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“Between my life that is over and my life to come”: Embodying Authorial Ambivalence in Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997)

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Anglophone Caribbean literary criticism has extensively addressed regional women writers’ responses to their male counterparts’ literary authority. However, it has not attended to contemporary male writers’ responses to women writers’ evolving literary authority and swift ascendance in the international literary market. Consequently, it appears to counteract what it also celebrates: women writers’ active role in the discursive formation of the Caribbean nation. This paper is part of a larger project asserting that women writers’ entrance into the Anglophone Caribbean canon has necessitated contemporary male writers’ renegotiation of a formerly exclusive literary authority and attendant responsibility to write the nation. I argue that contemporary male authors’ negotiation of what David Scott calls the “problem space” borne of shared literary authority within the Anglophone Caribbean has resulted in a persistent ambivalence that pervades their works. This ambivalence is most clearly evidenced in these authors’ construction of female protagonists, namely their corporeality, agency and capacity for verbal expression. Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* features the slave Mintah as a female protagonist who offers a firsthand account of colonial subjection; here, I demonstrate how Mintah also serves as an embodiment of the ambivalence produced through male writers’ renegotiation of literary authority. My reading of D’Aguiar’s text challenges a critical paradigm and counters the formation of another problem space by activating women writers’ work in the formerly male-dominated Caribbean canon rather than fixing their place within it.

Women writers' influence on the Anglophone Caribbean canon

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Abstract

The Anglophone Caribbean canon represents the region's identity to a global audience. It is ostensibly gender inclusive, yet critical perspectives reveal an ongoing redefinition of literary authority in response to women writers' inclusion. This study uncovers a critical resistance to women writers' agency and identifies their influence on their male counterparts' work. In doing so, it historicizes women writers' impact on canonical development and promotes critical inquiry that transcends patriarchal limitations.

Introduction

Critics began to acknowledge women writers as part of the Anglo-Caribbean canon in 1990, disrupting male writers' exclusive claim to authorship. Since then, criticism on women writers' work has focused on their **existence in**, not their **influence on**, the canon. This critical tendency limits their agency and literary authority and overlooks their contributions to canonical development and national construction.

Project Design

Part I: Theoretical frame

Belinda Edmondson's concept of "making men" is extended to analyze the relationship between gender and literary authority in the modern-day Anglo-Caribbean canon. It holds that Anglo-Caribbean male writers were authorized to write the nation by Victorian Englishmen who possessed the cultural authority the Caribbean lacked. The male writers credited with establishing the Anglo-Caribbean canon attained literary authority by modeling Victorian standards of gentility. Women responded by migrating to the United States and writing within and against this inherited tradition (14).

Part II: Critical contributions

To date, Anglo-Caribbean scholarship has not acknowledged women critics' central role in canon formation/national construction. Interviews with four key Anglo-Caribbean women critics establish a historical record and critical awareness of their work: Elaine Savory, Carole Boyce Davies, Sandra Pouchet Paquet, and Evelyn O'Callaghan. The transcripts of these interviews will constitute the first record of founding women critics' contributions to Anglo-Caribbean canon development.

Part III: Canon constructs

The canon's resistance to gender inclusiveness is illustrated through this reconstruction of women writers' critical reception since 1990. The women's writing "boom" was critically constructed and circulated (Donnell 131), which facilitated canonical acceptance. Yet critical inquiry continues to *limit* women writers' agency by celebrating their presence rather than determining their influence. Women's writing's critical endorsement increased its academic worth and popular appeal, which consequently challenged male writers' academic prominence and market success. These factors combined with male writers' tenuous inheritance of literary authority to create an ambivalence toward female narrative in their works.

Part IV: Close readings

Close readings of three contemporary male Anglo-Caribbean writers' texts illustrate their reflection of a critical tendency to "fix" women writers' agency. Each text contains a female protagonist who recounts the trauma of slavery. The protagonists' development represents the renegotiation of women writers' literary authority and their role in national construction.

Conclusions

- The Anglo-Caribbean's critical inquiry is based on patriarchal paradigms that discount alternative readings;
- The Anglo-Caribbean canon's missing historical record of women critics' role in its formation downplays their literary agency;
- The Anglo-Caribbean canon's patriarchal construction resists gender-inclusive authorship.

Summary

Critics have not acknowledged women writers for their significant contributions to the Anglo-Caribbean canon's development, and critical inquiry objectifies their inclusion by limiting their authorial agency. These patterns indicate the persistence of patriarchal paradigms that constrain Anglo-Caribbean literary production and counteract regional identity formation.

Works cited

- Donnell, Alison. *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*. London: Routledge, 2006.
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