

Experiences of Caribbean Enslaved Women in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century

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HIST-380: Pirates, Captives, and Slaves

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At the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade, more African men than African women were enslaved, with approximately 60-70% of the total captives being men.<sup>1</sup> However, as the abolishment of the transatlantic trade neared, enslavers realized the unique reproductive value of female slaves in maintaining slavery in the colonies. This led to a demographic shift in the late 1700s, with some places such as Barbados even having a slight majority of female slaves.<sup>2</sup> Whether they were a majority or a minority of the enslaved population, Caribbean enslaved women's experiences reflected their gender in their exclusion from gender privilege, their sexual exploitation, and their unique forms of resistance against oppression.

### **Racialized Views of Femininity**

Enslaved women in the Caribbean embodied contradictory views of gender: while they were forced to do the same jobs as enslaved men, which white women of the time would have been considered too fragile for, they still were valued less than enslaved men. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, West Indian planters did not differentiate between men and women as field workers, dividing them by strength, not sex.<sup>3</sup> However, among white, American families of that time, the sexes were separated into "spheres," where the woman stayed at home cultivating domestic graces, and only the man dared venture into the working world full of sin.<sup>4</sup> In this so-called "cult of domesticity," motherhood was elevated because white mothers were responsible for teaching

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<sup>1</sup> David Geggus, "Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Data from French Shipping and Plantation Records." *The Journal of African History*. 30 (1989). 23 - 44. doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700030863.

<sup>2</sup> Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, 1st ed (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 2016), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Trevor Burnard, "Toiling in the Fields: Valuing Female Slaves in Jamaica, 1674-1788," in *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories*, edited by Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris, 33-48 (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 162, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2711179>.

their children morality.<sup>5</sup> According to the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrum*, children inherited the status of their mothers, so free white women would birth free humans into the world and enslaved Black women would birth children automatically seen as enslaved.<sup>6</sup> Despite their presumed physical ability to do the same field work, female slaves in Jamaica were consistently sold at prices 25% lower than male slaves, concurring with the lower status of women as a whole at that time.<sup>7</sup> This may have been due to men being allowed to learn trades perceived as more valuable, while midwifery was the only skilled career that enslaved women could provide for their white masters.<sup>8</sup> According to the scholar Hortense Spillers, enslaved African women became genderless because they were denied the gender privileges of the dominant, white class.<sup>9</sup> White women at this time were not allowed to have many property-owning rights, but they were able to perpetuate the institution of slavery by bequeathing their slaves in their wills to other family members, and even “giv[ing] slaves to free people of color as gifts.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Sexual Oppression**

The Atlantic slave trade tore African families apart and sold mothers away from their husbands and children in the slave markets upon arrival in the Caribbean, but also affected future families by causing female infertility. The Middle Passage had such traumatic health effects that according to researcher C.L.R. James, “after that dreaded journey... a woman was usually sterile

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<sup>5</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 89.

<sup>6</sup> Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Burnard, “Toiling in the Fields,” 36.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer L. Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic*. (Philadelphia, PA: University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 134.

<sup>9</sup> Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 75.

<sup>10</sup> Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 87; Palmer, *Intimate Bonds*,” 107.

for two years.”<sup>11</sup> Sexual violence against enslaved women often began on the boats before they even started working at plantations, and was even perpetuated by African sailors working on slave ships such as Olaudah Equiano.<sup>12</sup> Upon arrival at the plantations, many enslaved women continued to face sexual violence and rape from their new owners.<sup>13</sup> While there may have been some cases in which enslaved women received benefits from liaisons with their masters, they were never able to “consent” as their enslavers presumed they were “always willing in sexual encounters despite the fact that their status as enslaved prevented their refusal.”<sup>14</sup> White female slaveowners also participated in systematic sexual exploitation of their female slaves for economic reasons. In Barbados, and presumably other islands, white women would “hire out” their personal female slaves to provide sexual services for profit.<sup>15</sup> It is estimated that only “five percent of slaves in Saint-Domingue were female in the eighteenth century,” which would have also contributed to difficulty in starting families there.<sup>16</sup>

Modesty was a value of white women in the “cult of domesticity,” and a privilege denied to enslaved women. At slave auctions, slaves were often stripped naked or at least partially naked so that their potential buyers could examine their bodies to judge their health and strength before buying them.<sup>17</sup> In Barbados, all captured runaway slaves, including women, were stripped naked and held in a public cage so that their bodily markings could be identified and they could be

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<sup>11</sup> Jayne Boisevert, “Colonial Hell and Female Slave Resistance in Saint-Domingue,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2001): 61–76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41715082>, 66.

<sup>12</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 2004), 94.

<sup>13</sup> Morgan, “Slave Women and Reproduction,” 242.

<sup>14</sup> Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Boisvert, “Colonial Hell,” 63.

<sup>17</sup> Boisvert, “Colonial Hell,” 62.

returned to their owners.<sup>18</sup> This contributed to the dehumanization of the slave women, as they weren't allowed the dignity of clothing and could be ogled by men passing by. Some field slaves in Saint-Domingue wore such little clothing on a daily basis that, "when some newly-arrived European girls expressed their shock at the slaves' lack of clothing, they were told: 'Why don't you ask us to clothe our cows, mules, and dogs?'" making explicit slaves' sub-human status in society.<sup>19</sup>

When enslaved women were able to get pregnant, they were not given lighter workloads and may have even received intentional abuse because of their pregnancies. Women are most at-risk of miscarriage during the early months of pregnancy, but the female slaves were given no extra rest.<sup>20</sup> According to one source, "Women were expected to work in the fields and house until at least six weeks before delivery and return to work no later than three weeks afterwards," in a best-case scenario likely not put into practice.<sup>21</sup> Mary Price testified in her narrative of life in Bermuda that a female slave, Hetty, was severely whipped while pregnant, which led to her going into premature labor, delivering a stillborn child, and weakening until she died.<sup>22</sup> Jamaican planters were also known to regularly kick the stomachs of pregnant enslaved women to punish them.<sup>23</sup> On the island of Saint-Domingue, when pregnant slave women were whipped on the ground, "a hole was dug in the earth to accommodate the unborn child."<sup>24</sup> The doctor John

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<sup>18</sup> Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Boisevert, "Colonial Hell," 62.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Morgan, "Slave Women and Reproduction in Jamaica, c.1776–1834," *History* 91, no. 2 (302) (2006): 238. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24427835>.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Bush, "Towards Emancipation: Slave Women and Resistance to Coercive Labour Regimes in the British West Indian Colonies, 1790-1838," in *Abolition and Its Aftermath : The Historical Context 1790-1916*, ed. David Richardson (New York: Frank Cass & Co., 1985), 31.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince* (Memphis, Tennessee: General Books, reprinted 2010), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Bush, "Towards Emancipation," 32.

<sup>24</sup> Boisevert, "Colonial Hell," 63.

Williamson, who practiced in Jamaica, noted that similar severe beatings of pregnant slave women in Jamaica often led to prolapsed uteruses, resulting in miscarriages. When slave owners thought their slaves had suspiciously high infant mortality rates, they would often revert to whipping their female slaves as punishment for their infants' deaths.<sup>25</sup>

Slaveholders were more likely to blame the poor health and low fertility of their female slaves on the temperaments of the slaves themselves rather than the conditions they forced their slaves to live in. White slaveowners believed in “the classic slave myth of animal-like sexual promiscuity” in order to avoid taking responsibility for their slaves' health.<sup>26</sup> When Mary Prince, a West Indian slave who eventually published her autobiography, attempted to gain manumission from her owner in Bermuda, he tried to defame her character by “allege[ing] that she was, before marriage, licentious, and even depraved in her conduct, and unfaithful to her husband afterwards.”<sup>27</sup> Prince's autobiography tells a different story, that when she decided to marry a free Black man she was flogged repeatedly as punishment for her marriage.<sup>28</sup>

When enslaved women were able to carry their pregnancies full-term and gave birth to children, they were denied the ability to “mother” them because they were expected to return to work as soon as possible. Charles Ball recorded female field hands on a plantation having to leave their babies “at the side of the fence, or under the shade of the cotton plants” while they worked in the field, and that they would have to nurse them instead of going to get water on their

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<sup>25</sup> Karol K. Weaver, “‘She Crushed The Child's Fragile Skull’: Disease, Infanticide, and Enslaved Women in Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue, *French Colonial History* 5 (2004): 93–109. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41938250>.

<sup>26</sup> Morgan, “Slave Women and Reproduction,” 240.

<sup>27</sup> Prince, “The History of Mary Prince,” 27.

<sup>28</sup> Prince, “The History of Mary Prince,” 17.

allotted breaks.<sup>29</sup> In one case in Saint-Domingue when an enslaved woman gave birth to triplets, the slave master trained goats to nurse the babies rather than let the mother care for them during the day.<sup>30</sup> In other cases enslaved women were forced to breastfeed their masters' children as "wet nurses," instead of or in addition to being allowed to breastfeed their own children.<sup>31</sup> However, by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers began warning against wet nurses because they thought that children gained physical and mental influences through breast milk. Since enslaved women were thought to be of inherently poorer moral character than the white mothers, it was thought enslaved wet nurses could cause physical and moral harm to their masters' children.<sup>32</sup>

Most enslavers did not hesitate to sell children away from their parents, and Mary Prince was one of many children across the Caribbean who experienced this. Mary Prince was born a slave in Bermuda, and was sold as an infant with her mother when her first owner died. When Prince was 12 years old, she and her two younger sisters (whose ages are unknown) were separated from their mother and each other when they were sold to different owners.<sup>33</sup> However, children did not have to be sold to be separated from their parents. The abolitionist Angelina Grimke noted that wealthy slaveowners with both city properties and country plantations would "often take children from their parents as soon as they [were] weaned, and send them into the

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man* (Lewistown, Pennsylvania: J.W. Shugert, 1836), 150-151, in Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: a Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973) 48.

<sup>30</sup> Boisevert, "Colonial Hell," 66.

<sup>31</sup> Paula A Treckel, "Breastfeeding and Maternal Sexuality in Colonial America," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 20, no. 1 (1989): 25–51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/204048>.

<sup>32</sup> Weaver, "She Crushed The Child," 101.

<sup>33</sup> Prince, "The History of Mary Prince," 6.

country; because they [did] not want the time of the mother taken up by attendance upon her own children.”<sup>34</sup>

### Resistance

At risk of punishment, enslaved women would leverage their bodies, their pregnancies, and their sexuality to rebel against their enslavers. Enslavers in Jamaica suspected that their female slaves were prolonging breastfeeding their children in order to avoid working, and implemented “weaning houses” to counteract it.<sup>35</sup> Lactation also serves as a natural means of contraception, which would contribute to lower fertility rates as well.<sup>36</sup> There is evidence that enslaved women in the Caribbean performed abortions, but scholars disagree on the reason why. Historian Jayne R. Boisvert surmises that it may have been done as a rebellion after being raped and impregnated by white enslavers, and notes the typically high value placed on motherhood by slaves.<sup>37</sup> However, Trevor Burnard argues that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century enslavers *didn't* want their slaves to become pregnant because it would take them away from their work and there was a high risk they would die in childbirth. Thus, if enslaved women performed abortions on themselves, it must have been for other reasons than to rebel against their masters.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Boisvert notes that “some white masters encouraged their female slaves to commit abortion” in order to maximize their labor.<sup>39</sup> Kenneth Morgan also suggests that what enslavers called

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<sup>34</sup> Theodore D. Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839) in Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: a Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973) 48.

<sup>35</sup> Bush, “Toward Emancipation,” 38.

<sup>36</sup> Morgan, “Slave Women and Reproduction,” 243.

<sup>37</sup> Boisvert, “Colonial Hell,” 67.

<sup>38</sup> Trevor Burnard, “Toiling in the Fields,” 31.

<sup>39</sup> Boisvert, “Colonial Hell,” 66.



abortions may have actually been miscarriages and stillbirths due to the poor health of the slave women.<sup>40</sup>

Female domestic slaves and female field slaves were able to use their positions to develop unique forms of rebellion and resistance against enslavement. Emma Carmichael, a white slaveholder in Trinidad, claimed that her washerwomen would use twice the amount of soap necessary to wash the household clothes and also accused them of stealing clothing.<sup>41</sup> In a more drastic form of resistance, slaves who worked with food are known to have attempted to poison their masters, as Sally Bassett attempted to do in Bermuda in 1729.<sup>42</sup> Female field slaves gained notoriety for being far more “insolent” and “disobedient” than male slaves, as seen in a plantation log in which 21 of the 34 punished slaves were women.<sup>43</sup> Both domestic and field slave women are known to have participated in marronage, running away for short or long periods of time, though at a lesser rate than men.<sup>44</sup>

Clearly, enslaved Black women in the Caribbean were victims of the compounded oppressions of racism *and* sexism, as not only were they enslaved but they were denied the gender privilege of motherhood allotted to white women. In 1989, scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to describe this experience of overlapping oppression, as one cannot study the racism that affects Black women without seeing the concurrent sexist beliefs about gender and sexuality that also affect them.<sup>45</sup> Racism and sexism still exist in our society

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<sup>40</sup> Morgan, “Slave Women and Reproduction,” 246.

<sup>41</sup> Bush, “Towards Emancipation,” 37.

<sup>42</sup> Virginia Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda, 1616-1782*. (University of Missouri Press, 1999) 213-214.

<sup>43</sup> Barbara Bush, “Towards Emancipation,” 37.

<sup>44</sup> Boisvert, “Colonial Hell,” 68.

<sup>45</sup>The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "What Is Intersectionality?" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (September 20, 2020), <https://www.britannica.com/story/what-is-intersectionality>.

today, though they have changed shapes since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and may not be as overtly visible. The oppression of the past is also perpetuated through intergenerational trauma. Study of the intersectional impact of racism and sexism on Black women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century can be used as a tool to better identify and understand their impact on Black women in the present.

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