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Slavery and Silence: Latin America and the U.S. Slave Debate

by Paul D. Naish (review)

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to date, namely, Baraka's *Slave Ship*, Feelings's *The Middle Passage*, and Kara Walker's evocations of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. These works receive a thoughtful treatment in *Cultural Memories of Origin*, and Wilker's attention to the intersectionality of word and image not only enriches his discussions but also adds significantly to the book's scholarly value.

Finally, despite my criticisms, I have an autobiographical answer to the question of target audience that I opened with: when I was a student at a northern European university before moving to the United States for graduate study, I would have benefited from monographs in African American literary scholarship with 120-page-long introductions, in a manner of speaking. In an environment where courses solely dedicated to African American literature were not offered, acquiring introductory knowledge was an arduous task. Some advanced research was available in the form of monographs and journal articles, but large textbook-like surveys of the field's fundamentals were not; in their absence, extensive introductions to monographs would have been useful. Different readers have different needs, so I look forward to learning which audiences will respond most favorably to Wilker's book, the strongest sections of which are thorough and informative.

Paul D. Naish. *Slavery and Silence: Latin America and the U.S. Slave Debate*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2017.

Reviewed by Jeffrey F. Taffet, United States Merchant Marine Academy

The late Paul Naish argues that antebellum discussions about Latin America were a way to address slavery in the United States at a moment when intellectual and inclusive conversations about slavery were impossible. He suggests that despite extensive anti- and pro-slavery writings in this era, most this literature served, and was consumed by, people already committed to a particular view about human bondage. Authors, especially novelists and historians hoping for a broader audience, reflexively shied away from explicitly writing about slavery as a way of appealing to wider audiences. This was especially true, Naish contends, in the two decades preceding the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

Writers in the United States obviously appreciated that slavery was the essential question of the era however, and their stories and narratives about Latin America provided opportunities to present their ideas. His strongest chapter considers historian William Hickling Prescott, the author of three influential books about the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Prescott castigated the Spanish for their harsh treatment and enslavement of indigenous Americans, yet also cautioned that rapid change might lead to social disorder. To make this point, Prescott celebrates the Dominican priest, Bartolome de las Casas, for his abolitionist-like work in the early Spanish empire, but he also argued that las Casas, though "strongly on the ground of natural right . . . like some of the reformers of our day, disdained to calculate the consequences of carrying out the principle to its full and unqualified extent" (159). Naish suggests that Prescott's approach neatly reflected his New England whiggish instincts about the depravity of slavery as well as a belief in the wisdom of a slow and orderly march toward change.

Naish also looks at slavery's defenders, carefully exploring the writings of a set of pseudo-Archeologists who proposed that Aztec cities and the extensive earthworks in the Ohio Valley were not built by indigenous peoples. Instead, Naish explains, they claimed that Europeans had arrived long before Columbus, and that Europeans were responsible for the construction of these grand projects. This argument

stemmed from views about race-based intellectual capabilities, and buffeted a position that slavery was a beneficial part of a biologically organized social system. Naish also demonstrates, effectively, that this position also muddled questions about indigenous and Mexican original land ownership; it eased a defense of westward expansion into the Ohio Valley and the taking of Mexico's territory in the settlement following the U. S. war on Mexico.

More broadly, Naish explains how racial sentiments impacted political approaches to the rest of Latin America. In a lengthy early section, he explains that the simple question of whether to send a delegation to the 1826 Panama Convention of independent states in the Americas turned into a nasty congressional debate. Advocates for participation suggested that U. S. involvement would be a sign of goodwill and respect for these new nations, would signal an appreciation of common democratic values, and could help build trade relationships; opponents highlighted the evils of Catholicism and most pointedly noted that many Latin Americans, even among the elite, were multiracial. If U. S. representatives went to the conference they might sit next to, in the words of Virginia's John Randolph, "the mixed breeds, the Indians, and the half breeds" (qtd. in 31).

Although the elements of Naish's arguments all work individually, taken together, the meaning of the larger picture is not always clear. A fundamental point, that conversations about Latin America, as a racial other, reflected internal views about race is somewhat obvious and has long been a subject of extensive scholarly attention. Naish seems to want to suggest, as his contribution to the scholarship, that this process happened in silence as the costs of addressing slavery and race were too high in the antebellum period. Yet in his examples, overt linkages between slavery and Latin America are abundant. Either the connections were made explicitly or not made explicitly, it seems logical that it cannot be both. What Naish really demonstrates, once he moves past the argument about silence, is that there was a complexity to ways in which conversations about Latin America intersected with questions about race and slavery in the pre-Civil War era. These conversations, Naish proves, reflected the diversity of views among both slavery's defenders and its opponents.

Naish does not stray beyond the antebellum period and does not speculate on the ways that perceptions of peoples in other nations reflect racial views in the contemporary era. It is entirely appropriate that he sticks with his combined historical and literary analysis approach. Yet his work serves as a reminder that judgments about the other are rarely just about the other. The text helps clarify that there is nothing new about this process, that domestic racism, and opposition to domestic racism, have always been a part of U. S. international relations.

Ed. Susan J. McWilliams. *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2017. 426 pp. \$80.00.

Reviewed by Douglas Field, University of Manchester (UK)

In "The Price of the Ticket," James Baldwin briefly recalls his Trotskyite years in the 1940s, recalling that he was a member of the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL). Baldwin's tantalizing reference to his political past is brushed aside by the writer, who claims, "[m]y life on the Left is of absolutely no interest. It did not last long. It was useful in that I learned that it may be impossible to indoctrinate me." As Susan J. McWilliams points out in the introduction to *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, despite Baldwin's reluctance to identify with one or other political camp,