University of Wisconsin–Madison  
Department of History  
History 730  
Pro-Seminar in Latin American History  
THE HISTORICAL LITERATURE OF THE CARIBBEAN  
Semester I, 2006-2007

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Office hours:  
Wednesday 10:00-12:00 (sign-up only)  
Wednesday 1:00-2:00 (walk-in)

Course description: This seminar introduces the historical literature of the Caribbean, a region encompassing the Greater and Lesser Antilles, the Bahamas, and nearby countries (e.g., Suriname, Guyana, French Guiana, and Belize) or portions of countries (e.g., the Central American Caribbean coasts and Caribbean Venezuela and Colombia) that share in the islands’ history of slavery and colonial exploitation. The Western Hemisphere’s colonial sphere par excellence, the Caribbean has always been historicized under a colonial gaze. Its modern historical narratives sprang in the eighteenth century from European aspirations for a more rational exploitation of the region’s working populations. Later narratives were kindled by North Atlantic processes that put Caribbean peoples at the center of concern but kept them, for the most part, in a subaltern role: the antislavery debates of the nineteenth century, the decolonization debates of the mid-twentieth, and arguably the postcolonial approaches of a more recent era. Counternarratives of resistance, adaptation, and survival have always existed, of course. But in spite of the latter’s importance, what sets the Caribbean apart in historiographical terms is the degree to which historical knowledge has assisted the practices of domination and the exercise of colonial or neocolonial power.

We will read and discuss representative examples of contemporary historical writing about the Caribbean. The analysis will proceed from these examples to other discussions from which they have arisen or with which they are connected.

Introduction and main themes  
As the principal gateway to the Americas, the Caribbean region has been at the center of power rivalries and long-distance exchanges—mercantile and cultural—for more than five centuries. Combining fertile soils, vital trade routes, and a coveted strategic location, the islands and surrounding continental lowlands constituted one of Europe’s earliest and most desirable colonial frontiers. Soon after European conquest and settlement the newly founded societies of the Caribbean turned toward the satisfaction of demands in faraway markets for sugar, coffee, tobacco, and other tropical staples. Faced with an intense demand for labor in these industries, and in the absence of a large indigenous population, which had been decimated upon contact, Europeans imported millions of laborers from Africa, the Far East, the American continents, South Asia, and even Europe, turning the Caribbean into one the earliest and largest examples of a group of societies “made up from scratch” under the aegis of commercial capitalism. The resulting societies were partly fashioned after European, African, indigenous, American, and Asian precursors and models, but were unquestionably creole at the core—social formations and cultures comprised of a mosaic of inventive blends.

In fulfilling the roles historically assigned to them in the international division of labor, Caribbean societies were shaped by a common set of forces combined in different ways. An entrenched colonial and
neocolonial dependence on outside powers was one of these, a dependence which has lasted longer there than in any other world region. Another was the orientation of economic life—once agricultural, now industrial and tourism-based—toward the satisfaction of external demands, a tendency which has often prompted an opposite reaction: the desire to isolate oneself from the pervasive effects of slavery and other forms of unfree labor through the tenuous autonomy of peasant life or the “safety valve” of emigration. In the end, all these systems of labor exploitation have been predicated, to one degree or another, on racial and cultural distinctions. As Stuart Hall has put it, Caribbean societies were forged by colonialism and racism into “societies structured in dominance,” where race constituted, on the level of perception and ideology as well as praxis, the fundamental principle of social organization.

The socioeconomic and political structures spawned by colonial dependence and the labor demands of the plantation system have produced ambiguous results. They have created, or at least aggravated, profound and intractable social problems, such as poverty, joblessness, ecological devastation, underdevelopment, a normative orientation to emigrate, and many others, while making it difficult to come up with viable solutions. Clearly, when the historian focuses on these problems, as she must, Caribbean history casts a long shadow of tragedy and woe. But one must keep in mind that Caribbean societies also present a history of human resourcefulness and creativity in the face of formidable odds. People who have confronted these odds have managed to build resourceful, adaptable, multiracial societies and cultures, firmly planted upon a resilient African substratum. Indeed, it is this deep layer which serves as the strongest common denominator of regional history. Although the Caribbean exhibits wide-ranging variation in ethnic, racial, political, and linguistic terms, it is united by a common African-American heritage, and hence, by creolization processes that have drawn primarily from this heritage, albeit always in combination with others.

The seminar’s choice of themes reflects these basic tenets of Caribbean history, which have focused the attention of historians for decades. If our emphasis falls upon socio-economic and cultural processes, it is because these problems have attracted the greatest attention and arguably have produced the finest empirical and interpretive works.

History as a discipline is not alone in its dialogue with the Caribbean past. Accordingly, our spotlight will be, in part, on works produced within the framework of other disciplines, most prominently that of historical anthropology. Indeed, in the field of Caribbean Studies, history and historical anthropology have been—not surprisingly, perhaps, given anthropology’s attention to cultural Others—constant interlocutors. Our course outline faithfully reflects the scope and fruitfulness of that dialogue.

**Requirements**

**A) Paper (50% of final grade):** Seminar members will write a substantive, article length (20-35 pp. long) historiographical paper. The paper will exhaustively probe the contours of an historical debate or problem, denoting the principal contributions and assessing their overall significance. In doing so, it will not only address a problem specific to a country or (hopefully) set of countries, but attempt to associate it with wider theoretical or methodological currents in Caribbean and Latin American, and possibly worldwide, historical writing. If at all possible, the paper will be comparative; that is, it will focus on more than one island, country or colony. Ideally, it will also straddle linguistic/political areas; for instance, by comparing Jamaica with Cuba or the French West Indies with the Spanish islands.

The papers are due in my mailbox by 5 p.m. on Thursday, December 14.

**B) Presentations (20% of final grade):** Each seminar participant will make a brief in-class presentation that incorporates insights and findings from all the readings assigned for a given week (Groups A and B, as well as the general assignment). A one- or two-page written summary of the main points of the presentation, with copies for every seminar member, to be distributed at the beginning of the class meeting, will complete this task. A schedule of presentations will be drawn up at the first seminar
meeting. The presentations will synthesize and critique the most significant issues raised in the weekly readings, and will lay the groundwork for the ensuing seminar discussion. It is expected that the presenter will assume a leading role in seminar deliberations on the day of her/his presentation.

C) Weekly book critique (30% of final grade): By Tuesday at 10 a.m. each week, students will email to the instructor (fscarano@wisc.edu) a 150-word (maximum) summary critique of the common reading for that week. This critique will be shared by email among the seminar participants every Thursday morning. It will provide a capsule account of the reading’s central argument and a succinct evaluation of the author(s)’ contributions.

Books available for purchase

Rainbow Bookstore (426 W. Gilman Street, 257-6050) has the following titles available for purchase. They constitute the majority of common, required readings. Copies will be on College Reserve. Most other required readings will be on electronic College Reserves.


WEEKLY THEMES AND READINGS

I. INTRODUCTORY SESSION (Sept. 5)

No assigned readings.

II. SILENCE AND ABSENCE: ON WRITING CARIBBEAN HISTORY (Sept. 12)

Trouillot, *Power and the Production of History*.

**Supplementary:**


Fernando Martínez Heredia, Rebecca J. Scott, and Orlando F. García Martínez, eds., *Espacios, silencios y los sentidos de la libertad: Cuba entre 1878 y 1912* (Habana: Ediciones Unión, 2001).


III. COLONIAL FRONTIERS, IMPERIAL APPETITES (Sept. 19)

Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*.

**Supplementary:**


IV. ENVIRONMENTS, COLONIES, NATIONS (Sept. 26)

McCook, *States of Nature*.

Supplementary:


Bonham C. Richardson, *Economy and Environment in the Caribbean: Barbados and the Windwards in the Late 1800s* (Barbados; Gainesville: The Press University of the West Indies; University Presses of Florida, 1998).


V. ECONOMIES OF SWEAT AND TOIL (Oct. 3)

Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*.

Supplementary:


VI. NEITHER “INNER” NOR “OUTER” PLANTATION: THE WORLD OF THE MAROONS (Oct. 10)

Price, First-Time.

Supplementary:
- Kenneth Bilby, “Maroon Culture as a Distinct Variant of Jamaican Culture,” in *Maroon Heritage: Archaeological, Ethnographic, and Historical Perspectives*, foreword by B.W. Higman (Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago: Canoe Press, University of the West Indies Press, 1994), 72-85.

VII. THE MAKING OF CREOLE CULTURES (Oct. 17)


Supplementary:

**VIII. PROTO-PEASANTIZATION (Oct. 24)**


**Supplementary:**


IX. MEANINGS OF FREEDOM, CHALLENGES TO RULE (Oct. 31)


**Supplementary:**

X. RACE AND RACELESSNESS IN THE MAKING OF NATIONS: THE VIEW FROM CUBA (I) (Nov. 7)

Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba.*

**Supplementary:**
Aviva Chomsky, “‘Barbados or Canada?’ Race, Immigration, and Nation in Early Twentieth-Century Cuba,” Hispanic American Historical Review 80, no. 3 (August 2000): 415-462.

Fernando Martínez Heredia, Rebecca J. Scott, and Orlando F. García Martínez, eds., Espacios, silencios y los sentidos de la libertad: Cuba entre 1878 y 1912 (Habana: Ediciones Unión, 2001).


XI. RACE AND RACELESSNESS IN THE MAKING OF NATIONS: THE VIEW FROM CUBA (II) (Nov. 14)

De la Fuente, Race, Inequality, and Politics.

Supplementary:
Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds., AfroCuba: An Anthology of Cuban Writing on Race, Politics and Culture (Melbourne; London: Ocean Press; Latin American Bureau, 1993).

XII. ON SHIFTING GROUND: WOMEN, SEXUALITY, AND POWER (Nov. 21)

Findlay, Imposing Decency.

Supplementary:
Mario R. Cancel, ed., Historia y género: vidas y relatos de mujeres en el Caribe (San Juan: Asociación Puertorriqueña de Historiadores, 1997).
Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, and Barbara Bailey, eds., *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective* (Mona, Jamaica: Department of History, University of the West Indies, 1995).

XIII. SEX, LOVE, AND WORK IN THE AMERICAN BANANA KINGDOM (Nov. 28)

Putnam, *The Company they Kept.*

Supplementary:


XIV. THE DICTATOR’S LITTLE SECRET (Dec. 5)

Turits, *Foundations of Despotism.*

Supplementary:

Resources for the Study of Caribbean History

I. Journals

Leading Journals
Revista Mexicana del Caribe
Illes i Imperis (Spain)
Historia y Sociedad (PR)
Santiago (Cuba)
Revista de la Biblioteca José Martí (Cuba)
Del Caribe (Cuba)
Anales del Caribe (Cuba)
Journal of Caribbean History (Jamaica)
Slavery & Abolition (GB)
New West Indian Guide (Holland)
Hомines (PR)
Estudios Sociales (DR)
El Caribe Contemporáneo (México)
Ecos (DR)
Eme Eme (DR)
Op. Cit., Boletín del Centro de Investigaciones Históricas (PR)
Historia y Cultura (Cart., Colombia)
Kacike, Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology (online)
Cuban Studies (USA)
Caribbean Studies (Puerto Rico)
Caribbean Quarterly (Jamaica)
Revue Française d’Histoire d’Outre-Mer

Occasional articles
Hispanic American Historical Review
American Historical Review
William & Mary Quarterly
Journal of Latin American Studies
Journal of Interdisciplinary History
Journal of Social History
Social History
Latin American Research Review
NACLA Report on the Americas
Latin American Perspectives
The Americas
Colonial Latin American Review
Comparative Studies in Society and History
II. Web resources

**Society for Caribbean Studies (UK) - http://www.sesonline.freeserve.co.uk/carib.htm**
Online papers from various SCS meetings.


**Mitchell’s West Indian Bibliography - http://www.books.ai/**
Comprehensive English-language bibliography of non-fiction works on the West Indies, including the non-Hispanic countries. Unfortunately, it is not searchable and items are only arranged alphabetically.


Short but useful bibliography.
Caribbean Historiographical and Bibliographic Resources: 
A Select Bibliography


Goveia, Elsa V. “Eric Williams, British Historians and the West Indies.” Caribbean Quarterly 10 (June 1964): 48-54.


Rodríguez León, Mario A. *Los registros parroquiales y la microhistoria demográfica en Puerto Rico*. San Juan: Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, 1990.


