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0521642337 - The Cultural Politics of Sugar: Caribbean Slavery and Narratives of Colonialism

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## *Introduction*

The first phrase of my title is used on two separate but not unrelated occasions in Richard Ligon's *History of Barbadoes* (1657; 1673). In both usages there resonate the unmistakable motives of the discoverer and the publicist. The first occurs towards the end of the principal exposition on sugar production in early colonial Barbados (p. 96). It caps three pages of hard reckonings in which the author makes the case persuasively that handsome profits were to be made investing in Barbados sugar plantations, sweetening the narrative with reports of the success achieved by Colonel James Drax and Colonel Thomas Modiford, two of the colony's earliest pioneers. The second, coming some twelve pages later, concludes a sketch of the personality types best suited for life in this emergent enterprise zone. To men of orderly and 'moderate' tempers it holds out the attractive inducements of the first reference, issuing a stern moral dissuasion to men of dispositions 'too volatile to fixe on businesse' (p. 108).

Besides fitting its immediate contexts with a certain aptitude and felicity, 'sweete negotiation' carries with it a remarkable density of reference, reaffirming the Bakhtinian axiom that the most commonplace of utterances are often found to be inhabited by a multitude of voices. In this particular instance, the 'sweete negotiation' to which Ligon referred was as much a *mot juste* to describe the headiness of his personal discovery of the rare taste of sugar as it was a cleverly telegraphed message to a wider audience about the quality of experience and opportunity that awaited early colonizing populations in the sugar colonies of the West Indies (opportunities available even to perfectly common people). Not only was Ligon attempting to express his private excitement about the possibilities the emergent sugar colony of Barbados offered for enriching his personal knowledge and enlarging the stock of ideas available to a man of letters, he was also (albeit only thinly) disguising the larger publicity

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function of his book, a commonly used strategy in these early colonizing texts designed to stir the hunger of prospective new settlers for the promise of individual enterprise and prosperity that awaited their exploitation on this new economic frontier.

Still another function, of even greater ideological significance, lies embedded in this dialogic voice: 'sweete negotiation' stands as a complex cultural marker within its own host text, while its allusive coding of sugar production prefigures certain forms of desire enacted in Ligon and scores of other contemporary and later narratives as they pursued similar aims of claiming and defining positive social value for these colonized spaces.

Like Ligon's *History*, the five other narratives that form the nucleus of this study, Charles de Rochefort's *Natural and Moral History of the Antilles* (1666), James Grainger's *The Sugar Cane* (1764), Janet Schaw's *Journal of a Lady of Quality* (composed 1774–6), William Beckford's *Descriptive Account of Jamaica* (1790) and Matthew (Monk) Lewis' *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* (1834) all manifest a conscious relationship to this multivoiced practice of negotiation. All six texts evidence this activity in the linkages they infer between the process of literary production and the more secular business of sugar production, negotiating that relationship into an argument consciously framed to seek validation for a contested colonial culture. In general terms, the earlier texts are driven by the sheer demands of making these far outposts of empire known to audiences 'back home', domesticating differences in physical nature, and assimilating diversities in manners and mores of both indigenous and colonists. As the texts seek authority for their producers, they simultaneously assume the role of courting legitimacy for the rather narrow special interests of a colonial planter class deriving its wealth and power from slave-produced sugar in the colonies and for their commercial and political allies operating from the metropolises. Faced with the local imperatives of producing value and building community at the periphery while divorced from the certainties and settled traditions of the centre, the slavocrats found valuable allies in colonialist authors.

Most assuredly, in its consumable substance and in the politics spawned by its trade, sugar represented a complex signifying system. Ligon and the early colonizing intelligences evaluated their new-found prospects in a language figuring the discovery of a fruitful, desirable body, ripe for appropriation and assimilation. As one of the

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‘fruits’ of this desirable body, the sugar cane played a central role in developing the material economies of these societies. Similarly, sugar’s real and imagined properties are reproduced in textual economies as central metaphors for the idealized desires of those special-interest Creole publics. These texts thus implicate multiple voices in this representation of the desire for a particular kind of civilized order. Typically, these authors and these interests imagined an idealized body politic made up of masters and servants living in serenity, peace and harmony, and handing on their legacy to posterity.

Not surprisingly, the politico-cultural objectives of these texts are complexly constructed. Heavily fraught with ironic ambivalences and contradictions, they oscillate constantly between the polarities represented by the two oddly coupled ideas contained in the defining concept of ‘sweete negotiation’, and then the further internal oppositions contained in the single locution ‘negotiation’. Succinctly stated, it is that polarity which will be the object of this study. The central argument will be that ‘sweete negotiation’ is a complexly constructed metaphor for the cultural desire that informs these texts. Drawing its energy principally (though not exclusively) from the economies of sugar production, that desire subsumes within itself both the material artifacts and the ideological content of that production. These texts produce negotiation as a desire to win a tenuous and elusive legitimacy for an evolving ideal of Creole civilization, conflicted by its central relation to slavery and its marginal relation to metropolitan cultures. Each of these sources of conflict posed stout challenges to Creole pretensions: slavery aroused moral and economic objections crystallizing in abolitionist and anti-slavery polemics; traditional cultural preservationists (purists) back home continually interrogated the Creoles’ desire for social credibility by raising the spectre of cultural pollution and political disintegration.

Reading each text as a distinctive production of antagonistic cultural designs, my critique will illuminate the dynamics of negotiation as a dichotomy between two (ideological) myths, two sets of cultural ethics that inhere in the etymology and ideology of Ligon’s usage and retain their force and durability across the 160-year trajectory represented in these texts. Dichotomy and antagonism are rooted in the very origin of the term ‘negotiation’. The Latin voice *negotium* is constituted from two roots: *neg-* (not) and *otium* (ease, quiet). Juxtaposed, the separate parts produce antithesis and nega-

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tion; compounded, their essence yields ambiguity and ambivalence, a fitting verbal correspondence for the kind of tension (referred to earlier) and crisis that were to mark the slave plantation economy as it grew into a mature system. Deconstructed in this way, negotiation also illustrates some of the questions that are raised by the very nature of conquest and colonization, questions bound up with the right to alienate and appropriate physical space and exploit the economic resources of that space. Thus, negotiation begs the very question that these texts were produced to resolve: the uneasy interface between the twin principles of *neg* and *otium* problematizes that very bid for cultural legitimacy and respect which these publicists endeavored to wring from the metropolitan audience. These texts oscillate ceaselessly between the twin poles of *neg* (colonization, slavery and the economic activities related to sugar production) and *otium* (ease, the antithesis of business, the inverse of the active life). The *neg* supported a lucrative commerce and helped to develop the bourgeois capitalist ethic, promoting lifestyles of luxury, consumption, and dissipation. The *otium*, formerly a consummation devoutly to be wished, now becomes distracted by an anxiety that this suddenly acquired wealth and power would sap the very virtue on which the metropole predicated its imperial greatness. *Neg* and *otium* would be the prime factors in the constitution of colonial identities. *Neg* and *otium* would increasingly engender the fear that identities so constituted would bring on political threat, moral enervation and cultural degeneracy. At the focal point of this search for legitimacy and this anxiety over cultural dilution stands the figure of the West Indian Creole. It is typically around the formation of Creole identity that the dynamic tension of these texts is concentrated. For that identity is often embodied in the person of the very author, hence transforming substantial portions of these texts into strategies defensive of the common interests of author and audience. This anxiety and these strategies give rise on the one hand to a recurrent thematic preoccupation, and on the other to a definitive structural property. Together they situate these texts squarely within the defining formations of Caribbean society: the theme is that of purity and pollution, the structure is the dialectic of antagonistic forces, a dynamic which has since attracted significant scholarly analysis from theoreticians in Caribbean history and sociology.<sup>1</sup> I shall return to this theme and structure later in this chapter and in the Lewis chapter where I discuss revolutionary energies.

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Reference to Creole anxiety and the writing of Caribbean history demands some prefiguring of a cultural critique within which to probe the roots of that anxiety and a larger historical framework within which to trace the evolution of these texts. In pursuit of its design for a cultural study, this book will deploy the complex *negotium* of Ligon's early conception as a theoretical instrument with which to derive a collective cultural meaning; which might serve as a foundational and diachronic principle of these six texts. Because none of these texts is, by any common measure, standard fare on academic or scholarly menus, I have thought it fitting to locate each work in relation to a specific nexus of colonial-metropolitan historical developments contemporaneous with its composition or publication. Thus the discussion of each text will seek to unfold that pattern of meaning and continuity implied in the preceding chronological listing and later in the sequential relationship of each text to the dynamic of the thesis. The object will be to show that the texts always identify themselves with and promote forms of idealism associated with colonial cultural desire. That idealism will be historicized in its relation to the insidious external forces of scepticism and adverse mercantilist policies which were having their effect from as early as the first half century of sugar production in the West Indies (reflected in Ligon's *History*). Those forces will be shown to shape the content and strategies of these texts, as their subject elites, were pressured, some to reaction, others to reform, when plantation slavery and sugar began to be implicated in political and economic transformations which culminated in the full-blown campaign for abolition and emancipation.

To posit the significant presentation of Creole anxiety as early as Ligon's *History* is to confront two large problems endemic to Caribbean intellectual history and scholarship: how to locate the roots of creolization, and how to define the causes and consequences of that anxiety. What follows will sketch out some historical and theoretical lines bearing on these questions and illustrate their relevance to the present discussion.

In his groundbreaking historical work on creolization in the West Indies, Edward (Kamau) Brathwaite defines that process as the gradual development of a distinct cultural identity by diverse groups of people 'caught up in some kind of colonial arrangement' with a metropolitan European power, on the one hand, and a plantation arrangement on the other, and 'where the society is multiracial but

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organized for the benefit of a minority of European origin'.<sup>2</sup> In further amplifications on the terms 'Creole' and 'Creole society' Brathwaite identifies and develops the master-slave-plantation nexus, the heterogeneous nature of the society, the persistent struggle with adaptation to local and external pressures and, very importantly, the Creoles' commitment to the 'area of living'. Granted, Brathwaite's work confines itself to Jamaica and focuses on the 'developed' manifestations of creolization there around 1820. Still, because it has stood for such a long time as the most substantial historical study of creolization in the West Indies and has been used for significant extensions and extrapolations, it provides a respectable point of reference from which to re-examine the question over the wider domain of colonies represented here. And since the very morphology of the term 'creolization', like the term 'negotiation', is synonymous with gradual continuous process, and reciprocal exchanges, the effect of my inquiry will be to place the origins of Creole identity and its attendant anxieties closer to the origins of West Indian settlement and sugar production (here represented by Ligon's text), thus supplying some earlier substantive chapters to the record established by Brathwaite. Ligon's gesture grows in complexity the more it is understood (at least in part) as a defensive response to metropolitan attitudes of contempt and calumny. All five of the writers examined here offer their personal experiences self-consciously as credible authorities in the representation of newly incorporated colonial spaces, and the broadest ideological values of their texts as persuasive signs of the existence of culture in Creoledom, tangible proofs against anti-colonialist detractions and scurrilities concerning West Indian character. The noted Caribbeanist Gordon K. Lewis acknowledges this burden of proof as existing 'from the very beginning', a burden imposed by the 'Anti-Caribbean animus' emanating from the metropolises and directed against poor white emigrants and rich white planters: 'what London thought about Jamaica was only matched by what Paris thought about Saint Domingue and what Madrid thought about Cuba'.<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Scammell adverts to the 'universal contempt' in which colonials were held in the old world because they were thought to be 'imperfectly governed and archaic in their manners'.<sup>4</sup> Likewise Philip Boucher, writing of French colonial attitudes, documents the stereotypes of colonists as 'human refuse'.<sup>5</sup> Understandably, such

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scepticism and antipathy contributed to obscure the existence of a 'genuine Caribbean historiography, a Caribbean sociology [and] a Caribbean anthropology'.<sup>6</sup> Two years before Ligon's publication, the report of a visitor to Barbados confirms that creolization as earlier defined was already in evidence in the pride and sense of value witnessed in the attitudes of the colonists. Barbados was already accounted one of the 'Riches spots of ground in the wordell . . . where the gentrey . . . doth live far better than ours doe in England.'<sup>7</sup>

Thus, on the one hand Ligon's 'sweete negotiation' may be seen as providing a more sophisticated (because more complex, more literary and multiply signifying) usage as an abstract metaphor, a snapshot of the self-confidence born of improved material prospects, and the self-consciousness born of cultural adaptations, and the all-round sense of well-being felt by early colonists in the most thriving colonies. On the other hand, it serves as the verbal figuration of that conflict referred to earlier as Creole anxiety that is problematized in colonial Creole desire. Each successive text reproduces its own specific expressions of Creole anxiety. In Rochefort, that anxiety drives the text's recourse to the classical topos of *premiers temps* and the rhetorical strategies of collusion. In Grainger that anxiety appears as diffractions of the desire for cultural monism. In Schaw, a sensibility flushed with the perfect assurance of its own superiority works to deny Creole value and privilege the metropole's. William Beckford endeavours to reclaim the Creole advantage by valorizing the colony's landscape and its elites through the aesthetic of the picturesque. And in Lewis anxiety underlines the persistence of the revolutionary sublime in the struggle to mediate the roles of slave master and romantic reformer.<sup>8</sup> All these connotations of conflict and struggle are the conditioned defensive responses to those calumnies referred to earlier: they are manifestations of anxiety embedded in identity, but for all, they are manifestations of cultural consciousness resonant enough to earn the descriptions of 'emergent Creole identity' and 'embryonic Creole nationalism'.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most unmistakable sign of the Creoles' deep-seated anxiety about their colonial status and the low esteem in which plantation society was held in the metropolis was the high incidence of absenteeism among landowners and slavocrats.<sup>10</sup> Ownership of

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land and slaves brought with it the perquisites of power and prestige that were to be enjoyed from leadership in local politics, law, trade and religion. However, for increasing numbers the magnetic pull was great to seek a different order of civil society and higher public visibility in the more populous cities and resorts back home in Europe. The historian J. R. Ward identifies this as one important respect in which British West Indian slavery as an institution differed from its classical antecedents, as well as from its even closer counterpart in the antebellum South: 'Most British West Indian slaves belonged to men who chose to live as absentees in the mother country.'<sup>11</sup> He further estimates that by about 1760 close to one-third of British West Indian sugar plantations belonged to absentees, with a steady increase in the proportion into the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Even amongst the most colony-loyal of slavocrats, feelings of disconnection and exile affected them powerfully. Even in Ligon's Barbados, which developed an early tradition for high residency, one finds strong sentiments of nostalgia and firm determination to return as soon as great fortunes could be secured: 'planter outlook was typically one of felt exile.'<sup>13</sup> Judge Edward Littleton, writing in *The Groans of the Plantations* conveys in this reflection those conflicting emotions, that sense of a self divided in its loyalty-relationship between two places: 'By a kind of magnetic force England draws to it all that is good in the Plantations. It is the center to which all things tend: nothing but England can we relish or fancy: our hearts are here, wherever our bodies be: if we get a little money, we remit it to England. When we are a little easy, we desire to live and spend what we have in England, and all that we can rap and rend is brought to England.'<sup>14</sup>

But nostalgia, homesickness and older loyalties do not account totally for the full complex of absentee anxiety. The personal fortunes derived from sugar were inevitably placed on public display to satisfy the need of this new plantocratic class to indulge in emulative consumption, to imprint these forms of ostentation and visibility as signs of their entry into the culture of emergent bourgeois capitalism. The fine clothes, lavish equipages and opulent accommodations were deliberately theatricalized to elicit envy and recognition, without which new wealth typically feels unverified. Not the least among the insignia with which absentee identity and anxiety code themselves in this context is the display of the human body as



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property in the object relations of the slave to the master or mistress. As a ubiquitous companion in public places, liveried and ornamented (often in ludicrous mimicry of heroic, classical figures), a slave so displayed could not fail to advertise that anxious desire for higher social recognition in the Old World.<sup>15</sup>

It bears further emphasis that this aspect of absentee behaviour signals more deeply repressed layers of tension and ambivalence that are indivisible from the formation of the West Indian creolized self as it is inscribed in these texts. Physical absence from the scene of bonded labour, spatial distance from shackles and whips, no doubt assuaged absentee guilt; their own social costumes and those of their slaves permitted them to reconstitute themselves by masking and recovering these harsher social realities. Herein is powerfully produced two complementary expressions of that 'sweete negotiation' between the pursuit of subjective self-invention and the pursuit of cultural legitimation. The Creole subject struggles to reconcile the conflicted parts of this new identity by expatriating those complex bodily formations from the physical scene of production on the plantation and reconstituting them as familiarized objects on the constructed scene of bourgeois life.

Likewise this book's representative authors endeavour to naturalize those increasingly contested scenes by negotiating credibility for their personal and literary authority through aestheticizing the bodies and work of the slaves and the guilt-ridden natural emotions both evoked. The covertness and complicity that mark the colonizing apologetics of these texts will establish their substantial role in producing identities for Creole West Indian elites as they attempt to penetrate the larger body of bourgeois elites in Europe. We shall see this diffidence about admitting their true relationship to the violence and brutality of slave-owning and slave-dealing most sharply dramatized in the writings of Grainger, Schaw and Beckford. In the delineation of the historical framework unfolded in the ideological content of these works, we shall see how carefully orchestrated abolitionist agitation (for example, the anti-saccharite movement) appropriated that discourse of degradation and contamination to affect consumer attitudes towards slave-produced sugar. Later in this introduction, in the context of georgic, I shall return to this discussion of the effacing, obfuscatory functions of colonizing narratives.

The pattern of absenteeism on British plantations mirrored a

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model of engagement that reflected the indirect-rule official policies of the central authorities in London, and was reproduced in popular perceptions about the role of the colonies as dumping grounds. The case of France differed decisively in this respect. It is critical to emphasize this here for a clear and proper assessment of the part Rochefort will play in this book and for a similar understanding of the distinctive cultural politics his book illustrates. The French West Indian model of colonial administration exhibited qualitative differences in the deliberate attention France paid to selecting both political administrators and ordinary settlers. According to Adolphe Roberts, 'The Gallic concept of overseas territory resembled that of Ancient Greece. It sought to make each holding an integral part culturally, politically, and commercially of the homeland. The colonists in Saint Domingue and Martinique so loved their traditions that no new civilizations sprang up.'<sup>16</sup> By the date of Rochefort's *Histoire*, the monarch and his chief ministers were beginning to predicate the country's imperial greatness on the success of the colonies, and by 1678 gubernatorial appointments were being made directly by the Crown. With respect to common settlers, a certain idealism informed official policy: 'Colonies were not to be, unlike those of Portugal and England, dumping grounds for undesirables, but were to be populated, as the Spaniards planned for the Americas, by virtuous and hardworking Catholics and old soldiers from the mother country.'<sup>17</sup> With respect to indigenous Carib Indians, policy tended more towards appeasement and conciliation. French Creole anxiety at this early period (1630–60) arose from a unique cultural desire to incorporate these new territories into an imperial ideal of Greater France, a pointed distinction from British policy. This peculiar national difference drives the specific negotiations (allusions and collusions) that distinguish Rochefort's text from the British texts treated in this study.

Besides the cultural differences that separate French and British colonial policies, there are significant differences to be found in the two nations' political histories during the period spanned by these texts. And since the colonized scenes they describe occupy such widely disparate historical junctures, some attempt will be made next to elucidate a pattern and context in which these texts' contents can be understood.

The 260 or so years bounded by the literary landmarks of Ligon's *History* and Lewis' *Journal* describe a colonial period in which the