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THE CARIBBEAN REGION: An Open Frontier in Anthropological Theory

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KEYWORDS: culture theory, complex societies, history, native voice, units of analysis

The encounter between anthropological theory and any region of the globe says as much about anthropology as it does about that region. Caribbean anthropology is a case in point. This region where boundaries are notoriously fuzzy has long been the open frontier of cultural anthropology: neither center nor periphery, but a sort of no man's land where pioneers get lost, where some stop overnight on their way to greater opportunities, and where yet others manage to create their own "new" world amidst First-World indifference. Accordingly, the object of this essay is dual: I write here about the Caribbean as viewed by anthropologists, but also about anthropology as viewed from the Caribbean. The review dwells on the coincidence between some zones of weakness in anthropological theory and areas of concern for Caribbeanists. I claim neither exhaustiveness nor statistical representativeness in dealing with the literature, and my boundaries are both arbitrary and fuzzy. I emphasize a present that encompasses most of the last 20 years, but my framework—not to mention the absence of any Caribbean focus in previous issues of this series—justifies forays into more distant pasts. I concentrate on works available in English, which happens to be the predominant language of Caribbean ethnology; but this emphasis here is no less arbitrary. More importantly, since I am addressing outsiders and insiders alike, I flatten some rough edges and over-
look inevitably some segments of the corpus, notably the anthropology of healing and that of religion, and urban studies as such (but see 59, 87, 156, 181). Issues in Creole linguistics, the ethnography and politics of language in the Caribbean, have generated many solid studies and deserve separate treatment. So does the literature on migration. The reader can consult other review essays on specific topics or earlier periods, bibliographies, as well as bibliographies of bibliographies (19, 27, 45, 112, 136, 165).

The essay is organized around three major themes: “heterogeneity,” “historicity,” and what I refer to as “articulation” (matters relating to levels, boundaries—the nature and limits of the unit of observation or analysis) and their ramifications. I do not see these themes as natural groupings of a self-contained Caribbean corpus but as markers highlighting the encounter between Caribbean studies and anthropology, scattered posts on the open frontier.

AN UNDISCIPLINED REGION

Christopher Columbus’s landing in the Caribbean in 1492 provided a nascent Europe with the material and symbolic space necessary to establish its image of the Savage Other (188, 191). Not surprisingly, it is in the Caribbean islands and in the surrounding mainland that a certain kind of comparative ethnography was born in the 16th century, with the writings of Spanish scholars (134). But the Caribbean was also where Europe first achieved the systematic destruction of the Other, with the genocide of the Caribs and Arawaks of the Antilles. By the time the Enlightenment returned to the myth of the noble savage, recycling with a vengeance the debates in philosophical anthropology that had marked the Renaissance, most of the Antilles were inhabited by African peoples who had crossed the Atlantic in chains, and their Afro-Creole descendants, also enslaved. Many of these slaves worked on plantations run by profit-conscious Europeans on quite “modern” lines (119).

Slavery ended in the Caribbean at about the same time that the social sciences diverged from law and history in Europe and the United States; but by then the Caribbean had become an oddity in Western scholarship. The swift genocide of the aboriginal populations, the early integration of the region into the international circuit of capital, the forced migrations of enslaved African and indentured Asian laborers, and the abolition of slavery by emancipation or revolution all meant that the Caribbean would not conform within the emerging divisions of Western academia. With a predominantly nonwhite population, it was not “Western” enough to fit the concerns of sociologists. Yet it was not “native” enough to fit fully into the Savage slot where anthropologists found their preferred subjects. When E. B. Tylor published the first general anthropology textbook in the English language in 1881, Barbados had been “British” for two and a half centuries, Cuba had been “Spanish” for almost four, and Haiti had been an independent state for three generations—after a long French century during which it accounted for more than half of its
metropolis's foreign trade. These were hardly places to look for primitives. Their very existence questioned the West/non-West dichotomy and the category of the native, upon both of which anthropology was premised.

The entire corpus of Caribbean cultural anthropology from the early decades of this century up to the present can be read against the background of this basic incongruity between the traditional object of the discipline and the inescapable history of the region. In that light, many riddles of the encounter fall into place, including North American anthropology's relative avoidance of the Caribbean (112). Up to the fourth decade of this century, native scholars from Haiti, Cuba, or Puerto Rico were more willing than foreigners to apply the tools of anthropological analysis to the study of their own folk. Later on, as Caribbean anthropology developed its specific interests, some of the weakest zones of anthropological theory came to overlap with concerns that Caribbeanists could not fully escape. Even the increased interest in Afro-American anthropology in the early 1970s (83, 198) failed to accord full legitimacy to the Caribbean within the guild. Today, as anthropology continues to nurture a legacy of tropes and concepts honed through the observation of societies once deemed "simple" (if not "primitive"), outsiders continue to confront the fact that Caribbean societies have long been awkwardly, yet definitely, "complex" (if not "modern").

No Gates on the Frontier

Three related features of this complexity sustain the lines of tension between anthropological discourse and Caribbean ethnology. First, Caribbean societies are inescapably heterogeneous. If savages elsewhere once looked the same to most anthropologists, the Caribbean has long been an area where some people live next to others who are remarkably distinct. The region—and indeed particular territories within it—has long been multiracial, multilingual, stratified and, some would say, multicultural (49, 50, 122, 150, 158, 161, 193). Second, this heterogeneity is known to be, at least in part, the result of history. Caribbean societies are inescapably historical, in the sense that some of their distant past is not only known, but known to be different from their present, and yet relevant to both the observers' and the natives' understanding of that present (6, 28, 102, 139). There is no general agreement on the extent of this relevance, but some of the earliest attacks on "the fallacy of the ethnographic present" (157:76–77) were launched from the Caribbean.

To be sure, the Caribbean is not the only area where heterogeneity and historicity have haunted the practitioners of a discipline that once made sociohistorical depth the exclusive attribute of Western societies. Elsewhere, however, anthropologists often blocked the full investigation of that complexity by posting "gatekeeping concepts": hierarchy in India, honor-and-shame in the Mediterranean, etc (10), a maneuver that, in my view, reflected as well the West's ranking of certain Others. Anthropological gatekeeping notwithstanding, "Sinology" was—and is—more likely to be taken as a separate field, and
any reunion of “Orientalists” as an academic meeting, than similar bodies or institutions of knowledge—and power—dealing with many other parts of the world. Would anyone open Pandora’s box by suggesting that such implicit rankings are based on “objective” grounds?

Still, gatekeeping as a specific anthropological strategy was relatively successful in many complex societies outside of the Caribbean because anthropologists dealing with these regions could pay lip service to history while using that same history as a buffer against historical investigation (cf 3). With history kept at a comfortable distance, anthropologists could resurrect the “native” while forsaking the primitive. Gatekeeping concepts are so-called “native” traits mythified by theory in ways that bound the object of study. They act as theoretical simplifiers to restore the ethnographic present and protect the timelessness of culture.

Gatekeeping has never been successful in the Caribbean. Here, heterogeneity and historicity opened up new vistas, deflecting energies from theoretical simplification. Each in its own way pointed to a third feature of the sociocultural landscape, the fact that Caribbean societies are inherently colonial. It is not only that all Caribbean territories have been conquered by one or another Western power. It is not only that they are the oldest colonies of the West and that their very colonization was part of the material and symbolic process that gave rise to the West as we know it. Rather, their social and cultural characteristics—and, some would say, individual idiosyncrasies of their inhabitants (59)—cannot be accounted for, or even described, without reference to colonialism.

This inescapable feature precludes the resurrection of the native, even when colonialism is not evoked explicitly. Here, there is no way to satisfy anthropology’s obsession for “pure” cultures (109, 148, 167). Even populations such as the Island Caribs of Dominica and St. Vincent or the mainland Garifuna are known to be products of complex mixtures (65, 67, 69, 180). Whereas anthropology prefers “pre-contact” situations—or creates “no-contact” situations—the Caribbean is nothing but contact.

Understandably, disciplinary fences are quite flexible. Anthropologists engage historians, economists, and policy makers (35, 70, 71, 99, 126, 185), and many publish as much in historical or regional journals as in publications regimented by the guild. Gatekeeping themes never muster a partisan following large enough within the discipline to allow for fermentation. Anthropological master tropes have rather short tenures on the frontier, as competing topics sneak through the open lands and establish new lines of exchange. Theory alone cannot enclose the object of study, not because Caribbean reality is messier than any other but because anthropological theory has yet to deal with the mess created by colonialism with handles as convenient as honor-and-shame, the caste system, or filial piety. Yet, in part also because of colonialism, empirical boundaries are no clearer in this region of prefabricated
enclaves and open frontiers where the very "unit of empirical existence" (171:2), let alone that of analysis, is a matter of open controversy.

HETEROGENEITY

If complexity is what first strikes the anthropologist when looking at Caribbean societies, and if heterogeneity is at least one marker of this complexity, what, then, holds these societies together? Michael G. Smith's answer to this question has remained consistent over the years. "[T]he monopoly of power by one cultural section is the essential precondition for the maintenance of the total society in its current form," writes Smith (160:183), quoting himself 24 years later. For Smith, Caribbean societies are "plural": They exhibit antagonistic strata with different cultures. They stand as essentially political shells, filled with juxtaposed—and incompatible—value-systems, different sets of institutions being held together solely by the vertical power of the state (158, 161).

The debate over Smith's use of the "plural society" concept has been long—much too long, some would say (14, 18, 49, 50, 145, 146, 159, 160, 162). Caribbeanists of various persuasions fail to see the insurmountable wall that Smith erects between his corporate groups. Moreover, the distinction between plural and nonplural societies never seemed convincing to the rest of the guild, and few scholars (51, 130) embraced Smith's framework. Yet, his inflexibility notwithstanding, Smith does raise eloquently the issue of the relation between heterogeneity and power, an issue that remains to be taken more seriously by anthropologists, in the Caribbean and elsewhere. For Smith is right in suggesting that in the Caribbean case, at least, one cannot presume "culture," if by this we mean a principle of homogeneity, determined by fiat, that would somehow find its parallel in an equally bounded entity referred to as "society."

Cite, Praise, or Paraphrase?

M. G. Smith makes much of the respective birthplaces, nationalities, and races of his various opponents. Smith himself is Jamaican-born and faces continuous insinuations that his application of the plural society is local middle-class ideology passing for social theory (145, 146, 159, 161, 162). Unfortunately, the serious issue of the status of native discourse remains only in the subtext of this debate. For although many Caribbean-born scholars have rightly questioned some of the assumptions behind the plural society framework, we need to ask why approaches that emphasize ethnic or cultural segmentation constitute a cross-generational stream in Caribbean studies and letters (130, 135, 142). These approaches are singularly effective when translated into the realm of state politics by a self-trained ethnologist such as Haiti's François Duvalier, by self-anointed "natives" such as Forbes Burnham in Guyana or Balaguer in the Dominican Republic, or by dissidents and potential coup leaders in Surin-
name and Trinidad. In an obvious reference to the local persuasiveness of his views, Smith himself notes that those “who participate in those processes and who are most directly affected by them” implicitly know which side is right (161:35). This “proof of the pudding” argument is not convincing to those of us who believe that social science is possible and that Goebbels does not necessarily provide the best analysis of Nazism. Yet the fact that Smith’s viewpoint indeed reflects Jamaican elite ideology does not change by an iota the fact—equally “obvious”—that the presumption of order and homogeneity that has been a hallmark of Western social science is itself a reflection of dominant Euroamerican consciousness, a by-product of the ideological invention of the nation-state.

The issue is not trivial. Even a superficial inquiry reveals that the pronouncements of Caribbean peoples of various origins have long made their way into anthropological accounts with unequal value added. Recently, Richard Price has systematically undertaken to record the Saramaka Maroons’ voices and narratives from and about the past and present them to an academic audience (137, 138). Price excels at inventing intellectual quotation marks, new ways of marking on the published page both the boundaries and the dialogs between voices; but he keeps prudently away from epistemological issues. Advancing along the path Price broke with First-Time, Alabi’s World masterfully mixes four voices on the page. Price gives us tips on how to “hear” three of these voices (Moravian missionaries, Dutch planters, and native Saramakas) but none on how to read his own prose and “passages from other scholars.” Yet it may be worth asking which philosophy of knowledge we should use to evaluate native historical or sociological discourse or, for that matter, that of any participant (140). How do we handle the overlaps and incompatibilities of participants’ judgments with Euroamerican scholarship (54, 195)? How does anthropology handle the similarities between, say, Puerto Rican discourses on virility and nationalism and Peter Wilson’s construct on reputation and respectability (about which more below), or the affinities between the social criticism of Haitian scholars in the 1930s and Herskovits’s notion of “socialized ambivalence”? To identify scholars independently of nativeness reopens the epistemological issues we might have wanted to postpone. Yet even if we set aside the issue of knowledge qua truth, who is the outsider who assigns differential semiotic relevance to alternative native voices (139)? And who is to bestow nativeness, anyway (54, 129, 195)? In the Caribbean, there is no “native” viewpoint in the sense that Geertz assumes nativeness (61), no privileged shoulder upon which to lean. This is a region where Pentecostalism is as “indigenous” as Rastafarianism, where some “Bush Negroes” were Christians long before Texans became “American,” where some “East Indians” find peace in “African” rituals of Shango (16, 76, 138).

Anthropology has yet to reach a consensus on both the epistemological status and semiotic relevance of native discourse anywhere. Is native discourse a citation, an indirect quote, or a paraphrase? Whose voice is it, once it enters
the discursive field dominated by the logic of academe? Is its value referential, indexical, phatic, or poetic? The problem is compounded in the Caribbean by colonial domination whose duration and intellectual reach defy most understandings of nativeness. At least some resident intellectuals have long been interlocutors in European debates about the region (64, 90, 142, 146). No discursive field is fully “ours,” or “theirs.” Diane Austin’s suggestion that Caribbean anthropology is marked by an analytical antinomy between, on the one hand, conflict-resistance and, on the other, integration-domination is telling (13), for similar dualities obtain in Caribbean intellectual discourse (90). But such dualities stand correct only if we do not try to push every single author toward one or the other pole.

At any rate, the real debate is not over whether heterogeneity exists but about where to locate it and—quite literally—what to do with it. The answer to that question turns on one’s idea of what Caribbean societies are about and, equally important, on one’s theory of culture and society. This is also what I mean by saying that the inescapable fact of Caribbean heterogeneity poses fundamental questions for anthropological theory that most anthropologists have chosen to ignore. Raymond T. Smith, one of M.G. Smith’s earliest intellectual opponents, said as much long ago, though in more muted terms and in a different context.

Gender, Social Organization, and the Wider World

In a 1963 review of family and kinship studies in the Caribbean, then the dominant field of Caribbean ethnology, R. T. Smith states: “The major problem is what it has always been; to relate patterns of familial and mating behaviour to other factors in the contemporary social systems and to the cultural traditions of the people concerned. Here progress is less impressive because we are still unclear about the nature of these societies” (165:472).

Smith’s concern should not be read only as the reflection of a functionalist’s search for structuring principles. The assumption that fieldwork will somehow reveal the nature of the entity under study, however persuasive it may look in cases of apparent homogeneity, breaks down completely on the frontier. Smith’s statement shows how the inescapable manifestations of complexity turn the anthropologist’s eye toward a larger horizon. It suggests why the glut of kinship studies did not lead in turn to enduring gatekeeping concepts in Caribbean anthropology: the heterogeneity of the ensemble precluded the domestic unit, the matrifocal family, or the allocation of gender roles to generate theoretical simplifiers, in spite of a flow of publications recycling a restricted number of themes.

I cannot do justice to this abundant corpus (more than 200 titles between 1970 and 1990), which has sparked, in turn, a number of anthologies, bibliographies, and reassessments (e.g. 92, 136, 143, 147, 177). The streams are multiple, though they tend to crisscross around the role—or the plight—of women as mothers, as child-bearers and rearers, and as mates. In their own
way, Caribbean kinship studies have always been gender studies, and they have always insisted that gender is a two-way street. This had to do, ironically, with an early concern for policy on the part of officials who saw Afro-Caribbean families as “deviant” simply because they did not fit the nuclear folk-model of Western consciousness (147, 148, 168, 170). Just as in the United States, these bureaucrats’ views were echoed by social scientists who wanted to explain—or explain away—such “abnormalities” as “missing fathers.”

Two early studies continue to influence the tone of the research: Edith Clarke’s *My Mother Who Fathered Me* and R.T. Smith’s *The Negro Family In British Guiana* (42, 163). Smith’s legacy may well be, to his despair, the often misused notion of matrilocality. Smith insists that he coined the word not to mean female-headed or even consanguineal families, as others would believe, but to underline the role of women as mothers (166, 167). Clarke’s legacy goes more in the direction of a social pathology. More recently, Peter Wilson’s construct of “reputation and respectability,” which neatly ties gender roles to the wider society, came close to becoming the master trope of Caribbean anthropology, precisely because it did not treat the domestic as a closed domain. Criticizing the fact that “social organization” was a code word for limited studies of the purely “domestic,” Wilson postulates a pan-Caribbean opposition between an internal value system (“reputation”), emphasizing equality, virility, and lower-class norms, and an external one emphasizing ranking, womanhood, and elitist respectability (201, 202). The scheme is more ingenious than most of the dualities that plague Caribbean studies; hence its continuous impact on the literature (e.g. 1, 148). But it is too neat for comfort; hence the reluctance of most Caribbeanists to use it as an overall simplifier. Wilson’s polarity requires strong qualifications when the observer tackles the historical and social particulars of specific territories and especially the relations among gender, the dual value system, and colonialism (132).

New paradigms have yet to emerge in spite of an abundance of refreshing positions on gender and the family. I can note only a few: the call to incorporate an emic approach to kinship into ethnographies of “social organization” (95, 136, 141); the call for yet more careful distinctions between household and family (147), or for a reconceptualization of the consanguineal household (66); the call for a more systematic study of the wide realm of female responsibility (56) or for the delineation of gender-specific estates, spheres, or domains against the background of economic roles (26). The last two strategies do not always point to a simplistic division that would consign women to the home and leave the world to men. Neither among the relatively isolated Maroons of Suriname nor in Barbados, arguably one of the most Westernized islands, do the cultural ideals and the practice of gender roles duplicate fully dominant Western patterns (48, 141, 179). Further, the case for female-centered domains, material or symbolic, is usually made on more sophisticated grounds than a base/superstructure model where gender would duplicate the division of labor (16, 178, 202). Furthermore, the division of labor itself does not always
operate as most Westerners would expect. Specialization in independent economic activities, notably marketing, often helps open for rural women certain gender-specific vistas upon the wider world (106, 121, 128). Men may occupy street corners and engage in lewd behavior in nonfamilial settings (37, 91, 98), but the woman’s world is by no means “private,” as North Americans would understand this word (20, 21, 88). The evidence does not prove that gender equality is a widespread Caribbean phenomenon, but it does indicate indigenous forms and designs of female autonomy. In that context, female independence does not necessarily mean the breaking of traditional ties; it may signify the reinforcement of certain “networking” practices (21). Nor does modernization always mean the demise of a putative “feudal” patriarchy. On the contrary, recent Western inroads often create or renew forms of gender inequality. Off-shore industries, Christian churches, professionalization, monetization, or remittances from migrants may reduce traditional female autonomy or increase gender-specific risks (35, 68, 73, 89, 106, 149, 179, 187). The complexity of gender roles recorded by Caribbean ethnographers implicitly begs feminist theory to de-Westernize its premises further.

Caribbean analyses of kinship and gender keep encroaching upon the wider world. Sally Price’s rich ethnography of Saramaka shows how the production and flow of art reflect and reinforce cultural understandings about gender (141). In an equally acclaimed study of mating patterns in 19th-century Cuba, Martinez-Alier centers on the relationship between sexual values and social inequality. She argues convincingly that the battles between sexes, races, and classes intertwine and that, in the final analysis, it is “the hierarchical nature of the social order” (100:128) that generates sexual codes as well as gender roles and relations. One cannot adequately abridge Martinez-Alier’s superb exposition of these arguments. I note here that, in the end, they echo R. T. Smith’s earlier intimation to look at “the nature” of these societies. How revealing, then, it is of the relationship between the Caribbean frontier and the discipline that a leading feminist theorist found it necessary to state five years ago that “analyses of marriage must be based on analyses of entire social systems” (43:197).

If Martinez-Alier’s work remains the concrete standard for studies tying marriage and the family to the entire social system, Raymond Smith remains the most consistent advocate for studies that meet this standard. For him, the strongest critique levied against any analysis of Caribbean kinship, including his earlier work on Guyana, is that which undermines the linkages that the researcher establishes between family and society (167). Smith repeatedly emphasizes that kinship relations are not mere derivatives of a larger social structure and especially not epiphenomena or consequences of the economic order (166–168, 170, 171). Rather he sees domestic organization tied to the wider world by way of multiple subsystems (households, sex roles, etc), each of which can be explored more systematically as potential linkages to the totality.
Smith's views of that totality and of the ways to deal with it reflect changes in emphasis and a capacity to incorporate multiple influences. One detects a distinct shift from structure and stratification (163, 164) to culture, and at times, a less clear-cut move from culture to culture-history. The second mode pervades Smith's recent essay on race, class, and gender in the Americas, one of his most powerful to date (172). In the first and more familiar mode, Smith distinguishes culture as an analytically distinct system of symbols and meanings, but he replaces David Schneider's "conglomerate" cultural level with a plane of "ideas in action," the "norms which mediate" (rather than govern) behavior. Smith then tends to locate on an intermediary level the two messy fields that I call here heterogeneity and historicity.

**Heterogeneity and Hegemony**

The intermediate level has served as the emergency exit of social science since at least Talcott Parsons. If Smith, to his credit, tries not to treat it as residual, it took younger scholars to make the very heterogeneity that this level embodies the stuff of anthropological inquiry. Lee Drummond draws on fieldwork in Guyana to question the homogeneity of culture and on Creole linguistics to propose a "creole metaphor" that posits a set of intersystems with no uniform rules, no invariant properties, and no invariant relationships between categories (55). The proposal is refreshing in light of the dominance of Western folk-models of cultural homogeneity in anthropological theory but, as Brackette Williams notes, Drummond's continuum is unidimensional and overlooks hierarchy. For Williams, who also did fieldwork in Guyana, the construction of mixed hierarchies is a chief concern, and multidimensional complexity a theoretical litmus test. Multidimensionality is what makes the hitherto intermediate level—where putative purities evaporate, where neither thought nor action constitutes an unruffled web, let alone a harmonious system—both pivotal and amenable to study. Williams's research strategy on ethnicity (partly colored through Gramscian lenses) emphasizes the process of homogenization of national cultures (199, 200).

Williams seems unaware of André Serbin's work on ethnicity and politics in Guyana, published in Venezuela in 1981. This unawareness would confirm that various anthropologists now tackling the relationship between heterogeneity and power in the Caribbean consider Gramsci a stimulating interlocutor, since Serbin's treatment of Guyana is explicitly Gramscian. Yet if both Serbin and Williams agree on the limits of hegemony (in the Gramscian sense) in Guyana, Serbin insists on the state-wide mechanisms that foster both dominant and counter "ethnic ideologies," while Williams documents the cultural struggle in a back-and-forth movement from the "community" to the national scene.

Race, class, and power—and Gramsci—are also present in the work of Austin-Broos. Austin's theoretical reformulations include a distinction between culture (values and their embodiments) and ideology (the interpretation of that culture in a contested field); a rejection of the old oppositions between
ideology and knowledge, between the symbolic and the structural-practical (11-13, 16). Austin’s ethnographic comparison of two Jamaican neighborhoods exposes a situation where conflict is constrained by a dominant (and, in her view, hegemonic) ideology of education (15).

The conflation of color, class, and power and the fiction of the nation-state return in my book on the Haiti of the Duvaliers, which rests on a reevaluation of Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as “imagined community” and on yet one more reading of Gramsci that emphasizes the role of the state (189). The nation is not a political fiction but a fiction in politics, culture-history projected against the background of state power. In both Haiti and Dominica, the state is part of the stakes and yet, at times, is an actor competing for the very stakes that it helps to define (192). The requisite gap between state and nation creates a field where both homogeneity and heterogeneity are simultaneously created and destroyed.

The contention that sameness and heterogeneity intermesh necessarily in so-called “complex” societies was not always a given of anthropological practice. Nor is it an explicit premise of most anthropological strategies today. It is thus further illustration of the ambiguous relationship between the Caribbean frontier and the discipline that an early quest to untangle the roots of heterogeneity remained for long on the outer orbit of anthropological discourse. Individual assessments of The People of Puerto Rico vary (144, 204); but when Steward and his associates launched that seminal project, it was an extraordinary attempt to look beyond the singular community study and treat an entire society as a complex structural whole. Further, in spite of its intellectual contradictions, the collective book did set out a proposition central to the themes that structure this review: Communities need to be studied in reference to a “larger context” that includes networks of local institutions but also the development of colonies and empires (176:32, 505-6). In short, heterogeneity cannot be grasped without serious reference to history.

HISTORICITY

The Puerto Rico project did not introduce historicity in debates about Caribbean cultures, even though two of its participants, Sidney W. Mintz and Eric Wolf, have become well-known proponents of a historically oriented anthropology (112, 120, 203). Dutch scholar Rudy Van Lier, a pioneer of 20th-century Caribbean studies, also leaned toward history in his dealings with Caribbean heterogeneity, as would his compatriot H. Hoetink, later in the century (79, 80, 194). In the 1920s and 1930s, many Caribbean-born writers, such as Price-Mars in Haiti and Pedreira in Puerto Rico, saw the study of culture as inevitably tied to history (135, 142). In 1940, antecedent of some of Mintz’s work, Cuban writer Fernando Ortiz (133) saw in the history of export crops the framework within which to look at sociocultural patterns in Cuba.
In the United States, by the mid-1930s, Melville Jean Herskovits had also concluded that Caribbean heterogeneity made the use of historical data “almost mandatory” (78:329). Herskovits saw the Afro-Americas and especially Caribbean territories as ideal laboratories for anthropologists suspicious of the theoretical assumptions underpinning analyses of “simple” societies. Within the framework of acculturation studies, anthropologists could map out the differential evolution of European and African traits in the Americas and, ultimately, discover the nature of culture, understood as a continuous process of retention and renewal.

This research program paralleled a political agenda marked by the US experience. Herskovits was anxious to demonstrate that cultural legacies were innate entitlements of all humans; they were neither the exclusive property of whites, as believed by the general public, nor an awkward accoutrement of some American Indians, as demonstrated by anthropologists (78:297–330). Herskovits saw culture-history as one of the most powerful antidotes to North American racism. It is fair to say, however, that in spite of this political goal and in spite of an explicit attention to the workings of culture under strain, the model itself cannot deal with the differential access to power that conditioned the encounter between Europeans and Africans in the Americas—only with its consequences. Thus, the investigation of slave culture can take on a life of its own; the description of past or present cultural traits (or their ascription to African, European, or Creole roots) can become an end in itself.

The extent to which Caribbeanists still engage in such exercises and manage to avoid the Herskovitsian pitfalls depends very much on their view of the region, but also on their perspective on both racism and the nature and role of culture theory (e.g. 124). Holland & Crane (81) rely more on industrialization than on the past in studying current developments in Trinidadian Shango. For Roger Abrahams and John Szwed, the vision of Americans of African descent as misadapted individuals, stripped of their cultural heritage, is very much alive and should be challenged on Herskovitsian grounds (2:1–48). Abrahams & Szwed’s compilation of travel accounts and residents’ journals from the British Caribbean shows enslaved Africans and their descendants busily building a distinctive Afro-American culture patterned after African models. The extracts cover various aspects of slave life, with an emphasis on religion, patterns of performance, and expressive continuities (2). One or another of these emphases returns in a number of works published in the 1980s (47, 53, 156, 181)—but see Glazier (63) for an exception to Herskovits’s influence, and Dirks (52) for a more narrowly materialistic treatment of a slave ritual.

The rigidity of Herskovits’s model became an open secret after developments in the historiography of slavery in the 1960s and early 1970s, but few anthropologists before Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (122) dared to revise the scheme. Rejecting the backward search for the retention of alleged African forms, Mintz & Price argue that the African influence on Afro-American cultures is best defined in terms of underlying values and “grammatical”
orientations, and that the culture-history of the Afro-Americas should rest upon historical knowledge of the concrete conditions under which the slaves operated and interacted with Europeans. Although they do not address frontally the role of power in the making of Afro-American cultures, Caribbeanists from various disciplines addressing the issue of African and European continuities in the New World must now take into account their influential reevaluation of the Herskovits model (40). Mintz & Price’s methodological framework for the study of culture contact also has important implications for the guild, now that anthropologists admit, more readily than in Herskovits’s time (77), that we are living in a global village. Richard Price’s subsequent work, often in collaboration with Sally Price, greatly advances our knowledge of the Afro-Caribbean past (137–140).

The explicit reevaluation of Herskovits and the reevaluation of Steward implicit in the addenda to—and contradictions of—the Puerto Rico book are the intersecting lines with which Sidney Mintz scissors his space on the Caribbean frontier. For Mintz, heterogeneity cannot be grasped without history (as knowledge) because heterogeneity is the product of history (as process). Historical knowledge is not just a succession of facts—though its empirical grounds must be sound; nor can it pass as explanation—though it illuminates patterns and trends (107, 112). Rather, history provides the only context within which to make sense of human beings as subjects (121). Thus, the historical study of the material and symbolic rise of sugar in the modern world provides the context within which to observe the connection between culture and power (120). What is true for a world commodity is also true for a localized religion: “Vaoudou cannot be interpreted apart from its significance for the Haitian people, and for Haitian history” (105:11).

Mintz’s view of historicity thus encompasses the natives’ conscious sense of the past emphasized by Price, the “conditioning fact of historicity” emphasized by Alexander Lesser (119:59), and the sweeping movements so well captured by Eric Wolf (203). Mintz’s historicism reminds us of C. L. R. James and E. P. Thompson (but note that the former influenced the latter), insofar as it takes the great tides of history (107, 114, 116, 120) as seriously as it does the petty details, of individual lives (111). But individuals manifest themselves only in cultural guise and within the constraints of historically defined social roles. Indeed, social positioning can steer the employment of the same cultural materials in opposite directions (117, 118). Mintz repeatedly uses Afro-American slavery, as the most repressive and influential institution of recent Western history, to underscore the necessary dialectics between institutions and individuals, system and contingency, adaptation and resistance, and structure and creativity (115, 121): “The house slave who poisoned her master’s family by putting ground glass in the family food had first to become the family cook” (107:321).

From that viewpoint, history is never just about the past; that is, the historical process never stops. History is, altogether, part of anthropology, part of
what anthropology studies, and part of why anthropology matters; it is material, tool, and context of anthropological discourse. "Culture must be viewed historically if it is to be understood at all" (117:508). Culture itself is cleansed of ahistorical assumptions of homogeneity. Mintz agrees with Wolf that "culture" and "society" are neither "perfectly coherent in themselves nor necessarily congruent with each other" (117:509). A favorite axis along which to follow the play between the social and the cultural is the plantation-peasantry complex. Mintz sees Caribbean peasancies and the cultural patterns they recreated, developed, or renewed over time as one of the most vibrant signs of resistance on the part of Caribbean peoples (especially Afro-Caribbeans) against a system imposed from the outside and dominated by the capitalist plantation (108, 115, 116, 121).

Unfortunately, many of the metatheoretical insights that Mintz draws from the Caribbean and that serve him so well in the study of the plantation-peasantry complex are hidden in over 100 publications, most of which stand outside disciplinary lines. He rarely packages theory for immediate consumption (but see 108, 110, 120, 121). Understandably, some students of the Caribbean freely adopt any combination of the themes that he refines or generates: the proto-peasantry, slave marketing and its impact on social organization, etc. Others follow similar directions but on parallel lines. Still, the peasant-plantation complex is a major theme in the anthropology of the region, in part because of Mintz’s work. Historians, sociologists, geographers, and anthropologists continue to raise cognate questions about the transition from slavery to free labor in the Caribbean, about the relation between the cultural and the social before and after slavery, and about the relation between agrarian systems and cultural traditions (29–32, 38, 46, 99, 101, 182, 185). Accommodation and resistance are the organizing themes of Karen Fog Olwig’s monographic study of St. John, a work that spans three centuries and combines effectively oral history, archival research, and ethnographic fieldwork (131). Marilyn Silverman (155) retraces the factional politics in a rice-producing village of East Indians in Guyana over a 70-year period. My own book on Dominica spans more than two centuries, combining historical and ethnographic research to situate a Caribbean peasantry in a changing world. I explicitly use the case as a contribution to peasant studies and social theory (187). In richly different ways, Jean Besson, Hymie Rubenstein, and Drexel Woodson look at customary forms of land tenure and the perception of land in Jamaica, St. Vincent, and Haiti. Woodson’s work is well grounded in history and explores the dialectic of similarity and dissimilarity as it relates to person, place, and forms of tenure (205). Besson emphasizes “family land” as an institution of resistance in Martha Brae, Jamaica; but Carnegie, in turn, sees customary tenures as probable African retentions (29–32, 40). Rubenstein’s contributions to the field are numerous. His monograph on a St. Vincent village uses primarily ethnographic data to address both the Caribbean and general literature on issues of livelihood, kinship, and household structure and
social life outside the family. But, as Robert Manners long insisted, even community studies in the Caribbean must take cognizance of the past and use archival materials (97).

BOUNDARIES AND ARTICULATIONS

Historicity, once introduced, is the nightmare of the ethnographer, the constant reminder that the groupings one tends to take for natural are human creations, changing results of past and ongoing processes. Caribbean ethnography long faced the issue of the boundaries of observation and analysis (42, 176), but this concern increased lately with the greater awareness of history. I disagree with Rubenstein’s statement that Caribbean ethnography has been marked by too much theory running after too little descriptive data (148:3–4). Caribbean ethnographers are no worse than others. Rather, the complexity of the frontier makes the application of many models inherited from the guild simplistic—a realization often deterred in other regions of the world by gatekeeping and the adoption of unproblematized units. To Radcliffe-Brown’s search for a “convenient locality of suitable size,” Baber replies (18:95) that “social boundaries can never be a matter of convenience” and that their setting is crucial in analyses of multicultural situations. Elsewhere, Baber warns us that Turner’s notion of social drama may be misleading without proper attention to the context within which this drama is played out (17).

But in the Caribbean, context is not uniform and the individual actor, this basic unit of methodological individualism, not an obvious entity of which the boundaries are known—even though individualism may be quite evident (51, 121, 202, 205). Ever since Comitas’s influential article (44), Caribbean anthropology has tried to deal with “occupational multiplicity,” the simultaneous or sequential engagement in a number of economic activities. Of course, there are obvious reasons why the urban and rural poor, women heads of households, migrants, and other people eking out a living under social and economic strain would want to be skeptical and bank on multiple adaptive strategies (21, 39, 41). Yet I suspect that what strikes most ethnographers is something more than risk management. First, the systematicity with which people maintain multiplicity is prevalent enough for observers to phrase it not in terms of movement between roles or types but in terms of types or roles that include movement (44, 60). Second, Caribbean peoples seem to have fewer problems than most in recognizing the fuzziness and overlap of categories, and multiplicity is not confined to the economic realm or to the poor. What appears to some as divided political, economic, or social loyalties has a long history on the frontier (33, 135, 139, 142). Middle-class individuals engage in behavior similar to the economic strategies of the poor—but further research is required because few anthropologists have enhanced our knowledge of the Caribbean middle classes (5, 96). Still, what seems to be at stake here is a way to live what the
post-Enlightenment West calls—and anthropology uncritically accepts as—individual oneness. Herskovitz's comments on Haitian "socialized ambivalence" seem to rest on an assumption of universal univalence, and a good deal of symbolic anthropology is premised on individual oneness.

The presumption of a microcosm, to paraphrase Manners (97), is no easier to maintain when studying a "community" on the frontier. The village tradition of the anthropological monograph becomes problematic in the Caribbean, where the line between rural and urban folk is not clear-cut (103). Anthropologists have noted the scarcity of book-length community studies in the region (40, 148). This deficiency is not just a reflection of the politics of the guild; it is also a healthy sign that Caribbean ethnographers often realize that the story they were after does not end with their village. How does one package ethnography with such an awareness? Williams ties her descriptions of Cockalorum to the national space in Guyana. Rubenstein admits that his village is open to the world (148:83–84) but stops short of drawing from this confession any fundamental shift in the scope of description. Still, Rubenstein goes much further than the expected chapter on history and the nation. He takes 78 pages to get to his village and, once there, he returns to history for a proper introduction of his core unit of observation. Woodson also rejects the perfunctory historical introduction: In his dissertation, historical chapters spanning the Haitian space come after the ethnographic introduction of his community and before his institutional analysis (205). My own study of Dominica also takes on the joint issues of historicity and boundaries. I use three units of description and analysis, The Nation, The World, and The Village—three different vantage points from which to look at Dominican peasants. History generates the first unit; political economy helps make sense of the second. The reader enters the village-level ethnography only two thirds of the way through the book (187).

The simultaneous use of multiple units of analysis by a single author or a team is one of the many strategies that reveals the search by many Caribbeans for a way to tie their immediate units of observation to the wider world (42, 120, 176, 183, 186, 187). The overwhelming evidence for the intrusion of outside forces makes Caribbean anthropologists attentive to—if not always uncritical of—world system theory, dependency theory, or cognate approaches that allow them to read their data beyond the traditional boundaries of the colonial or national state (17, 35, 36, 58, 68, 72, 73, 101, 127, 154, 167, 168, 171, 183). But once the world is acknowledged, one must deal with "local response," of which the Caribbean is a powerful illustration precisely because it is so colonial (114). Potential methodologies include analyses moving down, through concentric circles, from the level of the world system to as small a unit as the plantation by way of increasingly smaller units, such as the region or the territory (183).

Fortunately, at the level of the region, the conceptualization of units and boundaries is well advanced. Mintz's overview of the Caribbean stands as one
of the most sophisticated conceptualizations of a sociocultural area in the anthropological literature. Neither a laundry list of necessary particulars nor a covert reference to an immanent essence, it is doubly open. First, it ties the Caribbean to the rest of the world, notably to the continental Americas, and to Europe and Africa, by way of the Atlantic. Second, it does not superimpose homogeneity upon its internal units but views Caribbean territories along a multidimensional continuum informed by history. Colonial domination, African substrata, ecological limits, forms of labor extraction, cultural and ideological ambiance, and now US domination intermix in this scheme, which I read as an exemplar of "family resemblance" à la Wittgenstein (104, 107, 109, 123).

The concern for a regional multilevel methodology is explicit in the Women in the Caribbean Project, a multidisciplinary study covering a number of Caribbean territories that is the focus of two special issues of Social and Economic Studies and that has already spurred one book (151). Unfortunately, in line with most of the works published or sponsored by the University of the West Indies (but see 7), the project concentrates on territories where English is the official language, a weak commonality if we take seriously the idea of family resemblance. What makes Guadeloupe look like St. Lucia is not what makes Dominica look like Antigua; what makes Barbados look like Cuba is not what makes Cuba look like the Dominican Republic; and even Haitian exceptionalism is, to a large extent, a myth (190). There are good grounds for arguing that a comparison of women in Jamaica and Haiti would be at least as interesting as one between women in Jamaica and Trinidad; good grounds to suggest that we may understand better the degree to which Barbados is British if we also look at Martinique; good reasons to suppose that studies of local consciousness in Curacao may throw a better light on Puerto Rican nationalism. More important, everything we know about each of these territories confirms one thing: It is as a complex package that the Caribbean presents such stimulating challenge to Western social science and to anthropology in particular.

CONCLUSION

The domination of English on Caribbean studies reflects and reinforces boundaries and rankings inherited from the colonial past, as well as current US domination. It is also a scholarly handicap that amplifies intellectual parochialism within disciplinary, linguistic, or colonial spheres. It restricts the range of comparison and the number of territories studied (Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana, Trinidad), and promotes superficial similarities. Few students of Caribbean culture (especially Caribbean-born or African-American scholars) dare to cross linguistic or colonial borders, with only a few exceptions in recent years (e.g. 17, 18, 205). Few dare to bring explicitly to the discipline the political or meta-theoretical lessons learned on the frontier (74, 190, 191). Fewer dare to be
comparative across linguistic boundaries (101, 121, 123, 139). Yet as language gives fieldworkers the impression of being on familiar territory, chances increase for them to be off guard and also to ignore works done in other languages.

Yet Dutch scholars continue to produce a small but steady stream of works on the Caribbean, only a few of which are available in English (e.g. 79, 80, 82). In the 1970s, PhD theses on the Caribbean outnumbered those dealing with every other non-Western area in departments of anthropology and sociology in the Netherlands (19). Works in Dutch and in other languages are covered in the yearly update on Caribbean Studies of the Boletin de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe. A few titles by historians in Spanish (e.g. 125) and a number of works in French, on the French Antilles, Guyane, and Haiti, should be also of interest to English-speaking anthropologists (4, 8, 9, 22–25, 28, 62, 75, 85, 86, 93). To be sure, while the Dutch tend to match North Americans in empiricism, works in Spanish and French are rarely based on the kind of ethnographic fieldwork required by most US universities. On the other hand, the latter works often partake of an ancient and fundamental debate about the nature of Caribbean societies and their relation to the West. A number of writers (mostly linguists and literary critics writing in French, many of whom are Caribbean-born) are asking questions about Creolité, or what it means for Caribbean people to be part of societies and cultures born out of contact (e.g. 28, 64, 85). The multidisciplinary periodical Études Créoles extends beyond the technical issues of Creole linguistics and ties the Caribbean to societies and cultures of Africa and the Indian Ocean. In short, the concerns that I have highlighted here as scattered posts on the frontier are not the exclusive domain of Caribbean anthropologists nor are they exclusively expressed in English. A number of academics and intellectuals, writing in at least four languages, have dealt in different ways with what I here call heterogeneity, historicity, and articulation. That some think this endeavor possible without anthropology reveals their intellectual preference and prejudices. Yet it also suggests some of the limits to anthropological theory, at least as seen from the frontier.

Acknowledgments

I thank Flor Ruz, Sara M. Springer, and especially Paul Kim for their research assistance. I am grateful to Suzan Lowes, Sidney W. Mintz, and Drexel G. Woodson for their comments on an early version of the manuscript. I alone remain fully responsible for the substance of the argument and the final text.

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