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From West Indies to East Indies: Archipelagic Interchanges

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In this paper, I work to rethink notions of comparison and area studies by viewing my ethnographic work in Indonesia through the lens of theories developed by anthropologists working in the Caribbean region. In bringing 'East Indies' and 'West Indies' together in this way, I explore the possibility of reconfigured networks of citation, collaboration and interchange that might help anthropology respond in new ways to contemporary dynamics of globalisation.

Keywords: East Indies; West Indies; Indonesia; Archipelago; Comparison

Introduction: Travelling Theories

I first dreamed up the phrase 'East Indies/West Indies' in the late 1990s as a way to think through the comparative project without predicating 'comparison' on either physical closeness or a random sample. This paper draws upon my research amongst *gay* Indonesians to illustrate an alternative framework for comparing the 'East Indies' and 'West Indies'. (I italicise the Indonesian term *gay* throughout to emphasise that it is not identical to the English term 'gay', despite the obvious links between the two— a state of affairs that is indicative of the patterns of culture transformation addressed in this paper.) One way in which the two archipelagoes could be related is through comparison narrowly construed; I could, for instance, have compared my own data with men in the 'West Indies' who term themselves 'gay' (Murray 1999). A second way to relate the two archipelagoes would be to examine empirical exchanges between them; for example, the presence of Javanese indentured labourers in Suriname (Hoefte 1998). A third way would be to construe them as a single meta-archipelago; to examine, for instance, common dynamics of resistance to colonial rule. The approach I take in this paper, however, differs from all of these: I play an ethnographic object from one archipelago against a theoretical lens developed for the

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other. This exercise goes against the grain of 'comparison' as usually understood, which is the juxtaposition of data with data. In doing so, I aim to open up new kinds of questions about anthropological inquiry that reconfigure assumptions about the provenances of 'data' and 'theory'.

For the purposes of my argument here, I sometimes consider all of what is now known as 'Southeast Asia' to be part of the 'East Indies'. In other words, I use the phrase 'East Indies/West Indies' to refer to Southeast Asia versus the Caribbean, though historically 'East Indies' was more commonly used to refer either to the Dutch East Indies (what is now called 'Indonesia') or to 'Island Southeast Asia' (what is now Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei and parts of Malaysia).

The pairing I focus upon in this paper involves juxtaposing my own 'East Indies' work with a significant theoretical work in 'West Indies' scholarship, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price's (1976) *The birth of African-American culture*. While this work has been critiqued by later generations of 'West Indies' scholars (see Price 2001), its innovative approach to theorising culture change provides surprising insights into the 'globalisation' of what are termed *gay* subjectivities in contemporary Indonesia. Indeed, while 'East Indies' scholarship has of late become sensitive to the transnational, it has been less sensitive to the 'West Indies' scholarly insight that 'the processes described as "creolization" are crucial to understanding the contemporary expansive discourse of "globalization"' (Sheller 2003, 174). Perhaps this example might indicate how there may be an unexplored potential in the use of theoretical frameworks developed in 'West Indies' scholarship for 'East Indies' life and vice versa.

As a case of 'travelling theory', my analysis might raise fears of mismatch and imposition. However, I would argue that using theory developed for one context to illuminate (not authoritatively 'explain') another context is one important way by which comparison and analysis themselves progress. Applying the work of Mintz and Price on African-American culture to the case of *gay* Indonesians might seem improper, a pairing of theoretical apples with substantive oranges. Yet like African-American culture, the culture of *gay* Indonesians has emerged from forms of plural interaction. In the case of *gay* Indonesians, this interaction has taken place primarily through re-interpreting conceptions of sexual selfhood encountered in globalising mass media; most *gay* Indonesians have not travelled to the West or spent significant amounts of time with gay or lesbian Westerners. It is precisely because of these differences, however, that drawing upon the work of Mintz and Price can bring insights. Similarly, the fact that most Caribbean societies are heterosexist does not invalidate the exercise of redeploying the work of Mintz and Price to speak about forms of homosexuality. Obviously, were gay and lesbian studies to limit their analytical tools to those that are certifiably not heterosexist, they would be forced to discard almost their entire theoretical apparatus, from psychoanalysis to Marxism and beyond.

Since this is an attempt to use a theoretical apparatus developed with reference to one set of circumstances to speak to another set of circumstances, it should not be

misunderstood to imply that the African-American culture Mintz and Price examine is more 'general', and *gay* Indonesian culture more 'specific'. Both involve thousands of people across a range of ethnic groups and a wide geographic distribution, so such a view would participate in the heterosexist worldview that ghettoises non-normative sexualities as exceptions and aberrations rather than cultural worlds in their own right. I am not applying a 'general' theory to a 'specific' case, but exploring how a theoretical framework derived from human social life in one time and place can illuminate human social life in another time and place. One topic to which the particular exercise of this discussion speaks is the following: in our contemporary Information Age, how can forms of cultural 'creolisation' take place without the physical movement of people?

Theorising Culture Change

In *The birth of African-American culture*, Mintz and Price sought to steer between two common interpretations of African-American culture that they felt were unsatisfactory. The first of these was that, owing to the tremendous dislocations and oppressions of the slave trade, African-American culture had originated solely in the New World and there was nothing particularly 'African' about it. The second interpretation was that scholarship could uncover 'retentions and survivals' from Africa, which were thus assumed to be the thing that made African-American culture 'African'. Mintz and Price expressed dissatisfaction with both of these explanations: with the first because it flew in the face of observable resonances between African-American cultures of the New World and African cultures; and with the second because most ostensible retentions and survivals could be shown to have originated in the New World.

In developing an alternative account, Mintz and Price began from several principles, three of which are particularly relevant to my argument. The first is an emphasis on what they term the 'political coefficient' of all anthropological research, especially research on communities that have histories and current experiences of oppression. Second is the view that 'the past must be viewed as the conditioning circumstance of the present' (Mintz and Price 1976, 83). As they and many other scholars of the 'West Indies' have noted, the concern with historical context, which was brought relatively recently into 'East Indies' studies by scholars like Clifford Geertz (1980) and Ann Stoler (1985, 1989), has undergirded the anthropology of the 'West Indies' since its beginnings.

A third principle emphasised by Mintz and Price, and by Mintz on his own in *Caribbean transformations* (1974) and elsewhere, is the creative and transformative character of West Indian cultures, for which the oppressions of slavery and servitude created 'a fundamental dynamism, an expectation of cultural change as an integral feature' (Mintz and Price 1976, 51). Many other scholars of the 'West Indies' have addressed this ubiquity of cultural transformation, as in Fernando Ortiz's (1947) notion of 'transculturation'. Indeed, where 'East Indies' scholarship has emphasised

stasis, 'West Indies' scholarship has emphasised change. One wonders whether structural-functionalism, for instance, could have developed had work on the 'West Indies' been at the centre of the discipline from its beginnings. For example, Furnivall's (1944) 'plural society' thesis, addressing the way colonising and colonised groups could coexist in a single society despite largely distinct cultures and institutions, has retained analytic value in 'East Indies' scholarship (*e.g.*, Hefner 2001) but, despite being adopted by scholars like M. G. Smith (1984), it was soon critiqued in 'West Indies' scholarship as legitimating elite ideologies of social inequality (Maurer 1997, 2002; Robotham 1980).

This issue of cultural transformation is central to Mintz and Price's thesis concerning the 'problem' of African-American culture. Their answer begins with the observation that, while persons brought to the Americas from Africa (primarily, but not solely, under conditions of slavery) came from many different ethnic groups and cultures, those cultures, primarily from West and Central Africa, shared many traits because of long histories of interchange. As a result, cultural logics shared at a fundamental level could exist, even though their daily manifestations might differ. For example:

> the Yoruba 'deify' their twins, enveloping their lives and death in complex ritual, while the nearby Igbo summarily destroy twins at birth. But both peoples appear to be responding to the same set of widespread underlying principles having to do with the supernatural significance of unusual births. (Mintz and Price 1976, 10)

Another example of a cultural logic shared at a fundamental level despite differences in its daily manifestations is that, 'though "witchcraft" may figure importantly in the social life of one group and be absent from that of its neighbour, both peoples may still subscribe to the widely held African principle that social conflict can produce illness or misfortune' (Mintz and Price 1976, 10). Mintz and Price use the metaphor of a cultural grammar that can be shared at a level of deep structure even if its surface manifestations differ, just as related languages can share grammatical features even if mutually unintelligible.[1] This model of culture emphasises dynamism and flexibility; indeed, Mintz and Price (1976, 59) characterise it in terms of 'continuity and change', the exact phrase that, ever since Benda (1962, 1972), has been a key trope of 'East Indies' anthropology. Additionally, this model posits the possibility of cultural formations that are translocal and transethnic— shared across distances that often escape anthropology because of dominant conceptions of 'the field' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

Armed with this conception of culture, Mintz and Price argue for a third alternative to the two conceptions of African-American culture mentioned earlier: that it either originates wholly in the New World or can be characterised in terms of survivals. They argue that, because of the dislocations of slavery, in which it is quite clear that Africans were seldom grouped together by ethnicity, specific cultural practices rarely survived the Middle Passage, but cultural 'grammars' from West and Central Africa that transcended locality and ethnicity *did* persist.[2] This allowed for

the formation of a framework by which African-Americans could produce new cultures: not through a notion of retentions and survivals that fixes these cultures in a nostalgic mode, but through notions of transformation and translocation that emphasise the creativity and innovation of African-American cultures.

From West Indies to East Indies

This summary does not do justice to the richness of Mintz and Price's argument, or the extensive evidence they marshal in its support. My goal is not to engage in full-scale exegesis, but to sketch out some key elements of their theoretical framework that I now wish to deploy with regard to my work in the 'East Indies'. Recall that the analytic project of this paper runs against the grain of 'comparison' as typically understood, because I juxtapose not two different sets of data but, rather, data and theory: ethnographic material from one area with a theoretical framework developed for a different area. Clearly, the ethnographic example I have chosen, male transvestites (*waria*) and men who identify themselves as *gay*, is 'worlds apart', or at least archipelagoes apart, from the context upon which Mintz and Price founded their analysis. It goes without saying that the historical and contemporary circumstances of *gay* and *waria* life in Indonesia differ radically from the historical and contemporary circumstances of African-Americans in the Caribbean. Drawing upon lines of argument ranging from Edward Said's (1983) notion of 'travelling theory' to Benedict Anderson's (1998) notion of 'the spectre of comparisons', the ultimate issue under consideration in this paper is what kinds of insights might ensue by de-linking theoretical frameworks from their substantive moorings of origin and allowing them to provide necessarily partial but possibly incisive insights into places and times far from their intended referents. For instance, I find that the 'West Indies' argument set forth by Mintz and Price opens productive avenues for understanding contemporary cultural transformations in the 'East Indies'.

One important way that Mintz and Price's framework can fruitfully inform an analysis of *gay* and *waria* Indonesians is via a critique of what I have called 'ethnolocality'. This is the assumption, widespread in anthropological work on Indonesia, that ethnicities and localities are isomorphic, and that this scalar logic, however problematised and in dialogue with national and global forces, is where culture is ultimately found (Boellstorff 2002). Most anthropologists do not say they study 'Indonesians'; they say they study Javanese, Balinese or some other such group.

However, in comparison to 'East Indies' scholarship, 'West Indies' work has long emphasised social and cultural formations not reducible to ethnolocality, because of the foregrounding of translocal dynamics associated with colonialism and capitalism. The very notion of 'African-American culture', for instance, invokes a translocal spatial scale that transcends ethnic or island particularity. Crucially, it permits (while not requiring) the possibility that, in some cases or in reference to some subset of social life, such a translocal spatial scale can be ontologically prior to the ethnolocal. In other words, it allows for cases where a cultural phenomenon comes into being or

is articulated on a translocal (national, regional, even global) scale first, only later becoming instantiated at ethnolocal levels.

This insight has been of great use in my own analysis of *waria* and *gay* Indonesians; for instance, it is possible to consider *waria* Indonesians in light of Mintz and Price's work. *Warias* are persons born male, and usually identify as male all their lives, but who dress in female clothing, wear makeup and otherwise behave in an effeminate manner. However, while 'traditional' homosexualities and transgenderisms historically existed in many parts of the 'East Indies', and in some cases persist to the present day (Graham 2004; Wilson 1999), the *waria* subject position is not a 'traditional' transgenderism. This subject position appears to date from the nineteenth century and, from its beginnings, has been linked not to ritual but to petty commodity trading and sex work. It has been associated not with ethnolocalised 'traditions' but with the urban centres of colonial and now postcolonial capitalism (Boellstorff 2004a).

It is striking that male transvestite subject positions similar to those of the *waria* appeared in roughly the same timeframe in many parts of Southeast Asia, and persist in forms like the *kathoey* subject position in Thailand and the *bantut* subject position in the southern Philippines (Jackson 1997; Johnson 1997). Indeed, such subject positions appeared in other parts of the world as well, particularly in Latin America and the 'West Indies'. They seem to be instances of 'commodified transgenderal' sexualities, which, among other characteristics, arose in the context of colonial encounters and are 'largely urban, largely detached from rather than integrated into traditional kinship networks, more or less associated with prostitution for money rather than any kind of socially sanctioned marriage, and at odds with instead of sanctioned by the dominant religion' (Drucker 1996, 77).

In the contemporary 'East Indies', it seems that male transvestite subject positions like *waria* and *kathoey* share a 'cultural grammar'. Communication between such persons across national boundaries is rare, yet many commonalities exist. For instance, everywhere in contemporary Southeast Asia it appears that such male transvestites are associated with salon work, and everywhere in contemporary Southeast Asia it appears to be the norm that, while bodily modification can include silicone implants or consuming female hormones, removing one's penis is not essential and, in fact, is sometimes understood as leaving the male transvestite subject position altogether in favour of 'becoming a woman' (compare with the *hijra* subject position in India, where castration is the norm: Cohen 1995; Nanda 1990). The terms differ and the communities in question are not really in contact, yet broad parallels exist, which appear to be informed by a shared legacy of colonialism and mercantile exchange. Another possible source for a shared 'cultural grammar' of male transvestism may lie in widespread patterns of gender complementarity, in which male and female are perceived as analogues rather than opposites (Errington 1990). The theoretical architecture crafted by Mintz and Price for the Caribbean context can thus contribute to understanding how forms of selfhood in another archipelago are linked historically by a 'cultural grammar' that, in

this case, provides for the possibility of socially recognised (if often devalued) effeminate male bodies.

Quite distinct from the *waria* subject position is the *gay* subject position.[3] However, one fundamental condition of existence the *gay* subject position shares with the *waria* subject position is that it is irreducible to ethnolocality. Men who identify themselves in terms of this subject position think of themselves as *gay* Indonesians with regard to their sexualities; there has never been a *gay* Javanese or *gay* Buginese subject position, no sense of *gay* selfhood limited to a particular ethnicity or island (Boellstorff 1999, 2003, 2004b, 2005). In other words, the cultural processes by which the ostensibly Western term 'gay' becomes transformed—transculturated—into *gay* have hitherto resisted discourses of indigeneity. A stance of suspicion towards indigeneity is common to 'West Indies' scholarship, but runs against the grain of 'East Indies' scholarship, which since colonial times has tended to reify the culture concept (Pemberton 1994).

My ethnographic data forces me to regard the ostensibly political economic unit of the Indonesian nation-state as the unit of *ethnographic* inquiry. I thus take to heart what a scholar of the 'West Indies', Trouillot (1991), terms the 'savage slot' in the anthropological imagination, a framework that has led to views of the 'West Indies' as being contaminated and unworthy of anthropological study, and of the 'East Indies' as being pristine and the ideal setting for anthropological study. While many contemporary scholars of the 'East Indies' foreground the way ethnic groups rework outside forces and are even shaped through these encounters, groups conceptualised in terms of ethnolocality remain the foundational unit of ethnographic analysis—despite the fact that the 'East Indies' has been involved in the dynamics of capitalism and colonialism as long as the 'West Indies', longer, in fact, considering the central position of the 'East Indies' in the trade between China and India, as well as the spread of Islam. A disciplinary division of geographical labour persists, in which political scientists study 'Indonesians' while anthropologists study 'Javanese', 'Buginese' and the like. The most radical case of this ethnolocalising assumption can, to my knowledge, be found in the introduction to Eiseman's *Bali: Sekala and Niskala*:

> Since I live about six months of each year in Jimbaran, my observations are strongly influenced by practice in that particular village. In effect, this book is really about Jimbaran and should be entitled: *Jimbaran: Sekala and Niskala*.
>
> Years ago I set out to learn as much as I could about Indonesia. A decade of experience later, I decided to narrow my field to just Bali. Another decade later I thought I had better concentrate upon South Bali. A couple of years ago the field narrowed to Jimbaran. It is now becoming apparent that I had better focus only upon South Jimbaran. (Eiseman 1990, xiv)[4]

While this is an extreme case of ethnolocalisation, the more general pattern of assuming that the nation is ontologically secondary (and thus not constitutive of the 'culture' that is ethnography's object) remains prevalent, both with reference to Bali and other parts of Indonesia: it is still acceptable to erase 'Indonesia' from

ethnographic analysis to the point of making statements like 'Bali is a country of two million people' (Napier 2003, 27) rather than an Indonesian province.

Taking seriously the possibility of the nation as an ethnographic unit of analysis, however, is crucial to understanding the processes by which some Indonesians (including but by no means limited to Balinese) come to feel that the term *gay* applies to them. At some level the irreducibility of *gay* to ethnolocality makes intuitive sense: no one learns about the term from one's parents or from 'local tradition'. Yet, in many other domains of *gay* men's lives, ethnolocality is central to the organisation of subjectivity and sociality, a centrality fed by post-Soeharto conflicts over ethnicity and religion.

Given such differences, how do Indonesians from all over this far-flung archipelago see themselves as sharing *gay* subjectivity? I can think of no better way to understand this situation than in terms of the cultural transformation framework set forth by Mintz and Price. The fit is not perfect: it is obviously not my intention to equate *gay* Indonesians and African-Americans. As noted from the outset of this paper, however, my goal is to investigate the heuristic potential of setting a theoretical framework alongside an ethnographic referent different from the one for which it was originally conceived. Here I contend that the 'cultural grammar' metaphor Mintz and Price developed for the specific case of African-American culture in the 'West Indies' is useful for thinking through how Indonesians from various backgrounds can come to share a sexual subjectivity that originates not as a retention or survival, but as a creative transformation of concepts originating from within and beyond Indonesia. Mintz and Price's work fleshes out and grounds Geertz's (1973) 'webs of signification' in a way that helps me link those webs of signification to broader structures of power—in particular, archipelagic conceptions of national culture set forth by the Indonesian state (Boellstorff 2005).

Mintz and Price's analysis is even helpful in domains where the case of *gay* Indonesians differs quite starkly from that of African-American culture. For instance, in the Indonesian case cultural logics are moving, but people for the most part are not: most *gay* Indonesians have never travelled outside Indonesia or met a gay Westerner and, since Indonesia was a Dutch colony and most *gay* Indonesians are lower middle class or lower still, they rarely speak English. The modalities of globalisation and reterritorialisation clearly differ; yet Mintz and Price provide one way to analyse how persons with little cultural capital or social power transform cultural 'grammars' from one place to another. Mintz and Price were steering between the view that there was nothing 'African' about African-American culture and the view that the Africanness of African-American culture was to be found in retentions and survivals. It is not coincidental that, in a similar vein, I find myself midway between seeing nothing 'Indonesian' about *gay* Indonesians—that they are simply suffering from false consciousness and are victims of global gay imperialism— and holding that the Indonesian-ness of *gay* Indonesian culture is to be found in 'traditional' homosexualities and transgenderisms, over which the concept *gay* is but a veneer. It is because I discern parallels between processes of cultural transformation

in the 'West Indies' and 'East Indies', parallels foregrounded when setting the theoretical framework developed by Mintz and Price against the case of *gay* Indonesians. Thus, while the word *gay* may be self-consciously borrowed, the concept *gay* is transformed within a cultural grammar that originates neither in the West nor in tradition. For instance, *gay* men often marry 'heterosexually' and assume that gay Westerners do the same (Boellstorff 1999) and, in both everyday interactions and informally produced magazines, discuss a desire to be accepted by a specifically Indonesian conception of national society (see Boellstorff 2004b for an example).

Conclusion

In the 'East Indies' contexts where I have conducted my research, and where I have tended to acquire my theoretical frameworks as well as my data, there has been much hand-wringing over the following question: does 'Southeast Asia' really exist?

On one side are those, like Lewis and Wigen (1997, 173), who ask: 'Can Southeast Asia be so defined [as a region]? By most criteria, the answer is no.' Lewis and Wigen (p. 172) point out that while the term

> dates to the early nineteenth century … the Southeast Asia of modern area studies is in many ways an artifact of military usage. It entered popular consciousness in World War II, when military strategists used it to designate the theater of war commanded by Lord Louis Mountbatten.

In fact, the term was institutionalised only in the late 1950s in the now defunct Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) (Tarling 1992, 603). On the other side are those who argue for Southeast Asia as a legitimate region—one recognised by some non-Western sources—based on maritime links and shared cultural and linguistic factors (Reid 1988, 1999; Hefner 2001).

While I tend to side with those who find legitimacy in the concept of Southeast Asia as a region, what is most striking is that these debates over the concept of 'region' are dominated by the 'Mediterranean analogy' that compares Southeast Asia to the Mediterranean (Sutherland 2003). A possible 'Caribbean analogy' is not really set forth in these debates, even as a possibility for discussion. I hope that this paper, and this collection more generally, indicate the opportunities engendered by placing the 'East Indies' and 'West Indies' into new forms of conceptual and empirical dialogue. Whether considered as two archipelagoes or one, the 'East Indies' and 'West Indies' demonstrate a fascinating mix of similarities and differences. Additionally, as I have indicated in this paper, the quite divergent theoretical traditions associated with each archipelago can be fruitfully uncoupled from their empirical base and transposed onto the other archipelago. Such a conceptual exercise may not provide conclusive answers, but can certainly open up new research questions as well as perspectives on existing work.

Although I have cast my discussion in interdisciplinary terms, I feel that it is anthropology more than any other discipline that could benefit from novel

archipelagic interchanges. In tactically privileging a 'West Indies' theorisation with regard to the 'East Indies' ethnographic material, I challenge the way that, as a scholar of the 'West Indies', Yelvington (2001, 249), observes, the Caribbean has been 'elided from the core of the discipline' (see also Sheller 2003, 1). Perhaps archipelagic interchanges between East and West can open up new politics and poetics for anthropology in an already globalised world.

Notes

[1] As Mintz and Price (1976, 88) note, in West Indies scholarship, at least, this metaphor originates with Herskovits (1990 [1941], 81).
[2] Mintz and Price (*e.g.*, 1976, 55–56) do emphasise, however, that there are cases where it seems clear that a 'retention' or 'survival' has occurred.
[3] I do not address lesbian women's subjectivities in this paper; see Boellstorff 2005 and 2007 and works cited therein.
[4] See Boellstorff 2002, 33–34 for a more detailed discussion of this passage and its implications.

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