

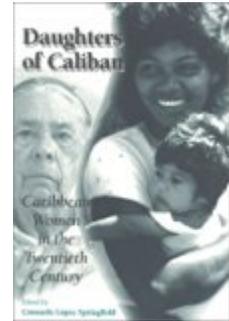
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Consuelo Lopez Springfield, ed. *Daughters of Caliban: Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1997. xxi + 316 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21092-0; \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33249-3.

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In Hakluyt's Voyages "Caliban" meant "cannibal." In Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Caliban was the son of a witch, the island's original inhabitant who became the slave of Prospero. For Caribbean intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s, however, Caliban became a figure to be turned on his head in the name of Caribbean pride. Inverting the once lowly status of "savage" Caliban, Caribbeanists more positively identified him as signifying the triple heritage of indigenous, African and European peoples in the region. Coupled with this re-appropriation was the idea that the former slave now represented an awakened "rebel" consciousness of resistance to European colonial hegemony.

Building on this tradition, *Daughters of Caliban: Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century* assembles a cast of fourteen scholars who examine the many different experiences of Caribbean women. Citing the poetry of Jamaican poet Louise "Miss Lou" Bennett, editor Consuelo Lopez Springfield introduces the collection by suggesting that Caribbean women can be seen as "everyday Calibans, (who are) striving to articulate meaning in a hostile world, to establish...a site free of colonial inhibitions and paternalistic constraints" (p. xii). To this end, several of the authors note progress made along a number of fronts. On the other hand, the essays presented in *Daughters of Caliban* remind us of the work still ahead in the struggle to reverse the many negative effects wrought by Prospero-led oppression.

Each of the authors in *Daughters of Caliban* challenge various forms of gender bias in academic discourse. Several of the essays also detail ways in which feminist perspectives in the Caribbean differ from "Western"

approaches. Scholars here contend that non-Caribbean analysis too often attempts to impose totalizing theories and over-determined generalizations. Instead, *Daughters of Caliban* sets out to tackle the difficult task of encompassing a wide variety of Caribbean women's experiences by focusing on family, health, labor, legal, cultural, national and transnational issues. Taken together, the essays in *Daughters of Caliban* succeed in offering an important interdisciplinary contribution to not only the study of the Caribbean as a region but to a variety of scholarly debates centering on gender, class and identity issues.

In Part One of the book, authors Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Cynthia J. Mesh both explain the need for greater specificity in Women's Studies. Paravisini-Gebert's "Decolonizing Feminism: The Home-Grown Roots of Caribbean Women's Movements," sharply criticizes the approach of some scholars who, in the still current craze of postmodern, postcolonial "isms," approach Caribbean studies "as if we constituted a homogeneous block, an undivided, unfragmented and unfragmented entity—knowable, understandable, whole" (p. 3). She cautions against such generalizations, arguing that "scholarship on Caribbean women needs to be rooted in true knowledge of the historical and material conditions responsible for women's choices and strategies in the region" (p. 4). Paravisini-Gebert chides many academic producers for paying too much attention to trendy theoretical matters while failing to sufficiently "anchor (their) work in a (more) profound understanding of the societies we (they) inhabit" (p. 4). Discussing some examples of women's movements in the region, Paravisini-Gebert concludes that uncritically applying feminist and

postcolonial theories in the region will inevitably fail to grasp “a greater complexity in the alliances and misalliances that make up the complex web of historical relations between race and class groups in the Caribbean” (p. 15). With this, the agenda for *Daughters of Caliban* is set.

Cynthia Mesh’s “Empowering The Mother Tongue: The Creole Movement in Guadeloupe,” argues for a more significant consideration of the French-speaking Caribbean, particularly the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Noting outsider views of the French Antilles as “vacation getaways,” Mesh writes that little is known about “the people who inhabit these islands” (p. 18). Central to her discussion is a discussion of Creole—developed in the French Antilles through the mixing of French, West African and Arawak languages. As one might guess, certain negative attitudes of Creole have taken shape which reflect more general views of the largely African, Indian and Chinese residents of the islands who speak Creole. The colonial discourse, as Mesh writes, determined that “those who did not speak French, then, were deemed inferior to the French, and even inhuman” (p. 25). In this equation, “the widespread, indeed racist, characterization of people of color as intellectually inferior spread to the notion that their language, Creole, was also incapable of expressing complex and abstract thought” (p. 25). Countering this kind of persistent prejudice against Creole speakers as well as the lack of scholarship on the French Antilles, Mesh concludes with a discussion of Guadeloupean scholar and grassroots activist Dany Beget-Gisler—a woman who has helped lead a movement for Creole recognition and empowerment for over twenty years.[1]

Part Two of the volume is titled “Women and Work.” Each of the four essays which comprise this section put a human face on what recently has been termed “the feminization of poverty.” Several of the authors detail ways in which an emerging international division of labor has combined with various traditional gender roles at the local level to create both new opportunities as well as new forms of oppression for women and men in the Caribbean. Mary Johnson Osirim’s essay, “We Toil All The Livelong Day: Women in the English-Speaking Caribbean” provides a general set of issues to be considered (history and classification of women’s working experiences, women in the contemporary labor market, etc.). Surveying the current situation, she concludes that “the majority of women in the English-speaking Caribbean persist in unrewarding, gender-segregated activities that severely restrict their upward mobility” (p. 55).

Her discussion of Caribbean women’s attempts to address social inequality, however, is unfortunately too brief and schematic. Mention of domestic workers in Trinidad, the Sistren theater collective in Jamaica and the Women and Development Program in Barbados left me wanting to know more about each of these examples of “women’s empowerment.” Instead, Johnson Osirim seems to dismiss the impact of local efforts by writing “although women in the English-speaking Caribbean have made valiant efforts in the quest for empowerment, the improvements made in the lives of poor and working-class women in the modern period have either already largely been eroded or stand in jeopardy of disappearing in the near future” (p. 57). Johnson Osirim, in other words, does not see much hope for improvement in the near future as structural adjustment programs in currency devaluations, cuts in government spending and subsidies have had “the greatest impact on the lives of women, especially those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy” (p. 58).

Especially interesting material in this section can be found in essays by Carla Freeman, Luisa Hernandez Anguiera as well as a personal memoir (“Daughter of Caro”) by anthropologist Ruth Behar. Freeman’s “Reinventing Higglering Across Transnational Zones: Barbadian Women Juggle the Triple Shift,” uncovers a number of continuities between the traditional market woman of the past, or “country higgler,” and the emerging population of “pink-collar” office workers in the region’s increasingly transnational economy. In this task, Freeman seeks to understand exactly “what is historically reminiscent and what is decidedly new about today’s transnationalism” (p. 68). She suggests that women currently working in information processing (“informatics” she dubs them) manage to combine “wage work in new foreign-owned transnational” office-factories with “informal” craftsmanship and suitcase trade and varying degrees of domestic or reproductive work (to) illustrate complex interconnections between multinational capital and local culture” (p. 69). Together, these types of formal, informal and domestic work constitute what is called the “triple shift” for these women. For Freeman, these laborers “are fashioning new feminine identities (which) demonstrate how deeply ‘local’ culture is embedded in the transnational” (p. 69). Instead of their engaging in informal trading of agricultural goods as commercial women or “higglers,” today’s marketeers make their exchanges along more modern trade routes. Freeman writes “market women now rely on telephone communication, private cars, and minivans for organizing and

transporting their produce“ (p. 72). She adds ”while traveling tradesmen and higglers have long been a part of both rural and town life in Barbados, today a constant stream of minivan traders pull up at lunch time and shift breaks in front of these new offshore enterprises, displaying everything from perfume and fresh produce to shoes, underwear, fashion jewelry, and the latest pirated videos“ (p. 72).

Some of these “informatics” are also “suitcase traders” of various types who travel to nearby countries to purchase wholesale to be resold at a profit at home. Freeman notes a connection with traditional higglers when she says that “women’s participation in informal marketing simultaneously marks innovation (new patterns of material consumption and individual motives and desires) and the endurance of traditional social and economic roles played by Caribbean women” (p. 73). Providing three case studies to illustrate the variation in the triple shift, Freeman creates a favorable impression of these women’s determination, creativity and pride in their labors. For her, the practice of transnational higgling constitutes “an historical tradition of female entrepreneurship and creative strategies for making a living (which at the same time) embod(y) a unique nexus where social and economic practices blend tradition with innovation, self-definition with conformity, and re-fashion ’local’ and ’transnational’ cultures...in a frenzied dialectic of new pressures and pleasures across the production/consumption terrain” (p. 86).

In contrast to the transnational Barbadian higglers portrayed by Freeman, Dominican women working in Puerto Rico appear to enjoy far fewer pleasures. Luisa Hernandez Angueira’s “Across the Mona Strait” details the harsh discrimination Dominicans experience based on perceptions of nationality, class, gender and race. Sixty-three percent of employed Dominicans, according to Hernandez Angueira, labor as domestics. A majority of the women she interviewed contributed most significantly to their household income—a fact which corroborates Helen Safa’s work on the myth of the male breadwinner.[2] As Hernandez Angueira notes, this fact flies in the face of many traditional cultural expectations and “force(s) migrants to maneuver through incompatible and contradictory courses” (p. 105). From this discussion of immigrant labor, *Daughters of Caliban* then turns to the issue of health—the subject of Part Three.

Caroline Allen’s “Women, Health, and Development: The Commonwealth Caribbean,” offers an overview of contemporary health issues. While some of her discus-

sion focuses on the English speaking areas of the region, she provides data which allows for other intra- (Spanish and French/Dutch Caribbean) and inter-regional (North America, South America, Europe) comparisons. More specifically, however, Allen argues that limitations with statistical indicators for the Commonwealth Caribbean have distorted assessments of women’s health. She writes that within the region, conditions do not match conventional indicators of health and development. In particular, Allen criticizes the United Nations human development index (HDI)—a composite figure which includes longevity (life expectancy), knowledge (adult literacy and years of schooling) and standard of living (real gross domestic product per capita adjusted for local cost of living). What Allen points out is that while the Commonwealth Caribbean registers as an “intermediate” region when compared to general health in Europe, Africa and the Americas, that these figures alone do not provide an adequate picture of women’s quality of life. Not only that, constraints in measuring health have led to “a misleadingly rosy picture of (Commonwealth Caribbean) women’s welfare relative to that of their counterparts in other parts of the ’developing’ world” (p. 173).

While, for example, death rates among Commonwealth Caribbean women are lower than other developing regions, Allen charges that these women nevertheless “suffer the greater burden of illness” (p. 175). High rates of three diseases, cervical cancer, diabetes and hypertension, among Commonwealth Caribbean women also support Allen’s point. Additionally, the high number of AIDS cases among women in the Commonwealth Caribbean (the highest regional proportion of total cases in the Western Hemisphere) further complicates matters.

After Allen’s convincing critique of health reporting and development, perhaps one of the most interesting chapters in *Daughters of Caliban* is Karen McCarthy Brown’s “The Power to Heal: Haitian Women in Vodou.” Describing Vodou as ultimately concerned with social relationships, McCarthy Brown makes no bones about her criticism of Western medicine. “In Western medicine,” she writes, “healing power, like diseases and patients, is controlled by defining it as a piece of property”:

The power to heal is understood to reside in things—medical instruments, drugs, and machines—whose use is restricted to those who possess other things—diplomas, licenses, and white coats—that indicate their ownership of a particular body of knowledge...Seeing healing power as property, subject to all the dynamics of a capitalist system, is one of the most significant root metaphors

of Western medicine and one of the most damaging to women (pp. 123-24).

In contrast to the commodification of healing in Western medicine, Vodou regards illness as well as other assorted problems as matters caused by a “disruption in relationships.” McCarthy Brown notes that “Haitians...see the person as defined by a relational matrix and disturbance at any point in that matrix can create problems anywhere else” (p. 129). In both diagnosing and healing, fluidity is key. The matter of assessing one’s health emphasizes the subject’s connectedness to others. As Haiti is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, McCarthy Brown adds that practitioners of Vodou must be flexible and willing to accept both the limits of human knowledge as well as death. Nevertheless, “clients of Vodou healing,” she writes, “do not lose personal history or social identity, and this may partially explain why, at all stages of the cure, the patient is an active participant” (p. 136). Seen through the lens of Vodou healing, problems are not merely physical but related to a more complex social and spiritual configuration. As such, they cannot easily be diagnosed and subsequently “colonized” by Western medical techniques. When it comes to healing, the world of Haitian Vodou suggests that much remains beyond the realm of appearances.

The same can be said to be true when examining women’s health traditions in rural Jamaica as Elisa J. Sobo does in “Menstrual Taboos, Witchcraft Babies, and Social Relations.” Sobo offers a second alternative to Western medical discourse when she informs us that “Jamaicans see the body as an open system that must stay equalized” (p. 145). Among the two most important bodily concerns for Jamaicans are bellies and blood. Each give indication as to whether one is healthy or not. “When Jamaicans think about sickness, they do not think about battles for power and territory being fought between alien enemy forces of germs and armed white blood cells...(i)nstead, they think about imbalances and about their bellies” (p. 147). Sobo’s detailing attitudes shared among rural Jamaicans eventually leads to a discussion of “tying.” Here, it is thought that women wanting to affect a man’s behavior can do so through the incorporation of their menstrual blood into his food. From this it is believed that “a woman’s menstrual blood in a man’s body ties him to that woman just as shared blood ties an unborn child to its mother-to-be” (p. 154). The assumption is that once tied, the man will act more lovingly toward the woman. As one might suspect, Jamaican rural culture carries several menstrual taboos. Not surprisingly, men, according to Sobo, are some of the strongest

supporters of such taboos—many of which have to do with food preparation and sex. Offering another example of local medical knowledge and cultural practices, Sobo also discusses the belief in spirit impregnation of “witchcraft babies.” Here she says that “women must always beware of male ghosts of duppies, for, dead or alive, men are expected to constantly seek sex” (p. 158). Aside from the cautionary advice such ideas may contain for women, this business of witchcraft babies further reinforces rural Jamaican’s central health concern with bellies and blood—a focus both metaphorical and real as well as quite different than that found in Western medicine.

Part Four of *Daughters of Caliban* is titled “Women, Law, and Political Change.” Essays by Suzanne LaFont and Deborah Pruitt (“The Colonial Legacy: Gendered Laws in Jamaica”) as well as Carollee Bengelsdorf (“[Re]considering Cuban Women in a Time of Troubles”) both argue that legal codes concerning the family do not correspond with lived realities. Instead, elites in both Jamaica and Cuba promote—through various legal and cultural modes—a model derived from the European middle class nineteenth century nuclear family. LaFont and Pruitt note that policy makers in Jamaica have often ended up blaming working class citizens (ninety percent of the total population) for their “lack of family” (read nuclear family) values and practices. This “diagnosis” on the part of elites, according to LaFont and Pruitt, has met with disastrous consequences both in Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean more generally:

The fact that many low-income Jamaican women and men are unable or unwilling to engage in familial relations as prescribed by the elite continues to fuel arguments about why the Caribbean masses remain what elites call disorganized and impoverished. This scapegoat method of social analysis conveniently masks unequal distribution of wealth, unequal access to opportunity, and sexual and racial distribution (p. 219).

While certain revisions to the Jamaican legal code have begun to address some of the major gaps between laws rooted in colonial times and Jamaican social reality, the authors charge that the root of the problem stems from “the fact that legal rights are abstracted from social contexts so that the outcome of legal action is not necessarily social equality” (p. 225). Clearly the message here is that law as well as the very idea of “the family” needs to be seen as part of a larger Caribbean cultural context rather than imposed from outside.

Despite a revolution which attempted to do away with colonial practices, residents in Cuba also can be

seen facing a similar problem when one considers how elite conceptions of the family clash with everyday social practice. In her discussion of contemporary Cuba, Bengelsdorf identifies a key concept at work in the making of social policy—the “Engelsian paradigm”:

The Engelsian paradigm, in brief, subordinates women’s emancipation to a more generalized emancipation resulting from the overthrow of capitalism, sees women’s emancipation as a result of their entry into the productive (that is, waged) workforce (in keeping with the Marxist axiom that human beings realize themselves through work), and postulates that women will be relieved of their work in social reproduction in the household which keeps them subordinated by the socialization of these tasks (p. 250).

The problem, of course, is that these so-called modern conceptions of the family and women’s liberation do not account for a continuing sexual division of labor (which persist in keeping women in so-called traditional types of work outside the home), as well as the complex nature of Caribbean family arrangements. Added to this is the significant influence Cuba’s history as a slave society has had on family life. As Bengelsdorf notes, difficulties arising from the disparity between ideal and real conceptions of family life after the 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union have only become more obvious:

[A]ny observer walking the streets of Havana or provincial cities and towns can note the degree to which women are involved in traditional women’s work, centering most particularly on small-scale food preparation and provision, sewing, beauty care, artisanry, and domestic service. That is, the pattern which seems to be emerging is one in which women working for themselves or others, whether legally or illegally, are filtering into exactly the occupations which were theirs before the revolution (p. 240).

This “feminization of poverty” is rooted in a sexual division of labor which continues to privilege men over women in virtually all aspects of social life. Until this, along with prevailing attitudes about “race” and sexuality are addressed, Bengelsdorf asserts, the future for many women in Cuba will remain even more uncertain than it already is for men.

The critique of machista attitudes in Cuba which comes at the end of Bengelsdorf’s essay serves as a transition to the final section of *Daughters of Caliban* which focuses on popular culture. Frances Aparicio’s essay “Asi Son: Salsa Music, Female Narratives, and Gender

(De)Construction in Puerto Rico” offers a critique of what she calls the “phallogocentric tradition of salsa lyrics” (p. 263). Seeing (hearing) the music as “highly contradictory,” in terms of class and gender issues, Aparicio discusses the history of the music and laments the lack of feminist commentary about salsa before considering how listeners nevertheless, involve themselves in an “interpretive community” which allows for a wide variety of “rereadings” of the musical text. Wanting to encourage this kind of “productive pleasure” Aparicio believes she is helping other women better understand the gender politics of salsa:

[M]y role as a cultural and feminist critic is to foster a politics of listening to salsa by which women, young and older, acquire an awareness of the ways in which the discourse of love, desire and pleasure are social constructs created by a patriarchal society. Through this politics of listening and the ensuing critical dialogue established among male composers, feminist critics, and women listeners, a reflexive meta-language flourishes, allowing for the possibility of deconstruction these modes within our own lives (pp. 266-67).

Trendy academic language aside, this endeavor sounds healthy—although exactly where, when and among who such an exchange would take place is unclear. Aparicio herself offers a discussion of ways in which traditional gender scripts are constructed and communicated by analyzing Willie Colon’s 1990 “Cuando fuiste mujer” (When you became a woman) as well as another traditional song titled “Quince Anos” (Sweet sixteen). Both songs, according to Aparicio, “reinforce the power of males to construct woman according to their gaze and desire” (p. 276). This being true, we also know from experience that music is a many-sided discourse. On one level music reflects a male-dominant perspective. Yet in many different ways, listeners form their own interpretations—interpretations which cannot easily be characterized as “indiscriminate,” “socially dependent,” “naive” or simply “politically unsavvy.” While Aparicio’s essay does much to begin a conversation about an interesting and important topic, her approach regarding the way people hear music needs to be more complex. Nevertheless, one can heartily agree when she says there is “much work remain[ing] to be done regarding the reception of salsa by both male and female interpretive communities” (p. 281).

Although “Face of The Nation: Race, Nationalisms, and Identities in Jamaican Beauty Pageants,” by Natasha B. Barnes comes as the last essay in *Daughters of Caliban*,

I recommend that it be read first. Combining an analysis which considers gender, ethnicity, class and national identity, Barnes' history of the Miss Jamaica pageant is particularly noteworthy because of its attention to the politics of representation both before and after independence. Explaining her choice of subject, Barnes writes:

With Jamaica suffering from an unemployment rate at 30 percent, a political party system that has abandoned the social-uplift commitments made during independence, poor inner-city dwellings stunted by neglect and crime, it is in the area of culture—the side of cricket, music, and beauty pageants—that has become the place where black people, resigned to the fact that there will be no piece of the economic pie for them, have come to claim and sometimes violently defend as their own (p. 287).

As a subject which initially may appear to run contrary to today's political correctness, Barnes shows how Jamaicans have, since the 1930s, battled over conceptions of beauty as part of a larger ideological struggle against European political and cultural hegemony. Not surprisingly, many objected to colonial preferences towards whiteness before independence. Perhaps more interesting, however, is the continued contestation after independence. Then, the identity or "face of the nation" was thrown into question once again. As a multi-racial society which included significant numbers of citizens of Asian ancestry, who and how was "Jamaica" to best be represented? With the replacement of colonial standards of beauty with what she terms the "black is beautiful stridency of the 1970s," Barnes provides an interesting discussion about how identity politics were played out in new ways in the beauty pageant arena:

The real test of the anticolonial struggle was thought to be measured not only in concrete material gains, but in the success that the centuries-old stigma attached to black skin could be eradicated. And it is in this regard that the beauty contest, more so than any other area of cultural production, was seen as the ideal place where the readiness to accept these values could be tested (p. 301).

More recently, however, the sponsorship of the beauty pageants has changed. Compared to the years immediately following independence, investors now may

no longer be so concerned about who should be considered "typically Jamaican" when considering contestants. Instead, many have begun to favor women—including "whites"—who might have the best chance of winning international competitions and thus, capturing the greatest financial reward. As Barnes asserts, continued struggles within the world of Miss Jamaica "[are] indicative of the peculiarly post-colonial dilemma facing Third World cultural production in the era of late capitalism...it makes Jamaica's conversation with itself over questions of identity and autonomy as bitter as it is ongoing" (p. 303).

Scholars concerned with questions of identity, autonomy, the future as well as the past in the Caribbean will be significantly informed by the essays included in *Daughters of Caliban*. As an historian working on gender and popular protest, I found one of the shortcomings of the volume to be a lack of discussion regarding social movements and labor organizing in the region. Instead, forms of resistance to colonial and "Western" hegemony are limited here to considerations of individual and cultural aspects of the Caribbean.

Many of the essays leave the reader wanting more—and fortunately, references provided by the authors help pave the way for further reading. On a practical level, *Daughters of Caliban* would benefit from the inclusion of a basic map of the region as well as a few additional illustrations. While some edited volumes attract only limited interested, this is a collection sure to generate discussion on a wide variety of important topics.

Notes

[1]. Janet Momsen's edited collection titled *Women and Change in the Caribbean: A Pan-Caribbean Perspective* (Kingston, Jamaica, Ian Randle, 1993) is one of the rare works focusing on gender in the Caribbean which includes consideration of English, French, Spanish and Dutch speaking cultures.

[2]. Helen Safa, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner*. (Boulder, Westview Press, 1995).

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