Calypso Jews: Jewishness in the Caribbean Literary Imagination

Sarah Phillips Casteel
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This book is a joy, well written, well argued and solidly researched. It is sadly not often that a monograph is such a pleasure to read. It is also important for provoking thought on this unexamined topic.

Casteel charts a clear path but always gesturing towards a complex understanding of this nexus of imaginative spaces.

A great example of this is the illustration on the cover, "Koo, Koo, or Actor Boy," by Isaac Mendes Belisario, a nineteenth-century Jewish-Jamaican artist, and the subject of critiques by both Stuart Hall and Rex Nettleford. Hall positions Belisario as a member of the merchant/professional class, and thinks he erases the violence of slavery and African presence, whereas Nettleford accepts that Belisario's parents and grandparents were involved in the slave trade as part of the normality of those times and sees him as a significant Jamaican national figure. Casteel wisely points to this disagreement as evidence of "the ambiguous position of Caribbean Jews," (33) and goes on to map her book as providing "more ambivalent" literary subjects and a range of representations summed up as "nuanced," "more idealized," "unsettling of master/slave opposition," "allies of the slave." The range of Casteel's authors/texts is impressive and functional, because collectively they represent multiple Caribbean languages and Caribbean countries (including Cuba, Jamaica, Suriname, Puerto Rico, Barbados, St. Thomas, St. Lucia, Haiti, Guadeloupe, Trinidad and Tobago, as well as important places in the far flung Caribbean diaspora). Thinking about Jewish presence in the Caribbean is yet another reinforcement of the truth that the Caribbean as we know it now is founded on journeys, forced and voluntary, which thread so much of the world complexly together in the region, despite a brutal history of forced segregation.

It is less clear that extending the discussion to include writers of African descent in the U.S. and Canada works to the benefit of the book's core purpose. In the United States, at the core of what Casteel calls "African American anti-Semitism," lies the understandable resentment that one group of disadvantaged, racially subordinated people could appear to escape poverty and racial targeting more easily than another. James Baldwin's essay "The Harlem Ghetto" should have figured here. After a thoughtful and brutally honest consideration, Baldwin concludes: "The American white Gentile has two legends serving him at once: he has divided these minorities and he rules" (57). Baldwin tracks both identification by African-Americans with Jews, as another people who had been enslaved and brutalized, and distrust

resulting from New York City "small tradesmen, rent collectors, real estate agents, and pawnbrokers" (56). But Baldwin appears only once in Casteel's book—within a quote by Caryl Phillips, mainly about Ann Frank. To unpack U.S. racial tensions (and those of the Caribbean) is to necessarily and explicitly put race in dialogue with class. Casteel explicitly engages with class only occasionally. In discussing a "Jewish Atlantic," she says Jews served as "navigators, translators, and traders who facilitated the conquest of the New World where they also introduced agricultural techniques that helped develop the plantation economy" (102). Of course, much agricultural knowledge came also across the Atlantic with those kidnapped from Africa, but those who had access to capital helped build the means by which the plantation system was established and maintained.

It is also worth asking to what extent the book is pulled between exploring Black-Jewish interactions in the north of the Americas (which brings about reference to texts by Canadian and U.S. authors of African descent) and trying to stay with its declared intention of reading Caribbean literary texts for their portrayal of characters of Jewish heritage and identity. It is of course hard to establish borders: Casteel describes NourbeSe Philip as Caribbean-Canadian. The Caribbean diasporas in the U.S. and Canada make it very difficult to make a strong separation between what is Caribbean and what is North American, so it is understandable that Casteel finds it hard to impose a boundary as well. But the book's title focuses attention on the Caribbean, which has its own social and cultural identities.

Casteel focuses on important archetypes around which she constructs her chapters (i.e., Sephardism and Derek Walcott; Marranism and Creolisation in Miriam Chancy and Michelle Cliff; Port Jews in the Slavery Fiction of Maryse Condé and David Dabydeen; Plantation Jews in the Slavery Fiction of Cynthia McLeod; Calypso Jews in the work of John Hearne and Jamaica Kincaid). She also organizes chapters around parallels or links across race: Nazi genocide and the Middle Passage in the work of NourbeSe Philip and Michèle Maillet, who link and parallel Nazi genocide, and Ann Frank as an inspiration to Michelle Cliff and Caryl Phillips. This is a deft map-drawing and is very insightful and helpful. Importantly, Casteel recognizes the danger of her project reflecting literary employment of generalities when she says "sephardism also exposes the risks of reducing the Other to the same and of treating the Jew as an abstract metaphor" (39). She comments that in the work of Condé and Dabydeen, at times "their isolated presentations of the figure of the Jew remain firmly within the bounds of well-established discourses about Jewishness, referencing a series of high conventional images of Jews … their Jewish protagonists are essentially compilations of these stereotypes" (133). This raises the question of how far Jewish characters serve a primary goal, in texts included here, of representing the history of people of African descent, by analogy or contrast, which would present the temptation to utilize them in the service of a story rather than follow their human complexities as character.

There is also the question of aesthetic form in these texts, which at times seems overlooked. For example, in the discussion of Walcott's "Tiepolo's Hound," Casteel speaks of "[t]he tension that emerges in these lines, as the poet finds himself shrunken into the posture dictated by the Jewish artist's colonial picturesque vision" (56), as something which exposes asymmetries between the artist and his newly emancipated subjects. Exploring how far the fluency of the lines, the loose couplet flow of the poetry with its clever rhymes, might constrain these tensions, would have been interesting. For Walcott, the visual and the aural talk to each other intensely so that "lines" can be both poetic and painterly, as they are explicitly at this moment of this poem: how does the couplet form contribute to this as a form of thought or framing?

To move beyond form to content, it might have been helpful to dwell more on the nature of creolisation. Kamau Brathwaite is rightly given credit, but only in a footnote, for the groundbreaking way in which he defined creolisation as a process in which the subordinated majority could significantly influence the elite. Creolisation is an intensely inventive process of constant recreation, including, as Brathwaite calls it, "lateral creolization," the leakage "between, say, poor white and coloureds; between Syrians, Chinese and Jews; between these and blacks; between blacks and East Indians and between East Indians and others" (*Contradictory Omens,* 64). This goes on alongside the top-down hierarchy as well as the bottom-up majority cultural influence, and despite racial separatism, whereas in North America the social separation of races exists in many places at all class levels, even after it has become voluntary. Such differences can impact formal decisions by writers: diasporic writers, whom Casteel favors, have to make choices as to how to construct a literary text from a wide range of cultural influences coming from their own or their parents' migrations. In talking about the U.S. and the Caribbean, complex cultural locations for authors might have been indicated, and creolisation juxtaposed to the U.S. tendency to essentialisms.

This book raises many important questions. Reading it is like having a conversation with a sharp mind which is not only highly informed but also usefully self-critical and aware—and this is no small part of the pleasure. Casteel has given us a fresh way to read Caribbean literature as simultaneously regional and diasporic, through the central and richly complex figure of the Jew

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. "The Harlem Ghetto." *Notes of a Native Son*. Corgi, 1965.

Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*. Saracou Publications, 1974.