Women Seeking Freedom: Gender, Oppression & Resistance in Caribbean Slave Society

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How did race and class affect the life chances of women within Caribbean slave society? While women differed at the intersections of race and class, they nonetheless experienced oppression as a result of their gender. The plantocracy attempted to define the role of women, but they responded by resisting this power through various forms. While white women enjoyed higher status within Caribbean slave society, they did not enjoy the freedom and mobility of their male counterparts. Therefore, white women sought autonomy by participating in the urban market economy where they would act as entrepreneurs.[1] For slave and free women of colour, opportunities for upward mobility were severely limited. Therefore, work disturbances, cultural resistance, and participation in the internal market economy provided an opportunity to assert some degree of independence. Though women of colour were often forced into sexual partnerships with prominent white men, they sought to reclaim their power by seeking freedom and other benefits.[2]

The purpose of this paper is to examine how gender, race and class shaped both the oppression of women in the Caribbean, and their responses to it. As historian Barbara Bush has argued, if white women and women of colour had anything in common, it was that

[1] Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman-Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 65.
[2] Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 282.

they were subordinate to all men.[3] However, their experiences could hardly be described as similar. It is important to emphasize the extent to which racism worked to limit and restrict the lives of black and brown women within Caribbean slave society, when compared to their white counterparts. Thus, while all women in Caribbean slave society faced difficulties in asserting their independence (albeit in varying degrees), they nonetheless struggled against the limitations imposed on them by the powerful planter elite.

Race by far played the most determining factor in how women were viewed and treated by the plantocracy. While white women occupied the highest status of all women within Caribbean slave society, questions remain as to the role they played within the system of slavery. Some historians believe that white women were dependent and voiceless victims trapped in a patriarchal order imposed by their men[4], while others assert that they were active participants and beneficiaries within the slave system.[5] There is also the persistent belief that white women were even more cruel than white men in their treatment of slaves and free women of colour.[6] What remains certain is that white women who resided in the Caribbean during slavery remain an under-examined group.

While all women in Caribbean slave society faced gendered oppression, white women remained exempt from the additional burden of racism. Since freedom was passed down matrilineally, white women became the torchbearers of freedom, and thus enjoyed the protection of the powerful planter elite.[7] This meant that despite class divisions, white women fared far better than their black or brown counterparts. Racial prejudice dictated how women were perceived and as a result, white women were painted in a favourable light. While black and brown women were seen as morally

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[3] Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (Shepherds Hill: Villiers Publications, 1990), 8.

[4] Pedro L.V. Welch, *Slave Society in the City-Bridgetown Barbados-1680-1834* (Miami: Ian Randle Publishers Inc., 2003), 129.

[5] Pedro L.V. Welch, *Slave Society in the City-Bridgetown Barbados-1680-1834* (Miami: Ian Randle Publishers Inc., 2003), 127.

[6] Barbara Bush-Slimani, "Hard Labour: Women, Childbirth and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (eds.), *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 194.

[7] Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman-Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 62.

degenerate and sexually promiscuous, white women were perceived as being demure and monogamous.[8] However, this was not always the case. In the early stages of slavery, poor white women experienced both class and gender discrimination but as slavery matured, the status of all white women was elevated above women of colour, regardless of class.[9]

It appears that white women sought autonomy through financial independence, but their success depended on where they resided. While those in rural areas often lacked opportunities for independent financial gain, urban areas provided more opportunities. The large number of white women in Barbados meant that many remained unmarried and untied to plantation households.[10] Their financial independence meant that there was a greater tendency for them to participate in the market economy as autonomous agents giving them more freedom than their rural counterparts.[11] Since powerful white men dominated the centre of the urban economy, many white women operated on the periphery as owners and managers of taverns, sex-houses, and slave rental services.[12] While the urban economy provided white women with greater independence in a society based on patriarchal power, it could also work to further subjugate women of colour. Some white women were slave owners, and some would profit from the wage earnings of black and brown female prostitutes, as well as the ownership and sale of any resulting children.[13] The informal economy, thus allowed white women to exert considerable autonomy independent of male ownership. However, many working-class white women within the Barbados were unable to gain access to these opportunities. The occupations which they would have previously

[8] Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (Shepherds Hill: Villiers Publications, 1990), 12-13.
[9] Hilary Beckles, "Black Men in White Skins: The Formation of a White Proletariat in West Indian Slave Society", Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, XV; 1 (Oct. 1986): 13 quoted in Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (Shepherds Hill: Villiers Publications, 1990), 12.
[10] Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman-Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 64.
[11] Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman-Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 64.
[12] Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman-Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 65.
[13] Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman-Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 65.

filled became unthinkable because of their association with both blackness and enslavement.[14] Professions such as cooks, seamstresses and maidservants had once been the livelihood of poor white women, but by the end of the eighteenth century, became the domain of female slaves.[15] This resulted in the rampant poverty of white women within Barbados.[16]

The black woman faced the most oppressive discrimination because of her race. In *Centering Woman-Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society,* historian Hilary Beckles asserts that the black woman became completely defeminized and recast as the "Amazon."[17] This process allowed slave owners to justify her subjugation to a destructive material and social environment.[18] It also meant that whites came to believe that black women could withstand working without recuperation, dropping children at will, manipulating at ease the physical environment of the sugar estate, and being more productive than men.[19] The racism directed at Africans would only increase throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, taking on a more explicitly biologically based tone as slavery matured.[20] Racism and sexism meant that the fieldworker (which was often female), was treated as the capital stock of the plantation (on par with the animals) and maintained at

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[14] Melanie Newton, "Defining Freedom in the Interstices of Slave Society," Chapter 1 in *The Children of Africa in the Colonies: Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 29.

[15] Melanie Newton, "Defining Freedom in the Interstices of Slave Society," Chapter 1 in *The Children of Africa in the Colonies: Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 29.

[16] Melanie Newton, "Defining Freedom in the Interstices of Slave Society," Chapter 1 in *The Children of Africa in the Colonies: Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 29.

[17] Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman-Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 10.

[18] Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman-Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 10.

[19] Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman-Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 10.

[20] Trevor Burnard, *Master, Tyranny, and Desire-Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 131.

bare subsistence level.[21] The harshness of fieldwork often led to low productivity which was linked to various forms of resistance undertaken by the fieldworkers.[22]

While resistance has often been associated with large scale revolt or rebellion, smaller acts of resistance appear to have been frequently utilized by enslaved women within the Caribbean. This is based on the fact that many European planters documented that female slaves in the West Indies were more troublesome than men.[23] Jamaican planter Matthew Lewis commented on the insubordinate nature of his female slaves, stating that they tended to be more insolent and aggressive.[24] The concerns articulated by Lewis do not appear to be unusual indicating that slave women did in fact play an important role in resisting their enslavement. [25]

It appears that a significant number of slave women risked the wrath of their white masters by using verbal abuse and insolence.[26] On the Kings' Success Plantation in Demerara - Essequibo, there appears to have been a number of cases involving insolent slave women.[27] For example, the female slave Quasheba was repeatedly punished for refusing to go to work when ordered by the doctor, as was May Caroline for abusing the manager and overseer.[28] Slaves Clarissa and Lavinia were also repeatedly punished for

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21 Barbara Bush-Slimani, "Hard Labour: Women, Childbirth and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (eds.), *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 196.

22 Barbara Bush-Slimani, "Hard Labour: Women, Childbirth and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (eds.), *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 196.

23 Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (Shepherds Hill: Villiers Publications, 1990), 53.

24 Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (Shepherds Hill: Villiers Publications, 1990), 53.

25 Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 234-235.

26 Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (Shepherds Hill: Villiers Publications, 1990), 60.

27 Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (Shepherds Hill: Villiers Publications, 1990), 58.

28 Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (Shepherds Hill: Villiers Publications, 1990), 58.

resisting work obligations.[29] It appears that slave women utilized the master's dependence on their labour as a form of protest. Since productivity was crucial to the economic viability of the master, work refusal remained an endearing form of resistance.

Cultural practices were another way that slave women could resist their oppression. There is evidence to suggest that slave women led one of the most fundamental forms of verbal expression: the song.[30] They used this medium as they toiled in the fields using artistry and often malice, making penetrating statements about themselves, or heaping ridicule upon their masters.[31] This annoyed and disturbed planters, particularly after 1791 when songs in the British-colonized territories mentioned Haiti.[32] William Beckford documented that this style of singing was exclusive to the female field gangs, and that men would rarely join in the chorus, except under extraordinary circumstances.[33] The dress and body could also be manipulated in an effort to alter social representation and relations of power.[34] During rebellions, slaves would often use clothing in order to ridicule their masters.[35] This may have occurred because in some African religions, clothing has potency and is

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[29] Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (Shepherds Hill: Villiers Publications, 1990), 58.

[30] Olive Lewin, "The Role of Women in Jamaican Folk Music," Savacou 10 (1974) and J.B. Moreton "Manners and Customs", 152-153 quoted in Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 235.

[31] Kamau Brathwaite, "The Development of Creole Society, 1770-1820," 221-225 and Orlando Patterson, "The Sociology of Slavery," 253-259 quoted in Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 235.

[32] Verene A. Shepherd, *Women in Caribbean History-The British-Colonised Territories* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 61.

[33] Kamau Brathwaite, "The Development of Creole Society, 1770-1820," 225 quoted in Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 235.

[34] Steeve O. Buckridge, *The Language of Dress-Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica-1760-1890* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004), 78.

[35] Steeve O. Buckridge, *The Language of Dress-Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica-1760-1890* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004), *80.*

strongly connected to the spiritual world.[36] Thus, some may have believed that this practice could have helped in the defeat of the enemy.[37] Another way that dress could be used as a tool of resistance was for runaway slaves.[38] If a slave woman could save enough money to buy shoes, stockings, and a dress made of fine fabric, she may have been able to pass herself off as free.[39] With limited resources, slave women found ways to utilize fabrics in order to distance themselves from their enslavement. Cultural resistance was an accessible way for women to protest the injustices of their society. It also provided a "cultural shield" which helped to insulate the slave woman from the brutality of plantation life.[40]

An urban environment provided even more opportunity for slave women to curtail their oppression. In the urban context, skilled and domestic female slaves as well as those involved in self-hire, marketing, and selling could acquire a certain degree of autonomy, despite of their enslavement.[41] The slave-dominated marketing system, urbanization, and the practice of self-hire helped to foster the development of huckstering which was one of the few skilled jobs dominated by slave women.[42] Within these broad categories of urban occupations, slaves handled their owner's money as well as their own

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[36] Steeve O. Buckridge, *The Language of Dress-Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica-1760-1890* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004), *80.*

[37] Steeve O. Buckridge, *The Language of Dress-Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica-1760-1890* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004), *80.*

[38] Steeve O. Buckridge, *The Language of Dress-Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica-1760-1890* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004), *80.*

[39] Steeve O. Buckridge, *The Language of Dress-Resistance and Accommodation in Jamaica-1760-1890* (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004), *83.*

[40] Barbara Bush-Slimani, "Hard Labour: Women, Childbirth and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (eds.), *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 196.

[41] Pedro L.V. Welch, *Slave Society in the City-Bridgetown Barbados-1680-1834* (Miami: Ian Randle Publishers Inc., 2003), 157.

[42] Melanie Newton, "Defining Freedom in the Interstices of Slave Society," Chapter 1 in *The Children of Africa in the Colonies: Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 34.

and acquired valuable skills.[43] If a slave woman was extremely lucky, the relationships she forged through long-term absences from the masters or mistresses' residence could result in manumission with property.[44]

Women of mixed European and African ancestry were somewhat better received by the plantocracy because of the preference for lighter skin.[45] A paler complexion meant that the mixed-race woman enjoyed a position of relative privilege on the plantation.[46] Their white connections combined with the frequent identification of pale skin with physical frailty meant that the brown woman was often exempted from the most menial estate tasks which were found in the fields.[47] However, despite the fact that brown women enjoyed a marginally higher status than their black counterparts, they nonetheless were subject to oppression by the planter class. Many women of mixed African and European ancestry were selected for house work, but this by no means meant that these women enjoyed lives of unqualified privilege.[48] The round the clock demands of the household greatly restricted the physical freedom of the mixed-race woman.[49]

Though black and brown women faced oppression as a result of their race, class factors cannot be ignored. Brown women were

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[43] N.A.T. Hall, "Slavery in Three West Indian Towns: Christiansted, Fredericksted and Charlotte Amalie in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century," in B.W. Higman (ed.), *Trade, Government, and Society in Caribbean History, 1700-1920: Essays Presented to Douglas Hall*, 1983, 30.

[44] Pedro L.V. Welch, *Slave Society in the City-Bridgetown Barbados-1680-1834* (Miami: Ian Randle Publishers Inc., 2003), 157.

[45] Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 270.

[46] Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 269.

[47] Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 269.

[48] Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 269.

[49] Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 269.

more likely to ascend to a higher social position however; factors such as education and material wealth divided them.[50] Free women of colour who were the wives of wealthy and educated free men of colour had a high social status.[51] Property ownership was also a determining factor in social status, and the elite free woman of colour who was fortunate enough to obtain property may have been better off economically than some white women.[52]

The frequency of white and brown concubinage resulted in the stereotyping of the brown woman as "temptress." This is exemplified in the writings of Moreau de Saint-Mery in which he describes a woman of mixed European and black ancestry: "The entire being of the mulatresse is dedicated to sensual pleasure, and the fire of that goddess burns in her heart until she dies...."[53] While this depiction indicates that the brown woman actively seduced white men, evidence suggests that sexual relationships were often forced upon women of colour.[54] However, they sometimes sought to utilize these unions for the betterment of themselves and their children.[55] Long-term sexual relationships with white men could provide the possibility of either freedom or social advancement for the brown female.[56] Historian Lucille Mathurin Mair argues that the mixed-race woman was relatively well placed within Caribbean slave society to name a high price for her favours.[57] Without an abundance of white women, the law of supply and demand gave mixed-race women

[50] Verene A. Shepherd, *Women in Caribbean History-The British-Colonised Territories* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 73.
[51] Verene A. Shepherd, *Women in Caribbean History-The British-Colonised Territories* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 73.
[52] Verene A. Shepherd, *Women in Caribbean History-The British-Colonised Territories* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 73.
[53] Médéric-Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, excerpt from "Description... of the French Part of the Island of Saint Domingue," in Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus (eds.), *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 59.
[54] Hilary McD Beckles, *Centering Woman-Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 23.
[55] Marietta Morrissey, *Slave Women in the New World-Gender Stratification in the Caribbean* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 148.
[56] Marietta Morrissey, *Slave Women in the New World-Gender Stratification in the Caribbean* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 148.
[57] Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 282.

considerable bargaining power.[58] White and brown partnerships often developed with the understanding that a deal had been struck between the parties concerned, and mutual advantages negotiated.[59] Marietta Morrissey asserts that free women of colour were more likely than slaves to develop beneficial relationships with powerful white men.[60]

Along with both white and black women, the woman of mixed-race sought financial improvement through the urban market economy. The dynamics of the town helped to shape the dominant image of the brown woman as someone economically active and viable.[61] Mixed-race women faced brighter prospects in urban areas where they could run profitable hotels or lodging-houses.[62] The owners of these houses were known for their skills in herbal medicine, and were said to be excellent nurses.[63] Women of colour could also improve their financial lot through the selling of goods, sewing[64], and the hiring-out of slaves.[65]

While all women found it difficult to assert their autonomy within Caribbean slave society, they nonetheless sought ways of resisting the oppression imposed on them by the plantocracy. While white women resisted traditional gender roles through their

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[58] Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 282.

[59] Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 282.

[60] Marietta Morrissey, *Slave Women in the New World-Gender Stratification in the Caribbean* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 148.

[61] Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 278.

[62] Verene A. Shepherd, *Women in Caribbean History-The British-Colonised Territories* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 74.

[63] Verene A. Shepherd, *Women in Caribbean History-The British-Colonised Territories* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 75.

[64] Verene A. Shepherd, *Women in Caribbean History-The British-Colonised Territories* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers Inc., 1999), 75.

[65] Lucille Mathurin Mair, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica 1655-1844,* eds. Hilary McD Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: The University of the West Indies Press, 2006), 279.

participation within the urban market economy, black women used work refusal, cultural resistance, and the internal marketing system as ways of resisting their enslavement. While white, black and brown women did not have equal access to resources, they all sought the benefits of the urban market economy as a way of improving their lot. Therefore, it is evident that while the plantocracy sought to maintain their power, women attempted to resist it. While the experiences of women were diverse and complex, resistance helped to counteract gendered and racial oppression within Caribbean slave society.

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