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Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Caribbean Literary Field: Crossing Boundaries in Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*

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Abstract

In his 1996 article “Enduring Substances, Trying Theories”, Sidney Mintz returned to a theme that has been central to his work on the Caribbean, that of the region’s fundamental and historically specific modernity. Discussing the rise of the plantation system from the sixteenth century onwards and the importation of enslaved and indentured labour, he observes as follows:

The enterprises for which these people were carried across oceans were intimately associated with Europe and its growth. Their development was an instance of precocious modernity, an unanticipated (indeed unnoticed) modernity — unnoticed especially, perhaps, because it was happening to people most of whom were forcibly stolen from the worlds outside the West. No one imagined that such people would become “modern” — since there was no such thing; no one recognised that the raw, outpost societies into which such people were thrust might become the first of their kind. (1996, 298)

Underlying this “precocious modernity” was the complex agro-industrial character of the plantation, its unity of field and factory and the application of technical features in

operations that predated the Industrial Revolution (Mintz 1996, 295).¹ Equally important, though, was the impact this economic organisation had on the labour force. For Mintz, the particular form of socialisation occasioned by conditions on the plantation imposed a modern cast on those shoehorned into its structures. The stripping of kinship and community, the extirpation of familial matrices, the forced transportation and resettlement alongside culturally unlike peoples — all this constituted a form of brutality that, while underwritten by the seemingly pre-capitalist institution of slavery, in fact reflected the harsh exigencies of modern capitalist industrialisation. And as the enslaved, the indentured, and later the free sought to resist such pressures and reassemble in the Caribbean those traditions they had preserved in conjunction with those they had been newly exposed to, they built ways of life that were both unique and paradigmatically modern

¹ Throughout his work, Mintz has reiterated this view that Caribbean peoples were the first modernised peoples in world history (see also Mintz 1974, 1993). See too David Scott's thorough discussion of Mintz's perspective in "Modernity that Predated the Modern" (2004).