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Travels with Anthropology

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Several times during our first visit of 2005, Tooy tells me why he's come to the conclusion that fleeing may be wiser than standing your ground. "We once could have confidence in our *óbias*," he'd say. "But nowadays, who knows how much of their powers are left? Let's say someone comes running at you with an axe and you have to choose whether to see if your *óbias* are still worth something or to make your escape. Which makes more sense? I'd say, run for it!" And he giggles.

—Richard Price, *Travels with Tooy*

There are many ways to read Richard Price's new text on Saramaka cultural practice and history.¹ No doubt, experts in Maroon cultures will find it to be a remarkably textured and engaged account of ancestral healing practices within cosmopolitan Guyane, and scholars of New World African religions will see it as offering a nuanced perspective on the ways *Africa*—as both reality and rhetoric—works within creole forms in the Americas. On the surface, *Travels with Tooy* is a book about the transmission of esoteric knowledge passed down from "First-Time" to the present, about the ways this knowledge is mobilized by different communities in particular settings, and about how this mobilization exemplifies the dynamics of change that are so foundational to New World processes and worldviews. For me, however, this is really a book about the role of anthropological knowledge within Caribbean studies, and more particularly, within the kinds of issues that were especially fundamental to Caribbean studies (as well as other postcolonial "area" formations) in the aftermath of World War II. In other words, *Travels*, a text that further opens the window first cracked by *First-Time* and *Alabi's World* on

1 Richard Price, *Travels with Tooy: History, Memory, and the African American Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); hereafter cited in text.

processes of Saramaka nation building, also opens a window on the anthropological contribution to more general debates about nation building throughout the circum-Caribbean.² As a result, it raises questions about anthropology's pasts and futures. Tooy's quandary in the epigraph above thus struck me as the quandary of Caribbeanist anthropology. I want to suggest that there is another alternative besides "fleeing" or "standing your ground."

Let me begin at the end, then. It is not until the last chapter, "Reflections from the Verandah," that Price's analytic voice truly enters the story. Here, he reveals his main objective in laying out Tooy's understanding of how the past works in the present, and what of the past is important in the present. Tooy's story, in fact, is presented to us in its fullness primarily to critique contemporary analyses of creolization within New World African religious practice and to make a case for the continued relevance of anthropological research in the Caribbean. With respect to the first of these problematics—that which addresses creolization processes—Price unfolds Tooy's knowledge to unsettle contemporary critiques regarding the mobilization of memory, arguing that he sees memory not as something fixed but as something that is "socially contingent, always subject to human agency" (304).³ This is important because for Price, the primary task of diaspora scholars has to do with "the complex politics of self-representation and identity through time" (ibid.). In other words, we should not, as scholars, get caught up in debates about memory and forgetting when there are more critical questions at stake (and here I'll quote at length):

For most scholars of the diaspora, the broadest historical question remains how—in each New World colony—enslaved Africans, coming from a variety of nations and languages, became African Americans. To begin to explore these processes, across the many regions where Africans were landed as captive laborers, we must first ask: how "ethnically" homogeneous (or heterogeneous) were the Africans who arrived in a particular New World locality—in other words, to what extent was there a clearly dominant group—and what were the cultural consequences? How quickly and in what ways did they and their African American offspring begin thinking and acting as members of new communities? In what ways did the African arrivants choose—and to what extent were they able—to continue particular ways of thinking and doing things that came from the Old World? What did "Africa" (or its subregions and peoples) mean at different times to African arrivants and their descendants? And how did the various demographic profiles and social conditions of particular New World settings encourage or inhibit these cultural processes? In short, what is it that made what Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls "the miracle of creolization" possible, across the Americas, over and over again? (287–88)

These have long been Price's preoccupations, but there is also a history and a politics to this that has to do with the ways Afro-American anthropology (broadly speaking) emerged. As

2 Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); and Richard Price, *Alabi's World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). These are only the two most well known of Richard and Sally Price's many publications about the Saramaka Maroons. For a more complete list, see <http://www.richandsally.net>.

3 In this case, Price is responding most particularly to the critique in David Scott's seminal essay "That Event, This Memory: Notes on the Anthropology of African Diasporas in the New World," *Diaspora* 1, no. 3 (1991): 261–84.

several Caribbeanist anthropologists have noted, the Caribbean remained outside the regular purview of anthropology until after World War II. Because everyone who populated the region came from somewhere else, anthropologists viewed Caribbean territories as lacking true natives who shared an easily discernable and unified cultural ethos. Moreover, far from being isolated, pristine, and uncorrupted by modernity, the region had extensive political and economic relations with Europe and North America because of its history of colonialism, slavery, and plantation-based export-oriented agricultural production. In short, the Caribbean was not comprised of primitive others, and the region was thus seen as distinct from other areas that anthropologists studied, particularly in terms of its composition and also scale of social, political, and economic development. As a result, with the exception of Melville Herskovits's early fieldwork in Suriname and Haiti,⁴ ethnographic studies of the Caribbean were not formalized until after World War II, when Britain was in the process of relinquishing its empire and US policy makers wanted to know what kinds of territories and populations were soon to become part of the US "backyard."⁵

In the mid-twentieth century, Caribbean studies, as an area of concentration within anthropology, began to take off. The Rockefeller Foundation and the Center for Social Research at the University of Puerto Rico (founded in 1947) were instrumental in developing a new research agenda throughout the region after World War II. In fact, the 1940s could be said to represent the beginning of modern ethnographic fieldwork in the Caribbean, with research underway for Julian Steward's pioneering study on national subcultures in Puerto Rico, Morris Siegel's unpublished study "A Puerto Rican Town," and Madeline Kerr's study on culture and personality in Jamaica.⁶ No longer were the lack of "primitivity" and pristineness seen as drawbacks to Caribbeanist research; societal complexity had become an attraction. Of course, this interest was also helped along by several features of the mid-twentieth century that were important for the Caribbean: industrialization, migration, the Cuban Revolution, and the subsequent intensification of the cold war. The United States had a new level of geopolitical and economic interest in the region and the increase in anthropological work in the Caribbean must also be seen within this context.

At the same time, as New World black political movements became radicalized, the earlier questions that shaped the debate between Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier were

4 For an extended discussion of Melville Herskovits's contribution to the field, see Richard Price and Sally Price, *The Root of Roots; or, How Afro-American Anthropology Got Its Start* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003).

5 For more on these issues, see Bill Maurer, *Recharting the Caribbean: Land, Law, and Citizenship in the British Virgin Islands* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Sidney Mintz, "North American Anthropological Contributions to Caribbean Studies," *Boletín de estudios latinoamericanos y del Caribe* 22 (1977): 68–82; Sidney Mintz, "Enduring Substances, Trying Theories: The Caribbean Region as Oikoumene," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 2 (1996): 289–312; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Caribbean Region: An Open Frontier in Anthropological Theory," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (October 1992): 19–42; Karla Slocum and Deborah A. Thomas, "Rethinking Global and Area Studies: Insights from Caribbeanist Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 105, no. 3 (2003): 553–65; and Deborah A. Thomas and Karla Slocum, "Caribbean Studies, Anthropology, and U.S. Academic Realignment," *Souls* 10, no. 2 (2008): 123–37.

6 Julian Steward, *The People of Puerto Rico: A Study in Social Anthropology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956); Morris Siegel, "A Puerto Rican Town" (unpublished ms., Río Pedras: Social Science Research Center, University of Puerto Rico, 1948); and Madeline Kerr, *Personality and Conflict in Jamaica* (Liverpool: University Press, 1952).

revisited. While Herskovits had originally elaborated the “New World Negro” as a social and theoretical problem for US anthropology, his position that black people in the Americas shared cultural “stuff,” and could in fact trace this cultural “stuff” to particular African practices, was marginalized in relation to E. Franklin Frazier’s emphasis on the cultural “stripping” that was the result of the Middle Passage.⁷ Both these positions were undergirded by a particular sense of politics. For Herskovits, the acculturation model—critiqued for being excessively classificatory and culturalist in its formulation—nevertheless also directed attention toward a preslavery history and culture, something he believed could provide inspiration for black political action in the United States in the aftermath of the failure of Reconstruction in the US South. Herskovits felt that clarifying the African derivation of African American cultural practices in particular would counter the claims of those who asserted that black Americans had no significant cultural legacy and therefore contributed nothing culturally or politically to the United States. For Frazier, the lack of “African retentions”—at a time when things African were still seen as backward, not conducive to modernist development paradigms—meant that African Americans were fully assimilable into the culture of the United States and therefore deserving of the rights and responsibilities associated with full membership in the US polity. Frazier’s supremacy within this debate reflects the political position that was dominant in the 1930s and 1940s straight through the civil rights movement. It was not until the late 1960s and 1970s that the idea of African retentions gained speed again among academics and activists, at which point Herskovits’s work enjoyed renewed attention.

Ultimately, what is important for our purposes here is that the debate about the place of Africa in the Americas was a debate about nation building, about the place of black folk in relation to New World states after slavery, colonialism, and Jim Crow. There is another aspect of the nation-building project, however, and this one has to do more with the kinds of pathologies that have been attached to Africans in the Americas, particularly in the aftermath of World War II, and less with the sorts of political and cultural mobilization that became possible once pride in an African heritage was something that could be imagined as a mainstream (rather than fringe) position. This nation-building project was also pushed forward by anthropological research, this time in relation to kinship and gender relations. Implicit within the extensive literature on the organization of Afro-Caribbean families from the 1940s through the 1970s were concerns regarding the political futures of the black Caribbean at the dusk of empire. To briefly recapitulate a story that has become well known through the work of Caribbean feminist scholars, after the late-1930s labor riots throughout the West Indies, the Moyne Commission (charged with determining the causes of discontent and suggesting ameliorative policies) found that Caribbean family structures were dysfunctional in relation to norms of paternity in particular, that this dysfunctionality caused a lack of economic productivity and motivation,

7 See Melville Herskovits, “The Negro in the New World: The Statement of a Problem,” *American Anthropologist* 32, no. 1 (1930): 145–55; Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941); and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

and that this lack generated an inability to participate politically in an engaged and modern way. This ideology about the dysfunctionality of black families was also reproduced in the United States through Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma*, the study commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation to examine the causes of the continued inequalities between blacks and whites in the United States, and was written into policy by Senator Daniel Moynihan's "culture of poverty"-inspired report, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*. This, of course, is not coincidence, but points to how particular ideologies about black folk in the New World were developed transnationally in response to the growing dominance of modernist developmental strategies.⁸

Within the Caribbean, the family literature thus also led to an anthropological focus on structuring principles and models of societal (dis)integration, culminating ultimately in the plural society debate. As is well known, this debate was ultimately oriented toward assessing the potential success, or predicting the foreseeable failure, of nationalist projects designed to unify diverse sectors of West Indian populations. As in other regions across the globe, these debates became platforms for the development of a cultural politics of race, class, and gender during the mid-twentieth century, and tied in with the agendas of emerging postcolonial political parties, where race and class figured prominently.

Why revisit this disciplinary history here? Because the question of how Africans become Americans remains central to works such as *Travels*, and because this centrality leads Price to make the arguments he makes and to focus his gaze in the direction he does. Of course, Price argues that this is not only his preoccupation but also Tooy's. Yet, as Tooy himself makes clear, this is a generational preoccupation. At one point in the text, he is pessimistic and discouraged, arguing that youth are no longer interested in learning what he has to teach. "My own sister's children don't even bother to come and sit with me," he laments. "You're the only one who seems to care" (228).

It is clear there is much to be gained by a focus on the past in the present, on the various twists and turns in the stories of Africa in the Americas, and we are all indebted to the Prices and many others for taking the time to document, corroborate, and complicate the processes of culture building. However, I think it is fair to ask whether this focus is still the most fundamental one for anthropologists interested in New World black pasts and presents. What are the roads not taken in *Travels* that someone else, politicized and trained at a different moment, might have pursued? There are several, I imagine, but I'll offer only two (with *brawta*) here, not to suggest that Price should have written a different book, but to point out

8 Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1944); and US Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington DC: US Department of Labor, 1965). See also Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1965); and Roderick A. Ferguson, "Nightmares of the Heteronormative: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* versus *An American Dilemma*," in *Aberrations in Black: Toward A Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 82–109.

alternative anthropological paths into the stories of Tooy and his networks that are rooted in postmodernist, rather than modernist, sets of contexts and concerns.

The first has to do with the generational issue, most specifically as it concerns the character of Ben, the young Saramaka man who is president of the Association of Young Active Saramakas of Guyane. Ben's very close and respectful relationship with Tooy leads him to pursue Tooy's official recognition as the Saramaka captain in Cayenne. Yet Price also mentions that Tooy is seen by the association, at least sometimes, as atavistic. They would like him, as Price writes, "not to go off on tangents about First-Time stories or ritual lore every time they come to him with a matter concerning the French bureaucracy" (91). We encounter Ben several other times in the text; clearly, this is someone who is busily working toward the public recognition of Saramaka cultural, linguistic, and ritual practices and who is therefore actively shaping how his community is viewed from the outside as well as how it develops from the inside. These are, of course, also elements of Tooy's daily practice, but the hint of conflict between their visions is not explored here. How I would love to know more about Ben's understanding of the past in the present, about his vision for the future and his understanding of what it means to be modern, about his objectives in engaging the French state! To what extent does his perspective represent a more general generational one, and what might this say about Saramaka cultural politics today? It must be true, after all, that not only Saramaka First-Time stories are "concrete evidence of their people's collective contribution to France" but that their contemporary forms of understanding and mobilization are as well (66).

The second road not taken has to do with the unfurling of histories of labor and industry that contextualize Tooy's movements and those of his clients. Throughout the text there are titillating—and to a nonspecialist, surprising—tidbits regarding the ancience of regional migratory patterns. We are told, for example, that Saramakas first began moving to coastal Suriname, and finally to French Guiana, as canoemen following the early-twentieth-century gold rush. There, they encountered Brazilians, among others, and might even have been among those who found work on the freighters that circumnavigated the Caribbean (10–13; see also 135). Tooy himself first traveled outside Saramaka territory in the early 1940s to build a US air base, and in 1958 he crossed the border to Guyane on a bauxite ship (159–61). By the time Price is writing *Travels*, Tooy is acknowledged as the best known *óbiaman* in Cayenne, where he serves "Brazilians, Haitians, Martiniquais, Guadeloupeans, Creoles, East Indians from Guyana, Amerindians, Paramakas, Alukus, and Saramakas . . . and even the occasional French metropolitan woman or man" (36). And when Tooy is serving his prison sentence, Price's first visit leads him to remark that "among the fifty or so visitors waiting for the hour to strike, there was not a word of French being spoken—only Brazilian, the Creole of Georgetown, Haitian Creole, Sranan-tongo, and a bit of local Guyanese Creole" (204).

Though these cosmopolitan presences appear consistently throughout *Travels*, they remain largely unexplored. In part, this speaks to the degree to which movement, contact, frontier zones, and borderlands are taken for granted among Caribbean populations. However,

slightly more analytic attention to these sorts of travels would on one hand temper the proclamations of observers who imagine globalization as a late-twentieth-century phenomenon (within Caribbean scholarship, this is by no means a new theme, since anthropologists and others have long been making the argument that this phase of globalization is merely the most recent). On the other hand, attention to the dynamics of this sort of emergent cosmopolitanism would also allow an exploration of the various kinds of fissures that are reproduced within communities that share similar experiences. I'm thinking in particular of the ways a certain prejudicial commentary is reserved for Haitians in Guyane by Tooy and others in the text, commentary that would be familiar to anyone working elsewhere in the Atlantic world. Parsing this sort of commentary could tell us volumes about the different ways pasts are processed in the present, how particular pasts come to be associated with specific groups of people, and what this means in terms of the sorts of hegemonies that influence the shaping of diasporic communities.

Finally, the *brawta*. There is, throughout *Travels*, a sense that the ideologies concerning gender and the practices regarding kinship and sexuality are different among Saramaka from the idealized Euro-American middle-class nuclear norm. This is, as I mentioned earlier, a long-standing thematic concern within Caribbeanist anthropology and is not something I want to dwell on at length here. But I was interested in how these topics were broached in the text. The obvious place to start here would be the trial and Price's account of Sally's expert testimony regarding sexual mores in Saramaka communities. But this mobilization of expert knowledge is not what fascinated me. Instead, I was taken by the small snippet very early in the book when Price is remembering his 1960s dissertation research, and Saramaka men's responses to the photographs in his books:

I kept in our tiny house a small shelf of anthropology classics including *The Nuer*, with its photos of lanky leopard-skin chiefs and other Nilotic men with their lengthy male members. Saramakas, examining the photos, remarked to a man, "We've lost it! Look at how those Africans were hung!" What is Africa for Tooy? A land of men's men. (51)

There is something here to develop that has to do with how black Atlantic people understand creolization in relation to ideologies about masculinity and femininity. Price suggests here that for Saramaka men, the process of creolization was also one of femininization, but certainly there is more to this that would be worth exploring in more depth.

Let me end by briefly considering the second problematic Price takes on with this book, the one that has to do with the relevance of anthropology in Caribbean studies. In the last pages of *Travels*, Price offers the following polemic:

We must remain focused on the historical conditions of cultural production. We must take account of conflict as well as consensus in representing culture and demonstrate its role in shaping and reshaping institutions. We must grant full agency to African Americans, recognizing them as the central actors in the construction of their cultures (as well as privileged spokesmen on their representation). We must remain focused on process and change, the ways certain

continuities become privileged, the ways certain discontinuities become masked—the politics of culture through time. Where relevant . . . we must explore dialogue between people in different class positions and in often distant places throughout the Americas and Africa. Historicization and contextualization remain a primary responsibility. And we must continue to do careful ethnography. For when all is said and done, all of our theories (whether about creolization, transnationalism, globalization, or whatever) depend on the adequacies of that ethnography—long-term immersion in diasporic sites and situations, command of the relevant languages, and, ultimately, earning the trust and respect of our interlocutors. (304)

Price has long been concerned with how different forms of knowledge emerge, circulate, and are transmitted from generation to generation, and with the power dynamics that inhere within these different forms of knowledge. Anthropological knowledge is, of course, one of these forms, and here, Price gives it pride of place in terms of understanding the dynamics of New World black life. I want to controversially second this polemic, but with a few caveats. There is an enormous amount to be gained from the inter- and transdisciplinary conversations in which many of us are productively engaged. However, the methods of specific disciplines give specific kinds of insight, and to genuinely benefit from these insights (and to develop new ones) requires not only a degree of retraining, but also some retooling. Though anthropologists are no longer quite as central to Caribbean studies as they once were, they made extremely critical interventions during the immediate postwar period and up through the independence of the larger formerly British possessions.⁹ Moreover, we continue to make important contributions to more general understandings not only of creolization but also of transnationalism and globalization, nationalism and diaspora, gender stratification and sexuality, performance and media, among many other topics. These contributions often remain unacknowledged, however, and we have to ask why this is so. In what ways have we remained wedded to a manner of investigating and speaking that allows other scholars to maintain that anthropology is merely colonialism by another name? How is it that certain topical areas remain dominant, while others continue to be marginalized, and what might this have to do with particular forms of gatekeeping? How might we more radically retool our focus on nation building in order to foreground the significant transformations in context since the mid-twentieth century? I take Price's polemic about ethnography as an injunction against fleeing. But in order to stand new ground, we must also ask some new questions.

9 See Charles V. Carnegie, "The Fate of Ethnography: Native Social Science in the English-Speaking Caribbean," *New West Indian Guide* 66, nos. 1–2 (1992): 5–25.