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BOOK DISCUSSION: Black Empire


African American Manhood in the Making of Caribbean (Inter)Nationalism

Belinda Edmondson

My father has been obsessed with Billy Eckstine for as long as I can remember. As a black boy coming of age in colonial Jamaica in the 1950s, my father had before him many images of dignified, educated, black and brown West Indian professional men: teachers and civil servants, trade union leaders and lawyers. But Billy Eckstine was different. The devastatingly handsome African American crooner led big bands composed of jazz luminaries like Dizzy Gillespie. Eckstine refused to walk through the back door of any Jim Crow American establishment because, as Miles Davis later recounted, “B didn’t take no shit off nobody.”

Yet this race rebel came packaged in the accoutrements of High Style: the tailored suits, the cigar holder, the throngs of screaming black—and white—women. Eckstine played music that was inescapably associated with blackness; yet he was thoroughly modern. In the colonial Caribbean, blackness and cosmopolitanism were mutually exclusive traits. Yet here was Billy Eckstine, a black man, an American: he was Modern Blackness, personified.

Reading Michelle Stephens’s Black Empire, I was reminded of the admiration my father’s generation had for African American men like Paul Robeson and Billy Eckstine. And I was

2. In her essay ”The First Negro Matinee Idol: Harry Belafonte and American Culture in the 1950s,” in Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States, ed. Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 224–37, Stephens writes on the magnetizing effect of Paul Robeson on Harry Belafonte, himself of partial Caribbean heritage and raised in his formative years in Jamaica. It is an interesting turnaround that the West Indian-identified Belafonte, like his compatriot, Bahamian Sidney Poitier, became symbols of the New Negro for African Americans.
reminded that this admiration did not merely reflect the fabulousness of individual celebrities, but also confirmed that African Americans came to represent for West Indians a way to be black in the world. The importance of this book is that it brings to the fore a relationship not often acknowledged: the centrality, not simply the influence, of the African American experience in Caribbean thought. Indeed, it seems that the Caribbean has found it difficult to acknowledge the contributions of black America to its own genesis.

Though in the English-speaking Caribbean black people occupied many positions of rank, they did so essentially as political servants: after all these were still colonial societies, dependencies on an English authority. African Americans, despite their own subjugation, provided a template for how to carve out a modern black society in a free republic. The African American experience had produced famous black institutions like Tuskegee; famous black philosophers like W. E. B. DuBois; famous black writers like Langston Hughes. Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* occupied many a bookshelf in the colonial Caribbean, including that of young V. S. Naipaul.³ African American thought had produced the artifacts of civilization: books, art, institutions. When we think about the impact that this would have had on black West Indians, especially those who migrated to the United States, it is curious that the link between Caribbean and African American ideas of nation has not received more attention among Caribbeanists.

*Black Empire* breaks new ground in establishing the importance of the African American experience, and of African American thought, to black thinkers of the anglophone Caribbean. Although Caribbean studies is now attentive to the influence of contemporary African American culture on the Caribbean, epitomized by such recent work as anthropologist Deborah Thomas’s *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), we Caribbeanists have paid far too little attention to the historical relationship between the two.⁴ *Black Empire* brings together and builds upon two heretofore separate fields of inquiry. On the one hand, because of its engagement with the history of black West Indian thinkers in the United States, *Black Empire* belongs in the same group of history studies as Winston James’s *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, Winston James’s discussion of the influence of Caribbean political radicalism in American politics. On the other hand, its unflinching focus on the masculinist ideas imbricated in the construction of the black nation bring it more into line with literary and cultural studies such as Hazel Carby’s *Race Men*.⁵ Where it departs from either group is in its argument that the Caribbean desire for freedom, writ as a kind of

black diasporic empire that transcended nationalist boundaries, had its origins in English (or European) ideas of the imperial empire and in American, and specifically African American, masculinist ideas of race and the republic. Indeed, it could be said that African Americans gave West Indians the very language with which to articulate the problems of race in Caribbean nationalism. The kind of debate this book will engender among Caribbean historians and literary critics is sure to be productive for all of us who wrestle with questions of the origins of Caribbean nationalism.

Perhaps the most provocative thing about Black Empire is in the title: the emphasis on the concept of “empire” itself. Not black internationalism, not black diaspora, not black Atlantic, not black globality or any of the other terms currently in circulation, but empire. Why the investment in that particular phrase? Given that, because of US forays into Afghanistan and Iraq, we are living in a period of American history where the American people finally have to grapple with the charge that the rest of the world has been laying at the nation’s doorstep for some time now—that America is an imperial power, and its various invasions, occupations, bases, and “protectorates” constitute the holdings of its empire—it is particularly ironic that a book about black colonials’ articulations of a free black space should be constructed in the very image of the Beast. So the current discussions about empire form a kind of rhetorical doppelgänger for Stephens’s discussion.

Despite the assertion by Hardt and Negri that America is not an empire (even if it is imperialistic), a plethora of academic books have made the case for the benefits of an American empire, among these Michael Mandelbaum’s The Case for Goliath and neoconservative pundit Robert Kagan’s extremely influential tract, Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order. In particular, Kagan’s argument strangely comes to mind when reading about Garvey’s views of the Black Empire because, like Garvey, Kagan’s view of the importance of American empire—like many of the American defenders of American imperialism—is grounded in a deeply masculinist view of the world. Kagan characterizes American military power and political dominance in explicitly masculinist terms: American unilateralism is an example of its sense of agency and individualism, while the European penchant for multilateralism and negotiation is an example of its weakness, its lack of military might, and its need to be protected. For defenders of empire like Kagan, empire guarantees paradise, and empire is a man’s game: “That is why,” he proclaims, “on major strategic and international questions today, Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus.”

As deliberately inflammatory as this prose is, in its investment in empire Stephens’s argument essentially invokes the same imperialistic, gendered binary in the thought of Caribbean intellectuals as disparate as protofeminist Marxists C. L. R. James and Claude McKay, and patriarchal black millennialist Marcus Garvey. The reason I raise the comparison with white American political hawks is precisely the American race factor: American interest in the concept has been, and continues to be, the preserve of white America, and a very patriarchal white America at that. Despite the influence of African American thought on Caribbean visions of Black Empire, and despite the wealth of what Stephens refers to as Black Empire narratives in African American literature, African Americans arguably had very little practical interest in the concept of empire itself. As Stephens notes, much African American political thought was domestic in its goal, geared towards reshaping American nationalism to include African Americans.

By contrast, Caribbean male intellectuals chafing at their lack of cultural self-determination, lack of national status, and generally subordinate and feminized—as they saw it—relation to the European metropole, would have had a different, much heavier, investment in the concept of empire, with its masculinist overtones of dominance and ownership. After all, as Stephens observes, it is the English-speaking Caribbean that deployed some of this rhetoric in the exhortations for the short-lived West Indian federation of the 1950s. So the question must be asked: how much of the Caribbean visions of Black Empire were constituted by African American thought, how much by American thought? These are often not the same thing.

Stephens carefully lays out the ways in which Alain Locke’s concept of the New Negro in the early part of the twentieth century laid the groundwork for the global black imaginary of a Black Empire, particularly in regard to its literature. As she asserts, the New Negro of the twentieth century was all about manliness and militariness, in contrast to the image that shadowed black America from the nineteenth—that of black men as submissive slaves supplicating white America for their rights. My own argument that early twentieth-century Caribbean male intellectuals predicated their own sense of agency on a Victorian model of the respectable gentleman is worth noting here, given that Stephens persuasively argues for another model. For Caribbean migrants to the United States like McKay and Garvey, Stephens asserts that the Victorian model of manliness came head-to-head with the quintessentially modern American equation of heroic manliness with virility, physicality, and aggression. (This is now clearly embodied, to my mind, in the present-day political visions of Kagan et al. Again: where

does New Negro-ness end, and American-ness begin?) For the West Indians, the requirements of colonial Victorian manhood had to be balanced against the requirements of republican American manliness, out of which came the discourse of Black Empire.

Some examples given of New Negroism, if one can call it that, in Back Empire literature by West Indians, are fascinating for what they suggest about the gender politics of empire. Among these are the revolutionary romance “A Ray of Fear” by the West Indian editor of The Crusader, Cyril Valentine Briggs, and a little known McKay short story, “The Little Sheik,” as well as his better known novels Home to Harlem and Banjo. Like DuBois’s Dark Princess, these stories employ the trope of the romance, a decidedly feminine genre, to articulate the vision of black utopia. Of course, what is radical about McKay’s treatment is that the real romance is between and among men, and indeed Home to Harlem and Banjo see black internationalism in terms of transnational male movement, but nevertheless the figure of woman is central to the story about the meaning of home.

Stephens reads McKay’s “Little Sheik,” Home to Harlem, and Banjo as indications of the triumph of McKay’s internationalist politics over nationalist concerns: they are stories of “the race’s failure at and ultimate incompatibility with the romance of nationhood and statehood” (131). Yet Stephens is curiously silent on McKay’s final novel, Banana Bottom, which is at distinct odds with the “vagabondage” aesthetic in McKay’s other stories, as she herself notes. If, for McKay, black male mobility is the distinctive trademark of black internationalism, as Stephens asserts, and black or racially mixed women the site of domesticity and nationalism, what does it mean for McKay’s radical, internationalist black politics that his final vision of the Black Empire is back in Jamaica, with his female protagonist Bita Plant comfortably married to that most authentic of all black Jamaicans, the Drayman Jubban? That black Bita Plant is the antithesis of the black male vagabond protagonists of other narratives (or even of the African American female protagonist of “The Little Sheik” who is, as Stephens writes, “of vague and potentially hybrid racial origin”); and that Bita marries another black “plant” (Jubban is the name of a Jamaican root), is surely indicative of McKay’s ideas about the marriage of authentic, radicalized black identity and Caribbean nationalism, at the very least. Some critics have read Bita as McKay himself, which certainly makes his choice of protagonist all the more interesting (in other words, is it only as a woman that McKay can embrace nationalist politics at the expense of the more masculinist, internationalist vision?), but if literature is to be read as a form of political discourse, then Banana Bottom becomes the full stop to McKay’s internationalist vision, not the footnote.

The argument for Marcus Garvey’s vision of Black Empire is, obviously, easier to make. But what is noteworthy in Stephens’s analysis is that, as with McKay, she lays the responsibility for Garvey’s radical race consciousness at the doorstep of Black America. The iconic Garvey is now one of independent Jamaica’s celebrated founding fathers, literally a national hero precisely for his vision of a free black state. Yet, according to Stephens, it was in the United States where Garvey began to identify as black in the political sense of the word. Upon his return to Jamaica, he found himself at odds with his own society. As he wrote, “I was simply an impossible man to use openly the term ‘negro’.” The word “negro,” and its modern descendant, “black,” are diasporic words, linking African-descended populations who identify as such across the globe. That Garvey could not literally be black in Jamaica (he poses the choice as either becoming “one of the [prosperous] ‘black-whites’ of Jamaica” or being one who led the black masses—in other words, a “negro” in its political sense) but had to acquire radical blackness in the United States is quite telling, especially since the word “black” continues to carry, especially in the Caribbean and Latin America, associations with African American identity politics. Even more intriguing is that upon his return to Jamaica from the United States Garvey called for the replacement of the colonial system of education with “African American style” colleges inspired by none other than Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute.

It is this kind of detail that both confirms and complicates Stephens’s central thesis. As a subservient accommodationist to Jim Crow laws, Booker T. Washington, of course, is the very antithesis of the manly New Negro ideal for African Americans. Yet for West Indians, both at home and in the United States, he was admired for his school and practical up-by-your-bootstraps work ethic. Booker T. Washington is another shadow that haunts Stephens’s narrative, because the nationalist concerns of Booker T. Washington, and the international ambitions of the Black Star Liner, were part of the same Garvey rhetoric, one that is never quite reconciled here (if it ever can be). Garvey was taken with the tangible results of the Washington philosophy, if not with its philosophical accommodationism. In some ways one could argue that Washington’s ideas form a part of the black radicalism of the Nation of Islam, which similarly reproduces a capitalist, self-help agenda within its masculinist, separatist, America-centered frame. In other words, masculinity in the American version is associated with “producing results,” with practicality. (Again, the subtle gendering of the current American political climate comes to mind: think of the common conservative complaint that liberals are all theory but have “no program.” They are not doers; they are not “manly.”) When we compare Garvey’s brand of by-your-bootstraps black internationalism with that of the mostly theoretical, Marxian internationalism of McKay or C. L. R. James, it goes without saying that

the Garvey version has been far more influential among black Caribbean people. Given this, it might be worth extending Stephens's definition of black internationalism, since Garvey's muscular kind of internationalism was itself concerned with the national as much as with the international. And, indeed, James himself seems to understand the appeal of a populist black internationalism when he notes that Garvey's call for a black state “would awaken a response among these masses, as bitterly as it is opposed by all the intellectuals and more literate among the Negroes.”

I am also particularly intrigued by Stephens's delicate treading on the question of Garvey's “black fascism,” to use Paul Gilroy’s phrase. According to Gilroy, Garvey fetishized race as compensation for lack of full access to nationality; therefore, his desire to own blackness as property through cultural displays of empire must be read accordingly. By contrast, Stephens argues that in bringing together the diasporic longing for home with the state majesty of empire, Garvey exposed the nakedness of the modern state: “[I]t was also the black emperor who, in his mimicry of empire’s racial ideologies, exposed the modern state newly clad in the uniform of nationhood for what it was, a form of racial nationalism and fetishism without its imperial robes” (96). In other words, Garvey's cultural politics functioned as a form of critique through mimicry. Yet even as this rebuts Gilroy’s view of Garvey’s race “fetishism,” Stephens goes on to conclude, “Gilroy is certainly accurate in casting Garvey as the black fascist on the stage of world politics” (100).

Which is it to be? One of the most powerful points of this fine book is the paradox it exposes between the longing for black freedom as a diasporic concern, and the desire for empire as an exercise of black power. To reduce Garvey to race fascist seems reductionist, as Stephens's more subtle reading indicates. Throughout Black Empire Stephens strives to illustrate both the progressive and the reactionary impulses in the desire for Black Empire. Accordingly, she wishes to both keep the Gilroy critique and yet retain Garvey's radical, progressive oppositionality. But can the two images of Garvey coexist?

This tension between black longing for freedom and black imperial designs is brought home again in Stephens's discussion of C. L. R. James’s understudied 1936 play based on his famous history, The Black Jacobins. In the play, Toussaint L’Ouverture, the father of the Haitian revolution, refuses the British suggestion of a monarchy for Haiti—with presumably himself as king—in order to negotiate with France for a form of self-government that would follow the model of the American republic. The play suggests the almost romantic power of American republicanism in James’s imagination, and indeed James wrote, “The Europeans wrote and

11. C. L. R. James, “Notes Following the Discussions” (1939), quoted in Stephens, Black Empire, 231.
12. This argument is made in Paul Gilroy, Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
theorized about freedom in superb writings. Americans lived it.”

Again we see the alignment of European liberalism with theory and—perhaps?—effeteness, and America with practice and action. I am reminded of Claude McKay’s ambivalent love song to America embodied in his eponymous poem, in which he exclaims, “I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!” American-style nationalism, ironically, leads to the formation of black internationalism for these two black West Indian Marxists.

Lest the gender politics escape us, Stephens informs us that James had greatly admired Paul Robeson, especially his masculinity and physicality, and had intended to write a chapter in his autobiography entitled “Robeson and Me.” It seems that James may have envisioned Toussaint as a kind of Paul Robeson figure, a prototype of the black male hero. So, again, the alignment of African American manhood with republicanism, action, freedom, and yet, within an imperial design also associated with blackness; for, as Toussaint opines, “We are Africans, and Africans believe in a King.”

Black freedom is equated here with both empire and with freedom of movement, two things that don’t necessarily go together. But freedom of movement, the very basis for black internationalism as represented by McKay, James, Garvey, Robeson, W. E. B. DuBois, and a host of other transnational black figures of the early twentieth century, was essentially a male activity. The equation of movement as male, stasis as female, is part of a very old American equation, embodied in American classics such as Huckleberry Finn where Huck wants to light out for the territories before he gets civilized by Aunt Sally. Again I come round to the question: beyond the discovery of race discourse, how much of the African American experience that so influenced McKay, Garvey and James was grounded in the American experience?

13. C. L. R. James, American Civilization, 31, quoted in Stephens, Black Empire, 223.