Uneasy Heritage: Ambivalence and Ambiguity in Caribbean Heritage Practices

Philip W. Scher

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1 Introduction

This essay explores the issue of public debates about history through the examination of controversial public monuments in the Caribbean. In addressing this concept, the idea of what constitutes historical debate immediately emerges. Debates about “what happened” in the life of a community, society or nation range from academic arguments all the way to violence and vandalism taken against historic sites, monuments and archeological digs. The stakes are often extraordinarily high and the results may be extraordinarily drastic. All of these things are concerned with history and are, as such, the rightful province of heritage studies, conceived as the present’s use of the past. The stakes may be raised further as heritage becomes increasingly important as an economic activity and may lead to specific interventions into specific areas of a community’s culture in order to secure viability into the future. Such interventions range from institutional oversight and protection of cultural forms to exploring legal protections. Justification for state or governmental involvement in the representations of historical events is often manifested through “nation branding” which makes a strong case for the preservation of history while at the same time positioning the nation-state as the only legitimate political entity because it has the ability to define, safeguard and promote that which is key in
creating economic health and competitiveness. This essay focuses on the routine and seemingly seasonal debates about the fate of the statue of Horatio Nelson in Heroes Square in downtown Bridgetown, the capital city, as well as an earlier outcry over a statue raised to honor emancipation.

2 The Heritage Landscape: Barbados

Sarah Ann Gill is one of ten national heroes of Barbados. This distinction was bestowed upon her memory in 1998. Gill, a Methodist free colored woman of the early–19th century, was elevated to the status of national hero as a result of her outspoken resistance to religious oppression in the British colony and her persistence in preaching Christian doctrine to the enslaved population of Bridgetown. She was persecuted and threatened by representatives of the white planter class, who both opposed her attempts to convert slaves and her non-conformity to the Anglican Church. In the face of a violent mob she protected her home and land. In April of 2010, she was called the “mother” of the nation by noted University of the West Indies historian Henderson Carter in a lecture in the Parliament building. Dr. Carter, in the same speech, called for the re-introduction of the teaching of history to secondary school children in forms one to three (Barbados Advocate, April 25, 2010).

There are two noteworthy aspects to this lecture: Firstly, the home of Sarah Ann Gill, “mother” of the nation and defender of her house and land: The Methodist Church, to which she had willed her property, had had that very same structure demolished in February, 2009. Secondly, Dr. Carter’s talk highlighted the fact that history as a subject is not taught to early secondary school students. It is also not taught to elementary school students. In the wake of the demolition of the Gill house, historian Karl Watson wrote: “the glittering process of modernization dulls our historical consciousness and the relevance of old buildings with historic associations is often questioned. New high rise buildings are equated with the notion of progress. Old structures seem symbolic of the past and of stagnation” (Watson 2009: 187).

In an essay in the same volume of Slavery and Abolition, Jamaican scholar Annie Paul details the debate that surrounded that country’s decision to commemorate the abolition of slavery in 2006 and 2007. Paul notes that certain segments of the society (she cites the example of the parish councilors of St. Elizabeth, Jamaica) were unhappy with what they complained was the continual focus by Jamaican scholars on the issue of slavery, noting that they (the councilors) preferred to think more about the economic future of the island. At the same time, Paul quotes the Kingston and St. Andrew Corporation’s resolution that:
the government and the local authorities, as well as the Jamaica National Heritage Trust, should make plans “to renovate existing historical sites, and to erect additional statues and monuments to transform Kingston, Spanish Town and other towns, ahead of Cricket World Cup 2007. Thus making our city and towns of historical interest to the thousands of visitors expected to attend Cricket World Cup 2007. (cited in Paul 2009: 169–170)

According to Paul:

The St Elizabeth councilors, however, begged to differ. A newspaper article quoted: the comments of two senior councilors, Wright and Sinclair: “I do not wish to remember that kind of thing,” said Sinclair. “Talking about the slave trade and slavery is just reminding ourselves that whites had domination over us. We need to leave slavery behind and forget it. All I want to know is how to develop this country. (Paul 2009: 170)

Indeed, there was a subdued reaction to the commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade all across the Caribbean region, except mainly in academic and some government circles. Often, as Watson notes, local residents in Barbados and elsewhere commented that “by focusing so heavily on the period of slavery, negative feelings and feelings of inferiority were strengthened rather than dissipated among the young” (Watson 2001: 180). Furthermore, the reminders of slavery contributed to the opinion that young people in Barbados could never “make it” and that it was better to focus on the future and on material gratification and success.

It would appear from this evidence (and this is only a small sample of such comments) that the focus on slavery in the Caribbean is frequently perceived as detrimental at the psychological level and ultimately a hindrance to the economic development and betterment of the nation and its population. The specific issue of the commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007 and the events surrounding the demolition of the Sarah Ann Gill house in Barbados are only two of many events in the past few years that highlight a deep ambivalence about the role history should play in the consciousness and public life of the nation. Just to enumerate some of these events:

- October 2008: A “slave hut” is demolished in Rock Hall Freedom Village.
- March 2009: Concert promoter Al Gilkes calls for the demolition of Farley Hill House, the remains of Barbados’ “most magnificent plantation house.”
- October 2010: Fire ravages historical landmark Sam Lord’s Castle.
- Ongoing debate over the presence of Horatio, Lord Nelson’s statue in the center of Bridgetown.
A vocal portion of the population in the wake of these events was generally outraged, disappointed or cynically philosophical about the failure to preserve and protect heritage sites. However, it does not appear, on the whole, that such publicly expressed sentiment is accompanied by any real political action. Overall, however, it becomes clear that the resistance to the focus on slavery and the slave trade in the Caribbean derives from wanting to move on, to leave the past behind and think about the future of the nation; primarily, the economic future. Yet the economic future of Caribbean nations is increasingly becoming dependent, at least in part, on developing heritage into a marketable commodity. Thus, the desire to leave the past behind and the desire to foreground the past in the expansion of a heritage-based tourist economy are increasingly coming into conflict. The expression of this conflict manifests in both public debate in the press, in parliaments and government agencies, in the university, and finally in public expression. These debates are not always clearly articulated in these specific terms and one must often read the silences and general ambivalences as voices in their own right. Nevertheless, a significant dimension to the global push to develop heritage tourism at both the tangible and intangible levels is a problem of what to do about heritage that makes a significant portion of the population uneasy, angry, hurt, and distressed.

3 Background on Barbados

For the purposes of this paper, I focus primarily on the nation of Barbados. Here, in this small Caribbean nation of 166 square miles, the legacy of British colonial power is perhaps most strongly felt. Barbados was settled by the British in 1625 and achieved independence in 1966 having never been the colony of any other European power. It is, in fact, the only Caribbean colony never to have changed hands. In that regard, it has some of the most enduring and impressive examples of English Caribbean colonial architecture. Furthermore, unlike many of its neighbors, the newly independent government of Barbados did not indulge in the usual post-colonial erasure of the monuments and buildings of the former colonizers. Whatever one’s political views on the subject, many parts of Barbados look as they might have in the late–19th and early–20th centuries. In addition, many of the plantation houses are still privately-owned and inhabited, and although they are generally inhabited by whites, they are not always the descendants of the original owners. Outside of the plantation homes, Bridgetown, the country’s capital, has many examples of churches, government buildings, former hospitals, and military structures from the 18th to the early–20th century that survive. The Bridgetown garrison, the subject of intense historic preservation activity, for example, contains some of the most impressive and contextually intact British military buildings in the Caribbean along with perhaps the most complete collection of early cannon in the world.
Through this landscape, the population of Barbados, 95% of African descent, moves on a daily basis. The structures that impose themselves on the visual experiences of the majority of “Bajans” is saturated with the history of how this colony came into being, how and why Africans were brought here and how they were treated for 350 years. The idea of “commemoration,” whether it manifests in placing plaques on noteworthy buildings, sites of slave sales, locations of resistance and rebellion, having celebrations or ceremonies of remembrance is met with profound ambivalence by many Barbadians. Indeed, the general neglect for historic buildings and sites is itself testimony to the general lack of interest in highlighting “history” in Barbados, and where history is preserved, for instance, in museums and galleries, there is often the observation that slavery is downplayed or even erased (Price 2001, Watson 2009). The charge, for it often appears as such by artists and intellectuals, that the Caribbean is a place of “amnesia,” of “pastlessness,” of forgetting is an extremely common one in the Caribbean (Walcott 1974, Trouillot 1995, Reinhardt 2006), especially as it pertains to slavery. However now, as Walkowitz and Knauer indicate,

in the wake of deindustrialization and economic restructuring, everyone from grass-roots organizers to politicians and developers stresses history (or “heritage”) as an element of the cultural or creative economy that they fervently believe (or hope) will serve as a magic bullet to revitalize sluggish local and regional economies. (Walkowitz and Knauer 2009: 5; see also Klak 1998)

There is increasing pressure to pursue diversification in the tourism market in Barbados. Citing falling revenues in other sectors, attributable, for instance, to the pursuit of neoliberal economic policy throughout the region and the devastation such policies have wreaked in manufacturing and agriculture, national governments are increasingly turning to those resources that are not subject to intense international competition. Even the more traditional sectors within the tourist economy, such as resorts, beaches, tropical landscapes, et cetera, are increasingly competitive and market share is harder and harder to come by.

The development of cultural and heritage tourism in the Caribbean comes as a result of distinct historical and economic pressures. The shaping of local economic strategies has most recently been by agents of neoliberalism, such as the World Bank, IMF, Inter-American Development Bank, World Trade Organization, and others. The influence of such powers as the United States and European nations is not, of course, new to the region. The Caribbean, as we know it, was created almost entirely by such “global” economic powers. What is somewhat newer is the elimination of whole economic sectors by the dismantling of colonial or post-colonial era protections and guarantees that has resulted, overall yet unevenly, in a massive tourism sector. Based originally on the foreign enjoyment of the natural attributes of the islands, Caribbean tourism and the landscapes promoted to for-
eigners through travel advertisements very quickly became enmeshed with representations of the people themselves who inhabited the islands (Thompson 2006).

In Caribbean tourism, as far as many North American consumers are concerned, there may be little to differentiate one island from the next, or one all-inclusive resort from the next. In the parlance of the tourism industry, this is the danger of substitutability. Transcending this “substitutability” by supplying comparative advantages has become a primary strategy in gaining market share. In that sense, seizing on that which differentiates one place from the next has meant commodifying cultural forms, such as Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago or “scratch music” in St. Croix. This strategy is not only imperative; it leads to specific interventions into expressive culture in order to, as mentioned above, secure the longevity of the festival into the future. Again, such interventions range from institutional oversight and protection of cultural forms to exploring legal protections (Scher 2002).

That being said, some amount of substitutability is clearly desired: For instance, in terms of Caribbean clichés that European and American consumers will readily recognize, a certain stability is required, especially in such areas as climate and landscape, vernacular architecture, music and festival, etcetera. I can recall a Trinidadian friend explaining to a visitor during carnival that Trinidad is not “typically Caribbean” in terms of its appearance. For that, he said, one must travel to Tobago, which has the classic appearance of a Caribbean island with its white sand and turquoise waters.

This brings up a continuing tension in marketing between that which all recognize as being fundamentally Caribbean, and that which differentiates one place from the next in such a way as to make it a specifically desirable destination. Striking that balance is not easy, especially when another dimension of neoliberal development is the opening up of markets to an influx of foreign businesses that threaten to homogenize the local.

The concept of “nation branding” is designed to solve some of these problems. Nation branding as an idea and practice has been pursued by such diverse countries as Taiwan, Jamaica, Poland, New Zealand, and Botswana. Briefly defined, nation branding involves “engaging the profit-based marketing techniques of private enterprise to create and communicate a particular version of national identity” (Aronczyk 2008).

With regard to Jamaica, nation branding has been a key strategy for economic development and national culture figures prominently in its implementation. Indeed, by its very definition, nation branding trades on the creative output of the people. Jamaica’s Ministry of Industry, Investment and Commerce, through its agency Jamaica Trade and Invest (JTI), has pursued nation branding aggressively. In a recent speech given at the “Target Growth Competitiveness Committee’s Minister’s Forum” on “Competitiveness in Manufacturing,” at the Hilton Kingston Hotel, Robert Gregory, the JTI president, said, “leveraging Jamaica’s culture into high-value, globally competitive niche products and services for economic wellbe-
ing and sustained prosperity, represents the next economic frontier for the ‘creative economy.’” He further stated, “that over the last 20 years, Jamaica has been transformed from a primary agricultural producer, to a predominantly services-based provider.” Mr. Gregory contended that the only way the country’s goods and services could achieve the competitive edge, is through the nation’s culture, “which makes us different from the rest of the world.”

Compare this, for instance, to Trinidad’s National Carnival Commission’s statement regarding its attempts to protect and preserve the traditional characters of carnival:

The characters in Trinidad’s traditional Carnival are the repositories of very important features which distinguish Carnival Trinidad and Tobago style from other Carnivals. They add to the uniqueness of the national festivals which, with calypso, pan and, above all else, the spirit, create a differentiation of the product as Trinidad and Tobago Carnival claims a niche in the world economic market. (Cupid 1994: 3)

Or yet again, from Barbados’ National Initiative for Service Excellence:

The national vision for Barbados is to be a fully developed society that is prosperous, socially just and globally competitive by the year 2025. The national strategic plan embodies the theme “Global Excellence, Barbadian Traditions”, which conveys the message of a Barbados that is a successful and globally competitive society, fully integrated into the world economy, but at the same time capable of preserving and strengthening its own identity, enterprise, national sovereignty, and traditions. (NISE Website; accessed March 15, 2009)

Strongly evident in this kind of rhetoric is the idea that culture is the key to economic success because it creates clear product differentiation. In its conception, nation branding makes a strong case for the preservation of the nation-state as the legitimate political entity because it has the ability to define, safeguard and promote heritage, an idea implicitly sanctioned by the structure of such international bodies as UNESCO (Askew 2010: 39). Diversifying the tourism sector is seen by many economists as a way of capturing tourism dollars by capitalizing on other attractions, such as eco-tourism, cultural attractions, history and heritage, etcetera. In the case of Barbados the most obvious “untapped” resource is its historical attractions.

It may be taken as evidence of the economic potential for heritage tourism that state agencies as well as private sector interests came together for the purpose of a particular heritage project: The nomination of Historic Bridgetown and its Garrison for UNESCO World Heritage designation. A World Heritage Committee was created to advance the nomination process and create the nomination documents
to present to UNESCO. A nearly 100-page document, the Historic Bridgetown and Garrison Management plan, was written which details, going forward, the management and development of the proposed site. In fact, the original dossier sent to UNESCO argued for the designation of a significant section of the city; a linking corridor, and the Garrison and Savannah, a former military base with historic buildings dating to the late–18th century, historic race track, cannon collection, and other items of significance. The site was officially declared a World Heritage Site in June, 2011.

The management plan gives a key insight into the collection of parties and organizations whose work must be coordinated and mobilized to ensure the nomination process is a success and to reassure UNESCO that the site will be well-maintained. That so many governmental organizations are involved and seemingly supportive of the project gives some indication that heritage has increased in importance in Barbados in recent years. There are 14 distinct entities listed in the report that would play a part in the management of the sites. These range from the Heritage Committee itself to The Town and Country Development Planning Office, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, the Ministry of Tourism, the University of the West Indies, the Chamber of Commerce, et cetera. Interested parties in the private sector include religious organizations that control historic churches on the site to the National Trust, The Barbados Museum, The Barbados Defence Force, et cetera. In addition to the coordination of these various institutions and agencies, legislation has been passed recently with the specific aim of preserving cultural heritage. The Amended Physical Development Plan of 2003, for example, pays special attention to historic buildings and sites in ways that are clearly more detailed and far reaching than ever before. Even more recently, the proposed Antiquities Bill provides for much more stringent penalties for the destruction of heritage sites. Yet the mountain of documents, legislation, suggestions, and proposals is ultimately only as effective as the revenue stream, enforcement and public can make it. The increased attention that the World Heritage designation has garnered for heritage in Barbados is directly linked to the expansion of the tourism industry, as noted above. Whether or not a general interest in heritage can be maintained still remains to be seen. The following section of the paper gives a case-study to underscore some of the issues faced by Barbadians with regard to embracing the heritage that would, ultimately, form the foundation of the heritage tourism industry itself.

4 Public Monuments: Ambiguity Set in Stone

I want to turn now to two statues and public monuments in Barbados. The purpose here is to examine two different sets of debates about two very different public monuments in order to show some of the attitudes that Barbadians have towards their own history and specifically about how it is represented to locals as
well as foreigners. These attitudes about history are presented in order to gain some insight into a local ambivalence towards the active pursuit of a heritage-based tourism industry to complement existing tourism modalities (Macdonald, 2009: 93–104). I conclude with the suggestion that a particular kind of historical narrative that has dominated in the Caribbean region, the resistance narrative, may have necessarily, but unintentionally, limited the contemporary uses to which heritage may be put. This would seem to have important consequences for attempts to create a heritage-based tourism industry.

4.1 Case 1: Redemption Song

Public monuments in Barbados, and indeed throughout the Caribbean, are largely memorials to significant figures or events in the building of the nation. If they are monuments that were left by the colonizers, then they are often re-evaluated through the lens of whether or not they are appropriate objects for public contemplation in that regard. As Petrina Dacres has pointed out, many monuments in the Caribbean celebrate the moment of or the passage to independence and the birth of the modern nation (Dacres 2004). Overcoming slavery is a significant part of this story. She has also astutely noted that in the absence of “wars of liberation,” some Caribbean states have focused their monumental displays on struggles of resistance, slave rebellions, et cetera. Indeed, this may be seen as a dominant trope in public sculptural displays in the region. However, unlike Jamaica, which makes up for a lack of a specific war of liberation with a rich history of slave and worker rebellions, maroon wars and the like, Barbados has very little to memorialize in this regard. Comparing the roster of national heroes between Jamaica and Barbados we find that although both share a dearth of female figures, and Jamaica has three fewer national heroes (seven as opposed to the ten of Barbados), more than half of Jamaica’s are connected in some way to rebellion, maroon resistance or racial pride.

In Barbados the history of slave uprisings is complex. Slaves undertook three major rebellions in Barbados in 1649, 1675 and 1692. These were put down at great cost to human life. There seem to be no historical records of any armed slave insurrections occurring in Barbados between 1702 and 1815. This may have been due to the presence of a large military force on the island. The most visible slave rebellion in terms of public history was the 1816 Easter Rebellion, often known as Bussa’s Insurrection.

Ultimately, in Barbados, the narrative of a struggle toward nationhood is placed within the workers’ or trade union movement. In either case, the emphasis in national monuments reflects a general conflation between the origins of the nation through struggle and the freedom of the majority of the people through struggle; but these are not the same thing. To explain this position further, I would like to take a brief look at a public debate that has unfolded in Jamaica over the
past few years concerning a contentious statue to Emancipation entitled Redemption Song by the artist Laura Facey Cooper. The decision to choose the work of an artist, albeit a Jamaican national, who is of predominantly European descent to depict an experience of deep importance to people of primarily African descent has been criticized or at least questioned in several quarters (Graham 2004, Paul and Thompson 2004). What is more salient, it seems to me, is the selection of emancipation as a theme for a national monument, and not because it is an ill-chosen theme. Monuments to the experiences of a portion of a community as representations of the history of a whole community are clearly widespread and not necessarily controversial. Moreover, where there has been controversy recently it has been found in the persistence of monuments to the achievements of elites over the subaltern or to the power of a dominant group to represent the histories of subordinate groups they have dominated (even if such representations are meant to communicate remorse) (Zimmerman 2007).

However, almost by definition, an “emancipation monument” in a multicultural nation with the descendants of slaves and slave owners, as well as those who had nothing to do with either historically, cannot be a national monument in the sense that it attempts to represent the experiences of the people as a whole. It must exclude those who were never emancipated. This is not simply the exclusion of whites, but also of other groups who may have been indentured laborers or more recent immigrants. A monument that represents the population as a whole should, theoretically, be an independence monument. However, this is rarely the case in the Caribbean. Furthermore, the ways in which emancipation can be represented are severely limited. Although cries against many public monuments charge that such monuments are elitist in design, execution and selection, the voices raising such cries are rooted in their own intellectual and creative traditions that one might more properly call a class fraction than a wholly separate class. Both sides of this debate tend to have an effect on the uses of history in public discourse and in public life. At the very least, such debates remind us that history is alive and meaningful for the members of any nation. They illustrate that the reason people argue over statues and buildings is that these are not mute features of an idle landscape.

The material presence that constitutes the built heritage of Caribbean societies continually speaks. It may, given the way it is contextualized and narrated, tell a people about themselves while also telling visitors what locals want them to know. As Peter Siegel has pointed out in his book Protecting Heritage in the Caribbean (Siegel 2011: viii), the Caribbean is faced with a difficult process in this regard. The fundamental idea is that by limiting the general conception of what slavery and emancipation mean to modern people – that is, that they should only be seen as sites of resistance – current narratives of heritage are preventing the creation of novel narratives of productivity, survival, innovation, and perseverance under slave conditions. This has a dramatic effect on 1: The desire even to construct a heritage industry and perform the requisite work of preservation and maintenance; and 2: The direction any such acts of construction, preservation and conservation may
Buildings and landscapes are never merely “maintained,” they are contextualized within a vision or several competing visions of history within society.

4.2 Case 2: Lord Nelson vs. “Bussa”

In the center of Bridgetown, Barbados, in a square formerly known as Trafalgar square, and renamed Heroes Square in 1999, stands a statue of Horatio, Lord Nelson. The square and statue were created and named in 1813 in honor of Nelson’s victory over the combined French and Spanish fleets off Cape Trafalgar in 1805. The victory was a devastating blow to France’s sea power and, whether accurately or not, was presented and commemorated as a significant factor in the preservation of the British West Indies from foreign invasion. In the intervening 196 years, the statue has been the object of celebration, lore, scrutiny, and ire. There have been scores of articles and letters written in the Barbados newspapers (primarily the Nation and the Advocate) debating the merits of its removal or destruction. There have been not one but two calypsos composed by The Mighty Gabby (Barbados’ most famous calypsonian) endorsing its removal and quite a number of statements supporting its preservation.

Not far away from Heroes–Trafalgar Square, out on the major arterial highway that runs from the airport up to the West Coast of the island, stands another statue. This one, created in 1986, represents a slave in revolt, his arms up-stretched, broken chains hanging from his wrists. This too has been the object of much debate. There have been calls for the removal of both statues over the years, but Nelson has clearly earned the “lion’s share” of the attention. The Emancipation statue was created by the Guyananese–Barbadian sculptor Karl Broodhagen and was placed (not without some controversy of its own) in a roundabout on the so-called ABC highway that runs through Barbados from the airport to the Industrial park of Warrens north of Bridgetown. It is not in a location that would be seen by visitors coming from the airport or near too many of the main tourist sectors. It was unveiled in 1985 as part of a memorialization of the 1834 emancipation of the slaves under Queen Victoria. The pedestal is inscribed on each side, including a popular song sung by the slaves upon hearing of the passing of emancipation in England:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lick and Lock-up done wid,} \\
\text{Hurrah for Jin-Jin (the slaves nickname for Victoria)} \\
\text{Lick and Lock-up done wid,} \\
\text{Hurrah for Jin-Jin.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{God bless de Queen fuh set we free,} \\
\text{Hurrah fuh Jin-Jin;} \\
\text{Now lick and lock-up done wid,} \\
\text{Hurrah fuh Jin-Jin.}
\end{align*}
\]
Another side of the pedestal contains text from the Abolition Act of 1833.

However, this statue of a man, naked to the waist, arms upraised with broken shackles on each wrist and chains dangling, is NOT intended to be a portrait of Bussa, the storied leader of the 1816 Easter time slave rebellion and one of the ten national heroes of the island as designated by the Order of National Heroes Act, passed by the Parliament of Barbados in 1998.

The assignment of that identity is purely apocryphal and, indeed, sometimes a source of some irritation for local scholars and artists. Many editorials were written at the time of the statue’s erection. Some were celebratory while others were highly critical of the appearance of the slave himself. Indeed, many of my informants mentioned that he was originally intended to be totally naked, but a general outcry led the sculptor to add “shortpants.” Terms such as “grotesque” and “crude” were used and some local residents called for the statue’s removal until a more suitable one could be created (The Nation newspaper, January 20, 1989). The editorial comments seemed generally to reflect an uneasiness not simply with depicting a slave or commemorating emancipation, but, as in the Redemption Song piece, depicting a person of African descent as a slave and in a kind of primal state. In both cases, this form of representation seems to have been read as “uncivilized” and a perpetuation of racial stereotypes.

The primary objection to Nelson is that he was a British colonial naval officer who, although a hero to the empire, despised Barbados and was a supporter of slavery. At the heart of the discussion over these two statues is ambivalence about the place and role of history and memory in Barbados. As such, it provides a sense of the way history becomes heritage, and further, how heritage in the Caribbean must always take account of both identity and the economy. From the economic perspective, heritage tourism is quickly emerging as something more than a luxury. As tourism increases exponentially in the region’s economic profile, diversification into a range of tourism products, such as heritage and culture, gain in importance. The debate over statues and other public monuments may be about identity within the context of a post-independence, post-colonial state finding a voice for its people, but it must also balance such struggles with the idea of what kinds of identity are best suited to show to the hundreds of thousands of visitors who pour off airplanes and ships every year. I want to frame this debate from an anthropological point of view, that is, with an eye towards the contemporary cultural implications of the debate.

5 Theorizing Heritage as Power

Historian and philosopher Michel Foucault said in an interview with Lucette Finas in 1979 that, “One ‘fictions’ history starting from a political reality that renders it true, one ‘fictions’ a politics that does not yet exist starting from a historical truth” (Morris and Patton 1979: 74–75). Statements like these made by Foucault have
often been taken and reduced to a kind of vulgar relativism, the gloss of which might be “historical truth is written by the victors.” Received this way, the challenge of the post-colonial historian is to wrest control of the writing of history from the colonizer, the West, whomever. However, Foucault, by pointing out the relationship between political realities and history, was not saying merely that the powerful compose histories to suit themselves creating, thereby, a “truth-effect.” Foucault was concerned with structures of power, recognizing that one does not free truth from power, but instead examines the production of truth in order to understand contemporary society. In exploring any historical debate, one gets a clearer picture of the political realities facing the participants. Certainly one might get a glimpse of the competing structures of power, all of which trust the persuasiveness of the idea that some histories are truer than others. History needs the backing of the science side of its social science status. Challenging historians to cite their sources and show their evidence is the prime example of this.

However, as such, I am not going to make a pronouncement on the figure of Nelson himself, although I will discuss what others have said about him. My object here is to broaden this discourse to a more general problem of history in Barbados itself. Indeed, my view is that Barbados has a relationship with history (its own, of course, but history in general too) that makes a relationship with heritage an issue. I say this not because historians there are not committed or uncertain, nor to imply that elsewhere history and heritage always have a cozy fit, but in many ways, ironically, it is a kind of certainty about history that has led, really, to an uncertainty about Heritage as an industry:

Against Nelson:

“Massa’s day not done?”
Down with Nelson; up with Barrow! If Goddard and his ilk want to see Nelson, they are free to go to England.

Or,
Barbados has a long way to go to free her children’s minds from the shackles of the slavemaster and one sure way to start this mission is to remove the marauder’s statue, hereby remove that energy, that invisible chain from the minds of her children. Then you can address the miseducational system. I say to replace Nelson with the labourers of the field.

Or,

Pull the statue down and put a Bajan born and bred hero in its place. Why not put one of Rihanna in its place, let’s move forward with what’s happening in Barbados in the 21st century not some ancient relic of the faded rule the world days of the English.
For Nelson:

How would this generation that wishes to see Nelson removed feel about a future generation tearing down Sir Grantly, Sir Gary or The Emancipation Statue. We need to realise that we cannot change history by pulling down statues, they are there as reminders of our heritage, that we should see, ask questions and learn from the past.

And perhaps most tellingly to this discussion:

I think it is an important part of our history and also plays an important part in our tourism product and should stay where it is now. (Commentary cited from Barbados Free Press website. Accessed August 18, 2008)

Barbadians need to start thinking about what we are offering to visitors as our overall product, I think it is a shame that everything old is taken down and most new buildings with no hint of the past are put up instead. Yes we have to move forward but we have to keep that island–historical feeling in our back pocket at all times if we are to compete internationally in tourism.

6 Plantation House vs. Chattel House: The Hegemony of “Resistance”

Anita Waters in her book Planning the Past: Heritage Tourism and Post-Colonial Politics at Port Royal, (2006), lays out what for her is the enduring problem that has plagued Caribbean historiography. This problem is characterized by a kind of historical amnesia, a “loss of collective memory” as Glissant has said (1989). Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) has identified this absence of memory as, in actuality, a silencing of memory. That is, the history of the islands is not merely written by elites; they create an historiography founded upon their own prejudices, privileging not only documents and archives, personages and events that they have ultimately created but that these are the only kinds of “history” that are considered legitimate.

As a response, but working necessarily within this structure of power, stands the following general rejoinder: The laying claim and repossessing of history on the part of the marginalized. This is not, as in some spaces, a divide of classes or levels of education alone, but always one of color. Walcott has called the response to colonial history the “literature of revenge” which, he says, “yellows into polemic” (1998: 37) Both Walcott and William A. Green (1977) seem to find only a grim dichotomy available for writers of Caribbean history. On the one hand, the remorseful or arrogant imperial histories, on the other, a rather shallow history of resistance that sees all people of the Caribbean who are not white as African and
whose actions stand as object lessons in opposition. I would argue that, given the
course of Caribbean independence movements and identity politics from the late-
1950s through the 1970s, the latter form of historiography has won out. Green
adheres to neither of these two poles; nor do I. Indeed, there may be many histori-
ans in the region who do not, but the legacy of this polarization in the writing of
history has become the power structure from which a Foucauldian “truth-effect”
has emerged. This “truth-effect” emerges as the rather broad stereotype of the
colonial world, the plantation house, et cetera. It derives, of course, from the plant-
tation’s very real role in the enslavement and oppression of generations of Afri-
cans, not to mention the indenture of poor whites, Asians and South Asians. How-
ever, the role of sugar and the plantation economy in the post-emancipation period
and the cultural changes that can be traced through the society of the emancipated
could provide a different kind of heritage.

Anthropologist Peter J. Wilson once wrote that Caribbean people have only
the land and themselves with which to identify and that “until such time as a Car-
ibbean culture is recognized with pride by the people themselves, much of the
burden of their identity must be placed on land” (Wilson 1973: 224–225). This is
enormously problematic in Barbados, although it may be somewhat true for other
Caribbean spaces. As quite a few historians have noted, land in Barbados has never
been readily available to free people without means. For free black and colored as
well as poor white, gaining access to land was extremely difficult. Furthermore, the
visible landscape of Barbados is a constant reflection and reminder of this state of
affairs. Sugar-cane is no longer the economic engine it once was, but the land is
absolutely dominated by it. Its presence is a continual reminder of the past. The
cane fields themselves are heritage. Given that sugar-cane is still standing and that
land is both difficult to get and expensive, it is no wonder that building a con-
sistent identity, as Wilson has said, based on land, is more difficult than, say in
Jamaica or Trinidad. A heritage industry based around monuments to those who
did own the land, presented largely in a vacuum of not only the social consequenc-
es at the time, but also of subsequent developments in the history of the island is
not going to resonate with the general public. Only public support can really sus-
tain a heritage industry.

To reiterate: The legacy of Colonialism and the kind of historiography that was
useful in the postcolonial moment has established a certain orthodoxy about slav-
ery and the plantation that makes an industry based on heritage very difficult.
There can be little flexibility in the narrative that continues to see sugar and slavery
in only one light. Richard Hart, a strong example of the post-colonial historian of
resistance, says quite clearly in his introduction to Slaves Who Abolished Slavery:
Blacks in Rebellion (2002) that his impulses were political, growing out of the work-
ers’ movement in the 1930s. Yet the role of the workers in sustaining the sugar
industry is a subject of far less public attention, even if there have been excellent
histories of it. Similarly, investigations into how others saw the plantation house in
the 20th century, how it was used, who else besides whites may have owned them,
may lead to public exhibitions about the other side of the great house; not simply rooted in the era of slavery but well beyond it. As Joanne Melish (2006) has said in her study of problems in representing slavery in the United States: “Acknowledging the past presents the problem of reconciling dissonant but fully developed interpretations.” Though this seems quite clear to historians and anthropologists working with the most “difficult” histories, in the case of Barbados and other parts of the Caribbean, it is compounded by the sense of urgency that comes from needing to expand and diversify the tourism economy. Why? It is because any heritage industry must be built on a notion of heritage that resonates with significant numbers in the society. The separation between those who control the reins of government and those who might control or stand to benefit from the industry of heritage is wide at critical points in Barbados, perhaps too wide at this time.

7 References


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