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Recovering the Afro-Metropolis Before Windrush

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Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 410 pp.

In *Black London*, Marc Matera's wide-ranging historical overview of the small but significant African and Afro-Caribbean presence in London from the 1920s to the 1940s, we have an important work which can take its place proudly alongside classic works such as Peter Fryer's *Staying Power* and complementing more recent works such as John Belchem's study of "black Liverpool," *Before the Windrush*. Synthesizing scholarship both old and new in a sophisticated manner with an impressive level of archival research undertaken over a decade, Matera provides a powerful, indeed unanswerable, rebuttal to all those who would persist in seeing the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* in 1948 as the critical watershed marking the birth of "black British history". The range of themes explored in *Black London* – political anticolonial agitation, social questions around interracial sex, imperial metropolitan cultural themes around British film-making and portrayals of Africa on the big screen, and the counter-cultures of resistance forged by black women and a host of musicians from across the African diaspora – mean that the work will appeal and be appreciated by not only historical specialists but also a wider public and popular audience.

Perhaps the most original and fascinating aspects of Matera's work on the making of an "Afro-metropolis" relate to his concern with what he calls the "Spaces of Black London," places usefully marked for non-Londoners with an accompanying map. Matera has gone a long way to bring home to those of us who have been primarily concerned with the political struggles waged in the imperial metropolis by figures like C.L.R. James and George Padmore in organisations such as the International African Friends of Ethiopia (IAFE) and the International African Services Bureau (IASB) just how important the wider geographical locales outside of specific sites such as Trafalgar Square – above all Soho - were for black Londoners. While other scholars – most notably Daniel Whittall – have explored the specific sites of struggle waged around race in inter-war London such as the League of Coloured People's (LCP) clash with the West African Students' Association (WASU) around Aggrey House and "Africa House" respectively, Matera builds on the work of scholars such as John Cowley and Val Wilmer to also bring alive just how vibrant the cultural and social fusion of gay and black clubs in this area must have been in this period, in a manner that I had simply not come across before. As Matera suggests, "black Soho was London's Harlem" (169), and his portrayal of this locale reminds one of reading about the infusion of American jazz and the creation of "black Montmartre" in Paris

during this period. One even learns that as unlikely figure as the bookish Trinidadian historian Eric Williams frequented Soho clubs such as Shim Sham, the Nest and Frisco in his youth (174).

Matera's discussion of other pioneering areas of black settlement in London, such as the Nigerians who had made Camden Town their home away from home by the 1940s, stand testament in general to the way in which he rightly explores and examines both the African and Caribbean experiences of migration. Indeed, Matera's work here really testifies to the "black internationalisms" forged in London during this period, as "metropolitan encounters at a historical conjuncture defined by competing imperialisms and internationalisms encouraged people of African descent to think in terms of their shared circumstances and challenges and to see themselves as representatives of an extranational racial community and a transcolonial opposition to empire" (63).

Matera's own specific interests in West African history come through clearly in this volume, with valuable discussions of WASU's anticolonial activism alongside that of a number of less well-known organisations such as the Gold Coast Students' Association. His concern with recovering the experiences and "black feminist internationalisms" of a range of often overlooked women such as Amy Ashwood Garvey, Constance Cummings-John, Edna Manley and Una Marson also makes this work distinctive. As Matera notes, "by examining how these women articulated feminism and a positive investment in blackness, what follows charts alternative trajectories and visions of black internationalism instantiated in art as well as activism" (103).

The work also has useful discussions of the experience and academic work of black colonial subjects who were students at British universities, particularly the London School of Economics (LSE), and their interaction with figures such as the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and the political theorist Harold J. Laski. The focus on how British subjects became black intellectuals in the imperial metropolis is one important underlying theme of this work. As Matera puts it, "the prevalent racism in the metropole and the conversations, alliances, and boundary crossings that made it possible, as well as the tensions and conflicts such encounters produced, influenced the changing political commitments and personal identifications of Africans and Afro-Caribbeans ... this book examines black cultural and intellectual production that emerged from the social geography of black London and the imperial and transatlantic networks that shaped the contours of that geography" (2).

This focus on intellectual and cultural production however – reinforced by Matera's excellent use of the diaries of the visiting black American scholar Ralph Bunche - does lead to a slight focus on intellectual and cultural figures in this work, and so *Black London* is perhaps not as comprehensive or convincing with respect to aspects of political, economic and social history as it might have been. Matera to his credit does make some pioneering and

innovative explorations of a host of overlooked entrepreneurs and the role they played in relation to the wider black community, from the eccentric bookie “Ras Prince Monolulu” (Peter Carl McKay) to “black pimps” and owners of black clubs, but the experience of black and wider multi-racial working class life in London noticeably remains rather marginalised in this narrative. Matera suggests that “most students from the Caribbean and Africa rarely interacted with black and mixed-race workers in the metropole” (286), but since we hear so relatively little about the latter in the book one has to take such a statement on trust. To Matera’s credit, black working class political activists like Arnold Ward and Chris Braithwaite and organisations like the Negro Welfare Association and Colonial Seamen’s Association do at least feature briefly, but given London was a major port, the experience and lives of the quite significant communities of African and Afro-Caribbean seafarers and dockers, often resident in areas such as Poplar and Stepney, arguably deserved and demanded more attention.

Matera registers in passing how the interracial relationships and marriages often resulting in such working class communities transgressed racial boundaries and upset imperialist sensibilities, noting for example that John Harris, who headed up the Committee for the Welfare of Africans in Europe, proposed to the Home Office in 1936 the gradual repatriation of black seafarers in Britain and suggested “steps might be found for raising the standard” of their mixed offspring “to that of the white races rather than leave them to drift down to that of the black” (210). Yet Matera’s work tells us little for example about the more general institutional racism suffered by this group of workers at the hands of the British state and the ship-owners (sometimes in collusion with the official National Union of Seamen), and perhaps more needed to be said about the “colour bar” that operated more widely across London (and Britain generally), for example in housing. Incidentally, it is noted that black actors such as Orlando Martins and Robert Adams survived by part-time work as wrestlers, but the role of black wrestlers as an aspect of wider inter-war multiracial working class culture might have been usefully developed (though I only am able to write this after recently hearing Gemma Romain give a fascinating paper on this very subject). Speaking of actors, though Matera does briefly discuss black theatre in Britain, I felt he could have pushed a little further in this direction, for example, building on the recent excellent work *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain* by Colin Chambers.

More on how class and concerns relating to “respectability” more generally shaped the leadership of organisations such as the LCP and WASU might have been useful, while I think Matera is a little too harsh at times on the more radical political figures such as George Padmore. For example, Matera claims that Padmore had a conception of “the black activist-intellectual as heterosexual and male” and so was guilty of the “erasure of African and Caribbean women in London” (142). Padmore’s own relationship to Amy Ashwood Garvey during the 1930s when she played a central role in organisations like the IAFE and IASB might arguably refute this, while

Padmore's criticism of black American upper class women on the grounds of their liking for "sorority dances" and "playing bridge" is clearly shaped above all by his own radical politics (and so by the fact that they were not on the whole, in the words of St. Clair Drake, "leftist and movement-orientated"). Matera's more general argument that "male anticolonialists in London equated black liberation with the rehabilitation and assertion of an 'autonomous, self-determining black revolutionary manhood', displacing women from the political realm" is slightly problematic and unconvincing, not least when we recall the comparative rarity of black women in London in this period. As Padmore noted bluntly, compared to the US, in the UK the simple fact was "there are no coloured women over here to marry" – or to get involved in political activity more generally (142). More generally, the idea that Padmore was subconsciously committed to "displacing women from the political realm" is perhaps problematic when we remember the testimony given by Peter Abrahams, quoted by Matera elsewhere: "Looking back ... [Padmore] always got on better with the women of the Communist Party than with the men" and "had a higher regard and healthier respect for the women of the 'movement' than any other Marxist, black or white, I have met" (225).

Finally, I think that Matera's thematic and culturalist approach perhaps means that some key political moments – for example the 1919 riots in the aftermath of the First World War, Italy's barbaric war on Ethiopia in 1935 and then the Second World War – and the repercussions of these events for "the making of an Afro-metropolis" are - perhaps inevitably – somewhat occluded, or at least not discussed with the attention they deserve. That the story of "Black London" was not simply the story of a forward march but sometimes also periods of extreme tension and retreat, when the African and Afro-Caribbean community was on the defensive in the face of an intensified racist offensive, should not be forgotten.

Overall, however, such matters should not distract from Matera's remarkable achievement in *Black London*, which is sure to take its place as an indispensable reference point amidst the growing historical literature relating to "colonial" and "postcolonial" Britain. Though there has been a growing scholarly literature relating to the activist anticolonial milieu in inter-war London, with recent works for example by Hakim Adi, Leslie James, Susan Pennybacker, Carol Polsgrove and Minkah Makalani, Matera's work usefully broadens our horizons. Perhaps the work's subtitle – "the imperial metropolis and decolonisation in the twentieth century" - is a little confusing, given the work only touches on the 1950s and beyond in places, and so does not really register the profound changes to "black London" that were to take place with mass migration from the West Indies amidst decolonisation. Nonetheless, the work itself – which is beautifully produced and replete with a range of rare images and illustrations – is a tremendous contribution and very much to be welcomed.

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