H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marc Matera. *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015. 414 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-28430-2.

Reviewed by Anne Rush

Published on H-Empire (September, 2016)

Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

In 1935, intellectual powerhouse Amy Ashwood Garvey opened her first restaurant in Soho. The International Afro Restaurant, as it was called, quickly became part of the fascinating world of black London--the important space of social and political engagement for black intellectuals that is Marc Matera's focus in this ambitious and engaging monograph. Concentrating on the era from the 1920s to the early 1950s, Matera's book falls naturally into two parts. He begins by introducing readers to the best-known black political and cultural associations in interwar London and provides a mental map of the places from which their members hailed (Africa, the Caribbean, the United States, and Britain itself) and the spaces they inhabited in the metropolis. He then deepens and broadens this story to include elements of black London that are far less well known--focusing in turn on women and feminism, musical developments and musicians, interracial sex and masculinity, colonial studies, and popular film.

Matera's approach rejects the boundaries historians so often draw between the social and political. Instead, he considers the development of social spaces (for example, the West African Student Union hostel, the aforementioned Soho restaurant and club scene, and even the set for the 1935 film ***Sanders of the River***) in a broadly political context. This allows him to engage aspects of black London society that have often been neglected, such as gender inequity and differences in political alliances, as well as to more fully explore the unity among black people in the metropolis despite such divisions. The point he makes, that "personal relationships forged through interaction and debate in London bred a sense of participating in a pan-African struggle" (p. 86), is not new. But his nuanced biographical sketches of black men and women--threaded through tales of events and discussions both familiar and unusual--create a layered and rich tapestry that allows the reader to see the intellectual and activist society of the black Atlantic that was centered in London as a vibrant and thriving entity.

His approach also allows him to challenge some long-held assumptions about black intellectual culture in this era. Among these is the belief that the important black intellectual activists in this period were almost exclusively male. Delving deeply into the work of female activists such as Amy Ashwood Garvey, Eslanda Robeson, Una Marson, Stella Thomas, and Kofoworola Aina Moore, Matera's work makes it clear that black women played a complex and important part in the pan-African activism of the era. And this was true not only in supporting roles, but often, as was the case of protests against Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, as leaders. These women were acutely aware that they faced gender discrimination as well as racism and used their writings to push back at their African and British male counterparts, who, they pointed out, blamed each other for misogyny in African societies while perpetuating gender inequality in their plans for future colonial self-government.

Matera is passionate about attacking the ongoing perpetuation of such gender inequality, calling out black men of the time for their erasure of black women's intellectual and activist activity and criticizing present-day historians' tendency to conceptualize black internationalism "solely in terms of the intellectual and political projects of male pan-Africanists" (p. 105). It is, I think, no accident that the book's cover, which depicts two black West Indian students--one male and one female--looking out over a London street, situates the photograph so that the woman is placed in the more prominent position.

While drawing much-needed attention to the work of women intellectuals in black London, Matera does not, however, neglect the nature of black men's intellectual lives. It is already widely accepted that black males were involved in the intellectual debates of the capital, but Matera's work supports the idea that historians need to employ creative approaches to more fully understand the depth of their involvement and the nature of their concerns. In a chapter that addresses the significance of cross-racial relationships for black men (a common scenario, since there were far fewer black women than men in pre-1945 London), Matera traces the ways in which black male intellectuals (from the flamboyant Ras Prince Monolulu to future politician Jomo Kenyatta) used and narrated sexuality in their London lives. As he points out, the tropes they employed in their personal discussions about sex, including the black pimp, the homosexual colonial official, and a feminized Africa, and the ways they linked them to broader issues and anxieties reveal much about their approach to the issues of empire, racism, and independence.

Matera also highlights black peoples' roles in significant intellectual discussions of the time where their contributions have not been fully recognized. Most scholars are aware that many black colonial students in London in the 1930s and 1940s (such as Eric Williams, W. Arthur Lewis, Lloyd Braithwaite, Elsa Goveia, and Jomo Kenyatta) went on to become highly respected academics and leaders in their homelands, but Matera points out that they also played a vital role in shaping the London-based fields of anthropology and colonial studies. Often dismissed by white academics and officials as nothing but "native informants" and facing constant racial discrimination from academic publishing, these intellectuals nevertheless managed to make their voices heard, having a profound and lasting impact on these fields (p. 256).

A major reason that Matera is able to trace the broader nature of black activist contributions is his willingness to go to places not traditionally addressed by political historians. A good example is his attention to the making of two commercial films (*Sanders of the River* in 1935 and *Men of Two Worlds* in 1946) in and near London. That the films were at least in part intended to be imperial propaganda is unsurprising (the latter was the brainchild of Noel Sabine, a Colonial Office public relations officer), yet Matera's stories of the eclectic community generated on the sets of the films reveal a previously untapped site of intellectual engagement, as does his analysis of the discussions about the films that took place within and beyond the black community. As Matera argues, the consequences of bringing together filmmakers, members of Parliament, black intellectuals, colonial officials, ordinary blacks living in Britain were "unforeseen and unintended" (p. 281), not least for the impact it had on Paul Robeson, who was drawn into serious involvement in internationalist pan-Africanism even as he starred in a film (*Sanders*) that promoted a profoundly imperialist agenda.

One of Matera's most important points--threaded throughout his book--is his argument that it was a combination of internationalism and anti-imperialism, not colonial nationalism (as has so often been assumed) that fueled the work of most black activists who spent time in London in this era. He argues that black intellectual women were, almost invariably,"feminist internationalists" and explains that at the time both they and their male counterparts rejected nationalism as a "divisive and obsolete paradigm for political community" (p. 98). His delightful chapter on the London music scene provides a unique entrée into grasping the attractions of internationalism in this era, as he traces the experiences of black musicians in London in the 1930s and how their engagement in black London inspired them to integrate and reformulate musical styles from around the Atlantic world (from jazz, swing, calypso, paseos, and mentos, to highlife, be-bop, ballroom, and the popular brass bands). As he notes, even the eventual soundscape of national independence was a profoundly internationalist hybrid. Here, as elsewhere, he provides compelling evidence that an internationalist vision had a profound impact on the associations and political expectations of black intellectuals living in London, whose very lives, as he reminds us, were profoundly cosmopolitan.

Matera presents ample support for his claim that the nationalism we usually associate with black intellectuals of the twentieth century only developed after they gave up on internationalism. black intellectual activists in 1930s London lived in a world that was largely comprised of empires and they were attuned--as were many of their white counterparts--to an internationalist hope for a new world that rejected the violence of warring nations. As such they were largely open to dialogue and cooperation with white intellectuals about future political structures--such as a British Commonwealth of Nations--that might embrace them as equals. At times, black activists took what seemed to be significant steps toward this goal--not least in the late 1930s, when representatives of black organizations, through their engagement with and critique of colonial development efforts, "helped force a major reformulation of the espoused goals of colonial government" (p. 74). But all too often their expertise and experiences were rebuffed (not least their warnings about the Italian invasion of Abyssinia) by whites, leaving them little choice but to turn to each other for support. It was such experiences, Matera suggests, that led black intellectuals away from an internationalist ideology to embrace a nationalist vision for their future.

Matera draws from a dizzying array of secondary as well as primary sources--including state documents, diaries, court cases, newspapers, even jokes--and makes creative and thoughtful use of them. Indeed, he is trying to do so much that his own voice is, at times, obscured by the many other voices he attends to, both past and present. Even with prior knowledge of the topics he addresses the wealth of information can be overwhelming for the reader. In a work that traces the movement of countless people through London and around the world, maps would have been a welcome clarifier, as would a biographical index. At the same time, there is no question that Matera's presentation of such a vast myriad of peoples and stories serves to give a strong sense of the complexity and broad influence of black intellectual London.

Matera's book will draw a respectable scholarly audience, but I can't help but think that with more judicious professional editing, this book would have a far broader reach, particularly given the current popular interest in black activism. I am delighted to see that the University of California Press has priced *Black London* at a very reasonable rate. Yet it would have been even better if this obvious recognition of the potential of Matera's work had encouraged the publisher to exert a bit more effort to assist Matera in organizing the book itself in ways that would allow it to engage an even wider audience.

Yet this should in no way detract from Matera's towering achievement. *Black London* is gratifying both for its careful attention to detail and its nuanced analysis of the political and social lives of the black intellectuals who lived in this mid-twentieth-century world. The view of the black society Matera provides is as important for revealing the differences and contradictions among its participants as it is for outlining their similarities and the unity they forged. Placing these men and women in the context of their everyday lives puts all the messy contradictions and complexities of reality on full display. And the resulting portrait is glorious.

Citation: Anne Rush. Review of Matera, Marc. *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century.* H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. September, 2016.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44782