



CRITICAL  
DISTANCE  
CENTRE FOR CURATORS

## Sugar – fragments of a narrative

Assembled by Yaniya Lee

I

A factory came into view as we drove down the deserted Jamaican highway in the starless night. It beamed light onto the water with the expansiveness of exploding fireworks.

For the Caribbean region as a whole, the steady demand overall and for most epochs has been for sugar.

European desires for sugar and other tropical products that circulate in transatlantic relays following the fifteenth century formalize in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the enormous trade circuit termed the triangular trade, fusing the formerly disparate economies of the Americas, Western Europe, and the West African coast.

Columbus's "West Indies" became known by English merchants as the "Sugar islands."

A racial twist has been given to what is basically an economic phenomenon. Slavery was not born of racism: rather racism was the consequence of slavery.

Its origin can be expressed in three words: in the Caribbean, Sugar; on the mainland, Tobacco and Cotton.

The West became the We, and the people of the Periphery-states became the OTHER. But the point is that neither the We nor the Other now existed as autonomous entities.

Wage earners ... lived like factory workers, ... worked in factories in the field, and just about everything they needed and used they bought from stores. Nearly all of it came from somewhere else: cloth and clothing, shoes, writing pads, rice, olive oil, building materials, medicine. Almost without exception, what they consumed someone else had produced.

You hear that you are living elsewhere. The BBC announcer is calling you. Telling you the news. Elsewhere is not a bad place at all. It is simply elsewhere.

The cheap labour far away was to become the concrete OTHER of the West, the ultimate polarity in a series of hierarchical polarities.

To enhance their ability to extract value from labor and land, elites fashion political, economic, and cultural institutions using ideologies and methods acquired locally, nationally, and internationally.

These island plantations had been the invention of Europe.

The sugar plantations demanded an exacting and ceaseless labour.

The “we” of the West would be defined by this ruling class in the context of the new capitalist world system and the relation of this “we,” both internally to the ruled classes and externally— and internally—to the ruled races, were an intrinsic part of the mechanism/system of capitalism.

It is this distinction that is loosely called today First/Third World.

The proximity and distance, simultaneous, of these systems is dizzying.

## II

Haiti burned the ears of the slave owners in the New World at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The Haitian Revolution was a morality play that pitted racism against resistance and recapitulated the conflicts and the inconsistencies at the heart of sugar slavery.

The Colonial Office papers regarding the decisions to end the slave trade in 1807, and slavery in the empire in 1834, demonstrate that Colonial Office administrators were more concerned both to prevent Black revolution in the colonies, and to expand profits in the sugar industry, than with the immorality of the dehumanizing system.

Whatever the forms primitive accumulation assumed, its social harvest would also include acts of resistance, rebellion, and, ultimately, revolution.

This was the dialectic of imperialism and liberation, the contradiction that compelled the appearance of resistance ... out of the condition of oppression.

They were hopelessly outnumbered by the blacks.

If unfinished liberation is the still-to-be-achieved work of abolition, then at bottom what is to be abolished isn't the past or its present ghost, but rather the processes of hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.

Radical consciousness in action resolves into liberated life-ways, however provisional, present and past.

The rebellion broke out with shocking suddenness.

The multiplicity of their responses to domination: the broken and misplaced tools, the burning of crops, the work slowdowns, the assistance and protection afforded to “runaways,” stealing, flight, the forming of short-lived maroon communities, even self-mutilation and suicide. Ultimately, of course, there was insurrection.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though, it was the maroon settlements that dominated the reaction to slavery.

Wherever mountains, swamps, or forests permitted the escaped slaves to gather, they formed communities.

Shifting the object of torture into the subject of history.

Rebellion, rebellion, rebellion, revolution.

Sugar, once the heart of the matter, sweetened less and less.

## **Coda**

Our resistance and creativity, our gestures towards liberation, are not bound by language. They are in the forms, in the textures, the colours and the sounds, of our expression.

Black rebellion—marronages, mutinies, funerals, carnivals, dramas, visual arts, fictions, poems, fights, dances, music-making and -listening, revolts, “periodic uprisings and ... the ongoing creation of culture”—is an intellectual breach.

What the creative text is, does not matter as much as what it does. And one thing black creative text and black creative praxes do is illuminate narratives of black life and humanity and, at the same time, create conditions through which relationality, rebellion, conversation, interdisciplinarity, and disobedience are fostered.

## **Notes**

Starting from francesca ekwuyasi’s curatorial premise that sugar is interconnected with “commodity goods and the transatlantic slave trade, labour exploitation, migration, Blackness, and food,” I assembled this narrative on sugar with fragments from the following texts:

C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (Random House, 1938).

Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

Sylvia Wynter, "Ethno or Socio Poetics," *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics* 2:2 (1976).

Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism* (Zed Press, 1983).

Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (Viking, 1985).

Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (Doubleday Canada, 2001).

Elizabeth Abbott, *Sugar: A Bittersweet History* (Duckworth Overlook, 2009).

Lindon Barrett, *Racial blackness and the discontinuity of Western modernity* (University of Illinois Press, 2014).

Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacy of Four Continents* (Duke University Press, 2015).

Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Duke University Press, 2021).

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography* (Verso, 2022).

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## Biography

Yaniya Lee's writing and research track Black creative practice and narratives of liberation across the nation. She is the author of *Selected Writing on Black Canadian Art* (2024, figure ground/Art Metropole) and *Buseje Bailey: Reasons Why We Have to Disappear Every Once in a While, A Black Art History Project* (2024, Artexte).

Lee has taught or written about art for universities, museums and institutions across North America and Europe including Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, de Appel Amsterdam, Dutch Art Institute, *Momus*, Toronto Biennial of Art, *Art in America*, *British Vogue*, *Vulture*, *Racar: Canadian Art Review*, *Chatelaine*, *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *The Fader*, *Flash Art*, Montez Press, and *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*.

She was a member of the editorial team at *Canadian Art* magazine from 2017–21.

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*Text edited by Alison Cooley*

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