DAVID LAMBERT

David Lambert is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Geography, Cambridge University. His thesis is on white society and culture in Barbados during the controversy over slavery of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. His supervisor is Dr. James Duncan of the Department of Geography and Emmanuel College.

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Competing Discourses of Whiteness in the 1816 Barbados Enslaved Revolt:

Theoretical Possibilities and Ethical Dilemmas

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Abstract

Central to the 'historiographic decolonisation' of the Caribbean has been a concern to narrate the non-white subject. A seemingly countervailing tendency has occurred within the field of 'white studies', a recent development within critical race and ethnic studies. Although sharing a similar concern to critique white racism, the object of study has shifted to white racialisation. Nevertheless, a subalternist focus is central to critical analyses of whiteness, revealing the role of non-white subjects in the (re)production of white identities. Yet, there are also dilemmas. The reflexive tendencies of 'white studies' carry the danger of recentring white narratives. Seeking to work through the synergies between, and dilemmas of, subalternist approaches, postcolonial theories and analyses of white racialisation, this paper focuses on the 1816 enslaved revolt in Barbados. Reading the texts and acts of insurgency and counter-insurgency, it explores three competing projects of white racialisation. Anti-abolitionist recriminations and anti-black violence sought to establish a white Barbadian identity under threat from enslaved subjects and metropolitan agitators. This was contested by British abolitionists who portrayed themselves as humanitarians struggling against 'un-English' colonists. These metropolitan and peripheral white identities were contested by the enslaved rebels, whose plotting and insurgency enacted an anti-white colonial project. Thus, the paper seeks to explore the methodological and theoretical dilemmas, complexities and anxieties of mapping the contested (re)production of white identities and spaces, in the context of a grounded Caribbean case study.

Introduction

In March of last year, I gave a paper at the *Breaking Methods* workshop at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London.[1] I sought to raise some initial questions about the relevance of the field of 'white studies' for critical work on the Caribbean. The aim of this paper is two-fold: firstly, to provide a more detailed theoretical framework for that effort and, secondly, to present an empirical elaboration of my argument. In this way, I will seek to sketch out how a *postcolonial historical geography of whiteness* might begin to be written. My focus will be less on listing the ethical dilemmas of

studying whiteness in a Caribbean context and more on how these might be addressed methodologically. I will begin by briefly charting the theoretical trajectory of my work, before moving on to discuss methodological and ethical issues. Finally, I will present a case study based on the 1816 revolt by enslaved people in Barbados – events known popularly as 'Bussa's Rebellion'.

Theoretical Trajectory

My doctoral research began with a geographical question about postcolonial theory, namely: "Is Edward Said's Orientalist model of colonial discourse applicable or useful in the slave societies of the British Caribbean, and particularly Barbados?"[2]I realised that one of the most appropriate historical foci in answering that question would be the trans-Atlantic controversy over slavery in the British empire of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. This was a time of pro- and antislavery campaigning and writing, overt enslaved resistance and imperial policy formulation. More abstractly, the controversy was a moment when textuality was linked directly to attempts to maintain or terminate the practice of enslaved (dis)possession. In short, this is an ideal focus for colonial discourse analysis. Yet, it is also a context that foregrounds some of the weaknesses of this approach and provides opportunities for more nuanced applications. For example, the 'tensions of empire' apparent in the slavery controversy – as pro- and antislavery campaigns sought to influence the metropolitan authorities, whilst enslaved people resisted and free people of colour struggled for civil rights – makes it clear that the binary division between 'coloniser' and 'colonised' asserted in some colonial discourse work is patently inadequate.[3]

Perhaps the greatest opportunity for reworking colonial discourse theory is in relation to the *object* of study. Much work in the wake of *Orientalism* has revolved around the inspection of how the colonised other was rendered in the imagination and acts of the coloniser. In contrast, the constitution of the *white* subject has remained largely uninterrogated. As Alastair Bonnett remarks…

> [There has been] a perversely intense focus upon the marginal subject-groups constituted within the Western and imperial imagination. The White centre of that imagination is not discussed. The latter seems to have an extraordinary power to appear transparent before the scholarly gaze.[4]

Whilst a focus on white representations of the black other is necessary to understand the racial hierarchies that structure various forms of knowledge and practice, there is a danger that, to the exclusion of other foci, such an approach may not only mirror the patterns of epistemic colonial violence, but actually have deadening, voyeuristic and reiterative effects by recolonising historically subjugated people in contemporary work.[5]It is perhaps for this reason that many scholars on discourses of slavery have sought to explore black (self-)representations, such as those by Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince. Another option is to examine representations *of* whiteness and to show that whiteness is just as discursively constructed as blackness.

This interrogation of whiteness is enabled, or rather demanded, by the particular form of the slavery controversy. Although the representation of blackness – as natural 'slave' or sable victim, eternally damned or fit for freedom – was certainly a key feature of the slavery controversy,[6] it was not the sole focus of discourse and practice. In addition, both pro- and antislavery campaigners were engaged in representing themselves and their opponents. Reading the texts of the slavery controversy, one is struck by the recurrence of debates about the 'character' of West Indian slaveholders and their abolitionist opponents, and issues of which white voices the imperial government should heed. Humanitarians condemned the West Indian slaveholders as debauched, drunken, sadistic creoles, engaged in economic and social activity that was thoroughly 'un-English'. The slaveholders and their supporters, in turn, emphasised their loyalty, Englishness and white sameness to the metropole, and portrayed the opponents of slavery as malicious, ignorant, troublemakers, whose actions served to incite enslaved people. Thus, the slavery controversy was about more than whether the trade in enslaved people should be ended or enslaved people freed. Given the centrality of the institution of slavery to the West Indian societies and to their relationship with Britain, this controversy was also about the nature of 'West Indianness', about which groups could claim to be 'white' and what this might mean.[7]

In sum, reading primary historical sources from the slavery controversy, alongside critiques and developments within colonial discourse theory, I concluded that central to a postcolonial analysis of this context would be a focus on *whiteness*, rather than simply representations of blackness, of the other. Thus, starting with a geographical question about postcolonial theory, my research became an attempt to write a postcolonial historical geography of whiteness, focussing on the controversy over slavery in and about Barbados.

What I want to do in this paper is to consider what this might entail. I will begin by briefly discussing three modes of analysis that are central to my project. I will then seek to exemplify this through a brief empirical case study based on the 1816 Barbados revolt.

Methods/Ethics

'White Studies' and Historicisation

Since the 1980s, there has been a growth in the analysis of white identity within a broad interdisciplinary field known as 'white studies'. The term itself is problematic, as both racially conservative *and* progressive, anti-racist work often go under this banner.[8] The most interesting 'white studies' work adopts a critical, deconstructive perspective, recognising that race and ethnicity are not simply traits of non-white people. In many accounts of race, whites only come in because they have 'attitudes' towards nonwhites – they may be *racist* but not *racial.* Yet, as Coco Fusco argues:

> Racial identities are not only Black, Latino, Asian, Native American and so on; they are also white. To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it…[9]

Within the field of 'white studies', my focus is on work that focuses on white racialisation – the processes through which certain people became defined as 'white' and the meanings and consequences of this. Such work is very useful for interrogating the signifying practices of whiteness within colonial discourses. Historical explorations by Theodore Allen, David Roediger and Noel Ignatiev approach whiteness as a product of American capitalism and working-class organisation.[10] The primary mode of analysis in this work is *historicisation*, tracing the contingencies, the inclusions and the exclusions through which a 'white' American identity was forged. This is a deconstructive, anti-essentialist strategy that discloses the violent, contested and partial nature of 'white' identity as positionally good. Historicisation is also vital to writing a postcolonial historical geography of whiteness.

Although such historical studies provide a useful model for anti-essentialist accounts of whiteness, they are mainly limited to the United States and Bonnett argues that 'a detailed and integrated historical geography of Whiteness is still some way off'.[11] Mapping this historical geography not only requires attention to spaces beyond the United States, but also to the value of a spatial awareness in critical work on whiteness.

(Dis)locating Whiteness: Spatialisation

Bonnett's comments on 'white studies' bring me to the second mode of analysis that I want to discuss – *spatialisation*. In his work, Bonnett sketches a global geography of whiteness that is unstable and in flux, and demonstrates the importance of a variety of locations for the emergence of dominant, modern, Euro-American meanings of 'white'. The employment of 'white' to refer to Europeans was most fully developed in sites of European colonialism – including the Caribbean slave colonies – something Bonnett describes as symptomatic of whiteness' key position in emergent colonial discourses.[12]

This spatial focus is reminiscent of postcolonial work on Englishness and Britishness, which emphasises the importance of the empire for the development of metropolitan identities. I'm thinking here of the work of Catherine Hall, Simon Gikandi or Ian Baucom.[13] One of the problems with this work, however, is that it tends to equate colonial space with non-white bodies, failing to recognise that the colonies were also the site of *non-metropolitan projects of white racialisation*. In particular, the forms of whiteness forged

and defended by settlers was not a displaced form of metropolitan whiteness, but often the creation of a 'new', *creole*, whiteness.

So, the story of whiteness is not simply one of colonial encounters with non-white subjects in peripheral space, which then impact upon metropolitan racialisation. Rather, it is a complex cartography of metropolitan and peripheral whitenesses, of centrifugal and centripetal forces. To map this cartography is to *spatialise* whiteness, a critical strategy that detaches 'white' from 'metropolitan'.

Interfering with Whiteness: Subalternism

Thus far, I have assembled the modes of analysis necessary to chart a historical geography of whiteness, but what ethical dilemmas might this raise? The emergence of 'white studies' has been controversial and even its most (self-)critical practitioners have been reticent about their work.[14] Perhaps its biggest danger is that far from being a deconstructive project, 'white studies' actually serves to recentre or 'recuperate' whiteness, keeping white people firmly at the heart of historical and geographical narratives, though now in the name of a supposedly critical perspective.[15] This possibility does not sit well with the aims of most contemporary Caribbean historiography.

A central aim of the contemporary historiography of the anglophone Caribbean has been 'historiographic decolonisation'.[16] Focusing on the historical experiences of the black majority and developing new forms of analysis, there has been an effort to unearth subaltern histories and geographies in the search for a 'usable and epic past'.[17] Such aims are clearly at odds with the recentring and recuperative threat that some critics believe 'white studies' work may pose and this raises some serious ethical issues. Yet the two approaches are not irreconcilable and useful here is the work of bell hooks, who has argued that whiteness might be interrogated without it being recentred by exploring the production of white subjectivity by *non*-whites and looking at how whiteness has been understood, used, rejected and ignored.[18] Similarly, David Roediger's recent edited collection of writing – *Black on white* – has shown that black people have long been central to the (re)production of whiteness.[19] Thus, the problem of recentring might be avoided, to some extent, if rather than exploring how white identity was produced or imagined by white people, we instead focus on whiteness as contested and contingent field.

We might term this a 'subalternist' focus, in which whiteness is viewed as a 'transcultural'[20] or – perhaps more appropriately in the West Indian context – a 'creole' category,[21] in which the acts and representations of non-white people were of crucial importance in its (re)production. It is precisely the empirically-rich and theoretically-sophisticated work of contemporary historiographers of the Caribbean, particularly their reworking of 'traditional' primary sources, that is vital here. In this way, the decolonising imperatives and strategies of Caribbean historiography have a key role to play in a truly postcolonial historical geography of whiteness.

Summary

So what I have done so far is to sketch out three modes of analysis that are central to a postcolonial historical geography of whiteness. By tracing its violent and uneven development over time, mapping its fractures and trans-locational connections, and exploring the role of the colonised, marginalised and enslaved in its (re)production and failure, one may be able to develop a critical approach to 'whiteness' that is neither recentring nor recuperative.

What I want to do now is to illustrate some of this by looking at the 1816 enslaved rebellion in Barbados, events popularly known as 'Bussa's Rebellion'.

Case Study: The 1816 Rebellion in Barbados

At 8 o'clock in the evening, Easter Sunday, 14 April 1816, the cane fields on Bayleys plantation in the parish of St. Philip were set alight, signalling Barbados' first major revolt by its enslaved population.

Martial law was declared on Monday, and militia and imperial forces were mobilised. Avoiding direct conflict, the rebels destroyed a fifth of Barbados' sugar cane crop through arson. Nevertheless, by midday on Wednesday 17 April, the uprising was crushed after two major military engagements. Acts of white vengeance continued until January 1817, however, with the trial, execution and deportation of the rebels. Marking the beginning of a period of overt and large-scale resistance across the British Caribbean, the revolt shattered the self-congratulatory complacency of Barbados' planters. The revolt also became a key moment in the trans-Atlantic controversy over slavery, raising questions about the impact of antislavery politics on the enslaved population, the rights or wrongs of imperial intervention in West Indian affairs and the costs of maintaining slavery.[22]

The 1816 rebellion was an intensely narrated revolt. Descriptions, investigations and contemporary histories sought to identify its origins and causes. Opponents and supporters of slavery tried to establish a dominant reading of the revolt in their struggle to influence the imperial authorities. Moreover, the rebels themselves narrated the revolt in plots, rumours and confessions. These various narrations can be seen as *spatial imaginaries*, in that they sought to *locate* the origins of the revolt in different sites – be it Barbados, particular parts of the island, the imperial metropole or the African diaspora. The narrations also revolved around the deployment and refutation of particular *discourses of whiteness*: were the slaveholders victims or sadists, were the abolitionists agitators or humanitarians, was white agency important in causing the revolt or did the rebellion express long-standing black hatred of slavery?

I will focus on three narrations of the revolt – though by doing so inevitably I am overemphasising their internal coherency. These are proslavery, antislavery and enslaved rebel narrations. My reading involves an eclectic combination of textual analysis, the reading of sources 'against the grain' and the reworking of recent historiographies of the revolt.

'A hell-broth': Proslavery Narrations

Even before the 1816 rebellion occurred, Barbadian slaveholders had warned that it *would* and were already ascribing its causes. In 1815, William Wilberforce, Parliamentary leader of the British antislavery campaign introduced a bill for the registration of the enslaved populations of the West Indies as an adjunct to the 1807 Abolition Act. Supporters of slavery argued that the bill interfered in the internal affairs of the colonies and would upset the improving relationship between enslaver and enslaved. In particular, they warned about the dangers of inciting a revolt. Once the 1816 rebellion had occurred, therefore, Barbadian whites were quick to attribute blame to Wilberforce's Slave Registry Bill and antislavery campaigning in general, as one planter put it:

> They have pierced the inmost recesses of our island, inflicted deep and deadly wounds in the minds of the black population, and engendered the Hydra, Rebellion which had well nigh deluged our fields with blood.[23]

An 1818 select committee report by the Barbadian Assembly was the prime codification of this position and located the revolt's origins in Britain. It argued that the rebels had mistaken Wilberforce's efforts as an act for their emancipation and when freedom did not transpire, they rebelled.[24]

In proslavery narrations of the revolt, Barbados was represented as a beleaguered island, its inhabitants demanding imperial protection. Traduced by the antislavery campaign – as smugglers and brutal masters – the proslavery writing after the revolt sought to contest this, establishing the sameness of Barbados and Britain, and the duties of protection and compensation that the metropole owed to the colony. This is parallel to Alan Lester's discussion of early nineteenth-century British settler responses in South Africa to humanitarian attacks, which involved an emphasis on their vulnerability to the 'savage' African enemy, the ignorance of humanitarian claims and their shared Britishness. He goes on to argue that it was around such 'legitimations and external representations that an emotive and defensive sense of settler identity coalesced'.[25] Similarly, the white Barbadian narration of the revolt portrayed a happy, peaceable colony of reforming slaveowners, set alight by ignorant, external interference. The particular form of whiteness mobilised here was one of outrage and betrayal. As freeborn Englishmen overseas, Barbados' whites had to be protected by the British authorities from 'fanatical' abolitionists.

'This unhappy state of society': Antislavery Narrations

Antislavery campaigners also narrated the revolt. An anonymous pamphlet, published in 1816, argued that Barbadian slaveholders themselves were to blame for confusion over the Slave Registry Bill.[26] In their eagerness to attack Wilberforce's proposals by arguing that emancipation was the ultimate aim, the pamphlet claimed that Barbados' slaveholders had only succeeded in inciting unrest. This point was forcibly reiterated through an image that recurred in the tract:

> Wishing to keep the light of a Registry Bill from their plantations, they would persuade us that those plantations are inflammable magazines. Yet they themselves at the same moment, as we have seen, are shaking torches and firebrands within them.[27]

The trope of fire was used to symbolise the self-destructive nature of the system of slavery and the self-inflicted, and therefore local, causes of the revolt.

Similarly, the pamphlet used the geography of the rebellion to identify its local causes. It argued out that the outbreak of the rebellion had been limited to a small area of the island, and that it was a response to localised problems over food provision – a situation it argued was common in such an unreformed slave society. The widespread damage caused by the revolt was attributed to the local militia's bloodthirsty suppression, which caused the rebels to flee. This was another sign of the self-destructiveness of Barbadian slavery:

> It is highly probable…that no small proportion of the twenty-five or thirty estates, which suffered from the conflagration of their canes, owed their loss, either to the firing of the militia on the fugitives, or to the burning of the adjoining huts.[28]

In suppressing the revolt, white Barbadians damaged their island's estates – just as the local misrepresentation of the Slave Registry Bill may have incited the revolt. The violence of the local militia and the self-destructiveness of slavery were used to emphasise the 'un-Englishness' of Barbados.

The antislavery narration posited the revolt and its violent suppression by the creole militia as symptomatic of slavery-as-usual. Portraying an unplanned and geographically-limited uprising, born of localised grievances amongst an enslaved population subject to the most brutal form of slavery in the West Indies, it rejected assertions that the antislavery campaign was to blame. Such antislavery narrations of the revolt mapped a spatial imaginary in which Barbados' alterity and that of its white population – especially the militia – was highlighted. Barbados' whites were portrayed as violent creoles, exhibiting an 'un-English' whiteness that was very different from evangelical humanitarianism central to abolitionist identity.[29]

Enslaved Rebel

In these competing pro- and antislavery narrations of the 1816 rebellion, we have a contest between two spatial imaginaries of the slavery controversy. Each was connected to particular forms of white identity: a slaveholding West Indian identity and an evangelical metropolitan identity. In order to avoid reproducing enslaved people merely as the objects in white narrations of the revolt, I want to finish by suggesting the possibility of an 'enslaved rebel' narration. This is not intended to be a truer or more 'authentic' account, but rather a *different* set of spatial imaginaries that contested pro- (and anti-) slavery narrations and identities. In considering these, two things must be borne in mind. Firstly, there are only fragments of the rebel narrations, often in the form of coerced confessions and rumours recorded by whites – a sign of the impact of rebel acts and representations on the white imagination. Weaving these together is what Hartman describes as…

> foraging and disfiguration – raiding for fragments upon which other narratives can be spun and misshaping and deforming the testimony through selective quotation and the amplification of issues germane [to the study]…[30]

Secondly, rebel imaginaries were circulating *before* the outbreak of the revolt, during the planning. In this way, the narratives were imbued with effectivity, as they were central to the strategy of the rebellion.

I will consider two rebel narrations of the revolt – Haitian intervention and 'black peril'.

The first way in which the enslaved rebels narrated the revolt was in terms of the role of Haitian intervention. Central to the suppression of the revolt were the black imperial troops of the First West India Regiment. Yet, the rebels gave 'three cheers' when they first saw them, because they believed 'that the Black Troops would not fight against them'.[31] Whilst this could be attributed to a faith in racial solidarity, there had also been 'many rumours in the slave lines that a Haitian revolutionary army would be landing at Barbados to assist them in their struggle for freedom'.[32] That the black imperial soldiers were French-speaking and green-uniformed troops from the island of Bourbon in the Indian Ocean, would have added weight to the rebels' belief that they were, in fact, allies sent by King Christophe. [33]

The rebels' belief must be read as more than just a tragic historical mistake. Given that the Haitian revolution had been the only successful enslaved rebellion ever carried out, it is little wonder that it occupied an important place in the rebels' imaginations. A number of the captured rebels mention Haiti/Saint Domingo[34] and one of the rebel leaders, a woman called Nanny Grig, used Haiti to exemplify what they *could* achieve if they tried, and also as a model of *how* they should revolt: burning cane to damage the planters economically.[35] Thus, Grig invested the representation of Haiti with effectivity. Furthermore, rumours about the presence of a Haitian fleet off the coast during the revolt, anxieties over the conduct of the black imperial troops and claims that King Christophe had orchestrated the entire revolt, suggest that the figure of Haiti was also a disturbing presence in white imaginations and that such fears may have been deliberately spread by the rebels. [36]

The figure of Haiti in the 1816 rebellion was part of an enslaved narration that marginalised *all* white people, even those who were opposed to slavery. Whiteness, as a significant factor in achieving freedom, was simply dismissed. Through this trope, the struggle in Barbados was linked to a broader history of black resistance across black diaspora.

A second rebel narration involved the deliberate provocation of discourses of whiteness. In many descriptions of the revolt, white people expressed fears about black male sexual predation or 'black peril'. References were made to the intentions of the rebels, who believed that 'the island belonged to them, and not to white men, who they proposed to destroy, reserving the females, whose lot in case of success, it is easy to conceive'.[37] Such fears of 'black peril' – about the black rape of white women – were common to many colonial situations[38] and relate to the local patterns of racial and gendered relations, for whilst (coerced) inter-racial sex between white men and black women was one of the ways in which enslaved property was 'enjoyed' in Barbados, sexual relations between white women and black men were strongly prohibited by cultural taboos and institutionalised practices[39]

White expressions of fear about black sexual predation can be read as a manifestation of racial prejudice, yet we can also detect some evidence of rebel intent here. This is not because sexual attacks *were* carried out (if any had, surely they would have been mentioned), but because the rebels deliberately made play of the danger that white people believed they posed. For example, descriptions abound of flags carried by the rebels into battle:

> Among the flags used by the insurgents, a rude drawing served to inflame the passions, by representing the Union of a Black Man with a White Female.[40]

In the context of Barbadian strictures on inter-racial sex, these flags represented a 'deliberately calculated insult' by the rebels, striking at the core of masculine, heterosexual, whiteness.[41] These rebel signifying practices were *terrorising*, sowing panic and provoking anxiety. A tactical purpose for these terror tactics during the revolt might even be suggested. A large military force was left to defend Bridgetown against 'black peril' when troops moved out to engaged the rebels. Moreover, during the battle at Bayleys

plantation – at which the standard showing inter-racial sex was flown – the military commander received a 'most alarming report' that 'a body of insurgents had threatened Bridgetown and thrown it into the greatest confusion'.[42] He ordered part of his force to fall back to defend the capital. Even after the revolt was suppressed, the white mood remained unsettled:

The alarm however, among the white females chiefly, is considerable, though there is no reason whatever to believe that the mass of the slave population are forming designs to revolt.[43]

These standards provoked and evoked whiteness, playing *up* and playing *on* white fears. Such fears about 'black peril' struck at the heart of the 'proper' reproduction of the white race and shaped a militant and paranoid society. One of the consequences of the white terror provoked was the terrible vengeance meted out by white Barbadians against the rebels. Yet, even this must be seen as more than a self-defeating rebel action, for in provoking white violence, the rebels contested slaveholder claims about a paternalistic system of slavery. In this way, the rebels were contesting whiteness – through their mocking portrayal of inter-racial sex – *and* reinforcing whiteness, by confirming white peoples' deepest fears. This is one example of how enslaved people interfered in white identity-formation.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have sought to suggest how one might begin to write a postcolonial historical geography of whiteness. There has been no development to parallel the emergence of 'white studies' in the Caribbean context, nor is it my intention to suggest that such a focus is the most pressing concern in the broader field of Caribbean studies. Rather, I have sought to sketch out the sort of theoretical possibilities, ethical dilemmas and methodological approaches that might be entailed in this effort. My focus on the controversy over slavery may seem odd, as many accounts of it see it as a manifestation of competing conceptions of blackness. Yet, simply to focus on 'otherness' in white imagination is to ignore the fractured, unstable and contested nature of the source of that gaze – the white subject.

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42 Codd to Leith, *op cit*.

43 T. Moody to Bathurst, 20 October 1816, CO 28/85, PRO.

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