Review Essay: Caribbean History and its relevance to Global History

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Seeking an Identity

Global History has been constructed as a research tool which is interdisciplinary, multinational and cross-cultural. Wolf Schäfer believed Global History is “the unwritten history of the twentieth history.”¹ He sought to distinguish between World History and Global History. The latter was viewed as “a new and distinctly different approach to the study of global processes in contemporary history.”² However, Schäfer neither defined the parameters of ‘contemporary history’ nor provided convincing illustrations of these ‘global processes.’ Furthermore, Schäfer argued that World History in its ‘totalizing form’ attempted to record the entire human past and all of humanity.³ This proposition by Schäffer seems skewed especially since a complete record of all events and processes is impossible.

An obvious dilemma is the issue of the vague and hidden boundaries separating World History and Global History. Global History scholars have not clearly defined the criteria for this sub-discipline as evident from the claim, “World History practitioners sometimes like to refer to their work also as Global History.”⁴ Patrick O’Brien contended, “The case for the restoration of Global History rests upon its potential to construct negotiable meta-narratives….”⁵ The question arises – would the ‘restorers’ of Global History appreciate the significance of Caribbean History as one of the meta-
narratives? O’Brien’s use of the word ‘restoration’ suggests that Global History once existed but has been forgotten, discarded, sidelined, overlooked or abruptly aborted. One also wonders if Global History has become out-dated and irrelevant. For instance, Bruce Mazlish uses the term “New Global History” and defines it as, “…the study of a wide range of dynamic factors or processes which are encompassed by the word “globalization,” and must be understood in terms of a new and evolving analytic method and a particular body of data.” The defining of globalization also seems to have different meanings. William Gervase Clarence-Smith contended that ‘globalization’ goes back to the ‘Big Bang’ or the departure of the Homo sapiens from Africa. I would suggest that the 20th and 21st centuries be regarded as the ‘Age of Globalisation’. Although we are early in the 21st century, there is evidence that we have not fully accepted the concept of ‘homo sapiens’ as belonging to a global family whose evolution and destiny is intrinsically interwoven and inseparably interlocked through time and space.

Caribbean History could probably fit into the existing paradigms of Global History. Markus P. M. Vink in “Indian Ocean Studies and the ‘new thalassology’” explored the dimensions of maritime-based studies. A similar model could be applied to Caribbean History. This is particularly true for the ocean and sea basins in the Atlantic World that are sometimes used as a frontier and framework of historical analysis. Elusive questions remain – could certain sub-fields as Oral History and Local History in the Caribbean be considered part of Global History? Should West Indian scholars devise new methods to reinterpret Caribbean History in a global context?

This relatively new field replaced the traditional World History which did not adequately consider the globalization process. West Indian History/Caribbean History
remains a crucial component of Global History. In retrospect, West Indian History cannot remain hidden or camouflaged and continue being marginalized and overlooked from any epoch or sub-field being studied.

*The role of Academia, Activists and Artistes*

Certain questions need to be addressed by historians. These questions include-

Who are the practitioners of Global History in the Caribbean? Have past researchers and historians properly linked Caribbean History to Global History? How relevant is Caribbean History to Global History? The existing historiography on the Caribbean provides ample proof that researchers have emphasized the worldwide interactions with the West Indies.⁹

Distinguished historians with international perspectives, such as Verene Shepherd (Jamaica), Bridget Brereton (Trinidad and Tobago), Walter Rodney (Guyana) and Brinsley Samaroo (Trinidad and Tobago), have been practitioners of Global History even before this sub-discipline formally emerged. For instance, Samaroo and Shepherd in their research on Indian indentureship to the Caribbean have emphasized the intricate connections among India, Britain and the West Indies.¹⁰ As a result of indentureship, slavery and colonialism, Caribbean History could be viewed as contributing to the histories of Europe, Asia and the United States.¹¹ Likewise, the early Spanish, French and British presence in the island of Trinidad is highlighted in Bridget Brereton’s seminal work- *A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962*.¹² Indeed, the Caribbean contributed significantly to Europe’s economic, political and social development, and no history of
Spain, England, France, Holland or Portugal is complete without that critical chapter on the Euro-Caribbean connection.

A few Trinidadians, such as Tony Martin (formerly of Wellesley College), are regularly invited to give public lectures in Trinidad. Similarly, other academics including Anthony Bogues, (Brown University, Rhode Island) and Edward Cox (Rice University, Texas), Selwyn Carrington (Howard University), Colin Palmer (Princeton University), and Maurice St. Pierre (Morgan State University) regularly interact with Caribbean-based academics at conferences. Experience and training in North America is seen as beneficial to the development of Black Studies in the West Indies, “Many Caribbean scholars are U.S.-trained and therefore influenced by their U.S. experience, and are favourably disposed to Africana Studies, especially those earning degrees over the past 25 years.”

Non-Caribbean persons writing on the Caribbean, such as Marika Sherwood (England) and Matthew Quest (United States), have certainly established global linkages.

Academic gatherings in the Caribbean have allowed for a greater sharing of knowledge and addressed the intricate Caribbean connection with world systems. Additionally, there is a regular exchange of knowledge among Caribbean, British and North American academics at the annual meetings of Association of the Caribbean Historians (ACH) and Caribbean Studies Association (CSA). There are special occasions which also allow this interaction. For instance, in 1988, a conference commemorating the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Guyana was hosted by the University of Guyana. During 1996-2007, there were international conferences focusing on the contribution of eminent Afro-Trinidadians: Eric Williams, Henry Sylvester Williams, CLR James, Lloyd Best and George Padmore. And, in 2007 the Caribbean’s observance
of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British West Indies also witnessed interaction among international scholars.

The rapidly expanding West Indian communities in North America and Europe coupled with the Caribbean’s historical and present significance have led to the emergence of separate Latin American and Caribbean Centers. In the United States these centers exist at the Florida International University, Duke University, Indiana University, University of Miami and Michigan University. Similar departments are vibrant at McGill University (Canada) and the University of Warwick (England). Practitioners of Global History should take heed of this development in academia as Caribbean History stakes its claim among sub-fields competing for their just recognition.

Global perspectives of History link practitioners from various regions who hopefully will arrive at some consensus which will make the study and teaching of History in every classroom interdisciplinary and trans-national. Radical ideology, culture and activism have been mediums directly connecting Caribbean History and Global History. Gifted West Indian personalities had considerable influence among the working class in the West Indies, Europe, United States and Africa. They include Henry Sylvester Williams (Trinidad), Adrian Cola Rienzi (Trinidad), Arthur Lewis (St. Lucia), Aimé Césaire (Martinique), Marcus Garvey (Jamaica), C.L.R. James (Trinidad), Bob Marley (Jamaica), Fidel Castro (Cuba) and Frantz Fanon (Martinique). Undoubtedly, these individuals made immense contributions to Caribbean philosophy, literature and culture. Their input and creativity contributed to shaping Global History in the twentieth century.

West Indian leaders, activists and artistes did not operate in isolation. Many had studied and resided in foreign countries, were influenced by foreign literature, and
corresponded with international organizations. Subsequently their radical speeches, writings, songs and activism laid a foundation which eventually resulted in the independence of African and West Indian countries during the 1960s and 1970s.

It is semantic frivolity to re-define ‘Global History’ or ‘history globally’, or history with a capital ‘H’ or a common ‘h’. The real importance is to identify with the critical call to avoid the parochialism and regionalism which have restricted several chroniclers and interpreters who have not adequately placed their local histories within a global context. Both Global and Caribbean historians need to realize that Global History is suitable for not only historians but other academics including social scientists and political analysts.

*Early Transnational and Transoceanic connections*

When early transnational and transoceanic connections are considered, the evidence justifies the inclusion of Caribbean History within the framework of Global History. This is especially true for The Theory of Continental Drift which proposed that the Caribbean was part of the Americas and the Americas were part of a larger continental mass including Europe and Africa.\(^{15}\) Also, this theory is often used to explain the origins and languages of the early indigenous peoples of the Americas. The initial inhabitants of the Caribbean could be traced to migrants who crossed a North Atlantic Land Bridge which linked Europe, Iceland, Greenland and North America. It is believed this bridge sank in 10,000 B.C.

Similarly, the early migrants could have utilized the Siberian Land Bridge which linked North East Asia and Alaska across the Bering Strait.\(^{16}\) The native peoples of the
Americas bear greater similarity to Asians rather than the Europeans, giving credence to the common suggestion of multiple migrations across the Siberian Land Bridge. This widely accepted theory suggests that waves of migrations from Asia to North America occurred between 50,000 B.C to 10,000 B.C.

These perspectives strongly suggest that the Caribbean could be viewed as part of the world’s oldest oceanic world. The invaluable linkages justify Caribbean History’s recognition within Global History. When continental migration is used as the major geographical units for re-creating history, one understands the importance of the Caribbean in global interactions and spatial boundaries.

Global History is vital for persons in the South to understand their past. It certainly corrects the arrogance, dishonesty and insularity of history texts we have used in lecture rooms which are excessively Eurocentric and which place on the periphery of history or even ignore the story of small regions, the former colonial possessions. Indeed, Global History determines that the human story ought to include the very cultures erroneously stereotyped as small, primitive, underdeveloped or barbarian.

Persons in the South are aware of the crime of the colonial machine which decimated hundreds of indigenous tribes and dismantled Pre-Columbian cultures in the Americas. The decline and destruction of the Aztecs, Incas and Mayans in Central and South America, and the indigenous tribes in the Caribbean was a result of the uninvited presence of Spanish conquistadores. The genocide of the Aztecs, Mayans and Incas has indelibly blot critical volumes tarnished Europe’s history. The unbridled savagery of the Europeans resulted in the world’s first genocide as millions of innocent persons were slaughtered and affected by new diseases. The indigenous peoples were forced by
unscrupulous Europeans to cultivate tobacco and cotton, and search for gold, silver and pearls.

The “horse-warrior revolution”\(^{17}\) which occurred in Central Eurasia c.1000-1800 simultaneously developed, though on a smaller scale, in the Caribbean. The Caribbean was a victim of ecological imperialism and was forever changed due to the introduction of foreign flora and fauna by the Europeans. There was a drastic transformation from a subsistence to capitalist-oriented economy.

Not surprisingly, the pivotal role of the Caribbean has been regularly sidelined in recent articles in the *Journal of Global History*. An analysis by Regina Grafe and Maria Alejandra Irigoin of the failure of Spanish Empire was attributed to revenue redistribution in Spanish colonies and also dismissal of the notion that Spain was an absolute ruler.\(^{18}\) Secondly, despite France possessing colonies in the Caribbean, Kevin H. O’Rourke in “The worldwide economic impact of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1793-1815”\(^{19}\) downplayed the economic effects on the population of the French West Indies.

There is further evidence of the marginalization or omission of the Caribbean in studies on Global History. These include articles such as “Disease, diplomacy and international commerce: the origins of international sanitary regulation in the nineteenth century,” and “Energy crisis and growth 1650-1850: the European deviation in a comparative perspective.”\(^{20}\) There are a number of explanations for this exclusion. The lack of exposure to Caribbean History could contribute to this omission of the region. There is also the possibility that no documented evidence exists which links the Caribbean to a specific global topic such as the importation of illegal drugs into Africa.
Undoubtedly, a globally integrated economy emerged due to a flourishing international slave trade. The rapidly diminishing indigenous West Indian population meant a search by the Spanish, and later the British and French, for an alternative labour supply. From the early seventeenth century, slaves were imported from Africa to work in the Caribbean. In the British West Indies, slavery was abolished in 1834 but these African slaves worked on the sugar estates until the apprenticeship was abolished on 1 August 1838. Even before 1838, the planters frequently complained of labour shortages and appealed to Britain for the approval of imported labour. Thus, there were attempts by the planters in colonies such as Trinidad to introduce Chinese labour on the plantations. As early as 1806, 192 Chinese from Macao and Penang were imported into Trinidad. However, this experiment soon failed. Subsequently, in 1834 and 1839, labourers from Portugal were imported into Trinidad. This ended when Portuguese workers could not withstand the rigorous conditions of the contract labour system.

During 1839 and 1840, two immigrant groups comprising 866 French and Germans were brought to Trinidad in an effort to fill the labour void. Again this proved to be a disaster and was abruptly curtailed due to a high death rate as a result of their inability to withstand tropical diseases and harsh climatic conditions. In 1843, licenses were granted for the importation of 2,850 Chinese into the British West Indies: British Guiana (Guyana) received 2,150 workers, Trinidad received 300 workers, and Jamaica obtained 400 workers. Furthermore, Chinese immigrant workers were also sent to Cuba. This work scheme, like previous efforts, soon collapsed due to the exorbitant cost of immigration, high mortality rates, and the demands of the Chinese government that a free return passage be accorded to immigrants.
After almost a decade of unsuccessful labour experiments, in 1844, the British government agreed to allow the immigration of 2,500 workers from India to Trinidad. This was a continuation of India’s contribution to the modern world economy. The immigrants originated from two ports in India — Calcutta and Madras. The first batch of 225 Indians arrived in Trinidad on 30 May 1845. Likewise, during 1838-1917, a total of 239,149 Indians were imported into British Guiana. This colony received the most indentured labourers in the British West Indies. During 1845-1920, a total of 143,939 Indians were imported into Trinidad and 37,000 to Jamaica. These indentured labourers were also employed on the cocoa, coconut and coffee estates. Other smaller colonies which received Indians to supplement their labour were Grenada, St. Vincent and St. Lucia. By 1884 when Indian immigration was abolished, the French West Indian colonies had a considerable number of Indians. Approximately 41,800 Indians had been introduced in Guadeloupe and 25,500 in Martinique. By 1920, the indentureship system had ended and Indians were no longer imported from India as labourers for overseas colonies. This search for reliable labour created a network among the Caribbean and three continents.

It cannot be denied that the horrific slave trade, nightmarish slavery and exploitative indentureship contributed to the socio-economic development of Europe. For many in the Caribbean the shameful link with Europe is traumatic and the emotional and psychological wounds cannot be forgotten. Often these Caribbean-Africa-Asia-Europe ties have created a camouflaged segment of West Indian History when Global History is being written.
In the field of religion there has been considerable global contact. Since the late fifteenth century there was continuous proselytizing by European and North American missionaries in the Caribbean and Latin America.\textsuperscript{25} From the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century, missionaries from Canada built schools and churches in Caribbean countries including Guyana, Trinidad, Grenada, St. Lucia and Jamaica.\textsuperscript{26} Informal links between Canada and its Caribbean missions continued even after these countries attained political independence.

The Caribbean bloc continues to occupy an important place in global economic history. Today, multi-national corporations from almost every continent have extensive investment in the exploration of the region’s resources, including natural gas, petroleum and petro-chemical downstream industries in Trinidad and Tobago, bauxite in Jamaica or Guyana, and fishing or tourism in the sunbathed islands. The globalizing effect of early Euro-colonial expansion, and later 20th century inter-continental imperial rivalry for world domination inseparably linked all the regions of the earth and laid foundations for an intricate network among the inhabitants of our planet.

\textit{Migration and World Wars}

The continuous migration of West Indians to North America, Africa and Europe, Asia and Australia is further proof that Caribbean History is relevant to Global History. The Caribbean diaspora includes thousands who have migrated from the West Indies over several decades and were absorbed into other societies, further diversifying the global family. This migration did not disrupt family patterns and lifestyles. However many of
the Caribbean diaspora faced racism and encountered obstacles in obtaining jobs and housing.  

From the late 1950s, the decision to migrate to other countries was partly to escape racism, for social mobility, obtain employment and be reunited with relatives.  

Their new homelands abroad cannot be readily portrayed as the “Promised Land.” For instance, during the 1960s and 1970s, Caribbean migrants in Toronto were disappointed by the racist treatment they constantly faced. Despite obstacles in the host societies, these West Indian ‘outsiders’ adapted to their new societies. Persons from the smaller West Indian countries also made notable contributions to the immigrant populations.

The experience of ethnic minorities could be classified as Global History. This is especially true in a global study of racism or migration. Individuals have also sought to replicate the culture of the Caribbean. For example, Dev Bansraj Ramkissoon, an Indo-Trinidadian, founded the Saaz-O-Awaaz Academy of Indian Music which is based in Brampton. The transplanting of Indo-Caribbean culture to Canada is a common trait:

…some Indo-Caribbean Hindu communities in Toronto are reconstructing their traditional Indo-Caribbean religious and cultural identity by aligning strongly with their South Asian counterparts in order to create a new diasporic Indo-Canadian ethnic identity—a syncretism between the West (the Caribbean) and the East (India). Other groups are simply replicating their old Caribbean identity and cultural way of life right here in Canada.

Such perspectives reinforce the argument that dislocated Indo-Caribbean migrants need to be included in not only the histories of Toronto or Canada but also included in global studies of migration patterns.  

A similar scenario exists in England which justifies the need to situate Caribbean migration within the field of Global History. In assessing the Caribbean presence in
Britain, the close bond between the colonial metropole and colonized periphery must be considered. In the post-1962 era, Caribbean families in Britain did not challenge the political status quo in which they were marginal. Most of these inhabitants of the former British Empire arrived with a desire to obtain education and stable jobs. Even though they were no longer considered British citizens, they still felt a sense of loyalty to Britain.

Many West Indian migrants experience the ‘snowflake phenomenon’ in which they appear physically similar to some Asians but on closer examination their differences are detected. The dilemma of the Indo-Trinidadians is that they belong to both the sub-groups of Indo-Caribbean and West Indian, whilst also sharing physical features and ancestral ties with the larger family of Asian Indians. Some East Indians have sought to formulate an identity among racially and ethnically diverse populations in Canada, United States and Britain.

Caribbean immigrants, through their celebrations, media and formation of associations, have benefited immensely from this apparently viable policy of multiculturalism. Some of the tenets of multiculturalism organizational support, financial assistance and toleration of foreigners have led to a metamorphosis of Caribbean culture, religion and entertainment. From the 1970s, Canada provided a fertile ground for immigrants to experience a cultural renaissance and socio-religious reformation.

Obviously, ethnic minorities from religious and cultural backgrounds that contrast sharply with the host society would experience difficulties in assimilation. However, whilst this might have initially been the case for the Caribbean populations in Toronto, there are noteworthy instances which suggest that social boundaries have been
consiously crossed. The result was assimilation and accommodation, though limited, in the Canadian society.

It is unfortunate that it took two World Wars to help us analyze humanity’s history globally and therefore now there is the urgency to protect our common environment, and earth’s common human family and ultimately all of earth’s life forms. Although imperial powers were at war, the repercussions affected the global community. For example, personnel from regions such as the Caribbean served in the Royal Air Force, the munitions factories, and the military trenches in Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, East Africa, India, France, Belgium and England.

How then could Caribbean History, though of a small community, remain on the periphery or marginalized when the global story is told? The negative impact of the wars affected every continent and island as no other experience in human history. Possibly one major positive effect was to indicate the supremacy of the global element in the story of earth’s peoples. Much earlier, John Donne, 17th century English essayist said: “No man is an island entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main…I am involved in mankind.”

During the closing decades of the 20th century, certain issues which were hitherto national were being placed with greater intensity and quite correctly within an international context; and the agenda for any history was being defined and written globally. It is obvious that global environmental issues gained prominence, focusing on earth’s sensitive ecosystems; the global greenhouse effect, pollution and climatic changes; protection of marine resources and the questions of world health, food and
water supply. Peace must be a global ingredient for human development and not merely limited to border security.

In retrospect, Global History provides the window that is crucial in allowing us to explore the importance of changes, continuities, connections and commonalities in the evolution of nations, cultures and environments. The Caribbean context of Global History provides explanations for causes and consequences in a holistic systems approach.

Endnotes

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
9 The terms ‘Caribbean’ and ‘West Indian’ are used interchangeably. The term Caribbean incorporates the English, French, Spanish and Dutch-speaking Caribbean- Martinique, Guadeloupe, Montserrat, Turks and Caicos Islands, Anguilla, British Virgin Islands,
Cayman Islands, Aruba, Bonaire, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Lucia, St. Kitts, St. Vincent, Antigua, Barbados, Jamaica, Cuba, Bahamas, Haiti and Belize.


14 The international seminar on George Padmore was held in October 2003.

15 “The Theory of Continental Drift,”

16 http://www.native-languages.org/bering.htm


