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On Reading Brownness, Seriously: Belinda Edmondson and Caribbean Middle Class Culture

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Belinda Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure Culture and the Middle Class*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 223 pp.

Belinda Edmondson's *Caribbean Middlebrow* asks that we significantly rethink Caribbean literary and cultural studies by taking seriously the contributions of the middle class. Edmondson's previous monograph, *Making Men* (1999), has been an important part of the twenty-first century questioning of nationalist, anticolonial understandings of Caribbean writing by presenting alternative ways of reading canonical writers like Claude McKay, George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, and Michelle Cliff. The more recent *Caribbean Middlebrow* complicates this sense of the canon even more thoroughly by specifically interrogating the system of values employed by critics of Caribbean literature to decide what counts as literary, what modes of popularity are valued, and what kinds of writing are truly Caribbean. Edmondson explores what Caribbean studies might look like if critics foregrounded the presence of the global marketplace so that popular culture were not taken to be authentic and revolutionary product of the working class, and if pleasure and entertainment value became as important critical categories as politics and resistance.

Caribbean Middlebrow takes on the assumption, most directly articulated by George Lamming in *The Pleasures of Exile* but also found in the work of Kamau Brathwaite, Kenneth Ramchand, and contemporary Caribbean cultural studies, that the Caribbean middle class is a group without a culture of its own and that the culture of the working class is therefore the most authentically Caribbean. Edmondson's chapter on Louise Bennett, in particular, shows how previous critics have positioned Bennett as embodiment of a revolutionary and anti-canonical folk sensibility, while in fact Bennett is more accurately read as middle-class translator of folk culture. According to Edmondson, Bennett's use of patois and folk tales are neither authentically working class nor simply an appropriation of that culture: this reading of Bennett shows how the performance of folk culture *is* part of Caribbean middle-class culture. In a context where Creole is not spoken only by the romanticized folk but is one of the languages of the middle class, part

of the pleasure middle-class audiences felt in watching Bennett's performance came from self-recognition; comic elements can help cover over that audience's anxieties about its own class status, but the laughter remains nervous as that anxiety is never erased. Rather than seeking to dismiss Bennett as a minstrel or rescue her as a "serious" writer, *Caribbean Middlebrow* wonders whether there can be a place for her in the canon that respects her popularity as an entertainer and her middle-class identity.

Edmondson argues that understanding Bennett or any of the other more recent iterations of Caribbean middlebrow culture requires historical perspective. The longest chapters of *Caribbean Middlebrow* (chapter 1 on "Early Literary Culture" and chapter 2 on "Brownness, Social Desire, and the Early Novel") thus fit into the trend in Caribbean studies during the past decade of questioning some of the field's basic assumptions by revisiting the archive of pre-World War II West Indian writing. Alison Donnell has probably made the case most forcefully for seeing as historically contingent the judgments about literary value and the canon made by critics in the 1960s and 1970s. Others such as Leah Rosenberg, Selwyn Cudjoe, Evelyn O'Callaghan and Faith Smith have also begun to delve into the archive of early Anglophone Caribbean writing to argue for *not* dismissing texts from the nineteenth and early twentieth century as too imitative of English writing to be considered part of the Caribbean cultural tradition. Edmondson's challenge to the equation that authentic Caribbean literature is writing that celebrates the lower classes thus dovetails with her interest in going beyond the post-World War II canon. Opening up the archive allows Edmondson to sketch out a compelling portrait of what she refers to as an early "brown" literary culture featuring turn-of-the-century newspapers such as the *Jamaica Times* or the *Trinidadian Mirror* as well as novelists like Maxwell Philip and Thomas MacDermot.

This early literary world is, in Edmondson's language, both authenticating and aspirational, showing a desire to connect simultaneously to local Caribbean culture as well as a modernity, frequently associated with the United States. Edmondson attends to how an array of publishing venues and writers imagines the political and social project of "brownness" differently, yet she is also able to call attention to certain common qualities of these projects. The chapter on newspapers and literary journals is particularly effective in showing what an important presence the United States has in the imaginary of these publications: as Edmondson puts it, while serious literature may have continued to be associated with England in the colonial

Caribbean, “fun reading was American” (35). *Caribbean Middlebrow* adds new insight to the scholarship being developed on early print culture by examining how images of the US circulate as models of commerce, professionalism, and modern blackness.

The chapter on early novelists continues to unearth mostly overlooked texts to show how they imagine brownness, with emphasis on how that identity is consistently refracted through gender and sexuality. This early literature’s brownness comes out of the dual impulses towards celebrating blackness as one of the primary origins of the Caribbean middle class while aiming towards a cosmopolitan identity beyond the pathologies assigned to the black working class. But the sources of middle class hybridity—not only in the cultural blending of Europe and Africa, but also in sexual coupling—makes the nonwhite woman’s body a site of both anxiety and desire. H.G. de Lisser’s *Jane’s Career* (1913), for example, uses Jane’s ascension to “reveal the [black] working-class origins of brown middle-class identity” (83) as a “final stab at brown people” (82) by a novelist identifying himself with the white ruling class; Stephen Cobham’s *Rupert Gray* (1907), meanwhile, ends with a speech against miscegenation, a seemingly bizarre coda to a novel about interracial romance that Edmondson reads as Cobham “reassur[ing] his black audience, not his white one, that the marriage of a proud black man to the ruling elite does not signify the self-hatred the novel has gone out of its way to depict [...] the bishop is assuring black men that the fruit of the black-white alliance—those brown pattering feet—will come under the rubric of black identity” (76). The brown political projects imagined in these texts become inseparable from discourses of respectability and sexual policing that remain influential.

Establishing this historical context becomes crucial for Edmondson’s later chapters on beauty pageants and carnivals in particular, where even today nonwhite women remain an index of modernity for Caribbean society. These chapters explore the positioning of Caribbean identity in the context of globalization, where celebration of the local is not necessarily resistant but in fact can be the price of entry into the global marketplace. Edmondson places the emphasis on identifiably black beauty in recent Jamaican pageants into a complicated matrix of contextual factors, including a realization that this identity will sell on the world stage, the influence of tourist iconography, as well as a “discourse of American-style professionalism” (15) associating women with a cosmopolitan international imagined community. These same factors return in Edmondson’s analysis of the emergence of Trinidadian carnival as a safe space for corporate

sponsorship because of its feminization, and again in discussions of the marketing of Colin Channer's novels.

Caribbean Middlebrow thus offers a fascinating and innovative set of tools for reading a variety of Caribbean cultural events. This methodology allows new questions and new approaches: her final chapter on pop fiction, for example, asks that critics not ignore literary works that achieve market success, since in the contemporary cultural world the lines between popular and serious works are no longer easy to draw. In fact, what Edmondson shows is how Channer's chick lit, Nalo Hopkinson's science fiction, or Valerie Belgrave's historical romance are constructed in relation to the international market; rather than dismissing this factor as automatically contaminating, Edmondson develops a methodology that addresses how audience aspirations and most of all pleasure need to be taken into account for understanding the production and consumption of these texts. Instead of reading the text by itself, then, Edmondson brings a cultural studies sensibility to literature to show how Channer, for example, imagines the politics of his work outside traditional anticolonial notions of resistance. In the process, *Caribbean Middlebrow* makes its own case that thinking about Caribbean literature and culture in terms of the categories of nationalism and anticolonialism has become outdated. Continuing to insist on the popular as oppositional or the folk as revolutionary agent ignores the realities of globalization in which popular culture is mediated through the market and folk culture is promoted by state, tourist, and commercial interests. In calling attention to this global context, and in looking back to the historical precursors of this present configuration, *Caribbean Middlebrow* opens up new ways of thinking about Caribbean literature and culture at the start of the twenty-first century.

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