Book Review: Caribbean Literature and The Public Sphere

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This is a fascinating subject, though, as Dalleo emphasizes right at the beginning of his book, any attempt to provide a theoretical or historical overview of a region as complex as the Caribbean runs the risk of over-determination and reductionism, let alone critical omissions. He rightly notes historical periodization is always ideological and political at root, and always selective. At the same time he persuasively argues the importance of subverting old maps and redrawing new ones, employing an intelligent wariness lest new maps turn into neocolonial master narratives. He thinks explicit dialogue with others who have attempted this is extremely helpful (he cites several, including Alison Donnell and David Scott).

His warnings are important, because he has, as he admits, imposed a structure on the vast scope of his material. The book is divided into three parts, corresponding to three historical “moments” (1804-1886, 1886-1959, 1959-1983), which according to Dalleo may be termed, respectively, the rise of a Caribbean public sphere, its changing identity in modern colonial/anticolonial period, and finally, a crisis in the literary public sphere. The dates are specific. The first begins with Haiti’s independence, continues through emancipation in the Anglophone Caribbean, and concludes with changes to the way colonies were run and the end of slavery in Haiti. During the second period, anti-colonial movements developed and colonialism took on new manifestations (as in the

The most exciting part of Dalleo’s framing of his book is his exploration of the nature of the public sphere. Despite Habermas’s important framing of the role of literary activity in Europe in critiquing the state, Dalleo reminds us that not all Europeans could participate in public debate. Certainly this has been true of the Caribbean, where early print culture was limited to whites and also hardly more than utilitarian. Dalleo also argues that comparing Hispanic, Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean narratives is of great usefulness for his particular project, despite his awareness of significant differences (for example, independence happened widely in the Anglophone Caribbean, but is still not in place in important States in the Hispanic and Francophone Caribbean).

The immense scope of Dalleo’s literary map is made manageable by his organization of chapters (two for each of the first two parts and four for the last). He contextualizes important writers (such as MacKay, Chauvet, Lamming, Carter, Lovelace) just as he does those largely important for their groundbreaking contribution to the growth of a literary culture, whilst not being major (such as Michel Maxwell Philip and Mary Seacole). The effect is that the reader perceives a living, evolving literary environment in which political, cultural and social factors play an enormously important role. Though he employs theory from outside the Caribbean such as that of Habermas and Michael Warner, he is aware of needing to refashion it for the Caribbean and he references Gordon Rohlehr’s important work on both literature and culture. Rohlehr has sometimes self-published, demonstrating a refusal to accept Europe or North America as an appropriate place for publication of Caribbean scholarship.

The range of Dalleo’s scholarship and the care with which he marshalls argument are both impressive. Inevitably there are omissions. In Chapter 2, the discussion of newspapers and journals providing a major foundation for Caribbean literature and for anti-colonial movements, omits the importance of feisty anticolonial journalism in Dominica in the late nineteenth century. But his major purpose is to offer a strategy for reading literary history, not an
entirely inclusive map.

His approach is sociological and historical to the extent that every
text is of equal importance, whatever the aesthetic merit. He reads
McKay's Banana Bottom for the sociological and political significance
of the characters, though he is not alone in this: much Caribbean
literary criticism in the mid-twentieth century expressed political
and cultural engagement. But Dalleo realizes that political
engagement does not necessarily mean erasing aesthetic
innovation, in commenting that McKay identified “unbounded
creativity, a poetic sensibility” as the making of a poet (107).
Dalleo's discussion of “the ideology of the literary” in magazines
and journals in the 1940s argues the aesthetic was important to
their politically aware editors. The important journal, Tropiques was
intended to give Martinique an explicit discussion of the relation of
art and politics, with one of its editors Aime Cesaire. Dalleo argues
that the Caribbean literary intellectual middle class was anxious to
distinguish itself from the professional class at the midcentury,
expressing itself through literary journals and magazines. But this
argument could have benefited from more demonstration that the
examples he chooses (the Dominican Republic, Barbados and
Martinique) were very different cultural environments. Prominent
here is a gendered reading of modes of anti-colonial writing: Dalleo
argues that “locally published magazines of the 1940’s... employ a
feminized version of the literary as a space of critique....
distinguished from the aspirations of government embodied by the
man of action” (16): gender is an important thread throughout the
text.

Chapter Five is devoted to Marie Chauvet and titled “The
Expulsion from the Public Sphere”. It begins the third section of the
book, devoted to “the effects that the crisis of anticolonialism had
on the region's literature” (125). Dalleo cites Matthew Smith and
Michael Dash on Haitian intellectuals, and concludes that “the
literary intellectuals discussed in the first half of this book never
truly came to power” (127). He sees Chauvet as between the modern
colonial and postcolonial eras, in which her novels “navigate a space
in-between where the idea of the committed intellectual still seems
possible but is becoming seriously in doubt” (128). La danse sur le
volcano (1957) is still engaged with nationalism, whereas Amour,
Colere, Folie is mostly read as dismantling “the romance of anticolonialism and the writer's heroic role in social struggles” (129). The last section of this chapter seeks to relate Chauvet's representation of Caribbean intellectualism within the schisms within this as colonialism gave way to the postcolonial era. It is a great ending to the chapter to have us think about ways in which Caribbean writers need to be seen in the context of leaders such as Eric Williams or Ernesto “Che” Guevara, or C.L.R.James, Heberto Padillo and Walter Rodney. The famously strained relationship which eventually arose between James and Williams is read as largely representing an important split in intellectual leadership, between, as Diallo puts it. “the intellectual and the technocrat” (146).

The chapter on Lamming and Carter begins with their “many affinities” rather than the specifics of their geographical locales (153). However they are discussed in separate sections and their differences ultimately emerge as more prominent than their similarities. Lamming, self-exiled in Britain, was not publicly engaged in the transition from colonial to postcolonial in Barbados, his homeland (indeed his last book came out only five years after Barbados's 1966 independence). Carter was jailed for public engagement in political action protesting British interference with Guyana’s political process. His last work appeared in 1981, during the serious period of serious tensions between African and Indian Guyanese. Lamming and Carter’s work was similarly radically anti-colonial, but Lamming chose fiction (albeit at times somewhat poetic), whereas Carter chose poetry. However Dalleo stays mainly with content and story, rather than with literary genre and form, because his major concern is the contribution of literary work to the currents of intellectual thought and political action in the region. He explains their premature literary silences by arguing that they thought “women and the folk no longer need the male professional writer to represent them” (174). This seems too easy a conclusion however, claiming a knowledge of the workings of the minds of two complex men without offering evidence.

The following chapter addresses orality, via Miguel Barnet's “testimonio” texts about Cuban history and Sistren’s important contribution both to testimony and to theater in Jamaica. Orality is a very important part of the story of the Caribbean public sphere,
in which the voice of the people is far more heard than in many other cultures. Dalleo reads Barnet's characters Esteban and Rachel, in different texts, as respectively bringing back into memory Cuba's past struggles against slavery and the Spanish as a frame for the Revolution, and representing “the threat to Cuban independence as the United States and a local complicit feminized bourgeois” (186). These together succeeded in turning “Cuba away from the heroic masculine tradition Esteban represents” (187). Dalleo is well-informed about the nature of Sistren’s work and rightly concludes “Instead of imagining politics only in anticolonial terms, as a context for the state, Sistren points to the sort of everyday politics that can inspire postcolonial critique” (198). Once again, Dalleo draws conclusions which remind us of the overarching vision he wishes to share, as when he argues that Sistren’s achievement of “a dialogic rather than a didactic conversation with the popular” demonstrates the possibility of a ‘committed postcolonial Caribbean culture’ (198).

He leads us from Sistren to framing an argument, in Chapter 8, that a turn to music and orality on the part of Caribbean intellectual (such as Gordon Rohlehr, Carolyn Cooper and Sylvia Wynter), helps to reframe the voice of the nation. Their work is a stage on the way to the full-fledged establishment of Caribbean cultural studies as separate from the study of scribal literature. An astute reading of two novels follows, Luis Rafael Sanchez’s La guaracha del Macho Camacho (1976) and The Dragon Can’t Dance (1979) which each represent the complexity of postcolonial space, and “to create a new heroic and masculine public role for the writer in a context where even that identity has been commodified” (223). Sanchez’s novel raises “questions about the public, culture’s role in forming that public, and the nature of the public formed by popular culture” (207). Lovelace’s novel represents characters who cannot integrate “anticolonial resistance and postcolonial nation building” (215). In the end, Diallo says, much literary work in postcolonial space tries to bring back the old idea of the heroic anticolonial writer or artist.

The book ends with a meditation on the work of Dionne Brand, especially her novel In Another Place, Not Here (1996) framed by a consideration of the development of empire studies and globalization studies as partial replacements for postcolonial
studies. Here Dalleo argues persuasively against Graham Huggins’ view that postcoloniality results from postmodernity, critiques’ ideas of globalization which deny hierarchy still prevails across the world, and finds “empire studies” more promising because this field acknowledges power differentials. At each stage of this text, we find literary criticism, cultural criticism and cultural theory are all seen as developing alongside literary texts, as all as part of a literary public sphere.

Daello discusses Brand’s novel as representing that revolution is not erased but also not actively present as a powerful idea by the late twentieth century and argues that Brand’s mature work seems to reimagine the heady optimism of forty years ago in the context of present day market forces. Her texts therefore inhabit the cultural public space of their era just as do all the other texts he discusses.

This is an innovative and significant book, encouraging pan-Caribbean debate about the nature of Caribbean literary history and the kinds of cultural productions which emerge from particular political epochs to challenge power. This book joins a number of revisionist histories of Caribbean literature, not replacing former mappings but complicating them. Dalleo ends succinctly by hoping his work will encourage attention to complexities in both Caribbean abolitionist and anticolonial models, and so help us understand Caribbean literature’s future now. He hopes to stimulate ideas about his claim that Caribbean literature needs to find new forms and directions now that the anticolonial period is ended. This book is a pleasure to read for its ideas because it demands the rethinking of old paradigms, but also for its language as it is written in a clear, provocative but very thoughtful voice.