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Teaching Difficult History: Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* and the challenge of critical pedagogy in the contemporary classroom

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ABSTRACT A fear of the past can inhibit the freedoms of the present as pedagogic practices that deny complex, and even contradictory, histories bind learners to normative narratives. The failure to recognize the complexities of difficult historical themes – presenting and representing them as something so much simpler so that they may fit in with dominant ways of being – disempowers both the 'ordinary' people who shaped history and those whose lives emerge from those histories: if we do not know where we came from, how can we know who we are? The authors examine this concern here through the teaching of the transatlantic slave trade and, in particular, through Eric Williams' seminal book *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944). Williams released a petrified history into the present and the authors argue that his engagement with history provides a model of post-colonial pedagogy that is urgently relevant to today's classroom. Moreover, his work is highly pertinent to the teaching of the histories of subjugated and even subversive groups struggling to assert their identities against past and present discourses centering upon race, class and gender.

Introduction

> Historians neither make nor guide history. Their share in such is usually so small as to be almost negligible. But if they do not learn something from history, their activities would be cultural decoration, or a pleasant past time, equally useless in these troubled times. (Williams, 1994, p. 212)

> One of the paradoxes of education [is] that precisely at the point when you begin to develop a conscience, you must find yourself at war with your society. (Baldwin, 1985b, p. 325)

In books such as *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985a), and *The Price of the Ticket* (1985b), James Baldwin maintained – like Eric Williams, whose book *Capitalism and Slavery* (1994) we will discuss centrally below – that we had lost a grip on the present because we were afraid of the past. We had lost the art of teaching about the complexity of our interwoven identities to the young because we had sought to bury the difficult themes of history and the present in our compliance to a pseudo-normative social order of stratified race relations. The contemporary educator, according to these two post-colonial intellectuals, has disengaged from history – snapping present pedagogical relations and activity from a difficult but useable past. Education separated from a vital engagement with the past has, indeed, become what Baldwin calls an area of 'risk' – a site in which the fault lines of conflicted history lie active beneath pedagogical

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practices that have sought to paste over the contradictions of society and bind the young into a theocratic order of allegiance to the state and dominant ways of being. These areas of risk constitute productive, though difficult, lines of encounter.

One of these difficult lines of encounter for present-day teachers is the topic of Atlantic slavery – a transaction of history that binds the differential fortunes of the people of the Caribbean Basin to the US South and, by extension, European powers such as England.[1] This is a history of associations in which the movement of cultural and economic capital, the movement and migration of populations, and the work of the imagination of the great masses of the people chart a vast transnational and transatlantic order of connections. Slavery lies at the gestation of industrial capital and the modern world. And, the enormous stakes and fortunes of the actors of slavery in the region project into the sinews of contemporary life. The violent lines of stratification of these post-plantation societies, the elaboration of a world system of center and periphery, and the evolution of our deeply striated racialized beliefs systems have a genealogy etched in slave history. Teaching about slavery is therefore to pierce a vein of associations that releases petrified history into the present – the fault lines of the past destabilizing our comfortable complicity with the status quo.

No single modern scholar was more committed to the idea of a critical pedagogy of teaching the relational history of slavery viewed from the interests of the periphery than Eric Williams, author of the seminal text *Capitalism and Slavery*. Williams clearly believed that we could not understand the turbulent present of the post-plantation social orders of the Caribbean and the United States without an exploration of this difficult past that links the region to the industrialization of England. In what follows, we explore the treatment of slavery in Williams' groundbreaking study. We argue that his engagement with history in *Capitalism and Slavery* exists as a model of post-colonial pedagogy that is urgently relevant to today's classroom.

The Stakes of History

There is, we believe, in the Caribbean, like most societies arising out of plantation arrangements (we are especially here thinking of the United States), a profound antipathy, a deep-bodied hostility towards the people's history. This is not tacit. It is not a benign neglect. On the contrary, it is a very active will to the suppression of knowledge, empathy and sympathetic feeling to the great challenges, struggles and triumphs of the lower orders. This suppression is most keenly produced in the organization of knowledge in schooling and the practices of teacher education preparation. Indigenous history, indigenous letters, and indigenous cultural form have had the most hostile of gestations in the Caribbean region as well as in the United States.

This is the landscape into which Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* arrived in 1944, published outside the Caribbean by the University of North Carolina Press at Chapel Hill. This book, we want to argue, is a precursor to post-colonial theory. It is, in our view, a founding text of post-colonial thought, in that, like C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (1989) and Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), it brings an excruciatingly finely wrought examination on the center–periphery relationship, reading back and forth between the colony and the metropole. This is pioneering relational analysis that anticipates the work in British cultural studies decades before it arrived on the intellectual scene. In this article, we revisit Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery*, published over six decades ago, to explore its implications for educational pedagogy in the post-colonial present of the Caribbean region and beyond. We look sharply at the stakes of teaching history as people's history, drawing on Williams' extraordinary, groundbreaking text.

In *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams broke through a 'repressive hypothesis' (Foucault, 1990, p. 15) – a tendency in the region and in the United States to hold down critical analysis and reflection on the bad modernism and the twisted social relations to which plantation society, as a totalizing system, gave birth. What, then, is invested in and who are the beneficiaries of this repression of history, this 'repressive hypothesis'? The answer to this question for us is quite clear: this repression of history is an expression of the mobilized maintenance of planter-mercantile power and British and US imperial supremacy in the region.

Now, this endogenous form of repression is only one of the arenas, one flank, of struggle in which Williams' work is engaged. The other is on the terrain of the discipline of history itself: the domain of Western historiography parlayed in the white-dominated academy. Within this

disciplinary framework, there is very little room for the 'British West Indies' as a subject of sustained analysis and research. And there is little room for what Williams does in this book: launch an indictment of capitalism and imperialism for the propagation and maintenance of slavery. And on the basis of rigorous research, Williams offers the thesis that slavery, once established, effectively helped to sustain mercantile capitalism and launch industrial capitalism. The latter, in turn, disengaged from slavery when the slave plantation owners' thirst for monopoly impeded profits and industrial expansion. Indeed, the distinguished historian Colin Palmer (1994) calls attention to the fact that Williams' indictment of capitalism did not go down well with some of the leading US historians of the day. And he noted the bumpy road the manuscript had to publication. For instance, Palmer tells us that one of the manuscript's reviewers for the University of North Carolina Press maintained: 'I told him [Eric Williams] that he [should] soften a somewhat caustic racial bias against capitalism' (Frank Pitman, quoted in Palmer, 1994, p. xiii). A 'caustic racial bias against capitalism'? What by the way and in the name of heaven is that? And would capitalism care? Would capitalism plead for exemption from the post-colonial historian? Indeed, this is Williams' whole point: capitalism uses racism, just as it could be argued that it uses sexism. Capitalism used slavery as long as it was profitable. This is evident today in all the sweatshop labor conditions that produce the shoes for Nike in Indonesia, Vietnam and the Dominican Republic, and which produce the baseball gloves and the logos for universities such as Duke, Cornell, and Harvard, as Naomi Klein (2000, p. 407) tells us in her book *No Logo*.

To make the point succinctly, Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* is an originary scholarly event. In its thematic thrust it identifies the central generative articulation of slavery and the related triangular trade to capitalism. Capitalism's route to the explosive growth and multiplier effects that came with industrialization ran through the trading of African bodies, the expropriation of African labor and the cultivation of sugar cane on the slave plantations of the Caribbean Basin, the latifundia of the Americas and the southern plantation lands of the United States. In foregrounding these relations of slavery to capitalism, Williams brought a new research object – the exploitative production of West Indian slave plantations – onto the terrain of Western history and historiography. And, he advanced a new methodological impulse, a form of post-colonial history writing that works back and forth between the periphery and the metropole, linking West Indian-based African labor in the plantations to the production of the enormous wealth for planter interests in the region and the absentee landlords residing in England. Williams links the West Indian plantations as central economic dynamos to the English economy and politics of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He shows these relations in banking, in heavy industry and in insurance. According to Williams:

> In 1718 William Wood said that the Slave Trade was 'the spring and parent whence the others flow.' A few years later Postlethwayt described the slave trade as the 'principle and foundation of all the rest, the mainspring of the machine which sets every wheel in motion.' (Williams, 1994, p. 51)

Williams goes on:

> Britain was accumulating great wealth from the triangular trade. The increase of consumption goods called forth by that trade inevitably drew in its train the development of the productive power of the country. The industrial expansion required finance. What man in the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century was better able to afford the ready capital than a West Indian sugar planter or a Liverpool slave trader? We have already noticed the readiness with which absentee planters purchased land in England, where they were able to use this wealth to finance the great developments associated with the agricultural revolution. We must now trace the investment of profits from the triangular trade in British industry, where they supplied part of the huge outlay. (Williams, 1994, p. 98)

Williams' analysis of primary sources, as indicated in the quotations above, sets his work apart from mainstream historians in the pre-war era, who made little or no connection between slavery and the emergence and development of industrial capital. It is important, then, to appreciate Williams' writing in its historical context. It is this matter that we pursue in the following section.

The Historical Context and Times

In order to fully appreciate the significance of Williams' intellectual intervention at the time, we must put *Capitalism and Slavery* in context. One must be taken back to the historical period to appreciate how forward-looking and iconoclastic this text is. The West Indies of the 1940s was still, for the most part, a string of islands in the vice grip of the traumatic plantation arrangement and plantation mentality. Indigenizing processes, working-class collectives, and so forth were still ruthlessly suppressed. Subjugated knowledges were still broadly seen as illegitimate. The entire social-economic arrangement, as the Moyne Commission (*Report of the West India Royal Commission*, 1945 [The Moyne Report]) discovered from gathering the opinions of the masses in the 1930s, was still on master/servant mode. At that time, there was no University of the West Indies; no institutional space for the systematic working out of intellectual ideas on the kind of canvas that Williams worked on. There was, in short, no West Indian history, as V.S. Naipaul notes in his 1962 work *The Middle Passage*. At the beginning of the 1940s, the Caribbean, for all intents and purposes, was still in many ways 'locked ... on this earth' (Lipsitz, 2004) in prehistory – the people, as Fanon (1968, p. 218) would put it, under the collar of colonialism; 'a race of angels'. In the Naipaulian (1962) sense, the region was without history, 'half made' for better or worse. The idea of Caribbean subaltern actors at the center of the knowledge text (the 'Slaves and Slavery', as Williams imaginatively notes), as with the idea of foregrounding the West Indian agro-proletariat at the center of the novel or any literary text, was still, as Langston Hughes (1994, p. 426) noted, 'a dream deferred'. The Caribbean masses were still *más o menos* missing from the public sphere. Labor unions, political parties, and black and brown political leadership in these societies were still matters postponed – or at the very best inchoate or embryonic structures in which the masses did not have a footing of any kind. The Caribbean working people did not have the right to vote. The educational system, as it existed, artificially held down people of our parents' generation in elementary school because of a Faustian pact between the imperial government and the planter-mercantile class – signed and authorized upon emancipation, a century before. This pact guaranteed the planter-mercantile class a reserve army of labor.

Yet, despite all of this, there is a tremendous yearning for freedom, yearning for participation, yearning for the West Indian nation not yet born. This is seen in the riots that began to rock the region from one end of the archipelago to the other (Beckles, 2006). It is evident in statements made by the people interviewed by the Moyne Commission, the Royal Commission appointed in 1938 to evaluate the causes underlying the riots throughout the region in the 1930s. According to the report of the Commission, the people were not just making demands for increased wages, but they were also asking for a qualitative change in the nature of their existence and the societies in which they lived. This is seen in the emergence of West Indian black and brown cricketers: the great Learie Constantine; George Headley; Clyde Walcott, Everton Weeks and Frank Worrell (the '3Ws'); and the unsung ones such as Mathew Bondman and Wilton St. Hill, celebrated in C.L.R. James's *Beyond a Boundary* (1963). There is a surging energy for change in the rise of Caribbean letters. Again, C.L.R. James is important as he travels to England in the 1930s with the manuscript for his novel *Minty Alley* (1997) in one hand and *The Case for West Indian Self-Government* (1933) in the other.

The Slaves and Slavery

We believe *Capitalism and Slavery* registers these developments, this emancipatory current, and this enormous quest for integration into the public sphere. Williams documents the great *Bildungsroman* of the people. James captures this in *The Black Jacobins*. Williams does so in the astonishing last section of *Capitalism and Slavery*, 'The Slaves and Slavery'. This is perhaps the most heroic untold story in the history of the Western hemisphere: men and women held down from birth in slavery as objective property, as chattel. Men and women owned by other men and women, trembling before the power of the plantation owner, smell freedom, articulate a natural philosophy of the indivisibility of freedom, of free will from the shackled body. Men and women want freedom metaphysically and practically, even though materially constrained. This notion is uttered in the remarkable words of the Guyanese poet Martin Carter, whose famous lines soothed readers at Walter Rodney's death and echoed across the ages: 'Death must not find us thinking that we die'

(Carter, 1977, p. 51). It is also uttered in the words of the great Jamaican poet and co-founder of the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay (1999, p. 43): 'If we must die, let us nobly die'. This quest for what Jürgen Habermas and Paulo Freire call 'human self-emancipation from domination' is a key transformative current of history that Williams identifies in his book. According to Williams (1994, p. 204): 'The slaves were not prepared to wait for freedom to come as dispensation from above. The frequency and intensity of slave revolts after 1800 reflect the growing tensions which reverberated in the stately halls of Westminster'. As the Governor of Jamaica noted on the occasion of one of the most wide-scale insurrections in the region:

> The insurrection, 'was not occasioned by any sudden grievance or immediate cause of discontent. It had been long concerted and at different points deferred.' The leaders were slaves employed in situations of the greatest confidence, who were consequently exempted from hard labor. In their position motives no less strong than those which appear to have actuated them – a desire of effecting their freedom, and in some cases of possessing themselves of the property belonging to their masters – could have influenced their conduct. (Williams, 1994, p. 206)

In 'The Slaves and Slavery', the final section of *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams puts the capstone on an incessant argument for the centering of the West Indian reality in the evolution of modernization in the West. The slaves, in the rise of republicanism, understood as the will of the people, particularly downtrodden people, should have control over their destinies. This is a case that C.L.R. James makes brilliantly in *The Black Jacobins*. What Williams was foregrounding was the idea of resistance as part of the everyday negotiation of the slave world by the slave. This aspect of the modern history of the Western hemisphere has received little attention. It must be acknowledged that scholars like Eric Williams and C.L.R. James (and Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said who followed in their footsteps) have brought this dimension of modernity to contemporary consideration.

Making History, Writing History

What, then, does it mean to be a post-colonial historian? What is distinctive methodologically about *Capitalism and Slavery*? Firstly, in this book, Williams broke away from the 'great man' view of history and historiography; the sense that history is organized around the agency of singular figures, kings and queens, and military figures. Williams instead focuses attention on how collectivities of people move; how they conflict with each other; and how systems frustrate their sense of possibility, their will to appropriate from nature, and their efforts to live a better life. This is what C.L.R. James calls 'the struggle for happiness'. James asks: 'The question must now be faced, and faced at once. What is it that the people want?' (James, 1993, p. 166).

In their establishment, the colonies helped to relieve overpopulation in Europe and served as reservoirs of new economic growth and regeneration. During this period, white people were being lifted off the streets of Liverpool, Bristol, and so forth and sent to populate the colonies through trickery or punishment for petty crimes. This is the period in which, according to Williams, 'to Barbados' a person was regularly used as an infinitive in the British courts of law. The colonies helped to provide solutions for economic, religious and political crises in Europe. Williams foregrounds the sugar plantations in the periphery paradoxically at the center of economic development in England, Spain, France and Holland. He puts the matter in brilliant comparative terms:

> The amazing value of these West Indian colonies can be presented by comparing individual West Indian islands with individual mainland colonies. In 1697 British imports from Barbados were five times the combined imports from the bread colonies; the exports to Barbados were slightly larger. Little Barbados, with its 166 square miles, was worth more to British capitalism than New England, New York, and Pennsylvania combined. In 1773 imports from Jamaica were more than five times the imports from the bread colonies; British exports to Jamaica were nearly one-third larger than those to New England and only slightly less than those of New York and Pennsylvania combined. For the years 1714-1773 British imports from Montserrat were three times the imports from Pennsylvania, imports from Nevis were over three times those from New England ... Mercantilists were enthusiastic. The triangular trade and the associated trade

> with the sugar islands, because of the navigation they encouraged were more valuable to England than her mines of tin and coal. These were ideal colonies. But for them Britain would have no gold or silver, except what she received from illicit commerce with the Spanish colonies, and an unfavorable balance of trade. (Williams, 1994, pp. 54-55)

Williams then proceeds to analyze the triangular trade in which slave traders from cities like Liverpool and Bristol went to Africa, secured slaves for the planters in the Caribbean and took produce, mostly sugar, from the Caribbean to England, thereby giving an immense stimulus to British industry and overall economic well-being. The transactions from the slave trade helped to generate and maintain whole cities and it centralized for over two centuries the Caribbean in the economic development of England and the world. All this, Williams shows us by reading, in a radically relational manner, the social, economic and institutional aspects of the nexus of slavery and capitalism.

Williams discusses the planters and their lifestyle. He humanizes them as much as he shows them operating as a class exercising collective interests. We see how the West Indian planters' interests had a major impact on the British political and cultural scene:

> A very popular play, 'The West Indian,' was produced in London in 1771. It opens with a tremendous reception being prepared for a planter coming to England, as if it were the Lord Mayor who was expected. The servant philosophized: 'He's very rich, and that's sufficient. They say he has rum and sugar enough belonging to him, to make the water in the Thames into punch.' (Williams, 1994, p. 85)

There is an obvious impact from the periphery onto the center of politics. The West Indian planters were able to buy up seats and exert great influence in the British House of Commons; slave traders play a critical role in the triangular trade. Williams documents their movement back and forth from the metropole to the coast of Africa and to the West Indies, and then back again to Liverpool, Bristol and Glasgow. The British government and the British monarchy were pleased to derive profits from this nefarious trade. We get to see the industrialists and their ironmongering. Their refinement of sugar and cotton for export links them to the slave who grew the cane and cut it, and grew the cotton and picked it. We learn of the practical and flexible morality of the great abolitionists William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, and we see the slaves deeply invested in their emancipation, struggling for nothing else but the pure experience of freedom and wishing to have full autonomy over their lives.

The Natural Pedagogy of Freedom

This is a marvelous book, in which you see human actors (the slaves) appropriating from nature and challenging the brutal circumstances in which they are consigned. In this book, Williams details the structures that would divide the Caribbean in race/class stratification for all this time (as we recognize today). All of the enabling structures of the plantation system and all of the disabling practices towards cultural and educational production of black mentalities are set in these plantation arrangements. Here, also, is the birth of organic intellectual types that are presented in James's *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* (1978) and *The Black Jacobins* (1989). These types are present, too, in the literature of George Lamming and Earl Lovelace. These types of organic intellectuals (the slaves) are intellectual exemplars articulating their need for change as collective subjects. The possibility that Toussaint L'Ouverture's ideas, as expressed in the Haitian Revolution, might spread always played in the back of the planters' minds. The statements of the rebelling slaves as to why they revolted were particularly revealing. To quote Williams on one of the slave revolts in Barbados:

> It was a rude shock for the Barbadian planters who flattered themselves that their good treatment of the slaves would 'have prevented their resorting to violence to establish a claim of natural right which by long custom sanctioned by law has been hitherto refused to be acknowledged.' The rebels, when questioned, explicitly denied ill-treatment was the cause. 'They stoutly maintained however,' so the commander of the troops wrote to the governor, 'that the island belonged to them, and not to the white man, whom they proposed to destroy, reserving the females.' (Williams, 1994, p. 204)

Here, then, Williams foregrounds Caliban, as Lamming would say in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), 'ordering history' – expressing the elementary features of a liberatory theology, a belief in their divine right to freedom and possession of the lands on which they toiled.

Above all, Williams reveals the symbiosis between the metropole and the colony, the tissue of associations, and the fact that agency, not just effects, found fertile ground and exerted a powerful momentum in the Caribbean. This is an extraordinary insight in that it overturns a long-held position in contemporary scholarship that places the Caribbean in the conceptual location of secondary determinations. Long before the cultural studies theory that confronts the idea that masses were cultural dupes, Williams was propounding the thesis that the slaves were making their own aberrant readings of the political climate, not just of the plantation world in which they dwelled as degraded labor, but also the political realities of the mother country itself. He tells us that at several points in the 1830s, the slaves' anticipation of emancipation was so keen that they interpreted every policy development in England bearing upon the West Indies an edict guaranteeing their freedom, which they then suspected the planters of withholding. We are told that this keen anticipation led to rebellions in Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad, and elsewhere. This is the kind of organic intellectual work that James elaborates on in the history of the Haitian Revolution in *The Black Jacobins*. In *The Black Jacobins*, James affirms what Williams lays out in *Capitalism and Slavery*: namely, that the colony of Saint-Domingue is in the eighteenth century responsible for three-quarters of France's external trade; that revolutionary will is deeply present in the bosom of the slave people; and that their leader, the Haitian Toussaint L'Ouverture, aberrantly reads the French texts of Voltaire, Rousseau and Robespierre, and finds in them the idea of natural freedom, natural liberty, republicanism and God-given equality. We find this theme in George Lamming's *Season of Adventure* (1998) when Powel and Trumper, representatives of the working people, are reflecting on freedom and independence. We find this in Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), as Mariella (native woman and colony) resists the colonial rancher, Donne. We find this in Jan Carew's *Grenada: the hour will strike again* (1985), in the historical figures of Gamay and Fedon and their early demands for revolution and the overthrow of the plantation system in the 1760s, at least two decades before the Haitian Revolution. There is extraordinary drama in this story. Men and women held down like beasts, treated as beasts, express the most extraordinarily sophisticated reading of the political economic climate. They understand that capitalism is deserting slavery. The British colonial administration must do so as well. The real sleeping touchstones in the region are the planter class, who cannot imagine a remaking of the future of the Caribbean beyond slavery. The slaves want to navigate beyond 'the known world', as E.P. Jones (2003) calls it in the novel of the same name. It is in them and their posterity that the Caribbean will be remade and reborn. What Williams is saying, what James is saying, what Lamming and Lovelace are saying is that through these downtrodden people ('up against it'), the history of the Caribbean is made. It is through the vernacular yearnings of the agrarian proletariat (as identified by Edward Brathwaite in *The History of the Voice* [1984]) that the invention of the West Indian tradition is announced. This is the work of the organic intellectual. Their task is to unearth this history and to tell it in the manner that Williams illuminated and set forth as the first intellectual exemplar. It is through him and his life's work that we now are set our new tasks in the realm of education and in the work of building the new society.

Significance and Pedagogical Implications

Williams' work is therefore foundational post-colonial scholarship (see Williams' *British Historians and the West Indies*, 1966). We believe, for instance, that it is critical as a model for Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and his *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). What pedagogical use can we make of this work? We believe that our educational systems have, for too long, shied away from West Indian history, from Caribbean history, from US history, and from the history of the region. There are undeniable links between slavery and the educational predicament most African descendants find themselves in today. These links need to be acknowledged and understood by educators. Understanding these links can affect pedagogical decisions made about students and, as Asa Hilliard (2001, p. 1) has written, help educators 'understand that the structure of society and the embedded

structure of education/socialization systems in hegemonic societies are designed to maintain hegemony'.

Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* provides a deep analysis of how the system of slavery was profitable for whites (Europeans) and detrimental for blacks (Africans) even decades after the institution was abolished. The text can provide educators with possible points of departure to teach about an institution that systematically relied on the degradation of one group for the advancement of another, and how it has shaped present-day society. The universalism propounded in Williams' text has implications not only for Caribbean history and US history, but for history in the region, *tout court*.

In her text *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (2005), Joy DeGruy Leary discusses the lasting effects of slavery on the present-day life of Black Americans. She theorizes that post-traumatic slave syndrome is the reason why descendants of African slaves persistently face difficult circumstances, are on the receiving end of substandard education, and are thus relegated to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. She notes that much energy and 'science' has been invested into 'proving' the inferiority of slaves and their descendants, and that these theories, from centuries ago, have gained traction and are part of a negative grand narrative about the abilities and intelligence of African descendants. Thomas Jefferson, a co-author of the Declaration of Independence and a slave owner, wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*:

> Comparing them [enslaved Africans] by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites, in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous. It would be unfair to follow them to Africa for this investigation. (Jefferson, quoted in Kurland & Lerner, 1987, p. 536)

Throughout history, the fields of phrenology, anthropology and genetics have contributed to the belief about black inferiority – the same beliefs that are prevalent today (Gould, 1981). Scholars in the education fields of critical race theory, multicultural education and culturally relevant teaching seek to dispel these myths and stereotypes, but there remain the systems and practices that perpetuate these beliefs.

If schools were to study Williams' text and engage their teachers in dialogue, it may begin to reverse what Leary (2005) calls the 'sanitizing' of history in the classroom. She notes that American history is missing truth about itself: rarely do texts discuss the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement and systematic oppression of people of African descent – some of the most vicious crimes against humanity. As in the United States, so is the case in the Caribbean. This sanitizing of history means a silencing of voices. Education systems in our societies are powerful forces in the lives of children. These forces help students to shape perceptions about themselves and others, outline ambitions for themselves, and determine beliefs about success or failure. The legacy of slavery left African descendants with resounding feelings of worthlessness in plantation societies that placed commodified value on everything.

Final Thoughts

We believe that an act of recovery is necessary. We need a critical pedagogical response that works through schools of education, community centers and teachers' unions, as much as in the formal curriculum of schooling.[2] This must be assumed in the oral history, the recovery of myth, as well as primary documentation. These are the basic elements of a post-colonial pedagogy, as Laurette Bristol maintains in her brilliant post-colonial treatise, 'A State of Subversion: teaching in the postcolonial context of Trinidad and Tobago' (2009). This approach to post-colonial pedagogy is one that is indigenizing, one that is relational, and one that focuses attention on the question of the revision of educational power by bringing our students to the center of knowledge production and knowledge making. Our goal, following Eric Williams, is to create the intellectual space for autonomous recovery, examination and critique. In all this, teachers have the critical role of connecting the syndical to the pedagogical. The process of writing in the post-independence educational system has, for too long, been dominated by bureaucratic imperatives linked to the instrumental processes of examination and evaluation. We need to unblock the channels of creativity, connecting history to literature, geography, cultural and aesthetic analysis, and the other

disciplines. We can begin the little tradition of history writing and history production in the teachers' colleges, in the teachers' unions, and in the world of the teeming masses outside (Brathwaite, 1984). We can initiate research and writing in the small newspaper, the popular pamphlet, and in the working papers of the teachers' unions, as well as in the new textbooks of the twenty-first-century Caribbean school and the new theater of electrified culture – the Internet. And on the Internet, we must stand against the new colonization of the social commons in the virtual world, populating it with alternative narratives and new vistas of possibility linked to social networks of vigorous change.

Notes

[1] We recognize that other slave trades preceded the Atlantic slave trade and that slavery persists to this day. However, the focus of Williams' book is the Atlantic slave trade and that is also the focus of the teaching of slavery in many classrooms in many countries. It is, therefore, the focus of this article; and it is not our intention to downplay the past and present horrors of one of the world's oldest trades.

[2] We acknowledge that curricula are controlled in different ways in different countries and that the authority to disrupt normative narratives may therefore vary from country to country. Curricula in the United Kingdom and much of Europe, for example, are subject to relatively centralized definitions which constrain the freedoms of teachers' unions to shape those curricula. In the United Kingdom, substantial numbers of 15- and 16-year-olds will complete a piece of work on the slave trade (with maps of the triangular flow, diagrams of slaves shackled in the holds of ships, etc.) but such work often lacks chronological or ideological context and is petrified by the constrains of assessment. None of this, though, denies the moral imperative of those with authority to disrupt normative narratives to do so.

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