

Writing Caribbean Intellectual History

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ABSTRACT: Arguing that *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean* is an important text in the emerging field of Caribbean intellectual history, this essay suggests that missing from this important text is the working through of an intellectual history that grapples with black religious practices as modes of thought. It also argues that if Caribbean thought gets knotted up in the trope of Caliban, it will not decolonize itself and begin to wrestle with what Kamau Brathwaite has called the “inner plantation.”

The writing of Caribbean intellectual history is a tricky matter. There are not only conventional linguistic divides that balkanize Caribbean thought but also the more critical matter of what constitutes Caribbean ideas and thought, and thus a Caribbean intellectual tradition. Is this tradition constituted primarily of political ideas, literature, economic thought, or the historical knowledge of the region? In this mix, where do Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean religious practices fit? Do these religious practices not invoke, as Joan Dayan argues, a “project of thought,” with the “intensity of interpretation” that is allowed by such practices?¹ And if they do, then what does this mean for an intellectual history of the region and for the category of thought itself?

There is also the matter of popular culture as one of the ways in which subaltern classes both represent and produce, in Antonio Gramsci’s phrase, “ways of seeing things and acting.”² And finally, there is a thematic problem. In what ways can we characterize Caribbean intellectual history? In other words, what are the critical preoccupations of this history, not an intellectual laundry list of writers, thinkers, and practices, but rather preoccupations that allow us to reflect upon our historical experiences—historical experiences that at first blush

1. Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), xvii.

2. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 333.

oftentimes seem impossible to represent and in which official memory circulates as mnemonic spectacle. These are knotty issues that, although present at the “inauguration” of Caribbean intellectual history, assume today a vital centrality.

In thinking about these issues while reading Silvio Torres-Saillant’s *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean*, one recalls Elsa Goveia’s 1956 observation: in writing Caribbean history, we should “seek [to go] beyond the narrative of events, [to get] a wider understanding of the thoughts, habits and institutions of a whole society.”³ Writing before the formal political independence of the British Caribbean colonies, Goveia urged us on to a possible way in which we should consider history not just as the narrative of events to be recounted but instead as perhaps the most important frame for a postcolonial society understanding itself on its own terms. Almost twenty years later, Kamau Brathwaite in what has become a seminal essay in Caribbean thought, “Caribbean Man in Space and Time,” attempted to provide an answer to Goveia’s observation when he constructed two typologies for studying the Caribbean. One typology, the “outer plantation,” congealed itself into a disciplinary field calling itself Caribbean Studies. Arguing that historical study was the major preoccupation of this field in the early twentieth century, Brathwaite suggests that historical work cleared the way for “the concept of the plantation in Caribbean scholarship.”⁴ The concept of the plantation Brathwaite suggests draws on the 1927 writings of Gurrea y Sanchez. The plantation has been a central leitmotif in Caribbean thought, becoming a conceptual marker for the work of Lloyd Best and what eventually became known as the New World Group.⁵ Although appearing at a critical moment in Caribbean intellectual history, the theoretical framework of the plantation did not have *full* explanatory power. The reason for this, Brathwaite argued, was that plantation theory, although it claimed to be a theory of totality, did not “contain all that was planted.”⁶ For Goveia’s call to be properly answered, Brathwaite suggested that Caribbean writers and theorists needed to turn their gaze to the “inner plantation.” In this inner plantation, he says, “we are concerned with cores and kernels: resistant local forms: roots, stumps, survival rhythms; growing points.”⁷ Brathwaite’s call was not a narrow linguistic one.

What does it mean to examine the inner plantation? I would suggest that this requires first and foremost the recognition that one of the key defining historical moments of Caribbean

3. Elsa Goveia, *Historiography of the British West Indies* (1956; reprint, Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980), 177.

4. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, “Caribbean Man in Space and Time,” *Savacou*, nos. 11–12 (1975): 3.

5. For a set of essays reviewing the intellectual history and work of the New World Group, see Norman Girvan, ed., *The Thought of the New World* (Kingston: Ian Randle Press, 2008).

6. Brathwaite, “Caribbean Man,” 4.

7. *Ibid.*, 6.