

On the Question of Caribbean Studies

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I want to open a *parenthesis* here and to imagine the discursive space within it as the space of an invitation to think together—in the essays that follow—the contemporary *question* of Caribbean studies. Note that I do not say the contemporary question of the “Caribbean” as such (whatever, wherever, that might be) but the contemporary question of the *study* of the Caribbean, here conceived as a geopolitical area of the intellectual imagination, an object of intellectual history. I put it this way because I want to keep in view the ideological formation of the reflexive languages of representation, the languages we use to figure our preoccupations and the constitution of our intellectual objects—in this instance, the Caribbean. And note, too, the emphasis on *question* and the sense it evokes of an uncertainty of the “answer,” of an uncertainty of any simple transparency, of any presumed self-evidence, of the Caribbean as an object of our imaginations. I mean to press the idea, in other words, that to think something like “Caribbean studies” is already to be *inside*, to be in a conversation with, one dimension or another of the *archive* of thinking about what the Caribbean supposedly *is*, supposedly *was*. And consequently I mean to *urge* that quite apart from the substantive details of our research preoccupations (however much these are, understandably, what we often speak *through*) there remains the matter of how this work thinks and rethinks the domain of Caribbean studies as a conceptual, ideological, political, and moral question. My parenthesis, therefore, is meant to function not as a grammatical mode of either quarantine or digression (or, yet, of reification) but as a way of facilitating an approach to questions such as the following: What

is the picture that informs our various imaginaries (scholarly, fictive, visual, poetic) of the Caribbean as a space of investigation? What is the content of the form of that image and what is the rhetorical labor that it performs? What is the *point* (political, conceptual, disciplinary, moral) of mobilizing this particular image, rather than some other, of the Caribbean in these particular discourses? And what is the *present* that gives these varied pictures their critical purchase?

It may be helpful, as a way of beginning to inhabit this imagined parenthesis, to consider two genealogically connected moments in Caribbean intellectual history, moments that are constitutive of the very *idea* of “Caribbean studies,” that help to found and name a set of preoccupations (and perhaps narratives and images) and through which one would have to scrupulously pass, it seems to me, if we are to ask productively about the *contemporary* as a question of the Caribbean for the critical imagination. What today *is* Caribbean studies? What *can* it be? I should say at the outset, by way of a situating disclosure, that I am going to self-consciously speak almost entirely here of the Anglo-creole Caribbean, the former British West Indies. This is obviously *not* because it ought to have any special privilege in thinking about Caribbean studies, but simply because this is what I know most intimately (not only as someone *interested in* the Caribbean but partly also as someone *brought up* in Jamaica in a particular historical moment), and what I am after here is less a comprehensive story than an *emblematic* one. How are we to *figure* the question of Caribbean studies in such a way as to render it productively intelligible as a question for our present?

II

In 1955, a few years after his return to Jamaica following his PhD at University College London (based on research in northern Nigeria), M. G. Smith published a long essay titled *A Framework for Caribbean Studies*. I take this to be a *seminal* moment in the story of modern Caribbean intellectual life. What is immediately notable about the cast and voice of Smith’s “framework” is his explicit awareness that he was *opening*—and not merely contributing to—a question. He not only recognized the “slenderness of the sociological literature” on his subject and, therefore, the limited character of the data ready-to-hand, but he was self-conscious that, as a West Indian scholar thinking the question of the Caribbean, he was *inaugurating* a moment in Caribbean intellectual history. As he put it, the “dependent” character of the existing literature “reflects the fact that hitherto most of the researches in this area have been conducted by visiting social scientists from the United States or Britain, and have been guided by theories and themes of interest developed in studies of societies and cultures outside the British Caribbean.”¹ Smith, as he meant to underscore, was *not* one of these “visiting social scientists.” A Jamaican and a boyhood friend of the Manley family, Smith had returned to Jamaica in 1952, just as the beleaguered People’s National Party, the avowed spearhead of the nationalist movement, recently defeated in two consecutive national elections under adult suffrage, was yielding to the new Cold War imperatives and ridding itself of its Marxist Left.² Smith

1 M. G. Smith, *A Framework for Caribbean Studies* (Kingston: University College of the West Indies, Extra-Mural Department, 1955), 5.

2 On this political moment, see Trevor Munroe, *Cold War and the Jamaican Left, 1950–1955: Reopening the Files* (Kingston: LMH, 1992). On Smith, see Douglas Hall, *A Man Divided: Michael Garfield Smith, Jamaican Poet and Anthropologist*,

was no political radical. On the contrary, he understood himself to be a committed liberal nationalist *and* professional social anthropologist who would undertake the challenge of *framing* the question of Caribbean studies for the nation-in-waiting. Writing in the commanding, didactic style that so characterized all of his scholarly work, Smith undertook in this essay a wide-ranging survey of the then existing sociological and social anthropological ways of looking at the Caribbean—from Afro-Americanist work to folk studies to studies of social stratification and social psychology, culminating of course with his own just emerging theory of pluralism, offered as a *correcting* analytic framework that would overcome the weaknesses and deficiencies of its (foreign) rivals. Needless to say, I am not going to review the content of Smith's argument here. Rather, I only want to *locate* historically some of its concerns within the emerging nationalist complex of powers and preoccupations in the Anglo-creole Caribbean, here Jamaica most especially.

To begin with, Smith's "framework" essay has to be understood as an engagement *with*, even as it is a participant *in*, the problematization of the "social" in the Caribbean as an imperative of the rationality of colonial rule, that is, of colonial governmentality. It is notable, I think, that Smith makes no mention anywhere in his essay of the powers that are shaping his immediate context of knowledge, either the colonial powers or the nationalist ones. Even though William Macmillan had published his dire *Warning from the West Indies* in 1936, the labor riots that swept the Caribbean in 1937 and 1938 came to the Colonial Office as something of a surprise.³ Though the Caribbean had long ceased to be of any serious economic importance to the project of British colonialism, it remained a potential source of discontent and disorder. Not surprisingly, then, when the Moyne Commission that investigated the causes of the labor riots finally released its report in 1945 (with the Allied victory in the Second World War having restored an ambiguous and short-lived confidence in the colonial project), it clearly identified the domain of the "social" as the principal source of West Indian problems and *therefore* of potential colonial intervention. Indeed, the Colonial Office's sense of the need for sciences of the social to help in the work of governing the colonized was clearly signaled the following year by the publication of T. S. Simey's *Welfare and Planning in the West Indies*.⁴ And in 1947, just as Paul Blanshard published his *Democracy and Empire in the Caribbean*, the Colonial Office pressed its sense of the urgency of the question of the "social" in the Caribbean when, in conjunction with faculty members in the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics, it launched the now little remembered West Indian Social Survey.⁵ The program ran until 1949, collecting sociological and anthropological data, largely in rural communities and largely centered on the family as the epicenter from which social *order* or social *disorder* radiated.

1921–1993 (Kingston: University Press of the West Indies, 1997). For a selection of essays revisiting Smith's work, see Brian Meeks, ed., *M. G. Smith: Social Theory and Anthropology in the Caribbean and Beyond* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2011).

3 William Macmillan, *Warning from the West Indies: A Tract for Africa and the Empire* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936). On the labor riots in the West Indies generally, see O. Nigel Bolland, *On the March: Labour Rebellions in the British Caribbean, 1934–39* (London: James Curry, 1995); and on Jamaica in 1938, see Ken Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings: The Jamaican Labour Rebellion of 1938 and Its Aftermath* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978).

4 T. S. Simey, *Welfare and Planning in the West Indies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946).

5 Paul Blanshard, *Empire and Democracy in the Caribbean* (London: Macmillan, 1947). The story of the West Indian Social Survey is a much neglected aspect of the intellectual history of the Anglophone Caribbean. See Robert Ciski, "Joseph Obrebski, the West Indian Social Survey, and the Ethnology of the West Indian Family," *Phylon* 41, no. 4 (1980): 345–55.

This is one crucial dimension of the beginnings of the social sciences in the Caribbean, of social knowledge as a *means* of engineering social discipline in a colonial and nationalist context. The pioneering studies of two of the survey's researchers, Edith Clarke (*My Mother Who Fathered Me*) and Madeline Kerr (*Personality and Conflict in Jamaica*), are a lasting legacy of this colonial demand.⁶ And I want to suggest that this construction of the sociological and anthropological problem of the "social" is one of the generative discursive conditions of Smith's "framework" essay. It names, in effect, a *nationalist* response to the emerging social anthropological discourse of colonial governmentality; it marks an assertive West Indian *claim* on the question of Caribbean studies. Smith's essay would be an important part of the inspiration, in late 1956, for a famous conference sponsored by what was then called the Research and Training Program for the Study of Man in the Tropics, directed by Vera Rubin, and the collection she edited the following year titled, significantly, *Caribbean Studies: A Symposium*.⁷

Undoubtedly, as Don Robotham has presciently, if also a little irreverently, shown (at another moment in Caribbean intellectual history and from within the idiom of a then prominent Marxist political reason), Smith's sociological story of the theory of pluralism in its various incarnations can be mapped onto the changing political fortunes of the brown middle-class leadership of the nationalist movement in Jamaica.⁸ As those fortunes waxed in the middle 1950s (with the People's National Party finally in power), there was great optimism that the deep plural sections that characterized Jamaican society could be mediated in nonrepressive ways (that is, by a progressive, enlightened elite). But by the early years of the 1960s, when the black (especially rural) poor had rejected the nationalist leadership, this brown middle-class optimism in its ability (or its entitlement) to hegemonize the political order was replaced by a deep pessimism that only the repressive mechanism of the state could hold the polity in peaceful, or, anyway, productive, order. The ideological optimism of this class fraction would only return—and then only for a fragile moment—with the rise of Michael Manley in the 1970s.

III

It is to *this* moment that I now want to turn, when, at the beginning of the second decade of political independence, there was a self-conscious reflection on the earlier moment of Caribbean studies and, indeed, a move to *criticize* and even *displace* it.

In 1975, Kamau Brathwaite (still, then, Edward Kamau Brathwaite) published "Caribbean Man in Space and Time." The essay, first given as a paper at a conference in Barbados in 1973, was published in *Savacou* (the journal of the Caribbean Artists Movement), in a special issue devoted

6 See Edith Clarke, *My Mother Who Fathered Me: A Study of the Family in Three Selected Communities in Jamaica* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957); and Madeline Kerr, *Personality and Conflict in Jamaica* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1952).

7 Vera Rubin, ed., *Caribbean Studies: A Symposium* (Kingston: ISER, 1957).

8 See Don Robotham, "Pluralism as an Ideology," *Social and Economic Studies* 29, no. 1 (1980): 69–89, which precipitated Smith's response, "Robotham's Ideology and Pluralism: A Reply," *Social and Economic Studies* 32, no. 2 (1983): 103–39; Robotham's rejoinder, "The Why of the Cockatoo," *Social and Economic Studies* 34, no. 2 (1985): 111–51; and Smith's final word, "Pluralism: Comments on an Ideological Analysis," *Social and Economic Studies* 36, no. 4 (1987): 157–91. For my own reflections, see David Scott, "The Permanence of Pluralism," in Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie, eds., *Without Guarantees: In Honor of Stuart Hall* (London: Verso, 2000), 282–301.

precisely to the theme of Caribbean studies.⁹ The self-consciousness of a deliberate *intervention* was sufficiently present for the sociologist Herman McKenzie to comment in his introduction on the contrast between this issue of *Savacou* and Rubin's *Caribbean Studies* collection of almost two decades before, a contrast that turned significantly in his mind on the relation between the *social sciences* framing the earlier moment and the *humanities* framing the later one (a theme that, to my mind, remains of enormous importance). Yet at the same time, McKenzie felt compelled to admit, it was necessary to recognize the *intersections* that had taken place between these disciplinary domains in the intervening years—the assimilation, as he put it, of “theories and concepts in both the social sciences and the arts.”¹⁰ Indeed, this is a tension that Brathwaite was very much alive to, and precisely in relation to M. G. Smith, anthropologist as well as poet, whose theory of pluralism forms a generative point of departure for his own intervention. (As Brathwaite wondered aloud to himself about Smith in the preface to this issue of *Savacou*: “do his poems become a *framework* for caribbean studies?”)¹¹ But there was, beyond Smith, another social science target that Brathwaite had in mind in “Caribbean Man in Space and Time,” one also forecast in Rubin’s seminal collection, namely, the idea of the “plantation” as a matrix within which to think the contemporary social-economic problem of the Caribbean.¹² As is well known, in the 1960s Lloyd Best and George Beckford along with their New World colleagues were developing an innovative social science language in which to capture the continuing nature of dependence within the context of neocolonial sovereignty. In 1968 Best published his pathbreaking “Outlines of a Model of Pure Plantation Economy,” in which the plantation was pictured as an exploited hinterland of the metropolitan center; and in his 1972 book, *Persistent Poverty*, Beckford expanded the plantation model to frame a *general* theory of underdevelopment in the third world.¹³ “Caribbean Man in Space and Time,” then, was Brathwaite’s response to both Smith’s pluralism and Best’s and Beckford’s plantation society theory. In essence, Brathwaite felt that in both cases something vital about the inner and dynamic character of Caribbean cultural experience was obscured by their inflexible social science approach, by a language focused purely on factors exterior to the Caribbean subject. What was needed, as he felicitously put it, was a conceptual framework of Caribbean studies that combined the “social arts” with the “social sciences.”

Now, again, I am less concerned with a detailed account of the ins and outs of Brathwaite’s argument than with locating some of its concerns in a somewhat wider historical frame than he himself provides. As everybody knows, the October 1968 expulsion of Walter Rodney from Jamaica marked a critical turning point in the development of black consciousness and leftist political movements in the region. But part of what was *catalytic* about the Rodney-effect was that it made it possible, even *imperative*, to think “culture” as a knowledge-domain of power and struggle.¹⁴ One

9 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, “Caribbean Man in Space and Time,” *Savacou*, nos. 11–12 (September 1975): 1–11.

10 Herman McKenzie, introduction to *Savacou*, nos. 11–12 (September 1975): vi.

11 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, preface to *Savacou*, nos. 11–12 (September 1975): v.

12 See Charles Wagley, “Plantation America: A Cultural Sphere,” in Rubin, *Caribbean Studies*, 3–13.

13 See Lloyd Best, “Outlines of a Model of Pure Plantation Economy,” *Social and Economic Studies* 17, no. 3 (1968): 283–326; and George Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies in the Third World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

14 I have made this point before in David Scott, “Preface: The Paradox of Beginnings,” *Small Axe*, no. 28 (March 2009): vii–xiv.

way of thinking about the Caribbean 1970s is to think of the decade as, in a sense, *re-activating* the possibility of a radical subaltern resolution to the problem of social-cultural division—the possibility that seemed for all intents and purposes foreclosed by the neocolonial compromises of formal independence in the 1960s. And partly, anyway, what this re-activation demanded was a *cultural* (not merely a *social* or *economic*) idiom in which to think about what was shared as opposed to what was not—the ways we were *culturally interconnected from below* rather than the ways we were *socially and politically separated from above*. Arguably this is what the theory of creolization that emerged in Brathwaite’s work in the 1970s aimed to do; it refocused our attention on the submarine (because *suppressed*) unity of Caribbean culture: “our problem is how to study the fragments/whole,” as Brathwaite famously put it.¹⁵ Thus one way of thinking about the theory of creolization is that it became the *cultural* idiom in which to articulate the demands of this radical moment in the renewal of confidence in the possibility of a popular Caribbean politics.

IV

These, as I say, are but two historical moments, imperfectly sketched to be sure, of the formulation of the *question* of Caribbean studies in Caribbean cultural and intellectual history. Obviously, neither Smith’s theory of pluralism in the 1950s nor Brathwaite’s theory of creolization in the 1970s exhausts the range of theoretical debates about what the Caribbean is or ought to be in these respective periods, but they are I think *formative*, and thinking through them helps us to see—heuristically, methodologically—how the languages of formulation of Caribbean studies can be connected to ideological and conceptual worlds the thinkers occupy, the problem-spaces they inhabit. Still, the Caribbean that Smith and Brathwaite pictured and attempted to theorize in the 1950s and 1970s respectively is not exactly the Caribbean upon which we open our eyes in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Indeed, from a certain perspective, looking back from where we are today, Smith and Brathwaite might well appear to *share* more than either might like to think. Or, anyway, from a certain retrospect, their respective theories of Caribbean studies might actually be read as competing sides of a single coin whose presumed currency is that of sovereignty, or more properly the sovereign nation-state, that great, authorizing, modernist container in which it was faithfully believed the colonial construction of our historical malaise would finally be dissolved. From different sides, as it were—Smith looking out with ambivalent confidence toward the coming independence, Brathwaite looking to revise and rethink what had so far been made of it—both are keeping faith with the *problematic of sovereignty* as the basic ground on which, or grid through which, to think a theory of cultural identity and cultural legitimacy. As we know, the promise of that horizon of identity and legitimacy has yet to be fulfilled, and it is perhaps no longer clear from our vantage point that it *can* be.

And in this historical context of the uncertain aftermaths of sovereignty, it seems to me, Caribbean studies emerges once more as a *question* demanding renewed—and revised—response. This,

15 Brathwaite, “Caribbean Man in Space and Time,” 1. See also, of course, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (Kingston: Savacou, 1974).

anyway, was the thought that generated our two-day symposium, “What Is Caribbean Studies? Prisms, Paradigms, and Practices,” held at Yale University, 1–2 April 2011.¹⁶ Projected around a number of “conversations” among a diverse range of participants, the conference discussions engaged the problem of thinking about the Caribbean from a complicated plurality of perspectives. This is all the more evident in the revised essays now published in this issue of *Small Axe*. Each essay both stands on its own in its intellectual singularity as well as contributes to an overall collective reinhabiting of the conceptual-political space of thought about our Caribbean. What is the picture of the Caribbean that haunts the contemporary imagination? What paradigm, so to say, frames and ought to frame our preoccupations and why? What is the place of diaspora in these concerns? What is the role of transnational movements? How should we think about the visual? As a geopolitical space founded in European global expansion, what difference does *neoliberal* globalization make? How would we write the genealogy that inscribes these possibilities into the larger problem of a Caribbean intellectual history? These are questions, of course, that are the preserve of no single domain of intelligibility: the poem no less than the monograph, the installation no less than the novel, the essay no less than the film. They all form part of the “social sciences” and “social arts” that can potentially offer us insight if not solace.

I am, needless to say, concerned with these matters not solely as a reader and writer of the Caribbean (such as I may be) but also as the *maker* of a platform for the articulation and expression of Caribbean studies. And I am engaged in this as someone formed within a particular conjuncture of postindependence debates within Caribbean intellectual history now inhabiting the US academy. These, I take it, are important coordinates. The Small Axe Project, now miraculously in its seventeenth year, I take to be an inheritor—from such ancestors as *New World Quarterly* and *Savacou*—of the task of making and remaking Caribbean studies, and of doing so in a way that is attentive to the problem of *location* in its various instantiations: conceptual, institutional, geopolitical, generational, disciplinary. *Small Axe* is committed to the question of Caribbean studies and to *questioning* Caribbean studies, its assumptions, its occlusions, and its affiliations. This is because, as we are never-not repeating, this is the only way to extend and complicate the intellectual tradition in whose name we speak.

16 The international symposium was made possible through the generous support of the Initiative on Race, Gender, and Globalization, the Center for Transnational Cultural Analysis, and the Department of African American Studies (all at Yale University), and of the Small Axe Project. Its conceptualization—and its organization—owes centrally to the work and inspiration of Hazel Carby and Kamari Maxine Clarke, and little would have been accomplished without the help of Carlos Miranda.