The study of women in Caribbean slavery raises questions about the experiences of slave women throughout the Americas. European exploration of the New World led to production of commodity crops and the use of slaves in North America, the Caribbean, Brazil, and on a more limited basis, in other areas of South and Central America. In what ways did bondwomen’s lives vary in these settings? What systematic factors underlie slave women’s differing experiences?

Historians have considered North American slavery and bondage as categorically different from slavery in the Caribbean and Brazil. For Tannenbaum (1946) differences were rooted in the comparative treatment of slaves in these settings. Genovese (1965) has insisted on the structural origins of slavery in the Americas. Comparative case studies (for example, Klein 1967) point to a variety of specific differences, some situational, others the product of larger socioeconomic and political dynamics of bondage in the New World.

Several important works have appeared in recent years on slave women in the U.S. South (White 1985; Jones 1982, 1986; Hine 1979; Gundersen 1986; Fox-Genovese 1986). Their depiction of southern slave women’s position in the slave community and plantation-based production of commodity exports is not substantially different from our understanding of the lives of Caribbean bondwomen. In both cases women worked in the fields and as domestic servants, had relatively little entry into skilled positions, and were responsible for the care of their families and households. Some important differences emerge in slave women’s fertility, in the degree of slave women’s independent access to income-generating activities, and in slave family organization. In general, it appears that Caribbean slave women worked more frequently and intensely in field labor than their counterparts in the southern United States and wielded more status and authority as household heads and as petty entrepreneurs and traders than slave women in the South.

In this chapter I focus on the bases of this variation, beginning with broad differences in the historical development of the production of commodities for export in the United States and the Caribbean. Production of cotton, tobacco, and rice in the South evolved under different political, economic, and ecological constraints from those accompanying production of sugar in the Caribbean. These contrasting conditions generated diverging demands on the
slave work force, manifested in differing gender-based divisions of labor. They also created demographic circumstances more conducive to the organization of nuclear families, the endurance of kinship ties, and childbearing among slaves in the United States than among their Caribbean counterparts.

The comparison of southern mainland and Caribbean commodity production advances the development of a theoretical perspective on the situation of Caribbean slave women. Mercantilism and the related articulation of capitalist and noncapitalist modes of production set the contours of New World plantation slavery. The resulting form of plantation-based cash crop production and labor organization equalized the position of male and female workers at the lowest occupational levels and generated hierarchy within higher-status positions. Plantation systems able to take advantage of economies of scale were most likely to exhibit a skill-based hierarchy in gender stratification. Smaller-scale systems of slave-based plantation production generally assigned different work to male and female slaves, suggesting a more lateral, task-oriented division of labor. Some work allocation appears to have reflected earlier European and West African patterns of distribution of work and rewards to males and females.

Slavery in the United States and the Caribbean

Slave studies in recent years have focused increasingly on economic and political constraints and opportunities in the lives of New World slaveholders and slaves. Following Williams's (1966) seminal work, many scholars have seen modern slavery as the product of European social structural forces beyond the influence of individual or even group will in the plantation setting. This viewpoint has found fertile ground in comparative work, where scholarship has recently emphasized the profound contrast in the organization and use of slave labor in the South and the Caribbean and its relationship to the economic development of the United States and Great Britain.

Genovese has been an especially strong proponent of this view. In his Political Economy of Slavery (1965), Genovese painted a broad contrast among British, Spanish, and French political economies and their colonies in the New World that employed slave labor for the production of commodity crops. Using a Marxist model of capitalist development, Genovese claimed that more highly rationalized relations of production, influenced by mercantile and industrial capitalism, characterized slave labor in the English and French colonies. A quasi-seigneurial system, resembling the feudal manor, was found in the U.S. South and in Spanish colonies. In these places slaves had more highly personalistic ties with slave masters than in British or French colonies. More important, argued Genovese, was that slavery was an engine for capitalist development by the bourgeoisie of Great Britain and France. For the
Spanish and southern slave master, however, it was only a primitive social relation, bogging the South and Spain down in precapitalist backwardness.

Genovese, with Fox-Genovese (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 1983), has since advanced his conceptualization of the slave South, now arguing that "the Old South, more than any other slaveholding country, became a slave society in the strict sense: its politics, economy, and culture were primarily determined by slave, not feudal or bourgeois, relations of production" (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 1983, p. 16). This southern precapitalist slave mode of production was a "product" of mercantile capitalism. Fox-Genovese and Genovese agree with Dobb's (1947) characterization of mercantile capitalism as "conservative," producing perhaps economic growth through slavery but finally preventing industrial development.3

British and French colonial slavery had quite different relationships to more advanced forms of production. The Caribbean "slave-plantation system" was an "adjunct" of British capitalism, the "pawn and prize" in the struggle between capitalism and "residual feudalism" in France (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 1983, p. 5). No real economic development occurred in these regions, but the attitude of planters toward their enterprise and labor was more utilitarian and rational than in the U.S. South and their capital contributed to industrial growth and diversification in their imperial centers.4

Fox-Genovese and Genovese (1983, p. 60) comment further that patriarchy influenced political and community life profoundly in the South in contrast to the West Indies. Southern planters were generally resident, with whites the majority in most areas. There were, for example, 23,000 blacks and 72,000 whites in Virginia in 1715, a period of prosperous tobacco planting. Maryland, another major eighteenth-century tobacco producer, had a population of 9,500 blacks and 40,700 whites in 1715. Only in rice-growing South Carolina, did blacks outnumber whites in 1715, with 10,500 blacks and 6,250 whites (Harris 1964, p. 84). Of the nearly 10 million people in the United States in 1820 over 80 percent were white. Even in the South blacks were never more than 38 percent of the total population (Harris 1964, p. 85).5

The Caribbean offers a dramatic contrast to the South in black/white population ratios. Slaves were generally the majority of the population, particularly as sugar and other forms of cash crop production intensified and spread. In eighteenth-century Jamaica, Saint Domingue, and much of the rest of the Caribbean, more than 80 percent of the population was black. In 1650 blacks made up 25 percent of the British Caribbean population, constituting 91 percent by 1770 (Fogel and Engerman 1974, p. 22). Even in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and other Caribbean islands with relatively large settler populations, intense production of cash crops followed European settlement; production was regionally concentrated and meant the separation of the planters' households and family members from slaves and export agriculture (Scarano 1984; Moreno Fraginals 1978).
The effects of planter absenteeism on the community were many and evident in the ways that culture developed in the West Indies and in the United States (Patterson 1969, 1973; Genovese 1971). White women and children resided with their planter husbands in the U.S. South, fostering the development of formal religious, educational, and cultural institutions among whites. Miscegenation was also less common, although the exploitation of black female sexuality by the white elite was frequent, seeming to be intrinsic to New World slavery (White 1985; Jones 1986).

Southern whites held on to the institution of slavery until 1861, displaying greater tenacity and political will than Europeans in the West Indies. Indeed, the international merchant class and many prescient West Indian planters had moved their money to other pursuits and joined the forces of opposition to slavery by the turn of the nineteenth century (Williams 1966; Ragatz 1963). Those who held on saw their ranks thin and outside support dwindle. Southern whites, on the other hand, understood that their lifestyle and their livelihood depended on slavery. They sought separation from the metropolitan center as a means to continue what was finally, for both southern and West Indian planters, an economy and labor system out of line with world trends and forces (Wallerstein 1976; see also Wright 1987).  

Crops, Climate, and Changing Tastes

Differences in metropolitan political economies conditioned settlement patterns and other points of contrast between the Caribbean and U.S. South but cannot account fully for the ways in which local and regional economies emerged in the Americas. Ecological factors were extremely significant—temperature and soil conspired to make less lucrative crops suitable to the temperate mainland and the greater riches of sugar nearly inevitable for its West Indian producers. The emerging and differentiated European market for luxury foods affected the prospect of the successful production of various commodities (Mintz 1979-1980). Geography also contributed to the contrasting development of the West Indies and the U.S. South, encouraging settlement on the expansive mainland and warfare and piracy in the Caribbean Sea. These immutable physical factors intermingled, and as production of commodity crops developed on the slave-based plantations of the Americas, “inexorably and very rapidly—the island and mainland plantations evolved into two separate communities” (Dunn 1972, p. xiii).

Tobacco, Cotton, and the U.S. South

The tropical climate of the West Indies and the temperate zone of the Atlantic coast of North America were both well suited to tobacco cultivation, which has
traditionally been carried out on small plots and requires diligent and continuous care. A single planter or task force must carry the operation through from planting to harvest to preserve and nurture the quality of every plant (Ortiz 1947). Tobacco is thus less labor intensive than many other New World commodity crops, and the work of tobacco production is spread out through the entire year rather than concentrated in a few intense months, as in much other cash cropping.

Tobacco was grown by white farmers in Cuba and the other early Spanish territories, along with food and other cash crops. The English settlers of Barbados used slash and burn techniques to produce both cotton and tobacco for export (Dunn 1972, p. 5). Eventually slaves were introduced to tend tobacco, as its cultivation spread in the seventeenth century through the Caribbean region and to the Chesapeake Bay area on the east coast of the United States. Wallerstein (1980, p. 164) called tobacco “the poor relative” of sugar, “an early starter and an early loser.” In the Caribbean sugar production quickly surpassed tobacco. Yet tobacco production prospered in the Chesapeake area, in the states of Virginia and Maryland, where a “superior crop at lower prices” than could be cultivated in the Caribbean was developed (Wallerstein 1980, p. 165).

Tobacco leaches nutrients from the soil even more forcefully than does sugar, requiring a move to new territory every quarter century. The large expanse of land on the mainland was thus conducive to the soil replacement requirements of the crop. Planters could preserve the quality of the product and their land by rotating tobacco with staple crops, at the same time ensuring some degree of food self-sufficiency (Stampp 1956, p. 129). The annual work cycle began with preparation of the beds for planting during the winter months. In May the shoots were transplanted. “Worming, topping and suckering” of the plants occurred in summer. Finally, during the summer plants were “split, cut and left in the fields to wilt.” The processing phase then began, with drying and curing of the plant in the tobacco house. The following year, after starting a new crop, the tobacco was stripped from the stalks, tied into bundles, and “prized into hogsheads” (Stampp 1956, p. 49).

The European labor force was more extensive in the Chesapeake Bay area than in the Caribbean. The enclosure movement had encouraged British migration, and from 1600 to 1700, 500,000 English emigrated to North America. In contrast, 150,000 emigrants from Spain arrived in the Spanish Caribbean settlements from 1509 to 1790 (Harris 1964, p. 82). Kulikoff (1986, p. 4) notes that the seventeenth-century Chesapeake was “full of opportunities.” The many servants who migrated to the area worked in tobacco cultivation and related endeavors, often completing their service to become proprietors themselves.

Falling tobacco prices and a decline in white immigration led to an increase in the use of slave labor in the late seventeenth century. In 1650 slaves made
up only 3 percent of the Chesapeake population, but 15 percent in 1690, as chattel slavery became crucial to tobacco production in Virginia (Kulikoff 1986, p. 319). In 1690 Maryland and Virginia accounted for two-thirds of the black population in the United States; in 1790 Maryland and Virginia had 56 percent of U.S. slaves, even as the slave population was moving southward to work in cotton farming (Fogel and Engerman 1974, p. 44).

Plantations were relatively small in the Chesapeake Bay area, with estates in Virginia generally covering about 500 acres in the mid-seventeenth century, increasing to perhaps 1,000 acres in 1750 (Eaves 1945, p. 21). The average holding in Virginia and Maryland numbered fewer than 13 slaves (Fogel and Engerman 1974, p. 22). On the basis of his survey of several counties in the Chesapeake Bay area, Kulikoff (1986, p. 330) speculates that in the 1730s half of the slaves lived in units of 10 or less, with only a quarter on estates with more than 20 slaves. Each slave cultivated from two to three acres, meaning that much land was generally devoted to other crops and uses (Eaves 1945, p. 22).

The tobacco industry declined with a succession of crises and recessions in the eighteenth century (Kulikoff 1986; Fox-Genovese and Genovese 1983, pp. 53–55). The center of tobacco growing moved westward to Virginia’s Piedmont region. Many planters, along with their slaves, migrated farther south. Other slaves were sold to cotton planters in Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama by farmers in the Chesapeake Bay area and South Carolina. From 1790 to 1860, 835,000 slaves moved south from exporting states (Fogel and Engerman 1974, pp. 47–48).

Cotton production was found in the United States from the first years of the seventeenth century. Green seed, or upland, cotton, grew bountifully in the southern climate, but its widespread cultivation was hindered by early difficulties in processing. The hand removal of cotton fibers from the thousands of seeds in a pod, or boll, was a slow and arduous job. When the separation of fiber and seeds was mechanized in 1793, with the invention of the cotton gin, southern plantation production of cotton boomed. In 1709, 3,000 bales were produced in the United States, rising to 178,000 bales in 1810, to 732,000 bales in 1830, and to more than 4 million bales in 1860, when cotton constituted more than two-thirds of U.S. exports (Fogel and Engerman 1974, p. 44). Cotton production eventually spread through Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Missouri, Louisiana, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas. The U.S. slave population grew from 700,000 in 1793 to 4,000,000 in 1860.

The intensity of work in the cotton fields was higher than in tobacco farming, and tasks were more compatible with large-scale planting. Cotton seeds were planted in the winter, close together in shallow beds or furrows. When the seedlings were 3–4 inches high, they were thinned or “chopped” with a hoe. The cotton plant blossoms when it is about a foot high; the petals
fall off several days later and flat green bolls are left. The bolls then take up to two months to mature into egg-shaped pods that, when they split, reveal several compartments of cotton. In the deep South, the bolls were picked from the plant in July. The cotton fiber and seeds were then separated laboriously by hand or, finally, in gins.

Work was generally assigned in a mix of gang and task labor, depending on the size of the estate and the work force. Gangs of workers often plowed and hoed the cotton fields under the direction of a driver. Or they were assigned a plot of perhaps 150 square feet to tend, following the task system. Slaves generally picked a daily quota of cotton during the harvest (Stampp 1956, p. 55). The number of slaves per agricultural unit grew as cotton production prospered, with most cotton estates utilizing the labor of at least 30 slaves. The optimal number of slaves per unit immediately before the Civil War was 50 "on the black-belt soils of Alabama and Texas, and more than 200 in the alluvial lands of the Mississippi flood plain" [Wolf (1982, p. 280); see also, Fogel and Engerman (1974, p. 200)]. Nevertheless, about half of U.S. cotton was grown by small farmers with from one to twelve slaves.

Cotton processing was done on large estates or at ginning operations serving a group of smaller-scale farms. The fibers were pulled away from the seeds as the boll passed through a roller with wire teeth or a saw edge. After the ginning was completed, the cotton fibers were packed for transport to textile mills in the North, in England, and to a lesser extent, in southern cities.

**Other Southern Cash Crops**

Other commodity export crops were also grown in the slave South. Rice production dominated plantations in South Carolina in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, taking advantage of the large West Indian market for rice to feed the slaves (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 1983, p. 52). In South Carolina blacks outnumbered whites, constituting 60 percent of the population in the early 1700s, and perhaps 50–55 percent when cotton became an important crop there in the nineteenth century (Genovese 1979; Wood 1974). Rice was also grown in coastal Georgia and the Carolinas.

Rice is a delicate crop planted in shallow ground, but its cultivation is relatively simple. Planting began in March and April. In the summer slaves weeded, flooded, raked, and dried the fields. In the fall the rice was cut and milled. The process of threshing and pounding with mortar and pestle was borrowed from West African techniques of rice cultivation and introduced by the slaves. Finally the rice was screened and packed (Stampp 1956; Wood 1974). When not engaged in planting or harvesting, slaves cleared and refurbished the trenches and banks that made up the infrastructure of the rice plantation.
Slaves hoed during the summer in unison but performed other work by task, allowing time to themselves when their work was done. The number of slaves per unit was low in the early 1700s, perhaps from eight to twelve, comparable to the share in selected Maryland counties cited by Kulikoff (1986). However, the slave population was unevenly distributed and increasingly concentrated. Wood (1974, p. 159) presents the example of South Carolina’s St. George County in 1727, when two-thirds of the slaves lived on 18 plantations in groups ranging from 25 to 94 slaves, with more than 20 percent of the slaves on the largest 3 plantations. Rice planting was considered brutal because of the disease climate of the coastal swamplands and the general intensity of work. Indeed, South Carolina has been compared to Barbados, the origin of its early explorers and founders, because of the black majority and their tendency to lose population in the mid-eighteenth century rather than to gain slaves as elsewhere in the South.

Sugar production also acquired some significance in the U.S. South, beginning in Louisiana in the late 1700s with the emigration of slaves and former planters from then newly independent Saint Domingue. The state provided 95 percent of the U.S. sugar crop. Sugar was cultivated as well in Texas, Georgia, and Florida, all following the difficult planting regimen imposed on slaves in Louisiana and the Caribbean. The complex routine of processing sugar, described in the next section, required a few highly skilled workers. The cultivation of cane required labor of most plantation slaves, who worked in gangs to plant, weed, and harvest the cane and deliver it to the processing mill.

Although sugar and rice were important regional crops, tobacco and cotton utilized more land and slaves and were generally more profitable than other cash crops grown in the South. The difference in slave population engaged in each major cash crop in 1850 is marked, although by the mid-nineteenth century the peak period of tobacco and rice production had passed: cotton, 73 percent; tobacco, 14 percent; sugar, 6 percent; rice, 5 percent; hemp, 2 percent. United States southern production of commodity exports, primarily tobacco and cotton, made the South a center of New World slavery by the time of the Civil War. Fogel and Engerman (1974, p. 29) estimate that by 1835 the United States had nearly 2 million slaves, 36 percent of the slaves in the Western world.10

Sugar and the Caribbean

Sugar cane was grown in South Asia in 4 B.C. Crude processing came later, in perhaps the sixth century A.D., yielding sugar “crudely similar to the modern product” (Mintz 1979–1980, p. 58). By the twelfth century sugar production was well established in the southern and eastern Mediterranean, gradually
moving westward to Portugal and Spain. In the 1200s sugar was a delicacy enjoyed by British royalty. By the eighteenth century it was a common spice, enjoyed throughout Western Europe by working people as well as the nobility (Mintz 1979–1980; Dirks 1987, pp. 10–11). In the interim sugar production had moved from the Mediterranean to the Canary Islands and Madeira to Brazil in the sixteenth century and to the West Indies in the seventeenth century. With it came slaves and an enormous expansion in the cultivation and productivity of sugar.

Among West Indian islands Barbados made a dramatic transition to sugar by 1640. The Dutch introduced sugar following their expulsion from Brazil and brought with them production techniques and markets. A more profitable crop than tobacco, sugar attracted Barbados’s planters, who feared overproduction of tobacco in the region and in North America and a consequent drop in prices.11 The small island of Barbados was well suited to sugar production. Unlike many of the other West Indies islands, Barbados was flat and thus easily defended from the military and private force and violence dominating the Caribbean Sea at the time. Escape of slaves was also less likely there than in more mountainous nearby islands. Barbados’s less “enervating” climate made it a suitable outpost for English settlers, who found Caribbean temperatures generally difficult to withstand (Sheridan 1965; see also Wallerstein 1980, p. 163).

Still, European settlement was sparse, and profitable sugar production required large-scale planting. Hence labor shortages were a problem in Barbados, and slave labor expanded quickly once introduced (Green 1988; Dirks 1987, p. 16).12 In the 1670s slave-based sugar production started in earnest in the smaller Leewards and in French Martinique and Guadeloupe. The typical slave labor force was then 50 to 100 slaves on 100 to 200 acres. Although annexed by the British in 1655, the larger Jamaica did not become a major sugar producer until the eighteenth century, when the other large islands, first Saint Domingue and later Cuba, were able to take advantage of established planting techniques and the relative peace of the area to become sugar producers on an unprecedented scale. Average estates in late sugar producers covered more than a thousand acres, and plantation labor forces often exceeded 300 slaves. The intensification and spread of sugar cultivation brought the fortunes that intrepid Europeans had sought in moving to the West Indies, bounty more notable than that enjoyed by southern planters (Klein 1986).

New World sugar production was extremely complex by virtue of the complication and precision required in processing. Sugar cultivation itself involved a relatively simple technique. Slaves laid cane in holes in the ground in the fall for harvesting 16 months later. The harvest was a frantic and busy time, for sugar spoils immediately after cutting. Field slaves cut the cane and loaded it onto carts for the processing mill during an intense few days (Dirks
While field gangs recovered from the hurry and deprivation of the harvest, a small skilled team of adult male slaves processed the cane into brown sugar, rum, and in some settings, white sugar. The demanding and precise refining regimen began as the cane was ground in mills powered by cattle, wind, or water, and juice was extracted. A boiler then heated the juice in successively smaller and hotter coppers, cooling the juice at just the right time for crystals to form. This delicate work was followed by drying the sugar and draining off molasses for rum (Dunn 1972; Schnakenbourg 1980).

The slave labor force spent the remainder of the year engaged in replanting and waiting for the results of a second planting, from either ratooning (growing a second or even third sprout from the original cane) or new cane plantings. Either way the soil had little rest and the field gangs had considerable time away from planting. As on southern cotton plantations, dead time was spent on road work, repairing buildings, and cleaning equipment. Craton (1974, p. 129) argues, however, that Caribbean planters resorted to highly repressive methods to keep their relatively large, underemployed work forces under control when they were not directly engaged in sugar cultivation.

Sugar refining, like cotton ginning, had to be done on or near the plantation for the planter to realize large profits from cultivation. The ginning process was sufficiently simple that the nineteenth century brought no major technical innovations to increase the volume of cotton grown or processed. Increased productivity came later, primarily with mechanization of planting and harvesting. For sugar, technical progress was slow until the nineteenth century and was centered in processing machinery and techniques. Two innovations were especially important. First, steam-powered mills, developed in Jamaica, increased production and labor productivity. This was followed by the development in Cuba of the mechanized mill, which improved the quality and the amount of juice extracted from the cane (Moreno Fraginals 1978). Mechanization led to the separation of agricultural and industrial functions in Cuban sugar production, with centralized mills (centrales) drawing sugar for refining from surrounding farms. As a result, increased world demand for sugar could be satisfied, but only by raising productivity demands on the slave work force, constricted by the 1807 close of the slave trade.

_Mercantilism and Plantation Agriculture_

The New World production of commodity crops for export meant the development and refinement of the plantation as a major means of agricultural production. Beckford, Mintz, Best, Dirks, and others have drawn on the earlier work of Edgar Thompson (1975) to suggest that plantation production represented a qualitative shift in planting techniques, allowing for large-scale production of a single crop, generally for export. It has also been argued that
labor was frequently coerced and usually imported, because free laborers in an open resource situation would prefer to work for higher wages or to have their own firms rather than work for low plantation wages (see Dirks 1987 for a review of this argument).

Examination of New World plantations raises some serious questions about (1) the degree of coercion intrinsic to plantation economies and (2) the advantage of economies of scale for New World plantation producers of some commodities. Southern tobacco cultivation, for example, undermines generalizations about scale. Small-scale production prevailed in the Chesapeake Bay and Piedmont areas along with subsistence planting and crop rotation. Unit costs decreased as the number of plants increased but only up to a point that was quickly achieved and followed by overplanting. Only the need for slave labor and production of tobacco for export made tobacco consistent with the commonly held conception of a plantation crop. Indeed, Ortiz (1947) developed the dichotomy between Cuban sugar production, a large-scale crop cultivated by African slaves, and tobacco, the crop of, first, the Indian horticulturalist and, later, the skilled European farmer.

Sugar, cotton, and rice could have been produced with free labor. After the emancipation of slaves and the heavy capitalization of plantation production by emergent multinational corporations in the late nineteenth century, sugar was produced by wage laborers (Beckford 1972). Why was slavery necessary to earlier New World plantations? The logic of mercantilism encouraged broad-scale production facilitated by protective political devices. And the political strength of mercantile interests guaranteed the enormous costs of acquiring and seasoning slaves. The lack of success of some indentured servants and their eventual scarcity further supported the use of slave labor. But even within the confines of mercantile political and economic strategies, variations in labor organization and planting technique can be found, conditioned by the metropolitan stage of economic and political development and the exigencies of particular crops and climates.

These factors also influenced technical developments within plantation economies. Relatively high levels of capital investment and industrial sophistication could be achieved in the production of sugar, given both the means of processing and the political economy of Caribbean planting. In contrast, production of tobacco involved little sophisticated technology; nor did it yield the capital necessary for many forms of technical or agricultural change. The mix of political-economic and ecological factors affected women’s role in cash crop production and determined their level of participation in field agriculture, their labor productivity, and their entry into higher-skill processing jobs. Scale of production and general division of slave labor conditioned the gender division of labor.
GENDER ON NEW WORLD PLANTATIONS

Women were sold into the Atlantic slave trade in increasing numbers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in response to the New World demand for slave labor and African supply factors. Women had long played an important role in African slavery; most modern sub-Saharan African slaves were women. Long recognized as reproducers and keepers of African lineages, women, it is now understood, played a principal role in production. African slave women did "most of the agricultural and virtually all of the domestic work. The value of women slaves was based on a sexual division of labor which assigned much of the productive labor to women" (Robertson and Klein 1983, p. 11). The gender division of labor differed in the New World primarily by bringing males into agriculture, particularly into skilled positions. The domestic component lessened as well in large-scale cash cropping, and the nature of the agricultural work changed, becoming more repetitive (Terbourg-Penn 1986).

A continuum can be constructed of New World plantation economies on the basis of their size and apparent capacity to take advantage of economies of scale and of their level of technical innovation and sophistication in refining agricultural raw materials. The latter issue influenced the creation of stratification among laborers on the plantation and the demand for increased output of the raw agricultural crop. On one end of the continuum was tobacco production, conducted on a relatively small scale. Technical innovation and machinery were minimal. Improvements in quality and yield resulted primarily from the use of fertilizers and crop rotation. Changes were also made in the construction of drying and curing houses. But this too was a rudimentary kind of transformation, involving little or no machinery (Eaves 1945). Women planted and tended tobacco; indeed, few escaped field labor on many farms and estates (Kulikoff 1986, p. 399; Gundersen 1986). The skills involved in tobacco production were only reluctantly passed on by Chesapeake farmers to a presumably incapable slave labor force, and male slaves were deemed the most suitable recipients of tobacco culture. Yet, because many farms in the Chesapeake Bay area were small and nearly all produced food crops, slaves' work was generally more diversified than in the production of most New World cash crops. Women did many different kinds of domestic, horticultural, and agricultural work, and as the native-born proportion of slaves increased, kinship networks developed and fertility increased (Kulikoff 1986, p. 73).

Cultivation of rice and cotton represents the midpoint on the continuum of organization of large-scale cash cropping in the New World. Produced on a larger scale than tobacco, rice and cotton production nevertheless allowed for at least some task allocation rather than planting exclusively by gangs, as in
New World sugar cultivation. In rice culture gender determined the division of some agricultural labor, with women performing the winnowing of grain and the separation of the rice from its kernal with a mortar and pestle, much as they did in West Africa. It is likely that other tasks were allocated by gender: heavy work to males and horticulture, animal husbandry, and domestic work to females, much as in other agrarian settings. Rice was not refined but shipped in its crude state, eliminating a major basis for gender stratification. Even with the "'primitive'" conditions of coastal rice production in the South, "'it was not unusual for families to remain intact over the generations, and to maintain contact with kin on nearby holdings'" (Jones 1986, p. 15). Natural population increases developed at the turn of the eighteenth century but were reversed with the mid-eighteenth-century spread and intensification of rice cultivation. A later return to black population growth suggests that the work demands and conditions of rice culture were compatible with moderate fertility levels to the extent that planters modified their productivity demands and were responsive to the needs of workers in a stressful physical environment (Wood 1974, pp. 143–166; Jones 1986).

Southern cotton farming varied in its gender-based division of labor by size of holding. Small farms required diverse tasks of women, as field labor was mixed with household and other agricultural chores. On large estates women's options were more narrow, and they were rarely allowed to develop artisanal abilities. Slave women's domestic tasks on behalf of the master's family were seldom considered skilled. Slave women also had important roles in the small-scale production of cloth and textiles carried out on most estates and farms. Spinning and weaving were constant accompaniments to other tasks. "'This form of labor occupied female slaves of all ages at night, during the winter and on rainy summer days, whether or not they were pregnant or nursing a baby, and whether they were formally designated as cooks, house servants, or field hands'" (Jones 1986, p. 24). Such work remained secondary to cotton cultivation, however, and could be carried out only when women were not engaged in field labor. The larger and more productive the plantation, the more exclusive and significant women's role in cotton production and the less meaningful their work in other forms of production for use or exchange.

Sugar cultivation forms the last point on the continuum of New World slave-based cash cropping, with men and women cruelly and continuously exploited (Mathurin 1974; Gautier 1985; Bush 1981, 1986; Olwig 1985). Economies of scale were possible in West Indian sugar cultivation and were driven finally by technical improvements that allowed massive amounts of cane to be processed quickly. With the close of the slave trade, slave labor including that of women, was precious. On the large estates women worked long and hard, with little opportunity for less burdensome tasks. The intensity of cultivation and harvesting depleted their physical energy and well-
being, influencing fertility, as the general exigencies of constant work and locational instability diminished their prospects for family continuity.

Conclusions

The situations of bondwomen in the Americas are strikingly similar. Where plantation agriculture approached industrial forms of organization, males' and females' labor was not sharply differentiated. The expanded scale and technological apparatus of the plantations increased highly skilled tasks and allocated them to males. Where agriculture was on a smaller scale and processing nonmechanized, more traditional agrarian gender-based divisions of labor emerged. Males' and females' agricultural work in these settings was both more diversified and differentiated by gender. European and West African farming techniques and modes of agrarian organization influenced the ways in which labor was distributed, both in the production of cash crops and in related aspects of labor.

The comparison of the production of commodities for export and its impact on gender stratification is useful in establishing the interaction of ecological and social structural variables in any social formation. The political economy of colonial powers was meaningful to New World social organization only if planters and their agents were able to create profitable enterprises in a given physical environment. The ecosystem was often surprisingly malleable to the invention, creativity, and greed of the mercantile planter.

The larger issue raised by this discussion of New World plantation slavery is how little gender mattered in the production of raw commodities. Women lost ground in plantation agriculture, particularly if they had previously worked in simpler agrarian, horticultural, or hunter-gatherer forms of production. These systems separated male and female but recognized the contributions of both genders as essential. In plantation agriculture much of male and female work was the same. Gender-specific realms lost significance as gender hierarchies were established in the distribution of skilled work in the technically sophisticated processing and refining of commodities. In this sense New World plantations marked a watershed, in which on a large, regional scale the need for field labor overwhelmed production for use, women's province in both Europe and West Africa.