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'How natives think': The legacy of ethnography in criticism and minority literature

In this presentation I reconstruct one of the contexts in which American minority literatures are produced: the ethnographic expectations of both market readers and some academic critics. Ethnography – a western practice of observing and participating in the daily life of another culture with the aim of reporting on one's observations to lay and academic readers at home – is generally understood as a social science that works against chauvinism and racism born of cultural ignorance. Yet ethnography has also divided people into subjects and objects of observation; by focusing on cultural difference, it manufactured the “primitive” and the exotic; it also downplayed the role of global politics and intercultural contacts in the making of non-western cultures. By examining several works by the Caribbean writer Jamaica Kincaid, I attempt to problematize a range of literary strategies of negotiating the legacy of ethnography.