

Conversation Manqué: On Judging Someone Else's Book

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ABSTRACT: In this response to his critics, the author values the areas of missed opportunity observed by Brazier, Buscaglia-Salgado, and Bogues, while also endeavoring to “defend” his book from those objections that he ascribes more to the exigencies of the critic’s particular reading practice than to the text’s demonstrable failings. He uses the occasion to meditate on the psychopathology that informs the writing of a scholarly critique of a peer’s work and the tension that such a task may entail.

If the publication of a book constitutes an invitation to a conversation, as the late Martinican fiction writer Xavier Orville would have it, *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* has only partly succeeded at engaging the interlocutors who comment on it in this section of *Small Axe*. Taken together, their critiques illustrate the pitfalls that scholars face when appraising the works of other scholars. A popular literary critic, say, a book reviewer such as Michiko Kakutani assessing recent titles for the *New York Times*, will seek to embody the educated general reader, identifying with the best aesthetic interests of that imagined consumer of words. This assessor of texts will normally predicate condemnation or praise of given aspects of the work under perusal on his or her authority as an enlightened interpreter of the reader’s desire or need. In that sense, this popular critic admittedly inhabits a discursive field that differs from that of the author of the book under discussion. This critic does not write as a peer of the author but as an embodiment of the ideal reader who will consume the author’s published words.

When one writes as a scholar passing judgment on the writings of other scholars, a different psychopathology is unleashed. One is not a consumer of words reacting to a producer, but an operator in the same trade claiming comparable if not greater skill and expertise. Mindful of establishing or preserving one’s identity as an equal, at least, or, not infrequently,

as a better, the scholarly critic of a peer's work often treads the ground of epistemological or hermeneutic competition. Even when finding much to celebrate in the work under scrutiny, the scholar providing the commentary will normally reflect the discernible intention to avoid the demeanor of the admirer. Seldom, therefore, will the identification of virtues in the book being examined come unaccompanied by its prescribed itemization of balancing faults. The tension between the intellectual standing of the scholarly critic, an author placed temporarily in the role of commentator as reader, and the need to deploy effective strategies to affirm one's autonomy in relation to the author whose book is being considered, describe a psychopathology that in my view informs the genre of the scholarly critique. The recognition of that tension can provide us with a framework that may shed light on the varying attitudes that our books might trigger when undergoing the scrutiny of our scholarly peers. It may also imbue us with a salutary degree of self-awareness as we speak our way in reaction to the works of our colleagues.

With the foregoing background laid out, I can now proceed to thank my interlocutors—Jana Evans Braziel of the University of Cincinnati, José F. Buscaglia-Salgado of the University at Buffalo, and Anthony Bogues of Brown University—for the extent to which in varying degrees they have endeavored to extract from the pages of *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* sufficient grounds for accepting the invitation to converse that I have extended there. I should also preface this continuation of our conversation, as I respond to their critiques, by evoking a Mexican academic of the old guard who, cognizant of the proverbial conflict between the agendas of academic authors and learned critics, would openly declare, as he prepared to send yet another tome into the world, that his book lacked everything except that which it contained for sure. My book lacks, for instance, a cogent, full-fledged, explicit definition of the “intellectual” whose history I set out to chronicle in the text. Such a definition would have made it clear that I had no intention of acknowledging the contributions of all Caribbean writers who have gained visibility through their published works, whether they corresponded to “the nationalist Caribbean poetics of earlier literary generations” or to “a more recent generation of Caribbean intellectuals,” to use the temporality suggested by Braziel. My omission of “the deplorable conditions of Haitian migrant workers,” for example, might have seemed less “lamentable” to Braziel had I more clearly enunciated my interest in touching on specific episodes of the region's past or present history only when they promised to shed light on a particular point I wished to make regarding the place of the Caribbean person in the global representation of humanity that intellectual discourse boasts the power to deploy, a concern which forms the marrow of the volume.

Braziel organizes her commentary as a rapid overview of the book's introduction and three chapters, which she punctuates with intercalated expressions of discontent regarding particular