

THE LOST CONTINENT OF  
THE AMERICAS:  
Recent Works on Afro-America and the Caribbean

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*AFTER AFRICA.* By ROGER D. ABRAHAMS and JOHN F. SZWED. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983. Pp. 444. \$45.00 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)

*URBAN LIFE IN KINGSTON, JAMAICA: THE CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY OF TWO NEIGHBORHOODS.* By DIANE J. AUSTIN. (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1984. Pp. 282. \$46.00.)

*DEATH ROW.* By MARIO HECTOR. (London: Zed Books, 1985. Pp. 111. \$21.75 cloth, \$5.95 paper.)

*AFRICA IN LATIN AMERICA.* Edited by MANUEL MORENO FRAGINALS. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984. Pp. 342. \$45.00.)

*RACE, CLASS, AND POLITICAL SYMBOLS: RASTAFARI AND REGGAE IN JAMAICAN POLITICS.* By ANITA M. WATERS. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1985. Pp. 343. \$29.95.)

Few scholars would contest that the fifty-odd islands of the Caribbean archipelago belong to the Americas on either cultural, political, social, or historical grounds. But as soon as one tries to flesh out the terms and the extent of that inclusion, difficulties and controversies arise. Is the Caribbean part of Latin America or Afro-America, or is it better perceived as one part of the Americas of the plantations? As is always the case with such attempts at classification, answers to the questions depend on one's perception of the subpart itself and also on the definition of the larger ensemble in which it is to be included. In the case of the Caribbean, however, the dialectics of history make the classifiers' task even more difficult: the same processes that ushered in the distinctive sociocultural features of the Antilles are also those that force acknowledgment of their links with the mainland. Caribbean peoples are, to differing degrees, peoples of African descent, just as Caribbean cultures bear varying degrees of influence from Africa. But the demographic majority of Afro-America lives in Brazil and the United States. Likewise, Plantation America originated on the archipelago but established a foothold on the mainland north and south of the Antilles long

before it matured on many of the islands. If Latin America may be said to have begun with construction of the town of Isabella on the northern coast of Hispaniola (just as English America began in St. Christopher and Barbados), the island societies most influenced by Spain or France long ago ceased to wield as much cultural and political influence as the mainland Latinos with their critical mass. In short, the Caribbean is the place where Euro-America, Plantation America, and Afro-America first coincided, but it is also where they began to separate.

The historical dialectics inherent in the making of the Americas, of which the islands are the living testimonies, have always created nightmares for diplomats and policymakers as well as for conference organizers and compilers of edited volumes. The problem is not mainly one of determining labels or boundaries, nor even of ranking the processes that led to the creation of the so-called New World. Rather, the difficulty stems from the fact that similar processes merged differently in various eras and locales to form complexes in which the distinctions are at least as important as the similarities. Hence the temptation to generalize, but also the common realization that such sweeps often fail to advance significantly our knowledge of either the parts or the whole.

Two of the volumes under review, *Africa in Latin America* and *After Africa*, bear witness directly to these difficulties and to the many ways that various scholars try to overcome them. *Africa in Latin America*, edited by Manuel Moreno Fraginals, was originally published in Spanish for UNESCO in 1976. It includes fourteen essays: one deals exclusively with Haiti, two with Brazil, one with Cuba, and the remaining ten draw their empirical material from a range of island or continental subareas, despite a general tendency to emphasize Cuba and Brazil. All purport to deal with the making of the Americas, the role of peoples of African descent, and the continuing influence of African cultures in that process, especially south of the Rio Grande.

As expected, this bringing together of different worlds over such wide continuums invites theoretical predicaments. Also as expected, the most successful contributors are those who acknowledge the challenge and try to cut definite, if slender, paths through the methodological maze. Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, and Sidney Mintz set good examples. They suspend certain assumptions to explore the intricacies of that part of the encounter that they can examine best. The fact that the basic assumptions are not the same in these three instances is illuminating. Brathwaite explicitly assumes first the existence of an essential entity called "African culture" from which one can project a cultural derivative such as "Afro-America." Neither the assumption of African cultural unity nor that of an Afro-American cultural essence is necessary to Mintz, while Moreno Fraginals rejects the first and vacillates on the second in his use of the "deculturation

model." But because each author sets his own grounds within his specific problematic, all three essays nicely indicate paths for further research.

Moreno Fragnals forces his readers to evaluate some of the major variables of "deculturation," to consider the extent to which ethnic diversity, age, gender, food habits, clothing, setting, and work regimen might have affected the creolization of peoples of African descent. Brathwaite's typology of African literatures in the Caribbean (rhetorical Africa, African survival, African expression, and the literature of reconnection) rests on an extraordinary breadth of knowledge of the primary materials and will undoubtedly be useful to critics and historians on the islands and the mainland. Mintz, holding constant the theme of the rise and maturation of capitalism as a system of international proportions, points to a range of unresolved issues in the study of the Afro-Americas: slavery as an alternative among a range of coercive labor systems; the alleged differences in the practice of slavery; and the nature of the continuities between African and Afro-American cultures.

Unfortunately, exceptional essays like these three can only reveal by contrast what is wrong with *Africa in Latin America*. Most of the contributors flirt with the essentialist view best put forth by Brathwaite (the strongest exceptions being Isabel Aretz, René Dépestre, Octavio Ianni, and Mintz), but they seem to be unaware of either its premises or its implications. Significantly, Africa and Latin America figure in the title (one surmised within the other), but Afro-America does not. It remains the unnamed entity, often assumed but in such timid and hazy ways that one cannot venture to explore the unknown. Hence most of the book reads like a catalogue of traits, a Herskovitsian map of the African presence, dictated by individual research interests and the necessity of emphasizing Brazil and Cuba, two obviously "Latin" countries where such traits are more accessible for native researchers. To be sure, such listings are not irrelevant. They remain as important now as they were during Herskovitz's lifetime; and it may not be coincidental that most of the contributors to this volume are old enough to remember the time when the mere mention of Africanisms was a sign of academic heroism anywhere in the Americas, especially in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States. But the making of the Americas continues, and that ongoing process raises new questions for Afro-Americanists. Hence it is unfortunate that most of the Brazilian contributors conveniently avoid discussing the contemporary plight of Afro-Brazilians and the social pressures against conducting research among or about them. Likewise, the Cuban contributors (and Dépestre) take refuge in the convenient stance that racial and ethnic differences are epiphenomena of capitalism, missing a golden opportunity to address the specific prob-

lems of Afro-American culture and Afro-American studies in a nation-state committed to socialist conformity.

Political agendas underlie this documentation of the "African" presence in Latin America. The Cubans' ambivalence most likely stems from a recognition of both the achievements and the limitations of the Revolution vis-à-vis the Afro-Cuban issue. Likewise, one can see the scars that the experience of the "São Paulo school" has left on Ianni, just as one can surmise that Dépestre's hasty rejection of Négritude has much to do with the Haitian experience under the Duvaliers. But the contributors rarely use the record of the recent past to illuminate practical or theoretical issues in the study of the Afro-Americas. The empirical evidence remains vague or limited to past centuries, its relevance too often confined to a search for origins. In the absence of a framework delineating some of the contours of Afro-American cultures and the theoretical (or political) questions at stake, this compilation of Africanisms ends up (despite the contributors' intent) looking like a zebra blemish on Latin purity.

*After Africa* is more blunt in its theoretical approach and more limited in empirical scope than the *Fraginals* volume. The book presents itself as a compilation of extracts from early "travel accounts and journals . . . concerning the slaves, their manners, and customs in the British West Indies." It actually consists of two different books, with different aims, different methods, and perhaps different measures of success. The book within the book (and in my view, the most successful) is an introductory essay by the main compilers of the accounts, anthropologists Roger Abrahams and John Szwed. This essay tries to ground the assumptions touched upon by Brathwaite but left implicit by contributors of similar persuasion in the *Fraginals* reader, an outcome that partly explains why *After Africa* is dedicated to Brathwaite. Abrahams and Szwed explicitly reject the notion of "deculturation," the idea that *Fraginals* elaborated in his contribution to the UNESCO volume. They write: "To anthropologists, the idea that a group could be forcibly divested of culture, yet maintain itself and even proliferate, seems like a strange argument indeed" (p. 4). Thus their task is "to seek out in the oldest documents available the encounter of Africans and Europeans in the New World, toward the discovery of what was and is distinctly Afro-American in the cultures of the Americas." To clear the path, Abrahams and Szwed nicely debunk the vision of blacks as misadapted Americans (the prominent U.S. vision of Afro-Americans), recycle the issue of the nature of the continuities between Africa and Afro-America, and emphasize the relative autonomy with which slaves shaped certain aspects of their life, notably their festive and ludic activities. This essay is among the best updates in the Herskovitsian tradition

even though, true to that tradition, it does not deal comfortably with the inherent cultural disadvantages that differential access to power imposed upon transplanted Africans.

Yet the hemispheric perspective fades in the major segments of *After Africa*, the chapters featuring the travel extracts. The extracts focus exclusively on the British West Indies, privileging some territories within that group and disproportionately emphasizing the nineteenth century. One cannot fault Abrahams and Szwed for reflecting geographical and temporal emphases already present in the available sources, but the limited scope of the extracts reduces the interpretative value of the materials. How much can features and practices that may have typified Afro-American culture in nineteenth-century Jamaica or British Guiana reveal, say, about Dominica in the 1790s? Yet while Atwood's important account of Dominica is cited in the general introduction, none of its descriptions figure among the major extracts. Limitations of that kind, stemming from sources available and choices exerted by the compilers, tilt the book in a different direction than the one set by the introduction. Nor can the "sampler accounts" from the United States, which are packed in the appendix, restore the original hemispheric perspective.

Abrahams and Szwed have nevertheless rendered a valuable service in making these extracts available in paperback to a large audience and in classifying them into topical chapters and sections. The reader can turn to the chapter on "Religion and Magic" and find in the section on funerals fourteen accounts dealing with burial practices. Likewise, Anancy tales, festivals, music, dance, and ways of speaking are conveniently set apart, reflecting the authors' insistence on the "patterns of performance" and "expressive continuities" that thread the cultures of the Afro-Americas.

Performance and expressive continuities constitute the core data of *Race, Class, and Political Symbols: Rastafari and Reggae in Jamaican Politics*, a study of the five elections held in Jamaica since its independence. Anita Waters wants to explain why "a millenarian cult" [the Rastafari], . . . whose membership never exceeded about 3 percent of the electorate, and whose members exhort each other not to participate in politics at all" came to play a significant role in Jamaica's version of Westminster-style campaigning (p. 3). According to Waters, the Rastafarians' vocal association with "the majority racial group, blacks, and the majority socioeconomic stratum, the lower class," at a time when local and world events converged to enhance many Jamaicans' awareness of race and class, propelled the Rastas to the forefront of the national scene (p. 8). In the 1970s, Rasta symbols were systematically utilized by both parties, who often borrowed slogans and phrases from reggae songs, the indigenous music associated with the cult. This appropriation,

which was limited in the 1967 election, increased tremendously in 1972, was systematized in the 1976 campaign, then declined in 1980 and 1983. This curve duplicates the fortunes of the People's National Party (PNP) of Michael Manley, although Edward Seaga's Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) also made use of Rasta symbols.

Waters does not fully answer her original query. By the end of *Race, Class, and Political Symbols*, we are not entirely sure why Rasta symbols became so prominent. But in the course of her elaborate descriptions of the five campaigns, we do find out how those symbols were manipulated and how they transcended that original manipulation to take on a life of their own. In just a few years, the most popular reggae artists accumulated so much symbolic power that they came close to dictating if not party lines at least the language of political platforms. Between 1976 and 1980, these musicians stopped being mere providers of slogans into which politicians could inject a "content" and helped to shape political discourse itself.

But did they do so as Rastafarians or as "black" and "lower-class" advocates? Did they also manage to reach such heights because they were performers within a culture attuned to rewarding performance socially and politically? Unfortunately, Waters seems unaware of an ongoing stream of works, including the writings of Abrahams and Szwed, that emphasize the role of performance in the cultures and politics of Afro-Americas. As a result, she fails to probe the possibility that the "message" was significantly tied to the personae of the messengers. This omission is unfortunate, especially in light of Waters's summary treatment of Jamaican class structure. One could also argue that the Rasta message was a meteoric performance within an otherwise unchanged social structure whose ideological continuities it barely questioned.

This is part of Diane Austin's argument in *Urban Life in Kingston, Jamaica*. She writes: "If black consciousness, Rastafarianism and folk culture have become the banners of a new cultural nationalism in the postwar period, the reality behind this façade is that middle class cooption of these cultural products have destroyed them as rallying points for Jamaica's peasantry and working class" (p. xx). She argues that the ideological constant is "a fascination with schooling, qualifications and bureaucratic employment" (p. xxi). The emphasis on individual merit and achievements confuses the workers' perception of their lives and benefits the urban middle class.

Austin daringly tests her views through an ethnographic comparison of two "marginal" Kingston neighborhoods. Neither Selton Town nor Vermont represent poles of Jamaican social structure. Indeed, the objective distance between the two is "rather limited" in terms of occupation, income, and even location. Austin finds it telling,

however, that both neighborhoods were “redefined by residents according to culture paradigms that do represent the much greater social distances” (p. 213). “Vermont’s rather humble middle class” identify with the ruling elite; Selton Town’s manual workers carry the rage of the unemployed yet share in the middle-class ideology of meritocracy.

It matters little that Austin chose to frame her research with the now-fashionable, if diluted, concept of “hegemony,” à la Raymond Williams and Eugene Genovese, which reduces hegemony to “cultural domination.”<sup>1</sup> The strength of *Urban Life in Kingston* is rather its exposé of the many ways in which the legacies of the past, the structure of postplantation society, and the relation between state and society in an increasingly “urban” Caribbean continuously limit the effectiveness of a class-based political discourse and postpone the economic and political reforms that such discourse could facilitate.

That outcome is not a purely abstract matter, certainly not from the viewpoint of Mario Hector, the author of *Death Row*. “There was nothing abstract about this prostituted process of injustice” writes Hector, a class-conscious convict who spent thirteen years in Jamaican jails, three of them on death row (p. 4). Hector’s autobiographical account of the Jamaican penal system brings to life the symbols studied by Waters and the despair and anger observed by Austin: “I, a working-class dread had no chance in the Court of Babylon” (p. 5). His account delves into issues of race and class, political and civil rights, and cultural nationalism not as separate categories but as they meshed together within the life of one extraordinary individual. Yet individualized as the account may be, the power of *Death Row* transcends the author’s personal campaign against the death penalty. He observes of Jamaican independence in 1962, which he witnessed as a child of ten: “When the fireworks and celebrations were done, the butter was on the same side of the bread. Same exploitation; same class-rule; same Babylon; same Death Row” (p. 11). On the prison director’s reaction to a prison riot he led, Hector comments, “It was history and he did not know how to deal with it” (p. 75). Yet even for one purposefully surrounded by the writings of Marcus Garvey, Frederick Douglass, Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon, and Walter Rodney among others, the solitude of death row exacted its toll: “One day it suddenly struck me that I had forgotten how to smile . . .” (p. 17). Shortly after he completed this book and was released, Mario Hector was gunned down in Kingston by person or persons unknown.

#### NOTE

1. The current fad notwithstanding, in Antonio Gramsci’s original usage, not all cultural domination is hegemonic, although *hegemony* implies cultural domination.