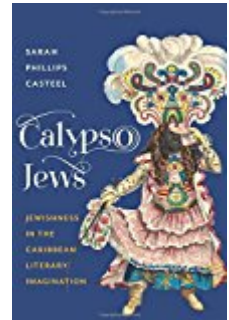


Sarah Phillips Casteel. *Calypso Jews: Jewishness in the Caribbean Literary Imagination.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. 336 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-17440-4.



Reviewed by Patrick Taylor

Published on H-Caribbean (January, 2017)

Commissioned by Audra Abbe Diptee (Carleton University)

Although the Jewish presence in the Caribbean has often been commented on there are few studies of Jews in Caribbean literature, and nothing that can compare with Sarah Casteel's *Calypso Jews: Jewishness in the Caribbean Literary Imagination*. In terms of sheer scope and breadth of literary and historical scholarship, this is a path-breaking study, fully deserving the 2016 Canadian Jewish Literary Award for Scholarship which it recently won. Deftly moving between and beyond the fields of Jewish studies and black studies, Casteel demonstrates that Caribbean writers from across the region's linguistic divides have inscribed Jewish experience in the Caribbean region as an integral aspect of the Caribbean experience of creolization, thereby productively transforming conceptions of the Jew as other, on one hand, and static notions of Caribbean identity and ethnicity, on the other.

Casteel structures her book in accordance with the two major dimensions of modern Jewish history as it relates to the Caribbean, the Sephardic experience, following expulsion from

Spain in 1492, and the Holocaust. This allows her to explore the ways in which Caribbean authors have dealt with Jews in relation to the history of colonial conquest and African enslavement on one hand, and the Nazi genocide, on the other. As in studies linking early colonial racism to antisemitism such as Irene Silverblatt's *Modern Inquisitions* (2004), the echo of Hannah Arendt is present in the very organization of the book, and it does not escape the author's attention that Caribbean thinkers such Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon likewise made the connection between colonialism and antisemitism, a tradition in black thought subsequently pursued by Paul Gilroy, among others.

But if antisemitism was one way in which European modernity constructed its internal others and colonial racism an analogous way of constructing Europe's external others, what was the meaning of the Jew in the Americas, potentially both victim of antisemitism and beneficiary of colonialism? This is the delicate issue that Casteel negotiates in part 1 of the book. Derek Walcott's

Pissarro is her point of departure for reading Caribbean literary Sephardism, where the Caribbean stands at the centre of the inter-diasporic cross-roads or contact zones binding the African and Jewish diasporas. Thus in *Tiepolo's Hound* (2000) Walcott sees his own diasporic experience in that of Camille Pissarro, the nineteenth-century impressionist born in the Danish West Indies, but finds he also has to distance himself from Pissarro's colonial gaze.

In subsequent chapters Casteel traces other representations of Sephardim in Caribbean literature. In *The Loneliness of Angels* (2010), Myriam Chancy brings Jewish themes into relation with African spirituality, thereby reclaiming the Jewish (or crypto-Jewish) presence in the creolization process at work in early Saint Domingue, while in *Free Enterprise* (2004) Michelle Cliff links *marranism* directly to *maroonage*, the two forms of resistance coming together when a descendant of a *Marrano* (crypto-Jew) joins Surinamese Maroons. If Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (2009) depicts the slave-owning "port Jew" as a victim of vicious antisemitism who frees his lover in an act of ethical remorse, David Dabydeen plays with stereotypes of Jews and enslaved Africans in *A Harlot's Progress* (2000) in order to reveal the ways in which both are victims of empire.

Casteel argues that the relationship between the Jewish and African experience in the Caribbean is sometimes romanticized in these works, and the portrayal of Jews often depends on external stereotypes, no matter how positively or sympathetically Jews are presented. Cynthia McLeod's *The Cost of Sugar* (2013) stands out, however, because Jews are presented from the inside as the central characters in a family epic revolving around the large number of plantation-owning Sephardim in Suriname's early history. McLeod's plantation Jews contribute significantly to building a racialized, slave-based society, yet they are also agents of creolization who challenge Dutch

antisemitism and racism. Enslaved Africans resist their enslavement by Jews as well as Christians, yet the presence of a Maroon leader of mixed Jewish descent in the novel signals the ambiguous, multidirectional nature of the Jewish experience in the region.

Part 2 of Casteel's book addresses the historical impact of the Holocaust in the Caribbean, where some Ashkenazi Jews found sanctuary, and the broader meaning of the Holocaust for Caribbean writers, who drew parallels to the black experience in the Americas. The waves of refugees who fled Nazi terror were often greeted with ambivalence in the Caribbean, and those Jews who arrived were themselves often ambivalent about their host countries. If John Hearne's narrator in *Land of the Living* (1961) is a Jewish refugee whose victimhood is identified with that of the Jamaican underclass, Jamaica Kinkaid's *Mr. Potter* (2003) presents the relationship between the Jewish refugee doctor and black Jamaicans in more ambiguous terms, even as the Holocaust serves to shed light on the trauma of enslavement. Other authors focus directly on what Casteel argues is a productive rather than a competitive relationship between the Jewish and black experiences. Thus the Holocaust serves as a site of surrogate memory in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Showing Grit* (1993) and *Harriet's Daughter* (1988), providing access to the experience of enslavement. Michèle Maillet's *L'étoile noire* (2006) focuses on blacks who were deported to concentration camps like Jews, noting how they sometimes experienced the racializing gaze of Jewish deportees.

Casteel's study culminates with the Caribbean novelist's engagement with Anne Frank (who, she observes, might have found herself in Cuba had her visa not been cancelled.) In *Abeng* (1984), Michelle Cliff's main character begins to interpret her surroundings in relation to *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), and the Holocaust opens her mind to the experience of slavery and her own relationship to it as a person of privilege. Caryl

Phillips creolizes the Holocaust diary form in *The Nature of Blood* (1997), interweaving it with a memoir by Othello in the Venice Ghetto, the Jew and the Moor sympathetic allies in a Christian world. Acknowledging her deep indebtedness to Frank, Cliff states that the diary gave her “permission to write,” while Phillips remarks that Frank was “partly responsible for my beginning to write” (pp. 248-249). If Cliff tends to adhere to a narrative of victimhood, however, Phillips, who discovered as an adult that his own grandfather was a Sephardic Jew, complicates that narrative by introducing themes such as intra-Jewish racial tension in Israel.

Casteel’s reading of Jews and Jewishness in Caribbean literature is rich with comparative analysis and historical detail, and throughout her book she supplements close readings of her chosen texts with commentaries on related Caribbean and non-Caribbean literary works. Drawing widely on contemporary literary and cultural theory, she emphasizes her own indebtedness to scholars of Caribbean background such as Édouard Glissant and Stuart Hall. At the center of her analysis are notions of pluralism and creolization, major concepts in Caribbean studies that address cross-cultural interrelationships between different racial and ethnic groups within the context of the plantation system and colonial power relations. *Calypto Jews* is a book about the representation of Jews in Caribbean literature, but it is about much more. It is a book about the Caribbean experience, the Jewish experience, the black experience, and the interconnectedness of these from the early modern period until today. By bringing a fresh approach to a much-neglected area of scholarship, Casteel has made a major contribution to our understanding of the Caribbean writer’s commitment to bearing witness to the traumas of modernity.

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Citation: Patrick Taylor. Review of Casteel, Sarah Phillips. *Calypso Jews: Jewishness in the Caribbean Literary Imagination*. H-Caribbean, H-Net Reviews. January, 2017.

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