

University of Warwick institutional repository: <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap>

This paper is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this paper please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published version may require a subscription.

Author(s): Cecily Jones

Article Title: Contesting the boundaries of gender, race and sexuality in Barbadian plantation society

Year of publication: 2003

Link to published version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09612020300200355>

Publisher statement: None

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Contesting the boundaries of gender, race and sexuality in Barbadian plantation society**

After decades of scholarly neglect, the pivotal roles played by enslaved African women in the socio-cultural and economic development of New World plantation societies is finally receiving critical attention as historians embark on gendered reappraisals of Caribbean history. Understanding how African women experienced slavery has considerably enriched our knowledge of the complexity of gender, race and sexuality in structuring colonial social relations. However, considerably less attention has focused on the experiences of white women within these societies. Dismissed at best, as the languid and leisured wives of male planters, and at worse, as a socially and economically unproductive category, white Caribbean women arguably constitute the most marginalised of social actors within Caribbean history.

This paper seeks to disrupt the uncritical representations that frame our epistemological understanding of the experiences of white colonial women. Taking the plantation society of Barbados as a case study, I argue that white women were crucial actors in the reproduction and social stability of successful slave economies. In Barbadian plantation society, ideologies of white supremacy legitimised African slavery, and race became the principal mode of social stratification.

White women's raced identity intertwined and overlapped with their gendered identity, so that one was not simply a woman, but a **white** woman. Their socio-economic and sexual relationships with the white male ruling class enclosed white women within a white cultural domain that stressed the imperative of maintaining white racial purity. Socio-racial and sexual boundaries were constructed around those who could legitimately claim white identity. Preserving white racial purity, and thus white hegemony, demanded female sexual virtue and economic dependency. Barbadian authorities sought to regulate the socio-sexual behaviour of all white women, particularly poorer class women, whose perceived sexual promiscuity identified them as potential threats to white solidarity and white racial purity. White women however did not simply accept the imposition of narrowly defined socio-sexual limits. When motive and opportunity arose, many asserted their agency and strenuously contested the racialised and gendered boundaries of social and sexual behaviour that defined the contours of their material reality. In the process, ideologies of whiteness/white identity, embodied in the idealisation of white womanhood, could be severely disrupted.

## 1. Introduction

The recent evolution of ‘white studies’ as an academic field of study has injected both new energy and direction to theories of ‘race’ and ‘difference’. This emergent paradigm seeks to critically interrogate the presumed normativity of whiteness as subjective racialised identity. Analysing whiteness enables an understanding of whiteness and white identity as neither natural nor fixed but one that is always contingent on social, economic, historic and political processes. This means that whiteness is therefore variable and as with other subjective identifications is always subject to transformation across time and space. Deconstructing whiteness has proven to be a productive analytical turn in ‘race’ theorising, where ‘race’ has hitherto acted as a metaphor for black subjectivity. Blackness and black identity has provided much fodder for theorists of race, but as David Roediger has noted, ‘White writing about whiteness is rarer, with discussions about what it means to be human standing in for considerations of how racial identity influences white lives.’<sup>1</sup> The tendency of white scholars to ignore whiteness as a racialised identity has reinforced prevalent assumptions of white identity as ‘unraced’ so that the association of whiteness with race identity has eluded theoretical analysis. Richard Dyer has cogently argued that whiteness has in fact become disconnected from the idea of race – in short, it is ‘other’ people who are raced, white people are just people.<sup>2</sup> Whiteness, then, as Alistair Bonnet has commented, has insinuated itself within contemporary race discourse as ‘an unproblematic, unchanging norm, a position from which all other identities come to be marked by *their* difference.’<sup>3</sup>

The recent theoretical shift however insists on making visible, naming and problematising whiteness, and in the process, has de-essentialised and de-stabilised white identity, revealing its social constructedness. Such a theoretical turn is long overdue. Black feminists from both sides of the Atlantic such as bell hooks (1992, 1997), Toni Morrison (1992), Helen (Charles) (1992)<sup>4</sup>

have drawn attention to the ways in which contemporary theorising around 'race' and 'difference' has tended to place blackness as a racialised identity under the theoretical spotlight, an epistemological approach that has rendered blackness to the status of 'problem', while leaving unexamined the nature of whiteness as subjective identity.

Placing whiteness under the theoretical spotlight impacts critically on feminist and liberatory politics. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has suggested that western-dominated feminist theory's inattention to white women's structural position of dominance over women and men who are not identified as white, reifies gender as a discrete subjectivity, reducing other identifications such as class position, race and ethnicity to secondary importance.<sup>5</sup> My concern in this paper is to explore whiteness as an ideological, social and historical construct, but further, I want to indicate the complexities of an identity that is mediated through the triad of gender, class and sexual relations. My intent is not to undertake a chronological mapping of whiteness, but to offer an account of how white subjectivity was constructed at a particular historical moment in a specific site, that is, within colonial Barbadian during the era of plantation slavery. This endeavour necessarily entails the simultaneous analysis of the interconnections of gender, social class and sexuality, for it is not possible to analyse study whiteness as though it exists in isolation from other modalities.

This paper then is a study of the interconnectedness of race, gender and social class in Barbadian plantation society. It represents an attempt to foster a more critical spirit of inquiry into the lives of a category of women who have been, and continue to be, under-represented, unanalysed, and misunderstood within Barbadian historiographies. It's central argument is this: that white women were pivotal actors in the reproduction of ideologies and practices that secured white identity in Barbadian plantation society. Securing and reproducing white identity rested on

the acceptance of prevailing ideals of white femininity and womanhood, which in turn was tied to the logical outcome of endeavours by European colonialists to define a specific role for white women as bearers and guardians of culture and civility. To paraphrase Simone De Beauvoir, white women in the colonial project were not born white women, but *became* white women.<sup>6</sup> By this is meant that, as with gender identity, whiteness is not an essential natural identity, but instead is constructed, acquired and reproduced through a series of discourses and material practices.

In section 1 of this paper I outline the theoretical and conceptual framework with a discussion of the concept of whiteness in the light of the emergence of critical white studies. I argue that whiteness as subjective identity cannot be universalised for it is mediated by gender, among other differences. I suggest that white female subjectivity assumes particular significance in racially ordered societies, and analysis of white women's structural positions within colonial societies can enrich understanding of the relative power differentials shaping social relations between white and black women in those societies. In section 2, I outline some theoretical approaches that have framed the limited historiography of white colonial women in the Caribbean. I argue that white women remain marginalised within traditional historiographies of Caribbean slave societies, and point to some implications arising from this neglect. Section 3 represents an analysis of the last will and testament of Anne Phillips, a Barbadian slave mistress. In subjecting Anne's will to scrutiny, I reveal one of the most potent contradictions in white slaveholding women's lives; while subjected to white male patriarchal authority, white slaveholding women exercised life and death power over enslaved women and men. Section 4 addresses the intersections of whiteness and gender with other modalities, particularly social class. As a category of analysis, 'social class' may have fallen out of theoretical fashion, but I remain firmly convinced that class-based analyses must be retained within any study of social

relations. Understanding the ways in which social class is inextricably entangled in shaping white identities undermines claims to the universality of whiteness. Drawing on an analysis of the Poor Relief records of two Barbadian parishes, I discuss in section 5 the ways in which poor white women were made the subjects of social and sexual surveillance and regulation in plantation Barbados. The links between race formation, reproduction and the control of bodies and bodily practices is already well established, and my intent is therefore to consider how the control of the white female body emerged as a significant strand of the Barbadian colonial regime as it struggled to impose white hegemonic rule, an imperative that demanded the construction, and reproduction of boundaries around the white community.<sup>7</sup> Although all white women were subjects of white male patriarchal control, poor white women bore the brunt of regulatory measures that had as their intent the demarcation and reproduction of whiteness as a pure category, white hegemonic rule, and the stability of a social order that rested on an ideology of white supremacy. By giving analytical primacy to poor white women, I bring to the fore the interconnections of whiteness, gender and class, and at the same time, reveal the hierarchical and fragmented nature of whiteness.

To what extent did white women in Barbados resist their subordinate position? The French philosopher Michel Foucault has argued that the exercise of power invariably breeds resistance, and I begin a tentative exploration of the nature of white women's resistance to controlling measures.<sup>8</sup> White women in colonial Barbados may have been subjected to male patriarchal authority, but this should not preclude the possibility of resistance. In Section 6, the final part of this paper, I begin a tentative analysis of the possibilities and spaces of white women's resistance to patriarchal domination.

White women in Barbados outnumbered their white male counterparts for much of the period of plantation slavery, yet it is the white male planter who has emerged as the central actor within the society. That we know remarkably little about the social experiences of white Barbadian women is partially due to the fact that so few left behind any written traces of their existence. The project of recovering their histories is an onerous task, and filled with methodological difficulties, for in comparison to their sisters in the southern slaveholding states of the North American mainland, white Barbadian women would appear to have been an illiterate category. With few notable exceptions they left behind them no journals, no literary writings, no copious collections of personal correspondence, or any of the other abundant sources of private testimonies available to gender historians of the American south.<sup>9</sup> Of necessity therefore, the data for this paper is drawn from a variety of public records, some of which, e.g. probated wills, were the products of white women, but the majority sources were extracted from official sources. Nevertheless, analysing the available sources enables a clearer understanding of the intertwining of gender and whiteness, and reveals the ways in which white women's raced identity as white people implicated them in relations of dominance in the racially ordered plantation society of Barbados. In the process, my intent is to reveal whiteness not as a given discrete category, but as a subjectivity that is always in the making, as an identity that is always perceived to be under threat of contamination, and one that is at all times mediated by gender, class position, religion, ethnicity and a range of other structural determinants: the non-black individual in colonial Barbados was never simply a white person, but, for example, was *always* a white woman, a poor white woman, or a planter class white male.

Critical white studies remains still an embryonic paradigm within the field of race and ethnic studies, and while it may be viewed by some with a degree of cynicism and wariness, its



emergence has been, and will hopefully continue to be, significant in transforming and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about the superiority, universality, and naturalness of whiteness. Whiteness may be everywhere, but it is always socially and politically contingent. This recognition should inform a critical reconsideration of representations of the ‘white colonial woman’, for the diversity of material, economic, social, cultural, religious and political conditions of individual Caribbean colonial societies produced a disparate array of standpoints from which white colonial women viewed their worlds. This is not to say that we cannot establish some general features that characterised colonial societies and that were probably common to white women throughout the colonies, but any such generalisations have always to be qualified. I have argued elsewhere for instance, that the material realities of Barbados and the southern slaveholding state of North Carolina on the North American mainland produced very different experiences for white women, even at the same historical moment.<sup>10</sup> It is for this reason that I have confined the scope of this essay to the English-speaking colony of Barbados during the era of plantation slavery from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Where I have considered it appropriate or relevant however, I have taken the liberty of transgressing geographical boundaries, island-hopping as it were, and drawn on evidence from other English speaking colonies to support my arguments.

### **1. Theorising whiteness**

What *is* whiteness? Thus far, I have discussed whiteness and white identity as though it were an unproblematic, essential, and self-evident category. But whiteness, like blackness, has its own history as a meaningful category. It is, to use the terminology of Theodore Allen, an invention, that was tied to the development of slavery as an economic system<sup>11</sup>. But attempting to define whiteness invariably involves a journey across slippery terrain, for although the term is laden with meaning, establishing the *qualities* of whiteness, and identifying just which individuals may

stake a legitimate claim to white identity is always historically and socially contingent. David Roediger (1991, 1994) Theodore Allen, (1994, 1997), and Matthew Frye Jacobson (1998) have variously explored the processes by which different groups of European immigrants to the United States from the nineteenth century onwards were 're-racialised' into *becoming* white people.<sup>12</sup> Noel Ignatiev (1996) in particular has pointed to the ever-present ambiguity of the 'whiteness' of Irish-Americans, whose whiteness was legitimised through economic struggles with African Americans in the decades after emancipation.<sup>13</sup> And, as I shall later show, the Catholic Irish community in Barbadian plantation society similarly occupied an ambiguous position within the populous of white people. The question of just who may legitimately claim white identity is therefore at all times subject to specific conditions and negotiations.

What makes an individual white? Does the possession of white skin colour alone confer whiteness? Establishing the properties that constitute an individual as white is inherently problematic. Richard Dyer has proposed that though white skin colour is generally taken to be the most visible indicator of whiteness, the possession of white skin colour alone does not securely fix an individual within the white constituency.<sup>14</sup> In the United States, the derogatory term of 'white trash' is representative of communities of *visibly* white people who are structurally located on the peripheral boundaries of whiteness, and whose legitimacy as white people is ever tenuous. The struggles of Irish and Jewish people to fix and establish their belonging within the constituency of white people are indicative of the contested nature of white subjectivity; that both groups *accomplished* white status only through prolonged struggle and contestation, suggests that whiteness cannot be reduced to a mere matter of colour, but to particular qualities and attributes that are inscribed onto white bodies. And as Dyer has also reminded us, 'all concepts of race are always concepts of the body'. Thus the corporeal body acts

as a *signifier* of race, for individuals are invariably identified as members of specific racial categories through essentialised physiological differences.<sup>15</sup>

The emergence of contemporary white subjectivity is irretrievably intertwined with the parallel emergence of blackness as subjective identity. Eighteenth century European discourses on race difference were rooted within an essentialist, biological deterministic framework that inscribed particular qualities and traits onto different raced bodies. Winthrop Jordan's study traces the origins of racism in North America during this period, and details the increasing European associations of blackness - and by extension, black peoples - with qualities abhorrent to European minds. In the European imagination, blackness was suggestive of the 'darker' side of human life - dirt, disease, impurity, uncleanliness, and death.<sup>16</sup> If blackness was already symbolic of the underbelly of life, it did not then require too great a leap of the European imagination to affix these attributes onto the dark skinned peoples with whom they came into increasing contact from the seventeenth century onwards. Black bodies were imagined and constituted as the embodiment of human baseness. Claims to the natural inferiority of black people were no doubt boosted by the accounts of European travellers to 'the dark continent', who returned to Europe bearing tales of the savagery, cannibalism and unbridled sexuality of Africans. Colonial Europeans, and later their imperialist successors justified the conquest, enslavement and domination of others they considered non-white - Amerindians, Africans, Native Americans - on the grounds that these 'races' were essentially inferior to the Europeans not only in body, thought and action, but in their social, political and cultural organisations. The 'uncivilised' races could only benefit from the civilising influence of white Europeans. But, as George Fredrickson has commented, European speculation on the essential natures of the 'dark peoples' seemed always to speak more about how the Europeans viewed themselves.<sup>17</sup>

It is possible to see within these eighteenth century discourses on blackness that Europeans were at the same time engaged in a process of self-introspection, and it is at this point, I argue, that ideas around the nature of whiteness, and what it meant to be a white person were also being formulated. If blackness signified ugliness, impurity, dirt and malignancy, then as suggested by the Enlightenment binaristic framework, whiteness as the opposite of blackness must signify the inverse of these qualities. Whiteness, quite clearly represented all that was not black; it was symbolic of goodness, purity, order, cleanliness, and where white women were concerned, whiteness represented the epitome of human virtue and beauty.<sup>18</sup> Thus white Europeans viewed the African as a mirror through which they could come to know themselves as white people. By the eighteenth century, the association of whiteness with superiority of body, intellect, and culture was becoming firmly ingrained in the European consciousness. Colonialism may therefore be seen not merely as the physical domination of peoples who were not Europeans, but as a crucial vehicle for the emergence, crystallisation and transmittance of modern ideologies of whiteness and white identity. It represented a period of racial formation of both white and black subjectivities as meaningful social categories. Omi and Winant describe this process of racial formation as ‘the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed’, and suggest that racial formation is always a process of ‘historically situated projects that take as their aim the evolution of hegemony, in which human bodies and social structures must necessarily be represented and organised’.<sup>19</sup>

In *White Women, Race Matters* (1993) Ruth Frankenberg conceptualises whiteness as framed within a set of material and discursive repertoires that shape white identity while simultaneously rendering it an invisible category.<sup>20</sup> Frankenberg identifies the cumulative experiences that shape white subjectivities and realities as ‘whiteness’:

First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege.

Second, it is a 'standpoint', a place from which white people look at others, and at society. Third whiteness refers to a set of cultural practices that are unmarked and unnamed.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, and critically for feminist theory, Frankenberg directs our attention to the ways in which whiteness is intrinsically 'linked to unfolding relations of domination'.<sup>22</sup> To explore whiteness as a social construction is at the same time to 'look head-on at a site of dominance'.<sup>23</sup> Confronting and acknowledging their own implication and complicity in the reproduction of racially ordered relations of dominance then, may be a difficult though necessary struggle for white women. Though they may be subjected to the patriarchal authority of white middle males, their racialised identities as white people enables white women to access modes of power and privileges from which non-white peoples are generally excluded. White dominated mainstream feminist theory has usefully revealed the ways in which patriarchy has served to subordinate and oppress women universally, but feminist theory has not attended equally well to how whiteness intervenes in social relations, placing women who may themselves be the subjects of patriarchal rule, into positions of dominance over non-white peoples. In Barbadian plantation society, *all* white women regardless of social class enjoyed an elevated social status above that of all non white people, and slaveowning white women wielded life and death power over black women and men.<sup>24</sup> Articulating the complicated entanglement of white women within structures of dominance makes visible situations within which white women may themselves be the subjects and agents of domination and exclusionary practices, rather than as the mere objects/victims of white male oppression.

Richard Dyer has noted that in contemporary society, whiteness has attained the status of invisibility, so that white is everywhere but yet is not seen, nor remarked upon.<sup>25</sup> The very

unremarkability of whiteness functions to give to whiteness its natural and normal status, so that black peoples come to be situated as the unnatural 'other', the individual that by virtue of their perceived difference, is always literally beyond the pale. Yet the invisibility of whiteness is not permanent, for whiteness may at particular historical moments be clearly marked and visible. Ruth Frankenberg astutely notes that 'in times and places where whiteness and white dominance are being built or reconfigured, they are highly visible, named and asserted, rather than invisible or simply normative'.<sup>26</sup> The colonial plantation societies of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries represented specific sites where nascent constructs of whiteness were fabricated, reworked and refined. In these social spaces, whiteness came to assume dominance *precisely* through its very heightened visibility and remarkability. This is not to suggest that the category of whiteness assumed stability in either form or content throughout the colonial period. Frankenberg also points to another quality of whiteness, that is, its tendency to masquerade as though it were universal in form and content, thus effectively obscuring its historical contingency, and the multiplicitous and hierarchical nature of white subjectivities.<sup>27</sup>

Race is not a discrete social category, but overlaps, intersects and fuses with other subjectivities.<sup>28</sup> Historically, whiteness has been implicitly interwoven with class, gender and sexual identity, shaping white masculinities and femininities in diverse and often oppositional ways. What it meant to be a white (ruling class or poor) male in colonial Barbados was never quite the same experience as being a white (ruling class or poor) white woman, even at the same historical moment. As instance, poor white men in Barbados were integrated into the white constituency through their service within the Militia, the island's main line of defence against internal slave unrest and external attack by foreign invaders. Service in the militia at least offered poor white males employment opportunities not afforded to poor white women, a circumstance that had significant implications for their respective economic situations.

Whiteness therefore cannot be considered a monolithic, universal or essential category, but rather, is constructed, reworked and reproduced in the processes of social life. As such, whiteness cannot be studied in isolation, for it is located in specific histories, cultures, ideologies and discursive practices with their own struggles to identify difference and establish dominance. In this paper, I am concerned to explore the entanglement of whiteness with gender, class and sexuality in a specific colonial site.

## **2. Gendering whiteness in colonial Barbados: white women and Caribbean slave historiography**

Traditional, male-stream history has been slow to recognise the significance of gender as a valid category of analysis. Since the 1970s however, feminist interventions into diverse areas of scholarship has challenged and forced a reappraisal of traditional 'male-stream' social theory and analysis, and the incorporation of gender as analytical category is now more or less widely accepted within most areas of academic scholarship. The work of Caribbean feminist historians is especially noteworthy for its insistent demands that Caribbean historiography be reappraised through the lens of gender.<sup>29</sup> The challenge laid down by Caribbean feminists has resulted in critical reappraisals of the significance of gender in defining and structuring social relations; this body of work has been pivotal in furthering our understandings and knowledges of the critical roles played by black women in the socio-economic and cultural development and reproduction of these slave societies.

While recent Caribbean historiography has acknowledged the significance of gender in shaping the experiences of enslaved black women under slave regimes, the same urgency has not been brought to bear on the recovery and writing of white women's experiences of Caribbean

colonial societies. Much of this body of gendered analysis displays a tendency to ignore or marginalise the differentiated experiences of white women, treating them instead as a homogenous category, undifferentiated by class, ethnicity or religion. Consequently, white women have been conceptualised them as insignificant subjects within the socio-economic processes of the colonial societies they inhabited, and remain shadowy figures on the margins of Caribbean slave historiographies.

In her pioneering study of women's experiences of Jamaican slavery, Lucille Mair argued that white women played negligible and unproductive, consumerist orientated roles within the plantation economy. Mair rightfully identified the significance of black and coloured women's productivity in fashioning Jamaican society, yet summarily dismissed white women's pivotal roles within the plantation economy. Mair summarised women's differing roles thus: 'the black woman produced, the brown woman served, and the white woman consumed'.<sup>30</sup> Such an analysis cannot withstand critical scrutiny, for there is an abundance of evidence to suggest that these representations of womanhood are extremely simplistic generalisations, and must therefore be treated with caution. Nevertheless, Mair's otherwise insightful study paved the way for the emergence of new, gendered analyses of plantation societies, but it remains indicative of traditions of Caribbean historiography that has uncritically dismissed white female agency, and in the process overlooked the pivotal participatory roles of white women in the colonial enterprise. Consequently, the histories of white Caribbean women remain largely undocumented, and to date, scholarly research continues to reinforce extant representations of white women as victims of colonialism, rather than as social agents of colonialism.<sup>31</sup> White women in Caribbean colonial societies then remain among the most invisible and marginalised of social groups, whose presence in Caribbean history comes to us only as footnotes to other people's histories.<sup>32</sup>



The relative invisibility and marginalisation of white women within colonial history represents a long tradition of historiography that established white European males as the principle actors of European expansionist ventures. Within this paradigm, the agency of white colonial women has been disregarded in favour of representations that confirm their alleged victim status. But giving primacy to gender as an analytical concept that enables us to understand social relations between women and men may well obscure other forms of power relations within which white women may be deeply implicated. Jane Haggis persuasively argues that to centre gender as analytical concept obscures the complexity of power relations embedded within colonialism, and inadvertently privileges white women as the benevolent victims of imperialist white males. Centering attention on male and female colonisers detracts attention away from the primacy of race in structuring social relations and as a fundamental principle of social organisation.<sup>33</sup>

It is axiomatic then, that an analysis of the gendered identities of colonial women proceed from the recognition of the interconnectedness of gender, race, ethnicity, social class and sexuality, among other variants. Analysing white colonial women's experiences through the multiplicities of gender, class and race/ethnicity should serve to disrupt the extant universalist representations of white colonial womanhood that limit severely our knowledge of the nature of gendered social power in colonial spaces. Such representations have for instance, obscured the agency of white colonial women in promoting pro-slavery ideologies, or their socio-cultural roles in fashioning the colonial societies in which they resided, and prohibits us from seeing white women's complicity in the construction, reproduction and dissemination of ideologies and discursive practices from which they benefited. In other ways, to represent white colonial women merely as unproductive victims unwittingly disguises the extent of their emotional and material investments in, and their political dominatory roles within colonialism. I am suggesting

instead that white women were imbricated within slavery and colonialism in far more critical ways than is generally acknowledged or understood.

By way of example, a crucial, but neglected aspect of research, involves the role of white women in the reconfiguration of African gendered identities. This neglect may be due, in part, to traditions of male centred theorising that established black enslaved males and white male slave owners as the central actors within the colonial drama. Recent slave historiography continues to account for the regendering of African femininities and masculinities primarily through analyses of the sexual division of labour that evolved to meet the exigencies of the planter class. Analyses of the role of the plantation-derived sexual division of labour may be fruitful in producing a *partial* understanding of the processes through which the gender identities of African women and men were transformed in the colonial complex. But such an analysis tells only half the story, for it inevitably elides the role of white women in this process, not least because dominant representations of ‘the planter’ continues to be conceptualised as male. Hence the restructuring of African gender identities is assumed to be the outcome of white male actions in the pursuit of increased productivity and profits. But in the absence of further analyses of other aspects of plantation life, that understanding remains partial. Collectively, white women were less likely to be autonomous owners and managers of plantations, but this does not mean that they played a lesser role in the redefinition of African gender norms. White women’s complicity becomes apparent if we move our analyses from the plantation field to the plantation house. In this sphere, the plantation mistress reigned. She bore responsibility for the smooth management of the household, a role that also incorporated the direction and supervision of enslaved domestic labourers. In the formative years of slavery, for instance, it is highly likely that such household tasks as instructing newly enslaved women in European methods and standards of food preparation, or in the care and cleaning of perhaps unfamiliar household items,

would have fallen into the domain of ‘woman’s work’, and thus the province of the plantation mistress, or in the absence of a mistress, to a white female servant/housekeeper. The autobiography of Mary Prince, the ex-slave who eventually escaped slavery is replete with evidence of the role played by white slaveowning women in fashioning the gender identities of enslaved African women and men.<sup>34</sup> Prince’s recollections of her owners is revealing. She recalled that on the first morning following her arrival at the home of her new owners, identified only as Mr and Mrs I, her new mistress:

“set about instructing me in my tasks. She *taught* [my emphasis] me to do all sorts of household work; to wash and bake, pick cotton and wool, and wash floors and cook. And she taught me (how can I ever forget it!) more things than these; she caused me to know the exact difference between the smart of the rope, the cart-whip, and the cow skin when applied to my naked body by her own cruel hand. And there was scarcely any punishment more dreadful than the blows I received on my face and head from her hard heavy fist. She was a fearful woman, and a savage mistress to her slaves’<sup>35</sup>

On arrival in Barbados, newly arrived enslaved Africans first underwent an initial period of ‘seasoning’, a physical and mental process intended to prepare them for the rigours of plantation labour. Seasoning also necessitated the training of slaves into the new roles and duties they were expected to fulfil. A critical reappraisal of white women as significant actors in this process may shed new light on the quotidian ways in which white women were important to the transmittance of European ideals and expectations of gender identities, roles and behaviour to the enslaved. John Blake, a Barbadian planter certainly recognised the value

of his wife in this regard. In a letter to his brother in Ireland in 1675, Blake complained that his white servant woman was 'a slut', but to his despair, he could not be rid of her until his sick wife had recovered. Blake informed his brother that 'washing, starching, making of drink, keeping the house in order' was 'no small task to undergoe', but he remained helpless without the assistance of a reliable white woman to instruct a recently purchased female slave in her new household duties, thus 'until a neger wench I have, be brought to knowledge, I cannot...be without a white maid'.<sup>36</sup> Patently, Blake identified these household tasks as belonging in the realm of 'woman's work' and relied heavily on his wife to train the newly brought 'wench' in her new duties.

White women's experiences of the colonial societies they inhabited were determined by a multiplicity of factors. Although the colonies of the New World exhibited some commonalities, they were also differentiated to a wide degree by a range of internal variations. As example, throughout much of the era of plantation slavery, the two major English-speaking Caribbean colonies of Barbados and Jamaica, exhibited significant demographic, political, social and cultural diversity. Similarly, the Caribbean colonies displayed substantive differences in their internal arrangements from the southern slaveholding states of the North American mainland. These regional variations lent to individual colonies their unique characters, producing variance and diversity in the lives of all their inhabitants, colonisers and colonised alike.

Of particular importance were intra-island demographic variations. Hilary Beckles has claimed that, if judged by numbers alone, then Barbados constituted a women's society, with both the white and black female populations outnumbering their male counterparts.<sup>37</sup> Beckles argues that this numerical ascendancy of white and black women had been established by 1715, and was a trend that was to continue until emancipation in 1838. In contrast, white males

represented the overwhelming majority of the white population throughout most other Caribbean plantation societies. Barbados was one of the few plantation colonies where white women were numerous. The colony of Jamaica, for instance, supported a numerically small white female population, as evidenced by Maria Nugent, wife of the Governor General of Jamaica from 1801-1805. Lady Nugent noted in her journal the relative scarcity of white women throughout Jamaica.<sup>38</sup> The paucity of the white Jamaican female population carried significant implications, not least the instability of white family life in that island. By the end of the eighteenth century, visitors to Barbados were commenting enthusiastically on the settled nature of white Barbadian households. It was reported that ‘everyone’ among the white population was married, and because the women were ‘so very prolific’, everywhere there were to be seen great ‘swarms of [white] children’<sup>39</sup>.

In one other respect, the white women of Jamaica and Barbados were differentiated: in the latter colony, the greater stability of white families limited the emergence and growth of a freed coloured female population, enabling enterprising white women to establish and dominate spaces within local economic markets. The deliberate strategies utilised by Barbadian authorities to restrict the size of the free coloured population thus provided some white women a range of economic opportunities not available to white Jamaican women who faced fierce competition from a sizeable and economically active class of free coloured women.<sup>40</sup> Hence, while the white and black inhabitants of the various Caribbean colonial societies shared some similarities, they also encountered specific and significant differences in many aspects of their lives.

### **3. White Lives, Black Bodies: engendering and embodying whiteness**

In 1778, in the southern Barbadian parish of St. Michael, the widowed Anne Phillips sat down with her eighteen year old daughter Eleanor, and carefully drafted what was to be her last will and testament. Anne Phillips's probated will is the only surviving evidence of her existence, and as such we know very little about the experiences of this mother and daughter who made their home in colonial Barbados. Neither can we state with certainty the factors that prompted Anne into drafting her last will and testament, but it is entirely within the realms of speculation that Anne approached this morbid task with the sure knowledge of her impending death. My concern here however, lies not with the immediate circumstances that led to the writing of the will. Rather, I want to focus on Anne as the owner and Mistress of a specific form of property, and on the nature of that property. As a widow, Barbadian property law permitted Anne Phillips the power to dispose of her personal property as she best saw fit, and the ways in which she chose to exercise this privilege are of interest.

That Anne Phillips was invested with the authority to devise her own will, and to autonomously decide the post-mortem disposal and distribution of her property, is revealing of her social status - a widow of property, some wealth, but above all, a free white person. In 1774, when Anne put pen to paper, few non-white people in Barbados could legitimately own property, and the few property owning non-whites – the majority of whom were free(d) coloured persons – endured constraints in the disposal of their property, particularly when that property was human. Foremost among Anne's concerns was the future security of an enslaved woman, Kate, whose body and labour power Anne had possessed, appropriated and exploited for some years. Again, the silences within the will cannot reveal the motivations guiding her decisions. We can speculate however, that Anne's concern for the future well-being of this particular slave was driven by a desire to repay Kate for her long years of servitude within the Phillips household. It is entirely likely that the two women shared a close and intimate relationship, and Anne's final

testament may well have been devised with that friendship in mind. Perhaps unwilling to trust another member of her circle of family and friends to carry out her final wishes, Anne appointed her daughter Eleanor executrix of her estate. According to the terms of the will, Anne's last desires, were that Kate be:

'...given the free use of the house in the yard where she now lives with the liberty of a free passage to and from the same in the same manner as in my lifetime until my daughter Eleanor shall hire or provide a proper house for her to live in at the rate of £6.00 per annum to be paid ....also Kate shall not be put to any labour or slavery for or by any person but is to be allowed free liberty the same as if she had been freed, and I also order that Judy, Kate's sister be and remain with Kate in the capacity of a slave to Kate during her life, and be in no way ordered and controlled by any person except Kate.<sup>41</sup>

What are we, from our perspectives at the dawn of the twenty-first century, to make of this eighteenth century document? What if anything, can a reading of this last will and testament left behind by a Barbadian mistress of enslaved people reveal to us about the significance of whiteness and gender in the colonial space? What if anything does it tell us about the human body as simultaneously the site of both power and oppression? And what can it say about the discursive practices that construct particular racialised bodies as legitimate free human subjects while other bodies are deemed fit only for enslavement, denied agency, and unable to determine their own lives?

An initial reading of Anne Phillips's will reveals little beyond the evident determination of an apparently benevolent mistress to safeguard the welfare of another

woman - Kate, her elderly and apparently much favoured slave. Clearly, Anne intended that the faithful Kate should forever be exempted from the rigours of slave labour, evident in her directive that Eleanor provide Kate with an annuity of £6.00 and secure housing. I am suggesting however that another interpretation of the last will and testament of this white Barbadian widow, will open up critical spaces through which we might think about whiteness as a position of structural advantage, and indicate just one instance of how white women were implicated into colonial relations of dominance; it may also enable a clearer understanding of the complexities of gender and race (specifically whiteness) as they informed each other in colonial societies. The persistent representation of white colonial women as the mere victims of patriarchal white male authority is then severely disrupted.

We cannot simply read Anne Phillip's will without regard to the raced subjectivities of the principal characters. For it is Anne's *whiteness* that legitimates her status as the owner of other human bodies. It is also her status as a white woman that enables her to consign Judith, Kate's sister, to a lifetime of slavery (and thus perhaps undermining initial assumptions of her benevolence). In 'giving' Judith into the perpetual service of her own sister Kate, Anne literally renders Judith's status that of slave of a slave. Again, the silences of Anne Phillips' will can tell us nothing about how the sisters Kate and Judith viewed this extraordinary arrangement. What the silence *can* reveal is the powerlessness of enslaved women, while highlighting the relative power of Anne, their owner and mistress. Kate and Judith may well have been favoured or well-cared for, but as enslaved persons, their legal status was that of property, and neither woman could lay claim to their own bodies, or to any property, let alone devise their own wills. Anne Phillips may well have been motivated by good intentions - perhaps she wanted to ensure that the sisters remained together, rather than endure the pain of separation that their sale would undoubtedly herald. But ultimately, the fortunes of each sister rests literally in Anne's hands, for in the



physical act of penning her will, she decides two human futures. Whatever emotions or misgivings Judith may have held about being forced to labour as her own sister's slave, ultimately, her fate was not hers to decide, but hinged on the whims of another woman, Anne Phillips, her mistress.

Barbadian property laws of the eighteenth century restricted white women's access to property, but economic considerations notwithstanding, all white women enjoyed the right to own or at least access the bodies and labour power of enslaved women and men. Even poor white women could access slave labour through the system of 'hiring out' slaves, a common economic enterprise that provided many white women with a source of income. Indeed, the right of white women to own slaves was recognised by Barbadian courts, as is evident from the successful petitions of separated and divorced white women who claimed custody and ownership of a proportion of slaves considered to be joint-marital property. Fifty years before Anne Phillips wrote her last will and testament, Sarah Andrews, owner of the Russia Plantation, was brought before the Barbadian courts to answer a charge of 'taking illegal possession of the estate and property of Wardell Andrews', her deceased brother. According to the terms of his will, Wardell Andrews had bequeathed the estate to his son William, who was a minor at the time of his father's death. However, young William soon followed his father to the grave, and Sarah, seizing an opportunity to increase her property holdings, took unlawful possession of the estate, which included both slaves and land. The suit charged that Sarah had somehow:

...got into possession of the plantation and slaves and held them for many years. Through her Barbadian attorney she continued to receive the profits of the plantation until William Andrews discovered that he had an interest under the will of his cousin.

Undaunted by the legal challenge, Sarah mounted a successful counteraction, and was granted legal ownership of the estate. Why Sarah should have been awarded legal ownership over the rightful claims of William Andrews is unclear. Tellingly, Sarah was a resident of Barbados while the legitimate heir resided in England. The expectations that white Barbadian women should also be allowed access to slave labour was possibly the decisive factor in this case, for a judicial judgement against Sarah may possibly have left her without slaves or estates, and thus reduced her social status as a white woman.

It is also their whiteness that legitimises the status of Anne Phillips and her daughter Eleanor as free citizens - albeit second class citizens - for in colonial Barbados only free white citizens were invested with the right to own and dispose of property according to their desires. A careful reading of Anne's will makes it possible to see the inherent power, social privileges and structural advantages that whiteness conferred on white colonial women.<sup>42</sup> Although patriarchal ideologies and practices constructed white women as dependent individuals subordinated to male authority and in need of the protection of white males, paradoxically, white women in colonial Barbados were themselves able to wield power over the bodies of African men and women.

This knowledge implicitly raises questions about the body and social power. As feminists have argued, white women have rarely held agency over their own bodies. Yet, the social and race relations of colonialism enabled white women who could not exercise control over their own bodies, to exercise power of life and death over enslaved black peoples. It is important to note that Anne Phillips chose *not* to emancipate Kate but instead, as her will indicates, directed that Kate be allowed to live '*as if she had been freed*' [my emphasis]. Kate

may have enjoyed the right of free passage, but this is clearly not the same thing as being free. Thus, a reading of Anne's will forces us to think also about the body as the site of both power and oppression, and moreover about the centrality of the body within the colonialist project.

I have already made the case that the enslavement of African peoples rested on European justifications of black bodily and intellectual inferiority. In many ways, European discourses on race resonated with parallel debates on the nature of European womanhood. Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau described white women in terms that were not too dissimilar from Africans - childlike, in need of white male guidance and protection, closer to nature in their lack of reason, but possessed of a potentially dangerous sexuality, and therefore in need of control.<sup>43</sup> Feminist theorists from Mary Wollstonecraft have equated the subordination of (white) women with the enslavement of Africans but this metaphorical association misses and obscures some fundamental truth: that white women were not and could not be enslaved, and further, that white women were themselves deeply implicated within, and derived specific advantages and benefits from colonialism. Anne Phillip's ownership of slaves and their labour power, and her ability to define the limits of their individual lives and freedom, indicates only one mode of power that white women derived from their position as members of the colonising group(s). White males may have simultaneously feared white women for their potential to disrupt white purity, while at the same time proclaiming their virtuosity, but the right of white women to live as free citizens was never threatened. Anne Phillip's whiteness shielded her from the possibility of enslavement, for in colonial societies, as Frankenberg observed, to be non-black meant to be non-enslaved, to enjoy an unquestionable right to liberty.<sup>44</sup> Even though the nascent plantocracy frequently decried the intractability of white indentured servants who constituted the primary labour force on Barbadian plantations before the advent of large scale slavery, there was at no time any

suggestion that servants be enslaved and indentureship was always time limited.<sup>45</sup> On another level, Ann Phillips's will reveals the implicit relationship between black and white women in the formation of gendered and racialised subjectivities, a theme that is pursued later in this paper.<sup>46</sup>

Anne's Phillips's last will and testament also invites us to reflect on the implications of white women in the reshaping of African women's gendered identities under the slave mode of production. The Barbadian historian Hilary Beckles has argued that slavery involved a regendering of male and female roles among enslaved Africans, but suggested that this process found its most brutal expression on African women's gendered roles. Beckles notes that the imperatives of plantation slavery demanded the 'defeminisation' of African women whose value, in contrast to white women was grounded in their perceived natural ability to withstand the arduous field labour demanded by sugar production.<sup>47</sup> European ideologies of white womanhood reified white women precisely because their reproductive capacities represented the future of the white race, and the continuance of white supremacy. While paying homage to white motherhood and maternity, white Barbadians consistently negated these same qualities in black women. White Barbadians then, configured white women as mothers, and black women as breeders.

This discursive distinction between white women as mothers and black women as breeders is clearly revealed in Anne Phillip's will when she turns her attention to the disposal of her remaining slave property. She bequeaths to her grandson Thomas, the 'negro girl' Betty, who was in the early stages of pregnancy at the moment when her mistress sat down to pen her will. It is clear that for Anne, Betty's value lies solely in her reproductive capacity, for as Anne advised her daughter Eleanor, in the event that Betty should miscarry her unborn child, then Eleanor should 'sell and dispose of the said Betty...and make and agree a good sale, and the

money arising should be used to purchase another negro for my grandson...'<sup>48</sup> Anne's patent disregard for Betty and her unborn child signals her complicity in the devaluation of black motherhood. Betty's value lies solely in her (re)productive capacity as a breeder of slaves. Anne's directions to Eleanor regarding Betty's future suggests that white Barbadian women probably shared the same perceptions held by white male planters of black women as breeders. If, as Hilary Beckles suggests, white Barbadian women shared the same ideological values as white males, then the expectation must be that they neither rejected nor challenged dominant ideologies of African women's gendered identities that were closely tied to their reproductive and productive labour functions.<sup>49</sup>

In subjecting Anne Phillip's will to critical scrutiny, I highlight the interconnections of gender and whiteness, and show how whiteness could function as a position of structural advantage within plantation society. I also reveal the ways in which women who may be constructed as objects may at the same time be subjects with the propensity to objectivize 'others' to whom they stand in relationships of dominance. Anne Phillips's instructions to her daughter Eleanor for the sale of pregnant Betty is not suggestive of the actions of a victim. Rather, Anne's directives both reveals her to be an economically shrewd agent acting in a rational-market manner, and exposes her pro-slavery commitment. For in denying the slave woman Kate the ultimate human status of freedom, Anne implicitly signals her support for, and complicity in, the reproduction of slavery as an institution.

#### **4. Whiteness and social class:**

The contours of white Barbadian women's lives were shaped by their ethnicity, age, marital status, religion, and social class, among other structural determinants. Their gendered

position as white women made for some commonalities of experience with other white women but the fact of their shared gender identity did not make for uniformity or universality of experiences. If anything provided a linking thread to women's lives it was their subordination to a patriarchal regime. Yet the forms and content of patriarchal ideology clearly varied, so that it was possible for unmarried and widowed white women to exercise greater autonomy in some areas of their lives than was possible for married women. Had Anne Phillips's husband been alive, it is unlikely that without his consent, she would have been free to devise her own will, or to autonomously decide the fates of the household slaves.

Patriarchal ideologies defined the private sphere of the plantation household as the proper place of white womanhood. Women were configured as the bearers of white culture and superiority, the reproducers of whiteness, the benevolent help-mates of the plantocracy, fragile, sexually virtuous, aloof from the brutality and baseness of slavery. Their identities as white women conferred on them specific rights and privileges denied to non-white women and men - the right to own human bodies, the right to protection, and social status. Racial privileges served the function of a demarcating line, distancing white womanhood from black womanhood. Even the social status of the poorest of white women was elevated above that of free black women.<sup>50</sup> This does not mean however that elite and poor white women experienced their identities as white women uniformly; the rigidity of class differentiation meant that white women's experiences of plantation society were also delineated by their position within a rigid white hierarchical order.

Karl Watson has noted that despite the small size of the white populous, white Barbadian society was surprisingly diversified and stratified according to socio-economic criteria and social status.<sup>51</sup> The class distribution of the white population resembled a pyramidal

structure, with the wealthiest planters, the landed elite, and members of the establishment situated at the apex of the triangle, while a middling class of accountants, overseers, lawyers, doctors and other professionals occupied the middle ranks. Below this stratum was yet another group of small traders, tavern keepers, craftspeople and a group of people known as the ‘ten acre men’, owners of ten or fewer acres of land.<sup>52</sup> At the bottom of this triangle was the class of poor whites, who represented at least half of the white population, and possessed neither land nor slaves. In the wake of the shift in labour policy towards enslaved labour, poor white Barbadians increasingly found themselves displaced from the plantations and from other sectors of the economy.<sup>53</sup>

Class differentiation represented only one form of social division among the eighteenth century white Barbadian population. Religious and ethnic differences represented further schisms, with Jews and Quakers excluded from the decision making processes of government. Disunity between and within white ethnic groups added to the political instability of the colony as the Irish, Welsh and Scottish also strove to pursue their own interests. Perhaps it would not be so far from the truth to claim that the only thread unifying white Barbadian society was race. Karl Watson notes that “as a minority, faced with all the attendant psychological stresses and paranoia shared by minorities everywhere, Barbadian whites felt constrained to close ranks and present a united front to the black majority”.<sup>54</sup> Ideologies of white superiority functioned to bind white people together into a cohesive constituency, and in the process created a semblance of white racial solidarity.

Informed by the pseudo-scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, eighteenth century Barbadians drew on Cartesian discourses that constructed ideas of race within a binaristic framework. Whiteness and blackness represented the foremost dominant racial

identities within Barbadian plantation society, although the increasing presence of a coloured population easily disrupted this duality. In efforts to maintain white hegemonic rule in the face of perceived (or actual) threats from the discontented enslaved, white Barbadians attempted to draw every white individual into a white cultural domain from which all non-whites were excluded. But inevitably, efforts to construct and represent white Barbadians as a monolithic homogeneous group foundered, for establishing just who could legitimately count as white was never self-evident. Some European ethnic groups (e.g. the English) could more easily establish a claim to whiteness, while the claims to whiteness of the Catholic Irish community were less easily secured and was thus contested. For many Europeans, the possession of a non-black body alone did not confer whiteness, and these 'other' Europeans experienced whiteness as a shifting and unstable identity, and moreover an identity that was achieved and maintained only through the process of struggle. Internally then, whiteness represented a hierarchical ladder with English women and men occupying the top-most rungs with 'other' Europeans scrambling to maintain a footing on this ladder. But even within the dominant English group, the idea of a cohesive whiteness was undermined by class differences, so that claims to whiteness by women and men of the poorer classes was always less stable and of a lesser quality than the whiteness of the elites. In the next section I turn to a consideration of whiteness in eighteenth and nineteenth century Barbados as it was mediated by class relations, and in particular, I analyse the articulation of whiteness, class and gender by focusing on the social experiences of poor white women.

### **5. (Not Quite) White Women: Regulating Poor White Female Sexuality**

I have argued that whiteness cannot be studied in general, for it is located in specific histories, cultures, ideologies and discursive practices with their own struggles to identify



difference and establish dominance. Whiteness is therefore socially variable. In Barbados, rigid class distinctions differentiated poor white from elite white women. While their identity as white women enabled all white women to enjoy particular racially derived privileges denied to black women – the right to own property, the right to stable family life, the right to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse - the differentiation of white female identities by social class meant that some white women were always whiter than others. The claims of poor white women to whiteness and its attendant privileges could therefore never be entirely secure, but had always to be negotiated. Thus poor white women experienced their whiteness in qualitatively different ways from elite women.

White women were integral to the drawing of boundaries around the white race and colonial authorities enacted various pieces of legislation, the intent of which was to bring white women under the surveillance and control of white males. In particular, the numerous women of the poor white class were identified as a potential threat to white cohesiveness and the dilution of white purity, thus threatening the claims of natural white superiority.

Mainstream, or white feminist theory has greatly assisted our understanding of the centrality of the body in structures of domination, and the necessity of controlling sexual desires in the formation and reproduction of racialised and national identities.<sup>55</sup> John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman have noted that “systems of sexual regulation, like sexual meanings, have correlated strongly with other forms of social regulation, especially those related to race, class and gender.”<sup>56</sup> In colonial Barbados, sexuality and its regulation could not be disentangled from race, class or gender relations. The control of all female bodies whether white or black, free or unfree, elite or poor, became an important instrument in the pursuit of the maintenance and reproduction of both patriarchal power and the purity of the white ‘race’.

The imperative to reproduce the slave community by natural increase led the plantocracy to define enslaved black women's primary functions as breeding workers and established control over black women's sexual behaviour. Black women's bodies belonged neither to themselves or to their partners and husbands, but ultimately to white masters and mistresses. Perceptions of black women as sexually libidinous creatures also enabled white males to justify their routine sexual exploitation and abuse of black women.<sup>57</sup> But As Hilary Beckles has shown, white Barbadians males were not alone in exploiting black female sexuality. In the urban towns of Barbados, it was not uncommon for slave-owning white women to profit from 'hiring-out' the sexual services of enslaved black women<sup>58</sup>.

Dominant ideologies of white women as virtuous, fragile and delicate beings ultimately denied the sexuality of white women beyond their reproductive functions, yet paradoxically, patriarchal regimes nevertheless viewed white female sexuality as potentially dangerous to the reproduction of whiteness and the stability of the social order. Hilary Beckles has suggested that the bodies of white women assumed particular symbolic importance during the seventeenth century. White colonial women, Beckles argues, came to be of immense significance in the struggle to maintain and reproduce white dominance, for the reproductive capacity of the white female body was the embodiment and conveyor of social freedom.<sup>59</sup> White female bodies then were the transmitters of whiteness and culture, and therefore had to be distanced from the realms of black male sexuality. The control of white female sexuality and social behaviour was to be placed at the centre of strategies utilised by colonial regimes in their efforts to maintain and reproduce an unsullied whiteness, and by extension, white hegemony and dominance. As the reproducers of the white race, white women potentially represented the "internal enemies" of the white race.<sup>60</sup> Black males represented the external enemy from whose alleged unbridled sexuality white women had to be protected. But clearly, white males identified

black men as a threat not only to their own sense of racial and social security but to their continued dominance. As Ann Laura Stoler has pointed out, white European males imagined themselves as the defenders of a dependent and virtuous white womanhood in need of protection from the voracious sexual attentions of black men.<sup>61</sup> Without the guiding restraint of white males, some white women, particularly those of the 'lower classes' might seek out black males as sexual partners. Sexual alliances between white women and black males always carried the potential to disrupt both the fictive belief of whiteness as natural and unassailable, and the stability of a social order whose bedrock was the belief of black racial inferiority.<sup>62</sup>

Colonial regimes from the Americas to Asia exhibited a potent fear of the consequences of uncontrolled white female sexuality. In these colonial sites, ruling class males sought to establish their dominance through a series of customary practices and legislative measures. As Victoria Bynum observed of North Carolina slave society, white women's sexuality was confined to the institution of marriage and reproduction, perpetuating kinship lines that provided the basis of male patriarchal authority.<sup>63</sup> The extension of social privileges to white women acted as powerful incentives for white women to align their interests with those of white males, even though some may have chafed against their subordination to white male patriarchal authority.

The effects of these regulatory practices impacted unevenly on white women, who experienced their force according to their specific position within the white social hierarchy. All white Barbadian women were subject to the authority and control of patriarchal ruling class white males, but women of the poorer classes bore the brunt of the regime's efforts to regulate and control women's socio-sexual behaviour. Their greater social proximity and intimate ties to ruling class white males, and the prospect of withdrawal of white racial privileges, undoubtedly

made for easier surveillance over the social and sexual behaviour of elite white women. But the policing of poor white women, existing on the boundaries of whiteness, often without the support or protection of white males, and thrown into greater daily contact with the black communities, demanded more specific regulatory measures.

Poor white women had always occupied an ambiguous position within white Barbadian society, in large part because of the dubious social origins of many of the white women settlers.<sup>64</sup> Almost from its early settlement, Barbados had become known as a dumping ground for England's undesirables.<sup>65</sup> The majority of the white female indentured servants who formed the first labour force on seventeenth and eighteenth century Barbadian plantations were voluntary migrants, but many others had been forcibly removed from the 'mother country' against their will. In August 1671, the gentlemen of the Barbados House of Assembly were called to hear the case of one Mary Butler, an indentured servant, who headed a deputation of four servants in bringing a charge of illegal transportation. Butler claimed that she and the four male servants had been 'under pretence of kindness invited on board the ship *Mermaid*, by the Captain, and 'there detained by force on board the said ship', illegally transported to Barbados, where they were then sold as servants. Having heard and debated the 'facts' of the case, the Assembly found in favour of Mary and her co-petitioners, and ordered that they be set free and compensated for damages arising from their 'unjust transportation'. Unfortunately for Mary, freedom was short-lived, for soon after, the Assembly was presented with new contradictory evidence which 'cast serious doubt' on her claims. The former order was rescinded, and Mary and her fellow servants were ordered to return to their master, 'until they can obtain their freedom by due course of law'.<sup>66</sup>

English courts routinely sentenced convicted criminals to transportation to the colonies, and among those who found themselves transplanted to colonies such as Barbados were numerous white women of the lower classes. Many had been found guilty of committing sexual and other immoral or anti-social offences. Jill Sheppard noted in her study of the poor whites of Barbados that the London Garrison was responsible for 'spiriting away' many women from London's brothels and other places of ill-repute, and at least four hundred women of 'questionable virtue' were known to have been press-ganged and placed on board a Barbados bound ship.<sup>67</sup> During his residence in Barbados in the mid-seventeenth century Richard Ligon, a keen observer of Barbadian life noted that among those he encountered on his sea voyage to Barbados were also many female ex-prisoners who had 'lately come from Bridewell, Turnball Street, and suchlike places of education'.<sup>68</sup> And a few years later, Henry Whistler, another visitor to the island, caustically observed that while the natural environment of Barbados was to be much admired, its inhabitants were quite another matter. Whistler morosely mused that Barbados had become 'a dunghill whereon England doth cast forth it's rubidge: rogues and whores and suchlike people are generally brought here'.<sup>69</sup>

As Whistler attests, many female settlers to the colony probably arrived with high hopes of finding a wealthy planter for a husband. In the early years of settlement, it was possible for young women of lower class origins to join the ranks of the planter class through an advantageous marriage. As Barbara Bush argues, in the infant plantation society, 'white women of humble origins could now aspire to the leisured, pampered position of higher-status women.'<sup>70</sup> The Revd. Francis Crow commented on the process of embourgeoisment he witnessed in Jamaica in 1686. '[Even] a cooper's wife', commented Revd. Crow, 'could go forth in the best flowered silk and the richest silver and gold lace that England can afford, with a couple of negroes at her tail'.<sup>71</sup> But while a fortunate few women may have enjoyed the

opportunities for social mobility offered by the new society, poor white women continued to be held in low esteem by respectable white society, as attested to in an anecdotal tale related by Richard Ligon: a planter wanted to buy a woman servant and hearing that his neighbour had one such woman for sale, agreed to pay the planter one pound of hog's flesh for every pound of the woman's flesh. The sale concluded, the planter discovered that he had purchased a woman who was 'extremely fat, lazy and good for nothing'.<sup>72</sup>

Poor white women came to be constituted as a sexually unrestrained and immoral category, who, left to their own devices might seek sexual alliances with black males, heralding the much-feared degeneracy of the white race.<sup>73</sup> Cast in such degenerative terms, poor white women then represented a potentially collective threat to the ideals of white hegemonic rule, white purity, and the stability of the civil order. Much of the evident unease surrounding white female sexual transgression appears to have been rooted in anxieties about the possibilities of white women seeking out black males as sexual partners, and the consequences this posed for the dilution of white purity. The male dominated authorities frequently gave voice to their anxieties about the dangers of racial mixing, and urged sexual propriety for white women. Yet few white males followed their own advice, and sexual restraint did not apply to their own behaviour. As Barbara Bush has pointed out, a hypocritical double-standard flourished, as evidenced by the routine sexual abuse and exploitation of black women's sexuality by white males.<sup>74</sup> The freedom of white males to access black women's bodies without fear of racial contamination was shaped by legislation that tied the legal status of children to that of their mother. In the case of female slaves, any children born acquired their mother's slave status. This legal measure ensured that the children of miscegenatious unions between enslaved black women and white men would remain within the slave community. Effectively, this served the double function of limiting the size of the free coloured population, while obviating the threat to white superiority and

dominance. White women in Barbados and throughout the colonies then represented the literal bearers of free status – the literal embodiment of freedom. Maintaining a class of enslaved peoples necessitated the social distancing of white women and black men, and sexual relations between these groups could not be sanctioned. The socio-sexual behaviour of all white women therefore had to be brought under the control and surveillance of white males, who drew on an array of regulatory measures explicitly intended to dissuade women of all classes from forging sexual relations with black males. White women who transgressed the norms of white socio-sexual behaviour could find themselves confronting a range of strategies brought to bear against them - social ostracism, the withholding of poor relief, the withdrawal of white privileges, and the threat of legal action were all employed against white women considered as ‘race traitors’.<sup>75</sup> Such women could no longer be considered ‘white’ and, as punishment for their transgression, were denied the privileges and status that whiteness conferred.

In a previous study, I have already shown how the withholding of poor relief could be used as an effective deterrent in the struggles to maintain boundaries around the white race.<sup>76</sup> In the parishes of St. John and St. Michael, poor relief was granted to applicants only if they could be identified as white people. Relief was granted to individual women only so long as their behaviour conformed to white norms. Both the vestries of St. Michael and St. John, who bore responsibility for administering poor relief to the parish poor, regularly enlisted the assistance of ‘respectable’ white women of the parish, who were called upon to provide character references for women claimants. Women who were known to have offended white sensibilities through unacceptable social or sexual behaviour could find their applications for relief refused by the all male Poor Relief committee.

The social control of white women was not limited to adult women, but extended to adolescent girls. Measures for controlling and keeping adolescent girls within the white cultural domain are revealed through an analysis of the actions of the vestrymen of St. John's parish, who in 1792 established 'The St. John School for Female Industry', a boarding school for young girls of impoverished women of the parish. Ostensibly, the rationale for the establishment of this school for young girls from poor white families was to provide them with a vocational education. Girls between the ages of eight and twelve spent a period of four years at the school during which time, according to the curriculum they were taught spinning, knitting, weaving and other domestic skills. On reaching the age of twelve, pupils were required to bond themselves for a further four years as apprentices in the homes of the wealthy and respectable parishioners, where their socio-sexual behaviour could be closely surveilled. Apprenticeship did not represent a choice, either for the young women or their mothers, but was an essential requirement to be fulfilled in order for their mothers to continue to receive poor relief. Not surprisingly, many young girls opposed apprenticeship, and their opposition assumed a number of forms, from performing work shoddily, neglecting their work, to absconding from their masters and mistresses. As the vestry records indicate, such subversive activity was often aided and abetted by their mothers, whose entitlement to poor relief, often their sole source of income, was withdrawn when evidence of their involvement in their daughter's transgressive behaviour was suspected. But even the prospect of the loss of poor relief could not deter women from decisive action over what many probably regarded as the forced removal of their daughters from their homes. Some mothers and daughters may no doubt have viewed apprenticeship as an opportunity to gain valuable marketable skills that in the long term could help supplement the family income. But for others, the combination of separation, and the loss of the daughter's domestic labour proved unacceptable. In 1803, the Rector of St. John Parish bemoaned in his report to the Vestry Committee that 'two of the last three girls put out [to apprenticeship], Mary



Books and Sarah Charge', had 'run away from their masters at the encouragement of their parents'. Mrs Brooks was ordered to be struck off the poor roll, and her daughter to be 'given up' [and] 'corrected and returned to her master if he will receive her'.<sup>77</sup> The prospect of removal from the poor roll could therefore function as an extremely effective deterrent against antisocial or disorderly and transgressive behaviour which could range from sexual partnerships with black males to behaving in ways deemed antisocial, or injurious to white unity.

We have no way of knowing the fate of those women who were removed from the poor rolls, but it is certain that in the stricken economy of early nineteenth century Barbados, such an outcome could only serve to push poor white women even further onto the margins of white society. Women who asserted their agency in refusing to conform to the dominant white norms were ostracised by 'decent' white society. In these circumstances, it would not be surprising that many forged more intimate relations with free black or coloured men. The removal of transgressive white women from the poor rolls therefore represented a contradictory position for the maintenance of the boundaries of whiteness.

## **6. Contesting the boundaries of whiteness?**

Patriarchal ideologies exerted powerful control over the lives of white women, securing their subordination to individual white males and the nascent state. But that authority was never so absolute as to deny possible resistance, and individual women tested the limits of patriarchal ideology and practice when opportunity presented. In May 1670, for instance, Mary Ditty, a young white Barbadian woman appeared before the Barbadian House of Assembly to request that her marriage be dissolved. As Mary explained to the House, before she had reached ten years of age, she had been coerced into marriage by 'those her duty taught her to obey', but

now 'coming to mature years [...] could not affect [her husband], as it being a match disproportionate for her'. After swearing an affidavit to the effect that '[her husband] had never known her carnally as a wife', the House pondered Mary's petition, eventually finding in her favour on the grounds that 'the said marriage being made under years of age of consent, it is declared to be a nullity, and the said parties to be separated as if not married, and that [the husband] leave her free, and claim no more the said Mary Ditty as his wife.'<sup>78</sup>

Mary's successful petition suggests some elasticity in the operations of patriarchal practices, if not in ideology. I want to suggest that such pliancy stemmed from the need for colonial authorities to maintain white cohesion and superiority. Such an imperative could mean that white men were forced to concede some social power to white women, if they were to gain the critical pro-slavery support of white women. In Barbadian plantation society, white women enjoyed an array of privileges precisely through their alliances with white males. This factor makes it possible to understand why subordinated white and enslaved or free black women were unable to bridge the chasm that separated them. White women's structural position within the dominant white constituency severely undermined any considerations of shared gender identity, or a shared sisterhood, with enslaved or freed black women. As Elizabeth Genovese has noted of southern slavery, the mutual antagonisms that characterised relations between white and black women effectively precluded the possibility of a shared female consciousness. In this respect, gender 'counted for little'.<sup>79</sup> An alliance with black women would not only undermine white women's own privileged but precarious position, but would undoubtedly threaten their own socio-economic and political interests. Some white women might have expressed reservations about the system but few were willing or able to relinquish the social or economic privileges that accrued from slavery. Ultimately, as pro-slavery agents, white women's interests lay not with enslaved women, but with the enslavers.

All women were subjects of patriarchal authority, but to ignore the quotidian ways in which patriarchal power may be undermined by a shared whiteness in a racially ordered society predicated on the basis of white superiority is to underestimate its variability. White and black women were both its subjects, but arguably, enslaved black women bore the full brunt of patriarchal authority in ways that did not impact on white women's lives. White women were subordinated to white male authority, but in turn, they were empowered to subject black men and women to their dominating power. Recall again the widowed Anne Phillips. Her status as a slave-owner, with the power to control even the future of unborn slave children enables us to better understand the ways in which white women may be complicit agents within dominant structures. Anne's identity as a white woman entangled her within the intricate and complex web spun by the social relations of slavery that enmeshed within its strands white women such as Anne Phillips as surely as it did the enslaved.

To what extent did white colonial women contest and challenge their imposed gender or classed identities? What new possibilities did the Caribbean colonial societies offer to European women? How were European gender relations reworked and transformed in the context of Barbados? What were the possibilities of resistance and agency for white Barbadian women? Without further research, the answer to these questions must remain tenuous. My own analysis of the Minute Books of the St. John Poor Relief Board provides strong evidence that some poor white women did not simply accept the regulatory and controlling measures of the Barbadian authorities. When motive and opportunity presented, poor white women challenged the regulatory practices of the patriarchal Poor Relief Board when its decisions were seen to encroach on particular areas of their private lives.<sup>80</sup>

Overall however, there is little evidence to suggest that poor or elite white women collectively challenged the ideologically discursive constructions of white womanhood, even though the narrowly discursive definitions of white womanhood worked against their interests. In any case, as many women no doubt realised, the reality rarely reflected the ideology. Hilary Beckles suggests that this fracture between ideology and practice makes it possible to understand for instance, why despite the prevailing image of white women as sexual innocents, it was possible to observe in Barbadian slave auctions, the sight of white women dispassionately fondling the genitalia of semi-naked black male slaves in order to assess their health and future breeding potential, before committing to a purchase. Beckles has also alerted us to the involvement of 'respectable' white women in the flourishing illicit sex economy during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, an involvement that rested on the ability of white women to exploit black women's sexuality.<sup>81</sup>

Evidence of women initiating court actions against wayward husbands, fraudulent men, and other white males may be found within Barbadian archives. But the actions of those white Barbadian women who took legal recourse to safeguard their rights are not indicative of any contestation of their gendered identities as white women. Some individual white women may have chafed against the narrow definitions of white womanhood, but there is simply not sufficient evidence to substantiate a proposition that white women mounted collective challenges to the power structures. Their resistance amounted to individual contestations of specific abuses of male power and authority, rather than an outright attack on the patriarchy, or a rejection of their gendered or raced or class positions. It is significant that an anti-racist, anti-slavery feminist consciousness does not appear to have emerged among white Barbadian women, even during the 19th century when white women in Europe and America were beginning to agitate for abolitionism amid assertions of a shared sisterhood between black and white women.

The material conditions of poor white women also disturbed ideologies of white womanhood. This is most evident when we consider the experiences of the many poor women, who without male support were forced to secure their own livelihoods by whatever means they could. Labouring white women clearly disrupted representations of white women as an economically dependant, and domestic-bound category. As Victoria Bynum has noted of poor white women in Antebellum North Carolina, 'their race and gender dictated that poor white women conform to the wholly domestic image of the true woman, but their class left them without the means to do so.'<sup>82</sup> But the paucity of evidence should not mean that white women were indeed the passive victims of patriarchal authority, but rather, is indicative of the undeveloped state of research in this area.

## **CONCLUSION**

By thinking through the implications of whiteness as a constructed identity, and the imperative for white ruling authorities to produce, maintain and justify a white identity, I have shown how Barbadian authorities attempted to secure and reproduce a hegemonic, unitary and pure whiteness through the patriarchal control of white women. At times, women's social activities brought them up against patriarchal authorities, as happened when women resisted the Poor Relief Board, but ultimately resistance could bring retribution to women who did not conform to normative white standards of womanhood, femininity or whiteness. A critical site of antagonism between white women and the authorities was the arena of white female-black male sexual relations. The reproductive capacities of white women in general and poor white women in particular situated women as potential threats to the reproduction of white racial purity and the stability of a social order grounded in white belief of their own superiority.

I outlined earlier in this essay some of the problems embedded within universalist representations of the 'white colonial woman'. A common social positioning of women can only be claimed however, by leaving unexamined evidence of women's agency in producing and reproducing the ideologies and practices of slave economy and society; the significance of white identity in elevating white women above all other women; the simultaneous significance of social class in dividing and diversifying them, despite their commonalities of gender and whiteness. Representations of white colonial women as victims of patriarchy can illuminate white male power over white feminine identities, bodies and sexualities, but do little to further understanding of the ways in which gender is mediated by race, nor the ways in which those who are constructed as social objects may seek to challenge their defined status in their quests for subjecthood.

---

<sup>1</sup> David Roediger (ed.)(1998) Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to be White, Schocken Books, New York, p.4

<sup>2</sup> Richard Dyer (1997) White, Routledge, London, p.1

<sup>3</sup> Alistair Bonnet, "'White Studies': The Problems and Projects of a New Research Agenda", Theory, Culture and Society, Vol. 13, No.2, 1996

<sup>4</sup> See bell hooks, (1992) "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination", in Killing Rage, Ending Racism Penguin Press, London; (Charles), Helen (1992), "Whiteness - the Relevance of Politically Colouring the 'Non'", in Hilary Hinds, Ann Phoenix and Jackie Stacey (eds.) Working Out: New Directions for Women's Studies, Falmer Press, London; Toni Morrison (1993) Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, Vintage Books, New York

<sup>5</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, Lourdes Torres (eds.)(1991) Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indiana

<sup>6</sup> Simone de Beauvoir (1964) The Second Sex, Bantam, New York

<sup>7</sup> See for instance the works by Ann Laura Stoler (1995) Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things, Duke University Press, North Carolina; Anne McLintock (1995) Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context, Routledge, London; Robert Young (1995) Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race, Routledge, London

---

<sup>8</sup> See Michel Foucault (1978) The History of Sexuality: Vol.1, Penguin, Harmondsworth; Foucault, (1975) Discipline and Punish; The Birth of the Prison, Vintage, New York

<sup>9</sup> The best known and to date only existing first hand account of Barbadian slave society to have been written by a white woman is that of Elizabeth Fenwick, whose correspondence to her friend Mary Hays remains an invaluable source of material on the socio-economic and cultural life of Barbados in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See A.F. Fenwick (ed.) (1927) The Fate of the Fenwicks: Letters to Mary Hays, 1798-1828, London. For an interesting discussion on Caribbean wide sources of other white women's testimonies, see Bridget Brereton's (1995) "Text, Testimony and Gender: An examination of some Texts by Women on the English Speaking Caribbean from the 1770s to the 1920s", in Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton and Barbara Bailey (eds.)(1995) Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective, James Currey, London.

<sup>10</sup> Cecily Lorraine Forde, "Engendering Whiteness in Two Plantation Societies: Gender, Race and Class in Barbados and North Carolina in Barbados and North Carolina, 1627-1860, Unpublished PhD thesis, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 1998

<sup>11</sup> Theodore W. Allen (1997) The Invention of the White Race: Vol. 2, The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo America, Verso, London, p.251

<sup>12</sup> David Roediger (1991) The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, Verso, London; Roediger (1994) Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics and Working Class History, Verso, London; Theodore Allen (1994) The Invention of the White Race: Vol. 1: Racial Oppression and Social Control, Verso, London; Allen (1997), The Invention of the White Race, vol. 2: The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America, Verso, London; Matthew Frye Jacobson (1998) Whiteness of A Different Colour: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts

<sup>13</sup> Noel Ignatiev (1996) How the Irish Became White, Routledge, London

<sup>14</sup> Richard Dyer (1997) White, Routledge, London. It is worthwhile noting that even the term 'white skin colour' is problematic, for as with black skin, there are myriad shades of whiteness. There is then a spectrum of white skin, from the very light to the very dark, and establishing the point at which an individual passes from white to non-white is not always self-evident. Thus, it is possible for an individual identified as non-white individual to possess a 'fairer' skin colour than an individual identified and recognised as white.

<sup>15</sup> Dyer, White, p.20

<sup>16</sup> Winthrop Jordan (1974) White Man's Burden: The Historical Origins of Racism in the United States, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.6

<sup>17</sup> George Fredrickson, "White Images of Black Slaves: Is What We See in Others Sometimes A Reflection of What We Find in Ourselves?", in (Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.) (1997) Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror , Temple University Press, Philadelphia

<sup>18</sup> See Barbara Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838, James Currey, London (Chapter 2)

---

<sup>19</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994), Racial Formation in the United States, Routledge, London, pp.55-56

<sup>20</sup> Ruth Frankenberg (1993) White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness, Routledge, London; p.6

<sup>21</sup> Frankenberg, White Women, Race Matters; p.6

<sup>22</sup> Frankenberg, *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Frankenberg, *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> For instance, see Hilary Beckles (1999) Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society, James Currey, Oxford. Especially useful in this collection are Chapter 1, “Property Rights In Pleasure: Marketing Black Women’s Sexuality, and Chapters 4,5,6 and 7 which specifically address white women as colonial subjects. See also Hilary Beckles, “White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean”, History Workshop Journal, issue 36, 1993, pp.66-82 Also useful is Barbara Bush, “White ‘Ladies’, Coloured ‘Favourites’ and Black ‘Wenches’: Some Considerations on Sex, Race and Class Factors in Social Relations in White Creole Society in the British Caribbean”, Slavery and Abolition, No. 2, 1991, pp.245-262

<sup>25</sup> Dyer, White, p.pp 44-45

<sup>26</sup> Ruth Frankenberg,(ed.)(1997) , “Introduction: Local Whitenesses, Localizing Whiteness”, Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism , Duke University Press, North Carolina. p.5 (introduction)

A pertinent contemporary example here may be South Africa under the Apartheid regime

<sup>27</sup> Frankenberg, “Local Whitenesses”, *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Omi and Winant, Racial Formation in the United States, p.68

<sup>29</sup> See for instance Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton and Barbara Bailey (eds.)(1995) Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective, James Currey, London

<sup>30</sup> Lucille Mair, quoted in Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society, , p.xii

<sup>31</sup> See for instance, Barbara Bush’s monograph “White ‘Ladies’, Coloured ‘Favourites’ and Black ‘Wenches’: Some Considerations on Sex, Race and Class Factors in Social Relations in White Creole Society in the British Caribbean”, Slavery and Abolition, No. 2, 1991, pp.245-262, which explores social relations between white, black and coloured women; Hilary Beckles’s seminal paper “White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean”, History Workshop Journal, issue 36, 1993, pp.66-82, in which Beckles makes a potent argument for ‘a clearly articulated and empirically sound conceptualisation of white women in their roles as pro-slavery agents within the world made by the slaveholders’; Kathleen Butler’s “White women and Property in early nineteenth Century Barbados”, paper presented at the Symposium Engendering History: Current Directions in the Study of Women, University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston, Jamaica 1993 in which Butler has analysed the extent of white Barbadian and Jamaica women’s investments in property, as does Trevor Burnards’s study



---

“Inheritance and Independence: Women’s Status in Early Colonial Jamaica”, William and Mary Quarterly, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, Vol. 48, No.1, January 1991, pp.93-114.

<sup>32</sup> This is not to claim that white women are the most marginalised of Caribbean women; among others defined as non-white, the histories of the indigenous Arawak and Carib women, and those of the Chinese and Asian women who were later brought to the Caribbean have yet to be recovered.

<sup>33</sup> Jane Haggis, (1998) “White Women and Imperialism: Towards a non-recuperative history”, in Clare Midgley (ed.) 1998) Gender and Imperialism, Manchester University Press, Manchester, p.48

<sup>34</sup> Moira Ferguson (ed.)(1987) The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave: Related by Herself, Pandora, London

<sup>35</sup> Ferguson, History of Mary Prince, p.56

<sup>36</sup> John Blake, cited in Hilary Beckles (1989) Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados, Zed Books, London

<sup>37</sup> Hilary Beckles (1989) , Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved African women in Barbados, Zed Books, London, p.7

<sup>38</sup> Patrick Wright (ed.)(1966) Lady Nugent’s Journal of A Residence in Jamaica, 1801-1805, Institute of Jamaica, Kingston, Jamaica

<sup>39</sup> Jack P. Greene (1992) “Changing Identities in the British West Indies: Barbados as a Case Study”, in Imperatives, Behaviours and Identities: Essays in Early American Cultural History (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville), p.33

<sup>40</sup> See Pedro Welch and Richard Goodridge (2000), “Red” And Black Over White: Free Coloured Women in Pre-Emancipation Barbados, Carib Research and Publications, Bridgetown, Barbados

<sup>41</sup> Will of Anne Phillips, E.M. Shilstone Notebook Library, 9/23/16, Barbados Museum and Historical Society

<sup>42</sup> This is not to suggest that white women shared the same relationship to property as white males. Until late in the 19th century, only widowed and single women were empowered to devise their own wills. Married women could do so only with the consent of their husbands. The point I am making however, is that their legally defined status as property meant that enslaved African women and men could not freely decide the disposal of any property they possessed, for property cannot own property.

<sup>43</sup> As Bonnie Anderson and Zinsser have commented “there was no Renaissance or Scientific Revolution for women, in the sense that the goals and ideals of those movements were applicable to men, so there was no Enlightenment for women”. Of course, there was no Enlightenment for black peoples, either men or women, as the ideals of this movement were applicable only to white European males. For a discussion of the Enlightenment *philosophes* attitudes towards European women, see Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser (1990) A History of their own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present, Vol. 2, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books

---

<sup>44</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, "Introduction: Local Whitenesses, Localizing Whiteness", Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism, Duke University Press, North Carolina. p.10

<sup>45</sup> For discussions of planter treatment and attitudes towards white indentured servants, see Jill Sheppard (1977) The 'Redlegs' of Barbados: Their Origin and History, KTO Press, New York; Richard Ligon (1659, 1673, reprinted 1970), reprint) A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados, Frank Cass, London

<sup>46</sup> There is an extensive body of scholarship on the relationship between black and white women and the formation of gendered and racialised identities during the era of plantation slavery. See for instance, Hilary Beckles (1999) Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society, James Currey, London; Verene Shepherd *et al* (eds.) (1995) Engendering Slavery: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective, James Currey, London, Barbara Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838, James Currey, London; Barbara Bush (1996), "History, Memory, Myth: Reconstructing the History (or Histories) of Black Women in the African Diaspora", in Stephanie Newell (ed.) Images of African and Caribbean Women: Migration, Displacement, Diaspora, Occasional Paper No.4, Centre of Commonwealth Studies, University of Stirling

<sup>47</sup> Hilary Beckles, (1998) "Centreing Women: The Political Economy of Gender in West African and Caribbean Slavery" in Christine Barrow (ed.) Caribbean Portraits: Essays on Gender Ideologies and Identities, Ian Randle, Kingston, Jamaica, p.95

<sup>48</sup> Will of Anne Phillips, E.M.Shilstone Notebook Library, 9/23/16 BMHS

<sup>49</sup> Beckles, "White Women and Freedom", in Centering Women, p.61; see also Barbara Bush (1996) "Hard Labour: Women, Childbirth and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies", in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (eds.) More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas, Indiana University Press, Bloomington

<sup>50</sup> See Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society, pp.11-22

<sup>51</sup> Karl Watson "Salmagundis vs. Pumpkins: White Politics and Creole Consciousness in Barbadian Slave Society 1800-1825", in Howard Johnson and Karl Watson (eds.) (1998) The White Minority in the Caribbean, Ian Randle Publishers, Kingston, Jamaica, p.17

<sup>52</sup> The term 'ten acre men' may imply that only white men enjoyed the rights to own land. However, as my analysis of property deeds in Barbados revealed, a significant number of white women also owned small to middling plots of land. Land ownership was indeed particularly important for white women as it represented a potentially important source of income.

<sup>53</sup> For more extensive treatment of the socio-economic positions of poor whites in Barbados, see Jill Sheppard (1977) The 'Redlegs' of Barbados: Their Origin and History, KTO Press, New York;

<sup>54</sup> Watson, The White Minority in the Caribbean, p. 18

<sup>55</sup> See for instance, Anne McLintock (1995) Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context, Routledge, London; Vron Ware (1992) Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History, Verso Press, London; Ann Laura Stoler (1995) Race and the Education of Desire:

---

Foucault's *History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, Duke University Press, North Carolina

<sup>56</sup> cited in Victoria Bynum (1992), *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill p.10

<sup>57</sup> Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*, pp17-18; See also Merrill D. Smith (ed.)(1998) *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*, New York University Press, New York (especially chapters 7 and 8)

<sup>58</sup> Beckles, *Centering Woman*, pp.28-29

<sup>59</sup> Hilary Beckles, "Taking Liberties: enslaved women and anti-slavery in the Caribbean", in Claire Midgley (ed.)(1998) *Gender and Imperialism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, p.140

<sup>60</sup> In Barbados, as was the case in many slave societies, a matrilineal system functioned to ensure that children inherited the status of their mother, so that any child born to a white mother was legitimately free. If white women were not discouraged from sexual relations with white men, the result would be a coloured community of free peoples whose presence could potentially undermine the stability of the white dominated social order

<sup>61</sup> Ann Laura Stoler (1995) *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina; p.132

<sup>62</sup> Note that it is whiteness, not blackness that is accorded purity of status and may thus be threatened

<sup>63</sup> Victoria Bynum (1995) *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, p.10

<sup>64</sup> Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, p.5

<sup>65</sup> I use the term 'undesirables' as it was loosely used during the 18<sup>th</sup> century to refer to elements of the British population who posed particular social problems within British society, for instance, those convicted of criminal offences, prostitutes, political dissenters

<sup>66</sup> *Council of Assembly Minutes*, 1667-1682, Barbados Museum and Historical Society

<sup>67</sup> Sheppard, *The 'Redlegs' of Barbados*, p.20

<sup>68</sup> Richard Ligon, (1675) *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (reprinted 1998) Frank Cass, London. Ligon is referring here not to educational establishments, but to London gaols commonly used to hold prostitutes, thieves, debtors and other undesirables.

<sup>69</sup> Henry Whistler, cited in Sheppard, *The 'Redlegs' of Barbados*, p.20

<sup>70</sup> Bush, White, "'Ladies', Coloured 'Favourites' and Black 'Wenches'", p.248.

<sup>71</sup> Francis Crow to Giles Firmin, March 7<sup>th</sup> 1686/7, *Jamaican Historical Review*, Vol. 3, No.2, 1959, p.54 cited in Richard Dunn, (1973) *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies 1627-1713*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, p.285

---

<sup>72</sup> Richard Ligon, True and Exact History, p.59

<sup>73</sup> Hilary Beckles (1993), “White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean”, History Workshop Journal, No. 36, 1993, pp.66-82

<sup>74</sup> Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society, p.17

<sup>75</sup> The term ‘race traitors’ is contemporary in origin, but it does serve to express the sentiment of white colonial Barbadians.

<sup>76</sup> Cecily Forde-Jones (1998) “Mapping Racial Boundaries: Gender, Race and Poor Relief in Barbadian Plantation Society”, Journal of Women’s History, Vol.10, No.3, 1998, pp.9-31

<sup>77</sup> St. John Vestry Minute Book, June 1803, Barbados Museum and Historical Society

<sup>78</sup> Council of Assembly Minutes, 1667-1682, Barbados Museum and Historical Society

<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1988) Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, N.C., p.333

<sup>80</sup> Forde-Jones, “Mapping Racial Boundaries”, pp. 20-26

<sup>81</sup> Beckles, “White Women and Slavery”, pp.72-73

<sup>82</sup> Bynum, Unruly Women, p. 7