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*White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity During the Age
of Abolition (review)*

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David Lambert's *White Creole Culture* asks how the West Indies articulated a white creole identity, at the very moment in the early nineteenth century when such an identity was under attack from anti-slavery forces. He uses Barbados as a case study, an especially salient choice for an investigation of white identity because of its reputation as "Little England," a more temperate island inhabited by a larger number of resident whites than the other British Caribbean islands.

This book is very good at seeing connections, but somewhat frustratingly cautious about stating exactly what those connections were. Lambert articulates an answer to his central question: white identity was bound up with slavery (p. 5). This is necessarily an incomplete argument, however, as the reader immediately asks how and why slavery created, influenced, or otherwise affected white identity. Lambert gives indirect answers to these supplementary questions. At the end of the book, he identifies four major manifestations of this white identity (p. 208)—white supremacism, the planter ideal, colonial loyalty, and colonial opposition. The four discourses are opposing pairs—white supremacism and the planter ideal offered competing visions to rationalize and normalize the growing problem of slavery. Colonial loyalty emphasized the Englishness of Barbados despite slavery, while colonial opposition embodied an "embryonic" Barbadian nationalism (p. 209) that sought to turn Barbadian marginalization into a position of power, as white creoles asserted the rights of a self-governing assembly. These four discourses are presented not to define a single white creole identity, but rather to delineate the matrix of "overlapping and vacillating" (p. 210) options available to white creoles in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. There is no simple explanation of how slavery generated a white identity because the impact of slavery upon these four discourses varied according to the individual embracing or rejecting them, and the particular moment that a white creole culture was being asserted.

To identify these patterns of identity and explain how they came about, Lambert takes an episodic approach. While the majority of the book explicates the actions and words of people in Barbados, those local actions are set against the backdrop of a changing British empire and

a rising abolitionist movement that consistently sought to identify slavery—and thus the foundation of Barbados society and economy—as a problem. *White Creole Culture* offers the Barbadian side of what Lambert describes as “an encounter between the white metropole and its white creole self/other in a West Indian colony” (p. 208). Thus the book begins by framing Barbados within the Atlantic world and the British empire and laying out the dimensions of this problematic encounter.

Lambert then gives a chapter each to several case studies. Joshua Steele’s work as a reformer in the 1780s and 1790s allows Lambert to examine “the relationship between plantation management and white culture” in chapter 2 (p. 43). Steele’s arguments for amelioration, and indictment of the actual practice of slaveholding, attacked the elite ideal of planter paternalism. Chapter 3 investigates the fractures within white identity, using John Poyer’s articulation of planter ideologies and the 1796 trial of Joseph Denny, free man of color, to study how the “liminal” (p. 81) groups of poor whites and free people of color forced elite white Barbadians to consider whether class or race offered the best foundation for a defense of slavery. The 1816 rebellion is covered in chapter 4, where Lambert “treat[s] the revolt as a site of contested expressions of white identity” (p. 111). His interest is in the discourse around the rebellion rather than the details of its narrative, examining pro-slavery, abolitionist, and Afro-Caribbean representations of the uprising. Anti-Methodism in the 1820s is the ground for chapter 5, as it created an impetus for the stronger assertion of one version of white creole culture through the persecution of Methodists. The final episodic chapter examines white fears of black freedom, and especially of black male sexuality, as emancipation approached. A very brief concluding epilogue lays out the matrix of available identities, but also offers Lambert the chance to add layers to his four main themes. Englishness, for instance, was used by planters in an attempt to reconcile both colonial loyalty and opposition as English.

Lambert positions himself within the evolving field of whiteness studies, and one of the most useful contributions of this book is the recognition that white supremacism and the planter ideal did not always march hand in hand. Historians largely present race and slavery as developing and operating in conjunction, but Lambert goes beyond this to analyze the contradiction between them in detail, laying out the “tensions between racialized and propertied visions of Barbadian society” (p. 171). In Barbados, these fissures manifested themselves in class tensions among the whites, especially explicated in chapter 3 on poor whites, and chapter 5 on the Methodists. Such outsiders offered a battleground for the conflict between class and race.

Lambert also seeks to explicate how non-whites intervened in the

construction of white creole identities. Lambert both begins the epilogue and closes the book with a reminder that despite plentiful white anxiety and energy, people of African descent made their own claims and “creolized the identities and spaces of the Caribbean” (p. 211). This project is most evident with his discussion of people of color in chapter 3, and by focusing on the enslaved people in the 1816 rebellion (pp. 108-109). Lambert argues that the rebels of 1816 deliberately terrorized whites with rumors of black men attacking white women (pp. 132-133). The quest for civil rights by the free people of color challenged the planocracy to embrace property as the basis of an alliance of slaveholders, rather than race as the foundation for white unity.

Several theoretical genealogies are visible throughout *White Creole Culture*. Lambert is an historical geographer, a discipline that in some hands produces environmental history. Lambert’s geography, however, is largely an imaginative geography. The “changing imperial cartography” (p. 169) that Lambert tracks is a map of perceptions, as British and Evangelical attitudes evolved. He frequently makes reference to the division between the slave and free world, as abolitionists in Britain sought to define the West Indies as a foreign place because of its dependence on enslavement, even as Barbadians refused to consider themselves part of the West Indies because they were English (p. 103). He sees a “geography of blame” (p. 112) at work after the 1816 revolt, as the abolition movement, Haiti, and planter protest are variously put forth as the causes of the revolt.

Lambert is also strongly influenced by postcolonial studies, self-identifying his work as postcolonial (p. 9) and as a “theoretically informed re-reading,” especially of the 1816 revolt, where he focuses especially on the “war of representation” over 1816. Lambert is more concerned with how planters understood 1816 and attempted to rewrite it than he is concerned with the course of the revolt or who led it. Similarly, his discussion of planters seeks to identify what they thought they “knew” about being a “good master,” rather than whether their actions were consistently paternalistic (p. 47). The third influence evident in Lambert’s work is a wide reading in Anglo-American and British imperial history, as he frequently draws upon North American comparators and looks to writings on the British settler colonies of Africa for some of his theoretical frameworks.

A final note: the book is handsomely produced, with generous footnotes and a rich separate bibliography, and even the occasional illustration. Lambert draws upon Barbadian and imperial records in seventeen separate archives, including Colonial Office records, planter tracts, traveler testimonies, and newspapers. His sources are largely textual, although the analysis and reproduction of a planter’s drawing

of the iconography of the enslaved people in the 1816 revolt is especially worth noting (pp. 128-129, Figure 4.3). In *White Creole Culture*, Lambert draws together the voices of rich and poor whites, free people of color, and enslaved individuals (even if largely by inference), in order to portray the struggle over exactly *which* values and attitudes would be defined as white and claim a legitimized place within the British empire.

Hernán Venegas Delgado. 2006. *Trinidad de Cuba: Corsarios, azúcar, y revolución en el Caribe*. Trinidad, Cuba: Oficina del Conservador de la Ciudad de Trinidad. 150 pp.

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La ciudad de Trinidad, el conjunto urbano colonial más extenso y conservado de Cuba, se ha integrado a la lista del patrimonio mundial a partir de una experiencia histórica común a otras de Latinoamérica: la ciudad enriquecida y luego bruscamente detenida en el tiempo debido a su dependencia de un sólo producto de exportación. El destino de la población y el significado de su cultura se hayan inmersos, por tanto, dentro de un proceso inseparable donde el curso de la economía regional ha desempeñado un papel protagónico.

Dentro de esta temática el investigador Hernán Venegas Delgado toma el hilo conductor de su texto *Trinidad de Cuba: corsarios, azúcar y revolución en el Caribe*. El libro condensa una intensa trayectoria investigativa que desde 1973 hasta la fecha ha emprendido el autor y ha publicado en forma de ensayos independientes, sobre todo en la revista *Islas*, órgano de la Universidad Central de las Villas, institución donde cursó sus estudios universitarios y luego pasó a impartir la asignatura de Historia de Cuba como profesor de la Facultad de Humanidades. Desde esta posición, su trabajo investigativo fue reconociendo el entorno histórico de los territorios tributarios a la sede universitaria, en otras palabras, la historia inscrita como testimonio en la experiencia cotidiana y personal tanto propia como de sus alumnos.

Los resultados de esta labor han proporcionado un saldo meritorio, con la publicación de una serie de ensayos históricos sobre las regiones de Trinidad, Cienfuegos, Remedios, Sancti Spíritus y Sagua la Grande,