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Reviewed Work: Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies by Mimi Sheller

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0111w42c>

Journal

NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids, 78(3/4)

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Publication Date

2004-06-01

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BOOK REVIEWS

Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies. MIMI SHELLER. New York: Routledge, 2003. ix + 252 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

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When Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1757) first visited Jamaica in 1687, he witnessed women feeding sick children a mixture of milk, sugar, and cocoa. Sensing opportunity, he brought the recipe back to England and began marketing “Sir Hans Milk Chocolate” for medicinal uses. Aside from his entrepreneurial interests, Sloane began a program of collecting, transporting, cataloguing, and studying plants from the Caribbean, many of which ended up in the Chelsea Physic Garden, an institution from which emerged such innovations as double-glazed glass windows for greenhouses, cultivated teas exported to plantations on the Indian Subcontinent, and cultivated rubber trees, sent to Malaysia. Sloane’s chocolate became big business; the recipe was bought by Cadbury’s. It is easy to read Sloane’s story as a familiar tale of the intertwining of science, the market, and colonial extraction. It is more challenging, and more important, to ask how the intellectual project, the system of knowledge/power Sloane represents, is replicated by contemporary Caribbeanist scholarship and its forms of knowledge. The author of this stunning book poses this latter question and, in the process, calls upon contemporary Caribbeanists to consider the ethics and politics of the way Caribbean studies as a field has helped to constitute the objects of its investigations.

At the most general level, this book is about the “‘invention’ of the idea of the Caribbean in Euro-American culture” (p. 8). Sheller takes the reader through the familiar ground of the Caribbean’s simultaneous incorporation in and exclusion from modern intellectual discourses. Often proclaimed to be the first site of modernity, the origin of Europe’s wealth and rise to world dominance, the proving ground of capitalist forms of production and work discipline, the laboratory for modern ideologies of race, the Caribbean just as quickly fades from view, not exotic enough to occupy anthropology, not dis-

tant enough to be considered part of the world outside the West, not important enough to remain in the center-stage of the grand theories of modernity, capitalism, postmodernity, and colonialism.

More specifically, the book tracks the forms of mobility and immobility, the “economies of movement, touch, and taste” (p. 4) that create “the Caribbean” as an object of inquiry, desire, and despair. Sheller proposes to put consumption at the center of the study of the Caribbean, and insists on seeing the Caribbean as “an effect, a fantasy, a set of practices, and a context ... [that] defies separation into the real versus the imagined” (p. 5). She is interested in “what something called the Caribbean has come *to mean* and *to do* for people from Western Europe and North America” (p. 8).

The book is not a simple exercise in reflexivity or denunciatory critique. Sheller is not interested in lumping Caribbean studies together with colonial science, nineteenth-century travel writing, and twentieth-century export agriculture and tourism for rhetorical effect to argue against the very possibility of knowledge about “others.” Rather, borrowing a page from Caribbean history – the ethical consumption movement of the abolitionists who boycotted slave-grown sugar – Sheller attempts to outline a new kind of ethical consumption for those who live in worlds made and re-made by the postslavery Atlantic.

The method of the book is different, too. Rather than lining up the good, the bad, and the ugly in the history of the world’s engagement with and construction of the Caribbean, Sheller traces out the dense networks of “human, floral, faunal, capital, visual, and informational movements that constituted (and constitute) the transatlantic world” (p. 21). The book thus has affinities with theoretical developments in science studies; figures like Bruno Latour and Sarah Franklin appear throughout the text. Studying how networked agents, objects, and knowledges create new agents, objects, and knowledges lets Sheller examine what she terms “the binding mobilities of consumption” (p. 15), the past flows that inform, inflect, and direct present ones, as well as the discontinuities, unintended consequences, and misfired desires that led to new possibilities for resistance and change. Everything comes under scrutiny in this form of inquiry – not just slave narratives, for example, and the circuits of affect, literacy, politics, and communities of regard that produced them, but also modern Caribbean literary studies, grounded in the idea of “the slave narrative.” Not just touristic images of tropical isles, but past and present environmental consciousnesses that require and feed a “nature” supposedly unspoiled by human culture. Not just the place of the Caribbean in the global AIDS epidemic and global AIDS discourse, but the place of Caribbean blood plasma and hormones in the transnational pharmaceutical industry (which have eerie precursors in Sloane’s collection of Caribbean people’s skin and body parts).

The book consists of an introduction and six chapters. The introduction lays out the project of the book. Chapters 1 through 3 examine different natu-

ral and material products of the Caribbean and their formation in consumption circuits, knowledge circuits, and natural circuits. Chapter 1 is a broad overview of Caribbean political economy and Euro-American knowledge, beginning with Sloane and ending with offshore finance and luxury gated communities. Chapter 2 looks at nature and landscape through travel narratives and botanical science. Chapter 3 concerns the “classic” Caribbean commodities, from sugar to bananas. Chapters 4 through 6 examine different understandings and formations of the “bodies” of the Caribbean region. Chapter 4 returns to travel narratives, and asks how Euro-Americans have “oriented” themselves to the Caribbean. The play on words is intentional, as Sheller examines how the Caribbean has served to orient discussions of the distinction between east and west, primitive and civilized, as well as how, beginning with Columbus’s initial voyages, the Caribbean has been “entangled” (p. 108) with histories and imaginations of Asia as well as Africa. The Caribbean, in Sheller’s analysis, makes explicit the instability of the geographical referents of Euro-American orientalism. Sheller also examines histories of the elisions between the Levant and the Caribbean in colonial discourse. Chapter 5 takes up the problem of cannibalism, and the literal and figurative ways that Europe and North America have eaten up the Caribbean. Here, Sheller not only takes the reader through the literary canon, beginning with Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, but also through the drug wars of the 1980s and 1990s, and the enlistment of Caribbean bodies in discourse and practices of disease and pharmacology. Chapter 6 turns to the domains of theory, asking why it has been so easy for cultural theorists to appropriate the metaphor of creolization for contemporary cultural hybridities. “Language, literature, and theory itself are all subject to [the] same processes of mobile but risky consumption” that characterized colonial science, travel writing, slavery, tourism, and agricultural production (pp. 202-3). Sheller concludes the book with a call for “historians and theorists of Western culture” to “begin to recognize [the Caribbean’s] centrality in the making of ‘our’ modernity” (p. 203).

Sheller’s book is a remarkable accomplishment. It does not present new findings so much as it helps us stop thinking about the old ones in familiar ways. Erudite, theoretically acute, and, incidentally, richly illustrated with images from primary documents, this book locates the problem of the Caribbean firmly within the problem of the ethics of knowledge. I would quarrel with some of its elisions. Sheller sometimes takes continuity for granted when it should be unpacked or justified. For example, statements like “from reading seventeenth-century descriptions of the first glorious taste of a pineapple, we can slide effortlessly up to contemporary debates about fair trade in tropical produce” (p. 23) rub against the grain of historicist sensibilities; seeing a “clear path” from slavery to the global division of labor (p. 23) begs the question of whether persons, bodies, and work as such can be abstracted from their historical situations to become elements of a uni-

versal theory. The language of networks and paths in the book sometimes tidies concatenations of persons, ideas, and things that might better be seen as tangles or knots. There is also, in general, a lack of attention to the differences between seventeenth-century quasi-feudal or tributary relations and cosmologies and later, more Enlightenment or capitalist ones. Nonetheless, this is an exciting and insightful contribution to Caribbean studies, one that brings much-needed theoretical rigor to new understandings of its objects and its forms of knowledge.

The Root of Roots: Or, How Afro-American Anthropology Got Its Start.
RICHARD PRICE & SALLY PRICE. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press/ University of Chicago Press, 2003. 91 pp. (Paper \$10.00)

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The field is the laboratory of the cultural anthropologist.
(Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works*
1947 [1951]:79)

History is the fruit of power, but power itself is
never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous.
The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility;
the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.
(Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 1995:xix)

This revelatory pamphlet is about the hidden power of ethnological paradigms in the presentation of ethnography. The data are plumbed by the authors from the handwritten diaries of Melville J. Herskovits and Frances Shapiro Herskovits, now deposited in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The diary entries are compared with the presentations in the Herskovitses' publications *Rebel Destiny* (1934) and *Suriname Folk-Lore* (1936). The Prices are two ethnographers and historians of Maroon peoples of the same region to which the Herskovitses traveled with their entourage. The work explicates a story told by the Herskovitses about their insights into Saramaka Maroon provenience based on their brief brokered encounters over several weeks during two summers in 1928 and 1929 with the people who