



# Inside/Outside: Adventures in Caribbean History and Anthropology

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in Caribbean History and Anthropology*.  
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Winner of numerous awards in history and anthropology, Richard Price has mastered, straddled, and stretched disciplines along with his wife Sally Price, a renowned anthropologist and art historian, since the early 1960s. *Inside/Outside*, a concise, illustrated memoir consisting of twenty short chapters, tells their story. The “adventures” of the title, most of them shared by this inseparable pair, are gripping and varied enough to make anyone drawn to the study of foreign cultures long for similar experiences, in-

cluding an extended stay in rural Martinique, surrounded by fruit trees and above an idyllic beach.

That’s the outside world. The “inside” of the title, a nod to early mentor Claude Lévi-Strauss, refers to the less-welcoming but no less adventurous world of academia, mostly in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century United States but also amid extended stints abroad. As anthropologists know better than most, individual success in a tight-knit village (or even

a family) often spawns envy, which breeds enmity, possibly exile, even murder. Indeed, as Price tells it, navigating death threats and tropical maladies in the jungles and teeming capital of Suriname has been easy compared to zigzagging through the minefields of the Ivy League.

Born into a middle-class family in New York City in 1941, Richard Price found his calling in anthropology before entering college. An early high school excursion nearly got him killed, but it did not dissuade. Educated at Harvard (directed by Clyde Kluckhohn and Evon Vogt), Price moved quickly from classroom to field, managing to visit Hopi and Navajo communities in the U.S. Southwest, Quechua-speakers in Vicos, Peru, francophone fishing folk in Martinique, and Spanish-speakers in rural Andalusia. Price accomplished all this, plus mentorship from Claude Lévi-Strauss in Paris and a couple of publications, before earning the bachelor's degree.

Price continued at Harvard for the PhD, but he says he was drawn to the more cultural, less structural work of Caribbeanist Sidney Mintz, who taught at Yale.

At a time when most ethnographers focused on Indigenous peoples, whether in the Americas or elsewhere, Price, soon joined by his young wife Sally, chose to live among and study the descendants of enslaved and free Africans in the French Caribbean and along South America's Wild Coast. Inspired in part by 1920s fieldwork by Melville and Frances Herskovits, the Prices moved to Suriname, then still a Dutch colony, in the late 1960s to live for two years among the Saamaka Maroons, a group whose strikingly vibrant material culture and deep sense of their own history stuck out among the Americas' several dozen surviving fugitive communities. Fieldwork in Suriname proved thrilling, as Price tells it, instilling a persistent longing and deep personal commitment that would haunt the couple throughout their long careers.

Upon returning to the U.S. to write up his dissertation, defended in 1970, Richard Price continued working closely with Sidney Mintz, joining him at Yale in 1969 where both sought to reframe Caribbean studies and to push cultural anthropology beyond its traditional bounds. In their separate ways, both scholars were embracing history,

specifically a broader African American history – a Black Atlantic history. A number of West Indian, African American, and hispanophone and francophone Caribbean scholars were on a similar track (e.g., Julius Scott in the U.S.), but institutional support was rare.

Price was recruited in 1974 to establish an Anthropology PhD program at Johns Hopkins University, whose history department was already moving in an Atlantic direction. Mintz soon joined Price in Baltimore, and Sally Price earned her PhD while raising two children. Some good years followed, and the Hopkins program produced outstanding PhDs like Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Brackette Williams, and Kenneth Bilby. Price and Mintz co-authored an argument for African American “creolization” published in 1976 that is still hotly debated, and in 1983 Price opened the field of (what he called) ethnographic history with *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People*, a vivid blend of oral and archival history presented as a collage of parallel or juxtaposed narratives.

Meanwhile, pots stirred in Baltimore, and the brew boiled over amid the success of *First-Time*.

Trapped between dean and department, the Prices felt forced to leave Johns Hopkins in 1985. Their dream of a shared half-time position that allowed for extended fieldwork had been thwarted, along with everything that came with holding tenured faculty positions at a wealthy and prestigious U.S. university. What followed was a decade of “freelancing,” as Price calls it, but it sounds more like academic exile. Infusing but not spoiling the remainder of the memoir, the Johns Hopkins trauma brought both lasting pain and renewed vigor and commitment.

Chances at lasting appointments elsewhere in the U.S. appeared, then fizzled, but the Prices survived by landing semester- or yearlong visiting professorships and fellowships, some competitive and others won by word of mouth. Fortunately, the pair had considerable academic capital to share, and they carried with them to temperate Paris, steamy Florida, and bone-chilling Minnesota. To offset frequent moves, the Prices purchased a fisherman’s cottage in their old stomping grounds in Martinique and called it home.

Academic exile enabled the Prices to do more fieldwork and

still more writing. For Richard Price, this meant composing what some (myself included) consider his masterpiece: *Alabi's World*. Published in 1990, this experimental, “multi-vocal” book garnered top prizes in both history and anthropology. More than *First-Time*, *Alabi's World* made ethnographic history seem possible, desirable, and of course, enviable. Eric Hobsbawm and other giants ate it up. But how were ordinary mortals to master archive and field in this complex, hugely time-consuming way, and without being trained in at least two “full-time” disciplines, not to mention a half-dozen, sometimes unwritten languages?

A seemingly impossible act to follow, after *Alabi's World* there came a slew of discoveries regarding John Gabriel Stedman, an eighteenth-century Anglo-Dutch soldier and Suriname maroon reporter of sorts (who inspired William Blake), and then Médard Aribot, an eccentric folk artist and accidental jailbird who died in Martinique in 1973. The Stedman project, launched by a tip from historian Stuart Schwartz, turned into a multi-year, transoceanic paper chase, full of unexpected twists worthy of Hercule Poirot. Price tells the story in riveting fashion.

Meanwhile, the Médard project blended archival serendipity with oral history, much like *Alabi's World*, and to a lesser degree, *First-Time*. History and ethnography continued to inform and challenge one another as each eccentric individual's tale grew in the telling. *The Convict and the Colonel*, from 1998, like the Prices' collective work on the Saamaka, both rewrote Martinican history and vindicated what Eric Wolf might have called “the people without it.”

Beginning as early as the 1970s, the Prices also collaborated on several books related to art history and the fraught politics of museum collections and displays, particularly those focused on so-called primitive peoples. “Museum studies” proved only slightly less dangerous than advocating for Saamaka villagers against murderous dictators, prompting still more forms of narrative experimentation. As Price explains, *Equatoria* (1992) and *Enigma Variations* (1995) were attempts to capture and communicate the surreal and often seedy character (and characters) of this academic/commercial enterprise. Swerving into fiction for the sake of personal safety, each book was inspired to one degree or another by Caribbean

writers like Alejo Carpentier, Derek Walcott, and Gabriel García Márquez.

*Maroon Arts*, another collaborative title meant for popular consumption, only hints at these behind-the-scenes intrigues, but it also raised (and still raises) the old conundrum of scholarly attention as a double-edged sword. How much is enough and how much is too much? Can you strike the right balance? Do “cultural objects” gain or lose value by virtue of exhibition? And what kind of value? Are they inevitably fetishized? Debased? Reduced to a bidding price? Sally Price would return to the many problems of “primitive exploitation” in later work, getting into trouble with French cultural gatekeepers along the way. Price devotes a full chapter to this struggle.

Richard Price’s next major book was *Travels With Tooy* (2007). It is, Price insists, a collaboration. Tooy Alexander, a Saamaka healer who lived in French Guiana among the growing exile maroon community until his death in 2015, rekindled Price’s obsession with Saamaka history in the late 1990s after an accidental encounter in Martinique. Whereas the younger Price (of the late 1960s) had been warned

away from maroon history as an outsider (a young white one, to boot) who might slip up and bring back the bad old days of slavery, “traveling” with Tooy, as Price tells it, entailed something altogether different: two older, “exiled”, intellectual buddies sharing notes, loose ends, and stories and trying to get as much as possible down on paper (after getting it on tape, or onto a digital recorder).

Like Price’s other work, “traveling” with Tooy was not a hurried process, but rather one that developed over the course of more than a decade. Not only did Tooy have a lot to share, he and his wives and brother constituted a walking theological seminary. In talking with these four and more over the course of many meetings, meals, ritual baths, and overland journeys, Price discovered more about Saamaka religion than he ever thought possible. Tooy’s explanation of the Saamaka’s multi-stage discovery of undersea and river deities known as Wentis is alone worth its weight in gold.

As Price tells it, getting so close to one’s “primary source” was not without challenges. A full-time healer with a diverse client roster, Tooy Alexander

lived a complicated life. What Price describes as a gross misunderstanding blended with opportunism enabled by new French legal statutes landed Tooy in prison. He was freed only after heart surgery and a drawn-out appeal, in large part thanks to the Prices' legal assistance. Few scholars have had to testify (repeatedly) to help free a professional collaborator from prison, yet for Richard and Sally Price, Tooy was a trusted friend who had gotten a raw deal, period.

Personal traumas aside, Tooy's understanding of Saamaka history and religion was kaleidoscopic and unfathomable, and yet Price's prior knowledge and archival research rendered him uniquely capable of making a portion of that understanding available to the rest of us. We may cringe at the ethical dilemmas this level of personal engagement entailed, but one gets the feeling from Price's account that Tooy understood how meaningful to his natal community this collaboration might turn out to be. Like all of Price's ethnographic history to date, *Travels with Tooy* is easy to criticize by today's sanctimonious standards of professional conduct, but its contents are impossible to replicate. And the work has been

made available to the Saamakas.

The Prices' legal advocacy continued, ramping up to include courtroom showdowns over Saamaka land and water rights. As Price tells it (more extensively in the book *Rainforest Warriors*), the professional, intellectual commitment one has as an anthropologist and historian, or as a humanist academic broadly speaking, is to live with ambiguity and to remain open to criticism. Anthropologists since the tortured, introspective 1980s and 1990s, were supposed to be hyper self-aware, and aware that their so-called subjects were a moving, if not altogether invented, "colonial" target – while still studying them and often speaking for them.

But in a courtroom, defending an obviously embattled "subaltern" group's human rights (or even an individual's civil rights) required a more artful and simplified approach, or so Price tells us. Put simply, anthropology's doubts about cultural survival as a viable concept don't mesh with the assumptions and expectations of modern citizens still thinking of timeless "primitive tribes." The Saamaka had to be essentialized for legal purposes in order to prove the group's roots and

rootedness, its rights to property and usufruct. Price explains that in court you can't have it both ways, which forces the scholar as expert witness to go against the disciplinary grain. Again: these are ethical minefields few scholars would enter willingly, much less without pay.

This all sounds like a drag, but *Inside/Outside* is filled with humor and lighter notes, even when the subject is dead serious. Near the end of the book, the struggle against dark forces continues, but in a different vein. Price reflects for a moment on how different his and Sally's work on the Saamaka Maroons has been in tone compared with that of two friends, the late Dutch scholars Bonno and Ineke Thoden van Velzen. Their decades of work among the Okanisi or Ndyuka Maroons strikes Price as loaded with conflict, demon possession, and doomsday prophecies – this going back to their earliest fieldwork. By comparison, Price admits his and Sally's parallel, long-term work with the Saamakas has consistently portrayed them as fun-loving, generous, endlessly creative (yes, there were vindictive individuals, as in any academic department, but they did not dominate).

Price asks: Is it us or is it them? He is referring to both the paired ethnographers and their subjects. It is an unanswered question, and a reminder of the place of temperament in all scholarly work, more so if and when the scholar gains stature and reputation, plus the sense of self-assuredness that sometimes comes with age. A paired expatriates' tale of sorts but also a boy's life realized, *Inside/Outside* offers a steady stream of enigmatic variations on the American academic dream. I prefer the outside, and this book is mostly about that. Together, the Prices have helped make the world care about some of the Americas' least understood but most fascinating cultural magicians: the Saamaka Maroons of Suriname, the fishing folk of Martinique, even the artist Romare Bearden, who we thought we knew. For this lifetime of scholarship and advocacy, we can only thank Richard and Sally Price. This book lets us "inside" their process.

Kris Lane