

EMPIRE WITHOUT END



**A NEW HISTORY OF BRITAIN
AND THE CARIBBEAN**

IMAOBONG UMOREN

Empire Without End

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IMAOBONG UMOREN is an associate professor of International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science where she specialises in histories of racism, women and political thought in the Caribbean, Britain and the US in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Empire Without End* received the 2020–21 British Library Eccles Institute and Hay Festival Writer's Award.

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Contents

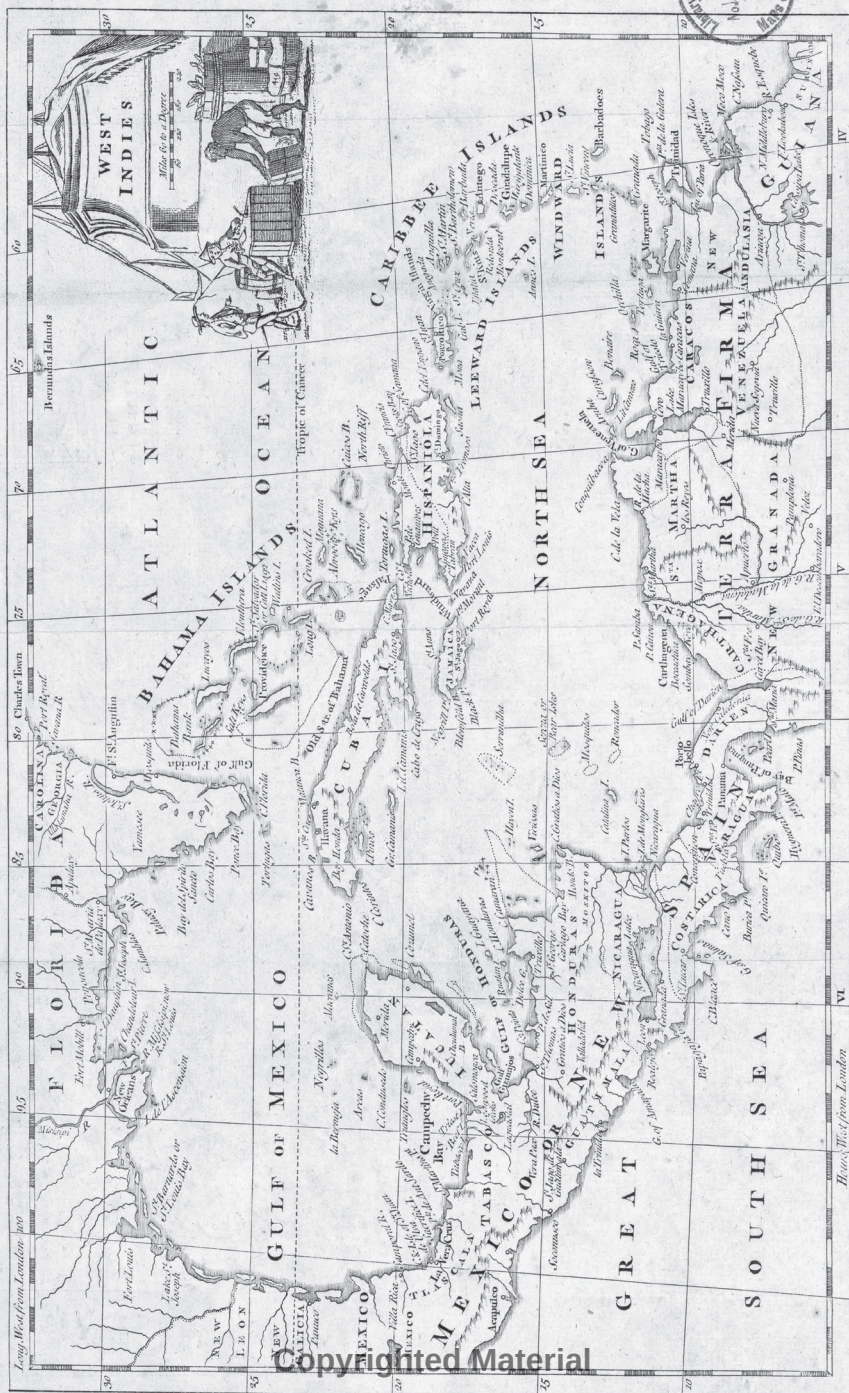
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1 'One of the richest spots of ground in the world': Indigenous Communities, Early Colonialism, and Hereditary Racial Slavery	17
2 'A dreadful state': The Making of the Racial-Caste Hierarchy	56
3 'The sooner all this mass of impolicy, crime and suffering, is got rid of, the better': Anti-Black Racism in Britain, Abolition, and Emancipation	95
4 'Our freedom can be taken away from us': Struggles for Economic Justice After Emancipation	147
5 'Fighting to prove that we are no longer merely subjects, but citizens': War, Anti-Colonialism, and Rebellion	183
6 'One united family': The Second World War	225
7 'Still colonial at heart': Constitutional Decolonisation and the Global Cold War	245
8 'Colonization in reverse': Caribbean Migration, State Racism, and Black Radicalism	287
9 'Flag Independence': Caribbean Black Power and the Rise of Neocolonialism, Neoliberalism, and US Imperialism	336
10 'Menace to society': (Post)-Colonial Melancholia	378

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	423
<i>Illustration Credits</i>	425
<i>Notes</i>	427
<i>Index</i>	491

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West Indies map by William Guthrie, published in London c. 1777.

‘The past does not exist independently from the present.’

Michel-Rolph Trouillot

‘The English have become such a pitiful lot these days, with hardly any idea what to do with themselves now that they no longer have one quarter of the earth’s human population bowing and scraping before them. They don’t seem to know that this empire business was all wrong and they should, at least, be wearing sackcloth and ashes in token penance of the wrongs committed, the irrevocableness of their bad deeds, for no natural disaster imaginable could equal the harm they did. Actual death might have been better. And so all this fuss over empire – what went wrong here, what went wrong there – always makes me quite crazy, for I can say to them what went wrong: they should never have left their home, their precious England, a place they loved so much, a place they had to leave but could never forget.’

Jamaica Kincaid

‘As such, in this post-colonial moment, the sensibilities of colonialism are still potent. We – all of us – are still its inheritors, still living in its terrifying aftermath.’

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Introduction

In June 1730, sixty-eight-year-old Sally Bassett was burned alive.¹ Her burning body hung in Hamilton, the capital of Bermuda. Bassett, an elderly enslaved woman, whose father was a white European and mother a black African, was sentenced to death for her attempt to kill by poison Sarah and Thomas Foster, the white slaveowners of her granddaughter Beck, and Nancy, an enslaved woman she considered more foe than friend. Although Bassett professed her innocence during her trial, the court concluded that she had been 'moved and seduced by [the] instigation of the Devil'.² Bassett was found guilty by the all-white male jury. Bassett's attempt at murder was not the first time she had committed a crime: in 1712, she had been charged with trying to poison the cattle and damage the property of two white Bermudians.³ She is best remembered, however, for her gruesome death.

Bassett's identity as a mixed-race enslaved woman was crucial to her life and death. The status of being enslaved passed down through women, meaning that the children of enslaved women were considered enslaved from birth. The society in which Bassett lived was built on distinctions between humans based on skin colour. White elite European men, already accustomed to placing humans in a hierarchy, created a structure that assigned those with more melanin as inferior to those with less. The latter group was fit for freedom; the former branded unfree. As a mixed-race enslaved woman, Bassett's gender shaped what types of labour she would perform, who could have unrestricted

access to her body and what forms of resistance she could enact. This society was maintained by extreme levels of racial- and gender-based violence; that Bassett turned to violence herself, therefore, should come as little surprise. The specific form of violence – poison – considered a woman’s crime in England and commonly used by enslaved women who drew on West African forms of knowledge – reveals that although Bassett may have never set foot either in Britain or on the African continent from which some of her ancestors came, its ideas ricocheted across the Atlantic Ocean. For Bassett and other enslaved women, poison became what social scientist James C. Scott called their ‘weapons of the weak’, a subtle, silent yet deadly form of resistance that existed alongside louder revolts and uprisings.⁴ That Bassett died by burning – a harsh punishment for a severe crime – reflects white elite fraught fears of death by poison.

Sally Bassett’s life and crime became the centre of controversy once again 279 years after her death. In 2009, a bronze sculpture of Bassett was erected in Bermuda, Britain’s oldest colony.⁵ Occupied by the English since 1609, the island covering 54 square kilometres and located in the North Atlantic, still belongs to Britain. As a non-sovereign state it is one of six territories located in and around the Caribbean that are no longer called colonies but rather British Overseas Territories.

The idea of Bassett’s statue began with the island’s ruling local party, the Progressive Labour Party (PLP). Founded in the 1960s, the PLP represented the voice of the island’s majority: Bermudians of African descent. But only in 1998 did the party finally win its first electoral victory against the United Bermuda Party (UBP), that tended to represent the island’s white residents. Bassett’s statue was created as part of celebrations commemorating the island’s upcoming 400th anniversary and is the first monument of an enslaved person on the island. Its sculptor, Bermudian

INTRODUCTION

artist Carlos Dowling, titled the work *Spirit of Freedom*. Initially, the PLP wanted the statue placed in a central position in Hamilton's City Hall, but Sutherland Madeiros, the mayor of Hamilton, said there was no space for it. Madeiros' position as mayor is part of the Corporation of Hamilton, which administers the capital and has long represented the island's white elites.⁶ His



Sally Bassett statue, Bermuda, sculpted by Carlos Dowling.

response sparked a 'race row' with the PLP, which argued that the mayor did not want a 'prominent reminder of slavery greeting visitors to City Hall'.⁷ Eventually, the statue ended up in its current location in the grounds of the Bermudian government's cabinet office.

Yet, the controversy that became divided along racial lines concerned not just the statue's location but its very existence. For some white Bermudians, the image of Sally Bassett at the stake, staring to the sky, was an unwanted reminder of a dark and depressing historical moment that tainted a (supposedly) racially harmonious society. Others argued that the statue would discourage tourism, a critical part of the island's economy.⁸ Those who disliked the statue focused their rage on Dowling's portrayal of Bassett rising above the flames with her hands chained behind her back, and a protruding stomach to signify that she was 'pregnant with the spirit of freedom'.⁹ Black Bermudians were more inclined to celebrate the statue, arguing that Bassett belonged to a long litany of women who resisted their enslavement. Others praised the statue for helping to refute the myth that enslavement in Bermuda was more benign than in other parts of the Caribbean.

At the statue's unveiling in 2009, Richard Gozney, the British governor of Bermuda, compared Bassett's statue to monuments commemorating none other than English statesman and soldier Oliver Cromwell; US Confederate general Robert E. Lee, whom he lauded for his 'strengths of character'; and the 1838 Boer Blood River battle waged against the Zulus.¹⁰ Black Bermudians denounced Gozney, especially his egregious references to white supremacist Lee and to African colonisers, and some called on him to apologise.¹¹ But he offered no regrets.

This history of Britain and the Anglophone Caribbean is, in a sense, about Sally Bassett – now she and millions of others like

INTRODUCTION

her came to live in a society dominated by a powerful racial hierarchy, and what occurred in the centuries afterwards. The heated debates about racism, memory, history, and the British Empire that are provoked by statues – Bassett's being, of course, just one of them – resonate as much in Britain as they do in the Caribbean because, although the hereditary racial slavery that dominated Bassett's life no longer exists, the 'racial-caste hierarchy' that was tied to it still does. And that hierarchy is historically rooted in and still shapes the Caribbean, as well as Britain.

Historians have been writing about the racial-caste hierarchy in the Caribbean for a long time, albeit without always labelling it as such. Stuart Hall called it the 'colonial class pyramid'.¹² Others have called it a pigmentocracy, or a 'white/brown/black pyramidal socioeconomic structure'.¹³ Whatever its name, it refers to a hierarchy based on race, skin colour (that shaped colourism), class, status, and gender. At the core of this hierarchy is the construction of race: the creation of distinctions between men and women based on skin colour and the linked process of racialisation whereby an individual's racial identity becomes critical to their place within society. Ideas about whiteness and blackness existed long before the early modern European project of colonialism, but it was in this process, alongside the rise of hereditary racial slavery and capitalism, that modern ideas of race were codified.¹⁴

The construction of race had little to do with biology and everything to do with power, because it underpinned hereditary racial slavery – a racially based capitalist system that produced generational wealth for European nations and a small group of elites. White supremacy – defined by legal scholar Frances Lee Ansley as 'a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources,

conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings' – was critical to the construction of race.¹⁵

Under hereditary racial slavery, social stratification ordered society. The racial-caste hierarchy became this structure and helped solidify 'race' as a group identity. Unlike other forms of human hierarchy, the Caribbean-derived racial-caste hierarchy was never static: at times it could be fluid, with different groups moving up or down. And although it was an overarching structure across the anglophone region, there were nuances in individual colonies.

What made the racial-caste hierarchy so distinct was that it always interacted with other forms of category – such as class, gender, legal status, and religion – which exacerbated inequality further. Moreover, as the centuries wore on, new groups would fit into this hierarchy, including those from Asia and the Middle East. Ultimately, however, white men and women and especially elites maintained their power at the top of the racial-caste hierarchy. This hierarchy was the basis for the colonialism that explicitly structured society from the seventeenth to the mid twentieth century. In the late twentieth century, this racial-caste system changed but did not disappear.

In Britain the racial-caste hierarchy operated differently. It was central and inherent to the economy and wealth accumulation that Britain experienced due to colonialism. It underpinned the powerful form of anti-black racism that became institutionalised through the country's 'colour bar' – a system that saw black and other people of colour denied the same opportunities and rights as white Britons. It seeped into exclusionary laws designed to curtail the black presence in Britain, and shaped policies that

pitted white working-class communities against black Britons. Aspects of these instances of anti-black racism in Britain persist to this day, above all in the gaping racialised and class disparities in the criminal justice system, healthcare, education, media, politics . . . (the list goes on).¹⁶ The overwhelming evidence of specifically anti-black, institutionalised, blatant and subtle forms of racism occurs alongside historic and ongoing attempts to deny its existence.¹⁷ In the Caribbean from the 1660s, the racial-caste hierarchy was explicit and codified by specific laws. As the centuries progressed, however, in both the Caribbean and Britain, the racial-caste hierarchy became more implicit, though no less insidious or violent.

The racial-caste hierarchy is not an all-encompassing concept. It does not consider all forms of anti-black racism. But it helps us centre and understand the *structural* nature of racist hierarchies – how they shift and adapt over time and space; how they are made, remade, and resisted; and how they impact everyone, in different ways. The places where skin colour, class, capitalism, sexuality, gender, legal status, politics, the economy, and geography intersect are never seamless or frictionless. In different ways and at different times, some of these categories overrode, undercut, or conflicted with others, but together they all helped determine how power remained in the hands of a few.

Paying close attention to the racial-caste hierarchy is also a reminder of how the British Empire (and empires in general) functioned – by adopting an overarching framework of ‘politics of difference’ that included a variety of different people within society but that sustained distinctions and hierarchies among them.¹⁸ This was especially the case when new groups from Asia moved to the Caribbean and had to be slotted into the hierarchy, creating tensions and collaborations with people of African descent. Moreover, the racial-caste hierarchy helps to highlight one

of the reasons racism is so enduring: because it keeps reinventing itself, adapting to different situations and contexts but still functioning in ways that discriminate.

Within this book run two (braided) arguments. The first is that the roots of contemporary racial and linked class divisions in Britain and the Anglophone Caribbean today lie in the racial-caste hierarchy created in the Caribbean in the early days of the British Empire. (Caste is understood specifically as a form of social stratification – a division of society dependent on different forms of identity. This usage of the term avoids comparisons to other caste systems that operate globally but differently and are not always tied to colonialism.)¹⁹ And this first argument flows into the second: that the racial-caste hierarchy's endurance is based on the British Empire's *continued* survival. Indeed, the British Empire is inseparable from the racial-caste hierarchy. Both grew in tandem.

The British Empire was a system of global white supremacy and class domination buttressed by violence, exploitation, extraction, and capital accumulation.²⁰ It was never a legitimate form of political power. Throughout its long existence, the empire has always been contested, especially by those who suffered its worst effects.²¹ Mid-twentieth-century constitutional decolonisation – the granting of political independence and sovereignty to former colonies – reinscribed British power more than it ended it, as British-led neocolonialism (that is, the persistence of colonialism), alongside US imperialism and neoliberalism, influence the region. The British Empire lives on in the region's overseas territories, which show little interest in becoming sovereign partly because of their economic dependency on both Britain and the US.

The realities of neocolonialism reflect how decolonisation did

INTRODUCTION

not confer a radical break with empire. The process was never designed to do so. Colonial-derived political, social, economic, and cultural ties endured deliberately, not just in former colonies but in Britain too, and not just in policies but also in ideas, ideologies, and institutions. Decolonisation was and remains incomplete. And that is why the work to undo the legacies of colonialism – to, in effect, *decolonise decolonisation* – reflected in the variety of decolonising initiatives and projects (in part, including this book) remains vital. Indeed, this book is not only about the physical presence of the British Empire but also the ideological vestiges and legacies of colonial practice and thought that persisted beyond the diminution of that empire and that are ever-present today.²² In the Caribbean, decolonisation processes have begun, but the work is far from over. As of 2024, eight sovereign Caribbean states retain Britain's monarch as their head of state (although some are trying to change this), which is just one example of the continuing presence of empire.²³ Documented here are the struggles between those who sought to maintain the racial-caste hierarchy and those who tried to end it; between those who tried to maintain empire and those who tried to challenge it.

Consisting of over 700 islands and mainland countries in South and Central America, the Caribbean is a small part of the world, and home to around 45 million people today.²⁴ Despite its relatively small size the events that have taken place in the Caribbean have been crucial to the creation of the modern world. The Caribbean is the only region to have experienced colonisation for a period of over 500 years and with this came a series of phenomena – including mass migration, forced relocation and displacement of populations, a brutal economic capitalist system (plantation-based hereditary racial slavery), revolutions, and the creation of entirely new cultures – all of which have tied the

region to other parts of the world: the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Indeed, the history of the Caribbean has led to the region being described as the engine of globalisation; a place that was ‘modern before modernity’.²⁵ From the 1500s–1900s, the English (from 1707, ‘British’), Spanish, French, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, and the Americans carved out different parts of the Caribbean, which became critical to their global empires.²⁶ But ultimately, the British came to dominate the region, amassing more colonies there than any other Western power.

Caribbean geography shaped British dominance. The islands were accessible by sea routes, which led to their ‘discovery’ and directed thousands of newcomers to the region. The Caribbean’s beauty attracted, and continues to entice, travellers and tourists, but its geography can be severe. The stereotype of the Caribbean as a tropical paradise runs parallel to its reputation for death and destruction following in the wake of hurricanes, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. Yet, the region is not monolithic. From the relatively flat islands, like Barbados, to the volcanic St Vincent or the mountainous Dominica; from large islands like Jamaica to the small cays of the Bahamas, one of the distinguishing features of the region is its diversity. Although widely used, the term Caribbean is not entirely accurate.²⁷ It usually refers to all of the islands and mainland countries bordering the Caribbean Sea. But the Bahamian archipelago that lies in the southern North Atlantic is also considered part of the Caribbean.

This book takes an expansive view of the Anglophone Caribbean: it explores all the British-controlled areas – from islands located in and around the Caribbean and North Atlantic seas like Bermuda, to countries that lie in Central and South America, such as Belize and Guyana. This approach puts in sharp perspective the complexities and variations of the region. And racial diversity matches geographic diversity: throughout the Anglophone

INTRODUCTION

Caribbean, one will find African, Chinese, Indian, Lebanese, Syrian, European, and indigenous communities. Together, these cultures lived alongside and interacted with each other leading to a process of what is known as *creolisation*. As a metaphor, used by various Caribbean writers and intellectuals (like Barbadian Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Martinican Edouard Glissant and scholars like Richard Price) creolisation describes: the ‘process by which enslaved and self-liberated Africans, against all odds, created new institutions (languages, religions, legal systems, and more) – for the ways that these people coming from a diversity of Old World societies, drew on their knowledge of homeland institutions to create new ones’.²⁸ From the ashes of violent colonialism new creolised Caribbean cultures and societies were formed that are both hybrid and heterogenous. And of course, within these societies, hierarchies, all rooted in colonialism, continue to exist.

In the early days of England’s fledgling empire in the seventeenth century, the Caribbean provided the wealth that fuelled Britain’s growth as a superpower. When hereditary racial slavery ended, the region’s economic significance waned. Former prime minister David Lloyd George derided the Caribbean as the ‘slums of the Empire’.²⁹ Nevertheless, the intimate entanglement between the Caribbean and Britain endured even as empire withered away because the colonial connection was so deeply embedded. Britain was never far away from the Caribbean – and the Caribbean was never far away from Britain.

Indeed, and foremost, *Empire Without End* compresses the space between the British and Caribbean archipelagos, arguing that the two regions became deeply entangled with one another. It is also a history of the legacies of the British Empire in Britain and the Caribbean, which centres the Caribbean in key parts of British history. Previous scholarship may have overlooked the

‘Caribbeanisation’ of Britain, or only considered it in relation to the period of racial slavery, or when larger numbers from the Caribbean moved into post-1945 Britain. The book considers these entangled histories over a much longer period, adopting a *longue durée* approach up to the present.³⁰ In doing so, racism is placed at the heart of both regions.³¹ Telling a history of empire means reckoning with many things – identity, society, the state, capitalism and neoliberalism, policing, education, housing – and these topics were indelibly shaped by racism and therefore feature throughout.

The British Empire was vast and varied, but in its focus on the Anglophone Caribbean, this book hopes to challenge generalisations about it, which are often dominated by a combination of nostalgia or amnesia, or emotions of shame, guilt, and pride. All are evident in polls that reveal, for instance, that Britons in 2020 were more likely than people in Germany, Japan, France, and any other former colonial powers to say that they would like their country to still have an empire.³² And that many Britons not only have pride in the British Empire but also deep dismay, and even regret, over its demise.

Part of this nostalgia comes from an inability to connect the British Empire to contemporary racial and globally unequal divisions.³³ It is also influenced by the sweeping Victorian-era image of the British Empire, which in the aftermath of the genocide of indigenous communities and the terror of hereditary racial slavery, reinvented itself as a supposed liberal, benevolent empire, determined to spread ‘civilisation’ and ‘modernisation’ (euphemistic terms for white supremacist ideology) to the purportedly backward peoples of Asia and Africa.

By returning to the origins of the British Empire in the seventeenth-century Caribbean, *Empire Without End* tries to dispel this image, notwithstanding the hostility towards histories

INTRODUCTION

of Britain that foreground white supremacy, which often provoke a loud defence and violent backlash. Remaining invested in myths of the British Empire (often shaped by a cheap patriotism) is dangerous because it fuels persistent inequalities that stem from colonialism, and which perpetuate violence today, just as it has done in the past.³⁴

While seeking to contribute to British as well as black British history, this book also intervenes in Caribbean history. Centring attention on the creation and long life of the racial-caste hierarchy allows for the complexity of Caribbean society and the various groups in the region to be seen more sharply. To focus on it serves as a reminder of the centrality of racial slavery to the political, economic, cultural, and social issues that have dogged the Caribbean's past and that bear heavily on its present. This history also shines a light on some of the smaller islands in the Caribbean, often overlooked in studies of the region due to their size or relative obscurity, to highlight the diversity of the anglophone area.

A global system built on the fiction of white supremacy, and one maintained through physical and psychological torture across centuries, whose ongoing presence shapes contemporary racial, political, economic, and spiralling environmental inequalities, is something to oppose. Admonitions to tell 'both sides of the story' – especially to emphasise the supposed good of this global system, as popularised by historian Niall Ferguson or the theologian Nigel Biggar – are troubling,³⁵ as they contribute to curtailing ongoing anti-racist movements, deny the reality of institutionalised racism in Britain, undermine the growing reparations movement, and energise violent white nationalism. Moreover, they fail to consider that no amount of balanced or 'both sides' history will obliterate the racist roots of the British Empire.

The racial-caste hierarchy that emerged amid racial slavery

was never a betrayal of Britain's purported image of being a freedom-loving land. It was central to its foundation. If there is pride to be had in the British Empire it lies in the fact that there were always those, like Sally Bassett, who tried to resist it. And in attempts to resist, new forms of Caribbean and British identity and culture were created – in language, religion, music, dress, and literature. Indeed, cultural resistance to the racial-caste hierarchy was endemic throughout this period.

Included here too are the stories of those who went to great lengths to ensure that the empire endured. In telling these stories it is important to remember that not everyone who was invested in upholding empire was the stereotypical rabid racist or die-hard imperialist. Many more were complicit, knowingly and unknowingly, through indifference or wilful ignorance of supporting systems of domination. While others, especially African-Caribbean men and women, were heavily invested in empire, seeing it as an important political community that they were just as much a part of as white Britons. Indeed, Caribbean people played a critical role in expanding British identity, as they saw themselves not as outsiders but rather as insiders, and in turn helped to inspire new forms of British-Caribbean identity. However, over the course of centuries, Caribbean people's service to empire was often responded to with violent denial and exclusion.

Empire Without End focuses on key moments to tell the history of the racial-caste hierarchy and the persistence of the British Empire, concentrating on the black-white-mixed-race (people of African and European heritage) racial dichotomy. Occasionally it stretches beyond Britain and the Caribbean – in particular to consider how British colonialism in the region shaped the intensification of control in North American colonies and Asia, and expansion in Africa. The British Empire did not operate in

INTRODUCTION

isolation from its European counterparts or the US's growing empire. Its interactions with other empires provoked change, competition, and innovation that influenced its mission in the Caribbean and the racial-caste hierarchy. Moreover, the racial-caste hierarchy, while specific to the Caribbean and Britain, spread its tentacles across the globe, overlapping with other racist structures in different colonial locations, or with Jim Crow segregation in the US. Just as the racial-caste hierarchy interacted with broader racialised global empires, there were always those who tried to challenge it. Detailed here are the coalitions across the 'Black Atlantic' that African-Caribbean people forged with other people of colour in the US, Africa, and Asia. Black politics and culture was never confined to one nation state or ethnic group; it was intrinsically transnational, drawing on how the legacies of hereditary racial slavery created transoceanic networks and ties between Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, the US, and Asia.³⁶

Empire Without End builds on (and is indebted to) current and emerging scholarship and draws on numerous sources. It follows a broad chronological structure, starting in the 1400s and ending today, and features the voices and stories of Caribbean men and women. This is not an even or linear history: some chapters dwell more on the Caribbean or British side of the story. Simultaneous global connections and the ways that events in one part of the world impact the other are highlighted throughout. Ultimately, it seeks to contribute to 'reparatory history' through its attempt to consider how a violent past – one example being the life and death of Sally Bassett – that still shapes the present can pave the way for a radically different future. As historian Catherine Hall has aptly describe: 'Reparatory history must be about more than identifying wrongdoers and seeking redress: it begins with the descendants, trauma and loss, but the hope is that the work of

mourning can be linked – to hopes for reconciliation, the repair of relations damaged by historical injustice.³⁷

This book is not just written to enlighten. It is written with the optimism that it may contribute to a willingness to dismantle unsustainable 500-year-old hierarchies.

‘One of the richest spots of ground in the world’

Indigenous Communities, Early Colonialism, and Hereditary Racial Slavery

In 1542 Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas wrote to Prince Philip of Spain about his encounter with the ‘poorest people on the face of the earth’, who were ‘unassuming, long-suffering, unassertive, and submissive’. Las Casas continued: they ‘are among the least robust of human beings: their delicate constitutions make them unable to withstand hard work or suffering and render them liable to succumb to almost any illness, no matter how mild’. Reassuring the prince that Spanish colonisation and Catholic conversion spearheaded by the monarchy would thrive, Las Casas explained that the indigenous peoples in the Caribbean were ‘innocent and pure in mind and have a lively intelligence, all of which makes them particularly receptive to learning and understanding the truths of our Catholic faith’.¹

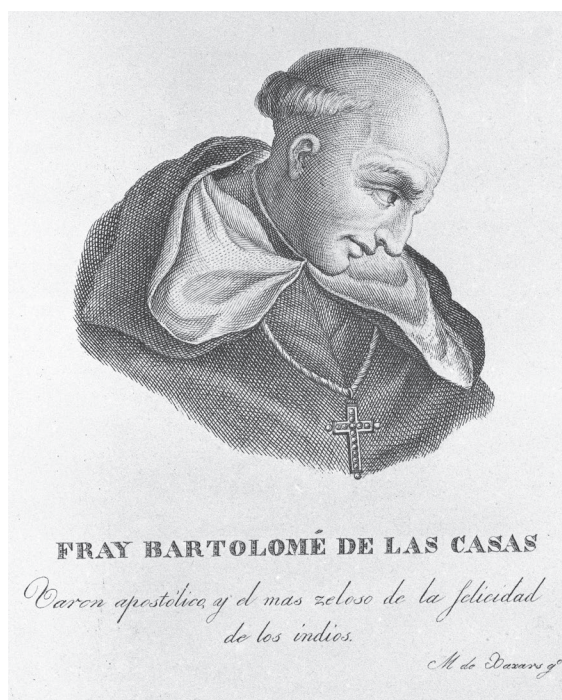
Las Casas’ tone changed when he wrote about relations between indigenous peoples and the newcomers. According to Las Casas, the Spanish settlers ‘tear the natives to shreds, murder them and inflict upon them untold misery, suffering and distress, tormenting, harrying and persecuting them mercilessly’. These ‘despotic and diabolical’ behaviours were leading to a

demographic disaster. Las Casas' estimate, which is contested by scholars today, was that 'over the last forty years . . . more than twelve million souls, women and children among them' had lost their lives due to 'unjust, cruel, bloody and tyrannical war' and murder.² In trying to explain this searing level of violence, Las Casas succinctly stated: 'the reason the Christians have murdered on such a vast scale and killed anyone and everyone in their way is purely and simply greed'.³ Here Las Casas was correct. But subsequent discourses about colonialism would come to overlook its economically opportunistic origins and inherent violence.

Interacting with people who looked or shared different beliefs and practices was not uncommon to Las Casas. Born in 1484 in the bustling city of Seville, the heart of the Spanish Empire, into a merchant family, he grew up interacting with Christians and Muslims of high, low, and enslaved status from across Europe, the Mediterranean, and North and Sub-Saharan Africa. But his observations of the indigenous peoples in the Caribbean, documented in *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, were particularly important given the consequences of his assumptions about them.

For Las Casas it is clear that indigenous peoples were not only physically, intellectually, and morally different; they were also *inferior* to Europeans. Their inferiority justified Spanish colonisation, which would supposedly civilise them. Although Las Casas saw the indigenous peoples as beneath Europeans in the 'great chain of being' – a concept describing a hierarchical structure with God at the top, followed by angels, humans, animals, and plants – he did not see them as *subhuman*. Owing to his staunch defence of the indigenous peoples in the Caribbean and other parts of the Americas he would acquire the sobriquet 'Protector of the Indians'. **Copyrighted Material**

‘ONE OF THE RICHEST SPOTS OF GROUND IN THE WORLD’



Fray Bartolomé de las Casas.

Las Casas first arrived in Santo Domingo, the capital of Spanish Hispaniola, the first Spanish colony in the Caribbean (what is today Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in April 1502. He landed as part of the largest fleet to leave Spain for the New World and he quickly became immersed in settler society. Like other ordained men, Las Casas profited from the labour of indigenous peoples, which he possessed under the *encomienda* arrangement. This system originated with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, who decreed that the indigenous peoples had to develop the land on behalf of the colonists. In exchange, they would receive protection from the Crown, Christian conversion, and a small wage. Las Casas came to despise his status as an *encomendero*. Two events in 1511 would transform his views: he

witnessed the violent massacres of indigenous peoples on the neighbouring island of Cuba, and then he heard a searing sermon delivered by Spanish missionary Antonio Montesinos, who chastised the Spanish settlers for their inhumane treatment of indigenous peoples. Together, these events inspired Las Casas to pen his *Short Account*. In 1515, he returned to Spain with Montesinos and informed King Ferdinand of the violence he had witnessed. But even laws passed to end settler excesses and the vicious treatment of the indigenous peoples only had a minor impact.

A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies, written in 1542 and published in 1552, was one of the first treatises to highlight the abuse and violence that underpinned Spanish colonisation in the Americas. It continues to influence Las Casas' controversial legacy. For some, in his defence of the indigenous peoples, he was the voice of Christian conscience. For others, he was a dangerous and dishonest antagonist determined to undermine the rewards of Spanish colonialism. Ultimately, his writings remain a seminal source not only for his descriptions of indigenous peoples, subjective though they are, but also because they foreground economic capital extraction and violence as central to colonisation. Las Casas was one of many important critics of colonial violence. But his position was complicated because he was also complicit in it due to his involvement in the project of conversion and colonisation.

Las Casas' defence of indigenous peoples did not initially extend to Africans, another group increasingly construed as inferior 'others'. Las Casas argued that as indigenous peoples were ripe for conversion to Christianity, their enslavement was a sin. Rather than enslaving indigenous peoples, Las Casas and many others turned to Africans, especially those captured in war or already enslaved, as a more acceptable option.⁴ Yet by 1561, when he completed his three-volume *History of the Indies* / *Historia*

de las Indias, Las Casas had changed his mind, declaring ‘that the enslavement of blacks was every bit as unjust as that of the Indians’.⁵ But by this time the use of enslaved Africans had gathered momentum.

The decades of exploration in the Caribbean and Spanish encounters with indigenous peoples, and the use of enslaved labour in mining, would lead to the cultivation of critical crops – namely, sugar – that would soon come to be developed using enslaved African labour. Spanish control of the Caribbean paved the way for English, and later British, domination in the region, following the 1707 Acts of Union with Scotland. This early modern period would set the foundations of the rise of the transatlantic slave trade and a new form of slavery – hereditary racial slavery – that would be central to the creation of the racial-caste hierarchy and to the rise of Britain’s wealthy and brutal Caribbean slave empire. It would come to usher in a key moment within the history of modernity. And it would come to completely upend, forever, the Caribbean.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

Around 7,000 years ago indigenous peoples embarked on a northern migratory path from South America to Trinidad, then still a part of mainland South America. Over the course of thousands of years, more continued this journey, moving beyond the Eastern Caribbean and reaching what is today Puerto Rico. In around 4,000 BCE others from Central America moved from the Yucatan peninsula to Cuba, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico. Most of these migrants were fisher-hunter-gatherers and belonged to numerous ethnic groups who left vital evidence of their presence in stones, burial sites, and artefacts.

Another wave of migration occurred around 2,500 BCE.

Coming from the Orinoco basin in South America, groups of agriculturalists settled in villages in the western and eastern parts of the Caribbean, speaking languages derived from the language family known as Arawakan. Over time, more developed societies began to appear in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico.⁶ Some of these people are collectively known as Taíno, which does not necessarily describe a specific group but rather is an adjective, loosely defined as noble or good.⁷ The Taíno enacted a broad set of sophisticated cultural practices shared by several cultures that occupied the Caribbean.

It is difficult to know all aspects of Taíno daily life due to a lack of sources, but Spanish chroniclers (such as Las Casas) recorded a considerable amount of information about them. Using new archaeological and ethnohistorical research, recent scholars have built on these works. They suggest that over hundreds of years Taíno society developed from being organised along tribal lines to chiefdoms.⁸ Chiefs or *caciques* held god-like powers and could order labourers to cultivate land or serve in military encounters. Their society was hierarchical, with those below the *caciques* known as the *nitáinos* (elites), *behiques* (perhaps shamans), and the *naborías* (usually servants and commoners).⁹ Taíno societies were matrilineal in their descent, meaning that women could be chiefs and that power was transferred from the chief's mother's relatives.¹⁰ Labour was gendered: men took to hunting, while women focused on agricultural work, cooking, cloth-making, child-rearing and harvesting. Taínos cultivated different crops ranging from fruits to sweet potatoes, yams, and peanuts.¹¹

The Taíno were not the only indigenous peoples residing in the Caribbean at this time. Another group, known as the Caribs, moved from South America and lived in the Lesser Antilles, the eastern part of the Caribbean. Caribs is a Taíno term meaning islanders, but the Caribs referred to themselves as Kalinagos, or

sometimes Kalipuna.¹² The surrounding sea, the Caribbean, is named after this group. While Europeans regarded the Taíno as peaceful, they called the Kalinago ‘careless and lazy creatures’, and ‘so vindictive there are no people more ready to take vengeance on anyone who has offended them’.¹³ Unlike Taínos, Kalinago activity tended to focus on trade and war. When they encountered Europeans, they would often put up a daring defence. In response, Europeans spread the myth of their cannibalism, which would be used to justify their enslavement. But there is no evidence that Kalinago peoples were cannibals.

Alongside Taínos and Kalinagos, the Caribbean was home to other groups: the Guanahatabeys, who occupied parts of Cuba, and the Lucayans, who lived in the Bahamas.¹⁴ While many details about indigenous peoples’ lives remain mostly unknown, what is certain is that by the fifteenth century they inhabited most of the islands in the Caribbean, with suggestions that their population was, adopting a conservative assessment, around 2 million by 1492.¹⁵ In this year, indigenous peoples first met European explorers, ushering in a new phase of globalisation that would connect the Caribbean to the rest of the world.

On 3 August 1492 the Genoese captain Christopher Columbus set sail on the *Santa María* from Palos, in the Bay of Cádiz on the coast of Spain, with around forty crewmen, alongside two smaller caravels, the *Niña* and the *Pinta*. They ventured first towards the Canary Islands before setting off across the Atlantic. Six thousand kilometres later, they arrived on the Caribbean island known by the Taíno as Guanahaní, which today is part of the Bahamas. Columbus took control of the land in the name of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, and gave it a new name – San Salvador, meaning Holy Saviour. Next, he and his crew moved along the north coast towards what was known as Quisqueya/Haiti, which he renamed Española or Hispaniola.¹⁶ Here, his ship

ran aground. He sent some of his crew to find the Taíno *cacique* Guacanagarí, who sent for canoes to aid the Spaniards. Later Columbus made an agreement with Guacanagarí whereby he agreed to fight the chief's enemies – in this case the Kalinago – for information on the location of gold mines.¹⁷ Columbus continued to search for gold before sailing to the neighbouring island, now known as Cuba. He eventually arrived back in Palos in March 1493, bringing with him some indigenous peoples.

Columbus' historic journey to the Caribbean occurred amid significant changes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, including the exploration of the Canary Islands and Cape Verde, the weakening of Islam, and the rise of Christianity in the form of Catholicism. Born in 1451 or 1452, Columbus grew up in Genoa, a commercial and financial centre. His career began on Portuguese ships, where he learned how to navigate the Atlantic on voyages to the African coast. Columbus was involved in transporting sugar, a profitable and popular new crop, from Madeira to Genoa. Around 1478 or 1479 he married a Portuguese woman from an aristocratic family and went on to climb the ranks as a mercantile agent before sealing his reputation as an intrepid geographer. Passionate about the discovery of new lands, he set his sights on the gold and riches rumoured to exist in Asia. Indeed, when Columbus arrived in the Bahamas, he thought he had reached Asia.

Columbus' voyage occurred during a pivotal moment of change within European politics and political economy. In this age of discovery, new maritime technologies including the caravel, information tools like the printing press, and changes in the process of loaning money, all helped contribute towards an upswell of European traders looking for new markets to conquer by force. Often romanticised and glorified as a triumphant moment in Western histories, Columbus' travels wreaked havoc

‘ONE OF THE RICHEST SPOTS OF GROUND IN THE WORLD’



Etching of Christopher Columbus landing on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in 1492 by Theodore de Bry, 1592.

in the Caribbean, which became one of the key areas for European expansion and subsequently violent accumulation.

A sense of surprise, wonder, and intrigue likely shaped the moment the Taíno and Spanish first set eyes on each other. The Spanish were small in number and so they possibly did not spark immediate fear. In his diary, Columbus noted that the Taíno:

all go naked as their mothers bore them, including the women . . .
They were very well built with fine bodies and handsome faces.
Their hair is coarse, almost like that of a horse's tail and short;

they wear it down over their eyebrows except for a few strands at the back, which they wear long and never cut. They are the colour of the Canary Islanders (neither black nor white) . . . They do not carry arms or know them. For when I showed them swords, they took them by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance.¹⁸

Columbus identified the Taíno as inferior to Europeans, noting: 'They should be good servants and very intelligent, for I have observed that they soon repeat anything that is said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, for they appeared to me to have no religion.'¹⁹ His initial categorisation of Taínos was to have profound consequences for the success of Spanish colonisation.

Encouraged by his first voyage, where he found small amounts of gold, Columbus embarked on a second in 1493. This time he went with the clear goal of establishing a trade colony with a royal monopoly in Hispaniola for his patrons Ferdinand and Isabella. The marriage in 1469 of the cousins Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castille united the Spanish Crown and would see Spain become a major European power. Known as the Catholic Monarchs, around 1478 they founded the Spanish Inquisition, which sought the homogenisation of Spanish society, by means of brutal force, if necessary. Together they would resume the Reconquest: the campaigns by Christian states to recapture Muslim territories from parts of the Iberian Peninsula. In 1492 they gained control of Granada from the Islamic Moors, and they ordered all Spanish Jews and later Spanish Muslims to convert to Christianity or face expulsion from Spain. Ferdinand and Isabella's encouragement of colonial expansion was part of their attempt to increase the power and wealth of Spain.

As part of Columbus' mission, the monarchs urged him to

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convert indigenous peoples to Christianity, search for more gold, and develop trading relations. For this endeavour they introduced new rules: settlers received wages, and Columbus was made admiral, with the right to receive one-tenth of all profits as commission. His expedition was equipped with seventeen ships and 1,500 male settlers, including priests.²⁰ The settlers also brought crops and livestock with them.

Charting a southerly route, Columbus ventured across the Atlantic from the Canary Islands to the Dominica Passage between the islands of Guadeloupe and Dominica.²¹ Navigating the Lesser Antilles, he began to observe and remark on the supposed savage and hostile Kalinago occupants.

When Columbus finally reached his destination, La Navidad, in 1493 – the first Spanish settlement in the Americas forged from the wreckage of the *Santa María* during his first voyage less than a year earlier – he was shocked by what he saw. The town had burned to the ground, and most of the Spanish settlers were dead, either of disease or in violent disputes about gold with indigenous peoples.²² The indigenous peoples informed Columbus that they had tried to defend the Europeans against attacks from a rival *cacique* known as Caonabó, the incident foreshadowing tensions between Spaniards and indigenous peoples that would arise in the coming years. After leaving La Navidad, Columbus sailed along the north coast of Hispaniola and discovered a new settlement, La Isabela. In April 1494 he resumed exploration of Cuba, inhabiting the southern coast before heading to Jamaica, known by the indigenous peoples as *Xaymaca*, meaning ‘land of wood and water’. As Columbus travelled to different islands and interacted with more indigenous peoples, he abandoned the initial plan of establishing trading relations with them. He had a new idea: to force the Taíno to work to develop Spanish

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colonisation.²³ In 1497 he assigned groups of indigenous people to some Spaniards in a system called *repartimiento*. This saw groups of indigenous people allocated to Spaniards to perform different tasks.²⁴

Many indigenous people began to flee their villages to escape from the Spanish. Others chose to rebel. When Columbus instructed settlers to build forts in large towns, Taínos attacked the settlers in large numbers. In 1495 Columbus retaliated by assailing Taíno villages and capturing chiefs. When Caonabó was arrested and sent to La Isabela, a group of chiefs raided Spanish settlements: joining with the indigenous peoples of Guacanagarí and other Taíno allies, Columbus and the Spanish fended off this attack.²⁵ That year, Columbus ramped up his assault on dissenting Taínos and sent out armed groups, instructing them to take captives if they encountered any hostility. As a result, around 1,600 Taínos across Hispaniola became captives – of these 550 were sent to Spain and 650 given to settlers. The majority of the released Taínos fled from La Isabela.²⁶ Famine increased in 1495 and 1496 due to some Taíno attacks on Spanish crops and this further diminished their population, along with increased labour demands and the spread of unfamiliar European-borne diseases against which the Taíno had no immunity, such as smallpox, influenza, malaria, measles, yellow fever, and the bubonic plague. Alongside famine and disease, the fall in the Taíno population was linked to waning fertility rates, partly due to attacks on Taíno villages.²⁷

In 1500, the Catholic monarchs removed Columbus from power in Hispaniola, due partly to disagreements around the treatment of indigenous peoples. In his place, they sent leading Spanish judge Francisco de Bobadilla to govern the colony as viceroy from 1500–1502. The monarchs introduced a range

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of other changes. They granted licences to other explorers and freed all indigenous peoples who had been enslaved and brought to Spain. However, Bobadilla's rule was to be short-lived: he died two years after being appointed when his ship was hit by a hurricane. His replacement was a military officer, Nicolás de Ovando, who served as governor of the Indies from 1502–9. Ovando arrived in Hispaniola with 2,500 settlers, including Las Casas, and his rule marked a new phase in Spanish–indigenous peoples' relations.²⁸

Ovando was granted enhanced powers in dealing with indigenous peoples, which he took as licence to further suppress them. He dismantled a considerable amount of Taíno leadership and introduced the *encomienda* system to organise forced labour of indigenous peoples to work in mines and agriculture. The *encomienda* system dealt the Taíno another blow, and as a form of resistance, some died by suicide.²⁹ More military clashes occurred in 1503 and 1504 and these saw numerous chiefs captured, assigned to Spanish settlers, and compelled to labour in the construction of towns. They were also made to convert to Catholicism.

Alongside increasing assaults on indigenous peoples, the next few years saw mass Spanish expeditions, and the establishment of new colonies. In 1508 the Spanish acquired Puerto Rico, the following year Jamaica, and Cuba in 1511. While these islands did have gold deposits, they were not as abundant as had been believed. By around 1508 gold mining had reached its peak, and in later years gold would be in short supply – colonists then turned their attention to sustainable crops that they could sell.³⁰ This meant drastic alterations in the ecology of the land by clearing the dense rainforest and burning trees for the planting of sugar.

In the early modern era, sugar was a valuable luxurious commodity, replacing honey as a sweetener. The process of developing sugar was long, arduous and would remain labour-intensive, associated with enslaved labour on large plantations.

The Portuguese were the first to develop sugar cane in Brazil, on Madeira and on the West African coast in São Tomé, using the labour of enslaved Africans from various places. Following them, the Spanish began cultivating sugar in the Canary Islands, which they had begun colonising in the fifteenth century. The Spanish subjugated and enslaved the indigenous population of the Canaries – the Guanches – exporting some of them to Madeira or Europe, while others were forced to labour on Canarian sugar plantations. The sugar development on Madeira and the Canary Islands would become a model for the growth of sugar in the Caribbean.

In search of more labourers, in 1509 the Spanish Crown granted permission for the forced movement and enslavement of the Lucayans in the Bahamas to Hispaniola, and this was followed by raids in Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad.³¹ Indigenous peoples resisted these practices. Some began attacking Spanish settlements and others fled to the mountains. Those who escaped became known as Maroons – runaways involved in the wars with the Spanish in 1519 and 1533. Their guerrilla tactics were effective, and in 1533 the Spanish signed a treaty with their chief leader, Enriquillo, that ended hostilities in exchange for land and freedom.

Coercion and violence were not the only features of indigenous peoples' interaction with the Spanish, however. Marriages between Taíno women and Spanish men were common, and in 1514 these unions were sanctioned by the Church and state. The offspring of these partnerships shaped the mixed – or *mestizo* – population. They also helped in the development of

creole – meaning ‘born on the island’ – society. But intermarriage could not protect the indigenous peoples, and through wars, disease, and famine their numbers continued to wane. In 1508 there were an estimated 60,000 Taínos in Hispaniola; by 1514 their numbers had plummeted to around 30,000; and by 1518, 11,000.³²

Ascertaining accurate figures for the decrease in indigenous communities in the Caribbean is challenging. While Spanish chroniclers numbered the population around the time of European contact to have been 1 million, anthropologists have disputed this, arguing instead for the population to have been between 6–12 million.³³ If these more recent figures are taken as more accurate, they reveal the utter devastation of the indigenous population caused by European contact. Their dwindling population contributed to a labour shortage, which led the Spanish to turn their attention to another group.

By the time the Spanish took an interest in the trade of enslaved Africans, enslavement was already a long-established global institution that operated in various ways. In Africa, men and women could be captured in warfare and enslaved, or taken as part-payment for a debt or as punishment for a criminal offence.³⁴ The Portuguese were an early European power to enslave Africans, doing so with approval in 1482 and 1485 from Pope Nicholas V, who issued papal bulls arguing that slavery provided a Christianising influence to supposed pagans. In this era, several justifications were offered for enslaving Africans. Europeans, including Las Casas initially, claimed superiority as Christians, as most of the Africans Europeans encountered were either Muslim or animist. The idea that God used Africans’ black skin colour as a mark of their lack of morality and inferiority was another factor (shaped by the biblical curse of Ham and his descendants, who were assumed to be of African descent), as were hierarchical notions of difference that

positioned Africans in the lower levels of the 'great chain of being'.

Modern notions of 'race' did not yet exist, but physical differences and complexion played a role in how Europeans perceived Africans, which would prove precursors to later ideas about whiteness and blackness. For the Spanish, in one sense, the justification for the enslavement of Africans was complex and varied. Some arguments for it relied on religion: the Pope had denied Spain land in Africa (based on attempts to limit competition with them and their Portuguese rivals), and many considered enslavement a good way to convert those considered pagans or who shared different faiths to Christianity. But, in another sense, justification for the enslavement of Africans was stark and simple: it served as a way to eke out cheap labour for surplus value from newly claimed territory.

Enslaved Africans were initially only a small part of Spanish colonisation in the Caribbean. The Spanish did not have any forts on the African coast, so they depended on other states, like Portugal, to supply them with enslaved people. The first enslaved Africans began to arrive in the 1500s and were ordered by King Ferdinand to work alongside indigenous peoples to build forts in gold mines. In 1502 Ovando brought over more enslaved Africans, but many escaped and found refuge with indigenous peoples who had fled to the mountains. From 1518, a new series of contracts – the *asiento de negros* – began, which allowed private figures to transport enslaved Africans on the condition of paying a fee to the royal treasury.³⁵ It was believed that Africans could withstand the tropical climate of the Caribbean and were more resistant to disease than the Taíno, and this helped spread the stereotype that enslaved Africans were physically stronger workers. In the mid sixteenth century, the enslaved African population of Hispaniola was around 30,000;

by the end of the century their number in the Spanish Caribbean had grown to about 100,000.³⁶

The use of enslaved labour was critical to the success of Spanish colonialism in the Caribbean, but the islands were just the first stage of a period of conquest during which the Spanish Empire expanded to include Florida, Mexico, Panama, Cartagena, and Peru. Crucially, however, the Spanish did not extend their reach into the Eastern Caribbean, for reasons still debated today. One argument is that these areas did not have the resources the Spanish sought to accumulate, while another casts the Kalinago as more difficult to subdue than the Taíno. Nevertheless, the Eastern Caribbean became a place of refuge for both indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans who had escaped from Spanish territories. It would soon also become a space for the arrival of new colonial powers who, having heard stories of successful Spanish exploits in the region, were eager to see if they too could prosper in the New World.

EUROPEAN RULE AND RIVALRY

Attempts to shatter the Spanish monopoly in the Caribbean accelerated in the 1540s. The French started to plunder Spanish ships on their voyages to Spain, and the English quickly joined in – their attacks shaped, in part, by the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, which spawned anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish sentiment. In 1572, Queen Elizabeth I sent English troops to help the Dutch win back independence from Spain and continued encouraging privateers – effectively pirates with a royal licence to plunder – to attack Spanish ships. As the Spanish hold over the Caribbean Sea weakened in the 1560s, English voyages to the region increased.

Naval commander, administrator, and buccaneer John

Hawkins led an early English expedition to the Caribbean around 1562, taking three ships via what is today Sierra Leone. On their way, he and his crew attacked a Portuguese ship, captured the enslaved people on board, and traded them in the Caribbean, making a profit for the London merchants who had invested in the expedition. With the approval of Elizabeth I, and with his second cousin and protégé Francis Drake in tow, Hawkins continued privateering, travelling to the West African coast where he purchased more enslaved Africans to trade in the Spanish Americas. In response, the Spanish attacked his ships.

Drake, who would become England's most famous privateer, pressed on regardless, and in 1585 he sacked Santo Domingo, the capital of Hispaniola. Men like Hawkins, Drake, and other privateers were joined by other, unlicensed, pirates who raided and plundered. Often diverse, pirate crews consisted of men and women of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds, including runaway enslaved people.³⁷ Yet privateering and pirate activity did not break the Spanish hold. That happened with the Anglo-Spanish Wars of 1585–1604, which prevented Spain from attacking other nascent European settlements in the region. From the 1590s the Dutch joined the French and English in their quest for control of the Caribbean.

European powers made new discoveries as they ventured further into the Caribbean. Hawkins was one of the first to bring tobacco to England in the 1560s. Consumed by indigenous peoples, tobacco was considered by some Europeans to be vulgar and pagan. King James VI of Scotland and I of England would notoriously describe it as 'a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless'.³⁸ Despite such disdain, many quickly became enamoured and addicted. As the

English did not want to pay a high price for Spanish-controlled tobacco, this spurred the development of the tobacco colony of Virginia, established in 1607, followed in 1612 with Bermuda when the island became an official colony. It was the potential of tobacco that encouraged European interest in the Lesser Antilles in the early 1600s. Unlike Spain, merchants looking to invest in emerging markets, rather than the Crown, spearheaded English colonisation.

St Christopher, later St Kitts, became in 1623 the first non-Spanish colony in the Lesser Antilles captured by the English. In 1624 the French and English jointly controlled the island and defended it against the Spanish. Both European powers also attacked the majority of the indigenous Kalinago people and planted tobacco and established plantation societies. Planting was not a new practice for the English; they had done the same in the conquest of Ireland from 1529–1603. The English settlers who began planting in St Kitts were led by London merchant Thomas Warner, who was commissioned as lieutenant governor by King Charles I in 1625. But a year later, profit-seeking settlers faced another Kalinago uprising, which the English and French quickly fended off, and in 1629 the Spanish also attacked and briefly captured the island, only to be eventually driven out. Although indigenous communities’ numbers dwindled, they continued to exist, and still do, in various parts of the Caribbean such as Dominica, St Vincent, Trinidad, and Guyana.

Anglo-French control of St Kitts was precarious, but another island would transform English colonialism. On the far eastern side of the Lesser Antilles lay the relatively flat 439 kilometre square island of Barbados. In 1625 English captain John Powell arrived there, joined two years later by his brother Henry, who came with a group of settlers and enslaved people captured from Portuguese ships. The two began working with

the London-based merchant Sir William Courteen to develop tobacco with labour from indigenous peoples, and quickly succeeded. In 1629, Courteen's settlement was taken over by James Hay, the Earl of Carlisle, who became the Lord Proprietor of the Caribbee Islands.

To develop tobacco plantations, settlers relied on indentured servants and labourers from England. Indentured servitude was a long-established practice throughout Europe. Some people, lured by rags-to-riches stories, voluntarily indentured themselves for 4–7 years, working for planters in return for 'freedom dues' – usually a roughly ten-acre plot of land. Others, such as Irish Catholics, considered prisoners of war, came to Barbados involuntarily, as did those who were kidnapped, and convicts.

While most planters treated indentured labourers well, providing them with lodgings and ensuring they had time off work, some did not, and stories of their mistreatment circulated widely. Richard Ligon provided one of the most memorable observations about the lives of these labourers. An English writer, Ligon travelled to Barbados in 1647 with a group of royalist exiles to help the barrister and planter Thomas Modyford. While in Barbados, Ligon spent time as a planter before returning to England in 1650 due to ill health and later serving time in prison for debt. Over the course of his three-year sentence, he compiled the *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados – a survey of the natural, social, and economic phenomena* (published in 1657). The popular book was one of the first English accounts of life in Barbados. In it, Ligon described servants as leading 'wearisome and miserable lives' who did 'very hard labour' and were provided with poor lodgings.³⁹ He believed that they, rather than the enslaved, had 'the worser lives' because, he surmised, Africans were more suited to work in the tropics.⁴⁰

As Barbados was developing tobacco plantations, other islands came under English control. The English settled in Nevis in 1628, and Antigua and Montserrat in 1632. Colonists in Montserrat were largely English and Irish Catholics who had moved from the Protestant-dominated St Kitts (although its official church was the Church of England).⁴¹ Land on Montserrat was more widely available than on other islands, allowing the extension of property ownership to those, like the Irish, who managed to climb up the social ladder.⁴²

Tobacco boomed between the 1630s and 1650s, but trouble was looming. The Caribbean produced poor-quality tobacco and planters faced stiff competition from the superior Virginian tobacco. When the market became saturated, prices dropped, which forced planters to turn to the production of other goods, such as indigo, timber, coffee, and cotton. However, alongside changing environmental conditions and the effects of drought, these crops struggled, and their prices dropped as well, which again forced planters to follow in Spain's footsteps. The switch to sugar was spearheaded in Barbados by planter James Drax. Drax arrived on the island in the 1620s, and a decade later held a portion of land with his brother William. In 1640, James Drax ventured to Brazil, where he heard the Dutch were growing sugar cane. He returned to Barbados to start experimenting.

Meanwhile, back in England, political change would soon influence the Caribbean. During the English Civil Wars from 1642–51, the Dutch began to threaten English naval power. Following the success of Parliamentarians and the execution of Charles I in 1649, the Rump Parliament passed the Navigation Act in 1651, which was designed to damage the Dutch. Part of the Act mandated that goods from English colonies or foreign countries must be transported in English ships, which meant that neither the Dutch nor other foreign powers could bring their

products to English ports, including those in the Americas. The Act led to the first Anglo-Dutch War from 1652–4.

As soon as this war had ended, the English quickly entered another. Disputes with Spain over trade routes led to the Anglo-Spanish War of 1654–60. During this time, Oliver Cromwell, who organised and led the New Model Army against Charles I during the Civil Wars, served as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland and was keen to expand his Puritan revolution into the Americas as part of his 'Western Design', which marked a new phase in English colonial activity. This phrase referred to English expeditions against the Spanish Caribbean amid the 1654–60 Anglo-Spanish War that sought to thwart Spanish control in the Americas. This was the first time a colonising mission had come under the direct control of the government rather than a private company. Cromwell sanctioned an expedition force led by Admiral William Penn and General Robert Venables that departed from England in 1654, first arriving in Barbados and then going to Hispaniola in April 1655. On 10 May 1655, they landed and fought off the Spanish to add Jamaica as another English colony.

In 1660, King Charles II passed a second Navigation Act. In trying to overpower the Dutch, the Act stipulated that all goods had to be carried to and from the colonies in English ships with a predominantly English crew. This sparked another war in 1665 that ended two years later with the Peace of Breda. In this treaty, the Dutch gained the colony of Suriname on the north-eastern coast of South America in exchange for New Netherland, its outpost on the east coast of North America, which provided England with more territory and power.

Back in Barbados, Drax's experimentation in sugar was gaining ground, and a sugar revolution was imminent.

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THE SUGAR REVOLUTION

Drax found that Barbados had the ideal topography for cultivating sugar. But the enterprise required a vast amount of land and capital, meaning that wealthier planters tended to spearhead sugar production. Many received money from the Dutch, who were simultaneously their competitors and collaborators. The Dutch anticipated sizeable profits from sugar production and provided credit, enslaved people, and equipment to planters in Barbados. English merchants also had a hand in providing credit, investing in land, and supplying planters with enslaved labour.⁴³ It was strictly illegal for planters in Barbados to have links with the Dutch, who were at war with England during this period, but contact occurred nevertheless due to the distraction caused by the English Civil Wars. With Parliament preoccupied with machinations against the monarchy, Barbados became something of an independent state: the planter class gained control of legislation and at times circumvented English law, though this would end in 1651 when the British Parliament sent a fleet to the island to restore metropolitan colonial control.

Planters like Drax planned to have a small number of enslaved men and women working side by side with indentured labourers, in a sort of mixed-labour economy. Early on, Drax reaped the benefits of this combined black and white labour system. In 1642 he began purchasing enslaved Africans from other European powers. By the early 1650s, his wealth had significantly grown, so much so that he built on Barbados the vast and imposing Drax Hall estate, which housed around 200 enslaved Africans. By the late 1650s, he had become an absentee planter, enjoying his riches in London.

Yet the increased wealth of planters like Drax exacted a cost

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on indentured labourers. The demanding process of sugar production worked and punished indentured labourers harder than before and, in turn, more servants ran away or rebelled. And as the construction of plantations devoured more land, less was available for servants. 'Freedom due' land grants (given to indentured labourers after they had served their period of indentureship) were replaced by a fixed sum of money of less value. As news began to spread back to England about the strenuous work on sugar plantations, indentured labourers started to look elsewhere.

By the mid seventeenth century, English people who saw indentureship or migration as an opportunity to improve their lives sought new opportunities in more desirable parts of the British Empire, such as the North American colonies of Virginia, the provinces of Maryland (established in 1632), and South Carolina (established in 1663). In response planters in the Caribbean tried to make indentureship appear more attractive. Some reduced the length of servitude, but this led to prohibitive increases in the cost of servant labour. In 1652 the indentured population in Barbados was 13,000 (a figure that included waged labourers); by 1683 it was down to 2,301.⁴⁴ As the cost of indentured servants rose and their numbers dwindled, the number of enslaved people began to rise. The choice of enslaved Africans had less to do with complexion than profit. As Oxford-educated historian and later first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Eric Williams, succinctly describes it: 'Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery.'⁴⁵ In the first decades of colonisation, race was used as a legitimising pretext for capitalist expansion and economic wealth. The turn to invest more in enslaved African labour drove the sugar revolution in the Caribbean.

Various arguments have arisen in attempts to understand the 'sugar revolution' – the transformation of Caribbean society

from one built on white labour to one dominated by enslaved Africans and sugar plantations. The climatic theory – that white servants failed to work on sugar plantations due to physiological factors while enslaved Africans were successful because of their race – has been widely refuted. The consensus today is one of complexity, with many situating the change within a much longer historical and larger Atlantic and global context.

While planters like Drax were initially independently involved in the purchase of enslaved Africans, the first companies to play a part in the slave trade to English Caribbean colonies were established in the 1660s. One, the ‘Company of Royal Adventurers of England Trading into Africa’, created after the restoration of the monarchy in 1663, built forts on the West African coast and by 1664 had sent 3,000 enslaved people to Barbados.⁴⁶ The then Duke of York, later King James II, was a principal leader in this company, and enslaved men, women and children sent to the island were branded with the letters ‘DY’. Its successor, the Royal African Company, was unable to keep up with the colonial demand for enslaved people and had difficulty maintaining forts on the African coast. In 1698 Parliament rearranged the trade and gave private traders the right to be involved legally on payment of a duty to the Royal African Company.⁴⁷ Consequently, the trade flourished. This duty ended in the 1700s, and so private traders from major port cities in England, including Bristol, Liverpool, and London, Lancaster, and Manchester, grew as the Royal African Company declined.⁴⁸ In its place a group of merchants joined forces to create the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa and maintained forts on the African coast that were financed by Parliament.

Some European slave traders cultivated friendly relations with African leaders, as they ventured up and down the West African coast, so as to procure enslaved people. The enslaved

were often prisoners of war, criminals, victims of abductions, or dependents with no kinship ties.⁴⁹ Gift-giving became an established practice to form positive bonds. African collaborators also helped European traders. Often of mixed heritage, the offspring of European slave traders and local African women, African-European men worked alongside European traders to capture Africans.

In exchange for enslaved people, English traders also provided commodities that Africans wanted. Many gave tobacco, rum, or valuable military weapons, leading to European entanglement in West African wars. While there were traders who interacted with African elites to access and capture Africans, there were plenty who did not. Some traders simply abducted Africans as they traversed the West African coast. Others raided villages in the early hours of the morning, capturing whomever they could. Olaudah Equiano, later an important abolitionist, was one of those captured in this manner. He was from the Igbo group of what is today Nigeria. In his famous autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa*, published in 1789, he wrote that at the age of eleven, while he was at home with his sister, 'two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both'.⁵⁰ After being separated from his sister, Equiano 'cried and grieved continually; and for several days did not eat any thing but what they forced into my mouth'.⁵¹

Trading in enslaved people was a dangerous activity. European traders in West Africa contracted various diseases such as jaundice, dysentery, and fevers. Between 1684–1732 Royal African Company records show that the average annual death toll for men in their service on the Gold Coast was 27 per cent.⁵² Likewise the enslaved fell victim to diseases brought by Europeans.

Though slavery had been considered a form of trade in West