

Memories of Race and the Formation of Nation: Barbados 1937-1967

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The foundations of modern Barbados were laid on the tectonic plates of race and class and their attendant, poverty. In 1954, for instance, everyone over the age of 68 who was eligible for the old age pension in Barbados was subject to a means test of \$BD 1.75. This means test was, even by the standards of the day, low. Yet seven out of ten people eligible for old age pensions qualified to receive them.¹ Despite the reforms initiated as a result of the Moyne Commission’s Report in 1939,² poverty levels throughout the West Indies, but particularly in Barbados, remained high. If poverty was the prevailing characteristic of the elderly, its bite was equally felt at the other end of the life cycle. In 1955, infant mortality was at 134 per 1,000 live births,³ significantly higher than its European or North American counterparts, and almost double that prevailing in other parts of the British West Indies.

¹ *Report of Inquiry into Social Security in Barbados* by J. Henry Richardson. Bridgetown, Barbados, Sept 1954.

² The West India Royal Commission, under the Chairmanship of Lord Moyne, was set up by the British Government to investigate the causes of the major riots which had spread through the British West Indies between 1935 and 1938 and to make recommendations. It reported in 1939, although its findings were not made public until 1945 – they were considered so damning that it was feared early publication would either incite further riots and/or provide the Axis powers with propaganda material. Nevertheless, many of the recommendations began to be implemented during the war, including substantial funds earmarked for the development of welfare provisions.

³ *Annual Report of the Director of Medical Services for the Year 1957-58*.

The underlying causes of the poverty lay in the racial divisions which structured Barbadian society. Unlike other British West Indian territories which benefited from the paternalism of Crown Colony (in effect, direct British) government, the legislature in Barbados was elected locally and responsible for taxation and domestic policy.⁴ Those qualified to vote represented a tiny, landowning minority. As a result, the Barbadian government and its economy was in the hands of a small, white and wealthy oligarchy – known as the ‘plantocracy’ – renowned for their racism, their reactionary views and their pride in an unbroken three hundred year tradition of local rule. The British government intervened rarely and only when the wilder excesses of retrogressive policies threatened to disturb the equilibrium.⁵ As a result, the Barbados government had been allowed to drag its heels on any kind of social, economic or political reform. The white elite lived in parallel worlds from their black co-patriots, operating on tenets of racial difference which had continued unabated and unchallenged since the abolition of slavery in 1838. S. C. Thorne, for instance, a prominent planter and a member of the Legislative Council argued in 1938 that,

When a man works five hours a day digging cane holes that man considers that he has done an enormous day’s work that day. He has four more hours in which he could earn more money and why does he not continue to work? Because he is satisfied. My experience is that an ordinary agricultural labourer wants to earn a certain amount of money per week and is prepared under no circumstances to earn any more that particular week.... It is the psychology of the people.⁶

⁴ The Bahamas and Bermuda also had their own Legislature, but were not considered, technically, part of the British West Indies.

⁵ It had prevented the 1838 Masters and Servants Act from becoming law as this was seen as reinstating slavery. As a result, the legislature was forced to amend the act before it became law in 1840. In 1876 the British Government had proposed a federation of the Eastern Caribbean, under Crown Colony rule, but this had been bitterly opposed and withdrawn.

⁶ Debates in the Legislative Council 19 April 1938

That malnutrition prevented labourers from working more than five hours a day, or that, many days of the year, there was not even five hours work to be had, did nothing to shift such views. Despite the conclusions of the 1936 *Report of the Committee appointed to consider and report on the question of nutrition in Barbados* 'that there is extensive malnutrition in this island...[due to] the inability of people of poor means to purchase necessary foods'⁷ or the poverty exposed by the report of the 1938 Deane Commission⁸, racist attitudes controlled the access to employment, health, education and welfare and denied access to the political process itself. Such attitudes were mirrored in the Colonial Civil Service and the Colonial Office itself.

This apartheid was enforced not only by a legal framework, but by custom and practice which, with the exception of a politically aware elite, remained broadly unchallenged until 1966 when a newly Independent Barbadian legislature outlawed racial discrimination. Until then, 'If you want to see apartheid' one informant told me 'all you needed to do was go to Church. The white people sat in the front pews and the black people way behind them, or up in the gallery. You dare not, if you were black, sit where the white people sat.'⁹

This paper is work in progress in understanding how West Indians – and Barbadians in particular - began to conceive of nationhood. Unlike decolonisation movements in Africa, India or Asia, where there was an idea of an original and authentic hinterland, nation building in the West Indies was

⁷ Barbados. *Report of the Committee appointed to consider and report on the question of nutrition in Barbados*. 1936, p. 12

⁸ Set up by the Governor of Barbados to report on the causes of the 1937 riots. Its evidence was dismissed by S. C. Thorne as 'tittle tattle' (Debates in the Legislative Council, 19 April 1938)

⁹ BN31

beset by dilemmas: how to build a nation when, as a result of its origins in slavery and forced migration, there were no roots, no pre-history upon which to build, when its history, society and culture were assumed, by both the British and West Indians alike, to be derivative rather than original, when its population was dispersed through migration and when its citizenry were divided by race, colour and class. Here I offer some brief, preliminary thoughts on memories of race in the formation of nation 1937-1966.

The racism of Barbadian society was reflected in the spatial segregation which symbolised and reinforced racial divisions. In the rural areas, the original villages (known as tenantries) were built on the former slave yards, a distance from, but dominated by, the plantation house. In Barbados the plantations were relatively small and the island relatively flat; the plantation houses – and the old militia buildings – were always visible, and visible from one to another. The visual images of racial domination and control were built into the topography of the landscape. The very ordinariness of this was unremarkable. Just as village life was lived below the radar of white people, so black people, in turn, lived lives seemingly unaware of white intervention. Maizie, for instance, the daughter of a village school master – by far the most prominent black person in the village – recalled that ‘growing up I did not know of discrimination, except that I read of it and I heard of it, but growing up we never had to suffer it because we were the people in charge of the village.’¹⁰ The visible structures of racial segregation were so pervasive, and of such long duration, that they appeared ‘natural’. Thus not only did the

¹⁰ BN25 p.9

spatial ordering of the countryside pass unremarked, even unnoticed, but people such as Maizie could not recognize this as part of the stuff of discrimination.

In the urban areas of Bridgetown and St. Michael, symbols of racial domination were equally integral to the built environment. The dense concentrations of people, however, and the commerce and interaction necessitated by urban life, meant that full segregation was impossible to achieve. Here, space had to be more overtly used not only to control but to discipline. Sylvia, for instance, lived close to the walls of Glendairy Prison, and,

when the gallows, when somebody's going to get hanged, you can stay out there and hear when the gallows, when it drop.... So, when they're going to have somebody hang you would hear, well the bodies, you could hear when it dropped... and you would hear when the thing drop, you know, you would hear. Yeah.¹¹

As Foucault would suggest, the ritual of execution was as much political as judicial,¹² and the location of the prison within the urban and most densely populated part of the island a constant reminder of its panoptic power. For the legislature, and the legislative process, was as riddled with racism as the Legislative Council itself. (Indeed, when offered the opportunity by the British to purchase a silent, rubberised trap door, the Barbados government refused.¹³)

¹¹ BN27, p. 26

¹² See Michel Foucault and A. Sheridan *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* London: Penguin 1991

¹³ Barbados Archives, Confidential Series – unfortunately, I read the file but did not take a note. It was only after this interview that I recognised its full importance. Since the Barbados Archives do not have the Government House and Confidential Series files catalogued, it is almost impossible to find the original reference.

Beyond the earshot of the prison, segregation was concentrated in particular locales and public spaces. Broad Street, in Bridgetown, was flanked by banks and large, white owned shops, such as Harrisons and Cave, Shepherd. Black people were not employed in any of the banks or shops on Broad Street, although they were permitted to shop there. On occasion, however, Black people were challenged and refused entry to the shops.

'Things have changed a bit' recalled Pearl,

But I think when I go into Cave Shepherd, although there are lots of blacks working there [now] I think I can still feel the kind of tension that used to be there before, because the place is still owned by whites and I think you've still got a little bit of this racial thing in the background, although it's not as prevalent as it used to be.¹⁴

If certain shops (and all banks) were out of bounds to black people as employees, and on sufferance only as customers, then certain neighbourhoods were equally out of bounds. Strathclyde and Belleville were two such neighbourhoods, peopled and controlled, almost exclusively, by the white and wealthy. Neville, as a young boy, had to deliver milk to Strathclyde, Belleville and certain parts of Bank Hall (a 'coloured' middle class area). As he explained, you could go to Strathclyde:

If you were delivering something, or if you were working in there, you know, but you couldn't go into Strathclyde just like that. And Belleville was also similar, you know, if you walking up in Belleview you have to walk fast, you couldn't walk too slowly because somebody would say, "Look, what this black man is doing up there, what he's up to sort of thing", you know. And you wouldn't probably [barking noise] some big dog comes out, you know [laughs]. Belleville and Strathclyde was very, very racial, very, very racial, very, very racial.¹⁵

This experience was confirmed by Pearl

¹⁴ BN12

¹⁵ BN13, p. 29

There were certain areas that you didn't go into if you were black. I remember at Belleville, men especially could not go down those streets after six o'clock because they had guards there that would stop them to find out what they were doing. It was all right if you were female because a lot of females worked there as maids and things like that, you know. But males weren't allowed to walk down those streets after six o'clock in the evening.¹⁶

Children were taught to fear the white man.

We used to hide from white people... the [plantation] manager on the horse, when we see him coming, like, he was so different to us, when we were small we used to run and hide from him at first...We were always scared. Now, the white people were always different to us, ...and the horse was huge in the first place, and a white person, to us, was like if he would harm us. This is we were lead to believe.¹⁷

Leisure spaces – including churches - were segregated. The large hotels, the haunts of white society, excluded black people (except as workers), and clubs such as the Yacht Club or the Aquatic Club, and certain cricket clubs, were exclusively for a white membership. Grantley Adams, a coloured, English educated lawyer – who later rose to prominence as the first black Prime Minister of Barbados – had an English wife.¹⁸ 'At that time' Neville recalled,

she was a member of the Aquatic Club in Bay Street and Grantley was not a member, he was a black man, he wasn't a member, but she ...had that privilege as a white woman to be a member of the Aquatic. And Grantley would carry her to the Aquatic Club, drop her there and turnaround and come back down the road [laughs]. Tell me when you're ready and I'll come back and pick you up when you go...He drop her there. That is your thing. You belong to that club. I'll put you there, you come back when you're ready to come, call me and I'll come back and pick you up.¹⁹

Racism was reflected also in the lack of opportunities, principle among which was the difficulty of accessing a secondary education, seen as the

¹⁶ BN12, p. 8-9

¹⁷ BN27, pp16 & 19

¹⁸ Mixed marriages were very rare

¹⁹ BN13, p. 43

passport to social and economic advancement. Until the educational reforms of the 1950s and 1960s, there were only a handful of secondary schools on the island. Entry was competitive and very few black children had had sufficient elementary education to pass the examination. In addition, the schools were fee paying, scholarships limited and preference was given to white children or those with connections.

Keith – the son of a mason and youngest of seven children - sat and passed the entrance examination to the Lodge School, one of the few secondary schools on the island 'I took this exam in a kind of haze' he recalled,

But I had no idea... as to how well I'd done in their exam. ..I go to school and there was a headmaster--, an Englishman called Tom Evans and he--, a classics master, and I'd been at school for about two years and he taught us Latin, so he got to know me kind of thing. And he said to me one day, "Hunte I must speak to you!" So I Chri--, oh Christ, what did I do now? So he said, "No, no, relax. I, I just thought I needed to tell you, you came first in that exam and I recommended you for a vestry scholarship." Now this was the parochial council...that traditionally gave a number of scholarships, except that they reserve the right to re-order the candidate list. So--, but I would not have known this if Evans hadn't unburdened it. And he said, "I must tell you, you came first and I recommended you for a vestry scholarship. I was annoyed that you didn't get it.'But the person [who got it] was...well connected ...light skinned etc, ...[and] he had pull...So there it was.²⁰

Sylvia, the daughter of (illiterate) agricultural labourers, left school when she was ten years old, but recalled the privileges associated with some of her fellow pupils who would have the opportunity to progress to secondary school:

they had a big [i.e. secondary] school and you couldn't get there unless you knew somebody. If your parents were some person like Mr Brooms Llewellyn, his father was a preacher and he had privilege. Then there was the Hopes. Then Reece St John,...the sisters in there they used to come to school in a buggy [laughs], a buggy. And we

²⁰ BN30, pp.6-7

used to be trying to hold the buggy so the man got the whip licking at us, but the buggy help us to get down to school, because the tar road was hot and your feet was on the ground...you hitch a ride...And they go to school like that, and they look very well. Floretta Corbin, Phyllis White, and those were the people that...we call them white, but the Hopes were fair--, not as fair as you--,brown skinned, and they had a big house. ... The gardens well kept, you know, so you used to pass and look at the wall house. They had everything. ²¹

Neville wanted to go to secondary school. He was poor and black and went to school (in the 1930s and 1940s) 'slapping tar' (i.e. barefoot).

I realise that I was, I realise within my self that I was passing my subjects in school...I realised that, you know, I was okay in school, yeah. And I would ask some questions in school at times that the teacher wouldn't even bother to answer me. No... They would not have given, you know, a fella--, a barefooted fella that sort of [chance], you know. ..

The discrimination was constant, and the memories of it raw, even sixty years later:

We would sing a lot of... those old English songs, you know. ..I remember one English song that they taught us in school, and I never forget, when we were going on holiday we would sing this song, Swiftly Glides the Morning Hours, I knew that was English written, you know.

Swiftly Glides the Morning Hours/Softly shines the evening star.

And the duly wayside flows/Greets the angels from afar.

So, with happy smiles and faces/Hearts aglow with sun and mirth's,

Ripened faculties and graces/Should our schooldays bring to birth.

And I would be glad to go up there and recite that, but they would not allow me... A little black barefoot boy speaking like that, you know, they just wouldn't, you know... I loved English, I loved reciting [laughs]. ..I just wanted to go up there and... say that to the class, to the school, Swiftly Glides the Mornings Hours/Softly shines the evening star, - and I imagined myself up there, you know - And the duly wayside flows/Greets the angels from afar. I want to do that so badly, they would not allow me. Never gave me the chance to do it, no, no, no. ²²

²¹ BN 27,p.30

²² BN13, pp. 27-28

In similar vein, Briggs, a devout Christian, wished to train as an Anglican priest. Not only was he black (at a time when the church hierarchy was exclusively white) but poor and lacking secondary education, a necessary requirement to become a priest and enter into even the lowest ranks of the clergy. Pearl wanted to become a nurse.

You needed qualifications here ...I had no school leaving certificates so it would have been impossible for me to get into the hospital here because in those days, you either had your school leaving certificate or you had to know somebody that knows somebody to get into the hospital. So we didn't know anybody and we didn't have the money. ..They would not have taken me here because I didn't have the qualifications and I didn't come from an established family. We were a non-entity so to speak....if you weren't white or you weren't one of the rich blacks or one of the established families, you didn't get anywhere. If you didn't know somebody, that knew somebody, you didn't get in.²³

Finally, race played out in acts of personal humiliation. Pearl began work as a domestic servant for a white lady but :

I didn't like it there because I felt that I was more or less like a little slave so I told my mother I didn't like it... I seemed to do all the menial tasks, you know, in those days there were no water toilets...and this lady used a bucket at night 'cause the toilet was in the yard, so at night they didn't go out into the yard to used the toilet and I had to go in in the mornings and empty this thing and do all the cleaning and things like that and I hated it....A lot of the whites ...still think that they had to be nasty to the blacks, you know.²⁴

Woodie was fortunate to win a place at Harrison College, the top secondary school. He was one of five black boys, and could recall the resentment – and name calling - articulated by his white classmates at his academic success. On leaving school, he went to teach at another secondary school, Combermere, which had been established some years before to

²³ BN12, p25

²⁴ BN12, pp.3 and 27

provide secondary schooling for black children, before being recalled to teach at Harrison College, a considerable honour and pathbreaking moment. He asked permission to leave Combermere to take up his post at Harrison College from the Chairman of the Governors, who refused it. "In that case" Woodie replied "I resign." He looked at me and said, "Black men don't resign."²⁵ Neville, too, remembered his humiliation when his achievements had not been lauded:

We had this boy at school and we were playing this game of cricket and that side was winning. .. one boy (Tommy Skinner) had came out and he made 11 runs... And they were going pretty good, so somebody said, you know, when Tommy Skinner reach 11 runs, somebody said, "Give Neville the ball", that's me. And the captain said, "Okay", and he throw the ball to me... So, I bowled eight balls, and out of my eight balls I got six wickets, and that was the end of that side. And when we got back into the class of course Tommy used to wear shoes and I was slapping tar. And my headmaster got up on the platform and he talked about Tommy Skinner's 11 runs...Tommy Skinner made 11 runs. He never said one thing about my six balls, six wickets over. He never mentioned it. And that hurt me... That hurt me bad...that six wicket thing wouldn't go out of my mind...But the boy was white--, he was a white boy...Tommy Skinner, yeah, he was a white--, he was a white, Skinner. ²⁶

That memories of humiliation are concentrated from childhood and adolescence is significant, for those were the years when ambitions were high and the full power of racism first began to be felt.

It is now forty years since Independence (and the outlawing of racial discrimination). A new generation has grown up where overt acts of racism are prohibited and where the spatial markers of segregation are less obvious. In addition, in the intervening years Barbadian historians have exposed and

²⁵ BN

²⁶ BN13, pp. 24-25

examined the role played by slavery and race in the shaping of Barbadian history, while the government and its educational and cultural agents have raised an awareness of the majority population's African heritage and creolisation. Yet, despite this and despite the furore occasioned by the 'Mutual' affair twenty years ago,²⁷ and the attempted 'coup' of the Council of the Barbados Museum in 1989,²⁸ both of which raised issues of racial representation in corporate, and cultural, affairs respectively, and which contributed to a climate of heightened racial awareness in public affairs, there has been relatively little public discussion on race *per se*. Some artists have entered the conversation: arguably, one of the most controversial is Jocelyn Gardner a white Barbadian, who explored the role of whiteness, creolity, history and race in a series of installations at the Barbados Museum in 2004. The exhibition was accompanied by a debate on race which played to a packed and engaged audience. Although this debate could not have taken place twenty years earlier, nevertheless, race remains a sensitive area. Racism, I was assured by several respondents, still exists. As Pearl pointed out, 'I think you still find a lot of this in some areas, it's not as prevalent as it used to be but it still goes on in some areas, you know. You find that some areas, the white's living there don't want the blacks to pass through....Even now, yes.'²⁹

Unlike Apartheid or of the Southern States of America, Barbadian racism was institutionalised but not arbitrarily or randomly violent. Opposition

²⁷ See for instance the role of Hilary Beckles in (among other incidents) the 'Mutual' scandal. H. Beckles *Corporate power in Barbados: The Mutual affair: economic injustice in a political democracy* 1989

²⁸ For a fuller discussion of this see Alissandra Cummins 'Caribbean Museums and National Identity' *History Workshop Journal* 58, Autumn 2004

²⁹ BN12, p. 8-9

to the system in the early years of the twentieth century was more against the poverty it engendered than the system which had spawned it. Despite the work of, for instance, the UNIA or Marxist groups such as the West Indian Workers Progressive Society in the 1920s and 1930s in raising black awareness, political opposition was more often spontaneous than organised, and not articulated in racial terms.³⁰ The 1937 riots in Barbados galvanised the formation of political parties,³¹ along with that of Trade Unions, and with the introduction of universal adult suffrage in 1951, the democratic process and black majority political rule had begun. There was no freedom or liberation movement, as there was in other parts of the British Empire, nor a civil rights movement as in the USA or South Africa, nor was there necessarily widespread support, until very late in the day, for decolonisation. At the time, between 1937 (the occasion of major riots) and 1966 (Independence), the angst of nationhood was the prerogative of political activists and intellectuals who saw a West Indian Federation as the route towards Independence, while the daily meat of politics was in the eradication of poverty. Even the Black Power movement in the 1960s and 1970s made very little dent in the silence surrounding race.

As indicated above, the history of race in Barbados has lacked the immediate trauma, and drama, of violent racist attacks; correspondingly, it lacks also the narrative of resistance.³² Yet the memories of race are long

³⁰ For instance, Ulrick Grant, one of the jailed leaders of the 1937 riots, presented evidence to the Moyne Commission from Glendairy Prison which spoke only of the poverty and lack of opportunity for Barbadians.

³¹ Attempts had been made earlier, most notably by Charles Duncan O'Neale and the Democratic League, but without universal suffrage, the League could not maintain any momentum

³² See Kim Lacy Rogers 'Lynching Stories. Family and Community Memory in the Mississippi Delta' in Kim Lacy Rogers, Selma Leydesdorff, with Graham Dawson (eds.) *Trauma and Life*

and multi-layered. The lineage of racism in Barbados can be traced directly to slavery, where the collective trauma appeared to have been transformed into a collective, and silent, denial after Emancipation.³³ For the most part – and particularly those elderly Barbadians with whom I spoke – there has not been ‘permission’ (in the Halbwachian sense) until recently, to express openly experiences of racism. The integral and integrated experience of racism may be likened to victims of long term domestic violence (or kidnap) where a form of collusion, and even victim guilt, arises between the perpetrator and its victim. Certainly, as Elsa Goveia pointed out, this lay at the heart of slavery.³⁴ And yet, in listening to accounts now of racism, we can see that recollections were framed by a compulsion to provide some retrospective rationale for their responses at the time.

Broadly speaking, these rationales can be categorised as assertion, adjustment and agency. Let me offer three brief examples of each. Neville, for instance, having described the neighbourhood of Strathclyde as ‘very racial’, and having willingly recalled the humiliations of his school days, nevertheless asserted that no one had, or could, cause him trouble there,

I would say no, because honestly I always had this, I would say, unconditional intention that nobody’s going to dominate me. And I didn’t particularly care for who didn’t like me, you know, sort of, I didn’t, I never really took it on, honestly. You know, I felt that I have a right to be, you know, as a young boy I have a right to be, and I think that [nothing] you could say would make me run. I wouldn’t run, no. I know that I’m honestly and I think truly I’m not about to do anything wrong, and nothing you would say would move me.³⁵

Stories, Memory and Narrative Series, London: Routledge 1999/New Brunswick: Transaction 2004.

³³ There is a telling moment in George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) where the school boys discover – but refuse to believe – that their ancestors were slaves.

³⁴ Elsa V. Goveia *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century* New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1965

³⁵ BN13, p. 29

In many ways, this kind of rationale corresponds to a category of response by Barbadian (and other West Indian) migrants to Britain who argue that racism there did not affect them for they had inner resources which enabled them to rise above it.³⁶

Pearl, on the other hand, remembered the resignation and sense of hopelessness she felt at the time, a response which may be categorised as that of adjustment:

I hated it, I hated it but what could you do? It was the law at the time. There wasn't much you could do... But I didn't like that at all, I could never understand why it was like that but ...you had to live with it... I remember asking my mother why it is that we couldn't walk around there as we pleased, and she said, "Well it's the law, so you have to abide by the law." She was a very law abiding person, but I didn't like it myself. .³⁷

Such a form of adjustment, in which resistance was not only futile, but illegal, exonerated any (implicit) endorsement of the system

The third form of response – agency – was the most multifaceted. In this, respondents subtly, but actively, resisted or even overcame the system. One form of agency (and this appears to be a gendered response) was for respondents to recall the pioneering position they occupied in breaking down racial barriers; several informants – from this sample and earlier ones – talk about their achievement in being the first black man to: drive a car, drive a

³⁶ See Mary Chamberlain *Narratives of Exile and Return* (Oxford: Macmillan 1997/New Brunswick: Transaction 2004); Mary Chamberlain 'The family as model and metaphor in Caribbean migration' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* Vol. 25 No 2, 1999

³⁷ BN12, p. 8-9

bus, drive a tractor and so forth.³⁸ Another – though less common – form of agency was that of reversal. Patricia, for instance, born into a middle class coloured family (her father was a civil servant) were the only coloured family to live, for a short while, in Strathclyde. While there,

I had been playing with a white girl and my nurse came back to my mother and said that she had been told not to bring me round to play again because the woman did not want her daughter playing with coloured children. The next day, my mother told my nurse to take me over to the house. My mother followed her. When my mother was in earshot of the lady, she called out to my nurse in a very loud voice: 'Nurse! Nurse! Come back with Patricia immediately! You know I have forbidden her to play with – well, my mother used an impolite word. She said – you know I have forbidden her to play with those poor bakra children!' Well, the woman went pink, purple, every colour, and of course the nurses were giggling and sniggering. She turned the tables, you see!

³⁹

Another form of agency was to engage in what E. P. Thompson would call the 'moral economy.'⁴⁰ Daisy, for instance, was a shoemaker, and would charge white people far more for their shoes than black people; Bob, a tailor, did the same. Others exploited kinship to secure employment, or labourer's networks to secure advantage.⁴¹ People stole firewood or food from the plantations.⁴² Sylvia remembered her parents hoodwinking the white estate manager by hiding estate yams

Mostly they used to give, like, the cut ones ... or sell them at a reduced price. But, of course, you have to have some hidden back that they can have later on until the next person.... I remember my father and my mother when they ... put by some yams and different stuff [to collect] in the dead at night... we would go with them, and we would be hopping through the... cane holes as children, so [to avoid] the white man, but he's coming to check on this thing, 'cause he don't know. So, they've got

³⁸ See Kim Lacy Rogers 'Lynching Stories'

³⁹ BN 21

⁴⁰ E. P. Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980

⁴¹ See Mary Chamberlain 'Renters and Farmers: The Barbadian Plantation Tenantry System 1917-1937' *Journal of Caribbean History* 24:2, 1991

⁴² Praedial larceny was the most common criminal offence, and rose dramatically at times of unrest.

the things on their head, the bags with the thing on there. We children falling down, but they never fall. Got everything and we run 'til they get home...

This kind of agency was as much a subversion of racism, as a strategy for survival. It played around the system, and even within it, at times even mocking it. As such, it constituted a form of resistance to the dominant regime and its daily visual and spatial reminders, its daily negotiations. Poor, black people may have lived in parallel worlds from the white elite and, to a certain extent, from black political activists and intellectuals, both of whom had a clear and articulate idea of what self-government would entail. Yet in their daily struggle they lived an alternative politics within an alternative society which in time came to be celebrated as distinctively Barbadian. This, perhaps, is how the narrative of race was best articulated in the making of nationhood in Barbados between 1937 and 1966.