

Book Reviews On-line

**Creole Economics: Caribbean Cunning under the French Flag.** *Katherine E. Browne*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. xvii + 271pp. , map, figures, photographs, drawings, endnotes, references, index.

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For the scholar of postcolonial identities in the Caribbean, Martinique poses a startling anomaly. The goal of independence animated island politics in the British West Indies throughout the 20th century, becoming the basis of the region,Àôs labor movements and political parties. By contrast, after three centuries of French colonial rule, residents of Martinique chose to formally integrate with France as an overseas department. Martinicans today are French citizens endowed with the same rights as their metropolitan compatriots, among them generous subsidies, housing allowances, and wage levels that make Martinique an island of First World affluence in a sea of impoverished independent states. In *Creole Economics*, Katherine Browne deftly explores the paradoxes of Martinique,Àôs simultaneous Caribbean and French identities, principally as islanders seek to exploit both the largesse of the French state and the opportunities afforded by illicit economic activities.

Much as the dichotomy between reputation and respectability has become a master symbol of Caribbean identity, Browne suggests that Martinicans are pulled in opposing directions by their French citizenship and Creole culture. Their official status as Frenchmen, a source of pride when Martinicans compare their standard of living with that of other Caribbean islands, does little to offset the racism they experience when visiting the *mv©tropole*. Neither can it erase a legacy of covert survival strategies that emerged in response to slavery. Just as African slaves resisted French planters with an arsenal of defiant acts, their descendants defy French laws designed to govern economic behavior on the island. Browne abundantly documents this thriving underground world of Creole economics, whereby *dv©brouillards*, islanders who define themselves by their cunning and resourcefulness, advance their well-being through unorthodox and often illegal activities. Among these are smuggling goods purchased in other countries and working ,Àúoff the books,Àù by collecting both an (unregistered) wage and state unemployment payments. Browne claims that such strategies are not merely mechanisms of personal gain but also are rooted in Creole values, foremost of which is a deep-seated need for personal autonomy (p. 55). She demonstrates that much of what defines Creole culture, including individuality, self-expression through clothing, and personal control over resources, is rooted in the experience of slavery, which denied all these things to its victims. Parenthetically, her argument corresponds closely with other widely noted aspects of West Indian economic behavior, including islanders,Àô famously intense attachment to land. Hence, even migrants who long ago settled elsewhere are reluctant to part with the fragment of land ,Àúback home,Àù that once signaled their families,Àô bulwark against plantation labor.

Unlike earlier examinations of the reputation,Àerespectability axis in Caribbean identity, which left the gendered dimensions of these value systems unexplored, Browne demonstrates how Creole values are expressed differently for women and men. Whereas ,Àúreputation,Àù for men hinges on *debrouillardism*, illicit activity that opposes European respectability, a woman,Àôs reputation derives from her ability to

devote resources to her household. Even though personal autonomy is a central value of Creole identity, for women who cannot depend on men to support their children, security rather than risk taking forms the basis of this cherished ideal. Hence, although many women earn wages legally, their participation in Creole economics takes the form of additional unreported income, as they extend their wage activities to work completed at home as secretaries, nurses, and teachers. If there is one omission from the book, it might be gleaned from Browne, "passing reference to the 'pitiful dwellings' of Haitians, St. Lucians, and Dominicans on the margins of Fort-de-France (p. 157). Migrants from Martinique, economically depressed neighbors compose much of the island's working population and, as in other developed societies, are consigned to jobs too poorly paid or unpleasant for natives to accept. Some also engage in livelihoods that carry considerable danger, such as ferrying marijuana from the English-speaking islands to Martinique, where drug trafficking incurs heavy penalties but potentially great rewards. Exploration of these activities might have shown how Martinicans' French identity is selectively deployed to legitimize a labor market increasingly segmented along national lines.

In *Creole Economics*, Browne has given readers a vivid ethnographic portrait of a Caribbean society that opted for the paradoxes and benefits of a formal political integration with its colonizers. In doing so, she challenges the prevailing view of informal economies as pragmatic survival strategies existing outside of local systems of meaning and identity. Her work draws on years of interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted among all sectors of Martinican society, lending a nuanced view of how class, gender, and culture structure the opportunities available to island residents. In addition to being a beautifully written and deeply empathetic account, Browne's book is visually striking. Interspersed with photographs from her fieldwork are many attractively rendered charcoal drawings of Martinicans and the flora and fauna of their island. The result is a *callaloo* of careful scholarship and imagery that is both enjoyable to read and a significant contribution to economic anthropology and Caribbean studies.

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