

In the Shadows of Postcolonial Studies: *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962*

Michelle Stephens

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Michelle Stephens explicitly positions *Black Empire* at a disciplinary crossroads as a way of exploring the borders between a number of intellectual fields. Early in the introduction, Stephens locates her work within “a discursive space that attempts to cross and move beyond . . . disciplinary and methodological boundaries” (*Black Empire* 8); later, the book’s penultimate chapter entitled “America Is One Island Only: The Caribbean and American Studies” ends by expressing the desire to move “across state and disciplinary lines to reveal the new problems facing modern nationalities at the turn of the century” (267). The round-table discussion on *Black Empire* in the June 2006 issue of *Small Axe* emphasizes the fact that the book occupies a territory at the intersection of African American, American, and Caribbean studies: Belinda Edmondson reads *Black Empire* as “break[ing] new ground in establishing the importance of the African American experience, and of African American thought, to black thinkers of the anglophone Caribbean” as the book “brings together and builds upon two heretofore separate fields of inquiry” (“African American Manhood” 262); Harvey Neptune, meanwhile, focuses on Stephens as “recruiting the [Caribbean] to offer a quiet yet stinging and timely critique of American Studies” (“At Sea” 271); and Stephens’s own response to these reviews explains her interest in “how the disciplines are organized—the boundaries between, say, Caribbean history and the fields of American and African American Studies in which I was trained” (“At the Borders Between” 278).

Stephens’s challenge to the borders and boundaries of these geographically-defined fields is undoubtedly central to *Black Empire*, which explores a group of thinkers whose “work inhabits a black *transatlantic* space between and moving back and forth across the national landscapes of Caribbean and African American Studies” (*Black Empire* 50). This ground is covered thoroughly in the round-table discussion on the book between Edmondson, Neptune and Stephens, but it is not the only border where we might locate *Black Empire*. The book also engages with the haunting presence of a less territorial field—the unhomely specter of postcolonialism, understood not as a discipline meant to study part of

the world as in the Area Studies model but as a transdisciplinary (or perhaps even undisciplined) way of reading and thinking about the world's interconnections. Through its engagement with various theorizations of globalization and Empire, from Paul Gilroy to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to Walter Mignolo, *Black Empire* allows us to consider postcolonial studies not as a geographically-defined field, relevant only to the "Third World" or "Global South," but as a way of thinking about the historical processes of imperialism and decolonization which connect intellectual and cultural histories from many different locales. For that reason, *Black Empire* makes an important contribution to rethinking the scope and object of postcolonial studies, and how the field can remain relevant in a world where European colonialism has given way to U.S. Empire.

Although Stephens conspicuously avoids using the term *postcolonial*, she describes her project as "bringing the study of empire and its relevant discourses front and center into African American and Caribbean studies, and bringing African American and Caribbean analyses of empire more centrally and frontally into American studies" (*Black Empire* 9).¹ Some readers may find it odd to suggest that the study of empire on the one hand and Caribbean studies on the other need to become better acquainted. But Stephens seems to have noticed the curious disconnect that sometimes occurs between those fields. While postcolonial studies has long considered the Caribbean definitely within its realm, Caribbean studies has frequently resisted the notion of postcoloniality for a number of reasons that may also suggest Stephens's hesitance to use the term: to begin with, describing the world as postcolonial seems to imply the end of foreign domination, a notion belied by the reality of Caribbean political status that encompasses Puerto Rico's "associated free state" and Martinique and Guadeloupe's departmentalization. Yet as Stephens shows through her readings of Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay and C.L.R. James, thinkers from the region have long made important contributions to theorizing sovereignty and the nation-state that can help the region in imagining its place within the current world system. Alongside this resistance within Caribbean studies to the term *postcolonial*, postcolonial studies as constituted in the U.S. and the U.K. is often meant as a synonym for South Asian studies.² As Stephens notes, the Caribbean's

This review developed out of discussions with the diaspora studies reading group at Florida Atlantic University: thanks to Sika Dagbovie, Luis Duno-Gottberg, Taylor Hagood, Elena Machado Sáez and Derrick White for helping me refine these ideas.

¹ Stephens's last two chapters make an especially convincing case for how C.L.R. James "prefigures some of the key arguments and insights in Hardt's and Negri's recent theorizations of globalization" (*Black Empire* 332); this section shows in impressive detail how James describes the rise of Empire and the role of the multitude within it half a century before Hardt and Negri.

² When Caribbean contributions to postcolonial studies are acknowledged, they are usually incorporated more as raw materials than as cutting-edge theorizations. Bart Moore-Gilbert, for example, distinguishes what he calls "Caribbean criticism" from postcolonial theory (*Postcolonial Theory* 180) by referring to Derek Walcott, Kamau

history, “sitting at the intersection of the decline of the European empires after World War I and the rise of the United States as an empire in the same moment” (11), suggests the ways the region can help reshape a postcolonialism attentive to contemporary forms of domination.³ As recent books like *The Caribbean Postcolonial* by Shalini Puri have begun to consolidate the Caribbean contribution to postcolonial theorizing, *Black Empire*’s call for more exchange between these fields is welcome.

In addition to setting up a direct and explicit dialogue between the Caribbean and studies of empire, by juxtaposing African American studies and postcolonialism, Stephens succeeds in her overall goal, to make the case that “border-thinking does not [...] simply reside on the margins” (13) but that these overlapping spaces can in fact be central to how we think about a field. Stephens’s rereading of figures from Martin Delany to Pauline Hopkins to W.E.B. DuBois to Audre Lorde demonstrates how thinking about transnationalism, globalization, and empire has been integral and central to the canon of African American literature throughout its history. Thinking this way may result in a slightly different African American canon—Stephens specifies that her approach calls attention to an “often invisible maritime tradition that exists within African American culture” (105), and explicitly contests received readings of the Harlem Renaissance that downplay the influence of ideas about nationalism and imperialism in discussions of the New Negro (45-47). The connections between U.S. ethnic studies and postcolonial studies have only begun to be explored in ways that attend to the particularities of each, and *Black Empire* certainly marks an important contribution to that project.⁴

Brathwaite, and Wilson Harris, all of whom are better known as creative writers than theorists and who established themselves during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s; similarly, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* uses essays by Walcott, Brathwaite and Harris as well as other works from the same period by Frantz Fanon and George Lamming, but fails to include more contemporary academic theorists from the region such as Gordon Rohlehr, Sylvia Wynter, Juan Duchsene, or Román de la Campa, to name just a few. For more discussion of the paradoxical place of the Caribbean in postcolonial studies during its academic ascendancy in the 1980s and 1990s—with postcolonialism readily designating primary texts from the Caribbean as within its purview, even while the region’s own criticism and theorization from the past two decades has never been privileged in the same way as not only Said, Spivak and Bhabha, but also Partha Chatterjee, Gauri Viswanathan, Ania Loomba, or others, have been—see “Emplotting Postcoloniality: Usable Pasts, Possible Futures, and the Relentless Present.”

³ The case Stephens makes resembles Juan Flores’s argument that the Caribbean’s diversity of political status can make the region “a test of the universalist claims of postcolonial theory, bringing to the foreground the relation between a purported global ‘condition’ (‘post’- as an ‘aftermath’) and the reality of national and regional conditions” (*From Bomba to Hip-Hop* 36). Shalini Puri elegantly makes the same point in the first line of her book: “*The Caribbean Postcolonial* treats the Caribbean as both an instance and an interrogation of postcoloniality” (1).

⁴ *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* undertakes a similar project of examining the ways that U.S. Latino/a literature and postcolonial studies might speak to one another. The idea of the “post-sixties” as a periodizing term suggests how

Foregrounding African American and Caribbean theories of empire not only forces a reconsideration of what spaces we think of as postcolonial, but also how the term can be used to periodize. *Black Empire* appears at and speaks to a crucial moment, when the idea of postcoloniality defined primarily by the end of European domination appears to be out of joint with a world in which imperialism is alive and well. Critiquing empire has never been more necessary in the U.S. academy, but postcolonial studies faces a political climate in which such critiques may be deemed unpatriotic or even treasonous.⁵ In this context, Stephens's identification of the "political unconscious" of her text as a "new world order with the United States as global hegemon" may be *Black Empire*'s most important contribution. The last chapter and conclusion call attention to C.L.R. James's reading of *Moby Dick* as an allegory for the intellectual's responsibilities during times of tyranny and totalitarianism, drawing uncanny parallels between James's imprisonment at Ellis Island and contemporary detainees at Guantanamo Bay, as well as the invasion of Grenada and the Iraq War. In this way, *Black Empire* demands that we consider how empire shapes the present. Stephens suggests that we think about this present—this postcolonial problem space—via a periodization that emphasizes not the end of colonialism, but a pair of related but distinct pivotal moments: first, "the failure of West Indian federation and the rise of the Caribbean nation-state [which] mark the end of a period in black transnational discourse" (28); and second, the invasion of Grenada as permanently shaking the region's faith in the narrative of revolutionary redemption.⁶ In other words, much like David Scott's definition of postcoloniality as "after Bandung" (*Conscripts* 1) in *Conscripts of Modernity*, making the U.S. and the Caribbean central to thinking about empire allows Stephens to conceive of the present not only as the aftermath of European colonialism, but as a moment with new forms of domination that demand new political horizons.

Black Empire productively points the way towards how we can think about this problem space. In her reluctance to use the term *postcolonial* to describe this moment, Stephens is suggesting that the present is not free of colonialism. At the same time, the book's invocation of the study of empire as represented by thinkers such as Hardt and Negri or Amy Kaplan tends to support Harvey Neptune's judgment of *Black Empire* as "an essentially American Studies project" ("At Sea" 274). The growing field

postcoloniality, postmodernity, and the post-Civil Rights era all belong to a similar historical trajectory.

⁵ In their introduction to *Postcolonialisms*, Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair give some sense of the hostile context facing postcolonial studies in their discussion of the hearings held by the U.S. Congressional Subcommittee on Select Education (7-8).

⁶ "If for James in 1962 the Caribbean could still be envisioned as a male space on a revolutionary trajectory embodied by leaders such as Toussaint L'Ouverture and Fidel Castro, after the failed Grenada revolution the Caribbean is now an invaded isle, and the masculine Caribbean subject is imprisoned in his own home by the forces of empire abroad" (*Black Empire* 277-8).

of “Empire studies” has the advantage of closely charting the development and dimensions of U.S. domination, but the field has been much less attentive than postcolonial studies to the ways in which the rest of the world has challenged and forced the reshaping of imperial sovereignty.⁷ In this context, *Black Empire* forms part of the process of bringing those two approaches together in order to make studies of U.S. imperialism account for the “shadows of empire” (*Black Empire* 59) that have always been the focus of postcolonial studies.

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⁷ Consider Hardt and Negri's own description of their project: “The genealogy we follow in our analysis of the passage from imperialism to Empire will be first European and then Euro-American, not because we believe these regions are the exclusive or privileged source of new ideas and historical innovation, but simply because this was the dominant geographical path along which the concepts and practices that animate today's Empire developed—in step, as we will argue, with the development of the capitalist mode of production. Whereas the genealogy of Empire is in this sense Eurocentric, however, its present powers are not limited to any one region. Logics of rule that in some sense originated in Europe and the United States now invest practices of domination throughout the globe” (*Empire* xvi). One of the catalysts of postcolonial studies has been to contest this idea that capitalism and modern sovereignty “originated in Europe and the United States.”

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