

## **Review: *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century.***

By Marc Matera. University of California Press, 2015.  
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*Black London* presents a history of black presence in interwar London. Marc Matera argues that though reconstructing the rich social and intellectual world of Black London, long-standing characterisations of black internationalism as movement of national-self-determination are challenged. He provides a more nuanced political picture of black-internationalism, which emerged from the complex range of possibilities for affiliation and sovereignty that the British Empire inadvertently propagated. Matera uses the encounters, experiences, and ideas of people from African and Afro-Caribbean descent in nineteenth century London as unit of analysis. He allows himself to be at daggers drawn with blunt notions of black-internationalism and writes a rather polemical imaginary of the future, which flows, in an excellent manner, from the nuanced idea of black-internationalism as explained in his book. He concludes with the recurring, and perhaps resurgent dream of a united West-Africa as an equal participant in a more humane world.

Matera's book can be seen as a lively historical account of Paul Gilroy's concept of the 'Black Atlantic'; a concept Gilroy uses to define diasporic African experiences as intercultural and transnational (Gilroy 1993). The Black Atlantic concept constitutes a counter-narrative to modernity, by arguing in favour of a shared and heterogeneous transnational diasporic black culture. This heterogeneous diasporic black culture developed in the age of modernity, but is not included in the narrative of modernity, in which the development of European nation-states eclipses the experiences, ideas, output, and culture of black people (Gilroy 1993, 36). It is transnational because it is constituted of the cultures various communities around the Atlantic: North- and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. However, where Gilroy's account of the Black Atlantic remains a theory, Matera gives vibrant historical substance to Gilroy's theory by exploring the London as the key site of development of black internationalism and anti-colonialism through the cultural, social, political, and intellectual output of black people in



interwar London.

In his seven chapters, the author takes his reader on a journey through London in the first three decades after the first World War. On its way, the reader encounters many inspiring and prominent black Londoners, like Dr Harold Moody, Kwame Nkrumah, Amy Ashwood, and Una Marson, who saw London as the place where they might help to transform the core of imperial thought and policy. They met in cultural and political associations such as the West African Students' Union (WASU) and the League of Coloured Peoples (LCC), or in the night clubs of Soho, where music was constitutive of the encounters among black musicians from all sides of the Atlantic. Matera portrays the restaurants and clubs in Soho where black musicians – as well as students, intellectuals, artists and left wing white individuals – met so vividly that it feels as if the reader is present in the club and observing from a table. Jazz, calypso, and Caribbean music would fill your ears, and a heterogeneous mix of black and white people would dance together, or sit at the bar exchanging anti-imperialist ideas. It was here that the activities of some musicians and entrepreneurs bridged the worlds of black activism and the jazz club. Another place where black students and intellectuals met and challenged racial thinking of the empire was in universities, such as the London School of Economics (LSE). There, black students gravitated towards the fields of anthropology and history in growing numbers in the decades before decolonisation, where they embraced opportunities to engage in a productive dialogue with European “experts”, on false established ideas about racial inferiority for example.

The deliberations on the awareness of the masculinity of black internationalism is what gives more depth to Matera's analysis. He devotes considerable attention to the experiences of black women, by presenting biographies of female activists. For example, he presents a biography of Amy Ashwood, whose understanding of the prospects for black collaboration and unity evolved alongside her increasingly feminist stance. Gender and class hierarchies influenced her thinking, and she moved from the narrow black nationalist politics of her youth, to a more expansive and explicitly feminist internationalism, that focused on the needs of black women. By exploring the lives and activities of several African and Afro-Caribbean women, Matera succeeds in presenting a more varied picture of black internationalism. Besides illuminating a number of overlooked or understudied figures such as Una Marson, Amy Ashwood Garvey, Coleridge Coole, and Ras Prince Monolulu, the book is a marvellous study of the rise of black internationalism at the height of the British Empire. In admirable detail, Matera explains the emergence and development of black internationalism in relation to anti-imperialism and anti-fascism, as well as how these themes intertwined in international critique against Italy in the Italian-Ethiopian war. Matera explores how interracial sexual liaisons were ultimate act of anti-imperialism – therefore, how even the choice of sexual partners of black men was politicised in the context of the Empire and

in the racial geography of London. Finally, Matera explains how Empire films, such as *Sanders of the River* and *Men of Two Worlds* were described as examples of the restructuring of imperial social formation.

Marc Matera's *Black London* is a must-read for any scholar of Black Atlantic history, who is dissatisfied with the histories that use the nation-state as unit of analysis, which is unsatisfactory to explain the experiences, ideas, and outputs of black people and diaspora in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In conclusion, Matera wrote a fascinating history, while using untraditional sources within the discipline of history: he uses cultural expressions, such as literature, poems, plays, and films, as well as social spaces, such as the WASU hotel and Soho restaurants and clubs, to explain political context. Matera's book is a powerful and sophisticated history of black presence in interwar London. He managed to give the theory of the Black Atlantic a true historical substance in a lively way. His unconventional historical methodology matches the unconventional contents of his book.

## REFERENCES

- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.