Jeff Karem


Inter-American scholarship continues to flourish, and its stock-in-trade appears to be persistent warnings against any facile homogenization of U.S. culture. Inter-Americanism is by definition comparative, including serious examination of the Caribbean islands; arguably this should be, at least by now, a moot point. But few critics have been equipped to engage French, Spanish, and English texts across the Caribbean basin with equal facility, which potentially means that broad comparisons are rare and overgeneralizations more likely. Consequently our scholarly and historical understanding over the course of the last century has struggled to capture the energy, diversity, and range of thought within and across the African diaspora.

Jeff Karem's The Purloined Islands seeks to redress this problem by gathering an impressively diverse and representative collection of writing by some of the brightest minds of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries devoted to racial thought from the United States and from English, Spanish, and French Caribbean islands—some well known, some lesser known but all in a fascinating and implicit, if not sometimes explicit, dialogue with one another. The list includes José Martí, W.E.B. DuBois, Anténor Fermin, Benito Sylvain, Henry Sylvester Williams, C.L.R. James, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Jacques Roumain, William Seabrook, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Claude McKay, Marcus Garvey, René Depestre, William Faulkner, Nicolás Guillén, Waldo Frank, George Lamming, Langston Hughes, and others. If that sounds like a lot, it is. Karem's broad sweep at times leaves him insufficient space to give adequate treatment to these figures, but his overview also provides a powerful reminder of the need for scholars to aggressively contextualize racial thought in the Americas, to be aware that it never emerged in isolation but in dialogue and competition with other voices across linguistic, racial, and geographical divides, and to see both the vital contributions and the apparent contradictions of such thought. His study serves as an indispensable reference for any future comparative work on racial thought in the extended Caribbean.

What also gives strength to this study is its thorough and often fascinating examination of archival materials—early drafts of books, correspondences, journals, essays—that help to fill out the picture of the anxieties and pressures that acted upon these thinkers as well as the sometimes unresolved differences between them. The methodology uncovers, for example, pressures on
Zora Neale Hurston in the writing of *Tell My Horse* that led her to cave in to some exoticization of Haiti, and it reveals the personal and political tensions between such figures as W.E.B. Du Bois and his Caribbean contemporaries. Karem’s examination of Faulkner’s earliest attempts to represent the Caribbean in his short fiction and his brief film work is much needed original research that provides new insights into the complexity of Faulkner’s approach to the Caribbean. Another terrific moment is Waldo Frank’s review of Eric Walrond’s *Tropic Death*, in which Frank aggressively claims Walrond but then chastises him for being ashamed of his presumed “Caribbean peasant” ancestor. Karem is on his strongest ground when he argues for a “reciprocal dialogue” over race that persists throughout the region and that therefore necessitates a circumspect and ambitious comparativism.

He is on less stable ground when he implies that we can equate complex positions among the various voices of the region. Some of these equations, to be fair, are not directly insisted on by Karem, but because he often leaves the comparisons unfinished, we get the impression that he wants us at least to see them as strong parallels, even when the evidence seems lacking. This is especially evident in his conclusion where he borrows from Donald Pease’s reading of C.L.R. James in order to ask us to see all of these complex and fascinating readings as, well, not so complex and fascinating after all, but all examples of crewmen on the Pequod, subject to their U.S. captains. Nothing seems to steal more autonomy from these voices than such a monological reading. Karem asks us to believe that “It is hard to imagine a part of our hemisphere more forgotten to contemporary Americans than the Caribbean” (p. 261). I would think the Atacama desert of Chile or, say, Suriname, or Uruguay would qualify as such a space before I would choose Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, or Jamaica. It is not so much the Caribbean’s lack of presence in U.S. discourse but the ways in which U.S. imperialism has been absented from its history in U.S. memory and from the story of black experience generally as conceived and framed by U.S. national discourse. It might be true that most Americans know of the Caribbean through Caribbean cruises, as Karem notes, but most Americans these days also know very little about, for example, the U.S. South. They aren’t even reading Faulkner, let alone James Weldon Johnson.

Karem doesn’t always tell us why certain figures are important, other than the fact that they spoke about issues relevant to the thought of others in his study. This obscures the reception history and relative impact of each writer, making the study at times appear to be arguing the obvious fact that writers have interests, ambition, and inevitable limitations that are a function of their language, culture, race, class, and gender. Or even of their individual personalities. The implicit assumption seems to be that if U.S. writers disagree with
or seek to distance themselves from Caribbean writers, it is only because of a political agenda even though what this agenda is or why we should believe that it always remains the same is never persuasively or clearly explained. Karem wants to insist on a persistent “purloining” of Caribbean ideas by U.S. thinkers, but the evidence—ample as it sometimes is in this exhaustive study—is not always there. Much of the evidence he uncovers speaks to the ways that the literatures of the two regions, and their racial concepts as well, were mutually constitutive, complex in motivation, and deeply ambivalent, rather than merely proving the one-way cultural theft by Northern intellectuals as his title and introduction imply. Sometimes it seems enough to argue that prickly or awkward personality conflicts such as the ongoing tensions between Marcus Garvey and Du Bois have shaped intercultural traffic. The more radical politics of Caribbean writers such as Garvey were not always rejected by their northern counterparts because of racial or geopolitical bias, as evidenced, for example, by Claude McKay’s rejection of Garvey’s politics. Karem sees this as leading to a stereotype of the islands as a whole. But to equate all rejections of radical politics as geopolitically motivated is to assume that radical politics are, indeed, truly Caribbean; it is, in other words, to assume such a stereotype.

Édouard Glissant, whose thinking about a poetics of diaspora is surprisingly absent in this study, provides an indispensable reading of Faulkner’s troubling and often contradictory racial discourse, the subtlety and nuance of which stands in contrast to Karem’s rather flat dismissal of Faulkner’s complex layering of rhetorical and multivoiced histories of southern spaces. Not all thefts are equal, which is to say that not all borrowings are thefts, and that is simply because all of them are committed with varying degrees of self-conscious awareness, artistic license, and sense of irony. That, anyway, was what I have always understood to be the function of fiction, at least since Cervantes’s impressive theft of Arabian romance.

Despite these shortcomings, we would do well to learn from Karem’s formidable ability to dig beneath the same old canonical voices in order to unveil the dynamic, political, and interpersonal struggles for authority and primacy that constitute literary and intellectual history. Such digging, he rightly insists, must take us beneath the veneers of geopolitical and linguistic differences and into the realm of an uncertain chaos that lies at the heart of all literary endeavors to make meaning. This allows us to see the politics of identity and of history that have been occluded by the same old meanings, habits, and stereotypes and to hear the range and particularities of individual voices. Karem’s study doesn’t follow through on its own claims enough to fully achieve this worthy goal, but it comes closer than any study in recent memory.
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