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# THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

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**In his search for new lands**, following his lucky strike the previous year, Christopher Columbus on 14 November 1493 came upon an island which he named "Isla de la Santa Cruz" (called by the natives "Ay Ay," subsequently renamed "St. Croix" by the French). Continuing his voyage westward he sighted a few days later an array of islands, islets, and rocks (now known to be over 100 in all). On these, in honor of St. Ursula and her 11,000 martyr virgins (because of their number and, it is claimed, to exaggerate his find in the eyes of his patrons, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain), he bestowed the name "Las Once Mil Virgines" (the 11,000 Virgins). The whole archipelago is today known to the world as the Virgin Islands.

The Virgins straddle latitude 17° 40' and 18° 51' North and longitude 60° 7' and 65° 6' West, being some 1,400 miles from New York. The islands are, for the most part, of volcanic origin, many rising precipitously from the sea. Politically they are territorial possessions of the United States and the United Kingdom.

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The U.S. Virgin Islands comprise three main islands—St. Croix (84 square miles, with a population of 31,779), St. Thomas (28 square miles, population 28,960), and St. John (20 square miles, population 1,729). The total population of 62,468 is broken down into blacks: 45,309, whites: 11,339, others: 5,820 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1970: 16). This paper attempts to present an overview of the growth of predominantly black “native” Virgin Islanders, their relationship with “native” whites as well as immigrant whites and blacks, and their encounter with American colonialism.

### **BLACKS AND THE DANISH REGIME**

When Denmark joined the ranks of European colonial powers by formally taking possession of St. Thomas in 1672 (some 100 years after the aborigines had been effectively exterminated), a logical early act was the importation of African slaves to provide the labor necessary for plantation development. The first consignment arrived within a year, and the plantation system (principally the cultivation of sugar and cotton), in typical West Indian fashion, began simultaneously to enrich the adventurous European and to dehumanize the captive African—one gradually, the other immediately. Establishment of plantations was extended to St. John in 1717—by which time there were eight times as many blacks as whites in a population of over 4,000—and to St. Croix in 1735, two years after its purchase from France.

Danish West Indian society was not unlike other slave societies in the Caribbean; very much in evidence were harsh slave laws, planters' reliance on strict discipline and what they regarded as hebetude, and the interminable but futile attempts on the part of slaves, mainly on St. Croix and St. John, to free themselves from their lot. The Danes, however, attempted to be less ruthless than some other colonial powers (for example, nothing could raise the blacks to the status of

human beings in the eyes of the English and the Dutch, and they were treated as the Egyptians treated the Israelites—with whom they held it an abomination to eat bread; Edwards, 1966: 23). As early as 1718, royal orders were given for good treatment of slaves and discontinuation of the planters' power of life and death over them. These were, nevertheless, largely ignored in practice, as planters excused themselves by claiming that the blacks had brought vicious practices with them and that force was necessary to ensure subjugation to their owner's will. Decided numerical increase of slaves (largely through importation) was a factor in their abuse, as this engendered among the whites a fear of their potential power. (Toward the end of the eighteenth century there were some 31,000 slaves in the islands.) Besides, after each hurricane or period of drought—and the islands fell prey to such disasters quite frequently—their plight grew worse mainly through extra work and near-starvation. Actually, it was after such a visitation and some consequent deaths by starvation that the slaves on St. John (1733) rose up and took control of the entire island, massacring any whites before outside force could retake it. Several isolated incidents on St. Croix were put down by extremely harsh measures.

Free blacks became a part of the society at an early period, freedom being either bestowed by white fathers or purchased. The free were mostly "colored" and emerged from the ranks of house slaves or artisans who were in a better financial position to effect their own purchase than were plantation slaves. Their presence increased the existing social stratification by creating a new class between the poor whites and the slaves. In 1773 they comprised one-third of the total population of St. Thomas, outnumbering whites in the town of Charlotte Amalie 336 to 225 (Knox, 1852: 89). The term "colored" here is distinguished from "black" as used at that time. Not only did the former mean that ancestry automatically suggested higher social status in the eyes of whites and, consequently, among their own people. To be "colored," then, meant to be

socially superior to the blacks (pure-bred), whether or not they were free.

Some "coloreds" prospered to the point of owning slaves, engaging in commerce, and, later, being employed by the government. The women enjoyed the "privilege" of being mistresses and "housekeepers" to white men of all nationalities; among these men was Governor-General Peter von Scholten (1827-1848), who, in his wife's absence, had a permanent colored "companion" assisting him publicly and privately at government house entertainments which included "colored persons of culture" (Christensen, 1955: 12). Members of this group could neither vote nor hold responsible office, however, until 1834 when a royal decree gave them the status of citizens and allowed them to enjoy full legal and economic rights.

Here, as elsewhere, the churches attempted to raise the moral and spiritual life of the colony—but they ministered exclusively to the European population. It was not until after 1755, when the Danish government took over administration of the islands from its West Indian and Guinea company, that the state church (Lutheran) made any missionary effort among the blacks; a separate service in English was conducted for them. As late as 1838, they entered by a special door and were provided a special place in the Anglican church. Moravian missionaries, however, arrived in 1732 to bring to this unregarded mass of humanity the message of the fatherhood of God; undaunted by the opposition of planters, they ministered to slaves spiritually and educationally. Mission schools were set up throughout the islands to Christianize them, and gradually planters began to tolerate the work.

Moravian efforts were strongly buttressed by the Danish government in 1787 when, in keeping with its relative benevolence, history was made by the establishment of four public schools for the education of blacks—slave and free. The missionaries translated the New Testament and wrote primers

in Negro Dutch Creole (a language literally created by the slaves by grafting their tribal tongues to Dutch)—which action, it is observed, gave to the blacks a sense of dignity hitherto unknown. Through the continued combined efforts of the Moravians and the state, Denmark was credited early in the nineteenth century with having the largest number of literate slaves in the world (Larsen, 1950: 123-125).

Generally speaking, the early nineteenth century seemed to hold out some promise for blacks. Denmark, having earlier declared the slave trade unlawful, had suppressed it by 1803; the Danish attitude toward slavery was becoming progressively more liberal. Economically, the islands were still doing well. But across the Caribbean (characterized as a social inferno) came blowing strong and decisive winds of change which were not to bypass the Danish West Indies; the British freed their slaves in 1834, some of whom were only two miles away in the Virgin Islands, many carrying on frequent intercourse with Danish blacks.

Danish political action at this time established certain measures which would tend undeviatingly toward the abolition of slavery; but an economic downturn made the planters unwilling to support amelioration. In 1847, on the birthday of the queen-dowager, King Christian VIII issued a decree declaring all children born after that date free and offering freedom to all others at the end of 12 years.

The anticipated satisfaction with which such news would be received was not forthcoming. Instead, the proclamation seemed to stir up feelings of discontent, and agitation was accelerated by French emancipation in February of 1848. Having no intention of waiting 11 years for a life so many others were enjoying (including their own children), the slaves in St. Croix on July 3 took matters in their own hands. Led by Moses Gottlieb ("Buddhoe") and armed with sticks and cutlasses, they marched some 2,000-strong on Fort Frederik and demanded their freedom. With the increase in numbers and the inflaming of passions, the scene became very formid-

able indeed. In the face of this manifestation of determination, Governor von Scholten proclaimed immediate emancipation. (This extralegal action was sanctioned by the king within two months.) The promise was forcibly fulfilled. It is noteworthy that at the time of emancipation one-half of the black population already was free.

The act of emancipation, however, did not ensure the existence of true freedom. When the tumult and the shouting of rejoicing ended, most of the ex-slaves, particularly those on plantations, basked in long-desired idleness and flatly refused to work. Within a month, stringent legislation was passed to restore some semblance of "normalcy." A Labor Act followed (1849) which regulated the working conditions for the blacks and restrained them and their families from leaving estates—"it was better that the laborers suffer a temporary evil, than that they should be given up to their ways, to their own serious and permanent injury, and the serious injury, if not destruction, of social order" (Knox, 1852: 113).

The "temporary evil" lasted some 30 years, during which time the social order remained intact. There was an absence of governmental intervention to raise living standards for the oppressed workers, and, instead of increasing the subsistence wages, estate owners on St. Croix imported coolies and Barbadian blacks—another variant of slave labor. With property qualifications necessary for enfranchisement, blacks were as powerless as they ever were, their discontent and restlessness increasing with time.

The laborers' patience was exhausted when a skirmish in Frederiksted between them and police officers triggered an insurrection in 1878. The town was burned and pillaged and great suffering ensued, but the oppressive Labor Act was completely destroyed, and blacks in the islands were at last really free. "Queen Mary," characterized as "a canefield worker with a genius for leadership," was the moving spirit

behind the rebellion; she remains today a genuine heroine in the eyes of Virgin Islanders.

St. Thomas blacks had been in a somewhat more fortunate position due to the commercial prosperity of that island which afforded less burdensome labor around the dock as an alternative to plantation toil. Indeed, unlike St. Croix, plantation laborers were a distinct minority, a situation which precipitated rapid decline of agriculture. Free to loiter around the port, the emancipated blacks worked when they were in need and idled when they chose. Economic depression during the last quarter of the century, however, affected all classes in the society; and with the decline of prosperity there was a concomitant decrease in population. In large numbers, blacks responded to the beckoning of the Panama Canal and the sugar industries of Santo Domingo and Cuba. There they assured of enough money, although largely on a seasonal basis, to maintain their families. Many of them never returned.

Among the islanders that did not emigrate was D. Hamilton Jackson of St. Croix ("Black Moses"), who, as a representative of the laboring class, went to Denmark in 1915 and secured certain concessions from the crown, the chief of which was freedom of the press. (The event of this acquisition is still marked by a public holiday—Liberty Day, November 1.) Jackson soon after began publication of the first native newspaper, *The Herald*, and organized a labor union (the first in the West Indies) which staged a general strike for higher wages and better working conditions, both of which were won. The success of Jackson's efforts and the spread of unionism to St. Thomas led to similar action by the coal carriers two years later.

### U.S. SOVEREIGNTY

In 1917, after "on again-off again" negotiations for some 50 years, the United States paid Denmark \$25,000,000 for the



132 square miles of land which they needed for military purposes due primarily to the strategic location of St. Thomas. The new acquisition contained over 24,000 blacks of a total population of 26,061, and the historian of the local patrimony records that there was “a full-grown social and economic problem rearing on its haunches, kicking, snorting and waiting for the cowboy with rope and saddle” (Jarvis, 1938: 112).

The Navy, which had assumed administration of the islands, soon understood the meaning of this assertion. Apart from the lack of employment opportunities, social conditions, according to the first governor, were “deplorably low” and “intolerable in the extreme” due to poverty and bad living conditions. The naval medical officer reported general health to be so poor that on his visits to St. Croix he saw as many dead people as sick ones; infant mortality was described as “particularly disgraceful to a civilized community”; sanitation (especially the disposal of night soil) was alluded to as “primitive”; storage of water and deficiency of food were major problems; housing was overcrowded and inadequate; the hospitals were inefficient and suffered from a lack of proper equipment and trained personnel; and the system of education left “about everything in the way of an adequate system to be desired” (Report of the Governor, 1917: 1-13).

The United States had become a colonial power several decades earlier (the Phillipines, Puerto Rico, and Guam were ceded by Spain in 1898; Hawaii became a territory in 1900), but the traditional “white man’s burden” had assumed another dimension with the purchase of the Virgin Islands—a black colony. And while it is true that blacks were a depressed and despised minority in several states of the Union, Americans had neither previous experience nor adequate preparation to deal with the task involved in the new undertaking.

Qualifications may have been lacking, but the navy engaged the enemy that was perceived. In 14 uneventful years, the islands received “much improved health conditions, paved streets, better schools, and an economic situation a little

better than they had reason to expect" (Jarvis, 1944: 88). One observer has pointed out that "at least half of the income of all wage earners . . . came from the United States Government. Without continuing government help the islands would have starved" (Blanshard, 1947: 234).

At least the natives had an answer, according to one summation of the critics' views cited by Creque (1968: 81): "They say quite plainly that an expert in political administration could not command a ship, and that Congress cannot intend that the reverse proposition by which a good ship commander must be an expert political administrator is the sum total of American intelligence in governing the Virgin Islands." So, in keeping with the "naval commander" attitude (and the colonial mentality), the natives merely took orders. As one local leader pointed out to President Coolidge, "politically we are peons. The franchise is monetary. . . . Our people are without voice in the government that they form a part" (letter from Rothschild Francis to President Coolidge, quoted in Hill, 1971: 82). A draft Organic Act introduced into Congress in 1924 elicited from the governor the comment that improvement for the islands lay more in owning homes and plots of ground than in ballot boxes and autonomous government, and that the creation of new positions would but provide jobs for "negro politicians" (Evans, 1945: 228).

Where the naval administration had an almost instantaneous effect was in the area of race relations. The Danes had permitted legal registration of "colored" people as white citizens on the basis of good behavior and social standing. And although this egalitarianism can be regarded as purely superficial—it could well be seen, in fact, as a subtle refinement of the colonial rubric, *divide et impera*—the social snobbery and stultification of racial brotherhood resulting from this policy had made Virgin Islanders distinguishable from other Caribbean "coloreds" in that there was no sharp dividing line between the white and near-white residents. The Americans, then, entered a society which for a long period was

without any official recognition of race, and in which an aristocracy of mixed blood, high social status, and considerable wealth called the tune.

According to Campbell (1943: 80), the transfer brought a group of administrators and merchants who were for the most part "thoroughly imbued with the characteristic American credo regarding race [and] many of the early naval and civilian officials were of southern origin." With their special system of racial classification, there can be no question that they were puzzled by the situation. "They had to revise most of their ideas of discipline, standards of living, morality, and social procedure" (Jarvis, 1944: 88). One notable attempt at trying to "adapt" was made by Rear Admiral Oman, who invited the general public to a levee, accepting as guests "along with pompous burghers . . . people without any status in local society," thereby ruining the dignity of the whole affair and causing considerable consternation (Jarvis, 1938: 133).

If the local elite found the transition from Danish to American rule difficult, the ordinary people had an even worse time of it. It is recorded (Jarvis, 1938: 141) that the very first night the marines came ashore "the negroes felt the heel of race prejudice, for one of the 'leathernecks' kicked an inoffensive black man into a deep gutter to the accompaniment of sulphurous language slurring his parentage and color." The marines had found a target and, displaying their racist contempt through open provocations, "enlivened the nights by impromptu battles with the natives." Besides making war, however, they also made love, finding the native girls "not too discriminating, and with the Navy began an era of free love such as had never been known" (Jarvis, 1938: 141).

The increased emphasis on race affected sexual relationships in a peculiar way. "Almost always," writes Creque (1968: 75-76), "black women of the lowest income groups preferred white bastard children to black ones, even those born in wedlock." This is explained by one observer, a psychologist, as follows:

A feeling of identification with white persons is undoubtedly an important source of ego-gratification for many lower-class people who cannot fulfill their status ambitions in more direct ways. This process of raising the color takes many forms, of which the most obvious is the willingness of many lower-class women to serve as temporary sexual partners of white men. . . . In most cases, these associations do not involve any monetary consideration; the principal motivation of the woman appears to be a desire to be known as the intimate of a white man and, if possible, to bear a child lighter in skin-color than herself. [Campbell, 1943: 56]

The islanders accommodated the new social conditions created by the fighting and loving marines together with hard times and a "let the Navy do it" attitude. As they had done in the days of the Danish planters, they continued to "live by their wits":

Each new naval governor was received with palm branches and garlands upon his arrival; when he met the legislature and crossed it he lost face. By the time the governor had survived two waves of unpopularity it was the hour of departure and the loyal people gathered in public meetings to tell how much they appreciated his efforts on their behalf. They made him presents of tortoiseshell paper cutters, mahogany canes, coral and silver ornaments, and they prepared to welcome the next one. [Jarvis, 1944: 89]

Both elected and appointed officials of the U.S. government appeared at a loss to decide what action should be taken about the mess in which they found themselves, and a veritable plethora of advice was proffered. A federal commission composed of American blacks admitted that the islands were in bad shape but found, curiously enough, that the one thing necessary for the civil and industrial salvation of the islands was to end the local sex and marriage customs and to replace them with a standard conforming to American ideals. There was somewhat similar moralizing in the 1929 Tuskegee-Hampton Report on Education, whose thinking, as Lewis (1972: 63) suggests, indicated "the wide gulf that has always

separated the value judgements of the American Negro from those of the Virgin Islands Negro." One is left to wonder whose America these blacks were speaking about.

Perhaps the course of action proposed by the Bureau of Efficiency in order to reduce federal spending in the long run by increasing appropriations "to do at once things necessary to bring about improved conditions" is explained by the rationale against the discontinuance of appropriations. This would cause an "intensified exodus of the colored to the United States which would be good neither for the islands nor for the United States" (Report of the Governor, 1944: 23).

The best advice was perhaps that of Rothschild Francis, militant editor of *The Emancipator*, which focused attention on the islands and did much to destroy the old spirit of resignation and "more, perhaps, than all the discrimination practiced by the officials, to tell black people that blackness is a handicap which only militant unity can hope to overcome" (Jarvis, 1938: 140). The reaction to this kind of activity was typical of colonialism. In the governor's view, this local leader was "irresponsible, is a bad influence . . . and teaches anti-government, socialistic, semi-Bolshevik and race-hatred stuff" (Report of the Governor, 1923: 2). "Agitation" continued, however, both in the islands and in "that hive of unrest, Harlem, New York" (Jarvis, 1938: 127)—to which many natives had emigrated because of unemployment and easy access. In 1927 the islanders were granted the status of American citizens, and in 1931 the islands were transferred from the jurisdiction of the Navy Department to that of the Department of the Interior.

The new administration found that "parasitism is highly developed (a result of unstigmatized pauperism—twenty-five percent of the total native population is on government relief of one kind or another)" (Jarvis, 1944: 100). And it was observed that the ease with which some things could be acquired had lulled them into a somnolence from which they were rudely awakened. The first civil governor and the people

took the knotty problem of managing the islands during the worst depression of modern times. The governor spoke, records Jarvis (1938: 160-161), "about 'letting down your buckets where you are,' but these people are not like the Booker T. Washington type in any sense. They had been accustomed to Old Testament paternal government, and they felt that dipping water from any stream of idealism was too hard for their unaccustomed muscles and minds." President Hoover, who looked once and said, "An effective poorhouse," had made no mistake.

The federal government established a rehabilitation program for the islands (private capital investment did not reach \$20,000 after 16 years of U.S. rule), but this was somewhat tentative. St. Thomas was temporarily saved when President Roosevelt personally intervened to establish a Marine Corps air base in 1935, and a submarine base in 1939 (Blanshard, 1947: 234). But as late as 1941, conditions in St. Croix were desperate to the extent that municipal salaries, small as they were, had to be reduced by 10% to 20%, and many of the public buildings had to be mortgaged to carry on essential services. And although the local political leaders had started to spread their wings, the islands were still "that sport of political morphology, the colonial possession of a representative democracy" (Report of the Governor, 1940: 50).

In spite of these disabilities, or perhaps because of them, race relations maintained a fairly even keel. The natives never became preoccupied with color. "One good reason for the indifference," suggested an observer (Jarvis, 1944: 31), "is the difficulty of getting all the people to agree on such an abstraction as the race problem is to them at present." The "browns," though making no attempt to align themselves with whites in times of crisis, regarded themselves as such and kept blacks at a distance in every respect—including residence. Some of them were accepted as whites for quasi-social and economic reasons, but, their pretenses notwithstanding, they were conscious of being merely tolerated by whites for pur-

poses of expediency. "Blacks" were little concerned about the snobbery, accepting the fact that they could not share the private social perquisites of the more privileged classes; in the absence of official segregation there was an awareness that, even when their finances allowed, they had access to the same commodities or modes of entertainment as anyone else.

Whites grew to understand the limits beyond which intolerance brought regrettable results. Displays of prejudice would elicit a disdain and contempt from nonwhites that would make them feel vulgar and inferior to others—a treatment which, according to Jarvis (1944: 32), "gets under the skin and hurts." An illustration of such contempt in more recent years is recorded by Harman (1961: 149): "My great-grand-father and my wife's great-grandfather were educated in Europe. Half of these Continental Americans don't even know who their great-grandfather was, much less where he went to school—if he did."

Historically, whatever havoc it created elsewhere, war has been a boon to the Virgin Islands. World War II was no exception. The governor could boast that

by reason of their strategic location . . . such has been the scope of the defense plans and their fulfillment that perhaps in no other place under the American flag has the normal economic and social structure of community life been so radically affected. . . . Employment, which is the first known measure of economic health, was at its peak. . . . Military preparations gave remunerative employment to every employable male. [Report of the Governor, 1942: 1-3]

At the end of the war, conditions took a decided downturn, and the islands began to seek a new economic base. Expansion and diversification of agriculture on St. Croix and the establishment of new industry were initiated, aided by tax exemptions and industrial subsidies, but the greatest focus was put on tourism, since the potential of the islands as a vacation retreat for escaping Americans was being

increasingly recognized, several former Navy buildings being converted into hotels. By 1953 it was reported that there was employment for all employable persons in tourist facilities and some small industries. Materially the islands continued to progress steadily; by 1960 it was considered that the islands were at, or close to, the peak of an era of unprecedented prosperity.

The philosophy of growth had become a virtual obsession, and the following eight years, under the leadership of a governor with a businessman's approach, saw updating of incentive legislation, the creation of a Department of Commerce to attract business to the islands, and the introduction of heavy industry (Harvey Aluminum and Hess Oil Refinery) into St. Croix. The coming of jet aircraft and the initiation of nonstop flights from major cities gave a tremendous fillip to the burgeoning tourist trade. Population, construction, the demand for public services, and per capita income (the highest in the Caribbean) soared; in Creque's (1968: 178) words, "in the decade of the sixties the people of the Virgin Islands have achieved the greatest . . . progress in their history."

### ETHNIC RELATIONSHIPS

Periods of prosperity historically have attracted migrants in comparatively large numbers. Before the coming of the Americans, black Virgin Islanders from the British side had moved in and out in search of employment. It is estimated that at the time of the transfer some 23% of the population had originated from this source. Until the U.S. immigration laws were brought into effect in 1927 the movement continued unrestricted, and during World War II particularly they entered "through the window"—that is to say, without the sanction or even the knowledge of the authorities. There were, however, no serious problems of



relationships as these immigrants were easily absorbed into the "native" community, the two groups of Virgin Islands actually forming a single geographic, socioeconomic, and linguistic unit, international boundaries notwithstanding.

French Huguenots from St. Bartholomew (St. Barths) in the departement of Guadeloupe arrived at St. Thomas in the 1850s; they have had a history of social and geographical isolation and a habit of inbreeding. Vulgarly known as "Cha-Chas," they, like other poor whites in the West Indies, were "characterized by features that facilitated their acceptance by the host society; that is, they were at once culturally [and linguistically] different, racially disparate, and socially inferior, while their occupational specialization, in fishing and farming, did not place them in a competitive relationship with the St. Thomanian Negro majority" (Lewis, 1972: 201). Assimilation has been, and still is, however, on the increase.

Puerto Rican arrivals followed American sovereignty due largely to the economic down-turn in the islands of Culebra and Vieques, dependencies of Puerto Rico. There was a significant increase after the application of the U.S. immigration laws to the Virgin Islands. The Puerto Rican presence in the Virgin Islands is predominantly a St. Croix phenomenon. Initially there was hostility on the part of Virgin Islanders, and five of areas of anti-Puerto Rican complaint have been noted—"unsanitary habits, troublesome behavior, attempted monopoly of livelihood sources, and 'white superiority' beliefs" (Senior, 1947: 18)—equally uncomplimentary changes being leveled in return. Puerto Rican acceptance has now reached the point where a Virgin Islands-Puerto Rico Friendship Day is an annual occasion. But perhaps the real reason for the amicable acceptance lies in the fact that they have remained under the peculiar spell of their home society, which is "a remarkably strong, viable human organization with a high awareness of cultural identity" (Lewis, 1972: 215).

“Continental” is the term in the local lexicon applied to white people from the U.S. mainland. The “Americanization” of the islands was initially a matter for officialdom. Private citizens were largely retirees, many with hill-top homes and little or no contact with local society or beachcomber types. With the growth of tourism, many of these private citizens moved into the work force, drawn by the magnet of investment possibilities. They, in turn, created employment for other continentals in tourist-related businesses. Some of the newcomers constituted the counterparts in the Caribbean of those fleeing to the suburbs of the mainland in the 1960s, and many of them created job opportunities out of an ability to discern them, often on a shoestring.

Between 1940 and 1960 the continental population almost doubled. They took on any kind of work that was available, in contrast to the natives, who are historically selective. As one of them stated, “this is a wonderful place for failures. The place is loaded with them, only they are not failures down here. Everyone is a success here who is a failure back home. For me and others like me this place is a money machine” (Donovan, 1965: 13). Recently, there has been a noticeable tendency for these successful individuals to sell-out to mainland groups, creating local “conglomerates” with frightening effects on local sensibilities.

The continentals, then, constitute an economic presence concentrated in the entrepreneurial sector. They are “business oriented in the main, with all the cultural philistinism of the business mind” (Lewis, 1972: 192). They are also culture-carriers of American values, and many attempt desperately to bring the best of American community consciousness to the life of the islands, even when such efforts are in conflict with cultural roots and might not make particularly good sense. In spite of their hard work for personal gain and their community-oriented preoccupations, they see themselves “not as creolized Americans in a different Caribbean society but as denizens in the American Caribbean” (Lewis, 1972: 188)

and feel it somehow unfair that they will never be accepted as "true Virgin Islanders" (Lewis, 1972: 186).

The hustling entrepreneurs, in order to produce greater growth, introduced to the islands what Lewis (1972: 228) has labeled "the modern variant of indentured labor." The aliens (12,092 immigrated between 1960 and 1968, and 6,635 in 1969-1970), only a small percentage of whom came as permanent residents, consisted mainly of West Indian blacks of Dutch, French, and British origin seeking to better their economic lot in a land of material promise not far removed from their own. The legally resident aliens were consistently joined by an unknown number of "illegals" who dodged the immigration authorities as long as they could and reaped the profits of the boom.

Bonded aliens on the average were lower class, poor, and generally unskilled. They performed the menial jobs scorned by Virgin Islanders, were "subject to some of the most flagrant general living conditions existing anywhere under the U.S. flag," second class citizens living in "a recognizable sub-world," exploited by employers and landlords, "exposed to social snobbery and cultural contempt," the "cultural economic, and social consequences of their presence [being] felt daily and ever more acutely in the spirit of Virgin Islands life" (Lewis, 1972: 217-235). The alien situation, to which the local government was initially indifferent, has been characterized as "a major social disease." Referring to their condition and the burden put on social services, one official from the Interior Department reminded the governor that they were incompatible with the philosophy of the Great Society. Both the federal and local governments, however, have made attempts to alleviate the plight of the bonded alien.

It is this congeries which presents a general picture of an economic sector mainly continental in its personnel, a political sector mainly native, and a labor force mainly alien that constitutes the Virgin Islands "community." Labeled the "showcase of democracy," it is held up for the inspection

of the world as “people living in dignity and mutual respect for one another and with a common goal of creating and developing a better life, each having an opportunity of sharing in the fruits of his labor, in accordance with his ability and regardless of the roots from which he sprang” (Shulterbrandt, 1967: 61-62). Lewis (1972: 167-168) challenges the assertion, referring to the society as

a parallelogram of informally organized segregationist entities pregnant with feelings of jealousy, hostility and even fear. It is true that divisiveness is offset by pride in being a “native Virgin Islander” in its more positive sense. But that term has also a negative meaning, used as a personality test to differentiate its possessor from the alien components of the social mix.

Native leaders had, at least through their political positions, set the stage for and helped to create the new social situation. The average Virgin Islander made as much use as he could of the improved economic conditions and the upward mobility it afforded. Before long, however, the natives appeared more like a dwindling audience in attendance at a perpetual drama being acted out by the ever-increasing players from the continent and Caribbean islands—a drama written largely by expatriate profit makers and produced by forces over which they seemed to have no control. The stage, as it were, could no longer contain the players, who spilled over into the audience creating what has been characterized as “social claustrophobia.”

Caught, as one native wit put it, “between two jaws—the aliens and their fairer counterparts,” natives, by now alarmed, from the “Black Power” philosophy imported from the mainland, went on the defensive. Many began asking tough questions of their economic benefactors and demanding a piece of the action—“If blacks and whites are equally powerful, in terms of economics or whatever, you can hate us as much as you want, but you’ll just have to treat me as an equal” (Mario

Moorehead, quoted in Cuchiara, 1973: 26). And it was not only the counterculture that was involved; the native president of the St. Thomas-St. John Chamber of Commerce summed up the continental presence as follows:

We must face the fact that, in general, the recent white arrival from the U.S. mainland has not been a good neighbor. Lacking roots in this community, he finds little in common with native Virgin Islanders and makes no serious effort to bridge the cultural gap that separates us. He is one of many migrants from many places and has little sense of responsibility to this community and not too much sense of common purpose even with other whites, except in search of congenial and social companionship . . . it would be difficult to find a mainland city the size of St. Thomas where the business community is as disorganized and as lacking in civic spirit as our mainland white-dominated business community here. [Wheatley, 1971: 2]

Further, the attorney general of the islands in a forthright analysis listed as problem areas the establishment of white schools, de facto segregation in employment, monopolistic tendencies in business, segregated housing, interpersonal relations, and discrimination in death (“the general practice of burial at sea for whites”). He concluded that

the tyranny of silence has allowed these conditions to exist for far too many years and . . . we are failing to assume our leadership role in promoting positive attitudes by condemning those who insist on maintaining the status quo. . . . The recent outcry for independence is not accidental. It is a natural avenue for those who are convinced that the objectives of the whites are incompatible with the objectives of the natives, and that there can be no reconciliation under the present system. [Hodge, 1973: 9]

Curiously enough, there was a native reaction to the aliens—fellow blacks who also survived slavery and colonialism—that was different only in the form of the rhetoric. They

were regarded as “rude, wild, fierce . . . uneducated people coming from a background . . . inferior to the American” (Lewis, 1972: 235)—which was also being criticized. As public services were made increasingly available to noncitizens, natives saw their children go to school in crowded buildings and trailers, waited in longer lines for service, and generally became conscious of moving aside to make room in endless ways for the despised and rejected who had long come to be known as “garrots.” So far as aliens were concerned, there was little that the average native addressed himself to in a rational manner. All the ills of society were laid at their feet, from unsanitary conditions to the failure of children to learn in schools. They became the “malefic scapegoats of society,” so much so that the president of the St. Thomas-St. John Chamber of Commerce felt constrained to chide his fellow islanders and to appeal to reason: “The generalizations we apply to the ‘garrot’ are as about as despicable as the mouthings of the Klu Klux Klanners in rural Mississippi about niggers” (Wheatley, 1971: 4).

Gerard (1970: 156) has categorized Virgin Islands society as “plagued by factorial disputes; racism does exist; economic exploitation is a fact of daily island life; poverty abounds in many quarters; functional illiteracy is assuming alarming proportions; and the opportunity to participate fully in our economic and social life is not open to all members of the society.” There seems to be substantial empirical evidence to support this categorization. (Although no in-depth studies of the situation have yet been undertaken, public discussions have been held and action has been taken by concerned organizations to examine what might be the root cause of social distress and to suggest prescriptions for cure or propose areas of attack to turn the tide of social tensions.) It appears equally clear that the black is the chief victim of factionalism, racism, and exploitation; he is poor, is becoming illiterate, and lacks equal opportunity. And all this in a society where he has historically constituted a majority of the population.

But blacks are divided into native Virgin Islanders, agitated by the fact that they have already become a minority in terms of the total population; aliens, growing in numbers and power and demanding that their contribution to the islands be recognized for what it is; and "statesiders" (black Americans), bewailing the fact that they are regarded as culturally different by the other two groups. This is not to say that in social, political, and even economic activities there are no contacts ("brother" and "sister," the "afro," the black handshake, and the like are all in evidence), but these are not because they are black. By and large the groups will factionalize on native, alien, or "statesider" issues whenever they appear. In the meantime, the white segments of the cosmopolitan population, particularly the continentals (who continue to control the economic life of the islands), persist in assuming the posture: "we are Virgin Islanders too" (a peculiarity that is seldom seen elsewhere). The infrequency of anomic incidents in these circumstances is attributed by some to the presumption that Jarvis' dictum that race is not really significant still holds, and by others to the migratory nature of the population. These are both untested hypotheses.

What is indisputable is the fact that Virgin Islands communities are complicated by all the contemporary ills and complexities of American cities and, on the other hand, seem to hold the ingredients necessary for the creation of a Caribbean ghetto. On the other hand, however, the potential exists for this multiracial mix in a tiny Caribbean society to develop into a viable community and make a reality of the much-vaunted "showcase of democracy" and "American Paradise."

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