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Advancing the Project (One Review at a Time)

In a well-known review essay, “The Caribbean Region: An Open Frontier in Anthropological Theory,” published over thirty years ago, our eminent colleague, Rolph Trouillot (who, like me, was a student of Rich’s at Hopkins), underscored—as Sidney Mintz and others had done before him—anthropology’s historically uneasy relationship with the Caribbean. For Rolph, anthropology’s customary reluctance for dealing with history was a handicap in a region whose colonial formation is inescapable. Moreover, the discipline’s predilection for boundedness and homogeneity was ill-suited to understanding the sociocultural dynamics of a region characteristically unbounded and heterogeneous.

Arguably, few other scholars have done more to open this frontier and breach these barriers imposed by disciplinary blind spots and divisive colonial histories or have ranged more widely and incisively across barriers of language, territory, gender, colonial pasts, and more, than Richard and Sally Price have done over a remarkably productive half-century career together. Their work has revealed new possibilities for a historically grounded, boundary-crossing anthropology that’s fittingly being celebrated here this weekend. Instead of singling out for focus some aspect of their pathbreaking oeuvre, I want to pay a brief tribute to the invaluable service they’ve given to the field of Caribbean Studies as Book Review Editors of *New West Indian Guide*.

Book review editors often serve thanklessly. It’s not the most glamorous or celebrated form of academic work. And from the point of view of the laborer-scholars who editors must rely on to supply raw material for the journal, the pain is often seen to outweigh the reward. In the anxiously competitive quest for tenure and promotion, after all, published book reviews are less reputation-enhancing, less valued, than peer-reviewed articles and books. Scholars often brush off editors’ requests to review, and this tendency has likely become more prevalent in recent decades. Indeed, as Rich and Sally comment in their Bookshelf 2002 roundup: “We can’t be sure, but we do have the impression that fewer and fewer academics are taking the time to write book reviews (or even to answer requests to review a book).” Reviewers often fail to meet deadlines and bristle at reminders and, as Rich and Sally have told us, many publishers ignore requests to send complimentary book copies.

It’s a slugging-away job that entails a voluminous correspondence each year, tedious follow-up requests, constant involvement in delicate negotiations, and an abundance of tact and diplomacy.

Remarkably, Rich and Sally have done this together since 1992, and Sally for an earlier five years, from 1982 (when she and Rich first joined the Editorial Board of NWIG) to 1986. In

Sally's first stint as book review editor, NWIG published around 36 reviews and 3 review articles per year. Working jointly, they now shepherd through to publication—since 1995—an average of a hundred single reviews and five or so review articles per year. Besides the mountain of work involved in identifying and getting hold of suitable titles, selecting and pinning down reviewers, and seeing the reviews through the pipeline to publication, Rich and Sally have also gifted us a "Bookshelf" essay each year, a bibliographic feast that includes listings of books that were not otherwise reviewed, as well as thumbnail sketches and commentary on scores of publications of interest that fall outside the remit of the journal's normal academic reviews—works of fiction, poetry, and drama, travel writing, exhibition catalogues, cookbooks, and more.

Over the years, Sally and Rich have offered revealing backstage glimpses into their editorial process, most fully in their "Bookshelf 2014" and "Bookshelf 2018" essays. Think, for example, about what's to be done with leftovers from the feast. As with any scholarly project, there are lots of loose ends, bits and pieces left over at the end of the day. Books never reviewed by people who had agreed to review them. Books for which the editors' diligent efforts to find reviewers were unsuccessful. Books about the Caribbean that fall outside the parameters of the journal. Books that may be of some interest to Caribbeanists, but whose main focus lies elsewhere.

Those of us who work on our own projects know that bits and pieces that don't get incorporated into the book or article can often get worked into a lecture or another published piece. As authors and scholars we usually have some considerable ownership over these remainders. The book review editors' leftover assortment, however, consists of work that others own, work that represents the fruit of perhaps years of investment by authors and publishers, and as editors they are under a greater obligation to account for them. In their editor roles, as with the innovations they've made in their own scholarly projects, Rich and Sally, decades ago, came up with an innovative and caring response to the conundrum of what to do with the leftovers, incorporating them into those annual "Bookshelf" essays like the one-pot meals that are the pride of any good Caribbean cook.

In the early years, the "Bookshelf" roundups began with a few delectable paragraphs centered on a Caribbean culinary theme. These mouth-watering excursions reveal cross-Caribbean connections and variations and, often in surprising ways, suggest possible Old World cultural provenances. We may never have imagined that, for example, *Rundown*—the Anglo-Caribbean sauce made by boiling coconut down until it's like a custard and adding seasonings, pickled fish and other ingredients—may have come to the Caribbean from Indonesia ("Rundown," 1993). They allow us to think about food and social class and change over time—for example, the ways in which vital staples like breadfruit and root crops have for many Caribbean folk become associated with old-fashioned country living ("Migan" (1994) and about subtle racialized associations of food. When, for instance, Sally and Rich served up the seven-meat *sancocho* at a pre-Christmas party in Martinique, their guests "suggested that the closest local equivalent, in this ever racially-conscious society, might be *manje-milat* (mulatto meal),

which is made with "half chicken and half pork, half plantains and half root crops" ("Sancocho," 1995). These essays allow us in fresh new ways to appreciate cultural creolization as it emerged across the Americas and in Africa, for example, in the marrying of cornmeal and okra in Bajan *coo-coo* and in cognate ways elsewhere ("Turning Coo-Coo,"1996). These culinary excursions into *migan*, *sancocho*, *rundown*, *coo-coo*, and the rest, offer up wonderful examples of the miraculous inventions (to borrow another of Rolph's metaphors) nestled at the very heart of Caribbean societies and sensibilities.

Rich and Sally's joining the NWIG editorial board coincided with and helped to broaden dramatically the journal's pan-Caribbean emphasis: representing a radical break from the parochialism and near exclusive orientation towards the colonial Dutch Caribbean context of its antecedent, *De West-Indische Gids*, founded in 1919, and characterized by a parochialism that's been a feature of most of the region's scholarly journals. (Here I'm drawing on Gert Oostindie's very useful article on the history of the journal published in 1994 to mark its 75th anniversary: "From WIG to NWIG."

Participating in this more expansive pan-Caribbean project of *New West Indian Guide* has afforded Rich and Sally an institutional base of sorts to express what Caribbean Studies means to them, even as they and the journal have helped to foster an ever-widening community of Caribbeanist scholars. This vision of Caribbean Studies serves as a counter-imaginary to the sundering and balkanizing practices of the colonial enterprise and to the exclusionary habits and mindset of the political nationalisms that have come in its wake. It is a vision, moreover, that serves as counterweight to the subordinating effects of an earlier Caribbean Studies of the immediate post-World War II era which—as historian Harvey Neptune, has argued—denied the region's modernity by relegating it to a pitifully backward "Third World" ("The Lost World of Caribbean Studies: Recalling an Un-American Puerto Rico Project," *Small Axe* 41, 2013). Making the case for us consciously to think the study of the region in a New-World instead of a Third-World frame, and drawing on a little-known essay by historian Daniel Boorstin, Neptune suggests, affords us a perspective from which to extricate ourselves with growing confidence over time from the borrowed ideas and aspirations of the Old World that continue to guide and constrain thought in the Caribbean and the Americas. Neptune urges that the ongoing work of decolonization requires instead that we draw more deliberately on the "creolizing sensibilities" of our New World formation. Through their scholarship and writing, exhibitions, advocacy, and editorial work, Rich and Sally have made invaluable contributions to this decolonizing horizon of transformation.