"Black Midas Reflects: Jan Carew on Guyanese Culture, Politics, and Environment"

Joy Gleason Carew, Ph.D.
University of Louisville

From his landmark 1958 novel, *Black Midas*, the story of Porkknockers in the Guyanese interior, throughout his long life as a novelist, essayist, playwright, historian, and poet, the late Jan Carew has always kept Guyana close to his heart. Though Carew lived the majority of his life abroad, repeatedly, he would credit his upbringing, and the polyglot races and cultures of his homeland, as providing the prism through which he would later interpret life. His most recent posthumous works, the autobiography, *Episodes in My Life: the Autobiography of Jan Carew*, and the collection of poetry, *Return to Streets of Eternity*, offer intriguing insights into his mind, creative abilities, and eternal commitment to liberation politics.

*Black Midas*, Carew’s first major publication, was launched to great acclaim in 1958. But, this was not without some effort. Carew had been shopping around his other novel, *The Wild Coast*, but Publishers were not interested. A disheartened Carew consulted with fellow Guyanese and Berbician, Edgar Mittleholzer, who had made the journey to England earlier and established his career. Showing him his own pile of rejection slips, Mittleholzer admonished Carew to stick it out. Life wasn't going to be handed to you on a platter and dilettantes need not bother. But, one publisher did finally take a chance on Carew's work – Secker and Warburg. Carew had shown them both books and they accepted *Black Midas*, leaving *The Wild Coast* on the back burner. Following the positive response for *Black Midas*, Secker and Warburg did bring out *The Wild Coast* later that same year.
In a lengthy review in the London *Times*, “Literary Supplement,” the reviewer noted of *Black Midas*, “Mr. Jan Carew is a very different writer. To begin with he is a stylist who writes a heavyweight prose which is a good deal lighter on its feet than most of our own native flyweights. . . . Mr. Carew has set himself the task of making a literary language out of the mixture of dialects that have evolved in British Guiana. . . . no other West Indian novelist has yet concentrated on this fundamental problem. . . . Mr. Carew is at pains to show that his "pork-knockers" are very far from being primitive savages. . . . they are not the kind of men that Hitler would have been able to recruit for his S.S. formations. They know too much about violence, both of man and nature, not to value the human solidarity it enforces (*Times*).”

The novel starts out in the village, “It was springtide and the surf was loud. If the sun plunged behind the courida trees into the sea before I reached home I would miss my Uncle Richard and my grandmother would be angry . . . . The sun followed me balancing on the courida tree tops . . . A herd of cattle crossed in front of me, their bony flanks still glistening with mud from the roadside canal. A naked East Indian boy cracked a whip, startling the herd to run. I waited until the cows passed by and I lost my race with the sun.” And, closes with the mysterious and haunting, “I closed my eyes and listened to the river and I remembered the night when Captain Rhodius had told me about the voices under the river. I listened, and all I heard was a single voice – Brother C.’s – and he was telling me the story of the men who had gone up the mountain, and he kept repeating the last part of the story: ‘When they open he hand it was empty and they keep asking he, “How is it that you come back and you en’t bring no wondrous thing to show we? How is it?... How is it? (*Black Midas*, 19, 265-266)”'
His work firmly located in both locale and language, Carew was signaling to the world that he had arrived, and along with him came a remarkable coterie of people and places to whom few had paid attention before. Over the many years of his writing and broadcasting career, he would tease out bits and pieces of the stories embedded in *Black Midas*. One of the last was the novella for young adults, *The Riverman*, which was an extended story about this same Captain Rhodius and his crew.

When Jan Carew passed away in early December 2012, the world lost a literary icon, often referred to as a “Renaissance Man” because of the breadth of his experiences and capabilities. Over his long life, he had also been an actor and playwright, broadcaster and journalist, and advisor to world leaders in many parts of the globe. Not only had he been engaged in intellectual work, but also, he was very passionate about his various agricultural projects, and in the last 40 years, to working in Academia as he helped shaped the field of Black Studies in the United States. In his ninth decade, he was lovingly referred to as “The Gentle Revolutionary (*Race and Class)*.” His voice no longer had the booming quality of his youth, but his commitment to the people’s struggle was no less strong. The turnout for the double book launches of these two most recent posthumous works in London last year, and in Guyana this past March, was a testament to the esteem many still hold for him. But, the legacy is not lost, his words and example remain. They are always waiting close by, ready to remind us of the potential of our lands to be bountiful and our peoples to be able to find humane and sustained ways to live together. The autobiography and the poetry collection are prime examples of this. On the one hand, they offer reflections of decades of a life well-spent, and on the other, some special opportunities to view the world the way that Jan Carew did. The autobiography, which I
had to finish for Jan as his health failed him, includes several poems and articles Jan wrote in the “heat of the moment” – in Ghana with Nkrumah, or in the UK struggling to make a living, or in the U.S. at the height of the Black Power struggle. So readers have both his reflections looking back many decades, and some example of writing published in those specific periods. For instance, he has a reflective section on Cuba and the Cuban Missile crisis, and I have included the three articles he published in the London Observer at that very same point. It is an unusual, almost 3-D type of perspective.

The poetry collection, too, is a special retrospective as it contains poems from his earliest collection published in Guyana in 1953, to some written in his early 90s. Though Jan wrote prolifically and in many genres, he was a poet at heart. Jan always bragged that this made sense, coming from Guyana. For, the Guyanese people loved poetry and would turn out in the thousands to hear Martin Carter and others read from their works in the streets of Georgetown.

Jan Carew lived in London for nearly 20 years and it is there that his professional life as a writer took off. And, throughout his literary career, he maintained aspects of his village, Caribbean perspective as he would then explore the confusions and wondrous possibilities of a larger world. The Guyanese language and landscape would also appear in many of Carew’s works, too, whether fictional or historical essays. His base, he often stressed, was located in the East Bank Demarara villages of Agricola and Mahaica, and in New Amsterdam in Berbice. In a 1988 essay, “The Third World: Its Façade and Landscapes Within,” Carew explored these relationships between his home-derived worldview and interactions with people and places outside his home country. He wrote, “I realized that my village in the sun was an important
point of reference for understanding the planet earth I lived on. The more widely I travelled, the more forcibly it struck me that Agricola with all its mysteries – its deceptive façade of poverty, squalor and apparent hopelessness – was a microcosm of the world; and growing up there, I have made the acquaintance of its secret sorrows and beheld the vision of its hidden but stubborn hope from the vantage point of its spiritual landscapes within. . . . (“Third World” 119).

Now living in London, he wrote a poignant piece, “The Odd-Job Man,” for the 1961 publication, Pepperpot, in which he reflected on race relations and people often hidden in the shadows of these metropoles. At one stage, Carew had a number of odd-job men working for him as he had a large house in Wimbledon that almost always needed some kind of attention. Most of the early odd-job men were working-class English. But, over the years, with the rise in the immigrant population, West Indians had begun to move into these itinerant positions. “This itinerant handyman, a leftover from John Bunyan’s age of the tinker, was threatened with extinction before West Indian and other minorities of colour began migrating to Britain in the 1950s. Groups of these newcomers had settled into Brixton and turned this borough into one in which Blacks had become a majority. This creation of a Black ghetto in London had taken place surreptitiously and it inspired an incipient racism . . . . The white hosts were not prepared for suddenly having black neighbours. . . . [But, these] odd-job men, who were trained as artisans before they migrated, found that they could augment their income by doing jobs that English workers no longer wanted to do. (Episodes, 139).”

Carew also found himself compelled to help “define” a new post-World War II identity, which could have dramatic political, cultural and psychic implications, not only in London, but also
back home. In a 1959 piece, “What is a West Indian?” written for the *West Indian Gazette*, which was circulated in both London and in the Caribbean, he observed, “The question ‘what is a West Indian?’ is one that concerns every thinking person in the British Caribbean today. For, we are standing at a cultural crossroads and the direction we take will affect our future, our identity….It is very popular for West Indian politicians to tell us about a West Indian culture, but I have heard none of them come near to defining for the mass of people what this culture is . . . . Some people evade answering this question by saying that we are part of a Western civilization . . . [Rather] culture . . . is the product of a man’s creative labour in a place, in a society where he has lived, and over thousands of generations, where he has put his particular stamp on an environment. To admit there is a West Indian culture is to concede that the foundations of this culture were laid by slaves, and later that some of the builders of these superstructures were bond labourers…The West Indian will only cease to be a [faceless cipher] when through a creative representation of the smell of his earth and the dreams of his people, he can discover a true image of himself (*Episodes*, 126-27).”

This was also the period when the peoples of the English-speaking Caribbean were wrestling with the idea of a Federation of nation states, and Carew weighed into this debate as well. This December 1962 piece, “Federation: Shadow or Substance?,” was written just after Carew spent the fall months in Cuba during the Cuban Missile crisis working as a reporter for the London *Observer*. And his concerns were clearly heightened as he had just witnessed the brink of human nuclear disaster. In the London magazine, *Flamingo*, he wrote, “Jamaicans voted 'NO' to a Caribbean West Indian federation in a bitterly contested referendum. The anti-federalists won by 35,000 votes though 40% of the electorate stayed at home . . . . Individual West Indian
leaders, while trumpeting their advocacy of the idea of a centralized government, made sure that enough power remained in their hands to make this impossible. . . . The West Indies can no longer afford to carry on by plastering sores; cures must now be affected in the bloodstream of society. We live in an age of emergent coloured peoples, of revolutionary social change. On a clear day you can stand on a promontory on the Jamaican north coast and see the shadow of Cuba rising out of the blue-green Caribbean Sea. . . . These are not just islands with sunshine for sale, but the homelands of people uprooted from history being pushed into the twentieth century (Episodes, 170-172).

Carew reflects upon in the Cuban revolution elsewhere in the autobiography, but also, he commemorates it in a number of poems in this current poetry collection. For Carew, the Cuban victory was emblematic of a people’s potential to take charge of their own lives and he never faltered in his commitment to its goals or the Cuban people. In 1979, having returned to Cuba for the 20th anniversary of the revolution, Carew joined a large number of other Caribbean and Latin American poets, including Pablo Neruda, Nicolas Guillen and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in producing a double-disk vinyl recording of selected poems in honor of the revolution. Carew's choice was "Cuba-Angola" which also appears in this collection, "Cuba – Angola . . . . The blood-knot was tied/ with ligaments of pain/ on sea lanes where caravels had plied/ since Cristobal had named his price/ and Isabella had paid (Cuba-Angola).”

Though Jan Carew has been known primarily for his work in the creative arts, he made a dramatic turn into academia and agricultural projects in the late 1960s. He did not stop writing, and over the next thirty years, would extend his writing into essays, histories and other works. But, he was powerfully drawn towards the Black Power movement in the US and, subsequently,
to help young Blacks enter and take full advantage of the universities that were now opening their doors to them. He was living in Canada at the time, and had pitched the idea of doing a program for the Canadian Broadcasting Co on the cultural explosion in the US. That 1968 journey to the US in proved faithful. Recounting this in a 1993 essay, he wrote, “I walked the streets of Detroit, Cleveland, Newark and Washington DC immediately after the Black rebellions in the late 1960s. These became euphemistically labelled ‘The Martin Luther King Riots,’ [King had been assassinated earlier in the year] but it was Malcolm X who had warned …. Rebellions would, inevitably, erupt in inner cities . . . . The culture of the streets then burst out of a hummus of decay like exquisite wild flowers flourishing in a dung heap. The poetry, songs, drama, music – plus new creative infusions of words, images and rhythms into the everyday language of the street – were an organic part. . . (Culture).” Teaching first at Princeton and Rutgers universities, he then moved to Northwestern University where he built the African American Studies department. It is here where I first met Jan in 1974, when I went to interview for a job there. When he retired from Northwestern in 1987, he was accorded Emeritus Professor of African American Studies.

The mid-1970s was also marked by a dramatic increase in information and resources for living a healthier lifestyle. Pouring over this literature and then conducting his own research into historical accounts, Carew became convinced that he should rally like-minded people around him to develop new models and methodologies that could be taken to ordinary people. Even, in this new endeavor, his Guyanese roots were clearly evident. “[Our] aim was to treat science, technology and culture as fruit from the same tree; and to hinge all new projects on the idea that agriculture is a culture, a way of life and being, a kaleidoscope of ideas and activities ranging
from the metaphysical to the concrete and objective. . . . I had grown up in a village on the edge of the vast forest of the Amazon basin, and working in Suriname crystallised ideas had been taking shape in my mind for a lifetime (Harvesting).” Thus, at 55, when most people were thinking about retiring, Carew began a series of agricultural projects – in Suriname, in Guyana, in Jamaica, and in Grenada – all of which were focused on more nutritious and sustainable crops. He had discussions with Prime Minister Michael Manley about setting up fully self-contained farming projects in Jamaica, and after Prime Minister Cheddi Jagan was re-elected in 1992, discussions with Mr. Jagan about possible projects in Guyana. The largest of these projects was growing Amaranth, a high-protein grain plant, in Grenada. And, though this project only lasted a few years, having been brought to an abrupt close with the US invasion of Grenada in 1983, Carew had the satisfaction of later hearing from some of the farmers that they had continued in his tradition.

These observations only touch on the vast contributions of Jan Carew’s legacy. Bridging the perspectives of his homeland, its villages and its ‘landscapes within,” Carew never tired of writing, exhorting, or otherwise speaking out and working on behalf of the downtrodden. And like the Amaranth seeds which he had spread around the Caribbean, the US, Europe and Asia, Carew invariably shared a philosophy that took root.
Works Cited


__________“Culture and Rebellion” *Episodes in My Life*, 263. Print.


