

Book Reviews

Dalleo, Raphael (2011) *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere: From the Plantation to the Postcolonial*, University of Virginia Press (Charlottesville, VA and London), xv + 296 pp. £48.25 hbk, £24.26 pbk.

Comparative gestures characterise much recent scholarship on culture and literature in the Caribbean, as do efforts to reveal the performative, non-script means by which Caribbean populations have been instrumental in shaping the region's historical processes. With *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere: From the Plantation to the Postcolonial*, Raphael Dalleo offers a bold comparative analysis that seeks to trace Caribbean writers' literary relationships to oppositional, anticolonial projects throughout the region as they were articulated within the public sphere. The study defines the public sphere exclusively as engagement with print culture, specifically literary print production, and explores the tension between the literary and political pursuits of numerous Caribbean authors. Selected works by these authors are comparatively analysed in the book's eight chapters, which are organised into three historical periods that include the late plantation system, modern colonialism and postcoloniality. Dalleo is careful to point out that this periodisation is less than ideal, but provides necessary contextualisation to understand the evolving role of the literary writer – and literature – as an anticolonial force in Caribbean societies. For example, the book underscores the complex historical reality of the modern colonial period, during which the anticolonial, oppositional counterpublic often had to struggle to untangle itself from national projects. Similarly, in a contemporary context of postcoloniality, precisely when literary culture's influence has diminished significantly, writers have had to navigate 'the contradictory impulses of anticolonial resistance and postcolonial nation building' (p. 215).

Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere presents an instructive model of pan-Caribbean, transnational literary criticism. In exemplary comparative style, Dalleo juxtaposes and provides nuanced readings of texts from disparate parts of the Caribbean, that might not otherwise be placed into dialogue. For example, in Chapter 4, which explores the significance of literature for Caribbean anticolonial movements, Dalleo's analysis of literary journals from the 1940s, including Barbadian *BIM*, Dominican *La Poesía Sorprendida* and Martinican *Tropiques* reveals common regional concerns as well as divergent political approaches vis-à-vis the literary aesthetic. Equally enlightening are the comparative studies on authors from distinct sites within the same colonial system, such as George Lamming (Barbados) and Martin Carter (British Guiana, now Guyana) in Chapter 6, or the distinct approaches to *testimonio* and subaltern voice in Chapter 8, which treats the work of Cuban Miguel Barnet and Jamaica's Sistren Theater Collective. As interesting as these island-based analyses are, this reviewer also especially appreciated Dalleo's consideration of a deterritorialised, displaced or exiled public sphere, a theme first presented in Chapter 2 as a way to understand turn-of-the-century texts grappling

Book Reviews

with transatlantic concerns, but which continues to demonstrate its relevance in the author's examination of more recent literature as well.

Dalleo is explicit about the parameters of his study when he states that his book focuses on 'the kinds of publics engendered by the written word', at the same time acknowledging that 'the discourses best representing the Caribbean majority in the period of slavery were expressed less in print than in cultural practices such as music, religion, and popular festivals like carnival', which were excluded from the public sphere (p. 21). Yet the influence of cultural studies on Caribbean and Latin American critical commentary, which the author incisively discusses in Chapter 8, has generated vigorous new trajectories in early modern colonial studies as well. This investigative work, largely based on archival and documentary sources, reveals how the colonial public sphere in the Caribbean was shaped also by free people of colour, slaves and women, who manipulated a power – often legal and written – that exerted its own influence on Rama's small group of literary elites in the 'lettered city'. Inevitably, this less 'literary' power demands attention throughout the book, as when Dalleo mentions the significance of gossip as a discursive mode, or cites George Lamming's reference to the Haitian Revolution as a speech act that 'gave voice to the silenced slaves' (p. 159). By strictly limiting the public sphere to print culture, we risk diminishing the power and agency of the vast majority of the Caribbean population that was impacting history and politics across the centuries. Perhaps our notions of the public sphere are either too rigid or too static, or both, and it may be that the Caribbean begs another paradigm of the public. That said, *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere* is an ambitious, instructive and well-constructed book. Its most admirable strengths lie in the author's adept close readings and his skill at comparatively reading across the historical, cultural and literary complexities of the Caribbean.

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