
BURTON, RICHARD D.E. *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997. Pp. xi, 297. Illustrations, glossary, references, index. \$17.95 pb, \$45 cb.

Over the past five centuries since the European arrival, the Caribbean has experienced the destruction of its indigenous populations and witnessed the emergence of new “creolized” cultures. This was marked first by colonialism and slavery, later by multitiered, multicolored post-slave societies still under colonial rule, and later by (mostly) politically independent societies still displaying the vestiges of colonialism and racial stratification.

Burton’s book is selectively comprehensive in that it seeks to build a theory suitable for several centuries of Caribbean history, yet looks in detail at only Jamaica, Trinidad, and Haiti, and at these only for specific incidents or behaviors at certain times. Within those limitations—and they are really not that serious—the book develops around three central themes:

1) This creolization, “segmentary” rather than “synthetic,” itself a function of “contention” rather than “homogenization,” generated cultural forms Burton labels Euro-Creole, Meso-Creole, and Afro-Creole. These overlapping groups reflected degrees of European, African, and increasingly reinvented Creole influences in a long-term process of both continuity and creativity; the resulting racial/ethnic tensions within and among these fluid groups were central to the cultural and political conflict/evolution of Caribbean society.

2) Perhaps the key arena in which these tensions expressed themselves was what Burton labels the world of “play” —a complex that includes such nonwork areas as music, dance, religion, language, humor, eating and drinking, and partying. Because the work world was so much controlled by the dominant forces, opposition could more easily and consistently be expressed in the nonwork (read play) realm.

3) In the sweep of Caribbean history these tensions—whether in work, play, or politics—most frequently generated drawing on the ideas of Michael de Certeau—acts of internal “opposition” as distinguished from external “resistance,”

except during the 1790s in Saint-Domingue, in the throws of the French Revolution, and in the 1830s in Jamaica leading up to projected emancipation. Otherwise, such opposition, while rebelling against one form of domination, contained within itself “the seeds of another form of domination” (p. 263): “in short, an additional culture, precisely because it opposes the dominant order on the dominant order’s own ground is always likely, sooner or later, to be ‘recuperated by it...’”(p. 8).

It is within that larger play construct that Burton locates “sports,” though he treats only two in even limited fashion, both of which he labels “archetypal forms of stylized aggression” (p. 173): stickfighting and cricket (basketball is cited in only two footnotes; baseball and netball in one each; boxing not at all). Carried out with the use of a kalinda stick or baton between individuals and groups representing their respective barrack yards and following a period of provocation, stickfighting, “the pivotal ritual in Trinidad carnival” (p. 174) after emancipation, was officially banned between 1884 and 1951 because as a surrogate form of violence growing out of the socioeconomic pressures and interblack competition, especially in Port of Spain, at times it could not fully relieve the tensions but led to even more disruptive behavior.

Cricket, to which Burton dedicates merely 10 pages of formal description and analysis (there are only 24 total pages cited in the index), may be linked to stickfighting through the batonnier-batsman continuity and the injection into the white colonial masters’ recreation, specifically Afro-Creole, meanings and values. What started at the “top” of the socio-political structure had trickled through the colored middle class to the street and beach, where, by the 1890s, it was appropriated by the black and poor whose combined heirs in 1950 could win a Test series in London, fielding a team of fast bowlers and aggressive batsmen who, at least at home, were closely tied to the spectators/fans who now, as then, flaunt their triumphs over the dominant elements.

Yet, cautions Burton, such situations blur the truly significant fact of West Indian cricket, and of other forms of play; “what it offers the ‘revelers’ is the fantasy, not the reality, of power that it takes away even as it holds it before them.” The essence is “not that they regularly beat Massa at his own game and regularly make him *look foolish*, but that they are playing his game in the first place” (p. 185). Within the system, West Indians express themselves in victory; but “*the System* itself survives... The paradox of West Indian cricketing prowess is that it is *at one and the same time* a conscious assertion of identity and an unconscious expression of alienation...” (p.186). By making cricket a symbol of national union and consensus, the dominant order has neutralized a potential cultural challenge.

In brief, this is not a major contribution to sports history as such, yet sports scholars can derive at least two valuable perspectives from Burton’s analysis. First, that sport may at times be better treated not as a discreet factor by itself, but as an integral part of a larger “play” complex. Second, that persons who challenge the dominant culture in their society are very often engaging in internal opposition

rather than external resistance and, even when apparently successful, paradoxically wind up drawn more deeply into that or a similar dominant culture.

Although he doesn't link it to sports per se, Burton's additional challenging prediction could also be of interest to students of contemporary sports, considering the continuing growth of women's scholastic, professional, and Olympic athletics: "I do see current shifts in gender relations as potentially the most dynamic force for change in the Caribbean since universal suffrage and political independence, and conceivably even since emancipation" (p. 12). If this is likewise at all applicable to the United States or elsewhere, what might it mean for the future of sports in those places?

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