Caribbean Crucible: History, Culture, and Globalization

In the present age of globalization, it is often forgotten that these world-encompassing processes were initiated with European expansion into the Caribbean beginning more than five hundred years ago. We now see the proliferation of overseas factories enabling owners, producers, and consumers of products to be in widely distant locales. It seems to us that in the search for profits, commercial activity has recently spread to every corner of the earth. We observe that the continual movement of humans across borders results in new forms of
hybrid and creolized cultures. And, we feel that the world around us is moving faster and faster: the rapid circulation of images and information, the advent of cheap long-distance travel, and the attendant quickened workplace demands all give us the impression that time is actually speeding up.

Rather than the beginning of something new, these global processes can be traced to when the Caribbean became the site of Europe’s first industries, starting in the sixteenth century. At that time, industrial techniques and a rational approach to time management were applied to the production and export of sugar, tobacco, and other commodities to be consumed by the burgeoning European urban bourgeois, artisan, and working-classes. These industries, in the forms of plantations and haciendas of various sizes, presaged and enabled Europe’s Industrial Revolution.

These new enterprises were worked by millions of enslaved Africans hauled from diverse West African societies from present-day Senegal all the way down to Angola; before them, by thousands of native slaves and European indentured workers; and, after them, by hundreds of thousands of indentured workers from Africa, Europe’s periphery, India, China, and even Java. Not only was it in the Caribbean where the first sustained European external colonizations occurred, but these colonies required and stimulated the creation and marshaling of far-flung trade and governmental networks—a truly global undertaking—with the aim of enriching imperial treasuries and creating dependent territories in their service.

Reconsidering the Caribbean as an origin-point of the modern global system means more than an understanding of the Caribbean’s role in the world. It means understanding the world’s role in the Caribbean, the constant back and forth movement of people, ideas, and things, and the intricate interplay of forces at work in shaping economies, societies, and cultures. It means donning a perspective that allows or, better, forces one to simultaneously reckon the larger processes and the historical specificities of this complex world region.
**Conquest and Colonization**

“In fourteen-hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue” begins the children’s rhyme. Not always, however, do the North American children who recite it or their teachers who teach it acknowledge the gravity of Columbus’s project or the world transformations that came in his wake. For North Americans, the emphasis on Columbus’s voyage has involved chiefly the settlement of their continent. This leads to a failure to realize that the primary axis of colonial expansion was decidedly to the south, where populations of indigenous peoples were ill-equipped militarily to completely deter the invaders and possessed no resistance to the diseases the Europeans brought with them. Columbus, hopelessly geographically confused, referred to the native inhabitants as “Indians” and characterized some as noble savages and others as bloodthirsty cannibals, thus justifying European intervention, Christian conversion, enslavement, and colonization.

The Caribbean was fortuitously situated in terms of soils, climate, and location to facilitate the westward development of the nascent European sugar industry from Sicily, Spain, and the Atlantic islands. Columbus brought the first sugar cane to the Caribbean on his second voyage in 1493; he brought it from the Spanish Canary Islands. It is likely that enslaved Africans from Spain also accompanied him on that voyage, foreshadowing the African-slave-sugar-commodity connection. In the Western hemisphere, sugar was first grown in the present-day Dominican Republic and shipped back to Europe around 1516. With the rapid destruction of the native populations, enslaved African laborers were imported shortly after the first canes were planted, thus paving the way for the proliferation of the widespread and centuries-enduring plantation complex and the rapid transformation of tastes and consumption in Europe.

One by one, at least six European powers entered the fray and wrestled with each over the riches to be obtained from the region under colonization. Caribbean islands were exchanged as part of peace negotiations after European wars, and sometimes captured outright by those countries that could muster the naval power so far from their shores. The source of this wealth was the fruits of the labor of enslaved Africans. Commercial and military intervention on the African coast ensured a supply of captive laborers for the plantations. The slave trade represented the largest capital investment in the world, meaning that the slaves themselves were valuable commodities, and was promoted and patronized by the royal families and leading merchants and politicians of Europe.

Africans were enslaved and taken to the Americas, agricultural commodities were transported, often in the same slaving vessels, from the Americas to Europe, and trade goods were shipped from Europe to Africa for more slaves—the so-called “Triangular Trade.” More than nine million enslaved Africans reached the New World (see Table 1), about 40 percent going to the Caribbean. Jamaica received nearly twice as many slaves as were imported into the United States; Barbados and Martinique, tiny islands where plantation slavery was established very early, each received roughly the amount received by the whole United States. While these figures cannot take into account the many millions who died en route, they do provide an idea of the intensity of Caribbean slavery. Caribbean slaves were notoriously malnourished, overworked, and susceptible to disease. They died...
in droves. It was cheaper for planters to simply import new slaves than to maintain their existing labor forces, and women were not encouraged to bear children until it appeared the slave trade would end.

While Caribbean slavery was diverse and no two islands had the same experience, the exigencies of the sugar production process imposed certain common patterns. The climate dictated harvesting times. Fields were often laid out according to geometric patterns, with a central mill and boiling house. Slaves were organized into three or four “gangs,” ranging from the “great gang” of the most able-bodied field laborers under the command of a driver who was a male slave, down to the “vine gang” comprised of the infirm and slave children as young as four who did light tasks around the plantation. Women generally predominated in field labor, and in marketing activities. Most of the skilled and prestigious tasks on the plantation were reserved for men. Slaves were “allowed” to grow their own food—not because of the planters’ benevolence, but because it saved them money.

In the enslavement process and plantation slavery, Africans and Europeans—albeit drawn from diverse societies on their respective continents—became “races.” In this process, Europeans and their descendants became “white,” while Africans and their descendants became “black” in the sense that meanings associated with physical attributes were culturally and ideologically systematized, elaborated, and given differential value. (This did not mean that ethnic identities of Africans and Europeans did not continue to be salient in a given colony. For example, ethnicity was implicated in slave revolts, and European colonists of differing nationality were often at odds.) In the ideology of “racial slavery,” permanent enslaved status became attached only to Africans and their descendants; it was automatically inherited by them at birth. At the same time, Europeans and those of European descent protected each other from the rigors of the system and permanent slave status.

The pattern of ethnic relations varied somewhat from island to island. The Spanish and French, more than the British or Dutch, developed elaborate social and legal distinctions for those “mixed race” individuals seen to possess various amounts of black and white heritage. In all cases, ethnic identity was (and is) more complex and nuanced, differing significantly from the United States’ black-white dichotomy, where “mixed” individuals were placed in the “black” or at least “non-white” category (the ideology of “hypodescent”). But what was constant in the Caribbean was (and in many respects still is) the valorization of European culture and “whiteness,” and the depreciation of African roots and “blackness”—despite the fact that the vast majority of Caribbean people are of African descent.

The ending of slavery was not a uniform process. Slavery was resisted everywhere—from grand marronage, the formation of runaway communities, to petit marronage, individual acts of subversion and sabotage—and these actions helped to speed up final emancipation. A dramatic slave uprising and revolution beginning in 1791 made for an independent Haiti, only the second independent nation in the Americas (after the United States), in 1804. In England, a combination of free market forces and humanitarian interests ended the slave trade in 1807, and slavery by 1834-38. In Cuba, it was not until 1886 that the institution finally trickled away.
Post-Emancipation Society

The transition from slavery to freedom entailed hardship and conflict, followed by a period of adjustment for both the ex-slaves and planters alike. Many ex-slaves continued to work on plantations, but more on their own terms. Some formed peasant communities. As perhaps nowhere else in the world, so-called “reconstituted” peasantry developed after capitalism. To save their profits in part by cutting the wages of the ex-slaves, planters and the colonial state brought in indentured workers from around the world, and they lived in slave-like conditions in the Caribbean.

Africans came to Jamaica and Trinidad. More than 125,000 indentured Chinese came to Cuba, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad. Indentured “Portuguese” from Madeira went to Trinidad and Guyana. From 1838 to 1917, more than 400,000 indentured Indians were brought to Jamaica, Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad (East Indians now constitute 40 percent of the population of Trinidad and Tobago, and 55 percent of Guyana’s population); and 100,000 to Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana. Suriname also received 22,000 indentured Javanese. Slavery (and indenture) left the legacy of divided loyalties, ethnic and class competition, and wide disparities in wealth and access to resources that today imprints all aspects of Caribbean society, economics, and politics.

As the anti-slavery struggle finally ended, it gave way to the anti-colonial, nationalist struggle, a prominent feature of twentieth-century Caribbean life, led for the most part by workers and their nascent organizations. At the same time, European dominance gave way in large part, though not completely, to U.S. political, cultural, and military hegemony—including a number of military interventions—which eventually brought tourists, satellite television, the Internet, and the International Monetary Fund. This experience was also diverse (see Table 2).

Political differences, linguistic diversity, and traditions and prejudices inherited from the differing colonial powers have meant that the Caribbean has suffered from a lack of unity and insular worldviews. Islanders often feel more in common with the colonial metropole than with the residents of the island next door who speak a different language.

Culture and Creolization

If Caribbean people have been constrained in their political and economic relationships, it is perhaps these very constraints that have generated the conditions for innovation and creativity that mark Caribbean cultural forms—from language, religion, and music to family structure. As Derek Walcott, a Caribbean writer and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, once wrote: “Colonials, we began with this malarial enervation: that nothing could ever be built among these rotting shack, barefooted backyards and moulting shingles; ... If there was nothing, there was everything to be made.” And made they have. In 1992, the quincentenary of Columbus’s first voyage, Caribbean litterateurs won Europe’s most prestigious writing prizes. Martinican novelist Patrick Chamoiseau was awarded France’s Prix Goncourt, Cuban poet Dulce María Loynaz won Spain’s Cervantes Prize, and Walcott, from tiny St. Lucia, won the Nobel.
Caribbean music—reggae, calypso, salsa, merengue, rhumba—has gained worldwide notoriety and acceptance and influenced other musical styles. Performers such as the Mighty Sparrow, Celia Cruz, and the late Bob Marley have achieved worldwide fame, and to these names could be added many others. Trinidadian carnival masker Peter Minshall was artistic director for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, and the 1994 World Cup opening ceremony in the United States. Novelists and poets including Jamaica Kincaid, V.S. Naipaul, and Kamau Brathwaite have found homes and followings abroad while their work is still identifiable as Caribbean. But these attainments are not the only consequences of Caribbean culture building.

The practice of everyday life as well as the development of expressive and communicative culture and religion might fruitfully be seen through the prism of creolization. “Creole,” from the Spanish criollo meaning “of local origin,” is to be understood in at least three senses. One is the general idea of a cultural blending, of more than one cultural tradition becoming transformed under local conditions to something unlike its antecedents—a process of change with early documentation in the Caribbean, and which even began on the slave ships themselves. But rather than an easy assimilation, as described by the United States’ “melting pot” model that has its counterparts in the Caribbean, creolization occurred and occurs in the context of differences in social power. Creolization may be more pronounced in some areas of culture than in others; it depends on historical context and sets its own standards.

Afro-Caribbean family forms, with the prevalence of female-headed households, single parenthood, and common-law marriage, are thus not somehow “deviant.” They have to be seen in their historical development and as strategies by men and (especially) women devised in the context of scarcity. Creolization is evident in syncretic Caribbean religions and their uses to oppose the established order. These include santería (sometimes called regla ocha or lukumí) and palo monte mayombe in Cuba; vodou in Haiti; the orisha religion in Trinidad; obeah in the English-speaking Caribbean; and Kumina, Myal, Revival and Rastafarianism—with its explicit evocations of Africa—in Jamaica. Caribbean music and art forms, such as Carnival in Trinidad and Cuba and Jonkonnu in Jamaica, are complex outcomes of the creolization process that include African-derived, European-derived, and even Amerindian-derived strains. Such art and stylized play involves resistance and opposition.

A second sense of “creole” describes a kind of language situation. Creole forms of speech exist throughout the Caribbean, and therefore the terms “Dutch-speaking,” “English-speaking,” and “French-speaking” Caribbean are somewhat misleading. The term “pidgin” refers to specialized trade or contact jargons, and a creole language comes into existence when populations in contact engage in regular interaction and the pidgin becomes the language of the home—a first language, expanding the language’s functions and scope.

Besides multilingualism, bilingualism, and monolingualism, the Caribbean also exhibits “diglossia,” the language form created when two codes exist, sharing one level (for example, vocabulary) but differing at other levels (for example, in pronunciation and grammar). In Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Haiti, for instance, French is the official language.
(used in legal proceedings, on television, and in schools), while creole is spoken on the streets and in the home in informal conversation. A “postcreole continuum” describes variation between a creole and a standard language of the same vocabulary, with Jamaica providing a prime example.

As Table 3 shows, the Caribbean is characterized by its linguistic heterogeneity and complexity. Everyday Caribbean speech is lively and vibrant, and much is informed by African language structures. Indeed, African words from Yoruba, Kikongo, and other languages even show up in present-day religious ceremonies. Language situations demonstrate hierarchy as well. Despite recent attempts at local language promotion and celebration, the old European (and current North American) depiction of the languages of Africans and their descendants as somehow deficient remains in some quarters in the Caribbean. When their value is acknowledged, creole languages and local forms of speech are (incorrectly) thought to be useful only to convey folklore traditions, not abstract or theoretical thought.

Finally, “creole” is used to claim indigenousness and authenticity. Upper- and middle-class elites often appropriate what they see as lower-class forms of popular culture—such as music or carnival; elevating it to “nationa”; status and themselves to the role of representatives and champions of the common folk. What is emphasized is the cultural fusion of old elements to create something new, something quintessentially local, such as the development of the jíbaro identity in Puerto Rico through the use of folklore. In another example, the Martinican writers of créolité celebrate various cultural contributions to Martinican culture, but this is really tied to their attempts to promote a cosmopolitanism that justifies their class and social position. But these discourses may generate opposition. Some religions, for example, represent themselves as entailing “pure” African practices. In any case, identity politics today are seriously compromised and caught up in commercialism and international advertising.

**People on the Move**

Not only does Caribbean cultural production move in international orbits. Caribbean people do, too. Movement has always been a feature of Caribbean society, and its very basis is caught up in the idea of migration. Planters and colonial officials often saw their Caribbean sojourns as temporary. Enslaved Africans were dragged from their homelands and, being regarded as chattel, were often sold, moving from plantation to plantation and from island to island. Indentured workers came with the intention of returning, but only a small percentage ever did.

After slavery, Caribbean people moved around the region and beyond in search of the few opportunities available. After the Haitian Revolution, white and mestizo planters and their slaves fled to Cuba and to Louisiana. In the 1850s, West Indians worked on the Panama railroad. In the 1880s, at least 50,000 workers—mostly Jamaicans—were involved in the French attempt to build the Panama Canal, while Cuban cigar workers migrated with their factories to Key West and Tampa, Florida.
At the beginning of the twentieth century, perhaps 150,000 Caribbeans migrated to Central America to work on the U.S. Panama Canal and for U.S. fruit companies. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of workers went from Jamaica, Haiti, and the Leeward Islands to Cuba and the Dominican Republic to cut cane, many facing nativistic hostility. Others headed to the oil industry in Curacao, Aruba, and Venezuela. Sizeable Caribbean communities were formed in New York, Boston, and Miami. After World War II, West Indians were recruited to work in the United Kingdom, and Caribbeans also settled in Paris and Amsterdam.

Caribbean intellectuals and political leaders often got their start abroad. Cuban patriot José Martí worked for the independence of his island while living in New York, Tampa, and Key West. Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey ran his Universal Negro Improvement Association—which once boasted nearly 1,000 branches internationally—from Harlem, where he was part of a burgeoning West Indian community in the early decades of the twentieth century. Puerto Rican bibliophile and political activist Arthur Schomburg was part of a radical Caribbean tradition in the United States of the 1920s and 1930s. Trinidadian Marxist thinker and historian C.L.R. James was based for much of his life in London. And writer Aimé Césaire of Martinique wrote the first version of Cahier d’un retour au pays natal (Notebook of a Return to My Native Land) in Paris in the 1930s. This was the most important document of the négritude movement—cultural politics designed to create and foster a positive black identity.

As innumerable studies of Caribbean immigrant groups in North America have shown, these people have dramatically altered their new communities, enriching local cultures with their carnival, music, entrepreneurial ways, work ethic, political activism, and love of education. Afro-Caribbean religions have also found new adherents in immigrant communities and beyond. Concentrated in Toronto, in Florida, and in the northeastern United States where their numbers are growing (see Table 4), Caribbean migrants are often better positioned with regard to education and resources than are many natives of the United States. There has been friction with African Americans and Latinos, as well as moments of cooperation.

Conservative middle-class Cuban exiles with Caribbean political clout were able to affect U.S. immigration law during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The differential treatment of Cuban and Haitian refugees arriving in rickety vessels in South Florida—Cubans accepted, Haitians deported—had everything to do with U.S. ethnic relations, Cold War politics, and the class and social position of the immigrant communities. Some migrants defined in the Caribbean as mulato, “mixed,” “brown,” or even “white,” who have distanced themselves from blacks, find themselves classified in the United States as black or lumped into the vast Hispanic category.

Many Caribbean people abroad keep one foot in the new setting and one foot back home, following political developments and providing financial and emotional support to kin from afar. Remittances to Jamaica, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, for example, are in the hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars annually. But the vast movement of people and things is
and always has been Caribbean, showing in another way how the Caribbean anticipated
and now exemplifies the modern globalized world.

Notes

1. Some good general introductory works on the Caribbean are listed below under
   “References.”

2. O. Nigel Bolland, On the March: Labour Rebellion is in the British Caribbean, 1934-39
   (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1995).

3. Derek Walcott, “What the Twilight Says,” in Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays

References

Knight, Franklin W. The Caribbean: Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism. 2nd ed. New

Knight, Franklin W., and Colin A Palmer, eds. The Modern Caribbean. Chapel Hill: University


Mintz, Sidney W., and Richard Price. The Birth of African-American Culture: An

Parry, J.H., Philip Sherlock, and Anthony P. Maingot. A Short History of the West Indies. 4th

Richardson, Bonham C. The Caribbean in the Wider World, 1492-1992: A Regional

Further Reading

Beckles, Hilary and Verene Shepherd, eds. Caribbean Freedom: Economy and Society from

Brereton, Bridget, and Kevin A. Yelvington, eds. The Colonial Caribbean in Transition:
Essays on Post-emancipation Social and Cultural History. Gainesville: University Press of


