



Holger Henke, Karl-Heinz Magister, eds. *Constructing Vernacular Culture in the Trans-Caribbean*. Caribbean Studies Series. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008. xxiii + 407 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-2160-3; \$44.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7391-2161-0.

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Vernacular Culture across the Caribbean Diaspora

This wide-ranging collection investigates the cultural production of an area that its editors describe as the “trans-Caribbean,” a term encompassing the Caribbean archipelago as well as its various diasporic communities around the world. Holger Henke and Karl-Heinz Magister make the case that globalization and migration have led to a specific form of transnationalism pertinent to the Caribbean. They frame this “discontinuous, displacing, and displaced transnational space” as “suspended in a double dialectic” between the metropolitan center and home, one that reflects and contests the ideologies of both. To explore the trans-Caribbean they focus on vernacular, or popular culture, meaning that the collection ranges across discussions of music, family, religion, travel, gossip, cyberculture, and gendered and sexual relations. Looking to expand the definition of “diaspora,” the book’s editors are interested in “new hybrids that are equally uneasy when relating to their points of (Caribbean) origin, as they are when relating to their new ‘home’ spaces”—a “new, transnational, rhizomatic, vernacular Caribbean culture” (p. xvi). As such, many of their chosen contributions demonstrate the ways that vernacular culture both supports and critiques hegemonic structures.

The fifteen essays are divided into four sections—focusing on home, performance, writing the self, and embodiment—and include contributions from anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, linguists, cultural historians, and gender specialists. They range across locations as diverse as Puerto Rico, Guyana, New York, Surinam, the Netherlands, Jamaica, Haiti, Grenada, and more. The ethnographic pieces are generally thorough in their execution. Melvin L. Butler and Maarit Forde, in particular, draw attention to the kinds of religious practices often neglected (in favor of economic and political perspectives) in discussions of transnationalism. Con-

stance R. Sutton and Curwen Best explore the possibilities and implications of the electronic flows between different geographical sites, providing concrete examples of the ways in which technology relates to questions of identity. Best’s farsighted essay specifically calls for Caribbean scholarship to take greater account of technological developments, pointing to how the Internet blurs traditional lines of inter- and intra-cultural experience.

In an interesting, though perhaps not fully developed, theoretical offering, Bettina E. Schmidt puts forward the concept of “polyphonic bricolage” as a way of placing ideas of globalization and creolization in productive tension. She also raises the crucial issue of the degree of self-consciousness held by different groups as they employ various forms of cultural exchange. Patricia Mohammed and Mimi Sheller both engage with questions of gender and sexuality. Mohammed’s authoritative and carefully considered essay is particularly strong in its summation of current feminist issues, though when she turns to Caribbean fiction the lines drawn between different literary generations are perhaps too stark. Sheller succinctly makes the case for citizenship being an embodied performance requiring certain kinds of racial or sexual behaviors, which are, in turn, mediated by state discourse and at the level of everyday practice. Summarizing recent Caribbean and African American scholarship about the sexual possibilities articulated in black popular music, Sheller treads a delicate balance between acknowledging the subversive potential of musical forms like dance hall and ragga, without losing sight of the fact that they are equally capable of replaying masculine, heterosexist, and national ideologies. By emphasizing female sexual expression, she could have delved further into the kinds of masculinities presented.

Finally, in the literary realm, Tanya Shields uses Pauline Melville’s novel *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* (1997) to

consider indigenous life in Guyana in terms of the trans-Caribbean, making an important point about the role of indigeneity in local and global circuits of exchange. Carole Bailey analyzes the work of Olive Senior, presenting gossip as a specifically female vernacular form. She argues that, despite its ambivalent relationship to existing social structures, gossip is nonetheless central in allowing Caribbean women to assert their voice. Providing an interesting angle on discussions of performativity in Caribbean fiction, Bailey also offers a nuanced reading of how ideas of difference play out in the region's culture. Magister, meanwhile, discusses Colin Channer's 1998 novel *Waiting in Vain*. He argues for the "nomadic" qualities of the novel's traveling protagonist, drawing an interesting distinction between Channer's presentation of migrancy and the "homelessness" shown in many earlier Caribbean novels. Alert to the male-centered nature of the book's nomadic cultures, Magister perhaps assigns too strict a divide between the waves of immigration he identifies. He could also have further explored the occasionally awkward shifts between vernacular and "high" culture apparent in the novel.

As a whole, the collection provides rich material to fuel ongoing discussions about the interaction between

national and transnational aspects of Caribbean culture. Its breadth is a clear strength, with the cross-disciplinary nature of the contributions offering a refreshingly broad approach. At times, however, certain essays strain to make the kinds of national/transnational links required, and more comparison between different diasporic communities (rather than between diaspora and home or diaspora and metropolitan center) would have proven beneficial. Although the injunction to look more closely at different kinds of diaspora is useful, the book itself does not fully mine the implications of this challenge. While the editors have clearly decided to allow the contributions to speak for themselves, they have perhaps demonstrated too light a touch overall. For a book focusing on the vernacular, the theoretical reasons for this choice are not strongly stated and their introduction is curiously silent on the relationship between popular and "high" culture across the Caribbean. Similarly, although they are careful to acknowledge the relevance of Caribbean nationalist movements, the relationship between nationalism and transnationalism could have been explored further. Finally, there are a number of typographical and printing errors, which let down the presentation of this otherwise stimulating work of scholarship.

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