



**Ethnicity and Identity in the Caribbean:  
Decentering a Myth**

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The Caribbean as an unified region that confers a sense of common citizenship and community is a figment of the imagination. To be sure, there is a geographical expression called 'the Caribbean' often associated with a site, a sea, and several islands. There are also many people who describe themselves as Caribbean persons, claiming an unique identity which has its own cohering characteristics that distinguish them from others. And there are many tourists and other foreigners who can swear that they went to this Caribbean place and met real Caribbean persons. They will all convincingly attest to a Caribbean reality. The truth, however, is that the Caribbean even as a geographical expression is a very imprecise place that is difficult to define. Some analysts include Florida, the Yucatan, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Venezuela, while others exclude them altogether. It is not only an imaginary region but one that is arbitrarily appointed to its designation. It will be difficult to pinpoint precisely where this Caribbean place is, for no country carries the name Caribbean either separately or in hyphenated form.

In this Caribbean place, however, and wherever we choose to locate its boundaries, it is usually visualized as an area populated by a diverse polyglot of peoples. There are whites, blacks, browns, yellows, reds, and an assortment of shades in between. There are Europeans, Africans, Asian Indians, Indonesian Javanese, Chinese, Aboriginal Indians, and many mixes. There are Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Rastafarians, Santería, Winti, Vudun, etc. They speak in a multitude of tongues—Spanish, English, Dutch, French, English, and a diverse number of Creoles such as papiamentu, sranan tongo, ndjuka, saramaccan, kromanti, kreyol, as well as Hindustani, Bhojpuri, Urdu, etc. In whatever combinations of race, religion, language, and culture they cohere and coexist, they dwell on small islands and large, some poorly endowed with natural resources, others abundantly. Perhaps, no other region of the world is so richly varied. Remarkd Caribbean scholar, Michel-Rolph Trouillot: "Caribbean societies are inescapably heterogenous...the Caribbean has long been an area where some people live next to others who are remarkably distinct. The region—and indeed particular territories within it—has long been multi-racial, multi-lingual, stratified, and some would say, multi-cultural."<sup>1</sup>

In all of this diversity, the concept of a Caribbean people and the construction of a Caribbean identity is caught up in many contradictions. It is easy to assert a Caribbean identity if that person does not have to meet his/her compatriots and have no hope of this ever happening. It is because of this fact that we can maintain the fiction of a collection of persons with an all-encompassing Caribbean identity, for in enlarging the ambit of one's interaction beyond the village or town one is quite likely to encounter Caribbean 'brothers' and 'sisters' whom one will instantly disown. It is in part because of this reason that Benedict Anderson titled his renowned book on ethnicity *Imagined Communities*. Argued Anderson: "It [ethnic or communal identity] is

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<sup>1</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Caribbean Region: An Open Frontier in Anthropological Theory," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 21.

imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."<sup>2</sup>

It is easy to understand that persons from an imaginary region designated the Caribbean may want an identity, especially one that is much bigger than a relatively small island. An identity imparts some sense of security in size and numbers. It bestows belonging, and the larger the tribe the greater the warmth imparted. However, some of these designations can be dangerous when ascribed collective identities assume the form of hegemonic cultural claims that omit or marginalize other communities. Identities are potentially dangerous constructs and can be manipulated for oppressive ends, as Edward Said has pointed out.<sup>3</sup>

One postulate that has provided some credible light argues that the human creature is a boundary-bound animal living in society.<sup>4</sup> Essentially, it is argued that, while the human person lives and finds meaning and belonging within the bounds of ethnocultural groups, this membership is ineluctably cast in 'we-they' separate antipathetic relationships with other groups. To belong at once entails to be included in an ethnic community and to be separated and differentiated from another or several. Put differently, the human is defined inherently as a group-bounded creature whose deep identity needs for belonging can only be met in a comparative if not oppositional relationship of inclusion/exclusion with other groups. Identity formation and sustenance is relational, often oppositional and conflictual. Ethnic group members may visibly display their distinctive boundary markers in symbolic and physical emblems in contact with others. If identity is deemed a dialectically constitutive dimension of survival, then it is in part constructed by inventing 'the other.' The 'we-they' dynamic, in this view, is deeply embedded in human psychology. While at times it may be benign relative to 'the other,' it can easily in new circumstances of unusual change and upheaval become conflictual, even turned into a marauding monster. The 'other' is always needed in identity construction, and over time and space, in new situations, the 'other' is continuously being made and remade. The point suggests that ethnic group conflict may not be artificially contrived as a situational strategy merely in search of pragmatic instrumental needs to satisfy, but a ritual structure riveted into social and human behavior that is not easily amenable to erasure or radical modification.

I believe that the Caribbean is suffused with an assortment of ethnic tensions that demonstrate the dangers of making indiscriminate ethnic identity claims. The many sites of ethnic struggles are located in relationships of 'we-they' claims to power and privileges. Most of these are low keyed and institutionalized in the Caribbean, but a few periodically break the bounds of

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<sup>2</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Publications, 1991, revised edition), 6.

<sup>3</sup> E. Said, "East Isn't East," *Times Literary Supplement*, February 1995, 3.

<sup>4</sup> See Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1969).

their normal routine and become quite explosive and dangerous. The very fact of racial as well as linguistic, subregional, and religious diversity embedded in the pattern of settlement and in the social structure of the twenty-odd states of the Caribbean populated by some thirty-three million people predisposes them to patterns of ethnic formation and self-consciousness engendering controversial claims which periodically trigger crises in ethnic contentions. Below the veneer of Caribbean homogeneity lurk numerous identities around the axes of race, culture, language, religion, region, etc. Political mobilization has played on these cleavages so that ethnic sensitivity and assertiveness pervade these states like blood the body. In public discourse few issues are definitionally free from ethnic motifs, and in some instances these are flagrantly and inflammatorily articulated. Practically every week, in the southern Caribbean in particular but also elsewhere, some sort of interethnic strife surfaces from the cleavages in the plural societies of the region. I shall provide a few cases to set the scene for what is to come.

The territories that I shall target for the first set of illustrations are the southern Caribbean complex of Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname. In this area, a peculiar ethnic demography describes the presence of Asian Indians, Africans, Chinese, Syrians, Lebanese, Jews, Portuguese, Europeans, Amerindians, and various mixes and combinations. Despite this ethnic heterogeneity, structurally there is a bipolar dominance of persons of Asian and African descent. The intense division between these two communities has had serious repercussions on non-white solidarity against external forces as well as internal challenges of development. It was Walter Rodney who, in his appeal to 'Black Power' as a means of mobilization "to throw off white domination and resume the handling of their own destinies" in the Caribbean, made clear that his category of Black people included persons of Asian descent who shared a common Caribbean experience in colonial oppression.<sup>5</sup> Internal fissures, especially the African-Indian division, have always provided the conditions for ethnic conflict and in any project of solidarity have had to be contained.

In June 1993 Ms. Hulsie Bhaggan, an Indian member of the Trinidad and Tobago parliament, charged the African-dominated ruling regime, the Peoples National Movement (PNM), with complicity in 'ethnic cleansing.' At the time a spate of crime had hit central Trinidad where Indians predominated and this occasioned Ms. Bhaggan's outburst that Indian women were being terrorized and raped by African men.<sup>6</sup> She charged the government with complicity by indifference in failing to respond to the plight of the victims and inquired whether the ruling regime "was going to preside over ethnic cleansing and the establishment of a Bosnia in Trinidad."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Rodney, *Groundings with My Brother* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1969), 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Guardian*, 2 June 1993, 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

While this dramatic event was transpiring in Trinidad, bringing African-Indian relations to a dangerous boil, in Guyana the defeated predominantly African party, the People's National Congress (PNC), charged the newly elected Indian-dominated Peoples Progressive Party (PPP) with 'ethnic cleansing' because of the dismissal and reshuffle of personnel in the predominantly African public service.<sup>8</sup> The PPP replacement of key civil service incumbents and restaffing of the Board of Directors, a practice common to all new governments, was interpreted as an act of betrayal of a campaign trust and more importantly as 'ethnic cleansing.'<sup>9</sup>

Another area of crisis engaging two ethnocultural groups in a civil war, which lasted from 1986 to 1992 and is still not fully and finally quelled and settled, is Suriname. Here the strife has been between two Afro-Surinamese groups, Creoles and Bush Negroes, each seen as culturally distinct and regarding themselves as such. The Maroon Bush Negro communities, which evolved from runaway slaves working on Dutch plantations, involve three major groups (the Ndjuka, Saramacca, and Matawai) which constitute about 10 percent of the country's population. In a conflict with the Creole-dominated military regime, the Bush Negroes had been submitted to genocidal treatment; many were displaced from their traditional homelands and driven into refugee camps in neighboring French Guiana while others migrated to the Netherlands. The conflict spilled its borders, saw the importation of arms and a few mercenaries, and drew human rights organizations such as Amnesty International into the fray.

There are also separatist tendencies in various places in the Caribbean such as Tobago, Nevis-St. Kitts, the Netherlands Antilles, and Suriname. In Tobago, which is part of the twin island state of Trinidad and Tobago, the quest for self-determination has been asserted at various times; it comes and goes as Tobagonians, who generally regard themselves as very different from Trinidadians, react to events that reverberate adversely on their lives, often charging Trinidad with discrimination, neglect, and indifference.<sup>10</sup>

Another type of ethnic conflict is brewing in Belize where the demographic structure has been radically altered as a consequence of the influx of large numbers of 'Spanish people' from Guatemala, Mexico, and Nicaragua. The old dominant anglicized Black and Mulatto Creole ethnic community is crying out loudly as it sees its pre-eminence eroded by the ethnopolitical realignments in the state. Another variant of ethnic strife and perhaps the most pervasive in the Caribbean points to the traditional Black (African)–White (European) cleavage that has emerged from the very inception of Caribbean settlement in the colonization of the region. It seemed that it

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<sup>8</sup> See Ralph R. Premdas, "Race and Ethnic Relations in Burnhamite Guyana" in *Across the Dark Waters: Ethnicity and Indian Indenture in the Caribbean*, D. Dabydeen and B. Samaroo, ed. (London: MacMillan, 1996), 39–65.

<sup>9</sup> Political Analyst, "A Coward Bows Out," *New Nation*, 10 May 1993, 1.

<sup>10</sup> See Ralph Premdas and H. Williams, "Self-Determination and Secession in the Caribbean: The Case of Tobago," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* (1992).

was only yesterday that the Caribbean was strongly buffeted by Black Power uprisings and riots in Jamaica, Trinidad, and the American Virgin Islands. Today, for the most part, the Black-White cleavage has been institutionalized mainly in a color-class system of stratification in which race, culture, and economic factors are combinationally nuanced. In Haiti color embodied in a distinct mulatto stratum has emerged as a salient differentiator in community formation with potent political implications even though this has undergone some major revisions. At times the color-class system turns more on the racial axis, as has occurred in various Black Power challenges.

I begin this discussion of a Caribbean identity by embarking on a discourse on where and what is the Caribbean. This is followed by talking very briefly about the need for identity. I will present an analytic scheme for understanding the construction of Caribbean identities. In the larger body of the paper that follows next, I shall examine individually the constituent elements that have featured in the formation of claims to a Caribbean identity at all levels of its expression and show how difficult it is to maintain the arguments that are made for them. Finally, I will offer a topology of identities that best describe the Caribbean situation.

### **The Caribbean**

What and where is the Caribbean? Where are its boundaries? Even though these are seemingly innocent questions, they have evoked diverse and sometimes controversial answers. In the early literature on the Caribbean, a still very useful definition was offered by Charles Wagley, who divided the Western Hemisphere into three regions: Meso-America, Euro-America and Plantation America.<sup>11</sup> Meso-America or Indo-America refers to the region extending from Mexico to Chile along the mountainous *cordilleras* encompassing mainly the descendants of the aboriginal civilizations, the Aztecs, Mayas, and Incas. From Spanish colonization emerged a new stratum of mestizos, latinos, and cholos from whom most of the contemporary leadership of this subregion is recruited. Euro-America refers to the Northern parts of North America and the southern parts of South America and encompasses the temperate areas of European settlement. Lacking minerals and metals, this area became regions of farming settlement and large-scale European immigration following the dispossession of the land from the indigenous peoples. Plantation America refers to a region that extended from about midway on the Brazilian coast into the Guianas along the Caribbean coast of Central America into the southern United States and taking in all of the islands within the Caribbean Sea. This is preponderantly a tropical lowland area and became a place of plunder ('colonies of exploitation' in contrast to Euro-America which consisted of 'colonies of settlement') around a production unit, the plantation, which required

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<sup>11</sup> See Charles Wagley, "Plantation-America: A Culture Sphere" in *Social and Cultural Pluralism in the Caribbean*, Vera Rubin, ed. (New York: Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1960), 3–13.

large amounts of cheap labor.<sup>12</sup> The avid labor needs of the plantations followed the decimation of the aboriginal Caribs, Tainos, Ciboneys, and Arawaks and witnessed the transplantation of transoceanic caravan loads of African slaves and indentured laborers from China, Portugal, India, Indonesia, and elsewhere. Thus, Plantation America was populated by a polyglot of peoples and races strewn across and intermixed in the region.

In the contemporary period the Caribbean states have been carved out of the functional plantation zone and have assumed their regional center of gravity in the insular areas. A few continental coastal countries are usually appended to this Caribbean region, including Belize and the Guianas. The islands include two great chains: the Greater Antilles, which covers 90 percent of the land space and peoples of the region and includes Cuba, Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic share this island), Puerto Rico, and Jamaica; and the Lesser Antilles, which incorporates the other smaller islands. The Caribbean region has been truncated into sublinguistic subsets reflecting the early pattern of colonization by an assortment of European powers. Hence, the Spanish area includes Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico which is part of American territory. Spanish is spoken by more than 60 percent of the 33 million people who inhabit the Caribbean. The French portion includes Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana,<sup>13</sup> which are currently departments of France, and Haiti, which has been independent since 1804. A French-based Creole is spoken in Dominica and St. Lucia. The Dutch parts include Suriname, which has been independent since 1975, Aruba, which is a separate part (officially the third part of the Dutch Kingdom), and the five-island Netherlands Antilles constituted of the islands of Curaçao, Bonaire, Saba, St. Maarten, and St. Eustatius, which are part of the Dutch state (officially the second part of the Dutch Kingdom). The English-speaking areas include an assortment of independent and dependent islands linked to Britain, collectively called the Commonwealth Caribbean (the independent ones include Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana, Belize, the Bahamas, Antigua, St. Kitts-Nevis, Grenada, Dominica, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent; the dependent ones include the British Virgin Islands, Monseratt, Anguilla, Barbuda, the Cayman Islands, and the Turks and Caicos islands), and those linked to the United States namely the American Virgin islands. There is one anomalous island, St. Maarten, which is a condominium jointly run by The Netherlands and France.<sup>14</sup>

The economies of the Caribbean eventually evolved typically into monocrop plantation production of cotton, coffee, and sugar, foreign-owned and -oriented for export. Colonization

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<sup>12</sup> See E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

<sup>13</sup> For French Guiana, see Peter Redfield, "Beneath a Modern Sky," *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 21, 3 (1996): 251–54.

<sup>14</sup> The Dutch spelling for this island is St. Maarten while the French spelling is St. Martin. The French component includes the island of St. Bartholomey.

bequeathed a diversity of races, languages, religions, and cultures and an immigrant society with weak social cohesion and community organization. In the late twentieth century a substantial number of the Caribbean peoples resided in North America, Britain, the Netherlands, and France in what has been referred to as the 'Caribbean Diaspora.' It has been argued that this phenomenon, which includes substantial retentions of Caribbean cultural forms in predominantly Caribbean residential areas in the metropolitan countries, has created a new meaning of the Caribbean region to include all areas of the world where Caribbean peoples have migrated and reconstituted themselves as discrete subcommunities. In this sense, the Caribbean is located wherever Caribbean peoples congregate in tropical and temperate parts of the world, in industrial and agrarian regions, among white and black communities anywhere and everywhere.

Having located the Caribbean, a few preliminary comments on its unity and fragmentation are in order. Beyond the fact that the Caribbean has shared a common history in slavery, indenture, plantations, and colonial control stretching over a period of some 500 years (the Caribbean contains the oldest European colonies), taken as a whole it is hardly a society in any meaningful sense of the word but rather a place that is deeply divided culturally, racially, ethnically, etc. As one observer emphasized:

it is crucial to note that regionality as expressed by regional characteristics in the Caribbean is an abstraction and perhaps more so than in other broadly delineated world regions. Within the Caribbean 'regional' matrix, imported and local geographical variables have combined in a great many ways in different places so that in reality the Caribbean is a regional mosaic of subtle complexity and incredible variety; regularities identified in one regional locale—to the chagrin of those who seek broad regional generalizations—are often absent in the next.<sup>15</sup>

It is quite true that coerced labor and colonialism as broad sweeping thematic strokes have conferred a peculiar historical imprint on the region as a whole. However, the manner in which the diverse colonial powers administered their respective territories and managed the different imported peoples in the varied Caribbean environments for a period of nearly five centuries bequeathed a region of immense contrasts.<sup>16</sup> David Lowenthal, noting the bewildering diversity in the region, went so far as to argue that each island in its peculiar evolution has become "a museum in which archaic distinctions were carefully preserved."<sup>17</sup> Sidney Mintz argued that the Caribbean, although consisting of the oldest European colonies and sharing common historical

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<sup>15</sup> B.C. Richardson, *The Caribbean in the Wider World 1492–1992* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>16</sup> F.W. Knight and C.A. Palmer, "The Caribbean" in *The Modern Caribbean*, Knight and Palmer, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 1–2.

<sup>17</sup> D. Lowenthal, *West Indian Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).



founding experiences, germinated after nearly half a millennium into a collection of social orders with distinctive features.<sup>18</sup>

The contemporary Caribbean displays in its raw statistics some of the variations in the region. Cuba has about 11 million persons, while the Caicos have only about 10,000. The per capita income in Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, is about \$300 while it is \$10,000 in the Bahamas and a high of about \$20,000 in Bermuda. Some islands are almost entirely populated by persons of African descent while Cuba and Puerto Rico have a creolized white majority and the majority of the Dominican population is mulatto. Maroon communities, which as noted earlier had evolved from runaway slaves maintaining distinct identities while they proliferated throughout the Caribbean, now persist in only Suriname and Jamaica. In the southern Caribbean, in Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname, there are substantial numbers of persons of Asian descent from India. In Guyana descendants of Asian Indians constitute about 55 percent of the population, about 44 percent in Trinidad and Tobago, and about 38 percent in Suriname. Descendants of Javanese, imported from Indonesia and living in distinct ethnocultural communities, constitute about 15 percent of Suriname's population. There are Hindus and Muslims as well as Christians and Jews. The colors are spread out on as wide a spectrum as the class formations. Income and color variations coexist within the same ethnic and racial groups, spawning manifold identities.<sup>19</sup>

While there would seem to be 'no single organizing principle' in relation to the fractured fragmentation in Caribbean social structure, one Caribbean scholar, M.G. Smith, would take up this idea and turn it into the main theme for analyzing the dynamics of Caribbean societies, referring to most of these colonial creations as "plural societies."<sup>20</sup> He pointed to the salience of institutional descensus as the defining characteristic of these societies.<sup>21</sup> It is critical to underscore that Smith's plural society was not a benign situation of cultural heterogeneity, of one culture juxtaposed and peacefully coexisting in the same state with others. He specified that the connection between the societies was one of power, political domination and unequal incorporation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> S. Mintz, "From Plantations to Peasantries in the Caribbean" in *Caribbean Contours*, S. Mintz and S. Price, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985), 129.

<sup>19</sup> F.W. Knight, "Societies of the Caribbean since Independence" in *Democracy in the Caribbean*, J.I. Dominguez et al., ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), 38.

<sup>20</sup> See Lloyd Braithwaite, "Stratification in Trinidad," *Social and Economic Studies* 2 (2 and 3, 1953).

<sup>21</sup> M.G. Smith, *Culture, Race, and Class in the Commonwealth Caribbean* (Trinidad: Extra-Mural Studies, University of the West Indies, 1984), 28.

<sup>22</sup> M.G. Smith, "Institutional and Political Conditions of Pluralism" in *Pluralism in Africa*, M.G. Smith and L. Kuper, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 27.

## Identity

Ethnic identity emerges from collective group consciousness that imparts a sense of belonging derived from membership in a community bound putatively by common descent and culture. As a subjective phenomenon, it imparts to the individual a sense of belonging and to the community a sense of solidarity.<sup>23</sup> Citing Johann Herder, Isaiah Berlin pointed to the pivotal part that belonging plays in human life: "just as people need to eat and drink, to have security and freedom of movement, so too they need to belong to a group. Deprived of this dimension in life, they feel cut off, lonely, diminished, unhappy. To be human means to be able to feel at home somewhere, with one's own kind."<sup>24</sup> Identity as belonging can be acquired through membership in various communities bound by one or more social attributes such as race, language, religion, culture, region, etc. In each case, the individual perceives subjectively, and emphatically regardless of objective and empirical facts, that his or her relation to a linguistic, religious, or cultural community is a unique link that confers a special sense of personal value, importance and collective meaning. Often this identity is formed in contradistinction to the claims of other groups to a similar sense of uniqueness, so that in a real sense identity formation is a relational and comparative phenomenon locked into 'we-they' antipathies which may be mildly benign or overtly hostile. To belong is simultaneously to include and exclude, to establish a boundary, even though this line of demarcation may be, as Barth noted, fluid and situational social constructs that are "subjectively held categories of ascription and identity by actors themselves."<sup>25</sup> Ethnic identity expressed as a solidarity structure serves important instrumental functions in daily life such as facilitating the acquisition of material gains and conferring expressive and emotional satisfactions.<sup>26</sup>

Caribbean identities are, like other group constructs, aimed at meeting instrumental and expressive needs wherever Caribbean peoples find themselves. In this regard, I have devised for conceptual analysis four levels on which Caribbean identity can be conceived: the trans-Caribbean; the regional; the insular; and the substate ethnonationalist. Of the four states, the trans-Caribbean is the most imaginary but in some ways the most dire and desperate in that it tends to exist in overseas Caribbean communities cut off from the nurturing source of the motherland. Its membership typically cuts across insular citizenships, racial, religious and linguistic cleavages and encompasses all those who identify with the Caribbean region. Prior to the mass

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<sup>23</sup> See W.W. Isajiw, "Ethnic Identity Retention" in *Ethnic Identity and Equality*, R. Breton, W.W. Isajiw, W.E. Kalbach, and J.G. Reitz, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 35.

<sup>24</sup> N. Gardels, "Two Concepts of Nationalism: Interview with Isaiah Berlin," *New York Review of Books*, November 1991, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Barth, "Introduction" in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Barth, ed., op. cit (n. 4), 9.

<sup>26</sup> Crawford Young, "The Dialectics of Cultural Pluralism: Concept and Reality" in *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The Nation-State at Bay?* C. Young, ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 23.

migration of Caribbean peoples, the trans-Caribbean type was frequently found among small overseas Caribbean student communities at universities in London, Amsterdam, Paris, New York, and Toronto. In isolation and loneliness away from home, the trans-Caribbean identity was discovered and constructed in almost desperate search for familiar persons and places. While resident at home, they are virtual strangers; however, in an alien land and often without family, Caribbean students desperately clung to each other like suddenly rediscovered lost brothers and sisters. It would be from this accidental transitional citizenship that they would later construct a more enduring myth of an inherent historical trans-Caribbean identity very similar to the process that many overseas African students would experience in constructing a Pan-African consciousness and identity. Today, the trans-Caribbean identity is found within the Caribbean diaspora and also in student communities at the various universities in the region such as the University of the West Indies and at overseas universities with many Caribbean persons as well in international organizations such as CARICOM where diverse Caribbean peoples work. At best it is an ambivalent identity, often shallow, held as a defense mechanism in an alien land and ready to be compromised by other identity claims.

If the trans-Caribbean identity is encompassing in comprehending the entire Caribbean as well as overseas areas conceived as a single imaginary entity to which a thin loyalty is attached, at an immediately lower level of inclusiveness is a regional Caribbean identity which incorporates persons resident in the linguistic spheres of the Caribbean. The regional identity is substantially a language-delineated boundary incorporating clusters of Caribbean states. Within the Caribbean taken as a whole, no other differentiator is as obvious and salient in separating Caribbean peoples into large interactive groupings than language. The Caribbean geographical area was truncated in the process of colonization into linguistic spheres of imperial control with higher levels of interaction among residents of a particular region than among islanders who may be geographically contiguous but belong to a different linguistic area. The English-speaking Commonwealth Caribbean has little interaction with the Spanish, Dutch, and French spheres which tend to maintain greater contact with their colinguistic metropolises and other ex-colonies of their metropolises. Most often the regional Caribbean identity is engaged when a person travels out of his/her country to another part of the Caribbean which is likely to be a place with the same language. Also, when out of the region in overseas communities, co-Caribbean linguists congregate in communities of common understandings stemming from a shared language. They can easily find solidarity in communicating over familiar regional issues and events disseminated to them through their common linguistic mass media which establish iron-like curtains of language walls of separation.

A third level of identity refers to country- or state-based loyalty. At this level, collective belonging assumes a more tangible and territorial form with easily identifiable enduring

differences. It is particularized around the administrative boundary that the colonial power had designed for its own convenience of governing. It was relatively easy to construct a separate identity on the administrative units in part because these were separate islands or clusters of contiguous islands. Over many years of separate evolution from other areas of the Caribbean, and especially in relation to the particular imported European cultural component, be it Spanish, Dutch, English, or French, the islands tended to develop idiosyncratic characteristics of their own. The linkages that were maintained with the outside world were most active with the respective imperial metropolis and not with each other. To be sure, the English possessions, like those of the other colonial powers, had more contact and exchanges among themselves in the Caribbean and possibly with possessions elsewhere in the world than there was between imperially separated island spheres. The upshot has been that over two centuries or more different dialects evolved as well as ways of life with distinctive insular identities.

A fourth level of identity points to the fact that often a more meaningful attachment is to a substate locality or cultural community. In the Caribbean, this is most poignantly expressed in those states that are geographically large, culturally plural, and racially fragmented, such as Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname, the Dominican Republic, and Belize. These substate identities tend to be thinly constructed on a diversity of deep cultural divisions. In fact, they are likely to be marked by a large number of shared national traits which in a crunch of hostile intergroup tensions become overly magnified. For instance, in Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname, in part because of the rise of ethnonationalist politics, Indians are likely to deny the impact that creolization has had in shaping a shared identity with other citizens and instead assert their Indian cultural characteristics even though these are only thinly continuous and retained from their ancestral past. Regardless, however, of their lack of cultural depth and the presence of many shared traits, these perceived differences are held to be crucially meaningful and have led to strong assertions of separate substate identities, particularly against their neighbors in many parts of the Caribbean, with such potency that they command the primary allegiance of residents in these areas.

To understand how peoples in the Caribbean cohere into cultural communities, how they are different and separate, how they act in solidarity and individually, it is essential that we look at the diverse bases on which they have tended to define themselves. These bases include such factors as homeland, language, religion, race, customs, etc., or what Clifford Geertz called the "givens of social existence."<sup>27</sup> These bases have a tendency to organize life into identity and

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<sup>27</sup> C. Geertz, "Primordial Sentiments and Civic Politics in the New States: The Integrative Revolution" in *Old Societies and New States*, C. Geertz, ed. (Free Press, 1963), 109; see also Ralph R. Premdas, "The Anatomy of Ethnic Conflict" in *The Enigma of Ethnicity: An Analysis of Race and Ethnicity in the Caribbean and the World*, R. Premdas, ed. (Trinidad: University of the West Indies Press, St. Augustine, 1993), 2.

solidarity formations which command the behavior of its members.<sup>28</sup> It is in the analysis of their identities at all four levels constructed from the claims of the bases of attachment, real or imaginary, that we shall also be able to evaluate how these identities can be mobilized for intraregional and extraregional effects with repercussions on international politics and society.

### **Homeland**

For most Caribbean persons their separate and unique identity is derived from their association with the shores and scenes, the special sights and sounds, of the Caribbean environment. It is the land that is the physical expression of home that has nurtured their identity, and wherever they are found away from home the images of the Caribbean assume the shape of a metaphor for life itself. The notion of region as distinctive diacritica of identity is hardly controversial, even though it has been known that a few groups such as the Jews in the diaspora after the destruction of Jerusalem sustained their community without the benefit of territory. Many Caribbean peoples who have migrated for decades and not returned home live in a sort of nostalgic dreamland of their ancestral environment that sustains their claim to a separate identity. Many make periodic treks back home as if enacting a life-reinvigorating ritual to an ancient mystic Mecca.

The Caribbean homelands, however, are not ancient places where Caribbean peoples and their ancestors have always lived. There are no historic religions and sacred sites decorated with folktales and lore commemorating origins lost in time. As Derek Walcott, the Nobel laureate poet from the island, St. Lucia, put it: "The sigh of history rises over ruins, not over landscapes, and in the Antilles there are few ruins to sigh over, apart from the ruins of sugar estates and abandoned forts."<sup>29</sup> While there are several interesting pre-Hispanic sites preserved as historical attractions, found notably in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, and numerous places throughout the Caribbean bear Amerindian names, there are no surviving languages and civilizations in the insular Caribbean. Caribbean peoples are new arrivals who have had to reconstruct their identities having lost most of what they had in the transmigration from the Old World. Continued Walcott:

That is the basis of the Antillean experience, this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs. They survived the Middle Passage and the *Fatel Razack*, the ship that carried the first indentured Indians from the port of Madras to the cane fields, that

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<sup>28</sup> Geertz, "Primordial Sentiments," op. cit. (n. 27).

<sup>29</sup> D. Walcott, *The Antilles: Fragments of an Epic Memory* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1992), 5.

carried the chained Cromwellian convict and the Sephardic Jew, the Chinese grocer and the Lebanese merchants selling clothes samples on his bicycle.<sup>30</sup>

This medley of memory applies to the polyglot descendants of the new Caribbean natives, separated from their Old World roots even though cultural residues persist in one form or the other.<sup>31</sup>

Homeland had to be reinvented. Homeland requires territory to start with before it is transformed into a moral architecture of the mind and memory. The territorial aspect was adopted from the administrative boundaries of the colonial powers.<sup>32</sup> Unlike continental land masses where such colonial boundaries tended to cut across ethnic communities, in the Caribbean the insular structure coupled with the decimation of the aboriginals allowed for unambiguous borders enclosing separate human settlements to be the constitutive units of the new homeland. Following the European model, the island colonies would emerge as states in the territorialization of the Caribbean, becoming new units of international organization.<sup>33</sup> The colonial administrative boundaries offered the perimeters of the homeland of the Caribbean peoples in a process of 'islandisation' of territorial identities. Thus, for example, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico would become the homes and states of the immigrants who came to this part of the Western Hemisphere and over time these identities would in turn become distinctive in their own way. Into these new insular spaces, narratives and myths would be infused, with memories constructed out of the recent painful past and attached to the land rendering it sacred and historical. Walcott again: "This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent."<sup>34</sup> It is in this recent reconstruction, the Caribbean homeland states are marked by their modernity.

In the conquest and displacement of the indigenous peoples that occurred at the very outset of alien settlement in the region, the Caribbean as homeland has been a contested area. European intrusion added in a spectacular way to the traditional forms of raids that the Caribs, Siboneys, Tainos, and Arawaks conducted against each others' settlements triggering disruption, displacement, and internal migration. Old indigenous settlements seemed to have been relatively fluid residential areas often overlapping with the continental coast; none yielding a stable and

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, op. cit. (n. 2).

<sup>33</sup> See A.D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>34</sup> Walcott, *The Antilles*, op.cit. (n. 29), 90.

imposing permanent civilization such as constructed by the Incas, Aztecs, and Mayas. The entire Caribbean was the locus of a series of shifting small-scale settlements which were therefore easy to dismantle by the European intrusion and conquest. By 1650 they were all practically erased by the alien intrusion. However, the European settlements that were constructed in place of the Amerindian were not imposing edifices serving provisionally as 'colonies of exploitation.' They were either to be abandoned once the lucre was harvested or remain as dependent appendages. It was on these makeshift sites of exploitation that the imported laborers constructed their homes, not knowing whether they were to be temporary or permanent. In the end they proved after several generations to be the homes of the descendants of all who stayed.

After about four centuries of settlement by a diversity of human types, the Caribbean is now home and homeland to its new 'native' residents. The descendants of the postindigenous immigrants are now the legitimate heirs to the Caribbean. They assume the mantle of the new 'natives' of the region. There are no contests of this claim brought by residual indigenous peoples, such as often occur in North America, for the return of ancestral land. In the insular Caribbean such echoes of protest have been permanently stilled by extermination. All of this would seem to have left the Caribbean as a place where ownership of the homeland is indisputable and uncontested. Yet this is not the case. In the fact of racial and ethnic diversity and the various times of arrival by the immigrants, as well as their uneven contributions to the development of the island states, resided the ingredients for divergent claims to equal membership and citizenship. There is strife in the Caribbean household. New contests have emerged over power and privileges in claims that have asserted differentiated membership.

In the willing and unwilling departure of the imperial presence, the opportunity to lay claim to the land offered itself. The most notable case of this transition occurred in 1804 when what C.L.R. James called the 'Black Jacobins' won control of Haiti after a prolonged and bitter civil strife.<sup>35</sup> Acquisition of the homeland was achieved through triumph in war. The descendants of the emancipated slaves, however, advanced a reason for their sole ownership of Haiti in the fact that they were the ones whose labor built the country. It was their sweat and tears in slavery mixed in with the soil in the construction of the plantations that conferred entitlement to the land as a whole. The emancipated slaves no longer saw Haiti as a place of exile, holding out the hope for freedom in repatriation, but as a new cradle of a revitalized existence with roots in the history of slavery and rebellion. It seemed only right that those whose labored and built the land should become the new inheritors.

This principle of territorial acquisition and ownership of a homeland was not controversial after the French were evicted. However, in other island states, especially those that had a

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<sup>35</sup> C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Random House, 1963).

multiracial and multiethnic population but certainly not restricted to them, it would emerge as a source of immense conflict, especially in contexts of rivalry over power and pre-eminence among ethnocultural communities. It occurred in Belize, Curaçao, and Bermuda but assumed acuity in the multiracial and multiethnic states of Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname in the latter part of the twentieth century. Because of the failure of assimilation in the creation of a single integrated society and the corresponding persistence of pluralism, the problem of inheritance and the corresponding right to rule has become an intensely contested issue. In these states where African-Indian ratios are close, the competition for power by the main ethnic communities is a matter to be decided not simply by the electoral marketplace but by a moral claim based on historical precedence and ironically by the degree of assimilation of the cultural values of the departed colonial power. One observer underscored this point in regard to Trinidad and Tobago: "The Afro-Trinidadian is demonstrably unwilling to share public resources and symbolic space with other ethnic groups not only because they regarded these as scarce, but because they deemed these to be their legitimate and prescriptive right by reason of their earlier historical presence in the territory and the greater proximity of their culture and patterns of behavior to the superordinate colonial culture by which public norms are referenced."<sup>36</sup> In Suriname's multiethnic society, Ed Dew pointed to the occurrence of the same phenomenon wherein "Creoles successfully conveyed the idea that they were the original Surinamers" and therefore best able to "serve the national interest."<sup>37</sup> Similar events have also occurred in French Guiana where, as Ken Bilby pointed out, Creoles share claims to legitimacy with Amerindians and Maroons.<sup>38</sup>

The right to rule has become ethnicized; claim to the homeland has become ethnicized; and access to the distribution of privileges and resources has accordingly been ethnicized. In the multiracial southern Caribbean states of Trinidad, Suriname, and Guyana, Africans fear that Indian numbers and superior reproductivity will displace them from positions of power and pre-eminence. They anchor their claim on being in the Caribbean prior to the arrival of Indians. Frequently in counterargument to affirm their equality, Indians underscore their superior economic contribution in the building of the homeland, even suggesting that this is a more substantial and important basis in claiming the rights of full membership and citizenship. In this discourse, the relative degrees of suffering and victimization in slavery and indenture are catalogued and entered in the ledger of claims and counterclaims. Part of the debate has degenerated into assertions of loyalty to the homeland reminiscent of the American preoccupation with the authenticity of a citizen's Americanness or un-Americanness. Here the discourse turns on the issue of 'creolization' or cultural adaptation of the descendants to the local

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<sup>36</sup> S. Ryan, *The Disillusioned Electorate* (Trinidad: Imprint Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Edward Dew, *The Trouble in Suriname, 1975–1993* (New York: Praeger, 1994), 2.

<sup>38</sup> Personal correspondence.



milieux. Creolization as a cultural mode of indigenization is often rendered as essentially a single Afro- or Eurocentric standard, and for some the acquisition of this pattern of adaptation should serve as the litmus test of loyalty and entitlement to the patrimony of the land. Applied in this way, for those whose peculiar cultural adaptations are different, especially among Indians in Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname, creolization is a hegemonic concept that elevates the cultural practices of one community as the measure of membership and entitlement. It is clear that there are many types of creole adaptations. All Caribbean residents become indigenized in the process of creolization, but in the contest over entitlement by the rival communities in different regional locations, one variant of 'creolization' has tended to be appropriated by one or another ethnic section as the 'authentic form' to legitimate its claims. This contest for power and resources is not confined to Trinidad, Suriname, and Guyana but is also found in many other parts of the Caribbean such as Curaçao, the Dominican Republic, and Bermuda, where an older stock of settlers make claim to superiority over relatively recent arrivals. Even where the same racial community is involved, many 'ethnicized' differences are invented and upheld as legitimate grounds for the allocation of recognition and respect. Professor Gert Oostindie noted this practice in Curaçao: "the local population tended to distance itself from 'newcomers.' Those groups that came to this island in the wake of its industrial modernization, i.e., after 1915, were generally not taken to be *Yu di Korsow* (Children of Curaçao). Race as such was no major criterion in this categorization: Afro-Suriname immigrants were considered outsiders just as much Lebanese, Dutch, or Poles."<sup>39</sup> Clearly, the jockeying for cultural authenticity is locked into issues of social recognition as well as power sharing but it has developed a more sinister aspect in Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname. This refers to the mutual distrust that separates the major communities, resulting in their relations always being cast in terms of domination and superordination. Africans fear 're-enslavement' and 'internal colonialism' in a new form of servitude to an Indian-run government; Indians similarly charge domination, discrimination, and repression in Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname in African-led regimes.<sup>40</sup> Contests with this sort of allegation are present in other parts of the Caribbean between other ethnocultural communities but expressed in more nuanced ways, some of them reminiscent of the old color-class divisions.

Contest over claims to the homeland in the Caribbean is also engaged openly in Belize. There the change in the demographic mix stemming from a steady cross-border flow of Spanish and Maya groups has raised similar issues regarding power and privileges. The 'Spanish'

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<sup>39</sup> G. Oostindie, "Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Exodus: The Dutch Caribbean Predicament" in *Ethnicity, Social Structure, and National Identity in the Caribbean*, G. Oostindie, ed. (London: MacMillan, forthcoming, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> See Ralph R. Premdas, "Ethnic Conflict and Domination in Trinidad" in *Trinidad Ethnicity*, K. Yelvington, ed. (London: MacMillan, 1993), and "Ethnic Politics in Guyana," *Ethnic Report*, June 1987.

component of the Belizean population has surpassed in numbers the traditional core of Afro-creole persons who had exercised pre-eminent influence in the past. Since WW II, much of the center of political power has resided in the domain of the Afro-Creole community who, even though constituting less than a majority of the population, about 42 percent, had come to see itself as the rightful inheritor to the mantle of power since self-government was conceded by the British colonial authorities. As more and more of the mestizos and 'Spanish' gained access to privileges and power, Professor Alma Young reported that "many Creoles argued that blacks are being robbed of their political power in Belize."<sup>41</sup> A rearguard attack is being made to diminish the value of the migrants membership claims in Belize, charging them with drug usage and crime, but as Young pointed out: "This perceived threat to the Belizean heritage has less to do with the official allegation that the Central American refugees are responsible for an escalating crime rate and more to do with changes to the ethnic composition of the country."<sup>42</sup> As in Trinidad and Guyana, the claims to membership rights, access to resources, and political control are made in relation to the history of residence and levels of acculturation to English norms and language. In the Dominican Republic, Haitians who are even second- and third-generation citizens are racially stigmatized and discriminated against by Dominicans who regard them as inferior and unworthy of equal access to status and benefits. Commented Martin Murphy:

Assimilation of all immigrant groups in Dominican society has been quite rapid and complete, with the notable exception of the Haitians. Spaniards, Syrians, Lebanese, Germans, French, other Caribbeans regardless of appearance, North Americans, Chinese and others have assimilated into Dominican society and its socio-racial categories, usually after one generation. However, Haitians and their Haitian-Dominican descendants are excluded from Dominican society. In only the most exceptional cases may one of recognized Haitian ancestry fully participate in Dominican society as an equal.<sup>43</sup>

In the French Antilles of Martinique and Guadeloupe, the contest over the homeland has assumed a different form with the charge by famed poet-politician Aimé Césaire of "genocide by substitution."<sup>44</sup> The French policy of 'departmentalization' has permitted the persistence of French domination. In turn this has triggered a movement of 'negritude' led by Césaire to claim the islands for the descendants of the slaves. About three-fifths of Martiniqueans and a third of Guadeloupeans have emigrated to France and there has been a reverse flow of French

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<sup>41</sup> A. Young, "Belize: Challenges to Democracy" in *Democracy in the Caribbean*, C. Edie, ed. (New York: Praeger, 1994), 117.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Martin F. Murphy, *Dominican Sugar Plantations: Production and Foreign Labor Integration* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 141.

<sup>44</sup> H. Hintjens, "France in the Caribbean" in *Europe in the Caribbean*, P. Sutton and A. Payne, ed. (London: Macmillan, 1991), 44.

Europeans into the islands occupying positions of official authority.<sup>45</sup> The charge of 'genocide by substitution' suggests an imperial policy of recolonization and dispossession of the land from the descendants of the emancipated slaves. This has prompted a demand for independence and the eviction of the French population. In Guadeloupe a small minority of the inhabitants probably numbering only about 5 percent of the population has also called for the repossession of the land in complete independence from France. All of this clearly depicts the homeland as a place of severe contest, especially in a context where the metropolitan power has permanently incorporated the colonies into its national territory.

There is another location, Suriname, where the contest over the homeland has grown into a grueling and destructive civil war, as alluded to earlier. In the mid-1980s, a particular group of Surinamese came in for discriminatory treatment bordering on genocide. This was 'the Bush Negroes' who were the descendants of the escaped slaves from colonial plantations. These Maroons, constituting about 10 percent of the population, were the largest group of escaped slaves anywhere in the Caribbean and had evolved distinctive ways of life separate from the rest of the Surinamese population.

The Maroon communities of Ndujka and Saramacca had signed treaties in 1760 and 1762 with the Dutch state, establishing autonomous homelands for the Bush Negroes. After Suriname obtained its independence from the Netherlands in 1975 the status of these groups as autonomous governing units was obliterated, leaving the Maroons at the mercy of the central government of Suriname. They had incurred the wrath of Suriname's military rulers who proceeded on a systematic campaign to destroy their way of life, relocate them from their traditional interior hinterland homelands, and even exterminate them.<sup>46</sup> The assault on the Bush Negro communities drew condemnation from Amnesty International.<sup>47</sup> Major displacements occurred with the creation of camps of Suriname refugee communities in neighboring French Guiana and as far away as the Netherlands.<sup>48</sup> An intriguing aspect of this particular ethnic conflict is that both the Bush Negroes and their main adversaries in the military government of Suriname are of African descent. The former are looked upon by the latter as dehumanized savages, even as biologically degraded types.<sup>49</sup> Though the civil war that occurred between 1986 and 1992 has officially ended, it did not resolve the issue of Maroon territorial autonomy and legal identity,

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45 Ibid.

46 See Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1983), *To Slay the Hydra: Dutch Colonial Perspectives on the Saramacca Wars* (Karoma, 1983), and *Alabi's World* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993).

47 Amnesty International, *Suriname: Violations of Human Rights* (1987).

48 Richard Price, "Executing Ethnicity: The Killings in Suriname," *Cultural Anthropology* X (X, November 1995): 437-72.

49 Ibid.

leaving open the possibility of renewed armed struggle.<sup>50</sup> This is especially the case as multinational corporations gain state concessions, without the consent of the Maroon communities, to exploit the lumber and mineral resources in these areas.

There are other places in the Caribbean where the homeland is contested but by the more penetrative and possibly permanent forces of tourism and television. Some islands are practically over-run by tourists especially in the winter. Among these are the Bahamas, Bermuda, Barbados, Antigua, St. Lucia, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Aruba, etc. With sugar and bananas incapable of commanding adequate prices and generating enough employment, tourism has emerged as the new life-giving force of deliverance. However, with the tourist package comes cultural pollution and a veritable loss of the homeland in the threat to a way of life. The tourist industry recasts the social and economic landscape as the plantation did, prompting protests of a new servitude to foreign forces. But this is not entirely an accurate picture. The fact is that Caribbean citizens actively participate in cultivating this industry. While the homeland is shared, it is being transformed radically. The physical land is placed in different use; the occupational structure and industrial endeavors are altered; social patterns are modified in countless ways to accommodate the tourist. To have a home is to control it. In many parts of the Caribbean, citizens surrender public spaces for exclusive tourist use and pleasures.

Accompanying the tourist influx is perhaps an even more sinister force—television. As part of a general globalization process, the Caribbean has now been linked to a battery of television channels that impact not only on tastes but also on travel. Caribbean peoples now share 'virtual' space in the same digital reality with their compatriots overseas. They often travel back and forth as if borders do not matter. They have become Americanized and love it. They display the latest sartorial fashions which are paraded in the Caribbean paradise as new status symbols of the West. This has entailed a significant shift in attitudes and patterns of behavior among the young. It makes the idea of homeland bound by geography irrelevant if not obsolete.

Nowhere in the Caribbean has a movement of any potency emerged to expel the foreigners and to repossess the homeland either physically or ideologically, as has occurred recently in Algeria. To be sure, there are small-scale struggles sporadically scattered throughout

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<sup>50</sup> See Wim Hoogbergen, "The History of Suriname Maroons" and H.U.E. Thoden van Velzen, "The Maroon Insurgency," both in *Resistance and Rebellion in Suriname: Old and New*, Gary Brena-Shute, ed. (Williamsburg, VA: Department of Anthropology, College of William and Mary, n.d.), no. 43 of Studies in Third World Societies. See also Melville Herskovits and Francis S. Herskovits, *Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1934); Richard Price, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1979, 2nd. edition); S. de Groot, "A Comparison between the History of Maroon Communities in Suriname and Jamaica" in *Out of the House of Bondage: Runaways, Resistance, and Marronage in Africa and the New World*, Gad Heuman, ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1986); Ken Bilby, "War, Peace, and Music: The Guianas," *Hemisphere* 1 (3, 1989): 10–12; G. Brena-Shute, "The Brunswijck Affair: System and Strategy of a Suriname Insurgency" in *The Three Guianas*, A. Hennessy and D. Dabydeen, ed. (London: MacMillan, 1990).

the Caribbean. In Puerto Rico there is an independence movement that occasionally spurts into prominence but remains decidedly a minority. In Aruba, the second largest island in the Dutch Antilles, a plebiscite for autonomous status which succeeded was aimed less at seceding from the Netherlands than at obtaining a separate status from its sister island, Curaçao, which allegedly dominated it. In the end, Aruba has remained as a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands but with a separate political identity. The remaining five islands in the Dutch Antilles, like Aruba, are joined voluntarily to the Netherlands by the *Statuut* or Charter of the Kingdom which came into existence in 1954. The Dutch Caribbean islands can leave the political unit of the Netherlands whenever they choose. In 1993 a plebiscite in Curaçao on a choice to leave the Netherlands was lost convincingly. In Guadeloupe there is an autonomist movement that has occasionally bombed a few places, but it seems to ebb and flow with irregularity and not much discernible popular support. Nowhere is there an attempt at ethnic cleansing to ensure that the homeland is an uncontested territory free from foreigners. Instead, foreigners have been invited to come as tourists, retirement residents, and investors. The Black Power uprisings of the 1970s in Trinidad, the American Virgin Islands, Curaçao, and elsewhere have been muted, and even though Black Power ideologies persist in small pockets, challenges to European expatriates and local whites have all but disappeared.

However, there is potential for trouble in the Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname triangle. From 1968 to 1992, in Guyana one ethnic community was submitted to systematic repression and extensive human rights violations resulting in mass departures and claims for refugee status in North America.<sup>51</sup> In Suriname, just before independence in 1975, the fear of ethnic repression triggered a mass exodus to the Netherlands. Initially, about 80 percent of all emigrants to the Netherlands from Suriname were Hindustanis but this ethnic imbalance has evened out with the arrival of large numbers of Creoles.<sup>52</sup> As Professor Bonham Richardson noted: "Fearing ethnic rivalry and worse when Suriname became independent in November 1975, tens of thousands of Surinamese of Indian and Javanese descent rushed to Holland in the preceding months. A total of 40,000—10 percent of the Surinamese population—emigrated to the Netherlands alone in 1975. More left after the military coup there in 1980."<sup>53</sup> There is the possibility that ethnic conflict, which has been driven to the brink of disaster repeatedly in recent years in Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname, will break the bounds of restraint and destabilize the region. If this should

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<sup>51</sup> See Ralph R. Premdas, *Ethnicity and Development: The Case of Guyana* (London: Avebury Press, 1995).

<sup>52</sup> See Dew, *The Trouble in Suriname*, op. cit. (n. 37), 39; also F. Bovenkerk, "Caribbean Migrants to the Netherlands," *Caribbean Review* 11 (1, 1982): 32–37.

<sup>53</sup> Richardson, "Migration in the Caribbean" in *The Modern Caribbean*, Palmer and Clarke, ed., op. cit. (n. 16), 218–19.

occur, one can expect the worst, including refugee flows and the involvement of overseas Caribbean populations and their allies in the fray. I hope you will take me seriously on this case.

Outside the Caribbean, the question of a homeland has asserted itself with curious vigor. In an earlier part of this essay I argued that the Caribbean must be conceived to exist wherever Caribbean peoples reside and seek to preserve and reproduce their patterns of life style. Perhaps as much as a third of all Caribbean peoples now reside overseas, especially concentrated in New York, New Jersey, Toronto, Montreal, and Florida. The homeland is as much outside the region as within the insular Caribbean, with comprehensive networks of kinship linking the areas into an integrated grid of self-perpetuating relations. In the overseas Caribbean areas, the replication of the Caribbean is very detailed so that even the most exotic ingredients and spices can be procured. Besides, relatives and friends continue to go back and forth with finished products brought in without hindrance. To the old landscape of coconut trees and the tropical scenery has been added the new architecture of the industrial cities as part of the Caribbean consciousness and, indeed, homeland. The significance of this extension of the geography of the homeland is that, unlike the Caribbean proper, the diaspora residents are for the most part relatively recent residents whose identity can still be questioned. The new extra-Caribbean diasporic regions in the developed countries are places of contestations among Caribbean peoples themselves.

Looking at the Caribbean communities generally in relation to the challenge of constructing a trans-Caribbean identity, the new homeland has turned out, especially among first-generation migrants, to be a place of island and linguistic exclusivism. The language of the colonial Caribbean spheres had literally established islands within the islands and this impacted on relations among Caribbean residents living overseas. As one observer summed it up: "Mobilizing Pan-Caribbean action is more problematic. Despite the historical and cultural similarities of all West Indians, there is a strong island identity and parochialism. In addition to geographic distances between islands, the Caribbean variant of colonialism stressed metropolitan connections to the exclusion of intra-Caribbean relationships and made 'mixing' between residents of different islands, other than university or in migration situations, nearly impossible."<sup>54</sup> Political cooperation among all Caribbean residents over issues of racism is tempered by the fact that often Caribbean peoples compete for the same jobs and jockey for favor among whites at the expense of playing down the value of each other. Relations between Caribbean residents and indigenous Black Americans tend to be strained.<sup>55</sup> All of this would paradoxically not inhibit political cooperation and mobilization among the two groups on issues of race.

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<sup>54</sup> Linda Basch, "The Vincentians and Grenadians" in *New Immigrants in New York*, N. Foner, ed. (NY: Columbia University Press, 1987), 180.

<sup>55</sup> N. Foner, "Introduction" in *New Immigrants in New York*, Foner, ed., op. cit. (n. 54), 20.

Caribbean peoples compete for opportunities and jobs and space to live. Mostly nonwhite and/or speaking with an accent, they face punishing discrimination. They also compete among themselves for these values and may either bond together or struggle alone. In this new site of struggle, Caribbean peoples have become embroiled in the debates and agitations over the policy of multiculturalism versus assimilation. Often Caribbean peoples are told that they do not belong and are treated as second-class citizens. The new homeland is fragile and often fraught with tension over the very humanity of their person. A familiar response is to assert one's Caribbean identity and mount a vigorous defense of the virtues and values of the old homeland. They become Caribbean ethnonationalists outside the Caribbean even if they do not plan to return to the region. They demand that Caribbean history be represented in school curricula. They insist that foreign assistance be targeted at their countries and that intervention be undertaken to assist in any special straits. In multiculturalism, Caribbean residents seek to locate themselves as new islands of opinion and value in quest of recognition.

### **Language**

If the Caribbean can be conceived as a single cultural community, this claim cannot be confirmed on the basis of a commonly shared language. Indeed, the single most potent and evident factor that fragments the region into discrete clusters of cohesive activities is language. Commented Gordon Lewis: "Each colonizing power imposed its language on its colonial subjects, thus leading to a disabling linguistic fragmentation in the region. It produced the well known trait of *insularismo*."<sup>56</sup> The English-speaking peoples hardly know their Dutch, Spanish, and French-speaking geographical Caribbean counterparts. Most communication outside the region is with the linguistic metropole. Yet language as a salient divider of Caribbean peoples is not a source of any major ethnic conflict in any part of the Caribbean. In the non-Hispanic Caribbean, to be sure, there have been struggles between local Creoles and standard metropolitan languages throughout the region, especially as part of the decolonization process. Competence in the metropolitan language conferred prestige and status to a tiny stratum of Caribbean residents who were also typically marked off from the rest of the population by elevated status and privileged access to economic benefits. But today that old division is of little public significance mainly because local Creoles are now accepted as a legitimate form of communication in both public and private life. The standard metropolitan languages are still a sure differentiator of status divisions, but their use does not carry exclusive legitimacy and no longer casts as strong a stigma on creole languages and their speakers as they used to. While a few academics are genuinely concerned with introducing creole as the national language so as to effect better

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<sup>56</sup> G.K. Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 12.

performance in school and promote development efforts, nowhere in the contemporary Caribbean is language the source of burning public controversy.<sup>57</sup> To be sure, there are some sites of residual language contestations as, for example, basilecta in Jamaica where Creoles are the source of class stigmatization. These, however, are not major issues that generate tension and widespread divisiveness, such as are found in Sri Lanka or Quebec. Various Creoles, such as papiamentu and kreyol in the Netherlands Antilles, scranan tongo, saramaccan, and ndjuka in Suriname, Jamaican creole and kromanti in Jamaica, etc., flourish in great uncontested vitality as the people's language throughout all parts of the Caribbean.<sup>58</sup>

Language however is a critical marker of identity in the Caribbean. As noted by De Vos in relation to other parts of the world, "it is undoubtedly true that language constitutes the single most characteristic feature of separate ethnic identity."<sup>59</sup> In places where language has emerged as a significant issue in ethnic identity formation and group assertiveness, official boards and commissions have been established to sanction proper usage and warn of language 'impurities.' In Papua New Guinea in the Southwest Pacific, the leader of a separatist movement asserted her claim to a distinctive Papuan identity and her demand for a separate state in part because of the threat of New Guinea 'Pidgin Imperialism.'<sup>60</sup> In this regard, language assumes the stature of a fixture with deep historical roots. Yet, as Professor Eric Hobsbawm has remarked, "(N)ational languages are almost always semi-artificial constructs and occasionally...virtually invented."<sup>61</sup> Clearly, this strikes against "what nationalist mythology supposes them to be, namely the primordial foundations of national cultures and the matrices of the national mind."<sup>62</sup> In the Western experience, as Ben Anderson noted, national languages were recent inventions often arbitrarily chosen from among a multiplicity of local languages or dialects and brought into service as a standard idiom in national communication in the construction of the unified territorial state. In the Caribbean, the decimation of the aboriginal peoples and the mass importation of laborers from different language communities left a national linguistic vacuum which was filled by the superimposition of the imperial language as the local idiom imported as part of the colonial freight.

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<sup>57</sup> See H. Devonish, "Towards the Establishment of an Institute for Creole Language Standardization and Development In the Caribbean," paper read at the third annual conference of the Society of Caribbean Linguistics, 16–20 September 1980, Aruba, Netherlands Antilles; see also D. Craig, "Language, Society, and Education in the West Indies," *Caribbean Journal of Education* 7, 1 (1980).

<sup>58</sup> See D. Bickerton, *Dynamics of a Creole System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); also A. Valdman, *Langue créole: Statut, structure, et origines* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1978).

<sup>59</sup> De Vos, 15.

<sup>60</sup> See Ralph R. Premdas, "Papua Besena: The Bases of Papuan Ethno-Nationalism and Secession," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* XVII (1–2): 157–76.

<sup>61</sup> E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 54.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*



The metropolitan language however was a minority medium and was in strong contest with varieties of reconstituted pidgins and Creoles which were the language of the masses. In the end, a duality has persisted with the metropolitan language coexisting with the national creole.<sup>63</sup> What makes both the metropolitan language and local creole distinctively 'national' and 'indigenous' in the Caribbean is the peculiar usage that gives them a particular local blend. This means that even where the metropolitan language looks the same on paper as its overseas counterpart, it is not the same in live daily verbal communications, where the cadences and intonations and the lexical peculiarities give it a rendering that is truly ethnically distinctive and exclusive. It is in the act of forging an indigenous creole that Caribbean peoples have appropriated the metropolitan language and mixing it with local experiences and twists in dialect have constructed a veritable new repertoire of national languages.

In terms of our four-fold level of Caribbean identity, these new Caribbean creole languages in their differentiated dispersal within the region occupy a central place in the formation of ethnic identity at the insular and ethnoregional levels. It is the spoken language practiced at the grassroots in its manifold creolized idiomatic forms throughout the Caribbean that locates the person in a particular community of shared meanings, of familiar communicable facts peculiar to specific Caribbean localities, in a universe where the self is defined by a shared patois and a set of language signs that embody communal symbols and beliefs. From island to island, it is the daily use of this familiar creole idiom that confers a sense of community in which one is always understood emotionally and spiritually and separated distinctively from others. In Aruba, the second largest island in the Dutch Antilles with about 65,000 persons, a peculiar papiamentu is spoken quite distinct from the papiamentu spoken in Curaçao. Interisland linguistic differentiation is a critical marker of identity not only in Aruba and Curaçao but in many other parts of the Caribbean, so that very often Caribbean residents can locate the home of another Caribbean person simply on the basis of an accent or a dialect. In some cases a different creole is spoken in the same country by a separate ethnic community, as in Suriname where coastal Surinamese speak scranan tongo and Bush Negroes speak their own Creoles in saramaccan, ndjuka, matawai, kwinti, paramaccan, and aluku. Among the Rastafarians, it has been argued that they "speak to each other 'in words and gestures opaque to outsiders'" so as to differentiate themselves from others.<sup>64</sup> Language and local culture are entwined in the identity of the Caribbean personality. These new indigenous Creoles are, however, more expressive than written standard metropolitan

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<sup>63</sup> See J.R. Rickford and E.C. Traugott, "Symbol of Powerlessness and Degeneracy or Symbol of Solidarity and Truth? Paradoxical Attitudes towards Pidgins and Creoles" in *The English Language Today*, S. Greenbaum, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 252–54.

<sup>64</sup> C. Gilman, "Black Identity, Homeostasis, and Survival: African and Metropolitan Speech Varieties in the New World" in *The English Language Today*, S. Greenbaum, ed., op. cit. (n. 63), 388.

words. It is a repertoire of cadences, shrugs, facial twitches, accents, peculiar words, all harmonized in an ensemble of localized meanings. This local language is powerful potion in the construction of decolonized Caribbean identities, but they have not been mobilized to the status of movements in quest of separate borders and protected territories. They have remained as local expressions of identity and have been politicized into claims for special recognition only in conjunction with other cultural traits. A few cases illustrate this. In Suriname the Javanese community constituting about 15 percent of the population speaks a distinctive Surinaams-Javaans (different from Indonesian Javanese) which is part of the Javanese identity constructed on language, religion (Islam), and customs. The Javanese are mobilized politically as a self-differentiated and self-conscious community on the basis of their linguistic, religious, and value diacritica and make claims for recognition, political representation, and resources on the basis of their self ascribed identity. Similarly, the Bush Negroes assert their right to autonomy in part based on separate languages (even when these are extremely close, such as Ndjuka and Sranan) as well as cultural and historical symbols. Amerindian groups as well as Asian Indians do the same.

Having said this about the insular and ethnoregional levels, one should to point to some interesting changes that are emergent and may be contentious in future. As part of a religious revival occurring in various parts of the Caribbean (on which I shall elaborate in the next section), and in particular among Hindus and Muslims in Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname, there are vocal claims for the introduction of Hindi and Arabic in the curriculum of primary and secondary schools. In part these claims are stimulated by the overseas confessional communities in South Asia and the Middle East which frequently send missionaries and receive Caribbean students for training. The idea of linking the preservation of the language of a community to its cultural and religious practices is an old one in the Caribbean. Remarkd one scholar: "Although the maintenance of extensive competence in Yoruba by some priests and diviners as in Brazil and Cuba is unusual, many adherents to these religions have a large African-derived vocabulary for gods and paraphernalia which distinguishes the religious register of their language from the metropolitan variety and marks it as specially identified with the African traditions preserved in the religions."<sup>65</sup> At one time in Guyana there was a movement to introduce Swahili as part of a larger project of African revivalism that involved the changing of Anglicized names to African and Muslim names. While the linguistic aspect of African revivalism has practically disappeared, the Hindu and Muslim versions are enjoying a fresh life with demands on the local educational systems to allocate resources and space for instruction in Hindi and Arabic. For the present, these languages are taught privately and are offered in the case of Guyana and Trinidad by cultural centers that have

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 390.

been built by the government of India. The use of Hindi in particular is encouraged by the heavy importation of Indian films and music.

All of this is intriguing since very few Caribbean Indians speak Hindi and Bojpuri in daily life. Hindi, Urdu, and Bojpuri are confined mainly to the realm of entertainment and religious practice. They are being pushed into a wider arena by cultural elites who seek to forge a militant Indo-Caribbean identity fashioned on language, customs, and religion. The potential this has for ethnic strife derives from the political mobilization process. More specifically, politicians in the plural societies of Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname in quest of votes often invoke and manipulate the symbols of the Indian cultural sections. Among the package of cultural symbolic claims to distinctiveness that demand recognition from public policy is the demand for language instruction in the public schools. Should concessions be made to one cultural community for its languages to be incorporated in the public school curriculum, then this is likely to trigger a stampede by other groups for other languages as well. Once this demand for language recognition gets fed into the electoral mobilization process, it can enroll many outside actors who only exacerbate the ethnic divisions that already exist and cause more societal malaise. If such divisions were to intensify, language is likely to feature as only one factor in a complex of inter-related cultural forms mobilized for collective struggle.

This ushers in the trans-Caribbean level of language identity. There is no language medium that is shared universally by all Caribbean peoples regardless of where they live. Rather, Caribbean persons are locked into an array of Creoles and separate Spanish, French, Dutch, and English language-layered spheres of reality. When the different Caribbean peoples settle in places like New York or Toronto, they tend to circulate within the ambit of their colinguistic compatriots, especially in the first generation of their survival. To be sure, many Caribbean-derived residents learn the language of their host countries and cooperate in political solidarity on various community projects. Also many retain their Creoles as a sort of secret solidarity code in acts of defiance against official state authorities, especially the police.<sup>66</sup> However, a common linguistic melting pot is likely to become a more dynamic integrative reality among second- and third-generation migrants who by now would have moved substantially away from their Caribbean roots. Professor Isajiw and others at the University of Toronto have demonstrated convincingly how over successive generations, immigrants progressively retain less and of their ancestral cultural heritage.<sup>67</sup> The process of incorporation however may not apply as well for all of the descendants of Caribbean migrants. While the white sections, especially from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba may assimilate into the European melting pot over a single

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<sup>66</sup> See D. Bolinger, *Language, the Loaded Weapon* (London: Longman, 1980).

<sup>67</sup> See W.W. Isajiw, "Ethnic Identity Retention" in *Ethnic Identity and Equality*, Isajiw et al., ed., op. cit. (n. 23), 34–91.

generation and adopt English as their language, the mulatto and black groups are likely to remain on the periphery within their ghettos, straddling two cultural and linguistic systems. While many of these persons are likely to be fully incorporated linguistically into the dominant society but continue to wear their Caribbean cultural markers, they tend to lose their facility in the use of Caribbean Creoles. This means that their Caribbean identity, especially after the first generation, is sustained in the imagination without the benefit of indigenous Caribbean linguistic supports.

## Religion

In the Caribbean, religious beliefs and practices, formal and informal, are pervasively present and immensely diverse. There are Hindus (including the Arya Samaj, Sanatan Dharma, Shivites, etc.), Muslims (including Sunni, Shia, and Black Muslims), Christians (including Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Moravians, Presbyterians, Baptists, Adventists, Seventh Day Adventists, Lutherans, etc.), numerous spiritist, syncretist, and indigenous religious groups (such as Rastafaria throughout the English-speaking Caribbean, Santería in Cuba, Winti in Suriname, Vodun in Haiti, Shango mainly in Trinidad, Spiritual Baptists, etc.) and a proliferation of Pentecostal and evangelical churches. Adding to this diversity is the fact that in the Caribbean many persons are practitioners of several faiths simultaneously, finding no dissonance in accommodating syncretist or spiritist rituals and beliefs to a formal attachment to an established faith. There was a time, especially in the settled townships, when one major religion was superimposed throughout the Caribbean during the Spanish uncontested control of the region for about two centuries since Columbus arrived in 1492. The Spanish conquest was aimed at both the acquisition of lucre and saving of souls. Spain imposed a system of slavery on that part of the indigenous population that refused to convert. Religion was enrolled in the service of empire-building and Christianity became identified as the faith of the conqueror. Resistance to the Christian religion was plentiful, but its superimposition was best symbolized by the tale of Hatuey, the Indian chief who was given the choice of living or being burnt to the stake on either accepting or rejecting conversion. Hatuey inquired whether on accepting Christian salvation he would be sent to the same heaven as his Spanish oppressors. On being answered in the affirmative he declined conversion, not wanting to suffer sharing the same space forever with those who had forcibly conquered and cruelly despoiled his civilization and repressed his people.

The Caribs, Arawaks, Ciboneys, and other indigenous groups had lived in the Caribbean region from time immemorial and created viable social systems with their own autonomous religions, governments, cultures, and economies. Columbus, like the early Spanish conquerors and settlers, quickly stigmatized the indigenous peoples into preconceived subhuman categories, laying the moral and religious basis of their servitude. He described the Caribs as cannibals and "a wild people fit for any work...who when they got rid of their cruel habits would be

better than other slaves.”<sup>68</sup> The work of the noted contemporary Spanish historian, Fernando Oviedo, described them as “by nature idle and vicious, disinterested in work, cowardly, prone to evil, liars...sodomites, cannibals, and idolaters.”<sup>69</sup> Their ‘idolatry’ was a pretext for unbridled brutality that ended in genocide. It was this fiction of a false religion, in part reenforced by superior religious and civilizational claims of the Spanish, that fed into the making of a stereotype of the indigenous people as subhuman, deserving of enslavement and genocide.

The same religion, Christianity or a version of it, that was enrolled as legitimator of oppression was, however, employed later for liberation. The fate of the indigenous peoples in their dehumanization and decline was temporarily arrested by the work of Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566), the Spanish priest who became officially the ‘Protector of the Indians.’ His actions attest to the many-leveled ambiguity of religion. Depending on historical circumstances and policies adopted by religious leaders, religion exercises a variety of different functions in society. The same religion is the bearer of diverse and contradictory trends: trends blessing the existing order, fostering the common good, promoting the material advantage of its own community, questioning existing power relations, or even severely judging the existing society. The same religion is capable of enslaving and liberating people.

In the Caribbean, religion has served this dual-headed role throughout its history. The early Christian settlers defined their identity oppositionally in their relations with the indigenous peoples who were deemed idolaters and heathens. For the indigenous peoples, the Christian conquest undermined their group identity and in desecrating and setting aside their spiritual symbols destroyed their religion which defined who they were. The affirmation of the conquerors’ identity was done on the altar of denying and defiling the religion of the other, as often happens everywhere in situations of forcible superimposition and subordination. It could be argued that Christianity was only a surrogate for the conquerors’ quest for territory and power. But they believed in what they did as prescribed and anointed by their faith which seemed to compel a mission of forced conversion.

It is paradoxical that the religion of the oppressor would in time be turned into the spiritual sword of their own damning. In many parts of the Caribbean the planters and government officials resisted the establishment of churches among the African slave communities. They were not always sure of their loyalty and were suspicious of certain churches and missionaries, such as the Moravian Church and John Smith in British Guiana who were believed to interpret scripture to instigate rebellion. Church support for the imperial order would be split, a condition that would persist to the present. The institutional edifices and cathedrals celebrating the spiritual territory conquered were erected everywhere, penetrating all parts of the Caribbean, and became the

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<sup>68</sup> Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, op. cit. (n. 12), 47.

<sup>69</sup> Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought*, op. cit. (n. 56), 47.

overt symbols of support for an oppressive order. At the same time that it undoubtedly served as a legitimator of compliant behavior to the established order, at other places it emerged as a main populist mobilizer in the dissolution of slavery. This fundamental split in the personality of the Christian churches in being oppressor and liberator, in availing itself for opposite purposes, in being the handmaiden of one political group or the other, would come to confer the defining characteristic of all religious bodies in the Caribbean in years to come.<sup>70</sup>

The struggle for souls and religious allegiances, often concealing claims for shares in power and material spoils in the Caribbean, is now pursued by a wide assortment of ecclesial entrepreneurs who have evolved or been engrafted in the region. The Caribbean is no longer homogeneously Roman Catholic. The European challengers to Spanish hegemony, the Dutch and British in particular, implanted Protestantism in its manifold denominational manifestations. With African slavery came residual retentions and syncretic combinations that gelled into autonomous indigenous antiestablishment faiths and spiritist groups such as Shango, Spiritual Baptists, Santería, Vudun, pocomania, obeah, lukumi, Winti, etc. When Asian Indians arrived as indentured laborers to replace the emancipated African slaves, they brought with them Hinduism and Islam. When the mainstream Christian churches failed to cater to the needs of their lower income co-confessants, a wave of evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic grassroots churches sprung up, many inspired locally while others were established by similar groups that had emerged in the United States.

While Christianity is the dominant faith in the region, the many religious groupings and their denominations are, however, not randomly distributed in the Caribbean. Catholics predominate in Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Netherlands Antilles, Puerto Rico, and St. Lucia; Protestants predominate in Antigua, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Monserrat, St. Kitts, Jamaica, St. Vincent, and Bermuda;<sup>71</sup> Hindus and Muslims are found mainly in the triangle of Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad; Shango and the Spiritual Baptists are located mainly in Trinidad; Vudun is mainly Haiti; Rastafarians are predominantly found in Jamaica but small communities are found throughout the region;<sup>72</sup> and the Pentecostal churches and evangelical Protestants, especially the Assemblies of God, which have grown more impressively than any other groups, proliferate and are scattered throughout the Caribbean. Added to this kaleidoscope of faiths and belief systems, especially after WW II, has been Marxism-Leninism. It has occupied solid ground in Cuba and found a home among many of the region's intellectuals and lower-class union workers. Overall, the Caribbean region is replete with religious

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<sup>70</sup> See Ralph R. Premdas, "Religion and Ethnicity in the Third World," *Ecumenist* (1993).

<sup>71</sup> See D. Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>72</sup> See H. Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance* (African World Press, 1987); P. Clarke, *Black Paradise: The Rastafarian Movement* (Bongo Press, 1986).

and ideological movements. In a small geographical region of the world, an immense and intense contest for the territory of the Caribbean mind and soul is being conducted daily. The region, having not produced its own universal religion apart from the various local syncretist spiritual formations that exist, has been traditionally an importer of religions and the recipient of an assortment of missionaries, religious and secular alike. An immigrant society with relatively weak institutions invites investors in the soul.

Generally speaking, as Ed Dew has pointed out, "(P)oliticization of the resultant pluralism in religious faith and practice has, however, been infrequent."<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, from time to time, religious formations have inflamed sections of the Caribbean community, throwing parts of the region into turmoil. A few events will illustrate the point well. In 1979, Jim Jones went to Guyana with his small community of followers and occupied a small strip of jungle in the uninhabited interior of the country. The mass suicide that followed seemed to suggest that the Caribbean is an open area for various imported religious experiments.

These cases are not examples of religious and ideological disputes that have been ethnicized in being linked to a communal section in a society. They simply point to the openness of the area to religious and ideological fishing and missionizing. Periodically an imported religion linked to a community becomes explosive with potential regional repercussions. An example of this occurred in Trinidad on 27 July 1990 when a small band of Muslims, called the Jamaat-al-Muslimeen, mounted an organized assault and nearly toppled the government of Trinidad and Tobago. They highjacked the Parliament when it was in session, kidnapped the Prime Minister and his cabinet, and succeeded for a few days in dislodging the government of Prime Minister, A.N.R. Robinson. The sect's leader, Abu Bakr, commanding the screen of the national television that he had captured, triumphantly announced victory over the temporarily fallen government in the name of Allah. He made it plain that his success could not have occurred without the blessing of his Muslim god. The Trinidad armed forces came to the rescue but not before a wave of violence had erupted in the capital city where 31 persons were left dead and the main business district was gutted by fires and looters.

Muslims constitute barely 5 percent of the country's population and most of them were not involved. The insurrectionary Muslimeen group actually was transplanted from North America to Trinidad as part of a Black Muslim movement and consisted of only about 300–400 members. The attempted overthrow of the government severely traumatized the population of some 1.3 million and laid bare the fragile vulnerability of the small island states of the Caribbean to covert attempts at destabilization. The evidence showed that the Muslimeen group had intimate links with external financial sponsors in the Middle East and that they had actually sent small groups of

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<sup>73</sup> Edward Dew, "Politics and Ethnicity in the Caribbean" (manuscript), Chapter 8, 4.

their members for training in Libya. Over a decade of covert operations, they had assembled an arsenal of weapons waiting the opportune time to strike at their target.<sup>74</sup>

The Islamic community in the Caribbean is small, concentrated in the southern Caribbean in Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname, and found mainly among persons of Indian and Javanese descent. There are also small Black Muslim communities in Trinidad and Guyana, and it seems that Islam was first brought to the Caribbean slaves.<sup>75</sup> Recently, a new controversy has emerged involving the rights of Muslims in wearing their religious gear in certain public places. More specifically, in Trinidad several Muslim school children wearing the *hijab* were turned away from classes. The matter created quite a storm and united Muslims of all colors and persuasions in Trinidad and the Caribbean region and more than likely mobilized Muslim support from outside the Caribbean. In Trinidad's ethnically plural society, public schools, many of which are privately managed but financed by the government, are required to accept eligible students from any religious or ethnic community. The incident in question arose when two Catholic- and Anglican-managed secondary schools barred Muslim female students from wearing the *hijab* in classes. Muslim leaders argued that the wearing of the *hijab* follows a code of modesty and chastity prescribed by the *sharia* and therefore represents a holy command from Allah. For many others the *hijab* symbolized fundamentalism, terrorism, and the oppression of women. The issue unified the boards of management of all the secondary schools except for Muslims against the *hijab* in their classrooms. The matter escalated and entered the debate in Parliament. Muslim leaders were up in strong protest against what they regarded as religious intolerance and discrimination. The matter was referred for adjudication in the courts which ruled in favor of the Muslim claim. The event mobilized the Muslim community around this issue which in turn incurred the wrath of other communities, driving a new wedge in a society that is already deeply divided.

Looking at the four levels of identity that were set forth earlier, it is clear that at the trans-Caribbean level religion does not serve a unifying role. Even at the regional level, a common religion is not shared. At the insular level there are some islands where a particular Christian denomination such as Roman Catholicism or Anglicanism has widespread confessional support. What is more prevalent is a dissection of the typical Caribbean state by crosscurrents of Christian denominational competition and in some cases added to this fragmentation is the presence of Hindus and Muslims. This does not mean that there is utter religious atomism and anarchy. Far from it. In fact, the various faiths and their denominational subdivisions tend to be

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<sup>74</sup> See Ralph R. Premdas, review of *The Muslimeen Grab for Power* by S. Ryan, in *The Caribbean Review of Books* 2 (November 1991): 1; see also B. Ragoonath, "The Muslimeen Attempt to Overthrow the Government of Trinidad and Tobago," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Studies* (1993).

<sup>75</sup> See Brinsley Samaroo, "Early East Indian and African Muslims in Trinidad and Tobago" in *Across the Dark Waters*, Dabydeen and Samaroo, ed., op. cit. (n. 8), 201–13.



comprehensively well organized in nearly all of the Caribbean states, each capped with its national organization often with international affiliations. Put differently, the geographical separation of the islands do not demarcate the boundaries of the various faith communities. The religious map crisscrosses these physical boundaries establishing new national and transnational communities which offer their own identities to their confessants who can be mobilized for action against national political loyalties. It is in this configuration of allegiances that the source of regional instability can be found. In a struggle among Muslims, Hindus, or Christians in any particular combination of conflict, the lines of allegiance and the sources of support are likely to derive from both intraregional and extraregional confessing communities. Hence, a religious conflict can easily gather incendiary support outside the boundaries of the state, internationalizing a conflict. While right now there is no major overt religious strife in sight in the Caribbean region, most of the religious formations receive material and moral support from outside the region. Issues that occur in one area easily draw on support outside the ambit of the Caribbean and in turn issues that occur outside the Caribbean involving religious brethren draw on support within the Caribbean. To give an example, when the Ayodiya mosque in India was burnt, this had repercussions in the Indian communities in the Caribbean. The JVP now has branches in Guyana and Trinidad. When Rastafarians were persecuted in Florida for using marijuana as part of their religious service, all the Rastafarian brothers became equally engaged in the conflict. The Christian-Moslem aspect of the conflict in Bosnia as well as the Western invasion of Iraq has incurred the disappointment of Moslems throughout the Caribbean. When the Muslimeen attempted to overthrow the government of Trinidad and Tobago in 1990, several groups of Moslems were being mobilized to come to Trinidad to offer support. In fact, one group arrived at the Trinidad airport but was detained and sent back. In effect, the religion factor where it operates as a salient marker of communal identity can become a volatile factor in the Caribbean. In part because of the small size of these religious communities and the diversity of faiths, however, little is likely by way of violent regional spillovers to come out of religious differences and conflicts in the Caribbean.

### **Culture and Customs**

If anything, it would seem that the Caribbean is an integrated cultural region. Caribbean peoples themselves often speak as though the region were a seamless expression of common customs, beliefs, and values. Expressions like Caribbean food, Caribbean music, Caribbean writing, Caribbean folklore, Caribbean personality, etc., are flowingly and unhaltingly used without being faulted. One may sentimentally make a case, based on much imagination and misinformation, for each of these cultural forms as comprehensively and universally shared. For

instance, Caribbean music as a generic type is variously associated with salsa (Puerto Rico),<sup>76</sup> son (Cuba), reggae (Jamaica), calypso (Trinidad), merengue (Dominican Republic), all marked by a common Afro-Caribbean rhythm in the use of drums and percussions so that an unified musical region can be conceived.<sup>77</sup> The musical variations are seen as existing along a single all-embracing continuum of prototypical Caribbean sounds. By the same reasoning, one can construct the variety of Caribbean foods, food preparations, and tastes on a scale characterized by distinctive culinary sharing.

The content of culture and customs engages a wide assortment of practices which can be operationalized to examine the claim of a core of shared symbols and artifacts. These include: music, dance, festivals, food, aesthetics, architecture, visual art, writing, education, socialization, games and sports, leisure, kinship patterns, attire, languages, dialects, accents, rituals, folklore, myths, material artifacts, etc. These factors are configured into a cultural mold that gives unique shape to the Caribbean mind. A prototypical Caribbean person may be projected as one who is a carrier of a common core of cultural consciousness that is constructed around these symbols and practices, constituting a distinctive and a separate way of life. However mythical or imaginary they may be, these cultural traits and the boundaries of distinctiveness that they imply are perceived as having evolved from the same environmental influences and through a similar set of historical travails and experiences in the Caribbean. In this cultural construction of a common Caribbean consciousness, a shared memory with certain historical peculiarities in slavery, indenture, plantations, and colonial oppression is assigned a distinctive role in the evolution of the contemporary Caribbean self. A history that commemorates a specific set of actors, episodes, and issues in sequences and narratives is a salient aspect of this monolithic Caribbean cultural identity.

One powerful way to interrogate the claim of a common cultural configuration is through the analytic device of our four-fold levels of Caribbean identity: trans-Caribbean, regional, insular, and ethnonational. In this respect, it becomes necessary to give specific cultural shape and content to this alleged Caribbean cultural identity. One may argue that there is a trans-Caribbean self substantially forged into existence from a common history and environment and embodying a set of unique cultural symbols and narratives. The most powerful historical memory of the Caribbean self was constructed from the saga and suffering that attended the importation of slave and indentured labor to work on foreign-owned plantations. Nearly all living Caribbean peoples in their early socialization, especially expressed in their school curriculum, claim this historical memory as distinctively part of their pedigree. The fact of varied Spanish, Dutch, English, Danish,

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<sup>76</sup> Salsa originated in New York in the Puerto Rican diasporic and trans-Caribbean communities.

<sup>77</sup> See Ken Bilby, "The Caribbean as a Musical Region" in *Caribbean Contours*, S.W. Mintz and S. Price, ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985), 181–18; also Jocelyne Guilbault, *Zouk: World Music in the West Indies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

and French metropolitan control, however, throws dissonance into this seemingly uniform historical narrative. The colonial regimes and their cultural systems and practices varied widely and in many salient ways registered strongly divergent imprints in the several parts of the Caribbean. Noted Sidney Mintz: “the cultural patterns of the controlling powers, though conveyed through a grossly uniform colonial design, have differentially affected the nature of local society in these various lands... Dutch, English, French, Spanish, North American and other imperial societies by no means have had the same impact on their respective colonies.”<sup>78</sup>

From the very outset of colonization, distinctive imperial cultural molds and metropolitan practices were inscribed. Some have argued that the slave systems in the French, Dutch, and Spanish colonies were different from the English and that the different dates of emancipation (1834 in the English colonies; 1848 in the French Caribbean; 1873 in Puerto Rico; 1863 in the Netherlands Antilles; 1821 in the Dominican Republic; and 1886 in Cuba) have reverberated differently in their effects on subsequent reconstituted freed societies.<sup>79</sup> Mintz went on to underscore the additional point that “the varying length and character of metropolitan political control” registered “differentiating sociological consequences.”<sup>80</sup> The differences among dates when the colonial powers departed were immense with Haiti becoming independent in 1804, Santo Domingo in 1821 (recolonized by Haiti from 1822 to 1844; 1844 back to Dominican control), Cuba at the end of that century, Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica in the early 1960s, etc. The Dutch and French territories remain connected to their imperial metropolitan states as do Puerto Rico, the British Virgin Islands, the American Virgin Islands, and a few others.

This apart, it bears reiterating that different peoples were imported into the Caribbean including Europeans, Chinese, Africans, Asian Indians, Javanese, etc., each group bringing with them their own cultural baggages. As the Europeans were different so were the Asian Indians and the Africans. Argued Mintz: “it should be remembered that the ‘African cultural impact’ did not consist of the diffusion of some undifferentiated, uniform body of beliefs, attitudes, linguistic forms, and other cultural materials.”<sup>81</sup> Apart from different origins, there was the further fact that plantation practices and colonial administrations varied.

In addition, the Caribbean itself is a geographically diverse region, with varying resource endowments, size, topography, etc., and is uniform only as a region of the mind. Together then, taking the different colonial administrations and their cultural systems, the different human types recruited as human labor cargo and their own cultural retentions, and the varied Caribbean environments, it can be shown that a wide variety of sociocultural adaptations and social structures

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<sup>78</sup> S. Mintz, “The Caribbean as a Socio-Cultural Area,” *Journal of World History* IX, (4, 1966): 927.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 923.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 927.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 921.

were spawned in the Caribbean, defying broad generalizations regarding a shared Caribbean culture, society, and personality. Some of this differentiation is in part outwardly manifested in language differences, different political systems, economies, and customs. The political cultures of the different islands are manifested in regime types that range from chronic military repression in Haiti and Cuba to representative democracy in Jamaica and Trinidad.<sup>82</sup> All of this seems to confirm the perception that the Caribbean is more an unified area in the imagination than in actual reality.

All of this variety in adaptation may lead to an hasty retreat from the claims of an all-encompassing Caribbean culture. The evidence for this is particularly pronounced in the different language spheres where the amalgam of the different metropolitan cultures (for example, English versus French patterns) with local conditions and cultural retentions has created substantially different indigenous cultural configurations. The Dutch, English, French, and American cultural links persist as formidable nurturing forces so that the separate contemporary cultural configurations bear more similarity to cultural forms in the metropole than among the Caribbean states. Put differently, the metropolitan forms intermixed with local ingredients and experiences produced widely divergent cultural effects in the Caribbean space. It can be more convincingly argued that there is a shared Caribbean cultural form at only the regional level within a limited Caribbean spread, each with its distinctive mix of local and metropolitan content than across the entire Caribbean. The heavy flow of communications between the respective metropole and particular island groups was particularly emphatic in the area of educational systems, literatures, languages, and material artifacts which imparted a particular tenor of life, for example, variously to Dutch Curaçao, French Martinique, English Jamaica, and Spanish Puerto Rico separating them into virtual cultural compartments.

In all cases but in peculiar ways, new local blends of collective behavior called “creole culture” have emerged as the new dominant indigenous societal form. Creolized adaptations have produced cultural systems with their own completeness and integrity, the metropolitan contributions notwithstanding. Creolization processes incorporate the special genius of the different Caribbean peoples in forging a separate and dignified existence out of economic and political domination. It has produced a diversity of dialects and language systems, a kaleidoscope of musical forms, a new set of syncretistic religions, and a proliferation of colorful Caribbean personality types. These are more meaningfully clustered into regional types as a form of association and belonging than a wider trans-Caribbean identity seeks to construct.

But even this general regional form can be challenged by certain unique and distinctive cultural expressions found in particular local parts in various areas and islands. It may be argued

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<sup>82</sup> See Edie, ed., *Democracy in the Caribbean*, op. cit. (n. 41).

that the cultural forms in Haiti, Cuba, Guyana, Jamaica, Tobago, and other places are sufficiently unique that they cannot be meaningfully subsumed under a collective regional identity. To add to these separate national claims to distinctiveness are further substate differentiations such as found in Carriacou, the Grenadines, the Corentyne (Guyana), Saramacca and Ndujaka (Surinam), Tobago, Aruba, Belize, and numerous other places pervading all parts of the Caribbean in Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and everywhere pointing to a proliferation of distinctive ethnoregional and ethnonational styles and sentiments. There are old colonial towns and settlements that are a world unto themselves in the Caribbean. The residual Amerindian presence in the Caribbean is varied, including some that are closely integrated in the national culture, such as the Carib settlements in Dominica, St. Vincent, the Garifunda in Belize, as well as several that are relatively more culturally distinctive and autonomous, including the several Amerindian tribes in Guyana and Suriname. The Asian-descended communities in Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname have in part have been creolized into the national culture of these countries but especially in Suriname and Guyana they have retained substantial traditional cultural forms that can be regarded as distinctive in their way of life.

Despite the fact that Caribbean cultural forms are fragmented, attempts are being made outside the Caribbean area in the stratosphere of trans-Caribbean longings among the Caribbean diaspora communities to invent a common Caribbean culture, consciousness, and identity. In particular, this has been done to assert the dignity of these groups as well as to make claims for shares in the distribution of public goods. The very large diaspora communities of Haitians, Jamaicans, Dominicans, Surinamese, Martiniqueans, Guadeloupeans, Guyanese, Cubans, etc., may find themselves living in contiguous residential areas in the metropole and share similar problems of racism and discrimination. These groups embark on a journey of discovering their common Caribbeanness out of their common difficulties. They learn to enjoy each other's company and enter into many forms of cultural exchanges which give rise to a new Caribbean identity that has no counterpart within the Caribbean itself. A new Caribbean identity has been invented in the diaspora communities bearing some continuities with the respective island cultures but developing new forms of collective expressions on foreign soil. More work needs to be done in this area.

Many Caribbean peoples also discover their differences in the diaspora communities and structure these into different cultural forms each calling itself 'Caribbean.' In several important instances, separate Caribbean communities have asserted their cultural and national distinctiveness against other Caribbean communities. Indian immigrants from Guyana and Trinidad have banded together into Indo-Caribbean organizations which print their own newspapers, convene their own festivals, and engage in their own distinctive cultural activities. Similarly, Afro-Caribbean organizations have been established. In addition to this organizational

level of competition and conflict, Caribbean historiography has also been challenged. A number of Indo-Caribbean historians have argued that the historical narrative of the Caribbean has tended to marginalize their presence and role with too much emphasis put on Europeans and Africans. Rivalry from the Caribbean environment has been transposed to the new diaspora communities overseas in Toronto, New York, London, and elsewhere. Separate Caribbean organizations have not only been established among African and Indian Caribbean residents overseas but also among various island groups which do not wish to carry the stigma of being associated with certain groups such as the Jamaicans in Toronto.

### **Race**

Perhaps, more than any other feature, race has assumed the role of the most visible marker of Caribbean identity. Often, despite the diversity of the human types that have come to inhabit the region, race refers to the African descent of many Caribbean residents. Observes Gordon Lewis: “a whole school of Black nationalist writers, following Herkovits, have seen the region as part of the African diaspora, thus tending to overlook its European, Asian, and Arab ethnic components.”<sup>83</sup> The only period when a single racial type had occupied the Caribbean was in pre-Colombian times. Following European contact, however, and ever since the Caribbean has been home for the entire range of biological types in the human zoo. There have been times when the Caribbean was associated with one raciocultural type, as occurred in colonial rule. Hence, the ‘Spanish Caribbean’ was a designation that was applied especially to the more than three-hundred-year period prior to successful challenge of Iberian hegemony of the region. However, Amerindians and Africans were also present in this period though they tended to be forgotten in the broader ‘Spanish Caribbean’ category. The same could be said of the other imperial spheres. Colonialism was contemptuous of the identities of the non-European populations. It was in decolonization that nonwhites became visible and dignified within a socio-racial category and attained the status as full citizens.

With self-government the pendulum seemed to swing from one erroneous stereotypical portrait of the region as European to another as African. To some extent this stereotype of the Caribbean as African is justified, for it is the region into which some ten million African slaves were dumped as chattels to labor on European plantations. In the triadic structure on which Caribbean society has been established—imperialism/colonialism, plantations, and slavery—the African is one of the constitutive ingredients in the making of the post-indigenous Caribbean. It was in part because of this dehumanization of the African by European planters and officials that the Caribbean came to be associated with anti-African racism to the exclusion of other racisms as a

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<sup>83</sup> Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought*, op. cit. (n. 56), 2.

primary motif of Caribbean social existence. As pointed out earlier, there is a movement afoot aimed at restoring in the historiography of the region the role of aboriginal Amerindians, Asian Indians, and especially those Europeans who struggled on behalf of the oppressed in the region. A reason for the relegation of the other non-African groups stems from the arbitrary division of the migrants into 'old and new arrivals,' with African labor described as the first. Ordinarily this differentiation would be harmless. However, in a region that is now strongly contested among the descendants of the migrants, the idea of being first on the scene is endowed with legitimacy for control of political power and priority in the distribution of privileges. Because the division is along racial lines, this kind of history is the source of invidious racial strife among Caribbean peoples. Clearly, in the Caribbean no one is indigenous except the virtually extinct Caribs and Arawaks, some of whose remnants persist in Dominica and St. Vincent. The Caribbean however has been populated by a plenitude of biological types or 'races.' The concept 'race' is simply, as John Rex puts it, "a purely taxonomic one used to classify human types in terms of the average distribution among different groups of a limited number of human characteristics."<sup>84</sup> Race points descriptively to clusters of common phenotype and physical features and implies nothing inherently behavioral or attitudinal; nor does it suggest that these concentrations often called racial stocks which are continuously in the process of change are fixed for all time. No racial classificatory trait has any superior or inferior adaptive value relative to survival, and further, no race is by natural preordination socially or biologically ranked any more than interbreeding or miscegenation produces defective or superior physical offsprings. These are some of the established truths about race. Many analysts however feel that it is an useless if not dangerous concept in social analysis in the Caribbean as elsewhere. Many Caribbeanists such as M.G. Smith however insist on its use. Smith refers to race as "the biological divisions of mankind differentiated by gross phenotypical features which are hereditary, polygenic, highly resistant to environmental influences, distinctive, and of doubtful adaptive value."<sup>85</sup> In the Caribbean human habitat, these biological groupings include Amerindians, Africans, Europeans, Asian Indians, Chinese, and variety of Mixed persons. They serve as sociobiological categories that still have meaning in the popular perception and consequently cannot be ignored in social analysis of identity.

In a new world where the formal trappings of social differentiation and discrimination built around phenotype have been removed but in which inequality and oppression persist, it is now important to look for the nuanced ways through which the racial motifs are manifested. The

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<sup>84</sup> John Rex, "Introduction" to Ruth Benedict's *Race and Racism* (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1942).

<sup>85</sup> M.G. Smith, "Race and Ethnicity" in *The Enigma of Ethnicity*, Premdas, ed., op. cit., (n. 27), 23–61.

historical context has changed and the actors as victims and victimizers are also differently attired. The political, social, and economic milieu have been transformed. But basic structures of struggle in the context of scarce resources and the quest for power and privileges point to a new drama in which old colonially inspired themes of distinction and discrimination are played out. The actors in the diverse Caribbean landscape are not antagonistically the same composed of whites against blacks. It is now mainly blacks against blacks; blacks against browns; high browns against low browns; Africans against Indians, etc. In many parts of the Caribbean, citizens prefer to classify themselves as white, mulatto, meztizo, 'indio,' etc., hoping that in eschewing an African past they can command more status and material benefits.<sup>86</sup> Even persons of obvious African descent who have ascended the socioeconomic ladder, such as the immigrants from the Grand Turks (locally called 'cocolos') to Santo Domingo, are classified as *negros blancos* (white blacks), while most mixed race persons in the Dominican Republic call themselves 'Indios.'<sup>87</sup> The resources for which the struggle is conducted are no longer control of the labor of nonwhite persons to produce sugar, tobacco, and cotton on plantations. It is now jobs, status, and privileges in a stratified order deriving its resources from multinational corporations, multilateral aid agencies, and other international sources.<sup>88</sup> The tools of control are no longer slavery and indentureship, explicit laws of discrimination, residential and occupational segregation, and formal codes of deference. They are now prejudice, customs, cliqueism, clientelist networks, kin connections, much of this informed by neoracial notions of group identity and solidarity. The overt consequences and manifestations are not always obvious. They have to be sought in the thinking, ideologies, elite structures, leadership recruitment patterns, cultural preferences, and substructural expressions of the actors. Essentially, we ask how the new societies, having traversed the terrain to decolonization and modernity, have constructed their identities in relation to their racial heritage. To answer these questions, however, we must examine empirically the full kaleidoscope of cultural and political forms that have emerged in the Caribbean as a whole.

As can be seen, the Caribbean is no longer a place of solely black-white hierarchical arrangements marked by the familiar forms of racial discrimination and oppression. Further, the Caribbean is not monochromal but characterized by a color-class system of stratification even after formal flag independence has been conceded. The Caribbean is an immensely complex place with regard to race and culture. The variations notwithstanding, there still persists the image outside the Caribbean of a monochromal and nonracial identity.

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<sup>86</sup> See Murphy, *Dominican Sugar Plantations*, op. cit. (n. 43).

<sup>87</sup> See José del Castillo and Martin F. Murphy, "Migration, National Identity, and Cultural Policy in the Dominican Republic," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 15 (3, 1987): 56–57.

<sup>88</sup> See Ralph R. Premdas and P. Hintzen "Coercion and Control in Political Change: Guyana," *The Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs* 22, 24 (3, 1983).



In terms of our four-fold level of identity, race by itself is of very limited value in defining and meaningfully differentiating the social moorings and identities of the peoples of the Caribbean. At the trans-Caribbean level, Caribbean peoples cannot be defined as uniformly and phenotypically African, European, Chinese, Indian, Mixed, or anything else. Caribbean peoples include persons of European descent. The preponderant part of the population in Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, three countries whose population together exceed more than half of the total population of the Caribbean, are white and mulatto. While many Chinese have emigrated from the Caribbean, in several places such as Cuba they still constitute a fair size minority. Descendants of Asian Indians are found throughout the Caribbean in various numbers, but in Guyana they number over 55 percent, in Trinidad about 44 percent, and in Suriname about 38 percent. Persons of 'pure' African descent predominate in most of the inhabitant islands such as Grenada, Barbados, Guadeloupe, Haiti, the Bahamas, Bermuda, the Virgin Islands, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Antigua, St. Kitts and Nevis, Dominica, Jamaica, etc. Many islands lack racial majorities and contain substantial clusters of 'Mixeds' who regard themselves as ethnoculturally different and are so regarded by the rest of the population. 'Mixed Races' or 'Coloreds,' as they are often classified in censuses though they are given different names throughout the Caribbean, constitute about one-third of the population of Cuba, the majority in the Dominican Republic, and up to 20 percent in places like Trinidad, Jamaica, Dominica, St. Lucia, Haiti and other places. Aboriginal peoples, although practically exterminated in the islands, are in reality mixed, especially with African background in Dominica, St. Vincent, Arima (Trinidad), and among the Garifunda of Belize. Less mixed, they constitute significant minorities in Guyana and Suriname.

What is more important than these racial concentrations in various parts of the Caribbean is the evolution of an indigenous cultural cocoon within which these groups derive meaning and self-definition. Called 'creole culture' in the Commonwealth Caribbean, it refers to the cultural adaptations that Caribbean peoples have constructed from their Old World memories and their Caribbean-specific experiences from the time of colonization. Caribbean peoples are differentiated and distinguished by these local cultures. They make nonsense out of claims of pure physical and biological heritages. In the mold of the creolization processes, the racial types have become sociocultural amalgams which are the real repositories of identity. For instance, local whites in the Caribbean are distinctively different from their counterparts in North America and Europe, bearing an unmistakable Caribbean creole identity even though often still living residentially and socially apart from other ethnocultural Caribbean groupings. Even descendants of Asian Indians who often see themselves as racially and culturally different from others in their societies are indelibly marked by a shared national creole culture. These Indians discover quickly when they encounter Indians from India outside the Caribbean that they bear less resemblance to them than to their African, European, and Mixed Race Caribbean counterparts.

Hence, race by itself is valueless in differentiating and ranking Caribbean peoples. The region has generated varieties of mixes in culture and race so that a claim that the Caribbean as a whole and a trans-Caribbean identity are distinctively and uniquely associated with one racial group or the other is inaccurate and meaningless. At the regional level, the same applies. However, at the insular and substate level in a number of instances the racial factor has retained salience even in a mythical form in defining ethnocultural identity. In Haiti, for instance, the mulatto-Black division has emerged as the a potent force in the distribution of resources and benefits. It will be useful to recapitulate briefly how this occurred, pointing not only to the role of color differentiation but to the rise of ideological constructs to justify the meaning of these putative differences in different parts of the Caribbean.

### **A Topology of Caribbean Identities**

As set forth earlier, conceptually, one can conceive a Caribbean identity as constituted around many levels of expression. In this part, I set forth in greater detail and complexity these levels as they have emerged operationally in handling the empirical data. A level may in some circumstances overlap with another and in other instances be exclusive. Each has its own base and behavioral structure and in its own way fulfills some particular need, symbolic and instrumental. Each identity establishes a boundary and asserts a claim. In this regard, it is potentially a source of strife. Claims are made against other claims. Identities are functional constructs that are apprehended in relation to some goal or project. They are sources of contest literally for the loyalty of the mind. They are as much assertions that aggrandize some and marginalize others.

#### **Type I: The Ethnonational or Ethnolocal Identity**

The ethnonational or ethnolocal identity occurs in substate localities which constitute the territorial site of their self-definition. The characteristic cluster of attachments tends to be partly territorial but includes patterns of values and practices that impart a special and unique quality to life. This sort of localism is often associated with closely knit social systems that have mechanisms of closure to outsiders. Often, this parochial identity is asserted antagonistically against a central governmental authority. The locality is seen as sacred and pure, a place of freedom and morality, to be protected from the corrupting influence of unwelcome outsiders. There are numerous places in the Caribbean with ethnonational or ethnolocal identities. The self in this context, as George H. Mead explained, is endowed with social meanings that concretely evoke similar responses in the experiences of other local citizens. As Mead argued, in such a situation "the meaning of any one individual's act or gestures...would be the same for any other individual...who

responded to them.”<sup>89</sup> Essentially, the local identity is caught in a network of interpersonal primary and secondary face-to-face relations in the family, neighborhood, and community that comprehend and promote the totality of a unified consciousness that is relatively free from internal challenges and dissonance.

An example is Tobago which as a separate administrative unit in Trinidad and Tobago regards itself as very different from Trinidad society. Tobago is suspicious of Trinidad and has demanded and obtained a separate local government status with considerable autonomy. Tobagonians regard their way of life as superior to that of Trinidad which is marked by violence and drugs. Many Tobagonians have expressed an interest in a separate destiny in self-determination and are willing to challenge the center for such an autonomous status. Another example refers to the Asian Indian communities in Trinidad, Suriname, and Guyana. They assert their Indian identity foremost and this is associated with their rural areas where they have lived since coming to the Caribbean as indentured immigrants. Places like Caroni in Trinidad and Corentyne in Guyana have become idioms of Indian identity. In these cases, local identity is forged along a racio-cultural axis which is expressed antagonistically against outsiders who are seen as inimical to their interests.

Generally, the ethnonational or ethnocultural identity and self tends to emerge in contexts of a large territory, a separate island, remote areas, and among populations that are articulated around racial, geographical, and cultural differences. No one knows for sure how many such localities exist in the Caribbean, but researchers continue to be amazed by discovering the prevalence and persistence of such groups. There are persons who have preponderantly this type of identity in the Caribbean. For them, this is the extent of their community horizon. To be sure, they are challenged by competing external forces that impinge on them, making claims on their loyalty and local attachments. Even when they migrate to urban areas or overseas, they see this movement as a temporary sojourn and live among their kin until they can return home, which may never happen. In the diasporic communities, they embellish and romanticize their home locations. Their attachment is fiercely tied to their locality and community; they can easily be mobilized politically to defend interests associated with such sites.

### **Type II: The Ethnonational Universal Identity**

This category may seem to be diametrically contradictory in including both ends of a continuum ranging from the local to the universal. When an ethnonational identity becomes linked to similar communities in other parts of the world, it can be designated ‘ethnonational universal.’ One defining feature of this ethnonational universal identity is that its loyalty and attachment are not to the state where its members reside and maintain their formal citizenship but

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<sup>89</sup> G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 310.

to a larger extrastate universal community. As such it displays marks of a belief community bounded by certain distinctive practices. Ethnonationally identified people are as much earthly in their activities as they are transcendental in their ultimate goals. They may even regard their lifestyles as 'pure' and an act of defiance even contempt for the 'corruption' around them. The nature of the link between the local community and its overseas counterparts is, however, not routine and mechanical but organic and integral. Exchanges are many, frequent, and significant and often involve flows of people, literature, music, and cultural and political programs. John Simpson catches some of the ideas of this type of identity in relation to the emergent global society at the end of the late twentieth century, arguing that the links among the local communities across the world construct several global villages: "There are potentially as many Meadian selves in the global circuitry as there are sites of primary and secondary socialization in the world. Further, it should be noted, time and space are no longer significant factors separating globally dispersed primary and secondary groups with a common culture and language. Transportation and communications now enable the construction of *ersatz* global villages (but no global village) spread far across the face of the earth among those with common or similar socialization experiences."<sup>90</sup> For instance, certain Islamic communities in Trinidad that maintain separate places of residence in both urban and rural areas also have established close fraternal links with similar groups in the United States and the Middle East. Another example is the Rastafarians who, apart from occupying special urban and rural residential areas on islands throughout the Caribbean, also maintain ongoing links with similar communities in London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Amsterdam, Paris, Auckland (New Zealand), Zimbabwe, New York, Toronto, Miami, and elsewhere.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, certain Asian Indian groups in Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname not only maintain links among themselves but also with similar groups in North America and Asia. In the past decade local Amerindian communities in Guyana have established close fraternal, almost organic, links with other First World groups in North and South America and elsewhere. They have met frequently formally and informally and developed joint agendas for action and concerted programs for educational and cultural exchanges.

Ethnonational universal communities are becoming more significant in the Caribbean in the wake of the end of the Cold War, the contemporary erosion of state boundaries, the growth of large trading blocs, the intensification of digital and visual communications, and the uprooting and mass migration of people all over the world. All of these changes, which seemed to come together in full force at the end of the twentieth century, also seem to have triggered a new quest

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<sup>90</sup> J. Simpson. "The Great Reversal: Some Notes on *Gemeinschaft* in the Global System" in *Comparative Perspectives on Inter-Ethnic Relations and Social Incorporation* in W.W. Isajiw, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

<sup>91</sup> See Neil J. Savishinsky, "Transnational Popular Culture and the Global Spread of the Jamaican Rastafarian Movement," *New West Indian Guide* 18 (3-4, 1994): 259-81.

for community. The ethnonational universal communities are, however, not the same as functional communities such as international trade unions, business associations, environmental groups, and feminist organizations. They tend to engage a wider ambit of interests beyond instrumental needs, embracing the totality of a community's life. They maintain their links around primordial myths of descent, shared cultural symbols and rituals, and political programs. They will challenge the state that seeks to infringe on their rights as a community in the practice of their beliefs and rituals. As indicated earlier, an instance of this occurred recently when certain schools in Trinidad attempted to prohibit the wearing of the hijab by Muslim students. Rastafarians and other ethnonational universal groups have mobilized extrastate international solidarity to their cause whenever and wherever they faced oppression.

### **Type III: A National Identity**

A national identity or self is born in the congruence between the beliefs of a community and those of the state. This is supremely a nationalist identity and where the Caribbean country is an island, it can also be called an insular identity. The national identity, where it exists, constitutes the highest attachment of group loyalty, superseding rival claims of locality and/or overseas community. "I am a Jamaican, Cuban, or Martiniquean first and foremost" is the clarion call of nationalists. It is important to underscore the point that a national identity is not constituted of persons who are related on the basis of face-to-face interpersonal familiarity. As Benedict Anderson pointed out, the emergence of a collective national sentiment owes its existence to available means of mass communications which have made it possible to craft a myth of common descent and community. The fact that such a sentiment is a creature of a contingent modern event does not in any way diminish the potency of the beliefs of the nationalist.

There are places in the Caribbean where this type of identity flourishes overriding claims issuing from racial, cultural, language, locational, and religious divisions. This is usually, however, not a fact of life underlaid and reinforced by empirically verifiable objective bases of solidarity but rather an ideal program for action and realization. The internal pluralism of most Caribbean states militates against the forging of a single uncontested nationalist identity. For some communities the strident ring of the nationalist is a source of anxiety and a summons to defenses. It is a threat of homogenization by a hegemonic community attempting to impose its cultural writ on the lives of others. In Trinidad, for instance, the nationalist who proclaims the superior virtues of 'creolization' is often a person who belongs to the ruling party and ethnocultural community. While the word 'creolization' in another context may be regarded as indigenous adaptation to local circumstances, in Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, and even in Belize it is viewed as an embodiment of the values of the politically dominant community and a threat to the way of life of other communities. The claim of a national identity is a major source of strife in the plural societies of the Caribbean.

#### **Type IV: The Trans-Caribbean Identity**

The trans-Caribbean identity occurs outside the Caribbean in all those places where peoples of Caribbean origin reside. It is constructed from memories of assigned Caribbean values, ecology, and history. Persons who argue for a trans-Caribbean identity can often recite a litany of historical facts about slavery, plantations, colonialism, and sugar and supply a catalogue of unique beliefs and customs that define and distinguish this type of identity. But is it important to the retention process that Old World cognitive familiarity be substantially preserved, especially since soon over half of the Caribbean diaspora will be born in a non-Caribbean country? Professor Isajiw sheds some light on this issue: "Some components may be retained more than others; some may not be retained at all."<sup>92</sup> Over the years, an immigrant "may subjectively identify with his/her ethnic group without having knowledge of the ethnic language or without practicing ethnic traditions or participating in ethnic organizations. Or, inversely, he or she may practice some ethnic traditions without having strong attachment to the group."<sup>93</sup>

As I have tried to show in this presentation, this reconstruction through increasingly attenuated retention borders on fantasy, bred and flourishing abundantly in the freedom of an imagination bereaved of its natural Caribbean sights and sounds. Put differently, it is argued that while the Caribbean identity is maintained in the peculiar circumstance of the overseas environment, it is likely to be deficient in information with each succeeding generation. What is crucial to the fact of retention of a Caribbean identity in this situation is that it constitutes a new identity which combines myths of the Caribbean region with the new facts and experiences of the Caribbean diaspora. It is in the diaspora that a trans-Caribbean identity is invented, increasingly forgetful of the original environment and forging into being a new collectivity that embraces the entire region. The Caribbean region, however, is too fragmented and fractured at all levels of its existence to be cozily enclosed in an all-embracing homogeneous category. In fact, the region is the site of ongoing contests and conflicts by rival claimants who seek an autonomous space of their own.

It is outside of the Caribbean that the trans-Caribbean identity is most vocally espoused and most convincingly contradicted. In getting off their islands and migrating to and congregating in new diasporic destinations in New York, Toronto, London, Miami, etc., the migrants discover their immense diversity. To be sure, certain groups, such as those from the Commonwealth Caribbean, may discover commonalties about themselves or invent them for purposes of solidarity, but by and large the separate Caribbean communities go their separate ways even as they talk about their Caribbean identity. The peoples of the Caribbean are openly divided and in a

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<sup>92</sup> Isajiw, "Ethnic Identity Retention," op. cit. (n. 23), 37.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

number of cases declare themselves as distinctively Haitian-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean, for instance, with the first half of their hyphen the more important, the other half a public relations ruse.

The trans-Caribbean identity is the highest form of nationalist fantasy. To some it is an aspiration while to others it is an useful badge to register complaints and make claims in a foreign land. It is as much an excuse for collecting grievances as to provoke counterclaims of cultural hegemony practiced by some Caribbean groups. This identity exists everywhere in the hearts of individuals in the divided diaspora and nowhere in reality. It is invoked and used to justify rival claims and to stake out new territory for exploitation, but is diluted and compromised by the claims of new identities emanating from their new home environment in the industrial countries. It is in this respect a divided if not schizophrenic identity, dwelling in several locations simultaneously. In a global perspective of mass migration, it is not an unusual identity. It is a quest for community in a fragmented and fractured world in which the Caribbean is a mirror.