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Catherine Plonquet, *Vieux-Bourg en Guadeloupe: Les racines de la mémoire*. Paris: Karthala, 2017. 148 pp. (Paper €15,00)

With tenderness and small, impressionistic touches, Catherine Plonquet recounts her scattered memories of Vieux-Bourg in Guadeloupe at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Her account details “the roots of memory” of an ethnologist looking back to the many people who contributed to her experiences. Vieux-Bourg comes to life, and readers are invited to meet this fisherman or that farmer, to accompany this or that memory, “to breathe the day beginning and welcome all this life about to pour over me” (p. 7). This is the empathy created between ethnologists and the people we talk with, all the people who cross our paths as we conduct our research, entering our lives, giving us their time, transmitting their knowledge, and revealing their world to us with generosity.

The book is a paean in defense of an ethnology of direct contact which allows for rare and unique encounters, which reveals an unknown world needing to be accounted for in spite of the difficulties. Plonquet gives us only a few details of the conditions of research at a time when Vieux-Bourg was isolated. She seems to have been there for a long time, though she provides few precisions, mentioning only that she returned several times. She lived in a small house with a leaky roof in the center of the town (no fridge, and a camp bed as the only furniture), and recounts with humor her adventures trying to compensate for the lack of a toilet with a chemical one. But it was nevertheless an excellent vantage point, close to the Zenith Bar, a vital meeting place. These conditions were similar in many respects to those of the people she observed, and so contributed to her immersion in their daily lives as a truly participating observer.

Plonquet speaks tenderly of this “earthly paradise.” The countryside and its mangrove swamp left a permanent impression on her: “I loved Vieux-Bourg ... I have known that fact with nostalgia and sometimes with bitterness all my life ... To each her own Eden” (p. 9). Tributes to the people follow one after the other, recalling that in spite of the passage of time the attachment endures; “what remains is a strange feeling of belonging, as if Vieux-Bourg was my native country and I was an exile with long memory” (p. 14). We can only identify with that same ethnological stance, as we maintain our stories and the emotions that accompanied our own fieldwork experiences. The presentation of endearing people through description of their activities produces a clear, sensitive picture of their daily life, their social organization, and their professional involvements, for example as fishermen or carpenters. We are invited to a dream-like journey,

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and with our eyes closed, we can imagine the places, as we meet Ti-Jo, Constance, Raymond, Prosper, and many others. We discover a single day, a trip out to sea or on the canal, and empathy is created with these people, as we come to appreciate “their native country of two streets and three shops” (p. 11).

These anthropological snippets are presented against a historical background. This means that the exhausting work in the gardens, the elements of the local fête, and many other aspects of their life are not minutely described, though we can imagine what is involved in a parade of market women in traditional costume. Certain pages dwell heavily on the history of the town when it was called Morne-à-l’Eau, following colonization and the creation of concessions. We learn about the history of the town and its slow decline owing to the building of a new town in 1826 and the opening of a canal to provide access to houses, to the detriment of Vieux-Bourg.

This isolation, however, the result of the island’s economic history, was also incorporated into local activities: “here the mentality of the fisherman was modeled on the gentle curvature of the landscape; it followed the contours of the mangrove swamp which it practically never crossed. Thus one stayed within oneself all the way to the sea” (p. 135).

In the 1950s and 1960s, Jean Benoist and Richard Price produced anthropological studies of fishing in Martinique; my own work in that realm followed in the 1990s. Now, more than 30 years after conducting her fieldwork, Catherine Plonquet’s exploration of the subject in Guadeloupe produces profound emotion.

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