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Rebels without Stories: Postcolonial Perspectives on the Literary Representations of Nineteenth Century's Jamaican Slave Insurrections

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores some aspects of the literary representations of Jamaican rebels in the XIXth century, considering some contemporary samples and some literary re-appropriations of Jamaican history in novels written in the first half of the XXth century. In the first decades of the XIXth century, Jamaican black slaves, who largely outnumbered the European colonizers, were the protagonists of a series of rebellions. Even the more relevant episodes of insurgency, however, and key leaders as the black Baptist deacon Sam Sharpe, never became fictional characters. 1816 and 1831 Christmas Rebellion have not been considered suitable literary subjects by their contemporaries. The representation of Jamaican insurgency in the British world was mainly confined to travelogues and personal narratives, as Matthew “Monk” Lewis’s. While racial issues flow through the Gothic novel, there seems to be a single example of Jamaican novel written in English that describes blacks’ resistance and lives in the plantations: *Busha’s Mistress*. Its author, Cyrus Frances Perkins, a Creole white, wrote it in 1855, when he had left Jamaica for Canada, but the novel was published in twenty instalments in the *Daily Telegraph* and *Jamaica Guardian* only in 1911, and has been published in a book only in 2003. Colonizers never trusted their version to fiction, but this novel “is by no means a standard antislavery tract” (Paton 2005), since its standpoint vacillates between the cruelty of slavery and stereotyped portrayals of “half devil and half child” slaves. In the first decades of the XXth century, a few novels have devoted attention to Jamaican slave rebellions and their protagonist, with special regard to the Morant Bay episode. These historical novels attempt to re-appropriate of a significant point in Jamaican history, making clear once again, the role of the novel as genre in the constitution of national identity. Making sense of the national past is an important step towards emancipation from colonial rule.

Keywords: Jamaica, Morant bay, slave rebellion, National identity.

As the official site of Jamaica’s government can confirm, contemporary Jamaica looks back to slave insurrections to identify the country’s ‘national heroes’, deliberately rooting its present into the resistance against British slavery. Nanny of the Maroons, Sam Sharpe, George William Gordon and Paul Bogle were protagonists of the major rebellions that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Morant Bay, the most famous of Jamaican insurrections, in 1865, harshly repressed by Governor Eyre, was only the last of a very long sequel of episodes that had started in the Eighteenth century. Jamaican slaves had periodically rebelled since 1673 – Mary Turner (Turner, 1982) counts an average of one insurgency every five years during the

eighteenth century. The so-called Christmas Rebellion or Baptist War in 1831 was the major riot before the abolition of slavery, involving twenty thousand slaves. More insurgencies happened also in 1839, 1848, 1859, but none had a profound impact on the British public opinion as Morant Bay in 1865. Governor Eyre's brutal suppression stirred a well known, very controversial reaction that involved intellectuals as Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Kingley, John Ruskin, who sided the governor, and John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer, among others, who promoted his trial as a murderer of British subjects.

This article will consider how metropolitan and Jamaican novels written in the years of the rebellions and, later, two more Jamaican novels written in the first half of the twentieth century, have provided some fictional representations of the rebellions that took place in the island during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, with special regard to Morant Bay rebellion.

The analysis of the representational strategies of the few novels explicitly concerned with Jamaican rebellions, will make evident how the meaning imposed to these episodes depends heavily upon the historical contexts in which they have been represented. There is a shift between the colonial focus on slavery questions, and the new interest for class dynamics, once Jamaica has undertaken a path towards some form of independence, in the twentieth century.

During the Victorian age, neither metropolitan nor Jamaican novelists devoted much direct attention to Jamaican history and to the island's troubled plantation life. The metropolitan novel voiced the anxiety produced by the uninterrupted sequel of riots in the West Indies and, more in general in the Empire, in the oblique forms of the Gothic.

We find an exception in one of the earliest Jamaican novels, that set its characters in the plantation of Greenside Estate, introducing references also to the rebellions that took place in the island before the abolition of slavery. This novel is Cyrus F. Perkins's *Busha's Mistress: A Stirring Romance from the Days of Slavery in Jamaica*, a clumsy work, that describes life in a plantation before the abolition of slavery. It was composed in Canada in 1855 and published in instalments in a Jamaican newspaper only in 1911.

Much later, the change of perspective that marks the works of Victor Reid, published in the late 1940's and in the following decades, offers the opportunity to reflect once more upon the role that the novel as a genre plays in the construction of national history and in the production of what B. Anderson calls the national "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983). Along with other poets and playwrights who devoted attention to the Morant Bay rebellion and its historical protagonists such as Paul Bogle and George Willam Gordon, Victor Reid regarded the episode as a turning point in the long path towards independence. Before turning to Perkins's and Reid's novel, it is useful to consider the features of the metropolitan literary responses to the Jamaican slave rebellions, to understand why it was necessary to wait for a modern Jamaica for having a fictional appreciation of the island's national history.

THE REBEL AS METAPHOR, OR METROPOLITAN RETICENCE

Several accounts of Jamaican slave system, plantation life and of the slave rebellions can be found in personal narratives, travelogues, diaries, written by British and West Indians. The literature concerned with the question of slavery, before and after the abolition, reached large

audiences, deeply stirring the public conscience. A slave narrative as *A Narrative of Events, since the First of August, 1834, by James Williams, an Apprenticed Labourer in Jamaica*, even provoked the institution of an official commission of inquiry in Jamaica, that was given the task to investigate about the truthfulness of what was stated in the narrative. Church representatives like Edward Bean Underhill, also contributed accounts of the events to support their religious stand (*The tragedy of Morant Bay. A Narrative of the Disturbances in the Island of Jamaica in 1865*. London: 1895). Other eyewitness, like Theodore Foulks (*Eighteen Months in Jamaica with recollections of the late rebellions*), or Bernard Martin Senior, Retired Officer (*Jamaica as it was, as it is and as it maybe: comprising interesting topics for absent proprietors, merchants & c. and valuable hints to person intending to emigrate to the island: also an authentic narrative of the Negro insurrection in 1831; with a faithful detail of the manners, customs and habits of the colonists, and a description of the country, climate productions &c. including an abridgement of the Slave law.*), to mention but a couple, were keen on offering first hand information on the recent blood-stained history of Jamaica in the form of a "faithful account" of their experiences and careful research. Works of this kind meant to involve the public opinion in the debate on slavery or, later, on apprenticeship and its consequences. Thus, they voiced either planters and the supporters of their interests, or human rights defenders. The attitude shown towards the rebels in these works clearly depended on the author's viewpoint on abolition matters, ranging from benevolent paternalism to harsh stereotyping of blacks' cruelty.

Metropolitan fiction was far more reticent in facing the question of slavery, and the representation of the 'other', especially of the rebel. British novelists preferred to adopt oblique, elliptical ways, even though all along the nineteenth century, the representation of the remote and recent historical past of Great Britain and her colonies enjoyed enormous popularity, ranging from historical romances to juvenile literature. Even if slave rebels did not become the protagonists of historical novels, the topic the 'other' as a rebel became well established in metropolitan novels not specifically concerned with history. Metaphorical representation of black rebel figures became archetypical models of the 'other'. One of the major and more example is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, where Rochester's Jamaican wife embodies the first 'madwoman in the attic'. The development of Imperial gothic themes, like atavism and the fear of 'going native', marked metropolitan fiction, even when apparently distant from a colonial setting.

These novels are the expression of "anxieties about the ease with which civilization can revert to barbarism or savagery and thus about the weakening of Britain's imperial hegemony." [Brantliger, 1988, p.229]

The remarkable silence about Jamaican rebellions can hardly be justified by invoking the choices and tastes of individual writers. In the attempt to search for an explanation, it is worth observing that among those who avoided the subject of the rebellions in their novels there were also not a few intellectuals and men of letters. It is enough to mention famous writers as Matthew 'Monk' Lewis, the novelist Charles Kingsley, Antony Trollope, the prolific popular writer Grant Allen, among others- who were personally involved in Jamaica or the West Indies and had first hand knowledge of slavery matters. Lewis had inherited plantations and died on his way back to Great Britain after his second visit to Jamaica; Kingsley's mother was the daughter of a Barbadian sugar-plantation owner; Trollope travelled to the West Indies; Allen was in Jamaica from 1873 to 1876, and, as his biographer remarks, "the island was peaceful

throughout the Allens' years there, but the threat of another uprising could never have been far from people's minds. (Certainly this became a plot-device in most of the stories set in Jamaica which Allen wrote years later in England.) [Morton, 2005]. Exception made for Allen, who set two short stories in Jamaica, none of the novelists mentioned above, directly addressed the subject of slave rebellions in their fiction, exactly as the other major writers of the period did. All of them, however, wrote travelogues –or other prose works- that related their experience in Jamaica and their views on the slave system. Lewis described his ambiguous attitudes towards slavery in *The Journal of a West India proprietor; kept during a residence in the island of Jamaica* (London:1834); Trollope kept a diary of his voyage in *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (London:1859); Kingsley did the same writing *At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies* in 1871.

Despite the evident differences, not a few analogies can be drawn between Morant Bay and its Indian antecedent, the Mutiny of 1857, starting from the cruelty shown by the British and by the institutional decision on behalf of the Jamaica Assembly to renounce its charter, letting Jamaica become another Crown colony, under the direct control of the Colonial Office. As far as the literary and, more specifically, the fictional representation of the events is concerned, while the Indian Mutiny attracted many professional and non-professional writers, who continually staged the events of 1857-58, since the end of the war to our days (Nicora, 2005), Jamaican rebellions have been almost completely neglected until the twentieth century. Why was the topic considered unsuitable, in this case? Several reasons can be invoked to explain this fact. Slavery was a very controversial topic, that could not support a mythographic celebration of the 'master race' as it had happened with the Indian Rebellion. The planters' behaviour was recognized to be dictated by their own economic interests, in the most complete disregard of the human dignity of their labour force. The richest white elite of the island was composed by absentees, who lived in Great Britain, enjoying economic privileges at a distance. The cruelty reserved to slaves and the planters' reluctance to comply to the new laws, fed some understanding of Black people's actions, making it difficult to regard them as ungrateful subjects eating 'British salt', as it had happened to the Sepoys. Moreover, albeit obeah and the diffusion of traditional rites among blacks, Jamaican rebels were often Christian, supported by the missionary Baptist Church. Baptists had a major role in supporting the fights for emancipation and to assure to the black slaves the possibility to earn their own living, becoming paid workers. Thus, the repression of rebellions could not become part of the British tale of national identity as it happened with the Indian war. Only later the rebellions would become part of Jamaica's tale of national identity, making it possible to write a counter-history and to vindicate the political meaning of the continuous resistance against the British.

PLANTATION LIFE AND REBEL STORIES

One of the first attempt to represent the rebellions from a Jamaican point of view is Cyrus F. Perkins's *Busha's Mistress: A Stirring Romance from the Days of Slavery in Jamaica*. (1855)

Although written in 1855, the novel was published in twenty instalments in the *Daily Telegraph* and *Jamaica Guardian* only in 1911. Printed in book form only in 2003, it hardly had any circulation either in the nineteenth or even in the twentieth century, a fact that considerably limits the significance of its representation. Perkins stages plantation life before the abolition of slavery, offering enough details to guarantee that he could rely on first hand experience. A non-elite Creole white, Perkins was the Jamaica-born, son of a doctor. *Busha's Mistress* may have

been written in the wake of the success of anti-slavery novel as Harriet Beecher-Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but moves away from the sub-genre. Comedy and romance prevail on melodrama, somehow undermining its political value. The narrative centers on Catherine, the "slave concubine" of a cruel white overseer (a "busha"), highlighting the intersection of race, color, and gender in the exploitation of enslaved women. In the Preface, Perkins condemns slavery, but albeit the display of the usual tropes of anti-slavery writing, as the flogging scene, the slave auction, the sexual exploitation of women slaves, the novel, according to Diana Paton "is by no means a standard antislavery tract [...] Rather, it vacillates between representations of the cruelty of slavery on the one hand, and portrayal of enslaved people as credulous and superstitious more characteristic of proslavery writing on the other." [Paton, 2005,p302]. The loose plot –mainly focused on the romance between Catherine, the Busha's mistress- is not concerned with the representation of recognizable historical episodes, although reference is made to the First Maroon War, and to the Church role in claiming emancipation for the slaves. Unfortunately, the text is particularly corrupted at the point where the newspaper edition reads: "Several pages of the manuscript are here missing. They evidently deal with the Maroon uprising which must be familiar to the student of Jamaican history. The new of the uprising sent a part of Englishmen from around Greenside to go and meet the rebel band which was operating in the vicinity". Despite this omission, an episode probably refers to the Maroon war. A group of soldiers and volunteers seems to be involved in the guerrilla warfare in the mountains. The white troops are baffled by the Maroons who control a mountain pass and discuss the necessity to prevent the Maroons to ally with the slaves. The slave compelled to act as a scout betrays his master, one of the volunteers, lies upon distances and in the night reveals the troops plan to the runaways and the Maroons. When the army reaches the town, after an extenuating and artificially prolonged march, the maroons have left the village and burn all provisions, so the troops have to retire "their expedition proving, if not as ridiculous and futile, at least as unsuccessful as Calligula's doughty invasion against the Britos. At headquarters, the regiment dispersed, after having been duly complimented on their military prowess, and informed by their gallant commander that 'the country thanked them for their services'." [Perkins, 2005,p.110]. Later, another marginal episode confirms the precariousness of the control of the island. A group of Maroons and slaves plot to attack an estate first to plunder and then to set it to fire. Having been discovered by a slave who reported their intentions, they are soon executed and the menace is provisionally removed but not eliminated. Episode like this, fed the planters' fear that mass slave revolts might break out. The effects of religious propaganda are also blandly suggested through the marginal character of Father Williams. The old slave who had learned to read the New Testament, is depicted as a sort of preacher, highly esteemed by his fellow slaves, to the point that he could persuade them to give up to their marketing activities on Sunday to go to Chapel. Although no reference is specifically made to the historical character of Sam Sharpe, religion appears as a way to discard the order of plantation life, gathering assemblies of slaves and challenging their submission. Although on the whole the narrative is both a historical document and a literary exploration of colonial tensions, the tone is never coherent: irony goes together with serious worry about the danger of rebellion,. The novel displays an ideological ambiguity: while the author's preface condemns slavery as "repulsive" and "degrading," the text vacillates between anti-slavery imagery (e.g., floggings, slave auctions) and pro-slavery characterizations that portray enslaved people as "credulous and superstitious". Despite this, the work keeps its historical significance, as an exploration of sugar plantation life, master-slave relationships, and Maroon resistance,

IN SEARCH OF NATIONAL HISTORY: MORANT BAY

Modern Jamaica looked back at its past as a way to enhance national awareness and compensate the lack of knowledge about local history produced by the British local educational syllabus.

In his novels, Victor Stafford Reid (1911-1978) wrote repeatedly about the Slave rebellions. He concentrated on Morant Bay in *New Day* (1949) and especially in *Sixty-five* (1960), while he went back to 1834 in *Peter of Mount Ephraim* (1971), focused on Sam Sharpe's Baptist war. *The Young Warriors* (1967) is set during the Maroons war and *The Jamaicans* (1971) moves further back to the seventeenth century guerrilla. Reid was convinced that Jamaicans and especially the younger part of the population should have the opportunity to become aware of their past. Victor Reid's novels seem to accomplish the task of building an 'imagined community' of the Jamaican nation moving towards independence. One of the first novels to employ Jamaican vernacular as its primary narrative medium *New Day* builds an epic "hymn" to the Jamaican people, charting the nation's evolution from colonial trauma to the dawn of self-governance. Reid wrote the book to refute foreign misrepresentations of the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion, humanizing figures like Paul Bogle and George William Gordon, who were often dismissed as mere "criminals" by colonial presses. In *New-day*, the story of Morant Bay rebellion is told through the eyes of John Campbell, now an old man who retrospectively sets the action in the broader context of Jamaican history. As has been observed by several critics, Reid's work does not strictly adhere to historical truth. He shares Ralph Ellison's iconoclastic purpose not to reconstruct truth, but to explore historical complexities.

Moving from the fact that the history of Jamaica was not taught in schools, where children learnt about British history and about the Empire, Reid engaged on staging Jamaican history as the only basis on which the new nation, at the eve of a new constitution, can be grounded. It can be argued that the novel parallels to the real-life political figures of the era (like Norman Manley) and that the treatment of female characters often relegates women to the periphery of what is depicted as a male-centric struggle, but the struggle to reconcile Jamaican past with the "new day" of Jamaican independence, makes the novel a significant step in providing a tale of national identity. Its explicitness may sound naive, but enlightens the role of slave rebellions as a path towards the discovery of a distinct West Indian identity

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