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Book Review - Calypso Magnolia: The Crosscurrents of Caribbean Literature and Southern Literature

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Off the SHELF

Calypso Magnolia: The Crosscurrents of Caribbean Literature and Southern Literature

by John Wharton Lowe (University of North Carolina Press, New Direction in Southern Studies Series, 2016, ISBN 978-1-4696-2620-8, \$39.95)

Calypso Magnolia by John Wharton Lowe has a little bit of everything. While Lowe primarily focuses on the ways in which Southern and Caribbean literatures share commonalities, he also goes in depth into the sociohistorical contexts in these regions that have created them. As such, literature acts as a conduit for a tale of shared history. In this text, Lowe ties together multiple threads of inquiry to present to the reader a well-crafted sense of why such comparative studies are not only interesting but necessary in creating less fragmented narratives of regional identity.

Lowe starts off describing what he calls the circumCaribbean, or the Caribbean extended beyond just the islands to places such as Miami and New Orleans, the eastern coast of Mexico, and the northern rim of South America. These places, he argues, share many historical ties, not only in colonization but also migration. For example, South Florida shares much history with the Latin Caribbean, as many Cubans have migrated into the area. Similarly, New Orleans once acted as the hub of France's American colonies, with France's Caribbean holdings being extensions of that country's power. Lowe, however, sees the ties going deeper than just these surface levels. The South and the Caribbean also share a more nefarious history

of a plantation economy driven by African slave labor. The cultural identities of circumCaribbean regions thus intertwine in deeper ways than mere geography. The Caribbean, argues Lowe, was merely an extension of the South in the minds of many Northerners for decades: hot and tainted by the slave trade.

In building this argument, Lowe explores the ways in which this relationship has manifested in literature. He pays particular attention to

authors that may not at first be obvious as inhabiting this relationship. For example, he discusses with great historical depth the similarity of experience of black peasants as shown in the work of Zora Neale Hurston and Claude McKay. Lowe also brings into the conversation newer writers, specifically Cuban-American writers of Florida, whose writing serves as a new area of growth for Southern literature, a genre where their voices may have previously been dismissed as not distinctly Southern. Lowe, however, sees their contributions as part of a

growing South that still has a unique, if historically different, literary voice.

Recommended for academic libraries that collect in the areas of Southern studies, Caribbean studies, or other relevant area studies. It is a complex, comparative look at not just literary works but also sociocultural history and thus could be useful for multiple disciplines.

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