

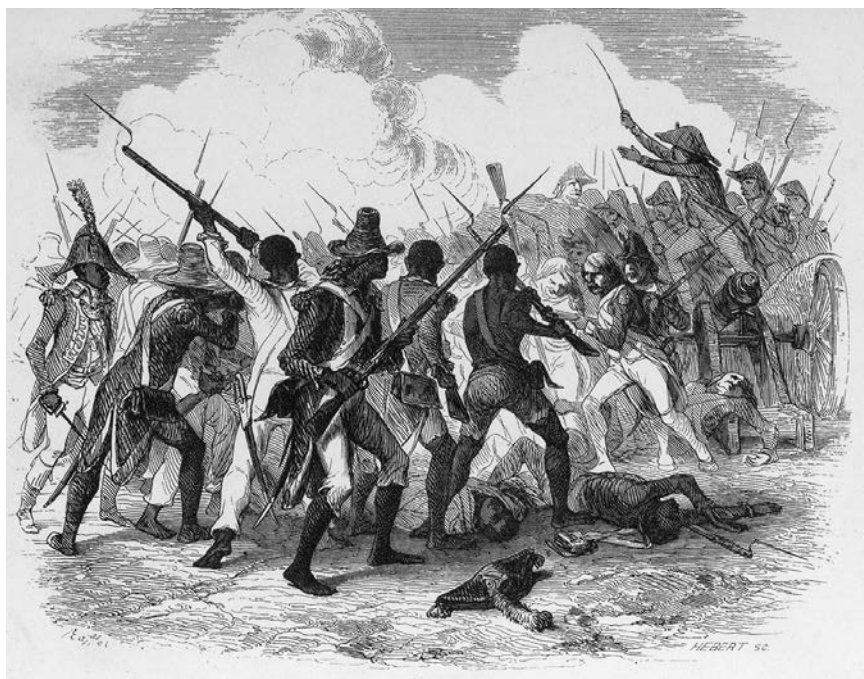
## Introduction

### Two Questions, the Imagery of Happiness and a Hope

**PLAY TODAY IS “BIG BUSINESS”. IT BRINGS FAME AND FORTUNE**, whether from major periodic activities like the Olympic Games and the World Cup or from annual activities like carnivals or from the everyday entertainment industry. Entertainment generates billions of dollars and provides a livelihood for millions of people across the world. In the Caribbean, entertainment, through tourism, has long replaced sugar and other raw materials as the mainstay of the economy in most countries. Two hundred years ago play was considered frivolous or marginal, not a proper way to earn a living; today that is no longer so – play is seen as virtuous. It is seen and promoted as a way to show off one’s culture, to represent one’s country, to prove oneself.

Historically, proving oneself was associated more with fighting than with playing, although both are fundamentally competitive human activities that are not always distinguishable. For example, puberty rituals in modern and traditional societies have blended the two. Yet when one’s dignity, safety or life is at stake, fighting is seen as the honourable way to respond. In the case of a community of people or a society, when there is a reality or threat of extreme dominance, internally or externally, fighting or war is seen as the honourable way to defend oneself. Still, the question that invariably recurs in the face of threats to life, limb, liberty and dignity is: Is fighting the only virtuous way to respond to extreme dominance?

Though the Bible is contradictory on this matter, Western law and morals are guided by its two recommendations – an “eye for an eye” in the Old Testament (Leviticus 24:19–21) and “turning the other cheek” in the New Testament



**Figure 1.** Haitian slaves valiantly fighting the French at Crête-à-Pierrot, by Auguste Raffet. In M. de Norvins, *Histoire de Napoleon* (Brussels: Société typographique belge, Wahlen et compagnie, 1839), between pages 236 and 237.

(Matthew 5:38–40). The nineteenth-century Anglican ethic in Mrs Alexander’s hymn “All Things Bright and Beautiful” is to be acquiescent, because the hierarchical order of things is ordained by God:

The rich man in his castle,  
 The poor man at his gate,  
 God made them high and lowly,  
 And ordered their estate.

Christopher Boehm, in his 1993 paper “Egalitarian Behavior and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy”, identifies through a survey of societies across the world four “mechanisms” through which egalitarian behaviour is achieved – public opinion, criticism and ridicule, disobedience, and extreme sanctions (for example, assassination). In other words, the response to extreme dominance is to remove it.

This book presupposes a combination of Alexander’s ethic and a weak form

of Boehm's "mechanisms" as the response of the people in the Caribbean islands (excluding Haiti) to slavery, a response powered by play and visibly expressed in an image of happiness. The question it addresses is: Did that image of happiness indeed reflect happiness, and, if so, was such happiness without virtue, dishonourable and a mask for weakness in the face of extreme dominance or was it virtuous and honourable, providing a viable model to follow? Bear in mind that in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, whites in the thirteen North American colonies had fought for their honour, and enslaved blacks in Haiti had done the same, whereas neither whites nor enslaved blacks in the Caribbean islands (except for Haiti) fought steadfastly for theirs; they played instead.

In answering the latter question, this book has tried to distinguish, in the historical record, between genuine happiness and cultural assumptions. Then and now, writers have often gone beyond making straightforward assertions and resorted to familiar comparisons and metaphors to portray happiness. For example, in temperate cultures, happiness is often associated with ecology (that is, the brightness/colourfulness of nature) as well as with lively activities, dancing and singing being the main ones. However, metaphorical representation is not always universally applicable, for symbols can be contradictory and, as to dancing and singing, they are media for expressing all degrees and types of emotion, not just happiness.

The bluebird is recognized as a symbol of happiness in parts of the United States. That in those places a brightly coloured bird signals the return of spring and happiness implies that happiness is seasonal for people of temperate climates. A logical inference from this is that happiness is perpetual for people of tropical climates with colourful vegetation. Thus, European writers may well have been inclined to believe that people in the Caribbean would "naturally" be happy.

Another problem with the bluebird's association with happiness is that a "bright" colour does not always signal happiness. In English, the colour blue is used to represent sadness (as in "singing the blues") as well as extreme anger. Consequently, for the Caribbean context, one can reasonably reject the bluebird as a symbol and substitute the blackbird – the latter is more familiar to the Caribbean and more generally to areas where enslaved blacks were and the adjective "black" applies to both the bird and the people. The problem is that although black people have been associated with happiness, the colour black has never been.

Note, however, that the two birds were connected by the American singer Florence Mills in her signature song and biggest hit “I’m a Little Blackbird Looking for a Bluebird”:

Never had no happiness  
 Never felt no-one’s caress  
 Just a lonesome bit of humanity,  
 Born on a Friday I guess  
 Blue as anyone can be  
 Clouds are all I ever see  
 If the sun forgets no one  
 Why don’t it shine for me

*Chorus*

I’m a little blackbird looking for a bluebird too  
 You know little blackbirds get a little lonesome too and blue  
 I’ve been all over from East to West  
 In search of someone to feather my nest  
 Why don’t I find one the same as you do  
 The answer must be that I am a hoo-doo  
 (Clarke and Turk 1924, 2–4)

It is interesting how she plays on the meaning of the word “blue” when it applies to her and when it applies to the man she wants. It is clear that for Florence Mills the bluebird is a “sugar daddy” (probably a white man from the northeastern United States) who will make her happy.

Florence Mills was the daughter of former slaves, who was honoured by the island of Grenada by having her portrait put on a postage stamp to celebrate “the birth of the silver screen”. In her day (1920s) she was called the “Queen of Happiness”, and because of her untimely death at a young age she did not get to be the headliner, as she was slated to be, in the show *Blackbirds of 1928*. This Broadway show publicly established African American entertainers, principally singers, as blackbirds, probably seen as happy ones. Enslaved blacks in the Americas had previously been compared to songbirds by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1913) in 1899 in his poem “Sympathy”, which influenced Maya Angelou’s “Caged Bird” in 1983.

No doubt the most famous blackbird of all was the polymath Ziryab. Chapter 8 of John Gill’s book *Andalucía* is titled “The Blackbird of Baghdad: Ali Ibn-Nafi and the Invention of Rock’n’Roll”. Gill says:

It is simply too irresistible . . . not to identify . . . Abu i-Hasan “Ali ibn-Nafi” (789–857) as perhaps the iconic intellectual figure of Islamic Córdoba. [He was nicknamed Ziryab, blackbird in Arabic . . . *pajaro negro* (blackbird) in Spanish. . . . He was probably Persian Kurdish, although others argue he was a liberated African slave, which would lend itself to the legend that his nickname “Blackbird” came from the colour of his skin as much as his musical ability. . . . Ziryab turned Córdoba into a centre of musical excellence . . . Ziryab is credited with the invention of a school nowadays known as “Andalucian classical music”, an African-based “early music” form. (2009, 81–82)

Ziryab, therefore, in spite of the mythical nature of much of the evidence, can be said, almost like a national epic figure, to have single-handedly established the blackbird as a symbol of virtuosity in the arts and especially in music in the medieval Islamic world.

Whereas, in discussions of happiness/sadness, there is now this familiar connection between blackbirds, birds “singing” and enslaved blacks and their descendants in the Americas, there is no such connection between birds flying, dancing and Africans and their descendants in the Americas. Other than the belief in the transmigration of souls back to Africa, which could be associated with flying, the only other well-known image of black people flying is modern – African American versions, including Bob Marley’s reinterpretation, of Albert Brumley’s song “I’ll Fly Away” (“One bright morning when my work is over / Man will fly away home”). However, neither one of these specifically links flying to dancing.

There is today a “flying” image of the principal dancer of the American Ballet Theatre, African American Misty Copeland, deriving from her performance in Stravinsky’s ballet *Firebird* in which she is pictured flying like a “firebird”, which is also the title of her first book. The firebird, however, is a mythical feature of Russian culture and has little association with American or African cultures other than in the metaphorical sense of a distant, difficult, exotic goal to reach, which is partly expressed in the everyday phrase “flying high”.

“Flying high” and “having your feet on the ground” are two mutually exclusive images of living life. Whether it is in relation to Caribbean people now or in the net of slavery two to three hundred years ago, observers have had the same views about which of the two modes is virtuous and should be followed. Usually, those who think that moving away from “having your feet on the ground” is embarking on a vacuous path are vociferous in their condemnation. It is only when “flying high” is validated, as in the case of Misty Copeland, that most

people concede that dreams and aspirations should not be stymied with “logical” practicality. The chapter headings in this book refer to the era of slavery, but they are equally applicable to the Caribbean today as they systematically analyse the courage/cowardice and happiness/survival dilemmas provoked by play.

Colonial Caribbean societies were unusual in that they started as dependencies, with gender imbalances and with the majority of the populations being the property of or under the control of an ethnic minority. The fundamental problem in accurately visualizing the early colonies is that one has to interpret virtually everything through the words and images of the ethnic minority. At a time when there was a dearth of information but where new accounts sought to be comprehensive, cursory remarks in earlier accounts were often repeated with modifications or amplification to make them seem current. Also, there is no way of verifying the prominence or lack of prominence of any cultural characteristic – it could have been factual or illusory. There was no objectivity either in what caught the attention of one eyewitness as opposed to another or in what the person chose to write down, and there is no way of recovering omissions.

Primary or eyewitness writers had to find words to describe items that were unfamiliar to them. Even if they managed to discover the local word for an item, that in itself did not provide an explanation or picture of the item for the reader. They then resorted to comparisons with things presumed to be familiar to the reader and/or to define by explanation of structure, construction, function, use or by reference to authority. To complicate matters, historians, who sometimes depended on word-of-mouth reports, converted such items into their own image of them. This practice is apparent when early European illustrations of people and things unfamiliar to them at the time are compared with reality. “Borrowings” and omissions from the works of predecessors as well as translations across languages complicated matters even further.

The value given to eyewitness accounts as opposed to third-party accounts was not always of great importance to publishers, although there were differences between writers according to their training and intent. Moreover, the historical movement from ignorance to knowledge was not uniform across European countries or writers. There was violent disagreement among eyewitnesses from the very beginning, as was the case when Bartolomé de las Casas said of his Spanish compatriot Fernández de Oviedo: “Oviedo can say nothing big or

small because he was not capable either of seeing or understanding” (2011, 29).<sup>1</sup> Las Casas was of the view that understanding a people required being able to converse with them in their language, and this Oviedo could not do.

The French writers were mostly missionary-type priests who became immersed in the local culture. However, even among the French writers, competitiveness led to harsh words, as was the case when Labat summarily dismissed De Rochefort’s work, saying: “Minister Rochefort, who never saw the islands of America except through the eyes of others . . . since he copied Father Du Tertre, but he completely spoils his narrative by descriptions totally removed from the truth, in attempting to make things more pleasant and to hide his thievery” (Labat 1722, 1:xi–xii).

In the case of the British, those who were writing were mostly secular plantation types or people connected to the political and military administration of the colony or casual visitors who did not stay long enough to acquire a penetrating knowledge of the colonial culture. Some of these, like Trelawney Wentworth and James Phillippo, could be charged with the same “crimes” as Oviedo and De Rochefort in that they, without acknowledging it, included in their accounts with modifications and embellishments information that they copied from earlier writers.

In his introduction to the writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, Paul Hair says: “The attractiveness of Barbot’s printed account . . . has in no small part lain in its illustrations” (Hair, Jones and Law 1992, 1:xlvi). He goes on: “As he [Barbot] put it . . . : ‘my pencil has made some amends for the defects of my pen’” (1:li). However, since historical and social accounts were not dominated by illustrations, paradoxically, the few illustrations assumed greater importance as representations of reality and because they had memory value. Visions of colonial life were complemented by the works of those who drew or painted and produced their own versions of reality according to their political or religious intent or the likes and dislikes of patrons.

African slavery was the economic foundation upon which twentieth-century Europe was built and attempts to dismantle it were met with fiery opposition from many quarters, including several in Britain. Satire and caricature were used to bolster arguments on both sides and they became increasingly strident as the realization of the costs of dismantling slavery became more apparent. However, the problem with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British visual

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1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

satire dealing with slavery was that it increased the skewed images of life in the colonies and especially the image of the enslaved. Consider, in contrast, Auguste Raffet's visual presentation of the battle at Crête-à-Pierrot during the Haitian Revolution (see figure 1). Even though Raffet was a nationalistic Frenchman, his portrayal did not show a simplistic ridicule of black effort, for he foregrounds the Haitian soldiers as they overpower the French forces. It is by reproducing and commenting on such historical visual images that this book demonstrates the ways in which visual artists were like soldiers on one side or another of a cause.

In today's world, with the universal availability of the Internet and the explosion of social media, there are limitless possibilities of skewing visions of different people, practices and beliefs in the pursuit of power. Practices and beliefs are being given diametrically opposed valuations within and across cultures with the emphasis on converting souls to one's point of view, whether that be political, racial, religious or moral, by constructing attractive arguments. The struggle between honour (warrior) and happiness (non-warrior) will intensify because migration from former colonies or poor countries to First World countries will increase. Yet the same Internet and social media, by facilitating fluidity, creativity, interchange and transfer of a variety of ideas across the world among peers, will eventually break down negative territoriality at all levels in all countries. "Outside the box" music, dance and artistic entertainment generally will play an even greater role in facilitating the pursuit of happiness across the world than today and historically, especially in the lives of young people. Hopefully, in spite of the duplicity of imagery, the study of older colonial situations will help to lessen the problems of contemporary "colonisation in reverse" (Bennett 1966, 179–80).