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Gender, sexuality race and the 'problem' of identity in Martinique

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hardly any anthropological studies of the Andes, with the exception of her own, have been conducted in monoethnic peasant communities rather than towns – she should perhaps read Olivia Harris, Catherine Allen, Tom Abercrombie, and Denise Arnold, to name only some of the better-known ethnographers of the region. Of the studies that mention the Andean ‘fat extractor’ (naqaq, pishiao, or kharisiri), only McKee refers to any general anthropological work on the topic, although there are many in existence. On a different matter, I cannot imagine why a researcher of Joseph Bastien’s experience should attribute Nor Chicas province to northern Potosí rather than to the south of the department!

In summary, this book will be of interest to students and scholars of the Andean region, as well as to medical anthropologists. Although it has its shortcomings, and the quality of the essays is not uniformly high, some of its contributions are valuable.

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David Murray presents an ethnography of contemporary urban Martinique that casts the problem of Caribbean colonial identity as one of irreducible paradoxes. That ‘problem’ exists for Murray’s interlocutors as well as for anthropological analysis; it is both data and theory. Rather than attempting to subsume Martinican conversations about, and practices of, self-understanding under one theoretical rubric, or attempting to provide analytical closure to the ethnographic project, or grounding ‘identity’ in any one social category such as gender or race, Murray instead borrows the Martinican writer Edouard Glissant’s concepts of ‘density’ and ‘opacity’, allowing him to leave unresolved the paradoxes of Caribbean social worlds. Glissant’s aim was to query the ethnographic impulse to fix and freeze ‘the tangled nature of lived experience’ (Glissant, in Murray, p. 15).

Murray carries this forward by arguing that the overdetermined density of social relationships and performances demands a mode of analysis open to an opacity or unclarity that would necessarily lie in the way of ‘a position of transparent analysis’ (p. 15). Leave complexity, contradiction, and paradox where they fall; any attempt to ground analysis in fixed and transparent certitudes is likely to lack versimilitude.

Murray’s text, accordingly, is chock full of unresolved paradoxes and moments where both Murray and his interlocutors appear to hedge on issues of citizenship, gender, sexuality, language, race, class, and other modes of social identification. Still, Murray himself lends more weight to sexuality and gender in structuring Martinican identities. As he puts it, ‘sexuality and gender are both central and peripheral to understanding processes and projects of identity in Martiniqu’ (p. 4). While such statements of paradox may be adequate to the social reality Murray is describing, they are a little frustrating sometimes, especially as paramount phrases in the book often seem to take the place of analysis. But this, perhaps, is the point.

The book consists of an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. The chapters are divided into two sections. The first, ‘Privileged performatives?’ (note the question mark), sketches out some dominant discourses of identity and belonging via public displays of masculinity, official government discourse on ‘culture’, and scenes from a government-sponsored theatre group in which Murray participated during his fieldwork in the early 1990s. The second section, ‘Disruptive performatives?’ (again, note the question mark), returns to the theatre group and its experiments with improvisational acting, then considers Martinican gai men’s narratives of desire, home, and fantasies of escape from home, and concludes with a discussion of improvisational gender performances in carnival.

The richest material in the book comes out of Murray’s experiences with the theatre group. Murray’s work here is informed by studies of ritual and theatre in anthropology but is inflected by Judith Butler’s extensions of J.L. Austin’s work on linguistic performatives. There is a slippage, I find, between theatrical performance, everyday performance à la Erving Goffman, and performativity as developed by Butler. Readers will none the less find the discussion useful and engagingly narrated.

The chapter on gai Martinicen men adds to the growing literature on sexualities that variously co-opt, transform, or translocalize Euro-American concepts of gayness. Murray’s claims that gai men do not participate in the ‘Creole universe’ (p. 114) and that Creole linguistically ‘works to reinforce heterosexuality in normative, publicly performed discourses of masculinity in Martinique’ did not quite ring true to me, as Caribbean French-derived creoles have a rich lexicon for categories of men’s sexuality compared to English, at least on islands (such as Dominica) where English and Creole are both spoken widely. Still, Murray’s interesting material on the uses of Creole in public spaces to mark normative masculinity and exclude disruptive gender performances nicely complements other discussions of Martinican and Caribbean identity.
Murray's book leaves this reader very much in the thick of the 'opaque interpretive outcomes' (p. 148) with which he was left when, upon a visit to Martinique six years after his initial fieldwork, he found fears of youth violence dominating the local press and popular sentiment, throwing open whatever closure he had previously tried to bring to his project by focusing on gender and sexuality. 'Palpable but never predictable' (p. 150), the effects of colonialism, changes in the metropolitan administration of the island, the displacement of négritude by créolité, and the new discourse on youth lend credence to the value of opacity both as a strategy of resistance and a method of analysis.

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The book is a labour of love, a personal homage by Jane Nadel-Klein to the people she has studied for twenty years, those who are part of the fishing folk of the east coast of Scotland. As well as homage, the book is part socio-economic history of the Scottish fisheries, part analysis of the place of the fisheries and the people within it in the Scottish and British imagination, and part consideration of how these people have dealt with the transformation and contraction of the fisheries in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as with the incursion of a heritage industry that threatens to reduce their lives and their ancestors' lives to the 'Fisher experience'.

One thread within the book is the notion of place or locality, and one aspect of this is the history of the Scottish fisheries and, within that, the fishing village. Nadel-Klein points out that it was only in the eighteenth century that settlements that were devoted to fishing, fishing villages, appeared. Hitherto, coastal people who fished did so as a supplement to their main, agricultural activities. This change was the result of modernist Improvers, landlords who sought to increase the productivity of their holdings and offered people housing and boats if they would take up full-time fishing, though within a quasi-feudal relationship with their landlord. So places like Ferryden, her main focus, are distinctly modern creatures, generated by the political-economic forces and ideologies that existed in Scottish and English society more generally. Generally, these places prospered through the early part of the twentieth century, when the fisheries started to become more capital intensive and catches started a long but uneven decline.

Another thread within the book is ethno-graphic, a consideration of lives and experiences of those in the fisheries. Here again, much of the local and the traditional turns out to be a function of powerful forces at work elsewhere. With the emergence of specialist fishing villages, fishing became the full-time occupation of the men who went to sea and the wives and children who maintained nets and processed catches ashore. Then, with the increasing capitalization of the fisheries, a growing proportion of men became paid crew rather than captains or share-receiving hands; fishing voyages became longer; and a growing proportion of women became employees of fish-curing firms, travelling to seasonal work at ports in Scotland and England. Even religious experience was shaped by these outside forces, as Ferryden was caught up in religious schisms and revivals that swept Scotland and indeed the whole of Britain in the nineteenth century.

A third thread concerns the ways in which these people have seen themselves and been seen by others. Nadel-Klein indicates that, at least until the second half of the twentieth century, people in fishing villages tended to see themselves as exploited by fish-curers, the processors and merchants to whom they contracted their catch. On the other hand, outsiders tended to see and portray them as half-wild people, prone to excess of religion or debauchery and living in clannish and even incestuous isolation. With the gradual decline of the fisheries, however, and especially in the later part of the twentieth century, fishers were increasingly seen as part of Scotland's heritage, a timeless and even autochthonous contributor to the country's identity, at a time when that identity became increasingly salient both in terms of relations with the rest of the United Kingdom and in terms of the drive to attract tourists. Fishing villages began to sprout Fishing Heritage Centres, and the old conflict over what fishing folk are (or, increasingly, were) took a new form as local people confronted outside entrepreneurs, managers, and curators intent on representing Scottish fishing in ways that often were at variance with the very personal and place-specific orientation of the people who live in these dead or dying fishing ports.

As the author notes near the start of Fishing for heritage, Scotland is routinely presented as full of traditional places, the timeless land of Brigadoon. It is, then, a country distinctly suited to efforts to understand where such places come from and how they have been understood over the course of time.

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