

CHAPTER 6

BRITISH WEST INDIES AND BERMUDA

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IN 1998, Ira Berlin published a comprehensive study of slavery in colonial mainland British North America. He assumed that slavery was a negotiated relation that varied considerably not only over space but also over time. Slavery should not be viewed as a timeless, unchanging institution, he insisted, but had to be seen as continually changing in accord with circumstances of contestation and cooperation between owners and enslaved people.¹ Although Berlin did not deal with slavery in the British West Indies and Bermuda—half of the twenty-six British slaveholding colonies in the Americas in 1776—his four-staged evolutionary model proves useful for understanding the dynamic development of chattel slavery in what became the epicenter of British slavery in the Americas.

Berlin locates the origins of slave life and culture in mainland North America in a “charter generation” of Africans and persons of African descent—“Atlantic creoles”—who forged a composite identity from encounters and exchanges within an increasingly commercialized transatlantic littoral. Atlantic creoles established the lineaments of slave life in societies where the master–slave relation did not yet stand at the center of economic production. The length of this initial phase of slavery varied. In Bermuda, the charter period was considerable; in Barbados and in the smaller islands of the British Leewards (St Christopher, Nevis, Antigua, and

Montserrat), the charter period was relatively short; in Jamaica and later settled islands, a charter period could hardly be said to have existed.

The British West Indies differed from other places colonized by the British in the Americas in the rapidity by which slavery became central to the workings of society. In this process, Barbados, the easternmost island in the Caribbean, stands out both for the qualitative leap taken by entrepreneurial Barbadian sugar planters in integrating the factors of production—Barbadian land, African slaves, and London capital—into an impressively efficient operation under a single owner and for the influence of Barbados's slave society on English and non-English colonies. Colonized by the English in 1627, the island underwent a sugar boom beginning in the 1640s. The speed by which the integrated plantation developed in Barbados and the alacrity by which it was transferred throughout the English Caribbean and the southern colonies of mainland North America has led historians, such as Richard Pares, to term it a "plantation revolution." Recent scholarship, notably by John McCusker and Russell Menard, suggests that it took some time for a mature plantation system to emerge. About a generation passed between the transformation of English Caribbean societies into slave societies and the development of large plantations with gangs of several hundred slaves each. The making of the plantation system was, therefore, a distinctive phase in the enslaved experience in the English West Indies. By the eighteenth century English inventiveness in Barbados and elsewhere had helped mature slavery in the Americas into what Philip Curtin, a prominent historian of Africa, has called the "full blown plantation complex" where "the agricultural enterprise was organized in large-scale capitalist plantations" based on non-self-sustaining forced labor from Africa.²

The plantation period itself, lasting from the last third of the seventeenth century until the end of slavery, can be divided into two periods, one marked by the continual importation of African slaves to maintain enslaved population numbers, and one, starting after the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807, that relied on a growing creole, or native-born, enslaved population. In the first period, African influences predominated. Not only were the great majority of enslaved people recent arrivals from West Africa, but also the cultural patterns established by slaves were strongly African in form. When enslaved people resisted their bondage, African ideas and culture invariably informed alternative, restorationist visions to the white-controlled plantation world. African influences in Caribbean slavery never disappeared but were modified considerably as the abolitionist campaign against the slave trade forced slave owners to adopt ameliorationist policies towards their slaves and as both abolitionists and enslaved people began to agitate for the ending of slavery. Gradually, enslaved populations through natural reproduction began to become more creole, both in composition and in cultural orientation. That creole character was manifested most markedly in the adoption of evangelical Protestantism by enslaved persons and by their impatient aspirations for freedom. Although metropolitan actors played the leading role in making

emancipation a reality in the 1830s, increasing restlessness and rebellion among creole slaves unwilling to wait for the gradual granting of freedom shaped significantly the emancipation process.

OVERALL DIMENSIONS: VOLUME AND ETHNIC ORIGINS

By the 1620s, when English colonizers began to make permanent settlements in the Caribbean, slavery had long disappeared in England. Learning from the example of Iberian colonists to the Caribbean, however, English colonists, from the beginning, associated the New World with slavery. Many of the first slaves were Amerindians: Henry Powell, captain of the first ship to disembark Englishmen at Barbados, also freighted to Barbados in 1627 thirty-two Indians—Arawaks from the Wild Coast of mainland South America—to be used as slaves. In 1626, the prominent London merchant Maurice Thompson had organized sixty Africans to be deposited at St Christopher. It was West and West-Central Africans who comprised the great majority of enslaved people in the English Caribbean and Bermuda, although Indians were still being enslaved until the beginning of the eighteenth century (from 1707, the English Caribbean became the British Caribbean, following the union of Scotland and England).

Indeed, Africans made up the great majority of migrants to the British Caribbean. The best estimates suggest that 2,238,700 Africans arrived before 1807. Of these, the British retained 1,973,200 (around 25 percent of all slaves sent to Jamaica were transshipped to Spanish America). In 1807, the total number of slaves in the British West Indies (defined to include colonies around as well as in the Caribbean) was 776,105, indicative of the enormous demographic wastage (low fertility and high mortality) involved in plantation slavery. By 1830, the number of slaves had declined to 684,600, which accounted for 81.2 percent of the total population. If freed people are included in the calculations, then the total number of people in 1830 in the British West Indies who were of African descent was 783,035 or 93.7 percent of the total population. Jamaica alone accounted for 46.6 percent of British West Indian slaves. British Guiana accounted for 13 percent; Barbados for 12 percent; and the Leewards, the Windward Islands (Dominica, St Lucia, St Vincent, Grenada, and the Grenadines), and Trinidad and Tobago accounted for 25.5 percent of British West Indian slaves. The small colonies of the British Virgin Islands (of which Tortola is the largest and most important), British Honduras, the Cayman Honduras, the Bahamas, Anguilla, and Barbuda had 2.9 percent of the slaves.³

Recent scholarship has helped clarify the African origins of British West Indian slaves. David Eltis, an economic historian, has led the way in constructing rich data sets for the seventeenth-century traffic and for the last years of the slave trade. Identifying the sources of slave supply sheds light on the ability of enslaved Africans to recreate African cultural patterns in the New World. If Africans tended to come from one particular area of Africa and were sold to planters in large parcels containing people from a single area, then it seems logical to assume that there would be enough cultural commonality between enslaved Africans that they could create societies that resembled the cultures from which they originated. If, however, the regions of provenance for Africans were both diverse and also changing in importance over time and if enslaved Africans were sold to planters individually or in small parcels, suggesting a considerable degree of randomization in the distribution process, then enslaved people would find it hard to recreate the specific cultures from which they came.

The evidence about the regional origins of Africans sent to the Americas supports both interpretations. On the one hand, the anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Richard Price argued that Africans came from such a diversity of places in Africa that Africans who reached the New World did not arrive as communities but "as *crowds* and very heterogeneous crowds at that." The British were the most expert slave traders in the Atlantic world, with wide contacts throughout West and West-Central Africa (they took very few slaves from beyond the Cape of Good Hope). Consequently, they shipped slaves from a number of different regions. Compared with other traders, they took relatively few Africans from the Bight of Benin or from Upper Guinea and acquired comparatively numerous Africans from the Bight of Biafra and from the Gold Coast. But shipments from all regions were sizeable, and the British changed their shipping patterns frequently. Thus, in the late seventeenth century, as the Bight of Biafra slipped in popularity, the Bight of Benin ascended, becoming the source of the largest shipments. In the early eighteenth century, the Gold Coast and West-Central Africa became important sources of slaves until the Bight of Biafra overtook them after 1750. In the 1760s and 1770s, peak periods of shipments to Jamaica and Grenada, Sierra Leone equaled the Bight of Biafra as the region from which the British collected most captives.

Even within a single region, British slave traders purchased slaves gathered together by African suppliers from a large spatial area, so that it was unlikely that shipmates would come from the same area. The ways in which slaves were sold upon arrival also militated against their coming together on any one plantation from a single area of West or West-Central Africa. Becoming a slave in the West Indies evolved in a two-stage process. The majority of Africans were sold to merchants for a wholesale price. They kept these slaves in urban yards before selling them at retail prices, usually individually or in small parcels of two to five slaves, to planters or other purchasers. Consequently, any large plantation, from the late seventeenth century onwards, tended to contain enslaved people from

many regions of Africa. Frequent slave sales on plantations increased not just the likelihood of constant flux in an enslaved person's life but also the certainty of slave gangs containing slaves from diverse ethnic and regional origins. Thus diffusion and dispersal proved to be key features of the slaves' experience in the British West Indies.⁴

On the other hand, a good deal of evidence exists that slaves came from contiguous regions of Africa where pronounced cultural commonalities and shared language, ideas, and memories bound people from similar backgrounds together. Especially in the seventeenth century, when the lineaments of Afro-Caribbean culture in the British West Indies were first elaborated, nearly four-fifths of the slaves arriving in Barbados, nine-tenths of slaves arriving in Antigua, and three-quarters of Africans shipped to Jamaica came from the adjacent regions of the Gold and Slave Coasts and the Bight of Biafra, a stretch of coast only 200 miles long. Moreover, age and sex patterns were such among these captives that establishing family life just as in Africa was much easier than it was for slaves from other African regions or, indeed, for English migrants.

The pre-colonial African historian John Thornton argues for a relatively homogeneous Africa of three culturally distinct zones and seven sub-zones. For David Eltis, West African regional geographical, cultural, and political connections proved so strong that slaves in Barbados and Jamaica were as distinctively Akan/Aja in cultural orientation as European settlers were distinctively English. That Akan/Aja dominance receded as Africans from the Bight of Biafra and Angola became the dominant migrant groups. But conceptions of "Africanness" in the major West Indian colonies of Barbados, Antigua, and Jamaica suggest fundamental components of Coromantee (or Gold Coast) culture, as evidenced by such diverse practices as funerals and rebellion. A major conspiracy uncovered in Antigua in 1736, for example, revealed a Coromantee leadership that sought to replace white authority with a Coromantee kingdom.⁵ Still, a sizeable number of Africans shipped to the British Caribbean also came from the Angola coast, where cultural traditions were quite different from those in Lower Guinea. West-Central Africans were especially well represented among the slaves coming to the West Indies before 1650 and may have been influential in the early formation of Afro-Caribbean cultures.⁶

Recent scholarship has revised understanding of the impact of the Middle Passage on the development of Afro-American societies in the Americas. For some scholars, such as Orlando Patterson, the transit to America and the travails of enslavement led to cultural debasement, to a hollowing out of culture where enslaved people could merely mimic in desultory fashion dominant European cultural motifs. For other scholars, such as Edward Braithwaite, enslavement harmed but did not debilitate slaves into mere ciphers. To be sure, slaves confronted a host of restrictions and regulations that impeded cultural sharing, but the daily grind of enslavement notwithstanding, friction between black and white

operating in the interstices of the plantation complex created vibrant new African-American social and cultural patterns.⁷ In looking at the formation of African culture in the New World, as the historian James Sweet has insisted, "we should not start from a premise of creolization . . . [but rather] we should assume that specific African cultural forms and systems of thought survived intact."⁸ Ethnicity is therefore more important than race in shaping early cultural patterns. These negotiations reflect the extent to which the first arrived African-born members of slave communities, be they Yoruba in Trinidad or Akan/Aja in Jamaica or Barbados, were able to impose their cultural predilections on later generations of slaves.

Consequently, scholars now underscore the need to explore the African backgrounds of Caribbean slaves because early Afro-Caribbean culture should be seen as extensions of African ethnic alliances into the New World. Not until relatively late in the history of slavery in the British West Indies—probably around the mid-eighteenth century and perhaps not until the abolition of the slave trade—did Africans and creoles come to accept European assumptions that the major division in Caribbean societies was between white and black. Only then did ethnicity begin to be defined almost entirely in terms of skin color. This approach has greatly expanded understanding of the African roots of British West Indian culture. It is curious, however, how investigations into the formation of Afro-Caribbean culture diverge from concurrent investigations into the transfer of European cultures into the New World, where stress is placed in Europeans' creative adaptations to new environments and on the cultural heterogeneity that resulted from these adaptations. If environment significantly constrained Europeans in their re-creation of European culture in the New World, then how much more so must environment have significantly constrained Africans, given the coercive conditions in which they were placed, in their attempted re-creation of Africa in the West Indies?

CHARTER PERIOD

Arguing that African slaves surmounted their conditions of bondage to recreate African cultural patterns in Britain's Atlantic possessions requires much more intensive research into the history of the Atlantic creoles who formed the charter group in societies where slavery was not yet the norm. These Africans and persons of African descent, free people as well as slaves, tended to be multilingual, cosmopolitan residents of port communities in the Atlantic rim and acted as cultural brokers between Africans and Europeans. In the Caribbean, Atlantic creoles probably arrived with the first settlers. Barbados, for example, contained 40 African and Amerindian slaves among its 140 residents in 1628, one year after English

settlement. But that ratio soon declined. In 1638, there may have been only 200 Africans in the island and around 6,000 whites. These slaves left behind only a faint footprint, which was largely effaced in the next two decades by the sugar boom and the attendant arrival on the island of 60,000 African slaves.

In Bermuda, the charter generation of Africans, possibly from West-Central Africa, arrived early (by 1620, the island had around 100 African slaves) and lasted for several generations. Bermuda tried—and for a time succeeded—in establishing an economy based on tobacco, but this tiny archipelago, one-eighth the size of Barbados, never made the transition to a mature plantation society. By the turn of the eighteenth century Bermuda had become transformed into a maritime economy, specializing in shipbuilding, trade, and salvage. The number of slaves in the population proved substantial by the standards of New England and of pre-plantation Virginia and Barbados. By the 1680s and 1690s, slaves accounted for between one-fifth and one-third of the population. Without a plantation generation to overwhelm them, however, Bermudian slaves were quintessential Atlantic creoles, often attaining a measure of independence denied to slaves elsewhere in a fluid society where slavery closely resembled indentured servitude. Indeed, in 1739, Governor Alured Popple estimated that at least one-quarter of all sailors who crewed Bermuda's celebrated sloops were black.

England's main West Indian colonies, unlike Bermuda, had a brief charter period. In the British Leewards and in Jamaica, slavery on the model established in Barbados in the 1640s had become typical by the 1660s. Even if whites outnumbered blacks for twenty years in Jamaica and were the bare majority of the population in the Leewards until the 1690s, little latitude for enslaved people existed. In 1661 Barbados's legislature passed a harsh, comprehensive, and influential slave code. Colonists in both Jamaica and the British Leeward Islands, by that time working their slaves hard on small farms making tobacco, cotton, indigo, and sugar, drew on the Barbadian code for their own laws against slaves. Africans subsequently transported to these islands showed few of the characteristics of Atlantic creoles.⁹

THE MAKING OF THE PLANTATION

The limited importance in the seventeenth century of Atlantic creoles in England's principal West Indian colonies does not mean that the plantation system immediately took hold there. Although Barbadian planters broke new ground in the establishment of the integrated plantation with hundreds of slaves working in gangs to produce sugar, Russell Menard's research on the rise of Barbadian sugar

culture argues for evolutionary rather than revolutionary transformation in which the emergence of a sugar monoculture evolved out of previous attempts at market-oriented agricultural diversification. The dispersed system of sugar production, customary in Brazil, where tenant farmers grew cane for their landlord's mill, coexisted with the integrated plantation in Barbados until at least the 1680s. By then, however, most Barbadian slaves lived in plantations of 100 slaves or more and worked in sugar, possibly in gangs, although detailed evidence on slave labor management remains scarce until well into the eighteenth century. Small slaveholdings typified Jamaican agriculture until the 1690s, and in the British Leewards large plantations did not predominate until the early eighteenth century. Some of the delay in the making of the big sugar plantations can be explained by the need, especially in Jamaica, to clear land for cultivation and by small landowners' continuing attraction to other profitable crops besides sugar. One reason why the integrated plantation emerged slowly is that planters did not immediately turn to gang labor with its lock-step discipline and liberal use of the whip. A factory-like labor regimen that demanded intense, regular labor from slaves took time to develop as planters' attempts to impose gang-labor discipline clashed with the slaves' understanding of a proper moral economy, informed both by their African past and by the American conditions of bondage. To manage slave gangs, big planters often appointed one or more head persons or foremen to supervise the distribution of tasks among their fellow slaves. Even more important, however, was finding whites willing to do the hard work necessary to keep a workforce, disproportionately composed of restive adult African men, in check. Such white supervisory personnel were difficult to find as long as opportunities existed for smallholding. But as land aggregation proceeded and small planters were driven off the land, many found employment as overseers on plantations with expanding slave forces. At the same time that the integrated plantation became the norm, the number of whites listed as servants on inventories declined. If slaves were to be controlled, then there needed to be a firm division between supervisors who were white and workers who were black. It is also probable that many of these white overseers had military experience or had worked on slave ships. The gang system on large plantations represented a revolution in working practices and resembled the regimentation in armies that had emerged in Britain at the end of the seventeenth century. Men used to the severe discipline that marked late seventeenth-century European armies would have found the integrated plantation a familiar environment.¹⁰

Africans may have had more latitude and autonomy in their lives before the triumph of large estates and the integrated plantation system. But that latitude, however expansive, confronted the quotidian reality of racially prejudiced Englishmen who were ready, willing, and able to use their monopoly of force in brutal displays of violence against slaves. Thus the seventeenth century generated a supreme irony: while Englishmen fought battles with their rulers to establish

fundamental liberties for themselves, they established in the colonies a system of enslavement that in its bigotry, cruelty, and tyranny had no counterpart in England.¹¹ Early visitors to Barbados, including such leading Quakers as George Fox and Benjamin Lay, recoiled at the viciousness of the emerging slave system. Isaac Berkenhead, an English military officer in Barbados during the mid-seventeenth century, noted that it scarcely bothered planters to kill their slaves, “dogs and they being in one ranke with them.” The French priest Antoine Biet who visited Barbados in 1654 recorded how Protestant masters, surprisingly tolerant of his Catholicism, treated slaves “with a great deal of severity.” One whipped a slave caught stealing a pig “until he was all covered with blood” and then “cut off one of his ears, had it roasted, and forced him to eat it.” Though Biet agreed that planters “must keep these kinds of people obedient,” he thought it “inhuman to treat them with so much harshness.”¹²

The making of the plantation system in seventeenth-century Barbados and Jamaica engendered various forms of slave resistance, including plots and revolts. In 1692, for example, Barbadian officials claimed to have uncovered a sophisticated, island-wide conspiracy led by skilled and privileged creole slaves who had ambitiously recruited Africans into the fold. In suppressing such movements, anxious whites often mixed frightened comments about the “heathenish” ways and savagery of the coadjutors with genuine respect for their fortitude in facing torture and death. Christopher Codrington, the largest planter in the Lesser Antilles, called Akan rebels “Intrepid to the last degree, not a man of them but will stand to be cut to pieces, without a sigh or a groan.” It is in these executions of rebels that we begin to hear slaves speak for the first time. After a revolt in Barbados in 1675, a slave named Tony refused to name others before he was burnt to death. When a spectator heckled him, Tony replied insouciantly, “If you Roast me today, you cannot Roast me tomorrow.” The most poignant words, however, were uttered by another slave facing execution: “the devil was in the Englishman that he makes everything work; he makes the Negro work, he makes the horse work, the ass work, the water work, and the wind work.” The slave’s predicament showed the relentlessness of the plantation system.¹³

AFRICAN SLAVES IN THE PLANTATION SYSTEM

The twin maturations of the integrated plantation system and the British transatlantic slave trade in the early decades of the eighteenth century were the period of greatest degradation for African slaves and their descendants. Untroubled by metropolitan opposition to their actions and encouraged by the wealth that

plantation commodities, especially sugar, brought them, planters refined and perfected their systems of control over plantation slaves until the plantation became one of the most efficient economic systems for the production of wealth that man had yet devised. Slaves suffered from the system's exacting means of allocating resources to their most highly valued uses. Isolated, atomized, usually employed in backbreaking labor on plantations patrolled by planters and their operatives who treated them with terrible cruelty, slaves experienced desperate, uncertain lives that resembled nothing less than the Hobbesian vision of the state of nature, a *bellum omnium contra omnes*, in which slaves' nasty, short, and brutish existence was compounded by hunger and despair.

The easiest way to get a measure of the hellish existence many slaves experienced in the eighteenth-century British Caribbean is through demography. The demographic facts of slavery in the British West Indies tell their own story. Only Barbados, of the sugar colonies, managed to achieve natural increase in the slave population and that was only achieved around 1810, after the ending of the slave trade.¹⁴ In Jamaica, the importation of 575,000 Africans during the eighteenth century resulted in a population of 348,825 by 1807. Demographic conditions were probably worse earlier on before some limited ameliorative policies were adopted from the 1780s. In the century before 1750, the British West Indies had imported almost 800,000 Africans but deaths so far exceeded births that the slave population stood at less than 300,000. Although population data before the nineteenth century remains sketchy, the result was a dramatically imbalanced population, with relatively few children and young people and with the age structure skewed towards productive adults in their twenties and thirties. The health of these young adults was poor. Listings of slaves in inventories suggest that the percentage of adult slaves in workforces deemed by planters to be unhealthy amounted to around 20 percent. Slaves were generally malnourished, lacking sufficient amounts of thiamine, calcium, and Vitamin A to do their jobs properly.

Kenneth Kiple estimates that Caribbean slaves received around 1,500 to 2,000 calories a day when they probably needed around 3,000 calories to work as a field laborer. Evidence is scarce but it is probable that malnourishment was especially prevalent among children, as planters reserved food supplies for healthy field workers. The ways in which food was distributed aggravated malnourishment among the weak, the young, and the unhealthy. In most British West Indian islands, masters required slaves to grow their own food to feed themselves. For healthy enslaved persons who did not have large families to support, having individual provision grounds proved beneficial, allowing them sufficient food for their own needs and for sale of surplus when harvests were good at slave markets. Some slaves derived from their provision grounds money and goods to make their lives more enjoyable. But for slaves who were diseased, old or young, or burdened with a large family to support, the inadequacy of masters' rations and difficulties in cultivating provision grounds kept them hungry. Most slaves, even healthy ones,

lived close to subsistence. If conditions deteriorated, through drought, as a result of hurricanes, or consequent to wartime disruptions, as in the American Revolutionary War when cereals and fish from North America stopped coming to the Caribbean, then famine resulted. The devastating hurricanes of 1780 in Barbados and Jamaica led to thousands of slaves dying of hunger as food supplies were disrupted. The Jamaica Assembly estimated that 15,000 slaves died of "Famine or of Diseases contracted by scanty and unwholesome diet, between the latter end of 1780 and the beginning of 1787." One should not overemphasize nutritional stress—poor people in Europe and Africa suffered as much as slaves from inadequate diets—but one standard measure of well-being—height—suggests that slaves, especially children, in the British West Indies were at the low end of nutritional health. Slave children were smaller in stature than poor children working in the exacting mills of industrializing England.¹⁵

Sugar made the Caribbean a slave graveyard. Abundant demographic evidence suggests that slaves employed on sugar plantations had worse health, were worked more onerously, were punished more savagely, and died earlier and in greater numbers than slaves working in other agricultural occupations. Sugar culture took a severe toll not just in the British West Indies but also in nineteenth-century Louisiana, Cuba, and Brazil.¹⁶ The regimen on sugar plantations was not conducive to slave fertility, and it was low fertility, especially among African-born women working in sugar, not high mortality, that was mostly responsible for demographic failure. Historians, notably B. W. Higman and Stanley Engerman, have debated the causes of such low fertility. Slave women may have deliberately chosen not to have children as a means of biological resistance against enslavement. Others have argued that African cultural practices such as long lactation led to relatively lengthy gaps in childbearing. But the demands of working in sugar, especially for planters who preferred to buy rather than to breed and who were indifferent at best to the needs of pregnant women, are sufficient to explain the limited reproduction of slave women in the eighteenth century. As Kenneth Morgan argues, "among the many causes of low reproduction among Jamaican slaves, the material circumstances of overwork, dietary deficiencies and physical punishment provided a lethal cocktail."¹⁷

On the quotidian existence of slaves in eighteenth-century Jamaica, the diaries of Thomas Thistlewood, an English migrant who came to the island in 1750, yield disturbing riches. Thistlewood was a tough man in a tough place and knew that the only way that he could force slaves to do his will was through a combination of force and psychological pressure. Most male slaves were whipped for some small infraction and some slaves faced the indignity of being forced to eat excrement as a punishment. Female slaves suffered sexual exploitation. Having on 27 February 1758, purchased a young girl he named Abba, Thistlewood deflowered her on 19 April. He noted in his diary that the sex was "non bene," which is not surprising given Abba's youth and recent trauma on the Middle Passage. For some slaves, living under such brutality induced despair. Sally was so traumatized by her mistreatment that she gave up.

Originally from the Congo, she was bought in 1762 when she was 9. Flogged and repeatedly raped by Thistlewood and other white men, she became a habitual thief. By the 1770s, she had become a persistent runaway and was put in a collar "as she will not help herself, but attempts to run away." Disliked by fellow slaves, indifferent to her welfare, with no partner or family to help her, she lost the will to survive and was transported off the island in 1784. For slaves under Thistlewood's control, suicide ranked as one of the leading causes of death.

Nevertheless, slaves did gain some measure of self-expression within social structures characterized by fierce repression and constant uncertainty. They developed a rich cultural life, exemplified by their language, music, and religion. Many aspects of plantation life, not least the sexual exploitation that many whites employed against slave women, militated against the creation of stable family life, but it is clear that families did emerge and formed a bulwark against the rigors of enslavement. For many slaves, living on large plantations allowed them to find both emotional sustenance and alternative sources of meaning to those provided them by masters. Thistlewood's diaries reveal how slaves adapted to enslavement. Recreating the life story of Lincoln, the first slave whom Thistlewood purchased, reveals a determined survivor. Lincoln had his faults—he was as compulsive a womanizer as his master and was given to violence against other slaves. But through will power and the assiduous manipulation of his master for his own benefit, Lincoln established himself as a leader in his community. He worked himself into positions of authority as a driver; enjoyed a degree of autonomy as the slave sent on messages outside the plantation; and made himself the head of a large and polygynous household. He used his intimacy with Thistlewood to become an African patriarch and an economically autonomous individual, able, after Thistlewood's death in 1786, to hire himself out for pecuniary gain.¹⁸

Given the harshness of slavery in this period when slave owners were unconstrained in their actions and when an increasingly streamlined transatlantic slave trade enabled them to concentrate on production with little concern for the humans whose labor and lives they consumed, it is unsurprising that slaves tried to resist bondage. They did so either through individual acts of disobedience and sabotage or, less frequently, through insurrection. The British West Indies experienced only two major acts of collective slave resistance in the eighteenth century: a sophisticated conspiracy in Antigua in 1736 and an insurrection in Jamaica in 1760. Led by Tacky in the north and Apongo in the southwest, the Jamaican rebels, mostly Coromantee, made a concerted attack upon white planters, aiming to "extirpate" all the whites and replace white rule with an African kingdom. Tacky's revolt was put down only with the help of regular British troops and Jamaica's maroon allies. Although temporarily unnerving the Jamaican plantocracy, the insurrection inflicted little lasting damage on the plantation system and only about sixty whites and free coloreds respectively were killed.¹⁹ By contrast, Jamaican whites, after crushing the rebellion, followed by waging a brutal campaign of

terror designed to keep disaffected slaves in their place. As the historian Bryan Edwards wrote, it was "thought necessary to make a few terrible examples of some of the most guilty of the captives." Rebels were starved in gibbets, burnt to death by slow fire, and hanged. Nearly 400 slaves were killed during the revolt, a further 100 were executed, and 500 were transported to British Honduras. The planters' power was undisturbed and the plantation system continued to eat up its laborers. Tacky's revolt merely confirmed that in the plantation system the monopoly of force lay with whites. The gross imbalance of forces in every British West Indian slave society made frontal assaults by slaves against their enslavement acts of virtual suicide. After 1736, slaves in Antigua did not mount a major revolt until 1831, and Barbadian slaves did not rise up in a major insurrection against masters before Bussa's rebellion in 1816. Whites had good reason to trust in the stability of their slave system, maintaining an interest in their homeland security that paralleled their efficiency in sugar production.²⁰

CREOLES AND THE COMING OF FREEDOM

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White self-confidence in slavery, an institution, in Voltaire's words, "as ancient as war," made the abolitionist onslaught against it from the 1780s until 1838 seem all the more astonishing. Metropolitan opposition to planter pretensions and growing creole dominance within slave populations after 1807 made beaten down slaves suddenly optimistic about their chances for freedom. The great age of slave rebellions in the British Caribbean came at the end of slavery, with serious rebellions in Barbados in 1816, Demerara in 1823, and Jamaica in 1831/2. Both more violent and more politically focused than previously and put down with characteristic white brutality, these revolts, especially in Jamaica, had a considerable impact on metropolitan thinking and probably hastened the abolition of slavery. One reason for their comparative success was that they took place in slave societies with American-born slaves in the majority. Many of these creole slaves had become evangelical Protestants, able to articulate their resistance to enslavement in Christian terms easily understandable to Britons increasingly concerned about the humanitarian implications of slavery.

Nevertheless, if much changed between 1807 and 1834, much remained the same. Conditions on sugar plantations may have become somewhat easier as imperial officials insisted that the worst excesses of slavery were reined in, but work remained onerous, tedious, and dangerous to health. Planters continued to try and maximize production at all costs, meaning that, except in Barbados, natural increase did not occur. On Montpelier estate in Jamaica, where excellent records exist for the early

nineteenth century, birth rates continued to be less than death rates, leading to a slow decline in total slave numbers. Gradually the number of slaves who were creole increased until by 1832 they comprised 82 percent of the slave population. Male slaves held most of the supervisory positions, leaving females dominant in the field. Montpelier slaves lived in three kinds of households. About 30 percent of slaves, mostly African-born men, lived alone or with friends. A majority of the 70 percent of slaves with family links lived in simple, nuclear households. The small remainder, mostly creoles, lived in a variety of extended households. The nuclear family mattered most. They lived in houses reminiscent of West African compounds but with significant resemblances in form and function to houses in villages in lowland Britain. The physical patterns on Montpelier suggest both slave manipulations of the built environment and also planter power in imposing their models on slaves. Slave housing was poor and slave possessions were minimal. Nevertheless, by the end of slavery, slaves at Montpelier had established genuine small communities. These were not idyllic, stable places, but they did support "a fragile system of sharing and exchange that provided a common focus." This community was "rooted in material culture associated with the spirituality attached to particular places and largely contained within the boundaries of the plantation village, yet riven by conflict."²¹

The decibel level of slave voices rises during this period, amplified both by slave conversion to Christianity and by the antislavery white amanuenses who begin to record slave complaints. One source of slave testimony comes from the abundant records kept in Demerara, a colony acquired from the Dutch in 1803, by an official, probably derived from Spanish colonialism, called the fiscal. Like its Spanish counterpart, the fiscal investigated slaves' complaints. The British kept the office and recorded thousands of pages of testimony given by slaves about their treatment. The fiscal was a white official who tended to side with planters. When the slave Lewis complained that the overseer did not give slaves time to eat, the fiscal took the manager's side after the manager explained that his slaves were dissatisfied because they were now cultivating sugar rather than cotton. But the cases, coming as they did during a period when the metropolis enacted policies to ameliorate colonial slavery, suggest the limits of reform. Parents of Elizabeth, a recently deceased child, complained to the fiscal that their 10-year old daughter had been raped. The rape had been discovered when she was taken to the sick house. The slave nurse examined her and thought she had been raped. Pressed by her mother, the child blamed an adolescent slave boy for the rape (although doctors claimed in testimony that her physical condition suggested that penetration had not occurred). But when questioned more intensively, she put the blame for rape on her master, telling him when he confronted her that "It was you, master." The case was inconclusive, but the matter of fact way in which rape was discussed suggests that such treatment of slave girls was normal. The persistence of the parents in seeking justice, however, shows how determined these parents were to see justice done on behalf of their deceased daughter.

The records of the fiscals speak to how differently slaves and masters understood the system's moral economy. Masters wanted obedience; slaves wanted fairness. Slaves assumed that masters and slaves shared an unspoken contract, in which they had rights—such as getting sufficient food and clothing, not being forced to work unusually hard, and not being punished if they completed their tasks. Slaves in Demerara believed that they should perform to their abilities and that all should be provided for according to their needs.²² When this moral economy was violated, they felt entitled to rebel, as thousands of slaves did in 1823, alleging violations of their “rights.” What was so dangerous about this revolt in the eyes of the authorities was that the Christian slaves who dominated the leadership of the rebels rebelled according to evangelical Christian principles and posited a vision of a free Demerara society in which slaves would be free to practice their Christian religion. British missionaries such as John Smith in Demerara and William Knibb in Jamaica, although instructed not to preach rebellion to slaves, did preach liberating messages that validated slaves’ dreams of freedom and thus legitimized their rebellion. As the historian Emilia Viotti da Costa notes for Demerara, missionaries gave slaves dignity, autonomy, and a sense of being part of a community of brethren that encouraged them to rise up against a slave system predicated on humiliating slaves and on destroying group solidarity.

The slave leaders who led these revolts were prominent Christians. Quamina, the nominal leader of the Demerara uprising, was senior deacon at Bethel Chapel. Samuel Sharp, the leader of the Baptist revolt in Jamaica in 1831/2, was a fervent evangelical whom the missionary Henry Bleby thought “the most intelligent and remarkable slave I had ever met with.” Sharpe asserted “the natural equality of man” rooted in “the holy Scriptures.” He told Bleby before his death on 23 May 1832 that “he learnt from his Bible, that the whites had no more right to hold black people in slavery, than black people had to make the white people slaves.” If he were like most slaves, he would have combined his evangelical Christianity with traditional African beliefs, as West Indian Christianity was a fusion of European and African value systems. But his Christianity differentiated Sharpe and other nineteenth-century slaves from their ancestors. Slaves adopted evangelical Protestantism for a variety of reasons, especially because they were receptive to the intense emotionality of its theology and because they could shape their Christian beliefs so as to allow for expressive ritual behavior, ecstatic behavior, and strongly participatory worship. It also served as a principal form of resistance to masters. Ironically, the more that masters persecuted missionaries and their followers, the more likely it was that slaves would become attracted to evangelical religion.²³ With widespread conversion to Christianity after 1820, Afro-Caribbean people entered into a new phase, stretching but not breaking the bonds that had linked the British West Indies with West Africa that had lasted 200 years.

FUTURE NEEDS

It is scarcely possible to write a history of any place in the Americas without mentioning slavery. It is impossible to do so for the British West Indies and Bermuda. Slavery represents the engine that drove world commerce, "the principal cause," in Abbé Raynal's words, "of the rapid motion which now agitates the universe." It was also, in the words of Derek Walcott, "some open passage that has cleft the brain, some deep, amnesiac blow." For British West Indians, the vast majority of whom are of African descent and thus connected intimately at some generations' remove to the Africans who toiled in the hot sun as slaves, the legacy of slavery is still "laid wide like a wound . . . and in its swaddling cerements we are still bound."²⁴

Yet work still needs to be done on recovering the history of slavery in the region. The origins of enslavement deserve revisiting, in the light of work done by literary scholars, such as Mary Floyd-Wilson, that cast doubt on the instinctual racism of the English and by historians, such as David Eltis and Hilary Beckles, that stress the significance of local contingencies and the experience of white indentured servitude in shaping the introduction of slavery in Barbados.²⁵ An even more urgent need is a study of the transition from small-scale slavery to large-scale slavery in the late seventeenth century. We know very little about the process whereby slaves became part of slave forces that contained hundreds of slaves, working in lock-step producing sugar under very harsh conditions. British West Indian slavery was transformed in the first half of the eighteenth century as the average size of slave forces greatly increased, as the Atlantic slave trade became more efficient and more able to provide thousands of captive Africans each year for a burgeoning plantation economy, and as African cultural patterns became entrenched into West Indian society. The British West Indies was never more African than in the first half of the eighteenth century. Yet virtually nothing is known about this period and about the slaves who toiled without much chance of freedom, producing tropical commodities for an increasingly affluent British and colonial British American populace. A first step would be in-depth studies of the structure of slavery in the major British West Indian slave societies—Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua—in the first half of the eighteenth century. Indeed, more empirical studies of slavery in individual slave societies would be welcome. Relatively little is known, for example, about slavery in Grenada, one of the primary destinations of enslaved Africans in the years following the Seven Years War, or in early nineteenth-century British Guyana, a slave society acquired by the British from the Dutch in the Napoleonic Wars that had the potential, if the abolition of the slave trade had not occurred, to replace Jamaica as the leading slave colony in the British West Indies.

The greatest gap in the literature is, as is common in studies of slavery, an appreciation of the ordinary lives of enslaved people. Recovering the lives of illiterate, poor people from the condescension of posterity is, of course, extremely difficult, especially in the African period of slavery before the abolition of the slave

trade, ameliorative policies, and the adoption of Christianity by enslaved people changed the character of West Indian slavery. But sufficient sources exist about what enslaved Africans believed and about how they behaved to suggest that some of our interpretative paradigms are in need of revision. In particular, historians might reconsider whether it makes sense to view slavery in the British West Indies as much through the lens of resistance as is done at present. The West Indian slave is portrayed as always striving for freedom, with freedom described in unthinking ways as being the kind of freedom espoused during the great revolutions of the late eighteenth century. But to see West Indian slaves as always resisting and seeing their actions and behavior entirely within a framework that led to freedom diminishes the lives of those many slaves who neither resisted nor contemplated freedom in the ways that were customary for western Europeans and African-Americans in the nineteenth century. Most West Indian enslaved people came to the Caribbean from African societies committed to monarchy and hierarchy and entered into societies in which the possibilities of individual freedom were extremely limited. In order to understand these people and their lives, we need to imaginatively recreate the “deep, amnesiac blow” that they suffered as enslaved people by using a compass that includes, but is not limited to, the small amounts of direct resistance to overwhelming power that enslaved people were able to exercise.

NOTES

1. Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).
2. Philip Curtin, *Rise of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (Cambridge, 1998), 10–12.
3. David Eltis, “The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. (January 2001): 45; B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean 1807–1834* (Baltimore, 1984), 417–18, 433.
4. Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston, 1992), 18, 43; David Richardson, “The British Empire and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1660–1807,” in P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, ii: *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), 450–2; Trevor Burnard, “The Atlantic Slave Trade and African Ethnicities in Seventeenth-Century Jamaica,” in David Richardson et al., *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery* (Liverpool, 2007), 138–63.
5. David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge, 2000), 252–7; John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, 1992), 184–92; David Barry Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master–Slave Relations in Antigua* (Baltimore, 1985).
6. Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (Cambridge, 2007); Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean* (Kingston, 2003).

7. Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery* (London, 1967); Edward Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Oxford, 1971); Mintz and Price, *Birth of African-American Culture*; Mervyn C. Alleyne, *Roots of Jamaican Culture* (London, 1988).
8. James H. Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship and Religion in the Portuguese World, 1441–1700* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 229.
9. Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 17–28; Heywood and Thornton, *Central Africans*, 248–50, 255–8. Bermuda fits uneasily into this chapter, as it followed a different trajectory not only from the West Indian islands that became plantation colonies but also from marginal, small colonies such as British Honduras and the Bahamas. Bermuda did, however, have strong links with several marginal colonies through its maritime activities, through salt-raking on the Turks and Caicos islands and through logging on the Mosquito Shore of present day Honduras. See Michael Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda and Bermudians in the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680–1820* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010).
10. Russell R. Menard, *Sweet Negotiations* (Charlottesville, Va., 2006), 91–105; Eltis, *Rise of African Slavery*, 193–223; Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492–1800* (London, 1997), 332–44; Gary Puckrein, *Little England: Plantation Society and Anglo-Barbadian Politics, 1627–1700* (New York, 1984), 82–3.
11. Susan Dwyer Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640–1700* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), 142–4.
12. Larry Gragg, *Englishmen Transplanted: The English Colonisation of Barbados 1627–1660* (Oxford, 2003), 129.
13. Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 100, 110; Puckrein, *Little England*, 77.
14. Natural increase among slaves also seems to have existed in marginal West Indian colonies such as the Bahamas, Anguilla, and Barbuda during the eighteenth century. Higman, *Slave Populations*, 307.
15. Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624–1783* (Baltimore, 2006), 113–14; Richard B. Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves* (Cambridge, 1985); Kenneth F. Kiple, *The Caribbean Slave: A Biological History* (Cambridge, 1984); Philip D. Morgan, “The Poor: Slaves in Early America,” in David Eltis et al., *Slavery in the Development of the Americas* (Cambridge, 2004), 302–6.
16. Michael Tadman, “The Demographic Cost of Sugar: Debates on Slave Societies and Natural Increase in the Americas,” *American Historical Review*, 105 (December 2000): 1534–75.
17. Kenneth Morgan, “Slave Women and Reproduction in Jamaica, c.1776–1834,” *History*, 91 (April 2006): 251.
18. Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004).
19. Compare the revolt to the Gordon riots of 1780 in London, in which 60,000 people overturned public order for nearly a week and where the destruction of property and the extensive loss of life caused a real challenge to established authority. Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998).
20. More serious than slave rebellions was maroon opposition. Maroons threatened white control in Jamaica before 1739 and in 1795–6 and in Dominica and St Vincent in the second half of the eighteenth century. Also very serious was a revolt in Grenada in 1795–6 when francophone forces, including many slaves, rebelled under free colored planter Julien Fedon against anglophone whites. Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains* (Ithaca, NY, 1982); Gaspar, *Bondmen and Rebels*; and Mavis Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655–1796* (Granby, Mass., 1988).

21. B. W. Higman, *Montpelier, Jamaica* (Kingston, 1998), 293, 304 (quotes).
22. Emilia Viotti Da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood* (New York, 1994), 65–73.
23. Craton, *Testing the Chains*, 319–21; Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998), 137–43, 181, Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).
24. Abbé Raynal, *Philosophical and Political History of the East and West Indies*, 6 vols., trans. J. O. Justamond (New York, 1969), v. 107; Derek Walcott, "Laventille," *The Castaway* (London, 1965), 35.
25. Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 2003); Hilary M. Beckles, *White Servitude and Black Slavery in Barbados, 1627–1715* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1989); Eltis, *Rise of African Slavery*.

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