliation. Yet readers familiar with his Moses trilogy – novels released in 1956, 1975, and 1983 that take its protagonist from a racist London to Trinidad and back – know that Selvon’s politics do not emerge in his evasive interviews. His humor, however, nonetheless illuminates his stance on issues concerning identity, a topic that quickly becomes a slippery slope in the Caribbean, even after disciplinary divisions among its Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone dimensions. Selvon, whose paternal grandparents are (East) Indian, says he prefers being described as “Caribbean” as opposed to “West Indian.” “I don’t really like the word West Indian,” he tells Dance. “I think that it is a misnomer. I mean what do I call myself: an ‘East Indian Trinidadian West Indian’? Jesus!” (259).

The remainder of the twenty-two interviews in *New World Adams* covers the range of Caribbean literary figures. Dance includes conversations with bulwarks such as C.L.R. James, George Lamming, and Derek Walcott, as well as chats with female writers that belie the collection's title: Pam Mordecai, Velma Pollard, and Sylvia Wynter. Yet as Dance herself regrets, interviews with Kamau Brathwaite and Andrew Salkey could not be reproduced for reasons beyond her control (9).

Although *New World Adams* is a handsomely rendered edition of its initial 1992 publication, the fact remains that Dance's interviews were all conducted between 1979 and 1980. In spite of this temporal aporia, the book is worthy of shelf space for students of the Caribbean. Similarly, it would serve as a rich reference for those who seek cursory information on any of the writers interviewed; each is prefaced with concise biographical information and updated bibliographical resources. Given the dates of the interviews themselves, though, those who read Dance's interview with George Lamming, for instance, should also make a point of consulting the author's extended 2002 interview with David Scott, editor of the journal *Small Axe*.

A few more words on the packaging of *New World Adams* will help me transition to the second book under review. Dance's publisher, Peepal Tree Press, is currently undergoing a renaissance of sorts. In addition to this updated edition of *New World Adams*, the Leeds-based publishing house started its Caribbean Modern Classics series in 2008, bringing hard-to-find novels such as Andrew Salkey's *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* and Edgar Mittelholzer's *A Morning at the Office* within the reach of a new generation of readers and scholars. As a product of the Internet age and its instantaneous archive, I cannot but admire the faux materiality of *New World Adams*. One on level, Dance reminds us in her introduction that we are reading *transcripts of interviews*. While they might not replace the actual interviews, the final text strives "to retain as much of the flavour and tone and rhythm and content of the interview as possible in transcription" (13). On another level, each interview has a title page that simply says "Conversation With," which is followed by the image of a cassette tape with the writer's name typed on a label. This visual/textual design element ultimately reminds us of *New World Adams*'s status as an edited book – a minutely constructed yet extremely informative archive.

Yet the palpable feeling that an artifact – or better yet, the reproduction of an artifact – is in hand imbues nearly every aspect of *The Indian Militia*. Translated into the English for the first time by Timothy F. Johnson and edited with an extended introductory study by Kris Lane, *The Indian Militia* is Captain Bernardo de Vargas Machuca's manual to the sixteenth century Spanish colony of New Grenada (present-day Colombia and Panama, more or less). The book's brown cover uses a close-up of the frontispiece of the original 1599 print, giving *The Indian Militia*, on one hand, a rugged look that speaks to its status as a field guide, and on the other, the venerable aura of a museum piece.

Indeed, that last term – museum piece – is the best I can come up with to succinctly describe *The Indian Militia*. Yes, it *is* a manual and a field guide: divided into four parts, Vargas Machuca discusses a commander's requisite qualities ("Christian, noble, wealthy, generous, of good age, strong, diligent, prudent, affable and determined," 29), how to choose soldiers ("keep from receiving fat and clumsy men, for they are of no use for walking and sustaining the labor," 56), the duties of soldiers ("he who sleeps loses honor and risks his life," 82), and finally, how to settle lands once usurped from the indigenous population ("Eight streets, level and straight, will lead from the square," 141). These qualities of *The Indian Militia* make it a gold mine for understanding Spanish colonialism in the Americas, particularly its waning years. To be sure, editor Kris Lane begins his introduction by calling Vargas Machuca a "luckless conquistador"

(xi). But of interest to literary scholars – and what complicates categorization – are the sixteen pages of poems that begin *The Indian Militia*. Numerous sonnets vouch for Vargas Machuca's nobility and indispensability to Spain. Perhaps Vargas Machuca needed all the poetry he could get: Lane's introduction is helpful in underlining that despite the confidence of the captain's handbook, its purpose was mainly to ask King Philip for additional funds to support his expedition. On a textual level, then, *The Indian Militia* is undoubtedly an artifact emblematic of a particular juncture in history.

But this 2008 edition is also an artifact emblematic of *our time*. *The Indian Militia* contains drawings of helmets, pikes, and swords – not because the original 1599 text included them, but because editor Kris Lane drew them. Likewise, Lane's modern-day photographs of hospitals and town squares accompany Vargas Machuca's descriptions. I mention these aspects not to critique them, only to acknowledge their presence and suggest that they make an artifact of a text that is *already* mediated by its temporal distance from our current reality. As an edited book like *New World Adams*, *The Indian Militia's* scholarly footprints lead to someplace new, for better or worse, even as they attempt to take readers *back* to a particular moment.

Indeed, even though Vargas Machuca graces *The Indian Militia's* original and 2008 covers, the manual/poetry collection/museum piece actually leads to the Indians themselves. Although the translator's note takes care to mention how Vargas Machuca's language was negotiated, the captain himself leaves us no note of *he* translated the Indians he combated. Nonetheless, his text is valuable. He describes, in detail, their weaponry and style of attack: "Indians use the blowgun with poison darts...They attack with great shouts and shrieks" (20). This might reek of Hollywood stereotype, but it would be myopic to read them categorically as such. The captain provides four thorough pages on the methodology of Indian ambushes. By the time readers reach the fourth book of *The Indian Militia*, where one can read about their "ingenious" skills and their "festivities" with music, they realize that the captain's text reveals more about the Indians than their Spanish conquerors. The voice of the Indians, in other words, emerges from the captain's narrative even as he dismisses their lands as "always savage until our Spaniards tread upon and discovered them" (24). Reading *The Indian Militia* for its inadvertent insights on Indian tactics and culture might be the crux of this English translation. By consciously handling voices – translating them from Spanish to English, printing them from recorded sessions – these new editions of *The Indian Militia* and *New World Adams* sharpen the tools of scholars in their respective fields.

## References

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