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Nicole A. Waligora-Davis
Rice University, nw3@rice.edu

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“America is one island only:” A Review of Jeff Karem’s *The Purloined Islands*

Nicole A. Waligora-Davis, Associate Professor, Rice University

Jeff Karem, *The Purloined Islands: Caribbean-U.S. Crosscurrents in Literature and Culture, 1880-1959*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 304 pp.

In the concluding chapter to *The Purloined Islands: Caribbean-U.S. Crosscurrents in Literature and Culture, 1880-1959*, Jeff Karem turns his attention to George Lamming’s *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) to further evince what the very title to *The Purloined Islands* so pointedly announces: both the presence, and substantive effect, that an ongoing traffic between the Caribbean and the United States in expressive cultural traditions and political philosophies, has had on both regions. As Lamming’s words so deftly illustrate, it is an effect that places under suspicion the centripetal power the United States has historically imagined, discursively protected and sustained, and economically and militarily enforced for itself over the hemisphere: “‘America is one island only’” (qtd. in Karem 238). It is precisely because America is, as Lamming writes, *one island only*, and the Caribbean and its people represent a region of multiplicity (in people and spaces), that the United States would do well to shed her parochialisms and by Karem’s read, recognize the shared role played by the West Indies in the formation of the New World and its history and in the very shape and definition of the terms “American” and “America.” “My aim,” Karem writes, “. . . is not simply to trace literary or cultural genealogies but to consider the Caribbean as a collaborator and contributor not only to hemispheric New World cultures, but to the ‘American’ culture of the United States itself” (10). *The Purloined Islands* fits squarely within Black Atlantic, black internationalist, black radical thought and postcolonial studies, fields that have included J. Michael Dash’s *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination* (1997), Vera Kutzinski’s *Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (1993), Laurent Dubois’s *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (2004), Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993), Brent Hayes Edwards’s *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003), Edouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* (1997) and *Faulkner, Mississippi* (1999), and Michelle Ann Stephens’s *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of*

Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962 (2005). In *The Purloined Island*, Karem traces a literary and intellectual history of Caribbean and U.S. thought that places in relief a practice of willful ignorance within the U.S. literary imagination that consciously or not, effectively concealed, if not completely effaced, the substantive role played by the Caribbean in U.S. cultural and political formations during much of the twentieth century.

With a title that riffs on Edgar Allan Poe's 1844 detective tale, "The Purloined Letter," Karem offers both concept metaphor and grammar for understanding the nature and protocols shaping U.S.-Caribbean relations and cultural productions from the turn to the mid-twentieth century—purloined. Simply, "the contributions of the Caribbean islands have been appropriated and nationalized by U.S. culture, hidden in plain sight" (10). The richly woven literary history that unfolds within these pages calls into question the rhetoric of "exceptionalism" that has grounded much of the mythmaking regarding the United States. Moving across the turn of the nineteenth century to Fidel Castro's 1959 overthrow of Fulgencio Batista, Karem attends to one of the richest moments of cross-cultural exchange among the West Indies and the United States, interconnections that have nevertheless remained understudied and oft-overlooked despite the turn to hemispheric and globally-minded approaches to American studies. Opening with a critical study of the writings of José Martí, J.J. Thomas, Anténor Firmin, Henry Sylvester Williams, and Benito Sylvain, Karem traces several movements within Caribbean writings on the U.S. that include a recognition of the interdependencies, and for some, a call to "partnership" among nations within the hemisphere; and a critique of the U.S.'s racialized domestic politics and the sociopolitical and economic implications of its ever expanding imperial projects. Correcting the myopia that has governed much of the history of U.S.-Caribbean cultural relations, he teases out the constitutive role played by West Indian intellectuals in the formation of Pan-Africanist thought and in the articulation of a "New Negro movement," while also marking the influence of Black Power on de-colonial projects during the 1950s and 1960s. Read within the rich archival research Karem brings to bear, W.E.B. Du Bois's dating of the Pan Africanist movement with his own 1919 Pan-Africanist conference, marks a refusal of almost two decades of on-going work by West Indian intellectuals to Pan-Africanist thought. Trinidadian scholar and originator of the term "Pan African," Henry Sylvester Williams convened the first Pan-African conference in 1900 gathering political activists across the Black Atlantic, launched the journal *The Pan African* ten years later, and proposed creating branches of the Pan African Association scattered across the Atlantic (38). Texts like Benito Sylvain's *Du sort des indigènes dans les colonies d'exploitation* (1901) and the writings of Hubert Harrison, reveal the centrality of Pan Africanism's internationalist lens to the political and economic theory produced by its West Indian acolytes. Firmin,

Williams, Sylvain, and Harrison are among those Caribbean cultural activists whose contributions have been either un- or under-acknowledged. Karem compellingly argues that this patterned history of woeful oversight reflects a concerted attempt among African American intellectuals from W.E.B. Du Bois to Alain Locke to position black Americans as the political vanguard for alternative democratic and anti-colonial projects in the U.S. and worldwide.

Karem cogently reminds us that the same global consciousness suffusing Pan-Africanist discourse, a perspective shaped through dialogic engagements among black American and Caribbean writers, grounded the New Negro Renaissance. Differently put, the New Negro Renaissance cannot be understood outside the constitutive contributions made by Caribbean writers to its underlying tenets. The very language of "Harlem Renaissance" reads, then, too narrowly a movement shaped in and through the traffic in ideas and artistic formations among Caribbean and black American artists and political activists. Yet the precincts of our cultural imagination were not simply narrowed through nomenclature, but through deliberate acts of appropriation. Despite the fact that figures like Claude McKay, Marcus Garvey, Arthur Schomburg, and Eric Walrond routinely appear among the roster of New Negro Renaissance participants remembered in cultural histories, their West Indian origins are less frequently acknowledged.

The Purloined Islands makes evident that the effects of this slip were anything but benign. These writers' experience of the West Indies necessarily inflected their cultural politics and political and economic theories, discourses that collectively and individually activated and intensified forms of black radical thought, black nationalism, black militancy, and civil and human rights campaigns during the Renaissance. W.A. Domingo's "Gift of the Black Tropics" makes clear this point. He writes, "'Unlike their American brothers, the islanders are free from those traditions that bind them to a party and, as a consequence, are independent to the point of being radical. Indeed, it is they who largely compose the few political and economic radicals in Harlem; without them the genuinely radical movement among New York Negroes would be unworthy of attention'" (qtd. in Karem 154). Karem discloses nothing less than an intentioned strategy by some African American activists to 'nationalize' West Indian authors "whose works were deemed desirable," by mis-identifying them as African American (126). This re-coding further secured the political agenda of those black intellectuals who sought to privilege the role of black Americans in civil rights and de-colonial projects. It is a turn betrayed in Locke's vision of Harlem as "the center of new Negro 'Zionism'"; and in James Weldon Johnson's publication of select poems by McKay under a different title and without the poet's permission let alone compensation. Karem's archival retrievals place in relief both this pilfering and its recasting by Johnson as philanthropy: "[W]e wanted," Johnson

guilefully penned, “simply to keep you warmly alive, thru a period when practically nothing was appearing from your pen in his country” (173). Yet, this failure to 1) acknowledge the ethnic backgrounds of Caribbean writers; 2) credit the centrality of their work to Pan-Africanist, black internationalist, and black radical thought; and 3) ignore an author’s proprietary rights over his/her own work, participates in a larger politics of obviating, of *purloining*, furthered by the repertoire of pathologizing caricatures used to misrepresent the Caribbean.

The United States’ nineteen-year long occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) fueled a body of cultural productions and pseudo-scientific studies on the island: Eugene O’Neill’s *Emperor Jones*, (1920); William Seabrook’s *Magic Island* (1920), Faustin Wirkus’s *The White King of La Gonave* (1932), Victor Halperin’s *White Zombie* (1932), John Craige’s *Black Bagdad* (1933) and *Cannibal Cousins* (1934), and Edna Taft’s *A Puritan in Voodoo-Land* (1938) among others. While places like Haiti became objects of cultural fetishization and questionable scientific study during the early decades of the twentieth century, Karem draws our attention to the ways in which some American modernists employed the West Indies as a crucible for American national identity. Often described as America’s Golden Age, the 1920s marked a moment in which the very definitions of American citizenship, like the constitutive myths anchoring the nation’s identity, remained a virulent site of contestation. It was a battle, however, that only that deepened and ramified with World War I and its aftermath. Texts like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) quickly remind readers of an active white supremacist discourse marshaled in books like Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920) and Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race; or The racial basis of European History* (1916). Turning to William Faulkner, Eugene O’Neill, Wallace Stevens, and Waldo Frank among others, Karem parses out how the Caribbean functioned for some American modernists as a platform through which anxieties over nation, citizenship, and American imperialism might take center stage. In his words, “Each of these modernists’ ‘rediscovery’ provides not only fresh visions of seminal cultural figures encountering the ‘New World, but also offers new implications for understanding the history and future of the American hemisphere” (88). In language as trenchant as its point is sharp, Karem urges us to recognize what was so abundantly clear to many Caribbean authors: “to accept the economic promises of prosperity from the United States, whether as an immigrant or a recipient of U.S. corporate influence, is to risk a Faustian bargain—trading a sense of community, culture, or history for a greater economic stake that may leave one an unrecognized cog in the neocolonial machine, at home or abroad” (258).

Karem’s book is an essential read, not only for students and scholars of postcolonial, transnational, hemispheric, Black Atlantic, African American, and

American studies, but for those who are interested in deepening their understanding of the larger global, historical, cultural, and political exchanges, imperatives, and interdependencies that shape our world. Karem powerfully marshals the complicated and nuanced histories between the West Indies and the United States to insist upon a re-orientation of the optics governing our readings of American histories. Among the many contributions and provocations urged in this book, is an underlying challenge to employ the writings of West Indians as vehicles to think critically about the U.S., its history, its culture, and its engagements across the hemisphere.