Slave Women in the New World

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CHAPTER SIX

Women and the Slave Family

The family offers the best illustration of tensions in slave studies between structuralist and class analysis of culture. Structuralists claim that totalistic systems constrain cultural expression, including family formation. Class theorists argue that slavery allowed and slaves insisted on some autonomy in constructing kinship and other forms of culture.

Research and analyses of the New World slave family have traditionally been structural in approach. Proponents of this view hold that parental, marital, and kin responsibilities and rights were prevented by the slaveholders' preemptory control over bondmen and women. Some contend that it is the slave's legal status as property and the master's as owner that finally undermined marriage and family formation (Davis 1966; Finley 1968; Elkins 1976; Tannenbaum 1946). Patterson (1982) offers a variation on this theme, proposing that the symbolic estrangement from kin and corresponding social illegitimacy of the slaves' natal ties precluded family formation.

Three dimensions of family life—parenthood, marriage, and extended kinship—are said to have been uniquely influenced by the structural obstacles and limitations of slavery. New World slavery violated the basic human right to bear children and raise them. Children could be bought and sold away from parents. Other slaves and agents of the estate cared for children separated from kin. Slaveholders recognized maternity through the first years of a child's life. Infants were generally kept with their mothers and usually nursed. Paternity was wholly disregarded by slaveholders and the society they controlled. Advocates of a structural interpretation of slavery argue that the proprietary rights of the slave master, whether legally or symbolically condoned, superseded the custodial rights of parents.

New World slaveholding societies also considered illegitimate or illegal the rights and obligations of more distant kin. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles were without customary privileges or obligations to their families. Kin selection, dowries and bride wealth, old-age security, and other prerogatives of agrarian peoples were rarely exercised. That kinship commitments were occasionally expressed in no way alters or weakens the structural viewpoint: Social ties were not respected by various authorities and could be violated at any time in an arbitrary manner.

The legitimacy and likelihood of institutionalized forms of conjugal union are intrinsic to family formation. Allowing that slave marriages were rarely
legal, were they respected and preserved by custom in slave societies of the New World? Patterson (1982) argues that, wherever labor was internally supplied, for example, the U.S. South, slaveholders encouraged marriage to ensure reproduction of the labor force. In contrast, estate owners and managers actively suppressed stable conjugal unions in some areas of the West Indies, where labor was supplied through the slave trade and the expenses of childbirth and rearing of children were unwanted. But even in the pro-natalist South, husbands and wives could be sold at the will or whim of the master.

Structuralists argue further that slaveholders supplanted the rights and obligations of marriage among slaves. Planters and other whites disrupted sexual "rights" by establishing intimate unions with slave women. And neither male nor female slaves could dependably offer a spouse economic exchanges or protections. As Davis (1966, p. 104) notes:

Probably no society has attempted to prohibit slaves from having sexual intercourse with members of their own class, or even from living in more or less monogamous or polygamous units; but marriage leads to a contractual relationship of authority and obedience, of reciprocal rights and obligations within a family, which is clearly incompatible with the concept of a master's absolute ownership of slaves.

Lacking a basis in social and economic exchange, marriages failed to form or endure.

Structuralist commentators have looked particularly at males' relatively greater economic roles in marriage in agrarian societies and their diminution in slave families. Male slaves lacked the economic assets to fulfill traditional economic obligations. Without economic strength, structuralists argue, men had no part to play in slave marriages or family.

The "husband" was not an essential part of the slave family. It made little difference whether he was a free man or the slave of the same or another plantation. As long as his "wife" and children were the property of another, he had no legal rights over them, and they were not even dependent on him for their maintenance, since they received their allowances directly from the master. (Goveia 1965, p. 235)

As Goveia notes, the complement of males' economic failings was the capacity of the slaveholder to provide, through the estate, all that agrarian males traditionally bring to marriage.

This narrowly materialist foundation of structural analysis ignores emotional and sexual components of marriage, even in agrarian societies. Although lacking economic assets, some male slaves "married." Empirical analysis suggests, too, that with stratification among slaves marriage en-
hanced the position of many poor and less privileged slaves, although often only temporarily.

More pertinent here is the structuralists' uncritical portrait of agrarian patriarchy. Wealth traditionally entitled males in agrarian societies to property in the form of wives and children. Patterson (1969, p. 167) elaborates: Slavery destroyed males' marital "authority," leading to demoralization and continuing irresponsibility of West Indian men. Moreno Fraginals (1978, p. 44) makes a related point, arguing that the "bourgeois family and juridical structure" was incompatible with slavery and its violation of "elementary property rights."

The structuralist view of slave families is also the root of perceived gender equality among slaves. Advocates of this interpretation of slave culture argue that the slave owners' and estates' authority over male slaves rendered them equal to females: Both males and females were reduced to the property status traditionally held by agrarian females. Males' and females' equality was hence achieved by males' social decline rather than by females' social ascent. Slave women frequently capitalized on bondmen's degradation, of course, achieving relative economic strength and status.

PROMISCUITY AMONG SLAVES

The structuralists' insistence that slaves were generally "promiscuous" displays again the strong linking of economic exchange with marriage and coupling. If economic degradation precluded stable nuclear unions and equalized gender relations, it must then have made emotional commitment of any sort impossible for male or female slaves. Patterson (1969, p. 159), in his study of Jamaica, argued that the "breakdown of sexual mores and the institution of marriage among Negroes occurred all over the New World." Goveia (1965, p. 238) claimed that in the British Leewards the African custom of polygamy gave way to promiscuity, although "slavery, and not the practise of polygamy . . . accounted for the relative infrequency of lasting unions." C.L.R. James's (1963, p. 15) analysis of slaves' relationships in Saint Domingue is similar in describing casual mating and parenting. "Wives and husbands, children and parents, were separated at the will of the master, and a father and son would meet after many years and give no greeting or any sign of emotion."

There can be little doubt that slavery destroyed human relationships. But today's reader of these descriptions of slaves' "decadence" and "promiscuity" may be offended by their judgmental tone. Like other social science critiques of oppressive systems, structuralist analyses of New World slavery so abhor immorality imposed from above that its victims seem to be blamed as well. The cynical denial of the slaves' capacity to fight back is best countered
by the many historical examples of an integrated and morally responsible slave culture. The empirical roots of misperceptions of slaves' experience are in travelers' and slaveholders' accounts of slave mores.

Bennett (1958, p. 35) tells us, for example, that whites in Barbados often mistook polygamy for promiscuity. A male's union with several women involved emotional and other commitments that slaveholders and other whites missed, in part, because slavery prevented their full and/or visible elaboration. Jordan's (1968) research is potentially devastating of analyses built on elite accounts. His review of sixteenth- through nineteenth-century European documents about the New World shows an expectation of sexual abandon among slaves. The Western attitude was perhaps rooted in guilt or a projection of highly repressed sexuality (Jordan 1968, pp. 39, 152). Jordan (1968, p. 35) notes that "by the eighteenth century a report on the sexual aggressiveness of Negro women was virtually de rigueur for the African commentator." The same, it seems, can be said for observers of West Indian slave mores.²

Thomas Atwood (1791, p. 273) remarked, for example, that in eighteenth-century Dominica "so little are the sexes attached to each other, or constant in connubial connections, that it is common for the men to have several wives at a time, besides transient mistresses; and the women to leave their husbands for others, and to submit to the embraces of white men for money or fine clothes." Mrs. Carmichael (1834, vol. 1, p. 297) tells of how the female slaves' promiscuity allowed them to name more than one father for their children. These men then brought presents and other goods to their supposed progeny. It is no wonder, she asserts, that the slave "cares little for his father" and often does not know his identity. Janet Schaw (1939, p. 128) stressed a general emotional emptiness among slaves and a lack of warm attachments. "The husband was to be divided from the wife; the infant from the mothers; but the most perfect indifference ran through the whole. They were laughing and jumping, making faces at each other, and not caring a single farthing for their fate."

There were, of course, casual sexual unions among slaves. We have no reliable evidence that these liaisons were common, let alone the norm. Nevertheless, slavery did impose conditions, for example, sale of mates, that made coresidence and lasting unions difficult. Debin (1974, p. 262) claims that African slaves in the French West Indies, at one time polygamous, preferred free unions to more stable relationships. French West Indian slaves were apparently open to baptism by seventeenth-century missionaries, but male slaves shunned marriage, wanting the freedom to form many liaisons (Gautier 1985, p. 67). Bremer (1853, vol. 2, pp. 335–336) observed a majority of casual relationships on the intensively cultivated Cuban plantations she visited. Again, these may be cases of confusing casual and committed relationships.
Knight (1970, p. 68) asserts that, as gang size increased, slaves were ever more alienated from traditional family forms. Higman and Craton’s examinations of selected British West Indian plantation records reinforce Knight’s hypothesis, but these findings, reviewed in what follows, pertain only to residence. They do not support or refute hypotheses about the frequency of slaves’ sexual liaisons.

**Family Patterns**

*Slaves Alone*

There is some evidence that single residence was more frequent in the later stages of sugar production, when slaves resided in barracklike structures and work rhythms were hastened to increase productivity. In Trinidad in 1813 a majority of slaves 15 years and over (63.2 percent) were single; of family members 14.8 percent lived as couples, 29.1 percent as couples with children (Higman 1978, p. 171).

Slave couples were sometimes separated by sale or even plantation-directed living arrangements. They lived as single slaves or as part of maternal or extended families but considered themselves “married.” Traveling in Antigua at slavery’s end, Sturge and Harvey (1838, p. 76) found few married slaves residing together or even on the same estate. Slaveholders often counted as “married” only those slaves with mates on the estate. For example, the manager of Newton estate in Barbados recorded 20 women with coresident husbands and 35 with mates elsewhere. Members of the latter group were labeled single, members of extended units, or mother-child units (Higman 1984, p. 369).

*Matrifocality and the Matrideme*

Slaves with children lived in matrifocal or nuclear families. The structuralist view has it that mother-child families predominated. The tie between mothers and children is the building block of kinship, and where males fail to achieve economic strength or authority, mother-child units would naturally tend to prevail.

Patterson (1976, pp. 57–59) calls the West Indian family system a matrideme. With little stability and few survivals from African origins, slaves stressed the mother’s attachment to the children and the influence of her kin on the family. As Patterson notes, fathers were frequently prevented from completing their role expectations, or, because of the “weakening of the husband-father role,” men were not bound emotionally or economically to their children. On the other hand, the mother’s relatives generally lived on the plantation, strengthening her significance in the family.
Goveia argues eloquently that the mother-child family had both legal and symbolic legitimacy and was logically consistent with the slaveholder’s need to own slaves in the present and future.

It was the influence of slavery which insured that the matrifocal family would become the dominant family type among the Negro slaves and which gave slave ‘‘marriage’’ its typical character of informality and instability. For it was the claims of slave ownership which made the slave mother the essential link in the chain of descent and reduced marriage to the status of a personal arrangement [and] enabled the slave woman . . . to dispense with a recognized ‘‘husband and father’’ for herself and her children. (Goveia 1965, p. 237)

In fact, fathers and husbands were sometimes displaced through generations, as on the Bahamas, where girls tended to reside with their mothers until a second child was born (Craton 1979, p. 13). In the French West Indies in the 1600s religious groups promoted marriage, assuming that birth rates would increase (DuTertre 1958, vol. 2, p. 471). By the mid-1700s plantation lists recognized only the mother-child couple. Husband-wife units were still found on estates, but the master’s attention turned from the slave family to the ‘‘age, quality, [and] price’’ of individual slaves (Gautier 1985, p. 83). But, like other family forms, matrifocality was sometimes undermined by the exigencies of the slave trade, including intrasociety exchange of slaves and practices such as ‘‘halving,’’ common in Bermuda, whereby a couple’s first-born child was given to the mother’s master, the second to the father’s.

Slave women’s reproduction of the matriline in the West Indies is then questionable on empirical grounds. Were those female slaves heading families from areas of matrilineal descent? Higman finds to the contrary; for example, he notes that among African slaves in Trinidad only the matrilineal Kongo had more nuclear families than other forms of family organization. There is substantial evidence that female-headed families predominated among domestic and light-skinned urban slaves in the British West Indies in the early 1800s. ‘‘The towns also engendered occupational independence and hence the economic marginalization of the male, to a much greater extent than did the plantations (where women are concentrated into the field gangs, and men monopolized the occupations of skill and status)’’ (Higman 1979, p. 170). Indeed Higman’s research reveals that in the British West Indies the mother-child union was the least common family type anywhere but in the cities.

Nevertheless, mother-child family units did develop in plantation areas lacking the structural foundation for nuclear family organization. Female-headed households outnumbered nuclear units in Barbados and in nineteenth-century Cuban areas of recently escalated sugar production, for example,
where individualized provision grounds were few or declining (Bennett 1958; Moreno Fraginals 1978). On the late developing and highly rationalized sugar plantations of Trinidad mother-child units were numerous. In Trinidad in 1813, 22.1 percent of slaves belonged to mother-child units. However, urban areas account for a large share of these families and the proportion of nuclear families increased with the number of slaves on a plantation (Craton 1979; Higman 1978, p. 167). Some matrifocal families neared nuclear family form, with males responsible for certain tasks. At l’Anse-à-l’Ane in Martinique maternal unions resembled conjugal ones, with similar patterns of child spacing and male maintenance of provision grounds (Debien 1960, p. 49).

*The Nuclear Family*

The census, newly found plantation records, and the use of inferential statistical techniques to generalize findings to a larger slave population have revealed a more widespread tendency among slaves to form conjugal unions than was previously understood. The sociological underpinnings of this research largely distinguish it from the study of single-parent families. Advocates of this viewpoint attribute to slaves an ability to override the rules and conventions of slave masters in order to build families and intimate relationships. Craton argues that nineteenth-century British West Indies slaves lived in families by choice rather than forming them to satisfy particular planters or church officials (1979, pp. 14–15). The authority of planters to break up families for sale is not denied by Craton or others, although they suggest that it has been exaggerated for some settings. Rather, new research emphasizes slaves’ autonomous and courageous creation of culture under nearly impossible circumstances.

Indeed, many nuclear families are found among Caribbean slaves. The most direct and extensive evidence of nuclear families is available for the British West Indies. In the early 1800s “family life—even in patterns recognizable to Europeans—was the norm for British West Indian slaves” (Craton 1979, p. 2). Registration figures from the Bahamas reveal, for example, that 54.1 percent of slaves resided in simple nuclear families. Planters there were reluctant to break up families for sale even before the 1824 law forbidding it (Craton 1979, pp. 6, 17). Analyzing a single Bahamian estate, Lord John Rolle’s Great Exuma, Craton found that nearly half the slave population in 1822 lived in simple nuclear families, the most common family type (Craton 1979, p. 6).

Higman studied the family status of slaves in the late eighteenth century on three Jamaican sugar estates, Old Montpelier, New Montpelier, and Shettlewood Pen. About 50 percent of slaves lived in units similar to the elementary family. Field slaves constituted half of all couples, single slaves,
and groups of slaves. Domestics generally resided in female-headed families and slaves of authority in families with women and children. Only about 14 percent of Trinidad’s slaves lived in nuclear families in the early nineteenth century, and as few as 4 percent of slaves lived in nuclear families in rural St. Lucia and less than 1 percent in its towns (Higman 1984, p. 366). A “fairly large proportion” of slaves lived in nuclear families during the nineteenth century on Danish St. John. In 1855, 7 years after emancipation, 117 of 387 households on St. John constituted couples or couples plus children and/or relatives. Ninety-six single men and women resided there. Of 174 kin groups 167 were headed by females (Olwig 1985, p. 69).

Marriage was most common among French West Indian slaves in the 1600s, declining thereafter. At Capesterre in Guadeloupe in 1664 about one-fourth of slaves were married. In Basse-terre one-third of mothers were single and the rest married. In the newly colonized Grand-terre marriage was rare. Most nonsingle mothers were concubines. A Jesuit missionary wrote that in his quarter of Guadeloupe 48.6 percent of adults were married, although of these unions 27.7 percent were “bad” marriages or cases of concubinage. After a year of exposure to Christian teaching 57 percent of the population was truly married (Gautier 1985, p. 73).

Slave masters sometimes forced a union to prevent a slave from marrying off the plantation (DuTertre 1958, vol. 2, pp. 471-472). In contrast to the British West Indies, stable unions were more often found among Creole than African slaves in the French islands (Debien 1960, p. 50). Slaves established conjugal families sooner in Martinique and Guadeloupe than in Saint Domingue or the British West Indies, and in the 1700s they received some incentives to do so (Debien 1974, p. 278).

In Cuba and Puerto Rico nuclear unions were common in the 1600s and 1700s and continued to form in urban areas and on small farms and haciendas. Indeed, the Siete Partidas permitted slaves to marry against the will of their masters, and separation of couples for sale was forbidden. The Catholic Church was to persuade slave masters to buy their bondmen’s spouses from other plantations, or the church itself was to do so (Tannenbaum 1946, p. 49). Planters occasionally tried to impose marriages on the large Cuban plantations, where women were gradually introduced in the mid-1800s. In 1864 Jose Luis Alfonso arranged 29 marriages through the conversion of his slaves to Christianity and by isolation of young female slaves. But most such unions were failures because of the breakup of couples for sale (Moreno Fraginals 1978, p. 44).

European clergy occasionally sanctioned slave marriages. Spanish West Indian slaves frequently joined in religious marriage rituals. In Puerto Rico in 1830, 150 slave marriages were solemnized among 2,156 unions for all groups. In Cuba 3,684 solemnized marriages included 1,381 among slaves
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(Flinter 1834, p. 223). In the British West Indies clergy from Moravian, Methodist, and other dissident religious groups sometimes performed slave marriages, but only Anglican clergy were legally permitted to carry out these rituals (Furley 1965, p. 13). Without legal standing anywhere in the region, slave "marriages" were dissolvable when partners were sold away. Clergy sometimes performed second marriage ceremonies for those who lost mates to the slave trade.

Sale of slaves and the resulting breakup of families decreased as slave plantations lost prosperity. By the 1820s there were few public sales of slaves in the British West Indies and families were rarely separated (Barclay 1828, p. 55). Occasionally an estate's economic collapse led to the sale of slaves to a more prosperous planter. In both the Bahamas and Bermuda slaves feared that sale to another island might result in a harsher work regimen and the destruction of family ties (Craton 1979, p. 19; Packwood 1975, p. 141). The threat of family dissolution may have contributed to Cuban slaves' reputed fear of sale to a large, intensely cultivated plantation. As slaveholders ameliorated conditions with the demise of sugar production in nearly all Caribbean sugar islands, colonial legislatures enacted laws to prevent the sale of family members away from one another. The Danish West Indies 1834 slave code outlawed the sale of slaves beyond the island but permitted intra-island trade (Lewisohn 1970, p. 234). The British West Indies 1824 amelioration laws permitted marriage between slaves and forbade dissolution of families in trade (Matheison 1926, pp. 126–140).

**Polygamy**

Some Caribbean male slaves had several wives, as some females had more than one husband. Males resided with all of their wives or kept their families in separate dwellings. Carmichael (1834, vol. 1, p. 298) reports that co-wives lived amicably in Trinidad and St. Vincent; Moreau de Saint Méry (1958, vol. 1, p. 57) reports the same for eighteenth-century Saint Domingue. Polygamy was recorded in nearly every Caribbean slave society but was usually possible only for high-status males (Goveia 1965, p. 234). These slaves, with access to income and wealth, formed polygamous unions even in settings with few females, where monogamy or other family forms dominated. At the Codrington estates on Barbados, for example, polygamous unions were common, despite a predominance of males (Bennett 1958, p. 35). Women were, then, a commodity among slaves and one of the many resources available to skilled slaves and artisans.

There is some suggestion that African slaves preferred polygamous unions but were not immediately able to effect them. Hence they began with nuclear families, intending to incorporate new wives and children into the unit as
resources permitted (Craton 1979, pp. 25-29). This would explain the curious finding in the Bahamas, St. Kitts, Trinidad, and elsewhere that Africans more often than Creoles formed nuclear families (Craton 1979, p. 17; Nisbet 1970, p. 21). Later generations generally failed to form polygamous unions; they "either [lost] sight of these models (as part of the process of creolization) or were prevented from achieving them by the brutality of the slave regime (heavy mortality, separation by sale, miscegination, Christian proselytism, and so on)" (Higman 1978, pp. 171-172). It is also possible that Africans developed nuclear families for other reasons, for example, to establish social bonds quickly. Goveia contends, however, that the structural constraints against the reproduction of African family patterns, in particular polygamy, explain a variety of relationships found in the West Indies. "Among the field slaves polygamous marriage was most often replaced by promiscuous intercourse, or by 'keeper' relationships which were dissolved at will, or sometimes by faithful concubinage" (Goveia 1965, p. 235).

These contending hypotheses about the impact of African polygamy on slave family and mating patterns rest on little evidence. We do not know if slaves were indeed seeking polygamous unions in other types of relationships. The propensity of high-status slaves to have more than one mate is our most significant clue that polygamy was a desired family form. Nor do we know if those who sought such unions were from parts of Africa with polygamous conjugal patterns. 12

Polygynous unions are widespread in Africa and were even more common before settled agriculture developed with European colonization (Boserup 1970, p. 37). Women often did much of the farming in the shifting agriculture of traditional Africa. 13 Diverging devolution gave women inheritance rights and encouraged males to form multiple unions and hence consolidate their wives’ land and labor power. Males paid bride wealth to acquire their economically supportive wives, much as a woman’s family paid a dowry in African regions where women’s participation in agriculture was slight and monogamy prevalent. Population density discouraged African polygamy, as it almost certainly did in the West Indian islands where land for petty cultivation was scarce. The poor economic position of slave men made it difficult for them to amass bride wealth. Only men with resources had the means to acquire wives; only men with land in settings with the possibility of land expansion needed multiple wives. Therefore the structural conditions for polygamy were rarely present in Caribbean slave societies. Moreover, women had little incentive to join polygamous families unless a man’s resources were great enough to raise his wives’ standard of living well above what the estate provided. There was little exclusively female farming in the West Indies, a condition highly associated with polygamy in West Africa and suggestive again that polygamy was only occasional among Caribbean slaves.
Material Origins of Families

The structuralist and class approaches to family organization among Caribbean slaves differ over the meaning of family relationships. Both viewpoints hold that families of various types formed, but their proponents disagree about whether strong, stable families of emotional value to their members were possible. At a less abstract level there has developed another debate about the historical, demographic, and material correlates of family organization.

Demographic factors such as gender ratio, urban concentration, and plantation size have been posited (Higman 1978; Craton 1979) as key causal components of particular forms of family organization. Recent studies indicate a consistent relationship between female-headed families and urban residence. The associations between the proportion of women and family type and between unit size and families are inconsistent. Polygamous units were common in settings with few women. Although a large number of slaves would logically seem to be necessary for nuclear families to form, big estates in societies with particularly intense sugar production, for example, Cuba and Jamaica, discouraged kinship. Higman’s findings to the contrary for Trinidad are exceptional.14 Older sugar colonies in the British West Indies, for example, Barbados, Dominica, Antigua, and St. Kitts, with relatively small estates, had a higher proportion of families living apart than did estates on the newer, larger plantations of Jamaica and Trinidad. “Co-resident” households were more frequent on large estates in nineteenth-century St. John (Olwig 1985, p. 69).

Higman has also pointed to the African origins of nuclear family members. As indicated earlier, it has been hypothesized that African males from polygamous societies used the nuclear family as the first stage in polygamous family building. “Thus it must be concluded that the demographic selectivity of the slave trade determined very largely the extent to which particular groups of Africans could fulfill their familial ideals or norms” (Higman 1978, p. 174). Again, this view is at odds with the more traditional commentary on Africanisms among slaves that stressed the origins of multiple casual unions in African polygyny.15

Rubin (1975) has developed a provocative synthesis of the theories of Freud and Lévi-Strauss to suggest that human groups trade in women to make alliances and secure greater material security. A gender division of labor and subordination of females was the result in nearly all preindustrial societies. In African agrarian societies bride wealth secured a female’s family’s loyalty. Polygyny brought favor from males’ kin. This exchange was highly functional in Caribbean slave societies as well, with kinship fragmented and material life poor. But, as argued earlier, multiple families were realistic only for high-
status men. They alone had resources with which to bargain for women, to maintain new wives and families. Ironically the relative scarcity of women in the early stages of Caribbean slavery may have given women more substantial power in exchange than is commonly found in polygynous societies. Still, men’s economic status was determinate. Even powerful women had little to gain from unions with poor men.

Family economic interests were no less important in Caribbean slave societies than in African or other polygynous settings, but their intergenerational foundations were threatened by the slave trade and lack of control over large parcels of land. Slaves bargained sexually most often as individuals rather than as members of kin groups. Caribbean slaves formed many family types—nuclear, female-headed, extended, and polygamous. Few of these groups were constructed by generations of kin. They were generally neolocal and of greater value to the newly formed family than to their forebears.

What are the economic systems and incentives associated with the creation of small neolocal families in other historical circumstances? In the West the small neolocal family developed with capitalist encroachment into agriculture and industry. As farm size shrunk, fewer individuals could be supported, and the resulting peasant production of food and agricultural goods was strongly linked to nuclear families. Petty commodity production in cities also contributed to shrinking family size and separate residence from extended kin (Lasch 1977; Levine 1977; Goody 1976; Cancian et al. 1978).

Caribbean slaves had incentives to form nuclear families like those found in other agricultural settings (Morrissey 1986). Despite that slaves could not own property, their life chances were immeasurably improved by development and exploitation of the resources they could control. The growing of provisions on individualized plots and even in kitchen gardens resembled peasant agriculture, in which men’s heavy labor was sometimes required but made valuable, finally, by the contributions of women and children. Craton (1982), Mintz (1974), and others have argued that the growing and perhaps marketing of provisions in the Caribbean were controlled by men, consistent with the hypothesis that nuclear families had a basis in the slaves’ petty agricultural production. Some other forms of trade and income accumulation were also enhanced for adults if joined in a family. In all such cases the threat of sale and breakup of the family counteracted material incentives to family organization.

Patterson argues that, where growing of provisions was extensive, as in Jamaica, women found incentives in heading families. The equalization of male and female status and obliteration of male slaves’ property rights created opportunities for females to control resources. Women used their children’s labor and land to amass resources, it is argued, and were economically independent of men. This claim rests on the assumption that women could reliably depend on adult men for assistance in clearing land, constructing
houses, etc. Male kin, perhaps linked to several generations of matrilineal
families, were probably available for assistance. But the instability of planta-
tion life militated against the lateral construction of kinship, particularly for
more than two generations. It is doubtful that female-headed families had
institutionalized links to adult male kin, although, as with female-led families
in the twentieth century, informal networks of men and women probably
offered support to a woman and her family.

If Patterson is incorrect in his view that heading families enhanced slave
women’s economic well-being, he still contributes to our understanding of
slave women’s experience by focusing on their economic interests. I propose,
however, that women’s best opportunity for acquiring income in the agricul-
tural setting often lay with a nuclear family. Although her control of land and
resources was less in this household arrangement than when heading a family,
her access to male labor was greater, and, given males’ opportunities in skilled
and artisanal labor and other forms of income accumulation, male incorpora-
tion into the household was generally desirable. Even in Africa, where women
had substantial control over subsistence agriculture, husbands and other male
kin performed heavy labor and traded surpluses (Gautier 1985, p. 47). West
Indian slave women probably sought many means to institutionalize male
help, and, with the sale of males and high mortality, creation of co-resident
ties was undoubtedly the most flexible and therefore significant strategy.

Generalizing from registration figures and plantation-specific records, we
can draw some tentative conclusions about the relationship between the
growing and marketing of provisions and family formation (see also Morrissey
1986). The hilly, lush environment of Jamaica, Martinique, St. Lucia, and
Dominica yielded much food, individually controlled by slaves. On older
estates in these areas nuclear families were numerous. On newly settled
islands, such as St. Lucia, nuclear families were few. In fact, 32 percent of
slaves in nineteenth-century St. Lucia lived in mother-child units (Higman
1984, p. 367). Demographic and historical factors appear to override
economic ones in these settings. Women effectively utilized the opportunities
offered by control of their children’s labor and land, but the increase in
nuclear families over time implies that women preferred a continuing male
presence in the household.

In contrast, Barbados, the British Leewards, the Danish Virgin Islands,
late Cuba, and Saint Domingue rationed imported or estate-grown food.
There nuclear families were few. Higman attributes this pattern to creoliza-
tion and to growing West Indian preference for mother-child units in
Barbados and the Leewards. The continuing influx of Africans with high
mortality and little likelihood of entry into any kind of family unit can be said
to explain the relatively few nuclear households. While acknowledging the
significance of these factors, we must also ask what economic incentives a male
or female slave found to form nuclear families in these settings. That
creolization accompanied the creation of female-headed families supports the point that material benefits of nuclear family formation were often few. With demographic and historical factors favoring nuclear families, mother-child families still predominated.

Women’s economic interests may explain mother-child families in areas of food importation and estate cultivation and nuclear families among provision-growing slaves. With scant opportunities to earn cash or resources in kind, relatively more was available to a woman and her children if no adult man took a share. The labor that male field slaves could contribute was unnecessary where provision grounds, kitchen gardens, and marketing chances were scarce. And what men absorbed, at least in food, was generally greater than what was consumed by women and children. On the other hand, male slaves of high status must have been particularly desirable companions in those areas with few opportunities for women to enhance their economic and social position. Although there is no evidence to buttress this point, it is likely that polygamous units flourished among upper-strata males in such settings. With few alternatives in land or trade, men of prestige could effectively use women as sources of greater status and authority, although women’s utility for the men’s income expansion was limited if the men were landless. Powerless economically, women might gladly share with another woman the advantage of liaison with a high-status male.

Overlaying these patterns and tendencies was the history of sugar production. As productivity and output grew and family functions were collectivized, incentives to form nuclear families declined. Using data on the proportion of slaves with no living kin on plantations, Higman (1984, p. 366) cites examples that illustrate a linear relationship between the proportion of kinless slaves in a population and time of entry into large-scale sugar production. “At Newton Estate, Barbados, roughly 20 percent of slaves had no family living on the plantation in 1796, while at Montpelier, Jamaica, the proportion was about 30 percent in 1825. These proportions may be compared with the 31 percent found among rural slaves in St. Lucia in 1815 and the 44 percent in Trinidad in 1813.”

There is evidence, moreover, that in Barbados and other sites of early sugar cultivation and small estates many slaves were committed to nuclear families or conjugal relationships but were forced to live apart on different plantations (Higman 1984, pp. 369–370). On Saint Domingue and Cuba nuclear families broke down with the intensification of sugar production, expansion of estates, collectivization of residence, and rationalization of estate provision of goods and services. Cuban slaves fortunate enough to remain on small farms continued to form nuclear families. Creole slaves who joined the thousands of Africans brought to mid-nineteenth-century Cuba suffered disintegration of kin relationships along with a diminution of life chances, although there is evidence that families sometimes survived in the *barracones* of the nineteenth
century (Moreno Fraginals 1978; Scott 1985, pp. 17–19). Craton (1979, p. 25) summarizes the consequences of interplay between changes in sugar production and the ecological and social organizational patterns of various British slave societies. On one end of a continuum were the virtual peasants of the Bahamas, Barbuda and, perhaps, the Grenadines, with locational stability, a small proportion of African slaves, natural increase and a relatively high incidence of nuclear and stable families. At the opposite pole were the overworked slaves of new plantations such as those of Trinidad, Guyana, and St. Vincent, with a high rate of natural decrease, a majority of slaves living alone or in “barrack” like conditions, and a high proportion of “denuded,” female-headed families.

Similar trends occurred in the French islands, with slaves on small, less productive Martinique and Guadeloupe developing more nuclear families than eighteenth-century Saint Domingue. Puerto Rico produced peasant agriculture and corresponding nuclear family patterns to a greater degree than Cuba. And the Dutch and Danish Virgin Islands exhibited more nuclear family organization than the late-developing Surinam. Still, in many settings reliable kinship and affective networks were impossible because of the shifting population and excruciating labor demands. We may conclude, finally, with Craton and Higman, that, where nuclear families were possible, they were often the building blocks of other kinds of kinship organization and family structure (see also Morrissey 1986). Female-headed families were adequate or simply viable vehicles for economic survival elsewhere.

Materialist explanations for the frequency of nuclear family organization on the small, less intensively cultivated Caribbean islands are confounded by the physical support available from large, stable kinship networks. Olwig (1985, p. 75) presents evidence of slaves assisting one another with food preparation and child care. She questions whether spouses were the principal sources of economic support for slaves, noting that “family life among the St. Johnian slaves does not seem to have centered on the household or a nuclear-type residential family, but rather on networks of relationships involving various relatives and spouses.” Larger estates, particularly in more recent sugar-producing societies, lacked the population consistency and stability found on St. John. But Olwig’s work raises the significant question of how Caribbean slaves formed and utilized kinship networks. The idea of neolocal self-sufficiency was almost certainly foreign to African women who had large support networks through matrilineal kinship and polygamy (Gautier 1985, pp. 43–45).16

Domestic workers, especially in cities and towns, were the only female slaves able to improve their economic position autonomously. These female slaves had independent access to income and little need for male labor or
contributions to overall resources. Their houses and household belongings were arranged for them. Moreover, the presence of a slave "husband" may have discouraged white male advances, the most important potential source of income and freedom for slave women. Lewis (1834, pp. 122-132) reports having heard that colored slave women could have sexual relationships with white males of status only if accorded the position of housekeeper. Although generally improbable, the assertion suggests that women recognized opportunities in liaisons with Europeans or were perceived by whites as shrewd sexual bargainers.

FAMILIES AND RESISTANCE

In 1959 Stanley Elkins (see Elkins 1976) published the essay "Slave and Personality" in which he analyzed the personality and culture of slaves in the U.S. South. Elkins argued, on the basis of the scattered information about slaves' psychological and emotional expressions, that bondmen and women resembled Nazi concentration camp victims. Both were, according to Elkins, benumbed and childlike, passively enduring the horrors of life in totalistic institutions. Elkins's portrait of slaves and victims of Nazi oppression has brought considerable critical commentary. It at once rings true—as victims of social oppression and life's tragedies, all humans sometimes feel despair, hopelessness, and identification with oppressors. Yet Elkins seems to blame the victims for their plight, confusing passive reactions to slavery with passive personalities and cultures that allowed slavery to happen. Human pain breeds active responses and reactions that Elkins overlooks among nineteenth- and twentieth-century slaves. In every historical setting slaves have rebelled and occasionally prevailed, most dramatically in the Caribbean with Saint Domingue's revolution. As James (1963, p. 25) comments: "Men make their own history, and the black Jacobins of San Domingo were to make history which would alter the fate of millions of men and shift the economic current of three continents."

Stress on the courage of slaves as the basis of analysis fails as well, creating overstatements and errors. Not all slaves were revolutionaries or rebels. Not all social action was rebellious or insurgent. Borrowing from other literature on the Nazi slave regime, we can hypothesize instead that Caribbean slaves reacted to slavery in a variety of ways, as humans do in all settings. Bettelheim (1943, 1960), for example, observed a range of responses as an inmate of German concentration camps. He concludes that the militant but "informed" prisoners fought when winning was possible and withdrew when rebellion brought unnecessary or unproductive danger to themselves, their
family, or their friends. Bettelheim’s analysis is also pertinent to our discussion of culture as a vehicle of conformity and reaction to totalistic regimes. If passivity is generally politically useless in an authoritarian environment, he asks, why are ideological or cultural preservation and reconstruction from the past any less so? Devotion to a cultural ideal, like a particular family form, is finally retreatist, argues Bettelheim, no more seriously threatening the system than does conformity. To express one’s needs to kin is to fail to express them more directly or rebelliously.

It is perplexing that creation of nuclear families in particular is perceived as a form of political opposition among New World slaves (Genovese 1976; Craton 1978, 1979). If it was the inflexible and contrived cultural preservation that some have claimed, then family formation must have been counterproductive to slave resistance. This was especially true of the nuclear family, more often than the female-headed family, that fulfilled the occasional hopes of slaveholders for the reproduction of the work force. But Caribbean slaves’ female-headed families were intrinsically no less retreatist than nuclear ones. Mother-led households did not seriously threaten the slave system, except insofar as fertility was relatively diminished and women heads of households reacted to the pressure to both bear children and produce sugar with malingering or feigned illnesses. Neither of these patterns is consistently associated with female-headed families. And even if infertility and low productivity were common correlates of female-headed households, they would not necessarily constitute rebellious behavior.

Family life, especially in nuclear form, also appears to contemporary observers to buffer the individual from the cruelties of work. Industrial society has infused in home a sense of shelter, “a haven from a heartless world” (Lasch 1977). The modern example has been uncritically applied to New World slaves, it seems, and the family described as a therapeutic institution. Those who see slave families as politically effective institutions are in fact equating their therapeutic value with rebellion. The family filled slaves with the comfort to stay alive—exactly what slaveholders wanted.

The equation of slave insurgency with family formation is, then, grounded in bourgeois assumptions about family and not in serious consideration of what cultural opposition and resistance entail. For female slaves the link between resistance and family is especially troubling, for their household responsibilities were greater than men’s. It has in fact been proposed that family creation and maintenance were common vehicles for bondwomen’s opposition to slavery. Bush (1986, p. 128) suggests, for example, that in the British Caribbean “the family was the crucible of resistance. Women slaves, strengthened by traditional African culture, were the backbone of the slave family and community” (see also Jones 1986; White 1985).
Yet, as I suggest in Chapter Nine, women were both visible and invisible partners in more active forms of West Indian slave insurgency than is commonly recognized. More important, slave women’s strong affective ties toward friends and kin, often discounted by contemporary observers, are not necessarily rebellious or insurgent, even in a hostile and emotionally sterile environment. A simpler view is that women’s contributions to family life were substantial, as in many other cultures. A more critical perspective is that slave women’s affection and love for their families was functional to slavery.

Yet there were slave enterprises and activities closely tied to kinship that had a potentially disruptive effect on slavery. Families’ control of household economies—petty agricultural production and marketing—was sometimes the basis of authority and status for women. Mintz and others have suggested that household economies were an integral part of New World slavery: By achieving economic self-sufficiency, slaves relieved masters of responsibility for food and other resources. Nevertheless the slaves’ household economies were potential sources of contradiction in Caribbean slavery. They offered status, authority, and economic power to women and families and provided incentives for men and women to reduce their labor commitments to slave masters and increase time and resource investments in their own petty industries. In this sense home production and trade sabotaged the plantation structure. Although difficult to measure, the influence of household economies on slavery does not require judgments about slaves’ political intentions and goals.

Families performed another, similarly disruptive task. As a primary institution within the slave community, they formed vehicles for slave conspiracies (Bush 1986; Mathurin 1974). Women may have been especially important communicators, given their more frequent presence in slave owners’ homes as domestics. And, as principal socializers of slave children, they passed on knowledge about communication lines and channels. We can verify slave rebellions and acts of sabotage and assume with confidence that they were possible only with the support of kin and informal slave networks.

In summary, the structuralist and class views of family formation among Caribbean slaves are echoed in debates about the contributions of family types to slave insurgency. Structuralists deny the existence of families or their potential incompatibility with slavery, a notion that history does not support. Nor can the class hypothesis that slave families were numerous and intrinsically rebellious be upheld. The emerging portrait is one of synthesis: Families sometimes formed and in specific ways contributed to tensions and contradictions in slavery. Two means by which families were at odds with Caribbean slave systems are suggested: through household economies and by supporting insurgency. The latter may have involved women’s full participation and leadership. Household resources were accumulated by many family members, sometimes under women’s guidance and supervision.
CONCLUSIONS

Family organization varied among Caribbean slaves. Nuclear families developed where provision growing was extensive, suggesting a structural basis for nuclear family formation among slaves such as that found in peasant societies. Many slaves lived alone, especially in areas of late and intense sugar cultivation. Mother-child family units were perhaps less common than previously thought. High-status slaves formed polygamous families. Organization of nuclear families among African slaves is thought by some to be the basis of polygamy, although in the British West Indies later generations were less likely than Africans to live in nuclear or polygamous units.

Structuralist interpretations, particularly popular in the 1960s, expressed doubt that stable nuclear families could form among slaves because households were vulnerable to sale of members. Moreover, the father’s economic role in nuclear families was usurped by slave masters. More recent scholarship has revealed many nuclear families among Caribbean slaves. It can be inferred that slaves bravely created families despite structural constraints.

I have argued that the material bases of slave societies provided incentives for the formation of nuclear families in settings where household economies were possible. Land and income accumulation in the rural setting were enhanced by contributions of many family members. Males’ physical strength was often needed in households involved in food production and marketing and was most reliably provided through the nuclear family. Men’s greater access to skilled and artisanal jobs contributed further to women’s and children’s resources. There was little incentive for women to head households except in urban areas, where their access to income through domestic work was comparable to men’s.

In both cases we are referring to neolocal families with relative estrangement from extended kin. The economic advantages of household and family relations accrue to individuals in this kind of familial arrangement, not to several generations of kin. Wrested from African kinship systems of depth and breadth, Caribbean slaves appear to be shorn of kin, much as the structuralists suggest. The class approach sensitizes us to the continuing formation of slave families, no less valuable or meaningful to family members than the creation of extensive kinship networks. Women’s economic interests were expressed in all resulting neolocal family forms and reflect the complex mix of modes and systems of production that generally resulted in bondwomen’s loss of economic power and the rising social equality of male and female slaves.