

## SHALINI PURI'S THE CARIBBEAN POST-COLONIAL

Reviewed by Philip Nanton

Puri, Shalini. The Caribbean Post-Colonial: Social Equality, Post Nationalism and Cultural Hybridity. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. ISBN 1-4039-6182-4. pp. xii+300.

Some books create an effect of closure. They appear to offer the final word on a topic. Boundary lines are clearly drawn. Definitions are precise. The author's grasp of the subject matter is so firm the impression is created that the reader needs to look no further for the answer to a particular problem that the author has set out to explore. Others, in which the scholarship is equally rigorous, have the opposite effect. Ultimately, they open up areas of analysis or offer new combinations or ways of examining a particular world. In the complex world of Caribbean culture, Puri's book falls within the latter group.

The Caribbean Post-Colonial is addressed primarily to those in Caribbean cultural studies. Puri takes issue with postcolonial theorists Homi Bhabha et al., for being unself-critically metropolitan and insufficiently grounded in a specific social reality. A central concern of the book is to distance itself from abstract notions of hybridity and to root the concept in historical analysis. This requires the recognition that there are many hybridities and that discourses in hybridity are conjunctionally framed. The book begins by offering a case study of the Caribbean, and moves in the later chapters to a focus on predominantly 'dougla' features of Trinidad.<sup>1</sup> Structurally a collection of essays, the chapters move between politics and literary analysis. In the early chapters Puri locates hybridity and post-colonial national politics as central features of contestation for Caribbean cultural studies; both, she suggests, are open to conservative and progressive analysis. She offers a novel perspective on the Caribbean canon, demonstrating how authors like Brathwaite, Walcott and Harris in selected texts set out what she refers to as their 'manifestos of desire.' Each author's manifesto offers their understanding of hybridity as a route to Caribbean modernity. Essentially her argument suggests that each is compromised by a nationalist agenda as both authors and the state, each in their own way, attempt to manage their response to societal difference by 'non-conflictual diversity,' which in turn consolidates the functioning of the nation state. The result is 'unequal terms of inclusion,' meaning inequality, embodied in the realities of exploitation within and between different groups in Caribbean society.

As a Marxist analyst, her focus on inequality and resulting strategies of opposition is far removed from the determinism of classical Marxism. Instead, she offers the reader a way of rethinking the possibilities for cultural and political resistance. She explores these by an examination of hybridity as process rather than completion, drawing on situations in which meanings and representations are not fixed. She suggests that an important metaphor for this is the 'dress rehearsal,' a situation of exploration in which new forms of meaning are produced.

Her interrogation of power and authority in the relationship between Harry Trewe the hotel proprietor and Jackson his employee in Walcott's Pantomime illustrates just such a process of ambivalence and opening up of meaning by the use of improvisation. Similarly, her analysis of 'dougla poetics' in later chapters of the book provides a platform for this approach. The book is clearly a work of considerable scholarship and has quickly become an important influence in Caribbean cultural analysis.

One concern of this reviewer, with admittedly a more prosaic or teleological approach to the post-colonial nation-state, is what appears to be some hedging around the important question – in what national context do these hybrid identities operate? Or put another way, is the nation-state in the Caribbean weak or strong? Puri does concede that the nation state

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<sup>1</sup>The 'dougla' is conventionally the mixed descendent of Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians.

in the Caribbean is beset by many weaknesses. However, these weaknesses seem to disappear as the reader is beguiled by the representation of the Caribbean state as having considerable power and authority in its hegemonic regulation and manipulation of cultural hybridity. In the latter chapters the focus on preliminaries to opposition -- the issue of 'rehearsal' as well as subtle exposure of cracks in the wall of state-constructed cultural hybridity hint at more power and authority vested in the state than there is in fact evidence for.

Historically, the interest in so called 'cultural industries' by the state is a relatively new phenomenon. For some considerable time the state in the Caribbean appeared to have minimal interest in artistic cultural practices. Artists located in the region have long complained that those who hold power in the Caribbean have recognized cultural practices as at best a form of decoration and at worst something to be jettisoned when times are hard. In St. Vincent, for example, the disbanding of a post of national director of culture in the 1970s was effected with the notorious statement 'we can't eat culture.'

In the larger islands of the Anglophone region, the postcolonial state has retreated from interventions in privatization (the hybridity of state enterprise) in the 1970s and 1980s. In the smaller islands, the state has had to come to terms with the enforced retreat from the subsidized culture of banana growing. In most of these countries a case can be made that the state's sphere of control territorially is often, at best, tenuous. In one part of the region or another state boundaries are in flux from recurring threats of secession or they are in dispute. Urban and rural (periodic) no-go areas (the former gang controlled, the latter ganja growing) are on-going challenges to state hegemony as is its increasingly ineffective response to the threat of violent crime.

These contextual features of local state power in the Caribbean, or the lack of it, do raise important questions about hegemonic authority in the region and (conservative) cultural hybridity's capacity to hold the state together.

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