

Book Reviews

Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands by Charles V. Carnegie.
New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002. xii + 241 pages,
including notes, references, index.

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Bahá'í communities have offered themselves as a model of the world of the future. What will that world look like? For many people, scenarios of the future are depressing: will racism and nationalism result in an ever-greater increase in armed conflicts? Will globalization smother local cultures, producing a drab sameness worldwide? Will a giant global state reproduce the ills of nation-states on a larger scale?

Bahá'ís know that there is a more positive way to envision the “post-nationalist” future—the future as the era of nation-states draws to its end. Carnegie’s book gives us an expert angle on that future from the perspective of a cultural anthropologist. He argues that we can use historical and contemporary Caribbean societies—and Bahá'ís—to explore “forms of community suited to our transnational circumstances” (1). While many social scientists studying race, nationalism, and transnationalism have explored “the condition of the world as it is,” and how that has come about through history, he writes, “I am equally interested in urging readers to think about what and how the world might become” (8).

Well-written, rich with local detail and fascinating history, this book nonetheless requires careful reading and a tolerance for sometimes complex sociocultural theory. Carnegie’s book begins with a summary of the liabilities of nation-states, including the problematic intersection of “racial” identity with citizenship. Nation-states are beset by internal problems, and at the same time are caught up in transnational trends over which they have little control: money, people, and ideas flow ever more rapidly across the old national borders. At the same time, globalization proceeds with little structured support for human rights or needs. This is

the modern dilemma; Carnegie writes: “[B]etween the contradiction and instabilities of the nation-state and the compulsory but undemocratic character of the global system, people everywhere find themselves caught between the devil and the deep blue sea” (6).

Luckily, the deep blue sea is the Caribbean, and here Carnegie thinks we can find some guideposts (or channel-markers) to a desirable future.

In the Caribbean islands and coasts, ethnic diversity, problematic nationalism, cultural synthesis, porous boundaries, and transnational flows of money and people have been part of life for five hundred years. What can we learn from this dynamic world region that can help us understand more widespread global processes?

In the book's first section, entitled “Struggling with and against Race and Nation,” Carnegie uses his own personal identity to dissect complexly entwined ideas of race, identity, and nation. Jamaican-born Carnegie is a Caribbean albino—a person who lacks visible “blackness” and so confuses cultural categories, thus letting us see those categories in highlighted relief. Carnegie expertly uses historical and ethnographic data to explore how racialized thinking permeates Caribbean nationalist discourse and politics. He argues that the idea of human oneness, far from being a simple platitude, has to be understood deeply and elaborated thoroughly if it is to counter deep-seated racialized thinking, even in a place like the Caribbean where mixed and creolized identities are familiar. In the following chapter, Carnegie explores the theoretical context in which he develops his approach to how nationalist ideologies are constructed and maintained. Nation-states make their existence, and their citizens' identities, seem natural; a strong counterweight of cultural analysis is needed to “contest nationalism's stranglehold on our consciousness” (49). The wonderful complexity of the historical and modern Caribbean gives Carnegie a broad canvas on which to “contest nationalist ideologies” (51) by exploring how ideas of racial identity have both constrained and assisted efforts of Caribbean peoples to find freedom and prosperity.

“Our present vision of a global order,” Carnegie comments, “consists of little more than a conglomeration of nation-states” (64). What can help us imagine the different forms a global future might take? In a section entitled

“Nation and Transnation,” Carnegie proposes that the Caribbean, with its international flows of people, goods, and ideas, offers insight into creating “global-local community” (81): how to maintain a global sensibility, while also encouraging vibrant local cultures. A chapter based on his ethnographic research into small-scale international marketers (called “speculators” in St. Lucia) shows how these inter-island entrepreneurs use and manage transnationalism. Their “strategic flexibility has a counter-hegemonic quality” (111) that offers one alternative way to view the nation-state and its borders.

Part 3, “Prefiguring the Postnational,” provides us three other alternative models. One is the engrossing history of the active movement of enslaved Africans and their descendants, who traversed the seas and islands as sailors, escapees, maroons, and travelers. Carnegie’s description of “motion in the current of freedom” (117)—a wonderful phrase—opens a way of “reframing narratives of the past to raise questions about the present” (137). What if, instead of thinking of the Caribbean past in terms of fixed racial identities and rigid borders, we recognized its full complexity? Instead of Caribbean “roots” (in Native, African, and/or European ancestors), Carnegie proposes that we look at “routes”: how people then and now moved and intersected and transgressed colonial and post-colonial efforts to fix boundaries and identities.

The penultimate chapter, about Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, argues that a convincing vision of a transnational future depends not only on shared political and economic interests, but also on shared culture and religion: symbols, rituals, and beliefs that link people across borders. Garvey “needed to appeal to divine authority for a radical change in the prevailing order” (158) in order to build an effective international constituency. Despite the racialistic essentialism and patriarchalism evident in Garvey’s ideology, he built such a convincing vision of the future across and beyond the borders of nation-states that the countries affected by the UNIA were seriously worried about its success. It is ironic that Garvey has been adopted by Jamaica as a national hero; in Carnegie’s view, his heroism was creatively transnational.

By the end of the book, Carnegie’s theoretical argument is clear. “Race”

and “nation” must be deconstructed thoroughly in order for us to begin to envision futures beyond the limitations of nation-state organization. Evidence from the Caribbean’s history and present show us that there are flexible, effective, and creative movements and behaviors already in existence that propose alternative ways to live. The history of the Caribbean, and Marcus Garvey’s successful motivation of large numbers of peoples of African descent throughout the Americas to embrace a transnational vision, indicate the power of religion and of cultural symbols to generate such movements. But Garveyism is dead, and in any case its race-based appeal is quite inadequate to the needs of the moment. What, then?

The final chapter concludes the argument by presenting the Bahá'í global community as a model that satisfies the requisites this book has laid out for envisioning new futures. After presenting a brief history and summary of Bahá'u'lláh’s teachings, Carnegie explains how “Bahá'u'lláh’s far-reaching conceptual reorientation directly addresses the ideological limitations of race and nation” (182) while avoiding the truism of a simple assertion of our common humanity. How does the Bahá'í Faith meet the challenge of empowering both the local and the global, and linking them effectively? First, through powerful religious symbols and concepts that allow people to think about unity and diversity in new ways, replacing the divisive metaphor of “shared blood” with the refreshing and creative metaphor of diverse flowers within a garden, for example. Second, by giving Bahá'ís around the world the “commonplace experience” of belonging both to a distinctive local community and a global culture (e.g., through a universal calendar and culturally variable Feasts). (Although this dual consciousness may be “commonplace” for Bahá'ís, Carnegie reminds us that it is rare and precious in a world caught up in the disjuncture between the local and the global.) Carnegie adds a satisfactory link to this final chapter by presenting a brief history of the Jamaican Bahá'í community. Significantly, some of the early Jamaican Bahá'ís were Garveyites, important and active members in the waning UNIA as they also were important and active members of the growing Bahá'í community.

“The tendency to think of the local and the global as inherently

oppositional and the related fear that the latter must necessarily eclipse the former has perhaps inhibited scholars' efforts to theorize world community and seriously consider movements that promote it" (189), Carnegie writes. He criticizes the overwhelmingly negative approach that most scholars have taken to transnational and globalization studies, with their focus on colonialism, imperialism, consumerism, cheap labor, and war; "Global cultural and social forms are, in other words, conceived of largely in negative terms" (193). He sees a great need for scholars to start to think creatively about places—like the Caribbean, or communities—like the Bahá'ís, that offer innovative models of future possibilities. "To achieve a global vision and global citizenship," he concludes, "we must be endowed 'with a new eye, a new ear, a new heart, and a new mind' (Bahá'u'lláh 1983, 196)" (199).

In the book's first chapter, Carnegie writes that his "larger aim is to kindle a renewed passion for sustaining a condition of global belonging that nurtures the positive features of localized, patriotic attachments but does away with the fundamental contradictions inherent in the present-day nation-state order" (8). This book will kindle the reader's passion for helping that condition emerge, provide solid theoretical backing for asserting that it is practical, and outline ways in which the Bahá'í community creates that condition for its members.