

The Structural Violence of Jamaican Slave Society

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WRITER'S COMMENT: This paper was written for a class research assignment but also as a preliminary exposition, part of my greater undergraduate research project as a McNair Scholar. For the last 7 months, I have been wrestling with the question of violence within 18th-century colonial New World slave societies. Initially I was interested in investigating systems and power structures that reinforced the domination and chattelization of bodies. While spending much time with various archival material, I was struck by the brutality of punishment and slave ownership. If slaves were such valuable property, central to economic production, why was mutilation and spectacular execution so common? In this paper I decided to address such questions by focusing on the violence of physical and social domination that was essential for Jamaica's continued existence as a New World colony dependent on slavery.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: From almost the first day of class, Clifton and I began speaking about his previous research on American slavery and his desire to extend it for the research paper assigned in my UWP 102C: Writing in History class. The topic that he finally settled on, an examination of the structural violence in Jamaica's slave system, was ambitious for an undergraduate, but one that he skillfully researched and ultimately presented. His integration of both primary and secondary sources illustrates the time he spent investigating the subject, familiarizing himself with what other scholars have written about the topic as well as what the contemporary evidence reveals. Ultimately, Clifton's analysis of the role structural violence played in

Jamaica's eighteenth century plantocracy is compelling and thought provoking; the sophistication of his argument speaks to the level of scholarship the historical community should expect from him in the future.

—Jillian Azevedo, University Writing Program

Introduction

During the 18th century, Jamaican slave society was characterized by perpetual conflict, mass violence, and death. Torn by persistent slave insurrections, social instability, and disease, the colony was caught in a tenacious state of turmoil. Even so, Jamaica was one of the most economically productive English colonies in the Americas. The massive slave population that outnumbered whites by a 10:1 ratio provided the plantocracy with a bountiful slave economy. Yet, the massive slave populace challenged the plantocracy's ability to maintain order. Thus, the efficacy of the slave economy depended on the effectual subjugation of an aversive enslaved population. In confronting this dilemma, violence instituted by the plantocracy and the state became a functional necessity. Much scholarship on this topic has presented the subject of violence as an autonomous byproduct of slavery rather than being a systemic exercise of power mandated within slave societies. An examination of the conflict within Jamaica presents a question that prompts the investigation of violence as serving a greater function—how does violence become implemented as an answer to the dilemma of maintaining order and domination over the enslaved population?

In thinking about implemented violence as a systemic exercise of power to reinforce confinement rather than being an ambiguous byproduct of coercion, it becomes clear that violence becomes imposed as a structural force of terror and punishment. Public torture and maiming, mutilation and death are exerted to reinforce authority over enslaved bodies to ensure the effectual production of the slave economy. Furthermore, since the plantocracy and colonial state were obliged to assert dominion over the enslaved, it aroused a rivaled exertion of power that caused tension between state authority and slave-owning autonomy. As the colony was dependent on the economic power of the plantocracy, instead of revoking the power of slave owners, colonial magistrates

sought to sanction their customary practices through the state's power over governing slavery. Henceforth, the colonial state is able to assert slave subjugation through a structural regime of terror and punishment by adopting and sanctioning the violent customary practices of the Jamaican plantocracy to reinforce social and physical domination over slaves.

Wealth, Power, and Violence of the Plantocracy

In 1709 a merchant by the name of A. Baldwin published *A letter from a Merchant at Jamaica to a Member of Parliament in London, Touching the African Trade* to criticize the unethical practices of torture and violence within Jamaican slave society. In urging the English Parliament in London to act on the ambiguity of slavery's governance, Baldwin's letter alludes to the extensive power of the plantocracy within Jamaican slave society. Following the seizure of Jamaica in 1655 from the Spanish, it rapidly transformed from being an English settlement of buccaneers to an outright slave society dominated by a wealthy plantocracy. From 1655 through the 18th century, the social, economic, and political structures that were all based on slavery defined Jamaica as a slave society. For Jamaica, "Slavery stood at the center of economic production" which constituted the power of the colony—being based on slave labor and cash crop production.¹

As sugar became a dominant consumer commodity throughout the 18th century, its mass cultivation in Jamaica would lead to the rapid expansion of a slave-owning autocracy referred to as the Jamaican plantocracy. To secure their power, it became essential to ensure the continual expansion of sugar production dependent on slave subjugation. Furthermore, this subjugation was implemented through extensive forms of violence and terror to compel the enslaved to the authority of their owners. Baldwin's statement, advocating that Parliament "help and relieve so many thousands of miserable men, who groan under the weight of an insupportable tyranny and oppression," alludes to the power of the plantocracy being dependent on their ability to dominate a mass body of

1 Berlin, Ira. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. Harvard UP, 2003, 9.

slaves through means of violence.²

Baldwin's observation of the extensive malevolent acts of the plantocracy suggests a form of slave-owning autonomy within Jamaican slave society. Slave owners punished slaves with grave consequences, regardless of the severity of their acts of insubordination. In this sense, the power of the plantocracy depended on their efficacy to repress defiance. Baldwin illustrates this as he recounts a slave who was "kill'd by his master for taking a small loaf of bread as he pass'd thro the kitchin."³ Exercised violence meant to reinforce authority became the norm of private ownership, representative "of the cruelty wherewith the poor wretches—the negroes are used."⁴ Baldwin's plea for "the relief and ease of so many, who are basely oppressed, and inhumanely treated" further insinuates an epidemic of slave-owning belligerence held by the discretion of the plantocracy.⁵ His claim that "either the planters or merchants, the company or traders" harbor a kind of violence that "think it their business to shew, or for their credit or interest to have known" additionally suggests a link between the exercised brutality and autonomous authority of slave owners over their property.⁶

The autonomy of slave-owning authority further implies the existence of a prevailing sovereignty of the slave owner's estate. Within these contexts, the plantation becomes its own space—sovereign, yet bound within the constraints of an operating slave society. There the slave is subject to the slave owner's discretion of enforced domination. In *A view of the past and present state of the Island of Jamaica*, John Stewart observed that "the treatment of the slave depends in a great measure upon the character and temper of his masters or manager."⁷ Saidiya Hartman

2 Baldwin, A. *A Letter from a Merchant at Jamaica to a Member of Parliament in London, Touching the African Trade: To Which is Added, A speech Made by a Black of Gardaloupe at the Funeral of a Fellow-Negro*. London, 1709, 9.

3 Ibid., 4.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 14.

6 Ibid., 4.

7 Stewart, J. *A view of the past and present state of the Island of Jamaica: with remarks on the moral and physical condition of the slaves and on the abolition of slavery in the colonies by J. Stewart*. Edinburgh, 1823. Slavery and Anti-Slavery, 222.

writes, “The absolute dominion of the master predicated on the annexation of the captive body and its standing as the ‘sign and surrogate’ of the master’s body, yielded to an economy of bodies, yoked and harnessed, through the exercise of autonomy, self-interest, and consent.”⁸ As slaves were defined as chattel by the state, they were completely besieged by the will and authority of their masters. Within these contexts, the plantation becomes a domain of its own nature—further cultivating various forms of customary practices that were bound by the self-interest and individual desires of slave owners.

The crux of slave-owning power depended upon performative violence used to set an example. The body of the slave became a subject of projecting fear amongst the enslaved. The fear of slave insurrection constantly haunted the consciousness of the free. The mere existence of a free state of being, relinquished from bondage, provoked slaves to ponder or even pursue an alternative condition outside of the bondage of their enslavement. Furthermore, Jamaica had suffered several massive slave insurrections during the 18th century in which two resulted in the establishment of sovereign maroon communities. Black liberation would surely mean the undoing of the Jamaican slave economy. In response, punishment inflicted by slave owners was centered on using terror through bodily maiming to reassert their position of power over their property. Baldwin states, “They will with a knife lay open the flesh of a slave’s limbs in long Furrows, and then pour a hot liquor, made of pitch, tar, oil, wax, and brimstone . . .”⁹

Pain and suffering were used to seize the slave’s body as a mere material commodity. In this, the slave held a dual existence as person and property. The slave owner used pain to dominate the humanity of the slave and exercised such measures of violence by the will of his ownership over the slave’s body as property.¹⁰ Specifically, the customary practices of punishment and terror by slave owners were bound within this intimate relationship between owner and slave. Because of this, it became the custom for slave owners to use the maiming and disfigurement of the black body as a means of perpetuating a constant fear of white dominion

8 Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 120.

9 Baldwin, 10.

10 Hartman, 93.

through absolute terror. Thus, the power of the plantocracy over the enslaved necessitated extreme means of violence to ensure the effectual production of their sugar economy by enthralled bodies. Within these contexts, the wealth, power, and violence of the plantocracy were all intertwined within Jamaican slave society.

The Tension and Consolidation of Authority Between the Plantocracy and Colonial State

The autonomous concentration of power amongst the plantocracy constantly existed as a major dilemma for the colonial state. The sovereignty of slave owners persistently challenged the state's ability to regulate slavery. Yet Jamaica as a whole was dependent on the performance of the slave economy through the power of the plantocracy. Consequently, as Diana Paton explains, "[S]tate-operated penal and disciplinary mechanisms existed alongside 'private' forms of punishment directed by slave owners, while modern modes of punishment existed side by side with—indeed, were intertwined with—violent and spectacular modes of power and domination."¹¹

This was important in maintaining physical and social domination, yet certain practices of slave owners that sought to assert dominion over slaves breached beyond the parameters of slave-owning regulations that prohibited the mindless maiming and the "wantonly, willingly or bloody-mindedly" killing of slaves.¹² On the limitations of slave legislation, John Stewart notes "how ineffectual to the slave are humane and judicial laws, if a barbarous master or overseer has it in his [legal] power to evade them in various ways."¹³ Stewart further illustrates this in his criticism of slave law: "[H]owever beneficent the spirit in which those laws were framed, and however wisely intended to guard against oppression, still, as has been shown, they are liable to be evaded and violated in various ways by

11 Paton, Diana. *No Bond but the Law: Punishment, Race, and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780-1870*.

Duke University Press, 2004, 20.

12 *The Act of Assembly of the Island of Jamaica, to Repeal Several Acts, and Clauses of Acts, Respecting Slaves, and for the Better Order and Government of Slaves*. London, 1788, 9.

13 Stewart, 222.

persons so disposed.”¹⁴ Stewart reveals a kind of twilight zone in which slave owners were able to escape the boundaries of legal authority. Yet, the measures the state had taken to regulate the autonomous power of slave owners while still reinforcing means of social and physical domination over slaves should not be overlooked.

Though there was tension between the authority of the colonial state over slavery and the power of the plantocracy, the need to maintain domination over slaves created a sense of cohesion between magistrate officials and slave owners. In confronting the need to maintain a strong governance over Jamaican slave society, the colonial legislature adopted the plantocracy’s customary practices of reinforcing domination through sanctioned mandates of terror and punishment. Effectual slave domination in this sense equated with the efficacy of production through the slave economy. Hartman writes, “Slave law ensured the rights of property and the absolute submission of the slave.”¹⁵ Within this context, the relationship between slave owner and state is defined by the collective incentive of maintaining the economic production of Jamaican slavery. Much of this has to do with the fact, that during the 18th century, the colonial legislatures primarily were composed of the most prominent property landowners of the Jamaican plantocracy.

In his review of Jamaica’s Government and Legislature, Stewart criticizes Jamaican officials by saying, “Neither them nor the assistant judges of the supreme court are regularly bred by the law; they are appointed by the governor from among the most respectable gentlemen of property in each county.”¹⁶ Slave law and the various implementations of violence had become sanctioned by the state to serve the interests of the plantocracy specifically for maintaining slave subjection. To clarify, this is not the state’s surrender of power to the plantocracy, but more so an inherited and shared collective regarding the security of Jamaica from the threat of slave insubordination. Paton explains that in doing this, slave owners would use the “state to sanction the violence required to maintain the system of slavery, in the process legitimating an extreme use of violence.”¹⁷ However, this does not suggest that slave owners refrained

14 Ibid., 229.

15 Hartman, 90.

16 Stewart, 144.

17 Paton, 191.

from evading state regulations to affirm their own individual forms of authority; rather, it reveals the ways in which the state sought to cope with the prevalence of slave-owning practices to find means of regulating slaves.

Jamaican Slave Law—*Le Code Noir*

And be it further enacted and ordained, that if any negro or slave whatsoever shall offer any violence to any Christian, by striking, or the like, such Negro or other slave, for his or her first offense, by order of the justice of peace, shall be severely whipped, his nose slit, and be burned in some part of the face with hot Iron.¹⁸

Act for the Governing of Negroes of 1688

State magistrates were able to implement tactics of terror and punishment through slave law by sanctioning the slave-owning customary practices of the plantocracy. Slave law became extensively developed alongside the expansion of slavery to confront and address the conditions and challenges of Jamaican slavery. Alan Watson explains in *Slave Law in the Americas* that “The law came into being bit by bit, either by statute or by judicial precedent, sometimes based on what people did.”¹⁹ In this, slave law took form in response to runaway slaves, rebellions, belligerent masters, and slave insubordination to ensure the continuation of the sugar economy dependent on effectual coercion. Henceforth, the examination of slave legislation illustrates how physical and social domination was implemented as a structural regime of terror and punishment that was constantly developed and enforced.

Though the legislators were periodically slave owners themselves, the Jamaican plantocracy was not homogenous but, rather, autonomously comprised of different and conflicting interests and customs. Some discussed ideals about how slavery should be conducted while others criticized the practices and behaviors of their compatriots. In that sense, local legislatures were not just concerned with repressing slave

18 Barbados. *Acts of Assembly passed in the island of Barbadoes, from 1648 to 1718*. London, 1721, 139.

19 Watson, Alan. *Slave Law in the Americas*. University of Georgia Press, 2012, 64.

subversion, but also governing disorderly slave owners. It was a struggle between using the law to subdue the enslaved and to superintend the slave-owning class. Slave owners were blamed and punished for their ineffectual dominion over the enslaved because it impaired the efficacy of the overall plantocracy. Hence, the slave laws passed from 1696–1787 illustrate the way that the state sought to establish social and physical domination through extensive measures and procedures of enforcement for slave owners and the enslaved.

The most important way magistrates reinforced social domination was by legitimizing white supremacy through slave law. The Consolidated Slave Act of 1787 stated, “[W]hereas it is absolutely necessary . . . the slaves in this island should be kept in due obedience to their owners, and in due subordination to the white people in general.”²⁰

Racializing the different social positions of slavery, allows for the establishment of an overarching authority of racial hierarchy. Hartman further explains, “The laws of slavery subjected the enslaved to the absolute control and authority of any and every member of the dominant race. At the very least, the relations of chattel slavery served to enhance whiteness by racializing rights and entitlements, designating inferior and superior races, and granting whites dominion over blacks.”²¹ Throughout the 1696 Slave Act, the slave owner and the white identity become synonymous within the contexts of allocating permission to prevent slave subversion. Clause II of *An Act for the Better Order and Government of Slaves of 1696* states that any violence or instance of physical subversion to whites is punishable by the discretion of magistrates to inflict the execution of the said subordinate slaves.²² Because of the surmounting slave population, enforcing racial domination over slaves becomes essential for reinforcing owner authority.

For a slave to express a sense of autonomy and self-agency is to contest, and potentially undermine, the social hegemony of supremacy and authority. Stewart writes, “A slave may complain, that he is made to

20 Jamaica. *The Act of Assembly of the Island of Jamaica, to Repeal Several Acts, and Clauses of Acts, Respecting Slaves, and for the Better Order and Government of Slaves*, London, 1788. Slavery and Anti-Slavery. Gale, 10.

21 Hartman, 24.

22 Jamaica. *Acts of Assembly, passed in the island of Jamaica; from 1681, to 1737, inclusive*. London, 1743. Slavery and Anti-Slavery. Gale, 51.

labor at unreasonable hours, and on days which the law allots to him, and that he is neither fed nor clothed as the law directs; but who is to prove these Transgressions? The slave cannot; for the law does not recognize the validity of his testimony against the white man.”²³ Whereas the law prosecuted slave owners for their neglectful and abusive treatment of slaves, the slaves themselves were not allowed to testify against their masters. While maintaining law and order was important, the colonial state sought not to disrupt the racial hierarchies that maintained slave subservience. This reveals how imperative was the maintenance of racial domination was within Jamaican slave society.

In addition to laws that reinforced a social domination over slaves, the state-sanctioned physical domination by extensive measures and procedures of inflicting pain onto slave bodies through mandated public maiming, flogging, mutilations, and executions. In 1707, Hans Sloane bore witness in his journal to the grotesque forms of violence inflicted against slaves:

[T]he punishment for crimes of slaves, are usually for rebellions burning them, by nailing them down on the ground with crooked sticks on every limb, and then applying the fire by degrees from feet to hands, burning them gradually up to the head, whereby their pains are extravagant. For crimes of a lesser nature gelding or chopping off half of the foot with an axe. These punishments are suffered by them with great consistency.²⁴

On plantations, slaves were subject to limitless afflictions of perpetuated violence, ranging from rape to the severing of limbs. When these customary practices were adopted from the private space into the public sphere sanctioned by magistrates, the violence of Jamaican slave society becomes less ambiguous and more structural.

Mutilations and maiming were distinctive expressions of slave-owning punishment on the plantation, yet as we have seen, through the 18th century local magistrates and slave codes began adopting it as a legal form of corporal punishment. In 1707, An Act for the more Effectual Punishment of Crimes Committed by Slaves states, “And be it further

23 Stewart, 225.

24 Sloane, Hans. *A voyage to the islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica*. Vol. 1. London, 1701, *lvi*.

enacted by the authority aforesaid, that no slave shall be dismembered at the will and pleasure of his master,” while Clause V for committed slaves states that “it shall be made lawful for such justices or freeholders to order such slave, to be punished by cutting off one of the feet of such slave or inflicting any such other corporal punishment as they shall think fit.”²⁵ Prohibition of independent slave-holding dismemberment and sanctioning of state-inflicted mutilations suggests that measures were taken to prevent slave-owning anarchy. Yet, the state still sought to uphold the brutality of slave punishment through the power of magistrates and justices. It was not a matter of concern whether or not slaves should be punished as such but more so who had the power and authority to punish the enslaved.

State-sanctioned violence as punishment and terror had also an essential feature of being a public demonstration. In this sense, those who were punished by the state, either by execution or corporal punishment, were made a spectacle for an audience in public spaces. Vincent Brown writes, “The centerpiece of legal terror was punishment and execution used to set example . . . needed only to compel the enslaved to respect the authority of fear.”²⁶ Public executions and instances of public punishment were used to make a public display out of reckoning a slave’s humanity. Since the majority of Jamaica was enslaved, public chastisement meant being punished or executed in front of the slave masses at a town or parish center.

The *Consolidated Act of 1787* further required that “in all cases where the punishment of death is inflicted, the execution shall be performed in a public part of the parish, and with due solemnity; the care should be taken by the gaoler or deputy marshal.”²⁷ Making the punishment of subversive slaves a public affair, either through flogging or death, brings into question the symbolic power of the suffering slave body. The public spectacle of death holds power to perpetuate a fear that serves as its own form of authority. Katherine Verdery writes, “Aside from their evident materiality and their surfeit of ambiguity, dead bodies have an additional advantage as symbols: they evoke the awe, uncertainty, and fear associated

25 Jamaica 1743, 107.

26 Brown, Vincent. *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*. Harvard University Press, 2010, 140.

27 Jamaica 1788, 24.

with ‘cosmic’ concerns, such as the meaning of life and death.”²⁸ The displayed mutilated and lifeless body of the slave becomes a symbol of the state’s power. It represents to the surveying slaves in horror and fright that their lives are determined by their masters, the justices of the court and the overall white populace.

Jamaica: A Society in Conflict

Fear had conquered the consciousness of the enslaved and freed; violence was their tormentor. Slaves were forced to fear the authority of whites who had feared the threat of slave insurrection. Thus, Jamaica was caught in a state of constant tension, held in a suspense state of uncertainty. From the autonomy of slave-owning authority to the preeminent authority of the state in governing the affairs of slavery, violence is shown to have been essential to dominating a slave mass that vastly outnumbers whites. By using terror and violence to submit slaves under domination, the extensive acts of legislation reveal that Jamaican slave society was always in a state of conflict in trying to rule over slaves through means of terror. Increased runaways, the formation of massive maroon communities, the First Maroon War of 1730, Tacky’s Revolt of 1760, and the Second Maroon War of 1790 further challenged the legitimacy of confinement over the enslaved. Henceforth, various acts of legislation were passed and modified to confront the undoing of slave bondage.

The eventual emancipation in 1831 following the Baptist War in 1830 further reveals how a structural regime of terror and punishment to maintain social and physical domination over slaves was initiated, if not ultimately successful. As Vincent Brown explains, “In the history of the British West Indies, the planter, poet, and politician Bryan Edwards admitted that ‘in countries where slavery is established, the leading principle on which the government is supported is fear: or a sense of that absolute coercive necessity which, leaving no choice of action, supersedes all question of right.’”²⁹ Violence within Jamaican slave society was meant to ensure the continual existence of the colony, yet its implementation

28 Verdery, Katherine. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. Columbia University Press, 2000, 31.

29 Brown, 131.

prompted its undoing.

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