Review, Envisioning Caribbean Futures: Jamaican Perspectives

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Recommended Citation
Ulysse, Gina A., "Review, Envisioning Caribbean Futures: Jamaican Perspectives" (2010). Faculty Scholarship. 7.
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The NWIG is a publication of the KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies in Leiden. KITLV is a member institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW).

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[The Book Reviews section of this issue has benefited from the expert assistance of Landon Yarrington and the logistical support of the Department of Anthropology, College of Williams and Mary.]
the pluralism literature Abraham might have pursued more thoroughly the work of M.G. Smith, whose position she bowdlerizes beyond recognition. A consideration of his work on differential incorporation of groups within the societies in question might have yielded greater insight into the resulting political and social factionalism that has emerged.


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In Envisioning Caribbean Futures, Brian Meeks sets out to prove that another theoretical and methodological world is actually possible in Caribbean social science studies. Early in the introduction, he positions his manifesto as a direct riposte to Margaret Thatcher’s assertion that “there is no alternative” (p. 2). He makes a bold plea for Caribbean social studies, which has been caught in a disciplinary time warp, to be more interdisciplinary. Bold, because with this call Meeks rightly points to “the failure on the part of many philosophically inclined thinkers to engage with the seemingly dirty details of political economy” (p. 3) as well as an “equally serious failure on the part of political economists to engage with contemporary theory and philosophy” (p. 3). Since social life as Meeks writes knows no disciplinary boundaries, he aims to “stimulate a conversation that looks beyond the horizon of policy confines, yet is not so far removed as to appear hopelessly utopian” (p. 3). To do so in three chapters and a brief conclusion, he engages the works of several contemporary scholars, focuses on Jamaica as a case study, and then proposes a substantive alternative.

In the first chapter, “Explorations in New Caribbean Thought,” Meeks engages with what he calls “new avenues in Caribbean thought” from an array of interdisciplinary fields (feminist, development, philosophy, anthropology, and political science) that theorize the post-Cold-War moment. In his interrogation of the works of Eudine Barriteau, Davin Ramphal, Paget Henry, David Scott, and Hilbourne Watson, he argues for the continuous relevance
of Marxism and theories of capital vis-à-vis the deconstructive, postmodern, and historical materialist leanings of his interlocutors. Recognizing the shortcomings of their approaches, he proposes a middle-ground "Caribbean subaltern" that assumes progress is possible and does not deny the centrality of capital, but recognizes popular resistance (p. 48).

In the second chapter, "Jamaica in a Time of Neo-liberal Infatuation," Meeks denounces the simple failed state narrative to point to the paradoxical impact of neoliberal consolidation that creates an “atmosphere for enhanced profit taking” in conjunction with “a state of virtual collapse in other areas of the society” (p. 65). He revisits and delineates the key dimensions of the concept of hegemonic dissolution, which he had proposed a decade earlier. He ascribes this state of social collapse to the “withdrawal of the middle class from the centre of life in Jamaica” in part due to the brain drain caused by mass migration abroad (pp. 72-73) and competing ideological movements that have eroded “Creole nationalism” and the “nationalist project” that once embraced a “romanticized peasant culture” (p. 73). In their place are “autonomous Jamaican gangs” who “are no longer beholden to the local party structures and leaders in the same way,” (pp. 69-70) and “popular social forces are on the cultural offensive” (p. 78) contesting notions of what Jamaica is, thus leaving the island in a state of uncertainty and aimless meandering.... In the breakdown of firm moral codes, all segments of society look for ways to circumvent the law” (p. 78). This, Meeks stresses, is occurring within a broader social political context characterized by implosion of the U.S. imperial project and a global economic crisis in capital accumulation — thus the look south to Barbados for another way.

To avoid “international marginalization,” Meeks proposes a much-needed alternative. In the last chapter, “Imagining the Future,” he “suspended the political in order to imagine the future” (p. 172) and suggests “the basis for a new political compromise [in Jamaica] would have to begin with a profound historical act of good faith that would indicate the foundation for a new beginning, a genuine social contract” (p. 117). He insists this would require: (1) a process of national reconciliation to address, discuss, and exercise the national cataclysm of 1976-1980, (2) an extensive land reform measure, and (3) a Constituent Assembly of Jamaican People at Home and Abroad that would convene “not only [to] consider and address matters of constitutional reform but would debate broad questions about the political and economic direction of the country” (p. 128), engage in conversations around notions of a deeper democracy, linking the economy to popular culture and the environment and the pursuit of a single Caribbean market. Finally, given the primacy of concepts of freedom in popular imaginary, Meeks concludes that for this future to be democratic, it cannot be imagined without an articulated ethos. For this he turns to Sylvia Wynter and calls for an epistemic breakthrough to banish the repressive notion of man with its signifiers of racial, gender, and social dominance and build a new open, egalitarian epistemic order of the human (p. 159).

Meeks’s prescriptive project is not without limits. It is noticeable that his selected set of interlocutors are Anglophone scholars. Thinkers from the wider circum-Caribbean were either amiss or not deeply engaged. Have any not made applicable contributions to “new Caribbean thought?” Another lacuna is the gender of his theory. Meeks rightly and forcefully argues that in the new modality of Caribbean thought, intellectuals are no longer privileged with the superiority of insight (p. 58). Throughout the book, he muses on the lyrics of singers and DJs (all male) as theoretical reflections. This elevation of the writers to the status of organic intellectuals is a necessary feat if Caribbean social studies is to embrace an interdisciplinary model that considers the ontological and epistemological agency as well as what Michel-Rolph Trouillot would call the historicity of its subjects. To that end, and cautious of recreating gender binaries, where are the female subalterns? If “people construct forms of resistance” out of “their own foundations of knowing and understanding” (p. 50), then whose Caribbean futures are we envisioning with singular gendered insights?

Still, I highly recommend this work to anyone with interest in Caribbean intellectual development and Jamaica’s place at the forefront of movements in the region. With rigorous rethinking of macrolevel analysis that seriously engages issues of agency and subjectivity, Meeks makes it abundantly clear that henceforth Caribbean social studies needs to eschew compartmentalization and move towards synthesis. Crossing disciplinary boundaries, Meeks shows is no longer optional. Caribbean intellectuals, ought to take heed.


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Few among the millions of Africans snared in the Atlantic slave trade had the means or opportunity to record their autobiographies. Of those who did, Olaudah Equiano is the most famous, and others such as Venture Smith, James Albert Gronniasaw, Ottabah Cuguano, Ayuba Suleiman Diallo have