Lara Putnam


This book focuses on a little studied theme—the movement of “Afro Caribbeans” or “British West Indians” to what Lara Putnam identifies as the “circum-Caribbean” (the central border nations of Panama, Costa Rica, and Venezuela) as well as to Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Trinidad, as both a migrant receiving and sending country and because of its proximity to Venezuela, is also included. It concentrates on the thousands of British Caribbean people who left their homes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to seek agricultural plantation work or manual labor in the building of railroads or, as in the case of Panama, the construction of the canal. Their enforced return and that of many of their descendants during 1930–40 was prompted by various factors, including world economic tensions, increasing antiblack prejudice, and Great Britain’s rejection of West Indians born abroad. Many of those who returned were instrumental in creating social movements, contributing particularly to the labor unrest that spread through much of the Caribbean during the 1930s.

The book’s theoretical framework is on “Black Internationalism” which—unlike “Black Nationalism,” which concentrates on racial solidarity among Blacks—focuses on “racial subordination as part of systems that function on a supranational scale” (p. 6). Putnam also attempts to interpret the perspective of these West Indian communities as “imagined communities” (following Benedict Anderson) defined solely in terms of their lack of sovereign status; her aim is to “trace the story of one set of connected peripheries and the Black Internationals that emerged from them or bounced back to them” (p. 7). While not ignoring the political undertones of the various phases of these migrations, her main sources are based on the popular culture that emerged in these communities and was reflected in populist religious systems, media, the press, and above all musical expression.

In addition to the introduction and conclusion, six chapters discuss how these migrants experienced life in their new countries of residence. Chapter 1 describes the demographics of the migration and includes their working conditions and the constraints imposed on them by the state; it also features a case study from eastern Venezuela where “Venezuelan authorities, British officials, and tens of thousands of Windward Islanders argued over what kinds of prerogatives dark skinned imperial subjects could claim abroad” (p. 12). Three of the following chapters focus on the migrants’ popular culture, including religious practices (Chapter 2), the black press (Chapter 4)
and black popular music (Chapter 5). Putnam’s discussion of populist religion covers fairly familiar ground in its attention to the range of spirituality from Christian orthodoxy, revivalist, and fundamentalist groups to African-based Vodoun and Santería common throughout the Caribbean. However, she makes the important point that class and race intersected with religious observance. The rise of black media was aided by the high levels of literacy among the migrant West Indian populations. Media, especially the black press, provided information but also and most importantly created a “public space” for the dissemination of black ideology and the growth of Black Internationalism. Chapter 5, “The Weekly Regge: Music and Race-Conscious Moves in a ‘World of Jazz,’ 1910s–1930s,” is most interesting as it showcases the critical significance of music and sound in black culture generally as well as specifically in this circum-Caribbean area which ultimately includes the migrations to the United States. Musical spaces contribute to the development of “commonality, building cohesion, and wrangling with external prejudice” (p. 153).

Chapter 3, “Aliens Everywhere,” curiously interrupts the flow of discussion on the popular culture of black British West Indian migrants to the circum-Caribbean by focusing on the various state mechanisms of keeping them out which occurred during 1920–30. These included the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which “placed non self governing” (read: “black-majority”) under a numerical quota control (p. 82). Other exclusionary acts took place in the circum-Caribbean region where race was explicitly mentioned in the banning of “la raza negra” (p. 83).

While there is a significant literature on the later West Indian migrations to the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, this earlier time period has received far less attention. Putnam’s book concentrates less on political actions and the leadership of black internationalists—although these are not ignored—and more on the role of popular expression and the cultural role of musical expression, and their importance in transmitting political ideology and socio-cultural norms. Its methodology is typical of historical studies relying on data sources such as newspapers, magazines, and the archival materials studied intensively in each of the circum-Caribbean countries. Putnam relies on this bottoms-up approach to showcase the lives and experiences of ordinary black people instead of their international leaders. While this masterfully achieves her ends, one can’t help but miss the voices of real living people typical of anthropological research.

This book certainly has strengths, though more careful editorial work could have created a better flow of material. Furthermore, the language is sometimes loose and colloquial, which perhaps enhances its style but can also be
somewhat jarring. Although this is not a theory-based book, the theoretical framework that it calls on sometimes suffers from a disconnect with the data presented. *Radical Moves* is a dense and packed book, and certainly not an easy read!

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