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How to Read History: A Study of Interpreting Anglo-Caribbean Literature

Slavery in the 17th century Caribbean is a topic which in recent years, has been reexamined and discussed from a number new perspectives informed by contemporary culture and scholarship. Richard Ligon's *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbados* has found its place as an essential text from this period dealing with the issue of slavery and race relations, and is one which continues to be revisited by scholars and researchers today. In this essay, I will explore two different methods of approach to understanding Ligon for their advantages and drawbacks, and attempt to give voice to my own estimation of the correct way to read *A True & Exact History*, and by extension, how to study the past as a whole.

British exile-turned Barbadian plantation owner Richard Ligon published his account of the Caribbean island in 1657, just three decades after it was first established as an English sugar colony. His foremost goal in the text appears to be advertising the settlement and its economic potential to his countrymen across the Atlantic Ocean. He describes the flora, fauna, climate, and the inhabitants of the island in various sections, devoting a significant amount of attention to the enslaved African people on the island and their relationships to their white masters. In the distinctly briefer segment in which he speaks about the native inhabitants of Barbados, Ligon reports the much-replicated story of Inkle and Yarico, essentially a romance between an Englishman and a native Barbadian woman which has since served as a popular metaphor for European

imperialism. Many modern readers are often quick to identify Ligon as racist and sexist and to question his overall humanity, on account of the language he uses to describe the African slaves, especially women. However, recent scholarship on early Caribbean literature suggests that we be not so hasty in our condemnation of Richard Ligon and his peers.

In her essay "History Beside the Fact: What We Learn from *A True and Exact History of Barbadoes*" from the collection *Readings at the Edge of Literature*, literary scholar Myra Jehlen challenges readers of Ligon to re-contextualize his *True & Exact History*. She attacks revisionist readings of Ligon, which she argues limit our view of not only the text, but of history and the present itself. In combatting this methodology of reading history, Jehlen suggests to modern readers a new way of looking at Ligon: actually de-contextualizing it and attempting to read it simply for what it is. She suggests that we suspend our judgment of Ligon for not harboring the same revulsion to slavery that we do today, and to an extent advocates the notion that he was merely a product of his time, so to speak. She grounds this idea in intense close-readings of specific passages from *A True and Exact History*, in which she unpacks Ligon's syntax and punctuation that demonstrate his inner conflict in what he is writing. One of her most notable dissections is of the sentence: "For the most of them are as [sic] neer beasts as may be, setting their souls aside."[1] Jehlen argues that the way the comma splits up the sentence and awkwardness of the second half of it reveal how Ligon amends his narrative mid-thought, and show that he actually does consider the inhumanity of exploiting people who

[1] Richard Ligon, "*A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados,"* in *Caribbeana*, ed. Thomas W. Krise (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 18.

have souls.[2] Often, *A True & Exact History* is used and thought of in terms of portraying English conceptions of the Caribbean and of slaves as a whole, but Jehlen challenges us to assume Ligon's perspective while reading his history, and invites us to consider the effect of the episodes in the text on Ligon himself and the implications that this has in our understanding. Her overarching mission is an honorable one: to impel us to question how we read, write, and talk about history. However, looking so closely at the text itself makes it easy to carelessly discount various helpful contexts, one of which is described by Heidi Oberholtzer Lee.

Similarly to Jehlen, Lee acknowledges the difference between today and the 17th century in how race and racial differences are recognized and spoken about. However, she takes this a step further than Jehlen, and presents us with a concrete category through which she suggests that writers wrote and conceived of racial difference: gastronomy. She puts forth that Ligon and other authors wrote in a code of appetite and culinary violence when discussing race relations, and through this language, express the fear that the cruelty perpetuated by plantation owners and masters would ultimately lead to the degradation of the entire white race. According to Lee, this is especially present in the violent descriptions of hunting, slaughtering, and consumption of human-like animals, (she names turtles and sharks specifically) that permeate early literature from the Caribbean. Lee suggests that the animals being killed and eaten are used as a metaphor for black slaves, exhibiting the structure of absolute power and relative helplessness in the relationships between slave owners and slaves. The sympathy that Ligon and others

[2]Myra Jehlen, "History Beside the Fact: What We Learn from *A True and Exact History of Barbadoes*," in *Readings at the Edge of Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 182.

express when relating the pain of these animals is an outlet, she argues, for the sympathy that they feel for African slaves.

However, what Lee fails to see is that imposing this kind of category comes with its own issues: namely, the risk of introducing ideas into the text which are not clearly present there. In making Ligon work for her argument, rather than working to understand and analyze Ligon himself, Lee creates erroneously grounded claims, which actually detract from our understanding of Ligon. She contends that compared to other Englishmen writing about slavery in the Caribbean, Richard Ligon's account was relatively benign. She views the degree of sympathy he directs to the enslaved population as stemming from his experience of so-called similar abuses as a former prisoner in England, writing that he "proposes the amelioration of cruel slaveholding practices in order to curb slave desire for justice and mastery and to preserve the lives of slave owners."[3] However, nowhere in *A True & Exact History* does Richard Ligon suggest that slaves receive better treatment, or even acknowledge that what they live through might be less than pleasant. Instead, he makes the case that the white indentured servants living on the island are the ones who are worst off, and that the African slaves are actually "a happy people, whom so little contents."[4] In spite of this misleading conclusion, Lee's overall argument is compelling: that the texts of Ligon and other white authors exude the fear that white desire and appetite in the Caribbean were beginning to border cannibalism, thus blurring the line between Angle-Saxon civilization and savagery.

[3]Heidi Oberholtzer Lee, "Turtle Tears and Captive Appetites: The Problem of White Desire in the Caribbean," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 35 (Fall 2005): 314, doi: 10.1353/jnt.2006.0014.
[4] Richard Ligon, *"A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados",* 18.

Heidi Lee's essay, while it does not contain a direct retort to Jehlen, can, in a number of ways, be read as a counter to it in the ongoing debate as to how we should read history. Jehlen says we should limit the context with which we read texts such as this one; just three years later, almost as if in response, Lee imagines her own incredibly niche context through which she reads Ligon. Both authors, however, in spite of their differing methods, are attempting to do the same work: that is, to challenge us in the way we think about and talk about history. Jehlen urges us to start adjusting the ways in which we narrativize the past, and rather than attempting to provide our own chronicle to describe events through a specified lens, instructs us to read *A True & Exact History* simply as that; Lee outrightly rejects this theory in offering her gastronomic angle of looking at the Caribbean in the 17th century. Through their separate models, however, both authors let Ligon off the hook, I argue, a little too easily: they both acknowledge the unfairness and kind of irrationality in judging Ligon and other colonial authors by modern standards of humanity and racial difference. Jehlen, from her close-reading, emerges with a vision of Richard Ligon's racism as a consequence of his environment. Lee, on the other hand, by reading *A True & Exact History* through her culinary lens and promoting the perception that turtles and sharks in Anglo-Caribbean literature were meant to be symbolic of slaves, sees Ligon as not necessarily abolitionist, but at the very least opposed to the way that slavery was practiced in Barbados. It seems to me, however, somewhat unsatisfactory to simply brush off Ligon's explicit racism on the grounds that that was the norm in his time. So as 21st-century readers, what are we supposed to make of this? Ultimately, the question addressed by Jehlen and Lee of how we are to

understand Ligon speaks to the broader challenge of how to best and most accurately read historical literature.

Many readers' desire for facts and certainty will lead them to search for a definitive answer on how to read *A True & Exact History*—one in between the two extreme frameworks we see being used by Myra Jehlen and Heidi Oberholzer Lee. One aspires to an understanding of the text that goes further than Jehlen, who suggests that we de-contextualize it and attempt to simply read it for what it is, but is not quite as narrow as Lee, whose only somewhat successful attempt to use it as evidence for her re-contextualized culinary argument risks warping what the text actually says. I argue that rather than searching for only one answer, it is helpful to read Ligon with both notions in mind, using a sort of spectrum of contexts in order to get the most complete picture of what he stood for in his writing. We will never know what Richard Ligon actually thought about slavery and racial differences, besides what he explicitly says in his writing. Jehlen and Lee present two, among many, different ways of reading the text, which each have their inherent merits and issues. Not a single one, by itself, is better than the others, and I contend that to only look at one of them would be to get an incomplete understanding of the text. Thus, I maintain that it is through a combination of these various contexts that we study Richard Ligon, and the past as a whole. I realize this theory sounds idealistic, and that it is perhaps impossible for one scholar alone to offer a complete analysis of Ligon, or any other author of the past. It is for this reason, though, that we must look at *A True & Exact History of the Island of Barbados* from as many angles as possible, while not putting too much stock into a single one.