Jossianna Arroyo

Writing Secrecy in Caribbean Freemasonry. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. xix + 245 pp. (Cloth US$90.00)

When we think of Freemasons, we are used to imagining the secret societies of powerful white men: shadowy institutions that lie behind the control of governments and industry. Jossianna Arroyo’s fascinating book uncovers an entirely different story, one of subaltern resistance and competing versions of modernity, through which the Caribbean struggled to emerge during the nineteenth century from the legacies of slavery and colonial domination. Leading cultural and political figures of the Hispanic Caribbean were integrally linked to Freemasonry. Through their exiles, Arroyo tells a story that embraces the transnational nature of Hispanic-Caribbean identity at a time when Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans found themselves interconnected through their respective diasporas, and their common search for an enlightened and free future for their peoples.

Much more than an examination of secret brotherhoods, Arroyo’s detailed research contributes to our broader understanding of Hispanic Caribbean diasporic society and culture in the nineteenth century, cutting across the boundaries of class, race, and gender. The colonial and racialized cultures of the nineteenth-century Hispanic Caribbean saw manual labor as demeaning and indicative of social and racial inferiority, but Freemasonry valorized artisans and skilled workers who were playing a key role in the spreading industrial revolution. With many such artisanal occupations carried out by non-Whites, even slaves, in the plantation economies of Cuba and Puerto Rico, Freemasonry provided an underground alternative enabling transnational organization that would overthrow the cultural conservatism of white colonial society.

Throughout the nineteenth century Freemasonry in the circum-Caribbean became closely associated with revolutionary movements and attempts to overthrow the Ancien Régime. Arroyo looks at the various ways in which Masonic transnational interconnections shaped the political cultures not just of the Hispanic Caribbean, but of the entire Americas during this period, situating this story in a wide context that reaches back to Europe and the origin of Freemasonry.

In the nineteenth century, the “written word became a technology of advancement and resistance,” and Freemasonry provided a vehicle for this: “the secret axis for a secular, modern way of circulation of knowledge” (p. 14). After an exploration of secrecy, through philosophy, literature, and history (in particular as it applies to Freemasonry), Arroyo devotes the body of the book to a detailed study of five Caribbean intellectuals, each of whom played an impor-
tant part in the Caribbean diasporic circuit. With biographies taking them from the insular Caribbean to Europe and the United States, their examples provide an interweaving of “stories of initiation, revolution, transfiguration, and transcendence from forms of slavery, racialization, and colonial disavowal” (p. 27).

The polemic between Andrés Cassard (founder, in 1855, of the first Spanish-speaking lodge in New York) and Albert Pike (reputedly the most powerful Mason in the United States) uncovered the differing perspectives on what it meant to be American. The mid-nineteenth century was a period in which the United States was expanding its imperial presence in the Caribbean and elsewhere in the Americas, and Freemasonry played a hidden part. Through a close reading of their respective writings, Arroyo shows how Pike represented the voice of U.S. sovereignty over the region, from a position of racial and cultural superiority, while Cassard, the highest ranking Spanish-speaking Mason, was committed to uniting Hispanic Masons, through their own language, in support of “a trans-American global cause,” Cuba’s freedom from Spain.

Ramón E. Betances, the mulatto leader of the Confederación Antillana as well as honorary president of the Cuban Revolutionary Party in Paris, was an important protagonist in forging trans-Antillean connections during the period when Cubans and Puerto Ricans were fighting for their independence from Spain, and he did so exploiting the secret networks enabled by Freemasonry. Arroyo argues that he was the precursor of the more openly revolutionary activities and writings of José Martí a generation later, using “processes of race and class identification to define forms of political solidarity” (p. 71). Of particular importance for Betances was the way the Haitian Revolution exposed race as key to understanding Caribbean liberatory dynamics. By forging cross-race and cross-class solidarities, the Caribbean islands could aspire to building modern, liberal nations, and Caribbean Freemasonry provided a binding language that facilitated this.

While Freemasonry depended on secrecy, José Martí (an initiate) felt compelled to move beyond the closure, in order to further his republican ideals, which he saw as integral to Masonry, even if it brought him into conflict with fellow Masons. For Martí, the written word was supremely important, and Arroyo shows how through his writing, Masonic imagery was expanded out to a wider community. Words conveyed secrets, and brought together those whose combined action and labor was necessary for the ultimate goal of liberation.

The book ends in the fin de siècle, when the Afro-Caribbean intellectuals Rafael Serra y Montalvo (Cuban) and Arturo Alfonso Schomburg (Puerto Rican) exemplified the way Caribbean Freemasonry, forged in the liberation struggles of the nineteenth century, had become an organizing force for those who sought to overcome the racial inequalities that continued to plague their
respective societies. While Schomburg explored Afro-Atlantic histories and Serra sponsored black education and radical journalism, both sought to make real the racial and cultural solidarities that had been a common theme throughout the development of Caribbean Freemasonry. Together they helped define the basis for twentieth-century subaltern sociopolitical strategies.

Arroyo's study offers a fresh viewpoint on the history of the Hispanic Caribbean, with detailed analysis of the writings of these intellectuals, and their engagement with the wider social, political, and cultural forces of the time. Her book produces a fuller understanding of the central role played by Freemasonry in the revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century, in particular in the struggle to free Cuba and Puerto Rico from Spanish imperialism. At the same time, the Brotherhood helped the diasporic community connect with the North American and European societies in which they found themselves. Particularly admirable is the way Arroyo uses this story to reveal further complexities in the racial history of the region. This is an excellent addition to the intellectual and cultural history of the Hispanic Caribbean and its diaspora.

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