GERT OOSTINDIE

IN MEMORY OF HARMANNUS HOETINK
1931-2005

One and the same person may be considered white in the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico, and “coloured” in Jamaica, Martinique, or Curaçao; this difference must be explained in terms of socially determined somatic norms. The same person may be called a “Negro” in Georgia; this must be explained by the historical evolution of social structure in the Southern United States

wrote Harmannus – better known as Harry – Hoetink, in his seminal work *The Two Variants in Caribbean Race Relations* (1967).

Four decades later, this quotation may seem to border on the tautological. Yet at the time of its writing, “race” and essentialized racial identities were widely understood as the unchanging core issues modeling the societies of the Caribbean, and the Americas at large. Harry Hoetink was a pioneer among the first generation of post-World War II scholars who helped to rethink the meaning of “race” and color in the wider Caribbean.

Departing from a comparative historical and sociological perspective, Hoetink did not shy away from bringing social psychology into his analysis, as in his introduction of the concepts of “somatic norm image” and “somatic distance.” However much he may have been educated in a Western mold, his writings demonstrate a resolute rejection of unjustifiable generalizations based on “the ideal-typical Western homogeneous society, which unfortunately keeps producing the conceptual framework for the sociological analysis of completely different types of society” (*Slavery and Race Relations in the Americas*, 1973).

Remarkably, Harry Hoetink developed such insights as an outsider to the region. Born in the town of Groningen, in the north of the Netherlands, he studied social geography in Amsterdam and embarked for Curaçao in 1953, at only twenty-two years old, to become a secondary-school teacher on this Dutch Caribbean island. After this first arrival in the Caribbean, he immediately became an observant outsider and soon an honorary insider. In Curaçao, he met his future wife Ligia Espinal, who strongly contributed to his initiation into Curaçaoan society as well as into the society of her native Dominican Republic.

In 1958, he defended his dissertation on the social structure of pre-twentieth-century-Curaçao, written while on the island, at Leiden University. His reputation as a major scholar on race relations in the Caribbean and the Americas at large was established in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the publication of *The Two Variants in Caribbean Race Relations* and *Slavery and Race Relations in the Americas*. Moreover, in 1971 he published his seminal historical study *El pueblo dominicano* (published in the United States as *The Dominican People* in 1982). By then he had been a professor at the University of Puerto Rico (1960-64) and the director of the UPR's Institute of Caribbean Studies (1970-75), as well as a visiting professor at Yale and the University of Texas, Austin (1969). He was particularly proud of the special title of *profesor visitante permanente* conferred on him in 1981 by the Universidad Madre y Maestra (in Santiago, Dominican Republic). His writings are characterized by erudition, a comparative perspective, and a truly independent gaze; former students recollect that his teachings had the same merits.

After two sojourns in the Americas (1953-64 and again in 1969-75), Hoetink spent the remainder of his academic career, and indeed his life, in the Netherlands, serving as the director of the Centre for Latin American Studies and Documentation (CEDLA) in Amsterdam (1964-68 and again from 1975-77) and as a professor at the universities of Rotterdam (1964-68) and Utrecht (1977-83). Perhaps, in retrospect, this was not the happiest time of his scholarly life, as much of his energy was taken up with time-consuming and often tedious university bureaucracy.

Nonetheless, he continued to be a major figure in Caribbean studies by dint of a long series of articles, because of his continuing engagement with his two chosen Caribbean homelands, Curaçao and the Dominican Republic, and because of his decisive role, with Richard and Sally Price, in transforming the formerly Dutch-language *West-Indische Gids* into the *New West Indian Guide* as it stands today. He was awarded many academic distinctions as well as a high royal distinction. In 2001, he was appointed an honorary member of the KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, the publisher of the *NWIG*.

Harry Hoetink will be dearly missed as a thinker, and for many of us also as a friend and *caballero*, in the best possible meaning of these words. When the concept of ethnicity made an academic comeback in the 1990s, his work retained much of its original relevance. Although he had forcefully argued against the reification of "race" and color as unchanging propositions, he also objected to the extreme constructionist readings which came to prevail in much scholarly writing of the past two decades. He did not really need to rethink his approach. As early as 1967, he cautioned in *The Two Variants in Caribbean Race Relations* that "The sociologist's exposure of racial prejudices as mere myths will not put an end to their psycho-social reality, nor will his diagnosis of these prejudices as a mere defense spell their doom. On the contrary optimism is not the most natural reaction to the race problem."