Constance R. Sutton (1926–2018)

A pioneering scholar of Afro-Caribbean activism and migration and feminist anthropology, Constance Rita Sutton (“Connie,” as she was known to most) died on August 23, 2018. Her anthropology joined the production of knowledge to political action, a process she recognized as necessitating collaboration as much as, if not more than, individual effort and creativity. Her insights into the power of collectivity were shaped by her early encounters in Barbados with a cane workers’ wildcat strike and by her growing understanding of the strength and agency of women, especially when acting in concert. She envisioned an anthropology that extended beyond the academy, and she pursued this vision by working together with a cadre of female anthropologists, psychologists, writers, and activists like Eleanor Leacock, Vera Polgar/John-Steiner, June Nash, Helen Safa, Paule Marshall, and Maya Angelou. Influenced by the working-class, union, gender, and civil rights struggles beginning in the post-depression era of the 1940s when she came of age, Sutton ultimately sought to develop a social science that could contribute to social justice and equality.

The eldest daughter of Russian secular Jewish immigrants, Sutton (nee Woloshin) was born in Minneapolis, MN, in 1926. She studied at the University of Chicago, receiving a PhD (two-year “Bachelor of Philosophy”) in 1946 and an MA in anthropology in 1954. A student of Sol Tax, Fred Eggan, and Robert Redfield, she wrote a library-based master’s thesis, “The Role of Women in Plains Indian Gift-Giving Ceremonies,” which explored the practice of “give-away,” arguing that, like the potlatch, this was a ritualization of reinvestment in people. Upon graduation, she and her husband Samuel Sutton (1921–1986), a fellow student at Chicago who became a noted physiological psychologist, moved to New York, where Margaret Mead hired Sutton as her editorial assistant and, eventually, teaching assistant at Columbia University. Mead was an important early mentor to Sutton and in 1955 facilitated her entry into Columbia’s anthropology doctoral program. At Columbia, Sutton had the opportunity to study with scholars who were developing an anthropological perspective on complex and differentiated power relations and political economy. In a PhD seminar led by Charles Wagley and Vera Rubin, she was also introduced to her primary fieldwork sites: the Caribbean and Barbados.

Sutton’s doctoral research (Sutton 1968) was an event analysis of an island-wide wildcat strike of sugar-field workers in Barbados in 1958. Combining the ethnographic granularity of a traditional community study with a multiscalar analysis, Sutton offered an innovative twist on classic anthropology by tacking back and forth between Ellerton, a village of sugar-cane workers adjacent to a major plantation, and the trade union’s national political leadership in the urban center. The workers’ unauthorized strike, she explained, allowed her to see beyond what might at surface-level appear to be a staid, compliant society, though one on the brink of political independence. She analyzed how people circulated information and made decisions, offering a window into the quotidian creation of solidarity and power as people envisioned new political futures. Her on-the-ground study has lasting value for contemporary scholars of the Caribbean and beyond as they revisit the promises of anticolonial movements and rethink the parameters of sovereignty.
Between her fieldwork and the completion of her dissertation in 1968, Sutton gave birth to a son, David Sutton, who is currently a professor of anthropology at Southern Illinois University, and began her teaching career. Initially hired as a part-time lecturer in sociology and anthropology, she was one of the few women faculty at the newly coed University Heights Campus of New York University. Teaching at both the Heights and Washington Square campuses, Sutton became faculty advisor to the black students’ society, co-organized the local activities of the anti–Vietnam War movement, and brought together Caribbean and African American scholars in a major international conference. In 1970, she was appointed director of the University Heights Anthropology Department and, soon after, tenured. After NYU sold the Heights campus in 1973, Sutton moved downtown to the NYU Anthropology Department at Washington Square.

Sutton’s anthropology explored transnational connections and challenged the notion of bounded homogeneous cultures. With her student Susan Makiesky, who restudied Ellerton for her own dissertation (Makiesky-Barrow 1976), Sutton showed that migration was a “bi-directional rather than unidirectional” phenomenon (Sutton and Makiesky 1975, 114), which was producing a large-scale “transnational sociocultural system” in “the Caribbeanization of New York City” (Sutton 1987). This new formation, which was associated with a restructuring of international processes of capital accumulation, was changing people’s “racial and ethnic consciousness,” and their political subjectivities around gender and class (Sutton and Chaney 1987). Here, Sutton was ahead of her time in exploring how economic structure and political agency are dialectically tied to affect and subjectivity.

A feminist, Sutton used her scholarship on gender to fuel much of her activism. In a series of papers written in the 1970s, she took on both long-standing biases in anthropology and issues emerging in the new field of women’s studies. Drawing on her late 1950s fieldwork, she documented Barbadian women’s salient community roles and economic activities, the esteem and power conferred on them with motherhood, and the kinship and social ties that supported their relative equality within the plantation community (Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow 1977). In the working-class women of Barbados, Sutton found an inspiring model of women’s autonomy and power. She rejected theorizing that presumed a universal devaluation of women as based on selective, ahistorical conceptions of gender and cultural values. Instead, Sutton (1974; Sutton et al. 1975) maintained that women’s roles and gender relations must be understood in light of history and changing structures of power within a broader sociocultural framework. In Western societies, she contended (Sutton 1976), industrial capitalism inferiorized women in ways that limited Western analysts’ ability to interpret women’s status elsewhere. Though women’s status in industrial capitalist societies had recently begun to improve, gender equality, Sutton warned, would require a total social transformation.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Sutton and her sister scholars examined the strategies and forms of collective action that women in different cultures used to achieve political power and social recognition. Sutton was catalytic in furthering such scholarship, which explored how women’s political activity interacted with independence movements, Black Power, Anglo-American feminism, and pan-Caribbean organizations. In 1972, together with Eleanor Leacock and Ruby Rohrlich, Sutton organized the New York Women’s Anthropology Caucus, which later grew into the International Women’s Anthropology Conference (IWAC). Their goal was to provide an intellectual space in which women anthropologists could collectively examine, analyze, and compare gendered hierarchies and power differentials in their field research and in anthropology itself. An important influence on Sutton’s growing global feminist perspective was her participation in the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985. Electrified by this meeting, she engaged (under the umbrella of IWAC) in comparative analyses and collaborations with scholar-activists from Singapore, Brazil, the Caribbean, and the United States.

In the 1970s, Sutton did fieldwork among Yoruba people in Nigeria. Yoruba had a long “tradition of women’s economic and political activism,” which supported them “both as reformers acting within the current political structures . . . and as mobilizers of . . . visions opposed to those of today’s masculinized Nigerian military/civilian complex” (Sutton 1995b, 91, 101). In a fruitful collaboration with the political scientist Cynthia Enloe, Sutton confronted increasing militarization in the United States and elsewhere in the world by using comparative analysis to problematize the “masculinities and femininities invoked to support” it (Sutton 1995a, 89). Sutton and Enloe analyzed the seemingly contradictory and ambivalent positions women take in specific nationalistic and militarized contexts, anchoring a volume of papers about women’s roles and situations in seven countries (Sutton 1995a).

After her husband, Sam, died in 1986, Sutton deepened her friendship with anthropologist Antonio Lauria, whom she later married. The two shared an interest in crossing imperial and linguistic borders in the Caribbean. Sutton became particularly interested in Barbados–Cuba interconnections and Cuba’s vibrant Barbadian communities (Sutton 2014). Constantly revisiting/re-envisioning Barbados (Sutton 2011, 2013, 2014), she researched historical consciousness there and demonstrated a methodology for tracing the development of a postcolonial consciousness through the symbolic memory of public monuments (Sutton 2008). Sutton added a third generation to the doctoral dissertations on Ellerton by hiring and mentoring Lauria’s student from the University of Puerto Rico, Maria Quiñones (Quiñones 1990). Compiling an important book, she revisited Caribbean labor (Sutton 2005). She also applied her
organizational skills to chairing and revitalizing the Anthropology Section of the New York Academy of Sciences, where her global perspective enriched the scholarship of junior and senior colleagues.

Throughout her life, Constance Sutton was in the vanguard as a knowledge producer, teacher, mentor, and scholar-activist. Learning that “motherhood can be powerful” from the “embodied knowledge” of field experience, she linked her womanhood with social and cultural inter-generational continuity and the melding of work and career tracks (Sutton 1998). She also conjoined extended sisterhood with supportive dialogical men to construct a multidisciplinary transnational web of engaged intellectuals. Her mentee Andrea Qeeley (2019, 1) recalls first meeting Sutton: “I saw her walking toward me with what I came to know as her characteristic magnetic focus, infectious enthusiasm, and disarming warmth . . . all aglow with intellectual curiosity about my work and the potential for collaboration.” Sutton influenced and touched the lives and scholarship of generations of her students, who benefited from her extensive globe-spanning kinship network of anthropological “aunties” and friends. We, the authors of this obituary, some of her students, became part of her intellectual-activist family and have collectively worked in the writing of this obituary to continue this tradition.

Antonio Lauria-Perricelli  Gallatin School of Individualized Study, Gallatin School, New York University, New York, NY 10003; italorican@nyu.edu
Linda Basch  Stern School of Business, New York University, New York, NY 10003; linda.g.basch@gmail.com
A. Lynn Bolles  Women’s Studies, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; lbolles@umd.edu
Nina Glick Schiller  Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), Germany 06114; schiller@eth.mpg.de
Linden Lewis  Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA 17837; llewis@bucknell.edu
Susan Makiesky Barrow  Epidemiology, New York Psychiatric Institute, New York, NY 10032; suebarrow1@gmail.com
William P. Mitchell  Department of History and Anthropology, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ 07764; mitchell@monmouth.edu
David Sutton  Department of Anthropology, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901; Dsutton@siu.edu
Deborah A. Thomas  Department of Anthropology and Center for Experimental Ethnography, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104; Deborah.Thomas@sas.upenn.edu
Andrea J. Qeeley  Global and Sociocultural Studies Department, Florida International University, Miami, FL 33199; aqueeley@fiu.edu

NOTES
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REFERENCES CITED


