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Constructing Black Selves: Caribbean American Narratives and the Second Generation by Lisa D. McGill (Book Review)

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Using second generation Americans Harry Belafonte, Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, Piri Thomas, and the meringue hip hop group Proyecto Uno, Lisa D. McGill considers in *Constructing Black Selves: Caribbean American Narratives and the Second Generation* the issues of identity formation of those whose heritage ultimately includes Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, most often New York City. Though her subjects come from different national, racial, and language backgrounds; though they have made their names in different media; and though they have different views of race, identity, and culture, she convincingly makes the argument that "African America becomes a powerful site of assimila-

tion for Caribbean second generationers and that the racialization of Caribbean immigrants in the United States plays a dominant role in the acculturation process" (240).

Her first subject is the popular entertainer Harry Belafonte (born in New York to Jamaican and Martiniquan parents), who became the first of these immigrants to achieve success as a US pop icon. Exploring Belafonte's 1956 album, *Harry Belafonte—Calypso*, and the film *Island in the Sun* in the context of historical images of Black males in the media, McGill argues that he represents the first marketing of Black male sexuality in America. She contends that his "black Caribbean body afforded a sexual freedom not made available to his black American one" (33). Theoretically and historically her argument is well made. The only problem is that she repeats "black male body" *ad nauseam* throughout the discussion, with that phrase or some variation of same appearing 20 times on pages 68-69 alone. Though she makes some interesting observations about the texts of Belafonte's songs, one might argue in retrospect that her focus on the Black male body here results in less textual analysis of his art than is the case with her other subjects. One might also object that Belafonte receives a less-balanced consideration of his activism than does her next subject, the acclaimed novelist Paule Marshall.

McGill begins her discourse on Marshall, the child of Barbadian immigrants living in Brooklyn, New York, with a discussion of her participation in "artistic-political realms" (76), such as the Harlem Writers Guild, the Association of Artists for Freedom, journals such as *Freedomways*, and other organizations, symposia, and conferences associated with the US left community. Indeed, this first part of the Marshall chapter, titled "All o' We Is One," represents McGill's most important contribution to Marshall scholarship. While McGill acknowledges the significance of several other Marshall works to her theme in this study, she chooses in the second part of this chapter to focus on her 1983 novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*. Here she notes Marshall's insistence on the relationship of the African American, Caribbean, and African communities and her goal in the novel to lead Blacks to appreciate the need to find a more truthful sense of their identities through the psychological and spiritual return to Africa. This section, though well done, adds little to prior scholarship treating this important aspect of Marshall criticism. Further, given McGill's thesis, one would argue that there should be some mention of *Daughters*, *The Fisher King*, and "To Da-Duh, in Memoriam." Finally, McGill misleads in her passing reference to the "black subjects" of *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (83), given that Max Berman of "Brooklyn" is White. While one acknowledges the importance of the Black women in these novellas, there is no question that Marshall forces the reader to focus on the males as subjects through her quoting of William Butler Yeats's "Sailing to

Byzantium" in her forward and in her title ("An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick, unless / Soul clap its hands and sing").

McGill's third subject is noted poet and essayist Audre Lorde, born to Barbadian and Grenadian parents in New York. This chapter focuses on African god(dess) figures in *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde's seventh and most complex book of poetry, and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, her fictionalized autobiography or "biomythography." While Lorde, like Marshall, views Africa as the source of racial identity and awareness, Lorde, McGill argues, "enacts Africa as the site that validates her ties to multiple racial, cultural, and sexual communities" (117), thus making it possible for Lorde to reconcile all of those parts of herself that she frequently was asked to justify: a woman, a feminist, a lesbian, a Caribbean, an African American, a poet.

McGill moves to the African Hispanic community with her fourth subject, Piri Thomas, a Black Puerto Rican, whose autobiography, *Down These Main Streets*, reveals the dilemma, not only of a Black male in a dominant White society, but also a Black male in a family where everyone else was lighter-skinned and in an African American community where he sometimes felt alienated. McGill argues that this work is quite different from the African American *Bildungsromans* with which it is usually compared, such as Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, and Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*: "Piri is not liberated by his black consciousness, as are Malcolm X, Brown, Cleaver; thus, that consciousness of a black self undergirds a suspended tension in the autobiography, a tension that is never quite resolved" (167). Thomas's work, McGill informs, "was one of the first to launch the Nuyorican literary movement" (165).

Her final subject, Proyecto Uno, a musical group started by Dominican Americans in New York, moves us from earlier generations of individual artists to a contemporary generation of a group of meringue hip hop performers who have blended island and African American musical forms in unique new sounds. She points to concerns among their parents as well as some migration scholars that they have exclusively embraced African American culture and neglected their own Caribbean roots. McGill argues that they have rather created a "musical crossroads that proffers a multicultural, diasporic lens" (204), thereby "solidify[ing] a postmodern interconnectedness between multiple sites of blackness in the United States" (206).

The restrictions that McGill imposes on her treatment of varied subjects in individual chapters of this study present some problems. The focus on Belafonte's "black male body" (as important and as interesting as that discussion is) limits the recognition of the degree to which he has been a part of those whom she celebrates for "work[ing] through allegiances and conflicts to forge communities in the twentieth century" (241). McGill tells us that she limits herself in the Marshall chapter to the years 1959-83 (75, 255), thereby forcing her to ignore *Daughters* and *The Fisher King*, which are certainly crucial to both the theme of this book and the thesis of the Marshall section. She limits herself exclusively to *Down These Mean Streets* in her discussion of Piri Thomas, thus ignoring his poetry and merely mentioning in closing his later autobiographies. Her discussion of a group in the last chapter precludes the kind of discussion given to the individual in the other chapters. At times the chapters in this book read like essays individually prepared and only later brought together as a whole rather than chapters initially planned as a part of one project.

Constructing Black Selves treats a great deal: migration studies, politics, cultural identity, race, calypso, hip hop, fiction, poetry, autobiography, and on and on. Indeed, one might argue that it attempts so much that it does not achieve enough depth in any area to be useful to scholars in the variety of the fields it

treats. However, while this work might not be seen as the major source for the study of Paule Marshall or hip hop (to mention just two possibilities from this book), McGill must be commended for bringing together in one volume several dichotomies, usually not discussed together: English-speaking and Spanish-speaking artists; Calypsonians and Rappers; musicians and writers; veterans of the Civil Rights movements and spokesmen of the Hip Hop generation; Womanists and Black (male) Power advocates; high culture and pop culture or subculture. She thereby provides various interesting perspectives of the process by which Caribbean American immigrants of every possible ilk construct their own Black identities and impact African American culture. Along the way she informs her readers of a number of the significant artistic contributions of her subjects, and convincingly argues that their voices challenge the future definition and direction of African American studies. This book is an important study, one that is thoroughly researched and often eloquently presented.