Eric D. Duke

Building a Nation: Caribbean Federation in the Black Diaspora. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015. xvii + 359 pp. (Cloth US\$ 74.95)

Building a Nation adds new complexities to the analysis of the West Indian Federation by approaching it as a critical practice in the “racialized global struggle” for black uplift. Eric Duke traces the history of engagement with the idea of a federation for the British West Indies by divergent, differentiated, and conflicting interests, their ebbs and flows, and their eventual convergence in a federation that lasted from 1958 until 1962. He locates the discussions squarely within the terrain of a racialized global struggle around black “fitness” for self-rule, and the conditions under which this became possible. He touches on the historicist notion of colonial tutelage and trusteeship around which, eventually, the issue of a West Indian federation was settled, and which was partly responsible for the Federation’s demise. The book provides a not-too-overwrought history of the contestations, collaborations, and conflicts involved in the “idea” of a federation in which were involved the colonial merchant-planter class, the region’s white elite, British colonial officials, divergent metropolitan interests in Britain, and an emergent colonized creole middle class. Most importantly, however, and the *raison d’être* of the book, is its documentation of the historical role played by black diaspora activists, particularly in the United States but also in Great Britain, in envisioning, refashioning, conceptualizing, and supporting a united West Indian nation. It traces the way West Indian middle-class activists and migrant communities were critically inserted into black diaspora politics from the nineteenth century and locates all this in a broader project of universal black racial unity, liberation, and empowerment.

Duke discusses the competing agendas of federation advocacy, historically organized around administrative efficiency, the consolidation of white colonial control, economic efficiency, commercial consolidation, black “islandist” nation building, and black regionalism. He focuses on the way the agendas of West Indian “nation building” became centrally inserted into black globalized challenges to white domination aimed at transnational black liberation and empowerment. He argues that the participation of West Indian middle-class activists shifted the meaning of a united West Indies away from colonial envisionings of a “united status quo” articulated in terms of “administrative efficiency and greater economic productivity and opportunity” (p. 31). This agenda was coopted by Afro-Caribbean reformers and converted into demands for self-government and self-determination. Once inserted into the global project of diasporic activism, the idea of West Indian federation became transformed from a project for local and regional reform into one with implications for

worldwide black liberation, unity, and empowerment. According to Duke, this transformation meliorated tendencies toward “islandism” by black anticolonial activists and reformers in and from the region. It also congealed ideological differences into one project of universal black liberation. After describing nineteenth-century envisionings of federation, Duke turns his attention to the local struggles for self-determination in the early twentieth century and their coincidences with increased out-migration of West Indians especially to the United States. The West Indian Federation was shaped in the cauldron of racialized black diasporic activism occurring particularly in Harlem and London, with their growing populations of West Indian immigrants.

Building a Nation outlines the concatenation of twentieth-century developments that congealed into post-World War II concessions by Britain to grant some form of self-rule to its West Indian colonies under a version of a federal system. These concessions were formulated as a means of managing the decolonization process under conditions where radical anti-imperialism and racial internationalism were increasingly being viewed as dangerous, especially within the context of deepening Cold-War contentions. Once federation, self-rule, and dominion status were conceded by Britain, fissures began to develop between radical diasporic activists overseas conjoined by their regional and national supporters on the one hand, and the West Indian middle-class reformers on the other. The latter ultimately prevailed in the organization of forms of governance that came to be the hallmark of West Indian nationalism. The Federation eventually became victim to narrow tendencies toward “islandism” and ideological differences that had previously been abated and meliorated by the globalist agenda of black liberation in which the debate was inserted. Duke points to the racializing legacy of this agenda and the problematic manner in which it came to serve and define West Indian imagined nationalism because of its failure to accommodate the multiracial realities of the region. He compellingly documents the conflicting tendencies inherent in West Indian nationalist discourse by focusing on the discourses and practices of federation. He points, in conclusion, to the failure to contain the centrifugal pressures of black nationalism, black internationalism, multiracialism, and transracialism in the project of West Indian nation-building, and touches briefly on the way in which these pressures have continued to plague subsequent efforts at regionalism in the Anglophone West Indies.

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