Slave Women in the New World

Morrissey, Marietta

Published by University Press of Kansas

Morrissey, Marietta. 
Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean. 

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84007

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2882271
There are moments in the study of history when new theories, methodologies, and collaborations dramatically alter a field of investigation. Such was the period of the 1970s through the early 1990s, when the study of slavery and the slave trade in the Americas broke new ground. *Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean*, published in 1989, was part of a movement to bring new foci to the field. Taken with other works it marked a major shift in how we understand a form of human oppression that continues to influence social relations in the region.

As in most scholarly areas, the study of slavery and the slave trade in the Americas had traditionally focused on men, albeit with acknowledgment that women’s roles in childbearing and as house slaves were arenas of economic importance in some areas and eras. The belated entry of women’s voices as investigators and subjects in many fields touched off a scholarly revolution, moving me and others to consider slave women’s positions much more broadly. The resulting proliferation of women-focused books, articles, and dissertations on Caribbean plantations, communities, and larger societies was significant in its own right but also helped us to understand better the dynamics of plantation-based slavery. The need for women’s labor in the fields, their frequent provision of food for their families, their health and welfare, and their contributions to slave rebellions and escape were critical issues for understanding why Caribbean slavery could not sustain itself without new additions of labor and land. In short, a critical piece of the puzzle of how Caribbean slave economies and societies functioned and broke down had long lacked concentrated attention in our failure to fully consider women slaves’ positions.

History is not written by the voiceless in part because we have few written records of their experiences. This is the case for Caribbean women slaves. However, in the 1970s historians began to construct the stories of the voiceless by looking at new fields of inquiry. The material and social conditions of daily life became significant foci of investigation; historians joined with anthropologists, geographers, sociologists, and economists to bring new data, concepts, and methodologies to traditional historiography. In the case of Caribbean slavery, interdisciplinary research revealed threads of experience and action apart from plantation records, ships’ logs, colonial and local government policies and debates that told us much about slavery and the slave trade, but not the whole story. Uncovering information about matters like slaves’ burial rites, their physical remains, buried tools and utensils, sources of food and nutrition, natural medicines and poisons, gardening and
marketing systems—all arenas influenced by women slaves—provided important
details about how slave-based plantation agriculture functioned in the Caribbean.

The interdisciplinary study of Caribbean slavery inspired more comparative
research. Implicit in much traditional historiography about Caribbean slavery
were comparisons to slavery in the U.S. South. These comparisons became more
explicit and significant as the interdisciplinary study of Caribbean women slaves
developed. The great geographical, social, and political diversity of the Caribbean
region made comparison across territories and colonial regimes equally pertinent.
Replacing increasingly challenged ideas about the relative cruelty of colonial slave
regimes in the region were discussions about women’s position in comparative
plantation economies, opportunities for slave community and family autonomy,
and insurgency.

As a sociologist interested in Latin America and the Caribbean, I found the
changing panorama of slave historiography enormously compelling. I had recently
completed a dissertation and published writing on nineteenth- and twentieth-cen-
tury Caribbean economic development. In 1981, I attended Orlando Patterson’s
National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar at Harvard Univer-
sity on “The Comparative Study of Slavery,” focusing on an earlier period in Ca-
ribbean history. This rich introduction to the comparative history of slavery in the
Americas presented many traditional historical works and new ones that incorpo-
rated social science methods and concepts. The presentation of broader theoret-
ical conclusions based on comparative cases was especially exciting: Patterson’s
1982 *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* drawing on symbolic anthropology
was a model of what was possible in interdisciplinary comparative studies. I left
the seminar wanting to understand where focused work on women slaves would fit
in the body of scholarship introduced to me. Several years later *Slave Women in the
New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean* appeared.

The book was well received by historians and others constructing Caribbean
women slaves’ experiences. However, as a sociologist I was also interested in how
the study of slave women’s positions challenged our theoretical understandings of
Caribbean slavery. As noted in the introduction to *Slave Women in the New World*,
three related and complex debates oriented my research: the relative material
positions of Caribbean slave women and men, the continuing productivity and
eventual demise of Caribbean slave-based plantation agriculture, and the social
and cultural status of Caribbean slaves. A review of primary data related to these
debates and amassed in hundreds of books, articles, and other documents led me
to a series of propositions that I explicated and interrogated through the course
of the text.

Further, the focus on gender stratification, noted in the subtitle, expressed the so-
ciological understanding that the study of women’s positions was finally relational,
implying dynamic relationships between men and women and among women of
different social standings. We recognize these relationships more explicitly now in terms of their intersectionality: that is, the integration of multiple categories of social relations in social settings and institutions. Caribbean slavery was clearly marked by divisions of gender as well as age, political power, access to economic resources, and status. I believe *Slave Women in the New World*'s examination of women's positions in terms of gender relations and their intersections with other social categories contributed new understandings of Caribbean slavery and accounts for continued interest in the book.

Still, reflecting on *Slave Women in the New World* over the years, I have noted omissions and rethought analytical connections. I take this opportunity to address three matters. First, an issue related to the reproduction of the slave population in the Caribbean bears consideration beyond that given in the two chapters on fertility and fecundity. I explained the failure of Caribbean slave populations to reproduce themselves in terms of plantation work regimens, slaves' nutrition and disease incidence, gender imbalances, and women's intentionality. Slave labor force reproduction commonly failed despite sporadic efforts on the part of planters and colonial authorities to encourage higher fertility rates. *Slave Women in the New World* describes this phenomenon in detail, contrasting it to the U.S. South where slaves generally produced enough children to outnumber deaths. I mentioned the case of Barbados as well, where, by the second half of the eighteenth century, a natural increase in the slave population was achieved. Underdeveloped in this discussion were the causes of the natural increase in Barbados relative to the factors explaining slave population natural decreases elsewhere in the Caribbean. Notably, the links among demographic variables were worthy of greater attention, specifically the ratio of slave women and men, the ratio of slaves born in Barbados and in Africa, and the ratio of black slave and white settler population—all in relation to the fecundity and agency of women slaves. These issues are particularly pertinent given natural increases in slave population during still brutally oppressive periods of Barbadian commodity production. The exploration of these matters is not merely valuable in terms of Barbadian history but also critically important to the larger picture of Caribbean gender relations.

The title of the book, *Slave Women in the New World*, also deserves discussion, reflecting as it does terminology of an earlier era. That is, the “new world” was new only to the European invaders and not to the hundreds of thousands of native women and men killed in European conquest and settlement. Changing “new world” to the now more commonly used “Americas” might seem appropriate, but it has European origins as well. Once again the existence and frequent disappearance of indigenous communities in this hemisphere is obscured. The point, finally, is that the effort to recognize socially invisible actors can be challenging but is important; it is also critical to good scholarship. For example, the struggles of indigenous communities for survival and their relationships to slavery and plantation production have revealed much about Caribbean labor and territorial dynamics.

Finally, our recognition of how gender infuses every aspect of social, economic,
and political life has grown enormously in the last three decades. We understand that the history of European expansion into North America and the Caribbean is marked as much by the absence of women in authority as it is by male military, economic, and political actors. Plantation slavery was followed by abolition, emancipation, and the introduction of new forms of oppression and opportunity with a variety of consequences for gender relations across the region. National scholars now lead conversations about these stages and steps in Caribbean history, lessening the influence of North American and European investigators and taking ownership of how their countries’ narratives are written. The centrality of gender in these histories is now beyond question. Any scholarly work, including *Slave Women of the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean*, is best understood as a moment in an unfolding process of discovery, debate, and reconceptualization. That theoretical and empirical refinements and corrections followed, particularly within the region, is *Slave Women in the New World*’s most significant and enduring contribution to the study of Caribbean slavery.

Marietta Morrissey
Cleveland, Ohio
December 18, 2020