

**“Too oft allur’d by Ethiopic charms”? Sex,
Slaves and Society in John Singleton’s *A General
Description of the West-Indian Islands* (1767)**

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In 1767, the Barbados firm of George Esmand and William Walker printed for its author, John Singleton, *A General Description of the West-Indian Islands, As far as relates to the British, Dutch and Danish Governments, from Barbados to Saint Croix*.¹ This was, as the title page noted, “Attempted in Blank Verse.” The substantial and well-produced quarto volume is a tribute to the capacities of colonial printing in the period. At 2,470 lines, it is one of the longer poems produced in the Anglophone Caribbean region during the period, rivalling James Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane*, which was first published in 1764.² Like Grainger’s poem, Singleton’s enjoyed some success in its own day, though perhaps not for the same reasons that make it of interest to the modern student of Caribbean literature and social history. Another quarto edition (*A Description of the West Indies: A Poem, in four books*) appeared in London in 1776 and was listed by the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in its “Catalogue of New Publications” in July. The *Monthly Review* for September of that year was somewhat dismissive:

... the descriptions are sometimes too minute, and of course offend against the dignity of the verse in which they are conveyed ... The Author has succeeded still worse in episode. There is something, however, entertaining in his geographical account of Cole’s Cave, and the animal flower, which is, certainly, one of the most extraordinary phænomena [sic] in nature.

This was mild in comparison with some of the *Monthly Review*’s condemnations of would-be poets, however, and a briefer comment the following month in the rival *Critical Review* allowed that, “the West India islands are described in blank verse, with tolerable diction and spirit.”

A so-called “second edition” in a smaller format was printed in London in 1777, and in this an advertisement leaf made the claim that “The Quarto Edition of this poem” (meaning, presumably, the London 1776 edition) “having been honoured with a very liberal Encouragement; it cannot prove less acceptable to the public, in a smaller Size, and at a cheaper Rate . . .” (unnumbered prelims).³ Yet another edition appeared in Dublin in 1776, which was the only one of the four editions to include a subscription list, totalling 151, including a few titled persons.

The text of the Dublin edition is in almost all respects the same as that of the Barbados one, with only minor variations in punctuation. The two London editions, however, share a text that is significantly different. Most of the sometimes-lengthy footnotes in the earlier edition are omitted, and the names of some individuals, which were previously given in full, are reduced to initials or have some letters replaced by dashes. Where the poem itself is concerned, many passages that are in the Barbados edition are omitted from the London ones, including most of those which are given extended discussion in this article: the references to slave punishments, the passages on the curse of Ham, wet-nurses, interracial sex, the use of cashew juice for skinning the face, the Castalio and Chloe story, and the moralizing injunctions at the end of the poem. One omitted passage that appears to be uncontroversial is a description of scenery and horse racing in Saint Croix (III, 145–189 Barbados edition).

Whether these changes were made by the author or by another and whatever the reasons might have been behind them are matters about which there appears to be no evidence. Some, though not all, of the omitted passages are of a sort that might well have given offence to members of the West Indian planter class or to their relatives in Britain, and it is possible that Singleton himself decided to omit them from the London editions because he had received a hostile reaction to his criticisms of white Creole manners and customs, and he wished to placate a class whose hospitality he had enjoyed while in the Caribbean. It is also possible that, since English copyright law did not apply in Ireland, the Dublin edition, like many eighteenth-century Irish editions, was produced without the author’s involvement.

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A cursory survey of online catalogues of major libraries suggests that surviving copies of the London editions are more common than copies of the Barbados one. More important, perhaps, is the fact that the 1777 London edition is the only version of the text currently available on the widely used digital resource Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO). Whether or not as a result of the prevalence of the shorter and less interesting version of the text, Singleton’s poem, in spite of the fact that it must have been one of the most widely circulated literary productions of the eighteenth-century Anglophone Caribbean, has attracted little attention from modern historians and literary critics. Lowell Joseph Ragatz called it “A poor effort from the nature of the method employed in presenting material” (234), while Jerome Handler thought it “cumbersome and of limited value” (40). In his pioneering essay, “Creative Literature of the British West Indies during the Period of Slavery” (originally published in 1970), Kamau Brathwaite (*Roots* 127–70) did not even mention Singleton, though he did include him in his *Barbados Poetry? 1661-1979: A Checklist* (2), and extracts from the poem have been included in recent anthologies (Krise 262–314, 356–57; Basker 166–69). One recent writer who does make some use of Singleton for purposes of comparison is Deirdre Coleman, in her 2003 article, “Janet Schaw and the Complexions of Empire.”

This article examines aspects of the 1767 version of the poem, and attempts to show that Singleton’s work is not just “a literary curiosity” as Ragatz called it, one that is “of no value whatsoever” for the understanding of Caribbean history (234). The *General Description* may lack, for example, the detailed vignettes of plantation routine found in Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane*, but Singleton’s unabashed exposition of attitudes to race and sex that are utterly abhorrent to the modern reader (and about which even the author may have had second thoughts) may help to further our understanding of the complex nature of Caribbean slave societies. Singleton shows clearly how such societies cannot be analyzed in terms of a binary opposition of white and black, and a reading of his work brings out the importance of gender in complicating racial issues, and of the perceived differences between Europeans and Creoles that made “whiteness” a distinctly non-homogenous category. Like his

apparent attempts to condemn slavery and justify it at the same time, his assertions of the humanity of black people while disparaging them in explicitly racist terms show a lack of intellectual coherence, but his efforts to win over his readers to his illogical defence of an imaginary racial and cultural purity by the use of highly emotional language are of interest, not only for what they reveal of their original cultural context, but in comparison with the similarly spurious arguments which remain all too common in our own time.

Little biographical information is available about Singleton. He refers to his muse as “British born” (IV, 658) and his book suggests he had had a conventional classical education: he can quote Latin authors in the original in his notes, and the poem itself shows the parade of mythological allusions usual among educated versifiers of all degrees of talent at the time. Richardson Wright, in his *Revels in Jamaica*, a frustratingly amateurish book originally published in 1937 that nevertheless includes much recondite information, identifies Singleton as having been for a period a member of the American Company of Comedians led by Lewis Hallam, which toured the North American colonies and Jamaica from the 1750s to the 1780s. Singleton seems to have left the company by 1758 (Wright 38–41), and there is no specific mention of Jamaica in his poem.⁴ There are gaps in our knowledge of the history of Hallam’s company and we do not know which other Caribbean islands (if any) they may have visited. As a result, we can at present only speculate about how Singleton came to the Eastern Caribbean and what he was doing there. The poem does suggest that he had travelled along the entire arc of the islands from Barbados to the Virgin Islands, but his description of most places is brief. The exceptions are Montserrat and Barbados; more detailed accounts of these islands, and tributes to entire lists of local worthies, with whom he appears to have been on terms of some familiarity, suggest that he had lived in each of them for relatively protracted periods. He specifically says of Barbados—which he calls “Thou lovely Eden of the western isles” (IV, 124)—that

“Me thou received’st, with arms extended wide, / And thro’
a series of indulgent years/ Steep’d me in bliss complete” (IV,
35–7)

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His mention of Fontabelle, then just outside the capital, Bridgetown, “Where oft in groves umbrageous I have trod, / Poring the melancholy tragic page” (IV, 145–6) hints that he might have continued his profession as an actor while on the island. However, very little can be said about theatre in Barbados at this period, apart from the often quoted fact that the young George Washington went to see a performance of George Lillo’s once popular play, *The London Merchant: Or, The History of George Barnwell* during his visit to Barbados in 1751 (Goddard 17; Hampden 211–65). It is possible, though by no means certain, that Singleton had returned to Britain by the time the later editions of his poem were published in 1776 and 1777.

Among the most prominent aspects of the poem, at least in terms of bulk, are the descriptions of topography and natural phenomena: the difficulty of accessing “the forbidding solitary rock” (II, 147) that forms the little cone-shaped island of Saba, the volcano in Montserrat (II, 537–695), “that steep cave / Which takes its name from Cole” in Barbados (IV, 206–256) and the Animal Flower Cave in the same island (IV, 284–388), the terrors of “the dread hurricane” (III, 283–494). Singleton had read *The Sugar-Cane*, and specifically acknowledged the “tuneful Grainger, nurs’d in Fancy’s arms” as “fav’rite son” of the “pow’rful genius of these fertile isles.” Compared to Grainger’s “sprightly muse,” Singleton was but “an humbler poet” (II, 14–25). Singleton’s hurricane passage bears significant resemblances to that in Grainger, and there are other passages that might be verbal echoes, but the later poet says almost nothing about Grainger’s main subject. The Argument to Singleton’s first Book lists the “cane plant and the West-Indian fruits particularly described” among its topics, but the cane itself is dismissed in only five lines:

In high perfection here that plant uprears
Its verdant blade, whose yellow ripen’d stem
Pours its rich juicy streams abundant forth,
And from its sweets bestows increasing pow’r,
Plenty, and ease, on its impatient lord. (I, 61–65)

More attention is paid to how sugar is used to sweeten ladies’ tea (I, 66–76), and to the deleterious effects of rum (I, 77–90). The actual de-

tails of cane cultivation receive only passing mention. Singleton earlier requests his muse to

Traverse with me the hills, the varied slopes,
The levell'd plains; crown'd with transcendent bloom;
Where ever-budding spring, and summer gay,
Dance hand in hand, and, with eternal joy,
Lead up the jocund harvest to the mill. (I, 23–27)

What human agency might be involved here is an awkward subject that is simply avoided. Singleton says only that “the rich planter, well rewarded, sees / Perpetual produce springing all the year” which enables him to be “hospitable, at his plenteous board...” (I, 28–30). In a later passage, Singleton does refer to “the lab’ring negroes panting heart” (II, 262), and, further on, to slaves for whom

... all their piteous hours
Drag heavily along in constant toil,
In stripes, in tears, in hunger, or in chains... (III, 516–18)

However, we are never told of what their toil consists. The only place in the entire poem where we are actually given any detailed description of slaves working is where they feature as “sable cooks” and attendants at a barbecue which forms a sort of extended pastoral idyll (I, 245–441). The reader who was not already aware that the main purpose of slavery in the Caribbean colonies was to provide labour for the cultivation of cane and the manufacture of sugar would have been left guessing. This is in marked contrast to Grainger, whose avowed purpose is to discuss such matters in detail. Even the Barbadian-born Nathaniel Weekes, whose 1754 *Barbados: A Poem* is mainly a eulogy of the island’s topography and productions, includes a relatively detailed description of crop-time and sugar-making on a plantation (while noting that “Long time has it been” since his Muse actually saw such scenes). Weekes makes it clear that these things were part of the “daily destin’d Labours” of the slaves, and he mentions, and deprecates, the use of the whip in the field, even if he claims “There’s not a Slave, / In spight of Slav’ry, but is pleas’d, and gay” during crop-time (30, 55–61).

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Singleton, however, keeps returning to the topic of slavery itself, though it is difficult to find any consistent point of view in his comments. He qualifies the “constant toil” passage by immediately adding

These are the ills which they rejoice to fly,
Unless, by partial chance, their lot is cast
Beneath some kind indulgent master’s sway,
Whose hand, like their good genius, feeds their wants,
And with protection shields their helpless state. (III, 519–23)

He urges slaveholders to be moderate in their use of “Correction’s useful stroke” (IV, 566). This may be no more than practical advice, “For cruel treatment steels the stubborn mind, / And frequent stripes a callous skin create” (IV, 563–64). While he urges

... above all, no needful food with-hold,
And, parsimonious, stint the toiling slave,
Whilst you in pride and superfluity
Wallow content, nor heed thy servants wants ... (IV, 570–73)

and notes that “Too oft, alas! such practice, vile, prevails” (IV, 574). Here, too, better treatment is expected to benefit the master as well as the slave:

So shall the toilsome task of labour run
Far less tormenting thro’ the torrid day,
And cheerful eyes survey th’arduous work;
So shall the slave with grateful heart repay
His gen’rous master’s care, and bounteous love. (IV, 583–87)

When he begins to describe a “gloomy cave” in Montserrat, he says it was

First found, through chance, by some delinquent slave
Flying the lash of his revengeful lord,
Or overseer more cruel. (II, 35–37)

He speculates that the fugitive might have been “a prince perhaps; / By treach’rous scheme of some sea brute entrap’d” (II, 39–40), and follows this by calling the slave trade an “Accursed method of procuring

wealth!" (II, 45). Attempts to justify the trade on the grounds of alleged racial differences are similarly rejected as un-Christian:

Deal Christians thus, yet keep that sacred name?
Or does the difference of complexion give
To man a property in man? — O! no:
Soft Nature shrinks at the detested thought,
A thought which savages alone can form. (II, 48–52)

This is followed immediately by a passage which condemns the trader as a "wretch," and a "treach'rous friend," who promised to provide a European education for the son of an African king, but who instead, "in some far distant isle exchange'd / His sacred charge for vile commercial gain" (II, 53–88). This bears more than a passing resemblance to the real-life story of "The Royal African" William Anseh Sessarakoo, who had been sold as a slave in Barbados in 1744, and whose case caused a sensation when he was freed and brought to England at the end of the 1740s.⁵ Nevertheless, Singleton does not take this argument to its logical conclusion. Saying that the slave is "by hard fortune ... doom'd to toil, / And never taste the sweets of liberty" (IV, 588–9) may suggest that while the slave trade could be condemned as "traffic vile" (II, 42), enslavement itself is explained by bad luck, or simply part of the natural order of things.⁶ Singleton is aware that slaves might be subjected to brutal punishment: he talks of "flaggelation [sic] dire" (IV, 447) and "Th'hardening lash of public justice" (IV, 561), and he parallels the "kind indulgent master" (III, 521) with the "stern mistress" (IV, 604). Still, for him, good or bad conduct in slave-owners appears to consist in how they treat their slaves, not in the very fact of claiming "a property in man." While Singleton does not actually set out such an argument, he may perhaps be assuming that, while enslaving free-born persons is a bad thing, slavery is a different matter when the slaves have been born into the institution and so can be claimed to be accustomed to it. Matthew Chapman advances this idea much later in *Barbadoes, and other poems* (1833) in order to forward his claim that slaves were contented with their lot and that Emancipation would be a disaster for all concerned.

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In his conclusion to the whole poem, Singleton urges his readers, particularly his female readers (“ye fair”) to

Learn,
That wheresoever Heav’n hath set his seal,
“To give the world assurance of a man,”
Whether that being is to slav’ry doom’d,
Or shares an happier fate, yet, man is man,
And claims a milder treatment than the beast ... (IV, 638–43)⁷

A little earlier he has told the slave’s master – “thou lordly owner of his flesh” – that

His sable body cloaths a human soul,
To passion’s impulse feelingly alive
As well as thine. (IV, 590–93)

Similar acknowledgements of the common humanity of master and slave can also be found in Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane*, where reservations are expressed about slavery, but the overall assumption is that it would be impractical to abolish the institution, except possibly at some distant point in the future. There are some things which Singleton, interestingly enough, does not say: for example, he follows up his passage on the evils of drunkenness in Book I with an extended reference (I, 91–104) to the drunkenness of Noah (Genesis 9.20–27), without bringing in the story of the Curse of Ham and its alleged justification of the enslavement of Africans. This idea was already widely credited in the British colonies in the Caribbean and North America by the late seventeenth century, when Morgan Godwyn found it necessary to argue against it in his 1680 publication, *The Negro’s and Indian’s Advocate, Suing for their Admission into the Church* (Davis 369–70). The contrast which Singleton draws between white mourners bewailing the loss of their loved ones in the hurricane and the behaviour of “th’untutor’d slave” at funerals, where “his calm deportment puts to shame / The boasted reason of the polish’d world” (III, 495, 498–99) is not unfavourable to the African. Like Grainger, Godwyn is scornful about the activities of practitioners of obeah and traditional medicine (II, 331–85), but the “childish superstition” (III, 69) that leaves alleged piratical treasure unsearched for in

the Virgin Islands appears to be that of the white inhabitants. If obeah men and women practice “bold deceit,” this is something to which “the universe / At times becomes a prey” and which will “by turns, delude / The ermin’d monarch, and the tatter’d slave” (II, 386–89).

Nevertheless, while Singleton claims that “man is man,” there are places where his anxiety to emphasize differences between black and white leads him to formulate arguments as repulsive as those of Edward Long. In his *History of Jamaica* (1774), Long referred to Africans and their descendants in the Americas as “these men” but claimed that such was “their dissimilarity to the rest of mankind” that the logical conclusion was that they were “a different species of the same genus” (II, 356). The racism becomes increasingly apparent as we follow the references to love and physical desire that Singleton brings into his poem.

He begins with the barbecue at the end of Book I:

There the woo’d virgin, and the sprightly youth,
Am’rous and gay, the cool retreat enjoy;
Whilst pastimes innocent, and rural sports,
With high delight, the jocund hours beguile. (I, 252–55)

Their elders look on approvingly at the courtship of young white couples, who

in pairs drawn off,
With virtuous dalliance the sweet hours beguile ...
All unabash’d they toy, nor blush to meet
The chaste embrace, by chaste desire obtain’d;
Nor, cautious, from th’observing eye retire,
To steal, in secret, joys too dearly bought. (I, 340–41, 344–47)

In the next Book, we learn that the chief judge of Montserrat was “Blest in a beauteous progeny, conjoin’d / In Hymen’s happiest bans [sic]” (II, 747–8).⁸ But the course of true love does not always run smooth, and in Book III, Singleton introduces into his description of the Danish colony of St. Croix the story of Philander’s love for Aurelia, who, “Few charms attractive in her looks could boast” as a result of the smallpox, but who instead possessed “Each grace the mind adorns, largely bestow’d.” The

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reference to Aurelia’s “lily skin,” and the details of the story as a whole, make it clear that the romantic tale is that of a white couple. However, Aurelia’s mercenary father Avarus, who employed Philander and had taught him “all the secrets of commercial gain,” refused to see him as a suitable match for his only daughter. Only by flight from St. Croix, “to some protecting pow’r / Where British liberty should guard love’s rights” is the happy ending secured, “And in connubial bands the pair are join’d” (III, 190–282).

After this perhaps rather conventional story, it is a little startling to move on to the final Book of the poem, where, after extended descriptions of the social pleasures and topographical attractions of Barbados, we are abruptly told, “These are the island’s treasures: Now its plagues / Demand a thought” (IV, 389–90). Singleton claims that his muse is “unwilling to offend, / Yet studious to reform by soft advice / Where’er she finds a flaw” (IV, 391–393). He immediately continues, “Know then, ye fair, / Among your plagues I count the negro race, / Savage by nature” (IV, 393–95). It quickly becomes clear that Singleton is warning white Creole women to beware of their slaves, whose “callous senses” and “drowsy faculties” are, he claims, immune to instruction (IV, 397–400). They are “Cruel and fierce, no admonitions tame / The brutal disposition of their souls” (IV, 401–2). Adapting a phrase from Shakespeare, he suggests that “philosophy’s sweet milk” cannot “quench / The flame that ever and anon springs up / To curse their beings, and to torture ours” (IV, 403–5).⁹ The nature of the “flame” is not specified, but what follows later suggests that it is sexual passion.

The mention of “philosophy’s sweet milk” leads on to a vivid expression of the distaste inspired in more than one European observer by the thought that the white Creoles were in constant danger of becoming like their own slaves, a possibility described by Singleton in the language of disease and contagion. He warns white mothers against the employment of black wet-nurses. This was a common practice among white Creole women, and Singleton was not the only outside observer to be startled by the resulting physical intimacy across racial boundaries (Long; see also Watson 76, Coleman 174). If white mothers cannot nurse their children themselves, Singleton says, they should

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...rather use all art the babes to rear,
Than e'er condemn them to the sable pap's
Infectious juice! for, with the milky draught
The num'rous vices of the fost'ring slave
Deep they imbibe, and, with their life's support,
Draw in the latent principles of ill;
Which, brooking no controul, in riper years,
Grow with their growth and strengthen with their strength.
(IV, 413–19)¹⁰

Singleton further advises white mothers to avoid allowing others to teach their children “an horrid oath to lisp, / Or phrase obscene” (IV, 422–23). Children are also to be discouraged from delighting in the sight of slaves being punished: “Taint not the minds with cruelty and rage.” But it is the white women who are told that they themselves should not “wantonly indulge a savage joy / To practise torments on the hapless slave” (IV, 427–28). Singleton continues for some lines about how “Such dispositions ill become your sex” (IV, 429) and how women, should, rather, plead for mercy on behalf of slaves facing punishment and “save the wretch, / Crouching beneath the vengeance of his lord” (IV, 438–39). His clinching argument is that losing one’s temper is bad for the complexion: “Soon shall the wrinkle those arch’d brows deform, / On which stern Anger oft triumphant sits” (IV, 443–44).

What follows suggests that Singleton shared the view expressed by other European commentators that the cruelty some white Creole women exercised upon their slaves was the result of jealousy¹¹:

As Heav’n has form’d ye beautiful and fair,
Be wise, be good, be tender, and be kind,
And rather seek by gentle arts to win,
Your truant lord back to his joyless bed,
Too oft allur’d by Ethiopic charms,
And sinful made by an impetuous wife;
Be chaste, obedient, mild, sedate, and true,
With tender blandishments, and words of love
Reclaim your weaned spouse, meet him with smiles,
Let him find certain happiness at home,
And he’ll not fly to looser joys abroad. (IV, 449–59)

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However, there are limits to what a wife can be expected to do, and Singleton devotes forty-six lines (IV, 460–505) to warning her never “The desp’rate experiment to try / Of adding roses to the sallow cheek” by what he explains this at some length in a footnote as the “abominable practice” of “skinning the hands and face” by means of “a poisonous juice” obtained from cashew nuts. Singleton does not seem to have thought it was common (though it was also mentioned by Grainger), but his fascinated horror and the possibility that a few women might indeed have resorted to such a desperate and dangerous expedient—Singleton claims that one who tried it “skinn’d at length her precious eyes away”—appear to be rooted in the idea that the one thing which white women could offer men which black women could not, was the whiteness of their complexions.¹² If this was a good thing, and Singleton takes it for granted that it was, then “freckled skin ... / Or face imbrown’d by Sol’s irradiant beam” were evils to be avoided. Drastic cosmetic procedures, however, are “unwarrantable arts” which “insult” the power of the Creator who, Singleton rebukes his white female readers, “gave you beauty to attract mankind, / Sufficient beauty; yet ye covet more.” Even if they work, the results do not last:

... that momentary face ye own,
Got with the loss of many days ill spent,
Shall be the admiration of an hour ...

It is much better, he goes on to suggest, to “preserve beauty at a cheaper rate” by practising a régime of moderate early morning exercise and drinking spring water and fresh milk (IV, 506–20). His choice of terminology (“bid the milky udder yield its streams”) returns us not only to “philosophy’s sweet milk” but also to the “milky draught” from the bosom of the black wet-nurse, and to the idea of whiteness as something which has to be actively preserved from contamination.

This is developed further, when Singleton moves on to address the “sons of Caribbean lands” and urges them to “Shun the false lure of Ehtiopic charms” (IV, 521–51). His language becomes increasingly hysterical, as he talks about the “dark complexion”, “aspect foul” “deformity of features, shape and soul” and the “frouzy fragrance” of “the sable miss.” He works himself up to describing what he most fears:

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... can the frightful negro visage charm,
Thro' vague variety, or wanton lust,
Whilst the blind fool an angel's bosom quits,
To pillow in a fiend's unnat'ral arms,
Where the fond master oft succeeds his slave?

It does not make things any better, he goes on, if "the lewd spark the tawny shou'd prefer / To shining jet," since

... Alas! that tawny draws
Its copper hue from such an odious source,
As Heav'n ne'er pointed out to nobler souls,
Form'd to be blest with elegant desires,
And to communicate the virtuous joy
To objects truly worthy of their love. (IV, 552–59)

In other words, Singleton is an absolutist: the lighter complexion of a mulatto mistress does not make her any less of an evil than "the sable miss," it is merely evidence of the horrific fact of earlier miscegenation, the "odious source" of her "copper hue."

After this, it at first seems surprising to move on, not just to the passage about avoiding excessive punishments and the benefits of treating slaves humanely, but to another romantic tale, this time of "young Castalio" and "his sable Chloe" (IV, 593–635). Unlike the story of Philander and Aurelia, this one has no happy ending. Chloe becomes pregnant, and her "stern mistress ... wrapt up in hopes / Of sordid gain" is outraged at the thought that she will no longer be able to work as hard as before, and orders her to be confined so that the lovers can no longer meet. The despairing Castalio flies to the spot where they used to meet and there "He dash'd him down; and with a groan expir'd." No explicit racial designation is attached to Castalio, and only the fact that the story follows immediately after the passage, already quoted, in which the slave-owner is told that his slave's "sable body cloaths a human soul," suggests that, like Chloe, Castalio is a victim of slavery. We may note how "British liberty" does not protect Castalio and Chloe the way it does Philander and Aurelia. Singleton then winds up the entire poem by asking his readers (and it is clear that the readers he has in mind are white Creoles) not to

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deem his muse presumptuous “if from her tongue / Rash speech hath dropt, rash errors to reclaim” (IV, 656–67). Instead, they should heed his advice, or, as he puts it, “Submit to kiss the rod, by justice held” (IV, 660) and they will be all the better for it: “So shall your virtues ripen day by day...” (IV, 665–71).

Some of the apparent inconsistencies in Singleton’s poem can be resolved if we look at two more omissions, along with his bypassing of the “Curse of Ham.” Unless we follow Coleman’s reading, in which the description of skinning the face “suggests that the ritual functions as a cover for infanticide or for the application of abortifacients,” whereby “young white women collude with hags to destroy their mixed-race fetuses” (175), there is no mention in Singleton’s poem of the possibility of white women desiring black lovers, something which was perhaps just too horrifying for him to contemplate. Such relationships certainly happened in reality, but I am not aware of their making a literary appearance before the early twentieth century.¹³ The parish chronicles of the amateur local historians Shore and Stewart, first published in 1911, make it explicit that the Annie Palmer of legend (based, however loosely, on a real historical figure in early nineteenth-century Jamaica) had sexual relations with some of her male slaves, though the well-known novel by de Lisser, based on this story and first published in 1929 (and for many years now an important ornament of Jamaica’s tourist industry), only credits “The White Witch of Rose Hall” with a string of white lovers (Shore and Stewart 36, 40). More significant in Singleton, I feel, is the absence of the stereotype of the violent, lustful black man whose desires are directed towards white women, since such a stereotype features in Edward Long’s descriptions of slave revolts, and forms a lurid part of Matthew Chapman’s imaginings of such revolts in his poem “Barbadoes.” Like Long, who describes the sexual relationships of white men and black women in Jamaica as “goatish embraces” (Long II, 328), Singleton also represents interracial sex as bestial. For all his claims that “man is man,” Singleton clearly relegates black people to a position of inferiority and describes them in terms of racialized disgust. However, what he seems to fear most, as he contemplates the idea of the white man sharing his black mistress with one of his own male slaves, is not

the black slave of either sex, but the idea of white people becoming black, something hinted at by the language in which he describes how, during the process of skinning the face, “before the skin or mask of the face comes off, it turns black, and the person so suffering becomes an horrid spectacle.”¹⁴

In the modern Caribbean, creolization, the process by which an often-painful past has brought different cultures together to produce new and distinctive cultures specific to the region, is generally seen in a positive light. While the “All o’ we is one” rhetoric can sometimes seem facile and look as though it is being manipulated to the disadvantage of minority groups, few would question the idea that modern Caribbean societies are to a large extent the product of genetic and cultural mixture. For Singleton, living in the Caribbean at a much earlier stage of the process, this is precisely the problem. As he takes it for granted that a white skin and European cultural norms are more desirable than black skin and African cultural norms, anything which works against the preservation of the former is to be feared. For him, hybridity is not something to be celebrated, it is cause for alarm, and in his poem the physical imagery of inter-racial sex or of the black woman nursing the white child functions as a synecdoche for the wider issue of what Singleton sees as cultural contamination.

Something of the sort can also be seen in a much better known, and more or less contemporary poem, *The Sable Venus*, written by the Rev. Isaac Teale (d. 1764), an Anglican clergyman resident in Jamaica. The poem was written at the request of Teale’s pupil, Bryan Edwards (1743–1800), later famous as the author of the pro-planter *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British West Indies* (1793). First published in Jamaica in 1765 and later given a wider circulation by its inclusion in Edwards’ *History*, *The Sable Venus* is, on the surface, a celebration of the attractiveness of black women to white men, although it also romanticizes white male sexual exploitation of black women. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the poem may have been intended as satirical, since Edwards, at least in later life, regarded the custom, so widespread in the Caribbean, of white men keeping black or mixed-race mistresses, as a “vicious system of life” which was “baneful to society” (Dabydeen, Gilmore and

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Jones 426). The essential point was that sexual attraction had the power to erase, if only temporarily, racial distinctions, as was shown in Teale’s comparison of his Sable Venus with the Venus de Medici:

The loveliest limbs her form compose,
Such as her sister *Venus* chose,
In *Florence*, where she’s seen:
Both just alike, except the white,
No difference, no, — none at night,
The beauteous dames between. (9)

That the consequences of interracial sex could be long lasting is hinted at by Teale’s reference (10) to the birth of a mixed-race Cupid (“Blest offspring of the warm embrace! / Gay ruler of the saffron race!”), who is described as a figure of power and influence. In the same way, Teale characterizes the Sable Venus as a “queen” and “Goddess” whose power over white men (“all, adoring thee, do one, / One Deity confess”) is clearly subversive of the conventional racial hierarchy of slave societies, in which, of course, whites occupied the ruling position (10).

For all his tributes to individual Creoles in high places in colonial societies, Singleton clearly worries about the white Creoles as a group, reflecting the way British society saw them as strange and different, unlike true Englishmen. Samuel Johnson pointedly asked where the elder William Beckford (a prodigiously wealthy Jamaican-born politician and absentee planter who enjoyed a political career in Britain and was twice Lord Mayor of London) had learnt his English (Boswell 774), while Richard Cumberland portrayed the eponymous hero of his play *The West Indian*, first performed and published in 1771 (Hampden 339–408) as a sort of noble savage, shaped by the tropical climate in which he had been born. Singleton is fully aware of the commercial importance of the sugar colonies to Britain, and, like many of his contemporaries, he assumes that keeping them depends on maintaining the system of slave cultivation which was linked to a racial hierarchy. Singleton feels that the white Creoles are failing in their duty here: they are not being white enough. His harping on inter-racial sex suggests that he wonders if some of them are indeed white at all. While to associate domestic with political virtue

is sufficiently commonplace, Singleton does so in such a manner as to indicate that his ideas are precursors of the racist ideologies of the twentieth century. When, in his concluding call to the white Creoles to adopt his program of moral reform, he associates “Such virtues as in dear the marriage tie” with “Such virtues as inspire the patriot’s soul,” he appears to be motivated by the same views that led white South African politicians to view the Immorality Act as a bulwark of the apartheid regime.¹⁵ But we do not need to look at apartheid, or the similar prohibitions on mixed marriages which survived in several of the American states until well into the twentieth century, or at Nazism, for Singleton’s discourse of contamination is all too reminiscent of contemporary anti-immigration rhetoric in many countries.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this work was presented at the 36th Annual Conference of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Oxford, 3–5 January 2007. I am grateful to several participants for comments made on that occasion.
All references are to this edition and are given by book and line numbers of the poem. I am grateful to Betty Shannon (formerly librarian of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society) and to Patrick Roach for their help in obtaining a photocopy of the copy in the BMHS library.
- 2 Gilmore’s *Poetics of Empire* includes a complete text of Grainger’s poem, with detailed introduction and commentary.
- 3 The London 1776 edition was priced at three shillings (half-title), while the 1777 edition stated a price of two shillings on the title page.
- 4 Additional information about the Hallam Company (though not about Singleton’s relationship to it) may be found in Hill (76–80). Singleton does say in a footnote that “I am farther informed, that the admiral at Jamaica sends all those afflicted thus [i.e., with leprosy] from the hospitals down to the grand Caymana” (II, 253).
- 5 See my entry on Sessarakoo in Dabydeen, Gilmore and Jones (439–40).
- 6 Singleton also refers to “The sweets of liberty” (III, 511).
- 7 Singleton is quoting from Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.4. 61–62: “Where every god did seem to set his seal / To give the world assurance of a man ...”
- 8 Probably means “banns” here, not “bands,” which would also make sense; the OED has a 1745 example (from the poet John Gay) of “bans” as an alternative spelling for “banns.” The London, 1777, edition of Singleton’s poem also gives “bans” in this passage.
- 9 Compare Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 3.3. 54: “Adversity’s sweet milk, philosophy.”

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- 10 The image of the white child at the breast of the black nurse long remained a powerful one, but was sometimes shown in a more positive light: my personal collection includes an early twentieth-century postcard, reproducing a painting of possibly nineteenth-century origin by an unidentified artist, and depicting the “Impératrice Joséphine: Au Sein de sa Nourrice.” No publisher’s name is given, but the back of the card bears the rubber stamp of the “Musée Impératrice Joséphine” (now Musée de la Pagerie) at Trois-Ilets in Martinique, suggesting that it was sold as an affirmation of the Creole identity of the celebrated Empress of the French.
- 11 For an example, see the extracts from John Marjoribanks, *Slavery: An Essay in Verse* (1792), included in Basker (319–23): “A jealous mistress finds a ready sham/To give a handsome maid the sugar dram . . .” (i.e. poison).
- 12 Singleton’s note says, “I must with justice acknowledge that until I arrived at Montserrat, I never once heard of such an action, and I am not inclined to believe it a general fault in that or any other of the islands.” In a note to *The Sugar-Cane* (IV, 137), Grainger says the “highly caustic oil” obtained from cashew nut rinds “is used as a cosmetic by the ladies, to remove freckles and sun-burning; but the pain they necessarily suffer makes its use not very frequent” (Gilmore 193). Coleman discusses Singleton’s note (174–76).
- 13 As well as the examples cited by Beckles (78–79), see Marshall for a discussion of how local authorities in Barbados could use their control of a charitable fund to discourage poor white women from associating with black men.
- 14 Coleman draws attention to this detail (175).
- 15 South Africa’s Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) was followed by the Immorality Act (1950), which outlawed all sexual relations between persons of different races. Both acts were repealed in 1985.

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