SANDRA COURTMAN

Sandra Courtman teaches English literature and creative writing in the Institute of Lifelong Learning, University of Sheffield. She researches the apparent paucity and marginality of West Indian women’s writing in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. She recovered and edited a rare Jamaican woman’s autobiography, out-of-print since 1969: Joyce Gladwell’s Brown Face, Big Master (Macmillan Caribbean Classic, 2003). She was Chair of the Society for Caribbean Studies from 1999-2002 and continues to edit the online conference proceedings. As a result of this work, she published a multi-disciplinary collection, Beyond the Blood, the Beach and The Banana: New Perspectives in Caribbean Studies (Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2004).

The Psyche of a 'Cruel, Flagellating lot': The Abusive Streak In Creole Women's Writing

Sandra Courtman

The history of white settlement in the colonial West Indies is bound to the acts of extreme cruelty that occur during and after slavery. There are many accounts of the psychological, physical and sexual abuse of black slaves by their masters and mistresses. By way of a familiar example, the mythologised mistress of Jamaica’s Rose Hall, is Annie Palmer, fictionalised by H.G. de Lisser in The White Witch of Rosehall (1929). She is one of many Creole women with a reputation for extreme cruelty. In 2005, The Radio Times carried a full page image of an enslaved man’s deeply scarred flesh resulting from repeated flagellation. Channel 4 chose this disturbing image to advertise its programme on reparations for slavery. Punning both on Tony Blair’s ‘Cool Britannia’ and on the anthem ‘Rule Britannia’, the message about empire and cruelty is powerfully reinforced by the rhetorical ‘Cruel Britannia.’

This paper poses the question of what happens to habitual patterns of abuse arising from distorted power relations under slavery when the opportunities to practice such abuse should theoretically no longer exist. The question arises from recurring motifs in the fiction and autobiographies of white Creole women writers in the postwar and pre-independent period. The writer I am going to focus is virtually unknown in terms of Caribbean literary history.
She was born in 1915 in Jamaica and died in England in 1989. She settled in London, and published under the name, 'Lucille D'Oyen Iremonger', describing herself as primarily an 'historical biographer'. Her writing is a complex interplay between her own life story and the larger political histories that shaped its existence. Her autobiography, *Yes My Darling Daughter* was published in London by Secker and Warburg in 1964, and favourably reviewed by the Times Literary Supplement. By the time she has this book published she is a successful Conservative member of parliament in England, and her book carries a photograph of her campaigning in Lambeth in 1961.

The portrait of the author on the cover suggests that, like Jean Rhys, she inherited her mother’s French Creole beauty with dark hair, dark eyes and milky skin. She is writing her life story in England on the cusp of Jamaican independence at a time when her family’s privileged social position is being re-evaluated in the context of a black Caribbean history. What is interesting for this paper is that in her project to recover her family history, she reveals a strong interest in inherited forms of discipline, including extremely severe canings that were regularly metered out to the children in her family.

Iremonger traces her family history on her maternal side, writing of their escape from the French revolution to the French Caribbean island of San Domingo, only to flee once again in 1791 from the slave revolution which formed Haiti. Fleeing from one European revolution, they had little idea that they ‘were going merely from one revolution to another.’ (p. 74) At this point the author is troubled by her ancestors’ role in the horrors of slavery on St. Domingue but concludes that as individuals they were unlikely to have inflicted the atrocities associated with the causes of the revolution: ‘It is so much harder to be cruel to individuals than to meet mass brutality with mass brutality.’ (p.74)

One of her French ancestors is Frédéric Giles whose family managed to evade the disaster of revolution for the second time ‘leaving the wretched, bewildered Haitians to their black tyrants.’ (p.75) Having settled in Jamaica, her grandmother is killed in the Great Earthquake of 1907. Both her parents were orphaned and experienced deprivation and discipline but little in the way of love. She romanticises their ability to survive both physically and materially but is acutely aware of the ruthlessness that this survival instinct incurs. A ‘talent’ for amassing riches at the expense of others does not pass Lucille’s mother (Ivy) by. Ivy manages to die a rich woman even though her children experience an unexpected level of hardship under her
care. As a child, Lucille longs for ordinary Jamaican treats but is rarely allowed to have them. She is forced to save all her pocket money. Ivy even manages to manipulate the child’s longing for a piano by bartering with her for valuable gold sovereigns given on the child’s birthdays. Lucille dreams of a baby grand piano but in return for the Sovereigns, she receives a battered upright and the mother is considerably richer for the deal. Lucille is often caught between the conflicting values of a puritanical Anglo-Scottish father and a hedonistic French mother, describing her scheming mother as ‘a bandit.’ (p.59)

That the family are survivors, she writes: ‘The most casual glance at the more recent upheavals in those family chronicles takes in at least two revolutions, several wars, some catastrophic fires and earthquakes, and much financial ruin.’ (p.12) A maternal family tree follows which, although incomplete, illustrates Lucille’s French lineage.

Iremonger maternal family tree
A genealogy of cruelty?

Although she is very proud of her French aristocratic heritage, there is an obvious difficulty created by their connections with slavery and their implication in the causes of revolution both
in Europe and the colonies. The author uses her historical research as a way of understanding the sources of recurring types of cruel behaviours, certainly physical and psychological - and possibly sexual. Although the autobiography is centred on the precarious fortunes of a powerful plantocracy, it is nevertheless impossible to read this account of white history without acknowledging ‘the ghost of slavery’ which haunts its pages. In terms of the author’s family, there can be no white history without the rebellious black agents who haunt the pages. Their treatment is not the focus of the autobiography but the author is highly aware of their role in her family’s fortunes. Identifying strongly with the merchant princes and princesses of her aristocratic lineage, she must place herself on the losing side in the San Domingo revolution whilst sublimating the possibility of her family’s part in its viciousness and cruelty. The family archive was kept in the Jamaican mountain retreat of Uncle Thé-Thé only to be burned by his black housekeeper when he died. The author mourns this lost archive but imaginatively she also returns the evidence to ‘the banana groves’. In her account, arguably the land becomes a fitting repository for ex-planters whose archival remains become the ‘ashes to ashes’ of a violent and exploitative history:

The family history in which was rooted the disdainful pride of my people, the source of my unnatural isolation from others had gone up in those sparkly flames, had drifted across the courtyard and into the banana groves in those pieces of blackened paper.

(p.79)

Her version of recuperative history is interesting because it alternates so powerfully with C.L.R. James’s dialectical research for The Black Jacobins in which he reclaims the enslaved as autonomous agents. Of the white planters implicated in the San Domingo revolution of 1791, James writes: ‘On such a soil as San Domingo slavery, only a vicious society could flourish.’ Iremonger, like many of her contemporary colonial women writers, is uniquely placed in a dichotomous literary space. As Robin Visel contends:

The white settler woman and her descendents occupy a privileged position in comparison to their darker native or slave-descended sisters. While the native woman is truly doubly-oppressed or doubly-colonised, by male dominance as well as by white economic and social dominance, the white settler woman can best be described as half-colonised. Although she too is oppressed by white men and patriarchal structures, she shares in the power and guilt of the colonists. The best white women writers are acutely aware of this dilemma. […] her oppression as a woman draws her toward the colonized blacks, but her race and class ally her, in spite of herself, with the male colonizers: with her father, brother, or husband.
This paper explores the author’s pride and guilt in her privileged family position in relation to recurring experiences of child cruelty. Iremonger calls her family ‘great chastisers’ as if she needs to understand how this ‘chastising’ is an important part of the family legacy. There is no doubt that children of white planters learn to replicate abusive behaviours. Christina Sharpe suggests that the 1838 diaries of James Hammond, a South Carolina slave owner, illustrate how the rape of a twelve year old child is ‘normalised’ under slavery. Hammond affects a discursive switch where a paternalistic master narrative transforms sexual violence into affection. Sharpe writes: ‘…known for his “sexual proclivities” and a more generalised cruelty to enslaved people, in his diaries Hammond transforms his ownership and rape of Sally and Louisa Johnson into a narrative of benevolent paternalism.’ She concludes that if the slave master’s ‘affection’ is paternalistic, logically this ‘incest’ must be concealed.

Sexual relationships with the enslaved were commonplace and inevitable because in Edward Long’s view: ‘Since the West Indies was not home, anything could be done there. Morals and manners deteriorated.’ And yet this actual moral deterioration conflicted with an imaginary relationship where ‘…the whites and Coloureds had built nothing but the idea of superiority of the culture of the metropolis.’ There was the unspoken taboo of incest within white families that Kenneth Ramchand explains simply as a feature ‘of enclave life.’ Incest within white settler families was deemed a necessary means of protecting social supremacy because the white community was always less than ten percent of the total population. Of the French in Trinidad, Bridget Brereton writes:

> Even if marriage to whites outside the narrow ethnic community became more thinkable by the early twentieth century, on the whole, though, inbreeding was the safest way to avoid undesirable connections […] For the French creoles, intermarriage and inbreeding, social and familial incest, were both a virtue and a necessity.

I have only time to sketch the historical dimension of the psycho-sexual terrain in which Iremonger is working but this is of prime importance in relation to her questions about the origins of her father’s schizophrenic personality and of her mother’s rejection.

The psychological cruelty that Lucille experiences from her father might be explained in part by her mother’s contemptuous treatment of her husband. Ivy flaunts her numerous affairs as a means of humiliation. With a wife that so visibly rejects him, he inflicts different types of control and abuse on his children. Lucille, as the eldest, seems to incur the worst of his many obsessions and is expected to ‘perform’ in many different capacities. She must succeed.
academically, be beautiful like her mother and be physically strong. (p.135) He pushes her to the limits of her ability and beyond in all three of these. Very early she is expected to learn to read from English primers about hay-wains and skylarks whilst ‘bald-headed vultures wheeled over palm trees.’ (p.50). She was given a book to read at the age of six which, she explains, would have been difficult for most fifteen year olds. She rises to the challenge and is rewarded by an even more difficult book. ‘There was something bullying about the whole effect.’ (p.52) Basil’s many fetishes, such as his obsession with maps assumes obsessive proportions. As Anne McClintock explains ‘The colonial map of the world enchanted Europe and became its fetish.’ Thus she is expected to learn by heart all the countries and their capitals of the world. Her father then tests her on these in an experience so horrible that it ‘induces a life-long nausea associated with maps.’ (p.53) Her childhood is one of social isolation and homework. By the age of sixteen the singularity of this regime sees her deprived of friends, games, and ‘I know I had nothing to wear but my school uniform.’ (p.127) She is only made aware of the barrenness of her own upbringing when she visits the widower Major Fairfax who is demonstrative and openly affectionate to his five children.

The widower Major Fairfax is one of her mother’s ‘companions’ in an affair that will not last. Thus her mother’s beauty and her ability to attract lovers becomes contiguous with cruelty. Lucille knows that her ‘Grandmother and Great Grandmother were responsible for innumerable duels, suicides and departures for Cuba.’ (p.62). To be blessed with great beauty means the ability to inflict pain. We understand that Ivy is idle and vain, obsessed with money and clothes and that she uses these to attract men who become involved in a series of short-lived but destructive ‘affaires’. (p.62-3) Ivy even implicates her children in her liaisons. Lucille recounts how one lover rows mother and children across to the Palisadoes ‘a meeting place of prostitutes, paranoids and psychopaths.’ (p13) From their home at Breezy Castle, situated across the natural harbour, the children often gaze on the old site of Port Royal and try to imagine how the city was shaken into the sea in the 1692 earthquake. It is significant that the Palisadoes was the burial ground of the old Port and the chosen site for her mother’s liaison.

Knowledge of this strain of psycho-sexual cruelty on her mother’s side runs along side the physical and mental punishments which her father metes out. In a moment of Freudian insight, Lucille casts her mother as a mutilating figure: ‘My mother loved knives and always had one close at hand.’ (p.34) But it is her father whom she loves and who manipulates her compliance to breaking point. For the obsessively competitive Basil, Lucille’s beauty becomes another
source of competition against the old island families. ‘The prizes of the beauty competition were reserved for daughters of the white planting plutocracy and other old island families of the dominant caste.’ (p.65) She is delivered to the beauty competition by deception and entered against her will to be appraised as a 'young filly'. She manages to escape this public humiliation, and what she perceives as her parents' betrayal, by a dash from the Myrtle Bank Hotel where the competition is taking place:

This is just one of many examples of how Basil manipulates his child's longing for approval by changing the rules of engagement. In other situations he withdraws the expected reward. When the news breaks that she has won a scholarship for an English university place, and for which she has competed with the brightest of the entire Caribbean, it is her hated mother, not her father, who comes to collect her for lunch. This displeasure is heightened by the fact that the mother arrives in the school hall not with her father but with her lover, Major Fairfax. Lucille desperately wants her father's approval, but instead has to endure a return to the scene of humiliation and an anxious lunch at the Myrtle Bank:

They had come to take me to the Myrtle Bank Hotel, scene of the beauty competition, for a celebratory lunch. This was the hotel of which the capital was proudest, and my mother and the Major were its regular patrons. That day we sat under a leafy pergola, at a table close to the sea, watching the scarlet and blue Macaws which were chained nearby as an ornament and an entertainment, and eating delicious food. [...] I wondered where my father was, whether he knew, and how, if he did, he felt. Why had he not joined us? It was lunch-time and he came home to lunch every day. Was he eating at home alone?

When I was at last taken home he was not there. It was not until six o'clock that I was able to confirm that he was pleased. (p.141)

Her success is exchanged like a spoil in the war between her parents, hanging as a black cloud over the child's achievements. When she finally gets to tell her father that she has achieved the Island Scholarship, he tells her to 'Go, and don't come back.' (p.196)

Not surprisingly, the author’s father is the source of complex emotions where she must attempt to understand her extremes of love/hate for him. As with many women’s autobiographies, the writing is an imaginative response to childhood trauma and substitutes for a real dialogue that she would never have. She interrogates the text with questions as to whether his behaviour was as a result of the 'cruel, flagellating lot' imported from England to administer his own education, and further speculates: 'Or was it the bullying he endured at his brother's hands?' (p.45) She cannot ignore the obvious anxiety: 'Or was it, yet again, a hereditary strain of cruelty? Who really knows about such things?' She writes:
Certainly he not only beat long and loud and often, confessedly delighting in the feel of the cane and its sound and the satisfaction of punishment, but his sole idea of paternal fun was to tickle his girl children until they screamed with terror and lost their breath entirely. He never played any other game except the variant, horrible one of Spiders, in which he made a spider of his long bony fingers, which travelled with awful deliberation from the tips of one's toes and up and over one's shins, knees and thighs, up and up, with accompanying ghoulish commentary in sinister tones, until it reached one's ribs and the dreaded tattoo of tickling and screams of high laughter exploded with suddenness and force. (p.44)

Iremonger is trying to understand behaviour that we would now recognise as going beyond the boundaries of play or discipline. The confessed gratification to be achieved in the 'long, loud and often' caning of the little girls suggests a displacement of pleasure obtained through inflicting pain - the only 'game' he plays, significantly with his 'girl children', building into a quasi-sexual climax of terror for the child and obvious release for the adult.

Her father mixes ‘affection’ with a ‘streak of cruelty’ in a way that evokes a type of paternal propriety that James Hammond displays to his ‘family’ of slaves. We might conclude from some of the depictions of physical punishments – beatings, canings and various forms of humiliation that seem to go beyond the bounds of discipline - that they may have an element of sexual gratification. In spite of the fact that beatings and cruelty exist as the cultural norm in Iremonger’s family tree, I would nevertheless argue that by contemporary standards, Iremonger’s accounts of her father’s pleasure in corporal punishment correspond to a paraphilia-related-disorder where he exhibits the need to obtain sexual gratification through the infliction of pain on others.10

In conclusion

Writing about Jean Rhys, Ramchand’s concept of a Creole ‘terrified consciousness’ does not go far enough to explain the taboo of sexual, physical and psychological abuse within white settler families. Of Iremonger’s generation, Jean Rhys is the most critically acclaimed author who explores how Creole girl children are caught in a paradox of material and social privilege but must grow up without the security of parental love. I argue that Creole women’s writing of the mid-twentieth century reveals the way in which this legacy of cruelty may be turned inwards towards the privileged children of white settlers. There is a much earlier example of parental cruelty and inter-racial sisterhood in The History of Mary Prince (1831) where she defends her master’s white daughter from a savage beating:
My old master often got drunk, and then he would get into a fury with his daughter, and beat her till she was not fit to be seen. I remember on one occasion, I had gone to fetch water, and when I was coming up the hill I heard great screaming; I ran as fast as could to the house, put down the water, and when into the chamber, where I found my master beating Miss D___ dreadfully. I strove with all my strength to get her away from him; for she was almost black and blue with bruises. He had beat her with his fist, and almost killed her. The people gave me credit for getting her away.  

It seems that this experience of severe beatings and other forms of cruelty recur in twentieth century writing depicting Creole childhood.

There is little doubt that Iremonger’s ‘outsider’ status has resulted in her work being overlooked. Evelyn O’Callaghan’s scholarship helps us to understand how, as a white Jamaican woman, her position is deeply ambiguous in Caribbean literary studies. Anne McClintock writes that: ‘Women and men did not experience imperialism in the same way. [...] Imperialism cannot be understood without a theory of gender power.’ However, whiteness may result in the occlusion of writers who reveal the way in which race intersects with imperial and gender power structures. Writing about the pioneer and political activist Phyllis Shand Allfrey, David Dabydeen poses the question: ‘So why is Allfrey virtually unknown or ignored in Dominica and the wider literary world?’ He asserts that ‘the substantial reason for invisibility is her whiteness’. In Sandra Pouchet Paquet’s literary survey of the 1950s, Allfrey’s novel *The Orchid House* is described as contributing to the view of ‘[A] white patriarchal colonial establishment [...] represented as singularly unattractive in its manipulative, exploitative, corrupt and effete relations in the world’. We can easily understand Creole women writers’ exclusion from an intense period of activity to establish black history, Black Nationalism and black feminism/s. Writers with access to white publishers and social privilege like Iremonger complicate the agendas of these recuperative movements.

Iremonger’s project is born out of intense contradictions which the author experiences growing up in Jamaica at a time when power is shifting – and for her father, this seems to signal the end of what has been a long process of loss stretching back to emancipation. We can see that this loss of power produces enormous stress for the author’s abusive and fetishistic father.

Dabydeen explains that ‘The emancipation of slaves (the source of their ancestral wealth) in 1838 began the long and painful process whereby the white grip on the island was loosened. [by the 50s and 60s...] the whites were in retreat, many fleeing from the prospect of black government by emigrating to England.’
This is the ‘paradox of belonging’ that impinges on the careers of white Creole writers in the postwar period. Whilst Iremonger is able to ‘retreat’ from empire through her education and marriage, her father could not go back to a mythical England because it never existed as a real place, nor would the British have wanted him. She writes rather enigmatically: ‘It became his obsession to help the child he loved most to escape. He realised that he himself would never do so; his great attempt had ended in an ignominious return.’ (p. 122). As the human remnants of an exploitative empire, anachronistic figures like Basil Parks might be regarded as postcolonial embarrassments. White authored fiction and autobiography written between the 1920s and 50s often represents the plantocracy as mad and doomed and in all likelihood, in 1960s England, someone like Basil Parks could serve as a reminder of an ugly history managed by an inbred degenerative white population. So whilst as a descendant of the elite class of slave owners, Iremonger’s version of the world might be supposed to have been privileged, in her autobiographical practice she has a need to represent an historical moment of retreat and fragile self-worth. Iremonger begins *Yes, My Darling Daughter* with this weary admission:

My reason for publishing this rather personal little book is that I have been persuaded [she does not say by whom] that I owe a footnote to history. I was by the accident of my birth placed at the confluence of two cultures, doomed and now vanished but not uninteresting, full of pride, of terrible conflicts and of pathos as they were - that of the English in the West Indies still living in the ethos of a slave-owning oligarchy, and that of the émigrés from the French Revolution. Much is published about the Carribean today, and it is all no doubt accurate as well as vivid; but the writers tell of a different world from the one I knew. (p.9. author's italics)

For some Creole women writers, like Jean Rhys, this situation has been highly creative. There are other authors of her generation and much more work that might be done to reclaim this as a genre in which the conflicts inherent in being born into that position of privilege and retreat are exposed. My work suggests there are patterns worth exploring here. Cecily Howland published her autobiography in 1961, significantly advertising the book as ‘a study in father-fixation.’ In her preface, she seems to crystallise the problem for her generation of Creole women writers:

To conjure the past for its own sake is a morbid exercise. But as an act of desperation it may suddenly illuminate the causes of despair. If one sees the way back one may see the way forward. If one learns where one came from one may divine where one should be going.’
This conjuring by reliving is what I have tried to perform in writing this book. I knew I must be prepared to lean far out over the deep, to look not only at my own reflected image but to plunge in and touch the bedrock below.  

Notes

2She is a multi-faceted writer, and has published work in a variety of genres: fiction, history, biography, and writing for children. However, what is curious is that, as a relatively unknown writer, she should have such a strong impulse towards autobiography. Her first autobiography was published in her mid-twenties in 1948, entitled It's a Bigger Life, and she then returned to the autobiographical mode in the 1960s. And His Charming Lady was published in 1961, while Yes, My Darling Daughter was published - and favourably reviewed by The Times Literary Supplement - in 1964. All further references to Lucille Iremonger, Yes, My Darling Daughter (London: Secker and Warburg, 1964) appear as page numbers in the text.
5There are several accounts of how planters teach their children to be cruel. As Christina Sharpe writes: ‘Despite emancipation then, the very force of, among other factors, sex, sexual violence, and sexual desire kept people tethered to awful psychic and material configurations’. Discussing the diaries of James Hammond a South Carolina slave owner, she cites the cases of the enslaved Sally and Louisa Johnson. Hammond had (from 1838) ‘protracted sexual “relationships” with both Sally and Louisa Johnson; immediately with Sally and then with Louisa when she reaches the age of twelve’. Hammond’s diaries suggest how these ‘habits’ are ritually passed down from father to son: In the event of his death Hammond advises his eldest son Harry that he should “Take care of Louisa and her children who are both your blood if not mine”. Hammond’s ambiguous reference to Harry’s “blood” indicates that either Harry or James is the father of some of Louisa’s children. Sharpe, Christina, ‘Gayle Jones’ Corregidora and “Days that were pages of Hysteria”, in Revisiting Slave Narratives, ed. by Judith Misrahi-Barak (Coll, Les Carnets du Cerpac, no.2. Université Montpellier III): 159-176, 163.
6Sharpe, ‘Gayle Jones’ Corregidora and “Days that were pages of Hysteria”, 162.
10In an article by Martin Katka in Psychiatric Times, he lists ‘sexual sadism, inflicting suffering or humiliation on others’ as a common form of paraphilia. Martin P. Katka M.D., ‘Therapy for Sexual Impulsivity: The Paraphilias and Paraphilia-related Disorders’, Psychiatric Times, June 1996, Vol. XIII, Issue 6, p.1 Lucille’s father would appear to be manifesting some of the symptoms of a paraphiliac, especially one with sadistic tendencies. His pleasure at administering pain is clear enough from other accounts in the autobiography. Paraphilia is defined by the American Psychiatric Association Manual as unusual and bizarre behaviour involving sexual activity with non-consenting adults or children, particularly one where gratification is obtained from inflicting pain. (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, DMS -111, 1980). I acknowledge the expert direction of Carolyn Hicks, Professor of Healthcare Psychology, University of Birmingham UK in obtaining this reference.
13Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Class, Gender and the Colonial Contest, p.6.
Bibliography


Dabydeen, David, ‘Island Dreams’, *Guardian online archive*, January 22, 2005. [http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,5108582-110738,00.htmlBooks/Island Dream accessed 22.05.05.](http://books.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,5108582-110738,00.htmlBooks/Island Dream)


McCIntock, Anne, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (London: Routledge, 1995)


This paper was given at The Society For Caribbean Studies Conference held at The National Archives, Kew, London, 5-7 July 2006
Copyright remains with the author.

PLEASE USE YOUR BROWSER BUTTON TO GO BACK