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Sweetened Blood, Sweat and Tears

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Of the transatlantic diffusion of culture, there is no better example than what developed out of Caribbean enslavement. Caribbean culture is distinct from Black culture in the United States as a result of a nuanced, complex history of imperialism. The loss of African identity among slaves with a common, methodically destroyed ancestry, along with the diversity inherent to the different groups of Africans and Europeans and their respective cultural elements and identities resulted in a complex homogeny of culture, race, nationality, and socioeconomic status that has continued its development since the introduction of slaves to West Indian soil. It was this same soil that would cause the demand for slave labor to explode throughout European-controlled Caribbean islands, from the addition of a key ingredient to this particular cultural recipe: a massive amount of sugar. The initially experimental introduction of cane to the region ultimately flourished, and with it, the culmination of the distinct black and white cultures into the unique and overlapping Caribbean identity of today.

Although the history of Caribbean sugar is so immensely nuanced and complex that libraries could be filled with the literature alone, the objective reality that the literature describes can be summarized as follows: West Indian sugar transformed colonial agricultural production in the region from a small operation in accordance with subsistence, to a massive transatlantic industry. Colonists experimented with a variety of cash crops that, relative to cane, proved mediocre in quality and harvest. Colonists in Barbados, for example, “tried growing cotton, indigo, and fustic wood…” which, “…did not produce great fortunes” (Wayne 14). Imitating the agricultural success New England, planting tobacco was a particularly pitiful failure: “A glut in London soon undercut prices, and Barbados tobacco… was “so earthy and worthless”… that it provided “little or no return from England” (Wayne 14). A 1628 shipment was described as

"foul, full of stalks, and evil colored." Even the islanders wouldn't smoke it" (Wayne 14). Tobacco was simply too fragile for the region. Griffith Hughes explains in his 1750 *The Natural History of Barbados* that, "[Tobacco] is here planted but very ſparingly, and that chiefly by the Slaves, and the poorer Sort of White Inhabitants, but none for Exportation. It is very liable to be deſtroyed at the Roots by a Grub, or large Worm" (Hughes 171). Against the failure of traditional cash crops popular for English import, sugar persisted resilient to the environment, becoming a commodity of popular demand and immense profitability. Wayne summarizes the change succinctly: "Then came sugar" (Wayne 14). The Introduction of cane sugar to the region traces to the earliest years of the Columbian Exchange, with Columbus himself bringing seedlings to Hispaniola on his second journey to the New World in 1493.[i] In stark contrast to the meagre harvest of traditional New World crops of popular European demand, the sugar cane harvests were rich in every sense of the word - quality, quantity, and profit: "The sugar grew fabulously, and colonists were quick to establish plantations… in Mexico, Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico… Barbados made the most of it. In England, the demand for sugar soared as it quickly evolved from a luxury for aristocrats to a staple for the masses" (Wayne 15). This rapid expansion of a brand new and widely available commodity – Caribbean sugar – necessitated a correspondingly massive labor force to cultivate it, and greed dictated that those laborers couldn't cut into the illustrious profit margins. Indentured servants, natives (who, "could not for a long time be brought into Subjection by the Whites" (Hughes 8)), and above all, immense, dreadful numbers of slaves from the African continent were forced to work in the cane fields to grow the sugar that Europe so desperately craved.

The distribution of labor in the European-dominated Caribbean presents an early example of the cosmopolitan integration of diverse people and cultures that defines Caribbean culture

even today. Initially, the laborers consisted not only of slaves, but of indentured servants and Indians and small holders from Europe, as well.[ii] As sugar production became more efficient and productive, the production process grew in scale, and the demand for labor overwhelmed that which could be provided by the modest mixed labor and inherently temporary indentured service. The sugar plantations of the Dutch, English, French, and Spanish, "demanded an exacting and ceaseless labour" (James 10), and likewise demand correspondingly ceaseless imports of slaves. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the number of slaves imported to Caribbean islands would rise immensely. In French-controlled Saint-Domingue alone, "between 1764 and 1771 the average importation of slaves varied between ten and fifteen thousand. In 1786 it was 27,000, and from 1787 onwards the colony was taking more than 40,000 slaves a year" (James 55). Production figures soared in response to the influx of laborers, with the same Saint-Domingue production, "between 1783 and 1789… nearly double[ing]" (James 55), from the increase. This increasing *rate* of import for enslaved labor making its way to the West Indies also allowed for staggering *quantity* of slaves: "From 1701 to 1810 Barbados, a mere 166 square miles in area, received 252,500 African slaves. Jamaica, which in 1655 had been invaded by the British, followed the same pattern of "economic development"; in the same 109 years, it received 662,400 slaves" (Mintz). Of the roles that sugar has played in the development of Caribbean culture, the incentive in riches that it provided for the enslavement of African people is perhaps the most crucial. Not only did the need for laborers bring culturally diverse peoples into intimate proximity to one another, but the importation of the enslaved population had sown the seeds for nationality.

Despite the egregious institution of slavery, it stood also as a testament and factor of unity to those slaves. They were no doubt abused and suffering, but the common experience

among the slaves also stood as a factor of unity, despite their hailing from different African cultural backgrounds. Their dehumanizing enslavement rendered their past differences obsolete; supplanted with their contemporary reality of slavery. It is this commonality that would inspire nationality, revolt, and eventually emancipation. In his 1765 *An Essay upon Plantership*, Samuel Martin suggests that a healthy relationship should be maintained between master and slave:

> Thus then ought every planter to treat his negroes with tenderness † and genero∫ity, that they may be induced to love, and obey him out of mere gratitude; and become real good beings by the imitation of his benevolence, justice, temperance, and cha∫tity; for nothing influences the conduct of mankind ∫o much as the example of ∫uperiors (Samuel Martin, 1765, p. 6).

The relationship Martin describes between owner and slave unsuprisingly proved more theoretical than literal, and the enslaved people certainly did not exhibit his presupposed graciousness to their masters for whatever "justice" they were afforded in coerced labor. Griffith Hughes described some of the slave owners of his time that he observed around him as, "Owners unpoli∫hed in their Manners, and in∫atiable of Riches" (Hughes 18), though the description reads congruent to the institution of enslavement as it was employed by Imperial entities as a whole throughout the world. These prospectors "insatiable of riches", "… like the *Egyptian* Tyrants, require Brick without Straw, or, more literally, exact ∫evere Labour from an hungry Belly, or a naked Back)" (Hughes 18). The slaves of Barbados endured an experience characteristic of enslaved people throughout the region, with, "∫carce a Gleam of Re∫t from hard Toils, and heavy Stripes, but whil∫t Sleep, with its ∫hort Interval, eludes the painful Scene, which mu∫t again be renewed with the returning Dawn" (Hughes 18). The oppression of the enslaved laborers planted resentment among the enslaved toward their masters, rather than Martin's naïve idea of gratitude

and dedicated service. The enslaved made up, communally, the lowest class of inhabitants throughout the West Indies, literally the next rung up the social ladder from pack animals: “Having thus hinted the duties of a planter to his negroes, let the next care be of cattle, mules, and horſes: for theſe creatures are next in degree valuable to their owner” (Martin 7). They also were segregated into a community from the free and whites, housed communally together, “around a square… These huts were about 20 to 25 feet long, 12 feet wide and about 15 feet in height… The floor was beaten earth; the bed was of straw, hides or a rude contrivance of cords tied on posts. On these slept indiscriminately mother, father, and children” (James 11). The enslaved were a force that together commonly dreamed for freedom and found resolve in creeds against their masters. Against Samuel Martin’s optimistic assumption of gracious labor, CLR James presents a quite different characterization of the enslaved in their opinions of their masters, defined by their dissenting attitude toward their enslavement: “At their midnight celebrations of Voodoo, their African cult, they danced and sang, usually this favourite song:… ‘We swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow’” (James 18). Much like a working-class proletariat, the enslaved were united by the shared experience of oppression and the common desire for freedom, even, “liv[ing] together in a social relation far closer than any proletariat of the time”(James 392), and much like Marx’s theory of revolution, these oppressed would even, as was the case in Saint Domingue, proceed to revolution against their oppressors. Thus, “from the very momentum of their own development, colonial planters… were generating internal stresses and intensifying external rivalries, moving blindly to explosions and conflicts which would shatter the basis of their dominance and create the possibility for emancipation” (James 26). Enslavement became a central and defining characteristic in their unique identity, and essential to the development of a sense of nationality

among such different African people. Africans were forcefully enslaved, but from their enslavement, they reinvented themselves, overcoming their relegation to chattel and in the process, becoming a people. In the case of Saint Domingue, this took the form of successful rebellion against the slave owners. The enslaved, in this case, literally departed from their fields to become a separate people and a force of liberation as, "those [who] found slavery intolerable and refused to evade it by committing suicide, would fly to the woods and mountains and form bands of free men – maroons... Women followed them. They reproduced themselves. And for a hundred years before 1789 the maroons were a source of danger to the colony" (James 20). The rebellion against enslavement from the fugitive slaves of the Caribbean is evidence of a nationality that is united against the institution, growing in strength and numbers like that of Saint Domingue in the years preceding Toussaint's rebellion: "In 1720, 1,000 slaves fled to the mountains. In 1751 there were at least 3,000 of them. Many of these rebel leaders struck terror into the hearts of the colonists by their raids on the plantations and the strength and determination of the resistance they organized against attempts to exterminate them" (James 20). The incentive for wealth out of sugar cultivation that brought slaves to the West Indies would serve as the rallying cause behind the slaves in their unanimous hope for freedom, calling some to action and unifying all with an oppressive but resilient history.

Given sugar's demand for massive and increasing number of imported slaves and the finite surface area of land for large plantations, an overwhelmingly enslaved proportion of the population was an inevitability. Slaves came to heavily outnumber the free people and whites of the islands. At the end of slavery in Antigua, out of the 37,000 residents, 30,000 were formerly enslaved, and only 2,500 of the total inhabitants were white[iii]. Barbados by 1780 had accrued some 70,000 black inhabitants to 17,000 white.[iv] In pre-rebellion Saint Domingue, slaves

outnumbered whites 10:1[v], with still more freed people of color sympathetic to the enslaved. Their strength in numbers compounded with the resentment toward the white owners, the slaves of the Caribbean were poised for revolution, and revolution did occur – almost entirely unsuccessfully: "Enslaved people rebelled against slavery right up until emancipation in 1834… including: Tacky's rebellion in 1760s Jamaica, the Haitian Revolution (1789), Fedon's 1790s revolution in Grenada, the 1816 Barbados slave revolt… and the 1831 slave revolt in Jamaica" (nationalarchives.gov.uk). While revolution was attempted and, though almost exclusively met with failure, eventually did occur, the *cultural* revolution that was at play, evidenced by these revolts, was influential, effective, and extensive throughout the Caribbean.

Analyzing revolution in the Caribbean typically focuses on slave rebellion throughout the region, though focusing exclusively on the militaristic aspect of the history inherent to rebellion neglects the wider cultural processes in progress. Revolution in terms of violence is only part of the history that links sugar to modern Caribbean culture; sugar was a revolution to the region in itself. This larger, "sugar revolution" assumes that what has taken place in Caribbean industrial and economic development is rooted in Caribbean sugar, and these historical consequences are the result of introducing the crop to the islands: "the sugar revolution points to the transformative power of a single commodity, resulting in what has sometimes been termed 'crop determinism'" (Higman 213). This concept of crop determinism describes the origins and consequences of Caribbean history exactly. The transition, "from diversified agriculture to sugar monoculture, from production on small farms to large plantations, from free to slave labour, from sparse to dense settlement, from white to black populations, and from low to high value per caput output" (Higman 213), are the direct result of the happenstance introduction of sugar and its perfect adaptation to the region. The amount of historical phenomena that can be attributed to other

historical phenomena and interpreted as causal, at times even producing contradictory results, is boundless. The deterministic effect of cane sugar, however, is *integral* to the Caribbean as we know it today not only economically and industrially, but culturally, and that particular cultural development can be traced, specifically, to 1493:

> "In 1000 A.D., few Europeans knew of the existence of sucrose, or cane sugar… by 1650, in England the nobility and the wealthy had become inveterate sugar eaters, and sugar figured in their medicine, literary imagery, and displays of rank. By no later than 1800, sugar had become a necessity – albeit a costly and rare one – in the diet of every English person; by 1900, it was supplying nearly one-fifth of the calories in the English diet" (Mintz 6).

West Indian sugar, because of the dietary demand from Europe and opportunity that it offered for mercantilist wealth, "generated a massive boost to the Atlantic slave trade, provided the engine for a variety of triangular trades, altered European nutrition and consumption, increased European interest in tropical colonies, and… contributed vitally to the industrial revolution" (Higman 213). Columbus brought sugar, sugar generated demand, which in turn demanded laborers, who demanded emancipation, each consequence producing another to ultimately result in the complex Caribbean culture that exists today.

Caribbean culture can be interpreted as an example of black culture in the Americas (*could be* because of the assimilation that took place – it was never monolithic, but diverse), but the concepts are not interchangeable; Caribbean describes a more precise subculture. It is more distinct; culminated from transatlantic diffusion of culture from Africa, Europe, and Asia: "The idea of tradition gets… invoked to underscore the historical continuities, subcultural conversations, intertextual and intercultural cross-fertilisations which make the notion of a

distinctive and self-conscious black culture appear plausible" (Gilroy 188). Black culture is too broad a signifier to acknowledge the differences and nuances of the different cultures that are incorporated under the umbrella term. The black culture of the United States does not necessarily share a tradition with the idea of Caribbean or European black culture, and indeed have developed from different, though similar and in some cases related, histories, and reflect those different histories in their occasionally extreme differences from one another. Nevertheless, they are consistently and improperly grouped together as a common tradition. Black culture can be better understood as, more broadly, a concept of European nationalism that describes a people that do not match the description of European as defined by ethnocentrism. Black culture therefore becomes, "the displacement of European models of high culture, of Europe as the universal subject of culture… against the barbarians" (Hall 83). Black culture is a signifier that compares concepts of identity. It neglects the description of what that culture *is,* but concerns itself with what that culture is *not*. Although it is in this way a part of black culture, that which is specifically Caribbean has emerged from a history of enslavement that is separate from that of the New England colonies. The conception of cultural identity is, "upset by other enormous historical transformations… without which the story could not be told" (Hall 66). Cultural identity is founded in historic causes, and in the Caribbean, specifically formulated from the history sugar cultivation and the enslavement that it entails. Hall describes that, "People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth" (Hall 70). His analysis defines his cultural origin in its contrast to the European conception of blackness. The capital from sugar that West Indian territories offered European empire exploded

into demand for free African labor. Curtis Wayne suggests that, “if not for slavery, sugar might have been a minor economic footnote in the rise of North America” (Curtis 121), though it is equally valid to argue that, if not for sugar, then slavery, plantations, agriculture, and imperial escapades throughout the West Indies might not have developed and exploded to the extent that it had, and most significantly, what has become of Caribbean culture could not have developed either.

Even cultural elements as seemingly inconsequential as alcohol are inextricably linked to the sugar of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Caribbean sugar developed a huge market for spirits distilled from the waste of sugarcane refinement. Rum might not have been first developed in the Caribbean (emphasis on *might* the history is unclear), but it has definitely become a staple in Caribbean cuisine and culture; a regional spirit, and associated with the Caribbean and culture therein. In fact, many name brands of rum today reflect the dark history of sugar production, but do not dwell on the subject to any significant extent. Brands such as Captain Morgan, Plantation, and Appleton Estate advertise their plantation history. This last one has particular historic value, tracing back to a specific Appleton plantation in Jamaica. Despite the history attached to these products, it is the furthest thing from a slightly inebriated mind. Indeed, the history of enslavement is rather neglected even on such a product still sold today that totally relied upon enslavement to bring it about. Rather, the brand totes its summarized and gilded history on its bottles: “Established 1749, Nassau valley,” and, “Inspired by the vibrancy of Jamaica, its land and the joyful nature of its people”[vi]. It could perhaps be interpreted as the adoption of a national symbol, reflecting a pride in heritage and, literally, capitalizing on it, ultimately canonizing rum as part of the culture.

The various Caribbean islands represent a collective mix of mutually assimilated cultures into one that is common, nationalistic, and unique to its particular region. Attracting the interests of European colonial forces to the Caribbean islands was one central consequence of the sugar revolution, but bringing the different people of Europe and Africa together both figuratively and literally bred a culturally hybrid people. European colonialization of the West Indies decimated the aboriginal inhabitants of the islands.[vii] The West Indies were left with, essentially, a clean slate for the cultures of the colonizers and their slaves to meld together in their close proximity and relative isolation over the course of centuries: "Every succeeding year… saw the labouring population, slave or free, incorporating into itself more and more of the language, customs, aims and outlook of its masters. It steadily grew in numbers until it became a terrifying majority of the total population" (James 405). Consequently, the enslaved became culturally hybrid peoples, incorporating and blending foreign customs with their own to develop Caribbean culture. Voodoo as a religion was itself interesting as distinctly Afro-Caribbean developed from cultural culmination in Haiti that among the enslaved became a, "medium of conspiracy. In spite of all prohibitions, the slaves travelled miles to sing and dance and practice the rites and talk" (James 86). Toussaint Louverture himself, although a first generation Haitian, (his father was enslaved from Africa) was from, "the services of the Catholic Church… instructed… in the rudiments of Latin" (James 20). A unique Creole even developed as a hybrid language in the Caribbean but as a hybrid people as well.[viii]

This last point is the infallible result of humans; Europeans and Africans (even to a small extent Indians, for as long as they survived European occupation), living together in such close proximity and isolation from other members of their culture and class. Reproduction, and the birth of the intrinsically culturally hybrid and often multi-racial creoles was, because of these

circumstances, inevitable. Even today, the, "modern Caribbean genomes are largely composed of African and European ancestry… relatively little indigenous Caribbean ancestry remains" (Hannes). The Caribbean islands presently hail not only from social diversity, but biological diversity from the inhabitants centuries ago looking to make wealth of sugar cane harvests. These individuals came to make up a special class of pseudo-citizens in the French colonies as, "neither legislation, nor the growth of race prejudice, could destroy the attraction of the black women for the white men of San Domingo… the planter or overseer who chose a slave to pass the night with him and drove her from his bed to the lash of the slave-driver next morning" (James 37). The offspring of these interracial relationships enjoyed de facto freedom until they were 24, and were even freed by their parents' marriages authorized by the Negro Code of 1685[ix], and would come to challenge the white population on the island, and outweigh it, especially when compounded with the majority enslaved population: "The whites were only 30,000. The Mulattoes and free blacks were about the same, and increasing at a far greater rate than the whites… they called the whites intruders and themselves nationals" (James 64). These self-proclaimed nationals literally personify and embody the development of unique culture, even a unique conception of race, within the Caribbean from European and African sources.

Because of the variety among colonial powers throughout the Caribbean during the 17th and 18th centuries, the exact modern meaning of Caribbean culture varies depending on where in the Caribbean the term is applied. The different colonial forces' conquest of the many different islands has determined to a great extent the heritage of those particular islands. The islands that fell under Spanish, British, and French control differ from one another in various aspects of their culture today in such elements as their languages differing between French as in Haiti, Spanish as in Cuba, English as in Trinidad and Tobago, religious affiliations differing between

Protestantism and Catholicism, and cooking traditions that meld geography with colonial history, like Cuban arroz con poillo or Puerto Rican arroz con gandules reflecting their Spanish colonial history[x]. Regardless of the cultural differences even between the various Caribbean islands, they are culturally linked to one another because of the cultivation of sugar that initiated their individual cultural divergence: "That the majority of the population in Cuba was never slave does not affect the underlying social identity. Wherever the sugar plantation and slavery existed, they imposed a pattern. It is an original pattern, not European, not African, not a part of the American main… but West Indian, *sui generis*, with no parallel anywhere else" (James 391-392).

The Caribbean as it exists today almost certainly could not have come into existence without the planting of cane sugar and the consequences that developed as a result. Alternative cash crops produced subpar agricultural yields that were uninspiring from a production standpoint as well as from the perspective of colonial forces to invest in the West Indies with their immense means of production in human and mechanical labor. Had the Caribbean not produced sugar in such profusion, the enslaved laborers who were to a great extent responsible, along with the Europeans who brought them there, for building their own cultural heritage, wouldn't have been needed within the geographical tangent, better utilized in the more prosperous colonies elsewhere. Instead, a simple bladed grass, really an alien and invasive species, gave life to an incredibly complex variety of culture within the region that has been in development since 1493 and persists to this day. It is a challenging, if not impossible, thought experiment to, today, envision the islands without the deterministic influence of this one sweet crop.

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