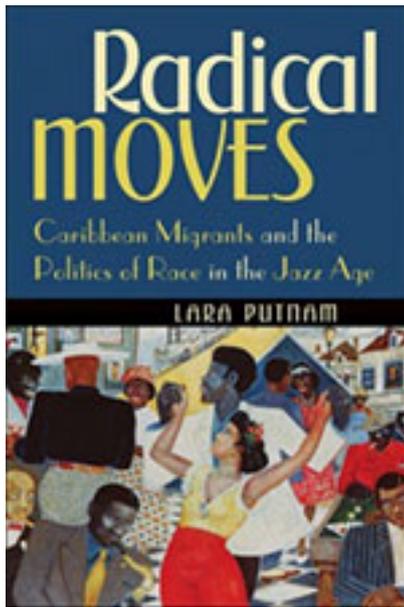


***Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* by Lara Putnam**

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In *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age*, Lara Putnam demonstrates the integral, though often neglected influence of the Caribbean and its people on the world stage. Putnam is not, of course, the first to emphasize the Caribbean's centrality to global history, but few works connect the region to so many people, places, events, and processes worldwide, and fewer still do so without focusing on slavery or the Haitian or Cuban Revolutions. Her book revolves around the British Caribbean from 1900 to 1940, but also dedicates serious attention to places, processes, and events beyond those spatial and temporal borders. Labor, migration, religion, public policy, and music all receive significant treatment. This broad, creative approach helps make it one of the best, most important books published in recent years about Latin America and the African Diaspora, and one of the few to center the British Caribbean in so many interesting ways. Putnam proposes an important, seemingly straightforward argument: black Caribbean laborers and migrants saw themselves in quite different terms than British, U.S., and Spanish officials did. Unlike these outside observers, the subjects of Putnam's book understood themselves to be at the center of three massive global transformations: "the creation of a newly self-conscious and self-active collective: 'Our People,' 'the Great Negro Race;'" "the fundamental redefinition of the relation of people to government;" and the "crisis of empire itself" (Putnam 2013, 3). In making this argument, Putnam develops a number of challenging and complex points, some of the most important of which are discussed below.

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While mindful of famous figures, leaders, and activists, the book highlights “unremarkable men and women doing their best to live unremarkable lives” who nonetheless indelibly shaped the twentieth century. “Sometimes,” Putnam writes, “the experiences and ideas of not-very-powerful people in not-very-prominent places generate very powerful change” (1). Putnam drives this point home by tying the stories and lives of such people to those of the powerful and known. In the process, she presents a number of surprises and provocations. It is not exactly common knowledge, for example, that the “most trusted deputy” of Sun Yat-sen, Republican China’s “founding father,” was Eugene Chen, who was born in Trinidad and spent his formative years there (117). After leaving the island in 1911, he became a force in Chinese foreign policy. Putnam weaves stories like Chen’s together with others who had their hands on the levers of power. Through the example of Marcus Garvey, she illustrates the kind of trade off and dilemma that empires foist on their denizens, and the unsavory choices that some make in response. When Garvey chose to support Jamaican anti-Asian immigration rules and defined those rules as crucial to local sovereignty, he not only revealed the paradoxes of empire, but also embraced the kind of policy that he might have otherwise strenuously opposed. The payoff for most Jamaicans was meager, especially in comparison to Latin American nations, where populist regimes successfully (if momentarily) redistributed wealth and reshaped the relationship between state and citizen. Putnam suggests that few such prizes were to be had in Jamaica: “By making the right to enact race-based exclusion the yardstick to rights within empire, Garvey put his imprimatur on a symbolic bargain that offered Jamaica’s black masses all of the xenophobia and none of the populism” (114).

As if taking this kind of critical look at Garvey were not enough, Putnam gets *really* blasphemous by suggesting a plausible alternative genealogy for “reggae”—the word, she carefully points out, though not the music. In chapter five, Putnam describes how men, women, and teens gathered in Port Limón, Costa Rica, to dance at gatherings called the “weekly regge” decades before musicians in Jamaica pioneered the form. Like the West Indian entrepreneurs who journeyed to the outer-edge of the circum-Caribbean (also known as New York) to build and shape the city’s emerging jazz scene, those who attended the parties in Port Limón were surely among the massive waves of people who crisscrossed the region, impacting cultural meanings near and far in the process, and in this case possibly planting seeds that would sprout decades later in the soil tilled by Bob Marley and others. Putnam uses this history to illustrate how 1930 Limón was “more tightly linked” to Kingston “than Kingston was to any port in any British Caribbean territory” (156). This kind of unorthodox geographical orientation challenges typical accounts of empire and beckons scholars to write new histories of Caribbean places that the book does not cover in detail—Puerto Rico, for example.

Putnam also engages the now well-discussed rumors of child-sacrifice that coursed through the islands during the early twentieth century, stoking racism and indiscriminate popular violence against people of African descent (Chapter Two). In recent years, scholars have used the rumors as a window into racist pathologies and politics, focusing mainly on what the rumors may tell us about the consolidation of elite power and the violent exclusion and marginalization

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of black cultures and peoples. While building on those studies, Putnam points us in a different direction. She writes, “We need to take seriously popular belief that malicious supernatural agents threatened children in Caribbean communities, in part because those beliefs remind us just how vulnerable children really were in this time and place” (68). The ongoing child refugee crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border makes this point painfully prescient and current.

In writing a “bottom-up” history that, in fact, also looks at things from the top down, sideways, and from so many other angles, Putnam brings together the unremarkable and the remarkable, the vulnerable and the powerful, and therefore links people, places, and events that have rarely been treated in a single volume. As a result, *Radical Moves* turns a seemingly simple, even unobjectionable starting point—the fact that black Caribbean migrants defined themselves in different terms than imperial officials did—into a baseline from which to contest and rewrite a number of histories. The book also paves the way for future works that, if written in the mold of *Radical Moves*, will challenge scholars of the rest of the world to shed the kind of narrow-minded thinking that so often consigns the Caribbean to the margins and inspire Latin Americanists and Caribbeanists to rethink many of their own preconceived ideas about race, place, power, and politics.

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