
Literary and Performative Culture in 1860s Jamaica

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Abstract

This article explores two movements in Jamaican literary history that occurred in the 1860s: first, the influence of US vernaculars via periodicals and blackface minstrelsy; and second, creole publications and performances by black, white, or brown authors. In some ways the 1860s was a decade of progress for black Jamaicans. These examples of 1860 Jamaican arts culture therefore reveal the aspirations and tensions within the society that contributed to the Morant Bay Rebellion and its repressive aftermath.

As we know, the origins of the Morant Bay Rebellion lie in the exploitation of Jamaica's black peasantry by the white elite. However, the 1860s was also a decade of progress for black Jamaicans in education. With increasing literacy came black readership and even black authorship. Add to this the vital presence of black and brown Jamaicans as theatre-going audience members and performers, and through the arts we get a complex picture of a changing society.

Jamaica had a thriving theatre scene by the 1860s, well-attended by Jamaicans of every racial and ethnic description. The theatre space provided a form of what Elizabeth Dillon calls a "performative commons", where the audience is not just a part of the show, but where people come to represent themselves.¹ It functioned as a relatively democratic space in an otherwise profoundly stratified society. According to Errol Hill, black Jamaicans were not just in the audience; as he finds evidence of black Jamaican amateur theatre groups from as early as the late 1840s.² Add to this the perception that whites who performed in front of these racially mixed audiences were in some sense tainted by their performative labour. Lady Nugent complained in February 1803 of a respectable white creole who "exposes himself in that way to the public"³ making it clear that Jamaica theatre, if not a democratizing cultural

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