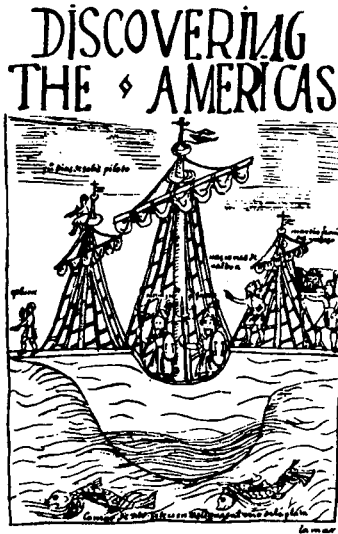


Richard Price

Ethnographic History, Caribbean Pasts



1992 LECTURE SERIES

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Department of Spanish and Portuguese

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Richard Price's many books include *Alabi's World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), *First-Time: the historical vision of an Afro-American People* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983, for which he was awarded the Elsie Clews Parsons Prize of the American Folklore Society), *Maroon Societies: Communities of Rebel Slaves in the Americas* (which he edited and introduced, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), *Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest* (with Sally Price, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), *Stedman's Narrative of a Five Years Expedition* (edited and introduced with Sally Price, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), and *Two Evenings in Saramaka* (with Sally Price, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). He has taught at Yale, Johns Hopkins, Minnesota, Stanford, and the University of Paris and now lives in Martinique, where he is continuing his explorations of Afro-American historical consciousness.

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Ethnographic History, Caribbean Pasts

Clifford Geertz concludes his recent book about classic styles of ethnography by commenting on the changed circumstances faced by the ethnographer of today. First there has been a “transformation ... of the people anthropologists mostly write about, from colonial subject to sovereign citizens,” which has “altered entirely the moral context in which the ethnographical act takes place” and which perform “leaves contemporary anthropologists in some uncertainty as to rhetorical aim.” “Who,” Geertz asks, “is now to be persuaded? Africanists or Africans? Americanists or American Indians? Japanologists or Japanese? And of what: Factual accuracy? Theoretical sweep? Imaginative grasp? Moral depth?” And he continues, “It is easy enough to answer ‘All of the above.’ It is not quite so easy to produce a text that thus responds” (1988: 132-33). But at the same time as the moral foundations of ethnography have been shaken, Geertz notes, its epistemological foundations have also been cracked by general questions raised in other humanities (and social and natural science) disciplines about the nature of representation. To anthropologists’ “‘Is it decent?’ worry [there is now added] .. an ‘Is it possible?’ one ... with which,” he adds, “they are even less well prepared to deal” (1988: 135). All of which leads, Geertz says, to the real challenge facing today’s ethnographer: “Once ethnographic texts begin to be looked *at* as well as through, once they are seen to be made, and made to persuade, those who make them have rather more to answer for” (1988: 138). Geertz concludes that what we need is effective *art*: “If there is any way to counter the conception of ethnography as an iniquitous act or an unplayable game,” he writes, “it would seem to involve owning up to the fact that, like quantum mechanics or the Italian opera, it is a work of the imagination” (1988: 149).

Today I want to consider two radically different cases of colonial encounter in the New World, trying to imagine ways of writing about them ethnographically that accept Geertz’s challenge and stretch toward his solution. My first case foregrounds resistance – anti-colonialism triumphant – with a discourse epitomized, let’s say, by this crisp exchange between an Afro-American Maroon and the German missionary who is trying to save her soul:

On the 30th [October 1787] we [missionaries] visited [the village of] Awara. I tried to speak a bit about the Savior but

archives in the Netherlands. I developed that particular literary form in response at once to the kinds of concerns that Geertz alludes to and to the ethnographic materials at my disposal covering that moment in Saramaka history. Later, in *Alabi's world*, I was able to carry this experiment in multivocality further. Trying, as before, to remain faithful to Saramaka modes of historical understanding, I could now – thanks to different kinds of “sources” – add several new layers of mediation and interpretation to those displayed in *First-Time*. In the new book, there is considerably more intersubjectivity, there are quicker shifts in perspective, and there is more grist for the hermeneutic mill. The reader is deliberately invited to participate in the act of historical imagination. Through the insistent use of multivocality and the presentation of large amounts of relatively raw extracts from the historical record, I have made a conscious effort to evoke a past world rather than simply to represent it, indeed to insist on multiple, perspectival interpretations rather than the synthetic, monological narrative of traditional histories.

There are four distinctive voices that speak in *Alabi's world*, and it is my wager that historical understanding may best emerge from listening carefully to their *interaction*. As James Clifford reminds us, “‘culture’ is always relational, an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically, *between* subjects in relations of power” (1986: 15). Or, as James Boon puts it, “cultures meet indirectly, according to conventional expectations of the cultures themselves.... A ‘culture’ can materialize only in counterdistinction to another culture” (1982: ix). In the present case, 18th-century Saramakas, 18th-century German Moravian missionaries, 18th-century Dutch colonial officials, and myself as author are the relevant players; my three “sources” had contrastive agendas that are brightly reflected in the records each has unwittingly bequeathed to me.

First, Saramaka voices. Since 1966, for something over three years, I have lived in Saramaka villages; since 1986, I have been limited to visiting Saramaka refugees from Suriname’s civil war in French Guiana, during summers. My fascination with their collective knowledge of their ancestors’ early years as maroons, hedged around as it is by extraordinary sacredness and secrecy, eventually resulted in *First-Time*. What Saramakas refer to as *fési-tén* (which I translate as “first-time”), their society’s formative years whose end roughly coincides with the death of Alabi, is an era that possesses overwhelming inherent power. It is the fountainhead of their collective identity. It contains the true root of what it means to be Saramaka. I once heard one man reminding another, “If we forget

the deeds of our ancestors, how can we hope to avoid being returned to whitefolks' slavery?" Or, as another man once told me, "This is the one thing Maroons really believe. It's stronger than anything else.... This is the greatest fear of all Maroons: that those times [the days of slavery and the struggle for freedom] shall come again." It is within the same complex web of epistemological, moral, and ideological concerns discussed at some length in the introduction to *First-Time* that the Saramaka voices that speak in *Alabi's world* were recorded and are now presented in print.¹

The German texts that appear in *Alabi's world* were, for the most part, produced systematically, as part of the worldwide Moravian master plan for converting the heathen. The Moravian Brethren were an evangelical Protestant sect, based in Saxony, that sent more missionaries, per capita, to foreign lands than any 18th-century competitor. Moravian missionaries were exhorted to keep a detailed record of their daily activities, with attention to both "outward and inward matters," and thousands of pages of such diaries from Suriname, plus a number of letters and handwritten books recording congregational matters, are scattered in Moravian repositories at Herrnhut (now in the German Democratic Republic), Zeist and Utrecht (the Netherlands), Paramaribo (Suriname), and Bethlehem (Pennsylvania). The written record of those missionaries who lived in Saramaka villages stretches from 1765 to 1813, and constitutes a detailed account of their overall failure to win souls from Satan, and a moving picture of Saramaka resistance. The texts were written at once for the Brethren back in Europe, as an inspirational record of missionary suffering and success, and as a personal confession to God, the strong sense of whose immanence emerges from every page. These rich, theologically exotic Moravian texts pose a signal challenge to the interpreter seeking to comprehend the encounter between displaced Europeans and Africans in colonial America. For they address, however obliquely, some central processes

¹ It may be worth noting that my Saramaka oral materials for *Alabi* would be considerably richer had not my own biases in the field led me to be more interested in trying to reconstruct what I – and my Saramaka collaborators – saw as the heroic birth of the Saramaka nation than in what I tended at the time to see as the routine and dreary history of missionization, not yet realizing that the one might throw bright light on the other. And undoubtedly, too, I held the romantic notion, never fully lost, that non-Christian Saramakas were (as they themselves see it) "real" Saramakas, while their Christian brethren (again, as other Saramakas see them) had moved somewhere down the bumpy road leading to the hated but ambiguously alluring world of whitefolks.

of that encounter, what Michael Taussig –writing of the confrontation of Indians and colonists near the headwaters of the Amazon –has glossed as

new rituals, rites of conquest and colony formation, mystiques of race and power, little dramas of civilization tailoring savagery which did not mix or homogenize ingredients from the two sides of the colonial divide but instead bound Indian understandings of white understandings of Indians to white understandings of Indian understandings of whites. (1987: 109)

The Dutch texts that constitute the third voice in *Alabi's world* are, from a historian's perspective, the most conventional. Consisting largely of journals and letters written by the colonial officials charged with observing and reporting on Saramaka life (especially as it related to the security of the colony), and with carrying out the orders of the colonial Court of Policy in Paramaribo, these documents were intended to focus on political life. As such, they form an almost perfect complement to the contemporaneous Moravian records, as they deal largely with those apparently secular matters that least interested the other-worldly Brethren. The journals and letters of these Dutch "*posthouders*" in Saramaka were written both for the members of the colonial Court, for whom they provided almost the only source of information about the collective behavior of the recently "pacified" Saramaka, and for the Directors of the Chartered Society of Suriname in Holland, whose business interests were very much at the mercy of Maroon political decisions. Postholders, who were usually military men by training, were under explicit orders to keep systematic journals – and there is strong stylistic continuity between the journals of the field commanders on military expeditions during the Saramaka wars of the early 18th century and the post-treaty writings of the postholders. As lone civil servants, stationed at remote posts, reporting back on their own activities to their superiors (who controlled their promotions, salary, and other emoluments), the postholders clearly had their own scripts, and –as with the Moravian documents and Saramaka testimonies – their records must be read with all of our critical faculties.

The fourth and controlling voice in *Alabi's world* is my own, that of a self-styled "ethnographic historian." (Though "ethnohistorian" might seem a simpler label, I am afraid that "ethnohistory" has all too often been understood as little more than "the history of the

bare-assed” – and, as it happens, the only known depiction of Alabi, in a book by a Moravian, shows him in precisely this condition.) At its best, ethnography entails a special perspective, a way of seeing and writing that is equally appropriate for the study of a modern industrial corporation or a group of Indians in the Xingu. The practice of ethnographic history need know no geographical or typological boundaries: historical studies of “primitives” or “the civilized,” Trobrianders or The British (and especially their respective interactions) come equally under its purview. But simply writing “social history” or reconstructing a past world, no matter how masterfully, would not qualify. The endeavor must be animated by a constant attentiveness to meaning (teasing out the significance of experience and actions to the actors – a kind of ethnological hermeneutics), to the process of producing histories (the relations of power in creating and suppressing historical discourse, the social negotiation of historical knowledge, the relationship between the author and the historical observers upon whose records he depends), to relationships between the author and his historical subjects, to processes of knowing (maintaining the distance of others’ categories), and to problems of form and “catching experience whole.” Fortunately, Stuart Schwartz’s apt characterization of ethnographers as “the tribe that hid from history” (1986) no longer applies. Indeed, to paraphrase Greg Dening, the new ethnographic history, shaped by the ironic trope in which things are never what they seem to be, would at its best be a thoroughly demystifying art (contrasting with “gilded history,” which Dening reminds us tends also to be “gilded history” [1986, 1988]).

As part of my experiment in writing *Alabi’s world*, the four kinds of voices in the book are being set in different typefaces, to preserve their distinctive tones. My own prose, like quotations from other modern scholars, appears in a standard font; materials taken from Moravian writings appear in a slightly heavy, Gothic-looking font; those from Dutch (or other planter) sources are in another heavy font; and those spoken by Saramakas are in italics, and unlike the rest of the book have ragged right margins, to emphasize their spoken nature. In the book – though some might consider it High Kitsch – I encourage the reader who wishes to embrace this experiment fully to imagine the Gothic passages in the accent of a working-class 18th-century German Moravian, the other heavy-type passages in the Dutch accent of a bewigged colonial governor or his soldier-administrators, and the italic ones in the speech cadences of

the elderly, dignified Saramaka men who have shared their historical knowledge with me over the past two decades.

Social historians, like anthropologists, are prime targets for the “if I were a horse” criticism, attempting, as they often do, to imagine themselves in the shoes of another time or place and then interpreting the past accordingly. Yet (*pace* Geertz [1976]) without such attempts at empathy, ethnographic or historical interpretation risks being empty and soulless. With no apologies, I aver that my own reading of the Moravian and Dutch documents, as well as Saramaka records about their own past, is deeply conditioned by my ethnographic experience in Saramaka (which included frequent interactions with twentieth-century Moravian missionaries and Dutch administrators). Throughout *Alabi's world*, I try hard to understand what the world of 18th-century Saramaka looked like, smelled like, and felt like, and the meanings that those who lived in it (whether Saramakas, Moravian missionaries, or Dutch postholders) attached to unfolding events and developing institutions. While taking the greatest pains not to read the present backward into the past, I nonetheless am constantly trying to understand the records left by the past in terms that are unavoidably colored by the present. I know no other way, and the success or failure of the endeavor must be judged, ultimately, on grounds of plausibility, after taking into account every scrap of knowledge, written and oral, available to us. While my decision to present large unadulterated swatches of observations by eyewitnesses is motivated in part by a wish to decenter the narrative, to fragment the power of the author's inevitable authority, and to draw the reader more directly into the process of interpretation, I do not for a moment pretend that the construction of the book is not a careful calculation or that the author is not always present, even when just off-stage.

James Boon, with only slight exaggeration, has characterized the traditional anthropological monograph as possessing

A stylistic taboo on authorial viewpoint.... Its order of contents was physical surroundings firmly first, religion vaguely last, kinship and social organization determiningly at the core.... Systematically omitted were chapters on relations between a particular culture and others and on that culture's own sense of others ... [as well as] chapters on the history of the tendency to conceptualize the population as a “culture” and on the ultimate fact of fieldwork: the significance of a

stranger's inserting himself into the routine context of a face-to-face population. (1982: 14-15)

In a very real sense, it is just these "taboos" and "omissions" that constitute the core of *Alabi's world* (or perhaps of any truly ethnographic history).

Since Saramakas display a strongly linear, causal sense of history, chronology seemed an appropriate dimension with which to vertebrate the narrative, permitting me to avoid the imposition of some other arbitrary analytic order. To evoke something of the texture of 18th-century life in Saramaka, it seemed especially important to eschew modern Western categories, such as religion, politics, economics, art, or kinship, as organizing principles. (My similar decision, despite the urging of several colleagues, not to make an index that encourages consultation along such ethnological lines stems from a growing conviction that such categories ultimately play a pernicious, obfuscating role in intercultural understanding.) Just as "religion" cannot be described by saying that the natives believe this or that, but can only be understood by describing and analyzing the connections between events, experience, social relationships, and the ways people represent these to themselves (Burridge 1975), so too with any of these categories. Hence the attempt, in the book, by means of a variety of rhetorical devices, to focus attention on activities, encounters, and relationships through which may gradually emerge a partial understanding of a faraway past world.

In writing *Alabi's world*, I was constantly aware of the enormous weight of documents, fieldnotes, tape recordings, and previously published relevant tomes, each of which, while providing historical insight, in one way or another circumscribed my freedom to choose particular written forms. This is one way that the practice of ethnographic history, like that of biography, differs fundamentally from that of the novelist – because of the very great weight of the recorded past that must be taken into account.

In a novel, the novelist knows everything about the hero or heroine. His characters are his own invention and he can do what he wishes with them. Novelists have omniscience. Biographers never do. The personages exist; the documents exist; they are the "givens." ... They may not be altered.... The fancy of the biographer ... resides in the art of narration, not in the substance of the story. The substance exists before the narration exists.... The biographer truly succeeds if a distinct

literary form can be found for the particular life.... A writer of lives is allowed the imagination of form but not of fact. (Edel 1984: 13-17)

Nevertheless, like a good historical novelist, the ethnographic historian tries to penetrate existential worlds different from his own and to evoke their texture, by bridging – but never losing sight of – the cultural and semantic gulf that separates the author from the historical actors and from the historical observers (those who create the “sources” – which themselves possess and represent complex prior histories). Philipp has written programmatically that “the primary aim of historical analysis is the recovery, partial though it must be, of the lived reality of people in their past” (1983: 352). As a statement of technical goals, I would accept this formulation. But as Whitten suggests (1986), I also take a moral stance, insisting, with Saramakas, that “the horrors recorded and etched in their individual minds and collective psyche cannot be forgotten or left to a Western sense of history, as that which is only in the past.” That the prophesy of my Saramaka friend Peléki – that “those times [the days of war and slavery] shall come again” – has been chillingly realized in the present brutally collapses for him and other Saramakas Alabi’s world and their own. With mine and yours as well. More than two decades of work on Suriname has taught me that in that particular postcolonial space (which has, ever since the conquest, been a prototypical “space of death,” as Taussig has used the phrase), books as well as ideologies quickly take on a life of their own. Thus I end the Prologue to *Alabi’s world* by expressing the wish that this book, about a moment of peace and reconciliation two centuries ago, might in some small way encourage the painful process of healing that must today be set in motion, between Maroons and other citizens, in a nation torn by civil war, along the banks of the River Suriname.

To what extent does this studied use of multivocality, combined with the particular interpretive turn that insists on the presence and responsibility of the author (with all his idiosyncratic and disciplinary biases), make a difference in the experience of reading about these particular colonial encounters, in helping to penetrate these examples of colonial discourse? Others must judge. But, for better or for worse, it seems clear that we have already moved a considerable distance from the classic anthropological (or historical) monograph.

If, as Edel has argued, the success of a biographer truly inheres in being able to find a distinct literary form appropriate for a particular life, much the same might now be said of ethnography (or

history) – a distinct literary form for a particular historical situation. The ethnographer or historian now faces each society or period, or for that matter each potential book, in a new, and newly problematic, way. For it becomes necessary to find, perhaps even to invent, a literary form that does not come ready-made and that effectively serves to elucidate that particular society or historical moment. *First-Time* and *Alabi's world*, now behind me, represent two related attempts to find literary forms that helped me make sense of two moments in the Saramaka past. I now stand before a new set of problems, among which that of literary form is but one, in seeking how to make sense of people's ideas about the past in a very different colonial (or more strictly speaking postcolonial) world, that of Martinique on the eve of the island's incorporation into the Europe of 1992.

Trying to grasp the history of the insular Caribbean has always been specially problematical. From the vitriolic queries of V.S. Naipaul ("How can the history of this West Indian futility be written? What tone shall the historian adopt?" [1969: 29]) or the bitter asides of Édouard Glissant ("the loss of collective memory, the careful erasure of the past" [1981: 277]) to the stark conclusions of Derek Walcott ("In time, the slave surrendered to amnesia [and] that amnesia is the true history of the New World" [1974:4]) or Orlando Patterson ("The most important legacy of slavery is the total break, not with the past so much as with a consciousness of the past. To be a West Indian is to live in a state of utter pastlessness" [1982: 258]), Caribbean intellectuals have rehearsed many of the difficulties. Most recently, three Martiniquan intellectuals have published, amidst much hoopla, a literary manifesto (called *Éloge de la créolité*) in which they offer their own perspectives:

Our History (or more precisely our histories) is shipwrecked within Colonial History. Collective memory must be our priority. What we once believed to be Caribbean history is no more than the History of Colonization of the Caribbean. Beneath the shock waves of French history, beneath the Great Dates marking the arrival and departure of colonial governors, beneath the uncertainties of colonial struggles, beneath the standard white pages of the official Chronicle (where the torches of our revolts appear only as tiny blotches), there was our own obstinate trudging-along. The opaque resistance of maroons united in their refusal. The new heroism of those who confronted the hell of slavery,

using obscure codes of survival, indecipherable means of resistance, an impenetrable variety of compromises, unexpected syntheses for living.... Within this false consciousness we had but a bunch of obscurities for memory, a feeling of bodily discontinuity. Landscapes, Glissant reminds us, stand alone as inscriptions, in their non-anthropomorphic way, of at least some of our tragedy, of our will to exist. Which means that our history (or histories) are not totally accessible to historians.... It is no accident that, when it comes to Caribbean history, so many historians use literary citations to try to grasp principles that they can only graze with their usual methodology.... Only poetic knowledge, romantic knowledge, literary knowledge, in short, artistic knowledge can reveal us, perceive us, bring us back, evanescent, to a reborn consciousness (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, & Confiant 1989: 37-38, 65).²

Nearly a decade ago, driven by motives not unlike those expressed by this modern Martiniquan literary troika, and fresh on the heels of my Saramaka investigations, I began a study of historical consciousness along the rural southern coast of the island. I envisioned uncovering, beneath the colonial veneer of History (from Joan of Arc to De Gaulle and after), hidden layers of history, called

² I have translated, roughly, from the following lyrical passage: "Notre Histoire (ou plus exactement nos histoires) est naufragée dans l'Histoire coloniale. La mémoire collective est notre urgence. Ce que nous croyons être l'histoire antillaise n'est que l'Histoire de la colonisation des Antilles. Dessous les ondes de choc de l'histoire de France, dessous les grandes dates d'arrivée et de départ de gouverneurs, dessous les aléas des luttes coloniales, dessous les belles pages blanches de la Chronique (où des flambées de nos révoltes n'apparaissent qu'en petites taches), il y eut le cheminement obstiné de nous-mêmes. L'opaque résistance des nègres marrons bandés dans leur refus. L'héroïsme neuf de ceux qui affrontèrent l'enfer esclavagiste, déployant d'obscurs codes de survie, d'indéchiffrables qualités de résistance, la variété illisible des compromis, les synthèses inattendues de vie.... Dedans cette fausse mémoire nous n'avions pour mémoire qu'un lot d'obscurités. Un sentiment de chair discontinué. Les paysages, rappelle Glissant, sont les seuls à inscrire, à leur façon non anthropomorphe, un peu de notre tragédie, de notre vouloir exister. Si bien que notre histoire (ou nos histoires) n'est pas totalement accessible aux historiens.... Ce n'est pas un hasard si, pour l'histoire antillaise, tant d'historiens utilisent des citations littéraires pour surprendre des principes qu'ils ne peuvent qu'effleurer du fait même de leur méthodologie.... Seule la connaissance poétique, la connaissance romanesque, la connaissance littéraire, bref, la connaissance artistique, pourra nous déceler, nous percevoir, nous ramener évanescents aux réanimations de la conscience."

by other names and inscribed not in books (the people whose lives I studied were hardly literate) but in language, in proverbs, in metaphors, and in the land (and sea) itself. From my experience in Saramaka, I was ready to find traces of the past in unexpected places, playing ever-changing roles in ongoing social and political life, and being preserved, transformed, or obliterated according to the location of particular individuals and collectivities in relationship to particular events and actors, past and present. Soon, I came upon a set of memories, a series of remembered fragments about the past, that seemed an ideal allegory for my more general contention that, pace Walcott, Patterson, or Glissant, Martiniquan peasants and fishermen preserved an heroic, anti-colonial vision of the past, that collective amnesia was more an invention of bourgeois intellectuals than a rural reality.

The story I thought emblematic, which I do not have time to rehearse in detail today, centered on a man named Médard Aribot, who lived from 1901 to 1973, and who was remembered by rural Martiniquans as at once a madman, an untutored artistic genius, and an anti-colonial hero who spent the better part of his life in a prison cell in the notorious French Guiana penal camps. Médard's locally-surviving artworks – sculptured busts of colonial officials, a miniaturized piano, some Bavarian-style wall decorations, a scale-model warship, two extraordinary houses, an African king – remained *aide-mémoires* for some of the lore associated with the man. Aspects of his memory were inscribed as well on the main street and remaining wooden houses of the town of Diamant, where an incident occurred that indelibly marked his life and made his memory meaningful to those with whom I spoke. And Médard's memory was also invoked in the rumshops and at the crossroads, whenever a particularly “hot” municipal election was being contested.

It was the spring of 1925 and election time in the small town of Diamant. A particularly brutal colonial governor intervened with armed troops to insure the election of his hand-picked candidate, the white owner of the local sugar mill, then running for mayor against a poor, black socialist. A crowd of angry fishermen and cancutters, whom the troops had illegally prevented from entering the polling place, marched toward the town hall carrying an effigy of the planter and chanting anti-colonial slogans. The planter-candidate, people told me, ordered the machine-gunner to open fire, and in an instant the sandy street was stained with blood. Ten men lay dead, another ten gravely wounded. When fishermen recounted these (and surrounding) events, which they referred to as the “war” (or, sometimes, the

“massacre”) of Diamant – the French archives label it dryly the “affair” of Diamant – Médard’s name was often invoked, for it was he who had fashioned the wooden image of the planter that was so “exact” that the French authorities, everyone said, chose to exile him to forced labor as punishment.³

At the time I began to explore Médard’s story in the early 1980s, its power seemed tangible and obvious to rural Martiniquans. The world of these fishermen, artisans, and peasants was still hemmed in by sufficient (post)colonial structures and relations for them to recognize in Médard’s struggle, which occurred in the 1920s at the height of classic colonial domination, something very much their own. I felt I had found a story that revealed a relatively hidden yet meaningful aspect of the way these people situated themselves in the world. And I was pleased to be able to find a local allegory that in some ways answered Naipaul’s ironic barbs, that gave local voice to Walcott’s contention (in a rather different mood from that cited above) that “Caribbean fisherman and peasant know who they are and what they are and where they are, and when we show them our wounded sensibilities we are, most of us, displaying self-inflicted wounds” (1974: 26-27). But today, less than a decade later, having lived for a longer time in and around these same rural Martiniquan places, I am increasingly unsure.

What seems to be happening is that the massive steamroller of French colonialism, with its destructive bending of consciousness and identity (most lucidly described in the essays of Glissant [1981], though foreshadowed by Césaire, Fanon, and other great Martiniquan thinkers) is finally sweeping through even the most rural, least “modern” areas of the island. What a decade ago our local friends understood as a story of heroic resistance to an almost incomprehensibly arrogant oppressor is today being sapped of meaning. Médard’s story, along with so much else that was meaningful until recently in rural Martinique, is on the road to becoming “mere folklore” for people who are increasingly (if still only very partially and not necessarily irredeemably) learning obediently to use French models of how to think and act.

³ I first began fieldwork in Petite Anse, a south coast fishing village near Diamant, in summer 1962, followed by intermittent visits ranging from a few days to four months over the next twenty years. The beginnings of my work on Médard’s story coincided with a more serious commitment to Martinique in the early 1980s. I allude to this story in an earlier publication (Price 1985) but have since considerably deepened my knowledge, both by speaking with people in Martinique and by working in archives in Paris.

By the mid-1970s, Médard's penultimate house, once a brightly painted, gingerbreaded jewel of bricolage, with spinning weathervanes and tiny windows looking out toward Diamond Rock, stood in ruins. But when local fisherman passed by, on the road or at sea, they remembered the man and his story. During the past couple of years, as part of state efforts to recuperate the "patrimoine" (the cultural heritage of this corner of France) and to promote tourism, a local youth group has cleaned up the graffiti left by some Rasta visitors, repaired the carpentry, repainted it in approximations of the original colors and, *voilà*, every tourist shop in the capital of Martinique now sells postcards labelled "Diamond Rock and her legendary house of the *Bagnard* [prisoner in the French Guiana camps]."

I expect it to take me at least another year in Martinique, before I'll feel some confidence about understanding changing Martiniquan realities – the increasing intensity of pressures from without (and within) as well as local responses. Only then will I be ready to situate Médard's story –which I fully intend to tell someday –within the flux of postcolonial Martiniquan identity and consciousness. Here, I can offer just a few preliminary notes.

Last summer, during what the French call "les grandes vacances," a woman, her husband, and their several children returned from metropolitan France, where they live and work, to their native Martinique, for a visit to her mother. Like many Martiniquans of that generation (now in their thirties or early forties), they had left the island with material encouragement from the government soon after high school to take up employment in the metropole. On this particular visit –the French government pays such trips for the whole family every three years –they brought with them the family cat, a five-kilo, impressively pedigreed "*chat de race*," which they had had specially vaccinated (three office visits) and otherwise prepared for the experience. On just the second day of their Martiniquan stay, the cat disappeared. Rural neighbors, out of earshot, joked that it had "marooned." A month later, when we visited the mother (an old friend), her daughter's family was still in mourning. "The cat," explained the son-in-law, had "meant so much to the children!" and had itself been a replacement for their previous cat, which had fallen from their sixth floor public-housing flat in France, precipitating costly consultations with a pediatric therapist who specialized in loss and grieving. Martiniquan neighbors, however, found the whole business droll. Cats, for rural Martiniquans, are utilitarian, rat-chasing animals (that also possess certain malevolent supernatural properties and, sometimes, particularly in the past, provided the stuff of a tasty

repast). Kicking them out of the way is a much more common mode of interaction than caressing them. "Perhaps," people said, "the pampered 'Metropolitan Cat' [as it had become known] had marooned because it disdained '*cuisine créole*'!" The story ended happily for all when the truly skeletal cat, which had no experience as a hunter, showed up two days before the family's return to Europe and, after some intravenous intervention from a Fort-de-France veterinarian (which provoked the mirth of rural neighbors), recuperated sufficiently to board Air France with the rest of the family for the trip back home.

The man of the house, in the home where the visitors stayed, is a mechanic/handyman in one of the island's large hotels, and has often told us how bright young French specialists "up to their ears in diplomas" are sent out to fix major machinery – airconditioners or refrigeration systems – but end up calling on him, a semi-illiterate making the minimum wage (after twenty years on the job), to fix the damn thing once they give up. He enjoyed quite directly the episode with the cat – to him, the arrogant, inept Frenchman incarnate. But his feelings, and that of other Martiniquans who have stayed on the island, are less simple toward the cat's owners – who are, after all, their own children who through emigration have become not "métropolitains" (for white Frenchmen remain in a class of their own) but "négropolitains," Martiniquans who have adopted (often-exaggerated) French values and behavior. During their visit, the owners of the cat enjoyed holding forth, for anyone who would listen, on the scandalous narrowness of local roads, the absence of sidewalks, the laziness of the workforce, and other lagging indicators of local modernity (always compared, of course, to France). At the same time, they frequently engaged in a very different but equally distancing and patronizing discourse involving folklorization or nostalgia – always from the perspective of the metropole. The visiting *négropolitain*, eating at a fisherman's table, exclaims, "Isn't it *remarkable* how you fishermen can go out beyond the sight of land, without a compass, and find your way back! How ever do you do it?" As the fisherman patiently explains about winds and waves, and mentions that shallower seas (as in the St. Lucia channel) tend to be rougher, the visitor is moved to exclaim, "How amazing! Rougher where shallower! Who would have thought it?" At the same time, the visitor's wife, born and brought up in the fishing village, obstinately discusses the place and its inhabitants only as scenes out of her childhood, creating a quaint, frozen-in-time relic. And, before leaving, they buy a small fishtrap, to hang on their wall back home.

For Martiniquans who have stayed on the island (some two-thirds of the population), the pressures from such summer returnees are reminders (made especially poignant because the purveyors of French mentalités are in this case their own children, brothers, and sisters) of the alienating pressures they experience every day of the year – from the media (radio and television for all, newspapers for those who read), the workplace, the banking system, the social security bureaucracy, the postal system, the hospitals, the schools, the *mairie*, the supermarkets, and so on. Recently, a good friend with whom I was eating lunch hesitated and stuttered a bit before using the word for “August,” finally mispronouncing French “*août*” as “ah-oh” – a remarkable hypercorrection, since in his native Creole it is pronounced the same as in French (rhyming, roughly, with English “loot”), and since he speaks both languages fluently. What prompted his awkwardness and insecurity was that, for the first time in his life, he had begun reading the newspaper and also watching a T.V. game show that only the French could have devised, “*Les Chiffres et les Lettres*,” in which sober-faced contestants pore intently over difficult anagrams, scrabble-like, on a large screen. (Incidentally, for rural Martiniquans that show plays somewhat the role that the more highbrow “*Apostrophe*” does for the Parisian bourgeoisie, giving them a sense of participating directly in Culture and Civilization.) For my friend, puzzling over the printed form “*août*” (this happened in August), seems to have undermined his confidence to speak a word he had been using, unselfconsciously, for a lifetime.

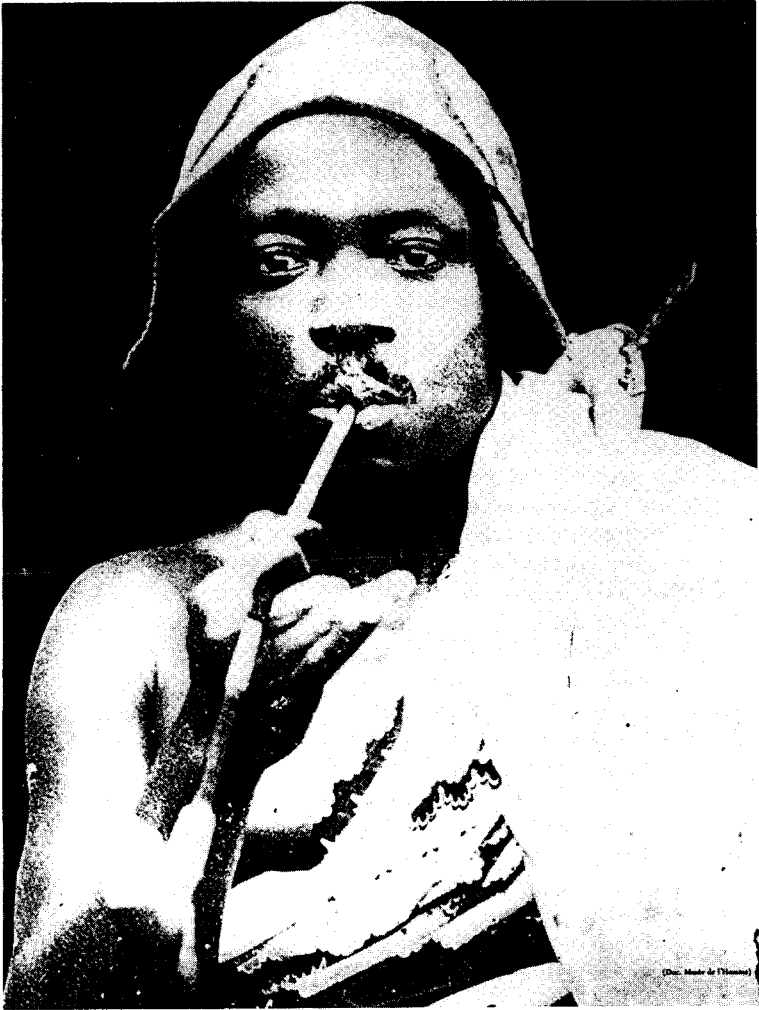
At around the same time, in a barn-like P.T.T. building in the *Ier arrondissement* of Paris, a Martiniquan-born customs official, then completing his nineteenth year in these grey surroundings, reminded me that historical consciousness is deeply rooted, and that understanding the current postcolonial moment will demand as much subtlety, and art, as this ethnographer can muster. While visiting the Ville Lumière, I happened to recount to this man’s Martiniquan/Parisian girlfriend (it was she, not he, who was my acquaintance) the recent personal discovery, in a fisherman’s shack by the sea near Diamant, of a wooden sculpture by Médard – evidently a king, with a golden (cigarette-paper) crown, epaulets, medals, brown skin, blue eyes – that the fisherman-owner said (or so I thought I heard him say) Médard had called “*Le roi des Ingues*.” “*Des Ingues?*” I asked, uncomprehending. “*Oui*,” he said. Trying again, unsure, I asked “*des Indes?*” “*Oui, le roi des Indes*.” And so, on the cover of *Caribbean Review* dated winter 1985 appeared, in full color, this haunting statue of “the King of the Indies” (sic.). But why

the “sic.”? It was the far-off customs official who, by suggesting to his girlfriend that I had perhaps found an image of “le roi Béhanzin” (which had been spoken as “le roi Bé-zingues”) who ushered me into a special corner of the Martiniquan collective consciousness, one that Glissant, had I been more attentive, had already prefigured when he alluded to: “Béhanzin, ‘King of Africa’, mirror of the exiled ... ever roaming through our unconscious” (1981: 18, 496). And, in fact, back in Martinique, the fisherman who owned the sculpture confirmed that Médard (barefoot, illiterate, “mad”) – whose whole *oeuvre* might be read, I would argue, as a discourse on colonialism – had sculpted not “Le roi des Indes” but “Le roi Béhanzin,” the final king of Dahomey, who had resisted the French penetration of Africa and been exiled (with an impressive entourage of wives, children and retainers) to Martinique just before the turn of the century.⁴

In a recent reflection on Martinique, Marie-José Jolivet observes that “To denounce the ‘erasure’ [of collective memory], to denounce collective ‘amnesia,’ is little more than to deplore the fact that collective memory is not what one would like it to be” (that is, the heroic, popular, history-from-the-bottom-up kind of counter-history that could stand against the imperialist history of the past) (1987: 306). But historical consciousness – collective memory – is never monolithic; whether in Martinique or in Saramaka it is always embedded in ongoing social process. For Martiniquans, the meanings of the past actively reflect (and contribute to) the multi-layered, fragmented, contradictory realities of their social existence. I feel equally certain that the “heroic” story of Médard has a place therein as does the tale of the cat.

Sidney Mintz has written of the special challenge of understanding national identity (or consciousness) in the Caribbean, where “populations ... are at once backward and modern, racist and anti-racist, European and non-European” (1974:328). Fast-changing Martinique seems an exemplary case, where such contrasts are stretched almost to the breaking point. With all its tensions and contradictions, Martinique may ultimately afford a privileged position from which to make sense of what Renato Rosaldo calls our own “border zones, pockets, and eruptions.” For “all of us,” he writes,

⁴ Médard was born soon before Béhanzin’s definitive departure from Martinique. It is unlikely he ever saw a photo or other likeness of the king. Yet his imagination of how an African king might look – a theme I intend to develop in a later publication – reveals a great deal about historical consciousness and colonialism in Martinique.



Le roi Béhanzin Ahydjéré, King of Dahomey, in exile in Martinique (photo: ca. 1900, see Godard 1978).

“inhabit an interdependent late-twentieth-century world marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries that are saturated with inequality, power, and domination” (1989: 207, 217).

While none of this speaks directly to the problem of literary form in ethnography, it seems clear that the postcolonial situation I have been describing in Martinique requires rhetorical resources different than those I drew on in Saramaka. My intended audience (which I had previously viewed as largely bi-polar – academics and Saramakas) now includes at once American academics, French academics (who have quite different assumptions, certainly regarding this neocolonial part of France and their own role in it), Martiniquan intellectuals (who have definite ideas of their own on these matters), and the rural Martiniquan people whose world I am exploring and attempting to interpret. And all this is undoubtedly further complicated by the fact that Sally Price and I have chosen to make our permanent home in rural Martinique, considerably blurring for us the distinction Geertz draws between “Being Here” (the university and its environs) and “Being There” (in “the field”). Geertz observes, “That there is some sort of chair or other under every anthropologist, Collège de France to All Souls, University College to Morningside Heights, seems by now part of the natural order of things. There are few more completely academized professions, perhaps – paleography and the study of lichens –but not many” (1988:130). Our stepping outside of this pervasive pattern of anthropological culture presents both special challenges and special opportunities for what Geertz likes to call “the ethnographical act.”

When Geertz writes of “the journal-into-work mode of text-building and the literary anxieties that plague it,” of “this mood – an enormous tangle of epistemological, moral, ideological, vocational, and personal doubts, each feeding upon the others, and mounting at times to something very near Pyrrhonism” (1988: 90), he effectively characterized a long and uneasy introspective moment in ethnography (spanning, say, the mid-1970s to the near-present). But there are already signs, I think, that it *has* been a moment – a crucial and ultimately creative one, from which at least some ethnographers have now begun shaking themselves out (self-consciously trying to leave behind objectivism, subjectivism, and certain other isms that have plagued our collective past) in order to return, with renewed moral commitment and new rhetorical possibilities, to ethnographic practice. As Rosaldo has recently suggested, one legacy of the 1970s and 80s is “the discipline’s new project” (which he views as a rather more



"Le roi Béhanzin" by Médard Aribot (sculpture ca. 1960, private collection).

engagé version of what Geertz is writing about) which “demands a wider array of rhetorical forms than were used during the classic period” (1989: 231). I would second his implication that it should be an exciting next few years for ethnographers and their various audiences.

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