

*White Skin, Black Kin:
"Speaking the Unspeakable"*

Joscelyn Gardner





*I am accused of tending to the past
as if I made it,
as if I sculpted it
with my own hands. I did not.
the past was waiting for me
when I came,
a monstrous unnamed baby,
and I with my mother's itch
took it to breast
and named it
History.
she is more human now,
learning language everyday,
remembering faces, names, and dates.
when she is strong enough to travel
on her own, beware, she will.*

Lucille Clifton, "I am accused of tending to the past..."

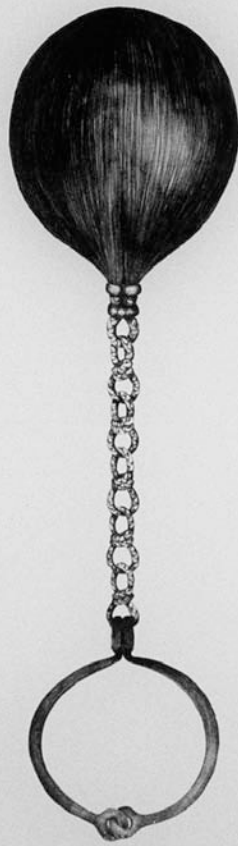


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An Intervention into the Barbados Museum Galleries

The Barbados Museum & Historical Society
St. Ann's Garrison, St. Michael, Barbados



Black Box 190

Angelo Gualoni 2002



Black Box 190

Angelo Gualoni 2002

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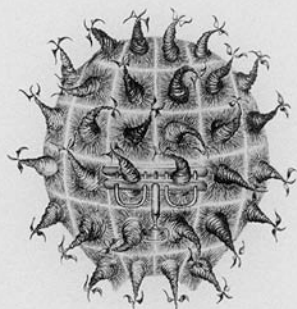
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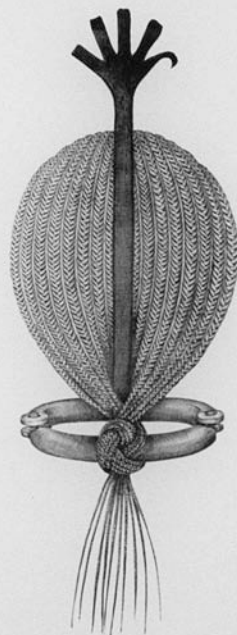
Finally, I would like to gratefully acknowledge the very generous support of the National Art Gallery Committee and R. L. Seale & Co. Ltd. in helping to sponsor this project.

Joscelyn Gardner.



Engraving 1872

Jessie Graham 1872



Engraving 1872

Jessie Graham 1872

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Introduction

With Joscelyn Gardner's exhibition **White Skin, Black Kin: "Speaking the Unspeakable"**, both Barbados and this Museum are taking bold steps into uncharted waters, and have willingly joined with the artist to invite you to join in a unique three-way 'conversation', between/amongst Barbadian art, heritage and identity. It is the kind of conversation which goes to the core of what I think is the most important statement in Gardner's work; namely, her desire to draw the links between artistic expression and the struggle against the results of colonial rule. After more than three hundred years of colonial domination, Gardner's graphic images and gentle interventions continually remind us of why it is still necessary to resist the consequences of this same domination.

The exploitative practices of slavery and colonialism, by uprooting, disrupting and rejecting foreign cultures, exerted a powerful grip on the West Indian consciousness, whose repercussions are still felt today. Nevertheless, it is still possible to examine the positive gains of the Caribbean people in recovering their heritage, and moving beyond a simplistic rejection of Western heritage, to a transformation of this inheritance through a process of remembrance and reconstruction. But what are the characteristics of such a contested heritage? Stuart Hall has postulated that Heritage is:

a discursive practice [...] one of the ways in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory. Just as individuals and families construct their identities in part by 'storying' the various random incidents and contingent turning points of their lives into a single, coherent narrative so nations construct identities by selectively binding their chosen high points and memorable achievements into an unfolding 'national story'.¹

Curators are often regarded (and regard themselves) as custodians of national memory, and thus 'authorized' in specific ways to interpret this collective experience on behalf of the local population. However, in most communities, organizations, and institutions elderly people can be found who remember past events leading to current status and conditions. The value of recording 'oral histories' of direct, 'lived' experience is thus self-evident. But when such opportunities do not exist, given the distance of time between the end of slavery and the beginning of independence, how can this absence of experience be addressed? The parallels between the role of the artist in "storying individual memory", and that of the museum in "constructing collective identity" become clear. **White Skin, Black Kin** thus puts the individual in the lead role, offering suggestions and insinuating alternative views which make it possible for the audience to pursue their own truths and establish their own parameters in the gold-mine (or is it the minefield?) of memories that is the museum. As "Museumist Artist" Fred Wilson has stated, traditional "Ethnographic displays create a distance between cultures that doesn't need to be there. This difference cuts off any connections and flattens out the complexity of our relationship in favour of exoticism".² Individual, collective, and national memories are even more credible when we can cite evidence of Aristotle's laws of association: primacy, recency, and frequency.

Both the context of the installation (multiple spaces, multiple layers, multiple levels) and the multi-media nature of the exhibition require that the viewer simultaneously pay attention to a multiplicity of sounds and images. Historian Elsa Barkley Brown has compared this history 'conversation' to a jazz improvisation:

History is also everybody talking at once, multiple rhythms played simultaneously. The events and people we write about did not occur in isolation but in dialogue with a myriad of other people and events. In fact, at any given moment millions of people are all

talking at once. As historians we try to isolate one conversation and to explore it but the trick is then how to put that conversation in a context which makes evident its dialogue with so many others - how to make this one lyric stand alone and at the same time be in connection with all the other lyrics being sung.³

There is a much more complex selection of memories, kinships, and circumstances being displayed and quoted here. **White Skin, Black Kin** invites you to view the spectator sport of history “re-lived” through imagined reenactment within the apparent neutrality of a museum gallery. The common-sense notion of spectatorship implies being an innocent, neutral bystander. But Gardner makes us uncomfortably conscious and even painfully aware, in a very real way. The Museum becomes an active site of contestation of histories, memories and identities. “Spectatorship” actually requires that we actively participate and take a position about what we are seeing. We need to make decisions about what our choices will be. Which one of the multiple images are we going to concentrate on first? Which whispering voice are we going to ignore? As John Berger has suggested, seeing is not a passive activity. “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe;” and then he adds: “To look is an act of choice” and further “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves”.⁴

The insertion and juxtaposition of objects and images allude to, as well as re-invent, a complex national identity, embedded in a deliberate insistence on the invisibility and the absence of the ‘other’. Barbadian national culture (“here” and “there”) has primarily defined itself not only by what it is, but – even more importantly – by what it is not. This perception extends from the colonial convention of identifying as creole any individual – African or English – born in the island. But the shared identity implied by the name, did not extend simply to a shared, but rather a mirrored experience – Black/White; Rich/Poor; Present/Absent. The artist has sought to reveal this denial and unveil a past which has remained voiceless, invisible in a national, political, cultural, gendered, sexualized, and racialized context.

Again, recalling the words of Elsa Barkley Brown, Joscelyn Gardner ‘s intervention has “put that [creole] conversation in a context which makes evident its dialogue with so many others – [...making] this one lyric stand alone and at the same time be in connection with all the other lyrics being sung “,⁵ and resulted in the kind of ‘cultural collaboration’ which I have envisaged for many years, and which I wholeheartedly welcome.

12th February, 2004

¹ Stuart Hall, ‘Whose Heritage? Un-settling’The Heritage’, Re-imagining the Post-Nation’, text of the keynote address given on November 1st,1999, at the national conference Whose Heritage? The impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain’s Living Heritage, Manchester, England , in **Third Text**, vol. 49 (Winter 1999-2000).

² Donald Garfield, “ Making the Museum Mine: An Interview with Fred Wilson” in **Museum News** (May/June, 1993), 48.

³ Elsa Barkley Brown, “Polyrhythms and Improvisation: Lessons for Women’s History,” **History Workshop Journal**, 31 (Spring 1991), 85-90.

⁴ John Berger, **Ways of Seeing** (New York: Viking Press, 1973).

⁵ Elsa Barkely Brown, Ibid.

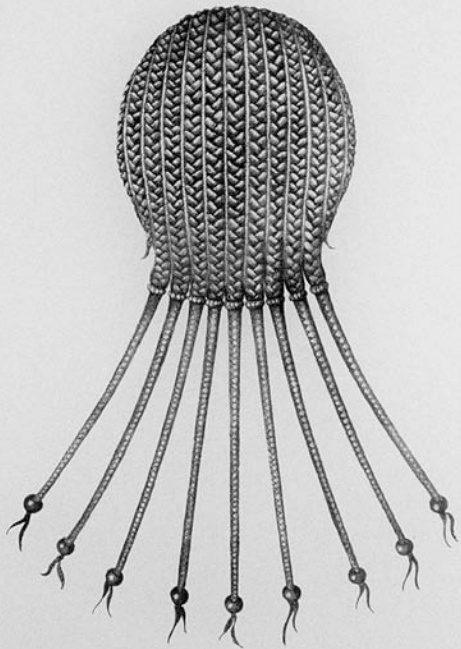


Fig. 100

J. G. S. 1882



Fig. 101

J. G. S. 1882

Black Hair / Her-Stories: Joscelyn Gardner's Inverted Portraits

Joscelyn Gardner's lithographs deal with hair, not just any hair, but black female hair. I fancy myself a bit of a black hair expert - a status achieved through experience more than practice.¹ Since the age of twelve, I have experienced natural platted styles, perms, (jerry) curls, braided extensions, weaves, a shaved head and most recently dreads. That said, my memories and often the seminal moments in my life can be related to hairstyles I had at specific times. Hair can be a complicated thing for women and for black women it is even more so.² Beyond an undifferentiated black hair, black female hair – bound up historically as it is with issues of gender, and sexuality which have burdened it as a specifically fraught site of the performance of “femaleness” – operates as an over-determined sign which binds us to our race and culture through its visibility and corporeality. As Kobena Mercer has argued, “within racism’s bipolar codification of human value, black people’s hair has been historically devalued as the most visible stigma of blackness, second only to skin.”³ As such, the stereotype of “good” and “bad” hair, code for straighter-equals-whiter-equals-more beautiful, went and still goes, hand in hand with the similar hierarchical obsession of degrees of blackness, code for lighter complexions-equals-whiter- equals- more beautiful.

Although many black women will openly lament the often painful and long processes of “dealing with” our hair (almost every contemporary black women in the west – and many outside of it – can tell stories of being at the salon “all day”), the context of the black hairdresser is an important site of cultural and social exchange within often dispersed or fragmented black communities. The black hairdresser is even more important within the black diasporic experience in the west, where black people are often scattered within dominantly white suburban or rural settings. In such cases, going to the hairdresser takes on ritual significance, not only due to the actual travel times/plans, but to the experience of being “in” the community that it provides. These sites are also places of black hair milestones, where “experiments” are undertaken and female passage to maturity and womanhood is marked. Sadly, until most recently, in a colonial west, these “passages” implied the “relaxing” or “perming” of our natural hair textures, an historically enforced, assimilatory move which traditionally marked the rejection of the black corporeal sign of hair through the transformation of its original “kinky” texture. This shift in texture also became a hoped for shift in weight and movement – evidenced by the continuing symbolic significance of the white female model/actress in contemporary shampoo commercials (Pantene and others) who flips her hair excitedly demonstrating its movement and thus health and vitality.⁴

Gardner's lithographs recall the “simple time” of pre-processed/pre-chemicalized black female hair. But the word recall is deceptive since it infers a past which is not necessarily what Gardner's works represent in any complete or easy way. Oddly, these prints also represent a possible present or contemporary recuperation of past styles. As such they stand as both colonial and postcolonial (temporally and symbolically). What is immediately striking is the intricacy and delicacy of the complex styles which Gardner evokes in masterful detail capturing both the quality of a black aesthetic and the property of hair texture which can be read as “natural”. What is most intriguing, perhaps, is how these women come to be individuated by the intricacy of their distinct hairstyles which serve to differentiate them, but also how the sign of hair becomes the dominant mark of race in “portraits” which have no faces. Although it is not explicitly coded, there is the sense that these hairstyles are recuperable to specific African or black diasporic cultures and representative of a heterogenous experience.

In this deliberate shift, Gardner refuses the primacy of the west's colonial dependence upon skin colour/complexion as the dominant means of "knowing" a body as raced. Interestingly, the specificity of an identifiable black hair aesthetic allows us to read race on to the unseen faces without the help of skin. Yet they raise questions for the viewer too: what type of face do you envision, how are our own racial identifications complicit in this visual imagining and how are race and slavery a part of the complex colonial matrix through which we come to "see" faces for these women?

It is through the absence of faces – the most crucial seat of identity in the tradition of western portraiture, that Gardner turns the portrait on its head as a reliable and complete archive for the knowing and recuperation of an historical individual. What is also at stake is how this flip forces a consideration of the colonial debt of portraits and their stake in cultural capital as an élite visual art practice invested in the class differentiation of "worthy sitters" which depended upon the othered bodies of the absent or appendaged white servant or black slave body. Historical portraits of black sitters are extremely rare in the west. Individuated portraits are even more so.⁵ Since the black female body often functioned in portraiture (much as figure painting) as the foil against which white female beauty was consolidated and celebrated, such black subjects were often literally and symbolically tangential within the image, present to serve, to be the "exotic" or "primitive", to point up the colonial power and imperial reach of the white sitter they helped to elevate.⁶ Within this historical context, to devote portraits solely to black female subjects, to deliberately reference slavery, to name them and to individuate them is a knowledgeable postcolonial turn indeed.

The references to slavery are precise and often difficult to look at. Gardner embeds the oppressive implements and weapons of slave torture directly into the beautiful and intricate hairstyles adorning her black female slaves. In so doing the beauty of the hair is disrupted in a disturbing gesture which again points up the race of the faceless women and their oppression within a colonial institution that literally committed a physical violation which threatened the integrity and safety of body and culture. At the same time, the embedding, does not "mess up" the hair – but is seamlessly and securely a part of the whole. As such one can speculate about how the rituals and practice of black hair were in part formed and hybridized through slavery and how assimilationist strategies were often thwarted through resistance of and on the body. Slavery, amongst its other evils, attempted to break the ability of black people to care for black bodies.⁷ In the process, traditions, knowledge, rituals were lost – but new ones were formed.

For me, Gardner's lithographs remember the experience of black females doing the hair of other black females. As a young child, that experience was deeply comforting – sitting on the floor, between your mother's legs, while she combed out your (often unruly) hair and applied (at times, not too gently) healthy dabs of Dax or TCB. The smell of the products, the tug of your hair as it was formed into plats, the smell of breakfast (since this was surely a morning ritual), the pain in my neck as I squirmed to glimpse the cartoon on the television, the yank of the head and pain in my scalp as my mother compelled me back into place – all this is the joy of black female hair.⁸

Today black hair in the west is at a full circle moment. With the advent of "natural", often chemical-free styles which embrace our original textures, there are more "natural-exclusive" hairdressers and more unisex salon experiences. Twists, short Afros, shaved heads, braids and dreads are common sights on black women, especially in urban diasporic centres in North America and Europe. Such shifts are celebrated in contemporary song by singers like Lauryn Hill and India Arie and contemporary books like the children's work **Nappy Hair** (1997).⁹ Although many of us can "do these styles" at home, the black hairdresser still retains its importance as a vibrant cultural and racial site of great community importance.¹⁰

Although Gardner's portraits are faceless, this move can be read as a unifying, solidarity-building gesture, rather than a homogenizing one. Here, the viewer has agency and the faces we may choose to insert say more about our own knowledge and/or ignorance of slavery and its attendant racial baggage than about the artist's own desires and consciousness. Do we see light or dark brown skin, do we imagine African tribal markings or scars from abusive masters, are they smiling or sad?

Gardner's inverted portraits can be read as an ironic move, which through naming and the specificity and intricacy of hair, is a retroactive reclamation of individuality for those who were most disenfranchised and anonymized by slavery.

¹ | of course note the diversity and heterogeneity of the black hair experience throughout the world and therefore, my insights are best applied to the black diasporic experience in and of the west in countries like Canada, the USA, Britain and the Caribbean.

² See: **Black, Bold and Beautiful** (1999), directed by: Nadine Valcin, National Film Board of Canada.

³ Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West, **Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures** (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 249.

⁴ The white woman hair flipping phenomenon is an often painful pain in black female existence since its unattainability (generally without some form of chemicalization and/or hair augmentation) signals the so-called inferiority of black female standards of beauty within the colonial western context.

⁵ Historical individual portraits of black or other colonized subjects as well as ones of white servants.

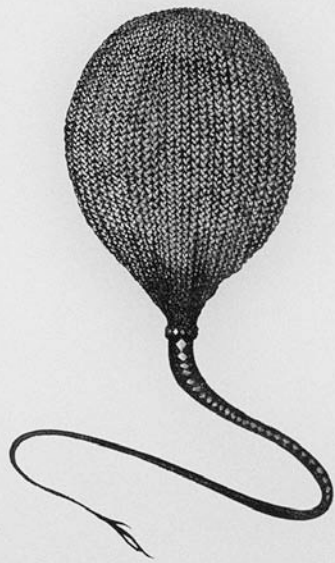
⁶ Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, **The Black Female Body: A Photographic History** (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 1.

⁷ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, **Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America** (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001).

⁸ I also vividly recall the pain of not having my Mother do my hair – as in the time she was in the hospital and my Dad, unable to do it himself, had our maternal Grandmother do it and alternatively, the Jamaican woman across the street. In both cases my sister and I thought it quite disastrous since the style (shape, positioning of plats and parts) were not our favourite or alternatively the parts were crooked. In the context of white suburban Canada, hair was for us a critical and often traumatic site of our racial difference which the prying questions from white kids ("why don't you need elastic to keep your braids in?") and actual physical assaults (braid yanking with a purpose of "feeling" our difference?) helped to memorialize.

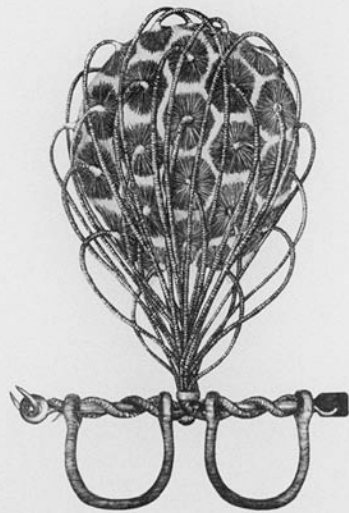
⁹ Carolivia Herron, **Nappy Hair** (Toronto: Random House, Canada, 1997).

¹⁰ Hence, the success of films like **Barber Shop** (2002) starring Ice Cube, Eve and Cedric the Entertainer, soon to be followed by a sequel.



March 20

Lucy Fisher 1904



Elizabeth - with my Mother 1904

Lucy Fisher 1904

Of Whispers and Traces in Joscelyn Gardner's "A Creole Conversation Piece"

Our standpoint is that remembrance does not simply become pedagogical when representations of the past are situated and engaged in educational sites such as schools and museums. Rather, whatever its site and social form, remembrance is an inherently pedagogical practice in that it is implicated in the formation and regulation of meanings, feelings, perceptions, identifications, and the imaginative projection of human limits and possibilities. (Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg and Claudia Eppert)¹

What might it mean to come to terms with the violent past of the Middle Passage as the grounds for inaugurating a creolized pedagogy for the Americas, one that concerns itself with an acknowledgement of how intertwined our histories are? [...] The importance of creolization to this issue of working through is its potential for enabling more complicated analyses of sameness and difference [...] It requires that we think about the possibilities and turbulences of violent cultural sharing that produce new positions of identity and relation. (Rinaldo Walcott)²

Joscelyn Gardner's **White Skin, Black Kin** is an exploration of identity, relation, sameness and difference in colonial and postcolonial Barbados. It is an attempt to "get at" the lived experiences of connection and overlap, violence and creation which underlie relations in this creolized space. **White Skin, Black Kin** is also an exploration of the gaps and silences in narratives of race and nation. It restores and recuperates these gaps in and through the bodies of white and black creole women.

Gardner has written that Caribbean plantation society was a "visually performative site" and plantation life a "visual spectacle of power and race".³ In the video installation **White Skin, Black Kin: A Creole Conversation Piece**, Gardner re-stages the drama of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Great House. The installation is a gathering of whispers and traces. The silent scene is of a drawing room occupied by three still white female bodies – a mother (with partially hidden infant) and two daughters. The smaller child plays occasionally with a topsy-turvy doll – white and black – and the scene returns to stillness. Three black female bodies move freely about the house while the white occupants remain motionless. They drift in and out of the frame – and of the viewer's consciousness – leaving barely a trace. The audio is quite separate. The listener must place her ear to the wall to hear the characters – a white woman, a black woman, three black women, a black woman and a white woman – all Barbadian and all living in the 1800s.

A Creole Conversation Piece is a re-working of the eighteenth-century artistic form from which it takes its name into a presentation that resembles a series of tableaux vivants (and is strangely reminiscent of a museum life group).⁴ Gardner's installation introduces the twin notions of domesticity and domestication as these are enacted on and through female bodies in the New World. The visual sequences of **A Creole Conversation Piece** address the structuring absence of blackness in contemporary representations of white creole life. The audio sequences complicate and augment the visual to address questions of white female complicity with the violence of slavery, white male violence towards black and white women and collusion between white and black women in the face of white male violence.

Gardner's piece raises compelling questions about what it might mean to represent the past in ways which facilitate an understanding

of relationship and relations in the present. How do we remember? How do we use the fragments of history and memory to reconstruct a viable present? How might we engage with the past and the present in ways which respect difference, admit to interconnection and encourage an embodied consciousness of human possibility? If the white creole woman is erased from stories of the plantation and the contemporary nation (except as stereotype) then it is because the stories of black creole women are also not fully told. When whispers and traces are all that is left of the experience of co-presence how do we represent the past? As Gardner might ask, how does one speak the unspeakable?

A Creole Conversation Piece tackles this as a conceptual and formal question. It moves beyond the spectacle of the visual to explore what might exist at its edges. It is a search for traces and it alludes – in the disjuncture between sound and image, movement and stasis – to a near impossibility of representation.

Three black women are inserted into the conversation piece. Each is a ghost-like figure – very real, not at all frightening, but existing at the edges of representation. The “sweeper” initiates the ghost story. She exists literally at the edge of the frame, entering on the left and exiting on the right. Her presence inaugurates a re-reading of the scene of domesticity and is unnoticed and unmarked by the family. The “server” enters and fills several glasses. She is standing directly in front of the **Portrait of Seale-Yearwood Esq.** and Gardner tells us that the master’s butler (serving the sangaree in the portrait) may well be his son.⁵ Presiding over the scene, then, is the master of the house with the evidence of his sexual conquest. The “server” leaves traces within the frame. Her drinks are left behind.

The third ghost is one whom we might call “la coquette”. She seems playful, is not working and appears to take a kind of ownership of the space. She stops to look at the portrait. Might there be some connection here? The smaller child returns to playing with the topsy-turvy doll and the scene returns to the frozen image. The “sweeper” reappears, this time at the back of the room. She spends a long time there, sweeping, fanning, resting briefly. She seems careful and thoughtful. She appears to frame the action while at the same time standing apart from it. The “server” and “la coquette” then appear together. The former seems upset that the latter is not hard at work. “La coquette” accidentally breaks a vase and is scolded by the “server”. The freeze frame returns following their exit. The video is looped after approximately fourteen minutes.

The trace of the father/master returns in the second video, **Sisters**, with the presence of a black/mixed race girl and the small child with the topsy-turvy doll. We assume that the two are sisters. There is no need for ghost-like presence here. The first child embodies the relationships which pervade the plantation. A child’s humming/singing voice permeates the room. The girls play together with their dolls and end in an embrace. The piece is clearly symbolic and would seem to be attempting a transition from the past to the present with a hopeful gesture toward the future.

In installing this exhibition at the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, Gardner makes an incursion into an official space of pedagogy where stories of the nation are told. In using the materials of the museum itself, Gardner expands the notion of remembrance and questions the ability of the archive to render knowledge. In a sense, the installation brings the museum pieces to life – making artifacts of human bodies, implicating the present in the past and the past in the present.⁶

The installation forces an acknowledgement of an underlying presence. The sound and images are whispers and traces suggesting the possibilities of untold stories. Yet the listener/viewer can only ever come away with fragments. It is easy to miss the ghost-like figures. The visitor to the gallery must work – press her ear to the wall – to catch the whispers of what might be going on. Only then can she begin to put together the “conversation piece” as a layered experiment in what it might mean to exist in the gaps of audiovisual language, in the gaps of representation and in the gaps of history. Gardner’s installation pieces make fragmentation and partial knowledge the condition of experience.

If remembrance is inherently pedagogical, as Simon et al suggest, what are the possibilities for identifications and feelings evoked by the installation? How has Gardner used the existing pedagogy of the museum to add another layer of experience? And how might that help us to recognize Walcott’s “touch of the past within the present”⁷ as a relationship of possibility, loss, trauma and re-creation, of shared lives and differently embodied histories?

The past can never fully be recaptured or redressed – it can only be revisited in a posthumous attempt to come to terms with what lives might have meant in their present and the implications for our own. **A Creole Conversation Piece** initiates a conversation that questions visible evidence and works at the edges of representation to suggest a multi-layered experience of history and memory.

¹ Simon, Roger I., Sharon Rosenberg and Claudia Eppert, "Introduction: Between Hope and Despair. The Pedagogical Encounter with Historical Remembrance." Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg and Claudia Eppert, eds. **Between Hope and Despair. The Pedagogical Encounter with Historical Remembrance**, (Lanham and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 2.

² Rinaldo Walcott, "Pedagogy and Trauma: The Middle Passage, Slavery, and the Problem of Creolization." Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert, eds. **Between Hope and Despair. The Pedagogical Encounter with Historical Remembrance**, 139.

³ See Gardner, "Colonial Plantation Theatrics: 'Staging' the Creole Body" in this catalogue.

⁴ See Gardner, "Postcolonial Portraits: 'Speaking the Unspeakable'" in this catalogue.

⁵ See Gardner, "Shared Lives, Disparate Histories: The Topsy-Turvy Relationship of Creole Women" in this catalogue.

⁶ See Simon, Roger I., "The Paradoxical Practice of Zakhor: Memories of 'What Has Never Been My Fault or My Deed'." Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert, eds. **Between Hope and Despair. The Pedagogical Encounter with Historical Remembrance**, 9-25.

⁷ Walcott, 146.

*Re-presenting Creole Identity:
Theorizing a (white) Postcolonial Creole Feminism*

Joscelyn Gardner

white + Creole + woman. How does one define/theorize a body that is at once visible (in its “native” space) and invisible (in the Western world)? In probing white female Creole identity in the postcolonial English-speaking Caribbean, the multi-layered complexities of a geographically fragmented and imperially constructed region must be considered. Here, a violent colonial history of institutionalized trans-Atlantic/plantation slavery fundamentally informed by Christianity and patriarchy has shaped a multiracial society in which the white female Creole body becomes the site of simultaneous privilege and marginalization.

The term “Creole”¹ is used in this text to refer to someone born in the Caribbean. This term originated in the seventeenth century to differentiate whites born in the newly settled colonies from those of European birth. Despite their similar British ancestry, such a distinction was found necessary in order to assert the cultural difference between Caribbean-born whites and those from the British Isles. In **The White Minority in the Caribbean** (1998), Karl Watson notes that “creolisation involved the identification of people, whatever their place of origin or racial composition, with the island societies in which they lived.”² The author states that “the evolution of this cultural synthesis of West African and West European forms was noticed and commented on in almost every eighteenth-century traveler’s account.”³ Further on, he notes that this “proto-nationalism” became evident in acts of open hostility by local whites towards Englishmen.

Since the nineteenth century, the term “Creole” has been used to describe all people born in the West Indies, regardless of race.⁴ Currently, it is often used in the West to denote the interracial body (particularly of French and African descent), or to refer to Caribbean languages. In this context, I am reclaiming the historical/colonial use of the term “Creole” and inserting it into postcolonial discourse as a cultural term that more succinctly defines (white) identity in the contemporary Caribbean. In doing so, I aim to complexify this identity as being distinct from, yet related to, (white) Western identity through its intertwined historical bond with black identity. As Bocquet suggests, the term has “the unique advantage of distinguishing mestizaje in the Caribbean from mestizaje elsewhere”⁵ and consequently serves to “unite” the Caribbean community.

The process of creolisation, which began to take place in the Caribbean as early as the sixteenth century⁶, is critical to my definition of (white) postcolonial Caribbean identity. A fundamental characteristic of Caribbean culture, it has been defined by some theorists as the blending of Amerindian, European, and African cultures that occurred as a result of colonization and plantation slavery.⁷ In the essay “Creolisation and Creole Societies”,⁸ Nigel Bolland cites Kamau Brathwaite’s seminal study, “The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820” (1971), as being the source of the Creole-society model. Rather than a process of “blending”, this model stresses “intercultural creolisation” between “Afro-Creoles” and “Euro-Creoles” as “a two-way process” with the “coloured population” as a “bridge, a kind of social cement” between the two cultures (24). It proposes that “the Europeans and Africans who settled in the Americas contributed to the development of a distinctive society and culture that was neither European nor African, but ‘Creole’” (23). Amerindian culture is omitted. Accepting this model of creolisation as being relevant to my study, I aim to explore the hybrid identity of Caribbean whites and to show that a shared geopolitical and cultural history can thus shape identity beyond the confines of the assumed racial/racist determinants in established Western theory.⁹

Using the broader yet intersecting frameworks of feminist discourse and postcolonial discourse, I am also mapping a methodological practice that draws on both black and third world feminisms and postcolonial studies to construct a (slippery) theoretical space for the white Creole woman. The history and concerns of (black and third world) feminist theories have in many ways paralleled those of postcolonial discourse, since it is recognized that women and colonized subjects have shared similar experiences of the politics of oppression and repression.¹⁰ Both feminist and postcolonial discourses share a political motivation to articulate the voices of the silenced, marginalized, and oppressed. By tracing how gender relations in the Caribbean have been constructed and experienced through colonialism and patriarchy by Creole women, I aim to negotiate an (alter)native overlapping cultural space for the former “colonizing female subject” (the white Creole woman) within a discourse which I shall propose as a “(white) postcolonial Creole feminism.” The contradictions implicit in such

a split subject position (the “privileged” colonizing subject with the marginalized/oppressed female subject) will become clearer later on in this study.

Why is it necessary to propose yet another feminism? In a postmodern age with multiple feminist theoretical perspectives and a myriad of shifting, unstable terms, why does one need to theorize gender from yet another margin? Why is it that the white Creole female body cannot fit within the existing “white” Feminist discourse?

Traditional Feminism has been important in undermining boundaries between the personal and the political and giving visibility to women through examining the discursive and material effects of patriarchy, yet it most often remains narrowly focused on white Western (heterosexual) interests. Thus, it readily becomes a totalizing theory that accommodates only gender and sex. Race, ethnicity, class, and geopolitical history within such a construct are often overlooked.¹¹ Feminism, in the widest sense, has not celebrated difference and has failed to recognize “otherness”. Early Feminist discourse viewed women as a monolithic group of white middle- and upper-class, educated married Westerners whose major interest was seeking equal rights in terms of gender.

Though it is recognized that this “white” Feminist discourse has previously been challenged, it still remains largely Western in its outlook.¹² Given the previous discussion of creolisations, the white Creole woman does not recognize herself within this relatively homogeneous Feminist theoretical framework. Though “white” and sharing a “female” history of oppression by institutionalized patriarchal structures, the white Creole woman occupies an “in-between” space (Homi Bhabha¹³). She finds more in common with black/Third World/postcolonial feminisms because of their concern with race, class, culture, and geopolitical history, and ultimately, the lived experience of women within particular geographical and cultural spaces. As a former colonizing subject, the white Creole woman appears to share a common history with the (white) Western woman. However, as a product of cross-cultural creolisation, the postcolonial white Creole woman consciously embraces difference and intuitively understands her own difference from (white) Western women. I am arguing here that, for her, the adjective “white” remains a descriptive term rather than a noun. She is, above all, a Creole who paradigmatically claims her Caribbean heritage with pride. In the proceeding paper, I intend to situate the white Creole woman’s experience away from the margins of historical discourse and to map the historical construction of her identity as Other by navigating between existing theoretical (feminist and postcolonial) methodologies.

The construction of the white Creole woman’s Otherness becomes evident when colonial texts written by visitors to the “Indies” are examined. Historian Edward Long, writing in the eighteenth century, commented on the “cultural deterioration” white Creole women experienced from “constant intercourse” with black household servants. According to Hilary Beckles, Long suggests that these women “‘insensibly adopted’ the dress, speech, and manners of blacks, which rendered them further removed from European culture than the colour of their skin suggests.”¹⁴

We may see in some of these places, a very fine young woman awkwardly dangling her arms, with the air of a negro servant lolling almost the whole day upon beds or settees, her head muffed up with two or three handkerchiefs, her dress loose, and without stays. At noon, we find her employed in gobbling pepper-pot, seated on the floor, with her sable hand-maids around her.¹⁵

Such vignettes, captured in the words of British men or women who were resident in or visiting the islands, portray a “fixed” image of the native (white) population.¹⁶ Here, the white woman’s body is visually conflated with blackness. Culture and race are collapsed through a system of bodily signs. The white body is seen to perform blackness through its dress and behavior. The imperial project seemed to necessitate the “othering” of all members of “native” populations outside of the “mother country” (a process that ultimately served as a warning against racial mingling and miscegenation). As Ania Loomba notes in **Colonialism/Postcolonialism** (1998), the central contradiction within colonialism was its need to both “‘civilise’ its ‘others’, and to fix them into perpetual ‘otherness’.”¹⁷ In the eyes of the European white, the white Creole woman had become a colonial subject in need of “civilizing”, as a result of her Creole culture. The European writer was employing an “objective” gaze to map her visual signs of difference and to “fix” her identity as culturally inferior.

The fabrication of the white female Creole’s alterity also becomes apparent later in nineteenth century British and American abolitionist publications. These include Sunday school primers, juvenile miscellanies, antislavery newspapers, and giftbooks. Produced largely by women who had organized themselves into Anti-Slavery Societies, these politically motivated publications served a didactic purpose by using sentimental strategies to evoke feelings of outrage in the hearts of their readers. As Sánchez-Eppler notes in **Touching Liberty** (1997), “The tears of the reader are pledged in these sentimental stories as a means of rescuing the bodies of slaves” (26). Such sentimental fiction

functioned through stereotypes: “In sentimental writing the self is externally displayed, and the body provides a reliable sign of who one is.”¹⁸ Children’s stories, such as **The Barbadoes Girl: a Tale for Young People** (1818), by Mrs. Holland, were written expressly to play on these stereotypes and evoke sympathy from the reader for the slave. In this story, a young white Creole girl (Matilda Sophia Hanson) is sent to England to stay with family friends, following her father’s death in Barbados. Depicted as a proud, self-willed, spoilt child who treats her female slave companion in a cruel and derogatory manner, Matilda is gradually transformed (read “civilized”) into a humble, caring, sympathetic child who understands that slavery is an evil in the sight of God. The book’s frontispiece illustration shows the Creole child, at the start of her visit, throwing a glass of beer into her slave’s face. In the text, we also learn (through hearsay) that in Barbados,

The most delicate ladies are waited upon by naked slaves, whose bare backs are probably bleeding from the recent effects of a sound whipping, inflicted, probably, because Missy’s dolly had fallen, and broken her nose, out of Missy’s own hands. (180)

In addition, we are presented with Matilda’s total self-effacement when she first sees snow in England and is ignorant about what it is. When her English playmates try to placate her, she exclaims with great humility “Oh no, European children know everything, but I am little better than a negro; I find what your mamma said was very true – I know nothing at all” (47).

The Anti-Slavery movement in Britain openly ridiculed Creole society. In a series of exaggerated and satirical cartoons, the Creole woman is stereotyped as an unsophisticated and uneducated “plantation mistress” whose chief concern is to do as little as possible and to maintain a decadent lifestyle at the expense of her black slaves. According to Watson, one such cartoon image shows a white Creole woman sitting at an upstairs window calling down to her slave who is standing outside. She demands that she come up to her room and take her head in from the window.

In expressly political cartoons such as **A Grand Jamaica Ball! Or the Creolean Hop à la Mustee; as exhibited in Spanish Town** (published in London in 1802 by William Holland), we are shown the unrestrained and decadent behaviour “characteristic” of an “uncivilized” (white) Creole society. White Creole “ladies” prance around with wild abandon, kicking up their legs in an unpropitious manner, as they cavort across the room in the company of the Red Coats (the local militia). Slaves lurk in the wings watching the activities, or serve large glasses of rum punch and Sangaree to the dancers. An inscription below the image reads,

Farewell ye girls! And still alas! As mama bids sad Red Coats shun!
But soon will each forsaken Lass, / Most keenly rue the Dance she’s run!

Charmless you’ll grow in person, face, and eye,
Joyless in youth, old maids you’ll useless die!

Images of the cruel mistress who abuses her slaves also abound in the literature. In the slave narrative of Mary Prince (1831; the only known West Indian female slave autobiography), we learn that her mistress taught her,

the exact differences between the smart of the rope, the cart-whip, and the cow-skin, when applied to my naked body by her own cruel hand. And there was scarcely any punishment more dreadful than the blows I received on my face and head from her hard heavy fist. She was a fearful woman, and a savage mistress to her slaves.¹⁹

Such stories and images were used to launch an attack on institutionalized slavery at the expense of Creole society. The guilt of the colonial slave trade had been effectively displaced onto the Other (the white Creole) with no responsibility shared by the citizens of the “mother country.”²⁰ Men and women were equally under attack, though a slightly more sympathetic appreciation of the plight of the planter’s wife is apparent in writing by European women who had actually visited or lived in the islands. Mrs. Carmichael’s account of life in the colonies points to fear (isolation on plantations), overwork (managing a large household of slaves), and the impossibility of dealing with slaves as the chief problems encountered by the white female. Yet, the text ultimately makes it clear that ironically, it is the Western woman who wields the ideological tools of colonial and patriarchal oppression over her white “sisters” in the islands.

There is little existent published literature from this period produced by white Creole women and few visible traces of their existence

made by their own hands.²¹ Only much later do they find a voice in the post-emancipation fiction of Creole writers like Jean Rhys. In her well-known novel, **Wide Sargasso Sea** (1966), Rhys counters the canonical text by reinventing the “mad” inbred Creole woman from Charlotte Brontë’s **Jane Eyre** (the first Mrs. Rochester) as the heroine of her tale. The white Creole daughter of a former slave owner in Jamaica, Antoinette Cosway, tries to navigate her way through the in-between space of being neither black (like the rest of her community) nor English (like her husband).

I’ve heard English women call us white niggers. So between you and I, I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all. (102)

Antoinette finally achieves liberation from this impossible situation when she burns down her husband’s English mansion and jumps into a pool (in her dream) where she is able to “merge the colonial blackness and Creole whiteness that have torn her apart and driven her to madness.”²² The text offers a site of resistance to the dominant colonial narrative of imperial “othering.”

These colonial texts (both pre- and post-emancipation) clearly articulate a syncretic relationship between black and white Creole identity. It is therefore useful to try to understand (white) Creole identity through the lens of black feminist theory. Black feminism is fundamentally engaged with intersectionality in its insistence that race/colour and sex/gender be simultaneously considered, and as such contests the homogeneity of “white” Feminism. Grounded in the theorization of black experience/identity, black feminism has challenged the assumptions of white Euro-feminism by legitimizing the black female voice as an essential element of Western history. Recognizing the shared experience of patriarchal subordination, black feminism suggests that black women have been doubly victimized and rendered invisible because of “scholarly neglect and racist assumptions.”²³ The difficulty involved in retrieving black women’s history and understanding its complexities lies in past refusals to regard such material as worthy of recording and institutionalization (with the exception of abolitionist publications).

Here I wish to argue that the refusal of white male historians to acknowledge white Creole women in the master discourse has meant that she must likewise seek her own history in the in-between spaces. The difficulty of finding primary evidence or representations of the life of white Creole women reduces the historical probing to peripheral sources such as personal diaries and letters that often reside within private collections. However, reading between the lines of British-authored Caribbean history (travelogues, European women’s diaries and letters, and published historical texts) and black history (via slave narratives and abolitionist publications), it is possible to glimpse different views of the white Creole woman. For example, a more sympathetic view of her as a product of colonialism and patriarchy is evident in Mary Prince’s slave narrative, where, when describing the home she grew up in, she states,

My master [. . .] was a very harsh, selfish man [. . .]. His wife was herself much afraid of him; and during his stay at home, seldom dared to shew her usual kindness to the slaves [. . .]. My poor mistress bore his ill-treatment with great patience, and all her slaves loved and pitied her. I was truly attached to her, and, next to my own mother, loved her better than any creature in the world. (58)

While Feminist discourse has argued that the patriarchal oppression of women together with their exclusion from documented history have provided women with a shared history, black feminists argue that it is not true to say that this “sisterhood” has been equally shared. Gerda Lerner notes that “black women have always been more conscious of and more handicapped by race oppression than by sex oppression”.²⁴ According to her, they have never attained higher levels of status than white women. Lerner and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have demonstrated that slavery and universal sisterhood are thematically irreconcilable because of the impossibility of achieving sisterhood between female slaves and female members of slaveholding classes.²⁵ I argue that while this is true in relation to the constructed historical identity of the white Creole woman, it is still possible to conceive of a shared “sisterhood” in attempting to understand racial and cultural marginalization in a postcolonial context. Following over three centuries of existence as an empowered racial minority, the postcolonial white Creole is now culturally marginalized within a region where the contemporary black Creole majority has increasingly claimed “native” legitimacy. This shift in power dynamics has sharpened the white Creole’s sensitivity to racial “othering” in a manner that allows the white Creole woman to empathize with the marginality experienced by black women in the West. This conception, though formed from a position of privilege, is nevertheless a more sensitized understanding than that of the Western white who presumes the “normality” of her whiteness and may never need to consider the problems of a marginalized identity.

In recent years, historians such as Barbara Bush and Hilary Beckles have re-examined historical texts in order to uncover a voice for the black slave woman. These texts have been mined to unearth the “truth” about Creole society during the colonial period. Beckles notes that, since the mid-1980s, the primary focus of research has been the black woman, “with the coloured²⁶ woman running a competitive second, and the white woman trailing behind at a distance.”²⁷ His essay, “White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean” (2000), seeks to address this lack by opening up a reading of white female Creole identity using a black feminist methodology. Rejecting the notion of white women as “victims” of white male patriarchal authority or as marginal to the colonial enterprise,²⁸ he reveals their important role in the fabrication of colonial ideology (as slaveholders in urban areas and active economic agents of colonialism in their own right). He describes them as being “generally pro-slavery, socially illiberal, and economically exploitative of black women.”²⁹ As a particular example of their economic role, he cites the evidence (from European travelers) of “the sight of creole white women examining the genitals of male slaves in the markets before making purchases.”³⁰ He also points out a crucial point of difference between black and white women through the “linking of white womanhood to the reproduction of freedom”,³¹ although he acknowledges the imposition of this law as a dictate of patriarchal rule.

In his book, **Centering Woman** (1999), Beckles presents separate case studies of white women in the Caribbean as evidence of his theoretical position. He uses the example of the Fenwicks, an English mother and daughter who settled in Barbados from 1811 - 1821 and set up a school, to demonstrate the economic capabilities of white women in the slavery enterprise. The journals and letters of Lady Nugent (the wife of a British Governor resident in Jamaica from 1801-1805), and the travelogues of Mrs. Carmichael (the wife of a Scottish planter who was resident in St. Vincent and Trinidad periodically in the 1820s), are also used to attest to the immorality and social deviance in the islands. He suggests that, through intimate social contact, these women had special insight into the lives of white women in the Caribbean. Though their viewpoints are distinctly British and they were visitors to the Caribbean for relatively short periods of time, he employs their subjectivity to paint a picture of Creole society that maintains and reinforces entrenched colonial stereotypes of white Creole womanhood. The differences that set the white Creole woman apart from her European counterpart are displayed as normative. Beckles also maintains a binary opposition between the black woman as slave and the white woman as mistress and fails to present the shared history of black and white women of Creole origin. Furthermore, by titling his chapters “A Planter’s Wife’s Tale” or “A Governor’s Wife’s Tale”, he undermines the authority of these European women’s voices, and thereby contradicts his own argument, by presenting their viewpoints as subjugated by their position as “wives”. The use of the term “tale” further serves to weaken these women’s voices by relegating them to hearsay and the insignificance of a “fictional narrative”.

The relative lack of texts by (white) Creole women is symptomatic of unequal colonial power relations between (white) European women and women native to the colonies. Without this documentation, it is difficult to formulate a “true” picture of white Creole womanhood. And as Beckles admits, (though his meaning is different) “this research” into the role of women in (white) Creole society “should then be informed by the culturally embracing process of social creolisation in which European immigrants are transformed at the frontier into natives who possessed an increasingly distinct value system and sensibility.”³²

With just such critical interest now developing around the Creole woman’s identity, it is necessary to look at how the (white) postcolonial Creole woman has functioned in response to such a heightened awareness of her historically inscribed “colonizing” identity. Just what is her consciousness of the shifts that have taken place in understanding the role of her female ancestors? How has the critical writing stemming from (black) historical research (which has unearthed these stereotypical images) been perceived, and how has it been contributed to, changed, or challenged by the white Creole? Has the white Creole woman found agency through literature, music, or art?

Gayatri Spivak argues that the combined workings of colonialism and patriarchy make it extremely difficult for the subaltern to articulate her point of view.³³ As a member of a racial minority³⁴, and as a female subject in a postcolonial society that is still under patriarchal dominance, it is relatively impossible for the white Creole woman to articulate a presence within or outside of the present-day Caribbean. However, contemporary fictional literary texts by (white) female Creole authors have attempted to subvert colonial stereotypes by creating complex, multi-faceted subjects who embrace a Creole ethos. As Evelyn O’Callaghan notes in **Woman Version** (1993), white female Creole writers have questioned the image of the “mistress” of the plantation house and stressed the (sometimes uneasy) “sisterly” bond between Caribbean women as well as their strong attachment to native place. A range of fiction by Caribbean women now exists, which presents a multiplicity of voices from a postcolonial feminist vantage-point (O’Callaghan). Their counter-discursive strategy involves “a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified ‘local’.”³⁵ Strongly resistant to (resurfacing/never completely buried) colonial

representations, they contest these perspectives by stressing the hybridity of their world as normative.

A postcolonial Creole feminist consciousness has also begun to appear in some contemporary white Caribbean women's art. Visual artists such as Marta Maria Perez Bravo (Cuba) seem to examine their Creole identity within this theoretical framework. In their work, the white Creole woman does not emerge as being diametrically opposed to the black Creole woman but rather as sharing an interdependent relationship. Her view of self is that of a participant within an ambivalent shared colonial history of subjugation and survival, with all of its contested cross-cultural baggage and multiple shifting subject positions. What also emerges is that, unlike the (white) Western woman, the white Creole woman is more willing to acknowledge her "whiteness" as a site of privilege within the historical colonial hierarchy of racist plantation economies and to share shame and culpability for the sins of former colonizers.³⁶

An understanding of white female Creole identity is clearly not possible within the narrow tenets of "white" Feminist theory. One must look to black and third world feminisms and their intersection with postcolonial studies to articulate an identity for the white Creole woman. Although, previously, white colonial subjectivity has not been considered by postcolonial studies, it is now possible to produce a (white) postcolonial Creole feminism by situating the white Creole woman's voice with those of silenced black and racially "othered" voices. By examining European-authored historical records of slavery and colonial texts and images pertaining to the Caribbean, it is possible to trace the historical construction of white Creole identity as culturally inferior Other. In its desire for regulation, the mother country asserted a code of visual and performative difference on the white Creole body that revealed a contradictory form of "double consciousness."³⁷ The white Creole woman became at once a colonial subject with a colonizing role who was also subject to patriarchal rule. Europeans portrayed her as an unacceptable example of moral and cultural corruption/mutation owing to her proximity to the black body and to her consumption of and participation within the violence of slavery. She was the privileged slaveholder who wielded power over her slaves and, the dutiful wife who remained subject to her husband's wishes and tolerant of both his sexual indiscretions with slave women and of the mulatto progeny that resulted from these illicit unions.

Now aware of the slippery in-between space in which her ancestors have been trapped by black feminist and postcolonial theories, the postcolonial white Creole woman must consequently negotiate the historical attempts to "fix" her ancestral identity as Other as well as demonstrate her historical difference from (white) Western women. Homi Bhabha argues that the "fixed identities" that colonialism seeks to impose on the masters and the slaves are rendered unstable because there can be no "binary opposition between the coloniser and the colonised [. . .] both are caught up in a complex reciprocity and colonial subjects can negotiate the cracks of dominant discourses in a variety of ways."³⁸ The Creole can therefore only be understood as part of a hybrid culture that resists fixity and categorization.

The insertion of the story of the Creole body and its subjectivity into a "crack" in white Western Feminism can function to realign the entire narrative ground of feminist discourse in such a way as to actively shift all other stories. This text has undertaken to map out the historical construction of Creole identity in order to unmask just such a story.

¹ For a discussion of the changing use of this term and its relevance to Caribbean cultural identity, see Bocquet, Pierre E., "The Visual Arts and Créolité." **Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America**. Ed. Gerardo Mosquera (Cambridge, Mas.: MIT P, 1996).

² Watson, quoting William Green, 18.

³ Watson 18.

⁴ In her book, **Domestic Manners and Social Condition of the White, Coloured, and Negro Population of the West Indies**. Vol. 1., published in 1833, Mrs. Carmichael explains in a footnote that "the word Creole means a native of a West India colony, whether he be white, black, or coloured", 17.

⁵ Bocquet, 118. Bocquet defines mestizaje as "cultural hybridism".

⁶ For example, by 1816, 90% of whites in Barbados were Barbadian born "most of whom could trace their ancestry back at least six generations, being in the main descended from families who had established themselves on the island in the period 1627-60" (Watson 20). Watson claims that by 1839, a Creole consciousness was evident.

⁷ In Poupeye, Veerle, **Caribbean Art**. World of Art Series (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 15, the author points out that the Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz, in 1939,

used the metaphor of *ajiaco*, a traditional Cuban pepper stew of Amerindian origin, to explain the process of creolisation. When ingredients are added to this simmering stew over a long period of time, some dissolve fully while others maintain their identity to varying degrees. The model proposes social unity.

⁸ A rich discussion of definitions and models of creolisation is found in Shepherd, Verene A. and Glen L. Richards, eds. **Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture** (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002). Here, Carolyn Allen's essay "Creole: The Problem of Definition" also examines the etymology of the term "Creole" and highlights its varying uses through history by "insiders" (Caribbean people) and "outsiders" (Westerners).

⁹ However, I remain aware of Bolland's argument for a dialectical theory that takes into consideration that creolisation cannot be a homogenizing process since Brathwaite's model neglects to recognize continuing class distinctions and hostilities within Creole societies.

¹⁰ I am referring to the "double colonization" of (black) women in formerly colonized societies by imperial and patriarchal ideologies.

¹¹ Differences of sexuality, religion, and age are also overlooked but beyond the scope of this discussion.

¹² White Feminism has concentrated upon affirming the sexual specificity of women and questioning patriarchal norms and ideals of femininity while generally ignoring the effect that the differences in material and social conditions of non-Western women have on these women.

¹³ Bhabha, Homi, "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences." Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. **The Post-Colonial Studies Reader** (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 209.

¹⁴ Beckles, Hilary McD, "White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean." Shepherd, Verene A., and Hilary McD. Beckles, eds. **Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World: A Student Reader**, Rev. ed. (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2000), 668. Parts of this essay also appear in Beckles, Hilary McD, "White Women and Freedom." **Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society** (Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1999).

¹⁵ Edward Long (1774) as quoted in Beckles, "White Women and Slavery", 668.

¹⁶ For example, Carmichael, Mrs., **Domestic Manners and Social Condition of the White, Coloured, and Negro Population of the West Indies**. Vol. 1.

¹⁷ Loomba, Ania., **Colonialism/Postcolonialism**. (London: Routledge, 1998), 173.

¹⁸ Sánchez-Eppler, 1997, 27.

¹⁹ **The History of Mary Prince a West Indian Slave Related by Herself**, 66.

²⁰ In an article dated November 22, 1831, in the **Bermuda Royal Gazette**, printed in defense of Mary Prince's former slaveowners, the (Creole) writer rebukes the Anti-Slavery Society in England for falsely maligning their character by printing Mary Prince's slave narrative. He accuses the Society of "blackening" and "defaming" the reputations of all West India proprietors and "poisoning" the "public mind in England [...] against their brethren in the West Indies". See Appendix 9 in **The History of Mary Prince**. Also writing in defense of the West India planters, Mrs. Carmichael (1833) states that "although nominally proprietors", they "are really nothing else than the farmer for the British merchant, who receives their annual produce", 17.

²¹ O'Callaghan, Evelyn., **Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women** (Warwick University Caribbean Studies 1. New York: St. Martin's P, 1993). O'Callaghan quotes Davies and Fido's introduction to **Out of Kumbla** as defining the "voicelessness" of women's writing in the Caribbean as "the historical absence of a specifically female position on major issues such as slavery, colonialism, decolonisation, women's rights and more direct social and cultural issues", 5.

²² Erika Pugh, "Caribbean Women Writers", 5.

²³ Lerner, Gerda, "Black Women in White America." Bhavnani, Kum-Kum, ed. **Feminism and 'Race'** (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 45.

²⁴ Lerner, 47.

²⁵ See Fox-Genovese's **Within the Plantation Household: Black Women and White Women in the Old South** (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988), and Lerner's **The Creation of Patriarchy** (NY; Toronto: Oxford U P, 1986).

²⁶ Throughout the body of this text, the term "coloured", as used here, refers to the interracial/mulatto body. Though I am aware that this term is used in a derogatory way in North America, it is commonly used in the Caribbean to distinguish the mixed race body from the black body.

²⁷ Beckles, "White Women and Slavery", 659.

²⁸ Beckles rejects Barbara Bush and Lucille Mair's proposal that white women, though privileged, shared the socio-sexual manipulation and exploitation of white patriarchy in the slave system.

²⁹ Beckles, "White Women and Freedom", 71.

³⁰ Ibid., 61.

³¹ Ibid., 62. Beckles notes that in the slave system white women were constitutionally privileged/protected. Children produced by white women with enslaved black men were born legally free, while children of black slave women and white men were born slaves. This legal tradition, known as *partus sequitur ventrem*, whereby slave status was immediately extended to any child born of a slave mother, irrespective of the status of the father, dated from imperial Rome. It guaranteed that black slave populations would reproduce themselves naturally.

³² Beckles, "White Women and Freedom", 71. The term native, as used here, refers to the subject's birthplace and ancestry rather than being related to aboriginal and North American uses of the term.

³³ Loomba, 234.

³⁴ Though the designation "racial minority" has different implications for the white body in the Caribbean as compared to the black body in Canada owing to different balances of power, it still embodies marginality.

³⁵ Tiffin, Helen, "Post-Colonial Literatures", **The Post-Colonial Studies Reader**, 98.

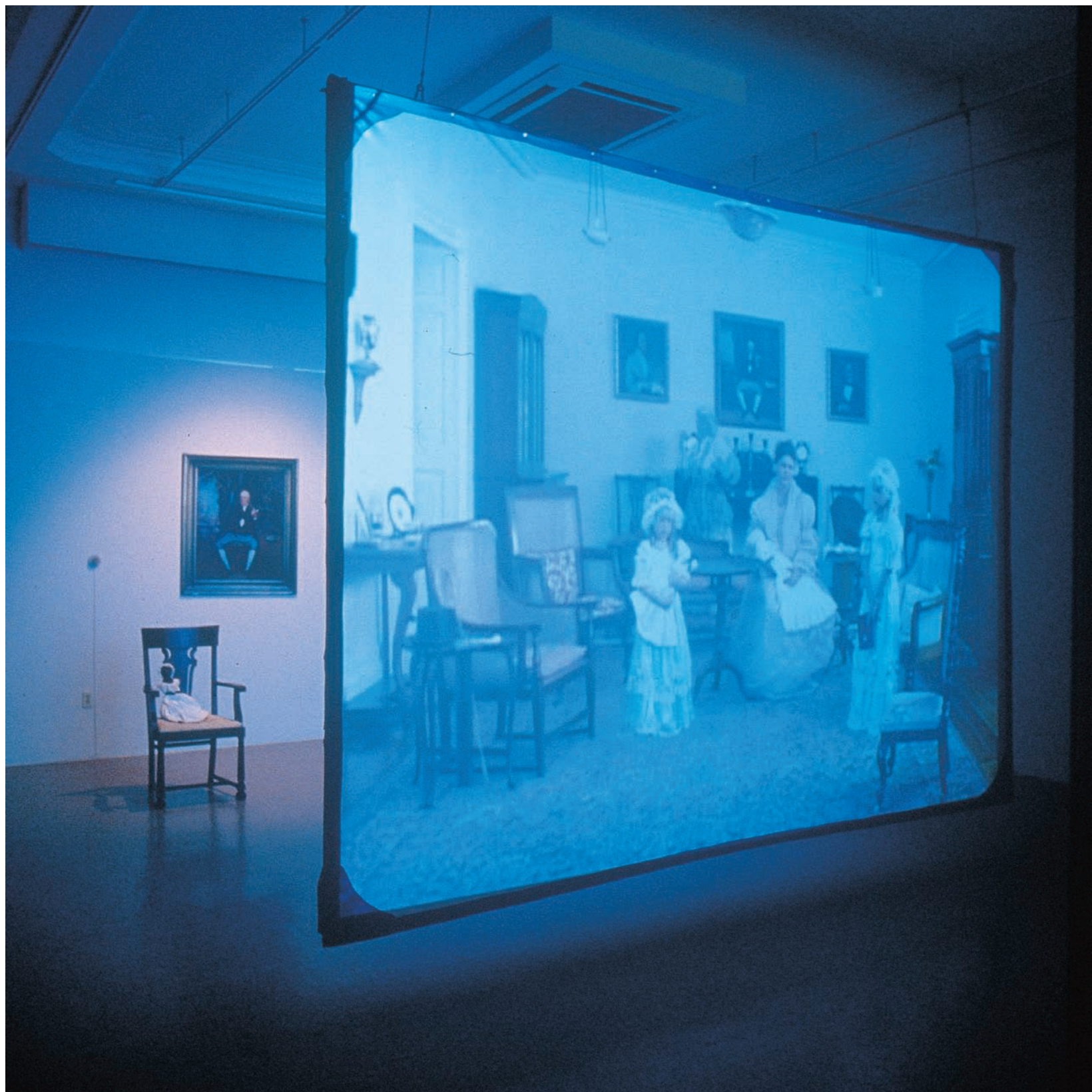
³⁶ I refer to the sins of physical and mental oppression institutionalized by plantation slavery. Works such as Pérez Bravo's **Paths** (1990) indicate a desire to symbolically share the pain of slavery.

³⁷ I acknowledge W. E. B. Du Bois as the author of this concept.

³⁸ Loomba, 232.

Plates







Joscelyn Gardner, Details of Video/Audio Installation *White Skin, Black Kin: a Creole Conversation Piece*, 2003
Photography: John Tamblin



"She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind."
Toni Morrison, *Beloved*



Joscelyn Gardner, Details of Multi-media Installation
A Tiny Prick, 2002-04, in the Prisoner's Cell, Barbados Museum.
Photography: James Marshall





Agostino Brunias, Untitled, c. 1773, oil on canvas

Agostino Brunias, Untitled, c. 1773, oil on canvas

Photography: James Marshall
Courtesy of the Peter Moores Foundation

Artist unknown, Portrait of Seale-Yearwood Esq., undated, oil on canvas
Photography: Willie Alleyne
Courtesy of the Barbados Museum





Joscelyn Gardner, Detail of Video Installation, Pinkie: "The Barbadoes Girl", 2003-04

Joscelyn Gardner, Topsy-turvy Doll, 2003
Photography: James Marshall

Frontispiece Illustration from *The Barbadoes Girl: a Tale for Young People* by Mrs. Holland, 1818
Photography: James Marshall
Courtesy of the Barbados Museum





Isaac Belisario, Jaw-Bone, or House John-Canoe, 1837, hand-painted lithograph from the series Sketches of Character printed by A. Duperly

Isaac Belisario, Koo Koo, or Actor-Boy, 1837, hand-painted lithograph from the series Sketches of Character printed by A. Duperly

A Grand Jamaica Ball! Or the Creolean Hop a la Mustee; as Exhibited in Spanish Town (published in London in 1802 by William Holland)
Photography: James Marshall Courtesy of the Barbados Museum

*Colonial Plantation Theatrics:
"Staging" the Creole Body*

Joscelyn Gardner

In the Caribbean we are all performers [...] we all try to act the roles that our skin reads out to us. This is a regularity. (Benítez-Rojo 236)

As Antonio Benítez-Rojo notes in **The Repeating Island** (1992), Caribbean identity has to a large extent been affirmed by the historical roles accorded by race, which is most prominently identified by the colour of one's skin. In this essay, I propose a reading of the eighteenth-century sugar plantation in the English-speaking Caribbean as a metaphorical amphitheater in which colonial racial identities were formally articulated and staged according to European dictates. At the top of the hierarchy (in this context), the white male Creole body, as instrument of power in the master class, was costumed in the garments of the European gentleman and assumed a leading role performing as the preeminent colonizing agent on the plantation stage. His white Creole wife, daughters, and sisters, similarly outfitted in European finery, performed supporting domestic roles according to the patriarchally established expectations of (white) "true womanhood."¹ Coloured slaves (products of the sexual exploitation of slave women by the white masters) also acted as subordinate supporting characters in the domestic sphere. Owned as chattel, they nevertheless enjoyed privileges denied to the general slave population because of the lighter colour of their skin. The half-clothed multitude of black slaves formed the majority of players in this tyrannical system. Forced into hard labour against their will, they were cast in the lowest roles in this highly stratified oppressive power structure.² The master's governance decreed subservient roles for both the white Creole women and the coloured and/or black colonized Creole subjects (the slave class) under his control, and survival on the plantation depended upon strict adherence to the specificities of these roles.

The visual dynamics of this "Plantation Theater", produced and directed by European colonial and patriarchal decree in the interest of the economics of sugar production, was accordingly predicated upon stereotypical roles based largely on the appearance of the actors. The "performance" of power on the plantation stage relied on visual spectacle and binary constructions of racial identity. Bodies were classified based on visual signifiers and compelled to perform roles and adopt behaviours appropriate to the identities predetermined for them at birth by race, class, and gender. Imitation/mimicry became important accomplishments of all of the players.³

In the following critical examination of eighteenth-century Caribbean material culture, I reveal Caribbean plantation society as a visually performative site. In particular, I look at paintings representing Creole bodies (the actors), tools of torture (the stage props), and images/replicas of the plantation yard and its Great House and furnishings (the stage setting) found in the Barbados Museum and Historical Society's collection to facilitate a discussion of plantation life as a visual spectacle of power and race.

The Caribbean sugar plantation of the eighteenth century operated as a mighty machine shaping the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of each island.⁴ Sugar became "king"⁵ and by the end of the seventeenth century, the fact that the economic boom required a forced black slave labour base had necessitated a huge shift in the racial population.⁶ Each plantation, isolated from other plantations, functioned as a microcosm of the colonial "sugar island" society.⁷ Europeans visiting the islands likened the plantation yard and slave settlements to complete villages or small towns, with the Great House as a "castle."⁸ The circularly arranged plantation yard became the stage on which regulated bodies performed the duties integral to the



plantation's economic success. Hierarchical subordination became the founding principle of success in an organizing system based on incarceration and the exploitation of forced labour.

A contemporary painting entitled **Burnt House Plantation** (1988)⁹, mounted in the Barbados Museum diorama to illustrate plantation life from this period, clearly lays out the typical plantation stage set. The Sugar Mill where the sugarcane is crushed by wind power dominates the left foreground. The Boiling House (with smokestack), the Curing House, and the Still House, together with the storerooms, workshops for tradesmen, stables, and houses for white staff, encircle the plantation yard. The mansion house or Great House (the white master's residence) occupies center-stage on slightly higher ground opposite the Mill. Centered within this circle, and moving between buildings, the slaves undertake the labour of producing sugar, molasses, and rum, while in the surrounding cane-fields, the field gangs harvest the sugarcane. To the west/lee of the mill yard and Great House, but in close proximity, a group of huts in orderly rows constitute the plantation slave settlement or "Negro yard."

In his essay on plantation settlements, Jerome Handler points out that slave settlements were placed near the plantation yard, and "almost universally within ready sight of the mansion house itself" for purposes of the planter's personal comfort, security, and ease of surveillance (Handler 125). He states,

The advantage of having the slave houses close at hand was sarcastically noted in 1796 by the manager of Newton and Seawell. In Barbados 'generally', he wrote [. . .] 'the manager's dwelling house is [. . .] situated where they enjoy the sight of all the doors of the [yard] buildings at one view; if nothing is wrong in the day time, all must be secure – they suppose – and from [. . .] their front door, they give their directions with a stentorian voice without the trouble of motion."¹⁰ (Handler 127).

In the painting of **Burnt House Plantation**, the division of labour between controlling white male bodies (on horseback) and enslaved male and female black bodies (toiling as forced labour) is readily apparent. Each actor has an assigned role within the plantation machine that is visually confirmed by strict racial codes of dress and behaviour. The two white male Overseers (in the left foreground and middle of the painting) are finely attired in tail jackets, bright red jodhpurs, shoes, stockings, and black top hats. Meanwhile, among the numerous black slave bodies they regulate, the women wear loose untailed clothing and head-wraps and the men are generally barebacked and walk barefoot. The slaves are all shown industriously performing their duties while the Overseers sit on their horses, high above their subjects, "overseeing" the work. Here, slave labour is normalized and glorified as a natural part of the sugar production process.

Missing in the painting of this plantation are the privileged players within the Great House and the scenes of torture that was daily inflicted on the slaves. The exhibition of this painting within the Museum display indexes the racial stratification that placed white and coloured bodies inside the House and black bodies outside in the fields. However, the objects in the display cases on either side of the painting only hint at the realities of plantation life. On one side, there is elaborate silverware, crystal, and miniature portraits from within the House. On the other side, there are the humble personal belongings of the faceless slaves (clay pipes, necklaces of beads, canine teeth, and fish vertebrae, and iron bangles and earrings) as well as the shackles, branding iron, and iron ball that are symbolic of slavery.¹¹ The viewer of the display is made aware of the class divisions of plantation life but the visual performance of the extremes of this life is left to the imagination. As Marcus Wood notes in his book **Blind Memory** (2000), these objects become floating signifiers devoid of the bodies that would give them meaning.¹² The painting "naturalizes" black slave labour and visually denies white privilege (the Great House is rendered as much smaller and less ornate than usual) while the display cabinets conflate inanimate objects with imagined performative experience.

The oppressive structure of disciplinary power that proposed the functioning of the plantation as a well-honed machine is only tentatively suggested by this display. Predicated on a network of surveillance systems associated with a hierarchical sliding scale of race and caste, this apparatus of power punished non-conformity to assigned roles through physical torture. Slave society was subdivided into rigid castes and classes corresponding to "racial divisions in which membership was hereditary and defined by laws: the white population first, and then, in descending order of social rank, the free persons of colour and the slaves."¹³ On the lowest rungs, domestic slaves were in one caste and field slaves in another. The field slaves (working directly with sugar production) were divided into work gangs. A black driver (of a slightly higher social class), equipped with a whip, led each gang and supervised their labour. Lashes were meted out frequently to increase production. Membership in these gangs was dictated by age and physical strength. The first or "great" gang included mature men and women who did the most difficult work – holing and harvesting. The second gang was composed of youths (from twelve to eighteen) and elderly men and women who did lighter fieldwork. Children, aged six to twelve, formed the third gang and worked weeding or gathering

grass. Slave registers further regulated black bodies by classifying them according to age, sex, country of birth, occupation, and value (in sterling) and kept account of all births, deaths, and serious illnesses.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the strict racial classification of plantation labour had been permanently instituted to simplify the visual regulation of plantation bodies. This is particularly evident when it is noted that white women who had earlier laboured in the fields and in menial jobs as indentured servants were removed from the fields and given privileged status over the black slaves.¹⁴ Power and privilege became visually equated with the minority white body. By contrast, the status of the majority black body as legal “property” destined it for a lifetime of subjugation, torture, and psychological trauma.

Compounding this violent oppressive system, slave laws in the British colonies were made directly by the slave-owning ruling class.¹⁵ The master had absolute power over his property, the slave. Since legally the slave was not regarded as a person, but as private property, the master could dispose of his body in any manner he chose. The plantation therefore became a stage for the theatrics of racist power in the pursuit of sugar production. Tools of torture such as cart whips, leg irons, balls and chains, stocks, bridles, branding irons, and iron collars provided the stage props for the performance of power. The visual spectacle of publicly exhibited corporal punishment was paramount in maintaining order both in its physically cruel fulfillment, and afterward, in the scars that it left on the slave victim’s body.¹⁶

Two simultaneous operations of power were accordingly manifested on the eighteenth-century plantation stage; namely, a visually codified surveillance system (based on racial signifiers) and corporal punishment in the form of torture. These disciplinary systems align themselves curiously in the space between Michel Foucault’s two opposing theories of disciplinary power and punishment proposed in his book **Discipline and Punish** (1979). Here, Foucault theorizes that by the eighteenth century European society had gradually substituted a modern system of surveillance for the old-style theatrical spectacle of violent torture (physical pain, death, and dismemberment) as a means of enforcing power. The author states that the punishment of torture was replaced by a system of hierarchized surveillance in which “disciplinary power became an ‘integrated’ system, linked from the inside to the economy and to the aims of the mechanism in which it was practiced” (Foucault 176). He suggests that an organized network of relations from top to bottom based on mutual observation of supervised and/or supervisory bodies (with a “head” and layers of lateral supervisory positions) produces a system of supervision that is automatic, silent, ever alert, and continuously present. Such disciplinary power functioned as an offshoot of the Panopticon surveillance system where multiple bodies could be visually regulated by a single body and negated the need for physical punishment.

In **Blind Memory**, Wood contests Foucault’s model by arguing that paradoxically both these forms of disciplinary power co-existed on the Caribbean plantation from as early as the seventeenth century. He points out that the treatment of black slaves in colonial cultures did not reflect Europe’s post-Enlightenment penal reforms as outlined by Foucault and that Foucault’s analysis of ritualized torture completely ignores “the relation of race to the language and semiotics of violence” (Wood 228). In Foucaultian terms, the effectiveness of torture relied on evincing pain in the victim and having the torture delivered in a measured fashion to satisfy the demands of ritualistic display and visual spectacle. Wood problematizes this by showing that the visual representation of plantation torture in European prints of the time was dismissive, depicting the black male body as “bufoonian” and impervious to pain, and the female black body as sexually erotic. He argues that Foucault completely overlooks the punishment of the slave body in plantation societies and that furthermore, torture was not used simply to expedite efficiency and profit within an economy of power, but more expressly, to inflict terror (Wood 229).

The slave codes, and the operations of large plantations, combined logic and efficiency with barbaric violence, and a display of power which was focused upon the public torture of the body of the slave. Both the slave trade and plantation slavery seem, at every point, to confound the central division, the division between ritualized torture and ritualized surveillance, which lies at the intellectual heart of **Discipline and Punish**. The public spectacle of torture, and the private discipline of the Panopticon, are fused in the private worlds of violence which characterised plantation societies. (Wood 230)

The eighteenth-century colonial sugar plantation consequently functioned as an economic, social, and political system that dictated the performance of prescribed racially coded roles on the plantation stage. Within this oppressive social structure, the occupants of the Great House became the most privileged players. The white family and its (usually mulatto) domestic slaves were symbolically divided from the outdoor plantation population according to skin colour, higher class, and the associated visual codes inscribed within behaviour and dress. Here, it was the white female body that assumed a starring role as symbol of domestic power. Responsible for organizing the affairs of the household, her position was pivotal to domestic order. She was also highly visible to outside visitors as hostess of dinners, teas, and parties,

and as a symbolic representative of her husband's wealth and class status in society. As an extension of the home's system of display, she was valued for her domestic formality and respectability on the plantation stage.

The plantation Great House itself functioned as a monument to power. Grand in scale, and hurricane proof,¹⁷ it represented permanence and stability. The elaborate décor, polished hardwood floors, fine mahogany furnishings, elegant porcelain china sets, sterling silverware, fine crystal, and valuable artwork, were calculated to convey the high societal status of the owners and to symbolize morality and cultural superiority. The resident plantocracy aimed to replicate the living standards of the mother country, England, and as such, the House functioned as a visual spectacle. Ironically, it was to become the main site of creolisation because of the plantation's isolation from the seats of European power and the close interaction of colonizing and colonized subjects within its shared confined space.

The period rooms in the Barbados Museum's Warmington Gallery¹⁸ recreate a traditional plantation Great House interior on a moderate scale (a nursery, a bedroom, and a living and dining room combined). Antique objects and furniture have been chosen from local collections to closely match those found in a mid-eighteenth to nineteenth-century plantation home. The contents of the living and dining rooms (the home's public display rooms) are of particular interest to this discussion of a discourse of power. Based on the layout of similar rooms in the homes of the British aristocracy that they sought to duplicate, the furnishings speak to the owner's status through careful positioning of treasured objects. Above the cane-backed mahogany settee in the living room is a pair of marriage portraits, **Mr. Samuel Brown** and **Mrs. Samuel Brown**, dating from the late seventeenth century. On the ornate mahogany sideboard several sterling silver pieces are laid out while in the china cabinet and on open display areas in the room there are fine china and crystal pieces collected from around the world. The exhibition of affluence and grandeur was an important signifier of assumed colonial authority and domination.

Such plantocratic importance was further reproduced in portraits that hung within the public rooms of the Great House. An interesting example of this portraiture is an oil painting in the Barbados Museum collection entitled **Seale Yearwood Esq. (1732-1823)**¹⁹. This full-length portrait depicts an elderly white Barbadian planter centrally seated in an upright mahogany dining chair with legs casually spread apart as he smokes a long pipe and grasps a wooden cane firmly in his right hand. Emerging from the shadows behind him on his left is a standing coloured man carrying a tray with a large filled Sangaree glass. Beside him, and immediately in front of his slave butler, is a low round mahogany pedestal table covered with a tablecloth bearing a silver platter of limes, a small knife and the sitter's spectacles and top hat. The elegant setting of the portrait appears to be under a tree outdoors, allowing a view of a colourful sunset through a wide opening between the trees on the sitter's right.

This portrait clearly speaks to the status of the sitter and functions as an icon of wealth and privilege.²⁰ Dressed formally in blue jodhpurs with knee buckles, white stockings with buckled black shoes, a high-collared white shirt with buttoned vest and black jacket, the sitter is presented as a fine upper-middle-class eighteenth-century gentleman. His relaxed pose with his vest partly unbuttoned and his legs wide open in a display of gendered power suggests a comfortable no-nonsense attitude. His manservant stands tall and is likewise attired in a fine dark livery with a white collared shirt and gloves. In the tradition of eighteenth-century European portraiture, the presence of the black slave in the portrait imparts grandeur to the subject of the portrait through the slave's position of inferiority. As Pointon notes in **Hanging the Head** (1993), "pictorially, the black body serves as the ideal complement to the white subject" since his situation in the shadows behind the subject and his dark skin provide a visual trope for the white subject and his empowerment in colonial terms (Pointon 143).

The artist appears to have caught the subjects in the late afternoon when the master is being served his afternoon liquor. The position of the figures and their body language describe positions given to formal servitude, on the part of the slave, and relaxed indulgence in the fruits of mastery on the part of the sitter. The portrait very obviously symbolizes the sitter's identity as a member of the master class and serves as a visual reproduction of power. Its representation of the sitter within the plantation setting surrounded by his material comforts (including his slave), makes the portrait a marker of privilege. The view outdoors shows the landscape over which he likely exercises control and ownership while the Sangaree punch that he is about to consume connotes the sugar industry and its byproduct of rum which provide the source of his wealth.²¹ The subsequent prominent display of this portrait within the plantation house would have served to reinforce its symbolic function as sign of power. Passed from one generation to the next, it would have substantiated the family's role as members of the planter class. The fact that the slave's identity remains unacknowledged in the painting's title and that he remains within the shadows further speaks to eighteenth-century portrait traditions and explicitly to his position as chattel.

The eighteenth-century colonial "Plantation Theatre" thus staged a performance of power that was based on highly determined visual codes of race and class difference. Creole bodies acted out roles that were predetermined by the plantation machine in the interest of the sugar economy's success. A hierarchical classification system allowed white bodies (the master class) to regulate black bodies (the slave

class) using disciplinary surveillance and physical torture. Within this structure, the Great House functioned as a central stage for the performance of “civilized” social relations. Permanently visible to the whole plantation, the occupants of the Great House (the white Creole woman, her family, and her domestic slaves), though privileged, similarly fell under the discipline of surveillance in the interest of colonial and patriarchal power. The plantation became a microcosm of a visually coded island society in which the slave body was sentenced to a lifetime of forced labour and the white body enjoyed a privileged existence. The white Creole actors in particular dutifully imitated the colonial roles set out for them by the mother country.

A series of lithographic prints in the Barbados Museum’s Cunard Gallery interestingly point to an eighteenth-century satire on these pretentious European “theatrics” that was performed by the slave population for their entertainment and that of the planter class. In these depictions of a costumed and masked male dancer performing a mimed repertoire of dance steps in a Jamaican street festival, the paradoxical necessity of mimicry in a creolised culture is highlighted. Two of the prints, **Koo Koo, or Actor-Boy** and **Jaw-Bone, or House John-Canoe**, both produced in 1837²², depict actors from the Jonkonnu masquerade in full costume.²³ In the first print (**Koo Koo**), the actor-boy, dressed in an “aristocratic” European lady’s elaborate regalia complete with wig, a full skirt with petticoats, a fan, white gloves, and elegant feathered and be-jeweled headdress, lifts his white face mask to reveal his black male face.²⁴ In the second print (**Jaw-Bone**), Jonkonnu, dressed as a courtier, confronts the viewer in a cross-legged dance pose with a decorative three-tiered model of a Great House (complete with royal palms) on top of his white-masked, wigged head. This “European” actor-boy character entertains his audience by reciting random passages from Shakespeare’s plays to the accompaniment of street music (drums and pipe). The performance was staged to make fun of the colonial masters. As Veerle Poupeye notes in **Caribbean Art** (1999), “these so-called fancy-dress Jonkonnu characters were not just imitating, but also parodying the Jamaican plantocracy and its “European” culture” by “mockingly” adopting a “white identity” (Poupeye 18). Peter Marsden, in 1788, writes, “They dance minuets [. . .] imitating the motion and steps of the English but with a degree of affection that renders the whole truly laughable and ridiculous [...]”²⁵ The ability to release hostilities through laughter was indicative of the black population’s resilience in the face of adversity. The festival combined the masquerade of Africa with that of British mumming plays²⁶ to undermine colonial authority through cross-gender/cross-race/cross-class performances that visually empowered the slave players through brief periods of liberty. It seems ironic that the Jonkonnu should so accurately both reflect and mock a visually coded society that prided itself on the perfect replication of British society.

In **Colonialism/Postcolonialism** (1998), Ania Loomba discusses mimicry and notes that Bhabha’s suggestion that “there is always a slippage, a gap, between what is said and what is heard” in any act of communication is relevant as a way of understanding the formation of colonial societies. In Bhabha’s argument, the process of trying to replicate British society in a colony could not be complete because “what it produces is not simply a perfect image of the original but something changed because of the context in which it is being reproduced.[. . .] colonial authority is rendered ‘hybrid’ and ‘ambivalent’ by this process of replication, thus opening up spaces for the colonised to subvert the master-discourse” (Loomba 89). Here, the “gap” between the appearance of the colonial presence as “original and authoritative” and “its articulation as repetition and difference [. . .] marks the failure of colonial discourse” (Bhabha in Loomba 177). The use of mimicry in the Jonkonnu festival to articulate signs of cultural difference parodies just such a construction and ironically it becomes a site of colonial resistance for both the enslaved black Creole bodies that perform it and the white Creole bodies who watch the performance. In a pure example of the process of creolisation, the Jonkonnu performers “act out” the ridiculous excesses of colonial society and make a farce of the role-playing that was integral to that society.

Though the curtains have long since closed on the colonial plantation and its theatrics of power, its history of codifying bodies by skin-colour still casts its shadow over life in contemporary Caribbean island societies. With the visual reinforcement of this history ever present in historical and cultural displays and in tourism brochures and productions which nostalgically recall the story of a romanticized colonial past to predominantly white Western visitors, the binary construction of racial stereotypes persists.²⁷ Because of the long-entrenched plantation dynamics of domination-subordination, it is doubtful whether the Creole imagination has managed to shape a hybrid identity out of the warring fragments of both West African and European culture in such a way as to feel comfortable performing in his own mythical Creole “skin”. As Benítez-Rojo writes,

[. . .] in the Caribbean, skin colour denotes neither a minority nor a majority; it represents much more: the colour imposed by the violence of conquest and colonization, and especially by the plantation system. Whatever the skin colour might be, it is a colour that has not been institutionalized or legitimized according to lineage; it is a colour in conflict with itself and with others, irritated

in its very instability and resented for its uprootedness; it is a colour neither of the Self or the Other, but rather a kind of no-man's land where the permanent battle for the Caribbean's Self's fragmented identity is fought. (Benítez-Rojo 201)

This “double conflict of the skin” marks Caribbean identity and leaves the Creole dreaming of,

[. . .] the possibility of arriving at a Utopian time in which conflict over skin colour does not take place, that is, where skin loses its ancient memory and erases the whiplashes and branding irons, the plantation's stock and shackles; where it washes out its guilty stains, the stains of the slave trade, of the terrible middle passage, of the buying and selling of flesh, of the master's house and the slave barrack. (Benítez-Rojo 210)

Un/fortunately, in the performance of identity, it is not as easy to take off the skin as it is the mask and since, as Bhabha notes, “neither coloniser nor colonised is independent of the other”, colonial identity today remains in a state of anxiety and flux.

¹ The domestic role of the white Creole female will be discussed more fully in the following essay.

² For a discussion of hierarchical systems as they relate to patriarchy and colonialism, see Moane, Geraldine, **Gender and Colonialism: a Psychological Analysis of Oppression and Liberation** (Great Britain: MacMillan P, 1999), 24-54.

³ For a further discussion of mimicry see Homi Bhabha “Of Mimicry and Man”, **The Location of Culture** (London; NY: Routledge, 1994).

⁴ Benítez-Rojo 72. This is true of the English, Dutch, Spanish, and French-speaking islands.

⁵ The sugar industry in the islands grew rapidly in the eighteenth century in response to demand for this product by western Europeans. For example, in 1741-45, the British West Indies produced 41,043 tons of sugar and by 1820-24, this had increased to 147,733 tons of sugar (Rogozinski, 105).

⁶ In Barbados, the population census of 1667 showed 745 white landowners and 82,023 black slaves while in 1645 there had been 18,300 whites (11,200 landowners) and only 5,680 black slaves (Benitez-Rojo 69).

⁷ This fits into the plantation-society model outlined by Nigel Bolland in “Creolisation and Creole Societies”, 19-21.

⁸ See Handler, Jerome, “Plantation Slave Settlements in Barbados, 1650s to 1834” (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle P, 2002). Reprinted from Alvin O. Thompson, ed., **In the Shadow of the Plantation: Caribbean History and Legacy**, 124.

⁹ Painted by Alison Chapman-Andrews on commission for the Barbados Museum. The artist, originally from England and well known in the Caribbean for her landscape painting, has resided in Barbados for over 25 years. The painting has been widely reproduced as representative of plantation life in historical and pedagogical source material. Its decorative style reflects the Museum's desire to satisfy the taste of the tourist market.

¹⁰ Wood, “Report on the Negroes [at Newton].” (Barbados: Newton Estate Papers 523/288, July 1796).

¹¹ This display case also includes illustrations of plantation life (slaves dancing on the plantation, market day, and a female slave being branded) as well as texts entitled “Punishment during Slavery” and “Private Lives” and a large pottery vessel used by slaves.

¹² Wood, 220.

¹³ Knight, Franklin, “Slavery in a Plantation Society”, **Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World**, 398.

¹⁴ The division of labour by race and gender is more fully discussed in Beckles, Hilary McD, “Field Women: Beasts of Burden.” **Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados** (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers U P, 1989).

- ¹⁵ For a full discussion of slave laws, see Goveia, Elsa, “The West Indian Slave Laws of the Eighteenth Century.” **Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World** (2000), 580-596.
- ¹⁶ A significant manifestation of power was evidenced in the visual spectacle of scarring and branding the body of the slave both to mark it as property and to act as a deterrent.
- ¹⁷ The walls of the Great House were constructed from massive white coral stone blocks in Barbados.
- ¹⁸ This gallery was reopened after extensive renovations on 18 September 2002. According to a Museum publication, it “showcases the environment, mood and setting of a traditional plantation house, spanning the period of the mid 18th – 19th centuries” (**Arti-Facts**, No. 76, 2002).
- ¹⁹ This portrait by an unknown artist is in storage and has never, to my knowledge, been displayed publicly in the Museum. The portrait’s significance will be discussed further in a later chapter.
- ²⁰ Eighteenth-century portraiture was used as a medium of communication. According to Pointon, “forms of clothing [. . .] are not read as naturalistic attributes of an individual in eighteenth-century society but understood as components in a language, in a vast repertoire of signifiers” (Pointon 112).
- ²¹ The presence of his walking stick also probably alludes to the possibility of his suffering from gout, a common affliction of planters.
- ²² From the series, **Sketches of Character** (1837), drawn by Isaac Belisario, a nineteenth century Jamaican artist, and printed by A. Duperly.
- ²³ The Jonkonnu masquerade festival originated in the Caribbean in the early 1700s as a Christmas holiday celebration. Masquerade characters included a king, queen, and courtiers. Masqueraders would go from house to house entertaining the occupants for food or money. The festival is thought to have celebrated an ancient African chief, John Conny, who headed a tribe on the Guinea Coast around 1720 (according to Edward Long, 1774).
- ²⁴ For a discussion of the significance of cross-race and cross-sex costumes, see “Dress Codes, or the Theatricality of Difference” in Garber, Marjorie, **Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety** (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- ²⁵ Marsden, Peter, **An Account of the Island of Jamaica** (Newcastle, 1788).
- ²⁶ Mumming plays, with actors in masks and costumes, were traditionally performed in Britain from the early 1700s. Using role-play, which identified a particular community, and played on the sense of that community, the actors used stylized ritualistic gestures in short mimes to celebrate their society’s virtues and expose its faults.
- ²⁷ A discussion of how the Museum’s display of colonial artifacts affects contemporary perception of Self by Caribbean people is beyond the scope of this paper, however, it is worth noting that stereotypical readings of racial roles continue to be reinforced by the Museum’s presentation of historical material.

*Shared Lives, Disparate Histories:
The Topsy-Turvy Relationship of Creole Women*

Joscelyn Gardner

To record the Virtues, and perpetuate the Memory
Of Mercy his dear, beloved Consort,
William Gibbes Alleyne Esq, as a Testimony of
His Sincere Affection, has erected this
Monument.

After thirteen years of constant uninterrupted
Bliss with a Partner, who by every Endearment,
sweetened the Joys, alleviated the Cares, &
heightened the Pleasures of the nuptial State, to
his inexpressible Sorrow, & Concern. She was
separated from him on Thursday
August 25th 1774 Aged thirty years.

Her Descent from a race of worthy Ancestry
deriving her Lineage from the Honourable
James Dottin, who was President of this Island
three different times and being the Daughter of the
Honourable John Dottin, a Gentleman who for a
series of years filled the Most distinguished civil &
military Stations, in our Community,
Gave her that Consequence among us, which is due
to Birth & Rank.

But her exemplary Virtues as a Christian Wife,
Daughter, and Friend,
Added that Lustre to Prosperity, & so far adorned
her Sex & Character: that while living she was
revered, & lamented when dead.

For her Loss was grievously deplored by her
fond Parents, no less than by her grateful, &
afflicted Husband.

A marble commemorative tablet on the wall of St. James Church in Barbados, erected in 1774 by a planter in memory of his deceased wife, eloquently outlines her distinguished (male) lineage and laments his deep sorrow at her passing. In stark contrast to this elegant memorial to a highly esteemed white Creole woman is the certainty that the bodies of her many female slave companions lie in unmarked graves on the unhallowed grounds of the plantation where they would have spent their whole lives together. Shared lives: disparate histories... Such is the condition of the “topsy-turvy” relationship between Creole women on the eighteenth-century Caribbean plantation.

In **Touching Liberty**, Sánchez-Eppler suggests the cross-racial “topsy-turvy” doll as a visual trope for the binary relationship between black and white women and their shared status as property under the patriarchal bonds of marriage and slavery. This doll, which originated in the eighteenth century and was usually made from scraps of cloth and stuffed with rags, combined two dolls in one: a white doll on one side, and a black doll on the other. Sánchez-Eppler points out that the long skirt that hid one (gendered) doll from the other also bound them together. In this discussion, I use the idea of “flipping” between the black and white dolls as a metaphor for the complex relationship between Creole women during the period of slavery in the Caribbean. In an attempt to allow the voices of these women to be heard in the following discussion, and to help manifest their lived experience, I also include direct quotations from both black and white women of the period in the text’s margins.¹

As a site of privilege in an élitist colonial culture, the white female body became a repository for the projection of all that was pure, chaste, and proper according to the British aristocratic ideals of “true womanhood.” From the eighteenth century onward, white Creole women enjoyed a life of relative ease and prosperity in comparison to that of most of the black Creole and African² women who surrounded them. Respected for their (presumed) domestic virtues, high moral values, impeccable appearance, and assumed pedigree, white women performed a crucial role on the plantation as models of societal propriety. More importantly, according to Hilary Beckles³, they performed an important supportive role as “symbolic matrons of the slavery culture.” By educating both their children and their domestic slaves as to their rightful place in life, that is, as subordinate to the white master, they were instrumental in reinforcing the ideologies of mastery and patriarchy. As managers of the plantation household, white women legitimized the plantation system and thereby ensured the reproduction of the colonial project.

In his essays “White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean” (2000) and “Sex and Gender in the Historiography of Caribbean Slavery” (1995), Beckles argues that this had not always been their collective role. He suggests that the social construction of the white woman’s representation as morally “pure” and “domesticated” became popular within the Caribbean in the early eighteenth century in response to the rapidly expanding sugar plantation economy and its growing reliance on black slave labour. Migration of white female indentured servants to the islands had virtually ceased since black female labour had become more economically viable and the few white women that remained had married into the lower levels of the white society or formed unions with free coloured/black men. The consequent shortage of available white women as sexual partners for white men in the planter and middle classes potentially threatened the (racist) colonial mission since this white community could no longer reproduce itself.⁴ Because of this, it became necessary to remove any remaining white women from manual labour on the plantations and to place them in the domestic sphere where they could gradually attain the required respectability to become wives of the white planters with small holdings.

On early Caribbean plantations, before the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade, a large percentage of the white population had formed the labouring class as indentured servants. Voluntarily bonded into service, deported from the British Isles as political prisoners, victims of religious persecution, or petty criminals and vagrants, they had lived a slave-like existence in colonial servitude on the plantations. These “poor whites” were promised a plot of land and freedom after a period of five to seven years’ hard labour and often joined the local militia, established small landholdings, or, if fortunate, worked their way up to positions as plantation overseers or managers following their indentureship.

The degenerate behaviour of the women in this white lower class was viewed in Europe as “social evidence of decay and degeneration at the colonial frontier.”⁵ The use of white female servants in the plantation house had ceased around the 1660s because of the reputation of these female indentured servants as “whores” and “debauched wenches.”⁶ The growing élitist social culture in the islands made it highly undesirable to hire such women in the house. By the 1660s, white women were also no longer being employed as field hands.⁷ Exposed to the extreme violence of slavery in the fields, and gradually becoming socially and sexually integrated with the increasingly large black population,⁸ these women were decried by elite white Creoles who already espoused the virtues associated with genteel notions of white womanhood. Not only would their presence in the fields debase notions of white delicacy, but also their presence in the house as servants would link the white female body to sexual immorality.

White planters became increasingly anxious to stabilize (white) Creole society by asserting the superiority/controlling significance of the white body. It therefore became important to the colonial project to remove white women from any association with the process of sugar production (with its related servility and feminine debasement) and to place them in the white household only as respectable mothers and wives. Here, through their signifying whiteness, they could be useful in socially reproducing the slave system and simultaneously upgrading the white population’s status in Europeans’ eyes, though, as Beckles notes, the aristocratic and bourgeois domestic values of England were not easily imposed on the “metamorphic creole culture of frontier civilization.”⁹

White women were accordingly placed indoors where they assumed responsibility for managing domestic affairs including regulating the domestic slaves. Here, they were prevented from formally socializing with the black population and could be protected from the crudest aspects of slavery. In semiotic terms, they had been transformed into the European construct of upper-middle-class femininity. As Beckles observes,

[the white woman] was now considered unfit for manual labour on account of her endemic fragility; unsuited to physical exertion

Next day I was put up by the vendue master to know how much I was worth, and I was valued at one hundred pounds currency.

Mary Prince (1831)

in the tropics as a consequence of her possession of a faint heart and delicate skin; terrified of male sexuality on account of her chaste, virginal, and jet-white purity; and devoid of lust, gaiety, and passion, having embraced in its fullness the importance of ordered moral discipline and self-denial. (Beckles 133)

A European construction of womanhood was being superimposed on the (already creolized) white female Caribbean body.

In her essay “Text, Testimony and Gender” (1995), Bridget Brereton describes the lives of Creole women gleaned from a number of texts written by women in the English-speaking Caribbean from the 1770s onward. From these texts, we learn that the planter’s wife lived in relative isolation on the eighteenth-century plantation, often being the only white female there, apart from her daughters. Besides governing the numerous domestic slaves, her time was fully occupied with such “arduous duties” as overseeing the stock-raising, attending to the vegetable gardens, and sewing her house servants’ clothes. Control of their children and their domestics were white Creole women’s only source of power and, according to Brereton, “defiance of their authority by the servants was seen as an assault on their power and privileges as women of the élite.”¹⁰

With the social construction of the white Creole female as the epitome of “true womanhood” or the female Colonising Self, came the simultaneous reconstruction of the black female as Colonised Other. Stereotypic traits were inscribed onto each racial body to create a binary. The idealized white female body (sexually pure, submissive, and delicately constituted) depended on the perceived existence of its opposite, the sexualized black female body. The black female was projected as immoral, promiscuous and libidinous, and possessing Amazonian strength, as well as thought to be lazy, dishonest, and indifferent to forming emotional attachments. As Franz Fanon argued when discussing colonial identities, blackness was employed to confirm the white self.¹¹

When Beckles addresses the relationship between white and black women, he notes that,

The tendency has been to see the white woman and the enslaved black woman as constituting a bi-polarity within a fragmented notion of womanhood that assured the reproduction of the slave system. (Beckles 1995, 129)

He points out that colonial slave laws dictated that the children of white women were born free, and that the children of enslaved women were born into slavery. “White women and black women were legally constructed as the vehicles on which freedom and slavery, respectively, traveled [. . .]. Womanhood then came to represent the reproduction of two extreme social conditions” (Beckles “Sex and Gender”, 130-131). Divided by this very significant racially based ideological difference, black and white women were pitted against each other in the interest of the colonial capitalist enterprise.

What neither Beckles nor Brereton discuss in the works cited so far (or tease out from the literature of the period upon which their work is based), however, is the shared relationship between Creole women who lived and worked together in the eighteenth-century plantation House. Often sharing both the confined physical space of the House and its environs as well as acknowledged/unacknowledged blood relationships with many of its occupants across racial boundaries, these women were bonded together by both duty to the master and their prescribed gender restrictions.

Beckles asks, “What does it mean [. . .] that representations of ‘woman’, reproduced during the slavery period say more about the origins

It is no uncommon thing for a lady of the house or her daughters to collect the young people, and give them a dance to the piano-forte; and to make up gay dresses for Christmas and Easter, which the negro has himself purchased; - for a negro lad thinks nothing of asking his mistress to make a pair of trousers or a shirt for him... Mrs. A. C. Carmichael (1833)

and character of representation than about the actual lives, experiences, and identity of women?” (Beckles “Sex and Gender”, 131). If a (white) postcolonial Creole feminist methodology is applied to examining the scarce visual documentary evidence of Creole life available, it becomes possible momentarily to put aside stereotypical versions of plantation life and to retrieve a different understanding of the lived relationship between Creole women. Often at variance with the satirical anti-slavery images of a degenerate Creole society and the official binarized (European) versions of Creole history or the black/ third world feminist reinterpretations of this history (Beckles, Brereton), this viewpoint, though similarly European-mediated, allows the (silenced) white Creole woman a transitory presence. Through examining the image of her (observed) body interacting with other Creole bodies (both free and enslaved), both the public and private realities of life shared among women living in such close proximity to each other can begin to be appreciated.

The Italian artist, Agostino Brunias, who accompanied one of the British Governors of Dominica to that island in the late 1700s as his personal artist, was one of the few painters to visually record Caribbean daily life. A series of untitled oil paintings in the Barbados Museum’s Cunard Gallery show Creole women (slaves, free blacks, free coloureds, and whites) mingling openly together in outdoor social activities. In the first painting reproduced here, a planter’s wife and her female companion casually stroll along a country pathway closely followed by their slave girl who carries a folded parasol. In the second painting, a coloured woman and her white female companion are informally seated on upright chairs under a shade tree, being served drinks by a slave woman. Accompanied by their slaves (who are situated behind the central figures but within conversational distance), the white and free coloured women in both paintings are engaged in activities that mark them as being relatively affluent and leisured. They appear to be enjoying each other’s company without the restrictions of genteel codes of behaviour and dress “proper” to their class and racial codification (as specified in Europe). Such cross-racial interaction evidences the interdependent relationship of Creole women in small societies. As Karl Watson notes in **The White Minority in the Caribbean** (1998),

The reality of dependence on blacks in all spheres of activities precluded any meaningful separation of the races. Economics and the psychology of slavery created a shared space delineated by the small physical boundaries of an isolated oceanic island [. . .].¹² (Watson 18)

Cross-racial contact on an on-going basis allowed multiple identities to co-exist. Rather than being simplistically divided between rich white planters and oppressed black slaves, it seems that island society was composed of several layers of cross-racial bodies that fit into various

social classes. Furthermore, as Watson notes, by the eighteenth century, the slave system (in Barbados) had created “a shared physical and mental landscape”. In such a small society, no one could remain anonymous.

[. . .] people communicated with each other, knew each other and possessed a solid understanding of family histories and relationships which allowed them to locate each and every member of society along the socio-economic spectrum [. . .] Both blacks and whites knew each other well [. . .]

Intimate contact with slaves on a daily basis over several generations had hastened the process of creolisation for the island’s whites.¹³ (Watson 19 - 20)

By way of example, Watson notes that “by the end of the eighteenth century, white Barbadian society, although numerically small, was surprisingly diversified and stratified” (Watson 17). He argues against the recognition of an upper-class monolithic white society, citing “latent class rivalries among the white population” between the elite plantocracy (large landowners), the small planters (holders of ten acres or less) and the disenfranchised poor whites who sided with the ten-acre men. A large part of the white population was therefore in the same non-slave owning poorer class as the free coloureds and free blacks.¹⁴ And to complicate matters, on some plantations, elite slaves might be given slaves for their personal use.

The resultant cultural hybridity/creolisation characteristic of this interracial Caribbean space becomes evident in the way Brunias’ women are represented in his paintings. The artist depicts their mode of dress - the “different styles of tying the madras headkerchiefs, of wearing the accordion-pleated petticoat, strapped bodices, and silk ‘foulards’”¹⁵ – and their mannerisms, in great detail. Painted for a European audience, and functioning as a visually over-determined record of the “exoticism” the artist perceived in the English-speaking islands,¹⁶ the paintings nevertheless provide tangible evidence of the “Africanisms” adopted by Creole whites at the level of expressive culture. In the paintings, clothing functions as a social indicator of class. The appropriate walking length of the women’s skirts, their visible shoes, and their elaborate headdresses mark these women as a privileged class. However, differences between the women are also apparent: in the first work, we see that the white woman wears an elevated white bonnet while the free coloured woman wears a more loosely arranged and colourful head-tie. Their brightly coloured striped skirts, ruffled blouses, loosened stays, and wrapped heads show the influence of African culture on European dress. The slave woman wears similar attire, though plainer in style.

In the second painting, the slave woman walks barefoot behind her mistress and her companion, indicating her lower status. The two white women wear loose flowing (immodest) white dresses and one of them carries a fan. Their clothes and bodily mannerisms all function as important visible signs of creolisation. The white woman to the right shows an amount of décolletage permissible for a European married woman and her veiled hat mounted atop a head-tie and colourful jewelry mark her as the mistress of this little group. Yet, in these paintings, the white body, in particular, is not recognizable as European in its general appearance and habits – a visual peculiarity that affirms its Creole difference.

A shared history of patriarchal and/or colonial oppression also characterized the lives of eighteenth-century Creole women. In her book **Slave Women in Caribbean Society** (1990), Barbara Bush emphasizes the fact that white male patriarchal authority subjugated all women on large sugar plantations in the later period of slavery. Though her work focuses on the experiences of “the ordinary black woman slave” in the fields rather than the coloured domestics or white mistresses in the House, it is useful in understanding the mutual socio-sexual exploitation that Creole women experienced.

With marriage, the white woman’s property was legally transferred to her spouse, assuring her second class status as subordinate to her white husband (master).¹⁷ Although legally “free”, in essence white Creole women became chattels through marriage and exercised little choice in varying their role from that which was expected of them. Excluded from holding public office and participating in political or church

The female slaves are really encouraged to prostitution because their children are the property of the owner of the mothers. These children are reared by the Ladies as pets, are frequently brought from the negro houses to their chambers to feed and sleep, and reared with every care and indulgence till grown up, when they are at once dismissed to labour and slave-like treatment. What is still more horrible, the gentlemen are greatly addicted to their women slaves, and give the fruit of their licentiousness to their white children as slaves. Mrs. Fenwick (1814-1821)

administration, their views were not sought or recorded. “Even when disturbing crises, such as slave revolts, surrounded and impacted upon their lives, their voices were silenced by officialdom and subordinated even to those of free non-white males” (Beckles, “White Women and Slavery”, 668).

Within the walls of the patriarchal Great House, with its system of enclosed spaces, the white woman, in her elevated femininity, also became a symbol of the white man’s most valuable property, a possession to be carefully protected. The master held his white Creole wife’s body in custody for his own exclusive use. Because children born to her were legally free, and in order to perpetuate the supremacy of the white planter society, she had to be safeguarded from social or sexual relations with the black man.¹⁸ A central colonial fear became the potential rape of the white female body by the black male body, an act that would grow to signify black insurgency in a white colonial world. Of course another fear for the white Creole woman involved suffering at the hands of violent and/or drunken spouses used to the absolute obedience of all of their subjects.¹⁹

The repression and domination of white Creole women under patriarchy was clearly symbolized by their severely restricted sexual freedom. White Creole women were the property solely of white men. In contrast, black slave women had sexual relations with both black and white men. Often, white men sexually exploited them through rape and enforced sexual services as “a ‘normal benefit’ of masterhood” (Beckles, “White Women and Slavery”, 661). According to Beckles, this act of masculine power functioned to make the enslaved feel inferior and emphasized their role as “reproducers” of labour.

It is perhaps in their connection to the white master that the intertwined relationship between black and white Creole women in the plantation Great House is most emphatically defined. Though Bush theorizes that white women suffered from jealousy of black women because of their sexual relationships with their husbands and sons, she also suggests that they promoted the use of black women’s bodies by white men by socializing their offspring to accept this as a “natural” part of achieving manhood (Beckles “White Women and Slavery”, 664). In **A Voyage in the West Indies**, John Waller, writing in 1820, states,

... she has to listen to all the stories of the people on the estate, – young, old, and middle aged: all their little jealousies and quarrels she must enter into, and be in short a kind of mother to them all. The negro children must be daily watched; she must see them swallow their physic when necessary; reward the good, and admonish the bad; visit the sick – encourage them – and take, or appear to take, an interest in all that concerns them. Mrs. A. C. Carmichael (1833)

I am concerned to bear testimony to the immorality which prevails in this respect, and to detract from the high character which I would gladly assign to the female part of the community. They are doubtless as chaste and virtuous as those of any part of the globe, but they have been accustomed to witness incontinency in almost all their acquaintance of the other sex, and frequently in their father and brothers, who openly keep their mulatto mistresses; so that it is not accounted the slightest degree infamous; nay, it would excite much more surprise in a Creole lady, that a man should be without one of these mistresses, than that he should have one.

The unique condition of sharing the body of the white master was no different for women in eighteenth-century aristocratic and bourgeois households back in the mother country. However, in the Caribbean, the act of coupling between the white master and his black slave (miscegenation) meant that the offspring of such extramarital unions bore visual signs of difference (and similarity) which visibly proclaimed the act. The white mistress of the House could not turn a blind eye to such obvious liaisons though she would be forced to maintain her silence in order to preserve her family’s societal status. Because a mulatto slave (the product of such a union) would never be sent into the fields, slave women sometimes used sexual relationships with the master to acquire social mobility. Their offspring would be employed in the domestic sphere and would often be manumitted upon the death of the master, though during his lifetime they would be expected to serve him as a slave.²⁰

With the rampant practice of miscegenation between the white master and his slave women as a given, we may return to looking at the portrait of **Seale-Yearwood Esq.** examined in a previous essay. When we examine the physiognomy of the two figures portrayed more closely, we see that it is evident that what we are looking at is really a “family” portrait. The male slave butler standing behind the seated planter bears a remarkable resemblance to his white master. Of obvious mixed racial heritage (either mulatto or quadroon), his facial features

(especially his long prominent nose and receding hairline) closely mirror those of the planter. It becomes clear that the slave is in fact the planter's son – the fruit of his licentious relationship with one of his slave women.

The slave mistress whose body has been exploited and the planter's wife (plantation mistress) whose sexual role has been usurped are both absent from the painting and effectively silenced in the name of colonial and patriarchal domination. The presence of such a portrait in the house where both women lived would have served as a constant reminder of the role of the slave mistress and reinforced both women's subjugation. Was it a cocky pride in fathering this son that allowed such a portrait to be commissioned by the master and displayed within his house?

In the novel **Creoleana** (1842), written by a (white male) Creole author, J.W.Orderson, there is blatant recognition of the practice of miscegenation between white men and slave women. As John Gilmore notes in the Introduction to the republished versions of this novel (2002),

Orderson is quite open about the sexual exploitation of black women by white men which was a constant feature of Barbadian slave society, and about the temptation held out to black women to use such relationships as one of the very few ways open to them to improve their position in such a society where on every hand they faced the constraints imposed on them by race and class. (14)

In the novel, the mulatto slave girl Lucy (the “illicit offspring” of Mr. Fairfield's relations with a slave “amour”), is given to Miss Caroline Fairfield (Mr. Fairfield's legitimate daughter) as “a lady's maid” so that “she could without impropriety be introduced [. . .] into his family” (33). The alliance between these half-sisters, Lucy (who possessed “a tolerably fair complexion”) and Miss Caroline (whose complexion was “of the most transparent whiteness tinged with a delicate roseate hue”) typifies the topsy-turvy relationship of Creole women of different races within the plantation House. As the novel progresses, we learn that Mr. Robert Mac Flashby, Miss Caroline's Irish suitor, has been intimate with Lucy (in spite of her engagement to a free coloured man named Joe Pollard, more suitable to her station in life). Though she has won “the entire confidence of her young mistress”, Lucy nevertheless goes behind her mistress' back and secretly pursues her own relationship with Mac Flashby. The discovery of the affair and her pregnancy lead to her downfall.

The complicated relationships between (white and black) Creole women who were resident in the eighteenth-century colonial Caribbean plantation Great House must have necessitated careful negotiation. Often related to each other through blood (though this fact would have remained unacknowledged) these women shared much more than simple daily life within the physical space of the House. Subjugated in their roles as wives and slaves respectively, they were bound together by the dictates of patriarchal masterhood. Like a topsy-turvy doll, they were “flipped” from one to the other according to the whim of the master – each one successfully negating the presence of the other beneath her long skirt.

It is interesting to note that in Jean Rhys' post-emancipation novel **Wide Sargasso Sea**, there is also a topsy-turvy relationship between the (white) Creole girl, Antoinette, and her little black Creole soulmate, Tia. Here, the author articulates both the abyss and the bond that exists between the girls following the burning of Antoinette's family's plantation house. In the ensuing furor, with the villagers turning against the white Creole family, Antoinette runs towards Tia only to have her throw a stone at her. In that moment of betrayal, Antoinette recognizes her predicament. “We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass” (38). Through Tia's reaction, Antoinette finds her “other” self, the flip side of her identity. Later in the novel, when Antoinette's husband sleeps with her female servant, Amélie, in the gallery outside her bedroom (while she lies asleep inside), the rejection she faces at the hands of the black Creole Other is further intensified.

Undeniably, Creole women have shared an intertwined (though unequal) history. Ideologically pitted against each other in colonial terms, they have nevertheless shared deep connections with each other through familial ties and intimacy with the white master's body – ties that are perhaps greater than most postcolonial Creoles may be willing to admit to.

She said that she would not have nigger men about the yards and premises, or allow a nigger man's clothes to be washed in the same tub where hers were washed. Mary Prince (1831)

¹ It is important to note that, as was discussed in an earlier essay, these voices have been articulated for the most part in the interest of the British anti-slavery movement and its documentation of the “difference” displayed by (white) Creole culture. There are no direct quotations from white Creole women – the white female voices are those of Europeans who sojourned in the islands. However, despite the obvious biases, these voices still open up a small space for understanding Creole women's lives.

² The term “African” refers here to slaves who had been brought directly from Africa.

³ Beckles, “White Women and Slavery”, 668.

⁴ This was true of islands like Jamaica where women accounted for only 40% of the white community up to 1780. In Barbados, in contrast, white women outnumbered men by 1% or 2% for most of the 1700s and therefore often remained unmarried and financially independent (Beckles, “White Women and Slavery”, 662). The large number of white women in Barbados also meant “the size and growth rate of Barbados’ mulatto group remained small during the 18th century.” See Beckles, Hilary McD, **Natural Rebels: a Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados** (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers U P, 1989), 15.

⁵ According to Beckles, early travel narratives describe white Creole women as “loose wenches”, “whores”, “sluts” and “white niggers.” See Beckles, Hilary, “Sex and Gender in the Historiography of Caribbean Slavery.” Shepherd, Verene A., Bridget Brereton, and Barbara Bailey, eds. **Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective**. (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 1995), 132. His argument fails to distinguish the various classes of white women being described and the possibility of different definitions of sexuality.

⁶ Beckles, **Natural Rebels**, 56.

⁷ Beckles notes that slave owners adopted this “racially inspired labour policy” to further “establish the ideology of white racial superiority” and that this was “just the beginning of a long-term attempt to elevate white women and degrade black women” (**Natural Rebels**, 29).

⁸ Beckles cites several examples of white female/black male coupling in a 1715 Barbados census record, (“Sex and Gender”, 133).

⁹ Beckles, “White Women and Slavery”, 661. It is important to note that the simultaneous “topsy-turvy” situation of, on one hand, the “gentrification” of the white female, and on the other hand, her “creolisation”, is being acknowledged as a metaphor for the complexity of white Creole female identity. In the case where the white female was the mistress of a large plantation with hundreds of slaves, her contact with slaves would have been limited to those in the home over whom she ruled. There would have been more scope for social interaction between white women and the wider slave population on smaller estates.

¹⁰ Brereton in “Text, Testimony and Gender”, 67.

¹¹ Fanon, Frantz, **Black Skin, White Masks** (New York: Grove Press, 1967), as quoted in Loomba 144. Loomba points out, however, that Fanon ignores gender difference and speaks only of the male subject.

¹² Here, Watson is apparently talking about a “physical” separation in a small geographic space. His use of the phrase “meaningful separation” must be contested since there were obviously many differences on a pragmatic and psychic level experienced by various members of the plantation society.

¹³ Watson uses the example of advertisements issued for runaway slaves that give details of physical features, residential location, and social relationships, as evidence of this close relationship. He does not mention here that blacks were also simultaneously creolised by their proximity to whites. See also, Watson, **A Kind of Right to be Idle: Old Doll Matriarch of Newton Plantation** (Barbados: University of the West Indies, 2000), 17.

¹⁴ Watson, **A Kind of Right to be Idle**, 7.

¹⁵ Anonymous, “Agostino Brunias: Precursor of Gauguin.” **The Bajan** (Barbados. May 1997), 17.

¹⁶ Apart from his stay in Dominica, Brunias accompanied his patron, Sir William Young, to St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Grenada, and Barbados. In the tradition of the colonial travelogue, the subjects of his paintings are portrayed through “superior” European eyes.

¹⁷ Beckles, “White Women and Slavery”, 662. As referred to earlier, Sánchez-Eppler explores the marriage/slavery parallels more fully in her essay “Bodily Bonds”.

¹⁸ Laws were passed which punished black men with “castration, dismemberment, and execution for having sexual relations with white women, who in turn were socially disgraced and ostracized” (Beckles, “White Women and Slavery”, 667).

¹⁹ Beckles’ discussion of the white woman’s socio-economic independence as slave owner in her own right, outside of marriage, is beyond the scope of this paper. His 1995 essay concurs that the “superordinate position of the white male patriarch” in Creole society “[. . .] ensured the marginalization of all women” (Beckles “Sex and Gender”, 131). However, by his 2000 essay, he has altered his viewpoint to suggest that white women could not be viewed as victims of patriarchy since they were “economic agents and positive participators in the formulation of pro-slavery values and institutions” (Beckles, “White Women and Slavery”, 660).

²⁰ For example, see Watson, **A Kind of Right to be Idle** in which he outlines the social mobility achieved by a slave matriarch, Old Doll, and her slave family through sexual relationships with their white masters. See also, Waller, writing in 1820: “[...] the natives cohabit with people of colour at a very early age; and I have observed many instances of their being perfectly captivated by their mulatto mistresses, who thus obtain their freedom, and that of their children, from the master who cohabits with them” (19).

Postcolonial Portraits: "Speaking the Unspeakable"

Joscelyn Gardner

The subject of the plantations stirred conflicting emotions. I felt proud (how rare the stories!) and sentimental (how touching the cast of family characters). At the same time, the slave business was a crime that had not fully been acknowledged. It would be a mistake to say that I felt guilt for the past. A person cannot be culpable for the act of others, long dead, that he or she could not have influenced. Rather than responsible, I felt accountable for what had happened, called on to try to explain it. I also felt shame about the broken society that had washed up when the tide of slavery receded [. . .]

When finally I chose to look into the slave past, I felt a remarkable calm [. . .] To complete the legacy, I would try to find descendants of the slaves. The plantation heritage was not “ours”, like a piece of family property, and not “theirs”, belonging to black families, but a shared history. The progeny of slaves and the progeny of slave owners are forever linked. We have been in each other’s lives. We have been in each other’s dreams. We have been in each other’s beds [. . .]. (Ball 1999, 14)

In his landmark book **Slaves in the Family** (1999), Edward Ball, the descendant of a large slaveholding family in the southern US, sums up his mixed feelings regarding his own accountability for his family’s past involvement with slavery. He concludes that his family has in fact shared a history with generations of black families, and that this must be acknowledged.

Like Ball, the postcolonial (white) Creole subject wrestles with emotions bound up in the historical detritus of the after-effects of slavery in the Caribbean. The painting by Annalee Davis (born 1963, Barbados) entitled **Putting on my Blackness** (1987) speaks to this agony by pointing to binaries in historical racial stereotyping and the apparent impossibility of crossing societal boundaries established by the plantation system. Here, the artist portrays herself as a solitary naked white figure inside her large plantation house (with British flag in the window) engaged in the act of stepping into a black skin. In the green cane-fields outside, between rows of small huts, a number of naked black bodies (male and female) hold hands in apparent unity around the Barbadian flag. Above these figures, a series of repeating brown triangles with white tips hint at the hierarchical relationship of the racialized bodies. The artist symbolically expresses her wish to join the people of the island by rendering the floor of the plantation house as a ploughed field of dark earth, and also, by trying to climb into a different skin. Her desire appears to be thwarted, however, by her isolation within the walls of the House. In another work, a black and white print from 1989, the artist schematically depicts her naked white self in a ploughed cane-field wildly ripping out her heart, with the words “My friend said I was too white” above her head. The rawness of these two pieces conveys the depth of emotion felt by this Creole woman contemplating her own identity in a land where she experiences a sense of alienation because of her ancestors’ (presumed) historical role in slavery and racial privilege of whiteness.

Marta María Pérez Bravo (born 1959, Cuba) uses the constructed photographic self-portrait to address her (white) Creole identity. Playing



on the syncretic characteristics of the Caribbean experience, she explores her history, ancestry, race, and gender, by subverting her medium (the photograph as document that records truth) and using her body as a canvas of appropriation and protest to (re)construct her identity. Unlike Davis, though, she drains her body of definable colour through the use of black and white photography, and thereby negates the reading of the most pronounced of visual signifiers, the skin. In works such as **Paths** (1990), the artist symbolically identifies her own (white postcolonial) body with that of the slave body. Here, in a fragmented image, the artist's ankles are bound together by a wooden yolk, similar to those used in the slave trade to lace slaves in bondage. The artist is symbolically retracing the steps of the slave body in order to reclaim a shared suffering of the trauma of slavery in the repressed memory (collective unconscious) of the Creole.¹

My own visual art practice likewise addresses (white) Creole identity and articulates my desire to acknowledge the intertwined historical/ancestral relationship between black/white women in the postcolonial Caribbean. Prior to 2000, my visual production expressed an idealistic consideration of female Creole identity by proposing creolisation as a "blending" of historical differences that could be achieved through spiritual metamorphosis.² Until then, I had never specifically acknowledged my own whiteness (and its privileges) though the metaphor of skin as something that could, or needed to be shed had preoccupied me. Now, addressing the denial, repression, and dissociation that operate in relation to the subject of slavery and white culpability, my work attempts to "speak the unspeakable."³ It retrieves the atrocities that lie buried in our collective memory in order to reconcile the past with the present and move toward a metaphorical healing of historical wounds. Because I was born into a colony⁴ that became an independent nation during the period of my early childhood, I represent the first generation of (white) Creoles to be brought up in a postcolonial space where black consciousness has sought to challenge the colonial dogma of the generations before. In the years since Independence, (black) Creoles have taken charge of local governments and the social and cultural agencies within their jurisdiction, and the white Creole subject, though still (relatively) economically privileged, has been effectively culturally marginalized.

In my intervention into the galleries of the Barbados Museum, a postcolonial feminist approach is used to negotiate a legitimate space for my (white) Creole voice. In the Temporary Exhibition Gallery, a series of black and white lithographic prints (**Creole Portraits**, 2002-03) that recall nineteenth-century abolitionist illustrations, experiment with representing a Creole identity by constructing ambiguous images of the back of female heads. Playing on Marcus Wood's observation in **Blind Memory** (2000) that slavery's memory has been objectified in museum displays through emphasis on the tools of torture rather than on the slave body, these images subvert the reading of these whips, collars, chains, and branding irons by illustrating them entwined in exquisitely braided hairstyles. Invoking hair as the site that is the second most important corporeal sign of race, these inverted "portraits" seek to "name" the women lost to history. As sites of both ritual enactment of love between women (the slow, careful act of braiding hair) and the pain associated with the physical and mental degradation of slavery, these hybrid images resonate as metaphors for the weight of history in contemporary postcolonial societies. Both attractive and repellant, they seduce the viewer and open up a space for contemplating the shared (repugnant) experience of slavery and its after-effects. The strict regulation of the hair into defined Afro-centric styles also ironically conflates eighteenth-century European fixations on hair/wigs⁵ (worn by men) as signifying social order, with the (female) Creole's ability to empower herself by expressing her (non-European) postcolonial cultural identity through hair design.

Also displayed in the Temporary Exhibition Gallery is a video installation entitled **White Skin, Black Kin: a Creole Conversation Piece** (2003). Here, the eighteenth-century "conversation piece"⁶ painting is reclaimed as a way of addressing the performance of Creole identity (and patriarchal/colonial power dynamics) on the plantation stage. According to Marcia Pointon, "The frequently rebuilt domestic space was a theatre of representation in the eighteenth century in which narratives of family structures are reshaped and sustained" (Pointon 168). In this re-staged (fictitious) family portrait, the white Creole female appears as "actress-text" in an opulent plantation Great House tableau that unfolds to explore Creole family relationships. Posed against an ideologically invested background of patrilinear ancestry (portraits on the wall), the female family members (mother and daughters) articulate the gulf between symbolic masculine power and silenced feminine domesticity. I subvert this unequivocal form of portraiture by "re-presenting" the family in its entirety. While the white family members visually articulate (frozen) social and familial propriety in their well-decorated drawing room, the illusory black "family" members are shown to symbolically unravel the inconsistencies within the household through devices of visual and/or sound intervention. Through their constant "ghosted" movement within the pictorial space, and with their "behind the scenes" conversations, the black/interracial family insists on a presence that functions to rupture the artifice of the officially staged (historical) portrait.⁷ Personal narratives and dramatized dialogues overheard by the attentive viewer expose submerged stories of sexual indiscretion. The inclusion of the master's armchair (on which sits a child's topsy-turvy doll) placed near to the c. 1730 **Portrait of Seale-Yearwood Esq.** (removed from the Museum's storage) further helps to

allude to these “family” secrets and to destabilize the master narrative.

The multi-media intervention into the Warmington Gallery’s four re-created Great House rooms further explores female relationships within the eighteenth-century plantation home at the site of (re)-staged patriarchal power. **A Topsy-Turvy Plantation Home** (2003-04) uses audio, video, and object “interference” to hint at suppressed emotions that may have simmered below the well-ordered historical surface. In the Bedroom, projected onto the mattress of the imposing four-poster bed, the image of a (white) child’s hands flipping a cross-racial topsy-turvy doll back and forth as she sings to herself, poignantly alludes to the interchangeability of (sexual) roles by the women of the house. In the Nursery, the voice of a Nanny singing a slave lullaby to her male charge belies the irony of both suckling the master and forcedly abandoning her own child “in de cane-field”. The Dining Room and Drawing Room scenarios speak to the inevitable slippages behind the façade of plantation role-playing. An embroidered sampler and a pair of needlework scissors are carefully placed on the sofa below the marriage portraits of **Mr. Samuel Brown** and **Mrs Samuel Brown**. The observation that in the former portrait the sitter’s right eye appears to have been poked out where the canvas is torn, together with an emotional dialogue between mother and daughter, subtly suggests female despair in the face of the rigid discipline of patriarchal/colonial rule.

In the Cunard Gallery, a video portrait entitled **Pinkie: “The Barbadoes Girl”** (2003-04) brings to life the subject of Sir Thomas Lawrence’s 1794 painting **Sarah Barrett Moulton (“Pinkie”)** and points to the irony of this portrait’s provenance. The Gallery contains eighteenth- and nineteenth-century images of Creole life executed by European artists whose patrons employed them to document the Caribbean landscape and its “exotic” peoples for viewers back in the mother country. The insertion of the video re-creation of this painting into this Gallery and its juxtaposition with the 1818 young people’s tale “The Barbadoes Girl” (a British-authored book from the Museum’s collection referred to earlier in this text) speaks to the ironies of colonial stereotyping. The famous eighteenth-century painting portrays a young girl wearing a flowing white dress with pink hat and sash poised in the middle of a dance on the summit of a hill overlooking the English landscape. According to Pointon, her painted image embodied “the very spirit of English childhood” (Pointon 200). As outlined earlier, the pre-emancipation book relates the story of an “uncivilized” (white) Creole girl who is sent to stay with family friends in England. It is ironic then to learn that the subject of Lawrence’s painting was none other than a Creole child who had also been sent to England to attend boarding school.⁸ Depicted as a “real” English girl (erased of all Creole identifying features and no longer in her “native” setting), the child in the portrait reveals the dichotomy of Self/Other faced by the non British-born white body.⁹ In reclaiming this portrait for the Cunard Gallery and reinserting the girl’s creolity, the work aims to highlight the inconsistencies of the representation of white Creole identity. The historical artifacts that describe the (white) Creole’s social construction by European whites as being culturally inferior “Other” are turned topsy-turvy by the revelation of the identity of the portrait’s subject.

In the confined space of the Museum’s Prisoner’s Cell, the multi-media installation **A Tiny Prick** (2002-04) probes the metaphorical prison of the postcolonial (white) Creole conscience. In place of the prison cot, a row of pillows with white pillowcases bearing lithographic “portraits” of Creole women (from the **Creole Portraits** series) are embroidered in white thread with the names of women lost to anonymity on the Caribbean plantation. White female hands in the act of embroidering (in an early nineteenth-century photograph and in a contemporary video) juxtaposed with wall text from Toni Morrison’s **Beloved** (“She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind.”) speak to (white) shame and accountability and to the indelible stamp of slavery which remains branded on the postcolonial Creole memory.

My work probes historical representations of the (white) Creole body in colonial visual and literary sources in order to come to an understanding of (white) Creole identity. I address the historical erasure of white Creole women’s subjectivity by rupturing the stereotypical idea of white (female) purity/innocence (still naively clung to by members of postcolonial Caribbean societies). My work suggests that slavery is both a white issue as well as a black issue (since the enslaved do not exist without the enslavers) and that the white subject must be accountable to this history in order to accomplish healing. Caribbean people cannot continue to ignore, repress, or forget the consequences of slavery but must embrace a reconciliatory approach to their Creole heritage.¹⁰ Critical dialogue amidst a diversity of voices is necessary. The binary oppositions through which the colonial subject was written (black woman versus white woman) must be refused. In their place, indigenous heterogeneity and plurality should be acknowledged. The bond between Creole women of all races, as (admittedly unequal) conceptual and historical “victims” of patriarchal oppression and colonial domination, can be a starting place for mutual engagement.

I have found it useful to link my approach to my visual work with the strategies recognized by O’Callaghan in contemporary Caribbean women’s literature.¹¹ She notes that Creole authors share several characteristics in their writing, including the rejection of linear narrative structures in favour of a multiplicity of voices/perspectives, the representation of a world of fluid boundaries (between self/other), and an

eclectic, fragmented structure composed of random, multiple voices. She also observes that their work is often autobiographical (based on journals, diaries, letters, or other “intimate” genres) and that it has a communal focus in recuperating buried/silenced orally transmitted knowledge. Moreover, it “re-examines and counters several female stereotypes” and is often subversive, being motivated by a strong desire for social change (O’Callaghan 6-7). All of these strategies apply to my own visual expression and thus help to locate my work within a growing postcolonial Creole feminist approach to cultural production.

The work of artists like Fred Wilson (New York, 1954) and Jamelie Hassan (Canada, 1948) have also been important in approaching the historical material that is so central to my project.¹² In my own practice, I have probed artifacts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, found mainly in the Barbados Museum collection, to unearth the silenced/ghostly historical residue that speaks to (white) female Creole identity. In particular, this research has examined portraiture and its signifying language, objects associated with slavery, and colonial literature and personal documents in order to open up a space to subvert the master discourse (Homi Bhabha). Through an allegorical response to the contemporary Caribbean condition, I aim to reveal the inescapable images and sounds from the past that continue to “haunt” the present.

The use of intervention strategies allows me to allude to the discourse of power signified by the objects and furnishings in the plantation House and to insert multiple (female) subjectivities and voices not recognized in the “official” (male) historical canon. Using the historical language of (patriarchal/colonial) inscribed portraiture, I “re-create” my own vision of the past and thereby unlock the shared relationships of Creole women and point to a new and different understanding of Caribbean culture. In my work, I reject a single absolute authoritative voice to reveal the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) falsehoods and contradictions of Caribbean society.

In **Double-Talking** (1992), Linda Hutcheon quotes Umberto Eco’s observation that “the past, since it cannot really be destroyed [. . .] must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently” (Hutcheon 16). She notes that irony “allows a kind of retrieval or even repetition of history” but suggests that it is a reflexive repetition that queries established orders inscribed by the past. This “reflexive irony” can unmask entrenched cultural constructions and produce instability about what in fact constitutes the truth. In my video portraits, the eighteenth-century “conversation piece” is manipulated in order to partake in this strategy of subverting an established history, to suggest another meaning that departs from the dominant view.

My research recognizes that the postcolonial white Creole woman is now trapped in the historical space between a split colonial identity as both a “colonizing” and “colonized” subject/Other (in Western eyes), as well as a patriarchal subject. As such, she is charged with actively negotiating the re-construction of her own identity through the mobilization of her own agency. Stressing the mutual relationship of Creole women within the privileged space of the plantation House (in a shared though disparate history), my project aims to reconcile the many misconceptions with respect to race relations which exist within the postcolonial Caribbean. Within this relational approach to history, the essentialist (colonial) binary construction of race is rejected. Instead, I aim to show that in the Caribbean, it is the division into classes based on the historical role of (multiracial) bodies in the colonial plantation House that is paramount to understanding Creole identity and its complexities.¹³ Today, power continues to be “distributed socially in a very unequal fashion” (Benítez-Rojo 132) to the descendants of those who inhabited the Great House. The white minority still retains economic privilege (particularly through its connection to white Western neo-colonial wealth) though it has been politically and culturally disempowered¹⁴ while the privileged members of the black majority (also presumed descendants of the plantation Great House history) govern the island nations. As Stuart Hall has noted, “Race is not a pure category in the Caribbean [. . .] even where a strong white local élite is present, race is defined socially” (Watson xv). A rigid class system helps to maintain the old colonial power structures in a multi-coloured guise. The plantation’s theater of race has been replaced by a theater of class in which “ghostly” colonial racial signifiers still enjoy some currency but binarized difference is largely relegated to the past.¹⁵

My project offers a unique perspective for examining postcolonial racial identity and representation from the point of view of a white artist. While many contemporary artists address identity issues, the subject of racial identity usually only appears focally in works by racially marginalized artists. Comparatively, white artists have failed to both examine their racial identity as a site of privilege and to scrutinize their ownership of colonialism.¹⁶ Though grounded in the Caribbean’s historical/cultural specificity, my project points to the wider issue of white Western postcolonial guilt and aims to subvert the notion that colonialism’s effects are solely an issue of the Other.

- ¹ While white Creoles did not suffer the physical trauma of slavery and to a large extent benefited from the system, it can be argued that they suffered a dehumanization from the continued infliction of violence and oppression on others (Aimé Césaire). In the postcolonial Caribbean, they “suffer” from the knowledge of this ancestral sin.
- ² My installation work proposed creolisation as a “blending” of African, European, and Amerindian cultures. The cocooned Creole body, through spiritual metamorphosis, was in the process of transcending racial difference (symbolized by the shedding of layers of skin) to become a “raceless” synthesis of the peoples who had historically settled the Caribbean.
- ³ Homi Bhabha refers to a “ghostly discourse” which is capable of “speaking to unspeakable pasts that have no language”.
- ⁴ I was born in colonial Barbados in 1961. The island achieved independence from Britain in 1966.
- ⁵ Pointon points out that in the eighteenth-century the wearing of wigs by men signified power and that their loss/absence (in portraiture) was connotative of the loss of masculinity and dignity. My lithographic drawings recall illustrations of these wigs found in historical collections. Their reference to contemporary hairstyles worn (mainly) by women subverts their historical significance.
- ⁶ The conversation piece or family piece was a group portrait of two or more identifiable people engaged in some form of communication with each other (“at employments or diversions proper to their age and sex”) in a private setting that described the habitat of the subjects. It was characterized by the stillness of the figures, and by minute attention to details of furnishing and interior decoration from which the viewer was invited to construct (genealogical) narratives across time relating to the still figures. The “social situations imaged in the conversation piece constituted a network of disconnected signs relating to the discourses of culture and politics” and were often a “mixture of authenticity and invention” (Pointon 159-162).
- ⁷ The subversive gesture of their presence is particularly relevant to portraiture since historically, this has been the domain of the wealthy and privileged. Servants, slaves, and the lower classes seldom appear in portraiture (individual or group) unless they are placed there as indicators of wealth, exoticism, or power.
- ⁸ The child’s grandmother commissioned the portrait after the girl had been sent to England from Barbados.
- ⁹ It is quite possible that the child’s grandmother required that the artist erase all signs of creolity from her granddaughter in the interest of promoting her likeness to English girls (an extension of Creole mimicry).
- ¹⁰ In Barbados, a National Committee for Reconciliation was established in 1999 to address societal issues surrounding race relations in the island. This committee was not widely welcomed and remained shrouded in secrecy. Its report was placed before Parliament in April 2001 but has remained unavailable to the general public.
- ¹¹ See O’Callaghan, Evelyn, **Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women** (Warwick University Caribbean Studies 1. New York: St. Martin’s P, 1993).
- ¹² See Berger, Maurice, **Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations 1979-2000** (Baltimore: U of Maryland Baltimore County, 2001).
- ¹³ The identity of the poorer classes (those who historically remained in the fields) is beyond the scope of my discussion.
- ¹⁴ Whites are denied a voice in the political and cultural arenas. Any reference to colonial (white) Creole “heroes” is also suppressed.
- ¹⁵ The undoing of slavery has led to this situation. However, though this was appropriate, and the shift in power dynamics was necessary, the current situation bears examination.
- ¹⁶ Western whites remain, for the most part, ignorant of the impact of race and class on their social status and consciousness. This remains a common misunderstanding in mainstream culture.

Joscelyn Gardner

Joscelyn Gardner is a visual artist whose practice focuses on her Creole identity from a postcolonial feminist perspective. She was born in Barbados in 1961 to a family that has been resident on the island since the seventeenth century. She spent her early childhood in West Africa, South America, and the Caribbean, and later received her secondary education at Queen's College in Barbados where she won a 1980 Barbados Scholarship. From 1980-85, she pursued her B.F.A. (Printmaking) and B.A. (Film) at Queen's University, Canada. She returned to Barbados where she taught art part-time at the Barbados Community College (1987-1999), founded and directed the Art Foundry galleries (1996-99), and worked actively on many committees, including the Art Collection Foundation, the Barbados Gallery of Art, the National Art Gallery Committee, and the Barbados Museum Council.

In 2000, Gardner moved to Canada with her husband and two children and she currently resides there. She received an M.F.A. from the University of Western Ontario in 2003 and now teaches art part-time at Fanshawe College, London, Ontario. She has represented Barbados in many international exhibitions including the Sao Paulo Biennials (1994, 1996), has held solo exhibitions in Barbados and Canada, and has exhibited in several group shows in Europe, USA, Canada, the Caribbean, and South and Central America.

List of Exhibited Works

Temporary Exhibition Gallery

Creole Portraits, 2002-03, 10 lithographs on frosted mylar, each 24” x 36”

Membah... also answers to the name of Mary; Zebby; Old Betty; Princess; Esther; Mary Ann; Dolly... daughter of Old Doll; Elizabeth... calls herself Phibbah; Phibbah; Black Bess. Collection of the artist.

White Skin, Black Kin: a Creole Conversation Piece, 2003

Multi-media Video/Sound Installation - 2 DVD projections (**A Creole Conversation Piece; Sisters**), 5 soundtracks, armchair, rag doll, **Portrait of Seale-Yearwood Esq.** (c. 1730; Barbados Museum Collection); Variable dimensions

Video Credits: The Barbados National Trust (Willey Great House, Barbados); Bob Kiss (photography/lighting); Jennifer Slauenwhite (editing assistance); Adzil Stewart (make-up/hair); Margaret-Rose Greenidge (costumes); George Washington House (costumes); Penelop Hynam (casting); Colleen Lewis; Laura-Lin Hutchinson; Rosemary Phillips; Melissa Marks; Abigale Eames; Kaleigh Gonsalves; Lily Renwick

Sound Credits: Allan Shepherd, Gray Lizard Productions (sound recording); Jennifer Slauenwhite (editing assistance); Laura-Lin Hutchinson; Rosemary Phillips; Antoinée Edwards; Lisa Shepherd; Kristen Tuleja

Warmington Gallery

A Topsy-Turvy Plantation Home, 2003-04

Bedroom: “Speak, Dolly, Speak”, 2003-04 – DVD Projection onto four-poster bed, sound

Credits: Gabriella Gill

Nursery: “Nanny”, 2003-04 - CD soundtrack

Credits: Rosemary Phillips; Allan Shepherd

Dining Room and Drawing Room: “Home Sweet Home”, 2003-04 – CD soundtrack, embroidered sampler, needlework scissors

Credits: Laura-Lin Hutchinson; Rosemary Phillips; Allan Shepherd

Cunard Gallery

Pinkie: “The Barbadoes Girl”, 2003-04

Video Installation – DVD projection, picture frame, sound, **The Barbadoes Girl: a Tale for Young People** by Mrs. Holland (London, Minerva Press, 1818) from the Barbados Museum Collection, wall text

Credits: Lauren Gill; Rosemary Phillips; Allan Shepherd

Prisoner’s Cell

A Tiny Prick, 2002-04

Multi-media Installation – lithographic portraits on embroidered pillowcases, DVD projection, wall text, mounted photographic image

Credits

White Skin, Black Kin: “Speaking the Unspeakable”

Joscelyn Gardner

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