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Of Bonds and Bondage:
Gender, Slavery, and Transatlantic Intimacies in the Eighteenth Century

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Jamie Ellen Rosenthal

Committee in charge:

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2012
The Dissertation of Jamie Ellen Rosenthal is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Co-Chair

Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012
For Neel, my best friend and partner.
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Of Bonds and Bondage: Gender, Slavery, and Transatlantic Intimacies in the Eighteenth Century

by

Jamie Ellen Rosenthal

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Rosemary George, Co-Chair
Professor Kathryn Shevelow, Co-Chair

This dissertation examines women’s autobiographical texts as key sites for understanding the variety of intimate, everyday practices through which the transatlantic slave system was constituted and challenged. I analyze journals, letters, slave narratives, and religious writings by women of different social and racial
backgrounds who traveled or lived in the Anglophone Caribbean during the long eighteenth century. I focus on the writings of Janet Schaw, Maria Nugent, Eliza Fenwick, Elizabeth Hart Thwaites, Anne Hart Gilbert, and Mary Prince. These women’s writings demonstrate that colonial control was exercised not only through formal state institutions, but also through the intimate interactions, alliances, and social norms produced by individuals in everyday life. At the same time, they show that colonial power was not only challenged through organized, collective action, but also by individuals who rejected or reinterpreted social norms regarding race, class, gender, and sexuality. Arguing against traditions of scholarship that minimize the centrality of intimate spheres in the constitution of the political, the complex positions of female colonists, and the theoretical and material contributions of slaves to the overthrow of the colonial slave system, I argue that intimacies produced within and across lines of social difference in the Caribbean were both productive of colonial power and the basis for unique forms of everyday resistance to the ideologies and material structures of the slave plantation economy. By reading women’s narratives in relation to unpublished archival sources, historical records, and other literary texts, I trace the ways that everyday practices within spaces such as homes, plantations, schools, and churches were implicated in transatlantic circulations of power, violence, and ideas concerning the form and future of the slave system. My project demonstrates that an appraisal of the intimate in colonial relations helps redefine politics by critiquing the binary logic that understands power primarily in terms of public, rather than private, acts.
INTRODUCTION

In colonial and postcolonial studies, it has become axiomatic to understand projects of empire-building as deeply embedded in the structures of social difference based on race, gender, class, and sexuality. In particular, research building on the intersections of feminist and postcolonial critique has, during the past decade, focused attention on the ways in which intimate aspects of everyday life became vital sites for the structuring of colonial relations. The important recent work of Ann Laura Stoler demonstrates that colonial authority depended in large part on the management of practices and relations that fall within domains of the intimate: sexual relations, domesticity, sentiment, and childrearing. Prescriptions regarding the “proper distribution of sentiments and desires” perpetuated European notions of civility and morality, thereby constituting categories of gendered and racialized difference. Colonial control was not exercised through formal state structures and institutions alone; the practices of individuals and groups in everyday life played a crucial role in the consolidation of colonial power. Similarly, colonial power was disrupted and challenged not only through organized, collective action, but also through the practices of individuals who rejected the prescriptions for behavior and social relations delineated in discourses of gender, race, and colonialism, or appropriated those discourses for their own purposes. In this sense, an appraisal of the intimate in colonial

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relations helps redefine politics by critiquing the binary logic that understands power primarily in terms of public, rather than private, acts.

Recent works on British colonialism that center on the question of the intimate have provoked a reassessment of “whose stories count, what kinds of stories count, and who is considered among empire’s key, if not principal, agents and actors.” For instance, in *A New Imperial History*, Kathleen Wilson points out the importance of the history of the intimate and the private to public projects of trade and colonization: “in garrisons, forts, and factories, plantation societies and urban centers, the utilization of enslaved, indigenous, subaltern, and ‘respectable’ women’s bodies, the regulation of sexuality and lineage, and the demarcation of masculinity’s and femininity’s roles and privileges constituted in no small part the substance of imperial power and dominion.” At the same time, analysis of the intimacies of empire can foreground unexpected alliances that form when people move across spatial and social boundaries. Leela Gandhi’s *Affective Communities* demonstrates that unique cultures of anti-imperialism were borne out of nineteenth-century movements of colonial subjects across continents and boundaries of race and gender. Detailing the various ways in which friendship structured utopian and radical projects of the late Victorian era, Gandhi analyzes communities that form around various expressions of sympathy

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and affect as powerful alternatives to traditional forms of community based on ethnic, national, or kinship categories.\(^4\)

Contributing to the growing body of scholarship on intimacy, gender, and empire, this study examines women’s autobiographical narratives concerning slavery in Anglophone Caribbean plantation societies as key sites for understanding the variety of intimate, everyday practices through which the colonial slave system was constituted and challenged. I analyze letters, journals, slave narratives, and conversion narratives by women who traveled or lived in the Anglophone Caribbean in order to trace the ways that everyday practices within homes, plantations, schools, churches, and other private and semi-public institutions were implicated in transatlantic circulations of power, violence, and ideas concerning the form and future of the transatlantic slave system. Arguing against traditions of scholarship that minimize the centrality of intimate spheres in the constitution of the political, the theoretical and material contributions of slaves to the overthrow of the colonial slave system, and the complex positions of women in the slave plantation system, I argue that intimacies produced within and across lines of social difference in the Caribbean were both productive of colonial power and the basis for unique forms of everyday resistance to the ideologies and material structures of the slave plantation economy.

I focus on the autobiographical narratives of six women from different racial, class, and national backgrounds: Janet Schaw (?-?) and Maria Nugent (1771-1834), upper-class British women; Eliza Fenwick (1766-1840), a middle-class British

woman; Elizabeth Hart Thwaites (1772-1833) and Anne Hart Gilbert (1773-1833), free colored women from Antigua; and Mary Prince (1788-?), an ex-slave woman from Bermuda. White, colored, and black women’s lives were circumscribed by the patriarchal ideologies and structures of the colonial system, although of course, their experiences of gendered oppression varied widely. Colored and black women experienced intensified oppression, as their gender and race made them subject to sexual and economic exploitation. The narratives of Schaw, Nugent, Fenwick, the Hart sisters, and Prince demonstrate that despite these constraints, women asserted agency through a range of intimate, everyday practices, contributing in crucial ways to the contest for power within the colonial slave system.

While I focus on women’s narratives produced within the Anglophone Caribbean, I situate these texts within the broader historical context of the Atlantic world in order to consider how political, economic, and cultural exchange between Europe, Africa, and the Americas shaped the everyday lives and views of colonists and slaves. The historical scope of this study extends from the 1770s, the height of the transatlantic slave trade, to the early 1830s, just prior to the abolition of slavery. I have organized my chapters chronologically in order to consider how women’s writings were shaped by and responded to historical and ideological developments in the Atlantic world. The period from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, often referred to as the Age of Revolution, was characterized by tremendous

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5 The term “colored” was used to refer to mixed-race people in the eighteenth-century British Caribbean. The term “mulatto” was also sometimes used to denote all mixed-race people, though it most often referred specifically to a person with one white parent and one black parent.
social and political upheaval. The separate struggles for colonial autonomy, democracy, racial equality, and slave emancipation played out in the American Revolution (1776), the French Revolution (1789-1799), the Haitian Revolution (1789-1804), and the British abolition movement promoted ideologies of liberty and equality. The women’s narratives that I discuss illuminate the ways in which these revolutionary ideologies were appropriated, reshaped, and challenged as colonists, slaves, indentured servants, and missionaries moved throughout the Atlantic world.

**Women and Caribbean Plantation Societies: The Existing Scholarship**

This project builds on and intervenes in existing scholarship on women and slavery in the Anglophone Caribbean by exploring the intimate as a domain that connects the broad structural relations of power to the politics and practices of everyday life. Women's experiences of labor, violence, sex, social grouping, and travel converge with sentimental and religious discourses and deeply politicized views of violence within the plantation system, demonstrating the linkages of broad power structures with the micropolitics of gender and race as lived in plantation societies.

Early scholarship on British empire and slavery in the Caribbean focused on official archives and public political and military contests that made men appear as the primary agents in the consolidation of imperial power, suggesting that women were of

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6 While “the age of revolution” refers broadly to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, studies on the age of revolution have taken different geographical areas and time periods as their focus. Eric Hobsawm’s classic historical text *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* focuses on the French Revolution and Britain’s Industrial Revolution. Following Hobsawm’s text, several studies have set out to provide a more comprehensive and complex analysis of the history of this period by considering events in Europe in relation to those in North America and the Caribbean. See, for example, Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1865* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999); and David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus, eds., *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1997).
little importance to the development of colonial ideologies and structures. During the past three decades, however, several historians and literary critics have made important interventions into this scholarship by illustrating the crucial roles of women within the institutions of colonialism and slavery. In this small but growing area of historical and literary scholarship, the six women whose texts I discuss in this study have offered important, if rare, documentary evidence of the complex roles that women of different positions in the social order played in Caribbean plantation societies and in contestations over slave labor. This scholarship made important contributions to understanding the deep gender biases in earlier scholarly conceptions of the political.

The prolific Caribbean historian Hilary Beckles has written a number of books and essays on gender and slavery. In his important book *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (1999), Beckles examines the lives and writings of black and white women in the British Caribbean (including Eliza Fenwick and Maria Nugent) in order to explore how the mobilization of gender and race ideologies contributed to “the sexual and racial division of labor.” Beckles demonstrates that black and colored women in the Caribbean played crucial roles in the plantation slave system as sources of productive and reproductive labor, mistresses of white men, and agents of resistance and rebellion. In addition, he challenges historical accounts of slavery that depict white women as victims of patriarchy whose roles within the slave system were merely “supportive rather than innovative and

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autonomous” by demonstrating that white women contributed in significant ways to the ideological and material structures of the slave system through their roles as managers of slave-based households, transmitters of pro-slavery ideologies, and economic actors.  

Barbara Bush’s *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (1990) is one of the few historical studies centered on the lives of enslaved women in the Caribbean. By exploring various aspects of enslaved women’s lives, including their labor, resistance, and family lives, Bush highlights these women’s strength and independence. She focuses especially on enslaved women’s domestic lives in order to illuminate their efforts to “reconstitute and cohere the slave family, the corner-stone of slave solidarity and community stability.” In doing so, she contests stereotypes and misconceptions of black slave women promoted by the pro-slavery writing of white women and men. Though she uses the narratives of Maria Nugent and other white women as evidence of such stereotypes, she does not discuss their writing at any length. Bush includes a more detailed discussion of Nugent’s journal in her essay “White ’Ladies’, Coloured ’Favourites’ and Black ’Wenches’; Some Considerations on Sex, Race and Class Factors in Social Relations in White Creole Society in the British Caribbean.”

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8 Beckles, *Centering Woman*, xvi.
Caribbean.” Focusing on the relationship between white, colored, and black women, she argues that creole society was shaped by “the mutual acculturation and tension resulting from the peculiar power relations in operation in slavery society.” Like Beckles, Bush works both to redress the gender imbalance of the scholarship and to complicate the very category of "woman" by paying attention to the deeply unequal ways in which women were made into laborers, kin, and speaking subjects.

Several literary scholars have also produced books focusing on the relationship between gender and slavery in the Caribbean context. Important among these is Moira Ferguson, whose research on women’s participation in and writing on colonialism, slavery, and abolition resulted in the republication of the texts of Elizabeth Hart Thwaites, Anne Hart Gilbert, and Mary Prince, as well as the publication of two critical studies entitled *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* and *Gender and Colonial Relations from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid: East Caribbean Connections*. In *Subject to Others*, Ferguson argues that white British women’s anti-slavery writing contributed to the development of feminism, while misrepresenting the very slaves whose freedom it advocated.

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Ferguson writes, “the historical intersection of a feminist impulse with anti-slavery agitation helped secure white British women’s political self-empowerment. Concurrently, that intersection fundamentally, though unintentionally, damaged future race relations.”14 Ferguson’s chapter on Mary Prince examines Prince’s efforts to represent herself rather than to be represented. Ferguson contends that in *The History of Mary Prince*, Prince “claims herself as a speaking, acting, thinking subject with an identity separate from Anglo-Africanist constructions of her past and present reality.”15

In addition to critical works that use the writings of women as a means to explore the relationship between gender and slavery, there are also a number of essays focusing on other aspects of the women’s narratives I discuss.16 For instance, Elizabeth Bohls’ essay “The Aesthetics of Colonialism: Janet Schaw in the West Indies, 1774–1775” examines Schaw’s use of the language of aesthetics in her journal. Bohls argues that Schaw’s juxtaposition of the beauty of the Caribbean islands with glimpses of the ugly violence of plantation culture “testifies to the power of aesthetic

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14 Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 6.
15 Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 282.
discourses while revealing its collusion with other discourses of domination.”

In “Janet Schaw and the Complexions of Empire,” Deirdre Coleman analyzes the construction of whiteness in texts from the 1760s and 1770s. Focusing particularly on the representation of the white creole woman in the writings of Janet Schaw, Edward Long, and John Singleton, Coleman argues that whiteness “forms an important cultural context for reading later abolitionist texts and for understanding how gender increasingly came to encode ideas of racial difference.”

Claudia Brandenstein’s essay on Maria Nugent’s journal, “Making ‘the agreeable’ to the big wigs’: Lady Nugent’s Grand Tour of Duty in Jamaica, 1801-1805,” traces Nugent’s performance of a gendered imperial subjectivity. Brandenstein contends that through role playing, Nugent constructs a public identity that is independent from her private self.

**Women's Narratives and the Intimate**

Building on this historical and critical work, the present study aims to provide transatlantic and interdisciplinary perspectives on women’s roles in the Caribbean plantation system in the long eighteenth century, with special reference to how women made sense of the institutions of slavery and engaged with the emergence of abolitionist, nationalist, and liberal political movements. Women's narratives from this context are not simply unmediated voices representing a particular standpoint from Caribbean plantation societies; they offer windows into the politics of the everyday

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and glimpses of the circulating fears of slave revolt and the complex cross-class and cross-racial intimacies that structured violence and resistance in the Atlantic world.

I attempt to bring together the rich body of Caribbean historical work on creolization and slave resistance with a close analysis of literary form and public culture. White, colored, and black women were brought into intimate settings that both enforced forms of social power and created unexpected bonds across boundaries of race, gender, and class. By analyzing texts describing the everyday encounters of unequal women in the world of plantation slavery, as well as women’s roles in broader institutions such as the plantation and the church and in emerging social movements, my project demonstrates that private, intimate acts had important consequences for the development of power in public culture. In each chapter, I consider women’s narratives in relation to unpublished archival sources, historical records, and literary texts that represent the Caribbean and the slave plantation system. This approach allows me to analyze how women constructed their identities in response to circulating discourses of race, class, and gender and to consider the multiple possible meanings contained within women’s accounts of colonialism and slavery.

In her essay “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” Lisa Lowe elaborates three different meanings of intimacy within the context of the emergence of modern liberal humanism. First, Lowe defines intimacy as “spatial proximity or spatial connection” in order to consider the economic and political relations between Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. She writes, “with ‘the intimacies of four continents’ I hope to evoke the political economic logics through which men and women from Africa and Asia
were forcibly transported to the Americas, who with native, mixed, and creole peoples constituted slave societies, the profits of which gave rise to bourgeois republican states in Europe and North America.”

The second meaning of intimacy Lowe discusses is that most commonly used by scholars: intimacy as privacy or domesticity, “often figured as the conjugal and familiar relations in the bourgeois home, distinguished from the public realm of work, society, and politics.” Finally, Lowe examines a third meaning of intimacy that highlights the “volatile contacts among colonized peoples” of different races and classes and the anxiety surrounding the “political, sexual, intellectual connections” and rebellions to which these contacts gave rise. Lowe states, “This is the sense of intimacies embodied in the variety of contacts among slaves, indentured persons, and mixed-blood free peoples living together on the islands that resulted in ‘the collision of European, African, and Asian components within the [Caribbean] Plantation, that could give rise to rebellions against the plantation structure itself.’” These intimate contacts between colonized peoples were “necessary for the production of bourgeois domesticity,” while at the same time posing a grave threat to the system of labor on which it relied.

Using Stoler’s and Lowe’s work on the role of intimacy in the consolidation of imperial power and racial divisions of labor as a point of departure, this study examines women’s autobiographical narratives as sites for illuminating how domains of the intimate reinforce and challenge the ideologies and structures of slavery in the

23 Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” 203.
Caribbean. The narratives of Schaw, Nugent, Fenwick, the Hart sisters, and Prince reveal multiple different forms of intimacy, which are often in tension with one another. Their writings demonstrate a concern with intimacy as it has traditionally been conceived—that is, as referring to those practices and relations associated with the private sphere, including sentiment, domesticity, sexuality, and friendship. Yet they also reveal other forms of intimacy that complicate or challenge the association of intimacy with privacy. Most of the women I discuss, with the exception perhaps of Fenwick, exhibit an investment in the maintenance of bourgeois domesticity not only through their idealization of marriage and the family, but also through their disavowal or condemnation of social and sexual mixing, slave resistance, and rebellion. Social and sexual mixing and slave resistance and rebellion often involve intimate forms of boundary crossing that both exceed and threaten the ordered bourgeois family home.

All of the women’s narratives I discuss register strong anxiety over non-heteronormative forms of sexuality, including concubinage and casual sexual encounters between white men and black slave women. Schaw, Nugent, Fenwick, and the Hart sisters explicitly condemn these practices, thereby participating in the policing of social and sexual relations that contributed to the maintenance of colonial divisions and hierarchies. As Lowe notes, “The colonial management of sexuality, affect, marriage, and family among the colonized formed a central part of the microphysics of colonial rule.”²⁴ Prince’s narrative also demonstrates an investment in bourgeois domesticity through its idealization of Christian marriage and the family;

yet, rather than condemning sexual practices such as concubinage and the sexual abuse of black slave women by white men, Prince omits or obscures references to these practices in her narrative. The varied ways that these women represent non-heteronormative forms of sexual intimacy have different effects. For Schaw, Nugent, and Fenwick, the policing of sexual relations reinforces social and racial boundaries, while for the Hart sisters and Prince, the condemnation or disavowal of non-heteronormative sexual relations allows for the creation of other intimacies across boundaries of race, class, and nationality. By suppressing the complex history of interracial sexual intimacies in the Caribbean, the Hart sisters and Prince are able to forge transatlantic alliances with white evangelicals and abolitionists who support them in their fight against racial inequality and slavery. Moreover, by writing personal histories that were read by fellow evangelical and abolitionist women and men, they contributed to the development of intimate publics in the Caribbean, England, and other parts of the Atlantic world.

The narratives of Schaw, Nugent, and Fenwick not only demonstrate their preoccupation with the perceived dangers of social and sexual mixing, but also reveal their pervasive fear of black slave rebellion. The rich historiography of slave resistance and rebellion by scholars such as C.L.R. James, Eugene Genovese, Michael Craton, Hilary Beckles, and Saidiya Hartman attests to the myriad individual and collective strategies of resistance deployed by slaves in the Americas. As these

scholars have shown, anti-slavery resistance was endemic to the slave plantation system and should not be ignored or minimized in analyses of the historiography and literature of slavery. Attempts to understand strategies of slave resistance and accommodation are made difficult, however, by the paucity of primary sources by black writers. Nevertheless, the extant narratives by black women demonstrate some of the strategies used by slaves to challenge racial oppression. White women’s narratives also provide valuable insight into the causes, forms, and psychological and material effects of everyday slave resistance and organized rebellion. While Schaw, Nugent, and Fenwick sometimes include explicit representations of black opposition to slavery, evidence of resistance and rebellion is more often found in the gaps and margins of their narratives. By reading their narratives in relation to archival and historical sources on slavery and rebellion, I analyze slave resistance and rebellion as an intimate domain that both overlaps with and threatens the intimate domain of bourgeois domesticity. The writings of white women such as Nugent and Fenwick demonstrate the contests for power that resulted from the intimate daily contact between white mistresses and slaves. Moreover, literary and historical representations of organized slave rebellions illustrate that they were often conceived and organized in a variety of intimate settings. For instance, slaves frequently learned information regarding political events through the table talk of their white masters and mistresses, while using community gatherings such as funerals to organize revolts. Yet while

slave rebellions were produced through intimate alliances among slaves, they involved public spectacles of violence and destruction that threatened to upend the order of bourgeois domesticity, the privileged site of intimacy. Slave resistance and rebellion thus constitutes an intimate domain that blurs the boundaries between the private and the public.

Anxiety over social and sexual mixing and fear of slave rebellion drives many of the rhetorical choices of the women writers I discuss. In the narratives of Schaw, Nugent, and Fenwick, discourses of racial difference converge and collude with discourses of sensibility, religion, and morality to bolster distinctions between whites and blacks and to justify colonialism and slavery. The Hart sisters and Prince in turn refute notions of innate racial difference and challenge slavery by using the discourses of religion and sensibility to assert the humanity and the feelings of black slaves. In *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810*, Roger Antsey traces the changing attitudes toward slavery during the eighteenth century.²⁶ He argues that by the 1780s, strong anti-slavery sentiment had developed in Britain as a result of both philosophical and theological developments. More specifically, Antsey attributes the rise of anti-slavery thought to the emphasis on the concepts of liberty, benevolence, and happiness in the writings of philosophers such as Frances Hutcheson, Edmund Burke, and Adam Smith and to the theological development of the concepts of benevolence and progress as a manifestation of Divine Providence. The emphasis on feeling and benevolence in eighteenth-century moral philosophy and religious thought

was reflected in the literature of sensibility. Indeed, Christian preachers, moral philosophers, and sentimental writers alike asserted the belief that humans were linked by the distinctively human traits of fellow-feeling, conscience, and benevolence. The English clergymen William Clagett wrote, “To Man only of all Creatures under Heaven, God has given this quality, to be affected with the Grief and with the Joy of those of his own kind; and to feel the Evils which others feel, that we may be universally disposed to help or relieve one another.” Such claims emphasized the capacity of Christianity and sensibility to create sympathetic bonds among humans across lines of race, class, and nationality. This is demonstrated by the important role of the literature of sensibility in the abolition movement. As I discuss in Chapter One, anti-slavery writers used sentimental rhetoric to foster sympathy for the suffering of black slaves.

Yet, as Lynn Festa points out, in order to excite sympathy for the suffering of other humans, it was first necessary to define humanity: “For if one of the principles underlying humanitarianism involves the imperative to alleviate another’s suffering simply because that other is human, then the matter of who exactly will be understood and felt to be human (and based on what criteria) becomes a question of some urgency.” Overlapping in many ways, sensibility and Christianity participated in the eighteenth-century imperial project of sorting and ordering bodies, distinguishing between those who were considered fully human due to their capacity to sense the

28 Qtd. in Festa, “Humanity without Feathers,” 8.
29 Festa, “Humanity without Feathers,” 3.
world and sympathize with the suffering it entails and those who were excluded from the category of the human due to their supposed lack of sensibility, God's guidance, and the capacity to think or feel beyond themselves. Thus, while sentimental and religious discourses could create affectionate bonds across lines of social and racial difference, they could also work to reinforce notions of racial difference and to justify slavery. While the discourse of sensibility allowed pro-slavery writers to exclude black slaves from the category of the human by portraying them as insensible, Christianity provided a justification for slavery in the claim that black Africans were heathen savages without souls. Pro-slavery writers who recognized the humanity of black slaves also employed sentimental and Christian rhetoric to legitimize slavery. Portraying slavery as part of Britain’s civilizing mission, writers such as Maria Nugent characterize it as a system of mutual exchange between benevolent slaveowners and contented slaves.

While pro-slavery writers employed discourses of sensibility and Christianity to justify the slave system, black slaves and free colored people in turn used them to repudiate notions of innate racial difference and to challenge slavery. As Mary Prince’s narrative demonstrates, slave narratives often emphasize the feelings of slaves by portraying the horrors of slavery from the slave’s point of view. Similarly, conversion narratives, which are often included within slave narratives, assert the spiritual equality of black slaves, challenging the depiction of blacks as soulless heathens. As I discuss in Chapter Three, black slaves and free colored people in the Caribbean used conversion to evangelical Christianity as a path to emancipation and
racial equality. Yet, on a more fundamental level, slaves also used conversion to Christianity as a means to gain entry into the category of the human. By asserting their status as subjects with souls, black slaves combatted the image of the slave as heathen savage or mere object of property.

Women’s Autobiography and the Politics of Recovery

My dissertation is indebted to feminist and postcolonial scholars who intended to "recover" the voices and histories of women and slaves that have been marginalized or silenced by official narratives of empire. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson discuss the importance of women’s autobiography as a mode through which formerly invisible subjects become visible by “writ[ing] themselves into history.” Yet, at the same time, they recognize the problematic nature of the category “woman” in this formulation, which has been challenged by feminists for its tendency to reinforce assumptions of a universal identity based on gender and sex characteristics; its tendency to elide differences of race, class, and sexuality; and its erasure of “the historical specificity of women’s material conditions, the specific ways in which some women at some times have been oppressed or empowered, and particularly the ways in which some women at some times have themselves been oppressors.” Rather than assuming a stable, universal female subject, this study interrogates the ways in which gendered and racialized identities are constructed through specific discursive practices and historical processes.

This study also insists that autobiographical representation cannot be understood as an unmediated "voice" attributable to a subject's particular social position. In *Women Writing the West Indies, 1804-1939* (2004), Evelyn O’Callaghan provides a survey of narratives of the Caribbean produced by women during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although she only discusses the early women writers of the present study briefly, O'Callaghan disrupts the presumption, common in work on literature from the Caribbean, that women's writing was either "absent" or transparent. She argues that while black women's writing is particularly rare in the nineteenth century, white women produced a significant number of texts which shed important light on the interlocking of race, gender, and class. The study of women's writing, then, requires attention to the complexity and different discursive strategies through which women expressed particular "West Indian" identities and themes. Like O'Callaghan, I treat women's writings as embedded in relations of power. Autobiographical texts such as journals and letters are often purported to be private and objective, serving as truthful accounts of the writer’s experiences. This has sometimes led them to be treated as such by historians and critics. In her essay “Experience,” Joan Scott challenges the “appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation.” Scott asserts,

> the evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems—those that assume that the facts of history speak for themselves and, in the case of histories of gender, those that rest on notions of a natural or established

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opposition between sexual practices and social conventions, and between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Scott critiques histories of difference that seek to make experience visible without examining the workings of the ideological systems through which difference is produced. Keeping this in mind, I read women’s autobiographical narratives not as direct evidence of the “truth” of slavery or of women’s experiences, but as sites for understanding how women’s subjectivities and experiences were shaped by and contributed to colonial ideologies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Women’s autobiographical texts demonstrate that categories of difference were constituted not only through the legal and political structures of British and Caribbean societies, but also through the everyday practices of colonial subjects.

18th Century Theories of Race and Racial Difference

Throughout this study, I argue that race, like gender, is a social construct with historically specific meanings rather than a stable category with a biological basis. The recent works of literary critics Felicity Nussbaum and Roxann Wheeler demonstrate that race was an unstable and fluid category during the eighteenth century. Nussbaum argues that eighteenth-century cultural and scientific representations of complexion were characterized by inconsistencies. She contends that “various manifestations of ‘race’ in language and culture coexist in the mid eighteenth century rather than solidifying into the more ‘consolidated, pure somatic form’ of later racial science, and that strategic confusions persist regarding the meanings assigned to skin colourings,

physiognomies, nations, and their relation to interior value.”\textsuperscript{34} Roxann Wheeler makes a similar argument regarding the fluidity of eighteenth-century conceptions of race in \textit{The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture}. Drawing on an extensive range of cultural, historical, and scientific texts, Wheeler argues that social, cultural, and religious differences were more important to understandings of human difference than complexion and other physical features now associated with race: “throughout the eighteenth century older conceptions of Christianity, civility, and rank were more explicitly important to Britons’ assessment of themselves and other people than physical attributes such as skin color, shape of the nose, or texture of the hair.”\textsuperscript{35} Wheeler explains that it was not until the late eighteenth century that complexion was consolidated as an important human difference. This shift was due in large part to the work of natural historians.

The eighteenth century is often referred to as the great age of classification because of the efforts of natural historians such as Linnaeus, Georges Louis Leclerc Buffon, and Johann Blumenbach to categorize the living objects of the natural world. In addition to classifying plants and animals, natural historians attempted to classify humans by creating categories of difference, including race and sex. Differences in human behavior and appearance were most commonly understood through climate and humoral theory, inherited from the ancient Greeks and Romans and transformed during the eighteenth century. The Greeks and Romans believed that complexion,

which referred not only to skin color, but more broadly to temperament or disposition, was produced by the climate’s interaction with the four humors: blood, bile, phlegm, and choler. 

People in different regions of the world were born with a certain combination of humors that determined their complexion; however, complexions could also change over time. 

While some natural historians continued to advance humoral theory as an explanation for racial difference in the eighteenth century, race was more commonly explained through climate theory, also referred to as environmentalism, and the theory of biological determinism.

Climate theory asserted that racial characteristics are shaped by climate and other environmental factors, in contrast to the theory of biological determinism, which asserted that racial characteristics are innate. Climate theory was adapted to a geographical model of human difference in the eighteenth century. According to this model, “proximity to Europe and to temperate climates generated a theoretical hierarchy—not a scale of horizontal differences—that placed Europeans, and a few groups from the Middle East and North Africa, at the top and Africans and Laplanders at the bottom.”

The differing climates of the torrid zones (the geographical territory between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn), the temperate zones (the territory between the Tropic of Cancer and the Arctic Circle), and the northern, or frigid, zones were believed to have a direct impact on the inhabitants’ habits, desires, and social relations. The tropical heat of the torrid zones was believed to “enervate the body, mind, and morals,” producing indolence while at the same time increasing

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sexual passion. Colonial texts frequently reference this association between tropical climate and hypersexuality. In *The Jamaica Lady*, Pharmaceuticus excuses his wife’s infidelity in Jamaica as a consequence of the corrupting power of the tropical climate:

> It’s true, indeed, he had caught her tripping at Jamaica, but that he thought was not so much the fault of the woman as of the climate, believing that cursed malevolent planet which predominates in that island and so changes the constitution of its inhabitants that if a woman land there chaste as a vestal, she becomes in forty-eight hours a perfect Messalina, and that ‘tis impossible for a woman to live at Jamaica and preserve her virtue as for a man to make a journey to Ireland and bring back his honesty.

In contrast, the mild climate of the temperate zones was held to encourage discipline, industry, and civilization. Climate theory thus validated assumptions of European superiority, but also suggested Europeans’ vulnerability to the corrupting influence of the tropical climate and, in turn, suggested that black slaves held the capacity for change and progress.

While climate theory sought to distinguish the domestic virtue of the civilized European woman from the excessive sexual passion of the woman of empire, women from all regions were seen to possess a potentially threatening sexuality that required disciplining. As Felicity Nussbaum explains,

> because the women in both torrid and frigid zones possess bodily torrid zones, women of all regions threaten to inject sexuality into the most temperate geographical domains even as imperial discourse strains to confine it to certain areas. Androgynous, transgressive, ‘monstrous,’ lesbian, and working-class women—indigenous and colonizing

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women—are all linked metaphorically to bawdy women and are located on the fringes of respectability akin to brute savagery.\footnote{Felicity Nussbaum, \textit{Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995).}

Proponents of climate theory were generally also monogenists, believing that all races belong to one species descended from Adam and Eve. They also tended to be more liberal, and were more often opposed to slavery, than those who insisted that racial differences are innate. As Londa Schiebenger explains, “Though monogenists (Buffon, for example) generally saw racial differentiation as a process of degeneration from a white origin, they were generally egalitarians. If bodies differed simply in response to the environment, then all peoples were made of the same raw material and had the same potential for intellectual and moral achievement.”\footnote{Londa Schiebenger, “The Anatomy of Difference: Race and Sex in Eighteenth-Century Science,” \textit{Eighteenth-Century Studies} 23, no. 4 (1990): 394.}

In contrast, proponents of biological determinism insisted that racial differences are innate. The most extreme proponents of innate racial difference were also polygenists, arguing that whites and blacks belong to different species. Edward Long, for instance, asserts in \textit{The History of Jamaica} that blacks are in fact closer in nature to apes than to European humans.\footnote{Edward Long, \textit{The History of Jamaica}, vol. 2 (London, 1774; New York: Arno, 1972), 356.} This claim was reinforced by the popular myth of miscegenation between apes and Africans, specifically male apes and African women (often represented as Hottentots). Laura Brown explains that the “leap of affinity” represented by the miscegenation anecdote “can generate an anxious reaction that is used to separate, not the ape from the human…but the non-European human from the European human. Thus, Edward Long, in his \textit{History of Jamaica} (1774),
concludes that the mixing of apes and Hottentots proves the African to be of a different species from the European.”

Eighteenth-century discourses of race and racial difference were crucial to the development and maintenance of the slave plantation system.

Yet despite colonists’ vigilant efforts to enact a white British identity distinct from those peoples they colonized and enslaved, the pervasive anxieties expressed by white Europeans and creoles over racial and cultural mixing and contamination bely the supposedly rigid racial boundaries of Caribbean plantation society. These racial boundaries were regularly crossed during social and sexual encounters between individuals, resulting in “in-between” populations that do not fit neatly within the binary categories of white/black and master/slave. These boundary crossings were most apparent in the large population of colored, or mixed-race, peoples in the Caribbean. The racial and cultural mixing that occurred as a result of these boundary crossings engendered a tremendous amount of anxiety for whites about degeneration. As Kathleen Wilson notes, British conceptions of national identity were permeated by fears regarding the “distressing tendency for supposedly ‘natural’ characteristics to degenerate into their opposites: Englishness into savagery, masculinity into effeminacy, femininity into vulgarity.” Women’s narratives illustrate that their views on race, gender, slavery, and liberty were shaped not only by circulating discourses of

race and racial difference, but also by gender ideologies and laws in the Atlantic world.

**The Social and Political Status of British Women in the 18th Century**

The eighteenth century saw heated debates over women’s status within Britain and the empire. Denied formal education and political rights on the basis of their alleged social and intellectual inferiority to men—particularly their supposed irrationality—women occupied a second-class status within British society. Gender ideologies such as the cult of domesticity promoted the division of a male public sphere and a female private sphere, relegating women to the private space of the home and placing primacy on their roles as homemakers, wives, and mothers, while marriage laws, property laws, and land laws maintained women’s legal subordination to men. Women were pressured to marry in order to gain the social and economic protection of men; once married, however, women were denied an autonomous legal existence, as their husbands gained legal authority over their persons and property.46 As the legal scholar William Blackstone explains in *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything.”47

While patriarchal ideologies, institutions, and laws had very real implications for women’s lives in the eighteenth century, however, women increasingly occupied important roles in British society and in the project of empire. As Barker-Benfield points out, bourgeois British women were not relegated solely to the domestic realm, but were “enabled to enter a new public world, comprised of those walks, streets, shopping parades, and amusement centers of the ‘urban renaissance’” where they exerted economic agency through various forms of consumption. In addition, British women began to write and publish in unprecedented numbers during this period, a fact that Anne Mellor uses to challenge Jürgen Habermas’ conception of an androcentric public sphere.

Women also asserted new forms of agency through their participation in eighteenth-century reform movements, including the abolition movement. The work of Clare Midgley demonstrates that women played integral roles in the campaign against slavery from the 1780s onward. She notes that the activities of women campaigners, which included meeting in domestic settings, canvassing from door to door, and leading sugar boycotts, “made interconnections between domestic and political life and between private and public activities.” In doing so, they “blurred the boundaries between ‘masculine’ public and ‘feminine’ private spheres which their menfolk were so concerned to establish and to maintain.”

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in the abolition movement and their anti-slavery writing testifies to the fact that white
British women’s subjugation to white men enabled many women to sympathize with
the suffering of black slaves. As I discuss in Chapter Two, British women writers
frequently drew parallels between gendered and racial oppression, portraying white
women and black slaves as common victims of white male patriarchy.\textsuperscript{52} While the
analogy between white women and black slaves is problematic, consideration of the
crucial role of white patriarchal power within the development of colonial ideologies
and structures is important for understanding the ways in which all women were
disadvantaged by their gender, although to widely varying degrees. Highlighting the
gendered nature of imperial power, Anne McClintock states, “Marital laws, property
laws, land laws and the intractable violence of male decree bound [colonial women] in
gendered patterns of disadvantage and frustration. The vast, fissured architecture of
imperialism was gendered throughout by the fact that it was white men who made and
enforced laws and policies in their own interest.”\textsuperscript{53}

However, the potential alliance between white and black women was hindered
by the social structure of Caribbean society, in which white women held a position of
power over all slaves. As Cecily Jones explains, “in the racially stratified slave
societies of the Americas where gender and race functioned as key organising
principles, their social location within the dominant white group afforded all white

\textsuperscript{52} For a discussion of the parallels that Mary Wollstonecraft and other feminist writers draw between
gendered and racial subjugation, see Moira Ferguson, “Mary Wollstonecraft and the Problematics of Slavery,” in Colonialism and Gender Relations from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 8-33.

\textsuperscript{53} Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context (New York: Routledge, 1995), 6.
women, regardless of social class, not only a privileged status, but conferred in their hands the ability to exercise power over all enslaved persons." While white women’s views on race and slavery were certainly not homogeneous, texts by white women in the Caribbean tend to reflect their belief in notions of racial difference and their subscription to pro-slavery ideologies.

Constructions of Women in the Eighteenth-Century Caribbean

Social, historical, and ideological developments in the Caribbean contributed to the construction of gendered and racialized images of women that often worked to reinforce patriarchal and colonial power. Constructions of white and black womanhood in the Caribbean occurred largely as a response to historical shifts in the structure of plantation society. In the seventeenth century, the need for labor on Caribbean plantations was fulfilled through the use of white indentured servants from Europe. These were ‘voluntary’ servants who contracted their labor for a period of three to ten years in exchange for passage to the colonies in hopes of obtaining land and accumulating wealth after serving their term, as well as political prisoners and convicts who were forcibly transported to the colonies by the English government. Historical evidence suggests that the treatment of male and female white indentured

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54 Cecily Jones, “‘To Be Free is Very Sweet:’ Racialized Representations of Slavery in Maria Nugent’s Journal and Mary Prince’s History,” Sargasso (2005-2006): 75. This was not necessarily true in the early stages of plantation slavery, when poor white women often labored on plantations or in the urban service sector and were held in low regard by bourgeois and elite whites. By the late seventeenth century, however, planters and colonial officials responded to the shortage of white women in the Caribbean and the threat this posed to colonial society by using legislation and social customs to distinguish between white and black women. For instance, by the eighteenth century, Caribbean planters generally did not hire white women as field laborers. Class differences consequently became less significant than racial differences in determining power structures. See Hilary McD. Beckles, “White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean,” History Workshop 36, no. 1 (1993): 66-82; Beckles, Centering Woman.
servants was similar in many ways to that of black slaves. Eric Williams explains that “[s]ervitude, originally a free personal relation based on voluntary contract for a definite period of service, in lieu of transportation and maintenance, tended to pass into a property relation which asserted a control of varying extent over the bodies and liberties of the person during service as if he were a thing.” For instance, the limited available evidence suggests that servants’ experiences and treatment during the Middle Passage was similar to that of slaves. They were packed tightly below deck and given little food or water during the six to ten week journey to the Caribbean. The close proximity of the servants ensured that viruses and diseases spread quickly, resulting in high mortality rates. Once in the Caribbean, indentured servants were under the total control of their masters during both their laboring and non-laboring hours for the duration of their contract. They were unable to leave the plantation without the permission of their masters, and they were frequently treated with cruelty and violence.

During this early stage of the Caribbean plantation system, propertyless white women constituted a significant number of plantation laborers. These women were domestic and field laborers, whose status was generally not distinguished from white male servants or black slaves. The low regard in which laboring white women were

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56 Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 16.
held during this period is reflected in early colonial narratives, in which these women are “described variously as ‘loose wenches’, ‘whores’, ‘sluts’, and ‘white slaves.’”

The migration of white women to the Caribbean dramatically decreased by the end of the seventeenth century, however, threatening the survival of the white colonial society. As a response to this problem, Beckles explains, white elite patriarchy attempted to insulate white women from “the crudest aspects of slavery,” by creating legislation and social customs that prevented white women from working as field laborers, prohibiting miscegenation between white women and black men, and linking white womanhood to the reproduction of freedom and black womanhood to the reproduction of slavery by dictating that the status of freedom and slavery be passed down through the mother. By the end of the century, the white woman had been relegated to the domestic sphere and her image had been reconstructed to adhere to a “model of passive, modest, virtuous, and dependent womanhood.”

This image of the virtuous, chaste, and fragile white woman was constructed in opposition to the stereotyped image of the black slave woman. By the end of the seventeenth century, as white women were prohibited from engaging in field labor, the majority of field laborers became black women, who were considered by planters to be better equipped than black men for agricultural production as a result of their experience as agricultural laborers in West Africa. At the same time, black women’s reproductive labor became central to the success of the slave economy, as new

59 Beckles, *Centering Woman*, xviii-xix.
60 See Beckles, *Centering Woman*, 62; Jones, “To Be Free is Very Sweet,” 71.
61 Jones, “To Be Free is Very Sweet,” 71.
62 Beckles, *Centering Woman*, especially 4-10.
colonial legislation dictated that children would inherit the status of their mother. The predominate image of the black woman that emerged at this time was “that of great strength—the symbol of blackness, masculinity and absence of finer feelings. Her sexuality was projected as overtly physical (no broken hearts here!)—hence brutish and best suited to the frontier world of the far-flung plantation.”63 While the white woman was portrayed as the embodiment of moral and domestic virtue, the black slave woman was portrayed as unfeminine, immoral, and devoid of familial attachments.

This construction of the black slave woman served to both account for and justify the economic and sexual exploitation of black women in the Caribbean. While both pro-slavery and anti-slavery writers condemned the pervasiveness of miscegenation and concubinage on the islands, pro-slavery writers tended to blame black women for these sexual unions by portraying them as licentious seductresses who use their sexuality to gain favors from white men, thus threatening the stability of the white family. Edward Long and Janet Schaw, writing in the 1770s, and Emma Carmichael, writing in the 1830s, shortly before the abolition of slavery, all place the blame for miscegenation on black women, depicting them as cunning Jezebels who lure white men into their traps. Denouncing the common practice of concubinage in Jamaica, Long writes,

In regard to the African mistress, I shall exhibit the following, as no unsuitable portrait. All her kindred, and most commonly her very paramours, are fastened upon her keeper like so many leeches; while she, the chief leech, conspires to bleed him usque ad deliquium. In

63 Beckles, Centering Woman, xx.
well-dissembled affection, in her tricks, cajolments, and infidelities, she is far more perfectly versed, than any adept of the hundreds of Drury. She rarely wants cunning to dupe the fool that confides in her; for who “shall teach the wily African deceit?”  

Long criticizes white men for their sexual involvement with black and colored women; however, he ultimately lays the blame on women, both black and white, for these unions. White men would not so easily be seduced by deceitful black women, Long insists, if white women possessed the feminine virtues necessary to cultivate a monogamous relationship.

While colonial texts frequently rely on and reinforce the binary opposition between white and black women, this opposition fails to adequately account for the range of identities in the Caribbean. In particular, the black/white dichotomy ignores representations of colored women and white creole women in the Caribbean. Colonial writers often distinguished between colored and black women, probably as a result of the fact that many colored women served as concubines of white men, therefore gaining a greater degree of freedom and privilege than other black slaves.  

Jenny Sharpe points out, for instance, that mulatto women were able to gain partial freedom “through a manipulation of their sexual exploitation, as their ability to establish conjugal relationships with white men who were not their owners allowed them to move out of the households to which they belonged.”  

Recognizing that these women were able to negotiate some power within the slave system, colonists frequently

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65 Jenny Sharpe explains that in Jamaica, 7000-8000 men had concubines. Merchants, shopkeepers, and overseers kept free mixed-race women, while lower status bookkeepers kept black or mulatto slaves. See Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery*, 45.
complained that their roles as concubines encouraged them to become intractable. Consequently, colored women were often portrayed as arrogant, vain, and sexually promiscuous.

This negative depiction was later at least partially displaced by the figure of the tragic mulatta, exemplified by John Gabriel Stedman’s portrayal of Joanna in *The Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796). Stedman portrays his concubine Joanna “as a mixed-race version of the noble black slave and domestic white woman,” whose beauty, innocence, virtue, and devotion to Stedman illustrate that she is superior to the cruel society in which she lives.67 Stedman’s narrative emphasizes Joanna’s faithful devotion to and nurturing care of him. As Sharpe explains, mulatto women were upheld by white men for both their sensual beauty and their superior nursing skills: “It is no coincidence that the mixed-race woman comes to represent the image of the concubine as nurse and nurturer, for the latter’s spirit of self-sacrifice and dedication to white men overlaps with that of the domestic (white) woman.”68 The idealization of the mulatto concubine can also be seen in the comments of the Jamaican planter and historian Bryan Edwards. Though Edwards condemns concubinage in general, he praises the modesty and virtue of mulatto women:

> In their dress and carriage they are modest, and in conversation reserved; and they frequently manifest a fidelity and attachment towards their keepers, which, if it be not virtue, is something very like it. The terms and manners of their compliance too are commonly as decent, though perhaps not as solemn, as those of marriage; and the

agreement they consider equally innocent; giving themselves up to the husband (for so he is called) with faith plighted, with sentiment, and with affection.69

Edwards reinforces the construction of colored women as nurturers and nurses, claiming that their most striking quality is “tenderness of heart; a softness or sympathy of mind toward affliction and distress.”70 Such idealized portrayals of colored women were used by anti-slavery writers to highlight similarities between white and black women and thereby gain compassion for the situation of black slaves.

Eighteenth-century texts also draw distinctions between British women, or “ladies,” visiting or living temporarily in the Caribbean, and white creole women, who were born and reside permanently in the Caribbean and therefore have a greater socio-economic interest in the maintenance of the slave system. While white British women are held up as exemplars of moral and domestic virtue, creole women are often depicted as socially and morally degenerate. The most common trope that emerges in relation to white creole women is that of the morally degenerate “cruel white mistress” whose cruelty and violence is equal to that of the white master. The figure of the cruel white mistress appears in numerous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, including W.P.’s short novel The Jamaica Lady (1720), “Creole’s” The Fortunate Transport (1750), and Sarah Scott’s The History of Sir George Ellison (1766). In The Jamaica Lady, for example, the slave Quomina incurs the wrath of her mistress Holmesia for drinking her citron-water during a trip to Jamaica: “It seems she had made bold with her mistress’s citron-water bottle, had drank and given away above a

70 Edwards, The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies, 23.
pint, which so enraged Holmesia that she flew at her, threw her down, cuffed and kicked her unmercifully, then laid her on to that degree with a manatee skin, that she fetched near the same quantity of blood from the wench’s side which she missed from her citron-water.”71 Upon hearing of the event, the captain of the ship exclaims, “I have heard talk of Furies with whips of steel and hair of serpents, and if it be true that the Devil does employ such instruments, a Negro had better live in Hell than with a Jamaica termagant.”72 Caribbean historians have sometimes interpreted the excessive cruelty with which some white mistresses treated their female slaves as a response to their jealousy toward colored and black women, with whom they felt they had to compete for the attention and resources of white men.73 Yet, eighteenth-century texts that contrast the cruel inhumanity of creole women with the moral virtue of British men and women also indicate that the trope allowed British writers to use creole women as scapegoats for the violences of colonialism and slavery.

Chapter Descriptions

The three chapters of my dissertation trace the ways in which women live and act within the racial, class, gender, and sexual constraints of the Caribbean slave system. Management of the intimate relations of everyday life was central to both the historical effects of women's acts in Caribbean society and the formal characteristics of their writings. Drawing on cultural, philosophical, political, and religious movements of the long eighteenth century, including sensibility, evangelicalism, and

71 W.P., The Jamaica Lady, 112.
72 W.P., The Jamaica Lady, 112.
abolitionism, women writers figure themselves as sensible and compassionate subjects constrained by worlds of sexual immorality and the organized violence of slavery and revolution.

Chapter One, “The Contradictions of Sensibility: Race, Slavery, and the Colonial ‘Lady,’” examines upper-class British women’s use of the discourse of sensibility as a strategy for navigating social difference and slave resistance in the Caribbean. Sensibility denotes the ability to feel sympathy and compassion for the suffering of others. Scholarship on the literature and culture of sensibility has often emphasized its capacity to create intimate bonds across boundaries of class, race, gender, and nationality. As I illustrate, however, sensibility could also reinforce notions of social difference. Arguing against scholarship that only sees sympathy as a progressive force underwriting abolition and liberal reform, I argue instead that sympathetic discourse could mask or reinforce deep structural inequalities.

I focus in particular on Janet Schaw’s *Journal of a Lady of Quality* and Maria Nugent’s *Lady Nugent’s Journal*, which chronicle Schaw’s visits to Antigua and St. Kitts and Nugent’s life as the governor’s wife in Jamaica. I analyze how Schaw and Nugent employ the discourse of sensibility to assert female moral authority, while simultaneously reinforcing the subjugation of black slaves. Schaw establishes her moral virtue by displaying pity and compassion for the British poor, while denying sympathy for black slaves by insisting on their innate difference, particularly their tendency to be reactive and their incapacity for prolonged suffering. Nugent shifts between a view of slaves as happy laborers and one that sees them as morally corrupt
and lacking proper sentimentality. She negotiates her relationship with the slaves through a sentimental rhetoric that recognizes the slaves’ humanity and their capacity for pain and suffering in an attempt to earn their gratitude and their submission. Nugent’s journal demonstrates that daily interactions with these supposedly inferior groups produce intimacies across lines of difference, as she revels in acts of gender passing and associations with colored women and black slave society. While these intimacies initially allow Nugent to express sympathy for slaves, her interactions with slaves are later circumscribed by her fear of slave revolt in the wake of the nearby Haitian Revolution. Thus, I demonstrate how the sympathetic text of upper-class women’s autobiography can develop divergent views of race, slavery, creolization, and gender as authors represent daily encounters that shape their views of Caribbean life.

Chapter Two, “Slavery, Radicalism, and the Fates of Working Women,” investigates the ways in which middle-class British women living in the Caribbean understood their own positions and the positions of black slaves within the broader context of movements for liberty and equality emerging in Atlantic world. In particular, I analyze the contradictions between Eliza Fenwick’s expressions of sympathy for the struggles of white women, her use of feminist discourses of liberty and equality, and her pro-slavery views and practices, as represented in the collection of her letters to Mary Hays in The Fate of the Fenwicks. Fenwick’s friendships with prominent English radicals, including Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William Godwin, and the views portrayed in her novel Secresy; or Ruin on the Rock, published
in 1795, suggest that she once held radical views regarding liberty and equality. In addition, Fenwick’s letters to Hays illustrate that their intimate friendship was based in part on their shared female oppression and their feminist views.

Fenwick’s letters chronicle her struggle to provide for herself and her children, a struggle which eventually leads her to the Caribbean. The discourses of liberty and equality deployed by Fenwick and her radical circle of friends within Britain stand in tension with Fenwick’s conflicted views regarding slavery after she moves to the Caribbean and with her eventual position as a slaveowner. While feminists such as Wollstonecraft drew parallels between the oppression of white women and the oppression of black slaves, Fenwick instead justifies her pro-slavery views and actions by insisting that her own gendered oppression is greater than that of any slave. While Fenwick consistently expresses sympathy for the hardships of white women, she often fails to identify with the oppression of the black slaves that she encounters in the Caribbean. However, her condemnation of certain aspects of slavery, particularly the practice of concubinage, leads her at moments to portray female slaves as the victims of white male immorality. These moments in which gender seems to trump race illuminate the fact that the abstract discourses employed by women in their narratives do not sufficiently explain how they negotiate the complexities of colonial slave society within their everyday lives.

Chapter Three, “Religion, Morality, and the Poetics of Resistance in Colored and Black Women’s Narratives,” illustrates how the writings of Elizabeth Hart Thwaites, Anne Hart Gilbert, and Mary Prince appropriate discourses of domesticity,
sensibility, and Christian morality in order to contest the racist views of white colonizers, while simultaneously advocating the creation of cross-racial, transatlantic communities devoted to abolitionism and evangelicalism. They portray slaves as objects of sympathy and subjects of rights developed within particular contexts of religious anti-slavery writing and multi-racial community-formation. However, I show that while evangelical Protestantism provides a setting for the particular narration of the intimate details of slavery, it also circumscribes black and colored women’s resistance by subjecting women’s texts to strict interpretations of morality and propriety.

The texts of Elizabeth Hart Thwaites and Anne Hart Gilbert challenge colonialism and slavery by representing everyday acts of resistance and advocating cross-racial, transatlantic Methodist communities. As free colored women who were born into a slaveholding family and who later married white men, the Hart sisters occupied a complicated position within Antiguan society. Their dedication to the education and religious conversion of slaves to Methodism was perceived as threatening to the Anglican ruling class of Antigua. Through these and other subversive acts and through their writing, the Hart sisters critiqued white immorality and hypocrisy and asserted the spiritual equality of blacks and whites. In addition, through their marriages to white Methodists, they breached conventions regarding miscegenation and forged cross-racial communities devoted to Methodism and abolitionism. Prince’s slave narrative, *The History of Mary Prince*, challenges the institution of slavery by providing a vivid account of the brutality and violence that
Prince experienced as a slave in Bermuda, Turks Island, and Antigua and by illustrating the importance of solidarities forged within and across racial, class, and national divides. Prince’s narrative contests the dehumanization of black slaves and the stereotype of black women as licentious by emphasizing her moral virtue and depicting her resistance to the physical and sexual assaults of her “indecent” masters. It also highlights black slaves’ capacity for spiritual development by recording Prince’s conversion to Moravianism while living in Antigua. Her narrative also demonstrates the capacity of intimate bonds forged across boundaries of race, class, and nationality to disrupt the violences of slavery by depicting moments of cross-racial female solidarity and highlighting the roles of white British abolitionists in the publication of the text.

By emphasizing their participation in cross-racial, transatlantic evangelical communities, the Hart sisters and Prince demonstrate the ways in which slaves and free colored people used conversion to evangelical Protestantism as a tool to challenge racial oppression. However, their narratives also reveal that evangelicalism delimited the possibilities of colored and black women’s agency by condemning forms of black female resistance that do not conform to codes of Christian morality, particularly the practice of concubinage. Though enslaved women’s roles as concubines often allowed them some mobility within slavery, the Hart sisters’ and Prince’s narratives suggest that non-heteronormative practices such as concubinage are inherently immoral. While the act of writing personal histories for audiences in England and the Caribbean allowed the Hart sisters and Prince to contribute to the creation of intimate publics, it
also worked to constrain the actions and self-representation of colored and black women.
CHAPTER ONE

The Contradictions of Racialized Sensibility: Race, Slavery, and the Colonial ‘Lady’

Understandings of sexual difference and social articulations of gender roles were crucial to the everyday maintenance of the slave plantation system in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. The gendered nature of the political economy of slavery was reflected in the relations of power and sexual divisions of labor in plantation societies. White women occupied complicated positions within these societies. Though their location within the colonizing group afforded them a degree of privilege and power over black slaves, white women were subjected to white patriarchal authority and were assigned those duties considered to fall within the private, domestic sphere, including the care of husbands, children, and the plantation household. Yet despite the ostensibly private nature of women’s roles, the intimate, everyday practices of women had important political and economic effects on plantation societies.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which white female colonists in the Caribbean use the discourse of sensibility to assert female moral authority, while simultaneously reinforcing the subjugation and exploitation of black slaves. The discourse of sensibility was innovative and radical in its capacity to create new forms of community based not on characteristics such as education, rank, or wealth, but on sentimental identification borne out of natural fellow-feeling. While the term sensibility is difficult to define, it generally refers to the capacity for refined emotion,
particularly the capacity to feel sympathy and compassion for the suffering of others. A writer for *The Monthly Magazine* defines sensibility as “that peculiar structure, or habitue of mind, which disposes a man to be easily moved, and powerfully affected, by surrounding objects and passing events.” As critics such as G.J. Barker-Benfield, Markman Ellis, and Brycchan Carey have noted, the literature of sensibility was closely linked to the rise of humanitarian reform movements during the eighteenth century. Sentimental writers used a variety of genres, sentimental tropes, and rhetorical strategies in an “attempt to reformulate social attitudes to inequality through the development of a new humanitarian sensibility.” Focusing on the experiences and suffering of a range of marginalized and disenfranchised groups within Britain and its colonies, including children, the poor, the sick, the insane, prisoners, animals, and slaves, sentimental writers sought to move readers to sympathy and benevolence.

The discourse of sensibility held a special significance for British women, who recognized its potential to undermine patriarchal ideologies and promote gender equality. Sensibility was a highly gendered discourse and was intimately linked to the shifting of gender relations during the eighteenth century. Women’s nerves were considered to be “more delicate and more susceptible than men’s,” resulting in women’s supposedly greater capacity for refined feeling and compassion. Markman

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76 Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility*, 49.
Ellis explains that sensibility “was a distinctly feminine field of knowledge, which, although available to both men and women, was particularly associated with the behaviour and experience of women and often apostrophized as a feminine figure.”

The gendering of sensibility worked simultaneously to women’s advantage and disadvantage: British women were held to be more morally virtuous than British men and non-European men and women as a result of their finer sensibilities, but were also considered to be more vulnerable to the dangers of the predatory masculine world and to various disorders, including the corrupting effects of excessive consumption.

Despite the problematic nature of sensibility, women recognized its potential for realigning gender relations, and emphasized their supposedly finer sensibilities in order to gain a new degree of power and authority within British society and the empire.

Scholarship on the relationship between sensibility and slavery has often centered on the important role of sensibility in the abolition movement, illustrating how anti-slavery writers elicited the sympathy of the British public through sentimental depictions of black slaves. The recent work of Lynn Festa and George Boulukos departs from this view by demonstrating that sentimental rhetoric can function as a way to differentiate among humans as well as to forge social bonds. Festa persuasively argues that sentimentality allowed the British and the French to

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78 Ellis, The Politics of Sensibility, 24.
80 For a thorough discussion of the relationship between abolitionism and sensibility, see Carey, British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility.
construct “communal identities based on the distinction between the community of feeling subjects and shared, but excluded, sentimental objects.”

Boulukos shows that the sentimental trope of the grateful slave ultimately served to reinforce notions of racial difference by suggesting that through the benevolent acts of white slaveowners, slaves could be taught to embrace their subjection.

Still, even in these works that note the forms of racial differentiation inherent in sentimental narratives of slavery, there has been little attention given to the ways in which gender structures racial difference and in the process contributes to the economic function of the British slave plantation system. Like Festa and Boulukos, I contend that while the culture and literature of sensibility could create social bonds and foster humanitarian reform, sentimental representations of colonialism and slavery could also mask or reinforce structural inequalities. Yet I further argue that white women’s deployment of sensibility, whether used to exhort the benevolent treatment of slaves or to justify the violence perpetrated against them, was of ideological and practical importance as a tool for managing and disciplining slaves and thereby bolstering the economic growth of plantation societies. As Caribbean Studies scholars such as Hilary Beckles, Evelyn O’Callaghan, and Cecily Jones have demonstrated, white women’s management of the Caribbean plantation home led to their daily, intimate contact with black slaves, producing hierarchies in which white women’s agency emerged to enforce new forms of subjection over black and colored men and women.

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81 Lynn Festa, Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2006), 11.
women. Confronted with the daily realities and struggles of plantation society, including everyday slave resistance and the pervasive threat of slave rebellion, white women’s use of the discourse of sensibility was an important strategy for maintaining power and extracting labor from black slaves.

White female colonists’ experiences with slave resistance made them acutely aware of the volatile nature of their power over black slaves. Mary Carmichael, the wife of a planter who lived in St. Vincent and Trinidad during the early nineteenth century, articulates colonists’ pervasive anxiety over the threat of slave rebellion: “…there is one source of suffering, that every resident West Indian has endured for some years, and is still enduring—and it is to be feared, will and must continue to endure,—and that is, a total want of personal security for himself and his family.”

While the white planter lives in a constant state of danger, according to Carmichael, the planter’s wife is even more vulnerable:

But if this is thought a distressing situation, what must be the feelings of a planter’s wife? If any serious apprehension of a rising is entertained, her husband and every white man upon the estate are obliged to join the militia, and she is left with her children in a state of alarm beyond description: surrounded on all sides by negroes, she knows that she has no means of escape, and that she and her family are left entirely in their power.

…. I am afraid some of those females, whose delicate sensibility has been so much affected by the bare name of West India slavery, would, notwithstanding their amiable belief in the gentle and harmless

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disposition of the negro, have been not a little nervous, had they found themselves placed on a wild West Indian estate, with a house so open as they all must be, and perhaps watching over a young family, alarmed for the safety of absent husbands…. 

In her pro-slavery polemic, Carmichael emphasizes the threat of slave rebellion in order to defend slaveowners’ methods of social control, particularly the use of corporal punishment. Only whites who have resided in the Caribbean for a significant period of time, she insists, can understand the necessity of using violence to control slaves. Carmichael’s criticism of British women whose “delicate sensibility” leads them to denounce slavery calls attention to the gendered nature of sensibility and the strong links between sensibility and abolitionism. Drawing on the prevalent dichotomy between feeling and reason, she suggests that while British women’s sympathy for slaves is based solely on irrational feelings, her pro-slavery views are dictated by a rational understanding of the dangerous nature of black slaves and the vulnerability of white colonists. Yet despite Carmichael’s evident resentment toward abolitionists who use sentimental rhetoric to evoke sympathy from the British public, her account illustrates her understanding of the importance of feeling in influencing public sentiment. Though she asserts her first-hand knowledge and rational understanding of slavery against the irrational sensibility of British women, she does not portray herself as devoid of feeling; rather, she emphasizes her feelings of fear. By insisting on the vulnerability of white women who live “surrounded on all sides by negroes,” she

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85 Carmichael, *Domestic Manners and Social Condition of the White, Coloured, and Negro Population of the West Indies*, 56-57.
attempts to reverse the power dynamic between whites and blacks in order to divert sympathy away from the suffering of slaves and toward white slaveowners.

As Carmichael’s comments suggest, the discourse of sensibility was crucial to debates over race and slavery in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Feeling was viewed as a prime indicator of humanity and worth throughout the century. As Susan Maslan notes, “Despite commonplace assumptions about the Enlightenment, the primary qualification for inclusion within the category of the human was the capacity to feel, not the capacity to reason.”

Feeling was not only used to determine who qualified as human, but also to distinguish between different kinds of humans. Thus, pro-slavery writers often deny black sentience in an attempt to allege the inferiority of black slaves and downplay the cruelties of slavery. While pro-slavery narratives often assert slaves’ supposed insensibility in order to distinguish between whites and blacks, narratives that highlight the feelings of slaves can also work, advertently or inadvertently, to create a sense of difference between white feeling subjects and black objects of sympathy. As Lynn Festa notes, “sentimentality generates a situation in which the subjects who sympathize and the objects who elicit sympathy confront one another across an affective and culture divide in which one set of people feels for—has feelings about and instead of—another.”

The tendency for the discourse of sensibility to reinforce difference and hierarchy is illuminated in the narratives of white women in the Caribbean, whose use of sentimental rhetoric often functions not

as a means of creating social bonds, but of establishing and maintaining racialized power.

To draw out the deployment of sensibility within the racial and gendered logics of plantation discipline, I analyze two key upper-class women’s texts: Janet Schaw’s *Journal of a Lady of Quality* and Maria Nugent’s *Lady Nugent’s Journal*.\(^88\) Schaw’s journal, an epistolary travel narrative comprised of letters written to a close friend in Scotland, chronicles her journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal during the years 1774-1776.\(^89\) Nugent’s journal, purportedly written for her future children, records her travels and residence in Jamaica with her husband George Nugent, the governor of Jamaica, from 1801-1805.\(^90\) Schaw’s and Nugent’s narratives exemplify the ways in which white female colonists could use sensibility to assert their moral authority, while reinforcing the subjugation and exploitation of black slaves. Schaw portrays herself as morally virtuous by displaying sympathy for the suffering of poor Britons, but ultimately denies sympathy to black slaves by insisting on their innate difference, particularly their incapacity to experience prolonged pain and suffering. In contrast, Nugent advances environmentalist views of racial difference, depicting both black slaves and white creoles as morally degenerate and suggesting that with education, guidance, and positive examples, blacks are

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\(^{89}\) The exact identity of Schaw’s friend is unknown.

\(^{90}\) Nugent’s journal was first printed for private circulation in 1839, five years after her death.
capable of improvement and reform. Yet, while Nugent’s more liberal views of racial difference allow her to feel some sympathy for slaves, this does not lead her to condemn slavery. Rather, she uses sentimental rhetoric as a tool to extract labor from her domestic slaves and to quell slave resistance by depicting slavery as a consensual system of exchange between benevolent slaveowners and loyal, contented slaves.

While Schaw’s and Nugent’s deployment of sensibility works to reinforce racial hierarchies, their narratives also reveal the vulnerabilities of white colonial rule. Colonial power was based on the seemingly rigid dichotomies of white/black, colonizer/colonized, and master/slave. Yet, as colonial texts illustrate, these categories were not natural or stable, but were instead socially constructed, unstable, and vulnerable. As Ann Laura Stoler and Kathleen Wilson have argued, colonial societies were not comprised of coherent, unified communities of white masters and black slaves, but were fraught with conflicts and divisions caused by racial, ethnic, national, political, and religious differences. The stability of colonial rule was weakened not only by internal differences among whites, but also by the pervasiveness of social and racial mixing in the Caribbean. While Schaw and Nugent use the discourse of sensibility to establish their difference from and superiority to black slaves and other supposedly inferior groups, their journals demonstrate that intimate daily interactions...

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91 Schaw’s and Nugent’s divergent views on racial difference can be understood in part as a reflection of the shifting socio-political landscape of the Atlantic world between the 1770s and the early 1800s. Schaw traveled to the Caribbean in the mid-1770s, before British abolitionism became a popular cause in the 1780s. By the time Nugent traveled to the Caribbean almost thirty years later, abolitionism had become a well-established cause. The abolitionist literature that circulated in Britain frequently asserted the humanity, if not the equality, of blacks. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Nugent more readily accepts the humanity of black slaves than Schaw does.

between individuals created unexpected intimacies across lines of difference. This is perhaps most evident in the anxiety they express over the widespread practices of miscegenation and concubinage, which created an “in-between” population of mixed-race peoples and generated tension among whites about the moral and economic implications of these practices. The prevalence of miscegenation attests to the fact that in practice, the social and racial boundaries delineated by colonial ideology were frequently crossed. Though Schaw’s and Nugent’s strong disapproval of miscegenation is indicative of their desire to uphold the social order, their journals reveal moments when they too participate in various forms of boundary crossing. This is most evident in Schaw’s friendships with white creole women and Nugent’s intimate associations with mulatto women, both of which threaten to undermine social hierarchies. Thus, while their narratives work in many ways to reinforce the colonial ideologies upon which the slave plantation system is built, they also demonstrate the potential of intimate, everyday practices to disrupt plantation norms.

**Race and the Limits of Sympathy in Janet Schaw’s *Journal of a Lady of Quality***

Janet Schaw’s journal demonstrates the ways that white women in the Caribbean could use sensibility to differentiate between whites and blacks and to delineate proper and effective forms of slave management. Schaw establishes her moral virtue by expressing sympathy for the suffering of poor Britons, while sorting slaves out of the moral community of feeling humans by depicting them as insensible. This portrayal works to justify the subjugation of slaves, conjoining sensibility to common economic, pro-slavery discourses regarding the proper treatment of slaves.
At the same time, it buttresses a racialist proto-feminist response to miscegenation that ultimately grants moral authority to white British and creole women at the expense of black and colored women. Schaw’s journal thus demonstrates the capacity of sensibility to be used as a tool for both resisting and maintaining social inequalities. By granting white women such as Schaw a new form of agency and authority, the discourse of sensibility enabled them to simultaneously subvert patriarchal ideologies and reinforce the racist ideologies and institutional structures underpinning the exploitation of black slaves.

Schaw traveled to the Caribbean in 1774, where she visited Antigua and St. Kitts, small sugar-producing islands that form part of the chain of Leeward Islands. She was accompanied by her brother Alexander, who had been appointed customs officer at St. Kitts. She then traveled to North Carolina to visit another brother, Robert, who owned a plantation on the Cape Fear. As was the case in all Caribbean colonies at the time, the whites on the islands were greatly outnumbered by black slaves. The population of Antigua consisted of 2,590 whites and 37,808 blacks in 1774, while the population of St. Kitts consisted of 1,900 whites and 23,462 blacks. The Caribbean section of Schaw’s journal contains limited explicit evidence of the political and racial tensions caused by the pre-revolutionary events in North America and by the various Caribbean slave revolts that culminated in the Haitian Revolution by the end of the century. Even so, her insistence on the absolute difference between feeling whites and

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93 Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492-1969* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 105. While I wish to emphasize the extremely uneven ratio of black slaves to white colonists in the Caribbean, racial statistics such as these are often unreliable. Also, these statistics do not take into account intermediate racial designations.
unfeeling blacks reveals colonists’ pervasive anxiety about slave rebellion and the survival of British colonial society. Anti-slavery resistance was endemic to the slave plantation system, as the work of C.L.R. James, Eugene Genovese, Hilary Beckles, Saidiya Hartman and others has demonstrated.\(^9^4\) Slaves engaged in myriad forms of individual and collective resistance, including feigned illness, work slowdowns, theft, unlicensed travel, and running away.\(^9^5\) This everyday resistance, as well as the multiple slave revolts that occurred in the Caribbean, created an atmosphere of insecurity and fear, evidenced by the systematic violence perpetrated against slaves in order to maintain their subjugation. As Saidiya Hartman notes, the excess of force with which everyday acts of resistance were met “serves to illustrate the terror that is part and parcel of the everyday landscape of slavery.”\(^9^6\) Schaw justifies the brutal treatment of slaves by suggesting that violence is a necessary aspect of the slave system and by disavowing the long-term psychological and physical suffering of slaves.

**Janet Schaw’s Sentimental Objects: Poor White Emigrants**

As a single, childless woman and a female traveler, Schaw was unconventional for her time. Although she does not express an explicitly feminist agenda, she challenges dominant gender ideologies by portraying herself as an independent, intelligent, and morally virtuous woman. However, Schaw’s assertions of female

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\(^9^5\) Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 51.

\(^9^6\) Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 63.
agency are not indicative of a wider belief in social and political equality; rather, her claims to female selfhood are predicated on the othering of various “inferior” classes of people, particularly black slaves. Schaw establishes her moral authority by displaying pity and compassion for the British poor, while denying sympathy for slaves by insisting on their innate difference, especially their tendency to be reactive and their incapacity for prolonged suffering.

Schaw’s investment in elite white privilege, afforded in large part by the slave plantation system, is evident early in her journal. Several days into the transatlantic voyage from Scotland to the Caribbean, Schaw discovers that she and her family are not alone on the ship when she encounters a crowd of poor Scottish emigrants on deck. Her initial description of the emigrants reveals her class prejudice: “Never did my eyes behold so wretched, so disgusting a sight. They looked like a Cargo of Dean Swift’s Yahoos newly caught” (28). By alluding to Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Schaw locates her journal within the popular genre of travel narratives, thereby positioning herself as the civilized, refined European traveler and the emigrants as the first of various others she will encounter on her journey. While her disgust with the emigrants evidently has to do with their lower-class status, her comparison between the emigrants and Swift’s ape-like Yahoos reveals a slippage between class and racial identities. In Swift’s novel, Gulliver describes the first Yahoo he meets in terms similar to those used in eighteenth-century descriptions of Africans: “…the Face of it indeed was flat and broad, the Nose depressed, the Lips large, and the Mouth wide:
But these differences are common to all savage Nations.’” By comparing the emigrants to Yahoos, Schaw racializes them by implicitly equating them with African slaves.

Schaw’s conflation of the white emigrants with Yahoos, and thereby with African slaves seems to result not only from the revulsion she feels at encountering “so disgusting, so wretched a sight” as the crowd of poor, dirty emigrants, but also from the fact that their treatment on board the ship is, to some degree, similar to that of slaves. Schaw explains that the emigrants had been “smuggle[d] aboard” the ship and confined “under the hatches” throughout the first few days of the journey. “They were fully as sensible of the motion of the Vessel as we were,” she writes, “and sickness works more ways than one, so that the smell which came from the hole, where they had been confined, was sufficient to raise a plague aboard” (30). Schaw’s description of the emigrants’ situation on the ship—their confinement, their sickness, and the horrible smell of the hold—resembles accounts of the Middle Passage. However, the obvious suffering that is suggested by this image of confinement and illness does not elicit Schaw’s sympathy, but her disgust. As Festa rightly notes, Schaw’s failure to sympathize immediately with the emigrants illustrates that “suffering by itself is inadequate to arouse emotion.” For Schaw, the emigrants’ proximity to African slaves, and thus their difference from her, interferes with the possibility of sympathetic identification.

98 Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire*, 175.
Schaw’s initial revulsion toward the emigrants is transformed into displays of pity and compassion several days later, however, when she witnesses the emigrants’ distress as the ship passes by the island from which they have been exiled. Schaw learns that the emigrants were forced to leave their homes on the Orkney Islands after their rents were raised beyond what they could possibly afford. When describing the scene in which the emigrants view their home for the last time, Schaw replaces her previous language of prejudice with the language of sensibility: “my attention was caught by one of the most affecting scenes that could be presented to a feeling heart, and, I thank God, mine is not composed of very hard materials. It is so warm on my mind that I fear I will not be able to reduce it into order, but if I am able to paint it the least like what I felt it, I am sure you will share my feelings” (33). Significantly, Schaw begins her account by highlighting her own feelings, rather than the feelings of the emigrants. In Schaw’s retelling of the story, her ability to convey her emotional response to the emigrants’ suffering and to enable the reader to share her feelings becomes just as important as the emigrants’ plight, if not more so.

When Schaw redirects the reader’s attention to the emigrants, she represents them as passive victims. Apostrophizing the Scottish landowner who forced them off their land, she writes,

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99 The emigrants that Schaw encountered were part of the highland emigration that occurred between 1763 and 1776, in which thousands of Scots from North Britain emigrated to the Americas. The emigration was caused by a movement similar to the enclosure movements in England. Landed proprietors “began to absorb small farms into large ones, evict tenants or raise rents, and harry the lesser folk with exactions and heavy oppressions, whereas the latter, bred to a farming and stock-raising life, were unable to find new forms of livelihood.” The rise in rent and increased cost of provisions forced these Scots to seek out a new home. See Evangeline Andrews, ed., appendix to Journal of a Lady of Quality, by Janet Schaw, 257-259.
Hard-hearted, little Tyrant of yonder rough domains, could you have remained unmoved, had you beheld the victims of your avarice, as I have done, with souls free from guilt, yet suffering all the pangs of banished villains; oh! had you seen them, their hands clasped in silent and unutterable anguish, their streaming eyes raised to heaven in mute ejaculations, calling down blessings, and pouring the last benedictions of a broken heart on the dear soil that gave them being…. (33-34)

Schaw portrays the emigrants, with their hands clasped in anguish and eyes streaming with tears, as innocent victims forced into exile by the selfish, tyrannical greed of the landowner. Her depiction of the emigrants as passive and silent sufferers not only contrasts their innocence with the landowner’s guilt. By emphasizing the emigrants’ powerlessness, Schaw also underscores her own agency, derived in large part from her superior social status.

Although Schaw claims to deplore the oppressive treatment of the emigrants, it is paradoxically her (belated) recognition of their suffering that makes them “respectable” in her eyes. She writes, “Where are now the Cargo of Yahoos? they are transformed into a Company of most respectable sufferers, whom it is both my duty and inclination to comfort, and do all in my power to alleviate their misfortunes, which have not sprung from their guilt and folly, but from the guilt and folly of others” (36). Schaw’s claim that it is her “duty” to do “all in [her] power” to help the emigrants again reinforces the notion of their powerlessness. Her comments exemplify

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100 This echoes a scene from Sarah Scott’s sentimental novel The History of Sir George Ellison, in which Ellison describes to his wife (depicted in the novel as a cruel white mistress) the gratification he experienced after preventing their overseer from inflicting a severe punishment on their slaves. He states, “Had you, my dear, been present when they threw themselves at my feet, embraced my knees, and lifting up their streaming eyes to heaven, prayed with inexpressible fervency to their supposed Gods to shower down their choicest blessings on me, you would have wept with me….” Both scenes use sentimental language and imagery to describe scenes of suffering in order to evoke sympathy from the person whose greed is the cause of that suffering. See Sarah Scott, The History of Sir George Ellison (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1996), 11.
the paternalistic attitude of many bourgeois and elite British women, who were seen to embody “the highest level of civilization” and therefore to have the right and responsibility to assist those peoples they considered socially and culturally inferior.\(^{101}\)

It is significant, however, that Schaw’s sympathy for the emigrants only develops as a result of their “transformation.” When Schaw views the emigrants as racialized figures comparable to Yahoos, they do not warrant her compassion, but once they manifest recognizably European affect (by staring longingly at Scotland and mourning over their exile), she is able to feel for them.

Once Schaw begins to view the emigrants as objects of sympathy, they no longer appear as a crowd of “wretched human beings,” but instead as individual figures, each with his or her own “tale of wo [sic].” Among these, the figure that interests Schaw most is a mother, the embodiment of moral virtue and domesticity:

In this general group of Sorrow, there was one figure that more particularly engaged my attention. It was that of a female, who supported with one arm an Infant about a month old, which she suckled at her breast; her head rested on the other, and her hand shaded her face, while the tears that streamed from under it bedewed her breast and the face of the Infant, who was endeavouring to draw a scanty nourishment from it. At her knee hung a little Cherub about two years old, who looked smiling up into her face, as if courting her notice, and endeavoring to draw her from her melancholy Reflexions; while a most beautiful little girl about eight years old stood by, and wept at the sight of her Mother’s tears. (35)

Schaw elicits the sympathy of the reader through the sentimental trope of a virtuous family injured by self-interested greed. Within the literature of sensibility, the family served as the paradigmatic locus of social affections, exemplified here by the mutual

\(^{101}\) Wilson, “Empire, Gender, and Modernity,” 22.
love and distress of the emigrant mother and her children. This scene is significant for two reasons. On one hand, Schaw’s depiction of the Scottish emigrant family as tearful, passive sufferers serves to highlight her own moral authority and agency. On the other, her portrayal of white suffering, represented by the mother and her children, especially the figure of the little Cherub, stands in stark contrast to her later portrayal of a supposedly unfeeling black slave family. Schaw’s account of the emigrants’ suffering demonstrates how sentimental representations ostensibly intended to evoke sympathy can ultimately work to reinforce social inequalities.

The Plantation Economy and the Limits of Sensibility’s Moral Community

Despite Schaw’s emphasis on feeling and benevolence in her discussions of the white emigrants, her expressions of sympathy and compassion do not extend uniformly to black slaves. Rather, she circumscribes the humanity of slaves by insisting on their limited sentience. The importance of feeling in Schaw’s distinction between whites and blacks illustrates the collusion of the discourse of sensibility with eighteenth-century discourses of racial difference. Drawing on the theory of innate racial difference, Schaw portrays blacks as reactive, incapable of long-term reflection, and impervious to psychological suffering in order to support divergent arguments regarding the nature and management of slaves. She initially advances arguments in favor of ameliorative reforms of slavery, suggesting that kind and compassionate treatment of slaves will result in their devotion and willingness to labor productively; however, she later justifies the systematic violence perpetrated against slaves by portraying them as insensible. She also condemns miscegenation, which threatens the
stability of the slave plantation system by blurring the distinction between whites, whom she includes within the moral community of feeling humans, and blacks, whom she excludes from that community. Though Schaw’s arguments may appear contradictory, both arguments work to justify the subjugation and exploitation of black slaves by suggesting that blacks, unlike whites, are particularly suited for slavery.

Even when Schaw displays sympathy for slaves, her sentimental expressions are undermined by her apparent self-interest, as evidenced by her brief mention of a slave being transported on board the ship. Before the ship leaves the coast of Scotland, Schaw is warned by her brother Alexander that she may hear screaming because the ship owner’s slave Ovid is being brought on board and put in irons. She writes, “We desired to know what crime the poor wretch had committed to deserve so hard a sentence. He replied, he knew of none…. my brother left us, and went on Deck to mitigate, if possible, the rigours intended against this unfortunate creature, and we lay trembling in fearful expectation of the event, but happily for our feelings, poor Ovid finding himself overpowered by numbers, submitted without resistance” (22-23). Schaw’s concern regarding the circumstances of the “unfortunate creature” seems intended to indicate sympathy for him. Her sympathy is called into question, however, by the pleasure she feels upon learning that he submitted to his confinement without resistance. Schaw’s relief over Ovid’s failure to resist his subjugation suggests that her initial concern was due not to his oppressive treatment and suffering, but rather to the possibility of his rebellion.
In the Caribbean and North Carolina sections of Schaw’s journal, her economic and political interests become more clearly articulated as she deploys sensibility to support various arguments regarding the management of slaves. While she at times acknowledges the humanity of black slaves, she differentiates them from whites by characterizing them as reactive and incapable of extended reflection and suffering. The first slaves that Schaw encounters in Antigua are those of Colonel Samuel Martin, a leading planter on the island, whom she refers to as “the loved and revered father of Antigua” (103). She presents the slaves “through the lens of a benevolent paternalism,” asserting that they are well cared for, happy, and healthy. Martin’s estates, she writes, “are cultivated to the height by a large troop of healthy Negroes, who cheerfully perform the labor imposed on them by a kind and beneficent Master, not a harsh and unreasonable Tyrant. Well fed, well supported, they appear the subjects of a good prince, not the slaves of a planter. The effect of this kindness is a daily increase of riches by the slaves born to him on his own plantation” (104).

Schaw’s depiction of devoted slaves cheerfully serving their beneficent master exemplifies the popular sentimental trope of the grateful slave. George Boulukos contends that representations of grateful slaves begin by recognizing slaves’ humanity through an acknowledgment of their capacity for suffering, only to later assert their

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102 Born in 1693 at his father’s plantation, Green Castle, Samuel Martin moved between Antigua and England for much of his life until settling in Antigua in 1750. He was a strong advocate of responsible plantation management and paternalistic slaveholding practices. See Papers of Samuel Martin, Senior, Additional Manuscripts, 41346 through 41351, British Library. See also Samuel Martin, An Essay upon Plantership, humbly inscrib’d to all the planters of the British sugar-colonies of America (Antigua: T. Smith, 1750).

difference from and inferiority to whites by portraying them as “so overwhelmed by passionate, irrational gratitude that they enthusiastically accept their state of slavery.”

Schaw’s use of the grateful slave trope justifies slavery by suggesting that blacks willingly choose their subjection. By representing Colonel Martin’s slaves as “subjects of a good prince,” she imagines slavery as a consensual system of mutual exchange, thus obscuring the forms of domination and exploitation that characterize the transatlantic slave system.

Schaw’s account of Colonel Martin’s slaves clearly illustrates the relationship between sensibility and the economics of slavery. Through kind treatment, she explains, Martin has gained the loyalty and submission of his slaves, who are in fact willing to serve him even without the formal constraints of slavery. According to Schaw, Martin has freed his household slaves, believing that “no slave can render that acceptable Service he wishes from those immediately about himself” and “the alacrity with which they serve him, and the love they bear him, shew he is not wrong” (104-105). She implies that by implementing ameliorative reforms, slaveowners can induce productive slave labor and prevent rebellion.

Schaw’s sentimental account obfuscates the forms of oppression, coercion, and exploitation inherent in even the most seemingly benevolent relationship between master and slave. By emphasizing

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105 Martin himself seems to have endorsed this view. Significantly, Martin’s father, Major Samuel Martin, was killed by his slaves on December 27, 1701 during one of the first recorded slave rebellions in Antigua. Though the official report of the incident does not state why Martin’s slaves rebelled, the archival record suggests that the slaves were most likely provoked by poor treatment. For instance, Governor Codrington wrote of Martin, “I’m afraid he was guilty of some unusual act of Severity, or rather Some indignity towards the Coromantees.” See David Barry Gaspar, Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), 186.
the love, gratitude, and loyalty that Martin’s slaves and ex-slaves supposedly feel toward him and downplaying the degree to which their “freedom” to act in accordance with their own desires is constrained by the social and legal structures of plantation society, Schaw naturalizes black subjection and servitude.

Fictional renderings of the grateful slave trope, though often intended to promote ameliorationist or anti-slavery views, similarly demonstrate how the trope bolsters the institution of slavery by suggesting that slaveowners’ benevolent treatment of slaves will earn their gratitude, increase their productivity, and prevent their rebellion. One of the most well-known examples of the grateful slave trope can be found in Sarah Scott’s novel *The History of Sir George Ellison*, published in 1766. In the two chapters of the novel that focus on slavery, Sir George Ellison, an archetypal “man of feeling,” sets out to reform the system of slavery on the plantation he inherits upon marrying a white creole woman. Though slavery is “abhorrent to [Ellison’s] nature,” he realizes that he cannot run his newly acquired plantation without laborers and believes that, given the “present state of the island,” he cannot attempt to abolish slavery, even on his own plantation.\(^{106}\) He therefore determines instead to implement a series of ameliorative reforms to make his slaves more comfortable. Rather than resorting to violent methods of social control, Ellison explains to his slaves that he will care for them and treat them well as long as they display the appropriate gratitude by performing their duties. Any slave who demonstrates that his “heart cannot be influenced by gratitude, or his own true

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interest” by failing to display good behavior will be punished, and on the third offense, will be sold to a new master. Ellison’s system of reform, which depends on the threat of being sold to a less benevolent master, succeeds in gaining the affection and loyalty of his slaves, who “promised him, and themselves likewise, never to offend so good a master, in such a manner as to bring them under the heavy sentence he had pronounced against those who persevered in disobedience.” Like Schaw’s depiction of Colonel Martin and his slaves, Scott’s novel portrays slavery as a reciprocal system of exchange in which the slaveowner’s display of humanity is rewarded by the gratitude and productive labor of his slaves. As these examples illustrate, the paternalistic fantasies contained within sentimental narratives of slavery work to naturalize racial inequality by suggesting that black slaves choose their subjection.

Schaw’s representation of Colonel Martin as a benevolent prince rather than a cruel tyrant can also be understood in relation to her loyalist views. During her visit to North Carolina, Schaw expresses a strong disapproval of the American rebels, depicting them as traitors who corrupt their fellow colonists with false statements about the “implacable cruelty of the king of Great Britain” (199). Her loyalist politics color her views on slavery: portraying the Caribbean plantation as a microcosm of society, Schaw suggests that slaves owe obedience to their rightful masters just as British subjects owe obedience to their monarch. Claiming that the revolutionaries are attempting to frighten colonists into supporting their cause by spreading false rumors about a royal proclamation, Schaw states, “The King’s proclamation they never saw;
but are told it was ordering the tories to murder the whigs, and promising every Negro
that would murder his Master and family that he should have his Master’s plantation.
This last Artifice they may pay for, as the Negroes have got it amongst them and
believe it to be true. Tis ten to one they may try the experiment, and in that case
friends and foes will be all one” (199). Schaw stresses the danger posed by the
political divisions among whites in North Carolina, which provide an opportunity for
slaves to revolt. Denouncing the American rebels for using the threat of slave rebellion
to gain support for their cause, she insists that in the case of an insurrection,
revolutionaries and loyalists will all appear alike in the eyes of black slaves.

Throughout her journal, Schaw deploys the discourse of sensibility to
distinguish between whites and blacks and to legitimize the brutality of the slave
system. While her depiction of Colonel Martin’s slaves attributes humanity to blacks
by acknowledging their capacity to reason and to feel, at other moments she
distinguishes blacks from whites by associating blacks with non-human animals. Upon
first encountering black children in Antigua, she writes, “Just as we got into the lane, a
number of pigs run out at a door, and after them a parcel of monkeys. This not a little
surprised me, but I found what I took for monkeys were negro children, naked as they
were born” (78). By ostensibly mistaking black children for monkeys, Schaw
momentarily expels blacks from the category of the human. Though she corrects her
mistake, her initial misrecognition of the black children and the casual manner in
which she relates the story work to reinscribe notions of black alterity.
Schaw differentiates blacks from whites not only by highlighting their physical differences, but also by depicting them as insensible. While sensibility’s emphasis on feeling could foster the benevolent treatment of slaves, it could also be used for the contrary purpose of justifying the violence of the slave system. Just as slaves’ supposed incapacity for extended reflection and reasoning facilitates their gratitude for the benevolent acts of their masters and their acceptance of slavery, according to Schaw, it also diminishes the impact of physical violence. In a key passage, she writes,

Every ten Negroes have a driver, who walks behind them, holding in his hand a short whip and a long one. You will too easily guess the use of these weapons, a circumstance of all others the most horrid. They are naked, male and female, down to the girdle, and you constantly observe where the application has been made. But however dreadful this must appear to a humane European, I will do the creoles the justice to say, they would be as averse to it as we are, could it be avoided, which has often been tried to no purpose. When one comes to be better acquainted with the nature of the Negroes, the horror of it must wear off. It is the suffering of the human mind that constitutes the greatest misery of punishment, but with them it is merely corporeal. As to the brutes it inflicts no wound on their mind, whose Natures seem made to bear it, and whose sufferings are not attended with shame or pain beyond the present moment. When they are regularly Ranged, each has a little basket, which he carries up the hill filled with the manure and returns with a load of canes to the Mill. They go up at a trot, and return at a gallop, and did you not know the cruel necessity of this alertness, you would believe them the merriest people in the world. (127-128)

Schaw seeks here to justify the violent treatment of slaves in several ways. First, she insists on violence as a crucial form of social control for the functioning of the plantation system. Though she avoids any explicit mention of slave resistance, her comment that slaves do not think or feel “beyond the present moment” alludes to their unpredictability, and thus the threat of their rebellion. Throughout her narrative, she uses the discourse of sensibility to negotiate between the anxieties over slave
insurrection that pervade Caribbean plantation societies and the moral civilizing
upheld as the justification for British imperialism. At the same time, she attempts to
diminish the horror of this violence by depicting blacks as “brutes” impervious to
psychological suffering. By insisting on the slaves’ diminished capacity for suffering,
Schaw uses the notion of innate racial difference to separate African slaves from the
sentimentalized objects of sympathy—namely, the British poor. Schaw can only show
sympathy for “slaves” when they are removed from any association with blackness
and racialized as white. In addition, by defending the “horrid” actions of creole
slaveowners, she implicitly constructs a moral hierarchy in which the “humane
Europeans” are superior to the white creoles, and both groups are superior to the
animalized slaves.

This passage also illustrates how the myth of the happy slave was perpetuated
by scenes in which the violent mechanisms of slavery were rendered invisible to the
outside observer, as Schaw notes that anyone who was unaware that the slaves’
alertness was due to the threat of whipping would think them “the merriest people in
the world.” Slaves’ performances of pleasure were coerced through the use of
violence, as well as the persistent threat of violence. The threat of violence was not
only used by tyrannical slaveowners, but also by benevolent slaveowners who
maintained power over their slaves through a “new, humane regime of discipline” that
depended for its success on the “threat that non-compliant – ‘intractable’ – slaves will
be sold to new, presumably less humane, owners.”¹⁰⁹ By acknowledging these less

¹⁰⁹ Boulukos, The Grateful Slave, 3.
visible forms of domination, Schaw inadvertently undermines her earlier claims about the happiness and loyalty of Martin’s slaves.

As further evidence of the supposed insensitivity of black slaves, Schaw insists on their disregard for familial attachments. After observing a slave family being sold at the market, she writes, “The husband was to be divided from the wife, the infant from the mother; but the most perfect indifference ran thro’ the whole. They were laughing and jumping, making faces at each other, and not caring a single farthing for their fate” (128). By representing the slave family as indifferent to their impending separation, Schaw defends slavery against the charges of abolitionists, who pointed to the fracturing of African families as one of the main evils of the slave system. As Kathleen Wilson notes, British women involved in the anti-slavery cause “brought their supposed feminine compassion and sympathy to bear on the sexual exploitation of black women and the break-up of families slavery enjoined.”

In contrast, pro-slavery writers portrayed black women as unfeminine, immoral, and devoid of familial bonds. Hilary Beckles observes that the black woman was “ideologically constructed as essentially ‘non-feminine’ in so far as primacy was placed upon her alleged muscular capabilities, physical strength, aggressive carriage, and sturdiness.” At the same time, black and colored slave women were portrayed as inherently promiscuous, a characteristic which supposedly contributed to the instability of slave families. Slaves, especially female slaves, were also accused of being indifferent and even cruel toward their children. Although planters’ poor treatment of slave women suggests that

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110 Wilson, “Empire, Gender, and Modernity,” 22.
111 Beckles, Centering Woman, 10.
they believed it was cheaper to purchase new slaves than to support their natural reproduction, they instead blamed the natural decrease of the slave population on slave women’s supposed disregard for motherhood and domesticity. Schaw’s representation of the slave family at the market supports such views regarding slaves’ lack of familial bonds. Her contrasting representation of the white emigrant family and the black slave family again reinforces the distinction between whites, who belong to the community of feeling human beings, and blacks, who fall outside of that community.

Schaw’s need to distinguish between feeling whites and unfeeling blacks leads to her condemnation of the widespread miscegenation occurring in the Caribbean. While she speaks highly of the white creole men overall, she denounces their sexual relationships with black women:

…they are mortals, and as such must have their share of failings, the most conspicuous of which is, the indulgence they give themselves in their licentious and even unnatural amours, which appears too plainly from the crowds of Mullatoes, which you meet in the streets, houses and indeed everywhere; a crime that seems to have gained sanction from custom, tho’ attended with the greatest inconveniences not only to Individuals, but to the publick in general. The young black wenches lay themselves out for white lovers, in which they are but too successful. (112)

Schaw views miscegenation as “unnatural” because it defies her belief in innate racial difference, blurring the racial and social boundaries on which the slave plantation system depends. She also sees it as interfering with the economic functioning of the plantation system by producing a population of mixed-race slaves unfit for hard labor.

Schaw’s concerns about the common practice of miscegenation between white men and black women are consistent with many pro- and anti-slavery writers. While the prevalence of miscegenation is understood partially as a consequence of the scarcity of white women living in the Caribbean, various contemporary accounts suggest that white men in fact often chose black and colored women over white women. Barbara Bush notes that “contemporary moral critics, both pro- and anti-slavery, decried the fact that white men appeared content with negro or mulatto mistresses, producing a ‘spurious race of children’ whose maintenance, together with ‘the extravagance of their sable mothers’, dissipated the men’s savings.” Edward Long, for example, complained that in Jamaica “a place where, by custom, so little restraint is laid on the passions, the Europeans, who at home have always been used to greater purity and strictness of manners, are too easily led aside to give a loose to every kind of sensual delight: on this account some black or yellow quasheba is fought for, by whom a tawny breed is produced.” The anxiety over miscegenation was caused not only by the fact that it increased the mixed-race population, but also by the fact that white men often rewarded their black and colored concubines for their loyalty by bequeathing property and wealth to them or manumitting them and their offspring.

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Though Schaw is critical of white men’s participation in interracial relationships, she ultimately lays the blame for miscegenation on black women by portraying them as cunning seductresses. The figure of the scheming black Jezebel who uses her sexual powers to acquire favors from white men is common within pro-slavery texts.\textsuperscript{116} Representation of black women’s sexuality as morally debased justified the sexual exploitation of black women by white men. As Evelyn O’Callaghan explains, “White women were supposedly completely fulfilled in nurturing domesticity and motherhood, and so refined that sexuality was repulsive; black women, who supposedly thought of little else, were by default ‘fallen’ temptresses and therefore subject to institutionalized rape.”\textsuperscript{117} Schaw’s claim that black women seduce white men once again removes the possibility of sympathy for blacks by denying the sexual violation of slave women by white men.

While Schaw’s critical depiction of white men’s sexual relations with black women is consistent with other accounts of the period, her positive portrayal of white creole women challenges the popular trope of the degenerate creole woman. The social hierarchy in the Caribbean was delineated primarily on the basis of race, with sharp divisions between whites, mixed-race people, and blacks; within this system, however, the power structure was further complicated by the distinctions drawn between white Europeans and white creoles. As the work of Bush, Beckles, and O’Callaghan has shown, eighteenth-century European writers frequently represent

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\textsuperscript{116} For a discussion of miscegenation and representations of black women as scheming temptresses, see Barbara Bush, \textit{Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838} (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990), 110-118.

\textsuperscript{117} O’Callaghan, \textit{Women Writing the West Indies}, 28.
white creoles as culturally and morally degenerate. Creole women are represented as being especially vulnerable to the corrupting influences of empire and slavery. While white British women are portrayed as the embodiment of moral and domestic virtue, their counterparts across the Atlantic are seen as “pallid imitations of ‘real’ English ladies: gauche, indolent, extravagant, and prone to display the ‘vulgar manners’ of their black servants.” European commentators often describe white creole women living in idleness and luxury by mercilessly exploiting the labor of their slaves. Though Europeans sometimes express shock over creole women’s cruelty toward their slaves, creole women’s use of violence as a form of social control is consistent with their investment in the social and economic interests of plantation society. As I explained in the Introduction, white women’s cruelty toward female slaves has also been understood as a response to their jealousy of black and colored women, with whom they sometimes had to compete for the attention and resources of white men.

Commentators not only portray creole women as morally depraved, but also claim that their intimate associations with domestic slaves led to their cultural degeneracy. As I discuss below, Maria Nugent consistently portrays creole women as ignorant and silly in her journal. Lamenting their use of the Creole language, she writes, “Many of the ladies, who have not been educated in England, speak a sort of

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119 Wilson, “Empire, Gender, and Modernity,” 35.
120 Beckles, Centering Woman, 66-67.
broken English, with an indolent drawling out of their words, that is very tiresome if not disgusting.”

Edward Long claims that within rural plantation settings, creole women’s social isolation led them to adopt the African customs and manners of their slaves: “We may see, in some of these places, a very fine young woman awkwardly dangling her arms with the air of a Negroe-servant, lolling almost the whole day upon beds or settees, her head muffed up with two or three handkerchiefs, her dress loose, and without stays. At noon, we find her employed in gobbling pepper-pot, seated on the floor, with her sable hand-maids around her.”

Claims regarding the degeneracy of white creole women emphasize the dangers of racial and cultural contamination, while also suggesting that creole women’s lack of sensibility, civility, and intelligence makes them especially susceptible to the corrupting effects of slavery.

In a clear attempt to counter such negative stereotypes of white creole women, Schaw idealizes them as models of womanhood. She asserts that the women in Antigua “are in general the most amiable creatures in the world, and either I have been remarkably fortunate in my acquaintance, or they are more than commonly sensible, even those who have never been off the Island are amazingly intelligent and able to converse with you on any subject. They make excellent wives, fond attentive mothers and the best house wives I have ever met with” (113). Unlike white creole men, whose “unnatural” behavior threatens the stability of the white family and thus the British colonial enterprise, creole women are shown to strictly uphold their duties as morally virtuous wives and mothers: “The sun appears to affect the sexes very differently.

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While the men are gay, luxurious and amorous, the women are modest, genteel, reserved and temperate” (113). By insisting on creole women’s combined qualities of sensibility, intelligence, gentility, and domesticity, Schaw vindicates her sex from charges of female ignorance and immorality. Her emphasis on white women’s moral virtue challenges patriarchal gender ideologies, while simultaneously reinforcing notions of racial difference that work to legitimize the economic and sexual exploitation of slaves.

At the same time, however, Schaw’s emphasis on white women’s femininity and domesticity reinscribes notions of female difference used to justify the social and legal subordination of women. Significantly, Schaw does not entirely adhere to these gender norms. Though she strategically appropriates the discourses of sensibility and domesticity as a form of resistance, her journal registers an ambivalence about prescribed gender roles and norms. Her status as a single, childless, elite woman allows her a degree of independence and freedom not available to most other women on the island. Using this to her advantage, she at times transgresses gender norms, refusing to conform to the rules of female propriety. For instance, when she learns that the creole women only drink lime juice rather than Madeira, she writes,

What a tyrant is custom in every part of the world. The poor women, whose spirits must be worn out by heat and constant perspiration, require no doubt some restorative, yet as it is not the custom, they will faint under it rather than transgress this ideal law. I will however follow our good Landlady’s advice, and as I was resolved to shew I was to be a rebel to a custom that did not appear founded on reason, I pledged her in a bumper of the best Madeira I ever tasted. (81)
By commenting on the tyranny of custom “in every part of the world,” Schaw highlights the shared oppression of all women. However, she quickly distinguishes herself as a “rebel” unwilling to follow the path of those “poor women” who allow irrational customs to dictate their thoughts and actions. Once again, she uses the language of sensibility to express sympathy for others, in this case other white women, while establishing her own superiority. She also disassociates herself from female delicacy, stating, “You have formed a very wrong idea of my delicacy; I find I can put it on and off like any piece of dress” (201). By insisting on her ability to adopt or reject supposedly inherent female traits, Schaw illustrates the performativity of gender. While she uses sentimental rhetoric to assert her female moral authority and virtue, she simultaneously marks herself out as superior to other women by emphasizing her independent capacity for reason.

Schaw’s use of the discourse of sensibility promotes sympathy for those oppressed by class and gender inequalities, but denies sympathy to those oppressed on the basis of race. Drawing on the contemporaneous discourses of sensibility and innate racial difference, she portrays blacks as insensible, and thus unable to become objects of sentiment. This strategy allows Schaw to promote her own agency through narrating her surroundings, as she deploys sensibility to create female agency and to divert sentiment from slaves to the British poor. Though she challenges dominant gender ideologies, she does not pose a similar challenge to the colonial racial order.
**Sensibility and the Civilizing Mission in Maria Nugent’s *Lady Nugent’s Journal***

As I have discussed, Janet Schaw’s *Journal of a Lady of Quality* exemplifies how upper-class white women use the discourse of sensibility to establish female agency, while simultaneously legitimizing slavery by denying black sentience. *Lady Nugent’s Journal*, which chronicles Maria Nugent’s life as the governor’s wife in Jamaica from August 1801 to June 1805, illustrates the ways in which sentimental accounts of slavery that recognize the feelings of slaves can also work to legitimize slavery. Nugent accompanied her husband George to Jamaica at the age of thirty. Her parents, Cortlandt and Elizabeth Skinner, were Anglican Americans whose ancestry was Scottish, Irish, and Dutch. The Skinners, loyalists like Schaw, moved to Britain after the War of Independence. In 1797, Maria married George Nugent. George was of Anglo-Irish aristocracy and had wealthy and powerful family connections. He was Member of Parliament for Buckingham for ten years before becoming a Colonel during the war with France, and eventually being promoted to the high-ranking position of Major-General. In 1801, he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Jamaica.

In contrast to the relative independence of Schaw, Nugent’s life is more clearly circumscribed by her private roles as wife and mother and her public role as “the governor’s lady.” Although she does not possess the same degree of autonomy as Schaw, she should not be viewed simply as a victim of patriarchy. Nugent, too, asserts female agency throughout her journal, but does so within the parameters of domesticity. Like Schaw, she is well aware of her race and class privileges, and uses
these to her advantage in achieving her goals. Portraying the Caribbean as a place of corruption and moral decay, Nugent employs the discourse of sensibility to assert her moral authority and religious virtue against the immorality of others, particularly black slaves and white creoles. She negotiates her relationship with the slaves through a sentimental rhetoric, using kindness and benevolence to induce slave labor and quell resistance. While her paternalistic ideal of slavery leads her to endorse amelioration of the slave system, her depictions of contented, child-like slaves reinscribes racial difference and justifies the subjugation of blacks. At the same time, she critiques white creoles for their supposed immorality and lack of benevolence, suggesting that creoles’ failure to demonstrate proper morality sets a dangerous example for black slaves.

While Nugent’s use of sensibility reinforces categories of difference, her journal and unpublished letters also reveal that daily interactions with supposedly inferior groups produce affinities and intimacies across lines of race, gender, and nationality. Despite national and imperial conflicts between the British and the French, Nugent sympathizes with French female colonists subjected to the violence of black rebels in Saint-Domingue. In addition, Nugent crosses racial boundaries by establishing friendships with free mulatto women and associating freely with black slaves. These intimacies demonstrate the disjunctions between colonial discourse and everyday practice in plantation societies.

The years during which the Nugents lived in the Caribbean were turbulent ones, marked by the end of war between Britain and France and the French and
Haitian Revolutions. Jamaica, the leading sugar producer of the British Caribbean and Britain’s most important colony, was greatly impacted by the battle for imperial power between Britain and France and the events of the French and Haitian Revolutions. Throughout the eighteenth century, Jamaica’s prosperity was threatened by the nearby French colony of Saint-Domingue. Saint-Domingue was the most productive of all Caribbean colonies, with more exports than all of the British Caribbean combined.\textsuperscript{124} By the middle of the century, British planters recognized the potential for Saint-Domingue to ruin the British sugar colonies. However, the British did not make any serious attempts to conquer the island until the French Revolution and the slave uprisings in Saint-Domingue provided Britain an opportunity to forge alliances with Saint-Domingue’s white creole planters.

The French and Haitian Revolutions played a decisive role in the contest between Britain and France and their sugar colonies. One of the most important results of the French Revolution was the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which gave citizenship rights to all men. The National Assembly in France vigorously debated the effects of the rights of man on the legal status of the free blacks and mulattoes in the French Caribbean, eventually conceding in April 1792 to give free blacks and mulattoes the same political rights as whites. The white planters of Saint-Domingue, infuriated by this concession, turned to Britain for support. The planters had, in fact, been considering secession from France and allegiance to Britain for several years. In October 1791, the President of the Assembly of Saint-Domingue sent

\textsuperscript{124} Williams, \textit{From Columbus to Castro}, 238.
a letter to William Pitt, Prime Minister of Great Britain, “assuring him that ‘all Saint-Domingue’ was ready to take the oath of allegiance to Britain on two conditions only—the guarantee of Saint-Domingue’s internal regime and permission to trade with the United States.” However, Britain and France were at peace, and Pitt found it necessary to wait for war to conquer the French-colonized island. When war was declared between Britain and France in February 1793, Britain finally accepted the planters’ offer of Saint-Domingue, in return guaranteeing them that slavery would be maintained on the island.

Meanwhile, the slaves of Saint-Domingue had taken their fate into their own hands. The first organized slave uprising led by the spiritual leader Boukman had occurred in 1791. By the time British troops landed in Saint-Domingue in 1793, the slaves were led in their insurrection by Toussaint L’Ouverture. At the instigation of the revolutionary masses in France and the black rebels in Saint-Domingue, slavery was officially abolished in the French colonies in 1794. However, as Toussaint and the slaves realized, British seizure of Saint-Domingue would mean the reinstatement of slavery for blacks and limited political rights for mulattoes. The slaves fought the

125 Qtd. in Williams, *From Columbus to Castro*, 248.
127 Robin Blackburn emphasizes the mutual influence of the Haitian and French Revolutions on one another. Blackburn explains that by 1794, there was strong resentment toward the rich, particularly rich merchants, within metropolitan France. The news that planters in Saint-Domingue had been collaborating with the British, France’s national enemy, “permitted a patriotic reconstruction of the national interest that undertook emancipation partly to punish the traitors and partly to cement an alliance with the new black power in Saint-Domingue.” Thus, the Haitian Revolution helped to radicalize the French Revolution on the question of slavery. At the same time, French revolutionary ideas influenced the leaders of the Haitian Revolution to fight not only for the freedom of those directly involved, as was initially the case, but for an end to slavery. See Robin Blackburn, “Chapter 3: The Force of Example,” in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, ed. David Patrick Geggus (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2001), 16.
British troops, eventually defeating them. Maitland, the British commander-in-chief, signed a truce with Toussaint, which stated that Toussaint would not attack Jamaica and that the British would not interfere in “the internal affairs of Saint-Domingue” and would allow Toussaint entry into Jamaican ports for provisions.¹²⁸

In July 1801, Toussaint had a constitution drawn up that declared him the governor of Saint-Domingue and made the island essentially self-governing.¹²⁹ Infuriated by this news, Napoleon Bonaparte sent an expedition to Saint-Domingue to conquer Toussaint and restore slavery. Toussaint was captured and imprisoned in France, where he eventually died, but his successors Dessalines and Christophe continued to lead the revolution. In November 1803, the Saint-Domingue slaves finally defeated the French army, and on January 1, 1804, Saint-Domingue became the first black republic of Haiti.

The French and Haitian Revolutions had a profound impact on the everyday lives of colonists and slaves in the Americas. As seamen, merchants, slaves, indentured servants, and missionaries traversed the Atlantic, they spread rumors and news about the revolutions. The French Revolution, the British and French abolition movements, and black slave rebellion all contributed to the circulation of revolutionary ideologies of liberty and equality, inflaming slaves’ desire for freedom and striking fear into the minds of planters. The Haitian Revolution had an especially profound impact on slave plantation societies, as it provided a powerful example of black self-liberation. As David Brion Davis explains, “Throughout the Americas

¹²⁸ Williams, From Columbus to Castro, 251.
¹²⁹ Williams, From Columbus to Castro, 252.
planter and government officials learned to live in a state of alert. The very words ‘Santo Domingo,’ which English-speakers used to refer to the doomed French colony Saint-Domingue, evoked at least a moment of alarm and terror in the minds of slaveholders throughout the Americas.” Jamaica’s close proximity to Saint-Domingue, its large majority population of Africans and their descendants, its high rate of absentee planters, and its history of maroonage and slave rebellion made white colonists in Jamaica especially paranoid about slave rebellion. By the mid-eighteenth century, blacks outnumbered whites in Jamaica by 11 to 1. In addition to the large slave population, there were approximately 3,400 free people of color and 1,000 Maroons, or rebel ex-slaves. A total of seventy-five slave rebellions were recorded on the island in the eighteenth century, including Tacky’s Rebellion of 1760 and the two Maroon Wars of 1690-1740 and 1795-1796. Not surprisingly, then, the Haitian Revolution engendered strong anxieties and tensions in Jamaica, which were often reflected in the everyday encounters between slaveowners and slaves. White women’s writing from the period, including Nugent’s journal, often indicates their frustration over the challenges of managing “intractable” slaves and their fear of rebellion.

**Gender, Slavery, and the Power of Sentimental Rhetoric**

When the Nugents arrived in Jamaica in July 1801, Toussaint had just been declared governor of Saint-Domingue. Nugent’s initial portrayal of him is favorable, indicating a surprising degree of sympathy for the black rebels in Saint-Domingue. On October 21, 1801, she writes, “After dinner had a great deal of conversation with Mr.

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130 David Brion Davis, “Chapter 1: Impact of the French and Haitian Revolutions,” in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, 4-5.
131 Wilson, *The Island Race*, 150.
[Edward] Corbet, about General Toussaint l’Ouverture, which was particularly interesting. He must be a wonderful man, and I really do believe intended for very good purposes” (33). However, her opinion quickly shifts as she learns more about the situation in Saint-Domingue and begins to fear the spread of revolution. During her four year stay in Jamaica, as the nearby revolution continues, Nugent becomes increasingly anxious about the threat of slave revolt and fearful for her family’s safety. Her deployment of sensibility allows her simultaneously to assert her female moral virtue and maintain a sense of power over the slaves.

By the early nineteenth century when the Nugents moved to the Caribbean, anti-slavery sentiment had grown strong among metropolitan Britons, many of whom had come to view the figure of the Caribbean slaveowner as a corrupt and immoral tyrant. Throughout her journal, Nugent reconciles her participation in slavery with morality by positioning herself as a missionary for God. Before departing from Britain for Jamaica, she expresses disappointment over her husband’s assignment in the Caribbean, but presents their journey as a duty: “I enjoyed my little abode so much, I should greatly have preferred remaining, instead of playing the Governor’s lady to the blackies; but we are soldiers, and must have no will of our own” (2). In this and other passages, Nugent represents herself and her husband as soldiers working in the service of empire and of God. She suggests that whites have a moral and religious duty to civilize and educate black slaves, in turn earning their loyalty and cooperation. In December 1801, several months after moving to Jamaica, she writes,

This is the last day of the year, and I rejoice, as time passes, to think, that every day, now, will bring us, please God we live, nearer to
England, and our domestic comfort there. I will endeavor to deserve that blessing from Heaven, by being more vigilant and active in my duties here. I will begin the new year, at the Penn, by instructing the poor negroes, and if I do but succeed in making them the better understand their duties as Christians, I shall be happy indeed; and I pray for a blessing on my efforts for that purpose. (49)

This passage illustrates the interrelatedness of Nugent’s private roles as wife and mother and her public role as the “governor’s lady.” Nugent is aware of the many dangers—including disease, death, and slave revolt—that attend life in the Caribbean, and is constantly preoccupied with her family’s health and safety. Conjoining Christianity and sensibility, she suggests that their health, survival, and safe return to the “domestic comfort” of Britain depend on the mercy of God, which she must gain by fulfilling her paternal responsibilities toward the slaves. Another entry, written in August 1803, further demonstrates the convergence of Christianity and sensibility in her journal: “I feel truly thankful to God Almighty, who has been pleased to spare our lives thus far, for the health we have enjoyed….May we be ever grateful, and shew that we are really so, by our obedience to the commands of the Almighty, in all things, and by doing all the good we can to our fellow-creatures!” (170). Nugent suggests that the civilizing and conversion of the slaves is God’s will, implying that British imperial expansion is also sanctioned by God. Emphasizing her Christian virtue and her ability to feel for her “fellow-creatures,” Nugent uses the language of sensibility to diffuse the racial tensions that she encounters in the Caribbean, implicitly suggesting that Christian education can quell slave resistance.

Nugent’s attitude of paternalism is most evident in her efforts to convert her slaves; presenting herself as a missionary figure, Nugent endeavors to teach her slaves
the precepts of Christianity. Less than six months after arriving in the Caribbean, she states that she has accomplished her goal: “After the usual breakfast, gave my last lecture to the blackies, and finished my Christian story. I consider them now so well acquainted with their expected duties, that I have appointed the Rev. Mr. Warren to be here to-morrow, at 12, for the purpose of baptizing them” (38). Her process of civilizing the slaves not only involves baptizing them, but also convincing them to perform Christian marriages. She frequently visits plantations on the island and speaks to slaveowners about their treatment of their slaves. She is shocked to learn that a slaveowner named Mr. C offers financial incentives to his slaves for reproducing, but does not encourage them to marry: “Had a learned conversation on the cultivation of sugar-canies, the population of the negroes, &c. Mr. C told me he gave two dollars to every woman who produced a healthy child; but no marriages were thought of!!” (26).

By the time Nugent visited Jamaica in the early nineteenth century, the low fertility rates of slaves in the Caribbean, reformers’ demands for amelioration of the slave system, and the impending abolition of the slave trade had put pressure on slaveowners to adopt pro-natal policies. As a result, the work loads of pregnant slaves were reduced, and “financial payments for successful live births to enslaved mothers and enslaved midwives became commonplace.”¹³² Nugent does not seem disturbed by this practice; rather, her concern derives from what she perceives to be the general disregard of Jamaican slaveowners for the moral and spiritual welfare of their slaves (39).

¹³² Wilson, “Empire, Gender, and Modernity,” 33.
However, Nugent’s concern for the spiritual well-being of slaves does not presuppose a belief in racial equality. Like Schaw, Nugent views blacks as inferior to white Europeans; however, while Schaw suggests that blacks are inherently different from whites, Nugent holds an environmentalist view of racial difference, asserting that blacks are capable of enlightenment and reform. While Schaw’s portrayal of slaves as essentially non-human implies that they do not have souls, Nugent suggests that they do. Though Nugent is more sympathetic than Schaw toward the slaves, her sympathy is circumscribed by the value of the labor she expects to extract from them. As the governor’s wife, she is responsible for managing the home, and, in doing so, providing a model for others in the colony to follow. It is therefore crucial for her to effectively negotiate her relationship with her slaves, on whose labor the freedom and luxury of her family depends.

Nugent negotiates with the slaves through a sentimental rhetoric that recognizes their capacity to feel in an attempt to win their favor through that recognition. From the beginning of her stay in Jamaica, she portrays the slaves as happy in their subjugation; however, she expresses frustration over their failure to adequately fulfill their duties. Several days after moving into King’s House, she writes, “…the house is put into as good order as we could prevail upon the poor blackies to do it. They are all so good-humoured, and seem so merry, that it is quite comfortable to look at them. I wish, however, they would be a little more alert in clearing away the filth of this otherwise nice and fine house” (13). Two days later, she

133 King’s House was completed in 1762 and served as the Governor’s residence in Jamaica until 1872, when the government was moved to Kingston. See Philip Wright, ed., *Lady Nugent’s Journal*, by Maria Nugent (Kingston: Univ. of West Indies Press, 2002), 11 n.
determines that slavery is the cause for their “laziness” and decides upon a solution:
“Reflect all night upon slavery, and make up my mind, that the want of exertion in the
blackies must proceed from that cause. Assemble them together after breakfast, and
talk to them a great deal, promising every kindness and indulgence. We parted
excellent friends, and I think they have been rather more active in cleaning the house
ever since” (14). The discourse of sensibility allows Nugent command as mistress of
the household, as she uses sympathy and benevolence to gain the slaves’ loyalty and
increase their productivity. Moreover, her sentimental depiction of slavery reinforces
notions of racial difference by portraying blacks as child-like dependents who need
only to be occasionally rewarded in order to remain happy in their subordinate
positions.

Throughout her residence in Jamaica, Nugent continues to depict slavery as a
mutually benevolent system of exchange. In an entry written during her last year on
the island, she portrays a group of newly arrived Africans as perfectly content with
their new slave status:

In returning home from our drive this morning, we met a gang of Eboe
negroes, just landed, and marching up the country. I ordered the
postillions to stop, that I might examine their countenances as they
passed, and see if they looked unhappy; but they appeared perfectly the
reverse. I bowed, kissed my hand, and they laughed; they did the same.
The women, in particular, seemed pleased, and all admired the
carriage… (220)

Denying the terror of captivity and enslavement, Nugent uses this scene to advance the
stereotype of slaves as happy and carefree. She also uses it as an example of proper
sentimental manners; performing the role of the civilized Christian woman, she
demonstrates how to offer polite, benevolent treatment to the slaves, who supposedly respond with pleasure and gratitude.

Nugent’s claims regarding the slaves’ happiness are striking when considered alongside her numerous comments alluding to the brutality of the slave system. Her position as the governor’s wife allows her access to a wide range of information and perspectives on the slave system. Several passages in her journal indicate her knowledge of the accusations made by slaves and abolitionists regarding the brutal treatment of slaves in Jamaica and other Caribbean colonies. In January 1802, she writes, “Many negroes came to make complaints of their masters. It will all be investigated fairly, so I shall make no remarks at present; but it is a difficult situation for a Governor” (51). While Nugent declines here to remark on the complaints of the slaves, she explicitly acknowledges the violences of slavery on other occasions. For instance, when she visits a sugar mill to learn about the production of sugar in February 1802, she remarks on the oppressive conditions under which the slaves labor:

…there were several negroes employed in putting the sugar into the hogsheads. I asked the overseer how often his people were relieved. He said every twelve hours; but how dreadful to think of their standing twelve hours over a boiling cauldron, and doing the same thing; and he owned to me that sometimes they did fall asleep, and get their poor fingers into the mill; and he shewed me a hatchet, that was always ready to sever the whole limb, as the only means of saving the poor sufferer’s life! I would not have a sugar estate for the world! (63)

This passage clearly indicates the limits to Nugent’s paternal vision of slavery.

Though she employs the language of sensibility to express sympathy for the slaves, her sentimental identification with them does not prompt her to censure the overseer’s treatment of the slaves or to condemn the institution of slavery as a whole. Instead, she
distances herself from the most brutal aspects of slavery by exclaiming that she would never own a sugar plantation, thereby distinguishing the supposedly benevolent system of exchange between white mistresses and domestic slaves from the violences of the plantation labor system.

By advocating limited reforms to the slave system and distinguishing her role as the mistress of domestic slaves from that of plantation slaveowners, Nugent suggests that the problems of slavery are not inherent to the institution itself, but are instead the result of individual slaveowners’ failure to fulfill their paternal responsibilities. In April 1802, she provides a lengthy defense of slavery, while denouncing the “immoral” behavior of white creole men:

Amused myself with reading the Evidence before the House of Commons, on the part of the petitioners for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. As far as I at present see and can hear of the ill treatment of the slaves, I think what they say upon the subject is very greatly exaggerated. Individuals, I make no doubt, occasionally abuse the power they possess; but, generally speaking, I believe the slaves are extremely well used….the climate of this country being more congenial to their constitutions, they would increase and render the necessity of the Slave Trade out of the question, provided their masters were attentive to their morals, and established matrimony among them; but white men of all descriptions, married or single, live in a state of licentiousness with their female slaves; and until a great reformation takes place on their part, neither religion, decency nor morality, can be established among the negroes. (86-87)

Nugent adopts a more rational tone in this passage than in most of her other discussions of the slaves. Her claim here that accounts of the ill treatment of slaves are “greatly exaggerated” stands in tension with her earlier acknowledgments of the brutal conditions of slavery. However, she attempts to diminish this tension by portraying the violence of the slave system as individual abuses of power rather than a systemic
condition. Though she denies the systematic violence of slavery, she acknowledges the widespread miscegenation occurring on the island and condemns white men for engaging in what she sees as immoral behavior. Nugent, like Schaw, understands the danger miscegenation poses to colonial power; however, while Schaw accuses black women of seducing white men, Nugent holds white men accountable for the “state of licentiousness” in which they live with their female slaves. Nugent’s comments point to the ways in which British women’s Christian values and domesticity served the interests of colonialism and slavery. Nugent condemns miscegenation on moral grounds, suggesting that the slaves’ moral well-being depends on their performance of Christian marriages. Yet she also highlights the political and economic advantages of curbing the practice of miscegenation and promoting marriages among slaves, namely, the natural reproduction of the slave population and the end of the slave trade.

Nugent’s insistence on the slaves’ happiness and denial of the systemic violences of the slave system facilitate her denial of the slaves’ agency and resistance, which is exemplified by her description of their Christmas festivities. In December 1801, Nugent writes, “The Christmas sports recommenced, and we don’t like to drive out, or employ our servants in any way, for fear of interfering with their amusements. Poor things, we would not deprive them of one atom of their short-lived and baby-like pleasure. – The whole day, nothing but singing, dancing, and noise” (49). Nugent attempts to diminish the slaves’ agency through her patronizing tone and language. Yet her actions do not seem to be motivated solely by paternalistic benevolence; rather, her comment that she and her husband do not employ the slaves during
Christmas “for fear of interfering” in their amusements betrays her anxiety about the threat of slave rebellion, a threat that was simultaneously represented and contained by the Christmas holiday.

The slaves’ Christmas festivities were an important social tradition within plantation societies of the Atlantic world. Though elements of the festivities were oppositional, they were allowed and even encouraged by many slaveowners, who saw a certain degree of accommodation as necessary to prevent violent rebellion. Thus, slaves were freed from the labor and discipline of plantation life for several days to a week to celebrate the Christmas holiday. The holiday gave slaves a license to engage in behavior “so opposite to ordinary life as to constitute what anthropologists call a rite of reversal – ‘a ritual event in which everyday patterns are turned topsy-turvy.’”\textsuperscript{134} This behavior included eating, drinking, singing, dancing, and other forms of revelry. Slaves and slaveowners alike recognized the importance of these holidays for easing racial tensions, if only temporarily. Commenting on slaveowners’ use of holidays as a means of placating slaves, Frederick Douglass states,

\begin{quote}
From what I know of the effect of these holidays upon the slave, I believe them to be among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection. Were the slaveholders at once to abandon this practice, I have not the slightest doubt it would lead to an immediate insurrection among the slaves. These holidays serve as conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity.\textsuperscript{135}
\end{quote}

As Douglass recognizes, slaveowners’ seemingly benevolent accommodations often contributed to the maintenance of the slave system. At the same time, events such as

\textsuperscript{134} Gaspar, Bondmen and Rebels, 140.
\textsuperscript{135} Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, ed. Gerald Fulkerson, John Blassingame, and Peter Hinks (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), 55.
the slaves’ Christmas festivities functioned as important social gatherings that allowed slaves to retain a sense of their cultural identity and to temporarily subvert the power structures of plantation society.

Nugent’s description of Jonkonnu, a series of raucous song and dance performances put on by slaves during the days between Christmas and New Year’s, illustrates the subversive potential of the holiday festivities. Jonkonnu performances took place on plantation grounds or on the street. Groups of costumed slaves would perform songs for slaveowners and other whites, soliciting contributions of money or other small gifts, which were used by the slaves for their holiday carousals. As Peter Reed explains, the various elements of the celebration—the African origins of the masks and music used during the performance, the commemoration of John Conny, an African chief who resisted Dutch colonial authorities in the early eighteenth century, and the reversal of power structures enacted by the slaves during the performances—embodied a critique of colonial slavery.¹³⁶ This critique is evidenced by Nugent’s description of a play performed by the slaves during Jonkonnu:

After Church, amuse myself very much with the strange processions, and figures called Johnny Canoes. All dance, leap and play a thousand antics. Then there are groups of dancing men and women…. Then there was a party of actors. – Then a little child was introduced, supposed to be a king, who stabbed all the rest. They told me that some of the children who appeared were to represent Tippoo Saib’s children, and the man was Henry the ⁴ᵗʰ of France. – What a mélange! All were dressed very finely, and many of the blacks had really gold and silver fringe on their robes. After the tragedy, they all began dancing with the greatest glee. (48)

The play described by Nugent acts out a scene of colonial conflict. Tippoo Saib, Sultan of Mysore (also referred to as Tipu Sultan), opposed British rule in southern India in the late eighteenth century. He died in battle against the British in 1799. In the play, Tippoo’s children kill Henry IV, apparently out of revenge for their father’s death. As Richard Burton rightly points out, this was an “extraordinary ‘anticolonial’ play to perform before a British colonial governor and his wife just two years after the events in question.”

Though Nugent was likely aware of the political significance of the play and other elements of the slaves’ festivities, she downplays their oppositional qualities by representing them as innocent child’s play. Thus, for Nugent, the slaves’ gleeful dancing after their performance is not a sign of their excitement over the subject of the play—the murder of a British authority figure by his colonial subjects—but is instead an indication that the slaves are happy in their subjection.

While Nugent attempts to ignore the coded forms of resistance enacted in the slaves’ festivities, various passages in her journal reveal her anxiety over the possibility of violent slave rebellion. Throughout her stay in Jamaica, she receives reports of the slave revolts occurring on the nearby island of Saint-Domingue and witnesses at least occasional evidence of anti-slavery sentiment amongst the slaves in Jamaica. In November 1801, she writes, “Very much shocked in the evening, by a

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138 In addition to copying confidential political and military dispatches for her husband, she received information about the revolution from British and French officials. For instance, in 1802, when Britain and France were at peace, General Leclerc’s officers occasionally visited Jamaica and dined at King’s House with Maria and George Nugent, giving them “more and more lamentable accounts of the situation in Saint-Domingue.” See Philip Wright, ed., introduction to Lady Nugent’s Journal, by Maria Nugent (Kingston: Univ. of West Indies Press, 2002), xx-xxi.
sad account of the massacre of three hundred and seventy white persons in St.
Domingo. How dreadful, and what an example to this island” (40). Two years later,
she refers to news of the French colonists’ evacuation of Aux Cayes and Port au
Prince as “barbarous and strange beyond conception indeed!” (179). Nugent’s framing
of the revolts as shocking and strange is indicative of her refusal to view slave
resistance as a foreseeable response to the cruelty and violence of the slave system.
Indeed, the events of the Haitian Revolution are unthinkable to Nugent even as they
occur.

As the revolution gains strength and the slaves finally succeed in overtaking
Saint-Domingue, Nugent becomes increasingly anxious about the influence it will
have on the slaves in Jamaica. Jamaica’s proximity to Saint-Domingue made it
particularly vulnerable to the spread of revolution, especially as white colonists from
Saint-Domingue flooded the island, often bringing their slaves with them. On
March 4, 1804, several months after Saint-Domingue declared its independence,
Nugent writes,

Go to bed with a thousand apprehensions, and in low spirits. People
here are so very imprudent in their conversation. The splendour of the

139 David Brion Davis explains that during and after the Haitian Revolution, other slave plantation
colonies “sought to exclude bondsmen from colonies in which blacks had been exposed to
revolutionary ideas. Although slave insurrections had usually been associated with a labor force
containing a high proportion of recently imported Africans, white leaders were now far more fearful of
blacks who had been contaminated by French or abolitionist conceptions of liberty.” See Davis,
“Impact of the French and Haitian Revolutions,” 5. This fear is reflected in the unpublished letters of
George Nugent. On December 21, 1803, Nugent wrote to Lord Buckingham of his attempts to rid
Jamaica of the Saint-Domingue refugees and their slaves: “I am getting rid of all the Emigrants & their
Foreign Slaves as fast as possible out of this Island, with the Exception of those who may remain with
safety to the Community, by paying their Passage to New Orleans, [&] we have prevented the
Possibility of any others arriving in Jamaica, upon the late Evacuation of St. Domingo, from whom we
might have had much to fear.” Stowe Collection: Grenville Correspondence – Estate & Business:
Jamaican Estates Correspondence (1812, 1822-April 1835) Box 44 (8), Huntington Library.
black chiefs of St. Domingo, their superior strength, their firmness of character, and their living so much longer in these climates, and enjoying so much better health, are the common topics at dinner; and the blackies in attendance so much interested, that they hardly change a plate, or do anything but listen. How very imprudent, and what must it all lead to! (198)

Nugent is troubled by her dinner guests’ positive characterization of the black rebels in Saint-Domingue and by their carelessness in speaking openly about the rebellion in front of her slaves. By attributing physical strength and firmness of character to the slaves, her guests acknowledge black autonomy. The possibility of black autonomy conflicts with Nugent’s idealization of Christian education as a way to tame the slaves; not surprisingly, then, it is a possibility she finds terrifying. Moreover, Nugent sees her slaves’ interest in the conversation about the rebels as a sign of danger. Yet despite her obvious fear that slave rebellion will spread to the island of Jamaica, Nugent avoids articulating this possibility. Her comments begin with a vague allusion to her “apprehensions” and end with the unanswered question, “what must it all lead to!” For Nugent, the possibility of encountering slave rebellion is not only unthinkable, but unspeakable.

Nugent attempts to allay her fears by portraying her own slaves as child-like dependents rather than autonomous actors. When Jamaica is threatened by an attack from the French navy in April 1805, Nugent recognizes the restlessness of the slaves, but again tries to play down their activities. She learns from her maid Mrs. Clifford that the slaves in Spanish town “appeared to be inclined to riot, and to make a noise in the streets, when the troops marched out, but they were soon dispersed by the militia” (226). She explains that her own black servants “seem to rejoice at the bustle, but, as
they profess to hate the French, their pleasure is only that of change; for, like children, they are fond of fuss and noise, and have no reflection” (226). Nugent’s claim that the slaves are incapable of comprehending the political conflicts between Britain and France, or unwilling to take advantage of those conflicts, is consistent with her ongoing effort to deny the slaves’ capacity for political resistance.

Despite Nugent’s efforts to disavow the slaves’ agency, her journal reveals moments when she is unable to ignore or diminish the racial tensions that surround her. Only a day after writing the previous entry, she writes, “We met a horrid looking black man, who passed us several times, without making any bow, although I recollected him as one of the boatmen of the canoe we used to go out in, before we had the Maria. He was then very humble, but to-night he only grinned, and gave us a sort of fierce look, that struck me with a terror I could not shake off” (227). Nugent is shocked by what she perceives as the boatman’s audacity. His refusal to behave as a humble subordinate causes her to see him as “horrid” and “fierce.” It is moments such as these that haunt Nugent, and that she must constantly strive to suppress.

While Nugent consistently attempts to deny the slaves’ agency and resistance in her journal, her unpublished letters demonstrate her belief that the spread of rebellion from Saint-Domingue to Jamaica is inevitable. In a letter written to her friend Anna Eliza in August 1804, Nugent writes,

I was often persuaded before to try a Mountain Situation, but I was so fearful of the run-away Negroes & of Insurrection that I could never prevail upon myself to consent to it….I am sure you will not wonder at my Fears when you consider the State of St. Domingo & know that all Events there are perfectly understood & [canvassed] by the Blacks here, who will no doubt in Time attempt to follow their Example
however I trust the evil day is still far distant yet the Idea will have its effect upon the Mind.”

Her assertion here that the slaves in Jamaica perfectly understand the events in Saint-Domingue contradicts her comparison of slaves to children that “have no reflection” in her journal. Furthermore, in remarking on her fear of the “run-away Negroes,” Nugent acknowledges another form of slave resistance that constituted a threat to plantation society: maroonage. Maroon communities were composed of descendants of African slaves who escaped during the period of Spanish rule in the early seventeenth century and slaves who escaped from British plantations during the eighteenth century. After waging a constant guerilla war against the planters in the early eighteenth century, the Maroons signed peace treaties with them in 1738-1739 that recognized the Maroons’ freedom in exchange for their help in capturing runaway slaves. However, the peace that was created by these treaties was broken when the Trelawny Town Maroons attacked the planters in 1795. Though the conflict between the planters and the Maroons was resolved prior to the Nugents’ arrival on the island, it served as a reminder of the danger that the Maroons posed to the power of the white ruling class. Nugent’s explicit acknowledgement of the Maroons and the threat of slave insurrection in her letter belies the depictions of happy, child-like slaves found in her journal.

140 Lady Maria (Skinner) Nugent to Anna Eliza, Duchess of B & C, 3 August 1804, Stowe Collection: Grenville Correspondence – Personal & Political, Box 8 (39), Huntington Library. Nugent’s unpublished letters have received little, if any, attention from scholars.
In the face of possible slave revolt, Nugent feared that the cultural and moral
degeneration of white creoles would undermine the stability of plantation society. In
addition to denouncing the sexual behavior of white creole men, she criticises white
creole women for failing to uphold the ideals of white femininity and domesticity. The
number of white women living in Jamaica during the early nineteenth century was
quite small, and Nugent seems consequently to have encountered very few of them.
When she does meet them, she depicts them as ignorant, indolent, and lacking in
moral and domestic virtue. She writes of one party of women that “never was there
any thing so completely stupid. All I could get out of them was, ‘Yes, ma’am – no,
ma’am,’ with now and then a simper or a giggle” (55). Her denigration of creole
women points to whites’ anxieties about the transculturation that resulted from the
close daily contact between whites and blacks, particularly white women and black
slaves. Colonists decried creole women’s adoption of African customs, such as
carrying baskets on their heads and children on their hips, and their use of the creole
dialect, all of which served as evidence of their supposed cultural degeneration.142
Nugent remarks of a creole woman she meets on her travels around the island, “Mrs. C
is a perfect Creole, says little, and drawls out that little, and has not an idea beyond her
own Penn” (52). In addition to critiquing creole women’s ignorance and lack of
refinement, Nugent promotes the stereotype that they are cruel and abusive of their
slaves. While staying with the Rose family, she writes, “This is really a most
uncomfortable house; the servants awkward and dirty, the children spoiled, and

142 See, for example, Long, The History of Jamaica, esp. 278-279 and 412-413.
screaming the whole day. As for the ladies, they appear to me perfect viragos; they never speak but in the most imperious manner to their servants, and are constantly finding fault” (80). Creole women, like slaves, lack the refined sensibility that Nugent possesses. She interprets their lack of sympathy toward slaves as a sign of their moral degeneration and intimates that their cruelty is to blame for their slaves’ uncivilized behavior.

    For Nugent, sensibility—with its emphasis on sympathy, benevolence, and moral virtue—is not antithetical to slavery, but rather a crucial tool for negotiating the fraught relationship between slaveowners and slaves and maintaining the stability of plantation society. She is thus troubled by what she perceives as the immoral behavior of slaveowners and slaves alike. Depicting the Caribbean as a space of moral and spiritual corruption, she writes,

        It is indeed melancholy, to see the general disregard of both religion and morality, throughout the whole island. Every one seems solicitous to make money, and no one appears to regard the mode of acquiring it. It is extraordinary to witness the immediate effect that the climate and habit of living in this country have upon the minds and manners of Europeans, particularly of the lower orders. In the upper ranks, they become indolent and inactive, regardless of every thing but eating, drinking, and indulging themselves, and are almost entirely under the dominion of their mulatto favourites. In the lower orders, they are the same, with the addition of conceit and tyranny… (98)

Nugent advances the prevalent belief that the climate of the Caribbean causes degeneracy—including indolence, indulgence, and hypersexuality—in its inhabitants, white and black alike. The moral degradation of Europeans is particularly troubling to her, as it undermines the ideology of white superiority upon which plantation society is constructed. The indolence and indulgence of white males challenges the
construction of a masculine imperial identity based on values of morality, discipline, and hard work.

While Nugent uses the discourse of sensibility to shore up racial and social distinctions and to secure her position of power within Caribbean society, her journal and letters also reveal moments in which unexpected affinities and intimacies develop across boundaries of race, gender, and nationality. Despite Nugent’s strong condemnation of miscegenation, she develops friendships with the elite mulatto women on the island, who she explains are “all daughters of Members of the Assembly, officers, &c. &c.” (78). She often spends time with them in the evening, drinking tea and learning about the “private history” of the island in the intimacy of her bedroom. Her relationships with the mulatto women seem somewhat surprising given her apparent desire to maintain social distinctions. Borne of interracial relations and often living as the concubines of white upper-class men, mulatto women embodied racial and social mixing in Jamaica. This may explain why Nugent senses that the white women with whom she associates disapprove of her spending time with colored women: “Saw a number of black and brown ladies in the evening, to please the old housekeeper; but I don’t know whether the white ladies, whom I left in the drawing-room when I gave audience, quite approved of my conduct” (203). Nugent’s willingness to regularly engage with colored women, despite the possible disapproval of her white female companions, is likely motivated at least in part by political exigency. Mulatto women occupied an intermediate position that allowed them access to knowledge about both the black and white worlds within the Caribbean. Thus, by
establishing friendships with these women, Nugent could obtain valuable information about Jamaican society and gain another class of potential allies in the case of slave revolt on the island.

Nugent’s boundary crossing seems to be motivated not only by political exigency, however, but also by a desire to resist constraining gender norms. Within the colonies, the rules of female propriety were bound up with ideologies of race and gender, which sought to keep white women as isolated from blacks as possible. In practice, however, white women’s daily interactions with free colored people and black slaves often produced intimacies across lines of racial difference. While Nugent represents herself as an exemplar of female virtue and domesticity throughout most of her journal, there are moments when she defies gender norms by associating too intimately with black slaves. For instance, in April 1803, Nugent holds a ball for her slaves and shocks the other white women present by dancing with “an old negro man”:

However, I was not aware how much I shocked the Misses Murphy by doing this; for I did exactly the same as I would have done at a servants’ hall birthday in England. They told me, afterwards, that they were nearly fainting, and could hardly forbear shedding a flood of tears, at such an unusual and extraordinary sight; for in this country, and among slaves, it was necessary to keep up so much more distant respect!…I meant nothing wrong, and all the poor creatures seemed so delighted, and so much pleased, that I could scarcely repent it. I was, nevertheless, very sorry to have hurt their feelings… (156)

In this passage, it is the two Misses Murphy who embody female delicacy and sensibility by responding to Nugent’s supposedly inappropriate act with tears and near fainting. Nugent claims that she did not know she was behaving inappropriately, and

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expresses regret over hurting the women’s feelings. However, as Claudia Brandenstein rightly notes, “given that she has been in residence on the island for almost two years by the time of the dance in question, it is difficult to take Nugent at her word.”

Nugent’s act seems to result not from ignorance, but from a momentary rejection of the rules of white female propriety. In instances such as these, her ability to transcend social bounds bolsters her position as mistress of the colonial domain.

Nugent further defies gender norms by adopting a male appearance and spending time with an “old bachelor” named Simon Taylor. Taylor was the wealthiest and most influential planter in Jamaica; throughout his life he gained control of six sugar plantations and three cattle ranches, and he played a significant role in Jamaican politics, serving as a member of the Jamaican Assembly, Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas, and Lieutenant Governor of the militia. According to Nugent, Taylor was also something of a misogynist. Nugent writes of her relationship with Taylor, “he detests the society of women, but I have worked a reform, for he never leaves me an instant, and attends to all my wants and wishes. He recollects what I have once commended, and is sure to have it for me again. Every one of the party is astonished at this change; but I believe he takes me for a boy, as I constantly wear a habit, and have a short cropped head” (68). Nugent’s act of cross-dressing allows her to inhabit a different persona and move outside of her assigned gender position. Her satisfaction at being able to associate with a man who normally avoids the company of women hints

144 Claudia Brandenstein, “‘Making ‘the agreeable’ to the big wigs’: Lady Nugent’s Grand Tour of Duty in Jamaica, 1801-1805,” in In Transit: Travel, Text, Empire, eds. Helen Gilbert and Anna Johnston (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 59.

145 A habit was a costume worn by women for horseback riding, which included a tailored jacket similar in style to a man’s coat.
at her desire to transgress the limits imposed on her by the ideologies of patriarchy and colonialism.

Nugent’s relationship with Taylor, like her friendships with mulatto women, also underscores the ways in which everyday practices blurred the distinctions between private and public, personal and political in plantation society. Though excluded from the public realm of politics on the basis of her gender, Nugent’s relationships with individuals from various racial, class, and political backgrounds not only provides her with critical insights into the intricate social and political milieu of the island, but also allows her to promote her own views and interests, as well as those of her husband. Indeed, Nugent’s comments on her endless social engagements, including breakfasts, dinner parties, and dances with British and French colonial and military officials and members of the plantocracy reflect her awareness of the importance of “making the agreeable” with those in positions of power. In addition to the personal pleasure she seems to receive from her friendship with Taylor, she also uses it as a means to improve the relationship between her husband and the Jamaican Assembly. On August 22, 1804, she writes, “A most kind note from Mr. Simon Taylor, with a present of grapes and other fruit. Took the opportunity, in reply, of being equally kind and flattering; and so I do hope, if he is not an active friend, he will not be an implacable enemy to my dear N. the next session” (212). Throughout his term, George Nugent was at odds with the Assembly over issues related to the island’s military defense. Nugent frequently comments on her husband’s conflicts with the
Assembly, and sees her personal friendship with Taylor as an opportunity to influence the political relationship between the metropolitan and colonial governments.

While the forms of boundary crossing exemplified in Nugent’s journal can work to blur the supposedly rigid categories of race, gender, and nationality, they can also challenge some social categories while reinforcing others. This can be seen, for instance, in Nugent’s account of the horrors of the Haitian Revolution during its final stages. Despite expressing opposition to the French throughout much of her journal, Nugent expresses sympathy for the French colonists subjected to the violence of the black rebels in Saint-Domingue. In an unpublished letter written to Lady Temple in August 1804, Nugent relates an extraordinary account of a white woman who supposedly died from terror during the revolution:

I scarcely believe at this Moment a white Inhabitant exists in that wretched Island & the barbarous Manner in which they have been put an end to, is almost beyond belief & certainly [   ]. One poor Woman a Madame de [Saoult] actually died of the Fright after she had made her escape to the [   ] Man of War. Her Husband, her Friends & Family had been murdered. Her Life was spared on account of One of the black Generals taking a fancy when who [   ] her in his House with nine other Ladies he had selected as Wives. The Chief Dessalines discovered This & ordered them out for Massacre she continued to conceal herself & in an open American Boat got safe on board Ship, but she died a few Days after from the terror she had experienced & which it was quite impossible for her to shake off or believe she was in security. In short my dear Lady Temple nothing can exceed the miseries & horrors those wretched People have gone thro’ & whatever their former Faults may have been they have severely expiated them.146

Nugent’s sympathetic identification with French colonists, particularly female colonists, who are the victims of violent rebellion allows her to recognize similitude

146 Lady Maria (Skinner) Nugent to Anna Eliza, Duchess of B & C, 3 August 1804, Stowe Collection: Grenville Correspondence – Personal and Political, Box 8 (39), Huntington Library.
across national boundaries. With the social order of the Caribbean colonies under threat, Nugent is willing to forget national conflicts in order to create a sense of racial allegiance among white colonists. Yet while she displays sympathy for the French, she emphasizes the otherness of the black slaves in Saint-Domingue. In contrast to her earlier depictions of innocent, child-like slaves in Jamaica, Nugent depicts the slaves in Saint-Domingue as barbarous and lewd. The horrors of the revolution are not only embodied by black on white violence, but also by the threat of miscegenation between white women and black men. While miscegenation between white men and black women was a common occurrence in the Caribbean, as the critical comments of Schaw and Nugent suggest, sexual relations between white women and black men were strongly forbidden. Thus, Nugent suggests that Madame de [Saoult’s] terror is not only caused by the death of her family and the threat to her own life, but by the equally horrifying threat of sex with a black man.

While Nugent engages in certain forms of boundary crossing, her journal and letters demonstrate that she was strongly invested in upholding the social order of Caribbean plantation society. Nugent’s assertion of female agency challenges the prevailing gender ideologies, but reinforces colonial power. Sentimental and devotional rhetoric serve as central strategies for Nugent, allowing her to assert her moral authority, while simultaneously maintaining support for colonialism and slavery. Sensibility requires treating the slaves well, which is idealized as Nugent portrays the slaves as well-behaved and happy in her presence, but poorly behaved when mistreated by others. There is a simplistic divine justice at work in her writing,
which suggests that morality and benevolence will be rewarded—in this case, by the loyalty and cooperation of the slaves. While Nugent has a more liberal view of race than Schaw does, she does not challenge the basic labor assumptions of the slave system.

Schaw’s and Nugent’s writing illustrates that despite its potential for creating social bonds that transcend boundaries of gender, race, and nationality, sensibility could also bolster divisions and inequalities. Within Caribbean plantation societies, where the contest for power was played out on a daily basis, the discourse of sensibility allowed women to assert a new form of female agency, while reinforcing the violences of empire and slavery and bolstering the economic development of the plantation system.
CHAPTER TWO

Slavery, Radicalism, and the Fates of Working Women

In the last chapter, I explored some of the ways in which white women’s intimate, everyday practices contributed to the establishment and maintenance of colonial categories and relations of power in Caribbean plantation society. Focusing on the writings of Janet Schaw and Maria Nugent, I argued that white women in the Caribbean used the gendered discourse of sensibility to assert their female moral authority, while reinforcing notions of racial difference and legitimizing slavery. Yet, while the emphasis on feeling in Schaw’s and Nugent’s narratives generally works to reinforce difference and hierarchy, their journals also demonstrate that daily encounters between people of different classes, races, religions, and nationalities could sometimes produce intimate bonds across lines of social difference, blurring the supposedly rigid boundaries of slave plantation society.

The letters of Eliza Fenwick to the radical feminist Mary Hays, written between 1798 and 1828 and published by Hays’ great-great niece A.F. Wedd in The Fate of the Fenwicks (1927), further illustrate how categories of social difference and ideas regarding slavery, liberty, and equality were shaped and challenged through domains of the intimate. Fenwick’s friendships with English radicals and her feminist novel Secresy; or The Ruin on the Rock (1795) indicate that she once supported Enlightenment principles of universal freedom. After moving to the Caribbean in hopes of improving her family’s economic circumstances in 1814, however, she subscribed to pro-slavery views and eventually became a slaveowner. Criticism on
Fenwick’s novel *Secresy* focuses primarily on the radical feminist views expressed in the novel, while scholarship on her letters to Hays generally treats them as historical evidence of white women’s participation in the slave system. Little work has been done to bring these two aspects of Fenwick’s life together. In this chapter, I explore the tensions and contradictions within Fenwick’s life and writing by analyzing her pro-slavery views and practices in relation to her various associations with radicalism.

Little is known of Fenwick’s early years. She seems to have been born in Cornwall on February 1, 1766 to Thomas and Elizabeth Jago and baptized on June 25, 1766.¹⁴⁷ No further information appears to exist regarding her family’s class status, her childhood, or her education. She married John Fenwick, a writer, editor, translator, “political idealist, Irish patriot, [and] member of the London Corresponding Society,” around the year 1788.¹⁴⁸ It is not known how Eliza and John met. Fenwick gave birth to a daughter named Eliza Anne in 1789 and to a son named Orlando in 1798.

Though the Fenwicks are now less known than many of their friends, they had close personal and intellectual relationships with important radical writers, including William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Mary and Charles Lamb, and Henry Crabb Robinson. They appear to have been intimate friends with Godwin and Wollstonecraft in 1797 when Wollstonecraft gave birth to her daughter Mary, became ill, and died. The Fenwicks had dinner with Godwin the night before Wollstonecraft gave birth, and John Fenwick was one of several friends who stayed up throughout the night of her labor in order to provide necessary assistance. When Wollstonecraft

¹⁴⁸ Grundy, introduction to *Secresy*, 7.
became fatally ill four days later, Eliza Fenwick and Mary Hays acted as her nurses, and Fenwick remained with her until she died.\footnote{Fenwick also cared for Wollstonecraft’s daughter Mary for ten days after her death. See Claire Tomalin, \textit{The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft} (London: Penguin, 1974), 285; Grundy, introduction to \textit{Secresy}, 10.} Fenwick and Hays became life-long friends, corresponding across cities and continents for the next thirty years.\footnote{Unfortunately, Hays’ responses to Fenwick no longer exist. Fenwick’s descendants believe that these letters, along with her correspondence with other radical writers such as Henry Crabb Robinson, were destroyed by Fenwick’s granddaughter Elizabeth Rutherford prior to her departure as a missionary to West Africa in 1838. Letters of Jessie Duncan Savage Cole to Willie and A.F. Wedd, Fenwick Family Correspondence, 1830-55 & Undated, Fenwick Family Papers, New-York Historical Society.}

Fenwick’s interest in gender and class politics seems to have been influenced not only by her exposure to contemporary political debates about liberty and equality, but also by the circumstances of her personal life, particularly the difficulties within her marriage. The Fenwicks were economically prosperous in the early years of their marriage, as John was born into wealth; however, he soon brought economic ruin upon the family through excessive drinking and gambling. Henry Crabb Robinson wrote that John was “a wild Irishman of a good heart but no conduct. He reduced her [Eliza] to poverty from affluence.”\footnote{Qtd. in Grundy, introduction to \textit{Secresy}, 7-8.} In February 1799, John fled from London to Dublin for six months to escape his creditors. By 1800, Fenwick and John were living separately and Fenwick was caring for their two children, Eliza Anne and Orlando. Fenwick wrote to Hays, “I am determined Mary, if it be possible, to consider myself & children totally separated from his bad or good fortunes. If I should be able to contribute to his repose & comfort I should rejoice, but never, never, will I again, if the means are to be had by my industry of supporting my children, involve myself in such miseries and
perplexities as I have endured.” In 1802, Charles Lamb wrote to a friend that John was “a ruined man” and was again “hiding himself from his Creditors.” In 1806, he was imprisoned in the Rules of the Fleet (the area for debtors surrounding Fleet Prison) for two years.

After separating from her husband, Fenwick attempted to earn a living through a variety of endeavors, including running a school, translating, working in Godwin’s Juvenile Library in London, working as a governess, and publishing children’s books. Her letters indicate that though she worked continually, she was often unable to earn enough money to adequately care for her family and was compelled to turn to Hays, the Lambs, and other friends for money, clothes, and shelter. In 1802, Fenwick and her children lived with her brother-in-law Thomas, a tradesman in Penzance, but by the following year Thomas had gone bankrupt, and Mary Lamb wrote to a friend that Fenwick and her children were in Penzance “without a home & without money.” By 1806, they had returned to London, where they lived with various friends and relatives for the next few years. In 1811, Fenwick’s daughter Eliza Anne moved to Barbados for an acting job, and three years later, Fenwick and Orlando joined her there.

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154 Fenwick’s books were apparently successful in the literary market, but did not earn her any profits.
Fenwick’s letters suggest that after moving to Barbados, she enjoyed greater social and economic freedom by passing as a widow and running a school for girls. Her freedom and prosperity were made possible not only through her entrepreneurialism, however, but also through her exploitation of the labor of black slaves. Her participation in the institution of slavery seems at odds with the discourses of liberty and equality deployed by her and her radical friends. Yet I contend that her vision of social equality is circumscribed by her preoccupation with the struggles and hardships she faces as a laboring woman and a single mother in a patriarchal society. Fenwick’s concern with her own precarious economic position prevents her from recognizing slaves as subjects deserving of rights and liberty, especially as she encounters daily slave resistance and witnesses the Easter Rebellion of 1816. She attempts to resolve the tensions between her previous radical beliefs, her intimate friendships with Hays and other radical writers, and her roles as a single mother, a colonist, and a slaveowner by justifying her support of slavery through a discourse of racial difference that depicts blacks as inherently lazy and immoral and by insisting that her own plight is worse than that of any slave. Thus, I read Fenwick’s letters as evidence that white women’s resistance to gender and class inequalities can often reinforce racial inequalities, illustrating what Laura Brown refers to as the “necessary intimacy of structures of oppression and liberation in eighteenth-century culture.”

While Fenwick participates in the subjugation of black slaves, her letters reveal some ambiguity about the institution of slavery and the practices and customs of blacks.

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plantation society. In particular, her objection to the sexual exploitation of slave women and the mistreatment of slave children engenders a sense of identification with slave women and enables her to feel some sympathy, however transitory, for all slaves. These moments in which gender seems to trump race for Fenwick highlight the complex relationship between white women and black slaves and demonstrate how the shifting interests and alliances of individuals could work alternately to reinforce, blur, or undermine the social and racial divisions of Caribbean plantation society.

Works by historians and literary critics on white women in the eighteenth-century Caribbean often focus on upper-class women. This can perhaps be seen as symptomatic of the fact that the limited extant sources representing the lives of women in the Caribbean are written primarily by elite women who traveled to or resided in the colonies as wives, daughters, and sisters of male planters and colonial authorities. In contrast, Fenwick’s letters provide valuable insight into the lives of middle-class women who migrated to the Caribbean in search of social or economic opportunities. While some Caribbean colonies such as Jamaica had a scarcity of white women, Barbados had a relatively high population of white women, many of whom were lower- and middle-class, unmarried, and financially independent of men.157 These women were often forced to make a living in whatever way they could within the patriarchal plantation economy; as Hilary Beckles notes, they often “operated on the periphery of the urban economy, dominating the ownership and management of

157 In Jamaica, white women made up less than 40 percent of the population until 1780, whereas in Barbados, white women made up between 51 and 57 of the population throughout the eighteenth century. See Hilary McD. Beckles, Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1999), 64.
enterprises in the service sector such as taverns, sex-houses, slave rental services, petty shopkeeping and huckstering.” White women also worked as governesses, teachers, and actresses, as demonstrated by Fenwick and Eliza Anne. The lives of these laboring women differed markedly from those of upper-class women who enjoyed a much more leisured existence on the island.

While Fenwick’s letters are a useful source for understanding the experiences of white middle-class women in the Caribbean, I do not take them as unmediated representations of historical truth; instead, I read Fenwick’s writing in relation to the philosophical, social, and political context of the early-nineteenth century Atlantic world in order to pursue two separate but related lines of inquiry. First, I analyze the rhetorical strategies through which Fenwick negotiates her transition from English radical to colonial slaveowner. In her letters, Fenwick emphasizes the gendered oppression she experiences at the hands of a thoughtless and irresponsible husband and an unjust patriarchal society. She does not, however, portray herself as a passive victim; rather, she represents herself as a strong, perseverant, and industrious woman who uses every means in her power to protect and care for her children. By consistently foregrounding her own struggles in her accounts of colonial life and slavery in Barbados, Fenwick endeavors to evoke sympathy from Hays and other friends in Britain, some of whom must have felt strong ambivalence about her involvement in the institution of colonial slavery.

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158 Beckles, *Centring Woman*, 65
Second, I analyze Fenwick’s representation of different forms of radicalism in Britain, Europe, and the Caribbean—including English radicalism, feminism, and slave rebellion—to consider how ideas of liberty and equality were appropriated, reshaped, and challenged as they circulated throughout the Atlantic world. The principles of universal liberty to which Fenwick subscribes while living in Britain are put to the test when she moves to Barbados, a society built on racial slavery. Rather than seeing the tension between Fenwick’s earlier radical views and her acceptance of racial slavery merely as evidence of personal hypocrisy, however, I contend that it can be seen as indicative of a wider contradiction between the Enlightenment principles of liberty and equality and the existence of colonial slavery in the Americas. In her essay “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” Lisa Lowe explains that the principles of universal liberty put forth by Enlightenment philosophers in Europe both depended on and excluded slaves in the American colonies.\footnote{Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” in Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), 191-212.} Lowe notes that colonial labor on the plantations provided “the conditions of possibility for European philosophy to think the universality of human freedom, however much freedom for colonized peoples was precisely foreclosed within that philosophy.”\footnote{Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” 193.} She argues that the contradiction between humanism’s principles of universal freedom and colonial slavery was resolved through an “economy of affirmation and forgetting” that “civilizes and develops freedom for ‘man’ in modern Europe, while relegating others to geographical and temporal spaces that are constituted as uncivilized and unfree.”\footnote{Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” 206.} By narrating the
individual’s development from slavery to freedom through the institutions of property, marriage, and the family, liberal humanist philosophy constructed a definition of “the human” that excluded those people who did not adhere to liberal ideas of civility and domesticity. As Lowe argues, the social inequalities of the colonial past and the present are “a legacy of this definition of ‘the human’ and subsequent discourses that have placed particular subjects, practices, and geographies at a distance from ‘the human.’”¹⁶² Considered in this context, Fenwick’s pro-slavery views and practices can be seen not simply as a contradiction of her earlier radicalism, but as a manifestation of the tendency of liberal discourses of rights, liberty, and equality to exclude slaves in the colonies from the category of the human.

While Fenwick’s letters highlight the exclusion of black slaves from Enlightenment principles of universal liberty, they also provide evidence of the ways in which slaves responded to this exclusion through forms of everyday resistance and organized rebellion. As historians such as C.L.R. James, Hilary Beckles, and Barbara Bush have shown, Caribbean slave society was a highly developed and organized society with a distinct political tradition. Beckles notes that slaves “made definite political analyses of the power structures they fought against, and used almost every natural and human force available in that struggle—cultural, linguistic, military and psychological.”¹⁶³ Fenwick’s subscription to colonial discourse, which places blacks outside of the realm of civilized society, shapes her interpretation of the actions of black slaves. Throughout her letters, she depicts slaves as uncivilized, immoral, and

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¹⁶² Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” 206.
lazy, thereby implying that they are incapable of self-governance. However, by reading Fenwick’s letters alongside archival and historiographical sources on slavery and rebellion in Barbados, I demonstrate that the practices of slaves that Fenwick depicts as evidence of their inherent immorality and laziness are most likely calculated forms of resistance. In addition, I consider the Easter Rebellion of 1816 in relation to the broader culture of revolution in the Atlantic world to illuminate how slaves in the Caribbean appropriated the discourses of rights and liberty and the strategies of resistance used in the French and Haitian Revolutions for their own purposes.

**Eliza Fenwick’s Radical Roots**

Though there is limited explicit evidence of Fenwick’s political views during the years in which she lived in England, her friendships with English radicals and the critique of patriarchy and other tyrannical forms of power contained in her novel *Secresy* indicate that she was once invested in radical causes of liberty and equality. The Fenwicks and their radical friends were strong advocates of political and social reform. While not an ideologically homogenous group, the English radicals promoted the concept of natural rights, rooted in the belief of every individual’s right to security and freedom from arbitrary or despotic control.† In addition to supporting a shift away from traditional monarchy and toward a democratic form of government, they supported repeal of the Test Act, universal male suffrage, public education, progressive taxation, and greater relief for the poor. They supported the French

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† Nancy Johnson states that the radicals, or Jacobins, “supported the notion of inalienable individual rights that are derived from natural law, precede civil society, and cannot be violated by government or legal institutions.” Nancy E. Johnson, *The English Jacobin Novel on Rights, Property, and the Law: Critiquing the Contract* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 2.
Revolution, at least in its early stages, and celebrated the principles set forth in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789. Many of the radicals visited France to see the revolution first-hand. Fenwick’s husband John traveled to Paris in 1793, bringing the support of the English radicals to the National Convention. John carried with him a copy of Godwin’s recently completed *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, which he had been instructed by Godwin to give to General Francisco Miranda or another “Frenchman of public importance & personal candour” in order to arrange for a French translation and wider circulation of the text.\(^{165}\) Given the repressive atmosphere of the counter-revolution in England, John’s mission entailed some risk for both him and Godwin. In a letter written to John before his trip, Godwin states, “I shall be glad to hear of you. If you should choose that I should hear from you, be cautious in your expressions, that you may not bring your friend into trouble.”\(^{166}\) Though there is no evidence that Fenwick traveled to France with her husband, it seems likely that she also supported the principles of liberty and equality underlying the French Revolution.

Fenwick’s complex and sometimes contradictory views on gender, class, and race can be best understood in relation to the fraught debates on human rights that occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The principles of universal liberty and equality promoted by the French revolutionaries and their British sympathizers were rooted in the doctrine of human rights that emerged during the eighteenth century, which asserted that all human beings share a set of rights on the

\(^{165}\) William Godwin to John Fenwick, 15 February 1793, Pforzheimer Collection, New York Public Library.

\(^{166}\) Godwin to Fenwick, 15 February 1793, Pforzheimer.
basis of their status as humans. As Lynn Hunt explains in *Inventing Human Rights*, in order for human rights to qualify as such, they must be natural, equal, and universal: “For rights to be human rights, all humans everywhere in the world must possess them equally and only because of their status as human beings.”

Hunt notes that the concept of universal human rights first gained political expression in the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789. Though Britain did not produce such a declaration of rights in the eighteenth century, and discussion of rights in the first half of the century tended to focus on the rights of the freeborn English man, a more universal notion of rights began circulating in Britain by the late eighteenth century.

The writings and sermons of Richard Price, the Dissenting minister of Newington Green, helped ignite the debate over rights in Britain. An advocate of political and economic reform, Price was in contact with important Enlightenment philosophers in Britain, Europe, and America and was the friend and mentor of Mary Wollstonecraft. On November 4, 1789, Price delivered a sermon to the Revolution Society in London entitled *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, in which he advocated the principles of the Glorious Revolution and celebrated the French Revolution as inaugurating a new liberal order. Drawing connections between the

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Glorious Revolution, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution, Price states,

I have lived to see the rights of men better understood than ever, and nations panting for liberty, which seemed to have lost the idea of it. I have lived to see thirty millions of people, indignant and resolute, spurning at slavery, and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice, their king led in triumph, and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects. After sharing in the benefits of one Revolution, I have been spared to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious. And now, methinks, I see the ardor for liberty catching and spreading, a general amendment beginning in human affairs, the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.  

Though Price’s primary concern is the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, he promotes widespread reform in Europe and Britain, envisioning a society in which the spread of reason and knowledge will lead to universal liberty. Challenging the system of hereditary rights and privileges in Britain, Price argues that civil authority is not a hereditary right, but a “trust derived from the people.”

In response to Price’s sermon, Edmund Burke published *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in which he attacks the French Revolution and its British sympathizers. Burke rejects the existence of individual natural rights, insisting on the importance of tradition and the inheritance of rights and privileges. He warns of the dangers of basing a revolution on abstract principles and human reason at the expense of tradition and experience. Burke’s text provoked responses from numerous radical writers, including Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, and James Mackintosh.

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In Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), published only a month after Burke’s *Reflections*, Wollstonecraft challenges Burke’s association of liberty with the maintenance of hereditary privilege and property and advocates natural rights, “which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures.” Significantly, she also attacks the slave trade, implicitly extending natural rights to black slaves:

> Allowing his [Burke’s] servile reverence for antiquity, and prudent attention to self-interest, to have the force which he insists on, the slave trade ought never to be abolished; and, because our ignorant fathers, not understanding the native dignity of man, sanctioned a traffic that outrages every suggestion of reason and religion, we are to submit to the inhuman custom, and term an atrocious insult to humanity the love of our country, and a proper submission to the laws by which our property is secured.—Security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty. And to this selfish principle every nobler one is sacrificed.

Wollstonecraft highlights the contradictions inherent in a notion of English liberty that supports the institution of colonial slavery on the principle of private property. She argues that a reverence for tradition, when not balanced by the dictates of reason and morality, enables the continued existence of inhumane systems and laws, including the slave trade.

However, while Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* includes a strong, albeit brief, critique of the slave trade, arguments in favor of human rights generally excluded black slaves and other categories of people who were considered incapable of full political participation. As Hunt notes,

> those who so confidently declared rights to be universal in the late eighteenth century turned out to have something much less all-inclusive.

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in mind. We are not surprised that they considered children, the insane, the imprisoned or foreigners to be incapable or unworthy of full participation in the political process, for so do we. But they also excluded those without property, slaves, free blacks, in some cases religious minorities, and always and everywhere, women.\(^\text{174}\)

Hunt explains that in order to qualify for human rights, a person has to be viewed as morally autonomous, which requires the capacity to reason and the independence to make individual judgments. Europeans’ assertions that black slaves lacked autonomy and possessed only a limited capacity, if any, to reason and to feel facilitated the view that slaves were not fully human and were therefore not deserving of human rights. This view is evidenced by the fact that the revolutionaries in France did not initially support slave emancipation, realizing the extent to which the nation’s economy relied on the profits of the slave system.\(^\text{175}\) The revolutionaries’ eventual support for racial equality in France and the abolition of slavery in the French colonies was not a natural outgrowth of their belief in universal human rights, but rather a largely pragmatic response to the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue and the pressing demands of free colored and black people for full civil rights. While the English radicals with whom Fenwick associated were generally ideologically opposed to slavery, they tended to advocate gradual rather than immediate abolition, believing both that a new political

\(^\text{175}\) As David Brion Davis explains, “Despite the radical principles of the French Revolution, there was much awareness that the French government, whose bankruptcy ignited the revolutionary crisis, drew crucial revenues from slave colonies; and that millions of French jobs in port cities like Bordeaux depended on the slave trade and the stability of the slave system. Thus the French slave trade continued to receive an official subsidy until 1793…” David Brion Davis, “Impact of the French and Haitian Revolutions,” in \textit{The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World}, ed. David Geggus (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2001), 7.
system must be introduced before slavery could be abolished and that slaves must be prepared for their freedom.\textsuperscript{176}

**Feminism and Anti-Slavery Discourse in the Age of Revolution**

British feminist writers played an important role in the debates on human rights. Though women’s access to forms of wealth, mobility, and power differed depending on their class, race, and location, women were categorically denied full citizenship in their exclusion from education, suffrage, and property ownership. Denied formal education and political rights on the basis of their alleged intellectual inferiority to men—particularly their supposed irrationality—women occupied a second-class status within British society. In the late eighteenth century, British women used their writings to critique gender inequalities and to advance arguments in favor of greater rights for women. In doing so, they often drew parallels between gendered oppression and racial oppression, portraying white women and black slaves as common victims of white male patriarchy.

Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the first feminist writers to employ the analogy between white women and slaves, a rhetorical strategy that became popular

\textsuperscript{176} According to Robin Blackburn, “radical democrats and ‘rational Dissenters’ tended to argue that the introduction of a new political system would be necessary before abolition could be effected and that slavery, not simply the slave trade, could then be overthrown.” See Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988), 147. The view of some radicals that emancipation needed to occur gradually in order to prepare slaves for freedom can be seen, for instance, in William Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. While Godwin insists on the universality of reason and challenges the popular theory that climate influences character and that people in “warm and effeminate climates” are incapable of self-government, he nevertheless supports the view that slaves need to receive guidance and instruction before acquiring their freedom: “Infuse just views of society into a certain number of the liberally educated and reflecting members; give to the people guides and instructors; and the business is done. This however is not to be accomplished but in a gradual manner, as will more fully appear in the sequel.” William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 2d ed., vol. 1 (London: printed for G.G. and J. Robinson, Paternoster-Row, 1796), 105.
among feminist writers in the 1790s. While Wollstonecraft’s first *Vindication* explicitly opposes the slave trade, she generally uses the language of slavery in her writings to critique the oppression of white women within British patriarchal society. In her feminist polemic *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and her unfinished novel *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* (published posthumously in 1798), Wollstonecraft highlights the ways that women of all classes are oppressed by the legal system and social structures of British society. In particular, she exposes the detrimental effects of the laws governing marriage and the family on women. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argues that within marriage, women are slaves in “a political and civil sense.” Under the doctrine of coverture, a woman’s husband had legal authority over her person, property, and children, and her legal identity was subsumed into his. As the legal jurist William Blackstone explains, “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection,

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177 Moira Ferguson argues that “Wollstonecraft’s usage of colonial slavery as a reference point for female subjugation launches a new element into the discourse on women’s rights. It is no coincidence then, that [Charlotte] Smith and [Mary] Hays criticize colonial slavery along with discussions of women’s rights” (32). Yet the analogy between white women and slaves can also be found in pro-slavery texts by white women. For instance, Anna Maria Falconbridge employs the analogy in her travel narrative *Two Voyages to Sierra Leone, during the years 1791-2-3* (1794), which Deirdre Coleman rightly describes as anti-colonial, feminist, and pro-slavery. See Moira Ferguson, “Mary Wollstonecraft and the Problematics of Slavery,” in *Colonialism and Gender Relations from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 8-33; Deirdre Coleman, “Sierra Leone, Slavery, and Sexual Politics: Anna Maria Falconbridge and the ‘swarthy daughter’ of Late 18th Century Abolitionism,” *Women’s Writing* 2, no. 1 (1995): 3-23.

and cover, she performs every thing…."

Women were not only oppressed by the legal system, but also by the patriarchal economic system, which failed to provide them with respectable and profitable employment. The few jobs available to middle-class women included doing needlework, serving as a governess or lady’s companion, and writing for publication, while jobs for lower-class women were limited to manual labor positions such as housekeeping, washing, and factory work. Women who were unable to find work in these fields were often forced to support themselves through theft or prostitution.

Wollstonecraft takes up these issues in her novel The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria, which employs elements of the Gothic to mount a critique of patriarchal social and legal structures and their potentially devastating effects on women of all classes. The novel focuses on Maria, an upper-class woman who is imprisoned in a madhouse by her husband, George Venables. Maria marries George in order to escape from an unhappy home life with her unaffectionate father and his despotist mistress. Despite her initial visions of “the ineffable delight of happy love,” she soon discovers that her husband is a drunkard, a gambler, and a libertine who has married her not out of love, but out of mercenary motives. When Maria resists her husband’s attempts

182 Deirdre Coleman uses Wollstonecraft’s novel as an example of the pervasiveness of the analogy between white women and slaves in women’s writing of the 1790s. See Coleman, “Sierra Leone, Slavery, and Sexual Politics,” 3.
to take the inheritance she receives from her uncle, he becomes cruel and tyrannical. When she finally attempts to flee England in order to escape his abuse, he has her drugged and legally confined in a madhouse. Wollstonecraft uses Maria’s imprisonment to symbolize the shared “enslavement” of all women. Reflecting on the powerless position of women, Maria asks, “Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?”

During her imprisonment, Maria establishes a friendship with the attendant of the madhouse, a lower-class woman named Jemima. Wollstonecraft uses their different histories to highlight the effects of gender and class on women’s opportunities and to demonstrate that all women are oppressed by the legal, economic, and social structures of British society. Maria’s story illustrates how the patriarchal laws regulating marriage, family, and inheritance put women in a position of extreme vulnerability. Indeed, the inheritance bequeathed to Maria by her uncle becomes a source of danger rather than independence or empowerment, as her tyrannical husband demonstrates a willingness to go to any lengths to obtain her money. While Maria’s life exposes women’s disadvantages within the patriarchal system of marriage, Jemima’s life story demonstrates the extremely limited options available to women outside of marriage. Born a bastard, Jemima is forced into a life of servitude and abuse and is eventually compelled to become a thief and a prostitute in order to support herself before finally accepting her job as the attendant of a madhouse.

Wollstonecraft’s use of gothic devices can be seen in many aspects of the novel: the

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dark, oppressive setting of the madhouse, the tyrannical villains, the vulnerable women, and the sense of persecution and danger that permeates the novel. However, while the Gothic is typically associated with romance and imagination, Wollstonecraft’s text is grounded in the realities of women’s lives in eighteenth-century England. As Anne Mellor notes, “Wollstonecraft explicitly invokes the genre of the Gothic romance, the horror story of pure imagination, in which ghosts and apparitions haunt ruined castles. But she immediately rejects the romance…in order to write a ‘true story,’ the plausible or realistic representation of the sufferings of women in eighteenth-century England.” The terrors that Maria experiences are not those of the supernatural world, but the real life terrors produced by the seemingly unlimited reach of male power and violence.

The analogy between white women and slaves permeates Wollstonecraft’s novel. For instance, in one scene Maria’s husband attempts to sell her to one of his friends for sexual use. Considered in the context of the novel’s critique on slavery, this scene can be read as alluding to the sexual exploitation of all women, white and black, by white men. When Maria runs away, her husband advertises for her return and hunts her from place to place. His actions resemble those of white slaveowners in the colonies determined to retrieve their runaway slaves, calling attention to the shared legal status of married women and slaves as property. The most powerful allusion to slavery in the novel, however, is when Maria’s infant daughter is torn from her breast before she is imprisoned in the madhouse. On one hand, the forced separation of

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185 Mellor, “Righting the Wrongs of Woman,” 418-419.
mother and daughter highlights women’s legal oppression within marriage. Under British marriage laws, a woman had no legal rights over her children; thus, a woman who left her husband due to mistreatment could not only lose custody of her children, but could lose all access to them. On the other hand, the scene calls up images of the forced separation of slave mothers and children, seen by many opponents of slavery as one of the most troubling aspects of the slave system. Though Wollstonecraft’s novel does not explicitly address the issue of colonial slavery, its condemnation of men’s tyrannical abuses of power, particularly their sexual exploitation of women and fracturing of families, implicitly draws parallels between the oppression of white women and the oppression of black slaves.

Fenwick’s feminist epistolary novel Secresy, or The Ruin on the Rock also uses gothic devices in tandem with the rhetoric of slavery to critique the gender inequalities created and maintained by patriarchal ideologies, customs, and laws. The heroine of the novel, Sibella Valmont, is raised in almost complete isolation in the moated castle of her tyrannical uncle, Mr. Valmont, after her father dies. Mr. Valmont provides Sibella with basic care, but denies her an education and social companionship. He also hides the knowledge of her inheritance from her, causing her to believe that she is entirely dependent on him. Valmont raises his illegitimate son Clement alongside Sibella with the intention of marrying them to each other so that Clement can inherit the family fortune. Before this can happen, however, Sibella and Clement fall in love and secretly “marry” by exchanging promises and consummating their union, an act
which results in Sibella’s pregnancy, the secret around which the plot of the novel revolves.

Utilizing images of domination and violence, the novel criticizes the absolute power and authority that men have over the lives and property of their wives and daughters. Protesting the blind obedience that her uncle expects of her, Sibella states, “He demands my obedience, too! What obedience? The grateful tribute to duty, authorized by reason, and sanctioned by the affections? No. Mr. Valmont, here at least, ceases to be inconsistent. He never enlightened my understanding, nor conciliated my affections; and he demands only the obedience of a fettered slave. I am held in the bondage of slavery….” Sibella challenges the notion that women owe passive obedience to men, suggesting instead that men must earn women’s obedience by treating them with affection and respect. As critics have recently noted, while Fenwick’s novel clearly critiques patriarchal ideologies and laws, it can also be read as engaging in a broader critique of oppression based not only on categories of gender, but also on categories of class, race, and nationality. The novel’s frequent use of the analogy between women and slaves alludes to the cruelty that white women and black slaves suffer at the hands of white men.

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187 Ranita Chaterjee reads the novel as a critique of the “blind obedience that is demanded of men by all authority figures and of women by a patriarchal society.” More specifically, she discusses the novel’s critique of Rousseau’s gendered theories of education and the failures of the Hardwicke Marriage Act of 1753. Ranita Chaterjee, “Sapphic Subjectivity and Gothic Desires in Eliza Fenwick’s *Secresy* (1795),” *Gothic Studies* 6, no.1 (2004): 48. Malinda Snow draws connections between the novel’s critique of male domination of women and its critique of British domination of India. She argues that the novel is not only concerned with these problems, however, but “concerns itself more generally with exploitation and oppression, and with the moral discernment required to detect such inhumanity.” Malinda Snow, “Habits of Empire and Domination in Eliza Fenwick’s *Secresy*,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 14, no. 2 (2002): 160.
While Fenwick’s novel *Secresy* and her letters to Hays belong to different genres, they share some significant features in terms of form, rhetorical strategies, and themes. First, Fenwick’s novel and her letters both employ the epistolary form, using letters between intimate female friends to portray women’s lives and struggles. In doing so, the texts critique patriarchal social structures and the gender inequalities to which they give rise, while also illustrating the importance of female friendships. Also, the novel and the letters both focus on a female heroine—Sibella Valmont and Eliza Fenwick, respectively—whose problems occur as a result of mistreatment or neglect by a male family member, thus demonstrating the flaws of the patriarchal family structure and patriarchal society more generally. Finally, Fenwick’s letters, like her novel, frequently employ the analogy between white women and slaves to critique female oppression. In a letter to Hays in September 1811, Fenwick depicts her marriage as a state of slavery: “Orlando says we appear to thrive now we are away from his father, and I think we do succeed better since I burst the fetters that with him bound us down to almost every species of wretchedness. Some sorrows & disappointments must attend us, but often in my most depressed & languid moments, I am cheered by remembering that I am providing for my boy, who otherwise would be an outcast or a Slave” (46). Fenwick suggests that instead of offering her and her children protection and security, her husband brought only trouble and pain upon the family. Through the powerful image of fetters, she depicts her marriage as a form of slavery, while at the same time highlighting her ability to liberate herself and her children from her husband’s destructive behavior and to protect her son from a life of
misery and poverty. As in many of her letters, Fenwick represents herself simultaneously as a victim of oppression, a strong, resourceful woman, and a self-sacrificing mother. By emphasizing the emotional and physical hardships she endures for the sake of her children, Fenwick promotes the ideal of sacrificial motherhood. Yet she removes the idealized figure of the sacrificial mother from its traditional place within the patriarchal family by suggesting that in order to properly care for and protect her children, a woman must be able to survive independently of men. This was a radical view at a time when the patriarchal family was viewed as a microcosm of British patriarchal society. As Eve Tavor Bannet explains, an important eighteenth-century assumption was “that the family was both the origin of society and society’s most fundamental component unit, and that there was therefore continuity, as well as analogy, between the private and the public good, and between the ordering of private families and the peace, prosperity, and well-being of the state.”

Fenwick’s assertion of female independence undermines patriarchal power by challenging assumptions about gender roles and family.

Fenwick frequently laments the difficulty of attaining economic independence and security in a society that fails to provide working- and middle-class women with profitable employment. In an unpublished letter to Hays, she complains of the long hours she is forced to work in order to cover her basic living expenses: “An hour’s relaxation even is what I dare not attempt. Imagine the bitterness of such a toil. How

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much more independent & happy is your servant than such a being as I am! This passage illustrates Fenwick’s common rhetorical strategy of comparing her plight as a laboring woman to the plight of other disenfranchised groups, particularly poor white servants and black slaves. Yet rather than aligning herself with these groups, she insists that her own situation is worse than that of any servant or slave. While white women’s use of the analogy between women and slaves may be intended to illustrate their shared humanity and to critique the various abuses of white patriarchy, the analogy can be problematic in its tendency to elide an understanding of the actual conditions of slaves and render invisible white women’s complicity in empire and slavery. Moreover, as Fenwick’s letters demonstrate, white women’s use of slavery as a metaphor for female oppression often diminishes the suffering of black slaves.

**Gender, Slavery, and Resistance in Barbados**

The difficulties that Fenwick faced as a single mother in Britain and her desire to attain economic independence eventually led her to the Caribbean. In 1811, Fenwick’s daughter Eliza Anne was offered a two-year contract to act in Mr. Dyke’s theater company in Barbados. Eliza Anne had begun an acting career in London in 1806. Despite her timidity, she was successful, and by 1810 she was acting at Covent Garden under the famous actor and manager John Philipp Kemble. Fenwick was frequently occupied by Eliza Anne’s career, assisting her in making costumes and attending meetings and rehearsals with her. Though Eliza Anne was initially enthusiastic about the Barbados offer, the mutual anxiety that she and her mother felt

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about living so far apart from each other caused her to consider refusing the offer. Explaining to Fenwick that she had determined not to go to Barbados, Eliza Anne writes, “We will do the best we can, if I can get a country engagement, & if not I will try teaching & Authorship.—We will work & starve together—together we will remain” (37). In spite of her anxiety, however, Eliza Anne soon accepted the offer and moved to Barbados, where she experienced further success in her acting career, becoming the “little idol” of her Caribbean audience (89). In the summer of 1813, she married a British man named Mr. Rutherford and had a son, and she had three more children in the next five years.

Eliza Anne urged Fenwick to join her in Barbados, assuring her of the prospects for acquiring prosperity there. In a letter to Fenwick in 1812, she writes, “Yes, indeed, you must come here. I am sure there is a fortune waiting for you here, & easily earned. I have no time to teach. You would do wonders” (97). Fenwick, who was working as a governess in Ireland and trying to arrange a position for Orlando as an attorney, did not consider the move practical at the time. Two years later, however, prompted by her continued desire to improve her economic circumstances and her concern for Eliza Anne, who had been ill for several months, Fenwick and her son Orlando made the transatlantic voyage to Barbados.

Fenwick’s letters to Hays indicate that she enjoyed greater social and economic freedom in Barbados than she had in England, a consequence not only of the opportunities available for advancement in the Caribbean, but also of the strategic manner by which she increased her access to those opportunities. Since Fenwick
intended to support herself and her family by running a school for girls with her daughter Eliza Anne, it was crucial for her to establish social connections with the wealthy families on the island. This required cultivating a virtuous reputation. As Kathleen Wilson notes,

> In the traffic of goods, people, patronage, kinship and ideas that flowed back and forth across the sea, hearsay and reputed ‘character’ were important commodities that facilitated a range of social and economic transactions from the regulation of business dealings, extension of credit and negotiation of lucrative marriages to the escape from slavery….However, whereas a man’s reputation depends upon his behavior in a number of conducts, a woman’s reputation depended largely upon her sexual conduct, an activity that was in turn the especial purview of gossip.¹⁹⁰

As this passage suggests, a woman’s reputation depended on her ability to at least maintain the appearance of propriety. The anxieties over the degeneration of British women who migrated to the Caribbean, seen in a range of eighteenth-century literary texts and travel narratives, amplified the importance of female virtue and propriety in the colonies.¹⁹¹ As a woman in her late forties traveling to the Caribbean without a husband, Fenwick needed to take steps to ensure her respectability. One of the ways she did this was by passing as a widow. After learning that one of her friends from Barbados is planning to visit Hays in England, Fenwick writes,

> I have never been told so, but I shrewdly suspect I am here supposed to be a widow. I would not utter a falsehood if questioned, but it seemed so much a probability, or rather a certainty, that no question or hint ever

¹⁹¹ Wilson writes, “Certainly the ‘fallen woman’ turned colonial adventurer had become a stock figure in English accounts of the Caribbean and North America, given swashbuckling credibility by real-life Jamaican pirates Anne Bonney and Mary Reed, and mimetic form by Defoe’s eponymous heroines. The low moral character of English women in Jamaica was also a concern of travel writers.” Wilson, The Island Race, 144.
came across me either one way or the other. There is something so awkward & so humiliating in the explanations that would be necessary in stating the truth, that I beg you always to avoid any mention of that person who has been so unjust a Husband & unfriendly a Father. (212)

By performing the role of an independent widow, Fenwick is able to avoid the social stigma of having separated from her husband and to establish a successful business. On March 21, 1815, she reports to Hays that the school has been a success: “At present we are in fashion, & those rich families who do not send their daughters to England, give them to us” (167).

Though her move to Barbados affords her new social and economic opportunities, Fenwick struggles with the many challenges of life in the tropical Caribbean. In her letters, she depicts the region, with its unbearably hot climate, violent thunderstorms, flooding, and “intolerable and numerous tribes of insects,” as unfamiliar and hostile (175). Her letters also focus extensively on the dangerous consequences of the natural environment on her family’s health. When she first arrives in Barbados, she is “shocked at the alteration” of Eliza Anne due to her illness. Eliza Anne’s health remains unstable throughout the rest of their stay in Barbados, creating constant anxiety for Fenwick. However, the “heaviest Calamity” of Fenwick’s life is when her beloved son Orlando dies suddenly from yellow fever in November 1816. In addition to describing feelings of despondency over the death of Orlando and the ill health of Eliza Anne, Fenwick constantly bemoans the tremendous amount of labor involved in caring for her family and running her home and school. Eliza Anne’s husband, the only other adult in the family, proves to be of little help, as he turns out to be much like Fenwick’s husband in his habit of heavy drinking and accumulating
substantial debts through speculations. Eliza Anne asks him for a separation in 1818, and he soon after departs for England, leaving the women to support themselves and Eliza Anne’s four children.

Fenwick’s personal hardships seem to have a profound bearing on her views on slavery. Though no explicit evidence exists of Fenwick’s views on race and slavery prior to moving to Barbados, her support of slavery certainly seems at odds with her radical background. Moreover, Eliza Anne’s letters to Fenwick imply that Fenwick was once opposed to slavery. Soon after moving to Barbados, Eliza Anne writes to her mother in Britain about slavery on the island:

Do you expect a description of the Island, the people & the horrors of Slavery? Of the latter I have yet seen little. I think the slaves, I mean the domestic slaves, the laziest & most impertinent set of people under the Sun. They positively will do nothing but what they please. I have not seen a Negro struck since I have been here, but I have seen a great many deserve it. There are always three or four to do the work of one, & they laugh in their Owner’s face when reproved for not doing their duty. (76)

Eliza Anne’s assumption that Fenwick will expect a description of the “horrors of slavery” and her defensive tone seem intended to counter any anti-slavery views that Fenwick held at the time. Asserting her newly acquired first-hand knowledge of slavery, Eliza Anne attempts to refute arguments about the immorality of the slave system by insisting on the slaves’ laziness and insolence and denying the violence of slaveowners.

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192 In a letter to Hays dated 20 January 1819, Fenwick writes that Mr. Rutherford “took his passage for England, & departed exactly one hour after she had been put to Bed of her fourth Child” (194).
While slavery may have posed an ideological dilemma for Fenwick, as Eliza Anne’s letter suggests, she accepts the view that slave labor is absolutely necessary for whites’ economic survival after moving to Barbados. Her determination to overcome the gendered oppression and the economic struggles that she has experienced for years seems to cause Fenwick to see her exploitation of the labor of black slaves as justified. Like Eliza Anne, she quickly adopts pro-slavery views underpinned by notions of racial difference, depicting black slaves as uncivilized, lazy, and deceitful, and therefore undeserving of the freedom granted to white British subjects. However, while she adopts a pro-slavery stance, her letters reveal some continued ambivalence over her participation in the slave system. Not surprisingly, the aspect of the slave system that she finds most troubling is the sexual exploitation of slave women by white men, which she clearly sees as a reflection of women’s universal oppression.

Fenwick’s views on race, slavery, and slave rebellion are shaped not only by her personal experiences, but also by the socio-political environment of Barbados in the early nineteenth century. The most established British sugar colony in the Caribbean, Barbados was characterized by a relatively low ratio of black slaves to whites, a strong, organized plantocracy, and an entrenched culture of racism. After moving to the island, Fenwick notes that “An impassable boundary here separates the white from the colored people (many of whom are a fair, light haired people); & those Creoles whose wealth would introduce them to the first circles in England a white beggar would not speak to here” (169). As in the other colonies, black slaves outnumbered whites, though the ratio of blacks to whites was lower than in other
islands. In 1814, the year that Fenwick moved to Barbados, the population included 15,782 whites, 2317 free colored people, and 60,788 black slaves. Unlike Jamaica, which was plagued by the problem of absentee slaveowners, Barbados had a high number of resident slaveowners. As Michael Craton explains, the demographic and political features of the island bolstered white colonial rule:

With a high proportion of resident landowners, a deeply entrenched middle class of white merchants, managers, and professional men, and the fervent support of a relatively large number of poorer whites, the dominant culture was the nearest equivalent in the Caribbean to the racist civilization of the southern United States, while the government was the strongest plantocracy found anywhere, with quasi-aristocratic Councils, a self-legislating assembly, a vigorous magistry and militia, efficient parochial organization, and an established Anglican church ministering almost solely to the whites.

In addition to the demographic and political features of the island, Barbados’ topography also strengthened white rule, as the flat, open country and the developed network of roads enabled the militia to move easily around the island and made it difficult for slaves to establish maroon communities. As a consequence of these factors, there were no rebellions in Barbados between 1702 and 1815.

Many planters explained the lack of slave rebellions in Barbados by insisting that the slaves were well-treated and content. Planters also pointed to the fact that the majority of the slaves in Barbados were creoles, who were considered to be more submissive than Africans.

By the late eighteenth century, most sugar plantations in

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195 The percentage of black creoles in Barbados increased from approximately 45 percent to 93 percent between 1750 and 1817, the “the fastest change in the Caribbean, if not in plantation America.” In comparison, 63 percent of the slaves in Jamaica and 56 percent of the slaves in Trinidad were creole.
Barbados were producing their own labor force through the practice of “breeding” rather than importing slaves from Africa. The high rate of reproduction among slaves was due in large part to pro-natalist policies implemented by Barbadian planters. By implementing ameliorative reforms such as reduced workloads for pregnant female slaves and offering slave women financial rewards for successful births, planters sought to simultaneously increase their workforce and challenge abolitionists’ arguments regarding the poor treatment of slaves.

The lack of slave rebellions during the eighteenth century allowed planters to become complacent about the security of their rule and to “liberalise their plantation control systems.”¹⁹⁶ This was reflected in the ability of slaves to travel around the island, often without passes. Slaves frequently traveled at night and on weekends in order to visit family members, engage in forms of economic exchange, and participate in gatherings such as dances, festivals, and funerals. Joshua Steele, a Barbados planter, stated of the slaves in Barbados, “Both sexes are frequently travelling all night, going to or returning from a distant connection, in order, without sleep, to be in due time to go through a hard day’s labour, after their nocturnal adventures.”¹⁹⁷ While slaves’ ability to travel around the island allowed them to develop and maintain kinship relations and participate in various forms of entertainment, their subordinate position was maintained not only through an oppressive labor regime, but also through their lack of social and legal rights.


The absence of armed slave rebellion during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries does not preclude other forms of slave resistance. One of the most common forms of slave resistance in Barbados was running away. Since the lack of mountains and woods on the island prevented the development of permanent maroon communities, runaway slaves would seek shelter and protection from family members on other plantations, hide in the crowds at Bridgetown, or escape to neighboring colonies. Slaves also resisted whites’ authority by stealing, feigning illness, intentionally misunderstanding orders, or refusing to labor efficiently in order to gain concessions from masters or overseers.

Slaves’ participation in market activities on the island can be seen as another form of resistance. A large network of enslaved black and free colored hucksters sold goods in markets, on the streets, at houses, and on board the ships docked at Carlisle Bay. Dickson notes that many slaves spent Sundays traveling “for several miles, to market, with a few roots, or fruits, or canes, sometimes a fowl or a kid, or a pig.” The threat that black hucksters posed to the social system through their ability to compete with small white planters and accumulate capital frustrated authorities, who sought to limit slaves’ market activities with acts passed in 1733 and 1779. However, market demands weakened the authorities’ attempts to limit blacks’ activities, and the act of 1779 was eventually appealed. Through their persistent participation in the internal marketing system of Barbados, black slaves illustrated

their resourcefulness and industry, challenging stereotypes regarding slaves’ supposed laziness.

While the slaves had always resisted their oppression, historical evidence suggests that they became even more rebellious after the events of the Haitian Revolution in 1804 and the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, which made the possibility of emancipation seem more likely than ever before. Slaves learned of the British anti-slavery campaign led by William Wilberforce and the events in Saint-Domingue through various oral and written accounts. For instance, British and colonial newspapers circulated throughout the colonies were read by literate slaves to the illiterate slaves in the community. Domestic slaves also learned political news by overhearing the dinner conversations of whites. Realizing that the slave system was under tremendous pressure, blacks began to more openly resist the authority of white planters. In the early nineteenth century, many whites claimed that slaves had become unusually aggressive and were refusing to cooperate with the wills and desires of their masters.\(^{201}\) It was in this context of heightened racial tension and fraught master-slave relations that Fenwick moved to Barbados.

Though as a white woman, Fenwick held legal power over black slaves, her letters attest to the numerous ways that her domestic slaves undermined her authority. In Fenwick’s first letter to Hays from Barbados, written on December 11, 1814, she explains that she has hired domestic slaves to assist with the labor of running her home and school. Lamenting the difficulty of managing the slaves, she writes,

Our domestics are Negroes, hired from their owners, & paid at what seems to me an exorbitant rate….They are a sluggish, inert, self-willed race of people, apparently inaccessible to gentle & kindly impulses. Nothing but the dread of the whip seems capable of rousing them to exertion, & not even that, as I understand, can make them honest. Pilfering seems habitual & instinctive among domestic slaves.

It is said they are worse slaves & servants in this Island than in many others because there is less severity made use of.—It is a horrid system, that of slavery, & the vices & mischiefs now found among the Negroes are all to be traced back to that source. (163-164)

Fenwick’s comments are typical of the attitudes of slave managers and owners in early nineteenth-century Barbados, who expressed frustration over the challenges of managing “intractable” slaves, particularly hired slaves. Hiring domestic slaves was a common practice in Barbados: domestics comprised fifty percent of the slave population in Bridgetown, and many of these were hired out by their owners. These slaves, who typically were skilled workers and were well-informed about political matters related to slavery, were seen as more rebellious than rural plantation slaves.²⁰²

Fenwick’s explanation for the slaves’ ungovernable character combines two seemingly contradictory perspectives on slaves and slavery. On one hand, she depicts slaves as innately lazy, deceitful, and defiant, and justifies the violence of the slave system as a necessary means of social control. Indeed, she intimates that more violence is needed in order to restrain the slaves’ negative behaviors. On the other hand, she states that the “horrid system” of slavery itself is to blame for the “vices & mischiefs” of the slaves, suggesting that their negative characteristics are a consequence of their subordinate position rather than their nature. This passage reflects Fenwick’s attempt to resolve the tension between her economic interests and her previous belief in

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universal liberty. While her need for slave labor leads her to justify the violent domination of slaves through arguments of racial difference, she implicitly suggests that the slaves’ “immoral” behavior is a natural response to their oppression.

Ultimately, Fenwick, like Maria Nugent, views slavery as a problem, but recognizes that slave labor is crucial for her family’s prosperity. Yet while Nugent uses sympathy, kindness, and benevolence to negotiate her relationship with her slaves, Fenwick insists that the slaves are unmoved by acts of kindness and compassion.

Fenwick’s recurring comments on the difficulty of managing domestic slaves illuminate the ways in which colonial categories were shaped and challenged through intimate, everyday practices. Several months after writing the previous letter, Fenwick complains to Hays of her loneliness and discontent in Barbados. She states, “I suppose this mental discontent will wear away as habit enures me to new customs and manners, but one thing will ever militate against my contentment,—the negro Slaves. Slaves we have none, but we hire them at high wages of their owners for servants, & no imagination can form an idea of the unceasing turmoil & vexation their management creates” (168). This passage not only reveals the everyday practices of resistance enacted by slaves, but also points to the heterogeneous nature of white colonial society. While Fenwick emphasizes her opposition to the slaves, her sense of alienation also indicates her difference from other colonists, whose customs and manners are unfamiliar to her. Passages such as this challenge depictions of white colonial society as stable and unified. As Ann Laura Stoler explains, colonial authority was based largely on the premise that Europeans in the colonies comprised “a discrete
biological and social entity—a ‘natural’ community of common class interests, racial attributes, political affinities, and superior culture.” In reality, however, colonial communities were made up of people of different class, gender, religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, and were “more socially fractious and politically fragile than many of their members professed.” Though united with other white colonists by race, Fenwick’s ambiguous social and economic position and her unconventional political background hinder her ability to feel affinity with other colonists.

While Fenwick is not representative of most white female colonists, her “feeling of desolation” in Barbados nevertheless serves as a reminder of the differences and fractures within white Caribbean society. These differences are perhaps most evident at the level of class: while the lives of elite white planters were characterized by political power and material comfort, poor whites were socially and politically marginalized and impoverished. Poor whites totaled about 8,000, approximately half of the white population in Barbados. The lowest class of whites, which comprised about a quarter of the white population, relied on charity and vestry poor relief, were unable to vote as a result of the property and income requirements, and suffered from poor health. As David Lambert explains,

Their marginalisation and association with criminal and rebellious and Celtic origins – many were descended from Irish and Scottish convicts, prisoners of war and others declared undesirable by the seventeenth-century English state – contributed to the negative opinion of them held by many elite whites and enslaved people. Despite, then, the

204 Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, 43.
205 David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity During the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 78.
ideological and material advantages of whiteness, they were
marginalised and lived as free but not full citizens.²⁰⁶

Lambert points out parallels between poor whites and free people of color, who share
a similar liminal status within the colonial order. The ambiguous position of poor
whites, free people of color, and laboring female colonists like Fenwick illustrate the
heterogeneity of Caribbean plantation society, which threatened a colonial order based
on binary oppositions between white and black, colonizer and colonized.

In order to maintain their position of power, then, colonists attempted to shore
up distinctions between whites and blacks through discourses of British civility,
sensibility, and morality. This can be seen in Fenwick’s consistent portrayal of the
slaves as lazy, deceitful, and insensible. Throughout her stay in Barbados, Fenwick
becomes increasingly frustrated with the slaves’ refusal to abide by her authority.
Complaining to Hays that she was “several times almost mad with the provocations
their dirt, disobedience & dishonesty caused [her],” she writes, “You would be
astonished to hear me scold,—I do so, I assure you, & that with a vehemence which on
reflection surprises & pains me. Yet every instance of kindness, remonstrance,
persuasion, or gentle reproof are so determinedly scoffed at by the greater part of this
wretched race, that an excessive propensity to indolence can alone preserve any degree
of equanimity of temper” (175). Fenwick interprets the slaves’ behavior, particularly
their failure to labor efficiently, not as a conscious and justified form of resistance, but
as evidence of their inherent negative racial characteristics. While she is frustrated by
the slaves’ persistent flouting of her authority, it is their refusal to be coerced through

²⁰⁶ Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity During the Age of Abolition*, 78.
acts of white benevolence and kindness that most infuriates her. She chooses to
understand this exercise of the slaves’ will as a form of indolence, and thus a sign of
their inferiority. At the same time, she suggests that their lack of sensibility and
civility has a degrading effect on her by provoking her to mistreat them in a way
which “surprises and pains” her.

Though unable or unwilling to recognize the slaves’ everyday acts as forms of agency and resistance, Fenwick is forced to confront their unyielding desire for
freedom when she witnesses the Easter Rebellion, also referred to as Bussa’s
Rebellion, in 1816. In a letter written to Hays several months after the insurrection,
Fenwick writes, “I have, my dear Mary, a large sheet of paper in my desk, written
from April 15th, a memorable day here, to the 28th, gradually recounting all our terrors
etc. in that progress of the Negroes’ insurrection, & addressed to you. The news is
now old, & it is useless to try to interest you about a danger which you already know
has passed over” (178). The rebellion demonstrates the slaves’ capacity for political
organization and action. It began on Easter Sunday, April 14, 1816 in the parish of St.
Philip and rapidly spread throughout half of the island. The primary leader of the
rebellion was an African-born man named Bussa, a ranger at Bayley’s plantation in St.
Philip. The groups of rebel slaves on other plantations also had their own leaders.
Most of the rebel leaders and organizers were male and were part of the group of elite
plantation slaves that included drivers, rangers, and artisans, though several literate
free colored men also helped in organizing the rebellion. Historical evidence suggests

207 Rangers were responsible for “looking after boundaries and fences and matters of communication and business between estates” and therefore had license to travel around the island. See Craton, Testing the Chains, 258.
that, contrary to the claims of some white colonists, the slaves did not plan a general massacre of whites on the island. Instead, their strategy was to destroy the planters’ property and attack the island’s militia. During the rebellion, slaves engaged in extensive arson in order to destroy their masters’ plantations and to communicate with each other, and both black slaves and whites looted plantation houses.

Although well-organized and unexpected, the rebellion lasted for only four days before being suppressed by local militia and imperial troops. Deaths caused by the fighting were unevenly divided between blacks and whites. Approximately 120 slaves were killed during and immediately after the fighting, while only a few whites were killed. In addition, 144 blacks were executed and 123 were sentenced to transportation in the period of martial law following the rebellion.\(^{208}\) While the rebellion was ultimately unsuccessful, its adverse effects on the plantation economy were significant. The damage to property was estimated to total approximately £175,000, and 25 percent of the island’s sugar cane crop was burned.\(^ {209}\)

In August 1816, the House of Assembly appointed a committee to investigate the origins and causes of the rebellion. The committee’s report, published in January 1818, includes confessions made by rebel slaves during their trials. The slaves’ statements demonstrate that the Haitian Revolution and the British anti-slavery campaign were important preconditions for the rebellion. For instance, the confession of Robert, a slave from Simmons’ plantation, states,

\(^{208}\) Sir James Leith, Governor of Barbados to Earl Bathurst, 21 September 1816, CO 28/85, National Archives of England.

\(^{209}\) Beckles, \textit{Black Rebellion in Barbados}, 88-89.
That some time the last year, he heard the negroes were all to be freed on New-year’s Day. That Nanny Grig (a negro woman at Simmons’, who said she could read) was the first person who told the negroes at Simmons’ so; and she said she had read it in the Newspapers….That, about a fortnight after New year’s Day, she said the negroes were to be freed on Easter Monday, and the only way to get it was to fight for it, otherwise they would not get it; and the way they were to do, was to set fire, as that was the way they did in St. Domingo.

Robert’s confession illustrates that the circulation of information (and misinformation) among the slave communities played an important role in inciting the rebellion. As his comments suggest, rumors had spread among the slaves that the British imperial government was planning to emancipate them, but that the planters would most likely try to withhold their freedom. Many slaves confessed that they had heard from other slaves that they would be freed on Christmas day in 1815. When this did not happen, rumors next spread that the King was going to free the slaves on Easter in 1816, but that the planters would try to interfere. The slaves therefore determined to follow the example of the slaves in Saint-Domingue and fight for their freedom.

The rumors regarding emancipation were fostered by the debates over the slave registry bill that took place in Barbados in early 1816. Concerned about the continued illegal importation of slaves into the Caribbean colonies after the abolition of the slave trade, Wilberforce and the other members of the African Institution had proposed a bill for the registration of all slaves in the colonies, which the planters vigorously opposed. In an anonymous pamphlet published after the rebellion, the writer states that “Even in the newspapers of Barbados, formal Resolutions of the Assembly were

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published only three or four months before the insurrection broke out, denouncing the Registry Bill as a plan for the emancipation of the slaves.”

The confessions of rebel slaves indicate that many slaves had misunderstood the registry bill to be their manumission. Believing that they had support in England, the slaves mistakenly thought the imperial troops would not oppose them in their rebellion against the planters.

While the insurrection was unsuccessful in gaining the slaves their freedom, it had a powerful economic and psychological impact on the planters and other white colonists. After explaining in one of her letters that she suffered a serious illness as a result of her terror during the insurrection, Fenwick turns to the economic damage it caused:

The insurrection caused us a quarter’s loss of the income of the school, besides some delays of payment from persons who were great sufferers & who before had been rigidly punctual. My illness has, I suppose, cost 100 at least, so that we have felt a share of the general calamity & shall still feel it, as some of our debtors have died, & the accounts must wait until next year. In the end, I believe, we shall not lose, & as our pupils are returned we have still good prospects before us, & should consider the late difficulties but as dusky clouds passing over the sunshine of our prosperity. (178-179)

Fenwick laments the loss of income to her school caused by the devastation of colonists’ property and the deaths of colonists who caught a fever brought to the island

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212 The report explains that for several months prior to the rebellion, “the minds of the Slaves had been unsettled by a frequent repetition of a report, generally spread, that the time was quickly approaching at which they were to expect their freedom;—That these reports first took their rise immediately after the information of the proposed establishments of Registries in the British Settlements in the West Indies had been transmitted to the Colony; that they were combined with and originated in that information, and in the mistaken idea that the Registry Bill was actually their Manumission.” Report from a Select Committee, 12.
by troops during the rebellion. Despite her attempts to remain optimistic that she will recover from the effects of the rebellion, the economic impact continues for over a year, as the price of provisions increases as a result of the “devastation committed by the Negroes” (189). Moreover, the rebellion prevents Fenwick from ever again feeling a sense of peace in Barbados, as she is continually haunted by fears of another insurrection. In the months following the suppression of the rebellion, the colonial government tried to downplay its effects by portraying the majority of the slaves in Barbados as content. Governor Leith wrote several dispatches to London claiming that the island was in a “State of perfect Tranquility.”\textsuperscript{213} However, letters from colonists suggest otherwise. In June 1816, one colonist wrote, “The disposition of the Slaves is very bad. They are sullen and sulky and seem to cherish deep feelings of revenge. We hold the West Indies by a very precarious Tenure, that of military strength only and if they do not change at home their system of reduction I would not give a year’s purchase for any Island we have.”\textsuperscript{214} Despite Governor Leith’s claims, the suppression of the rebellion seems to have heightened rather than diminished the racial tensions in Barbados, creating pervasive fears among colonists of another uprising.\textsuperscript{215} In July 1821, over five years after the Easter rebellion, Fenwick writes to Hays of her reluctance about remaining on the island with her daughter and grandchildren: “…I should die here with a painful impression of the various disasters that might overwhelm her & her Children in sudden ruin,—our storms,—our hurricanes,—but

\textsuperscript{213} Sir James Leith, Governor of Barbados to Earl Bathurst, August 1816, CO 28/85, National Archives of England.
\textsuperscript{214} Anonymous letter from Barbados, 6 June 1816, CO 28/85, National Archives of England.
\textsuperscript{215} For further discussion of the rebellion and its suppression, see Craton, \textit{Testing the Chains}, 254-266.
above all the fatal insurrection which we constantly dread, prevent the soothing consciousness of being at home” (213).

While Fenwick’s comments help illuminate the economic and psychological impact that the slave rebellion had on her and other colonists, the silences in her letters are also revealing. Though her self-interestedness is perhaps not surprising, her failure to mention the circumstances or motives of the slaves in her letters seems significant. Despite her earlier exposure to and probable support of the French Revolution and her ongoing resistance to gender and class based oppression, Fenwick’s encounter with slave resistance and rebellion does not lead to any contemplation over the injustices of racial oppression. While her novel Secresy draws on the popular analogy between the oppression of women and the oppression of slaves, her letters from the Caribbean illustrate her acceptance of certain forms of exploitation and oppression.

Fenwick’s seemingly paradoxical feminist and pro-slavery views illustrate that white women’s resistance to patriarchy was sometimes predicated on the subjugation of racial others. Indeed, Fenwick uses her position as a woman and a single mother to justify her exploitation of slaves, insisting that she suffers greater oppression than any black slave. In May 1817, five years after moving to Barbados, she writes to Hays that “if you knew the slavery of managing a family in the Caribbean with Negro Domestics (& we have seven of them), you would wonder how I support the toil” (188-89). In this striking passage, Fenwick attempts to alter the power dynamic by avoiding any reference to black slaves as slaves, referring to them instead as domestics, while simultaneously representing her own position as one of slavery.
The seemingly incompatible views expressed in Fenwick’s writing also highlight the ways in which the relations between race, gender, and class shift depending on the historical period and location. As Beckles notes, research on women in the Caribbean should be informed by the “culturally embracing process of social creolisation in which European immigrants were transformed at the frontier into natives who possessed an increasingly distinct value system and sensibility.”

Fenwick’s letters clearly demonstrate the process of creolization that she undergoes, as she becomes increasingly accepting of the white supremacist ideology that defined race relations in Barbados.

While Fenwick subscribes to pro-slavery views, her letters do at times reveal ambivalence over her participation in the slave system. Yet even in these instances, she ultimately insists on the necessity of slavery to the survival of white colonists. For instance, when she eventually admits to Hays that she is no longer just a manager of slaves, but a slaveowner herself, she writes, “It will no doubt be repugnant to your feelings to hear me talk of buying Men.—It was for a long time revolting to mine, but the heavy Sums we have paid for wages of hired servants, who were generally the most worthless of their kind, rendered it necessary. Out of 8 in our household, 5 are now our property,—2 Men, 2 boys and one woman” (207). This passage illustrates Fenwick’s attempt to resolve the conflict between her former principles of liberty and her participation in the slave system. Her transition to becoming a slaveowner is complicated not only by her personal and political background, but also by her

216 Beckles, *Centering Woman*, 71.
intimate friendships with Hays and other English radicals who objected to slavery. While Fenwick acknowledges that her new role as a slaveowner goes against the radical beliefs that she and Hays once shared, she justifies her actions by insisting on their necessity to her economic survival.

The tensions and contradictions engendered by Fenwick’s contending values, beliefs, and affiliations are also evident in her strong objection to the practice of miscegenation between white men and slave women in Barbados. Expressing her disapproval of the sexual exploitation of slave women by white men and the treatment of slave children, she writes,

It is a horrid & disgraceful System. The female slaves are really encouraged to prostitution because their children are the property of the owner of the mothers. These children are reared by the Ladies as pets, are frequently brought from the negro houses to their chambers to feed & sleep, & reared with every care & indulgence till grown up, when they are at once dismissed to labour & slave-like treatment.—What is still more horrible, the Gentlemen are greatly addicted to their women slaves, & give the fruit of their licentiousness to their white children as slaves. I strongly suspect that a very fine Mulatto boy about 14 who comes here to help wait on the breakfast & luncheon of two young Ladies, our pupils, is their own brother, from the likeness he bears to their father. It is a common case & not thought of as an enormity. It gives me disgusted antipathy & I am ready to hail the Slave & reject the Master. (168-169)

In this and other passages, Fenwick portrays slave women as the victims of white men. In doing so, she challenges the views of pro-slavery writers who depicted slave women as naturally promiscuous and accused them of seducing white men in order to acquire social and material privileges. The Jamaican planter Bryan Edwards, for instance, explains the promiscuity of slaves, female and male, by insisting that they prefer to have multiple sexual partners: “they would consider it as the greatest exertion
of tyranny, and the most cruel of all hardships to be compelled to confine themselves
to a single connection with the other sex, and I am persuaded, that any attempt to
restrain their present licentious and dissolute manners…would be utterly impracticable
to any good purpose.” In contrast to Edwards’ view, Fenwick contends that slave
women are encouraged to prostitute themselves in order to increase the slave population and to satisfy white men’s sexual desires.

Fenwick also critiques the treatment of the mixed-race children born of these sexual unions, who are treated like pets by white women when they are young, only to be forced into a brutal life of field labor when they grow older. The practice of keeping black children as pets became fashionable among upper-class white women not only in the Caribbean, but also in England, as illustrated in various eighteenth-century visual and literary texts, including William Hogarth’s paintings *A Harlot’s Progress*, plate 2 (1733) and *Taste in High Life* (1742). The figure of the pet slave both functioned as a marker of the white woman’s elite social status and served to highlight the beauty of her fair complexion. This is evidenced, for instance, by Janet Schaw’s comments regarding her first encounter with an old friend named Lady Isabella Hamilton in St. Kitts: “When I first entered the great hall at the Olovaze, I was charmed with her appearance…. She had standing by her a little Mulatto girl not above five years old, whom she retains as a pet. This brown beauty was dressed out

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like an infant Sultana, and is a fine contrast to the delicate complexion of her Lady.”

Schaw admires the beauty of the white lady and her exotic pet slave without concerning herself with the consequences of this relationship. This is not so easy for Fenwick, who condemns the cruelty of treating colored and black children with “every care & indulgence” and then forcing them into a life of oppression, exploitation, and violence when they are grown. Fenwick’s objection to the treatment of slave women and children can perhaps be understood as a reflection of her feminist views and her struggles to protect her own children. While she acknowledges elite white women’s complicity in the mistreatment of slave women and their children, she ultimately portrays white women and black women alike as the victims of immoral white males.

While Fenwick’s gender politics allow her to feel some sympathy for slave women and children, her economic interests, which depend on the labor of slaves, ultimately lead her to prioritize race over gender as the determining category of identification. Fenwick’s decision to leave her husband, her autonomous entrepreneurial activities, and her critique of miscegenation can be seen as acts of resistance to patriarchal ideologies and structures; however, within Caribbean plantation society, Fenwick’s feminism does not translate into a belief in universal social justice.

CHAPTER THREE

Religion, Morality, and the Poetics of Resistance in Colored and Black Women’s Narratives

In Chapters One and Two, I examined the representations of gender, slavery, and resistance in autobiographical narratives by middle- and upper-class British women who traveled or lived in the Caribbean during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In this chapter, I explore the religious and autobiographical writing of Elizabeth Hart Thwaites and Anne Hart Gilbert, free colored women who lived in Antigua, and the slave narrative of Mary Prince, a black woman who lived in the Caribbean and England. Elizabeth and Anne Hart each wrote a separate *History of Methodism* in 1804, which document their conversions and the rise of Methodism in Antigua during the eighteenth century. Mary Prince’s slave narrative, *The History of Mary Prince*, published in 1831, chronicles Prince’s life as a slave in the Caribbean and her efforts to establish and maintain her freedom in England. I explore the engagement of these writers with evangelical religious movements in order to explain some of the public ways in which colored and black women were able to navigate the intimate contexts of social ordering. As denominations diversified in the eighteenth century, religion came to function as a domain in which intimacies could be refigured, intensified, and regulated within the Caribbean and the Atlantic world more broadly. Despite its deeply gendered moral codes, evangelical Protestantism took power away from white planters and enabled slaves to create new sites of community-formation. It radically transformed colonial space by proclaiming that the righteous had the right to
traverse borders to spread the gospel; it thus challenged the sovereignty of master and monarch by stressing God's dominion over all humans, including the white planter. Slaves and free colored and black participants placed their own imprint on the emergent religious publics of the colonies. In particular, new religious sensibilities created intimate publics for women slaves, helping them build cross-racial alliances and establish themselves in positions of social authority that were otherwise totally unavailable. At the same time, however, it constrained women’s political speech and social criticism based on highly scripted possibilities for the representations of race, sexuality, and sentiment.

The writings of Elizabeth and Anne Hart and Mary Prince advocate the creation of cross-racial abolitionist communities, while appropriating discourses of domesticity, Christian morality, and liberty in order to subvert and contest the racist views of white colonists. In the narratives I discuss in the prior chapters, these discourses are employed to justify colonialism and slavery. The Hart sisters and Prince repurpose these discourses to highlight the history of violence and oppression suffered by slaves, critique the immorality and indecency of white slaveowners, and portray black women’s resistance to slavery. They simultaneously narrate the importance of unique and life-saving solidarities forged across lines of difference in the face of plantation violence. Their texts make truth-claims based on the immediacy of the narrators to the everyday practices of white masters.

While the writings of the Hart sisters and Prince demonstrate their shared opposition to slavery, their representations of race, gender, and slavery also point to
the ways in which their experiences and perspectives were shaped by their different social and political status in Caribbean society. As members of the free colored community in Antigua, the Hart sisters enjoyed rights and privileges that Prince, a semi-literate black slave woman (and later ex-slave woman) did not share. Since free people of color in Antigua had obtained voting rights, the Hart sisters possessed a degree of political power that was denied to Prince. Their status as free women allowed them to maintain close ties with family, to marry, and to receive an education. In contrast, Prince was separated from her family as a child and was only able to marry and gain access to literacy through the use of stealth and subterfuge. Moreover, Elizabeth and Anne Hart were able to remain in their homeland of Antigua throughout the course of their lives, while Prince was forced to live in exile in England, away from her home and her husband, in order to escape her slave status.

Yet the Hart sisters and Prince also shared some important similarities. All women of color, free and enslaved, faced social and legal discrimination on the basis of their race and gender. Like slaves, free colored people could not hold office, serve as jurors, or act as witnesses against whites. “Illegitimate” colored and black children could not receive money from public funds, despite the fact that the colored and black populations were taxed at the same rate as whites. Moreover, colored and black women were disadvantaged by racial and gender ideologies that portrayed them as dishonest, scheming, and hypersexual.


Ferguson, introduction to *The Hart Sisters*, 4.
In the face of discriminatory ideologies and laws, Elizabeth and Anne Hart and Mary Prince turned to evangelical Protestantism as a means to challenge social and racial inequality. The Hart sisters converted to Methodism while still young and became prominent members of the growing Methodist community in Antigua, while Prince converted to Moravianism while living as a slave in Antigua. 

Through their membership in these religious communities, they formed affiliations with fellow Protestant abolitionists in the Caribbean, England, and other parts of the Atlantic world that empowered them to challenge the authority of the white planter regime. The Hart sisters defied the social conventions of Antigua by marrying white Protestant men and devoting their lives to the education and conversion of black slaves. Prince contested the authority of her last master and mistress, Mr. and Mrs. Wood, by converting to Moravianism, learning to read, getting married, and finally asserting her freedom in England with the help of white abolitionists. By highlighting their participation in transatlantic communities devoted to evangelical Protestantism and abolitionism, the Hart sisters and Prince demonstrate the capacity of solidarities forged within and across social, racial, and national divides to disrupt the violence of the colonial slave system and challenge the power relations on which the system is built.

While evangelical Protestantism provides a vocabulary and institutional setting for the condemnation of slavery and the promotion of multi-racial, transatlantic abolitionist communities, it also circumscribes colored and black women’s resistance

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221 Prince notes that she was led to the Moravian church after attending a Methodist meeting. Interestingly, the Methodist meeting was at the plantation of the Winthorps, who were related by marriage to the Gilberts, the family of Anne Hart Gilbert’s husband. Sandra Pouchet Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 29.
by holding them to strict codes of morality and propriety. The Hart sisters and Prince
counter assumptions of white racial superiority by representing themselves as
morally virtuous women, emphasizing slaves’ spiritual and intellectual capacity, and
critiquing the hypocrisy of white Christians who engage in immoral behavior. At the
same time, however, they implicitly or explicitly condemn forms of black female
resistance that do not conform to codes of Christian morality, particularly the practice
of concubinage. As I discuss in Chapter One, both supporters and opponents of slavery
were concerned by the widespread practice of concubinage in the eighteenth- and
nineteenth-century Caribbean. While pro-slavery writers placed the blame for these
relationships on colored and black women by depicting them as scheming sexual
temptresses, anti-slavery writers portrayed black women as the innocent, morally
degraded victims of white men. Yet, as Jenny Sharpe points out, representations of
concubinage that figure colored and black women alternately as scheming Jezebels or
passive victims fail to account for the ways in which enslaved women, who were often
not in a position to resist their sexual exploitation, manipulated their exploitation to
their own advantage.

Colored and black women who served as concubines gained various social and
material benefits from their relationships with white men. While casual sexual
encounters were generally characterized by violence and coercion, relationships
between white men and colored or black concubines (often referred to as
“housekeepers” or “secondary wives”) were often more formal arrangements

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222 Ferguson, introduction to The Hart Sisters, 11.
223 Jenny Sharpe, Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women’s Lives (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003), xix-xxiii.
characterized by intimate, affectionate bonds. As Barbara Bush notes, “Although without doubt sexual exploitation did exist, many white men from all social ranks had fond and enduring relations with black and coloured women.”\textsuperscript{224} Black and colored concubines fulfilled domestic roles, acting as maids, cooks, nurses, and emotional and sexual companions of the white men with whom they cohabited.\textsuperscript{225} As a result of their apparent faithfulness and loyalty to white men, women who served as concubines have often been seen as accommodating slavery. Yet as Sharpe argues, to characterize these women’s actions as a form of accommodation ignores the fact that enslaved women had extremely limited options: “They could be raped, paid a small sum for their outward ‘cooperation,’ or enter into more formal and long-term arrangements, but there was no position from which they could refuse.”\textsuperscript{226} By engaging in long-term relationships with white men, especially white men who were not their owners, enslaved women could achieve a degree of autonomy and mobility within slavery and could sometimes even escape the slave system. Through their relationships with white men, colored and black women acquired prestige, money, and gifts. In some cases, white men even bequeathed their estates to their colored or black concubines or paid for the manumission of them and their children.\textsuperscript{227}

The texts of Elizabeth and Anne Hart and Mary Prince reveal the widespread Caribbean practices of miscegenation and concubinage, while at the same time

\textsuperscript{225} Sharpe, \textit{Ghosts of Slavery}, 58.
\textsuperscript{226} Sharpe, \textit{Ghosts of Slavery}, xviii-xxii.
obscuring or condemning women’s participation in these practices. Though the Hart sisters breached social and racial conventions through their own marriages to white men, they condemn concubinage between colored and black women and white men as one of the worst evils of slavery. While their praise of women who overcome this form of “prostitution” challenges the claims of pro-slavery writers that colored and black women are naturally depraved, their sweeping condemnation of women who serve as concubines fails to acknowledge the extent of enslaved women’s oppression and the fact that concubinage often allowed them at least a limited form of autonomy within slavery. In contrast to the texts of the Hart sisters, Prince’s *History* does not include any explicit references to miscegenation or concubinage. However, her narrative alludes to her sexual abuse at the hands of her master Mr. White and includes a cryptic reference to her relationship with a white man named Captain Abbot, who apparently offered to help her buy her freedom. By excluding any explicit references to these sexual relationships, Prince’s narrative obscures the ubiquity of enslaved women’s sexual exploitation and implicitly condemns colored and black women’s attempts to exercise agency through acts that transgress Christian codes of virtue and morality. Yet in these processes of distancing themselves from concubinage, the authors maintain other intimacies: those with missionary and abolitionist white reading publics whose authority offered resources for navigating the complexities of kinship, race, and sex.
Missionaries and Slaves in the Caribbean

The texts of Elizabeth and Anne Hart and Mary Prince demonstrate the significant influence of evangelical Protestantism on the lives of Afro-Caribbeans and the complex relationship between religion and abolitionism in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world. The development of evangelical Protestantism facilitated community-formation and cultural exchange, enabling free colored people and black slaves to establish multi-racial, transatlantic networks, acquire education and literacy, and exchange ideas about freedom and equality. Yet despite its liberatory potential, evangelical Protestantism also functioned as a form of social control: by requiring converts to adhere to strict Christian doctrines of virtue, morality, and obedience, Methodist and Moravian missionaries sought to quell slave unrest and forestall acts of rebellion.

The work of Methodist and Moravian missionaries in the Anglophone Caribbean was devoted almost exclusively to the conversion of black slaves. The Moravians were descended from the Unitas Fratrum or Church of the Bohemian Brethren, which was founded in 1457 by a group of Hussites. Moravians were persecuted by the state from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, leading many Moravians to emigrate to other countries. As a consequence, the Moravians were largely unorganized until a small group of them traveled from Moravia to Saxony in 1722 in search of a place to practice their religion more freely. They were allowed to

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settle on the estate of Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, where they established a settlement named Herrnhut (meaning “the Lord’s protection”). Zinzendorf, who was raised a Pietist, became the leader of the Moravians. Members of the Moravian community visited England four times during the next decade, and the first Moravian congregations were established in England in 1742. Yet even before the development of Moravianism in England, the Moravian Church had established its missionary program. The first missions went to the Danish island of St. Thomas in 1732. Though the missionaries encountered initial opposition from the whites on the island, they were eventually able to gain planter support and to recruit large numbers of slaves, accruing a membership of 4,500 by 1770. From the Danish Caribbean islands of St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix, the Moravians expanded their mission to the British Caribbean in the 1750s, establishing churches in Jamaica in 1754 and Antigua in 1756.

Like Moravianism, Methodism also had a strong missionary project. Methodism was an evangelical movement founded by John and Charles Wesley and later led by the Wesleys and George Whitfield. In 1729, the Wesleys established the “Holy Club,” a religious organization at Oxford whose members became notorious for their asceticism and charitable works. The Wesleys led the Holy Club until 1735, when they left England to conduct missionary work for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in the newly established colony of Georgia. By the time John Wesley

returned to England in 1738, Methodism had begun to flourish under the leadership of George Whitefield, who had converted after the Wesleys departed for Georgia and had begun preaching among various religious societies in England.

The Moravians had also begun to establish a presence in England by this time, and a Moravian-inspired group known as the Fetter Lane Society began meeting in London in 1738.\(^{232}\) John Wesley greatly admired the piety and simplicity of the Moravians. He first encountered the Moravians during his voyage to America when he was inspired by their calm faith during a violent storm, and he spent a good deal of time with them while living in Georgia.\(^{233}\) Upon returning to England, Wesley attended meetings at the Fetter Lane Society, during which time he was influenced by Moravian beliefs; however, by 1740, Wesley broke with the Moravians over theological differences. John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield continued to lead the Methodist movement, which saw rapid growth in England, North America, and the Caribbean during the next fifty years. The success of the movement was promoted by the famous open air sermons that Whitefield and the Wesleys gave throughout England and North America, which attracted crowds of up to 10,000 people.\(^{234}\)

Methodism was established in Antigua by Nathaniel Gilbert, a planter, lawyer, speaker of the Antigua Assembly, and major slaveowner. In 1758, Gilbert traveled to England, where he was introduced to John Wesley and Methodism. Upon returning to

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Antigua, Gilbert began preaching to his own slaves and slaves from other plantations who chose to attend his sermons. By the time he died in 1774, Gilbert had recruited 200 primarily black members into his Methodist society. After Gilbert’s death, his work was continued on the island by his sister-in-law Mary Gilbert and by John Baxter, a shipwright and preacher from England who moved to Antigua in 1778.

The Afro-Caribbean Moravian and Methodist populations in Antigua increased rapidly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By 1798, the Moravian church had 11,105 mostly black and colored members. The population of the Methodist church, though smaller, was still substantial and was growing quickly. In 1797, the Methodist population included 25 whites and 2,379 black and colored people, and by 1804, the population had grown to 22 whites and 3,516 black and colored people. The combined number of Afro-Caribbean Methodists and Moravians at the end of the eighteenth century, totaling approximately 14,500, amounted to almost forty percent of Antigua’s population of 33,000.

While the Church of England also had missions in the Caribbean, only a small number of slaves converted to Anglicanism during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Anglican Church tended to reflect the social and racial prejudices of the white ruling class who were its primary members, and it was therefore less accommodating than the dissenting churches to the circumstances and needs of the

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236 Ferguson, introduction to The Hart Sisters, 4.
237 As John William Catron points out, the size of the Protestant population in Antigua is especially impressive when compared to that of the much larger island of Jamaica, which in 1804 totaled only 315 Moravians and 520 Methodists out of a population of 300,000. Catron, “Across the Great Water,” 88-89.
slaves. The church’s failure to accommodate the slaves is evidenced by the fact that most slaves could not afford the expenses associated with membership in the church. For instance, the fees for baptisms and funerals were beyond what most slaves and free colored people could afford.\textsuperscript{238} Moreover, blacks who were able to join the Anglican Church were not accorded equal treatment with its white members. The church, like the rest of Caribbean society, was racially segregated. During church services, free coloreds and blacks could only sit in the back pews, while slaves had to sit in the organ loft.\textsuperscript{239} Blacks were also buried in graveyards separate from whites.\textsuperscript{240} Thus, most black slaves who chose to convert to Christianity turned to the evangelical Protestant churches, which were more welcoming and accommodating.

Though many Afro-Caribbeans had embraced Moravianism and Methodism by the end of the eighteenth century, the missionaries faced numerous obstacles in their early efforts to evangelize the slaves, including opposition from both the white planters and the slaves themselves. Many white planters saw the missionaries as a threat to the social order of Anglophone Caribbean society. In addition to their anxieties about the implications of instructing the slaves in Christianity, many planters felt a strong distrust of the Methodist and Moravian churches, which were regarded by ruling-class Anglicans as disruptive elements in British society. Thus, the planters feared that the Methodist and Moravian missionaries would teach the slaves not only the “Christian virtues of industry and obedience but also that God made all men

\textsuperscript{238} Catron, “Across the Great Water,” 95.
\textsuperscript{239} Mary Turner, Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834 (Kingston: The Press Univ. of the West Indies, 1998), 12.
\textsuperscript{240} Ferguson, introduction to The Hart Sisters, 4-5; Catron, “Across the Great Water,” 95.
Their fears were not entirely unwarranted. Though the missionary societies generally did not condemn slavery, important links existed between the missionary and antislavery movements. As Mary Turner explains, the missionary societies and the anti-slavery movement shared the belief “that the most important single benefit to bestow upon the slaves within the framework of the slave system was Christianity.”

Thus, some leaders of the anti-slavery movement, including William Wilberforce, were associated with mission work. Moreover, some leading missionaries were opposed to slavery, including John Wesley, who wrote in his pamphlet *Thoughts upon Slavery* (1774), “Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air. And no human law can deprive him of that right which he derived from the law of nature.” The missionaries not only faced opposition from white planters, but also from the slaves they sought to convert. That slaves would resist conversion is not surprising. The missionaries’ teachings challenged the slaves’ African religious beliefs, including polytheism and a belief in the supernatural, and denigrated their cultural beliefs and practices, especially the practice of polygamy common to many African nations.

Yet despite the challenges that Christianity posed to the slaves’ way of life, many slaves came to view conversion to evangelical Protestantism as a way to acquire...
greater autonomy within the slave system or even attain freedom from it. By converting, slaves earned the right to attend church, which allowed them the opportunity to connect with other slaves and to establish more positive relationships with whites than was normally possible in plantation society. In contrast to the white plantocracy who treated the black slaves like chattel, the missionaries treated the slaves like “people with souls to be saved, capable of intellectual and moral judgments, and the activities they encouraged were presented in a philosophical framework that posited the spiritual equality of all men.” This belief in the spiritual equality of all men was reflected in the structure of the evangelical Protestant churches, which allowed slaves to achieve status and gain positions of authority within the church. In addition, by becoming evangelical Protestants, black slaves become part of the increasingly expansive evangelical networks in the Atlantic world. Through these networks, slaves gained contact with black and white evangelicals and abolitionists who could offer them assistance and gained exposure to new ideas about natural rights, liberty, and equality.

While conversion to evangelical Protestantism was used by many slaves as a means to resist oppression, it was also used by white planters, missionaries, and abolitionists as a tool of social control. Missionaries taught the slaves that their

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245 Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 47.
246 Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 83-84.
247 In his study of Afro-Atlantic Protestantism, Catron notes the important psychological and material benefits that blacks gained through conversion to evangelical Protestant Christianity: “Becoming evangelical Protestants gave blacks contact with interest groups that could potentially help them. Contact with black and white co-religionists provided a sense of psychic security; contact with abolitionists in Britain gave them hope for eventual emancipation; and contact with the world of ideas gave them the intellectual tools to work for their own freedom.” Catron, “Across the Great Water,” 184.
salvation depended on adherence to the Christian doctrines of duty, obedience, and industry. They preached that in order to be saved, slaves must obey not only the church and God, but also their white masters. In the *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John* (1777), the Moravian missionary Christian Georg Andreas Oldendorp provides an account of the missionaries’ efforts to maintain order and discipline among the slaves. Oldendorp explains that in 1755, three baptized slaves ran away from their plantation. Though the slaves had been provoked to run away by cruel treatment, the missionaries felt it necessary to use the situation as an opportunity to teach the slave community about their duties as Christians. Oldendorp writes,

> It was made clear to the entire congregation that all those who adhere to the teachings of Jesus are thereby duty-bound to endure all kinds of sufferings patiently, without needing any other relief but that brought about by prayer to God, and to remain faithful to their masters. Those who sought to help themselves by running away not only sinned against His holy ordinances, but they also brought shame on their entire religious community.\(^{248}\)

As this example indicates, the missionaries condemned any form of rebellion against the slave system. In general, the missionaries’ emphasis on the spiritual equality of black slaves did not lead them to advocate political equality. Whatever their private beliefs about slavery, missionaries “shied away from advocating emancipation overtly, since they were already regarded suspiciously as outsiders.”\(^{249}\)


\(^{249}\) Ferguson, introduction to *The Hart Sisters*, 8.
Moravian and Methodist missionaries’ use of slaves as “native helpers” exemplifies the function of religion as both a tool of empowerment and a form of social control. Since Moravian and Methodist churches in the Caribbean typically had only a few, if any, white members, white missionaries depended on the assistance of black and colored members for almost all aspects of church organization and discipline. When missionaries were ill or otherwise indisposed, helpers would take over their duties, giving sermons or supervising the choir. They also assisted white missionaries when they evangelized slaves on other plantations. The presence of these black helpers could be crucial to gaining new converts, as slaves sometimes only responded to the message of white preachers if it was confirmed by a “believer from their own nation.” Holding such positions of authority in the church allowed slaves to exercise some power and influence within their communities. At the same time, however, slaves’ positions as helpers contributed to the system of social control put into place by white missionaries. In the Moravian church, black helpers were sometimes recruited by missionaries to serve as “moral overseers” who were responsible for ensuring that the slaves under their authority demonstrated morality and “faithfully performed all the duties they owed their masters.” These helpers then reported to the missionaries on the slaves’ behavior and suitability for baptism and communion. Helpers also assisted with church discipline by bringing disputes

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before the missionaries, who then assigned punishments. Punishments were usually exacted in public and involved various levels of exclusion from the church.  

Through these elaborate systems of discipline, the missionaries sought to allay planters’ fears about the revolutionary potential of evangelical Protestantism among the slaves. Their efforts were, to some extent, successful. By the early nineteenth century, some planters began to recognize the potential benefits of supporting the slaves’ conversion to Christianity. These benefits included improving relations between the planters and the imperial government, which supported the efforts of missionaries to civilize the slaves, and creating more obedient slaves. According to Oliver Furley, some planters “found that Moravian converts made more obedient slaves than the others, less prone to rebel; and so by the 1820’s, after the planters had overcome their first prejudices, they liked to have a missionary on the estate and encouraged slaves to attend services.” Yet despite the efforts of missionaries and some planters to use religion as a form of social control, they could not determine how slaves and free colored people who converted to Methodism or Moravianism would interpret and use their new religion. As the texts of Elizabeth and Anne Hart and Mary Prince show, for many black and colored people, evangelical Protestantism became another tool in the fight against slavery.

Elizabeth Hart Thwaites and Anne Hart Gilbert: Gender, Methodism, and Abolitionism in the Atlantic World

The lives and writing of Elizabeth Hart Thwaites (1772-1833) and Anne Hart Gilbert (1773-1833) demonstrate that evangelical Protestant movements engendered a range of intimacies across social, racial, and national borders that worked to disrupt the power structures of slave plantation society. Through their prominent roles in the Methodist society in Antigua, the Hart sisters promoted the formation of multi-racial communities devoted to evangelical Protestantism and abolitionism. They defied social conventions of plantation society by educating and converting black slaves and by marrying white Methodist men. Their writings also challenged the social order of plantation society. Around the year 1803, Reverend Richard Pattison, a British Methodist missionary working on the island of Nevis, asked Anne and Elizabeth Hart to write separate histories of Methodism in Antigua. In 1804, they complied with his request and each wrote a text entitled History of Methodism. Though slightly different in length and content, both texts function as conversion narratives and religious histories. In their histories, the Hart sisters portray themselves as spiritual mothers of Antigua, emphasizing their intimate knowledge of and participation in the development of Methodism on the island. Documenting the history of Methodism enables them to adopt positions of power normally unavailable to colored women and to challenge the authority of white planters and corrupt white missionaries. By taking part in a new religious movement, they displace the dominion of the plantocracy for the dominion of God and portray themselves as his true representatives. They

255 Ferguson, introduction to The Hart Sisters, 28.
construct themselves as the bearers of a new and more perfectly Christian social order, one that is better than the normative colonial order when tested on its own terms.

However, while Elizabeth and Anne Hart use Methodism to challenge assumptions of white racial superiority and to create cross-racial alliances, their histories also reveal that Methodism, and evangelical Protestantism more broadly, circumscribed colored and black women’s agency by enforcing strict codes of morality and propriety. The Hart sisters extol the virtues of Christian marriage, while condemning sexual practices deemed immoral by white missionaries and abolitionists, particularly the practice of concubinage between white men and colored and black women. By denouncing concubinage rather than the slave system that allows such practices to exist, their texts implicitly suggest that the civilization and Christianization of black slaves is more important than their emancipation.

Elizabeth and Anne Hart were from a prominent Methodist family in Antigua. Their maternal grandmother was Frances Clearkley, a free colored woman who converted to Methodism under the ministry of Francis Gilbert, Nathanial Gilbert’s brother. She had probably been freed by Timothy Clearkley, a white man with whom she had a daughter named Anne.256 The Hart sister’s mother, Anne Clearkley, married Barry Conyers Hart, an Afro-Caribbean slaveowner who owned a plantation in Popeshead, near St. Johns.257 According to Moira Ferguson, Hart was considered liberal in his relations with slaves and “took seriously his conflictual role as a

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257 By the early nineteenth century, Barry Conyers Hart’s finances failed and he moved from Antigua to Trinidad in order to rebuild his career.
Hart was not blind to the exploitation of the slave system. He encouraged slaves’ spiritual development by allowing his home to be used as a place for public worship and helped slaves execute their affairs by offering advice and preparing their manumission papers without charge. It is important to remember, however, that slaveowners’ implementation of ameliorative reforms often worked to buttress slavery and reinforce notions of racial difference rather than challenging the slave system. As George Boulukos explains, “Amelioration seems to recognize slavery as a problem, but seeks to solve this problem through reform rather than more extreme measures such as emancipation. The solution it offers, in fact, denies that slavery is inherently problematic by imagining that it can be made acceptable, or that Africans can be understood as suited to it.”

Thus, Hart’s kindness toward his slaves should not necessarily be seen as an indication of racial identification with blacks or of anti-slavery views.

As free colored women born to a slaveowning father, Elizabeth and Anne Hart occupied a complicated position within Antiguan society. The political demands of free colored people overlapped in many ways with those of slaves. However, free colored people also owned slaves, toward whom they often possessed an attitude of superiority. The eighteenth-century historian Bryan Edwards wrote of the free colored people, “To the Negroes, they are objects of envy and hatred; for the same or a greater...

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258 Ferguson, introduction to *The Hart Sisters*, 5.
259 Ferguson, introduction to *The Hart Sisters*, 5.
262 Ferguson, introduction to *The Hart Sisters*, 5-6.
degree of superiority which the Whites assume over them, the free Mulattoes lay claim to over the Blacks. These again, abhor the idea of being slaves to the descendants of slaves.”

While Elizabeth and Anne Hart disapproved of slavery, their texts suggest that they initially felt a sense of social superiority to black slaves. They strove to overcome this, however, and dedicated their lives to educating and improving the lives of slaves.

The Hart sisters transgressed social and racial boundaries through their work with black slaves and their interracial marriages. When their mother Elizabeth Clearkley died in 1785, they took over the responsibilities of caring for and educating their siblings. In 1786, they were baptized in the Methodist church by the famed missionary Thomas Coke. Soon after this, they began teaching slaves to read and providing them with religious instruction. In addition to flouting convention by educating slaves, the Hart sisters challenged colonial proscriptions against miscegenation by marrying white Methodist men. In 1798, Anne Hart married John Gilbert, a white creole from an influential Methodist family. Gilbert was the cousin of Nathaniel Gilbert, the founder of Methodism in Antigua, and was himself a lay preacher. In 1805, Elizabeth Hart also married a white Methodist named Charles Thwaites, who worked as a religious instructor. The Hart sisters’ husbands supported and participated in their work with slaves.

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264 Ferguson, introduction to *The Hart Sisters*, 9; Saillant, “Antiguan Methodism and Antislavery Activity,” 87.
265 Gilbert worked as an accountant for the royal navy dockyard. He was the cousin of Nathaniel Gilbert, the founder of Methodism in Antigua, and therefore had strong ties to the Methodist community. He converted to Methodism in 1794 and became a class leader and lay preacher by 1797.
From the 1790s through the 1830s, Elizabeth and Anne Hart devoted their lives to instructing slaves in reading and Christianity. In 1809, the Hart sisters opened the first Caribbean Sunday school for boys and girls of all races. Opening a school for blacks and whites was viewed with suspicion by white planters, as the Reverend William Box explains:

Many [slave children] came from neighbouring estates; it was the first institution of the kind formed in the West Indies, and was formed at a time, too, when teaching slaves to read was so unpopular and suspicious a measure, that the missionaries were instructed [by the London hierarchy] to avoid it, lest it should prevent their admission into places where they might otherwise be allowed to preach the Gospel.

The disapproval of the white plantocracy did not discourage the Hart sisters from pursuing their work. In 1813, four years after the Hart sisters opened their multi-racial Sunday school, Elizabeth Hart and Charles Thwaites opened a school specifically for slaves. Elizabeth Hart taught two to three hundred children and adults there. In addition, she traveled to neighboring estates to care for the ill and she and her husband held a night school in their home for eighty to one hundred children.

In addition to educating slaves, the Hart sisters performed other forms of philanthropic work aimed at improving the lives of colored and black people in Antigua. In 1816, they founded a society for the orphans and children of “fallen and depraved relatives” called the Female Refuge Society. They gained support for their

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267 They did so partly in response to a prospective issued by Beilby Porteus, the Anglican bishop of London, advocating Sunday schools for slaves. See Ferguson, introduction to The Hart Sisters, 14.
268 Qtd. in Ferguson, introduction to The Hart Sisters, 15.
269 Ferguson, introduction to The Hart Sisters, 17-18.
270 Ferguson, introduction to The Hart Sisters, 20.
society from evangelical British women, who sent money and clothes to support the cause. According to Reverend Box, Anne Hart participated in multiple other charitable institutions, as well, including a Juvenile Association and an infant school, which received support from the Ladies’ Society in London. Through their personal lives and their work, the Hart sisters transcended social, racial, and national boundaries, creating alliances between white, colored, and black evangelicals in Antigua and England.

While Elizabeth and Anne Hart’s education of slaves threatened the social order of slave plantation society, the Hart sisters did not explicitly advocate emancipation. As Ferguson points out, this may be a reflection of the direction of the Methodist Society under the ministry of Thomas Coke, who arrived in Antigua in 1786. Coke was a prominent preacher and missionary who traveled and preached in Sierra Leone, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and throughout the Caribbean islands. Unlike John Wesley, Coke was not an emancipationist. Coke and other influential Methodist missionaries initially subscribed to Wesley’s anti-slavery views. Coke had condemned slavery in North America. When the Methodists broke off from the Church of England and established the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784, the new church adopted an anti-slavery rule that prohibited members from owning slaves (with some exceptions). However, as the demand for cotton increased the need for and value of slaves, Methodist attitudes toward slavery became more lenient. By the early

271 Ferguson, introduction to The Hart Sisters, 18.
272 Turner, Slaves and Missionaries, 7.
nineteenth century, Methodists had repudiated their anti-slavery ideals and practices.\textsuperscript{274}

The Methodist church’s acceptance of slavery is reflected in Coke’s *History of the West Indies* (1808). While Coke views slavery as “contrary to the spirit of Christianity,” he argues that the enslavement of blacks must be accepted as a “manifestation of the mysterious workings of God.”\textsuperscript{275} The enslaved condition of blacks is an anomaly, he contends, similar to that of tornadoes in the natural world: “In both cases we are assured that justice must mark the footsteps of God, in what he does and in what he suffers, though we are unable to trace it in either case. These things ensure to us an after scene, in which the mysteries of the present shall be completely unraveled…”\textsuperscript{276} Coke suggests that missionaries should not concern themselves with slaves’ physical bondage, but should instead focus on their spiritual well-being. Thus, he emphasizes the importance of civilizing and converting slaves rather than emancipating them. He depicts African slaves as savage heathens who are governed solely by their passions prior to being civilized by white missionaries.\textsuperscript{277} Therefore, he

\textsuperscript{274} Matthews, *Slavery and Methodism*, 22.
\textsuperscript{275} Thomas Coke, *A History of the West Indies, Containing the Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History of Each Island*, vol. 1 (Liverpool, 1808), 38. See also Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 8.
\textsuperscript{277} Coke writes of the African slaves prior to their conversion, “Lost in an abyss of iniquity, the feelings by which these negroes were governed, were little more than mere animal sensations. The violence of their passions, and their habitual indulgence of them, must have nearly smothered the internal dictates of their consciences, and reduced every emotion of the soul to one common level, and melted all into one general mass. Unable to discriminate between perceptions which through their habits of iniquity were apparently allied, though in themselves distant and remote, they were incapable of analyzing their thoughts. Their ideas were few, and bounded by narrow confines; the gratification of their inclination seemed to encircle all.” Coke, *A History of the West Indies*, 30.
argues that slaves have little to regret in being taken from their homes in Africa “since they have found a more than ample compensation for all in God.”

Given the fact that most whites in Antiguan society, including many white missionaries, either supported or accepted the enslavement of blacks, it is not surprising that Elizabeth and Anne Hart did not openly advocate emancipation. However, Elizabeth Hart privately expressed her opposition to slavery in a letter to a male friend written on October 24, 1794. While her friend has not been identified, the contents of her letter suggest that he did not live in the Caribbean and therefore had no first-hand knowledge of slavery. In the letter, Hart explains that she feels it necessary to suppress her anti-slavery views because they would be disapproved of by most other people: “I have never declared my sentiments so freely to any person (except my sister) as to you on this head. I find none disposed to receive such hard sayings; and why? Because they are not disinterested, self is concerned; and as I cannot, to please the best and wisest, lower the standard of right, or bend a straight rule to favour a crooked practice, I am, for the most part, silent.” Hart acknowledges that her anti-slavery sentiment would anger those who support slavery out of self-interest, although her letter does not indicate whether she was prompted by fear or by a sense of female propriety to withhold her views.

Though Hart felt compelled to suppress her anti-slavery views in public, her private letter contains a strong indictment of slavery. She refutes the popular pro-slavery argument that black slaves in the Caribbean are better off than poor white

278 Coke, A History of the West Indies, 35.
Europeans by pointing out that although both groups are subject to oppression, poor Europeans have “laws made to redress their personal injuries,” while slaves are denied legal protection. In addition, she argues that poor Europeans are able to enjoy familial connections, while slaves are separated by force from their loved ones. Hart writes,

> It appears to me that pains are taken to prevent, or break, the nearest alliances, often in times of sickness and distress, and sometimes from the basest views….I know several [slaves] who have been mothers of ten children, who never had the satisfaction to call one their own; and this, not from the hand of death, or separation by mutual consent; but sold, given away, or otherwise disposed of, according to the will of man.

Hart depicts the separation of slave families as one of the worst evils of slavery. She particularly laments the fact that slave mothers and children are torn apart for the sake of profit. While her arguments are common to abolitionist texts, she does not support them by simply repeating anecdotes she has heard, but instead asserts her authority as an eyewitness to slavery. Throughout her letter, she repeatedly uses the phrases “I know” and “I saw,” asserting her knowledge of slavery against the ignorance of her friend, and by extension, anyone who has not witnessed slavery first-hand. Yet while she claims to know the truth about slavery, she declines to describe the worst aspects of the institution: “Now, Sir, I have only given you a specimen of the situation of the slaves in this part of the world. It does not suit me to say the worst I know concerning it: only I assure you it comprises a mystery of iniquity, an endless list of complicated

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ills, which it is not likely you will ever know.” The details that Hart chooses to omit presumably have to do with the physical and sexual violence perpetrated against slaves. Even in her private letter, her adherence to notions of female propriety influences her representation of slavery. Yet, though she refrains from describing the “complicated ills,” she again asserts her authority by claiming to have an intimate knowledge of slavery, the most troubling aspects of which her male friend will probably never know.

While the Hart sisters do not explicitly condemn slavery in their religious writings, they challenge the authority of white planters and contest derogatory stereotypes of colored and black people. In Anne Hart’s History of Methodism, written on June 1, 1804, Hart takes ownership of the Methodist church, asserting her spiritual authority against the authority not only of the white plantocracy, but also of corrupt white spiritual leaders. She explains that when she and her husband moved from St. Johns to English Harbor, she found a small society of colored and black people who had remained faithful to Methodism and continued to hold prayer meetings despite the fact that they lacked a preacher and a permanent place in which to gather and that few of them could read. Hart states that in addition to these disadvantages, the efforts of the colored and black people to establish a strong Methodist community in English Harbour were “thrown back at different times by the scandal which was brought upon religion” by corrupt white apostates. She critiques the immorality of these and other white missionaries who fail to adhere to the doctrines and rules of Wesleyan

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283 Anne Hart Gilbert, History of Methodism, in The Hart Sisters, ed. Ferguson, 72.
Methodism. At the same time, she highlights her rigorous morality and piety and suggests that her status as a colored woman allows her access to the colored and black people who have grown suspicious of white missionaries: “My complexion exempted me from those prejudices & that disgust which the instability of their white Brethren had planted in their hearts & they tremblingly ventured to receive us as friends.”

Thus, she undermines assumptions of white racial superiority by asserting her spiritual equality with whites.

Anne Hart emphasizes the importance of Afro-Caribbean women’s contributions to the development of Methodism in Antigua not only by recording her own role as a religious leader, but also by chronicling the religious work of other black women. For example, Hart praises the efforts of Mary Alley and Sophia Campbel, black women who took over as temporary leaders of the Methodist church after Nathaniel Gilbert’s death in 1774 and kept the Methodist faith alive in Antigua until a new preacher, John Baxter, arrived. By highlighting colored and black women’s virtuous leadership in the Methodist church, Hart contests stereotypes of colored and black women as immoral, scheming, manipulative, and lazy. Indeed, her History suggests that colored and black women are among the most dedicated and hardworking Methodists in Antigua.

Yet while the Hart sisters’ philanthropic work and writing indicates their desire to improve the lives of slaves and suggests that they were opposed to slavery, their histories indicate some ambivalence toward slaves. Their subscription to Eurocentric

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Christian views leads them to denigrate African culture and religion. Like Thomas Coke and many other white missionaries, Anne and Elizabeth Hart portray slaves as heathens who must be saved.

Anne Hart suggests that slaves’ conversion to Methodism challenges the authority of the plantocracy by diminishing the cultural and intellectual differences between white planters and black slaves. In doing so, however, she reinforces views regarding the inferiority of African cultural and religious practices. She writes,

The great civilization of the Slaves, their gradual emergence, from the depths of ignorance & barbarism, has imperceptibly had an over-awing effect upon the System of tyranny & cruel oppression that was formerly exercised over them with little or no restraint when they differed in so few respects from the Beasts that perish; And as a natural consequence, those that are set over them feel more cautious in dealing with rational creatures than they did with beings imbruted in ev’ry way both body & mind.  

Hart recognizes that the education and conversion of slaves threatens the power relations of Caribbean plantation society. She portrays Methodism as a tool of resistance for slaves by arguing that their conversion prevents whites from exercising tyrannical authority over them. Yet by emphasizing the slaves’ emergence from “ignorance & barbarism,” she also reinforces Eurocentric views regarding the inferiority of African culture and religion that were used to justify Africans’ enslavement. Indeed, by comparing “uncivilized” slaves to brutes, Hart implies that cultural assimilation and conversion are necessary preconditions of emancipation.

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287 As Sandra Pouchet Paquet notes, the Hart sisters’ devotion to the Bible and to literacy “gave new impetus to Europeans’ sweeping rejection of African and African Caribbean cultures as pagan and barbaric. If the African convert was the equal of the European in the new religious order, ancestral Africa and African-derived customs were rejected as signs of ungodliness, ignorance, superstition, and sin.” Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography*, 23.
However, Hart’s disparaging remarks about Africans’ culture and religion are not intended to prove their inherent cultural and intellectual inferiority. Rather, Hart challenges notions of innate racial difference by insisting that Africans’ “ignorance & barbarism” is a reflection not of their natural character, but of their lack of education and opportunities. She also challenges notions of racial difference by claiming that whites as well as blacks lacked true religion before the arrival of missionaries in Antigua: “In respect of religion, all were equally & grossly dark, excepting one family & two or three others. A few, & but a few of white, colour’d & black people had some form of Godliness.”

Hart portrays the Caribbean as a site of moral corruption in which whites and blacks lived in sin until being civilized by missionaries. Her assertion that people of all races lacked religious piety before the arrival of missionaries undermines European assumptions of moral superiority.

In addition to emphasizing slaves’ spiritual growth, Hart stresses their desire and capacity for intellectual development and literacy. Since the Renaissance, literacy was seen as a sign of reason. In the seventeenth century, writers such as Sir Francis Bacon and Peter Heylyn distinguished between white Europeans and people of color on the basis of their supposed capacities for the arts. In his *Little Description of the Great World* (1631), Heylyn contends that blacks lack “the use of Reason which is peculiar unto man; [they are] of little Wit; and destitute of all arts and sciences; prone to luxury, and for the greatest part Idolators.” Over a hundred years later, this argument was given greater force by the influential Enlightenment philosopher David

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Hume. In his essay “Of National Characters” (1748), Hume asserted the “natural”
intellectual inferiority of blacks:

I am to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men
(for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the
whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion
than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or
speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them no arts, no
sciences…In Jamaica, indeed they talk of one negro as a man of parts
and learning; but ‘tis likely he is admired for very slender
accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly.290

The “negro” to whom Hume refers is Francis Williams, a Jamaican born around the
turn of the eighteenth century who was sent to school in England by the Duke of
Montagu as an experiment to see if blacks were capable of intellectual development.
Williams attended grammar school in England and then studied at Cambridge
University. After returning to Jamaica, he became known for composing odes in Latin
to successive governors of the island.291 Williams and other literate blacks
demonstrated that the general lack of literacy among black slaves was due to their
circumstances rather than a lack of intelligence. However, Hume refused to believe
that Williams had demonstrated true intelligence or literacy, claiming that he “was no
more than a parrot who had merely learned to mimic the discourse of his master.”292

Hume’s suggestion that black literacy is merely a form of mimicry was later used by
the Jamaican planter and historian Edward Long as evidence to support his theory of
polygenesis. Like Heylyn and Hume before him, Long argues in his History of
Jamaica (1774) that black Africans have no arts or sciences and lack the capacity for

290 Qtd. in Davis and Gates, introduction to The Slave’s Narrative, xxv.
291 Salih, introduction to The History of Mary Prince, xv.
292 Salih, introduction to The History of Mary Prince, xv-xvi.
literacy. For Long, blacks’ supposed lack of learning and literacy was proof not only of their intellectual inferiority to whites, but of their lack of humanity.293

Anne Hart challenges these views by affirming slaves’ humanity and rationality. She states of the black slaves in Antigua,

There is in all a thirst for knowledge. The greater part of those that can afford it get themselves taught to read & some to write also. There are hundreds of black & coloured children sent to school every year in this little Island; and the great change wrought in the manners & condition of all people of this description is beyond any thing that could have been expected and such as nothing could effect but the wisdom & power of God.294

By emphasizing slaves’ desire to learn and their acquisition of literacy, Hart challenges depictions of slaves as inherently lazy and unintelligent. Her assertion that education positively influences slaves’ manners and condition underscores the influence of environment and education on character.

Hart’s emphasis on slaves’ improved manners can be read not only as an effort to challenge pro-slavery arguments regarding the natural inferiority of slaves, but also as an attempt to allay planters’ fears about the revolutionary potential of Methodism among slaves. Teaching slaves to read was seen as a threat to the social order because many slaves perceived literacy as a vehicle to freedom and political rights. Slave narratives often emphasize the narrator’s achievement of learning to read and write in spite of tremendous obstacles and link the narrator’s newly acquired literacy to his or


her attainment of freedom. Though the Hart sisters did not openly advocate emancipation, their efforts to instruct slaves in reading and Christianity were no doubt seen as promoting social and political equality.

The Hart sisters’ histories demonstrate that the development of evangelical Protestantism in the Atlantic world facilitated the establishment of multi-racial religious and abolitionist communities and produced new opportunities for colored and black people, free and enslaved. However, their texts also reveal that Methodism circumscribed the agency of colored and black women. While the Hart sisters challenge some derogatory stereotypes about colored and black women, their strong condemnation of the practice of concubinage reinforces the view that women who engage in sexual relationships outside of Christian marriage are morally and sexually depraved.

In her History, Anne Hart celebrates the fact that colored women in Antigua have begun to refrain from serving as concubines: “I see with heart-felt joy that prostitution is now esteemed abominable & disgraceful by the greater part of the Colour’d Women in St Johns where the great bulk of them reside; and lawful alliances take place as frequently among them as among the whites.” By portraying concubinage as nothing more than a form of prostitution, she opposes it to Christian

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295 James Olney uses Douglass’s narrative as an example of the representation of literacy as a necessary step toward freedom. Olney writes, “The full title of Douglass’ book is itself classic: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself. There is much more to the phrase “written by himself,” of course, than the mere laconic statement of fact: it is literally a part of the narrative, becoming an important thematic element in the retelling of the life wherein literacy, identity, and a sense of freedom are all acquired simultaneously and without the first, according to Douglass, the latter two would never have been.” James Olney, “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature,” in The Slave’s Narrative, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 156.

296 Hart Gilbert, History of Methodism, 73.
marriage, which she sees as the only legitimate domestic relationship. While Hart challenges depictions of colored women as naturally depraved, she nevertheless reinforces the view that women who “choose” to engage in sexual practices outside of marriage are immoral. This is especially problematic since “consent” was highly mediated by the social circumstances in which black women found themselves.\(^{297}\)

Elizabeth Hart also includes a condemnation of concubinage in her *History of Methodism*, written on May 5, 1804. Focusing on the roles of female slaves as concubines, she writes,

> You know, Sir, that very, very few are brought up with any sense of decency or regard to reputation, with respect to the forming of their connections they are obliged to be governed more by convenience than affection and being bound by no Laws human or divine, their engagements are easily broken. It is mostly the case that when Female Slaves are raised to wealth, and consequence (may I not say respectability) it is by entering into that way of Life, that cause women in another sphere to fall into disgrace and contempt, I mean concubinage. Of this you have many instances.\(^{298}\)

While Anne and Elizabeth Hart both portray women who participate in concubinage as morally and sexually depraved, they do not hold colored and black women entirely accountable for this practice. Anne’s emphasis on colored women’s rejection of concubinage in favor of Christian marriages demonstrates their moral and spiritual growth and implies that their previous willingness to act as “prostitutes” was due to a lack of guidance and knowledge rather than an inherent lack of morality. Elizabeth makes this point more explicitly when she claims that most female slaves were not

\(^{297}\) As Saidiya Hartman argues, “Choice is a legal entitlement beyond the scope of the enslaved, who are reduced to chattel, unprotected by law, and ‘entirely subject to the will of another.’” Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 110.

\(^{298}\) Hart Thwaites, *History of Methodism*, 96.
brought up with a “sense of decency or regard to reputation.” In addition to critiquing slaves’ upbringing, she implies that their enslaved condition prevents them from forming lasting bonds. Though she does not explicitly mention the separation of slave families, her comment that slaves “are obliged to be governed more by convenience than affection” implies that the frequent separation of slave families interferes with the possibility of forming loving and lasting bonds, thus propelling female slaves into the disgraceful practice of concubinage.

Yet while the Hart sisters challenge narratives that figure colored and black women as inherently sexually depraved, their condemnation of sexual practices that do not adhere to Christian values ignores the important fact that many colored and black women were not in a position to refuse their sexual exploitation by white men and that concubinage often allowed women to gain some autonomy and mobility within slavery. Anne Hart applauds colored women for choosing marriage over concubinage. Yet when enslaved women and men married, they were often separated. Given the difficulty of forming and maintaining slave families, the vulnerability of colored and black women to sexual exploitation by white men, and the benefits that women of color could acquire through concubinage, their decision to serve as concubines is understandable. Moreover, the Hart sisters refuse to recognize that Christian marriage is not the only legitimate form of intimacy. As Barbara Bush and Jenny Sharpe point out, concubinage was often a formal, long-term arrangement that, while no doubt involving unequal power relations, could also be characterized by affectionate bonds. Sharpe explains that concubinage “was not a sexual transgression against domestic
life” as abolitionists and missionaries claimed, but was instead “part of a normative West Indian domesticity in which slave women served in such intimate capacities as the surrogate mothers of white children, secondary wives of white men, and mothers of their mixed-race children.” By failing to recognize concubinage as a practice that provides benefits for enslaved women that they would otherwise be denied, the Hart sisters obscure an important aspect of slave society and circumscribe the agency of colored and black women.

Elizabeth Hart Thwaites and Anne Hart Gilbert challenged the norms and ideologies of slave plantation society through their marriages to white Methodist men, their education and conversion of slaves, and their personal and religious writings. Through their lives and their work, they advocated the forging of multi-racial and transatlantic communities devoted to anti-slavery activity. However, their writings demonstrate that while membership in the Methodist community enabled free colored people and black slaves to resist racial inequality and oppression, it also circumscribed the agency of colored and black women. By positing Christian marriage as the only legitimate form of sexual relationship, Elizabeth and Anne Hart denounce all non-heteronormative forms of sexuality, including non-monogamous sex, casual sex, and homosexuality. Their texts thus critique the actions of enslaved women such as Mary Prince who used their sexuality as a means of navigating the social constraints placed on them by the slave system.

Slavery, Evangelicalism, and the Limits of Black Female Resistance in
The History of Mary Prince

Mary Prince’s slave narrative, *The History of Mary Prince*, published in 1831, was the first life story of a black woman and female ex-slave published in England. Prince’s *History* presents a vivid first-hand account of the violence that she and other slaves experience at the hands of white slaveowners in the Caribbean. It contests the dehumanization of black slaves by emphasizing slaves’ feelings and suffering. While Prince’s narrative focuses on the forms of domination and violence that constitute the slave system, it also portrays Prince’s intimate, everyday acts of resistance against slavery and highlights the importance of unique and life-saving solidarities forged across lines of difference in the face of plantation violence. By depicting moments of cross-racial female solidarity and highlighting her relationships with white abolitionists, Prince advocates the forming of alliances across racial and national divides.

Prince’s narrative and the supplementary material that accompanies it also demonstrate the important ways in which evangelical Protestantism shapes Prince’s life and her self-representation. Prince’s account of her conversion and her membership in the Moravian Society emphasizes slaves’ capacity for spiritual growth and demonstrates how evangelical Protestantism could function as a site of resistance to slavery. At the same time, however, her *History* reveals that evangelical Protestantism constrained the actions and self-representation of colored and black women by requiring them to adhere to codes of Christian morality and propriety.
Prince was born in Brackish Pond, Bermuda in 1788. During the course of her life, she lived and worked in Bermuda, Antigua, Turks Island, and finally England. She had multiple different masters and mistresses, most of whom she depicts in the narrative as cruel and violent. While much of the History is devoted to exposing the evils of slavery and the extreme suffering that Prince and other slaves endure at the hands of cruel white masters and mistresses, it is also a narrative of resistance. Prince records the numerous ways in which she resists the control of her owners and the system of slavery in general. While living in Antigua, Prince defied the authority of her owners, the Woods, by converting and joining the Moravian church without their permission. Soon after, she met Daniel James, a free black man, whom she later married, again without the permission of her owners. In 1828, she left her home and her husband for what she thought was a temporary trip to England with the Woods in hopes of finding a cure for her rheumatism. After being continually mistreated by the Woods while in England, Prince left their home and claimed her freedom.

After leaving the Woods, Prince sought out the help of Christian missionaries in London, who referred her to the Anti-Slavery Society in Aldermanbury. She was advised by the Anti-Slavery Society’s lawyer George Stephen that there was no legal means of forcing her owner John Wood to manumit her and that without a formal manumission, she would forfeit her freedom if she returned to Antigua. For the next year, Prince lived with a black couple named Mr. and Mrs. Mash who she met while working for the Woods and with a white woman named Mrs. Forsyth for whom she worked as a charwoman. When Mrs. Forsyth moved away in 1829, Prince again
sought help from the Anti-Slavery Society, and in November of that year she was employed as a domestic servant by Thomas Pringle, the Society’s secretary, and his wife. In 1831, Prince dictated her life story to Susanna Strickland, a friend of the Pringles, which was edited and published by Thomas Pringle. Three editions of the narrative were published that same year.

Though Prince managed to escape from slavery while in England, her newfound “freedom” was highly circumscribed. While slavery was not officially abolished in the British empire until 1834, the practice of slavery had effectively ended in England by the 1790s as a result of slaves’ self-emancipation and legal cases concerning the status of slaves in England. In the most famous of these cases, the Somerset Case of 1772, Chief Justice Mansfield ruled that a slave could not be forcibly transported out of England. Though Mansfield intentionally avoided addressing the legality of slavery in England, his ruling was widely misunderstood to have abolished slavery in England. This belief contributed to the demise of slavery in England, as slaves increasingly asserted their right to freedom by running away. However, since England and the colonies were under different legal jurisdictions, slaves’ ability to remain free was contingent on their remaining in England. This phenomenon was exemplified by the case of Grace Jones, a domestic slave who was brought from Antigua to England by her owner Mrs. Allen in 1822, but returned to slavery in Antigua the following year. Customs officers thought her re-enslavement

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300 Thomas Pringle was a Scottish poet who lived in South Africa for six years prior to joining the Anti-Slavery Society. Upon returning to England in 1826, he took up the cause of anti-slavery. After publishing an article on the South African slave trade in the *New Monthly Magazine* in October 1826, he became involved in abolitionist circles, and in 1827, he became secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society. Salih, introduction to *The History of Mary Prince*, xxiii-xxiv.
was illegal, and the case was taken to the High Court of Admiralty in 1827, where Lord Stowell ruled that although Jones had been free in England, she had forfeited her freedom upon returning to Antigua.\textsuperscript{301} Prince was thus forced to choose between remaining in exile as a “free” woman or returning to her home and her husband in Antigua as a slave. Prince’s freedom was constrained not only by the necessity of remaining in England, but also by the difficulty of supporting herself there. Her status as a black woman and her failing health severely limited her employment opportunities in England. Publishing her life story thus fulfilled two functions: allowing Prince to speak out against the evils of slavery and providing her with a source of income.\textsuperscript{302}

Like the eighteenth-century narratives of Olaudah Equiano and Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Prince’s History provides first-hand evidence of the brutalities of slavery. Yet, as Sarah Salih notes, “Unlike Gronniosaw and Equiano, whose texts announce on the title page that they are ‘narrated by themselves’, the History is not a straightforward autobiography, but a collection of texts.”\textsuperscript{303} Thomas Pringle published Prince’s narrative with an elaborate textual apparatus, including a preface, a sixteen-page editorial supplement, an appendix, and another brief slave narrative entitled

\textit{Narrative of Louis Asa-Asa, a Captured African}. Thus, while the History allows

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\textsuperscript{302} In the Preface to the History, Pringle states that “any profits that may arise from the sale will be exclusively appropriated to the benefit of Mary Prince herself.” Thomas Pringle, preface to \textit{The History of Mary Prince}, 4. \\
\textsuperscript{303} Salih, introduction to \textit{The History of Mary Prince}, xiii.
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Prince to tell her own story, that story is mediated by white evangelical abolitionists, namely Strickland and Pringle.

Pringle’s supplement chronicles the circumstances surrounding his publishing of Prince’s text and the controversy that followed its publication. In November 1831, James MacQueen, the editor of the *Glasgow Courier* and a pro-slavery campaigner, published an article in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in which he attacked the morality of Prince, Pringle, and abolitionists in general and challenged the veracity of Prince’s text. Pringle brought a libel suit against Thomas Cadell, the publisher of *Blackwood’s*, in February 1833 and won. In response, Prince’s previous owner Mr. Wood sued Pringle for libel in March 1833 and won. Both cases were reported in *The Times*.

The battle between Pringle, MacQueen, and the Woods regarding the truth of Prince’s story and Pringle’s subsequent attempt to authenticate Prince’s narrative through textual apparatus provides useful insight into contemporary attitudes about the morality and intellectual capacity of blacks. As I discussed above, many whites viewed Africans as savages who lacked the capacity for learning and literacy. In response to such attitudes, white abolitionists used a variety of methods to verify the truth and authenticity of texts by black writers. As William Andrews explains, “Slave narratives usually required a variety of authenticating devices, such as character references and reports of investigation into the narrator’s slave past (almost always written by whites), so that the slave’s story might become operative as a linguistic

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act.” Salih notes that Ukawsaw Gronniosaw and Phillis Wheatley underwent verbal examinations by panels of whites in order to affirm the authorship of their texts.306 More commonly, white abolitionist sponsors published slave narratives with supplementary materials attesting to the narratives’ authenticity and veracity. While the inclusion of supplementary material with slave narratives was common, Barbara Baumgartner points out that “the extent of the material accompanying Prince’s narrative is unusual and excessive.”307 Pringle’s inclusion of this supplementary material highlights the precarious position of the black subject, who is not allowed to speak entirely for herself.

The circumstances of the production and distribution of Prince’s History illuminate the complex relationship between white abolitionists and black slaves. Prince’s self-representation was shaped not only by her own interpretation of the events of her life, but also by the agenda of the white abolitionists with whom she collaborated. Her narrative was published as a piece of anti-slavery propaganda and distributed to a wide readership of abolitionist activists. It was especially marketed to ladies’ anti-slavery societies, which distributed texts describing the horrors of slavery “in order to educate their primarily female readers and to sway them toward the cause of abolition.”308 At the sixth annual meeting of the Female Society for Birmingham,
for instance, “the narrative of Mary Prince was recommenced for purchase…to every Lady present.” The society also donated £5 to create a fund to help support Prince.

As an anti-slavery narrative edited by white evangelical abolitionists and intended primarily for female Christian readers, Prince’s *History* adheres to a certain set of social and literary conventions. The narrative highlights aspects of Prince’s life that would have made her sympathetic to Christian readers, such as her religious conversion and her refusal to continue living with a master who is sexually abusing her, while obscuring or excluding those details of her life that her readers might have found troubling, particularly her sexual relations with white men. Prince gave evidence in both trials following the publication of her *History*. At the second trial, she confirmed the details included in her narrative, particularly those regarding the cruelty and violence perpetrated against her by the Woods. She also discussed additional details regarding her sexual life that were excluded from the narrative. She explained that prior to her marriage to Daniel James, she had lived for seven years with a white man named Captain Abbot. The report of her testimony states that “She did not live in the house with him, but slept with him sometimes in another hut which she had, in addition to her room in the plaintiff’s [Wood’s] yard.” Prince stated during the trial that she temporarily left the Moravian society because of her connection with Captain Abbot. She also stated that she was subsequently involved with a free black man named Oyskman, with whom she lived for some time. The report states that Oyskman “made a fool of her by telling her he would make her free” and implies that when he

309 Qtd. in Salih, introduction to *The History of Mary Prince*, xxviii.
310 Salih, ed., appendix to *The History of Mary Prince*, 100.
failed to follow through, Prince left him. Prince claimed that she related all of these details when she dictated her life story to Susanna Strickland, but she did not state who chose to omit them from her narrative.

In her History, Prince distances herself from non-heteronormative practices such as concubinage by idealizing domesticity. Prince’s narrative begins with a sentimental account of her childhood, which she describes as “the happiest period of [her] life” (7). Significantly, this is a period during which Prince lives primarily in the company of women and children, including her mother, her siblings, her mistress, Mrs. Williams, and the Williams’s daughter, Miss Betsey. Prince explains that her father belonged to another owner and that her master, Mr. Williams, was often away at sea or in the Caribbean, where he “reside[d] in other female society” (8). As Baumgartner points out, Prince portrays the relationships between the women and children as one characterized by “strong affective ties.”

According to Prince, Mrs. Williams treated her slaves well, and they, in turn, loved and pitied her. Prince writes, “I was truly attached to her, and next to my own mother, loved her better than any creature in the world. My obedience to her commands was cheerfully given: it sprung solely from the affection I felt for her, and not from fear of the power which the white people’s law had given her over me” (8). Prince depicts the relationship between Mrs. Williams and her slaves as one of mutual affection and sympathy, stressing the fact...

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311 Salih, ed., appendix to The History of Mary Prince, 102.


that Mrs. Williams does not take advantage of her legal power by abusing her slaves. As Jenny Sharpe notes, Prince’s sentimental representation of slavery under her first mistress Mrs. Williams serves to demonstrate that slaveowners are not inherently cruel, but are instead corrupted by the system of slavery, and “reassures readers that slaves are loyal and obedient workers so long as they are treated well.” In this respect, Prince’s inclusion of a sentimental account of slavery in her narrative might seem to indicate a degree of tolerance toward the institution of slavery. By portraying Mrs. Williams as a benevolent mistress whose kindness is rewarded by her slaves’ gratitude and loyalty, Prince seems to suggest that some forms of slavery are better than others and that amelioration is an adequate solution to the evils of slavery.

However, by considering Prince’s account of the relationship between Mrs. Williams and her slaves in relation to the rest of her narrative, it is possible to uncover other layers of meaning. Prince’s narrative illuminates the ways in which power is constituted and challenged through various intimate, everyday practices. While her representation of slavery often highlights the divisions between whites, colored people, and blacks in Caribbean society, her narrative also reveals intimate bonds that cross social and racial boundaries. By portraying sympathetic bonds between a white female slaveowner and black female slaves in the Caribbean, Prince provides her primarily female British readers with an example of cross-racial female solidarity in a society that is hostile to such alliances. Indeed, Prince suggests that Mrs. Williams took a personal risk by showing compassion to her slaves. She portrays Mr. Williams

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314 Sharpe, Ghosts of Slavery, 130.
as “a very harsh, selfish man” and explains that “we always dreaded his return from sea. His wife was herself much afraid of him; and, during his stay at home, seldom dared to shew her usual kindness to the slaves” (8). While Prince only hints here at the violence of white patriarchal rule in the colonies, by depicting the alliance between Mrs. Williams and the slaves, borne out of their mutual fear of the cruel patriarch Mr. Williams, Prince advocates the forging of cross-racial female bonds as a form of resistance against patriarchal and colonial power. In doing so, she encourages the white readers of her narrative to not only sympathize with black slaves, but to act courageously on their behalf.

Although Prince begins her narrative with a sentimental account of the intimate bonds between white and black women and children, the narrative emphasizes the precariousness of bonds of affection within slavery. Indeed, Prince explains that as a child, she was “too young to understand rightly [her] condition as a slave, and too thoughtless and full of spirits to look forward to the days of toil and sorrow” (7). When Mrs. Williams dies, Prince quickly learns what it means to be a slave, as she and her siblings are sold by Captain Williams to different owners. Prince employs the language of sensibility to describe the devastating day that she was torn from her family:

Oh dear! I cannot bear to think of that day, - it is too much. – It recalls the great grief that filled my heart, and the woeful thoughts that passed to and fro through my mind, whilst listening to the pitiful words of my poor mother, weeping for the loss of her children. I wish I could find words to tell you all I then felt and suffered. The great God above alone knows the thoughts of the poor slave’s heart, and the bitter pains which follow such separations as these. (10)
By emphasizing the emotional suffering of mothers and children separated by unfeeling slaveowners, Prince challenges the claims of pro-slavery writers that slaves are brutes incapable of feeling love or pain. Though she attempts to describe her feelings through sentimental language, she suggests that language is inadequate to convey her pain, a pain so deep that it is “unimaginable to all but God.”

Within Prince’s narrative, the sale of her and her sisters marks a critical shift in her development from the “unconsciousness and illusory happiness of childhood in slavery” to a sudden, painful awareness of the brutal realities of slavery. When Prince’s mother is preparing her children to be sold at the market, she equates the sale of her children with death: “See, I am shrouding my poor children; what a task for a mother!” (10). The sale of Prince and her sisters not only signifies the symbolic destruction or “death” of the family; as Prince’s mother clearly recognizes, it also puts her children in danger of a literal death at the hands of cruel and violent masters. This scene demonstrates the violation of motherhood within slavery. Prince’s mother is a figure of sentiment, weeping over the loss of her children, but she is also forced to be the agent of violence as she prepares her children to be sold. Thus, this scene effectively highlights the sadistic nature of slavery, which requires that the slave mother’s love be turned to the economic efficiency of the system.

The forced separation of Prince and her family also signifies a form of social death. In his seminal work *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson argues that

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the social death of the slave occurs as a result of his or her “natal alienation,” or alienation “from all formal, legally enforceable ties of blood.”\textsuperscript{318} Patterson explains that “It was this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of ‘blood’, and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave the relation of slavery its peculiar value to the master. The slave was the ultimate human tool, as imprintable and as disposable as the master wished.”\textsuperscript{319} As this comment suggests, severing slaves from the relationships through which humans create a sense of identity and belonging was one of the primary ways that white slaveowners sought to deny slaves’ humanity.

Prince highlights and critiques the cruel methods that slaveowners use to dehumanize slaves through the use of animal metaphors. Before leaving for the slave market, Prince’s mother sorrowfully remarks, “I am going to carry my little chickens to market” (10). Her comment highlights the role of slave women as reproductive laborers in plantation society. While slaveowners always used slave women’s reproduction as a means of increasing the labor force, women’s reproductive labor acquired even greater importance after the slave trade was abolished, as slaveowners had to rely on “breeding” rather than importing slaves. Prince’s narrative contests the status of slaves as objects of property that can be bought and sold at the owner’s will. Belying the popular claim of pro-slavery writers such as Janet Schaw that slaves lack familial attachments, Prince depicts the common grief felt by her fellow slaves when she and her sister leave for the market: “…my mother called the rest of the slaves to

\textsuperscript{318} Orlando Patterson, \textit{Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study} (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), 7.
\textsuperscript{319} Patterson, \textit{Slavery and Social Death}, 7.
bid us good bye. One of them, a woman named Moll, came with her infant in her arms. ‘Ah!’ said my mother, seeing her turn away and look at her child with the tears in her eyes, ‘your turn will come next.’ The slaves could say nothing to comfort us; they could only weep and lament with us” (11). The sale of Prince and her sisters is depicted not as a private event, but as a communal tragedy shared by all of the slaves in the household. Prince’s account demonstrates the love and affection that slave mothers feel for their children, and the devastation wrought on the slave family and kinship networks by slavery.

This opening section of Prince’s narrative adheres to conventions for abolitionist literature, particularly abolitionist literature distributed by ladies’ anti-slavery societies. As Charlotte Sussman notes, the discourse employed by ladies’ anti-slavery societies, which emphasized feminine compassion for the suffering of slaves, “demanded that the suffering to which sympathetic women were exposed be comprehensible. If British women were to plead for an oppressed figure, that figure was often enough a domestic woman like herself, who had been deprived of domestic happiness.” Thus, abolitionist literature aimed at women readers often focused on the break-up of slave families.

After conveying her mother’s devastation over losing her children, Prince provides a vivid portrayal of her own pain and fear upon being torn from her family:

My heart throbbed with grief and terror so violently, that I pressed my hands quite tightly across my breast, but I could not keep it still, and it continued to leap as though it would burst out of my body. But who cared for that? Did one of the many by-standers, who were looking at

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320 Sussman, Consuming Anxieties, 149.
us so carelessly, think of the pain that wrung the hearts of the negro woman and her young ones? No, no! They were not all bad, I dare say, but slavery hardens white people’s hearts toward blacks…. (11)

Prince again draws on the discourse of sensibility to contest the practices of white slaveowners. Throughout this passage, she describes the physical manifestation of her extreme emotional distress through images of her throbbing and wringing heart. Prince inverts arguments regarding slaves’ supposed lack of sensibility by juxtaposing her grief and terror with the cold indifference of the white merchants and planters, whose hearts have been hardened by slavery. It is not slaves who lack feeling, Prince asserts, but the white slaveowners who ignore their pain.

The indifference of white slaveowners to the feelings of slaves is especially evident in Prince’s depiction of the slave market, where slaves are examined and sold like cattle. Prince recalls being put on display for a group of men who treat her like an animal:

He took me by the hand, and led me out into the middle of the street, and, turning me slowly round, exposed me to the view of those who attended the venue. I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words – as if I could not more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts. (11)

This passage calls attention to the public spectacle of the slave market and the fear and shame of slave women who are subject to the gaze of “strange men.” Prince’s account contests the status and treatment of slaves as chattel that can be bought and sold at the
discretion of their owners. Though as a child Prince is powerless to resist her objectification and commodification by white male slaveowners, her retrospective narrative challenges their authority by disproving assumptions about slaves’ lack of feeling and intelligence.

Prince’s representation of whites’ indifference to the suffering of slaves at the slave market serves as a precursor to the systematic cruelty and violence that she experiences at the hands of her masters and mistresses. At the home of her first master, Captain I—, Prince is pinched, hit, kicked, and repeatedly hung by the wrists and whipped until her skin is raw and streaming with blood. Prince is not only abused by Captain I—, but also by his wife, Mrs. I—, whose brutality is equal to that of her husband. Prince’s depiction of Mrs. I— exemplifies the trope of the “cruel white mistress”:

She taught me to do all sorts of household work; to wash and bake, pick cotton and wool, and wash floors, and cook. And she taught me (how can I ever forget it!) more things than these; she caused me to know the exact difference between the smart of the rope, the cart-whip, and the cow-skin, when applied to my naked body by her own cruel hand. And there was scarcely any punishment more dreadful than the blows I received on my face and head from her hard heavy fist. She was a fearful woman, and a savage mistress to her slaves. (14)

In addition to physical violence, Mrs. I— also subjects Prince to psychological torture, often keeping her awake all night to wash clothes or pick wool and cotton. The cruelty

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321 As Colin Dayan notes, "Slaves were not simply things, nor were they really human. Instead, they seemed to occupy a curiously nuanced category, where animals, humans, and inanimate things juggled for primacy. As a matter of history, these relationships may well have a common element. As we go backward in time, familiar demarcations become blurred; and what now seem distinct—persons and things, animals and humans, or personal versus real property ( chattels and land)—were intimately blended in some much vaguer notion that was neither precisely the one nor exactly the other.” Colin Dayan, The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011), 124.
and violence of Mrs. I— provides a striking contrast to the kindness and benevolence of Prince’s first mistress, Mrs. Williams. Prince’s narrative makes clear, however, that the brutality exhibited by Mrs. I— is not the exception, but the norm in plantation society. Rather than exhibiting the supposedly feminine emotions of sympathy and compassion, Prince’s mistresses seem to derive pleasure from their ability to exercise power over their slaves. By detailing Prince’s abuse at the hands of her white mistresses, Prince demonstrates the degrading effects of slavery on white and black men and women alike. Prince’s description of the “education” she receives from Mrs. I—, which shifts from lessons about her domestic duties to lessons about different forms of torture and pain, highlights the ways in which slavery corrupts white women’s “natural” moral and domestic virtue.

Prince explains that after experiencing five years of abuse at the hands of Captain and Mrs. I—, she is initially grateful when she is sold to Mr. D— in Turks Island; however, she soon discovers that it is “but going from one butcher to another” (20). Mr. D— puts Prince to work in the salt ponds, where she and the others slaves are forced to stand in the salt water for hours every day, causing them to get painful boils on their legs and feet. Yet despite their suffering, they are given no given respite from their labor: “Sick or well, it was work – work – work!” (20). After Prince works

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Moira Ferguson raises the possibility that Mrs. I—’s violence is a consequence of her jealousy over sexual relations between Captain I— and Prince. She notes that Prince “overly repudiates certain forms of sabotage and sexual-social autonomy, yet her continuous inscription of maltreatment by female owners suggests other readings. The sadism of Mrs. Wood and Mrs. I— bespeaks a complex sexual jealousy partly directed at Mary Prince’s implied efforts at a distinctive self-definition.” Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 288. While Prince does not discuss or allude to being sexually abused by Captain I— (as she later does when discussing Mr. D—), Ferguson’s suspicions may be correct. The sexual exploitation of female slaves was common throughout Caribbean plantation societies, and historians often explain the cruelty of white mistresses toward female slaves as a consequence of their sexual jealousy.
in the salt ponds for about ten years, Mr. D— takes her back to Bermuda to work as a domestic slave. While Prince is glad to leave Turks Island and be relieved from the arduous labor of raking the salt ponds, her treatment by Mr. D— does not improve after the move. In both Turks Island and Bermuda, Prince is regularly brutalized by Mr. D—, just as she had been by Mr. I—. The only difference between her two masters is that while Mr. I— used to beat her “while raging and foaming with passion,” Mr. D— is “usually quite calm” (20).

Prince’s narrative suggests that Mr. D—’s violence was not only physical, but also sexual. She explains that “He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked, and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I could not come, my eyes were so full of shame. He would then come to beat me” (24). Though it is likely that Mr. D— was sexually abusing Prince, she only hints at this aspect of her life as a slave. By including only a veiled account of her sexual abuse, Prince’s narrative draws on a convention of sentimental literature. Sentimental novels that contain rape scenes often use devices that preclude representation of the act of rape itself, such as the fainting of the rape victim. This convention allows sentimental writers to allude to extreme violence without explicitly representing that violence. While Prince’s narrative strategy here is different, she nonetheless uses the convention of alerting readers to a scene of sexual violence without providing a graphic representation of that violence. Salih argues that Prince and her abolitionist allies may have glossed over her sexual abuse in order to “spare the prudish sensibilities of potential readers who may
have been to squeamish to face the truth about the sexual exploitation of black women by their white masters.”

Yet Prince’s motive for omitting explicit representations of rape may also have to do with the impossibility of translating the experience of sexualized racial violence for a white female audience. Since Prince cannot fully translate the feeling of being unable to control sexuality through consent or nonconsent in the context of racial slavery, she draws on the affective power of the sense of sexual danger rather than providing an explicit representation of her sexual abuse.

In the process of depicting her own experiences with the violence of slavery, Prince also records the experiences and suffering of other slaves. As Paquet notes, within Prince’s narrative, “Self-consciousness is engendered by consciousness of others. The tortured body of a female slave speaks through and on behalf of the tortured bodies of men, women, and children alike.” By documenting the suffering of slaves such as Cyrus and Jack, two young boys who were constantly beaten and pinched by Captain and Mrs. I—, and Daniel, an old, lame slave who was tortured by Mr. D—, Prince demonstrates the ubiquity of violence in plantation society and the need for the immediate emancipation of all slaves. At the same time, the affection and sympathy that she expresses for other slaves shows how shared suffering can produce affinities among slaves. This is particularly evident in Prince’s story of “Poor Hetty,” a slave woman belonging to Captain and Mrs. I— for whom Prince feels particular affection. Hetty is responsible for much of the household labor, including cooking,

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323 Salih, introduction to *The History of Mary Prince*, ix.
cleaning, caring for the slave children, and caring for the family’s cattle. When one of
the cows gets loose, Captain I—flogs her “till she was all over streaming with blood”
(15). After having a miscarriage as a result of the flogging, Hetty briefly recovers,
only to be repeatedly beaten again. Soon after, Hetty dies from what appears to be
dropsy.325 Prince recalls that “All the slaves said that death was a good thing for poor
Hetty; but I cried very much for her death. The manner of it filled me with horror”
(16). As Salih points out, stories such as this one are similar to the harrowing accounts
of slave abuse reported in the Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter, which were intended to
provoke “a sense of outrage and anti-slavery crusading zeal” in readers.326

The story of Hetty would have been especially shocking to British women
readers, who saw the flogging of slave women and slavery’s interference with black
women’s “natural” roles as wives and mothers as two of the most problematic aspects
of the system. Flogging was a critical issue for women’s anti-slavery campaigns,
especially after a bill for the amelioration of slavery passed by Parliament in 1823
opposed the flogging of women on the basis that it was “unbecoming to a sense of
Christian propriety.”327 As Moira Ferguson notes, “flogging was one of the worst
punishments evangelical women could imagine—especially, but not only, in the case
of females—since it combined absolute control and remorseless abuse of the female

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325 Prince explains that Hetty’s “limbs swelled to a great size; and she lay on a mat in the kitchen, till
the water burst out of her body and she died” (16). This seems to fit the description of dropsy, “a
morbid condition characterized by the accumulation of watery fluid in the serous cavities or the
connective tissue of the body” (OED).
326 Salih, introduction to The History of Mary Prince, xxvi.
327 Ferguson, Subject to Others, 293.
Hetty’s story highlights the horrific consequences of the violence enacted on women’s bodies since the repeated floggings she receives cause her to have a miscarriage and lead to her premature death.

Prince’s depiction of the extreme violence perpetrated against her, Hetty, and other slaves was intended to demonstrate to British readers that the conditions of slavery in the colonies did not improve despite the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. In the first phase of the abolition movement beginning in the 1780s, abolitionists believed that abolishing the slave trade would lead to better treatment of slaves in the colonies since planters could no longer rely on the importation of African slaves to replenish their labor force. The lack of natural increase of slave populations in the Caribbean colonies was largely attributed to the low fertility of slave women, a phenomenon that was explained differently by planters and abolitionists. Planters tended to blame slave women for their low fertility, asserting that practices such as polygamy and long nursing periods interfered with their reproductive capacities. In contrast, abolitionists blamed the slavery regime itself, citing harsh working conditions and the violent physical punishments to which slave women were regularly subjected as the primary causes of low fertility. By the 1790s, as the threat of the abolition of the slave trade loomed, planters were also forced to admit that the violent slave regime was incompatible with a healthy natural increase. Thus, the local assemblies of the islands passed a series of ameliorative legislation aimed at

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328 Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, 293.
increasing fertility and decreasing mortality among slaves.\textsuperscript{330} As Prince’s narrative demonstrates, however, violence remained a pervasive element of slavery in the colonies.

Prince’s representations of the separation of her family and of Hetty’s miscarriage highlight the adverse effects of slavery on the fertility and motherhood of black women. Given Prince’s attention to the issue of slave motherhood, her failure to mention her own lack of children constitutes a significant silence in her narrative. Ferguson suggests that the flogging and other forms of violence inflicted on Prince’s body may have left her sterile, a detail that Prince would have excluded because “[e]xplicit statements linking violence with sterilization would discount her text as suitable evangelical reading material.”\textsuperscript{331} Baumgartner posits an alternative explanation for Prince’s failure to mention her lack of children, suggesting that Prince may have manipulated her fertility by using natural forms of birth control or inducing miscarriage as a form of resistance against slavery. Baumgartner notes that while there is no concrete evidence that Prince manipulated her fertility, her “failure to bear children and the absence of any articulation of a desire to do so” point to this possibility.\textsuperscript{332} Whatever the cause of Prince’s failure to have children, her account of other slave women’s loss of their children through sale or death in combination with her conspicuous silence regarding her own lack of children underscores the devastating effects of slavery on the black family.

\textsuperscript{331} Ferguson, \textit{Subject to Others}, 289.
\textsuperscript{332} Baumgartner, “The Body as Evidence,” 260.
By highlighting the brutalities inflicted on slaves by white slaveowners, Prince’s *History* challenges the pro-slavery arguments that slavery is a benevolent institution and that slaves are suited for and happy in their subordinate position. Prince articulates her desire to expose the truth about slavery:

Oh the horrors of slavery! - How the thought of it pains my heart! But the truth ought to be told of it; and what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave - I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they may break our chains, and set us free. (21)

Prince speaks as a victim of and witness to the horrors of slavery. Though she has escaped slavery by becoming an exile in England, she continues to align herself with other slaves in the colonies. Her narrative is not simply a story of her own life in bondage and her struggle for freedom, but an indictment of the slave system and a call for the emancipation of all slaves. In the above passage and several other points in her narrative, Prince asserts her belief that people in England are ignorant of the brutal nature of slavery and suggests that when they learn the truth, they will demand an end to the slave system.\(^{333}\) Though her plea to the “good people in England” to “break our chains, and set us free” seems to place power in the hands of whites, Prince does not portray black slaves as powerless victims. Rather, her narrative demonstrates the everyday acts of resistance through which she and other slaves oppose their violent oppression. While Prince’s representation of her agency and resistance is circumscribed by the conventions of Christian abolitionist literature, which dictated that slaves be portrayed as moral, pious victims rather than defiant rebels, Prince

\(^{333}\) Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties*, 153.
nevertheless portrays herself and other slaves as active agents in the struggle against slavery.

Prince records her everyday acts of resistance against the physical and sexual abuse she suffers at the hands of her various masters and mistresses. After being repeatedly tortured by Captain and Mrs. I— as a child, Prince runs away to her mother, who hides her in a nearby cavern. When Prince’s father learns that she has run away, he returns her to Captain I—, apparently in the hope of forestalling the severe punishment meted out to recalcitrant slaves. While Prince’s father apologizes for her act of rebellion, he simultaneously censures Captain I— for his cruelty and justifies Prince’s behavior: “Sir, I am sorry that my child should be forced to run away from her owner; but the treatment she has received is enough to break her heart. The sight of her wounds has nearly broke mine. – I entreat you, for the love of God, to forgive her for running away, and that you will be a kind master to her in future” (18). While Prince’s father’s comments have little effect on Captain I— apart from provoking threats of further violence, they seem to encourage Prince’s opposition to her master. Prince states, “I then took courage and said that I could stand the floggings no longer; that I was weary of my life, and therefore I had run away to my mother; but mothers could only weep and mourn over their children, they could not save them from cruel masters – from the whip, the rope, and the cow-skin” (18). Though Captain I— threatens to punish Prince for her defiance, she declares triumphantly, “He did not, however, flog me that day” (18). Prince’s act of running away and her defiant speech to her master suggest that resistance is a natural response to the conditions of slavery.
Indeed, the fact that Prince’s rebellion against slavery begins while she is still a child demonstrates that slave resistance is endemic to the system.

Prince also demonstrates her resistance to the abuse meted out to her by Mr. D—and Mr. and Mrs. Wood. Prince describes her attempts to avoid bathing Mr. D—, which usually resulted in beatings. After one of these beatings, Prince defends herself and condemns her master’s immoral behavior: “I then told him I would not live longer with him, for he was a very indecent man – very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh” (24). Prince presents herself as an innocent and unwilling victim of white male lust, thereby challenging the stereotype that slave women lacked a moral code and were “always amenable to the sexual advances of white men.” Indeed, Prince’s aversion to her master’s “indecent” behavior is so strong that she asks him to sell her to Mr. Wood of Antigua. Though her new owners Mr. and Mrs. Wood turn out to be just as cruel and violent as Mr. D—, the fact that Prince instigates the sale serves as evidence of her personal agency.

Prince’s account of her life with the Woods reveals the daily contestations for power between Prince and her master and mistress, as Prince becomes increasingly resistant to her exploitation and oppression. Though Prince develops painful rheumatism that makes it difficult for her to wash clothes, her main duty for the Woods, she is given little reprieve from her labor and is continually abused, both physically and verbally. Tired of her mistreatment, Prince defends herself:

> My mistress was always abusing and fretting after me. It is not possible to tell all her ill language. – One day she followed me foot after foot

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scolding and rating me. I bore in silence a great deal of ill words: at last my heart was quite full, and I told her that she ought not to use me so; – that when I was ill I might have lain and died for what she cared; and no one would then come near me to nurse me, because they were afraid of my mistress. This was a great affront. (27)

This passage emphasizes Mrs. Wood’s social and moral degradation, evidenced by her abuse and neglect of Prince. By recounting Mrs. Wood’s constant use of “ill language” and her failure to display sympathy for Prince when she is sick, Prince demonstrates her lack of female propriety and sensibility. In contrast, Prince portrays herself as morally virtuous. Though she challenges her mistress’s authority, she does so only after repeated mistreatment. Prince’s reference to her heart underscores her humanity and her capacity to feel pain and suffering; yet it also signifies her strength and her capacity for resistance. Paquet persuasively argues that Prince uses heart as a metaphor for the spirit of resistance that she learns as a child from her family and community: “In Prince’s narrative, conscience and consciousness coalesce in and around the heart. The heart as center of life and value is formulated in childhood. It endures as a self-contained moral guide. It invokes both self-reliance and shared community.” Yet rather than inducing a sense of affinity or sympathy in her owners, Prince’s assertion of her humanity and self-worth seems only to infuriate them and provoke further punishment.

The struggle for power between Prince and the Woods is enacted on multiple levels, from everyday conflicts over Prince’s treatment to a protracted battle over her status as a slave. While still living in Antigua with the Woods, Prince begins saving

335 Paquet, Caribbean Autobiography, 49.
money in the hopes of purchasing her freedom. On several occasions, the Woods order Prince out of the house to look for new owners, presumably with the intention of terrifying her into submission. When Prince takes them up on their threats and finds men willing to help her buy her freedom, the Woods refuse to sell her. Prince’s efforts to earn and save money for her manumission by performing labor outside of the Woods’ household constitutes another form of resistance. Prince explains that whenever Mr. and Mrs. Woods went away from home and left her in charge of the house and property, she “had a good deal of time to [her]self, and made the most of it”: “I took in washing, and sold coffee and yams and other provisions to the captains of ships. I did not sit idling during the absence of my owners; for I wanted, by all honest means, to earn money to buy my freedom” (27). In this passage, Prince emphasizes her resourcefulness, industry, and determination. Despite her bodily infirmities, she takes advantage of every opportunity to earn money for her manumission. In her analysis of Prince’s use of physical pain as a site of resistance, Barbara Baumgartner notes the contrast between Prince’s capacity to work for her own benefit and her incapacity to labor for her owners:

What appears remarkable here, within the context of the emphasis that Prince places on her debilitated body during the time she is owned by the Woods, is her ability to work when she herself is the recipient of the rewards of her labor. While a host of other factors might contribute to Prince’s capacity for work from which she profits, a significant gap appears in the narrative between Prince’s focus on her inability to labor adequately as a slave for the Wood family because of physical incapacitation and her simultaneous capacity, indeed vigor, in working for her own profit.  

Baumgartner suggests that while the labor that Prince performs to earn money to buy her freedom can be seen as a type of resistance, it also points to another more ongoing strategy of resistance employed by Prince, namely, the manipulation of her bodily afflictions as a means of withholding labor from her owners. By highlighting her unyielding desire for freedom and the honest means by which she attempts to gain that freedom, Prince contests the pro-slavery argument that black slaves are naturally indolent and dependent and are therefore in need of the guidance and discipline of whites.  

In addition to depicting Prince’s individual strategies of resistance, the History also reveals the ways in which sympathetic bonds forged within and across lines of social and racial difference could challenge or undermine the slave system. Throughout her narrative, Prince demonstrates the networks of affiliation that exist among the enslaved. The kind, compassionate treatment that Prince receives from other slaves, especially during her childhood, contributes to her capacity for survival and resistance. When Prince first arrives at the home of Captain and Mrs. I—, two slave women offer words of sympathy and support: “Poor child, poor child! They both said; “you must keep a good heart, if you are to live here” (13). Moments such as this illustrate a sense of solidarity and community among the enslaved that challenges

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Many pro-slavery writers comment on the indolence of black slaves. The pro-slavery campaigner William Beckford, Jr., for instance, states that “[i]f negroes be not kept in constant motion, they cannot otherwise fill up an hour of vacation, or the periods of indulgence by any mechanical, or industrious avocation of present or future avail to themselves and families; on the contrary, whether it be from a continual lethargy, or from a vacuity of ideas, they no sooner cease to move, than they cease to think; and four out of five would remain in a continual torpor; unless they were roused by the provocatives of thirst or hunger.” William Beckford, Jr., *Remarks upon the Situation of Negroes in Jamaica*, in *Slavery, Abolition, and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, ed. Peter Kitson (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), 268.
slaveowners’ attempts to reduce slaves to mere objects of property. Saidiya Hartman highlights the importance of slaves’ “very purposeful and self-conscious effort to build community,” while also cautioning against a romantic vision of community that fails to recognize the limits and fractures of community in the context of terror, domination, and death.338 Hartman writes,

‘Community among ourselves’ is an articulation of an ideal and a way of naming the networks of affiliation that exist in the context of difference, disruption, and death. The significance of becoming or belonging together in terms other than those defined by one’s status as property, will-less object, and the not-quite-human should not be underestimated. This belonging together endeavors to redress and nurture the broken body; it is a becoming together dedicated to establishing other terms of sociality, however transient, that offer a small measure of relief from the debasement constitutive of one’s condition.339

The “small measure of relief” offered through identifications and affiliations among slaves is evident throughout Prince’s narrative. For instance, the terror that Prince feels during her first few days in the home of Captain and Mrs. I— is alleviated by the kindness of Hetty. Prince states, “I liked to look at her and watch all her doings, for hers was the only friendly face I had as yet seen, and I felt glad that she was there” (14). In the absence of Prince’s mother, Hetty becomes a surrogate family member for Prince. Prince’s narrative thus demonstrates the importance of the forging of bonds of affection among slaves as a means of restoring “disrupted affiliations.” However, the narrative also underscores the transience of social bonds in the context of slavery, as

338 Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 59-60.
339 Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 61.
Prince’s ties to family and friends are repeatedly severed by sales, migration, and death. 

Prince’s depiction of her bonds with other slaves also functions as an important rhetorical strategy within her narrative in that it serves to remind readers of those who remain in slavery in the colonies. Prince consistently links her accounts of her own suffering to that of her fellow slaves, stating, “In telling my own sorrows, I cannot pass by those of my fellow-slaves – for when I think of my own griefs, I remember theirs” (22). Prince makes clear that the brutalities she endured in slavery are not exceptional, but representative of the experiences of all slaves.

If Prince’s History illustrates the “purposeful and self-conscious effort” of slaves to create community among themselves, it also reveals the importance of unique and life-saving solidarities forged across lines of racial difference in the face of plantation violence. Prince explains that her master Mr. D— not only abused his slaves, but would also often get drunk and abuse his daughter. On one occasion, Prince intervenes in what may otherwise have been a fatal beating: “…I ran as fast as I could to the house, put down the water, and went into the chamber, where I found my master beating Miss D— dreadfully. I strove with all my strength to get her away from him; for she was all black and blue with bruises. He had beat her with his fist, and almost killed her. The people gave me credit for getting her away” (24). In this passage, Prince again advocates the forging of cross-racial female alliances as a form of resistance against white patriarchal violence. Prince’s action, which saves Miss D—
from further violence and possible death at the hands of her father, provides a model of cross-racial solidarity that, according to Prince, is praised by the community.

Prince also describes an instance when her own life is saved by the sympathy and kindness of other women. While living with Mr. and Mrs. Wood in Antigua, Prince becomes dangerously ill with rheumatism for several months. She is left alone to suffer in an old out-house, where she most likely would have “lain and died” were it not for the care she receives from a neighboring woman’s slave:

I got the rheumatism by catching cold at the pond side, from washing in the fresh water; in the salt water I never got cold. The person who lived in next yard, (a Mrs. Greene,) could not bear to hear my cries and groans. She was kind, and used to send an old slave woman to help me, who sometimes brought me a little soup. When the doctor found I was so ill, he said I must be put into a bath of hot water. The old slave got the bark of some bush that was good for the pains, which she boiled in the hot water, and every night she came and put me into the bath, and did what she could for me: I don’t know what I should have done, or what would have become of me, had it not been for her. (25)

This passage underscores the ways in which the intimate, everyday acts of slaveowners and slaves could reinforce, disrupt, or challenge the violence of the slave system. The sympathy and kindness of Mrs. Greene and the old slave woman serves to highlight the cruel negligence of Prince’s owners, Mr. and Mrs. Woods. In contrast to Prince’s numerous accounts of whites’ disavowal of and disregard for the suffering of black slaves, Mrs. Greene’s compassion for Prince’s suffering provides an important example of the capacity of sympathy to cross boundaries of race. While Mrs. Greene’s desire to alleviate Prince’s pain and suffering moves her to send help, it is the old slave woman’s daily care of Prince that provides her comfort and relief and perhaps even saves her life.
Prince’s *History* also demonstrates the ways in which her conversion to Moravianism facilitates her movement toward freedom by enabling her to form intimate alliances across boundaries of race, class, and nation. While living with the Woods in Antigua, Prince attends a Methodist meeting, which leads her to convert to Moravianism: “This meeting had a great impression on my mind, and led my spirit to the Moravian church, so that when I got back to town, I went and prayed to have my name put down in the Missionaries’ book; and I followed the church earnestly every opportunity. I did not then tell my mistress about it; for I knew that she would not give me leave to go. But I felt I must go” (29). While Antigua was considered the heart of Methodism, a large community of Moravians also existed on the island. Mrs. Flanighan, who wrote a history of Antigua, praises the “open-heartedness” of the Moravian missionaries, noting that “Among themselves they are ever kind and courteous, forming, as it were, one large family of affectionate brothers and sisters. They have done much good among the black race, for whose welfare the mission was particularly intended.”340 Prince’s act of converting without her owners’ permission both attests to and enables her increasing defiance of their authority. Her membership in the Moravian church promotes new forms of agency and resistance, as she becomes part of a new multi-racial community, learns to read, and gets married. Prince acquires literacy by attending classes taught by three white Moravian women who teach her

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and other slaves to spell and read the Bible. Soon after this, she meets her future husband Daniel James, a free black man who works as a carpenter and cooper. Prince notes that she would not agree to marry James until he joined the Moravian church, highlighting the importance for Prince of belonging to a community that offers her social acceptance and support. Prince’s insistence that James join the Moravians also emphasizes her piety and morality, important qualities to the Christian sponsors and readers of her narrative. Prince’s acquisition of literacy and her marriage are important forms of personal development that had been forbidden to her prior to her joining the Moravian church. Prince explains that she was baptized in the English Church in 1817 and that she had wanted to attend Sunday School at that time in order to learn to read, but was not allowed to do so without permission from her master. She states, “I did not ask my owner’s permission, from the belief that it would be refused; so that I got no farther instruction at that time from the English Church” (29). Similarly, she notes that she could not get married in the English Church since “English marriage is not allowed to slaves; and no free man can marry a slave woman” (30). Thus, Prince highlights the ways in which her conversion to the dissenting sect of Moravianism bolsters her opposition to slavery.

Prince’s conversion also aids her struggle for emancipation by providing her access to a strong transatlantic network of evangelical Christians. According to Colin Podmore, the Moravians’ extensive overseas missions created a powerful sense of international community: “In the 1740s no other Protestant church in England could

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341 The fact that Prince dictated her narrative to an amanuensis, Susanna Strickland, suggests that she was probably only semi-literate. However, it is also possible that Prince was forced to dictate her narrative because her eyesight was failing, as Pringle explains in his postscript to the second edition.
offer to anything like the same extent this feeling of being part of a single international organization or the opportunity to hear from fellow-members all over the world, for this was the first international Protestant Church." Through her conversion, Prince becomes part of this international community, thereby gaining access to a network of individuals and groups devoted to evangelicalism and abolitionism throughout the Atlantic world. This not only opens up new avenues of assistance and support, but also seems to give her an important sense of security. When Prince travels to England with the Woods, the steward of the ship is from the same class as her husband at the Moravian church and therefore treats her with kindness. Prince takes comfort in his kind and friendly manner, which counteracts the persistent cruelty of her mistress Mrs. Wood during the voyage (31).

Prince’s account of her experiences in England further demonstrates the ways in which her membership in the international evangelical community facilitates her self-emancipation. When the Woods threaten to throw Prince out of the house for the fourth time because she is too ill to complete her work, she finally determines to “take them at their word” and leave (33). She explains that after leaving the Woods’ house, she approached the Moravian missionaries for help:

When I came away, I went to the man (one Mash) who used to black the shoes of the family, and asked his wife to get somebody to go with me to Hatton Garden to the Moravian Missionaries: these were the only persons I knew in England…. The missionaries were very kind to me – they were sorry for my destitute situation, and gave me leave to bring my things to be placed under their care. They were very good people, and they told me to come to the church. (33-34)

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Though Prince does not mention the London Moravians prior to leaving the Woods’ home, her evident belief that she could count on the acceptance and support of the Wesleyan Missionary Society most likely helped her gain the confidence to leave the home of her owners in a strange new country. Moreover, she explains that in the year following her departure from the Woods’ home, she received assistance not only from the Moravians, but also from many other new friends: “…Providence was very good to me, and I got many friends – especially some Quaker ladies, who hearing of my case, came and sought me out, and gave me good warm clothing and money. Thus I had great cause to bless God in my affliction” (36). Prince’s emphasis on the sympathy and benevolence of the Moravians and other evangelicals and on the role of Providence in introducing her to these new friends highlights the importance of religious faith and community.

Like the texts of Anne and Elizabeth Hart, however, Prince’s narrative also reveals the ways in which evangelical Protestantism circumscribed the actions and self-representation of colored and black women. By only alluding to Prince’s sexual abuse and by omitting information regarding her participation in the practice of concubinage, Prince’s narrative elides a representation of the ubiquity of enslaved women’s sexual exploitation by white men and the ways in which enslaved women attempted to exercise agency under extreme conditions of constraint. While we have a very limited picture of Prince’s relationships with Captain Abott, a white man, and Oyskman, a free black man, the available evidence suggests that Prince had hoped to gain certain benefits from these relationships, most notably her freedom. Though
Prince’s narrative does not discuss the nature of her relationship with Captain Abbot, it does mention that she borrowed money from him in order to buy her freedom: “A gentleman also lent me some [money] to help buy my freedom – but when I could not get free he got it back again. His name was Captain Abbot” (27). Contrary to what Prince’s evangelical abolitionist sponsors and her Christian female readers may have believed, her participation in concubinage is not a sign of moral or sexual depravity; rather, it demonstrates her attempt to manipulate her sexual exploitation to her advantage. By excluding this aspect of Prince’s life, her narrative reinforces the view that enslaved women’s participation in non-normative sexual relationships was inherently immoral rather than exploring the meaning and significance of such acts within a system in which enslaved women’s possibilities for action were severely limited.

The narratives of Mary Prince and Elizabeth and Anne Hart demonstrate the complex choices that black and colored women were confronted with when they attempted to carve out public roles in the late phases of the slave system. Religious movements offered new positions of social authority and an entirely new and parallel social order to the plantation and the free colored communities; however, certain aspects of black female experience remained untranslatable in this scenario, particularly the problem of deep constraints on sexual consent imposed by the colonial racial order. These women writers demonstrate the close relationship between discourses of sensibility and emergent possibilities for cross-racial and transatlantic organizing against the abuses of the slave system, as well as diverse forms of everyday
resistance that emerged within plantations and at religious meetings and other sites at which intimate publics formed. They also speak to the work that was left unfinished as new liberal challenges to the plantocracy enforced normative Christian morality upon a Caribbean public that would see increased participation from colored, black, and white women.
CONCLUSION

Women’s autobiographical narratives concerning slavery in the Caribbean demonstrate that colonial power was constituted and challenged not only through formal state structures and institutions, but also through the intimate practices of everyday life. Despite the ways in which women’s lives were circumscribed by patriarchal ideologies and structures, white, colored, and black women played important roles in the contests for power within the slave plantation system. As I have argued, women’s everyday acts within settings such as the plantation, the school, and the church and forging of intimacies within and across lines of social and racial difference both contributed to the consolidation of colonial power and served as the basis for unique forms of resistance to the slave system.

Janet Schaw, Maria Nugent, Eliza Fenwick, Anne Hart Gilbert, Elizabeth Hart Thwaites, and Mary Prince employ discourses of racial difference, sensibility, and religion to assert female agency and to advance their views on colonialism and slavery. In the writings of Schaw and Nugent, sentimental and religious rhetoric works to reinforce notions of racial difference and legitimize slavery. By the end of the eighteenth century, religious, philosophical, and cultural developments contributed to a shift whereby the capacity to feel supplanted the capacity to reason as the defining trait of humans. The literature of sensibility, which rose to popularity in the second half of the century, both reflected and reinforced the importance of feeling as a distinctively human trait. Schaw and Nugent use the discourse of sensibility

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simultaneously to assert female moral authority and to extract slave labor and quell slave resistance. While Schaw legitimizes the violences of slavery by distinguishing between feeling whites and unfeeling blacks, Nugent acknowledges the feelings of black slaves. Yet Nugent’s recognition of the humanity and feelings of slaves does not lead her to condemn slavery; rather, Nugent’s sentimental depiction of slavery as a consensual relation between contented, loyal, child-like slaves and benevolent masters and mistresses reinscribes notions of racial difference and naturalizes black subjection. Moreover, by representing her participation in British empire and slavery as a duty sanctioned by God, Nugent justifies slavery by suggesting that heathen slaves will ultimately be saved through the process of civilization and conversion. Schaw’s and Nugent’s desire to uphold social and racial distinctions leads them to condemn miscegenation and other forms of social and sexual mixing. Yet while they use discourses of racial difference, sensibility, and religion to reinforce difference and hierarchy, their narratives also demonstrate that white women’s proximity to black slaves and other supposedly inferior people created unexpected intimacies across lines of class, race, and nationality that undermined the supposedly rigid boundaries on which the slave system relied.

While Schaw’s and Nugent’s narratives illustrate how the management of sentiment and sexuality contributed to the consolidation of colonial power, Fenwick’s narrative highlights other forms of intimacy through which the colonial slave system was constituted and contested. As a single mother who was dependent on the labor of slaves for her family’s prosperity, Fenwick shared the desire of Schaw and Nugent to
maintain racial boundaries. Despite her intimate friendships with leading English radicals and her promotion of principles of universal liberty in her radical feminist novel Secresy, Fenwick supported colonial slavery after moving to the Caribbean. She seeks to resolve the tension between her affiliations with radicalism and her participation in slavery by using a discourse of racial difference that depicts black slaves as uncivilized and immoral and therefore undeserving of freedom and by depicting her own plight as a laboring single mother as a form of slavery that is worse than that of any black slave. Her narrative underscores the contradictions inherent in Enlightenment discourses of universal rights and liberty, which both depended on and excluded black slaves in the colonies. Yet it also reveals the ways in which slaves challenged their exclusion from principles of universal liberty through forms of everyday resistance and organized revolt that arose both from the proximity of black slaves to white mistresses and masters and through the forging of intimate alliances among slaves.

The narratives of the Hart sisters and Prince appropriate discourses of religion and sensibility to contest notions of innate racial difference and to challenge slavery. Prince uses sentimental rhetoric to evoke sympathy for the extreme suffering of slaves, while both the Hart sisters and Prince highlight their conversions to evangelical Protestantism and their moral virtue and piety in order to assert their spiritual equality with whites. Their status as evangelical Protestants not only allows them to assert moral and spiritual authority within the space of the Caribbean, but also enables them

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to forge cross-class and cross-racial alliances with fellow evangelicals and abolitionists throughout the Atlantic world. Yet while evangelicalism aids the Hart sisters and Prince in their fight against racial inequality and oppression, it simultaneously circumscribes colored and black women’s agency and resistance by condemning practices such as concubinage that do not adhere to Christian codes of morality.

Prince’s narrative, more than any I have discussed in this study, demonstrates the many valences of intimacy that straddled notions of private and public, slave and free, individual and group in the formation of Atlantic publics in the Age of Revolution. Intimacies cannot simply be equated with privacy, but instead blur the boundary between the private and the public as they both bind individuals in solidarity across space and time and produce intricate forms of constraint and exploitation. Prince’s narrative represents the violences of everyday plantation labor through which slaves developed forms of collective care and resistance, even if she was ultimately unable to narrate the complexities of sexuality. Sexuality, both as intimate violence and as the potential for black women’s desire, was unrepresentable within the gendered moral constraints of the British Christian abolitionist audience. Yet Prince’s very act of self-representation gestures to where some intimacies could be consolidated even as others were disavowed. The very intimate act of dictating her story to a British woman, followed by the Anti-Slavery Society’s dissemination of her narrative through women’s abolitionist reading groups, involved forging new intimate publics that crossed racial and geographic lines, brought individuals together into a
shared sense of communion, and appealed to the spiritual and moral force accorded
the figure of the human. If Charlotte Sussman has described white women’s writing as
creating problematic and constrained discursive spaces for anti-slavery activism by
subsuming the violences of empire into a transhistorical, global figure of “woman,”
we can begin to understand how Prince’s narrative signals the ways in which the
diverse content of representations of intimacy ended up colliding with the constrained
forms available for expressing intimacy as a distinctively liberal ordering of bodies
inside and outside the home.

This is not to say that women’s autobiographical writings on slavery were so
constrained as to allow no complexity. The texts of Schaw, Nugent, Fenwick, the Hart
sisters, and Prince depict their everyday encounters with people of different social
backgrounds and their participation in forms of social transformation in the unruly
transnational connections of the Atlantic world. Even as they drew on eighteenth-
century discourses of racial difference, sensibility, and religion, they infused their
writings with the quotidian interruptions of the everyday. When we consider the quiet
fears of Jamaican slave revolt that erupt into Nugent’s narrative, Schaw’s rejection of
“irrational” gender norms, Fenwick’s ambivalent self-positioning as an unfree single
mother, and the Hart sisters’ claims to history, authorship, education, and the right to

345 Sussman notes that the rhetoric of anti-slavery texts written and read by members of ladies’ anti-
slavery societies attempted to develop sympathetic bonds between white middle-class English women
and enslaved women by making the suffering of enslaved women comprehensible to sympathetic
English women. Sussman writes, “Thus, an idealized image of domestic virtue organizes the sympathy
that such appeals hoped to generate…Assimilating captive African women entirely into the categories
of English domesticity made them accessible to abolitionist sentiments, even as it erased the culture
specificity of their condition.” Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender,
political discourse as free colored Methodists, women’s participation in intimate
publics within Caribbean plantation society seems to be premised in some sense on the
ways in which women could transgress certain elements of the social order seen as
conservative, backward, or even degenerate. Still, even as some women narrate a
sense of independence through first-person narrative, their self-representations tend
toward the privileging of highly gendered and racialized terms through which women
can assert moral authority either as individuals or as sentimental defenders of the
family and the human. They maintain a separation from the unruly forms of labor and
sexual disorder arising from the violences and solidarities of plantation life,
disavowing the roles that social and sexual mixing, slave resistance, and rebellion play
in bringing about first amelioration and then abolition. It is for this reason that Lisa
Lowe argues that “the multivalence of intimacy” was reduced to a notion of “the
liberal individual’s freedom” based on “racialized ideas of family reproduction.”
That the new forms of freedom were materially developed in a context of colonial
plantation labor relations is persistently disavowed in liberal humanist discourse.

Britain abolished slavery in the empire in 1834, three years after Prince’s
narrative was published. These waning years of the Age of Revolution saw the
transition from mercantile slavery to industrialization, the consolidation of the
American, French, and Haitian republics, the English Reform Act expanding the
franchise to the rising propertied bourgeoisie, and Britain’s triumph over the Spanish
and French in the control of the Atlantic world. Even as rights of citizenship were

346 Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” 204.
formally expanded, the complex range of intimacies that brought about such
transitions were brought into increasingly regulated formal relations between bodies,
capital, and the state. Yet evidence of the intimate contacts out of which modern
notions of freedom were secured abounds in the existing writings of women from the
period, who navigated the complexities of race, class, and gender even as forces as
varied as capitalism, religious evangelicalism, nationalism, and slave rebellion created
new openings and challenges for self-representation.
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