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Sidney W. Mintz

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Another Look at the Backyard: Caribbean Peoples Past and Present

Cover Page Footnote

This talk was presented at Sacred Heart University on November 5, 1992 as part of the University's observance of the Columbus Quincentennial.

SIDNEY W. MINTZ

*Another Look at the Backyard:
Caribbean Peoples Past and Present**

These are modern times. The competition for listeners, viewers and readers (customers, in short) by radio, TV, and the other media has come to resemble that among breakfast cereals for supermarket shelf space. As news subjects most nations, like most people, can hope to be celebrities for no more than a few minutes at a time. Big nations, with big problems and great power, hog the news; to avoid being lost in the shuffle, little nations with little power must be "exotic" – or they must be disaster areas.

Under such conditions, the societies in and around the Caribbean Sea, that region we call "The Caribbean," are not likely to attract much attention. They are little places, and their problems, though real, seem less acute than those of Africa, say, or even of much of Europe. As for exoticism, it is scant. Most of what is called "exotic" in this region strikes us as contrived: biting the heads off pigeons, flamboyant Mardi Gras costumes, papier-maché masks, and rather too much drum-thumping. An occasional Nobel laureate, boatloads of half-drowned Haitians, the desperate struggles of the *fidelistas* to stay alive – these once-important events are now treated as mere back-page filler in today's busy (and often ghastly) world.

Though still too often thought of as "our backyard," the islands and their peoples seem hidden from us somehow, by their apparent ordinariness. It is as if the sun, sand, rum, and drums end up serving as means for concealing their distinctiveness. What of a serious kind, after all, do we Americans know about this part of the world? That Fidel Castro rules Cuba. That Harry Belafonte comes from somewhere down there, as do the parents of Colin Powell. And *salsa*; and bananas; and many New York City cab drivers. These are hot places, we are told, endowed with good beaches,

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palm trees, coconuts, hurricanes, steel bands, and only occasional menace. Thus, for example, the island of Grenada, one-tenth the size

of Rhode Island, by which we were threatened; and which we then defeated militarily. Did you read that right? One-tenth the size of Rhode Island?

Yet the images, often even when dead wrong, are clear. One is of places and peoples prevailing Latin. Not a total image, to be sure. Yet the mind's eye is prepared to envision burros, sombreros, guitars, and large cacti. In spite of which we know that Jamaica is down there; and it is not Latin at all. Colin Powell's name doesn't sound Spanish. And what about Belafonte? And that writer fellow Naipaul, not to mention Bob Marley. What of them? Indeed, one thinks, if the Caribbean isn't Spanish, what is it? Or perhaps better, if it *isn't* Spanish, what is it doing down there?

A student of mine, born in Guyana and descended of Gujerati-speaking Indian grandparents, recounts to me how, when asked by African-American men where she is from, or "what she is," always answers "I'm from Latin America." It saves time, she says; the explanations take too long. There she is, just two generations' remove from Gujerat or Madras; and she's got her questioners comparing her to Rita Moreno and Sonia Braga. *Which* Indians, anyway?

That this entity called the Caribbean should seem prosaic on the one hand, yet murky in identity on the other, makes sense. Place names can be so bewildering, especially when there are lots of little ones: Puerto Rico and Costa Rica, Dominican Republic and Dominica; some folks even confuse Haiti and Tahiti – they sound alike in French. As with any poorly-specified category, the name "Caribbean" conceals as much as it explains. Yet behind the name there lies an astonishing history. To find out what the Caribbean is, we have to look backward, at what it was.

The discovery by Europe of what soon came to be called "The New World" began in the Caribbean region. It is thought that Columbus's first landfall was on the little island of Guanahani, called Watling Island or San Salvador today, which lies in the Bahamas. The Bahamas are not even defined as part of the Caribbean by modern geographers. But this first island was also the northernmost which Columbus visited. What received early attention as the "New World" lay *south* of the Bahamas. Only when Spain's hegemony was already beginning to wane, 125 years later, would the rest of the Americas take on a more concrete shape for the Europeans.

As a child I remember thinking that Columbus' achievement may have been overblown. He had ended up in such nothing places: Santo Domingo, Cuba. If he really was such a hot-shot navigator, I asked myself, why had he missed New York Harbor, Long Island, the Hudson River? Hudson and Verrazano had been closer to the target, it seemed to me.

Still, it turns out that what Columbus found the Europeans came to like. The center of gravity overseas for nearly two centuries after the so-called "Discovery" lay in Caribbean latitudes, not in North America. And it is when we are reminded that the first settlement of Europeans in the New World was on Santo Domingo in 1493 that dates such as 1619 (Jamestown), 1620 (Plymouth) and 1637 (New Haven) take their proper and tardy place in the history of the Americas.

Over time Columbus did find the islands which compose the Caribbean archipelago. Spain quite rapidly imposed her control. European diseases, war, and enslavement quickly destroyed the indigenous populations on the big islands. The process of conquest and destruction was slower in the Lesser Antilles; but there, too, native peoples were swiftly reduced, by a largely unintended (though no less implacable) genocide. To a shocking extent the impact of the Europeans on island populations was so devastating that they became empty lands, where the Spaniards, only recently the guests, had now become the hosts.

Spain's early conquest lived on. Not until well into the seventeenth century was she challenged by her British, Dutch, and French rivals in the Caribbean region. Except for occasional trading ships, slavers, and brief visits by the explorers of other nations, the Caribbean Sea remained a Spanish lake for far more than a century. The majority of the fifteenth-century explorers had been Italian, since it was the Italian states who were the naval powers of the Mediterranean before the Discovery. They often worked for Spain and Portugal (and soon enough, for the countries of Northern Europe as well). Before 1625, however, no power was able successfully to challenge Spain's territorial mastery of the Antilles. This is why the Hispanic colonies there are more than a century older than the first English colonies in North America.

At the start of the sixteenth century, Spain added to Santo

Domingo new colonies on Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Jamaica. She thus occupied the four big islands we now call the Greater Antilles, looking for gold, killing and enslaving their inhabitants, and christianizing as she imposed order. She was virtually unchallenged through the first quarter of the next century. But from about 1625 onward, the states of northern Europe began to chip away at Spain's domination, at first in the little islands south and east of the Greater Antilles.

The British, the Dutch, and the French made their challenge where Spain had established herself weakly or not at all: Britain in Barbados; the French in Martinique and Guadeloupe; the Dutch in the islands off Venezuela, for example; and all three amidst the islets at the northern end of the Lesser Antillean chain. The tiny island of St. Martin, settled around 1635 and to this day half French and half Dutch, epitomizes the process by which northern Europe began to whittle away at Spanish hegemony.

But what began as marauding by Spain's enemies soon became serious competition. By the end of the seventeenth century, Britain had already held Spanish Jamaica for nearly 50 years, and France had been ceded the western third of Spanish Santo Domingo, the St. Domingue that would one day become the New World's second independent country, the Republic of Haiti. From then on Spain's enemies would also challenge her on the mainland. Thanks to Bolívar, her political sway soon ended there; never again would she enjoy a monopoly of power in the New World.

We need to ask ourselves why the Europeans would go to such lengths to seize land in these hot, undeveloped, mineral-poor parts of the New World. By addressing that aspect of European intention, we find a basis for delimiting the Caribbean region. The answer lies in production, trade, and consumption; it is, in short, an economic answer. What could the Europeans have possibly wanted that they did not have already? First, there were certain newly-discovered products they turned out to like. Tobacco is a good example, to be followed some time later by cacao. Moreover, there were products already familiar in Europe but costly and in short supply, or for which demand was just beginning to grow, that could more easily be produced in the islands. Here would be included sugar, molasses, rum, and later, coffee, as well as many spices, some (such as pimento or allspice,

Pimenta officinalis) native to the Americas. While Spain was least interested of all the European powers in transforming her new possessions into producers of agricultural wealth, her northern rivals had nothing else so much in mind. We discern the early shaping of Caribbean societies by the rise of political and military interest in its potentialities as a producing region for substances in demand in Europe itself. A subtropical climate and fertile soil played a part in making it attractive. While it was far from Europe, it was not so far as India and the East Indies, from which many of these substances had formerly come. What is more, its various parts were quite easily transformed into colonies, a process that turned out to be less easy (though clearly not impossible) to carry out in Asia.

Though we have no confident idea of the scale of island populations before the Europeans arrived, we know that by the time Spanish power was waning, most of the native peoples there were gone. The projects the Europeans had in mind required labor; and it was not labor they themselves were prepared to carry out. The solution to their labor problem was not long in coming. It would shape in powerful ways the economic and social patterns of Caribbean societies for centuries to come. What I refer to, of course, is slavery. Early and irregular enslavement of American Indians was soon followed by the ordered enslavement, purchase, and transportation of Africans. The principal purpose of the slavery institution (though over time it came to serve other purposes as well) was to do the work required by their economic objectives that the Europeans would not do for themselves. The agro-social instrument of such production was the plantation; its single most important product was sugar, with its byproducts molasses and rum.

It had been the Spaniards who brought the sugar cane, the technology of its cultivation and processing, and enslaved Africans to the New World. By 1516, the first sugar ever made in the Americas was shipped from Santo Domingo (today's Dominican Republic and Haiti) to Spain. The sugar industry, based on the sugar cane plant, enslaved labor, and the technology of field and factory, was carried from there to the other Greater Antilles: Cuba, Puerto Rico and Jamaica. But the Spanish Crown was willing to afford only sporadic encouragement to a burgeoning industry so remote from royal control and from Spain itself. The industry in the Hispanic islands soon

withered; it would not be revived there for 200 years. Despite Spanish pioneering, it was the Portuguese in Brazil, and the British, Dutch, French, Danes and others in the Caribbean islands who would develop the sugar industry to gigantic proportions.

A wide variety of forms of labor exaction was tried out in the Caribbean, over the course of several centuries. But between 1503, when the first enslaved Africans are believed to have arrived in Santo Domingo, and 1886, when slavery was finally outlawed in Cuba, it was this form of exaction that prevailed. The scale of the trade, its economic and social significance, can hardly be exaggerated. Philip Curtin estimates in his *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (1969) that a total of nearly ten million Africans was transported to the New World. Of that almost unimaginable number, two-thirds were taken to Brazil, the Guianas, and the Caribbean islands. To pick one example, Jamaica, which was occupied by the Spaniards in the early sixteenth century, was seized by Cromwell's Britain in 1655; during its career as a "sugar island," it received nearly a million enslaved Africans. French Saint-Domingue (the western third of the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo, ceded to the French in 1697) received about the same number before the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution in 1791.

These figures seem even more important when we recognize when such movements were occurring. Shipping a million persons across an ocean is still hard to imagine, even in 1992, as World War II, Korea, Viet Nam and the Gulf crisis revealed. Thus we must ask ourselves what it must have been like in 1790 – or 1690 – to transport enslaved human beings alive, across 3,000 miles of ocean. Shipped in chains, tied down like animals, thrown overboard when seriously ill, starved and abused, these were the ancestors of this hemisphere's African-Americans. Thus could they be treated because they were defenseless. Thus were they enslaved because they represented considerable profit in guineas, *écus*, guilders, and good silver dollars.

But it does not suffice to note that it happened. We should think about why that labor was *enslaved*; why it was *African*; and why such enslaved labor was used in the production of *sugar*. Adequate answers to these questions cannot be provided in a short paper; but the questions themselves need to be included. The plantation form was more than a way to organize agricultural production, to undergird the economy. It was also a form of social organization, with an

accompanying structure. At the apex of the social and economic triangle was a small number of free Europeans; at the base there was a massive layer of enslaved people of African origin. Between these there developed a middle layer, consisting of people intermediate not only in status, but also in culture, and usually in complexion as well. Simplified though it is, this trifold schema typified many New World regions and, in the Caribbean region, even some entire colonies. Such a pyramid emerged in approximately the same fashion in the plantation colonies of different European powers.

The ideology of the planter class really left no room for any intermediate grouping, particularly not of slave origin. Ideally, these societies ought to have consisted of two groups only. And yet (though to a variable degree) all plantation colonies developed such a middle socioeconomic layer. Its existence dramatized the most glaring contradiction of a social system built on the concept of human beings as property, for its members embodied a merging or blending, a synthesis, of the ideologically counterposed groupings of masters and slaves.

Thus if we ask how this region might be defined, the answer takes shape in its economic history: the consequences of the plantation form; the labor system that vertebrated it; the social structure whose growth it nourished. The movement of African populations to the New World was keyed to the social and economic development of the plantations; the distribution of peoples of African origin to a large degree paralleled that development over time. In the sixteenth century, the relatively few enslaved Africans brought to the region reached the Spanish islands; no other power had colonies then. But the early plantation system of the Spanish colonies faltered. In these societies, the tripartite social structure that would evolve in later colonies came to look rather more like a dual structure, of "foreign" (Spanish) administrators on the one hand, and "creoles" on the other. Complexionally (or, as some would say, "racially"), the people of these old Hispanic Caribbean societies, such as Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic, now seem more homogeneous, more "mestizo." In contrast, in what became the more authentic North European sugar colonies, such as Jamaica and Haiti (former French St. Domingue), people of African extraction are much more in evidence, while people who look "mestizo" are fewer.

Because of the early development of the sugar industry in these various societies, the Caribbean region became markedly different from other poor and politically dependent areas in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This part of the world took on its character in direct relationship to European intent and power, and at an extremely early point in the history of the growth of the European states themselves.

Between 1625, when the North European challenge was clearly felt, and 1886, when slavery ended in Cuba (the last holdout), so much changed in the Caribbean that a paper of this sort must omit nearly the entire story. Still, two massive changes must be noted. The first was the passing of slavery itself, and the accompanying decline in the economic importance of the region to Europe. That decline began even before slavery ended throughout the region; it was marked by desperate attempts by the planter classes to replace the slaves with other, equally defenseless workers, to shore up their declining enterprises. The second change was the rapid growth of local economic adaptations, as the slave economy's grip loosened and more and more free and freed people came to populate the colonies. Both of these important changes deserve a word.

The search for alternative labor by the planters led them to large non-Western areas where successful agriculture had produced big rural populations, but where contributing resources, such as the land and the agricultural technology, were being outstripped by local population growth. Though their search for labor was not entirely successful by any means, the planters, with the help of their colonial administrations in Europe, succeeded in importing large numbers of foreign, non-slave laborers to work on their plantations. Thus, for example, more than half a million Indians from India, both Muslim and Hindu; more than 140,000 Chinese; upwards of 40,000 Javanese; large numbers of free Africans; and many landless laborers from the Canary Islands and Portugal, among others, were imported. They came under "contracts"; but they were by any fair judgment coerced laborers, often maltreated as harshly as the slaves. It is striking how, in most of these cases, the new workers came either from politically dependent places (such as India) or from countries (such as China) too weak to defend the rights of their citizens overseas. This guaranteed their defenselessness to their employers.

Once again, bringing into view the economic targets of those in

power allows us better to discern how different Caribbean societies took on differing forms. Looking backward we see why there are large populations of Indian origin in Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad and Jamaica today, and, at one time, a large population of Chinese origin in Cuba. But those Caribbean societies that stayed out of the renewed sugar production competition of the mid-nineteenth century, or that had developed large creole populations earlier (such as Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo) received relatively few new migrants. To sum up this part of the argument, I would claim that the outer boundaries of the Caribbean region, as I would define it, are the boundaries set by the aspirations of the European colonial powers, who created a plantation-and-slavery system to supply Europe with desired commodities.

The development of economic alternatives to the plantation by freed and free populations is the other great change to which attention must be called. Throughout the Caribbean plantation world, the slaves had created economic practices unconnected with the plantation itself – fishing, hunting, growing some part of their own food, growing food for sale, craft manufacture and so on. So important were these practices that in my book *Caribbean Transformations* I have referred to such people as “proto-peasants” who learned and exercised the skills of peasants while still enslaved. After freedom, these practices spread even more widely; as the region developed peasant classes, a genuine rivalry of sorts took shape between the peasantries and the plantation system. In *Caribbean Transformations* I have called these social groups “reconstituted peasantries,” for the people themselves had partly escaped plantation labor and slave status, evolving into independent small-scale cultivators. To this day the peasant adaptations of people in places such as Haiti, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and Guyana survive – a vital alternative to proletarian, plantation-based life.

The decline of Caribbean slavery and the rise of Caribbean peasantries were interconnected processes, taking shape at the same time that the United States was beginning to test its power as a sovereign state. From the enunciation of the Monroe Doctrine (50 years after the Declaration of Independence, 22 years after Haitian independence, 12 years before emancipation in the British West Indies) to the Spanish American War, the United States moved from a

declared opposition to the expansion of European power in the Hemisphere to an armed attack against her weakest imperialist neighbor, Spain.

It would be silly to argue that the Spanish American War was fought for tropical commodities. Nonetheless, it was at least a fortunate accident for the United States that its spoils included the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, while it also claimed Hawaii, annexing it as a territory in 1900. If the first 125 post-Columbian years of the Caribbean region were Spanish, clearly the last 125 years for the region have been American, militarily, politically, and economically. These were the very years when the Caribbean had given up its critical role in the economic life of the European powers that had conquered, settled, depopulated, repopulated, and ruled it.

Since World War II, the Caribbean has obtruded more upon our consciousness, not only because of heightened communication and Cold War tensions, but also because of the augmented presence of Caribbean peoples in the United States. Though migratory movement from the islands to this country is extremely old, the modern period can be thought to have begun with Puerto Rican workers who began coming in large numbers as World War II drew to a close. Since the Puerto Rican people are citizens of the United States, however, their movement to the mainland was internal, in a way that only one other migration (that from the U.S. Virgin Islands) would be. The next decades saw additional flows of Caribbean people, pulsating somewhat according to economic conditions in this country, and political and economic circumstances at home. Professor Roy Bryce-Laporte has stressed that the movement of Caribbean folk was the first massive immigration of nonwhite persons to the United States. It was a migration, he says, in which many Caribbean persons became "doubly invisible" – nonwhites whose ethnic and linguistic distinctiveness was entirely overlooked by the white majority, and somewhat misunderstood by the nonwhite minority (see Roy Bryce-Laporte, "Black Immigrants: The Experience of Invisibility and Inequality," *The Journal of Black Studies* [September 1972]).

In the 1960s, the movement of Dominicans, Cubans, and Haitians increased, stimulated by political unrest and pressure at home, as well as by economic opportunity here. Increasingly, anglophone Caribbean people have also come here and, like their predecessors, have become

American. The significance of these movements can be approached from various perspectives. As noted, this was the first substantial nonwhite immigration to the United States. At one time some observers might have thought of this movement largely in terms of its contribution to various sorts of entertainment: Belafonte, Poitier, Rivera, Ferré, the musicians, the athletes. Such is surely no longer true. That the tiny anglophone island of St. Lucia should have produced two Nobel laureates, one each in economics and poetry, should give all generalizers pause.

But the lesson is an even broader one. While I have tried to suggest here that certain *social* features have typified Caribbean history, the societies that compose it are separated from each other by deep *cultural* differences. Whether we look at music, politics, gender, literature, worldview, there is surely no ground for treating societies as different as Martinique and Puerto Rico, or Cuba and Jamaica, as if they are culturally alike. In the United States, where complexion is such a profound yet spurious diagnostic tool for the majority, the differences between black Cubans and black Jamaicans, say, are commonly ignored. Yet the cultural differences – not to mention those of class, education, and yet other bases of assortment – are ocean-deep. That we North Americans have started to adapt to the presence in our midst of non-European newcomers in all their splendid cultural variety is a good sign. That we have tried to do so, using the same flawed lenses that served us so poorly in the past, means we have a long way to go. We have still to stop mentally “homogenizing” people we perceive as looking alike.

In many ways Caribbean immigrants are simply repeating the history of the rest of us, for excepting only Native Americans, we are all of immigrant stock. Not only are we all (ultimately) newcomers: we also recognize the distinctive achievement of a society that welcomes newcomers, that waxes strong on their energy, their ambition, and their hopes for their children. In this instance, the region supplying these newcomers is unusual. There may be no other part of the world that was so early and so completely given over to a single kind of coercive agro-industry, as represented by the slave-driven plantation. Surely nowhere in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in any region this small, were entire populations subjected for so long, and with so little voice, to so harsh

a productive system. These are societies as poor in resources and in accumulated wealth as any in the world. Yet from the perspective of their contributions to world society, these are remarkable places. We need not take literature, most recently noticeable because of Walcott, but also easy to remember because of St. John Perse, Edouard Glissant, Aimé Césaire, Vidia Naipaul, George Lamming, and so many others. Politics, as a sign of Caribbean preeminence, is even more thought-provoking. What other region this small has produced a Toussaint l'Ouverture, a Henri Christophe – a José Martí, a Malcolm X, a Luis Muñoz Marín, a Stokely Carmichael, a Shirley Chisholm, a C.L.R. James, a George Padmore, an Eric Williams, or a Fidel Castro?

This is not, it seems to me, an accident. The precocious and little-understood "modernization" of the Caribbean region was taking place even while Europe itself was beginning to become modern. The societies within it produced persons who could be said to possess highly "modernized" mentalities, persons who had to contend with a local world oddly divided between city and country, agriculture and industry, slave and free, metropolis and colony, African and European. They were born to function within societies that created great wealth but that were themselves small, poor and powerless. Over time the descendants of those maltreated people acquired a highly distinctive and specialized outlook toward the world in which they had to live: their attachment to particular traditions was sufficiently attenuated by their region's history to let them think freely and imaginatively about themselves and the future.

Whether that talent (I think it is regionally distinctive) will be perpetuated far from the island tropics depends upon many imponderables. The successes of people such as Shirley Chisholm and Colin Powell, among many others, suggest that it will. The Caribbean region is its own best argument for recognizing the uniqueness of societies and of peoples, and for resisting the push to homogenize other people's traditions. That "race" and culture are not connected in any way is unfortunately still not credible to most North Americans, even Black North Americans. But over time, perhaps the Caribbean presence among us will help us to rethink the obvious.