

**Roshini Kempadoo**, *Creole in the Archive: Imagery, Presence, and the Location of the Caribbean Figure*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. ISBN: 9781783482207 (cloth); ISBN: 9781783482214 (paper); ISBN: 9781783482221 (ebook)

Where have images of the Caribbean been constructed historically? What is the place of enunciation of the Caribbean figure? How is photography both channeling and challenging processes of identity and identification in the Caribbean? These and other questions are the main concern of Roshini Kempadoo's *Creole in the Archive*. Kempadoo, herself a renowned photographer and artist as well as a Reader in the University of Westminster's School of Media, Arts and Design,<sup>1</sup> has traced the development of contemporary art in the Caribbean region. More than that, she has experienced the difficulties of dealing with the Caribbean through visual means and the burdens of responding to foreign and internal expectations. *Creole in the Archive* is a book about the potential of artists and image-makers to overcome those expectations through locational creativity.

The focus on space and more specifically on the spatiality and corporality of the process of knowledge production is one of the book's most innovative assets. Although our knowledge of Caribbean visual imagery has been substantially enriched within the last two decades, on few occasions is the place of the critic and researcher problematized to the level we find in *Creole in the Archive*. Kempadoo's book employs two different registers, one dedicated to the main analysis and another including fragments of her research diary. The diary is especially interesting, since in it Kempadoo positions herself as creator and researcher, revealing the continuity of administrative patterns of colonial domination that stand in the way of anyone who does research on Caribbean art. *Creole in the Archive* gives an account of the difficulties experienced by the artist when consulting public archives in Caribbean institutions. Through her personal approach to the process of researching, Kempadoo reveals how issues of authority and accessibility stand in the way of the configuration of a Caribbean archive.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://roshinikempadoo.com>

*Creole in the Archive* is written from the embodied perspective of its author while examining collections of photographs in Trinidad, including those at the University of the West Indies library, and the private collections of white Trinidadian families and contemporary Trinidadian artists. The first entry of her research diary appears on the first page of the introduction. From there on, theoretical discussion and critical analysis are interwoven with first-hand experiences, including conversations with practitioners and private collectors, wrestling with highly bureaucratized administrative systems (such as that of the University of the West Indies library), and spending time in alternative creative spaces such as Alice Yard (a communal “yard” or place of improvisation and exchange in Port of Spain, Trinidad). Kempadoo’s experience and interactions in these different spaces shapes her knowledge of the Caribbean, but also her relation with the traditions and genealogies of imagining the region and her capacity to challenge and deconstruct colonial regimes of value and truth. For instance, her experience as researcher in UWI and Alice Yard is highly eloquent on this point: the description of the Yard as a meeting place contrasts with the “institutionalized distrust” she found when doing research at the West Indiana and Special Collections Division of UWI. *Creole in the Archive* demonstrates that our knowledge and our imagination of the Caribbean is very much grounded in, and dependent upon, the capacity of places and institutions like UWI or Alice Yard to modulate our access and our sense of belonging, to intervene in the process of thinking and imagining, and finally to envisage alternative ways of relating to the Caribbean figure.

Central to the book’s main argument is the idea of the Caribbean figure, which Kempadoo defines as:

... a metaphorical presence of subjectivities (which at times may be considered *ghostly*), associated with the Caribbean and more specifically Trinidad. The Caribbean figure is constituted in the aftermath of the pernicious and tragic, inhumane economic project of colonial rule. The Caribbean figure is emergent from a working system of capital created for the systematic production of goods and resources for Europe. (p.3)

The idea of a Caribbean figure allows Kempadoo to delve into the continuities between colonial and postcolonial systems of visibility. Her way of approaching that figure is through a process of “creolisation” of the Caribbean archive, in which marginal narratives come to light in order to relativize and challenge the normativity of colonial and national official history. *Creole in the Archive* substantially contributes to the study of Caribbean visual culture by showing the social relevance of embodied and located visual production:

I argue that it is through creolisation that her [the Caribbean figure’s] presence may be imbued with a clearer sense of political, social, economic and cultural agency constructed through a historical and contemporaneous presence and perceived through an increasing digitally networked configuration. (p.33)

Simultaneously, the idea of a Caribbean figure raises important questions: In what way is “continuity implicit in the idea of a Caribbean figure”? If that Caribbean figure is always undergoing transformations and remappings, to what extent can we understand it as a single historical subject? In what way does the idea of a Caribbean figure take into account the transformations and remappings taking place in what Michaeline Crichlow (2009) calls the “post-creole”, that is, the transformations affecting postcolonial Caribbean societies after their independence? Does not that continuity imply the creation of a creole-yet-essentialized historical subject? Are “alternative subjectivities” to be measured in equal terms in colonial and postcolonial sociopolitical configurations? How does the idea of a Caribbean figure measure contemporary inequalities at play among postcolonial Caribbean communities? How does the concept relate to present-day processes of reterritorialization and to the overlapping between pervasive past and present forms of colonial power? What mode and rationality of citizenship corresponds to a Caribbean figure persistent in time? In what ways does the “re-narrativisation ‘created by the subaltern herself’” (p.216, quoting Carby 2009: 639) translate into an alternative civic agency?

Kempadoo provides valuable answers to those questions through looking into visual practices and historical imagery as a source of subversive thought about the Caribbean. In Chapter 3, for example, she analyzes colonial photography as a technology of social control and exclusion. She shows how successful photography was in normalizing the logic of Trinidadian colonial society, helping an elite of plantation owners to construct their own image by recreating idyllic images that excluded the image of the slaved or indentured worker. Those images helped that elite to portray themselves as a social elite inside and outside the Caribbean. Kempadoo's analysis reaches its most original tone at this point, when she deals with the lack of distinction between original and copied photographs; when she connects the lack of conflict in these images with the definition of ideas of moral decency; and when she deals with the contradiction those photographs represent in terms of historical source when integrated in national archives given the fact that most of the population of contemporary Trinidad is excluded from them.

As this example reveals, in *Creole in the Archive* the definition of a Caribbean figure is directly linked to the project of creolizing the Caribbean archive. One of the book's most innovative chapters is dedicated to exploring how digital technologies have altered our relation to images and archives. Central to the process of visualizing, Kempadoo argues, is "taking account of a dialogue and relation to our social selves and other persons" (p.141). The possibilities of interaction and enunciation offered by social media and digital platforms are redefining the ways in which that realization takes place.

Kempadoo also explores in great detail how institutional power legitimizes and confers a rationality to the process of categorizing and displaying the materials and memories that will be part of the Caribbean archive. *Creole in the Archive* reveals the continuities at play in the creation of postcolonial national histories, documenting how some presences were silenced in order to recreate a particular teleology of the national past that would find continuity in the postcolonial present. For example, in Chapter 5 Kempadoo examines the Williams Memoria Collection and Museum, dedicated to the figure of Eric Williams, a leading Caribbean anticolonial intellectual and the first President of independent Trinidad and Tobago. At this point, Kempadoo emphasizes

how the space where the collections are help reinforce the centrality of Williams in the making of the postcolonial nation-state, thus sanctioning an historical discourse that is reinforced by the images contained in the collection. Narrating her visit to that space, Kempadoo is shocked by “how predictable and conventional it all was.” (p.187) This does not imply any criticism to the Williams collection nor to the figure of Eric Williams himself; rather, Kempadoo’s sharp criticism is directed towards the role such spaces and collections play in the definition of official historical narratives.

Countering that role, Kempadoo claims that artists and visual practitioners are playing a central role in decentering and troubling the stability of national regimes of truth and vision. A valuable precedent to those practitioners’ work is examined in Chapter 4, where Kempadoo deals with issues of photographic accessibility and fashion, drawing from early 20<sup>th</sup> century studio portraiture to track the social role photography has played in the configuration of alternative identities in Trinidad and beyond. At this point, the book documents the potential of an alternative imagination through a direct and engaged analysis of the work of Trinidadian and Caribbean artists, among them Christopher Cozier, Nikolai Noel, Rodell Warner, Nadia Huggins and Sheena Rose. Through the visual production of those Caribbean artists, Kempadoo explores the role of self-representation in the creation of an alternative archive. She also tracks the ways in which Caribbean visual practitioners have expanded that archive beyond the territory and the normative order of the postcolonial nation-state, giving voice to subjects and bodies traditionally rejected by that order. For Kempadoo, “strategies of revolt, transformation and resistance are evident in the artworks as they operate as loud, proud and indignant imagery.” (p.165) In *Creole in the Archive*, the work of these artists emerges as a nuanced and productive tool in the production of alternative alliances and cartographies. More importantly, Kempadoo demonstrates how the photographic and filmic images of those and other Caribbean creators play a central role in the definition of subversive subjects and subjectivities.

In sharp contrast with the critical analysis of contemporary photographic images is the exploration of archival materials corresponding to plantation owners or consecrating official historical narratives about Trinidad. One of the most innovative elements of *Creole in the Archive* consists precisely in counterposing those two visual

and archival regimes. Through an in-depth exploration of photographic collections revealing East Indian indentured workers in Trinidadian plantations and social events attended by plantation owners, Kempadoo explores the fabrication and transnational commodification of a particular image of the Caribbean and Trinidad, an image where the materiality of slavery and indentured labor eloquently remain out of focus: “The photograph contributes to a *truth* ideology that endorses colonialism as an economic enterprise” (p.113). Or, as she clarifies further on: “Modern photography is seen as a model of capitalist growth and an economic success story” (p.115), as revealed by the examined colonial photographs where the workers’ image is visibly absent. The creation of a postcard image of the Caribbean to be sold and distributed is successfully challenged by Caribbean “alternatives” who are reimagining the archive from a productive and dynamic positionality.

A brilliant example of this is given in Chapter 5 through the critical examination of images of protest and collective mobilization, specifically those of colonial strikes in Trinidad between the mid-1930s and 1960. At this point, Kempadoo pays particular attention to the ways in which collective subjects were portrayed in Trinidadian publications such as the *Trinidad Guardian*, stressing that “the sentiment of the newspapers such as the *Trinidad Guardian* reflected that of the newspaper owners and other plantation and company businessmen who were integral to the British Crown administration maintaining control of the island. The style and language was markedly formal and with an apparent sense of urgency” (p.179). In this sense, Kempadoo reveals how the primary role of those photographs, that of giving an account to the paper’s readership of the evolution of Trinidadian society, was countered by the images’ allegiance to a colonial regime of visibility. She compares those photographs with postcolonial images of protest, such as those published in the *Vanguard*, where Trinidadian subjects are fully recognized and made visible as social agents.

At this point, the author’s exploration of the Caribbean figure reaches its maximum complexity in the consideration of the social agency of Caribbean bodies and subjectivities through participation in emancipatory civil practices. Kempadoo offers one of the few explorations so far of the photographic archive of decolonization in the Caribbean, pointing out that some of the images belonging to that archive are “neither

mediated nor subjected to authorial control by any particular photographer or agency” (p.184). Going beyond the traditional focus on representation and identification of the discussions on Caribbean art and visibility, Kempadoo connects the Caribbean photographic image with a broader process of civic agency and social imagination, opening a fertile path that could also be applied to other visual and intermedia creative manifestations.

In *Creole in the Archive*, Kempadoo does great work in exploring how art and photographic imagination strategically repurpose the locational dimension of visual production and display. The book provides solid ground upon which to redefine our critical analysis of the Caribbean visual imagination. It forces us to consider research and display as positioned and embodied practices intervening in the construction of regimes of truth and visibility and expanding the Caribbean archive.

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*Carlos Garrido Castellano*  
*Centro de Estudos Comparatistas*  
*Universidade de Lisboa*  
*cgc@campus.ul.pt*

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