Slave Women in the New World

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Students of gender in slave societies have noted the significance of personal ties between Europeans and slave women in expressing the complex dynamics of gender and race in New World slavery. Caribbean slave women's relationships with European men strained the social structure of slavery, violating laws and drawing the region's relatively few European women into tension with bondwomen (Bush 1981; Mathurin 1974). Intimate bonds are but one kind of personal relationship between slaves and masters. Slave owners' authority to inflict physical punishment on their slaves created another personal tie. Punishment in the period from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century was at once public and personal. Torture and execution were public responses of authorities to personal transgressions. Yet state authorities could not intervene in the elite's response to their slaves, servants, or subjects. The personal relationship underlying physical punishment, combined with its public visibility, kept its victims in terror.

Both sexual intimacy and physical abuse manifested forms of power perhaps unique to New World slavery, in one instance to control males' and females' sexuality, in another to end their lives (Foucault 1977, 1978). And in both cases the values of an earlier agrarian era are recalled. European slave masters, like feudal lords, had personal relations with slaves that could be publicly displayed. Agrarian societies sanctioned the same type of relationship between husband and wife: A male valued, honored, and finally owned his wife and children. He could express affection or great brutality. Objections by civil authorities or women's kin to the violation of law or standards of human dignity were of limited legitimacy and effect.

The patriarchal nature of the master-slave relationship seems to explain much about the contradictions of the master-slave tie. Yet some dimensions of this link and its expressions in sexuality and physical punishment are not consistent with the analogy to agrarian society. Few other agrarian regimes had the sexually free character of Caribbean slavery, at least as manifested in relationships between white men and black and colored women. Although white males were at liberty to establish personal ties with slaves, these ties were not sanctioned by law or religion after the seventeenth century. Indeed, many white males had formal and legally protected primary relationships with white women. On the other hand, punishment of slaves was under increased colonial scrutiny, particularly in the nineteenth century when public pressure...
created by disputes among advocates of the continuation of slavery and the slave trade over the treatment of slaves influenced state policies.

The peculiar mix of agrarian and industrial, capitalist and noncapitalist elements that define Caribbean social formations and have many ideological expressions is manifested again in personal associations between slave owner and bondwoman in New World slavery. Relationships between European men and slave women were sexually free, increasingly so over time. Yet punishments appear to have become more routinized and regulated, consistent with changing patterns of justice in Europe and its direct manifestation in the abolition movement (Davis 1966; Foucault 1977). Sparse data make it difficult to document trends in sexual and physical relationships between Europeans and slaves. What can be observed are the continuing contradictions and paradoxes of these encounters.

In this chapter I examine the treatment of slave women by white men in privatized sexual liaisons. I also look at the physical abuse of slave women by masters and mistresses. Finally, I trace the responses of slave women who were often drawn into complex social relationships in the slave and European communities. Conventional analysis holds that revolt and flight were the most significant sources of slave rebellion. In neither instance were slave women's numbers or authority equal to men's. I consider briefly both constraints on protest by women and forms of rebellion that were more compatible with their social position and commitments.

**White and Black Sexuality**

Women's sexuality is often considered dangerous to the community. Taboos associated with menstruation, childbirth, and lactation remind us of women's mythic power and their frequent cultural association with the forces of creation and destruction (Sanday 1981; Douglas 1966). Black women in the New World had such cosmic power when they fulfilled the roles of healers and practitioners of witchcraft (Debbasch 1963; Sheridan 1985). Women field and domestic slaves were culturally imbued with great sexual attraction and licentiousness (Davis 1966; Jordan 1968; Peytraud 1973, pp. 194–195; Gautier 1985, p. 151). Davis suggests that the nakedness and greater sexual pleasure apparently enjoyed by Africans, in contrast to European reserve, confused whites.

Such a mixture of freedom and restraint was, of course, incomprehensible to Europeans. It was inconceivable that nakedness should be taken as a sign of virginity in a girl, or that purity could coexist with what seemed the most obscene rites and ceremonies. Travelers faithfully reported that Negroes valued chastity and punished adultery; but this information
could not be reconciled with the obvious and shocking fact that Africans enjoyed sex and were unashamed. (Davis 1966, p. 470)

Jordan (1968, p. 39) concurs that travelers’ accounts of journeys to Africa routinely included reference to women’s sexuality. “It may be that Englishmen found Negroes free in a primitive way and found this freedom somehow provocative; many chroniclers made a point of discussing the Negro women’s long breasts and ease of childbearing.” When they arrived in the Caribbean, other factors intensified European perceptions of African sexual license. Kinship relations were destroyed and “promiscuous” nonmarital ties formed. The act of enslavement and social subjugation may have stimulated the sexual imagination of some highly repressed Europeans.

A demographic factor finally affected the formation of relationships between white European males and darker-skinned slave and free women: the scarcity of white women. Sex between master and slave was best tolerated where white women were most scarce (Davis 1966, p. 262). The physical terrain, climate, and lack of indigenous European culture discouraged white women’s residence in much of the region. Those who endured to establish grand estate households complained of the ambience, the lack of local cultural activity, and the manners and mores of other Europeans (see, for example, Lady Nugent 1907 and Mrs. Carmichael 1834). Sympathetic visitors found their lives monotonous and difficult. Bremer (1853, vol. 2, p. 351) observed that in Cuba “the life of the ladies is not cheerful and scarcely active at all.” Disease was often rife and childbearing and pregnancy apparently more perilous than in urban Europe among the upper classes (Bremer 1853; Stedman 1971; Nugent 1907; Bush 1981).

If women do indeed bear the culture of a community, as some have argued, West Indian white women had little success or assistance from their male companions (Patterson 1973). Contemporary observers found the local European males loutish (Bush 1981). Young males had little apparent interest in building an expatriate community. They hoped to make money quickly and return home. Patterson suggests that absenteeism and the related scarcity of white women led to violent and abusive treatment of slaves by slaveholders. There were no shared values; there was a “nearly complete absence of a cohesive set of collective sentiments among the masters” (Patterson 1973, p. 285).

European males regularly sought liaisons with slave women (Patterson 1976; Stedman 1971; Nugent 1907; Atwood 1791, p. 273; Edwards 1966, vol. 1, p. 273; Labat 1930, vol. 1, p. 215). “Every unmarried adult man, and of every class, has his black or his brown mistress, with whom he lives openly” (Stewart 1823, p. 178). James (1963, p. 32) claims that in Saint Domingue in 1789, of 7,000 mulatto women 5,000 were either prostitutes or the “kept mistresses” of white men. The West Indies were occasionally presented as a
land of sexual opportunity for young European males. J.B. Moreton (1793), a former estate bookkeeper, warned men to restrain themselves, for venereal disease was common in the British West Indies and not easily cured. Atwood (1791, p. 209) lamented that “in the English West Indian islands in general, there prevails a great aversion to forming matrimonial connections.” Edwards reassured his readers that free women of color, “universally maintained by white men of all ranks and conditions, are not prostitutes, as flourished in Europe at the time” (Edwards 1966, vol. 2, pp. 25–26).

Under what circumstances did slave women enter into sexual relationships with European men? Forced sexual relations were common (Westergaard 1917, p. 141; Sheridan 1985, p. 243). Slave women had legal protection against sexual violence in some settings, but these proscriptions had little apparent influence on behavior. Stedman (1971, p. 370) attributed many murders of whites in Dutch Surinam to the rage of male slaves over European exploitation of slave women. Slave masters and their agents in the British West Indies procured women for visiting Europeans (Moreton 1793, p. 77). The use of authority to force women into sexual encounters was also adopted by blacks of status. Stedman (1971, pp. 177–178) recounted, for example, the story of a young slave woman who was punished for resisting the sexual advances of a black overseer.

Slave women learned the value of sexual ties with European men and sometimes aggressively sought them. Stedman (1971, p. 17), Pinckard (1970, vol. 2, p. 383), Atwood (1791, p. 273), and Schoelcher (1842, p. 73) related that they or other Europeans were approached by slave families who offered young women for sexual intimacy in exchange for money or gifts. Lewis (1834, p. 78) described an incident from one of his Jamaican estates, Cornwall, in 1816, in which a slave woman left a black man for a white bookkeeper “because he had a good salary, and could afford to give her more presents than a slave could.” Economic motives and dealings might be rewarded, then, by a slave woman’s freedom or by food, clothing, and petty luxuries for herself and her kin.

Such ties between slave women and white members of the plantation staff were common. At Blandine estate in Guadeloupe from 1764 to 1772, five of thirteen single mothers had mulatto children (Gautier 1985, p. 163). At the Mesopotamia estate in Jamaica at the turn of the nineteenth century, sexual relations between no more than six white overseers and bookkeepers and slave women accounted for 11 percent of slave births. This ratio is high, given that 90 black males between the ages of 17 and 50 lived on the estates. Data from Mesopotamia reveal as well that “whites preferred their mistresses to be young: of the nine women who bore mulatto or quadroon infants [between 1799 and 1818], one was only fifteen years old and four others were under twenty. The whites also preferred light-complexioned women” (Dunn 1977, pp. 48–49).
Free colored women were in a better position to seek the attention of European men. They frequently formed a society of dances, balls, and other social rituals where European men came for entertainment (Moreton 1793; Fouchard 1981; James 1963; Moreau de Saint Méry 1958, vol. 1, pp. 104-107; Wynter 1967, p. 29). For the mostly French free colored women of Dominica, “dancing is the chief part of their amusements, their preparation for which are commonly very expensive; their ladies being usually dressed in silks, silk stockings and shoes; buckles, bracelets and rings of gold and silver, to a considerable value” (Atwood 1791, p. 220). With their “insatiable passion for showy dresses and jewels,” they “ensnare” young white men (Carmichael 1834, vol. 1, pp. 75, 71). Fouchard (1981, p. 43) comments that slave women in Saint Domingue imitated the mores of free women: “How could the slave avoid being drawn to . . . that intermediary class whose insolent ostentation gave birth to the war of lace and clothing that involved the entire colony in an all-out competition?” In a phenomenological sense, however, the brown or black woman was finally passive, Wynter argues (1967, p. 29). She could make demands only in a covert and manipulative way, lest she lose her coveted position.

Pinckard (1970, vol. 3, p. 252) claimed that slave women understood freedom to mean an intimate relationship with a white man (see also Hilliard d’Auberteuil 1776, vol. 2, p. 83). Certainly prospects for manumission were enhanced by intimate contact with Europeans. Sio (1976) warns, however, against confusing the incidence of miscegenation, apparently high in the British West Indies, with manumission, rare there in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Daughters of Europeans and slave women were, for example, often given to other Europeans as mistresses (Pinckard 1970, p. 204). In fact, manumissions were generally few, even in the French and Spanish West Indies where freed men constituted a greater proportion of the population than elsewhere in the Caribbean. In Saint Domingue in 1785 only 845 slaves were freed, but as many as 8,490 concubines were estimated among slaves in 1780. One-hundred slaves were freed in 1776 in Martinique, with concubines numbering 3,150 (Peytraud 1973, p. 419).

Some slave women and their racially mixed offspring were freed, of course. Light-skinned slave women occasionally attained considerable status as the mistresses of prominent white males. John Stedman’s mistress, Joanna, had a long and apparently loving relationship with him during his sojourn in Surinam when Dutch troops were fighting the Bush Negroes. Joanna refused to leave Surinam when he returned to Europe, instead remaining with a “humane” slave mistress. She was later poisoned by “persons envious of her privileged position” (van Lier, in Stedman 1971, pp. x-xi).

Free women of color were more likely than slaves to develop beneficial relationships. Many prominent West Indian officials were known to have free colored mistresses (N. Hall 1976). Anna Heegaard was the companion of
Peter von Scholten, the Governor-General of the Danish West Indies at the time of abolition in 1848. In Barbados several colored women, freed by white lovers, became wealthy tavern owners (Handler 1974, pp. 133-134; Pinckard 1970, vol. 1, p. 249).

European women are said to have reacted with anger to affairs between European men and slave women. "The jealousy of the [white] creole ladies is intense. The easy availability of other women reduces their status. They are intended to breed legitimate heirs and little else" (Wynter 1967, p. 28). Handler (1974, p. 199) expresses a perhaps more realistic view, that "white females condoned or were indifferent" to concubinage between Europeans and women of color.

A lore has also developed that European women, bored and jealous, were more cruel to the slaves than white men (Brathwaite 1971; Bush 1981, p. 258; Gautier 1985). Journals of visitors and plantation personnel have contributed to this impression. Stedman (1971, p. 179), for example, tells a tale that serves an as archetype for stories of white women’s cruelty. A European woman was disturbed by the cries of a slave infant. She tore the child from her mother’s arms and drowned it. The bondwoman was then severely punished for trying to save the dying child. That children were abused underlines the anger European women felt about sexual relations between European men and dark-skinned women and the resulting children.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travelers relate other incidents in which white women punished slaves or were insensitive to other whites’ cruelties (see, for example, Pinckard 1970; see also Brathwaite 1971, p. 305; Nistal Moret 1980, p. 89; Gisler 1965, p. 48). Turnbull’s account of a Cuban criolla’s attitude toward her domestic servants is telling.

The mistress of many a great family in Havana will not scruple to tell you that such is the proneness of her people [domestics] to vice and idleness, she finds it necessary to send one or more of them once a month to the whipping post, not so much on account of any positive delinquency, as because without these periodical advertisements the whole family would become unmanageable, and the master and mistress would lose their authority. (Turnbull 1840, p. 53)

The “cruel and capricious” Marquesa de Prado Ameno thus terrorized the family of the nineteenth-century Cuban slave Juan Francisco Manzano (Mullen 1981, p. 14). The underlying theme in all of these situations is the mercurial nature of European women. It is not that they punished slaves more often than did European men—impossible given that most slaves were in the fields, exposed primarily to white male authorities. Rather, some European women defied observers’ expectations by punishing slaves excessively and with pleasure, as
many European men did. Visitors to the West Indies undoubtedly expected more of women, a tenderness toward the slaves and ambivalence about the institution perhaps. This expectation is consistent with popular images of U.S. southern slave mistresses.

Clinton (1982) has recently reinforced this vision, describing the sad and lonely white plantation mistress in the U.S. South. The southern estate owner’s wife often had personal ties to slaves, caring for them at times of illness and intervening on their behalf when slave owners threatened punishment or the breakup of their families. White women considered themselves the conscience of the South. They were often hard workers as well, organizing and managing large farm or estate households. Most observers of Caribbean white women have been less kind, claiming that they contributed little to their communities and benefited shamelessly from slave labor.

James (1963, p. 30) repeats a common perception of European women in the West Indies. "Passion was their chief occupation, stimulated by overfeeding, idleness, and an undying jealousy of the black and Mulatto women who competed so successfully for the favours of their husbands and fathers.” European males may have preferred slave women and free women of color; they were more attractive than the European women who ventured to the New World (Bush 1981). Atwood (1791, p. 211) found white females a pale but pleasing group. They were pure and not possessed of the “inordinate desires” one would expect of white women in the tropics. Edwards (1966, p. 13) also noted their languid appearance. Moreau de Saint Méry (1958, p. 10) describes Saint Domingue’s white Creole women as lively but not strong, disabled by the warm climate and idleness. Marrying on average four years before their contemporaries in France, they acquiesced to social pressure to fulfill their most valued role, that of mother (Gautier 1985, p. 34; see also Hilliard d’Auberteuil 1776, pp. 31-32). Bremer (1853, vol. 2, pp. 343-344) suggests that the white woman in Cuba found it difficult to “maintain herself in an honorable way.” She notes further that “it frequently happens that marriage does not follow love and betrothal.” Ely (1963, pp. 748-751) cites contemporary observers who generally found Cuban women beautiful but flirtatious and coy.

The West Indian plantation mistress’s life, then, was boring and debilitating and surely produced behavior not in keeping with European upper-class norms for females. One can also infer from contemporary writings an anger at European women for failing to erect a mantle of gentility on slave society. Contact with a refined and gracious European coterie would have allowed visitors to deny the oppressive nature of slavery.

Another indication of white women’s projected status of decorum and purity is the colonial attitude toward sexual encounters between European women and black slaves. White women were not free to engage in intimate relationships with black men, particularly after the mid-1700s (Bush 1981, p.
There was little expectation, of course, that these conservative women would seek such unions. The degree of white women's desexualization and the dehumanization of black slaves is perhaps best indicated by the European acceptance of the slaves' nudity. Little or no clothing was allowed most slaves. Domestics served in the homes of people who would never tolerate undress among their peers.\(^{12}\)

Nevertheless, white women and darker-skinned males occasionally developed emotional and physical relationships. Westergaard (1917, p. 162) reports one such encounter between a planter's daughter and a slave in the Danish West Indies. Colonial officials recommended corporal punishment and life imprisonment for the woman; the slave was to be burned to death. He escaped, however; the woman's fate was not recorded. In a similar situation in late eighteenth-century Surinam, the European woman was "reviled" and the slave killed (Stedman 1971, p. 162). Labat (1930, vol. 1, pp. 215-220) reported several such incidents in the seventeenth-century French West Indies, resulting in social ostracism of the white woman. Even Lady Nugent, wife of a Jamaican governor, was criticized by her Creole companions for dancing with an old black man (Nugent 1907; see also Brathwaite 1971, p. 305).

Sympathy has sometimes been accorded to black males for the loss of wives and lovers to white men (Moreton 1793; Patterson 1969, p. 168). It appears, however, that in some settings slave women retained sexual ties with black men while becoming Europeans' lovers (Gautier 1985, p. 175). Modern observers have explored the social implications of miscegenation for bondmen in racially stratified slavery. Jordan (1968, p. 141) argues that, where slaves greatly outnumbered whites in the United States, symbolic acts of oppression reinforced whites' superior social status. "White men extended their dominion over their Negroes to the bed, where the sex act itself served as ritualistic reenactment of the daily pattern of sexual dominance." Patterson, too, notes emasculation of male slaves, who had little recourse but to tolerate the sexual exploitation of their female kin and companions.

**PHYSICAL ABUSE OF SLAVE WOMEN**

If European males related to individual slave women in a particular way, they were still the masters of many women. Slave owners generally treated bondwomen like bondmen, subject to the same punishments. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature on the Caribbean is replete with references to the brutalization of slave women and free women of color. There appears to be little difference in the severity with which men and women were punished, although men may have been brutalized more frequently. Mathurin (1974, p. 343) notes, however, that in the last years of Jamaican slavery bondwomen
were frequently victimized in the many well-known cases of brutality against slaves (Mathurin 1975).

Women were occasionally executed. For example, Stedman (1971, p. 33) observed 11 rebel captives killed. “One man was hanged alive upon a gibbet, by an iron hook stuck through his ribs; two others were chained to stakes, and burnt to death by a slow fire. Six women were broken alive upon the rack, and two girls were decapitated.” Women, along with young children and elderly slaves, were frequently whipped and flogged (Knibb 1832, p. 17). Cuban slave writer and poet Juan Francisco Manzano told, for example, that his mother was held down by two slaves and beaten for asking about her son’s fate as he was about to be punished (Mullen 1981, p. 87). Laws were enacted in the amelioration period in the French, Danish, and British West Indies to limit the punishment of women but to little apparent effect.

The abuse of pregnant women is notable in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts of plantation life. French West Indian slave owners followed the custom of whipping the pregnant woman by staking her to the ground, hollowing an area in the ground for her unborn child. The same practice was observed in Cuba (Ortiz 1975, p. 231; Ely 1963, p. 486). Lewis (1834, p. 390) offers a similar example from Jamaica: “I have not passed six months in Jamaica, and I have already found on one of my estates a woman who had been kicked in the womb by a white book-keeper, by which she was crippled herself, and on another of my estates another woman who had been kicked in the womb by another white book-keeper, by which he had crippled the child.” Olwig (1985, p. 34) reports that three women on Cinnamonbay plantation in St. John complained that, although pregnant, they were beaten for insufficient work. Sturge and Harvey (1838, p. 5) visited a prison in Bridgetown, Barbados, where guards insisted that a woman in late pregnancy shatter stones at the same pace as other women. Similar incidents are noted in the British West Indies and Puerto Rico (Moreton 1793, p. 153; Curet 1985, p. 129). Gisler (1965, p. 49) repeats the 1845 complaint against the brothers Jaham, planters in Martinique, charged with twice beating the pregnant slave Rosette.

The abuse of pregnant slaves seems to run counter to slave owners’ intentions to reproduce the labor force. In the U.S. South slave masters monitored pregnancies and punished women who aborted (Clinton 1982). The latter policy was enacted during the amelioration period in parts of the Caribbean. In the French West Indies, for example, women thought to have aborted or contributed to the death of a newborn were whipped or made to wear an iron collar, sometimes until pregnant again. The mothers of children who died of tetanus were often killed (Gautier 1985, p. 113). But even when childbirths were encouraged in Caribbean slavery, slave owners and their agents abused pregnant women, meaning, it seems, to inflict special pain on women slaves by threatening the lives they carried.13
Women's Protests

Women seldom exercised active leadership in Caribbean slave revolts. We have tended lately, therefore, to focus on their participation in indirect forms of protest. I have argued against understanding family formation as a means of rebellion. I have also questioned whether abortion, infanticide, and sexual abstinence, all hypothesized to be rebellious behavior by Caribbean slaves, were as common as sometimes claimed. Women are also said to have joined men in withholding productivity through a variety of evasions and deceptions of the slave master and his managers. Women were apparently adept at fooling slaveholders through complaints of illness, the need to nurse their children, and other behaviors that were defined as malingering by whites (Hine 1979; Patterson 1969). Mathurin (1975, p. 12) captures one implication for Caribbean slavery of this response:

One of the crucial factors that eventually helped to put an end to black bondage in the British Caribbean in 1838 was the fact that slavery, as a system of labour, became more and more expensive; it was expensive because it was unproductive; it was impossible to get maximum work output from forced labour. An important element in this low productivity was the unwillingness of the slave woman to work.

Women are once again here portrayed as sentient beings capable of anger and response and acting in the tradition of other "prepolitical" groups constrained by circumstance and custom from more direct forms of protest (Hobsbawm 1959).

The larger political message is a needed antidote against the tendency to conflate the experiences of male and female slaves and then focus only on the males and the kinds of protest, for example, revolts, in which they were prominent. Yet, in the absence of a written record and with only a fragmented oral tradition handed down from slaves, we have little ground for inferences about indirect forms of slave protest. As for women's proclivity for illness as an excuse for absence from work, there is no consistent evidence that women slaves were more frequently ill or absent from work because of illness than men. The nature of slaves' maladies is of course often vague in the historical record (Mathurin 1974, p. 314). They may appear to be contrived because research has focused so little on the epidemiology of Caribbean slavery and the entry of two population groups into a new disease environment (Sheridan 1985, pp. 1–41).

Protests against work and slavery varied in form with what was possible and effective. Some productivity lapses annoyed the slave master, for example, on Lewis's Jamaican estates. There slaves bore less likelihood of violent retribution than in the brutal sugar factories of more successful producers. Still, the
sadism of some slaveholders was extreme and their reactions to insubordination unpredictable, making it difficult for slaves or modern observers to gauge the political advances brought by insurgency.

How, then, did slave women protest the awesome burdens inflicted on them by slavery, especially in its highly rationalized and intense nineteenth-century forms? Women took part in some revolts and rebellions, if not overtly then as conspirators (Gautier 1985; Craton 1982, pp. 122, 132–133; Westergaard 1917, p. 176). Women sometimes served ritual roles, such as “queen” of a band of rebels (Craton 1982, p. 235; Mathurin 1974, pp. 91–92). Others appear to have been at the heart of plotting and planning: Nanny Grigg, a domestic slave, participated in the 1816 Barbados slave rebellion (Craton 1982, pp. 260–261). Certainly women and children were killed by whites in generalized acts of retribution against communities suspected of aiding insurgents (Craton 1982, pp. 315, 328; Schnakenbourg 1980, p. 108; Ortiz 1975, p. 151; Gautier 1985, p. 243). If captured, rebel women were subject to torture and execution alongside men (Price 1976, 1979; Stedman 1971; Gisler 1965, p. 54). Their knowledge of “le Vaudou” fortified slave troops in the Saint Domingue revolution. Women also served as spies and nurses and traded themselves for weapons in French West Indian slave revolts (Gautier 1985, p. 242).

Women became Maroons, although everywhere less frequently than men (Westergaard 1917, p. 176; Kopytoff 1976; Silié 1976, p. 78; Gautier 1985, pp. 227–238; Franco 1979; Price 1976, p. 26; Debien 1979). Women were occasionally taken from estates by Maroon leaders to serve as companions and workers (Edwards 1966). Women also fled to join lovers and kin. Lewis (1834, p. 91) writes of the escaped slave Pluto, whose generosity led women to join him in flight. Manigat (1977, p. 430) suggests that sexual and emotional motives often influenced slaves’ inclination to flee.

“Courrir les filles” (“girl-hunting”) was a natural urge that could not always be met within the plantation. Given the hard work and scarcity of leisure for the slaves, womanizing was a favorite diversion for which it was worth taking the risk of a “fugue” to another plantation or a more serious flight. Sometimes the slave became a maroon after a love grievance or conflict on the plantation with a luckier fellow-slave or even an enterprising master. A whole chapter could be written on marronage-sexuality, the slave running away because of girl-hunting, or running away because of girls who wanted to elope with them, or abducting girls after having fled and lived as maroons.

Polygyny among some Jamaican Maroons suggests that stratification within the band at times intensified the competition for women.
The peasant and hunter-gatherer communities established by the Maroons offered freedom to women but difficult circumstances. Women did nearly all the farming in Jamaican Maroon communities, claims Edwards (1966, vol. 1, p. 504). Mathurin (1974, p. 95) asserts that, without women’s contributions to “the resistance movement in the area of agriculture,” Maroons would have been a far less potent and pervasive political force in Jamaica. Maroon women ground millet and carried out domestic chores in Saint Dominigue (Fouchard 1981, p. 180). They performed domestic tasks while men farmed among the cimarrones of Capo Beata in the Dominican Republic (Silic 1976, p. 78).

Maroon communities probably had a higher birth rate than estates (Mathurin 1974, p. 93) but may have lacked a large population of children. Gautier (1985, p. 237) suggests that women fled less often than men, resisting separation from children and considering it too risky to include them in escape plans (see also White 1985). She offers a periodization of patterns of flight by women in the French West Indies that may have application elsewhere in the region. In the seventeenth century women fled with families, even newborns. By the eighteenth century, “with the dissolution of families and increased difficulties associated with marronage,” they fled alone. 16

The Jamaican Windward Maroon obeah woman Nanny was an important political presence in the group and an able warrior (Kopytoff 1976; Tuelon 1973; Patterson 1973, p. 262). Her feats are legendary in Jamaica, but her origins are unknown. She may have been an escaped slave who, with five brothers, took leadership of a Maroon band (Tuelon 1973, pp. 20–21). Her status is apparently anomalous, however, as no other comparable female Maroon leader has been identified and other evidence suggests that the Maroons were male dominated in number and in their frequent militancy.

“Insolence” was a frequent female offense, often resulting in punishment (Mathurin 1975, p. 13; Craton 1984). Arson and poisoning involved women (Debien 1974; Debbasch 1963). On many occasions these acts of insurgency required networks of conspirators and remind us that the often hidden support of women and children buttressed revolt. 17 Whole households of domestic slaves conspired to poison masters, their families, and guests in nineteenth-century Saint Domingue. Larger networks poisoned significant segments of masters’ slave work forces as well (Gisler 1965, p. 54; Hilliard d’Auberteuil 1776, vol. 1, p. 137). To the extent that abortion and infanticide were practiced, largely female groups worked together to conceal these events from the white plantation staff (Mathurin 1974, pp. 358–363; Hine 1979, p. 125).

It has been argued that suicide and self-mutilation also constituted “political acts” (Geggus 1983; Ely 1963; Ortiz 1975). Again the historical literature offers examples of women engaging in these forms of resistance. On the British Virgin Islands in 1793, for example, a well-known case involved “eight slaves,
two of them women, who cut off their arms with their bills, as a protest against plantation labour” (Dookhan 1975, p. 83).

Caribbean slave women’s heavy involvement in subsistence and household tasks reinforced their biological ties to the family. A woman’s range of protests was generally limited to those that would not endanger her family or her ties to it. The peculiar sadistic need of white male authorities to abuse pregnant females is a reminder of the emotional and physical commitments women brought to interaction with slave masters and their agents and the reactions that they could elicit.

This interpretation of females’ comparative reticence to revolt openly or in a militant way puts the emphasis firmly on intentionality—on women protecting their households. It is more consistent with our increased knowledge about women’s major roles in production. It also calls our attention to women’s tendency to flee to lovers and kin on other plantations and in Maroon communities and to work together, invisibly, to defy and destroy slave owners.

Efforts to establish the humanity of slaves and their “class consciousness” are sometimes at odds with information about the successful exploitation by masters of slaves’ labor power. Their pursuit of “political acts” did not mean that slaves had “cultural autonomy” or a full range of options for protest (Geggus 1983). Women slaves did not generally fulfill prominent leadership roles in traditionally understood vehicles for revolt, that is, Maroon communities and rebel movements. They did, however, fill subsidiary positions and give many kinds of support to male rebels. Female insurgency may have sometimes been expressed in malingering and in the refusal to conceive and bear children. But evidence of these practices is limited, and their incidence is at odds with other more fully documented tendencies, including physiologically based female subfecundity and high levels of work productivity.

**Conclusions**

Sexual relationships between European males and slaves and the severity with which female slaves were physically abused are not entirely separate phenomena. For some sadistic slave owners sexuality and punishment were perversely linked. For all, it is a contradictory and puzzling relationship that black female sexuality could be valued and black women’s bodies mutilated and destroyed.

A conceptual break existed for slave masters between the slave woman as sexual being and as worker. It is a profound separation, unusual even for other slave societies. Labor shortages and the failure of European women to settle in the region combined to make white men completely utilitarian in their treatment of slave women, untroubled by the degraded social status of their
sexual partners. The bondwomen's economistic pursuit of white men was also a means to control their situation. The colored and black mistresses of Europeans rarely achieved real security, but they remained ahead of field-workers, largely avoiding the physical abuses and difficult work lives those slaves endured.

The social autonomy of slave women underlay their vulnerability to sexual exploitation and physical abuse. A lack of economic power made their social position even more precarious and unstable. It is likely that whites' personal power over black women grew more totalistic during the course of sugar cultivation in the region. The frequent marginality of slave women to their own community is thus clear. The refuge provided by marronage further highlights slave women's marginal social status. Treated as the spoils of war, pawns in males' ranking systems, and the principal agricultural workers in Maroon communities, women's status was low and subordination to their male comrades pronounced.