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# Remaking of Race and Labor in British Guiana and Louisiana: 1830-1880

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# REMAKING OF RACE AND LABOR IN BRITISH GUIANA AND LOUISIANA

1830 - 1880

by

AMANDA GAIL LEWIS

Under the Direction of Dr. Michele Reid-Vazquez

## ABSTRACT

During the nineteenth century, the Gulf of Mexico fostered the movement of people, ideas, and news throughout the surrounding regions. Although each colony and state surrounding the basin had distinct cultures and traditions, they shared the legacy of slavery and emancipation. This study examines the transformation of labor that occurred for sugar planters in British Guiana and southern Louisiana during the age of emancipation. In this comparative project, I argue that in the 1830s planters from the British West Indies set the trajectory for solutions to the labor problem by curtailing the freedom of former slaves with Asian contract labor. Those in the sugar parishes of southern Louisiana followed this same framework in the 1860s yet it led to different outcomes. The nature of the circum-Caribbean provided opportunities for planters throughout the Gulf to observe the Asian indentured system and use a form of it in their distinct societies.

**INDEX WORDS:** Emancipation, Atlantic world, Caribbean, British Guiana, Louisiana, Labor, Sugar industry, Asian contract labor, Freedom, Slavery

REMAKING OF RACE AND LABOR IN BRITISH GUIANA AND LOUISIANA

1830 - 1880

by

AMANDA GAIL LEWIS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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2011

REMAKING OF RACE AND LABOR IN BRITISH GUIANA AND LOUISIANA

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## DEDICATION

*To my parents, for your steadfast and unwavering support and love*

*To Aunt Jerry, your life inspired me to pursue my passion for academic excellence*

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## INTRODUCTION

Arriving in British Guiana in 1840, sugar proprietor, Barton Premium, found his plantation in ruins after the end of slavery. He wrote in his journal, “The greatest consternation now prevails over the colony, in consequences of the cessation from labour which has occurred on the universal adoption of the rate of wages...”<sup>1</sup> An absentee owner, Premium traveled to his plantation in an attempt to salvage his estate after the Emancipation Act of 1834. His primary concern was that with the loss of slave labor, the sugar colony would collapse. Meanwhile, hundreds of miles away across the Gulf of Mexico, sugar owners in southern Louisiana watched British Caribbean planters, such as Premium, try to produce sugar without slaves throughout the 1830s and 1840s. The tone of Premium’s journal entries at the beginning of the 1850s changed as sugar owners began transporting South Asian Indians and Chinese indentured laborers to work in the sugar fields. By 1865, white elites in British Guiana slowly revived their plantation economy with Asian workers, while those in southern Louisiana were experiencing the acute problems associated with emancipation. I argue that southern Louisiana planters were heavily influenced by the larger discourse regarding the labor problem occurring throughout the circum-Caribbean and the Atlantic World. My study of British Guiana and southern Louisiana will demonstrate how planters throughout the region constructed freedom and realigned labor and race relations in post-emancipation societies.

Recently, the aftermath of hurricane Katrina uncovered the forgotten geographical similarities between Guyana and southern Louisiana.<sup>2</sup> Located around the Gulf of Mexico, both regions share a similar topography and climate. People throughout the two areas experienced dev-

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<sup>1</sup> Barton Premium, *Eight Years in British Guiana*, (London: Longman, Brown, and Green, 1876), 99.

<sup>2</sup> This paper focuses on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Guyana was a colony. When referring to the colonial period I will use the label, British Guiana. When speaking of the period after the independence movement in 1966, I will recognize its national identity as Guyana.

astating floods during the hurricane leaving thousands homeless. These overlooked correlations were much more evident in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Slavery, race, and labor forged common bonds among sugar planters throughout the Caribbean basin, including British Guiana and southern Louisiana. I use the comparative approach to explore the connections and distinctions of the historical experience between planters in Guiana and southern Louisiana during the transition from slavery to emancipation.

The end of slavery threatened the very institution sugar owners relied on to support their plantation economies, leaving many confronting economic devastation. It also forced them to remake their master-slave relationship with their workers into an employer-employee affiliation, which they tried to avoid. This project challenges historians to consider the connections between Louisiana and the wider circum-Caribbean, specifically British Guiana. First, many scholars do not include Guiana in their concept of the Gulf Basin because of its geographical location in South America. Many frequently overlook the ways the plantation economies of the colony and other circum-Caribbean societies relied on sugar to maintain their prosperity and how white elites throughout resented the difficulties of hiring freed slaves. Second, sugar planters in both regions recognized the potential benefits of Asian contract labor, beginning with those in Guiana, which provided a labor source and system for planters in southern Louisiana to consider and debate. Third, I argue that the frameworks and ideologies supporting the different models of Asian labor connected sugar proprietors in both locales.

Planters in Guiana and southern Louisiana experienced similar obstacles as they tried to recover from the labor problem. Highlighting the common geographical features of both areas uncovers an important comparable factor. In both areas, the coasts provided rich soil for producing sugar, but the climate and water currents also created torrents of rain that threatened the sta-

bility of sugar plantations. Proprietors in Guiana and southern Louisiana depended on slaves to dig ditches and maintain levees to irrigate crops and prevent flooding. After the end of slavery, most black laborers refused to work on dams and dikes even if they remained on the sugar estates. This left landowners without any means to protect their valuable commodity. The majority of former slaves in British Guiana left the sugar estates, leaving planters with no means to maintain the cane. In Louisiana, many former slaves continued to work on the plantations but would choose the tasks they would perform, leaving planters with workers but flooded plantations. The end of slavery not only stripped planters of control over their laborers, but also heightened their need to find workers who they could force to perform essential tasks to protect the crop. I will illustrate how this shared experience played an important role in the way both master classes restructured their labor systems.<sup>3</sup>

This project reveals how the political circumstances, the relationship between freedmen<sup>4</sup> and planters, and the eventual Asian contract labor models used to alleviate the labor problem produced different outcomes in Guiana and southern Louisiana. Although these sugar landowners lived in different political climates and interacted freed slaves in distinct ways, they all wanted to create a “free” labor system that would keep the masses powerless and in poverty. Both planter classes aspired to find a labor system where they could avoid paying former slaves like white workers and do so without treating them as equals. Illuminating the distinct political systems is crucial in order to understand why planters in Guiana had more success in establishing

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Follett, *Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 2005); John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 2001); Carlyle Sitterson, *Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South, 1753-1950* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1953); Alan H. Adamson, *Sugar without Slaves: The Political Economy of British Guiana, 1838 – 1904* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972); Jay Mandle, *The Plantation Economy: Population and Economic Change in Guyana 1838-1960* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> I will alternate between the terms freedmen, African Americans (when referring to those in the US) and Afro-Guianans (when referring to blacks in Guiana) and blacks to avoid confusion and emphasize the sharp distinction after slavery).

Asian contract labor than those in Louisiana. In the beginning, Parliament regulated Asian coolie<sup>5</sup> labor and set regulations that prevented sugar owners from remaking the economy and reclaiming white hegemony. As a unified group, proprietors in the British Caribbean pressured Parliament for more power to dictate the terms of indentured labor. The imperial government recognized the importance of sugar in the economy and ultimately allowed planters to control the labor system. In southern Louisiana, during Radical Reconstruction, the Republican national government prevented planters from using a form of Asian contract labor on their sugar estates. Officials were determined that free labor after emancipation would meet their expectations and ideals. They assumed that African American workers would be paid like other laborers and create their own lives economically and socially. This made it challenging for Louisiana landowners to structure migrant labor into a model that they could completely dictate. A major issue that proprietors in southern Louisiana wrestled with was trying to distinguish the term coolie from contract labor. In the US, the meanings of immigrant and slave were widely debated and planters had to continually prove that they did not treat hired Chinese workers as slaves. The distinct political structures that the planter classes lived under affected their efforts to construct a labor system that they could control. I will emphasize that the colonial relationship between landowners in Guiana and Parliament officials provided them opportunities to take advantage of coolie labor. However, in Louisiana the national government limited their flexibility to remake their society. This is a significant factor that shows the important impact of the distinct circumstances in each region.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> During this time period, white planters referred to Asian immigrants as “coolies”. This term has a derogatory connotation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and did during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well. Planters used this label to degrade Asian workers. However, in my paper when I quote from sources I will leave the term “coolie.” To emphasize the racial, social, and economic oppression that Chinese and Indian immigrants faced during this period I will refer to them as “coolies” or as “contract laborers.”

<sup>6</sup> William, Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cam-

Comparing the two models of contract labor that sugar planters in Guiana and southern Louisiana implemented is one important facet of this project. In the British colony, planters structured a rigid contract system. Chinese migrants became indentured servants and their seven to eight-year contracts contained strict conditions that bound them under the authority of the planter class. Sugar proprietors used violence and threats in response to South Asian Indians and Chinese who challenged the terms of their indenture. Asians were not simply workers but coolies, oppressed and manipulated by their masters and treated like slaves. In the US, planters could not use a form of “contract” labor because it was forbidden by law. However, they tried to structure labor to resemble the contract system but the work agreements had no legal authority. Although I will refer to the Louisiana model of Asian labor as “contract labor,” the written agreements between planters and Chinese in the sugar parishes did not carry the same power as they did in Guiana. In Louisiana, planters tried to persuade Chinese workers that they had to obey their contracts. However, when laborers showed resistance, proprietors could do little to enforce the stipulations of their work agreements. Unlike planters in British Guiana, those in southern Louisiana had to balance the problem of convincing Chinese to adhere to their work contracts and, at the same time, proving to the federal government that the contract system did not resemble British Caribbean contract labor. The hope was to complicate the boundary between slavery and freedom. Sugar planters in southern Louisiana believed that a form of coolie labor accommodating to the circumstances in the US would resurrect the sugar industry and “antebellum glory.” The goals of both models of Chinese labor, to maintain political hegemony and reestablish

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bridge University Press, 1995); Trev Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers: Chinese Indentured Immigrants in Guyana*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Vancouver, B.C Cane Press, 2003); Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1910* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Moon-Ho Jung *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Lucy Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without a History* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1984).

labor that resembled chattel slavery, were the same. This project illuminates the reasons why the system succeeded in Guiana and, ultimately, failed in southern Louisiana.<sup>7</sup>

This study will contribute to the scholarship of how white elites attempted to remake the political order and maintain white hegemony by changing the structure and conditions of labor to adjust to emancipation. I focus on the relationship between the transformation of labor during the end of slavery and the changes in race relations from the perspective of the white elite class. By tracing the distinct ways that the two models of Asian labor affected British Guiana and southern Louisiana, this project examines how the labor systems changed in the post-emancipation era. Comparing these two regions, where the elite experienced the end of slavery at different moments during the nineteenth century is compelling because it shows how planters throughout the circum-Caribbean impacted one another as they wrestled with the changes of freedom, labor, and race. Emancipation created similar basic problems for both master classes. What is significant are the ways planters in each region agreed upon a similar solution to the labor problem and yet it worked itself out in diverse ways.

As upheld by historian Alan Adamson in *Sugar Without Slaves*, planters in Guiana successfully constructed an oppressive and manipulative plantation political economy after emancipation. I contend that planters in southern Louisiana implemented many facets of this system in their society. In addition, although planters in British Guiana and southern Louisiana reestablished hegemony by controlling political and economic affairs and by disseminating their cultural norms, I posit that Asian immigrant workers and freed slaves protected their cultural traditions,

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Rugemer, *The Problem with Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War*. (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2008); Moon-Ho Jung *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation*, 5-6, 13, 37, 110, 145. Jung argues that coolies were never a people or a legal category but a conglomeration of racial imaginings that emerged worldwide in the era of slave emancipation, “a product of the imaginers rather than the imagined.” Asians did not fit into the racial categories of white or black, which also provided planters with opportunities to challenge the ideas behind emancipation.

which allowed them to guard their social mores. In both locales, the age of emancipation created an economic and an ideological crisis for white planters. How could they maintain low labor costs and successfully compete in the global sugar industry without slave labor? How could they create a new labor system that reproduced previous social hierarchies?<sup>8</sup>

Planters and proslavery advocates believed that emancipation would create complex questions about the meaning of freedom, race and labor. The end of the Haitian Revolution in 1804 proved, on the one hand, that free blacks and slaves could appropriate Enlightenment ideas to secure their own personal and political autonomy. On the other hand, a liberated colony under the control of free people of color created fears throughout the Gulf and strengthened pressure for emancipation in the Caribbean. Beginning in 1833 with the British Empire, slavery was gradually abolished throughout the circum-Caribbean. Between 1848 and 1863 the French, Danish, and Dutch empires prohibited slavery. Sugar planters in southern Louisiana avoided emancipation until 1865, leaving Cuba, Brazil as the remaining slaveholding societies in the New World. The master classes throughout these societies encountered the same general problems and questions about how to redefine freedom and adjust to a free labor system. During this “age,” white elites, officials, planters, black intellectuals, and freed slaves struggled to implement their ideas of freedom and apply a practical approach to labor. Questions arose regarding if freedom for former slaves included political rights and ownership of land.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This research offers new insights into the ways the idea and implementation of Chinese contract labor affected southern Louisiana, Guiana and the greater Gulf Basin. It also examines the diverging paths that the political and social identities of Guiana and southern Louisiana changed after Chinese immigration.

<sup>9</sup> David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* eds. David Armitage and Daniel Braddick (New York: Palgrave, 2002); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage the Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, eds. *From Slavery to Emancipation in the Atlantic World* (London: Frank Cass, 1999); Eric Foner, “The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation,” *Journal of American History* 81 (September 1994), 435-460; Demetrius Eudell, *The Political Languages of Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the US South* (Chapel Hill: University

I concentrate on the ways that these two specific societies, British Guiana and southern Louisiana, fit into the larger narrative of the age of emancipation. Although the Gulf of Mexico was a part of a larger dynamic community, the basin contained numerous port cities vital to the entire Atlantic World. The region, referred to as the circum-Caribbean, was a hub of trans-Atlantic commerce, and the production of commodities, including sugar, made the area an important part of the trade network. Furthermore, the connectivity of the Gulf created opportunities for planters to travel and exchange ideas. Port cities, such as New Orleans, Havana, Georgetown, and Kingston, were vibrant, multi-cultural centers where residents and travelers interacted with one another, encountering foreign cultures and traditions. Established shipping routes provided people access to information regarding events and circumstances occurring throughout the Gulf. As merchants traveled throughout port cities, they relayed news and shared ideas. A proliferating variety of local and regional reading publications scattered across the circum-Caribbean informed white elites of the economic and political climate throughout the region. Print media proved vital during the age of emancipation because it kept planters and white elites up-to-date about how emancipation was affecting the region. Shipping routes, port cities, and the print media created a network for sugar planters to better understand the changing dynamics of freedom, labor, and race during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup>

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of North Carolina Press, 2002); Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2008), Introduction; Edward Rugeimer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War*; Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Juanita De Barros, *Order and Place in a Colonial City: Patterns of Struggle and Resistance in Georgetown, British Guiana, 1889-1924* (Montreal: McGill-Queens's University Press, 2002); David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History"; Alison Games, "Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities" *American Historical Review* 111.3 (June 2006), 741-57.



Examining distinct circumstances and processes during the age of emancipation in British Guiana and southern Louisiana reveal the reasons why planters believed Chinese workers would alleviate labor problems. With these aims in mind, sugar owners hoped to replace former slave laborers, invigorate the sugar economy, and reinforce the status of the white planter elite. Sugar proprietors in the British West Indies initiated the transportation and operation of the coolie system in the Gulf. With the framework in place, the movement of people, ideas, and culture fostered by the circum-Caribbean allowed white landowners throughout the basin to implement, observe and understand the advantages and disadvantages of Asian indentured labor. Although the cultures and circumstances in both regions were distinct, the Gulf allowed landowners in Guiana and southern Louisiana, located hundreds of miles apart, to participate in the larger conversation about the problems of race and labor in the post-emancipation era.<sup>11</sup>

The complexity of the Caribbean and its role in the age of emancipation has fascinated scholars. Many have used the comparative method when exploring the social and racial challenges that individuals and groups in post emancipation societies faced throughout the circum-Caribbean, including Rebecca Scott and Roderick McDonald. The technique allows historians to emphasize the connectedness and distinctiveness of the region. The comparisons show the connections between the experiences of planters throughout the Gulf and the impact that they had upon one another. In *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba After Slavery*, Rebecca Scott reveals the multifaceted push and pull that politics and “race” had on the efforts of whites and individuals of African descent to establish economic, social, and cultural autonomy in Louisiana and Cuba. In his work, *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves: Goods and Chattels on the Sugar Plantations of Jamaica and Louisiana*, scholar Roderick McDonald compares the two

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<sup>11</sup> Juanita DeBarros, Audra Depte and David Trotman eds. *Beyond Fragmentation: Perspectives on Caribbean History* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006).

sugar plantation economies of Jamaica and Louisiana and emphasizes the similarities as slaves created their own culture and world outside the plantation. Both scholars examine aspects of Louisiana 19<sup>th</sup> century history and compare it with regions, such as Cuba and Jamaica, in the circum-Caribbean, with the understanding that planters in southern Louisiana and those throughout the Caribbean encountered similar situations during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. I seek to expand these comparative models to Louisiana and British Guiana using the key factors of labor and emancipation that permeated the Gulf region.<sup>12</sup>

Following a similar structural approach to Scott and McDonald, I trace the experiences of the master class in Guiana and southern Louisiana to uncover how they remade the labor system after the end of slavery to regain white hegemony. The unbalanced historiographies of these regions, highlights the challenges and significance of this study. There are few monographs that explore the impact that the process of emancipation had on the colony of British Guiana. Foundational studies include Alan Adamson's monograph, *Sugar without Slaves: The Political Economy of British Guiana, 1838-1904*, a structural analysis describing the changes that occurred in British Guiana in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Jay Mandle's book, *The Plantation Economy: Population and Economic Change in Guyana 1838-1960*, which focuses on the ways the colony's plantation economy shifted from sugar to rice. Adamson argues how the master class managed to subvert the development of post-emancipation society in Guiana by dominating the legislature and economy. Mandle adds to Adamson's work by stating that the exploitation in the plantation economy led to the problems in Guyana during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reactions of the planter class in the post-emancipation era had long-term significance. Historians Brian Moore and Juanita De Barros also provide important contributions to the transformations that occurred in Guiana during

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<sup>12</sup> Roderick McDonald, *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves: Goods and Chattels on the Sugar Plantations of Jamaica and Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1993); Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. In *Cultural Power, Resistance, and Pluralism*, Moore analyzes the ways the minority of white elites forced their cultural values on the non-white majority to support British imperial policies. He argues that the Victorian values and traditions of the white elite provided the colonists with a tool of power over the peasantry. White elites imposed their culture in indirect ways with the belief that their traditions needed to be the standard in the colony. Moore argues that cultural exchanges occurred which created a Euro-Creole society. Shifting focus from elites to subalterns, De Barros, in *Order and Place in a Colonial City*, contends that in the capital of Georgetown, blacks did not completely succumb to white authority but challenged it by transforming public places creating social tension. This was a way the blacks formed their own lives by claiming areas of the city as their own. While Moore and De Barros offer two distinct perspectives on the roles of the white minority and the black peasantry, I explore how the internal tensions between the white planters and freed slaves created a labor problem that led planters to recruit thousands of Asian workers. There are a limited number of monographs that explore 19<sup>th</sup> century British Guiana during the post-emancipation era. I seek to add to the historiography by connecting the distinct circumstances in the colony to the regional labor problem that united planters in Guiana with those throughout the British West Indies and the circum-Caribbean.<sup>13</sup>

Sugar planters in southern Louisiana also depended on slavery to support their social and economic hierarchy, as evidenced by the extensive scholarly literature that addresses these issues. Without wealth from sugar production, a small white elite class would never have had the opportunity to assert their cultural and social dominance, as historian Richard Follett argues in

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<sup>13</sup> Alan H. Adamson, *Sugar without Slaves: The Political Economy of British Guiana*; Brian Moore, *Cultural Power, Resistance, and Pluralism: Colonial Guyana, 1838 – 1900*, (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); Juanita De Barros, *Order and Place in a Colonial City: Patterns of Struggle and Resistance in Georgetown, British Guiana, 1889-1924* (Montreal: McGill-Queens's University Press, 2002).

his work, *Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World: 1820-1860*. Most of the rich historiography about 19<sup>th</sup> century Louisiana, however, including scholarship by historians Ted Tunnel and Joe Taylor, concentrates on the political transformations during Reconstruction. Additionally, many scholars recognize that the questions regarding the rights a former slave had as a laborer was a key debate after the Civil War. Historians William Messner and James Roark provide general analyses of the labor problem as masters lost their control over slaves, beginning in the Civil War to the transition to emancipation. While Messner and Roark layout a framework for understanding the significance of this process, there is little scholarship that concentrates solely on the changes that occurred specifically in the sugar parishes and connects the experiences of Louisiana planters with those in the greater Gulf Basin.<sup>14</sup>

One valuable work that has contributed to the historiography about the sugar parishes of Louisiana is John Rodrigue's *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes: 1862-1880*. He argues that after emancipation the particular demands of Louisiana sugar production provided freedmen bargaining power with planters over labor conditions. He explores pivotal issues, such as the reorganization of the labor system and the struggle for decision-making power on plantations. Freed slaves used their skills of sugar production and their political empowerment during Radical Reconstruction as leverage in disputes with planters over wages and labor conditions. Rodrigue focuses on the agency of former slaves even as they continued to labor on plantations and it explores the difficulties that planters encountered during emancipation. In my project, I also address the role of black political power

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Follett, *Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860*; Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed 1863-1877*, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1974); Ted Tunnel, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: LSU University Press, 1984); William Messner, *Freedmen and the Ideology of Free Labor: Louisiana 1862-186* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1981); James Roark, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977).

as planters tried to adapt to the labor problem. Instead of focusing solely on the relationship between freed slaves and sugar landowners, however, I examine how the frustrations with freed slaves pushed proprietors to consider other labor systems. I extend Rodrigue's analysis of internal racial dynamics in the area to address how the larger circum-Caribbean discourse regarding the meanings of race and labor affected Louisiana sugar planters.<sup>15</sup>

My project will add to the contemporary historiography on Louisiana by connecting the struggles that sugar planters encountered with the labor problem to their response to transport Chinese workers. I trace the transition that occurred due to the end of slavery and investigate further by connecting the experiences of Louisiana proprietors with those throughout the basin. In doing so, I argue that the impact of emancipation in the US South must be explored in a national and regional perspective. Furthermore, Radical Reconstruction in the American South was not a self-contained endeavor; it had circum-Caribbean origins. As Edward Rugemer contends in *The Problem of Emancipation*, the circumstances occurring throughout the Caribbean and Gulf Basin played a major factor in the cause of the Civil War. I seek to further his analysis by demonstrating that the ways other planters throughout the Gulf were approaching the labor problem significantly impacted planters in southern Louisiana during Radical Reconstruction. As Matthew Guterl argues, in *The American Mediterranean*, examining the lives and relationships of the master classes throughout the circum-Caribbean is vital to understanding the transformations in the power dynamics during the age of emancipation. Using the primary sources available, particularly planter diaries, travel narratives, and government documents, I seek to

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<sup>15</sup> John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes 1862-1880* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 2001).

show how planters viewed freed slaves and Chinese laborers as they constructed new economic, social and racial orders after emancipation.<sup>16</sup>

By comparing the historical experiences in British Guiana and southern Louisiana during the age of emancipation, it is evident that the encounters and reactions of planters in the British West Indies established a baseline for discussion and action about the labor problem throughout the circum-Caribbean. Exploring the similarities between the two regions reveals the shared issues that white elites confronted as emancipation transformed their societies, particularly how to maintain established racial hierarchies while remaking the labor system. Black resistance compelled hundreds of planters to recruit Chinese and South Asian Indian migrant laborers.<sup>17</sup> I explore the internal transformations in the sugar plantation economies of British Guiana and southern Louisiana during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, while also placing the two narratives within the larger framework of the implications of Asian indentured labor had in the Gulf. This is an innovative approach that compares and connects the significance of race relations, labor and emancipation in British Guiana and Louisiana.<sup>18</sup>

As planters entered a world “without the whip,” they began replacing their former slaves with Asian laborers.<sup>19</sup> Although this important factor, which joined these two distinct societies transitioning from slavery to a new economic and social system, has only recently become a subject of great interest. More scholars are beginning to recognize the significance of Asian indentured labor. Historian David Northrup in *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-*

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<sup>16</sup> John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes 1862-1880*; Edward Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War*; Matthew Guterl, *American Mediterranean, Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation*.

<sup>17</sup> Indians from the British colony, India migrated to British Guiana. I will refer to them as Indians from South Asia, South Asians, and Indians.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Guterl, “After Slavery: Asian Labor, the American South, and the Age of Emancipation,” *Journal of World History*, 14 (June., 2003), 209-241.

<sup>19</sup> Sidney Mintz, introduction to *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918* by Walton Look Lai, xxii.

1922 provides an important survey of the conditions and ideas behind Asian indentureship throughout the British Empire. He stresses the importance of the global flow of labor and compares the structure of chattel slavery to the Asian coolie system. Arguing that the end of slavery of chattel slavery did not create a “free” labor system, Northrup contends that planters constructed different ways of producing sugar cheaply. With his general analysis, many scholars recognize that planters transported Asians, but most do not examine the agency of the Chinese and South Asian Indians and the effects that they had in the Gulf. West Indian historians such as Walton Look Lai and Trev Sue-A-Quan examine the indentured systems of coolie labor and the lives of these people in British Guiana and the West Indies. The works of Moon-Ho Jung and Lucy Cohen uncover the narrative of planter ideology as they implemented Chinese migrant labor and give voice to the Chinese, who experienced life on sugar plantations in Louisiana. These historians focus more on the Asian immigrant worker experience distinctly in each region; this project seeks to compare and contrast the experiences of these laborers. The planters in the British West Indies set the framework for using Asian contract laborers to replace slavery, which influenced southern Louisiana planters as they began to fear emancipation. The arrival of thousands of Asian workers in the British West Indies instigated important questions that fostered a debate throughout the circum-Caribbean about the boundary between slavery and freedom. What was the legal status of Indian and Chinese laborers? Were they immigrants choosing to migrate or coerced into neo-slavery? The ambiguity of the differences between coolie and immigrant provided space for sugar planters to justify and exploit Asian workers.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Trev Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers: Chinese Indentured Immigrants in Guyana*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Vancouver, B.C. Cane Press, 2003); Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1910* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Moon-Ho Jung *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Lucy Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without a History* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1984).

The similar issues but distinct ways that planters in British Guiana and southern Louisiana confronted the problems of remaking race and labor sheds light on the ways white elites, planters, and officials throughout the Gulf struggled to maintain the established racial and economic norms. The conversation that developed among sugar proprietors throughout the region escalated as they sought profitable ways to adjust to a “free” wage labor system. Exploring the dynamics of the transition from slavery to Asian labor requires moving beyond national and imperial histories and recognizing the important interactions between people of distinct traditions living in different political and social environments. Sugar owners in British Guiana and southern Louisiana capitalized on the ways the permeability of borders on the regional and transnational level provided opportunities to confront the labor problem. Examining the age of emancipation from these perspectives emphasizes the influences of the relationships among planters, blacks and Asian immigrants. Simultaneously, this approach acknowledges that the movement of people, commodities, and ideas promoted by circum-Caribbean networks did not remove the social and deep-rooted distinctiveness of British Guiana and southern Louisiana but rather fostered support among white elites throughout the region after the end of slavery.<sup>21</sup>

*Remaking Race and Labor* narrates the comparison between British Guiana and Louisiana chronologically. The study begins in the 1820s with the rise of sugar in southern Louisiana and continues with the end of slavery in the British West Indies in the 1830s and in the US in the 1860s. It ends in the 1880s, as planters in British Guiana rebuilt their plantation economy and the divergent path that occurred in Louisiana with the unsuccessful use of Chinese contract labor.

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<sup>21</sup> Studies that support this argument are Christine Skwiot and Matthew Guterl, “Atlantic and Pacific Crossings: Race, Empire and ‘the Labor Problem’ in the Late Nineteenth Century” in *The Radical Historical Review* 91 (2005); Demetrius Eudell, *The Political Languages on Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the US South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).; Michele Reid-Vazquez, *The Year of the Lash: Free People of Color in Cuba and the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, forthcoming); Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).



Chapter one describes the panic that occurred among white planters in British Guiana as they lost control of their labor force and witnessed sugar production plummet. White elites in Guiana, living in the only colony that was not an island in the British West Indies, encountered distinct problems. This chapter traces the challenges of the topography, the impact of border disputes, and the withdrawal of the black peasant class from the plantations in Guiana. It also shows how white elites, colonial officials, and planters throughout the colony handled the labor problem. The idea of using Asian indentured workers connected planters throughout the British colonies as they faced government interference and resistance. Furthermore, a desire among colonial planters for policy change in migration legislation united white elites. Believing that Asian immigrants would be good replacements for slaves, landowners in British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica also hoped that these workers would be an example of an industrious and respectful people for former slaves to emulate. Furthermore, Asian laborers could act as a racial buffer to prevent the black peasant majority from threatening economic and political autonomy of the white elite. Landowners in British Guiana joined this ongoing conversation about the advantages of recruiting Asian contract laborers as a way to maintain their way of life and revive the sugar industry.<sup>22</sup>

Chapter two explores the influences that the British response to the labor problem had on southern Louisiana planters during Radical Reconstruction. The age of emancipation forced sugar planters to restructure their labor system. They had to negotiate wages with their former slaves, who used their political agency to demand better working opportunities. The routines and lives of many former slaves did not drastically change when slavery was abolished but they re-

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<sup>22</sup> David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism*; Trev Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers: Chinese Indentured Immigrants in Guyana*; Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1910*; Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

fused to allow planters to dictate the terms of their labor. African American political leaders believed emancipation gave freedmen and women the right to choose where, when, and how they would work. The rise of conflict between planters and African Americans about the terms of labor drove many planters to hire immigrant workers. I will analyze the impact that the introduction of Chinese immigrant workers had on the planter class. Many sugar owners traveled throughout the circum-Caribbean and Europe seeking advice and ideas of how to implement a labor system similar to chattel slavery. Although contract labor was not an option for planters in Louisiana they navigated different options to create a labor system that centered on a similar framework. Even though thousands more Chinese migrated to British Guiana than to Louisiana, I will examine the ways that the planters in both regions adjusted to a free labor system, particularly focusing on how they manipulated and exploited both freed slaves and other non-white laborers.<sup>23</sup>

The comparison comes together by examining the outcomes that planter reaction to emancipation created in Guiana and southern Louisiana. The most important distinguishing factor involves how white elites regained hegemony. In the US South, state sponsored Jim Crow laws promoted violence and terrorism; in Guiana local officials advocated the use of aggressive action to oppress black resistance. As former slaves challenged white authority planters in the regions responded in two distinct ways. Radical Reconstruction provided blacks opportunities to transform society and the African American community in Louisiana benefited from educational,

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<sup>23</sup> James Roark, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction*; Charles Roland, "Louisiana Sugar Planters and the Civil War," *Louisianans in the Civil War*, eds. Lawrence Lee Hewitt and Arthur W. Bergeron, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002); John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Field*; Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*; Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott. *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Post-emancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

political and economic reform. However, this came to an end in the 1870s as white elites reestablished control of their state governments. By the early 1870s, throughout the US South, Jim Crow laws set the precedent for white and black relations. Jim Crow was more than a series of rigid anti-Black laws; it became a way of life. African Americans were relegated to the status of second-class citizens. This contrasted to the situation in British Guiana where a small minority of white elites continued to maintain political control. They struggled to squelch the pressure of non-whites who demanded more freedom. A large group of Afro-Guianans became educated and as Asians became successful economically, a non-white middle class emerged. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, the colony experienced unrest including riots in Georgetown, as the white elite minority battled to maintain autonomy. Fear and hatred toward non-whites escalated and planters used their judicial authority to suppress resistance. As subjects of the British Empire, white colonists in British Guiana had more space to use force to silence riots than planters in Louisiana. Although planter reaction to emancipation restored the sugar economy, the influx of immigrants created a complex racial society in Georgetown, in which some groups were wary of one another and challenged white hegemony.<sup>24</sup>

Jim Crow laws in southern Louisiana kept black migrant laborers poor and dependent upon planters. Categorized as uncivilized, most African Americans could not gain the right to own land, which was one important component of freedom. Even though sugar production in southern Louisiana continued to decline into the 1890s, planters had regained leverage over

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<sup>24</sup> Hahn, Steven. *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration*; (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832 – 1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1974); Ted Tunell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: LSU University Press, 1984); C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913*, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1951); Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

blacks. African Americans could no longer use their political power and mobility to demand better wages. As white Democrats reclaimed power in the state government, black suffrage existed in theory but not in reality, and this helped planters reconstruct their society. Moreover, Louisiana's experiment with Chinese contract labor also ended in the 1890s with the anti-China immigration laws at the federal level. The coolie system in British Guiana created a different impact. As coolies ended their contracts, sugar production became more mechanized and planters relied on technology to compete in the global market. Georgetown became the center where race and labor collided, not in the cane fields and sugar mills but in industrial factories. Although battles over race and labor remained in both locales, they shifted direction in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In closing, this project emphasizes the significance of planter reaction to the labor problem during emancipation. The consequences traversed into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The ways planters in Guiana and Louisiana adapted to the transformations to the labor system created complex problems as whites and blacks continued to struggle to implement their definition of freedom in the post-emancipation era. The structure and organization of labor created by planters in Guiana and southern Louisiana influenced the power dynamics in these two societies, in the post-emancipation era. The comparison captivately shows how, in two diverse regions spanning the circum-Caribbean, planters worked out similar frameworks to alleviate the consequences of emancipation. Networks created by a body of water helped white sugar planters engage as a community to prevent sugar on their plantations from becoming "sour."

**CHAPTER 1**  
**FROM SLAVERY TO INDENTUREMENT:**  
**IMPLICATIONS OF THE LABOR PROBLEM IN BRITISH GUIANA, 1834-1870**

The Emancipation Act of 1834 abolished chattel slavery in the British Empire and irrevocably changed the lives of the master class in British Guiana. For sugar planters, emancipation transformed their relationships with former slaves and Parliament. They would never again produce sugar with a labor force so completely under their authority. Although the transition from slavery to emancipation was a systematic process, sugar owners found themselves in an unfamiliar situation. They competed with former slaves to restore their hegemony against new visions of “free” labor and the racial order. Facing resistance from Afro-Guianans and the lack of support by Parliament, planters searched for a way to remake the labor system. A contract system was appealing because workers would come on their own will and agree to strict terms of the work agreements. Planters hoped that they could manipulate the contracts and at the same time make the system look like “free” labor. This chapter focuses on the relationship between labor and race, exploring how sugar proprietors established a coolie indentured system to solve the dilemma of remaking white hegemony. The Asian contract system illustrates how sugar proprietors believed that creating a multi-racial society would prevent free people of color from challenging their authority. This chapter traces the processes that landowners engaged to reclaim economic and political power after emancipation and explores the social consequences of coolie labor in the colony.

This chapter begins with an examination of the colony’s plantation economy and social hierarchy during prior to emancipation. Recognizing the values of the master class and their way of life during slavery shows why sugar proprietors became economically vulnerable and desper-

ate to find laborers throughout the post-emancipation era. Following an examination of the Guiana during the slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I explore the transformation of the master class during emancipation in three important ways. The first section focuses on the distinct challenges that planters in British Guiana encountered during emancipation that pushed them to consider implementing Asian indentured labor. The end of slavery created general problems for sugar proprietors in Guiana and throughout the British West Indies. However, it is important to recognize that specific internal factors and circumstances pushed planters in Guiana to engage in the conversation about Asian contract labor. The three issues I will examine are: the topography of the colony, border disputes, and the mobility of former slaves. The second section of this chapter traces the political negotiations between planters and Parliament over the reconstruction of the labor system. When planters began transporting Asian indentured workers, the imperial government strictly regulated the process, preventing the master class from accomplishing their goals. Abolitionists were dynamic about free labor and imagined that it would alleviate social and economic disparities in the colonies. Landowners subtly worked against these ideals and expectations. Over time, sugar proprietors proved adept at reclaiming their authority. Analyzing the changes in the power dynamics between landowners and Parliament shows how planters gained more flexibility to dictate the terms of labor, which helped them reshape white hegemony in new ways. Thus, the third section explores how coolie labor helped sugar planters and the white elite stabilize their plantation economy and reconstruct the racial order. In this system, planters transported South Asian Indians and Chinese laborers to their plantations, signed them to binding contracts, and forced them to produce sugar under harsh conditions. Evaluating the purpose of the contracts, how they used them to engage Asians, and the consequences of the coolie system reveals how planters shaped their response to the labor problem. In conclusion, the chapter trac-

es the way planters adapted to the challenges created by emancipation and established a cheap labor system to reclaim white supremacy.

It is important to describe the coolie system and what planters wanted it to accomplish. Planters turned to Asian indentured labor to achieve three important objectives. First, these laborers would replace former slaves so that planters could compete in the global sugar market. Sugar proprietors believed that the only way they could produce enough sugar to match landowners from other regions was to create a contract labor system because they recognized that it would be impossible with free labor. Asian workers would sign six to eight-year contracts in exchange for a small stipend and provisions. Proprietors believed that Chinese and Indians could easily adjust to the warm, tropical climate and quickly learn about sugar production. They perceived these indentured laborers as hard-working and respectful people, who would not challenge their authority. Landowners hoped that in two to three years their ditches and trenches would be intact and sugar would again be the main crop of the plantation economy. Although transporting and signing contracts with coolies was more expensive than the slave trade, most sugar planters had confidence that their contributions to production would outweigh the expenses. Second, as Afro-Guianans struggled to earn money as village farmers, Chinese and South Asian Indians would make it difficult for them to live independently. If former slaves wanted to return to the plantations, they would have to compete with Asian indentured laborers for work. Planters believed they could limit the power that Afro-Guianans used to demand higher wages. Finally, colonial elites hoped that the indentured workers would prevent the black peasant community from challenging white hegemony and the political order. They envisioned that they could use coolie labor to discourage new visions for the colony. Planters brought Chinese and South Asian Indians to British Guiana primarily for economic reasons but they also had confi-

dence that Asian indentured workers would challenge Afro-Guianans' ability to apply their new visions of freedom in the colony.<sup>25</sup>

### **The master class and slavery**

Understanding the imperial legacy of the colony, the social hierarchy, and the plantation economy before emancipation reveals the impact that it had on the planter class. This demonstrates the reasons why the master class reacted so strongly to the changes created by the end of slavery. The colonization of British Guiana is a clear example of the imperial struggle that occurred in the circum-Caribbean during the mid 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Gulf was a gateway for trade from the Americas to Europe. When colonists from different empires discovered the benefits of making sugar in the region a geo-political struggle between European empires ensued. White settlers needed to be aware of events occurring in Europe and the Caribbean because proprietors depended on the flexibility to travel throughout the circum-Caribbean. Sugar production and access to slaves also connected planters throughout the basin and those in Guiana relied on this network for more laborers and foodstuffs. Availability of slaves and control of land in the Americas was essential for the expansion of European empires.

Access to slaves and control of land were two complex struggles that intensified European efforts to colonize Guiana in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. By this time, Dutch, English, French, and Spanish colonists had depleted much of the soil in the island colonies in the Atlantic and began searching for other lands to cultivate their crops. Settlers discovered that the land along the coastlands of northern South America was conducive for growing cotton, coffee, and sugar. The climate provided a sufficient rainy and dry season. The need to increase plantation economies

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<sup>25</sup> Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, chapt. one; Stanley Engerman, "Contract Labor, Sugar, and Technology in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History* 43 (1983): 645-647; David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism*, 4-10; Trev Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers: Chinese Indentured Immigrants in Guyana*;



quickly created a complicated imperial rivalry in which the Dutch, French, and British empires all struggled to control the province intermittently between 1701 and 1803. When the English conquered the region in 1796, a small planter class and large slave community made up the demographics. The population of English settlers and remaining Dutch planters rose from 29,473 in 1795 to 39,232 in 1798. The slave population continued to rise during the late 1700s, and by 1800 there were over 35,000 slaves in Guiana. When England colonized the region, Dutch and French settlers remained in Guiana. English colonists and proprietors not only identified themselves with the British Empire but also with Dutch and French settlers. Even though the British Empire controlled the colony, there was a Dutch judicial system. The British continued to follow Dutch laws and modes of taxation. British Guiana became a multi-cultural colony with a population that reflected its complex imperial legacy.<sup>26</sup>

The “golden age of sugar” lasted from 1803 to 1830. From 1815 to 1833 sugar production increased from 21,770 to 71,496 hogsheads.<sup>27</sup> By 1834, planters were discovering how to successfully produce sugar in the colony, make profits, and compete in the global economy. Slaves proved crucial to the formation of the plantation economy. Unlike in other regions, planters needed large groups of laborers to construct levees to prevent flooding and reduce cost of production. Once harvested, cane spoiled quickly and proprietors needed workers that they could force to produce sugar. The process was expensive and planters needed a cheap and dependable labor force that would allow them to increase their profits. The Emancipation Act

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<sup>26</sup> Adamson, *Sugar Without Slaves*, 24; George Bennett, *An Illustrated History of British Guiana* (Georgetown: Richardson and Company, 1866); Robert Schlomburgk, *A Description of British Guiana Geographical and Statistical* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Company, 1840); Henry Kirke, *Twenty Five Years in British Guiana* (London: Sampson, Low, and Marston, 1898); Barton Premium, *Eight Years in British Guiana* (London: Longman, Brown, and Green, 1876).

<sup>27</sup> Lowell Ragatz, *Statistics for the Study of British Caribbean Economic History* (Madison: Bryan Edwards Press, 1927), 25; Hogshead was the unit of measurement for sugar.

permanently changed the lives of sugar planters because it ended the only way landowners knew how to produce sugar.

The white elite consisted of absentee landowners and colonists, who directly managed the estates. Absentee planters owned many of the larger plantations and acquired them to preserve their positions as gentry in England. They did not identify themselves as colonists, but valued the wealth generated by sugar production on their estates to live as aristocrats in Britain. Absentee proprietors traveled to the colony only when events or issues in Guiana threatened their elite status in England. Although most of the master class managed their sugar plantations from long distance, they hired overseers to directly run the daily operations. Living on the plantations, overseers established a way of life in the colony. Most had the freedom to dictate the power dynamics on the estates because of the long distance relationship with absentee planters. They also profited from sugar production and had opportunities to purchase land of their own. This gave overseers and their families' chances to create better livelihoods in Guiana than they would have had in England. Proprietors living in England used their influence as gentry to direct the political and economic climate of the colony. Although accountable to absentee proprietors, overseers possessed authority over the enslaved majority.<sup>28</sup>

British Guiana's slave society was similar to others in the Caribbean basin. For slaves, life on sugar estates was demanding and the combination of horrible working conditions and poor diets made disease rampant. However, slaves took advantage of opportunities to create small spaces of freedom and autonomy. Planters reluctantly allowed their laborers to cultivate gardens and sell their produce to one another or in the local markets. This provided them with

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<sup>28</sup> Adamson, *Sugar Without Slaves*, chapt. 1; Emilia Viotti Da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 39-86; Barton Premium, *Eight Years in British Guiana* (London: Longman, Brown, and Green, 1876).

ways to make money and participate in the local economy. Slaves also created communities that expanded the boundaries of plantations. Most had opportunities to leave the plantations and socialize on Sundays. Overseers recognized that if they provided small incentives for slaves, they could take them away as punishment. This helped managers exploit slaves and obtain the maximum value from their investment.

By the 1830s, planters and their managers began experiencing strong resistance from slaves. Recognizing the potential devastating consequences that emancipation would create, sugar proprietors restricted slave mobility. However, by this time slaves had formed strong communities, and many had learned how to successfully engage in the economy. As emancipation became more of a reality, absentee planters feared that the end of slavery would provide their slaves with legitimate opportunities to jeopardize the plantation economy. They believed that this would permanently damage their identity and influence as gentry in England. For overseers, experiencing slave revolts and discontent in the colony created great concern as a minority living in a colony with a black majority. The space that slaves had created during their time in bondage ultimately provided them courage and fortitude to use the freedom given to them by the Emancipation Act in 1834 to remake the economic and social order of the colony.<sup>29</sup>

### **Irrevocable changes during the post-emancipation era**

From the beginning of emancipation in 1834 to the end of apprenticeship in 1838, the master class began experiencing the consequences of emancipation. Even though apprenticeship restricted most former slaves from leaving plantations, proprietors lost the power to force them to work. They could no longer legally use violence to maintain stability. In addition, Parliament compelled regulations that ordered landowners to interact with their former slaves as employees, and use negotiation rather than corporeal punishment to run their plantations. This made it diffi-

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<sup>29</sup> Emilia Viotti Da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823*, 44-54.

cult for sugar planters to prevent revolts and work stoppages. Proprietors and overseers, however, frequently ignored the rules and used violence, and local officials were inconsistent with enforcing the stipulations of apprenticeship.

At the same time, the system did not meet the expectations of former slaves, who believed that emancipation would allow them to leave the plantations and begin creating their own independent lives. Instead, the regulations compelled free people of color to continue to work in the sugar fields, learning to work for themselves and ostensibly how to become “civilized.” In reality, the system continued to limit the mobility of blacks. They received small stipends but remained under the authority of planters. Although apprenticeship prevented most former slaves from leaving the estates and creating their own autonomous livelihoods, they recognized that it provided them with more opportunities to test white hegemony. Apprenticeship lasted four years and during the process, free people of color found ways to challenge the political and social authority of the white minority. Frequently black workers resorted to collective action and revolts to voice their discontent and the vulnerability of planters dependent on their labor.<sup>30</sup>

White elites recognized the potential conflict that could occur as the dissatisfaction of apprentices increased. Colonial Governor Smyth observed that “considerable discontent exists amongst the laboring population upon many estates in consequence of their not having derived so much immediate benefit from the late change in their situation.” Many blacks challenged the system, and some had the courage to organize strikes and revolts. In a small coastal district of Essequibo, planter Charles Bean and other landowners killed animals and damaged the crops be-

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<sup>30</sup> Raymond T. Smith, *British Guiana*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), under “Race, Class, Politics, and Conflict: Chapter III: British Rule up to 1928,” [http://home.uchicago.edu/~rts1/chapter\\_iii.htm](http://home.uchicago.edu/~rts1/chapter_iii.htm) (accessed May 6, 2011); William Sewell, *Ordeal of Labor in The British West Indies* (New York: Augustus Kelley, 1861), 34-37; William Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830-1865*; Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 134-150.

longing to apprenticed blacks. Sugar proprietors wanted to completely cut off any outside sources of income for freedmen so they would work on plantations without causing conflict. However, black protest escalated. On August 9, 1834, over seven hundred workers refused to work on the plantations throughout the coast. Troops arrived to calm the revolt but seven leaders of the strike barricaded themselves in a church and hoisted a flag that represented their autonomy as freed Afro-Guianans. Freed slaves believed that the proclamation of 1834 signified their social and economic independence. They did not believe apprenticeship was a transition process to freedom but rather a new type of slavery.<sup>31</sup>

Although the 1834 strike was short lived, it was the first challenge to apprenticeship that Guianan officials encountered. In response, magistrates hearing the case delivered harsh sentences for the former slaves. Chief Justice Wray sentenced Damon and another leader to death and sent two to New South Wales as forced laborers. Four others spent over three years in prison. Judges hoped to warn apprentices of the severe consequences of opposing the new system. Similar uprisings occurred throughout the British West Indies and white elites reacted in ways comparable to those in the “Damon” case in Guiana. This is a clear example of how local officials protected planters. By 1838, the power dynamics between the local courts and Parliament had become problematic and the imperial government began taking more control over the affairs in colony. This political shift left magistrates virtually powerless to control future revolts, like the “Damon” case.<sup>32</sup>

When apprenticeship ended in 1838, sugar production had significantly declined because overseers failed to convince Afro-Guianans to continue to work on their plantations. When

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<sup>31</sup> Papers relating to the Abolition of Slavery in the British West Indies, Vol. 81, (1834), (307), Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers, (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1968).

<sup>32</sup> Papers relating to the Abolition of Slavery in the British West Indies, Vol. 81, (1834), (308-313) ; Dr. Odeen Ishmael, “The Guyana Story: From Earliest Times to Independence,” [http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/guyana\\_story.html](http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/guyana_story.html) (accessed May 16, 2011.)

asked by a Select Committee in London to what degree had sugar production decreased, Henry Barkly, a merchant and mortgagee reported:

The average production of British Guiana, I believe, for six years before the introduction of the free system, was about 63,000 hogsheads of sugar; I believe the average of the last three years has been about 37,000. I think that that is pretty nearly the rate of decrease with regard to my own estate.<sup>33</sup>

Barkley provided clear evidence that the rapid decline in sugar production was causing profits to plummet, leading to the loss of estates and the closing of merchant houses. In 1836, planters had exported 35,475 tons of sugar; that dropped to 25,870 tons by 1841.<sup>34</sup> The instability of the plantation economy and the failure to produce adequate amounts of sugar escalated concern and panic. Apprenticeship gave planters a foretaste of life without slavery, and by 1838 they realized the importance of finding a labor force to restore economic stability and social control. Planters feared that the black population would capitalize on opportunities to influence the economic and political agenda of the colony. Throughout the British West Indies, the planter class throughout the basin agreed that finding another source and system of labor was imperative.

### **Emancipation and Distinct Challenges**

Universal problems developed for planters throughout the British West Indies following the end of apprenticeship in 1838. Slaves left plantations or demanded high wages that they could not or would not pay. Landowners struggled to contend with sugar planters in colonies who produced sugar with slaves and failed to remain competitive in the global market. Former slaves used their skills as laborers as leverage to demand better wages and contest the power of

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<sup>33</sup> Report from the select committee on West India Colonies together with minutes of evidence, Vol. 1 (1842), (169), Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers, (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1968).

<sup>34</sup> Jay Mandle, *The Plantation Economy: Population and Economic Change in Guyana, 1838-1960*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973), 20.

the master class. These shared problems created a commonality of interest among planters throughout the West Indies and brought them together to push for a solution. However, in each territory, proprietor's experienced distinct consequences due to emancipation, which also pushed them to consider indentured contract labor. For those in British Guiana the topography of the colony, border disputes, and the formation of village communities magnified the impact of emancipation. These factors pushed them to join the regional conversation to structure a contract labor system. By highlighting these challenges, I argue that the internal dynamics of the colony increased planter reaction to the labor problem.<sup>35</sup>

Three major obstacles pushed landowners in British Guiana to consider the advantages of a contract labor system. First, the geography of the colony limited planters from expanding their plantations: most sugar was produced along the coast where the soil was ideal for harvesting cane. However without levees, floods frequently damaged estates. Without slaves, colonists could not maintain the dams needed to protect their crops from floods. Second, border disputes with the Venezuelan government restricted planters from moving into the interior of the colony to cultivate sugar. Planters wanted to find a solution to the flooding problem and to try and cultivate sugar a little further from coastline. Third, former slaves challenged the economic norms in the colony by purchasing vacant estates and forming village societies. This was a way that Afro-Guianans redefined labor and the political economy of the colony. They wanted to prove that they had the ability to establish their own identity as a class independent from the interference of planters. Village communities were an example of how former slaves took direct action to better their lives. These three factors intensified the need for planters to remake the labor system in order to economically recover and challenge black agency.

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<sup>35</sup> Guterl, *American Mediterranean*; Juanita DeBarros, Audra Depte and David Trotman eds. *Beyond Fragmentation: Perspectives on Caribbean History*, introduction.

Although Guiana was a large colony, much of the land was not suitable for growing cane. To produce sufficient amounts to earn profits required over 200 acres.<sup>36</sup> The river systems created pools of stagnant water throughout the colony and frequently washed away layers of fertile soil. The coastlands created further problems, flooding and damaging crops. This made the digging of ditches, dams, and trenches imperative. Most former slaves refused to do this type of labor because it was extremely difficult and they demanded high wages that planters either could not afford or refused to pay. For sugar proprietors in Guiana the labor problem created urgent dilemmas because without constant maintenance of ditches and trenches, sugar production was almost impossible.<sup>37</sup> John Brumell, sheriff of the Demerara province in the 1850's, described the distinctive challenges that Guianan planters faced in the post-emancipation era. In particular, he observed:

When the land begins to wash away on any part of the coast, considerable labour and expense are entailed upon the proprietor, who is then compelled to retreat more inland, and to make new sea-dams, sluices, and roads; and even, sometimes, to erect new buildings, as the sea wallows up the old ones at immense cost, to maintain a daily struggle against the waves, in which he is certain to be eventually defeated.<sup>38</sup>

Officials recognized the connection between slavery and the topography of the region. Without slavery, planters lacked the power to force their laborers to build crucial structures to protect their land. Lacking a reliable workforce, some planters had to purchase expensive steam-driven pumps. The majority of sugar investors, however, could not afford this technology. Instead, they were determined to find a way to hire workers and make them do the necessary tasks on their plantations for low wages. The mindset of the master class had to change. Moreover, because Parliament regulated post-emancipation laborers, planters also had to make it appear that

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<sup>36</sup> Jay Mandle, *The Plantation Economy: Population and Economic Change in Guyana 1838-1960*, 35.

<sup>37</sup> Alan Adamson, *Sugar Without Slaves* chapt. 1.

<sup>38</sup> John Brumell, *British Guiana: Demerara Fifteen Years after Freedom* (London: Bosworth, 1853), 27-29.



they had an employer-employee relationship with their workers in order to appease abolitionists.<sup>39</sup>

The geography of Guiana limited the space that proprietors could harvest sugar and created difficulties to protect their estates from the environment. The location of the colony also caused problems. Unlike the island colonies in the British West Indies, Guiana was a landlocked region situated between Venezuela, French Guiana, and the Dutch colony of Suriname. British officials continued to push farther into territory controlled by Venezuela, which ignited border disputes that at times became violent. This created a dilemma for planters. Access to land was essential to maintain the plantation economy. Emancipation made it even more critical for landowners to have opportunities to move farther away from the coast. They needed a way to compensate for their inability to prevent flooding. The border disputes exacerbated the labor problem because planters could not harvest sugar in the interior of the colony without fear of violence.<sup>40</sup>

The dispute was another factor that pushed planters into finding a reliable group of laborers. Beginning in 1841, a disagreement developed between the Venezuelan government and British Guiana. The British Government instigated the debate when officials commissioned Robert Schomburgk, a German surveyor and geographer, to map the colony and determine its western boundary. The border with Venezuela had been undefined for decades. Schomburgk concluded that the boundary was 30,000 square miles west of the Essequibo River, which the

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<sup>39</sup> In the early 1890s, surveyor and explorer George Dixon took a four month expedition along the west coast of British Guiana. In a paper read at the Royal Geographical Society on February 11<sup>th</sup> 1890, he described the unreliable nature of the geography. This reveals why planters could not grow sugar in most of the western Essequibo region. He stated, "As it was then in flood, we had such difficulty in pulling against the stream, that I was reluctantly forced to camp early on the following day and wait for the rush of water to abate. To my great relief next morning, I found that the river had fallen 3 feet, and we were therefore able to resume our journey under more favourable circumstances."

<sup>40</sup> Alan Adamson, chapt. 1; Emilia DaCosta, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823*.

government of Venezuela had indirectly possessed. He proposed that the British Government had the right to claim rich basin regions then located in Venezuela, reasoning that the lands surrounded the Essequibo River. However, recognizing the potential conflict over the land, Schomburgk drew the border line providing less territory to Great Britain than he initially measured. This agreement appeased a temporary solution to a serious problem. But Schomburgk's attempts to appease both sides failed and the conflict escalated as the British encroached on land across the established border.<sup>41</sup>

The tension between Venezuela and the British colonial officials in Guiana caused fear and panic among planters. Not only did the conflict prevent landowners from relocating their plantations but it also created concern of war. The discovery of gold only intensified the disagreement, especially when Britain attempted to claim another 33,000 square miles of land beyond the "Schomburgk Line." Colonists in British Guiana believed that they had continually provided generous concessions to Venezuela. The British Guiana Government stated that further proposals to yield territory to Venezuela would interfere with settled districts and prevent planters from using fertile land to harvest sugar. Officials in Guiana feared this disagreement would force more planters to lose their land and deepen the crippling economic impact of emancipation. The governor expended resources and energy to defend the western boundary, which weakened his ability to focus on helping sugar producers recover from the end of slavery. Despite these efforts, the western region of British Guiana remained underdeveloped and unsafe. Venezuelan soldiers frequently raided and attacked the colonial regiments along the Essequibo River. Another important consequence that occurred was that the conflict with Venezuela diverted the attention of colonial officials. Unlike planters in Trinidad, Jamaica, and other British West Indian

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Schomburgk, *A Description of British Guiana Geographical and Statistical* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Company, 1840); Henry Kirke, *Twenty Five Years in British Guiana* (London: Sampson, Low, and Marston, 1898).

colonies, landowners in British Guiana could not rely on the local authorities in Georgetown to act as a dependable advocate in international affairs. These pressures left planters with few choices over how to resolve the shortage of land and labor.<sup>42</sup>

The location of the colony and the border disputes became significant issues because most free people of color left the plantations after emancipation. Instead of remaining on the estates and negotiating wages with proprietors, many formed autonomous villages. The period of the “village movement” was from 1838 to 1852. Many proprietors lost their investments and could not afford to produce sugar. This gave former slaves opportunities to claim possession of land. During apprenticeship, they had earned wages as plantation laborers. After 1838, groups of Afro-Guianans would collectively invest this money in small plots from abandoned sugar estates. Afro-Guianans divided large amounts of land into small plots, where they would harvest sugar and other crops. There are many examples of this occurring. For example, from January to March in 1840, sixty five blacks purchased the Plaisance plantation for \$39,000. Collective groups of slaves also purchased estates of Peter's Hall, Farm and Garden of Eden on the East Bank Demerara, and Danielstown and Bush Lot on the Essequibo Coast. Former slaves encountered setbacks as they endeavored to forge their own autonomous lives, communities, and families. In many situations planters retained the land titles and most freed people of color were unaware of the legal stipulations. Conflict intensified between planters and Afro-Guianans regarding legal ownership of the land. The development of village communities created fear and anxiety for planters because it was a concrete example of the ability of former slaves to challenge their

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<sup>42</sup> Dr. Odeen Ishmael, “The Guyana Story: From Earliest Times to Independence,” [http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/guyana\\_story.html](http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/guyana_story.html) (accessed May 8, 2011); Henry Dalton, *The History of British Guiana* (London: Longman, Brown, and Green, 1855); George Bennett, *An Illustrated History of British Guiana* (Georgetown: Richardson and Company, 1866).

economic and political power. As Afro-Guianans purchased land and used it to engage in the economy they demonstrated their agency and voice.<sup>43</sup>

Black landowners involvement in property acquisition prompted a regional conversation among planters about an alternative to slavery. Sugar proprietors did not want to create a labor system that would allow workers to challenge their authority and force them to acquiesce to certain demands. Planters believed if they could find a way to structure the labor system by creating contracts that they had the authority to dictate and enforce, they would be able to squelch the visions of Afro-Guianans to become economically and socially independent. While planters throughout the basin began advocating for contract labor, they fought to undermine the efforts of former slaves.<sup>44</sup>

Planters did not succumb to the threats of former slaves but had a resistant strategy. Beginning in 1852, planters in British Guiana pressured the courts to pass numerous regulations to restrict peasant villages. The colony's Court of Policy and Combined Court implemented Ordinance Number 1, prohibiting the joint purchase of land by more than twenty people. The Colonial Governor also approved a bill that raised tax rates for groups of ten or more peasants who bought land together. In 1861, administrators approved Ordinance 66, which doubled the price of crown lands. Peasant communities had to buy more than one hundred acres of this land to form villages. These regulations forced most freed slaves to move and farm on cheaper land along the coast with poor soil.<sup>45</sup> As sugar planters and landowners, blacks did not have experi-

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<sup>43</sup> Raymond T. Smith, *British Guiana*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), under "Race, Class, Politics, and Conflict: Chapter III: British Rule up to 1928," [http://home.uchicago.edu/~rts1/chapter\\_iii.htm](http://home.uchicago.edu/~rts1/chapter_iii.htm) (accessed May 6, 2011); Dr. Odeen Ishmael, "The Guyana Story: From Earliest Times to Independence," [http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/guyana\\_story.html](http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/guyana_story.html) (accessed May 8, 2011.)

<sup>44</sup> Barbara Josiah, "After Emancipation: Aspects of Village Life in Guyana, 1869-1911 in *The Journal of Negro History* 82 (Winter 1997), 105-108.

<sup>45</sup> Report from the select committee on West India Colonies together with minutes of evidence, Vol. 1 (1842), (169), Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers, (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1968).

ence in managing and harvesting sugar. Furthermore, the villages, which were located along the ocean and rivers, needed the expensive, yet vital drainage systems to protect their crops. Frequent flooding and high transportation costs prevented peasant farmers from adequately supporting their families in Guiana. In 1859, following a visit to one of the peasant villages, famous Victorian writer Anthony Trollope wrote in his travel journal, “A negro village ... is not a picturesque object. As the ground is not drained in wet weather the whole place is half-drowned.”<sup>46</sup> Planters contributed to the destruction of black communities. Out of hostility, whites would release water from estate canals to flood nearby peasant villages. They hoped that in ruining the village land, Afro-Guianan laborers would return to their estates as wage laborers. Many settlements suffered from flooding and the lack of proper drains, which forced many to relocate to urban areas. The decline of most peasant villages provided white elites with concrete examples to support their belief that freedmen and women were lazy and racially inferior. This was class and racial war in action. Nevertheless, the “village movement” demonstrated to the planter a need for indentured workers in Guiana. By forming their own communities, the black community initiated a political and social struggle to demonstrate their definition of freedom.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Process of restoring hegemony**

By 1840, two years after the end of apprenticeship, sugar proprietors in Guiana joined those throughout the British West Indies to find a solution to the labor problem. The distinct challenges in Guiana combined with the shared experience of emancipation pushed proprietors to embrace the idea of using indentured labor. They considered Asian immigrants, mainly South

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<sup>46</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The West Indies and the Spanish Main* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1860), 183.

<sup>47</sup> Brian Moore, *Cultural Power, Resistance, and Pluralism*, 86. Walter Rodney, *History of the Guyanese Working People 1881-1905*, 61. Adamson, *Sugar without Slaves*, 57; Barton Premium, *Eight Years in British Guiana* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1876); Raymond T. Smith, *British Guiana*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), under “Race, Class, Politics, and Conflict: Chapter III: British Rule up to 1928,” [http://home.uchicago.edu/~rts1/chapter\\_iii.htm](http://home.uchicago.edu/~rts1/chapter_iii.htm) (accessed May 6, 2011)

Asian Indians and Chinese as ideal replacements for former slaves. Based on racial stereotypes of the Chinese and Indian worker planters believed that they would adapt to the tropical climate. White elites also perceived Asian indentured workers as industrious people, willing to submit to and respect authority. Above all, landowners believed coolie indentured labor would provide planters with laborers whom they could control and manipulate. Beginning in the 1840s, proprietors began pressuring Parliament to transport Chinese and Indians into the colonies. Initially, the imperial government monitored the contract system and prevented planters from exploiting the workers. The power dynamics between Parliament and planters changed as proprietors found ways to regain political control in the colonies. Tracing this process reveals how landowners eventually gained the power to bind Asian laborers to their contracts and use violent methods to prevent resistance.<sup>48</sup>

Before emancipation, Parliament allowed white elites to control affairs in the colony and placed protective tariffs on sugar. Imperial policy helped ensure economic stability in a volatile and unpredictable market. After the Emancipation Act, the British Government recognized the labor problem and acknowledged the economic impact on the empire as sugar production plummeted. British political leaders faced a dilemma; they listened to planters and agreed that the coolie system would be a viable solution for sugar proprietors to recover from the end of slavery. Simultaneously, Parliament faced pressure and criticism from abolitionists, who believed coolie labor was a distinct form of slavery. British politicians attempted to appease both sides by restraining planters from directly controlling the Asian indentured system. Initially, laws and regulations limited sugar owners from overworking and exploiting coolies.

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<sup>48</sup> Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918*; Joseph Beaumont, *The New Slavery: An Account of the Indian and Chinese Immigrants in British Guiana* (London: W. Ridgway, 1871); Saroja Sundararajan, *From Bondage to Deliverance – Indentured Labour in Mauritius and British Guiana*. (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2006); Trev Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers: Chinese Indentured Immigrants in Guyana*.

Elites in the colonies resented the imperial interference. Officials in London's Colonial Office closely regulated the labor system without consulting sugar proprietors. Furthermore, British politicians controlled all immigration to the British colonies, thwarting planter endeavors to construct a free labor system that imitated slavery. For example, the Colonial Office established recruiting agencies in Canton, Hong Kong, Calcutta, and Madras and assigned British officials to act as consultants. Landowners needed permission from British agents regarding every aspect of the immigration process from the type of vessels that they used to the number of laborers they wanted to bring to their estates. In 1851, under permission from Parliament, British Guianan officials allowed planters to pay one hundred pounds for each Chinese laborer they brought to their plantation. George Booker, one of the first sugar proprietors to hire Chinese indentured workers, arranged for the first shipment of Chinese to work as indentured labourers. The 115 men and 39 boys who were recruited were transported from the port of Amoy on the *Lord Elgin*. The ship departed on 23 July 1852 and after a journey of 177 days arrived in Georgetown on 17 January 1853. On this difficult voyage 69 of the passengers died.<sup>49</sup> The harsh and brutal nature of the trade brought further criticism, which forced British officials to scrutinize each aspect of the business. These regulations made labor migration extremely expensive for landowners who were already struggling to compete in the global sugar market.<sup>50</sup>

The Colonial Office also supervised the treatment of the Asian contract laborers on the plantations. Proprietors pressed for more control to successfully implement coolie labor. They needed Parliament to support the system and not question the legality and morality of it. At the same time, planters did not want imperial officials interfering with the way they operated con-

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<sup>49</sup> Dr. Odeen Ishmael, "The Guyana Story: From Earliest Times to Independence," [http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/guyana\\_story.html](http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/guyana_story.html) (accessed May 8, 2011); Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 112.

<sup>50</sup> William Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830-1865*, 276.

tract labor. Proprietors desired and sought the authority to enforce the ordinances in the contracts without the interference of Parliament.<sup>51</sup>

In order to achieve this relationship with Parliament, planters relied on the network they had established in the Gulf. The circum-Caribbean connected people throughout the region as merchants and sailors spread news and newspapers published articles about events occurring throughout the basin. British colonists used print media to specify their complaints as a singular voice to Parliament. In 1846, local officials, including the governors in Trinidad and British Guiana, convened and created a series of Rules and Regulations to restrict and control Asian laborers. Under these rules, planters would be able to control all aspects of the laborers' lives – work, travel, family, and other activities. They recommended these to Parliament, which quickly dismissed the proposed bill as “unsuited to a condition of free labor.” Former slave owners and local administrators in Trinidad, British Guiana, and Jamaica continually sent numerous dispatches to London describing the disastrous consequences of having no authority over their Asian laborers. This effort united planters in the British West Indies, as they persistently demanded legal and social control over contract laborers.<sup>52</sup>

Proprietors relied on colonial officials to request more authority over the labor system from Parliament and also circulated their own leaflets and writings to strengthen and gain support for their cause. They published numerous pamphlets representing the sentiments of all landowners in the British West Indies. Leaflets circulated throughout the colonies and in England, as planters appealed to Parliament to take action on their behalf. In 1847, pamphlet written

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<sup>51</sup> Hundreds of thousands of Indians migrated to British Guiana. The imperial and colonial relationship between Great Britain and the colony of India provided opportunities to transport these indentured workers. Of the contract workers, Indians were the majority.

<sup>52</sup> Report from the select committee on West India Colonies together with minutes of evidence, Vol. 2 (1842), Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers, (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1968).



by an anonymous planter in British Guiana made a request to Parliament on the behalf of all planters in the British West Indies. In the preface he stated, “The Author hopes, by the following observations, to draw the attention of parties in England to the ruin that we in the British West Indies have suffered by the emancipation of our slaves.”<sup>53</sup> White elites forged a common identity facilitated by imperial connections. Although this network and these relationships existed before emancipation, the unity among planters was fundamental during post-emancipation. As a group, they pressured Parliament to remove the strict regulations that they had to follow as they invested in the coolie trade.

By 1857, Parliament and the Colonial Office in London reluctantly conceded power to colonial governors, who gave planters more control to use force to compel Chinese and Indians to perform the most taxing activities under harsh conditions. For example, sugar planters influenced the governor of British Guiana to appeal to the British Government on their behalf to allow the transport of Chinese to Guiana by their own initiative. Parliament conceded to the request in 1857 and permitted planters to directly recruit Chinese. By 1858, two ships carrying over seven hundred and sixty passengers had left Hong Kong and arrived in Georgetown. During the voyage, sixty died and hundreds arrived sick and injured. The majority of Chinese who migrated to work as indentured laborers were coerced or “persuaded” by corrupt middlemen hired by individual planters. Asian contract labor was a contradiction. It was not as extreme as chattel slavery, but certainly not a valid example of free labor. By allowing planters to control the methods of hiring the workers, Parliament fostered more opportunities to manipulate and shape

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<sup>53</sup> “Thoughts on British Guiana,” (Demerara: Royal Gazette Office, 1847).

the contract system to meet planters' demanding needs to produce sugar cost effectively and efficiently.<sup>54</sup>

Before the planter class established control to dictate the terms of coolie labor, they continued to lack effective ways to resist black agency. The master class believed that maintaining authority over labor was the key to reclaiming hegemony and racial superiority. Controlling the labor force would revive the plantation economy and help sugar proprietors challenge black independence. The idea behind Asian indentured labor was that planters they could easily manipulate and exploit the workers. By creating complex contracts, landowners could present the labor agreements as fair work opportunities, however, it would give them the power to force Chinese and Indians to build levees and harvest cane. Planters hoped that by replacing their former slaves, who they believed were lazy and useless, with a more respectful and compliant non-white class that they would be able to remake the economic and racial hierarchy. Parliament support was crucial. Planters depended on the imperial government to disregard any drastic measures that they used to force Asians to comply with their contracts. Without questioning how planters operated their plantations, Parliament allowed the system to have success and for sugar production to stabilize.<sup>55</sup>

### **Asian coolie labor**

The main purposes for establishing coolie labor were to depress wages, help produce sugar cheaply, and bind labor. Planters also anticipated that Asian workers would act as a competitive working class against their former slaves. They believed these laborers would respect the white elite and work without challenging the hegemony of the master class. Planters per-

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<sup>54</sup> Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, 62; Trev Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers: Chinese Indentured Immigrants in Guyana*; Cecil Clementi, *The Chinese in British Guiana* (Georgetown: Argosy, 1915).

<sup>55</sup> Brian L. Moore, *Cultural Power, Resistance, and Pluralism: Colonial Guyana, 1838 – 1900* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995).

ceived Asian indentured servants as “non-white” but also as more intelligent and cultured than blacks. Their concept of race changed as they used Chinese and Indians. Planters adjusted the racial hierarchy that they had once completely controlled by allowing another distinct group of people into the colony to compete against the new visions of freedom of former slaves. Examining planters’ reasons, methods, and approaches to coolie system in Guiana illustrates how the master class used labor to adapt to the permanent changes of emancipation.

With Parliament’s approval, landowners arranged shipments of Southeast Indian and Chinese migrants to British Guiana. Between 1838 and 1870 approximately 300,967 Southeast Indian indentured laborers arrived with little difficulty from British colonized India to the colony and represented over 70 percent of the migrant population. The colony received only 13,533 Chinese between 1838 and 1870 and in total 17,904 Chinese migrated to Guiana. Pressure from the Chinese government and the high costs to transport Chinese workers compelled most sugar proprietors in Guiana to invest in Southeast Asian coolies. In 1859, during his visit to British Guiana, Trollope romanticized the character of the region and the way the Chinese and Indian coolies were reviving British Guiana’s economy. He wrote in his journal, “an enterprising Demerara planter said to me, ‘Are you talking of sugar? Give me my heart’s desire in Coolies, and I will make you a million of hogsheads of sugar without stirring from the colony!’”<sup>56</sup> Throughout his travel log, he emphasized recruiting a growing number of Chinese and Indian laborers as the key to exploiting the maximum profits from sugar production during the age of emancipation. Like Trollope, planters believed they had finally found an answer to their labor problem. However, in order to make the coolie system work as a long-term solution, planters knew that they had to structure so as to secure maximum benefit.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The West Indies and the Spanish Main*, 139.

<sup>57</sup> Henry Bronkhurst, *British Guyana and Its Labouring Population*, 99.

Planters recognized that it was essential to have the power to enforce the conditions of the contracts. If the agreements had no legal force, the white elite would continue to face the problem of reestablishing their authority in the colony. Landowners believed it was imperative that the contracts restrict the mobility of indentured workers and prohibit them from leaving plantations. They argued that forcing coolies to remain on the plantations would help maintain order. White proprietors developed a systematic indentured labor system, entrenched with harsh disciplinary laws. For example, if a coolie ate more food than the allotted amount, the planter would, without informing the worker, extend the laborer's contract. They anticipated resistance and integrated immigration ordinances that would help planters limit worker's rights. Overseers, planters, and immigration officers had the freedom to question indentured laborers and arrest them, if they suspected any misconduct. The local colonial government supported proprietors and allowed them to enforce immigration ordinances with violence.<sup>58</sup>

There was an expectation that Asian laborers would show resistance when they realized that the contracts required them to perform grueling work under harsh conditions for little wages. Sugar proprietors knew that they had to quickly assert power to remind workers of their subordinate position and the consequences of rebellion. Some laborers resorted to extreme measures to challenge planter authority and disrupt sugar production. The consequences of such action outweighed the advantages. Coolies fought back against the unmerciful treatment by committing suicide, running away, and feigning illness. The *Royal Gazette* described one instance of a suicide, "The body of a Chinaman named Lam-a-Shing was found in a trench...with his throat cut. It appeared from the evidence that deceased had cut his throat and after doing so ran and threw

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<sup>58</sup> Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918*; David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism*.

himself into the trench.”<sup>59</sup> The horrible living and working conditions drove many coolies to commit suicide in a desperate attempt to sabotage the workplace and disrupt the plantation system. Other laborers endeavored to cause problems for the plantation owners by disobeying and breaking their contracts. Running away was a common method of direct resistance but had serious consequences for those who were caught. Plantation owners punished coolies by sending them to prison where they suffered physical violence, lack of food, and forced to work under the hands of white elites. Coolies relied on relatively extreme methods to challenge planter cruelty and manipulation.

In response, planters used their powerful positions in the colony to silence resistance. This created order on plantations because most workers endured the exploitation with the goal of finishing their work term and establishing their own small businesses. The contract system was successful because planters made it clear that there were few ways to escape the regulations of the contracts. The coolie system provided proprietors with a way to dictate society through forced labor and landowners benefitted economically as sugar production began to stabilize.<sup>60</sup>

One important way that planters responded to resistance was using the court system to exert their authority and squelch resistance. Magistrates were expected to rule in favor of the planter or overseers in cases regarding their laborers. Sir George William De Voeux, a British colonial magistrate, observed that the laws and restrictions of the contract system, “had been so framed and its net, covering all possible offences, was woven so closely, that not even the smallest peccadilloes could escape its meshes.”<sup>61</sup> Before his placement in Demerara, De Voeux held colonial posts throughout the crown colonies and had observed many different labor regimes. In

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<sup>59</sup> *Royal Gazette*, 26 September 1864.

<sup>60</sup> Trev Sue-a-Quan, *Cane Reapers: Chinese Indentured Immigrants in Guyana*, 147-172.

<sup>61</sup> Sir George William De Voeux, *Experiences of a Demerara Magistrate 1863-1869*, (London: John Murray Co., 1903), 91-92.

Guiana, he witnessed countless overseers manipulate the law to their advantage by accusing their laborers of minor infractions and punishing them with beatings or imprisonment. De Voeux and others officials, including his friend, Chief Justice Beaumont, recognized the importance of protecting planter's interests but also acknowledged the injustice of the system. A foundational principle in Guiana was when "the evidence of 'white' and 'coloured' was opposed, that of the 'white' must necessarily prevail."<sup>62</sup> Most officials had a difficult time distinguishing the differences between the indentured labor system and slavery but planter interests and racial hegemony compelled magistrates to enforce the biased contract laws.<sup>63</sup> With the support of the legal system, sugar owners were able to enforce the contracts and recreate white hegemony that challenged the competing visions of freedom. At the climax of the coolie system, planters had reestablished their authority using violence and intimidation. Although their laborers were of a different race and the contracts appeared to be legitimate, legal agreements, the system was a clear contradiction to the free labor that abolitionists had imagined.

## **Conclusion**

Landowners and white elites believed that only a labor system regulated by violence and force would allow them to reassert and maintain racial and economic power as a minority over the plantation economy. Following emancipation, they approached the labor problem methodically, creating a rigorous and manipulative system to replace slavery. As they established this framework, proprietors forged an apprenticeship system rooted in fear and anxiety. Overseers, local officials, and sugar owners constantly feared that Afro-Guianans would successfully challenge their hegemony. They turned to another form of violence to maintain racial, social, and political order. Examining the transformation of the labor system in Guiana shows how planters

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<sup>62</sup> William De Voeux, *Experiences of a Demerara Magistrate 1863-1869*, 95.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew Guterl, Christine Skwiot, "Atlantic and Pacific Crossings," 45.

achieved their goal to prevent blacks' attempts at trying to establish their ideas of freedom. Proprietors turned to another race of people to "save" the colony. During the beginning of coolie labor, planters believed Indians and Chinese workers would be "model" minorities for former slaves to emulate. Initially, planters believed Asian laborers as ideal because they would adapt to the climate well, could work on a small diet of rice, and would accept the rigors of plantation life. The coolie system was successful in that sugar planters continued to make profits and prevented Afro-Guianans from becoming economically independent. However, the solution to the labor problem also created significant consequences that would affect the future of the colony.

Although coolie indentured labor provided most sugar planters with over forty more years of economic stability, their solution had long-term ramifications. There are three significant outcomes that occurred after the end of Asian indentured labor. By the late 1880s, the majority of Indians and Chinese indentured laborers had finished their contracts. Planters had not expected that Indians and Chinese would leave the plantations and move to urban centers. Proprietors wanted Asians to continue to work on the estates after the end of their contracts. Many landowners promised workers better wages and living conditions. However, the majority of Indians and Chinese equated plantation labor with their experiences as indentured workers. Most wanted to establish new lives and relocated to the capital of the colony. Massive urbanization occurred as thousands of Indians and Chinese moved to Georgetown or left the colony. Industrialization significantly changed the power dynamics in Guiana. Planters lost authority to dictate the direction of the colony and depended on factory owners and colonial officials to maintain social order. The struggle for the white elite to compete against alternative visions for the colony became more difficult.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1910*, 188-216; Trev Sue-A-Quan, *Cane Reapers: Chinese Indentured Immigrants in Guyana*.

The master class also realized that the permanent residence of Asians in British Guiana would make the colony a multi-racial and pluralistic society. Ethnic and racial tension created instability in Georgetown. Daily conflict occurred in marketplaces and public spaces as the non-white and white elite struggled to establish their idea of public order and cultural traditions. Violence and riots consistently troubled the colony because the non-white majority believed that uprisings were the only way to create change. Although British Guiana's racial and ethnic diversity problematic for colonial officials by the 1880s, they recognized the distinctiveness of the Chinese minority. Because the Chinese had established themselves as small business owners, the white colonists pointed to them as an example for other racial groups to emulate. Officials reasoned that if the Chinese could create livelihoods without disrupting white hegemony and be satisfied with political and social limitations, then Afro-Guianans, Indians and other ethnic groups could do this as well. During indentured labor, planters regarded Chinese workers in a paternalistic way because they were in awe of their "strange" customs and hopeful that the laborers would help former slaves become more "civilized." This paternalistic attitude continued after coolie labor ended, as the white elite perceived the Chinese community as a class who understood their place in society. However, this attempt to use race as a way to manipulate the social hierarchy failed.

It is evident that planters created complex problems in the colony by instituting indentured labor. They believed that without a contract system they would lose the ability to shape the direction of the colony. In reality, coolie labor only delayed the political and social change that white elites feared. By the 1880s, the sugar economy had faltered but not failed. Few sugar



owners produced enough sugar to increase profits. At this time the colony transitioned from having a plantation economy supported by sugar production to one dependent on manufacturing.<sup>65</sup>

The irrevocable changes that emancipation created for proprietors in the British Empire resonated with planters throughout the Gulf Basin. Witnessing the devastating economic impact that emancipation triggered in the British West Indies initiated a discussion about the labor problem throughout the circum-Caribbean. Proprietors, in regions where slavery remained, began to prepare for a future without the institution. The direction that landowners in the West Indies took to solve the labor dilemma established a framework that impacted sugar planters throughout the basin. Although proprietors in each locale experienced distinct problems during emancipation, they also faced universal setbacks that heightened their need to find a labor force.

This chapter has explored the obstacles and anxieties that those in British Guiana endured during emancipation. It has analyzed the ways landowners constructed a rigid and powerful labor system to silence opposition to their hegemony. The next chapter will examine how sugar planters in southern Louisiana, a politically and socially distinct locale, connected the end of slavery in the US with the experiences of proprietors in British Guiana during emancipation. This comparison will illustrate how emancipation, race, and labor forged common bonds among sugar planters throughout the Caribbean basin, including British Guiana and southern Louisiana.

Emancipation in southern Louisiana created similar problems that intensified the need for a solution to the labor problem. In both Guiana and southern Louisiana, sugar owners depended solely on sugar production to support and maintain their way of life. Estates in both regions were located in coastal areas and flooding was a constant issue. Similar to those in British Guiana, planters in southern Louisiana relied on slaves to maintain and build levees to protect the

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<sup>65</sup> Juanita De Barros, *Order and Place in a Colonial City: Patterns of Struggle and Resistance in Georgetown, British Guiana, 1889-1924*, 138-160; Brian Moore, *Cultural Power, Resistance, and Pluralism: Colonial Guyana, 1838 – 1900*.

crop, increase profits, and maintain their way of life. Emancipation permanently changed the way sugar proprietors in Louisiana produced sugar. Another similarity between both societies was the racial hierarchy before emancipation. Both planter classes made up the minority of the community and slaves the majority. Although most former slaves did not leave the plantations in Louisiana after emancipation, as they did in Guiana, African Americans demanded higher wages that planters could not afford. Proprietors also faced opposition, although in a different way, from the federal government as they tried to find a solution to the labor problem. These similar situations that planters in Guiana and southern Louisiana experienced during emancipation reveal some of the reasons that the British contract labor system appealed to planters in Louisiana.<sup>66</sup>

As argued in this chapter, proprietors in Guiana faced distinct political and social issues that made the Asian contract labor system appealing. Planters in Louisiana also encountered different internal problems in the post-emancipation era. Three significant issues included the impact of the Civil War, the staunch resistance of the federal government to support a form of “coolie” labor, and the consequences of black suffrage. These factors effected the way proprietors in the sugar parishes tried to implement the framework of coolie labor. Planters in southern Louisiana could not create contracts that they could enforce because of the interference by the federal government. Congress had illegalized coolie labor before emancipation in the US and sugar owners devoted much of their energy proving to government officials that their conception of Asian contract labor was ideologically and operationally distinct from the British system. Consequently, proprietors constantly had to convince Chinese workers that they did not have the right to leave the plantations or demand better wages without using violence or legal action. While planters in southern Louisiana encountered obstacles that made establishing a labor sys-

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<sup>66</sup> Richard Follett, *Sugar Masters*, 235-237.

tem using binding contracts and Asian workers extremely difficult, their efforts helped them forge a new kind of white hegemony.

Examining the identity transformations that the planter class in southern Louisiana encountered demonstrates that the white elite in both Guiana and Louisiana relied on similar solutions to reclaim power and social order. Comparing the shared regional experiences and distinct internal problems that planters in both locales faced, shows the influence of the network that the circum-Caribbean fostered. Planters in both societies recognized the advantages of establishing a form of indentured contract labor. The goal for both master classes was to prevent former slaves from making their dreams of freedom into realities. By the end of emancipation, white elites in both areas had adapted to the changes created by the end of slavery and created new forms of hegemony. Louisianans, however managed to solidify their authority, whereas in Guiana the non-white multi-cultural majority continued to challenge white authority.

The following chapter analyzes how regional and internal issues shaped the way planters in southern Louisiana constructed an alternative free labor regime after the abolition of slavery that helped them consolidate and reclaim their political, economic, and social supremacy over the African American majority. Elites in both areas maintained white supremacy through violence prior to the post-emancipation era. Following the end of slavery, white planters in both regions reclaimed their hegemony using violence in different ways and with distinct results. In British Guiana proprietors successfully reestablished their authority using coolie labor but long-term they continued to struggle to secure their power. The next chapter will show that although planters in Louisiana could not create a Chinese labor system in the region to remake the plantation economy, they found alternative ways to successfully regain long-standing authority through intimidation and violence.

## CHAPTER 2

### LOUISIANA'S LABOR PROBLEM: FROM EMANCIPATION TO JIM CROW

In 1865, when the Emancipation Proclamation abruptly ended slavery in southern Louisiana, planters lost the power to silence African American visions of freedom. Black workers used their knowledge and skills in sugar production as leverage to challenge white authority. Sugar owners refused to pay former slaves as they would free laborers; to do so would be admitting that African American workers had equal rights. The success of coolie labor in the British Caribbean motivated Louisiana proprietors to create a model of contract labor that they hoped would help them forge white hegemony and remake the economy. This chapter examines how the endeavor to reclaim power in southern Louisiana was not only a self-contained and domestic undertaking but had circum-Caribbean origins. In order to make this clear, the section examines the transformation of the master class in southern Louisiana during the post-emancipation era in relation to the experiences of planters in British Guiana. Comparing the similarities and differences of the ways emancipation changed the lives of sugar owners in the two areas, provides a compelling example of how two white planter classes in distinct regions surrounding the basin agreed upon a similar solution to approach the labor problem. By the 1880s, however, the

“Asian” solution produced divergent consequences in these two societies.<sup>67</sup>

First, an examination of southern Louisiana's plantation economy and social hierarchy during the antebellum era is necessary. Recognizing the values of the master class and their way of life before emancipation shows why sugar proprietors became economically vulnerable and desperate to find laborers after the end of slavery. Second, this chapter traces the similar conse-

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<sup>67</sup> Richard Follet, *Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World*; John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Can Fields*; Matthew Guterl, *American Mediterranean*; Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*.

quences that planters in Guiana and Louisiana experienced during the post-emancipation era, which shows why both master classes pursued contract labor to replace slavery. The shared geographical features of the two regions created similarities in the plantation economies and social and racial hierarchies and landowners faced comparable problems during emancipation. As in British Guiana, planters in Louisiana also experienced distinct challenges during emancipation that pushed them to pursue a model of contract labor. The third goal of this section is to examine the critical factors that thwarted proprietors from implementing the framework of Asian labor on their estates. I will analyze the political, social, and economic consequences of the Civil War, the impact of black suffrage, and planter's inability to manipulate the power dynamics with the Republican national government. Examining the significance of the domestic obstacles in southern Louisiana reveals why and how planters ultimately pursued a different direction to restore white supremacy. In conclusion, this chapter explores the reasons why Louisianan landowners pursued the idea of using Chinese workers and why it did not achieve their goals. Examining the reasons planters were uncertain that contract labor would succeed, the political debate surrounding the concept of Asian labor, and the power dynamics between planters and Chinese workers reveals why planters eventually followed a different approach to remake their society.<sup>68</sup>

The structure and concept of contract labor in southern Louisiana was significantly different from coolie labor in British Guiana. The US federal government passed a law, to "prohibit the 'Coolie trade' by American citizens" in 1862, before the end of the Civil War. Federal offi-

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<sup>68</sup> John Rehder, *Delta Sugar: Louisiana's Vanishing Plantation Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Richard Follett, *Sugar Masters*; Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*; John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Field*; Louis Ferleger, "The Problem of 'Labor' in the Post-Reconstruction Sugar Industry," *Agricultural History* 72 (Spring 1998); *Freedom A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, Steven Hahn, Steven Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie Rowland, eds. Ser. 3, Vol. 1; Lucy Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without a History*, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1984); *Beyond Fragmentation: Perspectives on Caribbean History*. Edited by Juanita De Barros, Audra Deptee, David Trotman. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006; Matthew Guterl, *American Mediterranean, Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation*.

cials hoped that the law passed to prohibit the coolie trade would prevent planters from recreating a form of slavery. Planters recognized that establishing an Asian labor system would be difficult, but believed they could transport Chinese workers as well as appease the federal government's regulations. Following emancipation, sugar proprietors pressured the American government to embrace Asian labor and they were emphatic that it was a distinct concept from coolie labor.

The power dynamics between Chinese workers and Louisiana landowners were different than in British Guiana. The Chinese would sign "work agreements" that had no legal authority. Although Louisiana planters classified it as contract labor, they had little power to enforce the work agreements with Chinese laborers. The contracts were not binding and only represented the suggested desires and regulations for laborers; workers could easily break them. In southern Louisiana, laborers could negotiate the terms of the agreements. Consequently, proprietors had to make concessions because Chinese workers would leave the plantations, and sugar owners could not force them to return. Landowners had to continually prove to the Chinese that the contracts had merit without using violence or having support from the courts. This was a stark contrast from contract labor in British Guiana, where planters had the power to demand Asians to finish their contracts. The documents had strict ordinances that sugar owners regulated and when workers broke the rules, proprietors depended on local magistrates to punish coolies. A key reason that the Asian labor model did not succeed in southern Louisiana was that the federal government refused to allow planters in the US South to create a labor system that remotely resembled chattel slavery. In British Guiana, Parliament initially protected Asian workers but eventually allowed sugar proprietors the autonomy to dictate the coolie system and design it to fit their agenda. In this chapter when the Asian labor system is referred to as contract labor, it is

crucial to understand that the contracts were flexible agreements and did not contain rigid regulations that planters could enforce.<sup>69</sup>

Landowners in Louisiana wanted Asian labor to achieve similar goals as it did for sugar owners in British Guiana. First, they hoped Chinese laborers would replace their slaves and become a dependable work force. Instead of signing long-term contracts, planters would negotiate with Chinese workers about wages and length of service over short periods of time. Sugar owners believed that once the laborers began working for them, they could find ways to exploit them. Second, witnessing the ways coolie labor revived plantations in the British West Indies made sugar proprietors in Louisiana believe that Asian laborers could help them repair the physical damage to their estates. Third, the “main feature of the plan” was that Chinese laborers would create competition for black workers, who were challenging the authority of sugar owners. Sugar owners envisioned that Chinese laborers would bring competition as African Americans tried to find the best wages and jobs. The objectives of transporting Chinese laborers to Louisiana coincided with the goals of coolie labor because planters in both regions shared a strong conviction. The planter classes were determined never to pay and interact with black laborers as they would white workers. In southern Louisiana, landowners recognized the obstacles they would encounter if they tried to establish Asian labor, but firmly believed that Chinese workers would provide opportunities to restore the economy and remake the racial hierarchy.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 36-38, the full text of the Act of 1862 is in Lucy Cohen’s monograph, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 177-179; Lucy Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 50.

<sup>70</sup> Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane* **page number**; Lucy Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South* 82, 175; David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism*, 12, 116.

## **The formation of the sugar plantation economy**

Understanding the multi-cultural traditions in Louisiana, the plantation economy and the social hierarchy before the end of slavery reveals the shared experiences planters had with sugar owners in British Guiana. This demonstrates the reasons why both master classes reacted so strongly to the changes created by emancipation. Highlighting these facets of antebellum society in southern Louisiana shows why two planter classes located in distinct regions of the Gulf approached the labor problem in comparable ways. Although the social hierarchy and plantation economy in Louisiana had distinctive qualities, the purpose of this section is to focus on the shared experiences between planters in these two regions. Planters in the basin engaged in a conversation about the labor problem and adamantly refused to pay former slaves as “free” laborers, which would signify that planters regarded former slaves as equals.

For slaveholders in Louisiana and Guiana, slavery was a system of racial oppression and of exploiting labor. Although slaves were oppressed for the color of their skin, it is important to understand the essential role of labor. As historian John Rodrigue argues, “The class and racial dimensions of American slavery were inextricably intertwined and black people were enslaved for their labor as well as the color of their skin.” The institution was central to maintaining their social position in regions with complex colonial histories and ethnically diverse populations.<sup>71</sup>

The colonial legacies of Guiana and Louisiana influenced the two slave societies. In the 1790’s, a growing number of French and Spanish colonists began cultivating sugar in Louisiana. To produce large quantities of sugar and increase profits, they relied on large groups of enslaved Africans. A plantation-based slave society formed and expanded after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 as Americans migrated to the state at a frenetic pace. Sugar changed the political economy

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<sup>71</sup> John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, 29; Eric Foner, “The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation,” *Journal of American History* 81 (September 1994): 435-460.



and social hierarchy of southern Louisiana by creating a small, powerful white elite and a large slave population. Louisiana was a colony of France from 1682 to 1762 and the Spanish occupied it from 1762-1800. After the colony became a U.S. state, the multiple colonial legacies continued to influence the region. French and Spanish traditions along with the arrival of American settlers created a complex and multi-cultural region. People spoke French and Spanish as well as English, the Catholic Church continued to have an influential presence, and the state utilized a combination of Spanish and French civil codes. Americans achieved political and social power bringing with them Protestantism and rigid notions of race. As in Guiana where the Dutch culture remained evident after British control, the French traditions continued to influence planters as they expanded their estates and cultivated cane.<sup>72</sup>

By 1817, sugar defined the plantation economy of southern Louisiana. Proprietors modified the process of cultivating cane to suit the tropical climate. They experimented with ribbon cane, which allowed them to grow it in nine months and avoid the danger of the winter weather. In the 1820s middle-class domestic demand for sugar and its availability to the middle class created demand for the commodity and a growing market for planters. By 1837, southern Louisiana produced 161 million pounds of sugar, which skyrocketed to almost 900 million pounds in 1854. The financial profits did not go unnoticed and officials, white elites, and planters hoped and argued that southern Louisiana could sufficiently supply the entire United States with sugar. To continue increasing production and accomplishing the goal of meeting American's demands for sugar, planters needed large groups of laborers to maintain their estates. In these two distinctive regions, sugar owners in Guiana and Louisiana needed levees and dams to protect the cane from

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<sup>72</sup> Judith Schaefer, *Slavery, The Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: LSU University Press, 1994), xiv-xv, 1-6, 60, ; Carlyle Sitterson. *Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South, 1753-1950* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1953); Richard Follett, *Sugar Masters*, 19-21; Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, 14; Paul F. Lachance, "The Politics of Fear: French Louisianans and the Slave Trade, 1786-1809," *Plantation Society* 1 (June 1979), 184.

floods. This work was difficult and demanding, proprietors knew that without slaves building and preserving these expensive structures would be expensive and extremely difficult. Smalley clarified the importance of ditches and levees for protecting sugar plantations:

The great enemy of the planters in lower Louisiana is water. Planters must constantly be on their guard against it, throwing up their defenses in front and rear in the form of strong dikes; keeping open with constant labor a checkerboard system of drainage ditches and pumping out into the swamp the water that falls as rain or soaks through from the river.

Planters in these two locales valued their slaves for this shared reason, which exacerbated this fear and created a heightened fear that they would no longer be able to support their mono-crop plantation economy after emancipation.<sup>73</sup>

By the 1840s, a small white master class formed and their wealth and status, derived from the productivity of slaves, defined the social landscape. For instance, plantation architecture distinguished the planter elite from other small sugar planters and signified their power. Henry Castellanos, a criminal lawyer and popular journalist, described the plantation estates in his memoir, *Louisiana As It Was*. He wrote, “Along the whole distance from New Orleans to Baton Rouge was a succession of most elegant villas, mostly in the French and Italian style of architecture. The elite planter felt an innate pride in the purity of his stock and the training of his children.” They consciously separated themselves from all others in society. In addition, planter families created strong kinship ties, intermarried, and established a tight knit elite group. Castellanos commented, “Who can enter the inner circle of his private life... Alas! That proud race of nature’s noblemen. As a general rule, the planter was a man of refinement and culture.” Further-

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<sup>73</sup> Eugene Smalley, “Sugar Making in Louisiana,” *The Century Quarterly*, 37, (November 1887), 105; *DeBow’s Review* 1 (January 1846), 55-56; Richard Follett, *Sugar Masters*, 19-25; Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: the Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985), chaps 2-3; John Rehder, *Delta Sugar: Louisiana’s Vanishing Plantation Landscape*, chapter 1; P.A. Champomier, *Statement of the Sugar Crop, 1845-1846*, 35; *DeBow’s Review* 3 May 1847), 414.

more, their wealth and power gave them the authority to control southern Louisiana and influence the political and social affairs of the state. They manipulated political officials and shaped public attitudes about slavery. Many served as governor and as representatives in Congress. Sugar landowners invested their time and energy to create a society that they politically, socially, and economically dominated.<sup>74</sup>

Proprietors in Louisiana closely controlled the daily operations of their plantations. Most lived on their plantations and cherished their way of life in the South. Sugar owners in Guiana viewed slaves and the power to control labor as a commodity to maintain their status as gentry. Although the wealth gained from sugar production was important for landowners in Louisiana, they also valued their sense of community as a master class. Louisiana planters had a more paternalistic outlook toward their slaves because they needed them to maintain their lifestyles, social autonomy and economic status. Slaves on large plantations received health care and adequate nutrition because planters believed it was their Christian duty and good business practice. They used Christianity to support and preserve the patriarchy. As God was the head of the church, so to white men were head over society and their families. Patriarchal relationships embedded themselves into the fabric of southern Louisiana society and slowly created assumptions that the more powerful and wealthy had obligations towards their slaves. An essential goal of sugar proprietors was to preserve their public privileges and hegemony over slaves on their plantations. Because in Guiana absentee proprietors traveled to the colony only when events or issues in the colony threatened their elite status in England.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Henry Castellanos, *Louisiana As It Was*, 177-183 (first and second quotes). Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, chapt. 1.; Richard Follett, *Sugar Masters*, chapt. 1-2; Sitterson, *Sugar Country*, 67-68; John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, chapt. 1 and chapt 2.

<sup>75</sup> Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 171-207; Richard Follett, *Sugar Masters*, 153-158; Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 3-7; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and

The elite planter class in Louisiana and overseers in Guiana shared values and ways of life. Directly managing the operations of production, both classes lived on the estates and established livelihoods in the colony. Most had the freedom to dictate the power dynamics on the estates because of the long distance relationship with absentee planters. Similar to planters in Louisiana, the master class and overseers in Guiana recognized the importance of protecting the health of their slaves to maintain the plantation economy and the social hierarchy. The elite planters in Louisiana and overseers in Guiana did not have the same economic positions in their social hierarchies but emancipation threatened to permanently disrupt their livelihoods and they recognized the irreplaceable significance of slavery.<sup>76</sup>

As in most sugar plantation economies, slaves comprised the demographic majority of southern Louisiana. On sugar plantations, grueling work defined a slave's life. Cultivating cane required long hours on the plantations for clearing land, maintaining levees, and repairing roads. However, slaves had space to form their own communities. Slaves lived in nuclear families rather than in single-person units as in other regions of the Deep South. The creation of slave communities alleviated some of the cruelties of slavery. African slaves did not abandon their cultural traditions and religious practices but blended their customs with European traditions. As kinship networks developed and strengthened through the centuries, American-born slaves developed a distinctive culture. Church became an institution that helped protect the past legacy of slaves and provided hope and unity to face oppressive white planters. The strong communal

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Eugene Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 505-612.

<sup>76</sup> William Russell, *My Diary North and South* (Boston: T.O.H.P. Burnham, 1863); Richard Follett, *Sugar Masters*, 3-4; Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 7-24.

character of slave societies and the institution of the church became key factors as slaves transitioned from bondage to freedom.<sup>77</sup>

A slave community existed outside of the plantation, and whites accommodated slaves to a certain point. To maintain a paternal patriarchal relationship with their slaves, plantation owners made concessions – they demanded them to work and also allowed them to develop and maintain their traditions and cultures. During the winter season, planters gave their slaves opportunities to grow their own crops, to engage in the market, and to save money. On many plantations, slaves created pockets of diversified systems of agriculture. They grew crops for their own needs and sold the remainder to the plantation. An internal economy developed between planters and their slaves. The account books of prominent planter Edward Gay reveal that in 1844 he compensated seventy-four slaves for selling the surplus of corn to the plantation. The work on sugar estates was extremely difficult, and yet slaves discovered some ways to make their own livelihoods and create space between themselves and their work as slaves. Overseers in Guiana also had to allow a slave community to exist outside of the plantation and permitted them to foster relationships and community with one another. The comparable structure of society in the plantation regions of Guiana and Louisiana created similar consequences for planters and overseers after the end of slavery. During slavery, blacks had already exploited opportunities to form their own autonomous livelihoods and emancipation in both locales allowed them to develop and sustain these independent communities.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 70-75, 443-566; John Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 36-40, 105-191; Roderick McDonald, *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves*, 76-81, Richard Follett, *Sugar Masters*, 212-223.

<sup>78</sup> Roderick McDonald, *The Economy and Material Culture of Slaves*, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1993), 50-88; William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South* (London, 1863); John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, 249-283; Thomas Bangs Thorpe, "Sugar and the Sugar Region of Louisiana," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* VII (New York: 1853); Daybook, 1844 (Vol. V), Edward J. Gay and Family Papers; Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ser. I, vol. 3, The Wartime Gene-

## Fears and effects of emancipation

As sugar production in Louisiana reached its zenith in the 1830s, emancipation began in the British West Indies. Sugar planters in Louisiana realized the significance of the end of slavery in the British Empire. Landowners in the British West Indies tried urgently to remake labor and the economy to salvage the old social regime and those in southern Louisiana closely observed the problems that occurred as the slave system changed to a contract system. In particular, sugar planters in Louisiana watched the ways the end of slavery created economic instability and what they considered “moral collapse.” Proprietors, politicians, and officials in the US South argued that emancipation in the British Caribbean caused blacks to revert to barbarism and this created fear for sugar owners that they would lose political and economic control. When landowners from the West Indies began creating an indentured labor system, it indicated the failure of free black labor to whites in the US South. For American slaveholders, British West Indian emancipation was a frightful experiment that white elites throughout the circum-Caribbean believed was doomed to fail.<sup>79</sup>

*DeBow's Review* kept planters in the US South apprised of the conditions in the British West Indies. The journal reveals that many prominent planters and slaveholding elites wrestled with ways to prepare for emancipation even as they committed to the defense of slavery. Articles before the Civil War contrast in tone to those following it. Beginning in the 1840s, US

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sis of Free Labor: The Lower South (Cambridge: (Cambridge University Press, 1990); John Blassingame, *Black New Orleans 1860-1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Carlyle Sitterson, “Magnolia Plantation, 1852-1862: A Decade of a Louisiana Sugar Estate” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 25 (September 1938); Sitterson, *Sugar Country: The Cane Sugar Industry in the South, 1753-1950*. Christopher Morris, “The Articulation of Two Worlds: The Master-Slave Relationship Reconsidered,” *Journal of American History* 95 (December 1998), 1007.

<sup>79</sup> Edmund Burke, *An Important Appeal to the People of the United States: Slavery and Abolitionism. Union and Disunion* (1856); William Green, *British West Indian Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830-1865*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 246; Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 213-214. Edward Rugemer, *The Problem with Emancipation*, 86-91.

planters dismissed contract labor as a viable labor system for sugar production. Many Louisiana sugar planters fervently rejected the British scheme of using coolie labor to replace slavery because they did not believe it would be a successful approach in the US. They considered blacks the only suitable people to work on their plantations because they had the skills and experience. For planters, blacks belonged in the sugar fields and the thought of transporting a new group of workers would be an unreliable solution if emancipation occurred.

DeBow himself reacted to British West Indian emancipation negatively. In one article, on a study of scientific racism in the British Caribbean he concluded, “the negro was created essentially to be a slave, and finds his highest development and destiny in that condition.” According to DeBow, only the African slave was suitable to work on sugar plantations because the race was physically and naturally designed to do so. He criticized West Indian planters because they had not fought hard enough to resist emancipation. He and others devoted themselves to protect the South from the same fate. DeBow and many sugar planters also condemned the coolie system as hypocrisy. In one journal article, a writer asked “how could coolies be accorded the specious title of free labor?” DeBow and others recognized that British planters coerced Chinese and Indians into “voluntary” labor when, in reality, they were entering into a system more cruel or equal to chattel slavery even though British colonial planters pled that the act was one of “free will.” However, it is interesting that only twenty years later most of the same planters and journalists that recognized the injustice of coolie labor began to support the idea of framing labor in a similar way in Louisiana.<sup>80</sup>

The significance of the pre-Civil War criticism of the coolie system is that it shows that planters recognized the oppressive nature of the system. US southern slaveholders wrestled with

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<sup>80</sup> “The West India Island,” *DeBows Review* 5 (May and June 1848): 455-500; “The Coolie Trade,” *DeBows Review*, 23 (July 1857):30-35, (second quote); Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 29-35.

the way British West Indian planters handled the labor issue. Like DeBow, some desired to set the US South apart from the practices of planters in the West Indies. Yet other proslavery advocates emphasized the importance of emulating the contract system before emancipation became a reality in Louisiana and throughout the US South. Daniel Lee was one of these men. He believed that “without making the disastrous sacrifice that ruined the planting colonies we may, if it be wise to do so, import Coolies, under reasonable contracts to serve for a term of years as apprentices, and then be conveyed to send them back.” The idea was that Chinese laborers would live on plantations for short periods of time, cultivate cane, and leave. Sugar owners that embraced Asian labor emphasized the importance that the workers would not create livelihoods in the US but act as replacements for slaves on sugar estates. According to Lee, the Chinese workers would fulfill the South’s need for labor and in return would help the South transition into the post-emancipation era.<sup>81</sup>

The difficulties and disastrous problems that sugar planters in the British West Indies experienced during the transition to emancipation affirmed for southern slaveholders that the end of slavery would have devastating consequences in the US South. The age of emancipation implied gloom and doom for sugar planters in Louisiana. According to historian Eric Foner, “Caribbean emancipation stood as a symbol and a warning to the white South, a demonstration of the futility of all schemes to elevate blacks, and of the dire fate awaiting American planters in the aftermath of slavery. Most of all, it taught that the freedmen must be barred from access to land.” The circumstances in Jamaica, Trinidad, and British Guiana frightened sugar planters in Louisiana because after emancipation, sugar production in the British West Indies rapidly declined, as former slaves embraced opportunities to leave plantations and form villages. Emancipation in the Brit-

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<sup>81</sup> Daniel Lee, “Agricultural and Laborers,” *Southern Cultivator* 12, no. 6 (June 1854): 169-170; Daniel Lee, “Laborers for South,” *Southern Cultivator* 16 no. 8 (August 1858): 233-36.



ish West Indies and its aftermath fortified the proslavery cause in the US South. As London *Times* reporter William Russell explained, “The anxieties attending the cultivation of sugar are great, and so much depends upon the judicious employment of labor, it is scarcely possible to exaggerate the importance of experience in directing it, and of power to insist on its application.” Cultivating sugar without slaves signified a bleak future. Most sugar planters could not fathom how their plantation economy would survive emancipation.<sup>82</sup>

### **Seeking solutions during post-emancipation era**

When the end of slavery became a reality in southern Louisiana, sugar proprietors encountered problems comparable to those in the British West Indies. Without slaves, it was difficult for planters to cope with the unpredictability of floods and the climate. Furthermore, the end of slavery and the Civil War disrupted the social hierarchy and destabilized the mono-crop plantation economy, which produced significant challenges for planters as they tried to remake society. It is important to recognize that landowners in Guiana faced these comparable challenges even though the process of emancipation was systematic and not violent. The end of slavery presented the same basic questions and anxieties for sugar owners in both regions. In both places, the planter classes relied upon sugar production to support their economy and social hierarchy. When emancipation disrupted sugar production and profits decreased, proprietors could not compete with planters in Cuba and Brazil, where slavery was still legal. Highlighting the three shared difficulties that created heightened anxiety for white elites in Guiana and Louisiana supports my arguments that planters in the basin engaged in a conversation about the labor problem because they refused to pay former slaves as “free” laborers and engage with them as equals.

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<sup>82</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988), 135 (first quote); Sir William Russell, *My Diary North and South*, Vol 1 (1863), 263 (second quote); Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation*.

After the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, acres of unharvested cane remained in fields that should have already been cut and processed into sugar. Vast swamplands surrounded most estates and after emancipation, planters found it difficult to prevent floods from damaging their plantations. This made the digging of ditches, dams, and trenches imperative. Most former slaves refused to do this type of labor because it was extremely difficult or they demanded high wages that planters either could not afford or refused to pay. For sugar proprietors in Guiana as well the labor problem created urgent dilemmas because without constant maintenance of ditches and trenches sugar production was almost impossible. Planters could not relocate their estates because sugar grew in the rich soil along the swamplands and coastal areas. Sugar proprietors were dependent on a climate that was unpredictable. During slavery, flooding and inclement weather did not create as much anxiety because landowners could force slaves to protect the crop from this variable.

When the end of slavery provided former slaves the ability to choose the work they would perform, the harsh weather became a significant problem. The mindset of the master class had to change because sugar production created and sustained the planter elite. They sought to find a way to force workers to perform hard labor, pay them little, and also make it appear that they had an employer-employee relationship with their workers. Landowners in Guiana shared this significant challenge and it created similar economic and social problems. Sugar owners in Louisiana identified with the struggles of those in Guiana and believed that the labor solutions that worked in the colony could be effective in their region.<sup>83</sup>

Beginning in 1862, the Civil War created havoc in the southern Louisiana mono-crop plantation economy sugar, the cane region, and the social hierarchy. Many planters with re-

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<sup>83</sup> John Rehder, *Delta Sugar*, 123-176; Charles Roland, *Louisiana Sugar Plantations During the Civil War* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1957), 57-75.

sources took their families and their slaves and left the Bayou before the invasion of New Orleans in April 1862, which left their property increasingly vulnerable. One Louisianan described the exodus, “Those elegant, refined, and cultivated and hospitable people who had adorned this region were scattered and gone, it was almost impossible to tell where.” The absence of planters provided easier opportunities for Union and Confederate soldiers and slaves to ruin and plunder most plantations. One planter depicted the transformation of the sugar region, “as the conversion of a rich, beautiful and highly improved agricultural region into a vast wilderness.”<sup>84</sup> According to *DeBow’s*, in the Plaquemine Parish in 1861-1862, 42 plantations thrived in the region and in 1864-1865 only 29 of those plantations continued to process sugar, however the difference in production was 20,132 hogsheads of sugar. Assumption Parish fared much worse in 1864-65, only 31 plantations remained in an area where 154 prosperous sugar plantations existed prior to the Civil War, which created a difference in production of 32,803 hogsheads of sugar. The political economy of southern Louisiana continued to depend on the cultivation of cane however, producing sugar remained competitive and expensive. Sugar owners could not maintain their elite social position without the ability to make profits, but they found themselves trying to recover the cane that was rotting in the fields.<sup>85</sup>

The end of slavery impacted planters in Louisiana and overseers in Guiana in comparable ways. Both groups lived on the estates and had established a way of life that allowed them to dictate the norms of society. Most did not know of any other lifestyle and could not imagine a world without slavery. Although elite planters in Guiana did not live in the colony and only had economic interests in their sugar estates, emancipation affected overseers and planters in Louisi-

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<sup>84</sup> “Memoirs of the War,” *DeBow’s Review*, 5 (February 1868), 160-161 (first quote); John W. De Forest, *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939), 191 (second quote); G.P. Whittington, “Rapides Parish, Louisiana: A History,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 18 (January 1935), 38.

<sup>85</sup> “The Sugar Crop,” *DeBow’s Review*, 2 (Feb 1866), 201; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction; America’s Unfinished Business* 129; John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, 59-77.

ana in similar ways economically and socially. After emancipation both classes searched for ways to salvage their livelihoods and remake the economy so that they could regain control. They both struggled to compete with new visions of freedom that challenged their autonomy. Former slaves refused to comply with planters needs to maintain the sugar estates, which pushed both groups of landowners in to embrace the idea of “contract” labor. Elite sugar owners in Louisiana and overseers in Guiana had distinct roles on their plantations and were different but the end of slavery threatened them in similar ways. Both groups recognized the need to have workers who could help them reestablish their way of life before emancipation. The planter class in southern Louisiana and overseers in Guiana connected with one another in a conversation of how to remake their societies without having to treat blacks as equals.

### **Emancipation and distinct challenges**

Despite their shared plantation economies, slavery and labor crisis following emancipation proprietors in Guiana and Louisiana experienced three distinct consequences after emancipation, which also pushed them to consider a form of Asian contract labor. Subsequently, these difficulties also prevented planters from using Asian labor to alleviate their problems. First, in the British Caribbean emancipation was systematic, gradual, and Parliament gave planters opportunities to replace slave labor with a contract system. In contrast, the Civil War created severe and abrupt repercussions for planters, which did not provide them space to adapt to the labor problem. The war forced sugar proprietors to suddenly operate their plantations with free labor suddenly and they experienced the consequences of the end of slavery at a faster pace than those in Guiana. Second, the Civil War brought significant political ramifications for planters. Radical Reconstruction provided blacks the right to vote and helped freedmen form political organizations and engage in public debate. Political mobilization inspired freedmen’s efforts to gain a

measure of control over their working lives even when they continued to labor on sugar plantations. Forming a collective political voice gave black laborers confidence to pressure planters reorganize the labor system. Third, planters were not able to manipulate the power dynamics between themselves and the federal government. Congress dictated the direction that planters could take to solve the labor problem. Unlike sugar proprietors in Guiana, planters in Louisiana could not gain more flexibility to dictate the terms of labor and reshape white hegemony. As they tried to transport Chinese laborers, landowners had to prove to the federal government that they were not coercing the workers by force. These three factors intensified the need for planters to remake labor and the racial order, but also made it more challenging to find a group of workers to replace slaves.

In May 1862, the successful invasion of the Union Army into New Orleans began the process of freeing slaves. In Guiana, Parliament implemented a systematic process to end slavery and created apprenticeship to help planters adjust to life without slavery. Apprenticeship provided them with access to workers and time to adapt to the labor problem. Planters in Louisiana experienced emancipation in a more severe and dramatic manner. Southern Louisiana sugar owners were considered enemies to the Union Army and the federal government had no interest in appeasing planter concerns. Union officials recognized the need to create a free labor system so that African Americans could begin creating independent lives. Developing a new form of labor that forced planters to relate to their former slaves on equal terms proved difficult. Blacks wanted planters and white elites to confirm and recognize their liberty and rights as people and workers. Planters quickly discovered that the labor contracts implemented by the federal government failed to create a submissive and dependable labor force. When African Americans decided to work, they set their own pace and refused to do the most imperative and arduous tasks

of digging ditches and levees. Sugar proprietors needed people whom they could force or rely on to meet the demands that sugar cultivation demanded. Production necessitated a rapid tempo of extracting the cane from the fields to making it into its edible form because once cut, cane rotted quickly. In a letter to the Commander of the Department of the Gulf, a group of planters complained that, “the time has come when preparations for planting and cultivating the crops of 1863 should be made. But without teams, and the ability to command the labour of our negroes, nothing can be done. Starvation stares us in the face.” Rather than relying on the erratic wage labor plan, many planters began exploring the concept of Asian labor and how landowners in the British West Indies used it to reestablish their plantation economies.<sup>86</sup>

The occupation of New Orleans provided slaves opportunities to leave plantations and settle near Union camps and the institution collapsed before the official declaration of emancipation. Planters already felt the major implications of the labor problem. In 1861, 459,420 hogsheads of sugar were transported from New Orleans and in 1864, the number declined to 9,800 hogsheads of sugar in 1862 with the Union occupation of the city. One writer lamented, “Such is the general destruction of estates by the war that many years must elapse before there can be any approximation to the past.” Sugar owners wanted to continue to be the sole producers of sugar in the United States even without slaves. However, this goal began to seem impossible as planters struggled to force their former slaves to work as wage laborers before the end of the war. Many appealed to Union military officials for authority to force their former slaves to work as plantation wage laborers instead of providing them with land. In his diary, William Minor, one of the most powerful and wealthy sugar plantation owners, expressed the urgency to find labor, “our

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<sup>86</sup> George W. F. Johnson to General Franck, 7 January 1863, Miscellaneous Records, ser. 1796, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pt. I [C-1062] found in Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ser. I, vol. 3, I, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 408; James Roark, *Masters Without Slaves*; Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy* (Baton Rouge; LSU Press, 1983), 8-34.

necessities and what guarantees of wanted to enable us to undertake with safety to make a crop this year.” Charged with reestablishing Union control in Louisiana, General Benjamin Butler implemented a wage labor system. Butler designed a plan that he hoped would appease blacks and planters. In return for “fair” wages, blacks had to agree to work twenty-six days per month. Conflict and tension constantly occurred as both groups wanted to dictate the terms of a new labor system.<sup>87</sup>

Although Union officials designed a free wage labor system, it had major imperfections in the minds of both planters and African Americans. The Republican federal government placed officials on the Freedmen’s Bureau to oversee the new employer-employee relationship between planters and freedmen and women. It structured wage labor so as to provide blacks small plots of land, if possible, or help them to seek a competitive price for their labor. Freed slaves applied their idea of freedom by demanding autonomy and higher wages, while planters battled to suppress their efforts. Many former slaves took advantage of the support of the Freedmen’s Bureau to challenge the exploitation of planters. In one instance, on Oaks Plantation, prominent owner Edward Gay refused to pay some the black wage laborers. In response, they complained to the Freedmen’s Bureau. In a letter the agent stated, “When you are owing them money honestly earned and which you no doubt promised to pay them at the end of the year. If the freedmen are not paid who were employed on the Live Oak Plantation immediately or in some good reason given. I shall take steps to secure them their pay provided there is property enough on the plantation to satisfy their claim.” African Americans used their relationship

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<sup>87</sup> “New Orleans,” *DeBow’s Review*, 1 (Jan 1866), 49 (figures and first quote); Charles Roland, “Louisiana Sugar Planters and the Civil War”, *Louisianans in the Civil War*, eds Lawrence Lee Hewitt and Arthur W. Bergeron (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 9-14; March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1863, Plantation Diary 34, William Minor Papers (second quote); William Messner, *Freedmen and the Ideology of Free Labor: 1862-1865* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1981), 32-43; John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Business*; Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed: 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1974).

with the Freedmen's Bureau to overcome inequality, especially economically. On plantations there was an intense struggle as white planters fought to remake labor in order to maintain the old regime and black workers were determined to exercise the freedom they obtained to change labor.<sup>88</sup>

Plantation work was arduous, slaves were expensive commodities, and it was important for planters to protect their investments. Paternalism was a vital component to the plantation economy. Emancipation all but eradicated paternalism in the relationships between former masters and blacks. As historian James Roark argues, "Benevolent behavior toward blacks could no longer encourage productivity or increase control." In response, planters exploited the competitive free market in an attempt to coerce and compel their laborers to remain on their plantations. Landowners forced former slaves to provide for themselves. Many exerted power over blacks by charging them money for clothing, food, and housing, which they had given them for "free" during slavery. Following the Civil War, the New Orleans Society of Free People of Color recognized that former slaveholders attempted to transform the wage-labor system into a "disguised slavery." This society believed that planters still had the power to control the lives of their workers and, as long as this continued, sugar owners would operate their plantations using force and coercion. As the New Orleans Society recognized, sugar proprietors did everything possible to manipulate free wage labor and circumvent the labor laws to mimic slavery. Planters labeled workers "good, average, or bad" according to how well they followed the rules set out by planters. If a laborer rebelled and challenged a planter's authority, they were considered a threat to the estate and received less pay. Union officials and former slaves agreed that planters and white

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<sup>88</sup> Letter from Freedmen's Bureau agent Charles Merrill to Edward Gay, Edward Gay Papers, Feb 24, 1868; Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds. *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*. Ser. 3, Vol1, *Land and Labor: 1865* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2008); Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ser. I, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South* (Cambridge: (Cambridge University Press, 1990).



elites blurred the line between slavery and freedom by forcing African Americans to pay for essentials that once planters provided them.<sup>89</sup>

Federal troops regulated the wage labor system until 1865. During Reconstruction, the Freedman's Bureau took over the task of managing the tension between former masters and free black laborers. However, sugar planters were determined to find ways to suppress the rights of their former slaves and turned to British West Indies planters for ideas. Resolved to remake the plantation economy without treating black laborers as equals, they considered the solutions used by planters in the British Caribbean. In the first issue following the war, *DeBow's Review* published an article entitled, "The South and its Duty." The writer described the core issues of planters during Reconstruction, he stated:

The vital question for the South at the present time is: Can the colored man be profitably employed as a free laborer? will he work? Or is he an exception to the general rule, which determines that when the laborer is remanded to his own interests he will prove most effective? The results of the experiment in the British West Indies would throw great light upon this inquiry.<sup>90</sup>

Many planters dreamed of the day when the old regime could restructure a system of compulsory labor as effective and efficient as slavery, allowing white Southerners to "manage their affairs in their own way." Ultimately, emancipation was an effort to put right the relationship between an unjust and privileged ruling class and an oppressed people that had been trampled underfoot and had no role in society other than as cheap labor. As sugar planters fought diligently to maintain power over blacks, African American workers challenged the economic and social disparity be-

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<sup>89</sup> Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom*, 131; James Roark, *Masters Without*, 144 (first quote); Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ser. I, vol. 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 595, (second quote); Jean-Charles Houzeau, *My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune*, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1984), 108-110; John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, 31-58; Richard Follett, *Sugar Masters*, 220-240.

<sup>90</sup> "The South and Its Duty and Destiny," *DeBow's Review* 1 (January, 1866), 72.

tween themselves and planters by using their skills in sugar production to prevent sugar owners from restoring their estates.<sup>91</sup>

The year of 1865 marked the point for former slaves to break through the barriers of slavery and face the challenges of living in post emancipation society. Most of them pictured freedom as an end to the separation of their families, the end to corporeal punishment, and the beginning of opportunities to educate their children. Freedom meant owning small tracts of land and participating in the local economy. One former slave stated bluntly, “If I cannot do like a white man I am not free.” From his perspective, African Americans should have been able to do anything a white planter or any white man could do. As Eric Foner states, “Blacks during Reconstruction laid the foundation for the modern black community, whose roots lay deep in slavery, but whose structure and values reflected the consequences of emancipation.” Nevertheless, achieving freedom was complicated for blacks. They wanted to use their new political, economic, and social rights to create a new vision for the state.<sup>92</sup>

One major distinction from the circumstances in Guiana was that at the same time that white elites sought to maintain established social hierarchies blacks did not secure the right to influence the political affairs of the colony. In southern Louisiana, black suffrage created significant repercussions because the population outnumbered whites considerably. Former slaves dominated the voting blocs of many sugar parishes and this provided opportunities for blacks to engage in the state legislature. In 1867, every parish except one, elected at least one black dele-

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<sup>91</sup> Ira Berlin et al., eds., *Freedom: A History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, ser. I, vol. 3, I The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); William Minor Plantation Papers; Jean-Charles Houzeau, *My Passage at the New Orleans Tribune: A Memoir of the Civil War Era* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1984), 75-77.

<sup>92</sup> Stephanie McCury in her book, *Masters of Small Worlds*, argues that most yeomen farmers joined the southern war effort because they felt that the federal government had “crossed the threshold” of their authority over their household; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Business*, 77-78; Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O’Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds. *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*. Ser. 3, Vol11, *Land and Labor: 1865* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2008).

gate. Although the African American presence in state political affairs was temporary, the election of eighteen total black delegates was also revolutionary. Blacks who continued to work on plantations also engaged in debate at political rallies, which helped them make cooperative decisions about how to resist the demands of planters. According to John Rodrigue, “the collective organization of life and labor on sugar plantations provided a fertile breeding ground for black grassroots politics, which in turn fueled freedmen’s efforts to gain control over their own labor.” Sugar owners struggled to prevent black workers from incorporating their political agendas as planters tried to control labor. Political activity disrupted the daily operations of plantation life and prevented landowners from recovering economically. Workers believed that their new political autonomy gave them the right to leave plantations for higher wages, demand better working conditions, and oppose the standards set by planters on their estates. One planter complained that “politics have crazed the negro here as elsewhere.” In order to counteract black political mobility, planters tried to dismiss workers from their plantations if they engaged in any political activities. They also used violence whenever possible, especially during the 1868 presidential campaign. Landowners in Louisiana formed the Knights of the White Camellia to terrorize freedmen and discourage them from engaging in politics. Sugar owners believed that politics was the business of whites and blacks belonged in the fields and they used whatever means possible to communicate this message. Labor and politics were closely connected as blacks tried to prevent planters from manipulating them by boldly voicing their opinions about labor regulations.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> John Rodrigue, chapter 3; Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1974), 143-47; Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: LSU University Press, 1984), 6, 153-159; M. Schlatre Junior to Edward Jay Gay, October 5, 1867, Edward Jay Gay Papers.

Another significant challenge for planters in Louisiana was the political agenda of African Americans who never experienced slavery. During Radical Reconstruction they began to voice their desires, visions, and goals for the state. Newspapers provided an outlet for them to promote the importance of the family, church, and education for former slaves and the entire African American population in the US South. In 1864, Dr. Louis Roudanez, a wealthy black doctor, established the *New Orleans Times*. He wanted the newspaper to be the organ representing African American needs, hopes, and goals. The publication provided an effective medium for African American thinkers, leaders, and reformers to express their opinions. Editor Jean-Charles Houzeau circulated copies of the paper to members of Congress and several Northern newspapers. The tactic was crucial because the voice of Southern black men with “radical” ideas for reform reached influential federal officials. It also continued to keep Northerners informed of the positive and negative effects of Reconstruction. The editors and columnists of the paper demanded educational, land, and social reform that would transform the oppressive conditions in Louisiana and throughout the US South.

Another newspaper, the *New Orleans Tribune*, advocated for full black political participation in all areas of government, including the judicial system, which was highly controversial. One editorial argued that, “freedom without equality before the law and at the ballot box is impossible.” Equality meant the ability to have the authority and right to work towards qualifying for any governmental position. The *Tribune* also promoted the right of African American children to access public education and the right of newly freed farm workers to decent wages and working conditions. The paper was brash and boldly confronted the power hungry white elite. “There is no more room, in the organization of our society, for an oligarchy of slave holders or property holders.” They believed the majority of people in the state, free people of color and

former slaves, should replace the minority and make political and economic decisions. On labor, they argued for a capitalist system, where the labor system mirrored a democratic system. For the writers and publishers of the *Tribune*, labor reform was the vital component for Reconstruction. This idea was a continual theme in the paper. “Labor is the only true element of prosperity, strength and grandeur in modern societies.” They aimed to eradicate the monopoly of the elite white plantation owners and replace them with African American men, who would own small portions of the plantations and take part in the local economy.<sup>94</sup>

In Louisiana, emancipation destroyed the antebellum political hierarchy and the control of the state government. Sugar planters closely observed the benefits of British West Indian coolie labor, but they also had to factor in the important implications of suffrage when thinking about the labor problem unlike colonists in Guiana. Furthermore, the illegality of coolie labor system created further difficulties. The presence of black officials in the state government provided greater hurdles for sugar planters as they tried to recover from the loss of their labor force. As one planter lamented to his father, instead of working, “The negroes are having meetings and electioneering for the different candidates for the convention. I saw about 20 on horseback yesterday with the stars and stripes floating over them.” This problem was foreign to sugar planters in British Guiana, and for the first time they watched and learned from those in southern Louisiana regarding ways to structure a dependable labor force with a black population who had political rights. The struggles in the US South further affirmed to planters throughout the British West Indies that they could find a way to transport Asian workers and this would be the most advantageous route to rebuilding their sugar industry. Landowners believed they would not have to fear that Chinese laborers would challenge the political hierarchy. Sugar owners needed stability,

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<sup>94</sup> *New Orleans Tribune*, Nov 15, 1865 (first quote); *Tribune*, March 1 1865 (second quote); *Tribune*, November 26 1865 (third quote).

and they believed that Chinese workers could provide some consistency in the midst of drastic change.<sup>95</sup>

By 1866, the attitude toward Asian contract labor had changed drastically. Unlike before the war, for most planters the coolie labor experiment in the West Indies, which had been in place since the late 1840's, convinced them that a form of this system could gradually restore the once-thriving sugar production region. The *New Orleans Picayune* reported, "In the West Indies the coolie labor has proved an immense success in the increase of the production. The importation of coolies has done more to discourage and break up the African slave trade than any other cause. Asiatic labor has saved many colonies from ruin and desolation." Many southerners believed Chinese laborers would bring competition to motivate the black population to work. One journalist reported in the *West Baton Rouge Sugar Planter*, the ways the contract labor system worked in the West Indies. It was "simple, laborers are hired by the planter for a season, terms of contract are distinctly set and understood. If either party breaks their obligations officials determine the issues. The attitudes of the black population toward labor has changed. They have become motivated." Thus the paper asserted "these facts, thus presented by an intelligent observer, embody more wisdom, more valuable, practical lessons to guide our legislators and social reformers." By the 1850s, the contract system, in the British West Indies slowly helped the crippled sugar plantation economies recover, and planters in southern Louisiana watched carefully. Even DeBow himself, once a staunch opponent to Asian contract labor, conceded that slavery was dead and that transporting and hiring immigrants would be a beneficial alternative option to rejuvenate the plantation economy. His personal sentiments did not prevent him from reporting the positive results of the Asian labor system in the West Indies. One article in *De-*

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<sup>95</sup> Edward Gay Papers, September 20, 1867; Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom*, 48-53; Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 73-107.

*Bow's* specifically cited British Guiana as the prime example of the advantages and success of the contract labor system. Although DeBow did not directly endorse Chinese labor, the editors and contributors of the journal reported the success of Asian indentured labor in the British West Indies:

The Demerara planters seem to have proved satisfactorily that sugar can be raised by free labor as successfully as under a system of slavery. None of the West India Islands turn out such bright and crystallized sugar as British Guiana... In Common with the greater part of the West Indies, Demerara suffers from deficiency of labour; but the colonists have strenuously exerted themselves to remedy this drawback ...

Although he continued to find some faults with Chinese labor, he also understood the desperate situation in southern Louisiana as planters sought an expedient alternative labor force to replace black wage workers.<sup>96</sup>

As American newspapers and journals continued publishing positive accounts regarding the ways sugar planters adapted to the labor problem in the British West Indies, those in southern Louisiana began to campaign for permission from the federal government to bring in Chinese immigrants. Planters, southern white elites, and politicians could not predict the future battle that they would face as they prepared to implement a Chinese contract system in Louisiana. In British Guiana, Parliament initially attempted to prevent the most obvious inhumane and oppressive aspects of the coolie system yet gradually conceded to planters the power to mold to the system to fit the labor needs. However, planters in Louisiana were never able to pressure the Republican federal government to allow them to establish an Asian contract labor system. Instead, tense debate developed between the national government and Louisiana planters about the legali-

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<sup>96</sup> *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, October 28, 1866 (first quote); *West Baton Rouge Sugar Planter*, December 1, 1866 (second quote); Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 77-80; Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed*, 58-73; Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction*, 95-101; "The Cultivation and Manufacture of Sugar," *DeBow's Review*, 3 (April-May 1867), 460 (block quote)

ty of the system. Examining the reasons that planters failed to change the federal official's attitudes towards Chinese labor reveals why sugar owners struggled to successfully implement a form of "contract" labor. Unlike landowners in Guiana, planters in Louisiana never gained the power to bind Chinese workers to their labor agreements. This is significant because proprietors in southern Louisiana encountered more obstacles as they tried to put limits on the idea of free labor.

One of the most difficult issues for landowners in Louisiana was the political debate between the idea of coolie labor and contract labor and the question of its legality. The argument about the similarities between slavery and Chinese labor was one of the fundamental factors that prevented sugar owners from dictating the direction of free labor in the region. From 1867 to 1869, Louisiana planters and southern officials argued that the Act only applied to the ports and subjects of China, not to immigrants who voluntarily came from China. *The Daily Picayune* was an ardent supporter of Chinese immigration and published continuous articles throughout the late 1860's justifying the project. One article stated that, "When they emigrate, they do so willingly, no force being employed nor any evasion of the laws of the country resorted to secure their deportation."<sup>97</sup> Planters and officials in the South believed that coolie labor and contract labor were two different systems and that their method of using Chinese would look different than the contract labor systems in Cuba, the British West Indies, and elsewhere in the Caribbean. Editors of the *Picayune* argued:

We observe that most of the papers, while differing in some instances as to the origin and the strict meaning of the word "Cooly," use it as though applicable peculiarly to Chinese laborers. The assumption is far from being correct, and might lead to serious misconceptions and practical mistakes. The word is Hindostan, and signifies day laborers, a fact in striking contrast with the popular idea in Western countries, which regards the word as the peculiar industrial characteristic

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<sup>97</sup>*The New Orleans Daily Picayune*, November 25, 1865.



of Coolies that they labor not by the day, or the week, or the month, but by periods of five, eight, ten years, and on conditions that render them virtually slaves. This is not the idea in the US South.<sup>98</sup>

Neither side, southern planters and northern abolitionists, ever came to definitively define the concept of coolie, although the main issue behind the debate concerned this very definition and idea.

Most Southern planters desperately tried to persuade the federal government that a labor system with Chinese workers would have no similarities to the coolie system in the West Indies. *Harper's Weekly*, however, challenged this characterization. In a formative and in-depth examination of Chinese “coolie” or “contract labor,” it defined a coolie as a Chinese slave, bound for a longer or shorter time and argued that the South was demanding “an ignorant and brutish population of laborers, instead of intelligent, industrious workmen.”<sup>99</sup> The “Chinese Labor Question” was embedded with racial issues on both sides of the debate. Republicans, federal officials, and African American leaders feared that the Fifteenth Amendment, based on racial equality, would need to include the Chinese and this would further complicate an already fragile political and social national identity. As federal officials and Republicans tried to disaggregate the nation, they were also hypocritically fighting to prevent Chinese from entering the country and “polluting it.” *The New York Evening Post* had blasted Chinese migration supporters accusing them of wanting to allow more barbarism, violence and lawlessness into the country. These results, they concluded, would stunt the nation’s prosperity and harm attempts to attract, “free laborers, the enterprising, active, intelligent, industrious population.” As Republicans, African American leaders, and others promoted universal equality, the same anti-slavery supporters contradicted

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<sup>98</sup> *The New Orleans Daily Picayune*, October 28, 1866.

<sup>99</sup> *Harper's Weekly*, August 14, 1869; Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 110.

this with their derogatory perceptions of the Chinese. For all involved, the Chinese did not fit into an existing category: they were neither free nor enslaved labor.<sup>100</sup>

The debate and public controversy of Chinese migration did not deter Southern planters and officials from devising a plan to transport hundreds of Chinese to the South. They tried to sidestep the federal government by holding special conferences to think of ways to transport Chinese to the region without stirring up controversy. In July of 1869, planters near Memphis and New Orleans organized a convention to investigate the possibility of hiring a private company, the Arkansas River Valley Immigration Company, to transport Chinese from China and San Francisco to sugar regions of the South. By July, the labor question and problem overshadowed all other issues that Southern planters, officials, and white elites faced during Radical Reconstruction. Their inability to control African American wage labor and the continuous decline of sugar production caused a group of prominent and influential citizens in Memphis to organize a convention in under two weeks. *The Memphis Daily Appeal* urged Memphis leaders to take a stand against Northern opposition to Chinese migration. One newspaper report warned that, “Already the negroes are forming combinations to make their own terms with their employers ... the quiet, orderly workers” from China were the people to replace African American wage laborers, “who (had been) made so unreliable by Radical interference and manipulation.” Although a hasty undertaking, numerous elite former slave owners, political leaders, former Confederate generals, and other powerful Southern leaders traveled to Memphis to better understand the proposition of Chinese migrant labor. Chinese labor was the sole topic of the meetings. Planters in

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<sup>100</sup> *New York Evening Post*, July 20, 1869; Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 19 and chapter 3; Lucy Cohen, chapt. 1.

Memphis and in southern Louisiana hoped that by gaining the support of delegates throughout the South, they would have a more powerful voice to weaken those against Chinese migration.<sup>101</sup>

Leaders presented two main arguments highlighting the need and the positive aspects of Chinese contract labor. The leading delegate, J.W. Clapp, set the tone for the convention and directly connected the experiences of the West Indies to the labor problem in the South. Most planters and politicians focused on the economic benefits of the enterprise. Some leaders passionately expressed the need for “dark-skinned laborers, Mongols, who luxuriate where the white man would perish” simply to provoke Northern opposition. Clapp completely ignored the previous attempts to persuade the federal government that the Chinese contract labor system in the South would be distinct from the coolie system in the Caribbean. He passionately argued,

Experience taught that the great staples could not be produced by voluntary labor, but under coerced labor systematized and overlooked by intelligence... these same island now employ a coerced labor, and again blossom like the rose: again they are an earthly paradise. Whose labor is it that has done this? India and China answers. Asiatic labor supplies the place of that stricken down by emancipation, and the country again commences to be what it once was. Shall we not profit by its example?

Clapp’s declaration reveals the different approaches used to confront the federal government’s opposition to Chinese labor. Regardless of how planters argued about the benefits of the system and debated the difference of Chinese migrant labor to coolie labor, the principles, framework, and motives for a Chinese contract labor system mimicked the approach in the British West Indies. Planters and Democrats had to present this solution to the labor problem to appease those who regarded it as a new form of slavery.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 106-110, *Memphis Daily Appeal*, June 22, 27, July 11, 15, 1869; *West Baton Rouge Sugar Planter*, May 29, June 5, 12, 1869; Lucy Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 63-64.

<sup>102</sup> *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July June 23, 24, 26, 27, July 1, 14, 1869.

Most of the delegates agreed with Clapp, yet believed a more subtle approach was necessary. They believed that the fundamental purpose of the convention needed to explore the economic benefits of Chinese labor. Most supporters of Chinese migration presented their plan as one that would benefit the US economy. Without Chinese labor, they claimed that African Americans would demand extremely high wages or refuse to work, resulting in ruined fields. One the second day of the convention, Cornelious Koopmanschap, with his business connections in Hong Kong that specialized in the recruitment of Chinese labor to San Francisco, informed the delegates of the logistical undertakings of transporting Chinese to the South. He presented the undertaking as cost effective and at the end of the convention delegates proposed a plan to create the Mississippi Valley Immigration Labor Company. The goal was to bring “as many Chinese immigrant laborers as possible in the shortest time.” To deter the reaction and possible legislation prohibiting their efforts, the *Daily Appeal* asserted that the South was interested in the voluntary immigration of willing workers who deserved to be treated like all other immigrants. Delegates left the convention optimistic and with a plan in place to potentially import thousands of Chinese laborers. However, trying to constantly prove to federal government that they were not practicing coolie labor made their efforts less effective unlike planters in Guiana they were never able to gain autonomy and authority to dictate Asian labor as they wanted.<sup>103</sup>

Ultimately, the structure of the coolie system in the Caribbean shattered hopes for Louisiana sugar planters to transport large groups of Chinese to replace African American workers. Although the coolie labor system in the British West Indies had revived sugar production, abolitionists in the US, who observed the process, recognized its harsh and slave-like characteristics.

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<sup>103</sup> *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July, 14, 15, 25, 29 1869; Lucy Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 63-68, Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 100-106; Frederick Douglass, “Composite Nation,” in Philip S. Foner and Daniel Rosenberg, eds. *Racism, Dissent, and Asian Americans from 1850 to the Present: A Documentary History* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 215-31.

Proprietors used violence and coercion to bind Asians to their contracts and Republican officials believed their methods were inhumane and illegal. For Louisiana sugar planters, however, the desire and goal of transporting Chinese laborers did not die. They found ways to bring Chinese to the region by transporting them from California and not through the Caribbean. Instead of bringing Chinese from Cuba and other parts of the Caribbean where the coolie system existed, a few white elite sugar planters traveled to San Francisco to hire Chinese workers who were in California. Bringing relatively small groups of laborers at one time and shifting their attention to Chinese immigrants already in the US, planters avoided some political roadblocks and setbacks.

From 1870 to 1872, planters transported approximately three thousand Chinese laborers in hopes of finding a cheaper work force that would alleviate the labor problem. Elite planter, entrepreneur, and business man Edward Gay's diaries and letters provide insight regarding the urgency that planters felt about bringing Chinese to Louisiana sugar plantations and the tedious process involved. In a letter to his agent, Samuel Cranwill, Edward Gay wrote that "the Chinese work well, rather slow but systematic...they improve rapidly and he [his agent] thinks they will each be superior to negroes, and they are more reliable. They are valuable laborers."<sup>104</sup> Cranwill believed that as Chinese workers became more skilled at cultivating cane that they would successfully replace black laborers. He hoped that the Chinese would continue to respectful and work without complaint. Cranwill wrote to Edward Gay, "It is a good resort for planters to obtain Chinese laborers. The negroes are becoming so saucy and unreliable they are intolerable. Then they must have their horse, their cow, their pig, and such extras as people whose time is fully paid for, should not expect. Tis well some resort is left to show them the planter is not wholly dependent on their caprice, and obliged to suffer their impertinences."<sup>105</sup> Fifty-two Chi-

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<sup>104</sup> Edward Gay to Samuel Cranwill, Sept 7 1870, Edward Gay Papers, LSU.

<sup>105</sup> Samuel Cranwill to Edward Gay, Sept 12, 1870 Edward Gay Papers LSU.

nese worked on the Gay plantation and, the overseer, Major L.I. Butler, reported to Gay that they quickly learned the methods of sugar cultivation to replace black wage laborers.<sup>106</sup>

Establishing monthly work agreements with the laborers, planters paid for workers whom they hoped would solve their labor problem. Most planters who hired Chinese laborers tried to find ways to manipulate and force them to work arduous hours and complete the work black laborers refused to do, like dig ditches and maintain levees. In response, Chinese immigrants challenged planter authority by demanding better wages. Although sugar owners did not have the power to compel the workers to finish their agreements, nevertheless, the goals were the same for planters in both regions, to remake the political economy, maintain their old lifestyles, and secure their authority and hegemony. Proprietors in Guiana and Louisiana embraced similar ideas of how to transform the labor system, but their approaches created distinct results and long-term consequences. Asian labor was successful in Guiana because planters secured their authority to dictate the terms of contract labor. In Louisiana, sugar owners were not able to gain this degree of autonomy.

Chinese labor, whether called coolie, contract, or migrant, had different results and reactions for planters in British Guiana and southern Louisiana. The same underlying dilemmas plagued former slave owners in both regions and sugar owners in Guiana and southern Louisiana searched for methods to inhibit the freedoms that former slaves were using to devastate their plantation economies. Both planter groups needed a labor force that would simultaneously help planters recover from the effects of emancipation and provide them with a way to stabilize the sugar plantation economy. Fear that blacks would dominate post-emancipation societies and reshape the direction of the region pushed them to restructure their labor systems to subdue anxieties. Sugar planters in both regions endeavored to restructure sugar production that looked like

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<sup>106</sup> L.I. Butler to Edward J. Gay, January 19, March 27, 1871.

or appeared to meet the criteria of free wage labor but in reality was a revised prototype of slavery. This, they believed, was the key to surviving the end of slavery. Proprietors in both British Guiana and southern Louisiana searched for a group of workers that were neither black nor white, and who could challenge and weaken the autonomy former slaves exercised.

### **Conclusion**

Following the Civil War, Radical Reconstruction provided blacks with opportunities to transform society. The African American community in Louisiana benefited from educational, political, and economic reform. Black delegates in the state government passed legislation that provided opportunities for workers to have a voice as they struggled to secure livelihoods on and off plantations. This also prevented planters from using the legal system to enforce and create vagrancy laws and contract-enforcement measures. They had limited power to restrict the labor market and struggled to reestablish control over their workers. Planters could only watch for so long as their cane rotted in the fields while blacks registered to vote and refused to work for low wages. When sugar owners tried to transport Chinese laborers the federal government interfered, preventing them from hiring enough workers to replace African Americans. Even though Chinese labor did not meet planter expectations they did prove adept at reclaiming their former powers and remaking white hegemony. The main issue in the Louisiana cane fields was resolving planters' and black laborers' contrasting visions of free labor. Former slaves fought for communal autonomy as they collectively worked on the plantations. However, as sugar owners adjusted to emancipation they struggled to control their workers in order to make sugar production profitable.<sup>107</sup>

Using a form of Chinese contract labor was only one way that planters tried to redeem Louisiana. Ultimately, sugar owners succeeded in maintaining the status quo and reclaiming

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<sup>107</sup> John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, 58-74.

their authority over society and over former slaves. Many of the white elite who were in power before the Civil War reestablished racial superiority after Reconstruction. Sugar proprietors found a way to preserve their way of life by ordering society through white supremacy, violence, and intimidation. Landowners in Guiana accomplished this as well using coolie labor, but once Asians finished their contracts, white elites struggled to silence rioting and discontent. Although Asian contract labor did not work in Louisiana, planters created a form of white supremacy that lasted until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and became intertwined into the structure of society. Sugar owners found a way to subvert the ideas of free labor by using a system of violence. Whites accomplished this by enacting Jim Crow laws, which set the precedent for white and black relations. The principles behind the laws were to relegate African Americans to the status of second-class citizens and separate them from white society.<sup>108</sup>

Beginning in 1876, Jim Crow laws in southern Louisiana kept black migrant laborers poor and dependent upon the wages that planters decided to give them. African Americans could no longer use their political power and mobility to demand better wages. This made it difficult for black laborers to own land, which was one important component of freedom. As white Democrats reclaimed power in the state government, planters regained the power to order their society. The goal for the master class in Louisiana was to prevent former slaves from making their dreams of freedom into realities. Louisianans re-established their power through violence but in a way that solidified their authority, unlike in Guiana where the non-white multi-cultural majority continued to challenge white authority.

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<sup>108</sup> John Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields*, 119.



## CONCLUSION

During emancipation, sugar owners in Louisiana and British Guiana experienced similar problems. They coped with the challenges of the post-emancipation era by drawing upon their connections with sugar owners throughout the circum-Caribbean world. Regional and internal issues shaped the way planters in Guiana and southern Louisiana constructed an alternative free labor regime after the end of slavery that helped them solidify and reclaim their political, economic, and social supremacy. Proprietors in both locales refused to pay their former slaves as they would white laborers because this meant succumbing to the visions of economic and political freedom and of racial equality promoted by African Americans and Afro Guianans. Both planter classes succeeded in different ways to reorder their racial and social hierarchy that undermined the goals of a “free” labor system. Sugar owners in Guiana regained the power to dictate the terms of labor by using Asian contract workers. Louisiana landowners tried to use similar methods to transform their society, but the U.S. illegalized contract labor before the Civil War. Planters in Louisiana had to remake white supremacy in different ways. In both societies planters devised a system that they could use to reestablish their customs, traditions, and livelihoods before emancipation and also adjust to the challenges that they encountered during the post-emancipation era. They also struggled to maintain their elite economic status and reinforce their social hierarchies. This ultimately created new worlds in which racial ideologies, violence, and political regimes looked both different and similar.

Emancipation created irrevocable changes throughout the circum-Caribbean by disrupting the social and racial order in societies. For the first time sugar proprietors had to negotiate with blacks, who pursued their own goals of economic and social autonomy. For former slaves, freedom meant the right to separate themselves from plantation life and form their own commu-

nities. In order to maintain a labor force, planters had to pay blacks competitive wages. For landowners emancipation meant losing the ability to dictate the social and racial hierarchy by exploitation. There were two key concerns that pushed planters in the Gulf, including Guiana and Louisiana, to find an alternative group of laborers to replace slaves. First, they committed themselves to find a way to operate their plantations without paying former slaves like free workers and prevent them from demanding certain privileges. Second, planters were determined to find a way to avoid treating blacks as equals. These two principles were non-negotiable. In order to reach these goals, sugar owners had to find effective ways to reclaim their former power and restore white hegemony. The difficulty for proprietors was to find a way to accomplish their goals in the post-emancipation era. How could they recover their previous way of living and at the same time adapt to the challenges created by emancipation? Landowners believed restructuring the labor system was crucial to answering this question. They wanted to create a framework for a labor system that appeared to meet the expectations of abolitionists and that subtly exploited workers to stabilize the sugar plantation economy. Proprietors throughout the Gulf strongly believed that they needed the ability to control their workers in order to continue to dominate the social and political hierarchy.

Asian contract labor became an effective solution that many planters used to reestablish their hegemony in the British West Indies. In Guiana, sugar owners gradually gained authority to dictate the terms of the coolie system and salvage their sugar plantation economy. However, Asian contract labor had significant long-term consequences that negatively impacted the planter class. The colony developed into a multi-cultural pluralistic society, which allowed the diverse ethnic groups that formed the majority of the population to use violence to challenge white autonomy. This is compelling because planters wanted Asian coolie labor to create racial and so-

cial diversity in the colony as a way to prevent the black majority from exercising their freedom and create better lives for themselves. From the 1840s to 1870s sugar owners increased sugar owners with Asian laborers but they also did not recognize the problems that would occurred when Asian began finishing their contracts. The work agreements did not bind Asians to plantation work permanently and landowners did not recognize the effects that thousands of independent Chinese and South Asian Indians would have on the colony. By the 1880s, the master class was outnumbered not only by the black population but also by other ethnic groups that were also disgruntled with their place in society. When massive urbanization and industrialization undermined the sugar plantation economy, white elites depended on manufacturing to advance the colony. Without the authority to force non-whites to work peacefully and comply with unfair working regulations, the master class remained vulnerable and fearful of losing their hegemony. White elites experienced similar issues during the 1880s as they did in the 1840s as they continued to struggle to find a way to pay and appease non-workers and avoid treating them as equals. From the perspective of planters, coolie labor turned out to be a temporary, although ultimately successful, solution to a complex labor problem.<sup>109</sup>

Restoring white hegemony in the cane fields worked itself out differently in Louisiana than in Guiana. As sugar owners in Louisiana tried to work out a solution to the labor problem, they also wanted to complicate the idea of free labor and limit the agency of African American workers. Landowners believed that Asian labor could be a viable solution for their similar problems experienced by their counterparts in the British Caribbean. The distinct circumstances in the region prevented Chinese labor from succeeding as it did in Guiana. Crucial differences in Louisiana that prevented sugar owners from using a form of contract labor were the illegality of it and the political opposition from the federal government to recruit Chinese workers. Although

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<sup>109</sup> Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*.

planters eventually found ways to transport Asian laborers to their estates, they could not assert authority over them and restore the sugar plantation economy. Ultimately, the experiment failed. This did not discourage landowners from finding a solution to the labor problem, but it did force them to search for different opportunities. However, sugar owners applied the principles of the coolie system to restrict African American workers from establishing their own autonomy as they tried to purchase land, form communities, or express their political opinions. After Reconstruction ended, sugar owners recognized the way northern businessmen were industrializing the US South and invested in machines that would produce sugar faster and more efficiently. However, they continued to need African American laborers who had the knowledge and skill to work in the mills and support the plantation economy. Sugar owners found ways to use violence and intimidation to prevent blacks from purchasing small plots of land and from demanding higher wages. As white elites regained control of the state government, planters successfully prevented blacks from voicing their political opinions and limited their ability to challenge white hegemony. With support from legislators and the governor, landowners created work agreements with blacks that they could dictate, enforce, and control. They regained power to manipulate and exploit African American workers to achieve their economic, political and racial hegemony. In the 1880s, white elites in Guiana were experiencing pressure from riots and violence from the multi-ethnic working classes, meanwhile, the master class in Louisiana resorted to violence to recreate aspects of their lives before emancipation. This is significant because during emancipation planters in both places pursued similar methods to restoring their plantation economies but the effects, success and failure, of contract labor had divergent results in both regions.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Matthew Guterl, *American Mediterranean*; Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery*; Juanita DeBarros, Audra Deptee and David Trotman eds. *Beyond Fragmentation: Perspectives on*

Emancipation forced sugar owners in Guiana and Louisiana to reluctantly change the way they produced sugar and cultivated cane. During the post-emancipation era the master classes searched for ways to restore what they considered the “golden age” of life during slavery. In Guiana, planters failed to permanently reestablish the old plantation economy and the autonomy of the slaveholding ruling class. Georgetown became the center of economic activity and industrial development weakened the ability of planters to maintain the sugar plantation economy. Although the master class tried to look to the past for inspiration and guidance to confront the riots and violence in the cities, white elites failed to silence and solidify their power in the colony. As a multi-cultural and pluralistic society, the racial hierarchy was complex and white elites struggled to suppress all of the diverse ethnic groups. Although industrialization also occurred in Louisiana, sugar planters successfully separated themselves from blacks and used violence to remain in power. Jim Crow laws and black codes prevented African Americans from claiming areas of the region or New Orleans as their own. In Guiana, Afro Guianans became artisans and merchants in sections of the city where white elites resided and did business, which challenged white hegemony. There was a power struggle in Guiana that white elites in Louisiana were able to suppress and overcome by the 1880s.<sup>111</sup>

As sugar owners in southern Louisiana began restoring economic and racial authority in the cane fields and in politics, they believed that they also needed to protect, control and guard their southern white past, identity, and cherished memories of antebellum life. They justified using violence to reclaim power on the grounds that it was their duty to renew the grace and gentility of the slaveholding class. However, they avoided addressing the devastating human and economic impact of the institution that supported them. The creation of Jim Crow solidified the

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*Caribbean History.*

<sup>111</sup> Juanita De Barros, *Order and Place in a Colonial City: Patterns of Struggle and Resistance in Georgetown, British Guiana, 1889-1924.*

efforts of whites to silence African American visions of freedom and helped planters regain the authority to manipulate the power dynamics with black workers. Believing it was their responsibility to maintain the customs and traditions of the antebellum South, proprietors recognized the important role of labor and its connection to the racial hierarchy. These landowners laid the foundations in matters of race, politics, economics, and law for Louisiana deep into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>112</sup>

The ways planters in Guiana and Louisiana adapted to the transformations to the labor system created complex problems as whites and blacks continued to struggle to define and pursue their visions of freedom in the age of emancipation. The structure and organization of labor established by planters in the two locales irrevocably changed the power dynamics in these two societies by the 1880s. The comparison captivately shows how, in two diverse regions spanning the circum-Caribbean, planters turned to contract labor to reassert their economic and racial power. It also explores how landowners succeeded and failed in different ways to salvage their previous livelihoods. The use of violence proved crucial to restoring white hegemony. Planters in Guiana successfully used violence to force Asian indentured workers to cultivate cane, which stabilized sugar production for forty years after the end of slavery. In Louisiana, the master class eventually used violence and even simply the threat of violence to silence discontent and remake the racial and social order. It is compelling how the network created by the Gulf provided planters from distinct regions with similar frameworks to approach the labor problem. Moreover, these circum-Caribbean linkages did not disrupt the distinct cultures and traditions of the two locales. Rather the different circumstances and political regimes in Guiana and Louisiana caused

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<sup>112</sup> James Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 98; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South*; Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (United States: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2005).

the planter classes to diverge as they confronted the outcomes and effects of their solutions to the labor problem in the decades following emancipation.

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