

The Caribbean Plantation: Panoptic Slavery and Disciplinary Power

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For Presentation at:
The Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association
Carleton University
Ottawa, Canada
May 27 – 29, 2009

[Draft - Comments Welcome]

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The Caribbean plantation was not merely a mercantile enterprise which oppressed the slave subject through economic isolation, physical abuse and cultural dispossession. It was, in addition, an institution where the proliferation of two modalities of power, disciplinary and governmental, translated Eurocentric philosophy into a biopolitical technique for shaping the colonized subject. This paper illustrates how the Caribbean plantation factory mobilized a panoptic institutional environment where disciplinary and governmental power re-constituted the slave body into a site for capital exploitation through coercion, punishment, and contractual obligation which promised manumission.

This Manichaeic race-thinking which came to shape the institutions, bureaucracies, and wider functionality of the European colonial endeavour in the Caribbean, can in part be traced to the earlier Spanish Inquisition in newly founded Latin American territories such as Peru. Here, we can observe how the Lima Magistrates, acting under the authority of the Madrid Suprema and Catholic church, persecuted anyone associated with the heretical practices of witchcraft (the veiled ladies/Tapadas), those practicing local Indigenous religious traditions, as well as the Jewish merchants for subverting the interest of the Spanish Empire through 'Judaizing'.¹ In the 17th century Lima's Inquisitors warned the Suprema of the emerging Jewish threat to all of Christendom. The magistrates were intent on characterizing the pervasive nature and urgency of this menace by locating Jewish merchants at the center of a networked global conspiracy to undermine the Spanish Empire aided with the help of negro and indio slave subversion. This earlier historical trajectory is only briefly evidenced here in an effort to illustrate how the categories of racialized difference were already active the New World.

¹ These insights are taken from Irene Silverblatt's text- *Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the colonial origins of the civilized world*.

However, the English and French colonizer on the Caribbean plantation would come to advance this broader unitary conceptualization of civilization and history where race and gender were situated as natural, permanent, and fixed modalities of *being*. By analyzing how plantation power was exercised through a decentralized web of diverse, yet interrelated institutional forces of legal and political authority, we can witness how the epistemological reality we have come to express terminologically as the ‘colonial imagination’, determined typologies of sexuality, race and class in the Caribbean.

The postcolonial theorist must unravel the ideological edifices and locations of bureaucratic practice to illustrate how individual subjectivity was regulated through a racialized and sexualized taxonomy. This avenue of inquiry allows for a more focused evaluation into how the practices of colonial domination were adapted and intensified by the colonizer to avert confrontation with the slave population. Furthermore, these histories of colonial destruction, exploitation, and violence cannot be simply disregarded nor divorced from the contemporary realities of race-thinking and power relations. As Paul Gilroy argues in his work *Postcolonial Melancholia*, there must be ownership of these historical events in order to re-evaluate contemporary questions concerning decolonization, multiculturalism, democracy, justice, and national identity. Claims to reparations for enduring racism, cultural genocide, and violence cannot be washed away as superfluous sites of contemporary governmental intervention which exceed the fiduciary responsibility of the state, especially when projections of patriotism, ethnic absolutism, militarization, and destiny continue to unlock new categories for defining the inhuman experience. What is at stake is disassembling this ‘pathology of greatness’ which can be observed through the continued melancholia infecting the western world,

where the justification for intervention can be legitimated as movements toward cosmopolitanism, humanitarianism, and justice under the true guise of economic hegemony and ‘benign imperialism’.

By applying a Foucauldian genealogical analysis, in an attempt to uncover how power was being exercised on the Caribbean slave plantation, this paper will undertake a diachronic historical examination of the colonial institutions, ideological practices and technologies of force which molded the slave subject.² As David Scott suggests in his work ‘Colonial Governmentality’, Foucault’s methodology can be utilized for interrogating the “*targets* of colonial power (that is, the point or points of power’s application, the object or objects it aims at, and the means and instrumentalities it deploys in search of these targets, points, and objects); and the *field* of its operation (that is, the zone that it actively constructs for its functionality).”³ As such, the salient features of modernity can be understood, in part, through the plantation experience in the Caribbean, as it comes to organize a site for bio-political engineering: Revealing to us how the emergence of hegemonic relations of power and colonial race-thinking came to define an ideological program legitimating slave subjectivity in the Caribbean.

The polyvalent constitution of disciplinary and governmental power protracted the site of colonial oppression beyond the plantation factory, and, ultimately, advanced the broader imperial apparatus by augmenting the capacity to anticipate, accommodate and subvert forms of slave resistance. By ensnaring the freedom of the slave subject,

² Foucault argues that genealogy identifies “the accidents, the minute deviations- or conversely, the complete reversals- the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations.” Foucault, Michel. *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Random House Inc., 1984. p.81.

³ Scott, David. “Colonial Governmentality” in *Social Text*, No.43, Duke University Press, 1995. p.193.

namely through the fragmentation of the family and further contractual obligation, the European sugar planter was able to secure his domination. As a result, the Caribbean plantation organizes a new technology of disciplinary and governmental power, assembling a geopolitical dimension where the Manichaeian ethos of the colonizer can legitimate the industrial/capitalist exploitation of the slave. In tracing an archeological analysis of plantation oppression –the institutional, economic, and legal dimensions governing slave life – this paper will reveal how Foucault’s theory of disciplinary and governmental power can be deployed as a methodology for apprehending knowledge of slave subjectivity.

In his work *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault develops his theory of disciplinary power by examining Jeremy Bentham’s philosophy of panopticon. Foucault does not approach Bentham’s political philosophy through a linear historical lens, which would interpret the panoptic project as the institutional materialization of utilitarian thought through the pragmatic reformation of the penal system in England for reasons of economic sufficiency and humanitarian intent. Instead, Foucault undertakes a genealogical approach which examines how the panoptic project gave birth to disciplinary and governmental power. In disrupting a causal, chronological, and teleological sense of time, Foucault’s genealogical examination of history outlines the functioning of governmental power through a ‘diagram’: A heterogeneous assemblage of discursive and non-discursive practices which operate through intersecting points of difference, resistance, and creativity.⁴ Following this approach, in his work *The*

⁴ Deleuze, Gilles. “A New Cartographer,” in *Foucault* (trans. Sean Hand). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1988. p.44.

Anthropology of Colonialism: Culture, History, and the Emergence of Western Governmentality, Peter Pels argues that “to actually realize how culture supplements history and vice versa, we need not only to find out how classifications of culture functioned within strategies of colonial governmentality but how historiography provided governmentality with an ontological underpinning.”⁵ By coordinating localities of divergent, yet analogous articulations of Eurocentric institutional practices for configuring the human body spatially –the Caribbean plantation and Bentham’s panopticon- we can grasp how a microphysics of slave subjectivity came to inform the broader forces of race-thinking and colonialism.

For Foucault, disciplinary power differs from the traditional understanding of sovereign power, where relations of force are realized through a matrix of localization, acquisition, and hierarchy. Gilles Deleuze suggests that Foucault’s understanding of disciplinary power cannot “be attributed to an appropriation but to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings; it is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions.”⁶ This approach to understanding power requires an examination of colonialism which focuses on the “nonverbal, tactile dimensions of social practice: the exchange of objects, the arrangement and disposition of bodies, clothes, buildings, and tools in agricultural practices, medical and religious performances, regimes of domesticity and kinship, physical discipline, and the construction of landscapes.”⁷ A

⁵ Pels, Peter. “The Anthropology of Colonialism: Culture, History, and the Emergence of Western Governmentality” in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol.26. 1997, p. 167.

⁶ Deleuze, p.25.

⁷ Pels, p.169.

genealogical analysis of the Caribbean plantation demonstrates not only how governmental power can restrain the agency of colonized peoples through mechanisms of disciplinary force such as surveillance, social experimentation and isolation, but how even under the most intense forms of physical repression and psychological trauma, the slave exercised autonomous action for survival.⁸

The sugar plantation was also an economic enterprise for developing new methods of industrial efficiency by disrupting any formative sense of *gemeinschaft*. The overall economic functionality of the plantation relied on a spatial environment for disciplining the slave subject into docile instrument of production, where the fear of physical punishment could quell desire for resistance. Clarence Talley explains that the “plantation structures of labour control serve as the basis of social practices and the legal structure of the plantation economy and society.”⁹ Foucault also professes that “to govern a state will mean, therefore to apply economy, to set up an economy at the level of the entire state, which means exercising toward its inhabitants, and the wealth and behaviour of each and all, a form of surveillance and control as attentive as that of the head of a family over his household and his goods.”¹⁰ Dale Tomich explicitly outlines how the

⁸ What interests Foucault is: “How to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom people will accept being governed, how to become the best possible governor – all these problems seem to me to be characteristic of the sixteenth century, which lies, to put it schematically, at the crossroads of two processes: the one that, shattering the structures of feudalism, leads to the establishment of the great territorial, administrative, and colonial states. Foucault, *Power*, p.202.

⁹ Talley, Clarence R. “The Social Transformation of Plantation Society” in *Plantation society and race relation: the origins of inequality* / edited by Thomas J. Durant, Jr. and J. David Knottnerus. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1999. p.181.

¹⁰ Foucault, *Power*, p.207.

plantation effectively instituted a division of labour for the purposes of economic efficiency through disciplinary measures and social conditioning.¹¹

Literature concerning the examination of the Caribbean plantation all too often marginalizes a focus toward analyzing the everyday lives and power dynamics surrounding the slave subject -a microphysics of power- instead fixating on the macro development of global imperialism, capital exploitation, and industrialization, as featured in Bonham Richardson's analysis.¹² However, the plantation as a site of social experimentation which inflicted psychological trauma, cultural disposition, and physical violence, created new techniques for mobilizing labour exploitation and industrial modernization. Consequentially, European colonization in the Caribbean can be understood as a mission for the advancement of imperial/capital Empire building, where the exercise of modern political thought, through spatial, political and cultural dimensions, came to demand an individuating diagram which worked to isolate and naturalize Indigenous peoples, Africans, and Indians as racialized bodies.

According to Eric Williams, in as early as 1455 a Papal bull authorized Portugal to 'reduce to servitude all infidel people' in the New World.¹³ From reviewing Williams'

¹¹ Moreover, Dale Tomich states that "within the limits established by the technically determined proportional relations between the various sectors, the need to maximize output and 'efficiency' integrated the division of labour on each plantation ever more closely and filled in the 'empty spaces' in the potentially available labour time [...] The superiority of slavery as a form of social labour lies in its capacity to forcibly concentrate large masses of workers and compel their cooperation. It secured a labour force that was abundant, cheap, and subject to strict work discipline and social control." Tomich, Dale W. *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital and World Economy*. Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield, Inc., 2004. p.144.

¹² Richardson suggests that "the Caribbean plantation is a global, not a regional, enterprise, and it has always been so...The trade circulation of plantation products eventually was interlinked with movement of global inputs for the Caribbean plantation in a complex shipping network often described as the 'triangular trade', involving Europe, West Africa, and Atlantic America." Richardson, 'The Caribbean in the wider world, 1492-1992: a regional geography', Cambridge: University Press, 1992. p.38.

¹³ Williams, Eric. *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill, 1944. p.3.

text *Capitalism and Slavery*, we can observe how the colonial powers of Europe mobilized slave labour, resource exploitation, and free trading principals to maximize profiteering for the mercantilists and to satisfy the foreign consumption demands of the metropole. Williams draws our attention to English political theorist Adam Smith to offer insight into the colonial mindset, where the measure of reason, progress, freedom and profit hinged on a free market and the ‘invisible hand’.¹⁴ Williams theorizes that “England and France, in their colonies, followed the Spanish practice of enslavement of the Indians. There was one conspicuous difference- the attempts of the Spanish Crown, however ineffective, to restrict Indian slavery to those who refused to accept Christianity and to the warlike Caribs on the specious plea that they were cannibals. From the standpoint of the British government Indian slavery, unlike later Negro slavery which involved vital imperial interests, was a purely colonial matter.”¹⁵

The main prerogative of the Spanish mercantilists in the New World was to ‘civilize’ the Non-European in a manner conducive to extracting labour and social conformity, a vision which the British and French colonizers would later sustain in their efforts to minimize the costs of slave labour by importing from Africa, India, and China when the local supply of Indigenous people had been exhausted from disease and violence. Williams is clear in his assessment that the origin of Negro slavery was not born from racism, but economic interest afforded from the cheap and virtually inexhaustive labour supply which could be procured from Africa. Interestingly, however, this was rooted in race-thinking, as the underlying Spanish belief in the superiority of

¹⁴ Ibid, p.136.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 8.

Black labour- One black slave was worth four Indians.¹⁶ In addition to this, Williams offers insight into the prevailing race-thinking of colonial period, stating that “Indian slavery and white servitude were to go down before the black man’s superior endurance, docility, and labour capacity. The features of the man, his hair, colour and dentifrice, his ‘subhuman’ characteristics so widely pleaded, were only later rationalizations to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labour and resorted to Negro labour because it was cheapest and best.”¹⁷

In an attempt to extract knowledge of how the Caribbean slave understood their identity, sexuality, culture and place within the New World, one must investigate the practices, relationships, and technologies of the factory plantation. The physical anatomy and spatial configuration of the plantation factory played a determinant role in the psychological, cultural, economic, and political relationship between the colonizer and slave. Richardson illustrates how the plantation and not the surrounding market towns occupied the epicenter of economic activity.¹⁸ An insight in the European colonial mind can be ascertained through a comparative inquiry into the experimental institutional organization of the Caribbean plantation along with Jeremy’s Bentham’s philosophy of the panopticon. In undertaking an institutional analysis of the physical design of the plantation through its uniquely configured infrastructure and technological advancement, we can observe how industrial ingenuity and innovation was tantamount to disciplining the slave.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.9.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.20

¹⁸ Richardson, pp.41-2.

Disciplinary power on the plantation factory was achieved through the functionalist and centralized architectural design which segregated the planter and supervisory network from the slave population, as well as in the highly transformative and innovative technologies crucial for extracting and maximizing profitability. The plantation factory, as such, was a technologically sophisticated organism which employed technologies of power such as surveillance, isolation, physical abuse, psychological dependency, and cultural alienation in an effort to increase economic production. Hilary Beckles explains that the Caribbean sugar plantation complex was “probably Europe’s largest industrial complex in the 16th and 17th centuries. Its deployment of state of the art production systems, energy and chemical technologies, and a disciplined labour force set it apart as something altogether innovative and futuristic.”¹⁹ Similar to Jeremy Bentham’s architectural design of the panopticon, the plantation factory was a self-sufficient institution comprised of all the basic services which would have been found in a small town.²⁰ The planter was able to maximize labour production, resource management, and frustrate resistance by creating a system of dependency and imposing an ordered lifestyle upon the slave population. Richardson explains that “the buildings of the plantation nucleus included the grinding mill, boiling house, and the owner’s or overseer’s dwelling...In 1794 Worth Park, Jamaica, for example, had both a plantation Great House and an overseer’s house plus separate buildings for offices, a slave hospital, cattle pens, a

¹⁹ Beckles, Hilary. “Capitalism, Slavery and Caribbean Modernity” in *Callaloo* – Volume 20, Number 4, Fall. John Hopkins University Press, 1997. p.779.

²⁰ Janet Semple reveals that in his manuscripts “Bentham sometimes referred to ‘Panopticon Town’ or ‘Panopticon Hill’, and was clearly envisaging a wider neighbourhood than the prison factory of his public schemes.” Semple, Janet. *Bentham’s Prison: A Study of the Panopticon Penitentiary*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993. p.285. And that Bentham’s panopticon would realize a “range of different processes, silkworm culture, trout-farming, vegetable-drying...Panopticon was to have its own coinage, newspaper, almanac, and maps.” Ibid, p.288.

curing house, and a still house, all located within one quarter mile from one another at the heart of the plantation.”²¹

Bentham’s panopticon “was to be circular or polygonal in shape with the cells around the circumference. At the core would be a central inspection area of galleries and lodge.”²² Within the inspection lodge the governor would be invisible, but able to observe prisoners through a veil of foggy glass. The central tower would be the site of surveillance, a control center which would observe the transgressions of prisoners, compile information for ‘social engineering’, and induce a mode of power in which those being observed would become self-regulating. Similarly, Richardson maintains that “slave cottages throughout the Caribbean were situated sufficiently close to the other plantation buildings so as to facilitate slave control.”²³ The pervasive inspection, isolation, and spatial ordering of the slave body on the plantation became an institutionalized social dystopia, where panoptic management would provide new systems of labour and productive efficiency by extracting a greater understanding of the human condition through social experimentation. Foucault argues that disciplinary power would be “an interrogation without end, an investigation that would be extended without limit to a meticulous and ever more analytical observation, a judgement that would at the same time be the constitution of a file that was never closed.”²⁴

²¹ Richardson, p.46.

²² Semple, p.116.

²³ Richardson, p.47.

²⁴ Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, p.227. Moreover, Stinchcombe asserts that “there were five main conditions under which records bearing on daily life of slaves and slave-master relationships were generated. One was manumission, the establishment of a former slave as free by a governmental act initiated by the property owner...a second source of documents was emancipation, the proposal by governments to treat slaves as at least eventually free people...a third was plantation

In her work, '*Capitalism, Slavery and Caribbean Modernity*', Beckles argues that, "facilitated by a transcontinental complex of brokers, agents, and financiers, the West Indian sugar planter held the known world with his gaze and made 'good' with the extensive array of goods produced. Using their economic success to maximum effect, they lobbied and bought their way into metropolitan Parliaments and Imperial Courts."²⁵ By gaining legal and political legitimacy, planters were able to infiltrate the bureaucracy and administer reforms to reap the benefits of the free market. In attempting to understand how slave subjectivity and families were shaped on a daily basis, we must explore how a planter's legal and political authority institutionalized and protected their right to coerce, physically abuse, and punish without restraint. Stinchcombe posits that "planters were more powerful when they had an assembly to which they were elected, rather than a cabinet of the governor to which the governor appointed the local rich, so the same amount of planter dominance translated into more governmental power on the islands with effective legislatures of his own choice."²⁶ The liberty of the slave population was constrained through a series of political and legal policies which aimed at

accounting and the plantation books of exceptionally well-run (and exceptionally literately run) plantations or other enterprises dependent on slave labour, where the accounting value of the slave depended in part on the nature of his or her activity." Stinchcombe, Arthur L. *Sugar island slavery in the age of enlightenment: the political economy of the Caribbean world*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1995. p.140.

²⁵ Beckles, p.778.

²⁶ Stinchcombe, p.136. Hutchinson also concurs with this analysis, stating that "the extension of control and authority, as worked out on each plantation, to the larger society may be started by the working out of economic arrangements by the planters within the larger society for the transportation, financing and marketing of the crop. At the same time, social relations among the planter families may be established quite strongly by intermarriage, which tends to bring about an extended family system. Eventually the planter group comes to control educational and religious institutions as well, all of which go to maintain the planter's authority." Hutchinson, H.W. "The Transformation of Brazilian Plantation Society" in *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2. School of International Studies, University of Miami, 1961, p.202.

inhibiting the slave from obtaining a legal identity, accessing legal protection from planter abuse, and gaining the rights for mobility and property ownership.

Paul Gilroy uncovers how colonialism came to ingrain a duality between black and white, a fixed conception of ethnic and cultural identity, and the legitimization of the constitutive ingredients reinforcing race-thinking such as Manichaeism, bio-ontologies, and racialized difference. In outlining his understanding of the term 'race', Gilroy professes that it "refers primarily to an impersonal, discursive arrangement, the brutal result of the raciological ordering of the world, not its cause. Tracking the term directs attention toward the manifold structures of a racial nomos- a legal, governmental, and spatial order."²⁷ The task, as suggested by Gilroy, is to re-examine the political philosophies which came to order a racialized modern epistemology and the subsequent creation of imperial statecraft through the metropole/colony economic relation. From this, we can observe how the historical trajectory of the racialized inhuman experience takes root in the subjugated slave body on the plantation factory. Varying degrees of bondage, labour roles, and potentiality for manumission resulted in a further fragmentation of slave hierarchy on the sugar plantation. However, even though governmental power was being imposed through an economy of violence and oppression, the slave population adapted to these new classifications in an attempt to survive.

Gilroy asserts that there is an enduring assumption that metropolitan governance and colonial administration was considered a necessary way in which to order two divergent worlds one white, civilized, and cultured, the other coloured, savage and without history. His analysis of raciological theory exposes the fundamental bio-political binarism of the Occident and Orient by illustrating a continued patterning of polarization and forced

²⁷ Gilroy, Paul. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005. p.39.

territorial, cultural, economic, and racialized existence. These essentialized categories of racial, cultural, and sexual identity coagulate into a Eurocentric bio-political epistemology on the sugar plantation. We need only look to Fanon to understand how colonization came to signify the syncretic death of a subjugated people through cultural lethargy, the petrification of the individual, psychological trauma, and how this Manichean fantasy came to totalize the lived experience of the slave subject.²⁸ Gilroy professes that racism involves a form of exploitation which is made ‘intelligible, habitable, and productive’ through racialized difference within a discursive, legal, and governmental ordering.²⁹ This protracted approach provides us a very palpable diachronic assessment of colonial history and the contemporary pressures of an increasing globalized political terrain. Theories of governmentality, biopolitics and genealogy therefore become operative lenses for articulating colonial statecraft and race-thinking.

Stinchcombe professes that “throughout the history of the Caribbean, plantations that had to import their labour from elsewhere have much preferred male labourers. The sex ratio of the slave was much more male on Caribbean sugar plantations, especially during the sugar-frontier period.”³⁰ This disproportionate distribution of the sexes, which existed in large part due to a belief that the heavy labour required for the initial construction phase of the plantation was best performed by male slaves, became a crucial

²⁸ Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2004. p.50.

²⁹ Gilroy, p.31.

³⁰ *Sugar island slavery in the age of enlightenment: the political economy of the Caribbean world*, p.90. David Geggus reports that “From the late seventeenth century, when buccaneering and ranching gave way to agriculture, to the abolition of slavery in the midst of the Haitian Revolution, the colonial consensus generally show six to eight male slaves for every five females.” Geggus, David P. “Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint Domingue.” *More than chattle: Black women and slavery in the Americas* / edited by David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. pp.259 -260.

factor in not only classifying labour roles, but also in determining the relative freedoms which could be accessed by slaves. Generally speaking, “females had much less access than their male counterparts to positions of independence, skill and prestige. The number of specialist positions open to women was extremely small, and they offered only limited rewards. Washerwomen passed much of their day unsupervised with fellow workers, but none had the mobility of the carters, coachmen, and muleteers, or the hunters and fishermen.”³¹ Although men appeared to occupy positions of greater esteem and independence within the plantation, women who could escape working in the field and gain access to the planter’s estate, had a much greater chance for attaining reward, mobility, and freedom.

As a result of increased access to the planter’s estate where relationships of trust and loyalty could be fostered with either the planter himself or his family, female slaves had a much greater probability of attaining freedom and reward, but these benefits came with other risks. These opportunities were made possible as women “were strongly represented among the domestic slaves as house servants, washerwomen, and, occasionally, seamstresses. They were sometimes presided over by a slave housekeeper, who was frequently the mistress of the plantation owner or manager.”³² Although these specialist positions retained only a small fraction of the female slave population, those who could gain entry into the planter estate would escape the demanding conditions of field work, but would still be, perhaps even to a greater degree, susceptible to rape and other forms of physical abuse with no guarantee that they would be rewarded freedom.

³¹ Geggus, p.262.

³² Ibid, 260.

As Geggus states, “lacking legal personalities, female slaves were exceptionally vulnerable to rape, and sexual harassment by whites occasionally extended to the most vicious sadism.”³³

In addition to being a site where the disciplinary mechanisms of oppressive social control would realize the unrestrained sexual adventurism of the planter, the Caribbean plantation was also a prime location for the advancement of race-thinking. The secondary factor in determining the potential for female slaves to gain reward or manumission, apart from sexual exploitation, was one’s perceived racial identity. Stinchcombe argues that “sexual ties between slave and free were mostly between white men and black or coloured slave women, especially young, creole, coloured, domestic servants.”³⁴ Employing a linear historiographical analysis of plantation life strips the slave subject of their agency by thrusting them into a position of complicity, passivity and otherness which cannot account for the motivational will behind women who engaged in the seduction of men to procure power and freedom. Geggus suggests that “slave women were able to use their sexuality to obtain material advantages from whites, free coloreds, and fellow slaves, and sometimes to gain their freedom [and that] sexual relations with whites ranged along a continuum, including the sordid and violent to rare cases of marriage.”³⁵ This psychologically and physically traumatizing sexual economy which ensnared female plantation slaves illustrates the exceptional circumstances demanded for ensuring survival.

³³ Geggus, p.265.

³⁴ Stinchcombe, p.143.

³⁵ Geggus, p.265.

The continuous and unrelenting reality of displacement, physical harm and surveillance on the plantation can be witnessed first and foremost in the breakdown of the family. In his seminal work *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James concludes that “the slaves in San Domingo could not replenish their number by reproduction. After the dreaded journey across the ocean a woman was usually sterile for two years. The life in San Domingo killed them off fast. The planters deliberately worked them to death rather than wait for children to grow up.”³⁶ Furthermore, Stinchcombe asserts that “the more rapidly the plantations in a particular area were growing, the lower their slaves’ fertility (because of lack of women and the lower rate of formation of family groups in which the male guarantees to help support the children).”³⁷ The oppressive living conditions, violent physical abuse, and rigorous labour were all examples of how expendable a slave’s life was to the English and French planter.³⁸ These factors coupled with the reality of a virtually inexhaustible supply of slave labour, procured through both kidnapping and coercion, contributed to the high turnover rate of a slave population on the plantation.

The floggings, rapes, and demeaning treatment of the slave induced a reality of psychological distress which could never be shaken within the environment of plantation life. The constant separation of family members, the significant disparity between the number of male and female slaves, the competition for security, and the squalid living

³⁶ James, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1963. p.14.

³⁷ Stinchcombe, p.90.

³⁸ Reddock’s research reveals that “Gynecological disorders were rife because of the absence of facilities for pregnancy and childbirth, the poor sanitary conditions, the mistreatment of pregnant women, and the heavy labor for long hours. One of the most common disorders was amenorrhea (absence of menstrual periods); this was usually due to severe malnutrition, injury to the ovaries, or problems in the endocrine system caused by severe beatings. Another was menorrhagia (excessive flow at the period). These menstrual problems often resulted in early menopause and therefore in a reduced fertile time span.” Reddock, Rhoda E. “Women and Slavery in the Caribbean: A Feminist Perspective” in *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol.12, No.1, Latin America’s Colonial History. Sage Publications, Inc., 1985, p.68.

quarters all contributed to low reproduction rates. However, this would not always be the case, as Geggus reports that “from about 1770 onward, as the price of slaves rose, planters began to display a greater interest in encouraging their slaves to reproduce. They tried to purchase greater numbers of female slaves, demanded less work from pregnant women, supervised midwives, and ordered small payments to mothers and mid-wives on the successful birth and weaning of a child.”³⁹ The pressure for retaining plantation labour intensified bio-political ontologies, introducing new forms of social control which delved deeper into the engineering of the social existence of the slave population. To be expected, women bore the brunt of this new form of disciplinary pressure through punishments designed to encourage reproduction. Geggus reports that this movement toward pronatalism: “could result in increased oppression and interference; it could also bring small financial, some recognition of the needs of pregnant women and nursing mothers, and about a one-in-a-hundred chance of freedom from fieldwork.”⁴⁰ Pronatalism realized another system of governmental bio-power through the violent exploitation of the female body. As outlined by James, female slaves would perform infanticide as a means to resist, where sometimes a mysterious jaw disease would take the newborn child’s life.⁴¹

³⁹ Geggus, p.267.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.268. Henrique also observes this phenomenon, adding that “the owner would often encourage his female slaves to breed from a number of men, even offering prizes for this purpose, in the mistaken belief that intercourse with a number of men increased fecundity. In other words, slaves were not permitted to form permanent unions on either an African or a European model.” Henriques, Fernando. “West Indian Family Organization” in *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.55, No.1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press., 1949, p.30.

⁴¹ James reports that “the jaw-sickness – a disease which attacked children only, in the first few days of their existence. Their jaws were closed to such an extent that it was impossible to open them and to get anything down, with the result that they died of hunger. It was a natural disease and never attacked children delivered by white women [...] Whatever the method of this disease caused the death of nearly one-third of the children born on the plantation.”(James, p.17) Moreover, Weaver professes that in the

The economic success and continued planter authority appears to have depended upon the circulating racist ideologies which restrained coloured peoples to a life of servitude. Through the institutional forces which regulated, monitored and calculated the behaviours of the slave population, the plantation served as the primary location for both the creation and reinforcement of Eurocentric perceptions of racial identity. This articulation of racial identity, which was predicated primarily on the polarization of black and white peoples, was grounded on a biological conceptualization of racial origin believed to be contained through a natural system of homogeneity which was impervious to hybrid forms. Homi Bhabha suggests that “hybridity represents that ambivalent ‘turn’ of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification.”⁴² Robert Young rightly observes that “Bhabha has extended his notion of hybridity to include forms of counter-authority, a ‘Third Space’ which [through] the transformational value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation, of elements...[becoming] a third term which can never in fact *be* third because, as a monstrous inversion, a miscreated perversion of its progenitors, it exhausts the differences between them.”⁴³

However, Richardson states that “the white versus black polarity on the earliest sugar-cane plantation soon became more complex with the emergence of a mixed-blood

“Eighteenth-century physician Jean-Damien Chevalier gave the most vivid description of mal de mâchoire when he wrote, ‘The sickness begins at the jaws: they become immobile. The infant is no longer able to take the breast. The rigidity is communicated to the back and to the thighs. The circulation is soon stopped, and the infant perishes.’ Medical practitioner Joseph Jacques de Gardane remarked, ‘The Creoles call this malady mal de mâchoire because the spasm manifests itself in the muscles of the lower jaw.’” Weaver, Karol K. “She Crushed the Child’s Fragile Skull”: Disease, Infanticide, and Enslaved Women in Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue”, in *French Colonial History, Volume 5*, 2004. p.97.

⁴² Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. p.113.

⁴³ Young, Robert. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995. p.23.

population of brown men and women. This ‘mulatto’ caste had become a noticeable segment of the human population throughout the region by the nineteenth century. On the plantations, mixed-blood slaves often were artisans, house servants or held other positions elevated from field drudgery.”⁴⁴ With the emerging hybridization of racial identity on the plantation a more enhanced taxonomy of racial identity created further social stratification: The lighter one’s skin colour, the better the chances of obtaining occupations of greater reward and skill, and better still the opportunity of gaining manumission.

The legal, sexual, and racial identities of African and Asian slaves were framed within a binary system of oppression which sought to extinguish the cultural traditions, historical memory and familial integrity of these transplanted peoples through the many exogenous disciplinary mechanisms first initiated by the Middle Passage.⁴⁵ As noted by James, the suffering endured by the Caribbean slave on the plantation was very severe but coupled with the constant volatility experienced through forced relocation and the high death rates endured during transportation, the growth and stability of community was compromised.⁴⁶ The cultural integrity, communal solidarity and historical memory

⁴⁴ Richardson, p.69.

⁴⁵ The Middle Passage “meant for the Negro a complete break with his traditional type of society. Customs, social sentiments, and patters of behaviour could survive only as ideas and oral traditions, for there were no special mechanisms in the new society by which they could be perpetuated.” *Henrique*, p.30.

⁴⁶ James details the sadistic rituals of plantation punishment: “irons on the hands and feet, blocks of wood that the slaves had to drag behind them wherever they went, the tin-plate mask designed to prevent the slaves eating the sugar-cane, the iron collar. Whipping was interrupted in order to pass a piece of hot wood on the buttocks of the victim; salt, pepper, citron, cinders, aloes, and hot ashes were poured on the bleeding wounds [...] Their masters poured burning wax on their arms and hands and shoulders, emptied the boiling cane sugar over their heads, burned them alive, roasted them on slow fires, filled them with gunpowder and blew them up with a match; buried them up to the neck and smeared their heads with sugar that the flies might devour them; fastened them near to nests of ants or wasps; made them eat their excrement, drink their urine, and lick the saliva of other slaves. One colonist was known in moments of anger to throw himself on his slaves and stick his teeth into their flesh.” James, p.13.

of the slave subject were considered expendable features of human agency which only diminished the economic viability of the plantation. Richardson argues that “the horror of the Middle Passage – a journey accentuated by suicide, malnourishment, disease, and occasional rebellion – did not automatically homogenize captured Africans into docile members of plantation workforces. Caribbean planters quickly recognized differences among the imported slave populations from Africa and came to associate particular behavioural characteristics. For example, the white planters of Antigua became aware of the organization behind the aborted slave revolt of 1736, planning that could be traced to recent Akan arrivals from the Gold Coast.”⁴⁷ The civilizing mission was accomplished most effectively by the forced transference of the slave from one plantation to another to ease worker shortages. Undermining familial and tribal loyalty aided to the psychological trauma of plantation life helping to prevent resistance, and the continual displacement of slaves assisted in assuaging the intense labour demands of the plantation circuit. The economic efficacy of the plantation, and subsequently the entire success of Europe’s economic mission in the New World, was determined by how effective the slave population could be transformed into a productive force void of any communal loyalty which could undermine the colonial regime.

Apart from the forced kidnapping and subsequent transportation of African and Asian peoples to the Caribbean for service on the plantation, another way of procuring labour was through contractual indentureship. The planter soon learned that a system limited to coercion, punishment, and repressive control could only go so far in disciplining the slave. Relinquishing, at least on paper, unlimited authority over the

⁴⁷ Richardson, p.65.

destiny of the slave, the planter created a critical instrument of colonial governmentality, the contract.⁴⁸ Walton Look Lai describes the basic tenets of the British West Indian indenture contract:

(1) the five-year contract of indenture, binding the labourer to a specific plantation for a specified time period at a fixed rate of wages, with severely limited rights of physical mobility outside the workplace environment; (2) the elaborate regulations contained in the various colonial immigration ordinances, governing the reciprocal rights and obligations of planters and labourers, all backed by criminal sanctions (fines and imprisonment); (3) active state involvement at the points of recruitment and transportation in the East, as well as at the points of arrival and distribution in the Caribbean, and the total exclusion of all privately sponsored immigration schemes; and (4) state subsidization of the financial expenses involved in operating the indenture scheme (paid public immigration, rather than free voluntary immigration).⁴⁹

Planter's and their ambassador's recruited African and Indian peoples with false promises and rewards which, although within the power of the planter, were rarely granted. These contracts were initiated as a strategy of recruitment to increase efficiency and profitability in a more competitive global economy. Without recourse to political or legal rights, the slave's opportunity structure was severely limited. Lacking legal protection, the slave was easily coerced into a position of dependency. Typically, contractual obligation was a system of material exploitation, "sometimes by women's carrying on a huckstering enterprise in the market; sometimes by men's hiring themselves out for episodic transportation work on the docks; sometimes by prostitution; sometimes by manufacturing or providing laundry services."⁵⁰ Although this offered the slave an

⁴⁸ Foucault posits that "contract theory enables the founding contract, the mutual pledge of ruler and subjects, to function as a sort of theoretical matrix for deriving the general principles of an art of government." Foucault, *Power*, p.214.

⁴⁹ Look Lai, Walton. *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. p.52.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.146.

opportunity for increased mobility and financial autonomy, these contractual obligations were an extension of the plantation system in which the tentacles of colonial oppression could exact further exploitation, quell demands for slave resistance, and mollify claims for citizenship.

Understanding strategies of resistance within a highly oppressive environment requires a reading of history which can locate the marginal transgressions of everyday life. Tracing the demarcation between latent forms of resistance and colonial subjugation can be an arduous task when trying to rationalize a postcolonial framework in which to evaluate the thought processes, actions and intentionality of the Caribbean subaltern. Sidney Mintz in questioning a clear division between resistance and accommodation argues that we must “first, to make sense of what may look like contradictory situations, we must deal with them as diachronic – that is, historical – processes. Second, such historical processes are specific and particular; each happens in some particular place, to people of some particular place, to people of some particular society; and it happens over time.”⁵¹ A genealogical approach toward tracing the resistance strategies of the Caribbean slave population reveals that the plantation was effective at enforcing isolation and violence. The plantation complex imprinted oppression upon the slave body through a never ending inquisition which individualizes. Far from occupying positions of docility and complicity, however, Caribbean slave resistance should not be confined to a reductionist analysis which requires a rationalistic interrogation of intentionality. From a reading of James’ ‘Black Jacobins’, we can ascertain that the San Domingo slave found

⁵¹ Mintz, Sidney W. “Slave Life on Caribbean Sugar Plantations” in *Slave cultures and the cultures of slavery/* edited by Stephan Palmié. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995. p19.

poisoning the most effective method of resistance on the plantation to exact revenge, safeguard their family, and determine the future succession of plantation rule:

A mistress would poison a rival to retain the valuable affections of her inconstant owner. A discarded mistress would poison master, wife, children and slaves. A slave robbed of his wife by one of his masters would poison him, and this was one of the most frequent causes of poisoning. If a planter conceived a passion for a young slave, her mother would poison his wife with the idea of placing her daughter at the head of the household. The slaves would poison the younger children of the master in order to ensure the plantation succeeding to one son.⁵²

This paper has sought to employ not so much a singular, coherent and totalizing strategy for evaluating how the colonial mind came to deploy strategies of colonial power on the plantation, but to elucidate within this framework, how colonialism cannot be articulated through a linear historiographical lens. Foucault's work outlines how diagrams of historical knowledge exist in multiplicity, heterogeneity and constant rupture, but this cannot exclude the concretization of segmented dispositifs of mercantilism, colonialism and capitalism, as they come to reveal meta-historical movements for identifying cultural genocide and racism. Peter Pels argues that governmentality "cannot be regarded as a singular colonial strategy, and we should study the struggles going on among groups of colonizers and the colonized and between them."⁵³ Postcolonial discourse, when surveying colonial relations of power and resistance, must avoid an examination of the colonizer and colonized subject within a unitary historical, cultural, and discursive reality. While revealing how coercive strategies of racial identification, cultural genocide, and capital exploitation on the plantation were

⁵² James, p.16.

⁵³ Pels, p.176.

effective practices for shaping the slave subject, these processes can only do so much into articulating spaces of intentionality, desire and identity. But nevertheless, these violent historical events require further examination in order to reevaluate how contemporary acts of violent oppression and racism endure within the political imagination.

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