

So Many Men, So Many Histories

The History That Matters to the Islanders

So many men, so many histories. Such an axiom is undoubtedly heresy for any serious student of history. Yet on multicultural and multinational SXM this saying is true. Those who think that newcomers can never love a place without a proper grasp of that place's history should visit this island. Those who think that SXM natives (or, locals) are always keen to know and preserve their history would be equally astonished. Newcomers and locals alike claim to love SXM, but their accuracy of (archival) historical knowledge of the island leaves much to be desired. Most of them like it that way. Appealing to a shared history lacks binding power on this island. One does not claim belonging because one knows historical facts. In fact, the opposite is the case: one belongs because one doesn't give a hoot about historical facts. By not caring about history, the island residents render it unimportant. As a result, the line between archival history and pure fiction is constantly being breached. Who gives a damn about Truth? Belonging becomes all about pragmatic truths improvised on historical facts that few people know. Here is a people happily ignorant of history. As Freud long ago taught us, history can contribute to the narcissism of small differences.

Contemporary SMXers do not care that early-twentieth-century SXMers would scarcely recognize the island that has resulted from the 1960s tourist boom. Neither would most of their ancestors have recognized early-twentieth-century SXM; their roots lay elsewhere. Since the tourist boom, 70 to 80 percent of the island's population of sixty thousand,

TABLE 1. Population of Saint Martin and Sint Maarten by Country of Origin, Excluding Illegal Immigrants

Country of Origin	Real Number
<i>Saint Martin</i>	
France (from Saint Martin and mainland France)	18,629
Elsewhere in the European Union	1,658
Haiti	4,508
Dominican Republic	1,432
Saint Lucia	159
Other Americas*	2,220
Elsewhere	506
Total	29,112
<i>Sint Maarten</i>	
Dutch (from Sint Maarten and other parts of the Dutch Kingdom)	15,472
Dominican Republic	3,098
Haiti	2,964
Jamaica	1,516
Guyana	915
United Kingdom	625
United States	564
India	510
Suriname	273
Colombia	178
People's Republic of China	96
Venezuela	73
Elsewhere	4,310
Total	30,594

SOURCES: Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, Census (Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe: 1999); Centraal bureau voor de statistiek (CBS), Census (Willemstad, Curaçao: 2001).

*Refers to North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean islands.

on both the Dutch and the French sides, consists of first- and second-generation SXMers. Thus, unlike many other Caribbean countries consisting primarily of newcomers from the time of colonialism, people who today refer to themselves as the “natives,” SXM is a country of recently arrived newcomers (table 1).

This factor has influenced how SXMers conceive of national history. The collective history of the contemporary population is twenty to thirty years old. Understanding this means understanding that it is not that history itself does not matter, but that a longing to investigate the specificities of SXM history before the tourist boom is quite an unnatural thing

for SXMers to have. They are interested in studying the history of other places, such as the Dominican Republic, Saint Kitts, Jamaica, Haiti, and India, but not the pre-1960s history of SXM. Or, more specifically, they are not interested unless they will gain monetary advantages from knowing the history of the island. But there are no such advantages. Tourists who visit the island are not interested in history or heritage. They most definitely do not want to be confronted with an atrocity exhibition. They want fun and sun. History has to be packaged in such a way that it does not disturb their daily rituals of sunbathing, shopping, and dining. Still, if history is all about tailor-made improvisations aimed to please Western visitors, what are the patterns and recurring themes among all these improvisations?

When I first came back to the island, Claudia Schueller, born in the Netherlands to German parents but a resident of the island since 1974 and now the dean of the University of Saint Martin, told me that I should listen to the stories the tour guides told the tourists about the island. They concocted biblically and pan-Caribbean-inspired stories about SXM's slavocratic era and even suggested that Nanny, Tula, and Tous-saint had resided on the island. These heroes of Caribbean lore were said to be guided by the Christian God as they led the slaves on the island and in the wider Caribbean to redemption. None of these tour guides seemed ashamed of the fibs they told. None felt the need to set the record straight, to tell an empirically correct story that corresponded somewhat with the archives. It did not take long for me to recognize that Claudia Schueller was right, that my assertion was correct. Even Rastafari were transposed to the time of slavery. I witnessed one the chief cooks at a beach bar tell tourists that some of the island's freedom fighters smoked herb, wore their hair in dreads, and worshipped Jah.

What individual workers did on the streets, the vast majority of the radio disc jockeys, the most popular media personalities on the island, did on the airwaves. For instance, DJ Shadow, the radical Rasta disc jockey that both young and old tuned in to, re-created the island's pan-Caribbean history directly from the soca and conscious reggae hits of such artists as Bob Marley and Alison Hinds. SXM's history of slavery was always at the foreground, with this history becoming a carbon copy of the history of Jamaica or of one of the other islands where slavery was more cruelly practiced. Yet the danceable rhythms and melodies, as well as the way the radio disc jockeys framed the matter, made the terrible history of slavery easier to digest. This was a case of "history lite." The message was that Caribbean blacks had suffered at the hands of the slave



Figure 3. A statue of a slave who never existed: the closest thing to the experience of slavery on SXM, or an illustration of fiction becoming fact

drivers, but they had been redeemed by God, just as he had rewarded his buffalo soldiers who fought back and believed in him. Now the islanders were all about One Love and held no grudges. White Western tourists and their money were most welcome. SXM's decision to remain part of its former colonial masters, France and the Netherlands, was also okay. God and common sense said so, according to DJ Shadow.

Amused at and sensing recognition of these preliminary findings—for I too was not well versed in the empirically factual history of the island, and while I resided there had always been content with imagining it to suit my fancies and the noble goal of One Love—but feigning concern, I asked Claudia Schueller if there was any indigenous hero who could replace Nanny and who could be disseminated to the tour guides and other tourist workers. After a long pause her eyes twinkled and she mentioned Onetitiloke, the one-breasted slave who resisted the dehumanization of slavery. Then, Schueller's allegiance to the discipline of history, her PhD subject, made her confess that Onetitiloke is also more than likely an invention. Stories about her have no sound empirical ground. Onetitiloke is the heroine that the Larosso brothers, the contemporary intellectuals on the island, created out of traces of the oral histories of slave revolts to give locals some sense of historical pride. Alfonso Blijden, an archivist of the Dutch side of the island, corroborated Schueller's confession.

Like the tour guides and the radio disc jockeys, the historically inclined intellectuals on the island were also fabricators of history: they were imagining the island's past to suit their fancies. In time I would learn that the major project of the Larosso brothers, which was endorsed by Schueller, was to build a sense of nationalism through the publication of books and articles that present an anti-Dutch and anti-French history. Despite the fact that destitution and absolute hunger were not a reality the islanders had to contend with, the fact that SXM had never been a honeypot for these two European powers, and the structural aid of the Hague and Paris, the Larossos insisted that SXMers see the Netherlands and France for what they were: usurpers, vipers, and exploiters of SXM. They wanted the island to become an independent country and to join the other independent nations in the Caribbean in their struggle against Western European and North American imperialism. They were the island's freedom fighters. Malcolm X's "By any means necessary," minus the potential for violence or for the loss of their properties and businesses, seemed to be their motto, even if it meant inventing a historic figure to match Nanny.

During my stay on the island, I encountered very few SXMers who were interested in national independence or were avid readers of the Larossos' works. Those whom I met were mostly petty entrepreneurs or schoolteachers. Perhaps those directly engaged in the tourist industry, the vast majority, were too tired after a hard day's work to care about what wrongs the Dutch and French had done umpteen years ago. Perhaps most islanders recognized these works for what they were: more fabrications. In such projects sound empiricism, basing one's historical account on detailed archival research, cross-checked when possible with oral sources, had an insignificant role to play.

The general opinion of SXMers was that the island had no indigenous history and no indigenous culture, except for the Creole Caribbean culture that the contemporary population was forming (Hagenaars 2006). SXM's pre-1960s history was deemed pan-Caribbean, with lots of space for the imagination. History was a game one played for the tourists. It was not a game one played to assert one's belonging or to construct a collective identity. Neither was it a way to assert, to the rest of the Caribbean or the wider world, what SXM meant for the global marketplace. Such processes were nonexistent according to most islanders.

SXM never produced a C.L.R. James or a Fernando Ortiz. Even lesser theorists are missing. Instead, SXM was a place where things happened. It had done nothing to deserve its wealth. It had just been lucky.

Or, as most of the islanders would put it, SXM was blessed. Nestor, a thickset, bushy-haired Texaco worker who hailed from Providencia, told me that SXM would be foolish to ever think about gaining political independence:

Those islands that independent have it so good, that is why they here. You name a Caribbean nation, and you find them here. Guyana here, Jamaica here, Colombia here. Santo Domingo here, Haiti here. Everybody here. Some places have oil and gold and all kinds of minerals, but they people still have to leave to come here. What this island have? Sun. Sea. Mountains. You find that all over the Caribbean, and yet SXM does get more tourist than all of them. I tell you is lucky, this place lucky. Is God that bless this place. When the tourists stop come, all SXM got to do is pick up the phone and call Holland and she there for them. You think we could do so with Colombia? You think them British countries coulda do so with England? England tell them . . . you there for me, I ain't there for you. Is only God know why he bless this place so.

God may be the force behind SXM's rise, but empirically speaking, from my human-centered view, the cause of this rise is a series of fortunate historical events, with SXM benefiting indirectly from the labors of others. The French and Dutch governments longed to remain world players after their terrible humiliations, first at the hands of the Germans during the Second World War, followed by the refusal of their prize colonies, Algeria and Indonesia (respectively), to remain within their fold. Then, with the clever politicking of Martinique's Aimé Césaire and Curaçao's M. F. Da Costa Gomez, French SXM became part of the French overseas department of Guadeloupe, and Dutch SXM, together with the rest of the Dutch Antilles, became an equal partner in the Dutch Kingdom (Oostindie and Klinkers 2003). These political changes of the 1950s eventually led to French and Dutch investments in upgrading the island's material and political infrastructure.

As it was in politics, so it was in economics. In 1959 Cuba, at that time the darling of wealthy America, fell into the hands of the rebel leader Fidel Castro, who nationalized US-owned companies and began a communist experiment. The American embargo soon followed. Some of the American hoteliers and financiers sought other paradises in the Caribbean Sea. SXM, being securely under the control of the French and Dutch governments, and with little development, was safe, unspoiled, and ripe for the picking (Glasscock 1985; Hartog 1981). SXM was deemed by some of these American capitalists the perfect place to invest and create a smaller version of Cuba. In the 1960s and 1970s, as the American home-owning middle class expanded and prospered, more

tourists traveled to the island. In the 1980s, the tax cuts of Reaganomics increased the purchasing power of the American upper and upper middle classes even more, and in France, defiscalization laws led to more French investment, indirectly bringing more Western tourists to the island. Today the island receives more than 1.5 million visitors annually, as tourists who come to the island and stay for a period of time or who visit the island for a day or so as part of a larger Caribbean cruise.

All that the SXM political leaders had to do was to capitalize on these opportunities. And capitalize they did. Rumors abounded that with all their hospitality and openness, these leaders enriched themselves. I cannot substantiate any of these rumors, but then again, I did not go looking to find out what was true and what was not. What did become clear through many interviews was that immigrants from the wider Caribbean and investors from other countries such as India, China, and the United States were welcomed to the shores without the necessary papers. Tax breaks were no problem for big businesses, such as hotels, and were granted by the federal government on the advice of the local ones. Speedy naturalization processes were also accommodated. Everything was done to keep the flow of money, tourists, and workers coming to the island.

The only sectors of society that the newcomers had to show absolutely no ambition toward were the political and administrative arenas, as these jobs were reserved for the locals. These locals, or, better put, the offspring of many of these locals, were also coming to harvest the fruits of all the blessings that had been bestowed on SXM. As locals they had the right to run the country. Yet unconditional hospitality to those who were building up the country was also a must. Without them, the locals would have to return to the countries of their diaspora. They would once again be guests in somebody else's country. The "mi casa es su casa" ideology was born.

There could be no talk about integrating newcomers into the local culture, as most locals were also immigrants. Members of the civil service and political machinery of the island became multilingual. Tolerance in all sectors was the new norm, even concerning religion, the seat of collective norms in small-scale communities such as SXM. The locals did not feel threatened by the faiths of the newcomers, since many of their returning kin also brought different Christian faiths to this predominantly Catholic and Methodist island. Christian churches of all kinds were founded along with a few scattered temples—Hindu, Buddhist, Baha'i—and even an Islamic mosque. Amid these different forms of worship, Christianity remained the norm. It was a new public Christianity

though that became the sum of the various Christian faiths, together with the influences of the other religions, and this new type of faith was accommodating to the tourist industry. Christianity became a metalanguage, the language of civics. Today it negotiates between the questions of belonging, for a vocal minority of locals feel that their needs should come first, and the needs of the tourist industry that is the newcomers' stronghold.

As interesting as this modern history and the role of public Christianity were—understanding the interface between the mediation of this public Christianity and the issue of belonging was the reason I was on the island—it was not something tourists queried SXMers about. Tourists wanted to know about a long, long time ago, about the time of slavery. This was after all a black country in the Caribbean. This history however had to be lightly packaged, as I mentioned before. As such, there was no reason for SXMers to delve into the past. What would they gain? For the most part, SXM's past was not their past.

If I were to be true to my first reading of the general mood on the island, I would not bother to write a history chapter, or, better put, an empirically correct historical chapter. Yet the question that every anthropologist working in the Caribbean has to face is this: what about the slavocratic history of this place and its people? It is an academic question, but it is also more than that. Mintz and Price (1976) and, before them, C. L. R. James (1938) made the answering of this question a prerequisite for any anthropologist claiming to write anything academic about this region of the world. Moreover, being the academic-activists that they were, they made us aware that paying homage to the slavocratic history in anthropological studies of the region is important to everyone. It is a question related to that all-powerful of Caribbean paradigms, namely, that Caribbean culture ought to be understood as a culture of resistance (Scott 2004). It is within this framework that one should place one's empirical findings. The systemic creation of slaves and indentured servants on the plantations failed to dehumanize the primarily though not exclusively black and brown downtrodden of the region. The Caribbean stands as a symbol of the unconquerable human spirit. From Marti to James to Mintz to Brathwaite to Chagan to Nettleford, these theorists have been responsible for disseminating this idea of the Caribbean, which has become the hallmark of the region. It is the way we like to imagine ourselves and like others to imagine us in academic settings. Nettleford worded it best when he wrote, "The mind is always creatively active to guarantee survival and beyond. Many a Caribbean

intellectual, like the Caribbean artist, has got to be a latter-day maroon, ambushing society under the camouflage of intellectual investigation, analysis and artistic invention” (Nettleford 2001: 182).

Lest I be misunderstood, there is much truth in this idea of Caribbean culture as a culture of resistance. There is no need to deconstruct this reading of the region. I cherish it as much as I do the “One Love” history-lite version and believe that it should be told to the descendants of the enslaved and indentured and to those whose nations committed the atrocities (Price 1998; Oostindie 1999). It is a valuable way to counter the racist notions of black and brown inferiority that still unfortunately prevail. But it is only one of the ways, and I began to understand that it needs to be complicated and complemented with another way of reading the past to do justice to SXM and the history that matters to the people on the island.

In addition to acknowledging that Caribbean culture is a culture of resistance, we also need to begin to explicitly acknowledge that much of that celebrated culture of resistance was born and took place within co-optation. In other words, co-optation changed the institutional and conceptual conditions upon which the Caribbean downtrodden created and performed their acts of resistance (Dubois 2006; Guadeloupe 2006; Scott 2004; Ford 2004). These acts of resistance include constructing oneself as a proud person of color and a Christian, running trade unions, and touring the alternative world music circuit in Europe, with a stiff upper lip when necessary, to be heard and acknowledged. Other acts of resistance include the cases, as few as these may be, of a cosmopolitan raceless identity that some Caribbean intellectuals assert (e.g., Gilroy 2006; Phillips 2002; Conde 2001; Glissant 2000; Walcott 1999; Harris 1970; James 1969).

However, the brute force of colonialism was not solely negative. It also enabled certain modes of being, with all the maroon varieties therein. Another way of saying this is that if the plantation is one the bellies of the world, as Glissant so poetically phrased it, and if tourism is built upon the palimpsest of the plantation system, as so many Caribbeanists assert, then we need to recognize that resistance took place within the conceptual framework of the system, not without.¹ Statements such as “That slavery as an institution survived must have been due to the capacity of the Africans to submit themselves physically to enslavement without at the same time committing themselves spiritually and psychologically to bondage” will not do.² These Africans chose, yes, but not under institutional or conceptual conditions of their own choosing.

Furthermore, these conditions also changed the Caribbean people. It made them different persons, different subjects. They were not transcendental egos—no one is—but rather social egos formed by the institutional and conceptual conditions they simultaneously had to tackle. In other words their culture of resistance was born within co-optation. Hence, even the acclaimed Caribbean maroon villages can be read as de facto weak antithetical protectorates of the plantation system that connected the Caribbean to the wider world, whose nation-states were growing more interdependent with the advent of Europe's ascendancy as a world power.

These conceptual and institutional conditions remain active and continue to influence what kinds of subjectivities Caribbean people, and more concretely SXMers, can exhibit to guarantee survival. The One Love ideology guarantees this while allowing Caribbean people to assert that their ancestors were agents during the long winter of slavery. A history written from this perspective is one that takes the stories of the people seriously while complementing and cross-cutting these with archival sources.

SXM history effectively starts with colonization and the struggle of European powers to conquer one another and the rest of world. SXM before the ascendancy of Europe is of little historical significance. The pre-Columbus presence on the island left no traces except the curiosia of archaeologists, which adorn the two museums on the island, and the trivia that the more cultivated of the islanders refer to their island by the Amerindian word *Suaouliga*: land of salt. It is widely believed that after the thirteenth century the Amerindians migrated to other islands.³ Thus, when the Spaniards claimed the island in 1493, it belonged to no one. Considering it an insignificant rock, one of the *islas más inútiles*, of little worth to the mercantile form of capitalism that they practiced, they made little effort to colonize the island (Paula 1993; Glasscock 1985; Hartog 1981). It would take more than one hundred years before Europeans decided to settle it. In 1627 the French landed and were quickly followed by the Dutch, who claimed the island as their own. The ensuing history of the island can be read as an infantile game of European countries outdoing one another for this thirty-seven-square-mile piece of rock: then the Spanish took over, then the British, then the French, then the Dutch, and so forth. Read another way, the game involved major stakes. Many of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century struggles among European powers were fought out in the Caribbean.

To effectively defeat their Spanish overlords, the upstart Dutch traveled to the New World. The Dutch West India Company (WIC)—one of the precursors of transnational companies—had been granted a trade monopoly by the Staten General in 1621. They decided to strike the enemy where it hurt most: their treasure chest, which was the New World. The latter part of what became known as the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648) between the Spanish and the Dutch took place in the Caribbean. Notwithstanding the superficial religious motivation of the Dutch, it was commerce and greed that dictated their actions (Oostindie 2005: 3–4). The WIC sought to circumvent the salt prices established by King Phillip IV of Spain after it had defeated Portugal, the main supplier for the Dutch, in 1580. In a bid to secure salt for WIC's growing herring industry in northeastern Brazil, the Dutch settled SXM. The Spaniards eventually put a stop to this Dutch adventure, conquering the island in 1633, but they continued to consider it one of the *islas más inútiles*. After the Eighty Years' War ended, SXM lost its geopolitical value and the island was once again deserted.

The departure of the Spanish caused the return of the French and the Dutch, who divided the island between themselves in 1648. The story of the division of the island has two versions: the tongue-in-cheek folklore that all the islanders know, involving alcohol and the possibility of making fun of the white metropolitan Dutch and French, and the more empirically factual account that speaks more to the geopolitics of the time. One of the most charming tongue-in-cheek accounts was told to me by six-year-old Veronica, who wore her hair in pom-poms that made her resemble Minnie Mouse. Veronica was sweet yet feisty and quick with her mouth. She was the spitting image of her mother, if one disregards that Veronica was bony and her mother, Yaya, heavy-set. Yaya, who was of Curaçao extraction, would turn out to be one of my main interlocutors and friends.

Veronica was a master storyteller who had learned the trade from listening to her mother and her mother's friends. Her hands and head moved in circles, imitating the movement of the female artists on the American music channel BET, as she told her story. Veronica began by explaining to me that French and Dutch soldiers had discovered the island simultaneously. Columbus and the Spaniards did not feature in her tale or in most people's versions. The soldiers had to determine which group would be awarded the largest portion of the island, so they decided to play a game. A French and a Dutch soldier were positioned back-to-back, and each began to walk around the island in opposite directions; each country kept the amount of island its soldier covered while

walking. The French soldier kept a steady pace and did not stop to rest. When he was thirsty, he sipped his wine and kept on walking. Veronica would emulate this imaginary soldier walking quickly up and down Yaya's small living room. Holding an imaginary glass between her fingers, she also imitated what she considered the proper way to drink wine.

It was no secret that Veronica had a liking for the French soldier; her body language revealed that much. She was all smiles and thrills as she played that part. Not surprisingly the Dutch soldier was the loser in her tale. He was lame, lazy, and above all had no style. He walked uptight, according to her, like the American tourists on Front Street—one of the main shopping lanes on Dutch SXM. He also liked “the bottle,” alcohol, too much. His favorite drink was rum, she said, likening him to the working-class men whose hangout spots were the many rum shops on the island. So fond was this Dutch soldier of rum that he drank it without soda water or ice. His excessive consumption of rum eventually took its toll, and the Dutch soldier had to lie down and rest. When he came to, resumed his task, and finally arrived at the camp, his French counterpart had long since beaten him there. That was how the French got a larger part of the island. And that was also why her mother never dated men from the Dutch side. No style.

Veronica's father was a Saint Martinoise, a Frenchie, as she put it, which meant that she too was a Frenchie. The fact that she identified herself as a Frenchie but was always glad to practice her Dutch on me, and at those moments was Dutch Antillean, was a mode of performing multiple national identities to bridge gaps in interactions and to create temporary unity. That SXMers had multiple identities was a recurring social fact on the island with which I will deal more extensively in chapter 2. Here it is worth noting that, like their *laissez-faire* attitude toward knowing the factual history of the island, SXMers endorsed an ethic of contextual national identity. It was more a matter of who one was relating to rather than of asserting one's roots.

This story of the division of the island, as told by Veronica, came in many versions. Sometimes the white metropolitan French were chastised for being too decided, and therefore dangerous to the “relax and enjoy yourself” ideology of the island. Then the Dutch soldier would be the hero, as he embodied the Dutch government's policy of very little interference with the daily running of the island. That was the version I heard from politically inclined middle-class French SXMers of local extraction, who sided with the Larosso gang and for whom political independence could not be granted soon enough. Hearing such talk, Yaya would explode. The

metropolitan French were good; it was the local French who were the problem. She meant that her ex-boyfriend was always late with his financial support for their daughter. At other times Yaya would impishly state how much she loved the local French men because they knew how to gyrate. Both white metropolitans and Dutch SXMers did not measure up to local French men, for they were crude and did not know how to treat and talk to a woman.

The tongue-in-cheek story of the island's division was common knowledge. It was the story SXMers told one another and visitors. Although quite amusing, this folktale is a simplification of how the division came into effect. According to the archives, soon after its decision to leave the island, the Spanish government sent a detachment from nearby Puerto Rico to effect the departure. On the ship were four Frenchmen and five Dutchmen, all of whom were prisoners of war. After arriving on SXM the prisoners fled to the hills and hid until the Spanish left. Thereafter they decided to pool their resources and inform their governments that they could share the island in a similar fashion to Saint Kitts, which was French and English. Despite a certain amount of mistrust between France and the Netherlands, the two countries agreed to share the island, and the treaty of Mount Concordia was signed. In the words of Jean Glasscock, who wrote a history of the island, "The treaty provided that the French would occupy the northern part of the island, that facing Anguilla, and the Dutch the regions of the Fort and the lands around it on the south side. Inhabitants on both sides were to have equal rights to hunting, fishing, salt ponds, dye-woods, rivers, pools, mines or minerals, ports and moorings, and other commodities of the island" (Glasscock 1985: 11). Although often breached—symbolized by the fact that the island changed hands sixteen times before 1816—the treaty is still in effect today. Both powers share the island's international airport and harbor, which happen to be located on the Dutch side of the island, where the tourist boom first took off.

In modern times the treaty has brought the island stability and prosperity, as the French and the Dutch have given the island structural aid, but in the past it occasioned SXM to be involved in one of the worst crimes of human history: the enslavement of more than twelve million black Africans. Greed and the need to be the most powerful player in Europe and increasingly on the world stage overruled any sense of civic decency (Oostindie 1995). What cotton was to the enslaved Africans in the southern states of the United States, sugarcane was to the Caribbean. And in this regard sugarcane production outdid cotton: "The human toll

of slavery, both physical and cultural, was intimately tied to exigencies of production, notably the work regimen. Working conditions generally imposed lower life expectancy, higher death rates, and much lower birth rates among Caribbean and Brazilian slaves than among their U.S. counterparts. From that viewpoint, sugarcane was the slaves' most sadistic tormentor" (Trouillot 1995: 18).

Because of the deep impact sugarcane production had on the lives of slaves, when SXMers spoke about slavery, and for the most part this was only when tourists asked about it, they spoke about sugarcane. The image they depicted of what took place on the island was usually what they grew up hearing or reading about in their former home countries. Even the local black SXMers, whose slave ancestors mostly worked the salt pans rather than the cane fields, spoke about cane. I learned that they had to make up some of this history, because their grandparents did not speak about slavery to them. One local, Miss Maria, a slender former schoolteacher in her mid-sixties with snow-white hair and brown skin, was adamant about the matter. Slavery was not something people spoke about when she was growing up. "Who want to talk about that? Boy, why you don't behave yourself?" For black locals, slavery was an episode worth forgetting. All that their grandparents had conveyed to them were the ideas that they should never think anyone better than themselves and that they should never let anyone take advantage of them, especially white people.

What the grandparents of locals did speak about was struggling in places like the Dominican Republic where they cut cane as guest workers. After slavery was abolished on both sides of the island, in 1848 on the French side and in 1863 on the Dutch side, SXM was a forgotten island, as *inútil* as in the time of the Spaniards. To survive and provide for their families, the able-bodied had to roam the Caribbean and the wider Americas. These stories of roaming and struggling always contained the message that unconditional hospitality to strangers was a must, for it was strangers who opened their houses to these workers. And it was strangers who had helped build up the island. Unconditional hospitality to strangers was one of God's commandments, Miss Maria believed, which is why she always prepared more food than necessary at meal-times. "You never know when someone will come begging you for a plate of food."

One disc jockey, DJ Cimarron, tried to capitalize on this God-given commandment in his activism on behalf of the illegal workers on the island. He believed the children of illegal workers should be granted the

same rights as the legal population's children. They should be allowed to attend school and to receive a scholarship if they qualified. DJ Cimarron was a modern-day Jeremiah: no one wanted to hear his message. Even Miss Maria could not condone such radical politics. Unconditional hospitality was God's commandment, yes, but she reasoned that God would not want the legal population to sacrifice their livelihoods for illegal workers who were already tolerated and who made a fair living on the island. Granting scholarships to their children was nonsensical. She reasoned that if these children wanted to go to school, they could do so on the French side of the island. The French were lenient on this matter, and the schools got more money from Paris. Miss Maria was pragmatic, while Cimarron was principled. Pragmatism was judged to be the better option. In chapter 5 I will deal extensively DJ Cimarron's quest and his radio program.

The commandment of unconditional hospitality resembled the One Love ideology, though the former spoke about the post-abolition rather than the pre-abolition period. What they shared was the appeal of a magical resolution to the lingering scars left by the history of slavery. It thus allowed all black SXMers to speak about sugarcane slavery with a heavy dose of poetic license that did not tear down their pride or give white tourists a guilty conscience. Even those whose ancestors did directly experience the horrors of sugarcane slavery were less than truthful with the facts. Let me furnish an illustration. Haitian-born SXMers have all but monopolized retail sales of touristy arts and crafts on the island. One of my most memorable experiences was observing an interaction in Marigot, the capital of French SXM, between a tall, pink-skinned American visitor somewhere in his late thirties and a Haitian vendor. The visitor was accompanied by two women, one of whom I assume was his wife. He was a walking Lonely Planet guidebook. I imagined that he had read up on the Caribbean before taking his cruise and wanted to show off his tourist-guide knowledge. He asked the vendor, who managed to subdue the Creole and French in her tongue and speak "American," if arts and crafts were part of her African heritage and whether she had made any of the pieces on display. He already knew that the answer was yes, for he had read that Caribbean people were good with their hands. Hence, before the vendor could begin to formulate an answer, he spoke about how much he admired the strength and artistic creativity of black women in the Caribbean.

The vendor, a very smart-looking caramel-colored woman whose beauty and slender figure were somewhat offset by her potbelly, seemed to know with what kind of expert she was dealing. Here was one of the

men for whom SXM was just part of what in his country's media is referred to as "the islands," the imaginary Caribbean of sun and fun, where a few bad events happened in the distant past. She told him that though she was an artist in her own right, her pieces were not on display. Her job as a saleswoman and a homemaker occupied too much of her time. But, she quickly stated, the pieces she sold were part of her culture. She was from Haiti, the land of Toussaint. The man's eyes lit up, and the rest of his body said, "Yes, please tell me more." The vendor did not fail to register the request and the opening to make a sale. What followed was a story about Haitians heroically fighting for their freedom on the sugarcane plantations, about the historical situation of SXM being a mirror of Saint Domingue, about the One Love resolution of all conflicts, and about her love of arts and crafts that was handed down to her from her mother, who learned the trade from her grandmother, who inherited it from *her* mother, who was from Africa. In all this she was displaying her batik dresses to the women as well as enticing them to try on the necklaces and bracelets she had on display. Although the man was all ears, his female companions were more interested in the goods and how they looked. The saleswoman skillfully balanced her time between their wants and the man's need for a history-lite lesson. She was a historian and a salesperson all in one. Her efforts paid off, as his companions bought several of her touristy pieces and did not ask again about her self-made ones.

Though this folk historian's stories of the Haitian revolution, slavocratic SXM, and her family's history were interwoven, they were logically incompatible. On the one hand there was the dehumanizing tale of being beaten into accepting inhumanity and the struggle to overcome this situation through the One Love ideology taught by God, and on the other hand there was this folksy narrative in which there existed an idyllic Haiti whereby "Africanisms" were easily bequeathed. It is this second Haiti, this Caribbean, that made the most impact on tourists. This was the SXM of their tourist brochures. While observing the spectacle, I mused that whereas Afrocentric historians have to twist and turn to argue that African cultural expressions have been retained in the face of the terrifying power of the plantation system, this vendor inherited her knowledge of arts and crafts straight from Africa. She did not have to struggle to obtain this inheritance. Her grandmothers did not have to hide to pass on the knowledge. It was all lovingly handed down to her in a Haiti that was part of and yet juxtaposed to the Haiti of the bloody rebellions. These two Haitis were dialectically resolved in the One Love Haiti, so unlike the Haiti where African descendants continue to struggle.

The idyllic Haiti of the vendor was of course a fabrication, but so too was her claim that slavocratic SXM was the spitting image of the Haiti that Toussaint and the other black Jacobins sought to liberate. The differences were major. SXM was not a country of incessant slave rebellions. Far from it. SXM was an island where enslaved Africans enjoyed a relatively high amount of freedom, despite their enslavement and the ensuing social death, as Orlando Patterson so fittingly termed it (Patterson 1994; Paula 1993; Hartog 1981). These were Creole slaves who knew how to negotiate with their masters, who lacked the will and means to implement the *de facto* and *de jure* power they had over their slaves.

Whereas in Haiti many of the enslaved came from Africa, and we know today that they played a pivotal role in the Haitian revolution, on SXM there is no archival proof or credible oral sources that can claim that SXM's slaves came directly from Africa. Enslaved Africans, who had been living in the surrounding countries, arrived on the island with their slave masters after they had been allotted pieces of land. In 1763 "France accepted anyone to live on the island: English, pirates, Dutch, French" (quoted in Glasscock 1985: 23). This was mirrored by a similar Dutch initiative issued a few years earlier. These initiatives were necessary, for SXM was empty. Even so, in the second half of the eighteenth century, only one-third of the island was inhabited (Paula 1993: 35). SXM was an island of creolized blacks and whites where revolts were sporadic.

Another telling difference is that unlike on Haiti, which was a quintessential plantation society with all of its associated hardships, on both French and Dutch SXM, the hard labor of sugarcane production played a minor role. The horrendous images of human defilement—of blacks surviving the hell of the Middle Passage only to enter the sugar or cotton plantations, where laboring meant precipitating one's demise,—does not apply to slavocratic SXM. In fact reports dating back to 1795 show that only thirty-five of the ninety-two plantations on the entire island were sugarcane based.

The sugar production yield on SXM was hardly enough to compete with the yield on other Caribbean islands, which were the major producers of the crop. Remedying this by importing more slaves was not possible because the slave trade was officially abolished in 1814, and planters on SXM lacked the finances to acquire the substantial number of slaves needed on the illegal market. Climatic factors also played a role, as the hurricane of 1819 devastated the crop yields and left only four boilers in working condition. Planters were not given a chance to

recover, as in 1830 there was a drought that left the island's plantations in shambles. One also has to mention the rise in the 1830s of sugar beet growing in Europe and the cultivation of sugarcane in such far-off places such as Java, both of which signaled the demise of the Caribbean as Europe's primary source for sugar.

SXM was part of the evolving world market that today we take for granted. What connects the SXM of the slavery system to the SXM of the tourist boom is that the island remains a minor player on the global stage, susceptible to the whims of larger powers. I would also learn from popular disc jockeys, such as the immensely popular DJ Fernando Clarke, whose philosophies of belonging were based on a humorous and inflated mimicry of the common sense on the island, that SXMers were acutely aware that when the United States sneezes, SXM catches a severe cold. Clarke knew better than to encourage his listeners to get involved in the fights of the big players of the world, no matter how unjust he found their antics. SXM would suffer, and thus the people would suffer. This was definitely not part of God's plan, as far as Clarke was concerned. In this pragmatic stance he resembled the Rastafarian DJ Shadow, notwithstanding Clarke's preference for playing Calypso.

The other important factor, as I mentioned before, is the climate. Human history changes far more rapidly than environmental processes do. The threat of hurricanes and the unpredictability of global capital are the recurring *ketos megas*, the metaphorical big fishes of Jewish lore, that constantly threaten to destroy the precarious economy of the island. These were the two things that SXMers feared most. Months later Miss Maria, Yaya, and others would caution me not to speak too loudly about hurricanes, lest I precipitate God's fury.

The realization that the power of nature and that changing global economic and political conditions could negatively affect the island at any time lacked any historical grounding. No one I encountered on the island spoke about the 1819 hurricane or about the perils of sugar production there. It was too far back for them to remember and too much effort to look up in a history book. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the empirically factual history had long since left the island, and few mourned its loss. SXMers were also not catering to tourists who were interested in archival facts. They were interested in a good tale of the horror of slavery that did not upset their stomachs and could quickly be digested. The history-lite rendition of slavery went together with the history-lite rendition of hurricanes.



Figure 4. Re-creation of the time of slavery at the Emilio Wilson estate: it's all about singing and having fun in spotless white clothing, not about the enactments of hardships.

I witnessed a conversation between a handsome waiter and two female tourists that concretized this reality. The waiter, judging from his accent a Kittitian-SXMer who couldn't have been on the island very long, was in his late twenties and obviously took care of himself. He seemed to have come out of the primal seas of Africa—the Africa of the Parisian catwalks, that is. He had a strong back and a chiseled face, which his short-cropped hair accentuated. He knew he looked good, and he knew how to work tourists. His clients were two dark-skinned, chubby Americans in their late forties who were looking for a good time. They asked him if he worked out, to which he replied that this was all natural, Mama Africa. Exactly what they wanted to hear. Aware that he had them eating out his hands, he continued by telling them that their ancestors had come over in the same boat as his; the only difference was that his had been put in a place where hard work was a killer. His great-great-grandfather chopped cane all day, and that's what gave him his great physique: genetics. But despite the sufferation that he inherited from slavery times, like Marley he was chanting down Babylon. God was on his side. The women loved it. He was the typical rude boy talking the history-lite talk that they liked.

In the flirtations that continued (they referred to him as “pure chocolate”), the subject of hurricanes came up. They began talking about how terrified they would be, and heaven forbid they ever experience a typhoon. The waiter saw his chance to show off and began talking about the hurricane of 1995 that had completely devastated the island. He mentioned that there was no electricity, running water, or cable TV, at which the Americans gasped. They could not imagine such a life. No TV, no clubs. He assured them that if a hurricane were to pass over the island, they need not worry, for his arms were broad enough to shelter them both. This simply made their day. When asked how often hurricanes pass over the island, he replied, “Every ten years or so.” He lied, of course, but his audience was not interested in the truth. They were interested in him.

Most tourists liked to be lied to. That hurricanes are rare but unpredictable was not what they wanted to hear. Neither would it have satisfied them to tell them that historical records show that plantations were not big business on SXM; that, with only a few exceptions, many planters barely eked out a living for themselves; that, as a result of the climate, the market, and the wars of the European overlords, planters saw their wealth dwindle; that, as a result of misfortune and inept management, slaves dangled on an existential limb between a life of continuous hunger and death by starvation. That type of story line is not a story line that would have worked. Neither black nor white Americans who visited the island wanted to hear that history. They wanted an easily digestible form of history that fit the familiar. SXM history had to resemble the dominant image of the resistance music of Marley, which spoke about struggle culminating in the One Love ideology.⁴ And it was this SXM with which the islanders furnished the tourists.

This fabrication of SXM’s pre-1960s slavocratic history was for the tourists, not for the SXMers themselves. Their peculiar histories remained. Both Haiti’s and India’s independence days were intensely celebrated on the island. On these days, the Haitians and Indians dressed up and remembered their ancestors and their struggles. On SXM day, when the islanders commemorate the treaty of Concordia, all the islanders come out to celebrate their multiculturalism and have a good time. There is always the obligatory ten-minute sketch of the hardships of slavery culminating in the One Love ideology, whereby everyone claims to care about the hardships of those who lived that nightmare. But few care to truly know what they experienced.

Irjanyani, an Indian merchant whom I spoke to during an SXM day celebration that was held at the renovated Emilio Wilson slave plantation, put

it this way: “Slavery was bad; you know, the British were harsh with us too.” That was as far as he got. What he really meant was, “Slavery was bad; you know, the British were harsh with us too, but the island has been good to me and my family. What would you like to drink, my friend?” Yaya was even coyer. Engaging a militant local, she said, “They really was animals, but thank God we survive.” When he left, she murmured that he was a real ass. She was a Yu Korsow, a Curaçaoan. Yaya did not visit the Emilio Wilson plantation to learn about her roots; she had come to see what it looked like, as she was planning to rent the grounds for Veronica’s seventh birthday party. It was telling. The two renovated plantations on the island had swings and seesaws for the children, and one of them, the Lottery Farm, even served gourmet meals to tourists.

Both Irjanyani and Yaya created a shared past with the descendants of the locals—Irjanyani, as part of Europe’s colonial history, and Yaya, as a descendant of the enslaved Africans—and thereafter went back to their ethnic particularities. This was simply a question of contextual identity, or relation identity, as Glissant (2000) would put it. Understanding the skillful use of both national and transnational identities to forge temporary shared identities, and why it was deemed effective, is the focus of the following chapter.