

## REVIEW

RAPHAEL DALLEO. *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere: From the Plantation to the Postcolonial*. Pp. xv + 289 (New World Studies). Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011. Paperback, £26.50.

Raphael Dalleo describes his monograph as one of a cluster of ‘different stories about the literary past’. It is certainly true that the field of Caribbean literary history has become particularly active in recent years. A number of scholars have sought to reflect on, contest and supplement received versions of the region’s literary production and, concurrently, to call up for interrogation the socio-political indices that have inflected both Caribbean literary works themselves and the critical portals through which they can most productively be read. Dalleo positions his own study firmly within this current trend of critical reconsideration and references my own critique in *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* as a ‘destablizing of existing understandings of the Caribbean canon [that] also opens up possibilities for telling different stories about the literary past’ (pp. vii–viii). Dalleo’s own critical venture can usefully be situated within this broad pathway of critical enquiry, also shaped in the Anglophone region by the work of Belinda Edmondson, Evelyn O’Callaghan, Leah Rosenberg, Faith Smith and, most recently, Michael Niblett.

Nevertheless, two factors distinguish *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere* as a critical study. The first is Dalleo’s searching focus on the idea of the public sphere and the two-way traffic that moves between Caribbean literary endeavours and their often complicated political aspirations for the establishment of a public that is ‘in some ways an audience but frequently a more idealized sense of the people’ (p. 2). The second is his ability and ambition to range across Francophone, Hispanic and Anglophone Caribbean worlds. The uncommonness of this genuinely comparative methodology should not be understated. Indeed, this book’s seemingly effortless configuration of a regional literary culture and its impressively inclusive description of the ‘role intellectuals have played in oppositional projects of the past’ (p. xi) across the different linguistic and geographical contexts that commonly bisect Caribbean studies provides an inspiring example of comparative analysis and its capacity to enrich our understandings of all places. Moreover, in his eight chapters that span the literary and intellectual endeavours of two centuries, Dalleo excavates lesser known literary ventures and writers as well as re-reading the conventional ‘greats’ in such a way as to deliver a genuinely fresh and valuable grasp on the social place of Caribbean writers and their own manoeuvres around this shifting location.

Chapter One examines the possibilities for an abolitionist public sphere during the era of plantation slavery and is persuasive in its conclusion that ‘in the English-, French-, or Spanish-controlled islands during the period of slavery, a small group maintained a monopoly on the written word so that entry into the literary public sphere required patronage, approval, and even translation from literary elites...’ (p. 42). His readings of the Hart sisters’ letters, Cyrille Bissette’s pamphlets and the *Revista Bimestre Cubana* alongside *The History of Mary Prince* demonstrate how, even during slavery, ‘Caribbean counter-publics were able to challenge the power and legitimacy of the local ruling class, but during

the period that challenge took place almost entirely in non-literary forms' (p. 42). This line of argument flows effectively into Chapter Two and its readings of three literary projects from the 1850s: Michael Maxwell's *Emmanuel Appodocca*, Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole* and the Cuban poetry collection *El laud del desterrado* that collectively bring to imagination an 'oceanic public sphere' (p. 59) where resistant counter-publics can conceive of change, if not always effect it.

Chapter Three examines how 'the idea of literary intellectuals as sensitive enough to listen to the nation and eloquent in articulating its desires allowed writers to give themselves a place in the anti-colonial project' (p. 70). This may well be a position which we already identify with José Martí, for whom the masculine and muscular words towards freedom were later translated from literary to literal action as he returned to Cuba to fight for freedom, and also with Jacques Roumain whose political commitment and involvement, including his founding of the Parti Communiste Haitien, is well-established. However, the reading of Trinidadian Stephen Cobham's 1907 novel *Rupert Gray* and its fraught depiction of race, class and gender politics alongside a strong anticipatory desire, offers an important act of restitution. Indeed, even when working in literary terrain that is frequently mapped, Dalleo brings original insights. These include his rendering (in Chapter Four) of the anti-colonial literary scene in Trinidad before the heady days of the Beacon group, and his close readings (in Chapter Six) of Martin Carter's poetry and its vectors of address across his career as the 'passage from colonialism to postcoloniality . . . challenged politically committed writers with a new world to which their literary discourse could not entirely adapt' (p. 153).

The book's interest in the gendering of both literary reputations and changing ideas of a public sphere is a steadily engaging thread that comes most sharply into view in Chapter Seven and its discussion of unlettered voices and the testimonial impulse in the 1970s which Dalleo reads effectively as another dimension of the long project 'uncovering cultural history apart from what Europe might recognize' (p. 176). Reading works by the Cuban writer Miguel Barnet alongside those of the Jamaican collective Sistren, Dalleo shows how *testimonio's* formal 'attempts to keep alive the anticolonial ideal of the intellectual' are profoundly gendered. His reading of the importance 'for the postcolonial writer to maintain his relevance and heroic masculinity' that pertains to his reading of Miguel Barnet also echoes back with relevance through the earlier readings of work by Barbadian George Lamming. It is a dominant anti-colonial gendering that Dalleo shows is held up for scrutiny in works by Puerto Rican Luis Rafael Sánchez and Trinidadian Earl Lovelace, as well, of course, by Sistren whose work directly contests the 'ideology of male dominance' in order to make visible the (lost) possibilities for solidarity and female counterpublics whose voices speak from and to everyday life

His extensive and thorough analyses of 'particular histories to show how changes in political, economic, and social structures have produced different sets of possibilities for writers to imagine their relationship to institutions of governance and publication' (p. 1) allow Dalleo some broad and bold synthesis statements that are especially persuasive given the assurance and reach of his regional perspective. Yet, while his study is consistently academically rigorous, it is not purely academic in motivation. His intricate line of argument is never forensically scholastic but rather remains alert to the unfolding story of the 'conflicted relationship of the literary and the practical in the context of anti-colonial politics' (p. 120). As Dalleo argues, 'Thinking about the commonalities in terms of historical experiences faced by various islands can be useful in formulating solidarities within the region' (p. xi). In looking both backwards and sideways at the same time, Dalleo's comparative

methodology brings significant and stimulating possibilities for such solidarities into view and for this, as well as for its many scholarly insights, his book should be widely commended.

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