

## **Philp, Geoffrey (2016). *Garvey's Ghost*. Kingston: Carlong Publishers Ltd, 254 pp.**

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Born in Jamaica, Geoffrey Philp is the author of the novel, *Garvey's Ghost*. Philp is a prolific writer whose body of work includes several books of poetry, two novels, numerous essays, interviews and reviews, children's books, short story collections, a play, and an internationally recognized Blog. His work is represented in nearly every anthology of Caribbean literature, and he is one of the few writers whose work has been published in *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Short Stories* and *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Verse*. A graduate of the University of Miami, where he earned an MA in English, Philp teaches English and creative writing at Miami Dade College. Geoffrey Philp's book, *Garvey's Ghost*, is a Young Adult novel with a message for all ages. When college student, Jasmine, disappears from home, her panicked mother is propelled on a journey of discovery that will yield much more than the daughter she thought she had lost. Philp's novel, which takes its title from Burning Spear's album, *Garvey's Ghost*, should send the curious reader in search of Burning Spear's music, potentially introducing a global community of reggae fans to a singer and songwriter whose genius and talent is under-rated outside of Jamaica.

Even more significantly, Philp's fast-paced novel, which is both a mystery and a love story, introduces international readers of all ages to the Pan-Africanist, Marcus Garvey, leader of one of the greatest mass movements in history.

Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) boasted membership in the millions from Africa, Europe, North, South and Central America during the '20s and '30s. He was charismatic, devoted to his people, and outspoken in his rejection of white hegemony. The Jamaican-born leader had a plan to do something about the global exploitation of Black people, and had managed to influence millions of followers on three continents. His *Back to Africa* movement was seen as a threat to America's ability to control its Black underclass, and a challenge to Europe's mission to colonize Africa. J. Edgar Hoover, then head of the FBI, made it his personal mission to stop Garvey and halt the advancement of Garveyism. His organization, the UNIA, was infiltrated, then his ships (purchased to take Blacks back to Africa) were sabotaged to the point of becoming un-

seaworthy. Subsequently, he was indicted on charges of mail fraud, having sold passages on his Black Star Line Shipping Company to his members via the US Mail. The trial focused on one ship, The Phillis Wheatley, named after the first African-American poet, that was advertised before its acquisition was completed. Marcus Garvey was tried, sentenced and deported back to Jamaica. His mission and vision was for the dispersed Africans, children of the slaves from all over the Western hemisphere, to repatriate to Africa to rebuild, repopulate and reclaim the land for Black Africans and their displaced children in the diaspora. Branded a racist, a separatist, and a fraud, the man who now occupies a place of honor in Jamaica as a National Hero, was effectively silenced, discredited and erased from the history of books in America.

Mr. Philp's invocation of Marcus Garvey in this novel offers a historical corrective in that it attempts to re-inscribe the former Black leader into contemporary academic discourse via a Young Adult novel whose primary audience will likely be junior high, high school and lower division college and university students. *Garvey's Ghost* tells a tale that is set in a modern era in the quintessentially Pan-Caribbean city of Miami, while paying tribute to Garvey's memory and legacy. Geoffrey Philp uses storytelling to resurrect a complex historiography, as well as to teach moral lessons to his young audience. For example, the vessel called the The Phillis Wheatley, also found its way into Philp's novel. This is important because Phillis Wheatley is rarely included on American syllabi. Ironically, the character in the novel who is a race-hustler is as charismatic as Garvey was reputed to be. Philp's Garvey-wanna-be is, like most race-hustlers, committed to his own self-aggrandizement and financial interest, and has no moral qualms about using his race for his own selfish motives. This is a risky move on Philp's part. Garvey's detractors are likely to read more similarities than differences between the fictional character and the historical one.

However, the character who represents Garvey's fidelity to Black people and his moral uprightness is neither an ideologue nor a man who trades in grand public gestures. Professor Jacob Virgo is a Pan-Africanist and a Garveyite, but he does not brainwash his students in order to find converts. He is a musician and a music professor whose quiet heroism cultivates internal revolution by providing young minds with information and the critical tools to use it to foster radical transformation for self and community. He is also a Rastafarian, highlighting the indebtedness of other Black social movements (Nation of Islam, Father Divine's Peace Movement, Rastafarianism, etc.) to Garveyism. In an interview with the Blog <http://jamaicans.com>, Philp tells the staff-writer: "Rastafari were solely responsible for keeping the memory of Marcus Garvey alive in Jamaica".

*Garvey's Ghost* makes innovations in form by employing several different narrators to tell the story of Jasmine's mysterious disappearance from her home and from her university. The reader is taken on a journey through contemporary Miami with Jasmine's desperate mother as she searches for

her daughter, and it is this journey that becomes the catalyst for multiple layering of stories in this Young Adult novel. Readers discover that the Trayvon Martin vs. George Zimmerman case has just been tried and Black Miami is completely disheartened by the verdict. Deftly avoiding what Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adiche dubs “the danger of a single story”, Philp’s narratology, which allows a first-person account from several main characters, invokes a polyphonic, Bakhtinian narrative technique within a modern, Pan-Caribbean setting, sensibility and plot. Adichie claims that “the single story” inevitably leaves out other voices, histories and perspectives, and allows dominant voices to speak for and possibly misrepresent the voices and experiences of subaltern others. Philp allows the story to be told by many voices, so readers get many perspectives and representations and no one voice emerges as dominant.

The characters in *Garvey’s Ghost* grapple with feelings of alienation, internalized racism, desperation, drug addiction, and familial and religious repression; nevertheless, some of them are full of life and hope. The main protagonist, Kathryn, is particularly likeable because no matter how many times she has been hurt, betrayed and abused, her heart remains open to love and to making and sustaining connections with others. Despite having been a teenage victim of rape and the daughter of an Afro-Jamaican father and an Indian-Jamaican mother who used religion to punish, shame and abuse her, Kathryn still manages to believe that she is worthy of a full and passionate life. Her resilience when love fails her, when life knocks her down, is what makes readers want to cheer for her.

Jacob Virgo is another character who is easy to fall in love with because he embodies compassion, raw male sexuality, sharp intellect and a deep commitment to his community. Like Kathryn, Jacob has a past that should have warped him, but has not. His father deserted his mother before he was born, leaving a father-sized hole that he tries to fill by being a mentor to his college students, and a source of support to other characters. Handsome enough to be a womanizer, Jacob chooses instead to be a kind and faithful lover. Kathryn and Jacob fill the cracks of their brokenness with gold; their physical and spiritual beauty, deep compassion and emotional maturity make these two characters appealing. Readers will find themselves rooting not just for the safety of Kathryn’s daughter, but for the nascent love affair developing between these two. Philp’s novel also celebrates friendship between women and highlights the ways in which Caribbean cultural norms, ideologies and customs migrate into the diaspora via food, relationships, spiritual traditions and contesting identities.

The polyglot of languages that pepper *Garvey’s Ghost* include English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, Jamaican Creole, Yoruba, Rastafarian dialect and Yiddish, and provides a perfect sound-track for the chaos of the hurricane that eventually, inevitably, passes through Miami. Similarly, multiple and diverse religious traditions (Judaism, Santeria, Voudun, Protestant, Jeho-

vah's Witnesses) underscore the diversity in Miami's ethnic communities. However, the instantiation of a pan-Caribbean sensibility in the novel runs the risk of glossing over the social realism of Black and Cuban relations in Miami, and the subordinate place that Blackness occupies in the Miami political imaginary. As Philp's character, Professor Jacob Virgo, observes: "Miami was still trying to pass for white" (123). Miami's diversity can be quite disarming in that it provides a camouflage for social segregation between different groups, including different groupings of Caribbean nationals. The friendship between the Jamaican female protagonist, Kathryn, and her Cuban best friend, Cristina (who acts as godmother to Jasmine's Cuban-passing daughter) is one such instantiation.

However, Philp recovers the social critique by allowing the reader a clear example of anti-Blackness from a Cuban character who clearly has bigoted views about interracial relationships and is not afraid to act out aggressively on these views. Anti-Black racism is a major source of Black socio-economic disempowerment in Miami. However, social and political ally-ship between Cubans (who hold significantly more political power) and Blacks, such as the one imagined in Philp's novel, could help to ameliorate Black disenfranchisement in significant ways.

Philp's narratology, then, reimagines creative possibilities of social sustainability, and political solidarity for a Pan-Caribbean Miami that utilizes diversity efficaciously. These positive interventions are important in a Young Adult novel whose primary audience is the next generation of Miamians.

Despite the revolutionary potential in the novel's themes and form, *Garvey's Ghost* does not depart much from the traditional Young Adult formula. In the end, the bad guys get their just desserts and the good guy wins the pretty woman and saves the young maiden. However, in today's political climate where Black Lives Matter is more of a question than a statement, the notion of Black love as first, possible, then as salvific, heroic, and redemptive for the Black family, is itself a radical intervention into Young Adult fiction.

## Bibliography

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