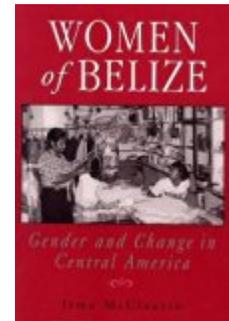




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The Meaning of Difference and Women in Belize

The literature on gender relations in Latin America and the Caribbean offers abundant historical and contemporary evidence of women's exploitation under prevailing patriarchal social formations. But an exhaustive catalog of the everyday exercise of male domination cannot in itself reveal why women in any given society continue to endure their subordination or how and under what conditions some women mobilize, successfully or not, to redress their individual and collective predicaments. To elaborate such an understanding requires clarifying how gender, race, ethnicity, class, and nation interpenetrate, often in contradictory fashion, in the simultaneously local and global historical processes of their sociocultural, ideological, and political-economic transactions.

Throughout Latin American history, the economic roles of women and men respectively illustrate structural disparities that have conditioned gender values and ideology in everyday social practice to subvert women's potential equality and autonomy. Variables of history, race, ethnicity, class, nationalism, and the effective sexual division of labor have produced distinct outcomes from one society to the next, but insofar as patriarchal control prevails over cultural and societal institutions, the systematic under-valuation of women and their work reinforces their material and ideological vulnerability as marginalized social, economic, and political actors.

This fact impinges most heavily upon poor women, whose need to work, as a matter of objective survival,

entails diverse and invidious forms of exploitation, exacerbated by the constancy of women's culturally prescribed domestic and reproductive responsibilities. The pressure to balance income production against labor-intensive domestic roles and to maintain one's public reputation imposes severe constraints on women's social and economic autonomy, and induces their ideological collusion to perpetuate the normative conditions of female subservience. Given systematic economic, political, and legal gender disadvantages, women's accommodation to their subordinate cultural, socioeconomic, and political status is usefully approached by analyzing the survival value that their ideologically and historically conditioned behavior patterns confer within the prevailing societal matrix.

These observations are clearly borne out in Irma McClaurin's ethnography, *Women of Belize: Gender and Change in Central America*, a contribution to Latin American women's testimonial literature from one of the region's most diverse but least noted cultural and historical crossroads. Belize (a former British colonial enclave carved from the Caribbean littoral of Spanish imperial Yucatan and Guatemala) remains enmeshed in an often antagonistic effort to reconcile its hybrid Anglo-African, Latin, and Amerindian cultural and social-historical pedigree with its Central American geopolitical destiny, and a growing economic and cultural dependence upon the United States.

Drawing on women's life narratives, McClaurin ex-

plores how her subjects assign cultural and political meaning to their experiences, how changing self-understandings serve to refashion the social category “woman,” and how they work to alter the material conditions of women’s lives. She describes the culture of gender in terms of prevailing beliefs, values, and behaviors, and seeks to articulate how conventional and emergent understandings of gender roles, relations, and stereotypes inform women’s varied responses. Hence McClaurin’s work is a pioneering contribution that marks out the terrain for the future study of gender in Belize.

McClaurin’s initial interest was women’s grassroots organization, and, consistent with other regional studies, she finds that activism reduces women’s sense of social isolation, creates new opportunities, and expands their cultural horizons, while also engendering new cultural and political challenges. But in a survey of some sixty participants in women’s groups and their awareness of Belizean public policy on women, McClaurin was taken with the personal insights of several especially eloquent respondents. These women she interviewed in depth, and “the three most articulate” narratives “form the core of this work.” McClaurin thus acknowledges that her ethnography is “biased toward women who are activists” (p. 7).

McClaurin’s analytical concern is with gender theory, oral narrativity, and ethnographic reflexivity. In her approach, the scrutiny of self in recitals of female transformation is intended to serve didactically as a means of individual and collective liberation. Rather than “an elaborate study of kinship, political institutions, systems of reciprocity, or the exotic ‘Other,’” McClaurin builds on narratives of “the individual lives of a few Belizean women.” Her conclusions “emerge from their voices, their experiences, and the sense that they make out of how the culture of gender in Belize is both constructed and lived” (p. 9).

The work comprises an eclectic blend of interviews, field-note transcriptions, ethnographic reflection, a survey of NGO and official reports on women’s status in Belize and the region, an interrogation of Belizean fiction, and the author’s own poetry. This is a reflexive, deeply personal, and politically engaged ethnography. As such it joins a long tradition of first-person narratives, especially by female anthropologists, written against the grain in a critique of the norms of positivist social science. In this era of postmodern scholarship the researcher’s self-positioning is obligatory, and McClaurin states her political position unapologetically: “In this work I do not

pretend to be detached—I owe no allegiance to scientific objectivity. Instead I insist that in any fieldwork experience we are always involved, despite any posturing we may do to the contrary” (p. 17).

McClaurin’s experimental approach asserts, as most anthropologists and historians may agree, that the boundaries between ethnography, fiction, and personal narrative are often difficult to perceive. As Kamala Visweswaran (1994) notes, anthropologists as diverse as Sapir, Kroeber, Malinowski, Boas, Benedict, Zora Neale Hurston, and Elsie Clews Parsons all experimented with narrative and fictional modes, establishing a little-noted tradition that persists into the present. McClaurin herself makes instructive use of the classic Belizean coming-of-age novel, *Beka Lamb* (Edgell, 1982) to illustrate how young girls are socialized to domestic compliance, to examine “Creole” notions of gender respectability and sanctions against unwed motherhood, and to take note of women’s involvement in the Belizean nationalist movement.

But a deeper interrogation of Edgell’s novel would further elaborate the contradictory gender, racial, ethnic, class, and nationalist complexities of Belizean society and history. The country’s long and uneasy relationship with its Spanish-speaking neighbors (dating from the seventeenth-century genesis of the Anglo-Spanish imperial regional struggle) informs the vexed nature of ethnic discourse and cultural-nationalist politics into the present. The fiction of Edgell and such other Belizean writers as Zoila Ellis (1988) illustrates the multiple dimensions of women’s subordination in Belize, including such matters as Creole identity (cf. Bolland, 1992); prevailing ideologies of feminine beauty (cf. Wilk, 1993); sexuality and prostitution (cf. Kane, 1993); race, class, and gender in the social context of domestic service (cf. Moore, 1988); kinship and class (cf. Smith, 1990); the supposed “Spanish” plague of *machismo* and the plight of Mestizo women (cf. Ehlers, 1991); and the Guatemalan diplomatic impasse (cf. Payne, 1990), as each informs the social-historical construction of gender, race, and nation in Belize.

McClaurin is most interested in the narrative analysis of women’s difficult relationships with men, and women’s commentary on popular gender ideology and institutionalized forms of gender discrimination. Her research focus and approach preclude reflection on women who (due to a variety of family, ethnic, and linguistic constraints) do not become activists. Hence this study can offer only general and secondary insights into the

culturally subordinate status of Mestizo women (typically Spanish-speaking and of Mexican, Guatemalan, Honduran, or Salvadoran descent), and of Maya and Mennonite women (the two most endogamous ethnic groups, and those least likely to be drawn into political activism). Collectively, these largely rural groups now comprise well over half the total Belizean population, so this ethnography of urbanized women who assert Creole, Garifuna, and East Indian ethnicity cannot be taken as representative of the overall national situation, as McClaurin herself acknowledges.

McClaurin is candid regarding her research interests and methods, which predilections inevitably curtail other potentially productive investigative avenues. Compare Visweswaran, who suggests the value of a feminist ethnography keyed on analyzing women's relationships with one another, and the inevitable power differential that conditions all such encounters. Such an approach she contrasts with feminist anthropology's early positing of a universal sisterhood, which endowed an untenable position. To counterpoise a universal gendered or racial self against a dominant (i.e., male) "other" undercuts a sense for the basic integrity of cultural difference, and favors appropriation in the guise of an empathetic identification with and "rescuing" of subordinate voices.

The potency of McClaurin's research relationships with the women she interviews cannot be diminished, built as they were upon the parallel autobiographies (e.g., common issues of marriage, children, economic struggle, divorce, gender politics) of the researcher and her subjects. But McClaurin overlooks the patent dimension of power in the amicable relationships she reports with her impoverished respondents, each of whom, it should be noted, is highly motivated to improve her individual situation.

Surely, McClaurin's empathy and interest in the plight of women, her own status as a mother, her professional rank, her U.S. citizenship, and her potential as an employer position her as an ideal patron for many Belizeans. As she herself notes, Belizeans immigrate to the United States to work (legally or illegally), and commonly, U.S. travelers and tourists invite Belizean women to come work for them, typically as live-in domestics, an expectation (acknowledged or not) that McClaurin's own status as a mother and U.S. professional will have stimulated in at least some of her field encounters.

Ethnography as "fables of rapport" (the term is Visweswaran's) can mask how ethnic, racial, class, cultural, and national differences operate in the context of

specific historical struggles to reproduce structural relations of domination, both between men and women, and between women of disparate origins. To downplay such palpable differences masks the inevitably unequal relationships between subjects (including the anthropologist and her interlocutors), and sustains a dubious pretense of understanding that favors essentialist representation and the acute flattening of historical specificity and insistent cultural difference.

McClaurin's deliberation of her own position as a researcher is also instructive as it informs a discussion of the ethnographer's duality of status as an outsider who seeks an insider perspective. Regarding "the difficulty of finding a community that might allow an anthropologist to 'go native'" (which McClaurin regards as a decided research advantage), she relates, "In addition to my gender, I believe that my 'race'/ethnicity was ... a significant factor in my fieldwork" (pp. 14-15). This favored "[my] acceptance by most Belizeans as a kindred spirit in a way they assured me could not happen for white anthropologists, no matter how empathetic they may be." McClaurin attributes her entree to "[being] black in a country where people of African ancestry had dominated the population" (p. 15). Such essentialist assertions of cross-cultural insider status would benefit from a perusal of Zora Neale Hurston's work in Jamaica (cf. also Narayan, 1993 and Visweswaran, 1994).

Notwithstanding, every ethnographer will recognize the emotional buoyancy of this singular fieldwork moment, the flush of cross-cultural "arrival," the symbolic conferral of honorary native membership. But concurrent claims of ethnographic authority and other-identification are problematic for any anthropologist invested in the concept of cultural relativism, and the radical proposition that all human difference is culturally (not naturally) endowed, and socially prosecuted.

This is particularly salient given the perplexed nature of racial and ethnic relations in Belize. The legacy of African slavery, a deliberate policy of fostering a diverse immigrant labor force, and the conscious crafting of a complex and contradictory racial aesthetic and ethnic hierarchy rooted in the colonial experience demand careful deliberation in order to avoid conflating the usefully distinct concepts of race and ethnicity.

"Race" (a common human fixation on classifying sociocultural groups on the basis of physical characteristics, with an implicit premise of racial inferiority and superiority) is not a self-evident quality. It is a sociocultural artifact inscribed in the folk taxonomies of particular so-

cieties, cultures, and histories. Ethnicity entails a broader human classificatory principle of a self-prescribed or externally ascribed combination of endogamy and common descent, place of origin, language, religion, and phenotype. So ethnicity may (but does not always) draw on conceptions of “race” in the social construction of identity, but in a more encompassing and culturally “coherent” way.

The validity of “race” has been repudiated in the biological and social sciences, but its everyday usage in ethnic discourse endures to fuel tenacious forms of racism. And precisely because racial classifications persist in popular practice, the analytical challenge remains to interrogate the historical and geographical specificity of their emergence, and to understand racism’s power to collate tenacious ethnic divisions in any given society, and to complicate other gender, class, and status differences.

Certainly, U.S. varieties of racism, the culturally and historically specific product of an involuntary hemispheric African Diaspora, remains a harsh reality. But racism takes its own particular forms in Belize, and “race” assumes different specific meanings as well, meanings which may well elude the easy comprehension of outsiders.

For instance, McClaurin reports people’s frequent speculation “that I must have a Belizean ancestor somewhere in my past”; with her denial “they settled upon the idea that our ancestors must have come from the same area in Africa but ended up on ships with different destinations” (p. 16). The assertion of fictive kinship assumes undeniable symbolic import, recalling the practical and metaphorical significance of the “shipmate” relationship as an enduring principle of social organization in the shaping of social relations in many African American cultures and societies (cf. Mintz and Price, 1992). But the invocation of kinship may have even broader symbolic and instrumental foundations, and the presumption of cross-cultural racial solidarity in the abstract is rarely capable on its own strength of sustaining personal relationships for very long. In this respect it would be more useful to know something of the evolving texture and content of the personal relationships between McClaurin and her female respondents.

What remains is the constructed nature of race and the fact that “national” identity (long assumed to be an exclusive Creole prerogative in Belize) has been and remains a highly negotiable, opportunistic, and elusive endowment of social belonging in the post-colonial era.

A conspicuous racial aesthetic (with collateral symbolic and metaphorical content) certainly persists in popular Belizean discourse, but its conceptual openness and contradictory content favor a conflation of race and ethnicity conducive to purposes that may be quite distinct from the convergence of “racial” experience that McClaurin presumes between herself and Belizeans of African descent. This lesson became clear to university-educated Belizeans who, returning from overseas study during the 1960s, discovered the fundamental inapplicability of the U.S. Black Power movement to the Belizean social reality, which grew out of a distinct historical trajectory (e.g., Hyde, 1970).

This issue resides in McClaurin’s own reportage that her conditioning in the U.S. racial formation (see Omi and Winant, 1994) often led to unfounded assumptions about an individual’s presumed ethnic identity. In one example, “At first I thought A.B. was Mestizo because of her looks and her Spanish-sounding last name, as well as her fluency in Spanish. But she is adamant about her origins. She is of African ancestry and states she is proud of her heritage. She tells me today she is ‘of white and African mixture which makes me Creole.’ She speaks three languages, Creole, English, and Spanish.... She also has an adopted Maya daughter” (p. 36).

This outwardly contradictory self-presentation “makes cultural sense” given the social-historical fact that an ability to claim Creole identity (notably, Anglo affinity) and to speak Belizean Creole were prerequisites to social mobility and government employment under the British colonial regime. Such ideals die hard; many self-identified Creoles perceive their ascendancy and privilege to be in decline since independence in 1981, as the government and society at large come more to reflect the country’s actual ethnic diversity. McClaurin notes the salient Belizean debate over whether an “authentic” Creole culture exists, an argument given certain popular urgency by recent Asian and (Spanish-speaking) Central American immigration, which many see as threatening the very ethnic and cultural identity of the nation. The Belizean dilemma has its universal dimension, as seen in comparison with the punitive anti-immigration and anti-welfare tone of popular discourse on cultural and national belonging in the United States today.

It is thus the hemispheric perspective that finally demands consideration. McClaurin’s wariness of “traditional ethnographic writings that focus primarily on the analysis of structures and systems” (p. 9) is understandable given the nature of her undertaking, but the Belizean

experience is most enlightening in precisely the comparative context that such an approach enables. Consider the tendency of many Belizeans (especially Creoles) to downplay the marked diversity of the nation's collective ethnic and cultural roots, as inscribed in individuals' actual genealogies and the bi- and multilingual abilities of many. This is a nation whose demographic and cultural mix reflects an unbroken history of forced and voluntary immigration from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. Hence the reported readiness of Belizeans to assimilate McClaurin to their personal lineages is compatible with the society's long history of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic hybridity, a condition that essentialist appeals to "race" or the persuasions of personal sentiment and empathic identification are incapable of explaining.

In this regard, McClaurin is best read as an experimental ethnographic assessment of the contemporary gender status of women in Belize. She presents impressive testimony to illustrate women's strategic adaptation to their continued subordination in Belizean society. The task that remains is to ground these and like narratives in the conflictive history of their actual genesis, as particular tales of a more extensive process whereby the peoples and social categories of the Caribbean were forged, under conditions not entirely of their own making, in the project of European colonial expansion that registered the very emergence of "the West" as a hypothetical cultural entity and a geopolitical reality.

In its historical constellation Belize thus remains a quintessentially Caribbean society, the culturally dynamic hybrid product of the forced association and social leveling of peoples from diverse backgrounds under the brutal prerogatives of an emergent global political economy. Some time ago, Sidney Mintz made clear the critical value of comparative socio-historical research in building analytical subtlety into an ethnographic and structural comprehension of Caribbean cultural and social phenomena. He wrote, "[I am] necessarily concerned with the processes by which Caribbean societies were simultaneously given their distinctive, individual character on the one hand, yet made importantly alike, on the other. That likeness, the consequence of a diverse yet homogeneous colonialism, is the basis of the historical integrity of the region" (1989 [1974], xix). But as should also be clear, the cultural formations that emerged were unique and genuinely Caribbean in character.

Most acutely, Mintz observed that the Caribbean "present is, for better or worse, much of the rest of the world's future" (1989 [1974], xxi). The Caribbean social

experiment's structurally dependent character stands as an imperative materialization of the skewed social relations of capitalist modernity. The flattening of cultural diversity, the devaluation of vital social roles and their reduction to categories of oppression, the unmitigated social displacement concealed in the ideology of "development," and the utter commoditization of human potential that emerge from Caribbean social history require that any politically committed analysis engage the full range of evidence at hand, and situate the concerted struggles for individual and group self-determination in the context of broader social processes, if there is to be any chance of countervailing Mintz's prescient apprehension.

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