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Caribbeanist Anthropology and Minerva's Owl: Lessons Forgotten, Lessons Learned

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Abstract

This essay presents a sketch of what a critical genealogy of the anthropology of the Caribbean might involve. After looking at the origins of anthropological interest in the region, I will focus on two case studies that, for better or worse, may be said to have had lasting diagnostic value for key epistemological orientations in Caribbeanist anthropology. I do so by examining M. G. Smith's *Plural Society* model and Julian Stewart's Puerto Rico Project in their Cold War contexts to point out why these truly pathbreaking endeavors resulted in a vision of Caribbeanness that we may well want to rethink. [M. G. Smith, Julian Steward, beyond peasant and plantation studies]

Resumen

En vez de examinar el estado del arte de la antropología caribeña contemporánea, este ensayo presenta un esbozo de lo que una genealogía crítica de la antropología de la región podría implicar. Después de analizar los orígenes del interés antropológico en la región, me enfocaré en dos estudios clásicos que, para bien o para mal, han tenido un valor diagnóstico duradero para las orientaciones epistemológicas clave de la antropología caribeña. Lo hago examinando al modelo de sociedad plural de Smith y el Proyecto Puerto Rico de Julian Stewart en sus contextos de la Guerra Fría para señalar por qué estos esfuerzos verdaderamente innovadores resultaron en una visión del caribeño que bien podríamos querer repensar. [M. G. Smith, Julian Steward, Más allá de los estudios campesinos y de plantaciones]

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This essay is a personal reflection on the anthropology of the Caribbean, and therefore based on my own involvement with the region, intellectual and otherwise. Writing such an essay is not an easy task, and not just because my necessarily situated perspective—or, indeed, my approach to such scholarship, past and present—may or may not sit well with the reader. The occasion of this anniversary issue on Caribbean anthropology demands that I not simply present my own research on matters to do with a particular place in the Caribbean. In my case, this would be La Habana's municipality of Regla, where I have done most of my ethnographic research since 1993, or the Cuban exclave of Miami, where I did my first field work beginning in 1985. I could do so, of course, and claim Regla and Cuban Miami as placeholders for some notion of Caribbeanness. In fact, most Caribbeanist anthropologists do just that when extrapolating from their (necessarily) "insular" experience. I think it is fair to say that even the most ambitious attempts to generalize across the region in terms that do *not* take off from certain historical commonalities that seem to render speaking about the Caribbean as a "regional unit" meaningful were based on (necessarily) local ethnographic experience and—I should add—localizable concerns.[1]

What comes to mind here, for example, are M. G. Smith's ([1955] 1965), Sidney Mintz's (1966, 1968, 1974), Gordon K. Lewis's (1968), or David Lowenthal's (1972) early and influential analyses of the historical factors that made it possible to think of an extremely heterogeneous geoformation (much of Cuba is, geologically, part of Yucatan) as a salient unit of human—or lastingly inhuman (McKittrick 2013; Palmié 2002)—geography. The Caribbean, as Mintz (1966) put it in an important and still eminently readable essay, represents a "socio-cultural region"—rather than, say, a nutritional one, as Clark Wissler (1917) argued when he lumped it together with the Amazon due to the predominance of manioc cultivation, or a subregion of a "Plantation America" that reaches from Georgia down to Southeastern Brazil, as Charles Wagley (1960) defined it on the basis of a form of export-oriented agro-industrial production that had become predominant in the eastern littoral of the tropical and subtropical Americas in the post-Columbian era.

True. But without seeking to detract from Mintz's careful delineation of the political-economic and sociohistorical factors that may render such a definition plausible, we may still ask ourselves: What "regions" of the world could possibly escape definition as "sociocultural ones"? Immanuel Wallerstein (1991) once brought that question into poignant focus by asking "Does India exist?" He then answered in a conditional sense: right now, yes, perhaps it does exist. But it does so only under some description (say, that imagined by the United Nations, Narendra Modi's BJP, Pakistan, the British Commonwealth, or even by some villagers in

Uttar Pradesh). But was there an "India" 300 years ago, will there be tomorrow, or is there today in Kashmir? This is a more complicated matter, to be sure.

Since the turn of the 21st century, the debacles about Greece's fiscal sovereignty, Brexit, the war in Ukraine, and the COVID-19 pandemic have well exemplified what is at stake in the fundamental historicity of geopolitical constellations that foreign policy experts tend to treat like natural, timeless (or, at least, reasonably stable) givens: assumed to be and treated as unproblematic entities of "business as usual"—until, that is, empires break up, iron curtains fall, the Third World scheme turns ludicrous (Where is the Second World now? Where did it go?), and other such events conspire to shake up eminently routinized common sense conceptions about what is where and when—and what is at stake in saying so. Let us not forget that what we today call the Caribbean began its career in Western thought as the "Antilles"—that is, as islands situated just offshore of the Chinese mainland ruled by the Khan. The Caribbean's existence was unthinkable for Columbus who accidentally found—rather than discovered—it. As a consequence, and like the "Americas" themselves, as the Mexican philosopher Edmundo O'Gorman (1961) put it—the contemporary chorological realities of the Caribbean archipelago and its adjacent mainland regions (and not just "the idea of it," as Mignolo [2009] might say) are inventions centuries in the making.

As late as 1650, it might thus have made more sense to lump Spanish Jamaica together with the Canary Islands or Portuguese São Tomé, than with British Barbados which, different from the former islands, had begun to embark on a violent career of slave-labor based agro-industrial development. In a series of important critiques of the historiography of slavery, Mintz (1961, 1977) thus called for "systadial" (rather than synchronic) comparisons in elucidating the formation of the Caribbean region as the birthplace of racial capitalism through its uneven and protracted incorporation into what Philip Curtin (1969) called the South Atlantic System.[2] In contrast, by the late twentieth century, the Caribbean had taken on a different shape: not only had a sugar-based colonial past mostly given way to precarious postcolonial sovereignty (Bonilla 2015) but by then a sizable literature had emerged that identified places like Miami, New York, Toronto, London, and Amsterdam as outposts of a now presupposed region. As Jean Bertrand Aristide's explicit call to Haiti's then 10th Department (i.e., the Haitian diaspora in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere) during his original Lavalas campaign in 1990 made clear, by then, no island was an island anymore—at least not necessarily. This is an issue that I briefly return to below. For now, let us just note that Puerto Rico still is an unincorporated Territory of the United States, and Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guyane are Departments d'Outre Mer of metropolitan France, part and parcel of a continentally far-off but economically and politically vital EU.

But let me put an end to these preliminary remarks about the creation/invention of the Caribbean as a geohistorical unit and resort to a conceit

that served me well in my last book (Palmié 2013): American academics do, in fact, know how to locate the Caribbean—namely, between the Library of Congress (LOC) call numbers F1601 and F2191 on the shelves of their university libraries. This may sound facetious. But it points to an important issue. Apart from anything else, and much like all other socially salient entities, the Caribbean is first and foremost a discursive product—and project (Fernández Retamar 1974; Mignolo 2009; O'Gorman 1961; Trouillot 1983). For make no mistake, here: the following remarks are part and parcel of what Alasdair McIntyre (1981) would call a tradition: a long conversation the participants of which (and whether they be native or foreign, scholars, activists, or both) need not agree on much else than the ethical and moral worth—and motive—of keeping it going.

This, I think, is quite clear when it comes to anthropology—a late-comer discipline to the part of the world that concerns us here. For traditions, in McIntyre's sense, have to be viewed on the historical backdrop of the interests and preoccupations of those who participate in them. This is what I want to do here by looking at a couple of episodes in the engagement of my discipline with the Caribbean as an exemplification of what I have called "the cooking of history" (2013). I hasten to add that this phrase is a mere riff on a theme originally developed in 1940 by the great Cuban polymath Fernando Ortiz ([1940] 2014), who likened his native island to a complex stew (*ajiaco*) bubbling away on the hearth of history, all the while new ingredients are added, and the dish's flavor and consistency constantly changes. Let me quote myself to make sure that we are on the same page:

> Whatever they are—ethnographic objects [and "regions" fall under that rubric, too, I think] behave in curious ways. . . . Places and problems change not merely because they change *in fact*—which, of course, they inevitably do. They also change because we come to them from no less historically changing epistemic vantage points. One can thus imagine generational cohorts of ethnographers marching across the same geographically or thematically defined terrain, and seeing different things—not just because of substantial changes that have factually occurred, but because we have come to ask different questions. . . . The figures we inscribe from fleeting observations (organized according to different theoretical conceptions) are no less subject to history than the empirical grounds from which our discursive efforts call them forth. (Palmié 2013, 8)

That said, in what follows, I am neither going to survey the state of the art in Caribbeanist anthropology nor present a proper genealogy of such endeavors. I am not qualified to attempt the former. This will have to be a collective effort, and as one of the editors of this special issue, my hope is that an approximation of this will emerge from our joint endeavors. But I do think I may be able to offer a few observations that might be useful in regard to the latter: a genealogy of anthropological thought about the Caribbean that also remains very much a

desideratum—a modest, and inevitably situated, contribution to what one of my anonymous readers for *JLACA* called the archive of Caribbeanist anthropology.

More specifically, what I intend to argue is this. First, that as an institutionalized regional specialization, Caribbeanist anthropology emerged under the signs of the Cold War and global decolonization, and initially solidified around a set of key issues to do with modes of life emerging from what has been called the "plantation-peasantry interface." Second, I want to point out the irony that just as anthropologists began to discover the social forms generated by the violent agro-industrial "modernity" that had characterized the region for centuries, global political economic transformations rapidly eroded the viability of *both* the plantation *and* the peasantry. Third, I briefly mention a number of recent ethnographic endeavors in what Don Robotham (2018) has called the "post-plantation Caribbean," indicating what directions the field might take. I close on a note of skepticism about analytical fads by casting a glance at the strange uptake some Caribbeanist key concepts experienced in the last decades of the 20th century, when nonregionalists suddenly appeared to discover that the Caribbean had somehow (just how exactly few bothered to ask) prefigured the supposedly postmodern condition of their own globalized, transnational, even hybridized Western worlds.

First, let me turn to the beginnings of scholarly engagement with the region. Ethnographic efforts and social theorizing on the part of indigenous intellectuals like the Trinidadians J. J. Thomas (1841–89), C. L. R. James (1901–89), and Eric Williams (1911–81), the Tobagonian J. D. Elder (1914–2003), the Haitians Antenor Firmin (1850–1911) and Jean Price-Mars (1876–1969), the Cubans Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez (1880–1970) and Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969), and the Martinican Aimé Césaire (1913–2008) did, of course, take place long before professionally trained anthropologists (Anglophones, for the most part) took serious note of the region. But their efforts either remained confined to the exigencies of insular national cultural projects or were geared toward an elucidation of the region's pivotal historical role in the making of global capitalist modernity. Thomas, Firmin, Price-Mars, Elder, and the younger Ortiz thus agonized over how to ideologically defend their nations' (or "nations-to-be") inescapable "newness," ethnic heterogeneity, and African heritage (both biologically and culturally) against authochtonist nationalist doctrines and the scientific racisms emanating from Europe and the United States. In contrast, Guerra, Williams, James, Césaire, and the later Ortiz sought to insert—or really rather reinsert—the history of the Caribbean region into where it truly belongs: the making of the "modern" capitalist world system. A very different project this is, which largely focuses on the region as such only to the extent that it had not always been the seemingly sleepy, unimportant, if not positively vexatious (from the metropolitan point of view) set of colonial appendages it appeared to be during the period of high imperialism. Rather, it was the initial focus and fulcrum of the modern capitalist world system.

The first professionally trained American anthropologists active in the region, such as Martha Beckwith (1871–1959), Elsie Clews Parsons (1875–1941), Melville Herskovits (1895–1963), and Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) certainly picked up on the former strand of concerns—the seeming anomaly of Caribbean societies' inescapable heterogeneity. But they completely ignored the latter—their historicity, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1992) put it. Different from the efforts of indigenous precursors who struggled to define—and defend—a sui generis sense of local identity for their racially and culturally heterogeneous nations (still colonized or already independent), it is not unfair to say that particularly Herskovits's project of establishing a metric of transcontinental Africanity remained remarkably unconcerned not only with the regional specifics of the Caribbean (as part of "Afro-America") but also with the contemporary history and politics of the local fields in which he and his students harvested their crop of Africanisms.

Right or wrong, Herskovits-bashing is a well-established genre in African Americanist anthropology by now. So let me just point to the fact that his—in many ways pathbreaking—1937 monograph *Life in a Haitian Valley* reserved mention of the decades of American occupation (at the tail-end of which he conducted his research) until the very last pages of his book. And even the potentially most interesting contribution to an anthropology of modern Haiti (rather than its African past) that Herskovits made—the concept of "socialized ambivalence"—turns out, upon closer inspection, to have been inspired by one of his elite Haitian interlocutors straining to avert falling into trance in the presence of his American scientist patron. The matter deserves closer attention than I can give it here.[3] But if there was socialized ambivalence involved in this incident, it was decidedly on Herskovits's part.[4]

More interesting is a second phase of professional anthropological engagement with the region. On the one hand, it can be traced to the aftermath of the Moyne and Simey reports (1945, 1946) on the social problems allegedly occasioned by West Indian family and mating patterns judged aberrant by metropolitan standards in the aftermath of massive labor unrest in the 1930s British Caribbean. On the other hand, it can be traced to Julian Steward's selection of the U.S. neocolony of Puerto Rico as the location for community ethnographies farmed out to his students in order to grasp the cultural integration of "complex societies" (as it was called, then; Which societies are not "complex"?). Perhaps not surprisingly, in the former instance, someone steeped in the British tradition of Africanist structural functionalism soon emerged as a prominent theorist of the region's characteristics and problems. This was M. G. Smith, a London-educated Jamaican with impeccable northern-Nigerian-based credentials for delivering empirical social science with a strong policy bent. Smith's "A Framework for Caribbean Studies" ([1955] 1965), first published only three years after his return to Jamaica in the politically

heady days of the early 1950s, was a manifesto in at least two ways, as David Scott (2013a) has pointed out.

First, Smith made it crystal clear that he was not one of the "visiting experts" called in to diagnose colonial social problems. Different from Trinidad's Andrew Carr (1953), who had published an important ethnographic essay on a community of descendants of liberated Africans on the outskirts of Port of Spain, or the British sociologist Andrew Pearse (1955), who had issued a call for the study and preservation of Caribbean folk traditions (interestingly, on a Swedish model and in a Dutch journal), Smith not only *was* a native scholar but had the imperial educational credentials that Carr lacked. As Scott writes, Smith "understood himself to be a committed liberal nationalist and professional social anthropologist who would undertake the challenge of framing the question of Caribbean Studies for the nation-in-waiting" (2013a, 3). Second, Smith had already come to form distinctly dyspeptic notions about anything but insular forms of sovereignty, emphatically predicting the failure of the West Indian Federation, and even remaining highly skeptical of any form of viably democratic national politics based on what he perceived as the "plural" nature of Caribbean societies. Smith's "plural society" may nowadays belong to the annals of forgotten theory. But rather than rehearse it here at any length, let me just point out that his extrapolations from J. S. Furnivall's formulations concerning the then Dutch East Indies painted a grim picture: for Smith, the socio-ethnic sectors of such "plural" societies as had grown out of centuries of plantations colonialism in both places were deeply divided. All that held them together was the market and the sheer force exerted by the colonizer.

Obviously, Smith's insertion of this model—deeply skeptical as it was of any possibility of collective nationhood—into a political sociology of the Anglophone Caribbean was questioned right from the start. To my knowledge, no one in the Hispanophone, Francophone, or even Dutch Caribbean ever seems to have followed Smith down the "plural society" road. Instead, Smith's plural society theory came under attack almost as soon as he had formulated it, and it was another Smith—Raymond T. Smith: former RAF pilot, Cambridge student of Meyer Fortes, and ex-colleague of mine—who would become M. G. Smith's most formidable opponent in Caribbeanist anthropology's first major debate that focused on matters other than Herskovistian searches for African origins. Again, without delving into the specifics of R. T.'s objections, it may serve us well to note that both M. G.'s "plural society" and R. T.'s "value integration" not only must be seen on the backdrop of late colonial British structural-functionalist anthropology in which both were rooted but also in relation to the kind of Parsonian consensus sociology that so characterized American social science during the Cold War (see Austin 1983 for a sophisticated dissection of the debate between the Smiths). To use one of Trouillot's (1990) phrases, while M. G. sorrowfully emphasized the "oddness" of Caribbean societies on the basis of the rather spurious and modernist

assumption of sociocultural homogeneity as a basis for viable polities, R. T. emphasized the "ordinariness" of a "value consensus" that, as Brackette Williams (1991) was to show, represented little more than the expression of (more or less) effective forms of ideological hegemony.

Let me briefly make two further points about M. G. Smith. Not only did he literally presage the demise of the West Indian Federation, he also was one of the main architects, and perhaps ultimately the sole author of the 1960 Rastafari Report, commissioned in the aftermath of the so-called Claudius Henry affair, when a raid on a Rasta camp yielded not only a cache of weapons but also a draft letter addressed to Fidel Castro (Bogues 2002; Chevannes 1976). For the longest time, this "report"—put together in the course of a fortnight!—has been treated as the authoritative source on the history of this movement. I am not the first to say so, but it is a Cold War document, first and foremost—both in the sense of policy and as a piece of historical, let alone ethnographic, evidence.[5] Keeping this particular case in mind, might we not ask: Was M. G. Smith (1961) right in arguing—only a year before the final break-up of the West Indian Federation—that "the Creole culture which West Indians share is the basis of their division"? To which we should add the prompt: Discuss!

This, of course, is what Deborah Thomas did in her monograph *Modern Blackness* (2004), where she makes clear that the stakes in the debate had been ideologically overdetermined from the start. Robotham (1980) had earlier criticized M. G. Smith for projecting the concerns of a mid–20th-century "brown" Jamaican middle class onto the history (and future!) of postindependence Jamaican society. But with some twenty more years of retrospect, Thomas saw the issues at hand in a broader light. The entire debate formed an integral component of a historically specific discursive formation aiming not just to define the conditions of viability of postcolonial Caribbean nation states but to *prescribe*—rather than merely represent—the kinds of "traditions," "norms," "values," and "cultural heritages" on which allegiance to such states was supposed to be based. As "models of" thus slid into "models for," the constructions of national culture emerging from such research and the political practices geared toward generating forms of national identification were locked into feedback loops from the get-go. This became evident in the postindependence perpetuation of long-standing colonial hierarchies that are not only linked to wealth, education, and the capacity to project "respectability" in highly gender-specific fashion but also bound up with a complex system of racializing referents.

While this may look like proof of Peter J. Wilson's (1969) immensely influential respectability/reputation model[6] (succinctly critiqued by Jean Besson [1993] for its androcentrism), I would say: think twice. Ironically, these hierarchies remained socially entrenched not in spite of *but because* postcolonial elites actively enshrined anthropological constructions of rapidly changing "folk cultures" as

emblematic of models of "creole nationhood" while they simultaneously continued to marginalize the producers of such forms. The historical difference from past times, of course, is that the use of the anthropological imaginary is no longer in the name of "civilizational uplift" and "Christian moral reform," but in the name of "modernization" and "development." In fact, we might do well to *extrapolate* from Wilson's face-to-face model toward a notion of the "respectable state" mobilizing implicitly "Black," "lower class" forms when it suits its purposes—whether populism or UNESCO accreditation—while unleashing the rhetoric of crises of value in almost cyclical fashion whenever novel counterhegemonic forms appear to threaten the smooth absorption of "folk culture" into a Gramscian state of transformist hegemony. Examples are not hard to come by, and they range from the postrevolutionary Cuban attempts to musealize Afro-Cuban religion and elevate "Rap Cubano" to a genre of national culture (as opposed to Puerto Rican Reggaeton) to Duvalier *père*'s mobilization of *vodou* temple networks for state-security ends, the Jamaican domestication of Rastafari in the post-Marley period (as opposed to the "slackness" of the dancehall culture), or the Martinican "*creolité*" movement's championing hyperbasilectal registers that virtually no one speaks so as to counteract a creeping *francophonie* and fiscal Euro-ization perceived as inimical to "authentic" forms of local identification.

But let us now look at a second, virtually contemporaneous moment of anthropological discovery of the Caribbean as a region—this time under the auspices of Julian Steward's Columbia University project concerning emerging peripheral "national cultures" and their "levels of sociocultural integration." As in the Jamaican case, the Cold War is the context in which we must place the so-called Puerto Rico Project. If the expulsion of the left wing of the People's National Party in 1954 had been the historical moment in which M. G. Smith may have developed his pluralistic "Framework," the project that Steward farmed out to his students in 1948 coincided with the election of Luis Muñoz Marín and the onset of *Manos a la obra*, a.k.a. Operation Bootstrap, which was designed to definitively jolt an economically backward but—at the time—politically volatile U.S. dependency onto a career of industrial modernization by attracting mainland capital through tax incentives and low local labor costs. It was also the year that the Puerto Rican Senate passed Law 53, better known as *la ley de la mordaza*, outlawing utterances critical of the US government or in favor of independence, and forbid the display of the Puerto Rican flag, even within people's own homes. Though one of the members of the project witnessed a week-long agro-industrial strike in December 1948, by the time the *nationalista* insurrections of late October 1950 were violently crushed, the American members of Steward's project were safely back home in New York—where they soon would be joined by a rapidly rising tide of more than 300,000 Puerto Ricans who opted for the mainland in the course of the 1950s alone.

Again, we need to look at the Puerto Rico project with hindsight, and in this case, several of the participants have done so themselves—sometimes repeatedly (see Mintz 2001). In fact, without slighting the achievement that *The People of Puerto Rico* (PPR) still represents, it could be argued that the study was already dated when it appeared in print in 1956—and not because it was in any way "old-fashioned." It was the first American anthropological attempt to holistically study a complex modern society, and a major contribution toward directing the orientation of the discipline away from its prior emphasis on human modes of life perceived as rapidly vanishing forms of cultural "aboriginalty."[7] Of course, this focus on our "primitive contemporaries" may always have been a particularly North American concern: few of the British-trained anthropologists descending on the Caribbean at the same time had any doubts that the domestic groups they studied as "workshops of social reproduction" (Fortes 1958) were anything but part and parcel of societies rapidly steering toward national independence. In fact, this was precisely the point: Would these "workshops" turn out citizens of viable nations-to-be?

Yet as Sydel Silverman (2011, 185f.) reminds us in speaking of the American disciplinary context in which the Puerto Rico project was launched in 1947,

> We need to remember what had not yet happened in anthropology. It was not yet taken for granted that anthropology could and should study modern societies; many still questioned the legitimacy of anthropology venturing beyond the primitive world with which it was identified. Peasant studies had barely begun with a smattering of village ethnographies; that field did not take off until well into the 1950s. Urban studies, ethnic studies, top-down ethnography, and other such approaches to complex societies were far in the future. . . . Modernization theory, and then its anthropological critiques, would not emerge for another decade or more; dependency theory was two decades away from its entry into anthropology. (Silverman 2011, 185–86)

Her catalogue of what had yet to come is longer, but this already suffices to bring into focus the innovative if problematic nature of Steward's transfer of a "cultural ecology" developed in the context of presumptively relatively aboriginal small scale societies (the Shoshoni, in Steward's case), to one of several million inhabitants that looked back on some 400 years of colonization during which its history and that of the capitalist world system had closely articulated. More importantly, and in precisely that sense, Silverman's list of "not yets" also serves to underscore what a tremendous advance his students' (then still largely intuitive) historical materialism represented in terms of our discipline's self-assigned tasks and theoretical repertoire. As has been repeatedly noted (Mintz 1978, 2001, 2011; Roseberry 1978; Vincent 1990; Wolf 1978), PPR actually represented two projects rolled into one, with what de facto were two separate and analytically opposed introductions.

Chances are that—as Mintz once surmised (2001)—Steward never read the introduction authored by "the staff." It was the one which, with hindsight, pointed toward the future of our discipline.

The irony is that without being fully aware of it at the time (And how could they? No ethnographer ever is), Steward's collaborators were studying the tail end of a Caribbean modernity that, long in the making by then, was just coming undone before their very eyes. Perhaps no one understood this sooner and better than Robert Manners and Sidney Mintz. Anticipating conceptions of "globalization," "transnationalism," and even "multisitedness" that were then still decades in the future, in a 1965 review of the changing nature of anthropological units of analysis in light of the growth of Caribbean remittance economies, Manners (1965, 188) quoted the Puerto Rico Planning Board to the effect that the island had become an "economic region" of the United States, and noted that in the preceding decade Puerto Rico's "most valuable export commodity" had been its people. By then, remittances from migrants had tripled since 1948, the export of surplus labor had begun to stabilize island politics, and it was becoming clear that—like other Caribbean islands—Puerto Rico could no longer be studied as a conveniently pelagic unit of analysis. Mintz, in turn, picked up on the local effects of such transformations (1955; cf. García Colón 2017). By the time he published his seminal essay on "The Rural Proletariat and the Problem of Rural Proletarian Consciousness" in 1974, he noted that the corporately owned company towns—*colonías*—that had grown around what he called the enormous "land-and-factory combines" into which U.S. capital had transformed former sugar haciendas after 1899 had all but disappeared. So had sugar itself—the industrial crop that had organized the mode of life that Mintz had observed in the late 1940s. In his restudy of Mintz's original field site, barrio Jauca, Brian Ferguson (2011, 240) found the same:

> In 1980 that world was gone. Aguirre [i.e., United States Central Aguirre Corporation] was part of the government, though few Jauqueños had anything to do with it any longer. Agriculture still dominated local land but not local life. Cane land was replaced by foreign-run cultivation of fruits and vegetables for export. Many people had no or little work; they survived on food stamps and slight other support from distant capitals. Yet a substantial minority in Jauca was doing well. They worked in education, health, factories, and government. (Ferguson 2011, 240)

As Mintz and others of the original project staff have repeatedly noted, one of the major shortcomings of the Puerto Rico project was their failure to take into account the neocolonial relationship between the soon-to-be Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and U.S. capital interests. True enough, and I don't want to belabor this issue here, except to note that the regime of US welfare *cupones*, remittances, and service sector jobs apparently did its job in stabilizing this relationship to a degree that the alternative to it nowadays no longer seems to be independence but

statehood.[8] Instead, I would like to point out yet another irony fostered, in part at least, by Mintz's own tireless efforts to arrive at an anthropological understanding of the rural sector of Caribbean societies as a vanguard of capitalist modernity (Scott 2004; Yelvington 2018). In part, this is a story of academic institution-building that remains to be told by somewhat more knowledgeable about such matters than I am. There is no question that the literature produced under Mintz's aegis and influence entirely transformed our ideas about the role that slave-labor-driven plantation economies played in the origin and history of what, by 1974, Wallerstein had come to call the modern world-system. There also is no question that we learned a tremendous amount about the plantation-peasant interface so characteristic of the social (and cultural) history of the region—and well beyond what economists and political sociologists like Lloyd Best, George Beckford, or Carl Stone told us on the basis of revealing but ethnographically "thin" and historically shallow survey research (cf. Carnegie 1992). Throw in patterns of customary land tenure, the history of Afro-Caribbean kinship structures, gender relations, peasant marketing, or even conceptions of peripheral, dependent urbanization, and you will get the picture.

But what we did not get may be revealing, too: Why do we lack ethnographies on, for example, how bauxite mining in Jamaica,[9] the nickel and copper industries in Cuba, or oil in Trinidad have interacted with the decline of both local peasantries *and* the agro-proletarian sector, until the moment when such studies could have been undertaken had virtually passed (cf. Robotham 2018)?[10] Speaking about my own field site of La Habana's municipality of Regla, we now know where the last African *babalaos* lived around the turn of the twentieth century. But we have no idea how the development of contemporary forms of Afro-Cuban ritual praxis related to the economic history of the larger Port of Havana, the Hershey railroad terminal, the Standard Oil refinery that built up entirely new sections of the town as housing for its workers, or the now defunct revolutionary hydroelectric power plant built by Soviet engineers. To be sure, by the time Kevin Yelvington (1995, this issue) published his ethnography of Essential Utensils, Ltd. in Trinidad and Carla Freeman (2000) published her ethnography on pink collar employees in Barbados, the chance to study these matters *while* such transformations were still going on was largely over.

I know that the male esoteric sodality known as Abakuá used to control the labor market at Regla's dockside, and I was lucky enough to speak to a few aged former stevedores (who held *abakua* titles) about the horrors of day labor at the pre-revolutionary dockside. My best informant on ritual oration was a (much younger) former naval engineer, who had turned to a full-time career as a ritual drummer when Havana's harbor froze up and destroyed his Soviet-underwritten revolutionary career in the early 1990s. I have tried to chart the multiplication of chapters in

one of Abakuá's branches over the course of the twentieth century (Palmié 2006a; cf. 2008), and I know that Abakuá's control over markets (both black and gray) continues to this day. But how exactly its ritual and economic histories intersected is now practically lost to reconstruction.

I once found a manila folder in my department's recycling stash indicating that Diane Austin had written a term paper about bauxite mining in Jamaica. But I know neither when she handed in that paper (presumably to Ray Smith), nor if it ever got published (was it Austin 1975?).

This, of course, is not to say that these were the only sort of changes that mattered, though it ought to be clear that what Robotham (2018) called the postplantation Caribbean is a very different place than prior scholarship has portrayed it to be. The much studied plantation-peasantry interface is gone, replaced by what Thomas (2019) calls "the wake of the plantation" and its continued reverberations of violence—a constellation in which formerly rural forms of patronage and violent entrepreneurship have migrated to urban "garrison communities" (cf. Maoz 2021). In the absence of economically viable extractive industries, tourism has replaced plantation labor, turning the descendants of slaves into waiters and prostitutes, servicing the demand for experience goods on the part of economically hypercapacitated visitors from the global North (Brennan 2004; Kempadoo 2004; Palmié 2004; Sheller 2003). Postindependence nation-building has given way to a variety of postcolonial predicaments. The promises of nonaligned sovereignty, such as in Michael Manley's Jamaica, Maurice Bishop's Grenada, or even Castro's Cuba have turned into "futures past" (Scott 2013b; see Brotherton 2012 for a concrete example).

But there certainly are emergent transitions to be studied in the region, and here I would point toward Vanessa Agard-Jones's (2013) work on environmental toxicity in Martinique, Rivke Jaffe's (2016) work on urban environmental justice in Jamaica and Curaçao, Kiran Jayaram's (2018) work on the social and cultural consequences of export mango production in Haiti, Ryan Jobson's (2021) ethnographies of petrochemical extraction in Trinidad, Olivia Gomes da Cunha's (2018, 2021) work on the afterlife of American bauxite mining in a Suriname maroon village, or the questions of national sovereignty—or the lack thereof—explored by my former students:[11] Greg Beckett (2019), Yarimar Bonilla (2015, 2020), Lee Cabatingan (2016, 2018, 2020), Jeffrey Kahn (2019), and Chelsey Kivland (2020) in the context of Haiti's perennial crisis, Guadeloupe's syndicalist movement, the Trinidad-based Caribbean Court of Justice, the evolution of the U.S.-Haitian water border, or grass roots organizing in Port-au-Prince, respectively (see Thomas, this issue). Brent Crosson's (2020) updating of the study of Afro-Caribbean religious traditions in light of post-Asadian discussions of secularism belong in that picture, as does Stuart Strange's (2018) explorations of Ndyuka "metaphysics of history" and affliction, or Anthony Medina's (2020) dissertation on Cuban

"*pandillas*"—i.e., criminalized Black male associations (which Medina carefully disentangles from both the image of U.S. "gangs" and Central American "*maras*")—that can be profitably read together with Jovan Lewis's (2020) ethnography of Jamaican online scammers. Aligned as all of these studies are with current key concerns in the discipline as such, they look to me as pointing toward possible futures of Caribbeanist anthropology. Whether this will be so, of course, remains to be seen. Remember: it is not just the empirical realities that change. Our perspective on them changes, too. A dialectical moment, to be sure.

Be that as it may, as Mintz himself pointed out (1996), just as our discipline had finally seemed to have absorbed the lesson to be learned from the "precocious modernity" that had asserted itself in the Caribbean periphery long before its symptoms were even noted in nineteenth-century metropolitan cores (and then frantically analyzed by the emerging discipline of sociology), anthropology was on to other agendas in which the Caribbean would play a somewhat paradoxically central role. By the time this happened, Silverman's "not yets" *had* become central concerns of our discipline's focus on a resolutely "modern"—even allegedly "postmodern"—world. In the first ever article devoted to the region in the disciplinary augury *Annual Reviews of Anthropology*, Trouillot (1992) thus felt emboldened to present the Caribbean as an "open frontier" for anthropological theory. I won't go into the substance of his argument, except to note that his insistence on the "undisciplined" nature of the region, the past failure of anthropologists to surround it with gatekeeping concepts, and the region's inescapable historicity and heterogeneity may have resonated, at least in some quarters, in perhaps rather unintended ways. Mintz (1996, 1998) sounded a strong note of skepticism with regard to the reasons behind our discipline's newfound enthusiasm for a region that, only a generation earlier, had been utterly marginal to its core concerns. But it was Aisha Khan (2001) who first systematically put a finger on what had become, by the early 1990s, a sort of cottage industry of indiscriminate and often rather opportunistic theoretical extrapolations from Caribbean ethnography to the concerns of a world newly perceived to be—as Ulf Hannerz (1987) put it—"in creolization." As Khan noted, the very "openness" of the frontier that Trouillot vaunted less than a decade earlier had paradoxically acquired gatekeeping functions—not for the region, however, but for a postmodern world. To quote Mintz once more, it suddenly seemed "as if global social processes needed to 'catch up' in the world at large to what Caribbean colonialism had done to its peoples, long ago" (1996, 303). Perhaps. But if so, how utterly trivial—and trivializing—to say, as James Clifford (1988, 173) did, that "we are all Caribbeans now, in our urban archipelagoes"! If that may have looked like a lesson of sorts in the 1990s, I am glad that it has largely been forgotten now. The region's seemingly anomalous heterogeneity, hybridity, and thorough modernity (even paradoxical "Western-ness," if you will) that had so puzzled our discipline in the past—and so excited it a generation ago—has now

become commonplace. The Caribbean has morphed into the site of studies that might just as well and just as easily be undertaken elsewhere: offshore banking, IT, beauty pageants, Islamic radicalization, reparations movements, climate change, environmental toxicity, DTC genomics, sex tourism, and so forth. And perhaps that's all for the better—as long as the ethnographic specificities of the region are kept closely in view.[12]

To conclude, then: while I myself have been a participant in some of the debates I just mentioned (Palmié 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2013), I am, of course, an utter latecomer to the kind of long conversation I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. But in Ortiz's terms, this is my privilege rather than my liability, and it will be future readers' privilege to look back at the moment that I published this essay and think "Palmié's views were just *so* early twenty-first century." And that, I imagine, will be entirely right. All knowledge is conjunctural, a proposition to which even Karl Popper would have agreed. The difference is that while Popperian falsificationism proceeded from the idea that better knowledge of an unchanging world would replace erroneous conceptions of it, in our case, changing social worlds do not so much invalidate (unchanging) prior scholarship than turn it into evidence—not just of changing social worlds but of the equally changing anthropological imagination.

So it will invariably be with this essay, and whether its current readers now agree with me or not. What future readers will make of it, I cannot know, of course. But perhaps I'll be still around for some of that future, and can reflect on what the Caribbean was when I got interested in that part of the world, and what it became during the time when I had the good luck of being able to earn my living by studying it. But the main thing is what eventually will be made of it when history will have cooked my contributions, such as they are, to the point that they will have become a mere ingredient to the *seemingly* finished dish that one reads about (or maybe not!) in textbooks about the region or the history of my discipline.

Notes

[1] Few self-identified Caribbeanists have ever worked in more than two island (or mainland) contexts. Sidney W. Mintz's ethnographic expertise in three different islands (Puerto Rico, Haiti, and Jamaica) with different colonial and linguistic backgrounds may be exceptional. M. G. Smith worked in Jamaica, Grenada, and Carriacou. Richard Price worked in Martinique, Suriname, and French Guyana. Olivia Gomes da Cunha worked in Cuba and now works in Suriname. Yarimar Bonilla worked in Guadeloupe and now in Puerto Rico. Scott Freeman works in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, as does Kiran Jayaram, who also worked in Cuba. Except for a stint of mostly archival research in Jamaica, I stuck to Cuba. I have not researched the matter as thoroughly as would be warranted. But the point may well be moot: though many of us read widely beyond our own ethnographic scenarios and the regionalist literatures, we all generalize from local experience. As anthropologists, we are wont to do just

that. None of us professing to be a Melanesianist or, for that matter, Mediterraneanist, could possibly claim anything else (for now classic statements of the problem, see Lederman 1998, Pina Cabral 1989).

[2]Mintz urged historians to compare slaveholding colonies not at a specific moment in history but at the same stage of political-economic development. After Spain's early experiments with slave-labor based sugar plantation agriculture faltered in the second half of the 16th century, Cuba, for instance, only reached the stage of the destruction of its peasantry, massive land concentration, and the brutal wasting of enslaved Black lives in agro-industrial sugar production toward the end of the 18th century. In contrast, British Barbados had attained that stage more than a century earlier, its plantation economy already going into contraction by the beginning of the 19th century (Guerra y Sánchez 1935; Moreno Fraginals 1978; Tomich 2004). As to Philip Curtin's (1969, 2) famous definition: The South Atlantic System was a "complex economic organism centered on the production in the Americas of tropical staples for consumption in Europe, and grown by the labor of enslaved Africans." Late in his life, Curtin opened himself up to what we might nowadays call decolonial critique, but it is hard to argue that this definition has not stood the test of time as the formula, immune to Occam's razor, for the origins of racial capitalism.

[3]On this episode, see Kevin Yelvington's (2009) careful reconstruction from Herskovits's field notes and diaries, as well as his discussion of the career of the concept of socialized ambivalence in American Culture and Personality studies.

[4]See, for example, Karen Richman's (2008) account of possession ceremonies in Herskovits's old ethnographic stomping grounds in Haiti, where foreign ethnographers—like Odette Mennesson-Rigaud—fell into trance themselves. Herskovits's highly ambivalent relationships to Zora Neale Hurston and Ruth Landes belong in that picture. He ignored the former and positively sabotaged the career of the latter for their alleged lacking of intellectual detachment from "the field."

[5]A case made forcefully by Robert A. Hill at a conflict-ridden conference in honor of M. G. Smith at UWI Mona in 2008, but strenuously denied by Roy Augier and Rex Nettleford, the two then still surviving coauthors of the 1961 Report (see Barnett 2013 and Paul 2014 for sharply divergent views on the Report). Planned in honor of M. G. Smith's legacy, that conference descended into chaos after Orlando Patterson, in his opening keynote address, not only dismissed Smith's work as utterly untenable but also scandalously alleged that Smith had had an affair with his childhood friend Norman Manley's mother, Edna. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the volume (Meeks 2011) that grew out of the conference's proceedings omits not just Patterson's and Hill's contributions but also any mention of this controversy.

[6]Based as it was on earlier studies, such as Antonio Lauria's 1964 work on *respeto* and *relajo* in Puerto Rico.

[7]On the history of American anthropological involvement with Puerto Rico—both before and after PPR—see Duany (2010). My thanks for this reference go to Kiran Jayaram.

[8]Cf. Godreau (2011) on the changing reception of PPR among Puerto Rican intellectuals—who largely shunned or criticized the book when it first came out, but now tend to view it in light of changed political circumstances.

[9]But see Tramm's (1977) early and in many ways exceptional study of the deleterious social, economic, and ecological impact of multinational bauxite mining in Mandeville, and its troubling implications for Jamaica's economy as a whole. I am grateful to Kiran Jayaram for having pointed me to this important essay.

[10]Sam Martinez's (1995, 2007) ethnographies of Haitian migrant labor in the rapidly decaying Dominican sugar industry may be as close as we get to that moment. Mimi Sheller's (2014) work on the global interconnections of the American aluminum industry and its impact on the Caribbean provides important insights, but lacks an ethnographic dimension. But see Gomes da Cunha (2021).

[11]Some of whom, I should say, I inherited from Michel-Rolph Trouillot after he fell so gravely ill shortly before my arrival at the University of Chicago in the winter of 2002–3. I imagine that Yari Bonilla and Greg Beckett think of themselves as Rolph's students rather than as mine.

[12]For a fine example of such scholarship see the contributions to Cabrera Arús's (2021) edited collection of essays on Cuban material culture studies.

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