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Reseña de "Caribbean Journeys: An Ethnography of Migration and Home in Three Family Networks"
de Karen Fog Olwig
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científica. Aunque la autora utiliza una perspectiva feminista y de género, incorpora en su análisis otras referencias a discusiones teóricas sobre la resistencia al poder hegemónico en la construcción de la nación.

Sin duda, la autora ofrece un claro, elocuente, documentado y pertinente texto de la nación beliceana al rescatar la historia de estas mujeres que abrieron el camino de tantas luchas que aún quedan. Recorriendo las páginas de este libro, nos percatamos que estamos ante un proyecto ambicioso, una obra, que será de gran valía y fuente obligada para estudiantes y académicos/as interesados en la región caribeña.

Referencias


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Karen Fog Olwig continues to find innovative ways to narrate the relentlessly mobile lives of Caribbean peoples. In this her latest book, she concentrates on three families: one originating in Jamaica, another in Dominica, and the third in Nevis. Olwig travels to England, various parts of Canada, the United States and the Caribbean to do life-history interviews with some 150 members of these extended families, spread across three generations. Their life stories not only cross geopolitical and generational boundaries, but also trace the careers of individuals and families from very different socio-economic backgrounds and straddle the crucial political transition from colonial to post-colonial, national status in the Caribbean. While not claiming to be representative, Olwig’s account offers an illuminating approach to the complexity of
“Caribbean” social life in its global dimensions.

In a way reminiscent of Lila Abu-Lughod’s advocacy of the need for “ethnographies of the particular,” to counter the homogenizing, overly structured tendencies of social science accounts, Olwig allows readers to appreciate the serendipitous pathways Caribbean travelers take, the variety of outcomes to which they lead, and the ways in which these migrants make themselves at home in their journeys (Abu-Lughod 1991). Though for most of her informants their Caribbeanness is a given, it is not asserted necessarily as an ethnic identity that supersedes other ways of representing themselves. Nor do ideas about blended or transcendent identities—as analytical constructs such as ‘diaspora’ and ‘hybridity’ might suggest—adequately convey how Olwig’s subjects see themselves. The notion of the “hybridized” subject, no less than that of the “ethnic” subject, which in some ways it sought to replace, both are anchored, Olwig argues, in the nation-state imaginary that continues to constrain the social science imagination.

While she applauds many of the critical gains that have been made in the study of migration, Olwig nonetheless sees much of the recent work in the field as still having a common frame of reference in the metropolitan countries to which migrants from places like the Caribbean go. “Thus, they study immigration, not migration; forms of incorporation into a migration destination, not life trajectories unfolding in a wide variety of places throughout the world; cultural expressions of minority populations, not the cultural contexts of life that people seek to establish within vibrant socioeconomic environments” (pp. 242-243). By contrast, Olwig shifts the focus to the second term in each of the foregoing binaries; she seeks in this book “to shift the focus of study from the point of view of the receiving country to the perspective of those who move by exploring the role of migration within a Caribbean framework” (p. 243). However, what this means for Olwig is not simply a return to “regional ethnography that can have only limited interest to those who are not area specialists.” It calls for “abandoning national frameworks of investigation defined by contemporary social concerns and cultural politics and returning to in-depth research on the relationship between physical movement, social position, and places of belonging on a global scale” (p. 243).

Dispensing, then, with national geopolitical units of place as its central pivot, Caribbean Journeys foregrounds instead those “pathways of interpersonal relations” (p. 10) that facilitate and sustain migration and that in turn take on new meaning through the experience of journeying. For Olwig—and, she claims, for her informants—it is the tropes and the social reality of “family,” kin networks, and of “home” rather than communities or nation-state homelands or destination that provide...
meaningful structure for migrants. Even though “family” and “home” mean very different things in each of the kin networks and to the individuals interviewed for the study, yet in their journeys her informants, Olwig claims, see themselves as shoring up old family homes or establishing new ones; through their migrations they live out or realize foundational family values and ideals; they tread pathways cleared by family members before them and help prepare the way for others to follow.

“Family” works as a credible organizing device for Olwig in part because her informants all come from large extended families: the all-important middle generation of the book’s three families comprises eight, ten and eleven siblings respectively. Lone Caribbean migrants, those from small families, those only distantly tied to families or whose kin networks aren’t central to their migration experience don’t feature in this account. Conversely, in its effort to provide an alternative to the analytical paradigm anchored in spatial locations, Caribbean Journeys borders on reifying the role and importance of family.

Olwig is careful to point out, though in a muted way, that “family” is an emergent and constructed reality, generated in part through the very practices (narrative and otherwise) that her study recounts (e.g., p. 215). Moreover, her ethnography provides tantalizing glimpses into the avoidances, embarrassments and disruptions of kinship and the ways in which kin ties are ruptured over time. Yet these observations remain secondary to the narrative as a whole. For each of the three families featured in the book, I find myself wanting to know a good deal more about their antecedents; about the nature of their ties to other family lines that branch from earlier generations; about the burdensome business of familial memory and forgetting.

In the case of Emma Muir, for example, matriarch of the Muir family, who effectively severed ties to her darker-skinned village family in her late teens and married a light-skinned man of higher status in the nearby provincial town of Falmouth, one would like to hear the stories her village siblings and their children tell about the Muirs and the erasure of connections between their respective kin lines. How, in other words, do present familial configurations come to be? What wounds still fester under the composed surface families and individuals present to the world? And how might the recording and airing of these complex and conflicted narratives help to put right the seething discontents that tear these still very young societies of the Caribbean apart?

While I applaud Olwig’s effort to find alternative ways of studying the phenomenon and experience of migration, I feel that the silences and ruptures, past and present, around kinship and family are at the very heart of the social agony of Caribbean societies and cry out for sustained and careful attention by writers and scholars. Lorna Goodison’s
sumptuous memoir, *From Harvey River: A Memoir of My Mother and Her Island*, demonstrates some of the possibilities I am imagining: offering an account that is at once a celebration of family and a loving and matter-of-fact exposure of some of that family’s peculiar and buried silences (Goodison 2007). In the process of shifting ethnographic focus “from the homelands represented in public manifestations of cultural politics to the places of belonging that emerge in the private, intersubjective context of migrants and their descendants’ lives” (p. 16), Olwig overlooks that there is a cultural politics too in the arena of kinship, a cultural politics that runs at the very core of Caribbean social discontents. A regional ethnographic focus is as important as it ever was, and must be maintained alongside the equally vital analytical emphasis on global belonging.

**References**


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This book is both an explanation of how Cuba became a major producer of sugar cane—for some years indeed the leading producer—and an assessment of the damage to the island’s environment this achievement involved. The author has based his arguments on research in archives in Spain and Cuba, on biological evidence of vegetation change and on the observations made over the centuries by government officials, travellers and scientists: Cuban, Spanish and