
Bonds of Empire argues that middle-class West Indians “of color” defined themselves through a particular expression of Britishness. Equating Britishness with “respectability,” they saw it as a vestibule of sexual morality, justice, and fairness, which even experiences of racism, in the Caribbean or in Britain, failed to dislodge. “Respectability,” so defined, served also to differentiate them from working-class West Indians less exposed to, and likely to embrace, “Britishness.”

Anne Spry Rush takes three British institutions—education, the monarchy, and the BBC—and examines how these played out in the Caribbean over the twentieth century. Secondary education, modeled on the British public school in curriculum and organization, administered by expatriot Englishmen, and assessed through English qualifying exams, was the route to social mobility. Although it offered a poor understanding of the history, culture, and needs of the Caribbean, attempts to inject practical relevance into the curriculum were resisted by the middle classes and, particularly, those who aspired to them.

As for the monarchy, Spry Rush argues, the historic (if inaccurate) connections between Queen Victoria and slave emancipation perpetuated a myth that the monarch was their protector, in contrast to local governments which were perceived, and often behaved, as reactionary impediments to progress. The abdication of Edward VIII did little to dent this image, while the coronation of Elizabeth II, and the subsequent royal tour, was regarded as heralding a return to the vitality of the first Elizabethan age and to the stability and morality of Victorian times. West Indians rallied to the aid of the mother country in both world wars which, despite blatant discrimination by the armed services (and the mutiny at Taranto), endorsed the pride many West Indians had in, and for, Britain, Britishness, and the monarchy.

World War II brought the BBC into its own. More (middle-class) West Indians had radios and the British government, anxious to keep West Indians on its side and to counter Axis propaganda (and American media influence), established dedicated Caribbean broadcasting. Of all the programs beamed to the Caribbean, Caribbean Voices proved the most
popular and successful, endorsing the burgeoning œuvre of Caribbean literature. Despite this, however, the BBC’s mission to “uplift” appealed primarily to a middle-class audience and lost ground, in the postwar period, to local, commercial, and often Americanized media.

This is a fair argument, solidly made—up to a point. Many in the middle classes considered “Britishness” with ambivalence and began to forge a legitimate alternative to what Spry Rush implies was an almost uncritical adoption of British, middle-class “respectability.” This ambivalence is at the heart of the matter. “Ontology,” the Martinican Frantz Fanon wrote, “does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon 1970:77). This theme recurs again and again in poetry, literature, and history, from Jean Price-Mars to Aimé Césaire, George Lamming to Kamau Brathwaita, W.E.B. DuBois to Richard Wright, C.L.R. James to Elsa Goveia, criss-crossing the old imperial and linguistic borders within the Caribbean and North America. New World Africans may have spoken the master’s language, but they lived in a bifurcated world—double consciousness, frog perspectives, disassociation, the terms vary but the sentiment is similar. For blacks, as Lamming argued (1956), subjective life was predicated on internalizing the destructive gaze of the Other. The concerns led to, and fueled, demands for self-determination, for psychological and political freedoms, and a consistent and conscious flowering of literature and the arts to accompany it, across the region.

These were not a surly minority of malcontents, but an articulate cohort of activists, drawn from the same middle classes that Spry Rush depicts. By the 1930s, a raft of magazines promoted an alternative cultural and political vision for the Caribbean, with a united regional focus. They continued throughout the 1940s, with Focus and Kyk-over-al and, above all, Bim. Spry Rush refers to the role of Cedric and Gladys Lindo in feeding material from the Caribbean through to the BBC, and fleetingly to Frank Collymore, the editor of Bim. But she fails to register that this material did not appear in a vacuum but was the product of a concerted effort by middle-class West Indian nationalists to promote and inspire West Indian culture and to develop its own vernacular. That it was then relayed back through the BBC endorsed its value, as Spry Rush points out, but without conveying the hinterland, and the intellectual and political ambiguity of the relationship with Britishness, her point loses its impact.
There are other quarrels with this book. Her picture is curiously apologetic. Yet the Empire cannot be seen in terms other than political. There are cursory nods to Caribbean nationalism, but decolonization merits only a paragraph or two. The riots of the 1930s—sanitized as “protests”—are barely mentioned, and their impact on the intellectual elite is given short shrift. The pressure exerted by the United States on the British government before, during, and after the Second World War is not mentioned. There are strange omissions—why, for instance, is the British Council not discussed as a separate case study?—and confusing terminologies.

Spry Rush focuses on a small pro-British elite who endorsed a particular register of Britishness as a mark of their own acceptability, and she traces their loyalties on this, and the adjustments they made over time. Her examples are well trodden, but no less valid for that. It is a shame that the book’s focus is limited, for Spry Rush writes well, and her scholarship is sound.

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References