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## Editorial

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Gregory B. LEE

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## EDITORIAL

GREGORY B. LEE

Islands contain, islands imprison, and islands protect, but make escape difficult. The islands of the Caribbean are no exception to this historical human experience. To this day several islands are under European rule. And the highest security prison the world has surely ever known, Guantanamo Bay, is enclaved on the southern tip of Cuba. The Caribbean islands first saw their existing population exterminated. Then arrived the slave ships from Africa. Slavery abolished, new cheap labour was recruited in Africa, India and China. Raphaël Confiant's recent novel *Case à Chine* tells the story of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese contract labourers who crossed the "Three Oceans" with the promise of a passage to America. But America's doors had been shut tight to Chinese immigration by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, confounding the hopes of would-be immigrants and employers seeking cheap hired hands alike. Those who later attempted to enter the USA were held on Angel Island generating hundreds of poems of despair carved into the detention centre's wooden walls. In Confiant's book, the immigrant Chen-Sang tries to flee the sugar plantation and marches in every direction possible to reach America, before having to face the reality that America in fact lies beyond the binding, boundless sea. The sea for the historically non-seafaring Chinese (with historical exceptions) was unknown to the vast majority of the country's inhabitants, and professional sailing being forced upon them by the mid-nineteenth century Opium Wars and the consequent Western maritime colonial presence and the subsequent ruin of the Chinese economy; faced with poverty and even starvation legion were those who sought a living overseas, like Chen-Sang, or who merely provided cheap labour for the West shipping lines, such as Blue Funnel. Confiant's story is one of adaptation to a hostile climate, finding a place in the varied and complex social and "racial" fabric of the French colony of Martinique, made famous

to the Western postcolonial reader through the work of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire.

But where is the poetry in such a sorry tale. It is, in fact, to be found in the poiësis, the creation and creativity, of the Creole language that Confiant long ago mastered and enriched and with which he peppers the dialogues of his novel.

Deliberately drawn from mutually unintelligible language groups in Africa, so as to prevent collusion and rebellion, the slaves had no alternative but to adapt and invent a new organic language. The Chinese in their turn had no alternative but to acquire this local creole language. Privation and necessity thus gave rise to a rich new poetry of everyday discourse that simultaneously relieved frustration and boredom of estranged colonial existence.

Another island and another beach on which one solitary Chinese once stood was Isla Negra, home to the Chilean Nobel Prize winning poet Pablo Neruda. Neruda's house, itself a poem constructed of objects of reverie, shells, prow heads, anchors, was first not on an island but on a promontory in Southern Chile. The gregarious lyricist's house was often full of poets from across the oceans. On one such occasion the Chinese poet Ai Qing wrote a poem in homage to the house and its master. The sea here was not a boundary as it is to Confiant's desperate Chinese, but rather a promise, a source of magical objects each containing its own poem.