citizenship from below: erotic agency and Caribbean freedom

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In her book *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*, Mimi Sheller continues a journey to which she introduced the public thirteen years ago through the publication of her first book, *Democracy After Slavery: Black Publics and Peasant Radicalism in Haiti and Jamaica* (Macmillan Caribbean, 2000). In her new work, Sheller situates herself as one who is 'neither located in nor originally from the Caribbean' (p. xiii) but who has had the opportunity to be immersed in various aspects of Caribbean culture through the diasporic spaces she has inhabited, and through her own experience of the Caribbean as a tourist. Through the nine chapters framing her critical thought on representations of 'hidden' freedoms, Sheller critiques historical representations of freedom in Caribbean history, especially in Jamaica and Haiti, which have tended to ignore subaltern realities, and which have often used 'written records of the literate scribal masters' (p. 4) to frame or contextualise the experience of freedom for Caribbean people. Such representations, Sheller suggests, merely encourage a process of continued silencing of perspectives and experiences that exist outside of what was considered 'elite' and 'normal'. Sheller's work therefore plunges below the surface of such histories through her own use of a unique type of historical methodology that seeks to uncover and represent the struggles for freedom experienced by those considered powerless and voiceless. This methodology involves unearthing both personal and social historical records and sources that have been obfuscated by the 'power relations' that have determined the way history has been and continues to be produced. At the heart of Sheller's historical method lies the idea that there are always specific stories or experiences that are left out when history is reconstructed. By focusing on these untold stories, Sheller is able to uncover the perspectives of the subaltern groups themselves and analyse these in order to determine the different ways in which freedom is envisioned and manifested by those who are often excluded by the society's 'ruling regime' (p. 5).

Freedom in the Caribbean has always been characterised by a sense of ambiguity because while the abolition of slavery and the end of colonialism brought an end to centuries of oppression, the leaders of these newly constructed independent societies, through the imposition of their own political, sexual and

racial codes, placed various forms of constraint on the members of their nations. In constructing their independent nations, political leaders imposed on their citizens 'ideal' forms of identity and modes of participation in the nation, which rendered problematic the experience of freedom for those existing outside of the nation's accepted roles and customs, forcing them to construct their own 'illegal' or 'deviant' forms of freedom. Sheller's in-depth analysis aptly excavates the grounds upon which Caribbean histories have been produced through both academic and nationalist historiography. She introduces her main theoretical premises on citizenship and freedom in her introduction and in Chapter 1, and then through focus on Jamaica in Chapters 2–4, examines the various 'subaltern subjects' through depictions of the Afro-Jamaican woman during slavery, representations of 'subaltern masculinities' in post-emancipation Jamaica and photographic images of places and people in the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion. Her focus shifts to Haiti in Chapters 5–8, where she analyses the various 'performances of citizenship' there, closing her discussion in Chapter 9 with a stimulating and profound explanation of the significance of her position on erotic agency in postcolonial discourse. Through this structure, Sheller is able to locate traces of the voices, bodies and experiences of those who have crafted their own forms of freedom in spaces that have either remained buried or are made to function in a social realm she classifies as being 'below', because they exist outside of and in contradiction with the regulations of the state. In such spaces these individuals often remain disregarded, but their presence evokes such discomfort that it disrupts the ideals of normalcy and destabilises the moral codes of the society.

Sheller's discussions go beyond the exclusion of the gay community, and address other groups of persons who have constantly remained on the margins of society because of the marks of difference in sex, race, colour or class imprinted on their bodies, through their skin, appearance, body parts, clothing or physical actions. Such groups include women, blacks, South Asian and African workers, participants in the popular dancehall and carnival cultures, and 'natives' who are pierced by the 'tourist's gaze' (p. 212). The sense of 'national belonging' for such groups is 'limited' (p. 7) because their identities and behaviours are not in alignment with the prescribed codes of the nation that were characterised either through constitutions and customs that still reflected the Eurocentric models of the 'ex-motherlands', or through the newly formed black, masculine middle-class or military-style rhetoric of many independent Caribbean postcolonial nations.

Sheller is able to account for the agency of the excluded groups through the 'politics of the erotic', a method she uses to make visible, despite ongoing delegitimisation and exclusion, the ways in which the erotic spaces in Jamaica and Haiti empower the devalued and unaccepted members of Caribbean societies. She challenges the limitations of the kind of compass that has been used to navigate explanations of slavery, colonialism and postcolonialism predominantly through the lens of the privileged, with her own proposed position on 'erotic agency' and

the inclusivity and fluidity that such a position enables for reading and critiquing the experiences of enslavement and freedom in the Caribbean. Using Audre Lorde's focus on the 'erotic powers of the body' (p. 244), and the writings of Carolyn Cooper, Paul Gilroy, Patricia Hill Collins and others, Sheller presents erotic agency as that which exists in opposition to the condition of enslavement. Sheller offers an expanded understanding of the erotic whereby 'erotic agency' is not bound to the sexual and sensual, but is stretched to include the kind of citizenship that is constructed through self-imagination and self-representation of all forms, and which exists beyond what are characterised by the laws and social codes as being 'good' (p. 238) identities, behaviours and social practices. She rejects essentialist notions of oppression and freedom and therefore acknowledges some of the contradictions and paradoxes wrapped up in the function of the erotic. Yet, she insists that because it offers a merging of the spiritual, the sensual and the political, this theoretical position provides not simply a deeper way of 'reading the world' but also a better way 'of being in the world' (p. 245). What is highly significant about Sheller's presentation of erotic agency is that it allows an understanding of past and present deep-rooted connections and power contentions between the state and the citizens. Erotic agency becomes thus erotic politics, in that it generates continued acts of protest, resistance and rebellion in response to the hegemonic practices of the society. Therefore, by focusing on what is revealed about the spaces occupied by 'citizens from below' through historiography, Sheller deconstructs notions of 'unified national identity' (p. 275), and reveals that focus on the presence of the erotic and explorations of this new 'kind of pervasive energy that can be a source for social and political change' is able to contribute to Caribbean postcolonial feminist discourse and the emergence of a more explicit form of Caribbean queer theory (p. 244). She provides insight into the significant role subaltern groups have played and continue to play in securing positive transformation in Caribbean societies and in ensuring resistance and challenge to the abusive forms of power and the systems of inequality present in contemporary Caribbean communities.

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