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Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age

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In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, thousands of British West Indians migrated within the Americas, to destinations including the Caribbean islands, Latin America, and the United States. They laboured in the construction of the Panama Canal, on Cuban and Dominican sugar plantations, in Central American banana plantations, and in Venezuelan goldfields. Lara Putnam?s *Radical Moves* looks at these migrations and, more importantly, how they laid basis for much of the modern world, particularly the construction of black identity in the Americas. Putnam teaches history at the University of Pittsburgh and is author of *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica*.(1)

On one level, her *Radical Moves* covers well-trodden ground, as excellent studies of British Caribbean migrants throughout the Americas already exist. However, Putnam?s new book focuses on a more ambitious challenge: writing a synthetic account of the experience of British Caribbean migrants in the interwar period. Rather than focus on one country, Putnam 'discard[s] national or imperial boundaries as the limiting frame for observing social and cultural processes' (p. 230). And while scholars have researched the 'black internationalism' forged in this diaspora, this has usually meant politics, especially radicalism and Marcus

Garvey's black nationalism. Putnam does not neglect either radical politics nor Garveyism, but her study provides a more bottom-up examination of how issues of gender, race, class, and empire affected migrants' lives.

Radical Moves emphasises 'the myriad black internationalism that flourished in popular culture' during the interwar period (p. 7). Putnam argues that 'the black internationalist and anti-colonial movements that would shake the twentieth century were rooted in the experiences of ordinary men and women ? not only in the cosmopolitan streets of Harlem and Paris but also in the banana ports and dance halls of the tropical circum-Caribbean'. This account focuses on 'how low culture and high politics, racist laws and radical religions, dock-workers and diplomats interacted' (p. 230). Putman's book takes the concept of 'black internationalism' out of the realm of politics alone, and puts it in the context of the actual real-lived experience of Caribbean migrants.

The book is divided into six chapters, plus an introduction and a short conclusion. The first chapter describes the migration of people from the British Caribbean, looking at 'the places that came to form part of the circum-Caribbean migratory sphere and the people who made it so' (p. 21.) She shows how the situation in the British colonies post-emancipation propelled thousands to migrate, so that 'migrants ? those who returned and those who kept going, those who sent help and those who were never heard again ? remade the geography of the Greater Caribbean in the first decades of the twentieth century' (p. 38). Although *Radical Moves* is not the first book to examine Caribbean migration (among other studies, see her own previous work on Costa Rica), certain features distinguish Putnam's treatment. First, its vision is broader, looking at migrants from and to many different societies. This allows a higher level of comparison than would have been the case had she focused on only one or two islands or receiving societies. Furthermore, she does not just focus on the better known destinations, such as Cuba or Panama.

At the same time as her book provides a wider vision, the specificity of Putnam's treatment of Caribbean migrants in Venezuela is through-provoking. Before construction of the Panama Canal begun, Venezuela was the prime destination for Afro-Caribbean migrants. Unlike other countries in the Greater Caribbean, the experiences of these migrants have not received the scholarly focus they deserve since 'not a single monograph in any language focuses on British West Indian migration to Venezuela per se' (p. 18). Putnam's treatment, based in part on research in Venezuelan archives, is particularly welcome. Were there nothing else of value in the book ? and there certainly is ? this alone would justify its existence.

The second chapter brings*Radical Moves*' emphasis on popular culture to the forefront in its examination of popular religion. 'This was a world', Putnam reminds us, 'in which common people took seriously the responsibility to listen for messages from God and to preach themselves if that was what dreams, visions, or intellect guided them to do'. It was a world marked by 'constant religious creation' (p. 49). Putnam argues that this creation was marked by race, class, and gender. A centrepiece of this chapter is its discussion of a common claim of white racists that 'black sorcerers sacrificed white children to use their blood for healing'. Scares of child-sacrificing sorcerers are not unique to the Americas in this period (although Putnam does not say so, it appeared to me, as I read this book during Holy Week, as if such fears were a riff on the medieval blood libel levied against the Jews in Europe).(2) Rather than trace the evolution of these myths, however, Putnam roots them in the context of the Caribbean at the time, 'for what they tell us about popular belief within the communities where the rumors began' (p. 64). One key, she offers, is that such beliefs 'remind us just how vulnerable children were' since 'the loss of a child to a malignant enemy might just be easier to bear than the loss of a child for no reason at all' (pp. 68?9). This helps remind us how precarious life was in the Afro-Caribbean diaspora. The remainder of the chapter focuses on class divisions within West Indian migrant communities. Educated migrants were disdainful of the religious beliefs of more plebeian migrants; political radicals also opposed these practices. Since inevitably, the experiences of the literate, middle-class migrants are more commonly remembered, Putman's stress on these differences is important.

The third chapter focuses on the wave of anti-immigrant laws that were passed throughout the Americas in the 1920s. This chapter is innovative in that it attempts to tie together several apparently disparate threads, including Nativism in the United States (resulting in the Immigration Act of 1924, which limited

immigration to quotas based on national origin); anti-West Indian sentiment in Central America; and anti-immigrant movements in the West Indies islands themselves. (Putnam's treatment of Eugene Chen, Trinidad-born [and non-Chinese speaking] who became Sun Yat-Sen's foreign minister in the 1920s is fascinating, both in its own right and in terms of how it shows the connection between immigration policy in the British Caribbean and broader historical trends.)

The fourth chapter examines the role of the black press in the Greater Caribbean in constructing a collective 'black international' of lived experiences, in part because of high levels of literacy among Caribbean migrants. (For example, more than 90 per cent of West Indians in the Panama Canal Zone were literate in the interwar years, compared to less than 80 per cent of the general population of Panama City ? and barely 40 per cent of the Republic as a whole (p. 128).) The circulation of black papers from the United States and Europe (or the reprinting of their articles) as well as local papers in Panama, Costa Rica, and elsewhere, contributed to creating collectivity, and Putnam's use of these papers is one of the strengths of the book.

The fifth chapter focuses on the role of music in the greater Afro-Caribbean world, including an extended search for the origin of the word 'reggae'. Putnam emphasises that 'black internationalism was not restricted to political leaders, nor to the print public sphere' but included music 'generated and spread by people of varied ages and stations, young working-class men and women and women most of all' (p. 4). Chapter six, the final chapter, examines the gelling of all these elements in the Anglophone Caribbean itself, as many Caribbean migrants returned to their homelands.

Radical Moves makes several important and original contributions to the study of Afro-Caribbean migrants. Perhaps most valuable is its panoramic scope. It is not just that the book looks at several different countries, but that its definition of movement is not just in one direction. There is no shortage of books on Afro-Caribbean migrants on both the giving and receiving ends of the migration of the period. However, *Radical Moves* attempts to integrate the process. This is important because many Afro-Caribbean migrants moved frequently; because they created networks throughout the West Indian diaspora; and because broader trends (from politics to religion and culture) were manifested throughout the region. By not focusing exclusively on one particular example ? say the effects of Panama-bound migration from Barbados, or Afro-Caribbean migration to Harlem, both of which have already been masterly studied (3)? Putnam is able to step back and look at the larger picture, of 'how low culture and high politics, racist laws and radical religions, dockworkers and diplomats interacted to remake the modern world' (p. 230).

Another original contribution is Putnam's treatment of the evolving British diplomatic attitudes towards British subjects in Latin America. (Since none of the Anglophone islands in the Caribbean were independent, their residents were officially British.) In the mid 19th century, at the time of the 'Don Pacifico' affair in Gibraltar (4), the official attitude was that all British citizens were worthy of protection by the British government, regardless of race. This came into conflict with the developing nationalism of several Latin American countries, which stressed the integrating power of national identity. Thus, in Venezuela in the early 20th century, the Venezuelan government asserted that foreign-born immigrants became nationalised after a few years' residence. In contrast, the British government instructed West Indians to remain British. Putnam is clear to point out that '[t]his nominal stance did not translate into expeditious and color-blind service from British consuls', but rather that 'it provided migrants with a lever, and they used it' to assert their rights (p. 40). However, within a decade or so, British interests in Central America waned. At the same time, a wave of nativism and xenophobia swept the Americas in the 1920s (reinforced by the Depression in the 1930s). Rather than nationalise West Indian migrants, Central American republics were trying to expel them. In 1928, for example, Panama's constitution all but stripped automatic citizenship from West Indian children born in Panama.

And rather than protect their supposed fellow Britons, the British government washed its hands of the situation. Putnam's use of British diplomatic papers is particularly illuminating. Thus Sir Josiah Crosby, British consul in Panama, described himself as 'anxious to see th[e] liquidation of the British element accelerated' by denying British citizenship to many Panama-born children of West Indians. Rather than extending the rights of British citizenship to West Indians in Panama, the Foreign Office at most issued

documents to facilitate repatriation to migrants' islands of birth (pp. 204?5). At the same time, many British colonies were taking pains to limit the ability of British subjects born elsewhere to migrate to other islands. Rather than cluck her tongue about British betrayal, Putnam roots changing British attitudes in the development (or decline) of British imperialist interests in Latin America. One wishes that this had been explored further.

One of the most useful aspects of Putnam's panoramic treatment of migration in the Caribbean is that this approach examines migrants' experiences from the point of view of both their home countries as well as their new (if often brief) destinations. This is particularly useful in the case of Trinidad, which was both a point of origin and a destination. A strength of *Radical Moves* is its inclusion of debates over immigration to Trinidad, particularly from Asia. (As Putnam describes it, China's foreign minister had more than abstract reasons to protest Trinidad's anti-Chinese laws: 'Left' Kuomintang leader Eugene Chen had been born and raised in Trinidad, where 'he grew up speaking English in a Westernized Chinese household, became a prominent Port of Spain barrister, and married a colored Creole' before joining Sun Yat-sen's Nationalists in 1911 (pp. 116?17).)

Related to British diplomatic manoeuvres are the evolving attitudes towards 'Britishness' on the part of Afro-Caribbean migrants. The West Indian migrant who was more British than the British has become a trope in fiction and academic studies. In the interwar period, black Americans criticized West Indian immigrants for this, while Hispanic Central American republics used this 'foreignness' as a pretext to expel migrants. Putnam incisively writes about diaspora Afro-Caribbean newspapers, 'In the years after the Great War, the circum-Caribbean black prints indeed fiercely loyal and also potentially radical' (p. 137). Putnam points out that, 'By the early 1920s, the notion that the British government would treat black emigrants' travails [in Latin America] as a call to arms ... was so transparently false that jokes about British Caribbeans being not "British subjects" but rather "British objects" became wry standards within émigré communities' (p. 47). One could go insane teasing out to what degree West Indians supported the British, and to what degree they did not. Afro-Caribbean immigrants' attitudes to 'Britishness' reflected the actions of the British government, class and educational status, the attitude of the host government towards migrants, and the overall political climate (including where on the bell-curve of the British Empire one happened to be).

From a methodological standpoint, Putnam's use of newspapers and diplomatic sources yields rich material, including a better sense of the experience of migrants throughout the Greater Caribbean. As noted above, Putnam's use of British diplomatic sources is fruitful. Her use of newspapers, along with her treatment of popular culture (especially music and religion) gives *Radical Moves* a depth that goes beyond what traditional elites experienced in the Caribbean diaspora. Given the migratory nature of the population under study, and the lack of oral history, these two types of sources allow the historian to get an appreciation of aspects of the migration experience that are often overlooked. Her argument is that 'the international circulation of black-run periodicals, and their integration in communal discussion at multiple sites, generated a transnational black public' (p. 126).

These very strengths, of course, are also limitations. By focusing on a 'transnational black public', Putnam examines the creation of 'black internationalism' from the bottom-up. However, the reader is left wondering how and why this took different forms and different paths throughout the Greater Caribbean. Putnam recognises that while 'the history of black people in the Western hemisphere has been a history of dislocation but also a history of location, and sometimes forced localization' (p. 237). She asserts that 'the way migration intersected with labor organizing [was] different between the eastern and western Caribbean' (p. 222). She makes the point to show how migrants returning to their home islands contributed to a cross-fertilization of radicalism in the interwar period. Yet, with the exception of Cuba's Communists, the book does not spend much time looking at how these differences affected migrants' lives abroad. Similarly, while the book's examination of the 'black international' beyond politics is welcome, one wishes that there were more of an attempt to integrate the political and the everyday.

All in all, this is an exciting book. One could of course wish for deeper treatment of this or that subject. For example, I would have like more discussion of the dialectic between the movement of Caribbean migrants

and the Hispanic Caribbean. (As I write this, the sound of reggaeton ? Hispanicised reggae developed in Greater Caribbean dancehalls ? drift into my flat from my largely Dominican neighbours.) However, the fact that one can formulate such desires highlights the valuable contribution of this work.

Notes

1. Lara Putnam, *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002).Back to (1)
2. Nor are they obsolete: this reviewer knows of at least one example within the last decade of an Afro-Latina woman being dismissed from her position as a nanny in the household of a prominent white Latin American family on the accusation of having cast spells on the children. And, of course, witchhunts are common enough in Africa to have their own Wikipedia page ('Witch Children in Africa').Back to (2)
3. See Bonham Richardson, *Panama Money in Barbados, 1900-1920* (Knoxville, TN, 1985); Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London, 1999).Back to (3)
4. David Pacifico ? 'Don Pacifico' ? was a Gibraltar-born (i.e., British) Portuguese Jew. As Portuguese consul in Athens in 1847, he was attacked by an anti-Semitic mob. After Pacifico appealed to the British government, Lord Palmerston initiated a British blockade of Greece under the justification that all British citizens, no matter where they happened to be, were entitled to protection by the British government. Whatever the hypocrisy in this attitude, it does contrast with the United States Supreme Court *Dred Scott* decision (1857) that declared black people could not become citizens and had no legal rights.Back to (4)

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