Book Reviews

Joshua Jelly-Schapiro

Island People: The Caribbean and the World. New York: Knopf, 2016. x + 453 pp.
(Cloth US\$ 28.95)

Why are literary travel books that cover the whole Caribbean so few and far between?—Patrick Leigh Fermor’s *Traveller’s Tree* (1952), V.S. Naipaul’s *The Middle Passage* (1962), and now Joshua Jelly-Schapiro’s *Island People*. Perhaps because you need quite a dose of chutzpah to give it a try. Jelly-Schapiro, Yale- and Berkeley-educated lover of Jamaican and Cuban music, has produced an ambitious, exuberant, but uneven book, from its opening Lamming epigraph and homage to C.L.R. James to its meandering depiction of some twenty years of on-and-off travels in the islands. In the end, I think he bit off rather more than he could chew—some of the literature discussions read as if he borrowed them from the undergraduate essays he fondly remembers in the introduction.

The two most substantial sections concern Jamaica, which he has visited often, focusing on music, and Cuba, where he lived for a year, concentrating on music and politics. He seems considerably less fond of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. The section on Haiti is especially “travelogue-y.” It deftly describes personal experiences and draws on published works by Michel-Rolph Trouillot and C.L.R. James, but has almost nothing on music—he seems much more attuned to Anglophone and Hispanophone musics than to their Francophone/Creolophone counterparts.

As Jelly-Schapiro heads south through the Lesser Antilles, his stays become briefer and the chapters more spotty: a view of Antigua that’s mostly from Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, a nicely rounded picture of Dominica, a quick stop in Barbados (describing Rihanna as “a kind of rotten junior queen ... of [American] pop”), an interview in Grenada with Selwyn (“Sello”) Strachan, Maurice Bishop’s one-time Minister of Mobilization and Labor, and a detailed description of a Beyoncé concert in Port-of-Spain.

Views of the book's merits may well depend on which island you're engaging it from. Jamaican Marlon James blurbs it as "dazzling" and the *New York Times* Cuba-specialist reviewer called it "a travelogue of love and scholarship." But we wonder what scholars from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, or other Caribbean sites (including the Dutch ones, all of which he missed) might have to say about his take (or silence) on the history, politics, and culture of their homelands.

For what it's worth, here's my take on the Martinique chapter. Although he apparently stayed in the capital for some days, there are few reported conversations (or even visual observations), perhaps because of his rudimentary French. Among the many infelicities I noted: numerous misspellings in French (doesn't Knopf have proofreaders?); his claim that the six daily flights from Paris originate in the Paris-Charles de Gaulle airport (they come from the one in Orly); his assertion that Martinique is part of the Schengen treaty zone (it isn't); that "the great cloud-flecked volcano" that he says "defines" the island's geography is "Morne ['hill'] Pelée" (it's Mont Pelée); that the island's CANAL-PLUS satellite dishes are aimed at the sky above Paris (they aren't); that the Hotel L'Impératrice is "quayside" (it's nearly four blocks inland); that Frantz Fanon's criticism of Banania's notoriously racist stereotype referred to "ads for a tropical fruit" (it targeted the image and slogan on the box of this French breakfast cocoa drink-powder); that Martinique's premier bookstore is the "old Librairie Papet" (perhaps he saw the sign, "librairie-papeterie" ["book and paper-supply store"], in the window of the venerable Librairie Alexandre); and that the urban planner in Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* was modeled on Serge "Latchmi" (Serge Letchimy, later elected mayor of Fort-de-France and a member of the French National Assembly). There's nothing about Martinique's *cuisine créole*—in general, island food doesn't seem to interest Jelly-Schapiro. The bulk of the chapter consists of trots of literary works, mainly by Aimé Césaire and Fanon. (A very brief, guarded interview with Chamoiseau reveals almost nothing.) Césaire—much discussed and quoted—is mildly denigrated as being too French, while Fanon is celebrated for his international appeal. But Césaire's significant anticolonial influence in Black Africa is ignored (his *Discours sur le colonialisme* barely mentioned) and Fanon's lack of recognition in Martinique exaggerated—there was, at the time of Jelly-Schapiro's visit, an active Cercle Frantz Fanon that gave an annual literary prize with that name, a "Salle Frantz Fanon" in the Atrium (National Theatre) in the capital, and streets named after him in the capital and many of the island's towns.

There are many similar small errors throughout the book. For example, Albert Mangonès, the sculptor of Port-au-Prince's iconic *Neg Mawon*, is called

“Ha Mangone”; the island of Bequia in the Grenadines is called “Bequai”; and Natalie Wood, mentioned because she played Maria in *West Side Story*, was born in San Francisco, not Russia.

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