ISLANDS AS PLACES OF BEING AND BELONGING*

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ABSTRACT. Islands, traditionally important units of research and analysis in ethnographic research, have come to be viewed as a problematic unit of analysis, as anthropologists have realized the close integration of island societies within the wider world. This article argues that islands are still useful and fruitful foci of research, if their particular character is explored from an islandic point of view. Through life-story interviews conducted in three large, dispersed families of Caribbean origin, the article demonstrates that islands may be usefully conceptualized as sociocultural constructs that constitute important anchoring points as well as sources of identification for migrants and their descendants. *Keywords: Caribbean, cultural identity, cultural site, ethnic categories, family, field site, migration, transnational communities.*

> It is clear, for the Caribbean at least, that a body of land entirely surrounded by water is no longer an island.
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> —Robert A. Manners, 1965

In the 1950s the American anthropologist Robert Manners brought a group of students to the Caribbean Virgin Island of Saint John for a summer field school. In the few months spent on Saint John, it became increasingly apparent to him that the island was a far cry from the well-bounded, tightly integrated, local social, economic, and cultural systems that anthropologists had come to associate with islands—and which made them popular field sites. Owing to massive emigration, Saint John's population had been decimated, and those who still lived on the island were almost entirely dependent on remittances received from emigrant relatives on Saint Thomas or in the United States (Manners 1965, 186). This remittance economy was so extensive that most islanders had given up on local economic activities such as small-scale farming and fishing, and Manners described a local society that had become almost entirely integrated into a geographically extensive field of social and economic relationships. The case of Saint John, he noted, posed a challenge to the notion of the local community corresponding to a particular geographical area—in the case of islands, conveniently demarcated by water—that had been the "traditional unit of research" in anthropology. When studying the Saint Johnian community this traditional research unit would no longer be "coextensive with the unit of analysis," because the latter unit needed to include the economic relationships that integrated Saint John into a single economic system extending as far as the United States (p. 182). A cross-cultural survey led Manners to conclude that Saint John was not the only small-scale society that depended on extensive remittances, and he suggested that this meant the end of traditional community studies as anthropologists had been conducting them. He warned that the anthropologist had to "be

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