1-1-2014

Citizenship From Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom

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Mimi Sheller


*Citizenship From Below* makes an extremely forceful and timely argument about how we must understand the relationships between various incarnations of the state (imperial, colonial, postcolonial, nationalist) and the development of alternative (subaltern) claims to citizenship, principally within post-Revolutionary Haiti and postemancipation Jamaica. By repositioning and retheorizing data originally gathered for her PhD research while also mining new sources, such as the photographs of Jamaica from the period of the Morant Bay rebellion in 1865 which are now housed at Princeton University, Mimi Sheller develops a theory of “citizenship from below” that foregrounds practices and performances of gender and sexuality. The book is thus part of a more general move to critique the liberal narrative of political citizenship and state formation, showing the various ways in which these processes have been ideologically grounded within (and therefore reproduce) particular notions of personhood and value that are gendered, racialized, and sexualized.

Like many other contemporary scholars, Sheller seeks to show that categories of subjecthood are constantly made and revised relationally within specific contexts, while at the same time demonstrating change over time. In particular, she wants to outline the “intimate bodily encounters” within workplaces, streets, churches, and other public and semipublic spaces that provide windows into the subaltern formation of gendered, racialized, ethnicized, and sexual subjectivities. In other words, she’s looking to develop a theory of “embodied freedom,” one that sits somewhere in the middle of the continuum between violent rebellion and hidden resistance, implicitly arguing that this is where we might find attempts to define alternative modes of belonging and to carve out institutional spaces in which notions of belonging can be generated.
Sheller is also interested in methodological questions and, as in her previous work, challenges us to think about the politics of knowledge production in and about the region. She asks: “What do we know about the Caribbean past(s), and how do we know it? Who can make claims to knowledge, with what license and legitimation? How does a researcher’s location inside or outside the Caribbean, and within or outside particular fields of power, matter in writing history?” (p. 3). And, more explicitly to the thorny question of identifying and representing what we might term subaltern archives, how do historians and other scholars “find these sources beneath the surface and tap into non-representational dimensions of the past, the embodied, spatial, and affective aspects that escape archival record?” (p. 5). These are questions, of course, that have provoked many Caribbeanists to both read between the lines of colonial archives and excavate other repositories of community memory and history, but here Sheller is especially interested in those bodies of knowledge (pun intended) that can tell us something about the relationships between sexuality, politics, and citizenship in the postemancipation period.

The scope of the book is impressively ambitious, and throughout Sheller makes three overarching arguments. One is that contrary to the opinions of contemporary post-World War II scholars and lay observers, there was a focus, among both women and men, on family integrity and autonomy among post-emancipation Caribbean communities, and that this focus served as the basis for many forms of public protest within a variety of venues. The second is that despite efforts to codify and classify the natural world according to a colonial logic, Caribbean populations did and do make different sense of landscape and space in ways that reveal alternative notions of belonging, use, and citizenship. And the third is that to make claims as politically agential subjects, Caribbean people have had to, in her words, “first position themselves as raced, gendered, national, and sexual subjects of particular kinds (i.e. as free men, or heads of patriarchal families, or good mothers, or British subjects, or loyal soldiers)” (p. 21)—in other words, they have had to locate themselves as citizens in ways that drew lines between themselves and others, in many cases reproducing colonial (and, in the case of Haiti, revolutionary) hierarchies. Of course, these arguments are not merely about Caribbean pasts but are also critical to our presents. That is, Sheller wants to parse some of the struggles that shaped postslavery visions of citizenship in order to situate the iterations of interpersonal and intercommunal violence that form such a noisy part of our landscapes today. Her audience, therefore, is quite broad and includes not only Caribbeanist historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary scholars, but also those interested more generally in Africana Studies, postslavery societies, postcolonialism, race theory, gender and sexuality studies, and the new studies
of citizenship, subject formation, and democracy. As a result, *Citizenship from Below* could be used in area studies courses as well as advanced undergraduate and graduate thematic courses addressing histories of empire, nationalism, colonialism, and race.

I want to end by saying something briefly about the theory of sexual citizenship Sheller develops. Her overarching point throughout the text is that “racial, ethnic, gendered, and sexual claims to citizenship in the postslavery Caribbean emerge as attempts to institute specifically embodied masculinities and femininities that are always in tension with state efforts to control and discipline sexuality, fertility, and labor relations” (pp. 26–27). By mobilizing a variety of kinds of archives, and through some unconventional readings (especially of what the photographs of the Morant Bay rebellion might tell us about issues related to color and political protest during that period), she builds on the work of a number of scholars of sexuality, including both established scholars whose work has charted new fields of inquiry and emergent scholars like Lyndon Gill (2010), who is attempting to think through the relationships among the political, the sexual, and the spiritual, a trifecta he calls “erotic agency.” She uses this work in order to make the argument that “sexuality does not simply emanate from within an already formed subject. Rather,” she continues, “it is interactively elicited through encounters between bodies and sexual geographies, which include spaces of belonging and safety, ethnonsexual borders and frontiers, and modes of normalizing, policing, and surveilling sexualized bodies and places” (p. 242). For Sheller, the exercise of sexual agency, while it may not necessarily transform the institutions through which inequalities have historically been structured, “may enable some forms of maneuver, negotiation, and exchange” (p. 260). It is by training this lens on nineteenth-century Jamaica and Haiti that Sheller most profoundly complexifies traditional political histories of slavery, freedom, and citizenship. I believe this theoretical reframing is the most critical contribution of *Citizenship from Below*.

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**Reference**