

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

[Book Review] Creole in the Archive: Imagery, Presence and the Location of the Caribbean Figure, by Roshini Kempadoo

Journal Item

How to cite:

Wainwright, Leon (2019). [Book Review] Creole in the Archive: Imagery, Presence and the Location of the Caribbean Figure, by Roshini Kempadoo. *The New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 93(3-4) pp. 345-346.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [\[not recorded\]](#)

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1163/22134360-09303032>

https://brill.com/view/journals/nwig/93/3-4/article-p345_34.xml

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

Roshini Kempadoo, *Creole in the Archive: Imagery, Presence and the Location of the Caribbean Figure*. Langham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. xii + 258 pp. (Paper US\$ 37.95)

Designed as an investigation into the interrelationships between “historical imagery and poetic narratives of memory” (p. 2), specifically within the context of Trinidad in the eastern Caribbean, this is a widely ranging and thoughtful book by a visual artist of Caribbean background based in the United Kingdom. Such interrelationships are complex and Roshini Kempadoo is fully immersed in the task of conveying their critical character, with attention to discourse theory and Foucauldian approaches to the study of images, locating such concerns in the Caribbean by way of the terms “presence,” “creole,” and “the Caribbean figure.” “Presence” seems to be an object of desire for Kempadoo, as an engaged scholar who strives to make visible those Caribbean subjectivities that have suffered invisibility, misrecognition, and trauma, being silenced and erased from historical memory. She aims at raising their status to one of newfound historical “presence,” calling forgotten Caribbean subjects to remembrance. Hers is thus a moral striving as much as a political project of foregrounding and highlighting more plural—and in that sense “creole” and more multivocal and inclusive—ideas about the past.

Any attempt to conduct advanced theoretical work on Caribbean visual imagery has to reckon with practical challenges that come from past neglect of the visual. Kempadoo has tackled that obstacle by gathering together visual materials in a primary and empirical way; the larger theoretical observations she makes are indicative of what may be achieved for other parts of the Caribbean. Even so, the book tends to treat Trinidad as if it were somehow typical of the region at large, a part-as-whole synecdoche. (The book’s introduction explains that the idea came out of a symposium and exhibition that Kempadoo attended in Cape Town, based on exploring “the status and idea of South African national archives.” But there, by contrast, the parameters were national and expressly not about archives of the African continent *in toto*). Other notable titles in recent years on visual and material culture in the English-speaking Caribbean have avoided the risk of seeming to generalize in that manner, offering a more graspable period interest and being explicit about their national purview—see, for example, Tim Barringer and Wayne Modest (eds.), *Victorian Jamaica* (2018) and Claudia Hucke, *Picturing the Postcolonial Nation* (2013).

Somewhat in tension with its emphasis on the workings of power, privilege, and social inequity, the book is less than candid about the author’s own social and cultural capital in relation to the matter of gaining access to private collec-

tions of visual materials that are brought under scrutiny. Kempadoo has much to say about the intellectual work of treating images as the focus of scholarly inquiry as well as the raw material of artistic production, and she has a good facility with the conceptual schemes offered by postcolonial theory. But there is less in the book about how contestations over cultural heritage in Trinidad, extending to conflicts among the island's middling classes along racial, ethnic and religious lines, seem to implicate the book and its author. Visual images are integral to a value system and its practices of differencing, so that care is needed when helping to create historical value for one or other such group, namely for re-presenting privately-owned images as figures of public and national, if not Caribbean-wide, "heritage." What does entering such spaces mean for a university-affiliated researcher and artist of note who is based overseas and whose own cultural identifications are so integral to this topic? What significance does "creole in the archive" bear for the intersubjective relations negotiated in the course of its research? These questions haunt the book alongside those about the political economy of institutions responsible for archiving and collecting images. Indeed, how may national or university archives (within and without the Caribbean), in their role as open repositories of material for public educational use, evolve in order to draw attention to the educational value of visual artefacts? What sorts of decolonized archives might this produce?

Accompanied by black and white illustrations, the book's five chapters explore little-tapped collections in Trinidad (including Kempadoo's own art and those of her contemporaries). It cuts between that more substantial content and quite obviously rhetorical passages presented as personal journal entries, interspersed with spare outlines of the late twentieth-century literature in cultural studies and postcolonial thought. Overall, the book reopens an established academic debate about the workings of power entailed in the production and circulation of visual images, and how certain rich and occasionally informal historical archives and collections in Trinidad carry significance for "spectators" and "readers" in the present day.

Leon Wainwright

Department of Art History, The Open University U.K.

leon.wainwright@open.ac.uk