

Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

Joy Gleason Carew
University of Louisville
Joy.carew@louisville.edu

Abstract

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, poet, and Academician, the late Jan Carew has always kept the Caribbean culture close to his heart. Though Carew lived the majority of his life abroad, repeatedly, he would credit his Guyanese upbringing, and the polyglot races and cultures of his homeland, as providing the prism through which he would later interpret life. The colonial legacies of Saint Martin/Sint Maarten, like those of the Dutch-British wrestling over Carew's home territory of Berbice, left an indelible mark on the shaping of Carew's sense of self and purpose. Carew's most recent posthumous works—*Episodes in My Life: The Autobiography of Jan Carew* and *Return to Streets of Eternity*, a collection of poetry—offer intriguing insights into his mind, creative abilities, and eternal commitment to liberation politics.

KEY WORDS: Caribbean, Creative, Liberation Politics, Culture

Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

Introduction

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 outside his country, 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 the persons, places and events that helped shape him as a creative intellectual committed to liberation politics. The autobiography, which I was able to finish for him as his health failed him, also includes articles Carew wrote in the “heat of the moment” – in Ghana with Kwame Nkrumah, or in the UK struggling to make a living, or in the US at the height of the Black Power struggle. Thus, readers have both his reflections looking back many decades, and examples of his writing published in those specific periods. For instance, he has a reflective section on Cuba and the 1960s Cuban Missile crisis, written many decades later. Also, I included the three articles he published in 1962 in the London *Observer*, at that very same point that this global drama was being played out. He was in Cuba at the time. It is an unusual, almost 3-D perspective. This preliminary review of this current work can help one appreciate the broad reach of Carew’s intellect and endeavors.

Black Midas, Carew’s first major publication, was launched to great acclaim in the United Kingdom 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 expatriate and Berbician, Edgar Mittleholzer, who had made the journey to the UK earlier. Mittleholzer was now an established writer. Showing him his own pile of rejection slips, Mittleholzer admonished Carew to stick it

Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

out. Life wasn't going to be handed to you on a platter and dilettantes need not bother. One publisher did finally take a chance on Carew's work – Secker and Warburg. Evidently, he had shown them both manuscripts and they accepted *Black Midas*, leaving *The Wild Coast* on the back burner. However, following the positive response to *Black Midas*, Secker and Warburg did bring out *The Wild Coast* later that same year. An American edition of *Black Midas*, entitled *A Touch of Midas*, also came out that year. Over the years, *Black Midas* would excite a larger global community and be translated into numerous other languages and optioned for film projects.

Narrative and Critical Reflections

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 . . .” This was the first major UK review to note that the writing now coming from England's colonial subjects was better than that from home-grown, English writers. It continued, “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.” In fact, along with elevating the people's language, Carew purposefully focused this story on people often hidden away in the deep interior of the country --the Guyanese porkknockers (gold miners). And, as he did so, he drew a more sympathetic and nuanced picture of these men. As the reviewer further observed, “[Carew's] '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*, 202).

The novel starts out in the village:

Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

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 (*Black Midas*, 19).

And, it closes with the mysterious and haunting riverine life:

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*, 265-266)

His work firmly embedded 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* and publish them in other formats. In 1975, he brought out the children’s book, *The Third Gift*, where he elaborated on the story of what was found on the mountain. Moreover, one of the last publications that he was able to complete before he passed (though released posthumously in 2015) was the novella for young adults, *The Riverman*. This was an extended story about the same Captain Rhodius and his crew.

He would also turn his novelist's eye to the hidden in the many different global communities he inhabited over his long lifetime. This was true not only of his fiction, but also of his essays and histories. For instance, there was his perceptive analysis of the itinerant handyman position being taken up by West Indian immigrants in the UK, in the

Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

piece "The Odd Job Man." 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 tending. 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 positions. Responding to this emerging climate, Carew wrote a poignant piece for the 1961 publication, *Pepperpot*, in which he reflected on race relations and people often left in the shadows of these metropolises:

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 ("The Odd Job Man," *Episodes*, 139).

But also, as seen in the last third of his life, Carew undertook an unrelenting quest to study, and thus expose, the true character of the explorer Christopher Columbus, and, the direct relationship of his incursions into the Americas with the origins of racism. A spate of histories and essays were written in which he detailed Columbus' history. In the introduction to the 2006 reprinting of his history of Columbus, *Rape of Paradise: Columbus and the Birth of Racism in the Americas*, Carew stated:

The history of the first voyage of "discovery" and the three others that Columbus made in his lifetime, has been glossed over for five centuries. Depicted mostly as one of romance and adventure, it is only recently that some of the hideous consequences of the 'discovery' have been brought to life The holocaust which Columbus and his brother set in motion, therefore, must be seen for what it is: an historical fact (*Rape*, 4, 5).

Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

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. He had also been an actor and playwright, broadcaster and journalist, and advisor to world leaders in many parts of the globe.

He had acted with Sir Laurence Olivier in the Olivier Company in the both the UK and New York in the US in the early 1950s, performing in Shakespeare’s “Anthony and Cleopatra,” and Shaw’s “Caesar.” The African American poet, Langston Hughes and his close friend, Arna Bontemps, exchanged several letters in which they discussed Carew’s work with the Olivier Company and his subsequent publications. Wrote Bontemps to Hughes in 1958, “Sometime ago you asked about Jan Carew’s novel. It is announced for fall publication . . . under the title of *A Touch of Midas*. You remember Jan – tall, handsome, here in a . . . role with the Old Vic [sic] Company. A mulatto from British Guiana” (Bontemps, 373). Carew’s work with the theatre extended from his acting days to writing radio, stage and TV plays. By the time he left England to work for Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana in the mid-1960s, he had been contracted to write and stage three television plays with ITV’s Granada Television. Two were produced in the early 1960s, “Day of the Fox” (1963) with the African American actor, Sammy Davis, Jr., and “The Big Pride” with the African American actor William Marshall. A third, which would have starred the Australian actor of subsequent “Rumpole of the Bailey” fame, Leo McKern, did not come to full fruition due to a strike by ~~among~~ the stage crew and because Carew had left the country (*Episodes*, 129-138).

Carew’s passions spread widely. He had earlier been attracted by the nascent anti-colonial activism in British Guiana, and had happily offered his services on behalf of this new leadership while he was living in the UK. The global movement was exciting and he was thrilled to get a sense of the growing nationalism on the part of Malcolm X and his evolving Organization of Afro-American Unity. Malcolm X had had very fruitful meetings with Nkrumah and other African leaders a short while before he and Carew met in London, and Malcolm X’s observations likely helped spur Carew’s own subsequent

Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

moves to Ghana. By accepting the position of advisor to President Nkrumah and agreeing to serve as the editor of the *African Review*, Carew seemed about to realize his Pan-Africanist ambitions. But, as Carew details in his autobiography, the year spent in Ghana was tumultuous, and, all was abruptly brought to an end by the coup led by General Akwasi Amankwa Afrifa (*Episodes*, 214-244). This dramatic end to his African sojourn was made all the more painful by the fact that his newly-formed friendship with Malcolm X had also been brought to an abrupt end a year before. These global leaders and their ambitious programs, whose examples Carew so admired, were suddenly jettisoned out of his reach – one by assassination and the other by being forced out of power.

Inasmuch as Carew lived most of his life outside the Caribbean, he was also very conscious of developments back home. Throughout, too, he always maintained aspects of his village and Caribbean perspective, as he explored the confusions and wondrous possibilities of a larger world. In a 1988 essay, “The Third World: Its Façade and Landscapes Within,” Carew explored the relationships between his home-derived worldview and his interactions with people and places elsewhere. 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 . . . (“Third World Writer,” 119).

And, periodically, he returned to the Caribbean with the intention of resettling there: “Each time, I felt a certain strong urge to rediscover my homeland” (*Episodes*, 165). But, local politics or other opportunities elsewhere continued to disrupt these plans. The late 1950s-1960s period was a particularly contentious time. For one, there was the heated debate over the notion of a West Indian Federation. People in this region, like other colonial properties in this post-World War Two era, were both pushing their anti-colonial agendas and calling for their right to form new kinds of alliances. In 1959, Carew wrote a piece,

Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

“What is a West Indian?” for the *West Indian Gazette*, circulated in both the UK and in the Caribbean. This work clearly presaged the observations he would make in his later essay, “The Caribbean Writer and Exile,” about the push-pull between rootedness and rootlessness:

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*, 126-127).

With Cheddi Jagan's electoral victory in the early 1960s, Carew returned Guyana to take up the position of Director of Culture in the Jagan Government, but, the internecine racial divide proved to be too painful for him: “When I first joined them in 1949, Eusi [Kwayana] and Cheddi were committed to forming a government of national unity in which the Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese would share power on an equal basis. By 1960, you could feel the depth of animosity that Blacks had towards the Indo-Guyanese government and vice versa” (*Episodes*, 169). Given opportunity to work in Jamaica, instead, he relocated there. But, again, Jamaican politics made his life there untenable for a long run; so, after reporting on the Cuban Missile Crisis, he moved back to London.

Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

Four years later, at once sobered by the unexpected turn of events in Ghana, but also recommitted to finding ways to meld his art with the global struggle, Carew decided to return home again. It was 1966 and British Guiana was on the eve of its own independence. “My trip home in 1966,” he wrote, “came on the heels of being arrested and deported from Ghana and I needed some time to reflect on my future options . . . , We were [also] anticipating our country’s independence from Britain, which was scheduled for May. These were exciting times for Guyana as the British had finally agreed to our full self-rule. I had also looked forward to being able to direct my play for the February 23rd Republic Day Celebrations . . .” (*Episodes*, 249). Yet, again, despite the acclaim for the production, Carew’s wanderlust called again, and he relocated to Canada at the invitation of the Barbadian-Canadian author, Austin Clarke.

Though Jan Carew has been known primarily for his work in the creative arts, he made a dramatic turn to Academia in the late 1960s and to agricultural projects in the 1970s and 1980s. These may seem quite distinct, one from the other, but Carew's overriding goals -- no matter the specific program or project-- had always been to empower people so that they could liberate themselves. Whether working with first-generation Black, Latino, and working class students at elitist US universities, or with local farmers in the Caribbean, Carew aims were consistent.

Carew was powerfully drawn towards the Black Power movement. He was living in Canada at the time that the Black Power movement took off in the US. Black Power had begun to assert itself in Canada to a lesser degree, and the Canadians were worried. So, Carew had pitched the idea of doing a program for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to learn more about it. In particular, he wanted to focus on the cultural explosion occurring around it.

That 1968 journey to the US proved faithful. Recounting this in a 1993 essay, entitled “Culture and Rebellion,” 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

Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

labeled ‘The Martin Luther King Riots,’ [King had been assassinated earlier in the year] but it was Malcolm X who had warned [that] 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*, 1).

Invited to teach first at Princeton and Rutgers universities on the east coast of the US, Carew moved the United States. Now, he was committed to finding ways to channel the new energies of the Black Power movement and, in particular, to developing programs to help young Blacks and other first-generation students take full advantage of the universities that were now opening their doors to them. He then moved to Northwestern University in the Midwest, where he was the first Chair of the newly-minted African American Studies department. When he retired from Northwestern in 1987, 14 years later, he was accorded Emeritus Professor of African American Studies.

In his ninth decade, he was lovingly referred to as “The Gentle Revolutionary” by *Race & Class* (*Race & 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 poetry collection, *Return to Streets of Eternity*, too, is a prime example of this commitment. The title of this work incorporates the title of his first collection, *Streets of Eternity*, published in British Guiana in 1953. This collection, meticulously curated from a lifetime of writing poetry, was a particularly precious project of Carew’s. It contains poems looking at the human condition, stretching from some of his earliest to some written in his 90s, many of them further refined and shaped to meet his high standards.

There is the exquisite beauty of a quiet morning, as in “Manaharva’s Dream”:

A cloud of azure Morpho butterflies
crossed Potaro at sunrise and imprinted shadows
on a timeless mirror of still water.

One butterfly lingered

Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

and dangled like a jewelled pendant
on the breast of the morning. . . . (*Return*, 176)

Or expressions of solidarity with revolutionary leaders, such as “Ballad for a Revolution,” or “Letter to Agostinho Neto”:

Brother Neto,
Paloma mia, corazon.
I had to write
and call you by the fondest names
the way Blacks of the Diaspora do
to greet a comrade, banish pain
but I must warn you just the same;
assassins never risk an open fight,
they come like thieves in daylight or the night
to steal a life (*Return*, 79)

Though Carew wrote prolifically and in many genres, he was a poet at heart. Carew always bragged that this made sense, since he came from Guyana; for the Guyanese people loved poetry and would turn out in the thousands to hear the poet Martin Carter and others on the streets of Georgetown.

Conclusions

On the surface, when one looks at Jan Carew's nomadic life over his 90-plus years, he seems to glide effortlessly in and out of diverse societies as he moved around the globe. Pushed by a wanderlust that even he could never fully explain, he was buffeted by endless opportune connections. At various times, one saw him living in London or on the Continent, in Ghana, Jamaica, Canada, or the US. It was no accident that his last collection of stories was called *The Guyanese Wanderer*.

This facility to adapt derived in large part, he contended, from his poly-cultural heritage and upbringing. But also, as he wrote in his famous essay, "The Caribbean Writer

Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

and Exile," this global wandering was a product of being a Caribbean writer in countries still struggling with the vestiges of colonialism:

The Caribbean writer today is balanced between limbo and nothingness, exile abroad and homelessness at home, between the people on the one hand and the creole and colonizer on the other. Exile can be voluntary or imposed by the stress of circumstances, it can be a punishment or it can be a pleasure. ... The colonizing zeal of the European made the indigenous people exiles in their own countries.... The Caribbean writer, by going abroad, is in fact searching for the end to exile ("Caribbean Writer," 91).

This theme can be applied to many others of his generation.

Bridging the perspectives of his homeland, its villages and what he termed, "the landscapes within," with a larger world, Jan Carew wrestled with his own challenges of longing and belonging. But, ever adapting as he made his way into larger circles of experience, he never lost sight of the roots of home and the voices of his ancestors.

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Black Midas Reflects: Longing and Belonging in a Multicultural Milieu

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