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Rethinking the Region SEDAAG and the Caribbean

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This essay discusses the need to raise the profile of Caribbean studies within the Southeastern Geographer and the professional activities of the Southeastern Division of the Association of American Geographers (SEDAAG). My discussion addresses four basic questions. First, what is the geographic link between the Southeast and the Caribbean? Second, to what extent is this geographic link reflected in SEDAAG membership, publications, and activities? Third, how can the study of the Caribbean achieve a higher profile in the Southeastern Geographer and SEDAAG? Fourth, why is it necessary to incorporate the Caribbean into SEDAAG? Responses to each of these questions indicate that some of the greatest potential for growth of the Southeastern Geographer and SEDAAG comes with a critical rethinking of its traditional regional boundaries and interactions.

KEY WORDS: southeastern United States, Caribbean, regional interaction, geographic research, Southibbean

The editors of the *Southeastern Geographer* have asked the members of SEDAAG to provide input on the future direction of the *Southeastern Geographer*. I have a simple answer for them. The journal should look to the Southeast; that is, to the Caribbean. As a scholar who has conducted research and field courses in the Caribbean for the last seven years, I have always won-

dered why studies of the links between the Caribbean and the Southeast have not possessed a higher profile in the *Southeastern Geographer* (and SEDAAG for that matter since it is impossible to separate the two). Sure, this may seem to be a rant from a researcher with a Caribbean bias, but I believe that the Southeast (SEDAAG) and the Caribbean are so interconnected that SEDAAG and its members are missing an excellent opportunity by not raising the profile of Caribbean studies within the Division's publication and professional activities. To frame my argument for the expansion of SEDAAG to the Caribbean, I have structured salient points around four basic questions.

First, what is the geographic link between the Southeast and the Caribbean? The history of interaction between the Caribbean and the Southeast is rich with each region possessing a strong impact upon the substance of the other. For instance, economic ties have existed between the two regions since the 1700s. Southern British colonies traded livestock, meat, wheat, and corn with the Caribbean for sugar, molasses, and rum. Between 1768 and 1772, this trade was only second behind trade with Britain and Ireland, comprising 27% of exports and 20% of imports from the colonies (Lemon 1990). This economic link between the regions continued to

grow as African slaves passed through the Caribbean to their ultimate destination as labor in southern United States plantation agriculture (Meinig 1986a, b). Later, during the United States' Civil War, neutral Caribbean ports became an important stop for Confederate blockade-runners, allowing for the sale of cotton to European markets and the purchase of all-important guns and steel (Horner 1992). It has been estimated that 1,650 vessels made 8,000 round trips between Nassau and Confederate ports during this period (Craton 1986). Such maritime trade relations may not exist today between the Southeast and the Caribbean, but economic ties have not disappeared. Rather they have taken the form of tourism, offshore banking, or migration of low wage laborers (Sealey 1990, 1992). Further, the Caribbean Basin Trade Partnership Act (CBTPA), signed by President Clinton in 2000, has been characterized as potentially offering 'NAFTA parity' to Caribbean economic activities, particularly the apparel industry (Heron 2002).

This Southeast-Caribbean link has not been limited to trade and economic relations alone. Political and cultural landscapes in both regions also bear imprints from regional interaction. The migration of Cubans and Dominicans has permanently altered the ethnic landscape of southern Florida (Boswell 1983, 1993). The geopolitical importance of the Caribbean to the Southeast and the rest of the United States has been illustrated by the repeated deployment of U.S. troops in the region and the Cuban missile crisis (Pateron, Clifford, and Hagan 1988), and one of the Southeast's most notorious historic figures, Blackbeard, haunted both Southeast and Caribbean waters (Cordingly 1995).

The combination of the Southeast and

the Caribbean into a single region is by no means a new geographic concept. Meinig (1986b) noted the shared institutions of slavery and plantation agriculture and a common African ancestry, calling the region the "Afro-American World" or the "Afro-American Archipelago". Jordan (1994) outlined a "Creole Coast" of "Romano-Caribbean ethnicity" stretching from Corpus Christi to the Chesapeake Bay. Most recently, Richardson (2001, 4) identified "a broad culture region with Little Rock at the northwest corner and French Guiana at the southeast that also includes the eastern rim of Central America as well as the Bahamas." I have combined these three definitions into what I call the "Southibbean," an area with vast potential for SEDAAG research and professional activities (Fig. 1).

If the Caribbean has a strong link with the Southeast, then this leads us to the second question: is this strong link between the two regions reflected in SEDAAG membership, publications, and activities? With regard to SEDAAG membership, a review of the AAG's *Guide to Programs in Geography in the United States and Canada 2002-2003* indicates that within the 45 geography programs of the 10 SEDAAG states, a total of six faculty list the Caribbean as a specialty/expertise. The greatest concentration of Caribbean specialists is in Florida with three. Georgia, Kentucky, and Virginia each have one geography faculty member specializing in the Caribbean. It should be noted that this number is a conservative estimate because it does not include emeriti faculty and does not include Caribbean specialists who do not list the region as an official AAG specialty/expertise (I am one of these people). Thus, more Caribbean spe-



Figure 1. The Southibbean region is a tool for re-thinking the boundaries of SEDAAG-based research and professional activities.

cialists may exist in the Division, but are not listed in the AAG Guide.

With regard to division publications, a review of the contents of the *Southeastern Geographer* volumes 1 to 33(1) indicates that eight research articles and two book reviews address the Caribbean in their research or review. Of the eight research articles, five address a link between the Southeast and the Caribbean: the origin of

Southeast agricultural crops in the Caribbean (Winberry 1979; Kovacic and Mason 1985), Caribbean influence upon the spatial patterns of migration, race, and ethnicity in Florida (Boswell 1993; Winsberg 1993), and Haitian immigration to Miami, Florida (Boswell 1983). Thus, it appears that SEDAAG researchers recognize the larger geographic context that binds the Southeast and the Caribbean. The remain-

ing three articles focus upon phenomena within the Caribbean separate from the Southeast. These Caribbean-focused articles examine the development of the apparel industry in Puerto Rico (Tata 1977), paleogeography of Christopher Columbus' landfall in the Bahamas (Valdes 1994), and origins of medicinal plants in Monserrat (Berry 2003). The book reviews include a review of the publication of Christopher Columbus' travel log and a textbook on the geography of the Bahamas (Bederman 1988; Brook 1996).

A review of SEDAAG Annual Meeting programs gives an indication of how active Caribbean scholars are in SEDAAG, particularly through the listing of research presentations. Since SEDAAG's Golden Anniversary Annual Meeting (six annual meetings), a total of 14 Caribbean research papers (as determined from the title) have been listed in SEDAAG Annual Meeting programs. Thus, it appears that the few faculty with Caribbean expertise in SEDAAG have been active at the last six SEDAAG Annual Meetings, but these activities are not resulting in publications in the *Southeastern Geographer*. Since 1994, very few Caribbean-oriented articles have been published.

This profile of Caribbean studies in SEDAAG leads us to the third question: how can the study of the link between the Caribbean and the Southeast achieve a higher profile in the *Southeastern Geographer* and SEDAAG? This higher profile can be achieved through several means. The first is the organization of special sessions at annual meetings. This may not be an annual occurrence at the meetings, but an occasional session is possible. Again, these sessions need not focus upon the Caribbean alone. In fact, they should not! The

sessions should focus upon the link between the Southeast and the Caribbean and allow for a wide range of topics underneath this theme. If you wish to become involved in such a session, please contact me. A second possibility is to encourage Caribbean researchers to submit manuscripts to the *Southeastern Geographer*. A third avenue for increasing the profile of Southeastern-Caribbean geography is outreach to geographers in the Caribbean. Has SEDAAG ever invited faculty from Caribbean universities to its annual meetings, particularly when they were hosted in Florida? I know of geography programs at four Caribbean universities: the College of the Bahamas, the University of Havana, the University of Puerto Rico, and the University of West Indies at Mona, Jamaica. SEDAAG would benefit from an attempt to communicate with these programs. Travel expenses and language barriers may make such an undertaking difficult, but it is worth the effort.

Furthermore, why is SEDAAG limited to states in the U.S.? What about the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands? Is there a specific reason these territories are not listed as part of the SEDAAG region? If we are truly an organization that represents the southeastern United States, these territories should be included in our activities, just as they are in many national organizations and in the federal government. I like the sound of the 2010 SEDAAG Annual Meeting in San Juan. Heck, if the Montreal Expos can find a home in Puerto Rico, why can't Southeastern geographers!

Finally, if I have structured my argument well, you, the reader, should be asking yourself the fourth question: why do we need to incorporate the Caribbean into

SEDAAG? Well, the need goes beyond recognizing the rich link between the two regions. It is based upon the future of our discipline. We have all heard or read of calls for our discipline to be relevant to the 'real' world, a world that is becoming increasingly interrelated. Accordingly, it appears that the future link between the Caribbean and the Southeast will only become stronger and more complex as Caribbean refugees from political upheaval and economic stagnation continue to flow into our region. Perhaps one of the greatest services geography can offer to society is the unique insight we offer into migration and other demographic processes. This stream of immigrants will only increase in the near future if the predicted increases in natural hazards created by global change are accurate (Nurse et al. 1998). Higher sea levels, more frequent hurricanes, and the loss of fishing habitats could further disrupt the fragile resource base of Caribbean island nations, forcing the islanders to look off island for a better life, particularly the United States.

The risks created by global change lead to the area that I believe has the greatest research potential in the Caribbean: physical and environmental geography. In completing literature reviews for my own research (hydroclimatology and water resources of the Caribbean), I am often pressed to find field-based physical geography research after 1960. Such a paucity of literature and research has produced a gap in knowledge of regional physical processes and leads to difficulties in resource managers' work towards sustainable development in the Caribbean. Geographers can help fill this need for information. Moreover, much of the knowledge gained in the Caribbean can be applied to simi-

lar environments in the Southeast, particularly in the fields of karst geomorphology, tropical climatology, and island biogeography.

It must also be noted, however, that the future geography of the Southeast and the Caribbean does not solely lie within the realm of climate change and physical/environmental geography. The inevitable death of Fidel Castro will have an enormous impact upon the link between the Southeast and the Caribbean. Without the 'threat' of a Communist leader blocking the normalization of the relationship between the U.S and Cuba, the potential for economic, cultural, and political exchange between the Southeast and the Caribbean is vast. Geography is one of the few disciplines that can quickly take advantage of research and education opportunities created by an invigorated relationship with Cuba. For SEDAAG, not being prepared to take advantage of such opportunities may be a step backward given the current goal of increasing the profile of the *Southeastern Geographer* and the Division.

In conclusion, I believe that the greatest potential for growth of the *Southeastern Geographer* and SEDAAG is a greater emphasis of Southeast-Caribbean interaction within the journal and division activities. The Caribbean is a region that possesses a long history of interaction with the Southeast and great potential for future interaction. In fact, this geographer would argue that the Caribbean is closer in terms of actual distance than any other AAG Division, and it also shares many more common traits with the Southeast than some other AAG Divisions, making it a natural fit for expansion of future activities.

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