SURVIVING SLAVERY:
POLITICS, POWER, AND AUTHORITY IN THE BRITISH CARIBBEAN, 1807-1834

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This dissertation explores a broad range of power relationships and struggles for authority in the early nineteenth century British Atlantic, focusing on the Caribbean colony of Berbice. I aim to understand how enslaved people and their enslavers negotiated their relationships and forged their lives within multiple, interconnected networks of power in a notoriously brutal society. To do so, I focus on politics and culture writ large and small, zooming in to see the internal conflicts, practices, and hierarchies that governed individual plantations, communities, and families; and zooming out to explore the various ways that imperial officials, colonial administrators, and metropolitan antislavery activists tried to shape West Indian slavery during the era of amelioration—a crucial period of transformation in the Atlantic world.

To analyze these overlapping power struggles, I focus on specific social contexts in which authority was contested. In particular, I explore: obeah, the construction of spiritual authority and its dangers; the predicament of drivers, enslaved men who balanced the competing needs of enslaved laborers and plantation managers; the gendered politics of marriage and sexual control; the connections between metropolitan penal reform and efforts to regulate physical violence against slaves; and enslaved people’s struggles to assert
ownership of different forms of property. In each case I show how the goals and priorities of different individuals and groups, enslaved and free, competed, overlapped, and intersected to shape high politics and lived realities.

I use a range of sources, including travel narratives, trial records, missionary correspondence, and official government documents. Most important are the records of the Berbice fiscals and protectors of slaves, officials charged with hearing enslaved peoples’ grievances and enforcing colonial laws. Their investigations produced detailed, first-person testimony from owners, managers, overseers, drivers, and enslaved laborers themselves. These records provide an unparalleled opportunity to understand how enslaved people negotiated their day-to-day relationships with one another and with Europeans and how they struggled to survive. The voices at the heart of this project reveal a complex set of power relationships and concerns, painting a rich portrait of a world where authority was constantly contested and contingent.
For Mafe,
with gratitude and love
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PP  Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons, England

T  Treasury Series, British National Archives, Kew, London, England
INTRODUCTION

When December, a thirty year old enslaved man on a riverside sugar plantation in Berbice, was flogged on February 23, 1833, the echoes of the whip’s cracks reverberated throughout the Atlantic world. While December’s wounds were still fresh, the plantation manager recorded the fifteen lashes December had endured in his official “punishment record book.” His punishment records, which the colonial government required him to keep as part of its statistical documentation of slavery, were not due for another five months. But December went to colonial officials just two days after he was flogged, leaving the plantation and traveling downriver to the colony’s capital, New Amsterdam. There he entered the office of the protector of slaves, where he challenged the legitimacy of the whipping, and complained that he had been forced to work all night in the sugar mill. The driver and the overseer on December’s plantation, when summoned, corroborated the complaint, and the manager was prosecuted “for having commenced the manufactory of sugar before the hour of
five o’clock in the morning,” which was illegal, “and for having unjustly punished December.” Ten months later he was fined £1.¹

The records of this investigation, which the protector forwarded as part of his semiannual reports to the governor, documented only one of hundreds of complaints made by enslaved people in Berbice in the 1820s and 1830s. These documents routinely made their way across the Atlantic, where they were scrutinized by the British Colonial Office and, occasionally, reprinted in Parliamentary Papers and in the antislavery press. Complaints like December’s thus generated a paper trail that spanned the Atlantic, connecting plantation power struggles to metropolitan authorities.²

The transatlantic reverberations of this iconic act of violence--the whipping of a single enslaved man on one plantation in a remote part of the British Empire--remind us that slavery was, even at its most brutal and most intimate, much more complex than it is often assumed to be. The binary, absolute master-slave relationship is a fiction. The process of surveillance and documentation that linked the end of the lash that tore December’s flesh to the core of the British Empire also reminds us that the personal power struggles at the heart of slavery were embedded in broader structures of power and authority in the early modern Atlantic world.

¹ Feb. 25, 1833, CO 116/152, 95-98. The protector of slaves (sometimes referred to as the guardian of slaves) was an office created by the British government in many of its colonies in the early nineteenth century. The protector was responsible for hearing and investigating slaves’ complaints, and he had the authority to decide on cases summarily or, for more serious offenses, prosecute cases in regular colonial courts. In Berbice, the office of the protector of slaves was created in 1817 and, until 1826, the protector’s duties were handled by the fiscal, the colony’s chief judicial official. See Mary Turner, “‘The 11 O’Clock Flog’: Women, Work and Labour Law in the British Caribbean,” in From Slavery to Emancipation in the Atlantic World, ed. Silvia R. Frey and Betty Wood (London, 1999), 38-39; Alvin O. Thompson, Unprofitable Servants: Crown Slaves in Berbice, Guyana, 1803-1831 (Kingston, Jamaica, 2002), 2; and John Lean and Trevor Burnard, “Hearing Slave Voices: The Fiscal’s Reports of Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo,” Archives 27, no. 107 (October 2002): 120–33. For a summary of the protector’s duties, see CO 116/155, appendix one.

² For the protectors’ of slaves reports, see CO 116/143-153.
Taken together, these observations support the central premise of this study: that enslaved people and European plantation authorities in Berbice negotiated their relationships within a larger, more complicated network of power relations that transcended, overlapped with, and sometimes undercut the slave-master dyad, the plantation, and, in some cases, the colonial Caribbean itself. The major goal of this project is to reframe the way we think about power and authority in Atlantic slavery. Specifically, this project aims to contextualize plantation society power struggles, to see how the range of political, cultural, and social systems in which slaveowners, their representatives, and enslaved people were embedded influenced the ways they tried to gain power, assert authority, and negotiate their relationships.

This study explores authority and power struggles at different levels, zooming in to see the internal conflicts and divisions of individual plantations, slave communities, and families on the one hand, and zooming out to assess the role of external authorities, such as colonial administrators and imperial officials on the other, in shaping the politics of plantation life. It also seeks to understand the relationship between these different levels—the ways that struggles for power and legitimacy in different realms overlapped with and were embedded in one another. Teasing out these relationships therefore requires sustained attention to both local power conflicts and to the broader cultural and political contexts in which these struggles took place. As recent studies of Atlantic slavery have demonstrated,

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3 My approach to Berbice is similar to what David Armitage has called “cis-Atlantic” history, the study of “particular places as unique locations within an Atlantic world [that] seeks to define that uniqueness as the result of the interaction between local particularity and a wider web of connections (and comparisons).” See Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800, eds. David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (New York, 2002), 21.
the social relations of power in colonial slave societies were shaped both by local circumstances and by imperial developments.4

This project straddles the Atlantic world, with one foot in Britain and the other in Berbice (Figure 1.1), which was one of the most well-documented plantation societies in the Americas. The records from Berbice are particularly rich because of the legacy of the Dutch, who began establishing plantations throughout the Guianas or the so-called Wild Coast (an area that stretched from the mouth of the Orinoco River in the West to the Amazon delta in the East) in the early seventeenth century. When the British captured Berbice and the neighboring colonies of Demerara and Essequibo from the Dutch in the late eighteenth century, they left much of the colonies’ legal and administrative structure intact. This included the office of the fiscal, a powerful legal official responsible for hearing enslaved

4 See, for example, Laurent Dubois, A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004); Diana Paton, No Bond But the Law: Punishment, Race, and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780-1870 (Durham, N.C., 2004); and Vincent Brown, The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery (Cambridge, Mass., 2008). As Diana Paton noted (drawing on the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot), studies of slavery “range widely in the scale of their units of analysis, from micro-studies focused on individual plantations, the ‘slave community,’ or on the planter-slave relationship, through nationally focused studies, to those which take empires or even the entire Atlantic world as their frame. Each unit of analysis has advantages and disadvantages...The most successful studies...are able to ‘articulate analytic levels,’ maintaining a sense of both the day-to-day struggles among people and groups of people and the world economic and political forces within which these struggles take place. Even more crucially, the best studies demonstrate the reciprocal connections between these levels of analysis.” Paton, No Bond But the Law, 3. See also Trouillot, Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy (Baltimore, 1988), 288-89.
people’s complaints against Europeans and against other slaves, and for prosecuting enslaved people for various crimes, ranging from theft to murder.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) For Berbice under Dutch rule, see Alvin O. Thompson, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment in Guyana, 1580-1803* (Bridgetown, Barbados, 1987), esp. ch. 4; and Marjoleine Kars, “Policing and Transgressing Borders: Soldiers, Slave Rebels, and the Early Modern Atlantic,” *New West Indian Guide* 83, nos. 3–4 (2009), 188-89. The first European settlements in Berbice were established in the 1620s by the Dutch Van Peere family along the banks of the upper Berbice River. British forces seized Berbice (and Demerara and Essequibo) during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars in May 1796. They restored the colonies to the Dutch (the revolutionary Batavian Republic) in March 1802 under the Treaty of Amiens, and recaptured them permanently in September 1803. In 1814, an Anglo-Dutch treaty formally ceded Berbice (along with Demerara and Essequibo, which were combined, and the Cape of Good Hope) to the British. Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo became jointly administered in 1831 as British Guiana, which achieved its independence as the Cooperative Republic of Guyana in 1966. For the role of the fiscal in Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo, see Emília Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York, 1994), 45; Lean and Burnard, “Hearing Slave Voices,”120–33; J. H. Lean, “The Secret Lives of Slaves: Berbice, 1819 to 1827” (Ph.D. diss., University of Canterbury, 2002), esp. 9-44; and Trevor Burnard, *Hearing Slaves Speak* (Georgetown, Guyana, 2010). Michael Samuel Bennett, the Berbice fiscal and a prominent slaveowner, only began keeping records of his investigations in 1819, at the request of Henry Beard, who had recently been appointed president of the courts of civil and criminal justice and who would become lieutenant governor in 1820.

\(^6\) This map is adapted from one drawn by Rebecca Wrenn. See Randy M. Browne, “The ‘Bad Business’ of Obeah: Power, Authority, and the Politics of Slave Culture in the British Caribbean,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2011), 452.
The large body of legal records that resulted from the fiscals’ investigations and prosecutions include detailed, first-person testimony from owners, managers, overseers, and, most importantly, enslaved people. The quality of these records distinguishes Berbice from most other Atlantic slave societies, where the voices and perspectives of enslaved people are much harder to find. The fiscals’ records, which cover the period from 1819 to 1832, are complemented by the records of the protectors of slaves (1826-34). Taken together, these legal records—which have only been used by a handful of historians—constitute the single largest body of testimony from enslaved people in the British Empire. When combined with other types of sources, which include travel narratives, missionary correspondence, legal statutes, newspapers, punishment records, and official government correspondence, the records of the fiscals and protectors of slaves provide a unique opportunity to see how enslaved people negotiated their relationships with one another and with Europeans in the context of an interventionist colonial government.

The early nineteenth century was a crucial period of transformation in the history of the plantation complex in the Atlantic world. The upheavals of the American (1775-1783) and Haitian (1791-1804) revolutions created imperial crises for Britain and France, leading to the end of slavery in some areas and forcing Europeans to reconsider the role that slavery would play in their empires. Nevertheless, when the British obtained Berbice in the midst of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, slavery was flourishing in many parts of the Americas, including Brazil, the southern United States, and Cuba, and the transatlantic slave trade was transporting nearly 100,000 captive Africans to American slave societies annually.

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Berbice and its neighboring colonies were an important part of this expanding frontier of slavery.

The British takeover in Berbice ushered in an era of remarkable growth, as British capital, planters, and captive Africans flooded into the colony on an unprecedented scale. The colony’s slave population more than doubled in six years, increasing from some 8,000 slaves in 1796 to more than 17,000 in 1802. By 1820, more than 140 plantations had been established along the colony’s flood-prone rivers and seacoast, a feat that relied as much on backbreaking labor as it did on engineering skill. Berbice’s famously productive soil—which had not been exhausted like that of older West Indian colonies—helped it become one of the leading British producers of coffee, cotton, and sugar in the early nineteenth century.

But the transatlantic slave trade and the slave system that made this growth possible were also under attack—especially in the British empire—during the so-called Age of Revolution, the very period when slavery in Berbice was putting down new roots. Only in hindsight can one appreciate just how quickly the British slave system collapsed: Britain ended its transatlantic slave trade in 1807, experimented with various schemes to “ameliorate” slavery in the 1810s and 1820s so that the system might be sanitized and

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9 Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 25.
11 In the late eighteenth century, coffee and cotton were the major exports in Berbice. These crops peaked around 1810, when Berbician planters began a shift to sugar cultivation. Throughout the 1810s, 1820s, and 1830s, many plantations were converted from coffee and cotton to sugar, while others were abandoned. See B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834* (Baltimore, 1984), 63, 106; Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 24; and Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 31, 41-42.
therefore preserved, and finally emancipated nearly 800,000 slaves in 1834.\textsuperscript{12} In the span of only three decades, Berbice went from an expanding and famously productive colony of some 23,000 enslaved people to a post-emancipation society that would soon turn to indentured laborers to maintain the plantation system.\textsuperscript{13} A central part of this study asks how these major transformations in the British Atlantic world--and especially the growing metropolitan interest in surveilling, regulating, and reforming slavery during the period of amelioration--shaped power relationships on the ground, connecting transatlantic imperial politics to the daily realities of colonial life. Doing so allows us, first, to explore plantation society power relations in a more nuanced way, and second, to approach antislavery and amelioration from a fresh perspective.

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Broadening our view of power relationships in Atlantic slavery reveals a rich and complex set of overlapping struggles. As historians have recently pointed out, an exclusive focus on the slave-master binary often leads to viewing slavery as a two-sided power struggle between dominating enslavers and slaves, who rebelled and resisted, struggled against “social death,” and displayed their “agency.” This obscures many important features of slavery. Of central importance is that focusing only on domination and resistance truncates the political and social lives of enslaved people, capturing only one part of a complicated

\textsuperscript{12} Emancipation was followed by a four year period of forced “apprenticeship.”

\textsuperscript{13} After apprenticeship ended in 1838, planters in British Guiana turned to indentured laborers from various places, including Portugal, Barbados, and, primarily, India.
predicament of enslavement. Reducing the history of slavery to enslaved people’s relationships with owners, managers, and overseers also makes it difficult, as Joseph Miller recently argued, to understand the other power relationships and networks that were at play, “the historical contexts in which both parties, masters and slaves, were trying to manipulate not only one another but also others around them.”

How, then, were plantation power struggles constituted and conditioned by a wider array of relationships and authorities in the early modern Atlantic world? One way of approaching this question is by recognizing the range of intermediaries or go-betweens that shaped the ways enslaved people and Europeans interacted with one another. This was particularly true in Berbice, where the majority of plantations were owned by absentee planters who lived thousands of miles away (mostly in Britain and the Netherlands). Most owners entrusted their estates to attorneys, who then hired managers and overseers to handle day-to-day business. Yet even overseers and managers, who lived on the estates they supervised, relied heavily on drivers, enslaved men who were appointed to carry out their

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15 Miller, “Biographical Turn.”

orders, keep slaves at work, and maintain discipline. Though drivers were often seen by Europeans and Africans alike as the highest (legitimate) authorities among enslaved people, they had the near-impossible task of balancing the competing needs of European superiors and enslaved subordinates. They were the key negotiators between the most powerful and the most compromised, the lynchpin of slaveowner power and its most intimate expression. Drivers’ struggles to assert authority—which they needed to maintain their position and thus their privileged status—highlight one of many overlooked layers of power in the plantation world. The driver’s predicament also emphasizes the extent to which the power of enslaved people and their enslavers could overlap or reinforce one another.

Contextualizing power relationships under slavery also requires us to acknowledge that slave communities had their own politics and levels of authority that were shaped, but not determined, by the slave system. Yet even what might seem like the most autonomous, non-European systems of authority, in areas such as religion and culture, intersected with official plantation power structures. This point is illustrated, for example, by looking at the practice and politics of obeah—a catchall term the British used to describe a range of illicit, ritualistic healing and divination practices conducted by specialists. Obeah practitioners were powerful spiritual and political authorities in the eyes of many enslaved people, who regarded them with fear and respect because they had the power to harm and to heal. Their practice, however, was illegal, in part because colonial authorities knew that they could threaten both the bodies and lives of enslaved people and the plantation system itself. At the same time, to carry out their rituals and maintain their authority obeah practitioners relied on
some of the same strategies that Europeans did, including cooperation with other authorities, like drivers, and spectacular displays of physical violence and terror.

Plantation relationships were also shaped by a politics of gender, as evidenced by the ways that enslaved men and women, European plantation authorities, and colonial officials negotiated marital and domestic disputes. Evidence from conflicts over adultery, separation, and domestic violence, for example, reveals that in many cases enslaved men and Europeans cooperated to control enslaved women’s sexuality and mobility through physical violence, intimidation, and legal action. Europeans supported enslaved men’s efforts to maintain control of women for reasons both ideological and pragmatic, assuming that husbands had a prerogative to control the women they claimed and that orderly, male-headed domestic relationships would lead to a stable population. The gendered assumptions of metropolitan antislavery activists and the imperial architects of amelioration, moreover, as reflected in colonial policies on enslaved people’s sexual and domestic lives, reinforced the authority enslaved men sought to assert over enslaved women. Enslaved women who found themselves in unbearable relationships therefore developed their own gender-based networks of support and protection.

The authorities on any given plantation, however, whether they were managers or overseers, drivers, obeah practitioners, or husbands, as well as the power struggles in which they were involved, were subject to the overarching power of the colonial government. Even if plantations were worlds unto themselves, they were not insulated from the wider imperial world. Colonial administrators such as the protector of slaves and the fiscal, who answered to imperial authorities, claimed a legal right to supervise and insert themselves into plantation
relationships. Whether the fiscal or protector reinforced or circumscribed the authority of an owner or manager, whether they upheld or dismissed an enslaved person’s complaint, their very presence demonstrated the government’s willingness and ability to intervene in the daily power struggles of life under slavery. Every time colonial officials collected plantation punishment books, sentenced enslaved people to imprisonment or public whippings, granted marriage licenses, or fined managers for not providing required “allowances” of clothing and food, they reminded European plantation authorities and enslaved people alike of the government’s power. Recognizing these overlapping power relationships and multilayered political struggles allows us to develop a more rigorous, nuanced understanding of the ways that power and authority were constructed and negotiated in Atlantic slavery.

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Reframing our understanding of the power dynamics of slavery also requires an approach to antislavery--and especially amelioration--that recognizes the dynamic connections between metropolitan and colonial worlds. Most of the scholarship on abolitionism in the British Atlantic world has approached antislavery as a problem in the cultural, economic, and political history of the British Empire, debating why the British abolished their slave trade and emancipated their slaves when they did and what impact abolition and emancipation had on the British economy. In contrast, this study approaches amelioration as a transatlantic power struggle shaped by both global (imperial) and local (colonial) concerns, by political actors on both sides of the Atlantic, free and enslaved. As recent studies have shown, the antislavery movements of the Age of Revolution and the emancipations that followed were shaped by the competing, overlapping, and intersecting
priorities of metropolitan reformers, imperial governments, slaveowners, and enslaved people themselves.\textsuperscript{17}

The narrative of amelioration in this study is, by necessity, both top-down and bottom-up. Imperial decisions affected colonial power relationships and daily life in the West Indies during amelioration. Among the most dramatic changes resulted from the new slave codes that some colonies, including Berbice, were forced to adopt. Ameliorative laws granted enslaved people a range of new legal rights and restricted the autonomy of managers and owners. The imperial government also forced slaveowners and plantation authorities in Berbice to adopt new systems of surveillance and record-keeping, such as slave registration returns and punishment record books, designed to monitor the progress of amelioration. Such developments provide an opportunity to assess the extent to which metropolitan ideologies and polices on everything from marriage and property ownership to religion and punishment shaped personal power relationships in the British Caribbean.

Yet amelioration and the struggle to end slavery were also shaped by the day-to-day concerns and political activism of enslaved people, which alternately overlapped with, diverged from, and butted up against the priorities of reformers. Even though the reforms enacted by colonial legislatures fell far short of the radical changes antislavery activists proposed--not to mention the aspirations of enslaved people--slaves in Berbice were still quick to use the legal and rhetorical space created by amelioration to articulate their own

\textsuperscript{17} My approach to amelioration has been shaped by Laurent Dubois’s scholarship on struggles over slavery and citizenship in the revolutionary French Caribbean, and especially by his insistence that enslaved people’s political visions and the rights they demanded influenced modern European political culture. See Dubois, \textit{A Colony of Citizens;} and \textit{Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution} (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).
visions of rights and fairness. The politics of enslaved Berbicians must therefore be
integrated into the broader history of antislavery during the age of amelioration.

Some of the strongest connections between metropolitan antislavery politics and
colonial power dynamics can be seen in the transatlantic penal reform movement.
Antislavery activists, many of whom were engaged in a broad range of humanitarian reform
movements, were heavily influenced by domestic penal reform campaigns, which coincided
with the rise of abolitionism in the late eighteenth century. One of the primary ways
abolitionists tried to reshape colonial slavery was to make it less physically violent. This
fantasy involved not only new, purportedly more humane technologies of punishment, such
as the treadmill, but also an unprecedented expansion of state supervision and control of
violence against enslaved people. In Berbice, the fiscal and protector were charged with
enforcing new regulations on punishment--which ranged from limits on the numbers of
lashes enslaved people could be given to stipulations that punishments be carried out in
public and recorded on standardized forms--in the name of protecting enslaved people’s
bodies. Enslaved people took advantage of these laws, protesting the legitimacy of
punishments before colonial officials and, by extension, exposing the limits of their owners’
and managers’ power.

The dynamic connections between colonial power relationships and the metropolitan
antislavery movement are also illustrated by enslaved people’s efforts to use the colonial
legal system to secure a range of customary property rights. These rights, many of which
were given legal recognition during amelioration, included the right to be provided with
regular allowances of food and clothing; to earn, accumulate, and exchange money and other
forms of personal property; to raise produce and livestock on provision grounds; and to enforce contracts. Enslaved people in Berbice used the language of moral economy as well as specific legal arguments in their complaints to the fiscal and protector to secure these rights. Colonial officials, meanwhile, enforced laws on everything from food and clothing allowances to “wages” slaves were entitled to for “overwork.” They also sometimes forced Europeans, slaves, and free people of color to settle their debts. One of the more dramatic ways that enslaved people shaped amelioration is evidenced by the “Small Debt Enactment” passed by the Berbice government--with imperial support--in response to enslaved people’s frustrating efforts to recover debts. The process by which enslaved people negotiated their relationships, economic and otherwise, thus underwent significant change during amelioration.

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At its heart, this project is an attempt to answer a simple, overarching question: how were power and authority constructed and negotiated in Atlantic slavery? Its ultimate goal is to understand the multiple local and transatlantic networks of power in which enslaved people and European plantation authorities in Berbice negotiated their relationships with one another and with their peers. The overlapping worlds of enslaved people and their enslavers turn out to be far more complicated--and far larger--than one might imagine. Yet the complexity of their predicaments and their aspirations are worth understanding, not least of all because the questions raised by their struggles--questions about the construction, legitimacy, and limits of authority and power--remain important and contentious today, nearly two centuries after slavery in Berbice ended.
CHAPTER ONE:
THE “BAD BUSINESS” OF OBEAH

When the drivers on Op Hoop van Beter, a riverside coffee plantation, saw Madalon’s bloodied, bruised body early one morning in August 1821, they knew that if knowledge about what had happened spread, their own lives might be in danger. Yet they were confident that others on the plantation of more than 170 slaves shared their interest in keeping the cause of the enslaved woman’s death a secret. As the workday began, the drivers ordered a small group of men to hide the body and then told manager J. Helmers that Madalon had run away. While the manager initiated the search for Madalon, news of her disappearance spread. Within hours a note had reached the nearby estate where her husband lived. He traveled to Madalon’s plantation to try to find out what had happened. But no one would tell him what they knew. Indeed, for more than a month the people of Op Hoop van Beter kept their secrets. Eventually, however, militia officer and planter William Sterk caught wind of a rumor that Madalon had been killed during a clandestine obeah ritual. Tracing the rumor to its source led Sterk to a slave named Vigilant, who reported that “Madalon was killed by the
directions of a negro, named Willem . . . on an occasion of his having danced the Mousckie
dance,” an illegal ritual also known as the Minje Mama or Water Mama dance.¹

Vigilant’s indiscretion set in motion a relentless investigation into Madalon’s murder
and the practice of obeah—an Afro-Caribbean complex of spiritual healing, harming, and
divination—on the estate.² Within hours Sterk apprehended Willem and took him two miles
downriver to the New Amsterdam office of the fiscal, the colony’s judicial authority. But
fiscal Michael Samuel Bennett was not content with merely identifying Madalon’s murderer.
He was determined to uncover detailed information about the nature of the rituals that led to
her death and about the people who participated in them. Over several months the fiscal
interrogated some two dozen witnesses, many of them slaves who lived on or near Op Hoop
van Beter. Finally, more than five months after Madalon’s death, he brought formal charges
against Willem and a few others, not only for Madalon’s murder but also for facilitating the
Minje Mama dance (a capital crime). Meanwhile onlookers such as the London Missionary
Society’s John Wray, who lived in New Amsterdam and saw obeah as an obstacle to
converting slaves, conducted their own informal investigations and commented on the case in

¹ Trial of a Slave in Berbice, for the Crime of Obeah and Murder: Return to an Address to His Majesty, by The
Honorable House of Commons, dated 29th of July 1822; for, Copy of any Information which may have been
received concerning the Trial of a Slave, for the Crime of Obeah, in the Colony of Berbice, British
Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons ([London], 1823), 13–14 (quotation, 13), 23. Vigilant lived on a
plantation adjacent to Op Hoop van Beter. An 1819 slave registration return listed 172 enslaved people (73
Africans and 99 Creoles) on Op Hoop van Beter. See “Return of Slaves, attached to Plantation Op Hoop van
Beter, Situate on the West Bank of the River Berbice, the property of Pieter Elias Charbon of Amsterdam,” Feb.
1, 1819, T 71/438, pp. 119–24. In 1819 some twenty-three thousand enslaved people lived in Berbice, with
Africans outnumbering Creoles 54 percent to 46 percent. See J. H. Lean, “The Secret Lives of Slaves: Berbice,
1819 to 1827” (Ph.D. diss., University of Canterbury, 2002), 23–24, 324.

² Obeah was “the catchall term used to describe a complex of shamanistic practices derived from various parts
of Africa and conducted by ritual specialists working largely outside of formal institutions.” See Vincent
of the Term ‘Obeah’ in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean,” Slavery and Abolition 22, no. 2 (August
2001): 87–100. On the evolution of obeah as a legal category and the challenges of defining it, see Diana
letters sent across the Atlantic. Two years before Madalon’s death, in 1819, the fiscal had prosecuted a similar case against an enslaved man named Hans “on charge of Obiah” after he, like Willem, had organized the Minje Mama dance on a plantation not far from Op Hoop van Beter. The fiscal dutifully sent records of both investigations to the Colonial Office in Britain, and Parliament published the proceedings of Willem’s trial in 1823. These records, taken together, provide an opportunity to see obeah and the Minje Mama dance, if not through the eyes of enslaved people themselves, then over their shoulders.

The need to approach obeah from the bottom up—to listen carefully to slaves’ testimony—is particularly acute because Europeans have played a central role in shaping historians’ view of obeah for more than two centuries. Indeed historians’ overriding interest in approaching obeah as either resistance or evidence of African cultural continuities can be


traced back to British interpretations of obeah during the eighteenth century. Until Tacky’s Rebellion, a massive 1760–61 Jamaican slave revolt planned with the help of obeah practitioners, slaveholders and other European colonists largely ignored obeah and saw African cultural practices as little more than evidence of Africans’ supposed primitivism or heathenism. In the decades after Tacky’s Rebellion, however, British writers began to pay greater attention to obeah and associate it with slave revolt. By the late eighteenth century, partially in response to anxieties tied to the Haitian Revolution, a Romantic fascination and even sympathy with the figure of the mysterious obeahman, depicted as a sort of African noble savage or rebellious martyr, emerged in British literature and drama.\(^6\) Colonials, meanwhile, had come to view obeah—which they usually defined as “pretending to have communication with the devil” or “assuming the art of witchcraft”—with alarm and outlawed its practice throughout the West Indies, beginning with the 1760 Jamaican “Act to Remedy the Evils Arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves.”\(^7\) In the name of curbing slave unrest,

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colonial courts routinely sentenced suspected obeah practitioners to deportation or, in more extreme cases, execution.⁸

When the British acquired Berbice, they followed this pattern, passing laws against the “evil” that was obeah in 1801 and 1810.⁹ A weak missionary presence combined with massive importation of African captives, however, allowed obeah and other non-Christian spiritual and cultural practices to flourish in the West Indies well into the nineteenth century, as evidenced by continued efforts to curb the practice, such as the 1806 Barbados “Act for the Punishment of Such Slaves as Shall be Found Practising Obeah.”¹⁰ By the 1820s one of several dozen offenses regularly recorded in Berbice’s punishment record books--records the colonial government required to better document slave behavior and punishment--was

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¹⁰ “An Act for the Punishment of Such Slaves as Shall be Found Practising Obeah,” Barbados, Nov. 4, 1806, CO 28/87, 103. This act was replaced with a slightly modified version in 1819 in the wake of a rebellion in which obeah supposedly played a role. See “Act for the Better Prevention of the Practice of Obeah,” Barbados, 1819, CO 30/20, no. 383. The missionary presence was particularly weak in Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo, where planter opposition was significant. As late as 1829, colonial officials in Berbice lamented the lack of progress made in converting enslaved people. As Henry Beard wrote to George Murray, “it certainly is deeply to be lamented that no measures should yet have been adopted to afford Religious Instruction to the generality of the Slave Population, more particularlly to the junior part of it. There are but two Clergymen, one of the Established Church, and the other from the London Missionary Society, in the Colony; and it is impossible for them to extend their labours beyond the town, the great mass of the slave population is unavoidably left in its original state of profound ignorance.” Beard to Murray, Sept. 25, 1829, CO 116/145, 23. See also Raymond T. Smith, “Religion in the Formation of West Indian Society,” in *The African Diaspora: Interpreive Essays*, ed. Martin Kilson and Robert Rotberg (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 312–42; Thompson, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment*, 133–34; Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory*, 3–37; Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 331.
“practising obeah.” Enslaved people in Berbice and elsewhere continued to use obeah despite British efforts to eradicate the practice, as the events on Op Hoop van Beter made clear. As rich as Willem’s trial record is, it is also problematic, partly because some witnesses testified under duress. Early in the fiscal’s investigation, Lieutenant Governor Henry Beard granted him the “authority to inflict such punishment as the law will admit of on such persons who be found prevaricating, and evincing a disposition to elude and frustrate the ends of justice,” and the trial record contains hints of the kinds of coercion that might have been employed to gather evidence. As historians of slavery who have used Latin American Inquisition records have shown, we must be very cautious when dealing with such testimony; people often gave false confessions or made untrue accusations against others, and some witnesses carefully crafted their narratives in hopes of avoiding or mitigating punishment. Studies based on such records, however, have also been enormously fruitful in uncovering the lives and cosmologies of people who left behind few written records of their own.

11 Semiannual punishment record books can be found in the records of the Berbice fiscals and protectors of Slaves, CO 116/139–53.

12 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 18. See for example the following description of the initial interrogation of Baron, one of the enslaved men on the estate, who witnessed the Minje Mama dance and who was ordered to bury Madalon’s body after her death: “On the negro Baron first being called he refused to give a decisive answer to any question that was asked. After Mr. Sterk striking him on the side of the head he said he would tell him the whole truth.” Ibid., 18–21 (quotation, 19). The trial record makes no further mention of torture. More often the fiscal used witnesses against one another. Frederick, for example, only testified “after being expostulated with by the witness Vigilant, who pressed him to relate the truth, as he was really acquainted with the circumstances.” Ibid., 15.

Testimony preserved in the written record is also the product of translation, not a literal transcription of slaves’ speech. Because of the colony’s Dutch heritage, many enslaved people there spoke a creole language known as Berbice Dutch. As John Wray observed when he visited Op Hoop van Beter soon after Willem’s trial, he had to communicate with the people there “in Creole Dutch” because they did “not understand English.” The fiscal therefore relied on an “interpreter in the English and Creole languages” during his investigation, so some testimony must have passed through several stages of translation and alteration before being committed to the final written record. But the presence of certain creole words and phrases as well as the frequent use of the first person in these records also suggest that legal secretaries attempted to record testimony precisely. And the African-derived terms in Berbice Dutch have allowed linguists and historians to explore the regional origins of African captives taken to Berbice with unusual specificity. Ironically, what the fiscal and other British colonials saw as a problem of translation has allowed some scholars to get even closer to slaves’ voices.

Using these records effectively and responsibly involves interrogating the possible motivations of all witnesses and taking seriously the possibility that many people revealed to the fiscal less--and sometimes more--than they knew. Testimony must also be read with an eye toward patterns of questioning and patterned responses, and with close attention to the

15 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 9.
ways that some witnesses’ stories changed over time and in response to the testimony of other witnesses. Fortunately, much of the information gained from these documents regarding obeah, the Minje Mama dance, and, more generally, the cosmology of enslaved African and Afro-Caribbean peoples can also be triangulated with other sources, ranging from missionary records and planters’ journals to contemporary ethnographic and anthropological scholarship.

Listening carefully to the slaves’ voices preserved in the records generated when the fiscal prosecuted Willem and Hans furnishes an opportunity to reconsider the role that obeah and its practitioners played in slaves’ lives and the internal politics of slave communities from a fresh perspective. To date, much scholarship on obeah has emphasized its varied African roots or antecedents, its connections to slave rebellion or resistance, and especially its role in healing and preventing misfortune.17 Much of this work has been illuminating, but it has also contributed to an underappreciation of the complicated politics of obeah, the dangers and violence associated with certain obeah practices, and the ways that obeah practitioners sought to establish and maintain their authority.

Obeah helped enslaved people solve many problems, but it could also be remarkably violent and dangerous. The records from Berbice reveal that the Minje Mama dance, for

17 The literature on obeah in the pre-emancipation Caribbean is vast, but some of the most influential work has been done by Kenneth M. Bilby and Jerome S. Handler. See, for example, Bilby and Handler, “Obeah: Healing and Protection in West Indian Slave Life,” Journal of Caribbean History 38, no. 2 (2004): 153–83. Bilby and Handler have argued that obeah was “primarily concerned with divination . . . healing and bringing good fortune, and protection from harm” and that “the supernatural/spiritual force (or forces) that the obeah practitioner attempted to control or guide was essentially neutral, but was largely directed toward what the slave community defined as socially beneficial goals.” Ibid., 154 (“primarily concerned”), 155 (“supernatural/spiritual force”). Historians have also, however, acknowledged obeah’s antisocial uses and the conflicts and divisions that it could cause among enslaved people. See for example Michael Mullin’s argument that “obeah both fed and contributed to the same passions and allegiances that fueled the other major features of the plantation’s political culture--ethnic rivalry and contests over turf. Together these features frustrated organized resistance in the countryside by keeping slaves divided, local in outlook, and often demoralized” (Mullin, Africa in America, 183).
instance, featured whippings, beatings, and other forms of physical violence, much of it directed against people who interfered with the dance or otherwise challenged obeah practitioners. And sometimes, as the slaves on Op Hoop van Beter learned, obeah proved fatal. The Minje Mama dance and other healing practices—even when they represented continuity with African cosmologies—came to include extreme violence when reinterpreted in the plantation environments of the Americas, where physical violence was central to the exercise of power.

The evidence from Berbice also reveals that obeah was an ambivalent and ambiguous practice: it could be used to heal or to harm, to preserve life or to destroy it, and was thus both respected and feared by slaves. The drivers on Op Hoop van Beter, for example, thought that Madalon had used obeah to sicken and kill other slaves. To counteract her powers, they called in another obeah specialist, Willem, who they thought could solve their problems. The rituals Willem organized, however, resulted in much bloodshed, intensified social divisions on the plantation, and created a new set of problems for the very people he was supposed to help. Obeah practitioners such as Willem and Hans were powerful, trusted healers, but they were also dangerous—and unpredictable.

These observations supply compelling reasons for approaching obeah in Berbice with a focus on questions of power and authority. How did obeah practitioners construct their authority? How did they get others to obey them and accept the risks associated with obeah? And what happened when they lost the respect or allegiance of those followers? Focusing on a particular obeah ritual—the Minje Mama dance—can help answer these questions while exploring how obeah practitioners fashioned themselves as spiritual and political leaders, how others responded to their use of obeah and especially their frequent recourse to violence and intimidation, and how these men dealt with challenges to their authority. As Willem and Hans knew, their authority was contested, contingent, and controversial. Above all, it rested on demonstrable success in practicing their craft.

“They could bring things on the estate to order”

For the drivers on Op Hoop van Beter, the Minje Mama dance was a last resort. For weeks or months, they watched other slaves become incurably sick, and no one seemed to know why. It was the end of the long rainy season—the time of year when illness typically peaked in the swampy environments where slaves lived and died—but things seemed worse than normal. By early August the death toll was still rising, and the medical treatment slaves encountered in the estate “hospital” proved futile. As the epidemic worsened, some people began to suspect that a malevolent spiritual force was the culprit. They needed someone with the requisite knowledge to identify and neutralize whatever it was that had sickened and killed their friends, kin, and neighbors, and they concluded that Anglo-American doctors were not up to the task. Lead drivers Primo and Mey realized they needed someone who
could “put the estate to rights” or “bring things on the estate to order,” as they understood it, by devising a solution to what they saw as a spiritual, not epidemiological, crisis.\(^{19}\)

The drivers might have been motivated by compassion, but it is also likely that their desire to restore the spiritual and social order on the plantation stemmed from an urgent wish to maintain their own coveted positions of authority and respect. If people continued to die, there was a good chance that they might be held accountable. So the drivers sought to reinforce a plantation regime that benefited them even as it enslaved them by turning to an obeahman—an unsanctioned authority—and his illicit knowledge.\(^{20}\) Far from threatening the slave system, as one might assume, obeah in this case was called on to preserve it.

Africans and their descendants in the Americas often suspected malevolent spiritual forces when sickness, death, or misfortune struck.\(^{21}\) In the British Caribbean, even slaveholders knew that when someone died unexpectedly slaves often accused one another of using obeah. Bryan Edwards, a Jamaican planter in the late eighteenth century, observed,

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\(^{19}\) *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 22. Primo was “head driver” and Mey was “second driver.” Ibid., 9 (quotations), 25. Contemporary observers believed Berbice and its neighboring colonies to be among the worst disease environments in the Caribbean, and epidemics were relatively common. See B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834* (Baltimore, 1984), 262–72; Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 20–21; Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 26, 239. Anglo-American doctors—trained in the humoral or miasmatic theories of medicine—often employed treatments such as bloodletting, purging, and blistering, which harmed their patients more than they helped them. Enslaved people were understandably more likely to rely on their own healers. See Higman, *Slave Populations*, 261, 272; Richard B. Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680–1834* (Cambridge, 1985), 70, 73, 320, 330; Handler, *New West Indian Guide* 74: 58–60. Enslaved people thought European medicine was particularly ineffective when it came to people who had fallen victim to obeah, as the lyrics of a so-called “negro song”—attributed to a wife whose husband had been “Obeahed” by another woman and described by Jamaican planter Matthew Gregory “Monk” Lewis—suggest: “Doctor no do you good. When neger fall into neger hands, buckra [white] doctor no do him good more.” See Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (London, 1834), 253.

\(^{20}\) Some drivers used obeah to enhance their authority. Vincent Brown, for example, observes that slave drivers buttressed their status by “presid[ing] over unsanctioned judiciaries” in which obeah often played a central role in determining guilt or innocence. See Brown, “Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority,” 197.

“When, at any time, sudden or untimely death overtakes any of their companions . . . they never fail to impute it to the malicious contrivances and diabolical arts of some practitioner in Obeah.”  

John Wray observed that slaves in Berbice “attribute[d] almost all their diseases to the Obeah-man or woman, and frequently also, the death of their friends; and [they] very frequently wore amulets to counteract their influence.”

Enslaved people went to obeah practitioners for help with an array of problems, but they also viewed these men and women--and the powers they wielded--with suspicion and fear. In 1822, when the slaves on Berbician plantation Friends became suspicious that Tobias had been “practising obeah on the estate,” they went to the manager and pleaded with him to punish Tobias. The attorney, manager, and overseer all agreed that Tobias was “a very bad character, and disliked by all the other negroes on the estate.” They had Tobias put in the stocks and later “sold at public vendue, and not allowed to return to the plantation.”

Similar tensions between an obeah practitioner and other slaves developed on Matthew Gregory “Monk” Lewis’s Jamaican estate in 1816–18. In his journal Lewis frequently complained of his problems with “a reputed Obeah-man,” Adam, who was “a most dangerous fellow, and the terror of all his companions, with whom he live[d] in a constant state of warfare.” Adam “was accused [by other slaves] of being an Obeah-man,” was “strongly suspected of having poisoned more than twelve negroes,” and had also “threatened the lives of many of the best negroes.” By 1818 they had had enough: several “principal


24 Examination of a Complaint preferred by the negro Tobias, belonging to plantation Friends,” Sept. 4, 1822, CO 116/138, pp. 132–33.
negroes” asked Lewis to remove Adam from the plantation, “as their lives were not safe while breathing the same air with Adam.”

When the drivers on Op Hoop van Beter decided to turn to Willem, they knew that bringing him to the plantation could help but would also expose them and other slaves to several dangers. Obeah and the Minje Mama dance were illegal, and the punishments were severe. And even if the drivers were able to avoid detection, the practice of obeah itself posed serious risks. Some obeah practices involved whippings, beatings, and other forms of violence that could prove more injurious than efficacious. And obeah practitioners themselves could be dangerous and violent. How, then, do we explain the drivers’ decision to turn to Willem despite the risks?

Willem was no stranger to the people on Op Hoop van Beter. One of about one hundred slaves who lived on Buses Lust, a coffee plantation on the east bank of the Berbice River almost directly across from Op Hoop van Beter, Willem visited the plantation regularly and eventually developed a relationship with a woman, Johanna, who lived there. Born in Berbice at the end of the eighteenth century, Willem had developed a reputation as a healer by his twenties, an impressive feat for a relatively young man. Several witnesses testified that Willem was known as “Attetta Sara,” “Monkesi Sara,” “the Minje Mama,” “God

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25 See Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor*, 137 (“reputed Obeah-man”), 147 (“most dangerous fellow”), 350 (“was accused”), 352 (“threatened the lives”), 353 (“principal negroes”). When Lewis found “a considerable quantity of materials for the practice of Obeah” in Adam’s house, he had Adam “immediately committed to the gaol” and then brought him to a slave court where Adam was tried “for Obeah & having materials used in Obeah.” He was sentenced to be transported. Ibid., 354 (“considerable quantity”), 237; “Slave Trials in the Parish of Westmoreland from 1st July 1814 to 30th June 1818,” Jamaica, Return of Trials of Slaves, 1814–1818, CO 137/147, fols. 25–29 (“for Obeah,” 27). See also Mullin, *Africa in America*, 179–80.

26 Willem was between twenty-one and twenty-three years old in 1819. See “Return of Slaves Attached to Plantation Buses Lust situate on the East Bank of the River Berbice,” T 71/438, pp. 655–58.
Almighty’s toboco,” and “a real Obiah man (Confou man)”--terms used in recognition of his authority.27

When Willem learned of the epidemic, he first tried to treat sick people individually. The healing strategies he employed--what might be called everyday obeah--were relatively benign when compared to collective rituals such as the Minje Mama dance. Willem first obtained the permission of those he treated. Cornelia, the estate cook, explained, “Willem . . . came on the estate and asked if we were sick, if so, he could cure us? I said perhaps he could cure us; and as I was sick, he took three twigs of the cocoanut tree, and struck me on the head, and told me to go and wash myself.” Willem “made her eyes turn,” a common description for spirit possession or a trance state. Afterward, Cornelia recalled, “she found herself much better, and [believed] that this had helped to cure her.” Fortuyn--who some witnesses claimed had brought Willem to the plantation--asked him to help his wife, who “had been two or three months with a sore on her foot.” Willem also visited sick children in the plantation hospital. He “came to the hospital,” one man explained, and

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“directed the children to be brought out,” where they “were washed by Willem, who took off two bits [coins] that were tied round the neck of one of them” as payment for his services.28

These efforts to treat individual symptoms, however, could only do so much. Willem and the drivers realized that because they faced a widespread problem, a more systematic--and much more dangerous--healing process was necessary. Willem needed to uncover the root cause of these different ailments if he was to put an end to the epidemic. It was time for the Minje Mama dance.

Unlike everyday obeah, the Minje Mama dance was a collective divination and healing ritual performed in moments of crisis. Also known as the Water Mama dance and by other names, it was designed to identify the source of maleficium, or harmful spiritual practice. Slaves throughout the Caribbean practiced variations of this ritual, which was often characterized by trance-induced dancing and spirit possession. Similar rituals or ceremonies have also been practiced for centuries in some parts of West Africa, where the spirit is known as Mami Wata.29 This ritual’s primary goal in the Caribbean was identification of the person responsible for harming others though the use of spiritual powers. It was thus extremely useful but also fraught with danger.

In the Guianas the Minje Mama dance was the tool of choice for identifying suspected obeah practitioners or poisoners. There was always the danger that an innocent

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participant or someone’s friend or family member might be identified as the guilty party, which must have given some people pause before lending their support to this ritual. As early as the eighteenth century, British observers recognized the central role the Minje Mama dance played in slaves’ efforts to combat sickness and misfortune. John Gabriel Stedman, who fought against the Maroons in Suriname in the 1770s, observed that enslaved people there worshipped the “Watra Mama,” a powerful spirit they believed lived in the colony’s rivers.30

Central to the Watra Mama’s authority was her reputation for helping those who worshipped her (for example, by locating poison) while harming or killing those who disobeyed her.31 Stedman—who supplied one of the earliest written descriptions of a Minje Mama or Watra Mama ritual, which he knew as “winty-play, or the dance of the mermaid”—recognized the sway obeah practitioners had among their peers. He described a class of “Locomen, or pretended prophets, [who] find their interest in encouraging this superstition, by selling . . . obias or amulets.” These “sage matrons” would dance and whirl around “in the middle of an assembly, with amazing rapidity, until they foam[ed] at the mouth, and

30 John Gabriel Stedman, Narrative, of a Five Years ‘Expedition, against the Revolted Negroses of Surinam . . . , 2d ed. (London, 1813), 2: 183. Written references to the Minje Mama dance in pre-emancipation Berbice are rare, probably because it was illegal and enslaved people tried to keep such dances a secret. There is scattered evidence, however, that the Minje Mama dance remained an important part of Afro-Berbician culture well into the nineteenth century. In 1834, for example, two persons were charged with dancing the “Makizie water or minji mama dance” at Plantation Waterloo. They stood accused of “pretending and feigning to have had an inspiration or revelation or intercourse with ghosts relative to poisoners or certain persons suspected of the crime of poisoning.” See Prosecutions Book of the Court of Criminal Justice, Berbice, British Guiana, 1832–37, in Higman, “Terms for Kin,” 66–67 (“Makizie,” 66, “pretending,” 67). Toward the end of the nineteenth century, missionary Charles Daniel Dance reported that people in British Guiana still performed the “water mamma” ritual. See Dance, Chapters from a Guianese Log-Book (Georgetown, Demerara, 1881), 78–79. For earlier references to the Minje Mama that compare the spirit to a mermaid, see Oostindie and Van Stipriaan, “Slavery and Slave Culture,” 92–93. According to John Wray, enslaved people in Berbice also consulted the “Minggie or Water Mama (the Mermaid) whom they suppose resides in the River and Creeks of Berbice and who makes known to these Men who it is, that inflicts sickness on their children.” Wray to Hankey, Feb. 6, 1822, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives.

drop[ped] down as convulsed,” possessed by the spirits. At these “extremely dangerous”
meetings, which were “often practised in private places,” Stedman wrote, “whatever the
prophetess orders to be done . . . is most sacredly performed by the surrounding
multitude.”

Legislators in Suriname had outlawed “watermama and similar African
dances” by the 1770s, and colonial officials in Berbice similarly found the Minje Mama
dance threatening enough to go to the trouble of having the legal prohibition of the ritual
publicly “read and explained to the gangs of different estates on the river” in the early
nineteenth century.

Documents generated during the criminal trial of an enslaved Kongolesian healer
named Hans, a fifty-six-year-old, half-blind field hand owned by the crown, supply a rare
opportunity to see the Minje Mama dance from the bottom up. In 1819 Hans organized the

32 Stedman, Narrative, of a Five Years’ Expedition, 2: 272–73 (“winty-play,” “in the middle,” 2: 273,
which spirit possession plays an important role, see C. J. Wooding, “Traditional Healing and Medicine in Winti:
visual representation of a winti dance is Dutch artist Dirk Valkenburg’s painting Slave Play on Dombi
Plantation (Suriname) (1707). Aspects of the Minje Mama dance as described by John Gabriel Stedman are
similar to John K. Thornton’s description of spirit possession in Afro-Atlantic cultures: “In the case of human
possession, a being from the other world would enter the medium’s body and speak with his or her voice . . .
Typically possession would occur after the medium had fallen into a trance, for . . . the other world seems to
have found it easiest to communicate with people in an unconscious state or an altered state of consciousness.
Such a trance might be induced by drugs or hypnotic dancing, singing, or drumming.” See Thornton, Africa
and Africans, 243. The Minje Mama dance also resembles the ritual dance at the heart of myal or myalism,
which was commonly associated with Jamaica. See Monica Schuler, “Myalism and the African Religious
Tradition in Jamaica,” in Africa and the Caribbean: The Legacies of a Link, ed. Margaret E. Crahan and
Franklin W. Knight (Baltimore, 1979), 65–79; De Barros, Slavery and Abolition 25: 40–41; Stewart, Three Eyes
for the Journey; Brown, Reaper’s Garden, 146–47.

33 Van Stipriaan, “Ever-Changing Face of Watramama,” 527 (“watermama”); Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 42
(“read and explained”); Alex van Stipriaan, “Watramama/Mami Wata: Three Centuries of Creolization of a
Water Spirit in West Africa, Suriname and Europe,” in A Pepper-Pot of Cultures: Aspects of Creolization in the
Caribbean, ed. Gordon Collier and Ulrich Fleishman (Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2003), 323–37, esp. 327.
According to British traveler George Pinckard, Europeans in Berbice also believed in “mermaids.” “It was
maintained,” Pinckard wrote, “that these lady-like animals, of fabulous note, do really exist in the Berbische
river, and I confess that I experienced some surprise, when I heard the governor, who is a sensible and
intelligent man, give his sanction to the opinion.” See George Pinckard, Notes on the West Indies: Written
During the Expedition Under the Command of the Late General Sir Ralph Abercromby: Including Observations
on the Island of Barbadoes, and the Settlements Captured By the British Troops, Upon the Coast of Guiana
(London,1806) 3: 7 (quotation).
dance on Plantation Demtichem, a coffee estate located across the river from Op Hoop van Beter. The drivers on the plantation decided to contact an obeah practitioner when a series of unexplained deaths confounded them. As one of the drivers explained, “so many deaths had occurred that he had sent for a man to put every thing to rights.” The driver “wished to have the bad people,” meaning those who had used obeah to harm others, “off the estate.”

Hans, like Willem, enjoyed a reputation as a skilled healer. “Negroes in general,” Hans boasted to John Wray, who interviewed him in jail after his arrest, “know that I possess the power of helping them if any thing is the matter with them and great numbers of negroes have applied to me and I have helped them.” It was this reputation that gave the people on Demtichem confidence in Hans’s abilities. “All the people and children got sick here,” the lead driver, January, explained, “and we know that in other places you have helped them and therefore we have sent for you.”

When Hans arrived on the plantation, January explained to a large group gathered before his house that Hans had come “to put every thing to rights.” Hans first needed to identify the “bad” person in their midst. He asked the children to “point out the persons who administered poison [on] the estate,” and some people told him “they suspected there was poison in [estate carpenter] Frederick’s House.” Hans then sacrificed a pullet, placed the
feathers in the children’s hair, and washed them with a special mixture of water and grass. He then “began to sing a country song,” instructing everyone to “join in [the] chorus,” and demanded payment for his services.37

The next day Hans returned to continue the divination process. According to Venus, who participated in the dance, Hans declared that “he would pull off all the poison that was in the ground, which made the people on the estate die so suddenly.” Hans washed everyone present and “sang the dance called Walter [Water] Mamma dans.”38 Hans made “all the negroes dance on one foot and clap their hands,” according to Wray, and some fell into a trance, possessed by the spirit of the Minje Mama. One man “became as tho’ he was crazy, jumping high up from the ground and throwing himself down.”39 “My head began to turn,” Venus told the fiscal, “as if I were mad.” The plantation attorney thought “the minds of the negroes must have been greatly agitated, they having thrown themselves on the ground, biting the grass, tearing the earth with their hands, and conducting themselves like maniacs.”40

Though potentially useful, this was a dangerous, violent ritual. The slaves “that were the most turbulent,” Frederick recalled, “were flogged with the wild canes . . . by order of Hans, and recovered; others more furious, and not recovering from the stripes [lashes], Hans struck with a bamboo, and they immediately recovered.” According to Venus, Hans made sure that everyone was “flogged with the wild cane first; if not recovered he flogged them

37 “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, p. 61 (quotations).
38 Ibid., p. 62 (quotations).
with a carracarra, and put guinea pepper in their eyes which he had chewed. All of this was
done to me, but I could not recover . . . I could see and hear every thing, but was exactly as
if I were crazy: I recovered a little after this last.”\textsuperscript{41}

As the dance continued, the results it produced sparked conflict, both about the
poisoner’s identity and about the extent of Hans’s powers. “Venus went into the middle of
the circle being apparently crazy” and “throwing herself upon the ground and rolling about.”
She then “burst out into Hysterial laughter and came up & struck [Frederick] again.”\textsuperscript{42}
“Coming up to [him, she] said, [he] was the bad man on the estate.” Venus told Frederick
“that they want[ed] to remove [him]” from the plantation. She knew he was “the bad man”
because she could “see it from the water that has been sprinkled over my face and eyes.” She
“ran out of the circle and said ‘come, and I show you where the poison is hid,’” leading a
group to Frederick’s house.\textsuperscript{43}

At Frederick’s, Venus and the others “threw down two casks of water, broke down
[the] kitchen and fowl-house, and dug up the earth with shovels,” Frederick explained. But
they could not find the poison. Venus claimed that she had made a mistake, that she had
meant to accuse another man, and asked to be allowed to “go to Hans . . . to get my eyes
properly washed.” “No,” Frederick protested, “I have been accused, and must insist, as my
house has been broken, that this business shall be found out, or I know what to do.”\textsuperscript{44}
Frederick decided to tell the plantation overseer “that the negroes were breaking open his house, and digging up the ground, accusing him of being a poisoner.” He had good reason to fear what might happen if the others believed Venus. The overseer put an end to the search for the poison and placed the drivers in the stocks, and the plantation attorney “reported the circumstance to the burgher officer and the Fiscal.”\(^{45}\) Meanwhile Hans fled.

The following evening Hans returned to locate the “bad thing” hidden in Frederick’s house. He knew it was there “from the smell he had of it,” and with the help of “the girl who had lost her mother” or a twin, he was sure he could find “the pot of obiah.”\(^{46}\) Two men brought Gabriel--a young female twin--to Frederick’s house, where she was blindfolded and given a pot to hold over a hole that Hans had ordered two other men to dig in the dirt floor. Hans “made the people examine the Pot to see if there was any thing in it, but Water,” and they all agreed that there was not.\(^{47}\) But when Hans removed the cloth that covered the pot, it “appeared to contain a ram’s horn, some fluid, and the bones of some animal.”\(^{48}\) The horn was cut open, which exposed “blood, Negro hair, shavings of nails, the head of a snake” and other objects commonly associated with obeah and Kongo minkisi. “The stuff in the Horn,” Hans explained, “was the bad thing which had destroyed the Children but it would do so no longer.”\(^{49}\)

\(^{45}\) “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, p. 60 (quotations).


\(^{48}\) “Complaint against the negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, p. 63.

Hans and the drivers might have been pleased that the Minje Mama dance had helped them identify the poison, but colonial authorities saw things differently. Hans was soon apprehended, and shortly thereafter the fiscal prosecuted him for practicing obeah. The fiscal recommended a death sentence, but the Court of Criminal Justice spared Hans’s life, perhaps because it agreed with Hans’s lawyer, who had argued that colonial authorities should take some responsibility for Hans’s belief in obeah because no efforts had been made in Berbice “to inform [Hans’s] Mind in Christianity” and he had “been permitted to remain in that pagan state in which he had been brought from his own Country.” The court sentenced Hans to be whipped under the gallows with his obeah paraphernalia around his neck, branded, imprisoned for a year, placed in the pillory four times, and forced to work in chains for the rest of his life. Those who had helped Hans were to be whipped, and at least one prisoner, Wray wrote, “was stripped naked when she was flogged.”

As the people on Plantation Demtichem and nearby estates learned, the Minje Mama dance had exposed them to a host of dangers, including the colonial legal apparatus and significant physical violence. Nevertheless the Minje Mama dance remained a vital tool in the struggle to restore physical and spiritual health in a world where disease and death were daily realities and malevolent powers abounded.

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51 As late as 1829, January remained angry with the manager, whom he blamed for losing his position as driver. See “Complaint of the slave January belonging to Plant. Deutichem,” Mar. 9, 1829, Fiscals’ Reports, CO 116/142, pp. 76–97.
“Setting the estate to rights”

When the drivers on Op Hoop van Beter decided to allow Willem to perform the Minje Mama dance on their plantation two years later, they were taking a serious, if calculated, risk. One Sunday afternoon in early August 1821, Willem slipped into “a small coriaal” (dugout canoe) after finishing his day’s work at neighboring plantation Resolutie and paddled a short distance down the Berbice River to Op Hoop van Beter. When he arrived “he inquired for the [head] driver’s house,” one man explained, “where he remained till the evening.” Later that night, after visiting his wife, Willem “made the people dance the Makisi [Minje Mama] dance,” according to witnesses. “The man Cuffey [Willem] . . . was the Minje [Mama], and superintended the dance; if he was not there,” one witness explained, “it could not be done.”52

The dance evidently served its purpose: Willem returned to the plantation the next day and publicly denounced Madalon, an older African (probably Kongoese) woman, as “a bad woman, and the cause of the healthy people on the estate becoming sick.” Madalon appears to have been without family or many friends on the plantation, and this social isolation would have made her vulnerable to accusations of obeah. The person responsible had now been

52 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 14 (“small coriaal”), 21 (“he inquired”), 29 (“made the people”), 23 (“man Cuffey”).
identified, but the healing process—and the real danger—had just begun. The challenge now, as Willem knew, was to “drive the bad story out of [Madalon’s] head.”

The day after Willem denounced Madalon, he returned to Op Hoop van Beter to begin what would turn out to be a brutally violent and socially divisive healing process. After the people had finished their work in the fields “and retired to the negro-houses,” one witness explained, Willem called several people together, including Madalon and the drivers. That night, according to estate watchman Frederick, “the woman Madalon was flogged by the negroes before the driver Primo’s door, and at the same time pepper was rubbed into her private parts” to help purify her.

Willem and the drivers tried to keep this gathering secret, but at some point the manager, J. Helmers, heard noises coming from the “negro-yard” and sent overseer Johannes Hendrick Lips to investigate. “The first person the overseer met was Willem,” one witness testified, “who took up some ashes from the fire and strewed them across the road, which prevented any body [from] seeing farther on.” Meanwhile Primo told the overseer that the

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53 Ibid., 32 (“bad woman”), 25 (“drive the bad story”). Described by witnesses as “a Congo woman” and “rather advanced in years, but otherwise a healthy woman,” Madalon was about forty years old at the time of her death, according to an 1819 slave registration return that listed her age as thirty-seven. See Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 14 (“Congo woman”), 21 (“rather advanced”); “Return of Slaves, attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter,” Feb. 1, 1819, T 71/438, pp. 119–24. The average life span for enslaved people in Berbice in the 1820s was less than twenty-three years, and slaveholders frequently thought of slaves more than forty years old as “old.” See Higman, Slave Populations, 18; Sheridan, Doctors and Slaves, 196. Though no one described Madalon as an obeah practitioner, enslaved women across the Caribbean practiced obeah. Enslaved men, however, accounted for the majority of obeah prosecutions. See Barbara Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650–1838 (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), 73–77; Handler, New West Indian Guide 74: 62 n. 14; Diana Paton, “Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica,” Journal of Social History 34, no. 4 (Summer 2001): 923–54, esp. 932; Brown, “Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority,” 194–95.

54 Ibid., 15 (quotations). Some enslaved people in the U.S. South similarly used “red pepper” to prevent witches from reentering the bodies of the people they possessed. See Albert Raboteau, Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South (New York, 1978), 85.
commotion “was nothing but the people rejoicing in consequence of having finished weeding
the last field of heavy grass.”

The overseer gone, Willem and the others finished whipping Madalon and then left
her tied up by the wrists. Badly beaten and probably terrified, she would have spent the night
in this position had it not been for Frederick, who untied her, covered her with a blanket, and
took her to his house to rest and recover and possibly to protect her from Willem. Willem
soon found out what Frederick had done, however, and threatened to flog him for
interfering.

How much and what kinds of violence were the slaves on Op Hoop van Beter willing
to accept? Did Willem’s recourse to physical force and intimidation bolster his authority or
alienate others? Focusing on the specific forms of violence Willem employed and others’
reactions to them helps explain why enslaved people held ambivalent attitudes toward obeah
practitioners. The centrality of violence in Willem’s practice of obeah also suggests that
Europeans were not the only people who recognized the efficacy of violence and terror for
maintaining control on the plantation.

The morning after Madalon’s first beating, she went to work as usual. But with
injuries still fresh from the night before, Frederick explained, she “was unable to get through
her row.” Quashee, “a temporary driver” who might have also had a romantic relationship
with Madalon, completed her work for her. “The driver asked her why she did not go to the

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55 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 34 (“negro-yard”), 25 (“first person”).
56 Ibid., 15.
57 Ibid. It is unclear what relationship existed between Quashee and Madalon. Frederick stated only that
Quashee “also had her.” Enslaved people in Berbice used the term row to refer to their daily task. See Gill,
“Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 147n41.
hospital,” another witness recalled, “seeing she was full of itch on her backside and a boil on her thigh,” not to mention “some blood on her clothes.” Despite her injuries Madalon claimed she “preferred going to her work to going to the hospital, as there she got nothing but barley to eat.” Madalon had no shortage of reasons for avoiding the hospital, where she would have likely been placed in the stocks and subjected to painful, if not fatal, medical procedures.

Madalon did not tell Helmers what Willem and the others had done to her. Perhaps she thought that her ordeal was over and that speaking up would only provoke Willem and make matters worse. Or maybe she was afraid that the manager might side with Willem and the drivers and punish her for using obeah against other slaves. To make sure that no one else went to the manager, Willem had “administered to the other negroes a drink,” Frederick testified, “declaring that it would be the death of any one of them who should reveal what had taken place.” Others probably kept quiet because they feared Willem’s physical violence. When the fiscal asked Kees, the driver in charge of the logie (coffee storehouse), for example, why he did not go to the manager, he explained that “he was too much afraid of Willem, from the severe punishments he inflicted upon them.” Lest the fiscal doubt him, Kees removed his clothes to reveal “the scars, or remains of flogging he had received from Willem.”

58 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 17 (“driver asked”); Wray to Hankey, Feb. 6, 1822, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives (“some blood”).

59 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 17.

Others probably kept quiet because the beating that Madalon had endured was not unusual. After all, slaves lived in a world ruled by endemic violence, and this was not the first time they had seen ritual flogging used to heal or to deal with a suspected obeah practitioner. Indeed Willem himself had previously performed the Minje Mama dance and other healing rituals on the plantation, and some people thought the efficacy of these treatments justified the pain they inflicted.

According to Vigilant, the Minje Mama dance was frequently “performed at plantation Op Hoop van Beter, on Sundays.” He “was present on one occasion when it was danced, and saw a negro . . . denounced as a confoe man, and severely beat; the negro Willem . . . appeared to be the principal, and promoter of the dancing.” Other witnesses corroborated Vigilant’s account and identified the man beaten as David, who had confessed to William Sterk that he had been “flogged by the orders of the negro Willem, called also Attetta Sara” because the Op Hoop van Beter people “blamed him as being one of the Obii people on the estate.” And according to Sterk, “after [David] was flogged he was ordered to give payment to . . . Willem for having flogged the Obeah work out of his head.” The fact that Willem expected compensation, like most healers, suggests that at least some of the people on the estate did not see this violence as torture or “punishment,” as the fiscal and other Europeans did, but rather as an effective, if dangerous, healing strategy. David also knew, however, that sometimes Willem’s violence had little to do with healing. When David offered Willem “three ells of Osnaburgh’s,” a coarse fabric, as payment, Willem became
angry and “struck him with his own cutlass on the forehead, saying what he had sent him was not sufficient, and that Obeah people were not allowed to wear any thing of value.”

Violence had also played a central role in Hans’s performance of the Minje Mama dance and his construction of authority. Hans beat everyone who participated in the dance; threatened to flog or kill Gabriel, the young girl who helped him find the poison in Frederick’s house, if she cried; and rubbed “guinea pepper” in the eyes of participants in the dance. Though painful, these actions were essential to the Minje Mama dance’s success: Venus was able to identify Frederick as the poisoner, and several witnesses testified that they were able to “recover.”

If violence was part of Willem’s healing practice, it was also central to his efforts to maintain authority, stifle dissent, and coerce others into helping him. In addition to threatening to flog Frederick, Willem attacked one of the drivers for failing to take part in the Minje Mama dance. Willem “beat me the following morning for not being present at the dance,” the driver told the fiscal. When the same driver admitted that he helped beat Madalon the following night, he claimed that he did so only because of “the influence of dread and fear under which he . . . as well as the rest of the negroes were, of the power possessed by the negro Willem . . . who was esteemed a great Obeah man, and the Minje Mama.” Indeed historians have long noted the fear that obeah practitioners inspired throughout the Caribbean, and Berbice was no exception. As Wray observed, “It is

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63 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 29 (“beat me”), 43–44 (“influence of dread,” 44).
impossible to describe the influence these men [obeah practitioners] obtain over the minds of the negroes.”⁶⁴ Their influence derived from their ability to heal, of course, but also from their capacity for violence and intimidation.

On the third day, Willem returned to the plantation to finish what he had begun. He had Madalon tied up in front of the lead driver’s door that night, where she was flogged again, this time worse than before. Armed with branches from coconut and calabash trees, slaves took turns beating her, under Willem’s command. Eventually, Madalon “acknowledged she had been guilty of the death of several persons.”⁶⁵ But confessing did not bring an end to her ordeal. The physical abuse Willem and the others inflicted on Madalon, unlike the torture of suspected witches in early modern Europe or North America, was designed less to elicit a confession than to serve as a sort of exorcism. And an admission of guilt did not mean that the “bad thing” had been removed.

So Willem and the others continued to beat Madalon, so badly, in fact, that “she fainted from the excess of punishment,” according to one witness. Willem “said it was only a sham” and ordered that the violence continue. His assistants dragged Madalon to a mango tree, where they “tied [her] up by the hands,” one man explained, “so that her toes could just touch the ground.” Frederick, who was hiding “in one of the negro-houses” to avoid Willem, told the fiscal that “the persons who surrounded and punished her were too numerous for him to distinguish the particular individuals who were striking her.”⁶⁶

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⁶⁵ Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 20.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 20 (“she fainted”), 15 (“one of the negro-houses”), 37.
Yet not everyone sanctioned this violence. Only about a dozen people—a small fraction of the estate’s slave population—appear in the trial record as participants in Madalon’s beating. Some people, such as Frederick, disapproved of what was happening; others were apparently not welcome. One man, for instance, testified that “the negroes would not trust him . . . to be present at any of these transactions, in consequence of being hospital-mate.” Another man explained that “Willem called him to go help flog the woman, but he did not go.” “He saw the woman flogged,” he admitted, “but did not help.”

When Hans went to Plantation Démichem—an estate with more than three hundred slaves—the situation was much the same: only a small group took part in the Minje Mama dance.

The types of physical violence that Hans and Willem used—whippings, floggings, beatings, and the application of peppers—were among the methods favored by slaveholders for torturing and punishing enslaved people. These forms of violence, moreover, were absent in West African and Central African rituals designed to identify or purify suspected witches or sorcerers, which suggests that the Minje Mama dance was a Caribbean phenomenon, not a watered-down African survival or retention. Its cosmological origins lay in various parts of

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67 Ibid., 37 (“negroes would not”), 27 (“Willem called him”).

Africa, but the brutal violence that characterized its practice had been learned on Caribbean slave plantations.69

Obeah practitioners thus derived their authority from both spiritual and physical powers. Men such as Hans and Willem appropriated slaveowners’ technology of control and terror to buttress their already impressive authority as spiritual experts and to stifle dissent among doubters. The Minje Mama dance therefore highlights the persistence of African practices and cosmologies in American slave societies and enslaved people’s ability to adapt or modify such practices. We should not assume that the Minje Mama dance resonated with all slaves equally or that they supported its violent incarnation in Berbice merely because of its African roots.

Not long after Madalon confessed, one witness testified, Willem hit her with a shovel across the back, “which made her fall down, and exclaim she was dying.” Madalon begged for her life. “You are killing me,” she cried out. “No,” Willem told her, “we are not killing you, but I will drive the bad story out of your head.” Willem remained defiant and continued to flog her. He claimed that he could bring Madalon back to life if she died before the healing process was complete. At this point several men began to worry that the violence had spun out of control. As one man told lead driver Primo, “it was going too far.” But those who tried to stop Willem failed. Frederick tried to intervene, but Willem drove him away and

“said nothing could happen to the woman.” When Primo, the estate’s highest-ranking slave and the one who had asked Willem to halt the epidemic in the first place, tried to end things himself, Willem struck him with a whip and continued to beat Madalon. Even the drivers had become powerless to stop him.

Willem and the others left Madalon, unconscious, tied to a nearby sand-koker tree for the night. Early the next morning, the people on Op Hoop van Beter discovered that she was dead.

**An authority no longer**

Madalon’s death resulted in “the utter astonishment of many of the negroes,” who saw it as proof that the obeah practitioner who was supposed to “bring things on the estate to order” had failed them. Any authority obeah practitioners such as Willem wielded rested not only on their capacity for violence and intimidation but also on demonstrable success in practicing their craft. Madalon’s death produced for Willem a sudden and almost complete loss of authority and therefore created a major crisis for him, for the drivers who had called him in, and for the other slaves on Op Hoop van Beter.

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70 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 26 (“which made her,” “going too far”), 25 (“You are killing me”).

71 Multiple witnesses told the fiscal that Willem had flogged Primo and suggested that “if Primo would take off his jacket, the marks would be seen where Willem had struck him with a whip, for interfering when the punishment became too severe.” The fiscal ordered Primo to take off his jacket, and “his shoulder exhibited the mark of a stroke of a whip.” Ibid., 35 (quotations), 21, 26.

72 Sand-koker was the common name for trees of the genus *Erythrina*, which provided shade on some coffee plantations. See Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 178; Hanif Gulmahamad, *Stories and Poems by a Guyanese Village Boy* (n.p., 2009), 204.

73 Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 40 (“utter astonishment”), 22 (“bring things”).
Far from helping, Willem had created a new set of dangers for everyone on the plantation, himself included. If word got out about the obeah rituals that had taken place or about Madalon’s death, anyone who had failed to alert authorities or helped Willem might face interrogation, torture, and severe punishment. The people on Op Hoop van Beter no doubt knew what had happened to Hans and the other people on Plantation Demtichem. The ways that the various actors—Willem, the drivers, those who had participated in the rituals, Madalon’s husband, and other bystanders—responded to Madalon’s death reveal how complete Willem’s loss of authority was and, paradoxically, how desperate most people were to keep the entire matter secret for as long as possible.

The immediate problem was getting rid of the corpse. Manager Helmers would soon notice Madalon’s absence, and if he found the body, the numerous cuts, bruises, and welts it bore—the “marks of the punishment were very visible,” one man observed—would prompt a threatening investigation. But even this urgent and seemingly simple task proved difficult for Willem. When he ordered a group of men to bury the body, they refused. They might have viewed the corpse as contaminated or spiritually dangerous, or maybe they were simply reluctant to get more involved in what was shaping up to be a major disaster. Willem “grew angry, and drove them away,” one man recalled. “Willem said it was of no consequence whether they had buried the body or not, as he would do that,” another witness testified. He boasted that “he was Minje Mama; he had plenty of people to assist him,” but he soon realized that in fact no one was willing to help.74

74 Ibid., 21 (“marks”), 29 (“grew angry”), 25 (“Willem said”).
Willem’s encounter with Madalon’s husband, Munro, who came looking for his wife a few days after she went missing, supplied a poignant illustration of just how little authority Willem had left. When Munro went to Op Hoop van Beter, Willem confronted him, asking, “How did you dare to go first to the manager’s house?” Munro told him that he went to show his pass and, challenging Willem’s claim to authority, insulted him: “I asked the Attetta Sara [Willem] if he thought I ought to have brought my pass first to him, or if he could read it?” Provoked to violence yet again, Willem ordered “several of the men . . . to beat [Munro],” but the others “interfered in his behalf.” Fortuyn “said he had brought the Attetta Sara on the estate, and that he could not beat him, Munro, for nothing.”

As frustrating as it must have been to lose the support of the people on Op Hoop van Beter, things could have been even worse for Willem. Take, for instance, the case of Mamadoe, an obeah practitioner or “doctor” who in 1824 wound up in trouble when he failed to find a permanent cure for a woman’s ailment on Plantation Nigg. When the woman’s husband became frustrated by Mamadoe’s lack of attention to his wife, his “country man” Rhina (both were Kongolese) threatened Mamadoe: “I will give you this moon to cure her & if you do not do so in that time, I will know what to do to you.” Rhina explained that “in his country, the way they treat Obiah men is to kill them, put them in their House & set fire to it.” A few days later, Mamadoe’s badly beaten body was found in his hut, which had been burned to the ground.

75 Ibid., 23 (quotations).
76 “Investigation into the probable circumstances of the death of the negro Mamadoe . . . ,” Nov. 8, 1824, CO 116/140.
77 Ibid.
When Willem’s authority collapsed, the drivers sought to take charge. But they, like Willem, found their authority tested when a group of men refused their order to dispose of Madalon’s body. Baron explained that they had “told the driver in Creole, You have sent us five negroes to bury the body, and if afterwards it comes to the knowledge of the white people you will put us forward to bear the blame, and you will remain behind, concealed.” The following afternoon, the “driver said to [Baron], Yesterday you refused to bury that body, to-day we have done it ourselves.” He explained “that they had buried the body without his assistance, and put the estate in order, or to rights again.” They “had sunk the body in a small coriall with weights” in some nearby body of water.\(^{78}\) Taking responsibility for the conspiracy, the drivers thus persuaded others that they were not going to simply blame them for Madalon’s death, as Baron feared.

Madalon’s death and the crisis it provoked united the slave community on Op Hoop van Beter, at least temporarily, around the shared goal of avoiding punishment for her murder and the practice of obeah. For several weeks none of the dozens, if not hundreds, of people who knew about Madalon’s death told colonial authorities what they had seen or heard. Part of the reason they kept quiet was that Willem and the drivers had threatened to kill them if they revealed what they knew. In addition to the loyalty oath some had taken earlier, the drivers told everyone “that if they revealed it to the Fiscal, or other white person, they should be hung.” Such threats, they claimed, “prevented them at first from telling the truth.”\(^{79}\)

Helmers, the manager on Op Hoop van Beter, however, might have known what had happened to Madalon long before Vigilant came forward in September and identified Willem

\(^{78}\) *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 19 (“told the driver”), 20 (“they had buried”).

\(^{79}\) Ibid., 35.
as “the promoter of the said Minje Mama dance” and Madalon’s murderer. When Sterk told
Helmers what he had learned, the manager admitted: “Something I have heard; but upon
negro testimony I can make no dependence, as I have often experienced, without certain
proof attached to the same.” More revealing still, one of the drivers claimed that “the
manager himself knew” that the drivers had gone to Willem. The manager “said he must find
some person capable of finding out who it was that was the cause of the death of so many
Creoles [children] on the estate,” the driver testified.\textsuperscript{80} If this was true, the manager had
good reason to feign ignorance. His tolerance of obeah rituals and his inability to prevent the
murder of one of his slaves would have been damning evidence of his failure to maintain
adequate discipline and control on the plantation.

For months after Willem’s arrest, the fiscal interrogated anyone he thought might
have witnessed or participated in the Minje Mama dance. At one point he questioned more
than half a dozen enslaved people on the plantation itself but, unfortunately for him, they had
apparently “preconcerted and agreed upon a certain statement, declaring their total ignorance
of the subjects of inquiry.” Eventually, however, several witnesses admitted that Madalon
had died as a result of the Minje Mama dance and that Willem was, as one man put it, “the
cause of all the bad business.”\textsuperscript{81}

Many witnesses admitted that they had participated in the Minje Mama dance but
claimed that Willem and the drivers had forced them to. Willem and the drivers, however,
steadfastly denied any knowledge of Madalon’s death or the Minje Mama dance. Willem

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 5 (“promoter”), 13 (“Something I have heard”), 19 (“manager himself knew”). Adolff, an enslaved man
on Op Hoop van Beter, also claimed that “we were informed by the drivers that the manager knew of it.” Ibid.,
22.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 17–18 (“preconcerted,” 18), 20 (“cause”), 6.
told the fiscal that the only reason he went to Op Hoop van Beter was “to see [his] wife
Johanna” and that he had never organized the dance or practiced obeah.  

Willem could have pursued the strategy that Hans employed two years earlier: admit to being an obeah practitioner or healer and try to justify the rituals he organized. Hans told John Wray, who was able to speak with him because he understood Berbice Dutch, that he saw himself as a healer who provided valuable services. He had, for example, administered ritual washings to pregnant women and children on multiple plantations (including Buses Lust, where Willem lived) to prevent the women from miscarrying and the children from dying. “A Congo,” Hans learned to heal in his “own country,” where his abilities set him apart. “Every one there is not gifted with this power, but only a few which comes from God,” he explained. According to Wray, Hans had been “instructed in the Roman Catholic Religion” in Central Africa. Among Hans’s powers was the ability to locate poison: “If I go to any house where poison is hid I can discover it from the smell.”

Hans insisted that he never used his powers for antisocial purposes. “Numerous applications have been made to me [to harm Europeans] but I have always rejected them. These applications,” Hans claimed, “have been made to me by Negroes who have bad masters to cool their hearts—-that is no part of my knowledge.” Aware of the stigma attached

82 Ibid., 14.
83 Wray to Wilberforce, Oct. 29, 1819, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives. Hans was probably a Kongoese nganga ngombo, a diviner or spirit medium who helped others locate lost items or identify the cause of death or sickness. See Thornton, Africa and Africans, 243; John K. Thornton, “Religious and Ceremonial Life in the Kongo and Mbundu Areas, 1500–1700,” in Heywood, Central Africans and Cultural Transformations, 71–90, esp. 81.
to the term obeah, Hans told Wray that he was “no Obiah man and [did] nothing that is bad.” “All my Art,” he explained, “consists in helping negroes that are sick.”

Willem, unlike Hans, denied being any sort of healer or spiritual authority. His only strategy of defense was to emphasize the fact that no one had found Madalon’s body. Willem “denie[d] the whole of the circumstance; and in order to prove the whole is lie, he wish[ed] that the people should be taken to the estate, and made to point out where the body is buried.” Willem knew, of course, that Madalon’s remains would have been all but impossible to find.

**Conclusion**

After hearing testimony from more than a dozen witnesses, the fiscal aggressively prosecuted Willem and the people who assisted him, particularly the drivers. He was primarily concerned with the drivers’ submission to an obeah practitioner--an illegitimate and dangerous authority in the fiscal’s eyes. “Such conduct on the part of drivers having the charge of slaves,” the fiscal explained, “cannot be tolerated, but on the contrary ought to be severely punished.”

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85 *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 34.

86 Ibid., 10. The fiscal also prosecuted Corydon and Allegro, two enslaved men who had helped beat Madalon, because they had “los[t] sight of the duty and obedience due to their proprietors, and submitt[ed] themselves to the authority of the negro Willem.” Allegro was “ill, and unable to attend and take his trial at the present session,” but the court sentenced Corydon “to receive One Hundred Lashes.” Ibid., 44 (“los[t] sight”), 10 (“ill”), 11 (“to receive”).
The fiscal argued that Kees, the logie driver, should be taken to the plantation to “stand with a rope round his neck fastened to the mangoe-tree under which the woman Madalon was suspended,” and then be flogged “at the discretion of the honourable Court, and afterwards worked in chains . . . for the period of seven years.” Kees begged for mercy on the grounds that he was “but a boy, and [had] only lately” been appointed as a driver. Young and inexperienced, he “had not the authority” to stand up to Willem. He also claimed that because he did not “go to the field with the people” he had “no authority over them.” Moreover, Kees added, “if not ordered by Willem, who also flogged me, I should not have beat the woman.” Unconvinced, the court sentenced Kees to one hundred lashes under the mango tree.

Primo and Mey deserved more severe punishments, the fiscal argued, because they were the lead drivers, the men responsible for day-to-day discipline and order. The fiscal chastised them for “subjecting themselves (the drivers), in the presence of the gang of negroes over which they were placed, to the implicit obedience of the orders and commands of . . . Willem.” They had failed to maintain “the authority confided to them, by enforcing due subordination on the estate” and had allowed the Minje Mama dance to be performed despite its prohibition. The real crime, the fiscal implied, was not Madalon’s murder but their failure to challenge Willem and faithfully represent the plantation owner’s interests. The court agreed that the drivers’ actions were tantamount to treason and gave both a brutal

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87 Ibid., 44 (“stand with a rope”), 32 (“but a boy”), 33 (“go to the field”).

88 Ibid., 11. Kees was the plantation’s “Overseer on the Logie” as early as 1819, when he was twenty-six years old, according to “Return of Slaves, attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter,” Feb. 1, 1819, T 71/438, pp. 119–24.
sentence: three hundred lashes each. They were also to be “brand-marked, and degraded as drivers, afterwards to be worked in chains” for a year.⁸⁹

Willem stood accused of murdering Madalon. But Madalon’s death was only the symptom of a larger problem: Willem’s ability to convince a wide range of people to obey him. The fiscal accused him “of treasonable practices, by deluding the minds of the negroes belonging to plantation Op Hoop van Beter . . . from their obedience to the laws of the land, and their proprietors, by instituting and causing to be danced . . . the Minje Mama dance.” Equally reprehensible was the fact that Willem “proceeded to inflict corporal punishment on several of the negroes, and even on the drivers of said estate, thereby confirming in the minds of the gang his . . . extent of power.” He had, in effect, acted more like a master than a slave. Willem had “used every means to influence the minds of the gang on plantation Op Hoop van Beter, in the belief of his possessing supernatural power” and had “taken it upon himself to rectify abuses, presuming to judge and prescribe punishments.” Because “the power of taking away life is confided solely to regular constituted authorities; and . . . all attempts to assert such power by any individual can only tend to the subversion of all rule and subordination,” the fiscal reasoned, Willem’s crimes needed to be punished with the utmost severity.⁹⁰ Europeans and enslaved Africans and Afro-Creoles had different attitudes toward obeah, but they all recognized its political power and the dangers it posed—both to the bodies and lives of enslaved people and to the plantation system itself.

On January 14, 1822--more than five months after Madalon had been killed—a unanimous court found Willem guilty of murder and of “dancing, or causing to be

⁸⁹ *Trial of a Slave in Berbice*, 41 (“subjecting themselves”), 42 (“authority confided”), 10 (“brand-marked”).

danced . . . the Minje or Water Mama dance.” It issued a sentence severe enough, it hoped, that in future people would think twice about becoming involved with obeah. Willem was to be removed from the jail where he had been confined for the previous four months and taken to Op Hoop van Beter. There he would be “delivered into the hands of the public executioner, and in the presence of this Court . . . be hung by the neck on the Mangoe tree under which the negress Madelon was suspended during her aforesaid punishment, until . . . dead.” Afterward Willem was to have “his head . . . severed from his body, and stuck on a pole . . . there to remain until destroyed by the elements, or birds of prey.”\textsuperscript{91} This gruesome execution and mutilation were designed to do more than punish Willem. As Vincent Brown and Diana Paton have shown, planters hoped this “spiritual terror” and “symbolics of mutilation” would send a clear message to other slaves: this is what happens when you break our laws.\textsuperscript{92} Willem’s decapitated body would be buried under the same mango tree, a symbolic effort to reclaim the space for the plantation regime and an attempt to imprint a haunted memory of violence and terror on the landscape.\textsuperscript{93}

Four days after Willem’s conviction, the fiscal and other officials accompanied Willem and the other prisoners to the plantation. According to John Wray, “the scene on the Estate was most solemn. The Governor, the Fiscal, and all the Members of the Court were present--also the Militia, and 400 or 500 Negroes and a great number of White people.” After Willem listened to his sentence, Wray recalled, he “walked firmly to the Tree, and told

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 8 (“dancing”), 9 (“delivered into the hands”).
\item \textsuperscript{92} Brown, “Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority,” 186–88; Paton, \textit{Journal of Social History} 34: 940 (“symbolics of mutilation”).
\item \textsuperscript{93} Brown, \textit{Reaper’s Garden}, 130–42.
\end{itemize}
the Executioner to fasten the rope well.” Willem “walked up the Ladder” and Wray “offered up an earnest prayer.” A moment later “he was launched into an awful Eternity.”

94 Wray to Hankey, Feb. 6, 1822, in Council for World Mission/London Missionary Society Archives (quotations); Trial of a Slave in Berbice, 12.
CHAPTER TWO:
“THE DRIVER IS TOO GREAT A MAN”

Drivers had one of the most difficult and most important jobs in Atlantic slave societies. Also known as “head men,” they had to walk a dangerous tightrope, balancing the interests of their enslaved peers and subordinates against those of the plantation managers and owners to whom they answered. As the key intermediaries between the most powerful and the most compromised, drivers occupied a crucial position in the complex web of power relationships that structured slavery.

Europeans knew that drivers--whose primary responsibility was to keep slaves working under grueling conditions--were the lynchpin of the entire plantation system. Drivers were especially important in places like Berbice, where Europeans were vastly outnumbered by enslaved Africans and where most plantations--with several hundred slaves

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1 Drivers, also known as rangers and headman in the British Caribbean, went by a variety of names in different regions. In the French Caribbean, they were commandeurs. In the Dutch Caribbean, bombas. In Brazil and Spanish America, feitores or capatazes. And in Cuba, contramayorales.

2 As the Jamaican attorney Robert Scott explained, “It is the duty of the driver to see that the people do their work...It is his duty to see that they are diligent in the field.” Quoted in B.W. Higman, Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834 (Baltimore, 1984), 169. Europeans’ appreciation of drivers’ agricultural knowledge and managerial skill was reflected in the higher values attached to drivers. In Berbice, for example, the colonial government set the official compensation rate for executed or transported drivers at 1500 guilders, which was 300 guilders more than ordinary field slaves. Berbice Gazette, Jan. 11, 1814, Georgetown, Guyana, Walter Rodney Archives. Drivers in other American slave societies similarly retained high values well into their senior years. See Laurent Dubois, Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution (Cambridge, Mass., 2005) 37; and Robert L. Paquette, “The Drivers Shall Lead Them: Image and Reality in Slave Resistance,” in Slavery, Secession, and Southern History, ed. Robert L. Paquette and Lou Ferleger (Charlottesville, Va., 2000), 50.
each--were owned by absentee planters. Slaveowners relied on a series of employees to keep their estates functioning. On Op Hoop van Beter, for example, a typical Berbician coffee plantation, the Amsterdam-based owner relied on an attorney, who in turn employed a manager and an overseer. At the bottom, however, it was the drivers--which included a “head driver,” a “second driver,” and “logie driver”--who represented the farthest extension of planter power. It was their job to maintain order among the plantation’s 170 slaves, a situation representative of owners’ and managers’ reliance on drivers throughout the colony.

There were multiple drivers on almost every plantation in Berbice, and, as a group, they outnumbered Europeans in the colony.

Despite drivers’ ubiquity and their importance in maintaining the plantation complex, we know surprisingly little about them. Popular nineteenth century abolitionist depictions of

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3 By 1819, approximately 70 percent of plantations in Berbice had more than 100 slaves. Approximately 63 percent of enslaved people belonged to absentee owners in the 1820s. Absentee-owned plantations had significantly larger slave populations (180 slaves, on average) than locally owned plantations (91, on average). See Higman, Slave Populations, 435; and J. H. Lean, “The Secret Lives of Slaves: Berbice, 1819 to 1827” (University of Canterbury, 2002), 162 fn300, 324. Alvin Thompson calculated that in 1811 the black-to-white ratio on Berbician plantations was as high as 126 to 1. In 1820 the Court of Policy passed deficiency laws stipulating the required ratio of adult white men to slaves on each plantation. The law still allowed imbalances greater than 100 enslaved people to Europeans, and planters had trouble complying with the law because of the difficulty of attracting Europeans to the colony to work as overseers and managers. Nevertheless, by 1830 the estimated slave-to-white ratio had been reduced to 34.1 to 1. This was still significantly higher than in many other West Indian colonies, including Demerara-Essequibo (21.9 to 1), Jamaica (16.9 to 1), and Martinique (9.3 to 1), for example. Moreover, these aggregate ratios understated the ratio of slaves to Europeans on plantations because Europeans living in urban areas such as New Amsterdam and soldiers accounted for a staggering 44 percent of the total European population in Berbice. See Alvin O. Thompson, Colonialism and Underdevelopment in Guyana, 1580-1803 (Bridgetown, Barbados, 1987), 112-3; and Alvin O. Thompson, Unprofitable Servants: Crown Slaves in Berbice, Guyana, 1803-1831 (Kingston, Jamaica, 2002), 26-7, 107.

4 The ownership and managerial structure of Op Hoop van Beter is based on Trial of a Slave in Berbice, for the Crime of Obeah and Murder: Return to an Address to His Majesty, by The Honorable House of Commons, dated 29th of July 1822; for, Copy of any Information which may have been received concerning the Trial of a Slave, for the Crime of Obeah, in the Colony of Berbice, British Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons ([London], 1823); and “Return of Slaves, attached to Plantation Op Hoop van Beter, Situate on the West Bank of the River Berbice, the property of Pieter Elias Charbon of Amsterdam,” Feb. 1, 1819, T 71/438, 119–24.

5 In 1819 about 4.5 percent of enslaved people in Berbice were drivers (850 out of a slave population of 19,201). See Higman, Slave Populations, 168-9, 551 (table S7.1), 589. The proportion of slaves who worked as drivers or “gang leaders” in Demerara was similar (5 percent). See Emilia Viotti da Costa, Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823 (New York, 1994), 59.
drivers as bestial, sadistic henchmen who unflinchingly brutalized their fellow slaves went largely unchallenged until the 1960s and 1970s, when a more subtle assessment of drivers and their predicament began to appear.6 Since then, historians have recognized that drivers were “men in the middle” or “men between” white managers and other slaves, intermediaries who occupied “the middle ground” and who struggled “to keep one foot in each camp,” cooperating with masters and slaves alike.7 Yet drivers remain poorly understood figures, mentioned in passing or ignored outright in most studies of slavery, which acknowledge the drivers’ predicament without exploring it.

The wealth of documents from Berbice, which include the records of the protectors of slaves and fiscals, slave registration returns, and plantation punishment books, provides a detailed picture of who the drivers were. The composite portrait of drivers that emerges from these records confirms common generalizations about drivers in other slave societies. On average, Berbician drivers—who were almost always men—were taller and older than other slaves.8 They received larger, higher quality allowances of food and clothing than other

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6 For an historiographical overview of drivers, see Paquette, “The Drivers Shall Lead Them,” esp. 38-43.


8 In Berbice, the average height of (male) African drivers was 66.02cm, compared to 64.29cm for (male) African field laborers. Height differences were negligible among Creoles: 64.53cm for drivers and 64.02cm for field laborers. See Higman, Slave Populations, 189, 541 (table S6.8). See also Paquette, “The Drivers Shall Lead Them,” 32. According to slave registration returns, in Berbice in 1819 only seven out of 318 drivers—slightly more than two percent—were women. No women were listed as first or head drivers. Higman, Slave Populations, 192-3, 571 (table S7.5). According to British traveler George Pinckard, female drivers, though a “novelty” for him, were relatively common in late eighteenth century Demerara. See Pinckard, Notes on the West Indies (London, 1806), 179. Female drivers were most common in Barbados. Higman, Slave Populations, 192.
enslaved people, had larger provision grounds, and lived in larger, better constructed houses. Cash bonuses, moreover, were not uncommon. As supervisors, they escaped the most back-breaking, monotonous work, and sometimes they used their position and their material resources to employ other slaves in various tasks. These advantages gave drivers a better chance of surviving a notoriously deadly plantation environment. They also made drivers more attractive marital partners and allowed them to form larger families than most slaves. In short, men appointed as drivers had longer, more materially comfortable lives than those of most slaves, which helps explain why they were willing to accept the position’s risks.

The greatest value of the records from Berbice, however, is not their documentation

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9 On the Katz plantations in 1831 in Berbice, for example, drivers received double the amount of salt fish and plantains that other adult slaves received. Higman, Slave Populations, 209. Zealand, the driver on plantation Beerenstein, similarly had “the use of the milk of the cows,” an invaluable source of nutrition undoubtedly denied to the estate’s other slaves. “Examination of the Negro Woman Rosetta,” June 4, 1819, CO 116/138, 54. See also Robert S. Starobin, “Privileged Bondsmen and the Process of Accommodation: The Role of Houservants and Drivers as Seen in Their Own Letters,” Journal of Social History 5, no. 1 (1971), 61-2, 65-7; Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 370-1; Higman, Slave Populations, 207, 221-2, 224; Carolyn E. Fick, The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution From Below (Knoxville, Tenn., 1990), 30; Michael Mullin, Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831 (Urbana, Ill., 1992), 147-8; Paquette, “The Drivers Shall Lead Them,” 32-3; Alvin O. Thompson, A Documentary History of Slavery in Berbice, 1796-1834 (Georgetown, Guyana, 2002), 10-11; and Thompson, Unprofitable Servants, 160-61.

10 The driver Zealand, for example, had his own “washerwoman.” See “Examination of the Negro Woman Rosetta,” 54-6. A driver’s wife on plantation Vryberg was able to afford to hire a carpenter. See “Complaint of the Negro Gasper Belonging to Pln. Vryberg,” Nov. 20, 1825, CO 116/1140.

11 Even among Caribbean slave societies Berbice stood out to contemporaries as “one of the most insalubrious colonies, where the mortality rate of both the enslaved and the free populations was exceptionally high” (Thompson, Unprofitable Servants, 69). In Berbice, drivers lived between seven and eighteen extra years longer than other enslaved men. The mean age of death for an African field laborer in Berbice was thirty-seven years, whereas the mean age of death for an African driver was about forty-four years. The difference was even more significant among Creoles: approximately twenty-four years versus forty-one years. See Higman, Slave Populations, 333-4, 345, 666 (table S9.27).

12 Drivers usually had the largest families among enslaved people. Some drivers, moreover, had multiple wives or partners, which was an impressive measure of their ability to attract women despite demographic obstacles. An extreme example was the driver April, who was reputed to have been “father and grandfather to upwards of seventy negroes,” a quantity of offspring that suggests April had many different sexual partners, if not wives. Lean, “Secret Lives of Slaves,” 173. See also Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 371; Higman, Slave Populations, 370-1; Philip D. Morgan, Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998), 223; and Anthony E. Kaye, Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2007), 79.
of drivers’ material circumstances but rather the unparalleled insight they provide into the predicaments and political maneuvering of individual drivers. These documents allow us to see in remarkable detail the ways that drivers negotiated the complex power relationships of the plantation world. Complaints from enslaved people and Europeans about drivers—as well as complaints from drivers themselves—shed light on the strategies drivers used to juggle the competing interests of slaves and management. In particular, these records highlight in vivid detail the limits of drivers’ power and moments when their authority was called into question. They also raise a number of important questions.

How did drivers accomplish the seemingly impossible task of forcing enslaved laborers who lived on the brink of death to cooperate with or submit to them? What did it mean—socially and politically—to be caught between two worlds and pulled in opposite directions? How did drivers walk the knife’s edge? How did they try to maintain control and legitimacy in the face of challenges from below and above? To what lengths were drivers willing to go to preserve their status? And what happened when they failed?

To answer these questions, this chapter explores the strategies drivers used to cultivate and maintain authority. It focuses on their often tense relationships with enslaved people and with Europeans, emphasizing the driver’s role as intermediary. Drivers relied on

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13 Official complaints from enslaved people against drivers were quite rare, accounting for less than 1 percent of all complaints to the fiscal and protector between 1819 and 1827. See Lean, “Secret Lives of Slaves,” 106 (table 2.12).
various tactics to maintain authority. One of the most successful was soliciting the support of European authorities, such as overseers and managers. Drivers and managers, despite their divergent motivations, shared an interest in maintaining order and discipline on their plantations.

“With a whip at their backs”

Like European managers and colonial authorities, drivers recognized the efficacy of physical violence in maintaining order. As the people who actually inflicted most of the punishments ordered by managers and overseers, drivers were skilled with the whip, which they used both as weapon and as unmistakable symbol of power. The whip was, in fact, the driver’s most recognizable accessory, tucked into his belt or held in his hand as he supervised his gang, ready to counter recalcitrance with violence. Everyday shows of physical force were a large part of what made someone a driver, as European observers noted. British soldier and surgeon George Pinckard, for example, described drivers in his Notes on the West Indies (1806) as “slaves so termed from being promoted to the distinguished office of following their comrades, upon all occasions, with a whip at their backs, as an English carter attends his horses.”

14 “The driver’s paradox,” Anthony Kaye has written, was “how to exercise power over field laborers when he had no more than a slave’s authority.” Kaye argued that there were two solutions to this problem. The first, more oppositional strategy was to “distinguish himself from other slaves” and inspire fear and respect, by practicing polygyny, sexually exploiting enslaved women, using distinctive dress, and carrying a whip, for example. The second, more collaborative one was “cultivating the persona of a leader among fellow slaves,” such as by working alongside their gangs, leading by example, and negotiating on their behalf. See Kaye, Joining Places, 140-44. Evidence from Berbice suggests that drivers used a combination of these two approaches.

15 For the driver’s whip as an important cultural symbol of power, see Richard Burton, Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997).

16 Pinckard, Notes on the West Indies, 348.
Indeed, physical violence was so central to drivers’ authority and public persona that the lash-wielding driver, often depicted as a sadistic torturer corrupted by his allegiance to slave owners or their agents, became an important figure in abolitionist literature and visual propaganda in the nineteenth century (Figure 3.1). From Sambo and Quimbo, the drivers in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), to the Cuban antislavery novels of the late 1830s and 1840s, authors and artists represented drivers as barbaric, unfailingly loyal to their owners, and capable of terrible acts of savagery against other slaves. These were one-dimensional caricatures that ignored drivers’ complex predicament, of course, but even in their excess they documented the connection between physical violence and authority that permeated all relationships in slave society, including those between drivers and their enslaved subordinates.

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Yet drivers’ coercive power was limited by law and custom. When drivers exceeded legal or customary limits on physical punishment, enslaved people protested. Indeed, physical violence was high on enslaved people’s list of grievances against drivers. Trim, an enslaved man who lived on a Corentyne Coast plantation, for example, complained to the

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18 For customary and legal regulations on corporal punishment in Berbice, see chapter 5.
fiscal in March 1821 “that the driver is continually finding fault with and licking him too much.” Even when people on the estate were sick, Trim claimed, “instead of giving them physic, [the driver] drives them away with a horse-whip.”

19 Rosetta, a woman on plantation Beerenstein, lumped together the “extremely severe manager” and the driver, Primo, who “treats them very cruelly,” in a complaint about being “very much flogged, badly fed, and ill treated.”

20 Hero, an enslaved man on plantation Kilcoy, similarly went to the fiscal after a violent dispute with a driver in August 1825. “I have story with the driver,” Hero began. “Driver trouble & lick [whip] me in the field. I had a pain in my stomach, driver told me to carry water for the negroes to drink.” Hero protested that he was unable to carry the water, but the driver ignored him and “sent to call four negro men to hold me...down on the ground. Driver then licked me until the blood came out.” Hero decided that the driver had gone too far, that he had abused his authority to use physical force, so he told the driver that he would “go to the massa in Town,” meaning the fiscal, “to complain.”

A driver on plantation Culcairn in August 1822 was especially cruel and sadistic, according to the testimony of an enslaved man named John. “When the driver is ordered to flog any of the gang,” John claimed, “he is in the habit of taking powdered glass and marabunters (wasps), and mixing them together, and then rubbing his whip with the mixture.” The driver, Bob, denied the accusation, as did the manager and overseer, who told the fiscal that if John’s complaint were true they would have sent Bob to the fiscal for

19 “Examination of a Complaint Preferred By the Negroes Trim and Rose, belonging to plantation No 49, Courantyn Coast,” Mar. 30, 1821, CO 116/138, 80.

20 “Examination of a Complaint Made By the Negro Woman Rosetta, belonging to plantation Beerenstein” Nov. 15, 1820, CO 116/138, 69.

punishment. John could not produce any witnesses to corroborate his story, so the fiscal
dismissed the complaint against the driver who was, in his opinion, “a sensible, well-behaved
negro.”

Enslaved people who caused problems in the field or who questioned a driver’s
authority inevitably found themselves on the receiving end of the driver’s whip. When
Brandy, an enslaved man on plantation Woodlands, arrived late for work one morning in May
1827, for example, the driver “flogged him with a cat [o’ nine tails], which he carries in his
pocket.” And when Brandy told the driver, Isaac, that “he would go complain to his
master...the driver flogged him again,” angry that Brandy dared challenge his authority.

Brandy knew, however, that Isaac no longer had a legal right to carry his whip into
the field: four months earlier the Berbice council of government had passed a new slave code
in response to metropolitan pressure to “ameliorate” slavery that, among other things, made it
a crime to “carry a whip, or any other instrument of punishment, into the field or elsewhere,
either as a badge of authority or a stimulus to labour.” (Drivers were supposed to report
infractions to managers, who could then order a flogging for the following day.) Drivers
like Isaac, however, who were on the front lines of plantation labor and discipline, were
reluctant to give up the whip, their primary weapon and the symbol of power of their
authority and status. Slaveowners like the one on Woodlands, moreover, ignored the new
regulations because they knew how important recourse to physical violence was for drivers.

When Brandy sought the owner’s help after Isaac had illegally flogged him, “his master took


his horsewhip and drove him away.” He flogged Brandy yet again after Brandy went to the civil magistrate to complain. The owner’s unwillingness to punish Isaac for using the whip in the field reveals that drivers and European authorities alike recognized the central role physical coercion played in buttressing drivers’ power and controlling enslaved people.

Woodlands was one of several plantations where drivers refused to give up the whip after its use was curtailed by the 1826 slave code. On the sugar plantation Highbury, for instance, drivers whipped people who fell behind in their work as late as 1833. Secundo, an enslaved woman ordered to carry megass (the pulp or waste generated during sugarcane processing) away from the mill, testified before the protector and, later, the court of criminal justice, that a driver had flogged her and other women “with a leather strap.” September, the driver in charge of the mill gang, admitted that when the manager “found fault with the gang for not doing their work properly,” he “desired September to flog them with the strap,” which he described as “about 2 feet long about an inch broad and tolerably thick.” Secundo and some of the other “megass carriers” had also been flogged the following morning by another driver, Hussar. He explained to the protector “that he carried the strap to induce the women to work & makes use of it if they do not work properly.”

September’s testimony also highlighted the symbolic power of the whip in buttressing drivers’ authority and distinguishing them from other slaves: “I walk with the leather whenever I am driver,” he


26 It is possible that Secundo was singled out for more severe punishment because her husband, Amsterdam, had caused a disturbance after he was demoted from his position as driver. Secundo began her complaint with this telling contextualization: “I have a Husband--Amsterdam--he was old Driver but is removed by Mr. Junor. The people of Highbury have been troublesome the last nights--but I had nothing to do with it--Amsterdam was one of those who came to Town, but it was not my business. Fiscal came down to quiet the people. The Fiscal ordered the Dienaars to handcuff Amsterdam and take him off.” Perhaps as retribution, Secundo “got more punished than the others” by the new driver. See “Charles Herbert First Fiscal Ro Vs. John Junor,” Jan. 21, 1833, CO 116/151, 161-72.
When enslaved people like Secundo complained against drivers who used unnecessary or excessive force, the implicit charge was that the driver had abused his authority. Drivers who were too harsh in other ways also lost the support of their enslaved subordinates. The driver Just, from plantation Rotterdam, found himself “abused” by three men for telling the manager that they took their midday break an hour early and that their pace of work was slower than the rest of the gang. For Peter, an enslaved man who was “too old” to eat the corn rations he received, the driver’s crime had been incriminating him for a petty theft that might have been overlooked. Peter took “some rice from the field” to sate his hunger, he admitted, and the driver “reported it to master, who took away all his corn in his house.” Eager to convince the fiscal that this was not isolated incident of callousness, Peter claimed that “the driver is so severe, the people are scarcely able to keep it out with him, he (the driver) often saying that he does not care whether the people hang or drown themselves, or whether they run away in the bush.”

For enslaved men like Peter, drivers who distanced themselves too far from “the people,” who abused their authority or used more violence than was necessary, were

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27 Dec. 22, 1832, CO 116/151, 200-03.


29 “Examination of the negro Peter, belonging to J. A. Delinert,” Aug. 29, 1820, CO 116/138, 68.
unbearable. Yet drivers who faced challenges from their enslaved subordinates could turn to European plantation officials, who generally supported their use of force.

“His authority in the field would be entirely done away with”

When other slaves publicly disobeyed drivers or challenged them, drivers enlisted the support of the Europeans who had appointed them. Overseers and managers were usually eager to help drivers, since they recognized that their own grip on control was highly dependent on their drivers’ authority. Enslaved people needed to be persuaded or forced to respect and obey their superiors, including drivers. Drivers were, in a sense, proxy managers, and an attack on them was tantamount to an attack on the entire social and political order that made slavery possible. Managers and drivers thus cooperated to stifle dissent.

The driver on Niewen Hoop was one of many drivers who turned to plantation officials when a slave on his plantation undermined his authority. The driver went to the manager after Woensdag, a field laborer, had been “very abusive.” Woensdag was an outsider, disliked not only by the driver but by other slaves on the estate, and his problem

30 Enslaved people also protested drivers who sexually abused enslaved women. The driver and “Plantain Walk minder” on plantation Resolutie, for example, was accused of having raped a thirteen or fourteen year old girl named Anna. According to Anna, who had been raped by the manager a few days earlier, “one day the Cook sent me to pick Beans in the Plantain Walk, the Plantain Walk minder Hendrik came upon me suddenly and threw me on the ground, he did not ask to be connected with me but threw me on the ground at once. I attempted to bawl out, and he took dry plantain leaves and stopped my mouth he then effected his purpose, he promised to pay me but to this day he had not done so. I suffered a good deal from Hendrik’s violence.” See “Complaint of the Female Slave Mietje Belonging to Pln Resolutie the Property of Major General Murray,” May 18, 1830, CO 116/142, 110-28 (quotation p. 125). See also Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present (New York, 2010 [1985]), 329 fn77; and Kaye, Joining Places, 79.
with the driver was only one in a long list of grievances he brought to the fiscal.\textsuperscript{31} Still, he chose to begin his complaint by focusing on his conflicts with the driver. The tipping point came on “Christmas Friday” when the driver found him taking a break to drink and cool down on the estate’s back dam. The driver, unhappy that Woensdag was not working, “said when you are at work you must not travel about.” Woensdag countered that “when I feel hot & thirsty I must wash & drink, I then feel strong to finish my work.” Upset that Woensdag argued him, the driver told Woensdag “oh, I know you, you are a lazy bugger & constantly going to the Fiscal to complain, and whether you are on, or off the Estate, we don’t care.”\textsuperscript{32}

The driver knew that if Woensdag’s behavior went unpunished he would lose face and set a dangerous precedent. In a society where power and authority were as fragile as they were important, one had to confront even the slightest challenges head-on. So the driver told the manager that “if Woensdag was not punished for his conduct...towards him (the Driver) that his authority in the field would be entirely done away.” Here the driver acknowledged the limitations of his authority as well as his dependence on Europeans. The manager sympathized with the driver’s plight and decided to punish Woensdag. But Woensdag escaped and went to town to seek the fiscal’s help.\textsuperscript{33}

“There are plenty of people who want negroes,” Woensdag told the fiscal, “and as they say I am bad, let them put me up at Vendue...I cannot nor will not go back to the Estate.

\textsuperscript{31} Woensdag’s poor standing in his community is illustrated by his experience on Christmas. When the day’s work was finished and the manager distributed rum to the estate’s slaves, a holiday custom, Woensdag refused to join them, he explained, “as the negroes said they did not care about me.” But “when they began to dance” he tried to participate, only to be “pushed out of the dance finding I was a poor fellow without a mother or family.” Woensdag then went to another estate to dance.

\textsuperscript{32} “Complaint of the Negro Woensdag the Property of Plan. Niewen Hoop,” Jan. 7, 1825, CO 116/140.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
If I go, I will go to the bush.” Knowing Woensdag, this was no idle threat: one of the reasons that the driver disliked Woensdag was because he had run away from his previous owner, which meant “he was of a bad character.” And, as the Niewen Hoop manager and attorney explained, Woensdag was “a healthy strong negro,” but was nevertheless “always backward in his work,” which must have frustrated the driver even more. Drivers were no more willing than managers to tolerate troublemakers like Woensdag, who jeopardized their status or publicly disrespected them. They often found the support they needed by appealing to European authorities. In this case, for example, the fiscal “ordered Woensdag to receive 39 lashes for making a frivolous complaint.”

Evidence suggests that European authorities were quick to punish slaves who disrespected drivers. An enslaved man on plantation Rotterdam, for instance, was confined in the stocks for having disobeyed the driver’s orders. Nicil explained to the protector that the driver “found fault with some of the negroes for sitting down to take their breakfast at 11 o’clock,” the normal midday resting period, “and said that in consequence they must work till six o’clock.” Nicil told the driver, Just, that “this could not apply to him as he did not leave off working & therefore would go home at 3 o’clock.” According to Just, however, Nicil’s refusal was less diplomatic: “You must be crazy,” Nicil had said. The overseer soon found Nicil “quarreling & using abusive language to the driver,” and “told him he better be quiet & not behave in such a manner in his presence.” But Nicil “persisted in his abuse,” so the overseer reported Nicil’s behavior to the manager, who had Nicil locked in the stocks for the night. The protector, after gathering testimony from several witnesses, determined that “Just

34 Ibid.
was wrong to state that all the gang were to continue on their work till six o’clock in the evening because some of them had taken their hours of rest during the day.” But he also warned Nicil that “nothing could justify the Insolence to the driver in the presence of the Overseer.” He upheld the manager’s decision to punish Nicil.  

Such cases reveal that colonial officials, like managers, supported drivers in slave-driver disputes. A case from plantation Hope & Experiment in November 1833 illustrates how drivers’ power rested at least as much on official support as it did on violence and intimidation. A dispute began when an enslaved woman, Ann, complained too loudly about being ordered to cut canes in an area of the field where they were sparse. The driver, Houston, overheard Ann’s “grumbling” and decided to put an end to it. Ann told the protector that she had “been beaten by the driver in the field for having observed to one of the Women working next to her, that there were not as many canes as where she worked the previous day.” Ann first appealed to the manager for help, but he supported the driver. Instead of punishing Houston, moreover, he “ordered [Ann] to be confined for three days.” Other witnesses, however, contradicted Ann’s story. The overseer claimed he “did not see the driver strike Ann,” and that she had not been confined afterward. Houston also “most positively denied having beaten or...ill treated Ann.” Whether these men had conspired to lie to protect one another or not, Ann’s complaint was dismissed due to a lack of supporting witnesses. The protector did, however, warn Houston that he “had no right to ill use any slave under his charge [and] that if he ever did he would subject himself to punishment.”

This admonition illustrated a major challenge for drivers: determining just how much

35 Nov. 21, 1833, CO 116/153, 158-61.

violence they could get away with.

Insulting or arguing with a driver, much like “insolence” toward overseers and managers, was a serious offense in the eyes of plantation management and colonial officials. Overseers and managers had good reason to punish slaves who disrespected drivers who had, from their point of view, simply done their job. Such insults could humiliate drivers, and they were also open challenges to the entire plantation hierarchy. The manager of plantation Deutichem apparently found insolence toward the driver even more vexing than not completing one’s task. When Francientje, a field laborer, “did not do her work” and “the driver told her she must be confined...she was extremely abusive to him.” As a result she spent two agonizing nights in the bedstocks. The manager explained that “other women had neglected their work on the same day but on expressing their contrition were pardoned,” and that Francientje’s transgression would have been overlooked, too, “had she not been abusive to the driver.”

Five women on plantation Prospect in 1832 told a similar tale. They claimed the manager had forced them to work all night in the mill gang--after a full day in the field--“as punishment for having disobeyed the driver.”

Managers themselves sometimes took the initiative in punishing enslaved people who disrespected drivers. One such person was Barentye, an enslaved woman on plantation Utile et Paisible who wound up in trouble when the drivers informed the manager that she had left the estate in bad weather--taking along her young child--without a pass. The manager locked

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37 Explicitly labeled offenses relating to drivers on plantation punishment record books included “striking driver,” “biting driver,” “holding and tearing drivers’ clothes,” and “raising cutlass against driver.”

38 Jul. 9, 1830, CO 116/146, 138-41.

39 The driver and manager admitted that the women had disobeyed the driver’s order, but claimed the women were ordered to work in the mill gang not as punishment but because it was their regular turn, and, moreover, that they did not begin until 6:00am the following day. Feb. 24, 1832, CO 116/150, 127-29.
Barentye in the Hospital for a night, and the next day “gently rebuked” her and others who had left without a pass “for pursuing so bad a habit which was so injurious to their health and particularly to the Child’s.” He would have let Barentye off with a warning at that point, he claimed, but unlike the other women, who “departed thankfully,” Barentye “immediately turned upon and began to abuse the Drivers in my presence for giving me information that she went off the Estate Sunday evening.” From the manager’s perspective, Barentye had publicly disrespected the drivers for doing what was expected of them: reporting slaves who violated rules. Determined “to preserve some share of discipline on the Estate and prevent this woman from breaking through all restraint,” the manager went to the fiscal and asked “that she be punished as in your discretion you may deem necessary.” It was not the drivers’ authority itself that that the manager was concerned with, of course, so much as it was the security of the plantation. Yet maintaining order required that challenges to a driver’s authority be punished. The fiscal, like the manager, recognized that people who did not show drivers respect and deference were dangerous. Barentye’s “conduct in abusing the Drivers in her Master’s presence because they had done their duty,” he concluded, “was highly disrespectful and...merited punishment.” He sentenced Barentye to four nights’ solitary confinement.40

Sam, an enslaved man, suffered a similar fate in May 1833 after a violent confrontation with the driver, Frans. According to an enslaved man who witnessed the altercation, the trouble began when Sam ignored Frans’s order to wait until a punt (a long, flat-bottomed boat) had reached the field before removing cane plants from it. When Sam

40 “No. 10,” Mar. 1, 1831, CO 116/142, 92-98.
refused to leave the cane plants alone, Frans pushed him off the punt. Then, according to Frans, Sam “dared Frans to strike him, and [said] he would return it.” Even worse, Sam “laid hold of [Frans], and was going to strike him, but [Frans] kept him off.” This was more than a simple fight over an ignored order: it was a battle over the legitimacy and extent of the driver’s authority. As one witness recalled, when Sam refused to leave the punt he declared that “Frans was not his master,” and “curse[d] Frans.” These insults were meant to emphasize the limitations of Frans’s authority as a man who was, at the end of the day, still enslaved man subject to higher authorities. Unwilling to tolerate such a direct challenge to his authority, Frans “reported Sam’s conduct to the manager,” ironically confirming Sam’s charge. The manager, after listening to Frans’s story, ordered Sam into confinement and lodged a complaint against him with the civil magistrate “for abusing the driver,” punishments that reinforced Frans’s authority while also exposing its shortcomings.\(^4^1\)

When drivers like Frans turned to managers for help, they reasserted control even as they acknowledged their weaknesses. Going to the manager and asking for help was an admission of failure or, at the very least, an implicit admission that for all the power drivers had over slaves, they were still underlings. Their authority was, after all, highly dependent on the managers or owners who had appointed them to the position. For European authorities, standing up for drivers was a means of preserving order and discipline on their plantations. Managers knew that drivers needed to be respected, if not feared, by other

\(^4^1\) May 8, 1833, CO 116/152, 127-29. “Insolence” toward drivers was a common explanation or justification given by managers for punishing slaves. The manager of Best Coffee Land, for instance, told the fiscal that “he was under the necessity of flogging Peter, who pretended illness, on account of his insolence toward the driver.” See “Complaint of the Negro Peter,” Aug. 2, 1823, CO 116/138, 103.
Indeed, many drivers achieved impressive levels of political power and authority. Some even became more powerful, at least on the plantations where they lived, than the Europeans who were nominally in charge, as the following cases illustrate. An enslaved woman on the cotton plantation Albian went to the fiscal in February 1825 after she and her sister were flogged by the driver. She decided to intervene, she explained, when “the driver thought it proper to lay my sister down & flog her with the whip.” When she tried to protect her sister, the driver flogged her, too, and “the manager got upon his horse and & rode away,” unwilling to interfere. The manager claimed that the driver had only given the woman’s sister “a few stripes” for refusing to send her child, who had whooping cough (pertussis), home from the field for its own good. When she went “up to the driver and was very abusive,” the manager explained, the driver “threw his whip round her thighs once.” Knowing she was pregnant and “fearful that she might induce the Driver by her passionate conduct to repeat the stripe,” he told the driver to “let her alone,” he claimed, and then “got on [his] horse & went away.” The woman, however, offered a different explanation for the manager’s quick departure: “the manager,” she claimed, did not stop the driver because he “is

42 Some slave owners took special care to avoid humiliating their drivers in front of other slaves. Virginia slaveholder Edmund Ruffin, for example, recommended that drivers should be punished out of sight of other slaves. See Starobin, “Privileged Bondmen,” 58 fn15. There was always a risk, however, that a driver might become too powerful or use his authority to undermine the plantation regime. The most extreme examples were drivers who led violent rebellions, including one that drew some 10,000-12,000 enslaved participants in 1823 in neighboring Demerara. Drivers also played key roles in rebellions in Berbice (1763), Saint Domingue (1791), Barbados (1816), and Jamaica (1831-2). See Thompson, Colonialism and Underdevelopment, 153-74; Fick, Making of Haiti, 30, 92, 94; Higman, Slave Populations, 393; Da Costa, Crowns of Glory; Dubois, Avengers, 97-8; and esp. Paquette, “Drivers Shall Lead,” 44-8. Openly rebellious drivers, however, were rare, as were drivers who ran away. For a rare case in which a Berbician driver led a group of runaway slaves, see “Enquiry Instituted By Authority of His Honor N. Musgrave President of the Courts of Justice, Into the Circumstance of Thirty Five Negroes (14 Men & 25 Women) Belonging to the Sugar Plantation Herstelling Situated Up the River Berbice, Having Absconded From Said Property.,” Apr. 12, 1825, CO 116/140. In this case the “woman driver,” Burke, allegedly led other some 30 people “into the Bush.” The “head driver,” in contrast, did not know about the planned escape, and as soon as he found out he informed the manager.
afraid of him.” Lest there be any doubt about the extent of the driver’s power, she reiterated: “the driver is too great a man.”

A driver on plantation Beerenstein seems to have possessed the same kind of unrivaled authority, at least according to Rosetta, an enslaved woman there. She told the fiscal that “she has nothing to say against the manager or her owner, but that the driver Zealand is the person who made her go to town.” Zealand “is continually licking and cursing her, and even cut her with a cutlass [machete] once in the arm...and once knocked her with a cutlass in her teeth.” Rosetta told the fiscal that after the most recent beating “she hid herself a few days in the bush, [then] went to the colony hospital and miscarried there...which...she attributes to the several misbehaviors of Zealand against her.” “The remainder of the gang,” Rosetta claimed, “will substantiate her declaration.” And she was right: one man testified that “he saw Zealand strike Rosetta with the bush-rope on her mouth, so that it made the blood come out and swelled her lips,” and that he also saw Zealand strike her with a cutlass. Zealand had apparently become so unbearable that the people on Beerenstein were willing to incriminate him, despite the risks.

Zealand, when interrogated by the fiscal, admitted having struck Rosetta in the midst of an argument about loading plantains. But he claimed he was justified by Rosetta’s lack of respect. When Rosetta gave him “a very cross and disgusting answer” to a question he asked, “he went up to her with a thin piece of bush-rope, telling her not to be so insolent, and licking her at the same time with this said instrument of correction on her mouth, stating, that


44 “Examination of the Negro Woman Rosetta, belonging to plantation Beerenstein,” Jun. 4, 1819, CO 116/138, 54-56.
as her mouth was so bad the same only deserved to be punished.” Why had the manager
allowed Zealand to treat a pregnant woman so severely? Rosetta’s answer was unequivocal:
“Zealand is the ruler of the estate.” Even “the manager has less to say than he.”

This was not, of course, how the driver-manager relationship was supposed to
function, and Rosetta knew it. Her complaint, although explicitly against the driver, was also
an indictment of the manager, of his inability to control the driver and maintain the proper
hierarchy on his plantation. As Rosetta explained, “the manager has not the least authority to
hinder him in his proceedings.”

Drivers like the ones on Albian and Beerenstein, who terrorized other slaves and even
intimidated white overseers and managers, did not necessarily pose a threat to European
authorities or to the plantation regime. Indeed, so long as they used their authority to keep
slaves at work and plantations productive, overseers and managers might tolerate, or even
welcome, such power. Strong drivers who used their authority to thwart a manager’s orders
or to negotiate or advocate for the slaves under their control, on the other hand, posed a
serious threat.

“The driver knows we are in the right”

Drivers had good reasons to look out for the interests of their communities and
collaborate with their subordinates. Altruism aside, cooperating with other slaves was a
logical political strategy for drivers who knew that people who saw them as representatives

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
or leaders instead of tyrants would make their lives and jobs easier. Yet drivers who were perceived by Europeans as being too close to “the people” jeopardized their relationships with the managers on whom they relied to reinforce their authority. There was even a designation on plantation punishment records for the problem that such drivers caused: “driver not co-operating.” And punishment records reveal that managers punished obstructive drivers more severely than they punished enslaved people for other work-related offenses such as “drunkenness,” “unsatisfactory productivity,” and “neglect of duty.”

Adam was one of many drivers who paid the price for using his authority to negotiate better living conditions for the other slaves on his plantation. As he told the fiscal, he “had been deputed by the gang to represent to their mistress that they were not sufficiently fed and clothed.” This was, from the slaves’ perspective, Adam’s job as their leader: to represent their grievances to the person with the power to do something about it. But Adam’s owner saw things differently. “His mistress,” Adam told the fiscal, “instead of affording redress,...directed him to be confined in the stocks” for overstepping his bounds.

Drivers also ran into trouble with management for advocating reduced workloads. Indeed, one of the most common causes of driver-manager conflict was disagreement about the quantity or quality of work expected of a plantation’s labor force. In general, managers wanted to extract the maximum amount of labor from slaves, whereas drivers had good reason to protest work assignments that would be difficult or impossible for slaves to complete. When the slaves under a driver’s charge failed to complete their work or


48 “Investigation of the Complaint of Nine Negro Men, belonging to Mrs. Ibon Sanders, residing in Upper Berbice; investigated this day before his Honor the President, and the honourable Member W. Halder,” Feb. 8, CO 116/138, 26-31.
performed poorly, it was often the driver who had to face an angry manager.

Such was the case on the coffee plantation Fredrick’s Lust in July 1828. The manager complained to the protector of slaves that his driver, Galant, “had combined with the gang in trying to defeat his...authority over them.” In particular, the manager believed that Galant was to blame for the other slaves having “been very neglectful for the last week in performing their usual tasks.” Moreover, Galant “had been very insolent in the morning.” The protector took the situation seriously enough to travel to Frederick’s Lust the next morning to ask the driver “what had given rise to the disobedience...and his insolence.”

Galant tried to minimize his responsibility by blaming the slaves he supervised for disobeying the managers orders, which he claimed he had passed down. But instead of “clean[ing] the grass from 100 coffee trees or one row” each, as Galant had ordered, they insisted on working “two men on a row.” The problems continued after the workday finished. When the manager ordered Galant to confine five men in the bedstocks for not finishing their task, Galant was “not able to catch the people that were to be confined,” he claimed. The manager then ordered him in confinement.49

When the protector questioned the other slaves, however, they told a different story: Galant had urged them to protest the quantity of work the manager demanded. He said that “had he to perform that task he would soon compel the manager to reduce the same.”

According to the other slaves, Galant apparently wanted their support to protest the manager’s demands. Perhaps Galant thought he would have had a better chance convincing the manager to reduce the workload if he could claim that he was facing widespread

49 “No. 31,” Jul. 15, 1828, CO 116/144.
resistance from below, casting himself as a mere messenger caught in between. Whatever the actual cause of the work shortfall, drivers like Galant, who used their authority against the interests of managers and plantation owners, took a serious risk. In Galant’s case, the protector sided with the manager. He “severely reprimanded Galant & ordered him to receive Forty Lashes for attempting to bring insubordination & discontent amongst the gang over which he was placed in authority.”

Campaigning for less brutal working or living conditions for the slaves under one’s charge might have bolstered a driver’s reputation among his subordinates, but it was a dangerous strategy. When Drenna, the head driver on plantation Friends, tried to get the manager to assign more reasonable tasks, for example, he wound up in the stocks. Drenna later traveled, with more than a dozen other slaves, to the protector’s office, where he complained about the manager and his excessive work demands. “Sometimes the Manager gives me task work for the people to do,” Drenna explained, “and if I tell him it is too much for them, he says I am to go in the stocks.” The previous Saturday, for example, Drenna and another driver had been placed in the stocks overnight because “the people had not finished their tasks.” The manager, however, claimed that the amount of work he required was reasonable, and that Drenna had been put in the stocks “for having deceived [him] in passing over slaves who neglected their work.” Whether Drenna had turned a blind eye to unfinished tasks, as the manager claimed, or had tried to negotiate a reduced task, the offense was essentially the same: being too sympathetic to the priorities of other slaves and challenging the manager’s prerogative to run his plantation as he liked.

50 Ibid.

51 “Complaint No. 36,” Jan. 1, 1828, CO 116/144, 84-90.
Drenna’s testimony also highlights another area of tension between drivers and managers: different notions about the amount of work to demand of slaves and about how it ought to be done. When Caroline, a field laborer, complained to the protector that she had been punished in late November 1830, she emphasized the discrepancy between the manager’s and the driver’s labor expectations. According to Caroline—and Grace, who testified on her behalf—the driver had ordered Caroline to weed grass on the back dam with another woman. But when the manager, Thomas Edgelow, found them working together he “said it was a task for one, [and] removed the other woman.” The driver, Grace explained, “had put two women on each side of the parapit.” He knew, as Caroline claimed, that “the task was too great” for one person alone. But the manager was not in the mood to negotiate; he “told [Caroline] to shut her mouth.” When she met the manager’s eyes, failing to show the deference he demanded, he “called out, You d____d B___h what do you look at, I will confine you and cool you.” The manager then ordered the driver to take Caroline to “the dark room” and, later, the stocks, as punishment “for insolence.” More troubling to the manager than Caroline’s insubordination, however, was that “there appeared to be a combination among the gang, as the whole were far deficient in performing their day’s work.” And the driver was apparently either unable or unwilling to compel the women to do the amount of work Edgelow demanded. The work stoppage or slowdown that he tolerated was so bad, the manager claimed, that “he was compelled to have the greater part of them alternately confined in the public stocks.”

The struggle between the manager of Everton and his driver continued, as evidenced

52 Nov. 26, 1830, CO 116/147, 130-33.
by another complaint against the manager less than a week later. This time, fifteen women went to the protector’s office. Like many slaves who sought the protector’s help, they framed their complaint in terms of impossible work requirements, unjustified punishments, and discrepancies in the amount of work expected by the manager and the driver. The women explained that they had been placed in the bedstocks for the past six nights because the manager, Edgelow, remained unhappy with the amount of work they performed. The complainants claimed that the grass they were supposed to weed was “exceedingly high,” and, more tellingly, that they performed their daily tasks “to the satisfaction of the driver.” Edgelow, however, was convinced that there was still “a conspiracy amongst the women, not to finish their work,” and that the driver was not doing what was necessary to restore order. When the driver was questioned by the protector, moreover, he sided with the women and second-guessed the manager’s judgment. He told the protector “that what they [the women] finished might be taken as a day’s work.”

Drivers’ ability to help other slaves by negotiating reducing workloads or supporting their efforts at collective bargaining was limited, as a complaint from a half dozen men in 1821 illustrates. The men told the fiscal that they had been punished because they damaged cotton while ginning it, which was not their fault. The cotton should not have been ginned in the first place, they claimed, because it was not dry enough. And the driver, Watson, had tried to explain to this to the manager. After all, he probably knew more about the actual work involved than the manager. When the manager gave the order for the cotton to be


54 For collective labor bargaining in American plantation societies, see Mary Turner, ed. From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas (Bloomington, Ind., 1995).
ginned, the “driver said, ‘No’,” one of the men reported. But the “massa said, ‘Never mind; I want the cotton ginned, and if they mash the seed I will cut their a--- at flog-time’.” So the men ginned the cotton, and the manager followed through on his threat, ordering Watson to flog them. Even then Watson tried to spare them as best he could. When the fiscal performed a routine physical inspection of the men who claimed they had been flogged, he noticed that one man lacked the wounds to corroborate his story. So he asked “why the recent punishment did not appear.” The man answered that “the driver knows we are in the right.” The driver “therefore does not punish us by cutting us,” he explained. Unsurprisingly, Watson denied the charge.\(^{55}\)

Whipping slaves as mildly as possible or pretending to flog them was one way that drivers tried to comply with their owners’ or managers’ demands—or at least appear to—while showing mercy to their subordinates. When Tommy, an enslaved cooper on Goldstone Hall, was asked by the fiscal why he lacked severe lacerations after he had allegedly suffered one hundred lashes, “he said he had been favoured by the drivers, who threw the whips over him” to spare him as best they could.\(^ {56}\) Some drivers took it upon themselves to reduce punishments they were ordered to administer. When La Rose, a driver on plantation friends,

\(^{55}\) “Complains [Sic] of Jack, Boast, Jem, Tancra, Trim, Harry, and Peter,” Dec. 24, 1821, CO 116/138, 93-94. The driver explained the lack of lash marks on the men he flogged by claiming “that on a former occasion he received orders from his master when he was vexed, and directed a negro to be flogged, that they should be burnt, but not cut.”

\(^{56}\) “Complaint of the Negro Tommy, belonging to William Fraser,” Feb. 9-10, 1819, CO 116/138, 32-34. Drivers in the U.S. South similarly faked floggings. See Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 380. Solomon Northup, a driver on an antebellum Louisiana sugar plantation, described in his autobiography how he collaborated with other slaves to fake whippings in order to please his owner. Showing leniency was dangerous, Northup explained, but if his owner “had seen me use the lash freely, the man was satisfied. ‘Practice makes perfect,’ truly; and during my eight years’ experience as a driver, I learned to handle the whip with marvelous dexterity and precision, throwing the lash within a hair’s breadth of the back, the ear, the nose, without, however, touching either of them...I would commence plying the lash vigorously, when, according to arrangement, they would squirm and screech as if in agony, although not one of them had in fact been even grazed.” Solomon Northup, Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853 (Auburn, Ala., 1853), 226-7.
was ordered to give Scipio eight lashes and flog him again “if [he] did not keep up with the other negroes” in the field, La Rose instead only “gave [him] two stripes with a carracarra,” according to Scipio. These were fairly safe ways of satisfying one’s manager while also demonstrating, at least to slaves, that a driver did not condone the physical violence he was compelled to inflict. Mitigating punishment was also a means of distributing favors in a way that enhanced a driver’s prestige and gave slaves good reason to ingratiate themselves with drivers, or at least avoid getting on their bad side.

“A disgraced driver”

Some drivers inevitably lost the crucial support of overseers and managers. Managers placed a great deal of trust in the men they appointed as drivers, and when drivers violated that trust or failed to maintain order, the consequences--and punishments--could be severe. For the least fortunate drivers, failure meant being “broke,” or fired, from the position. Demotion often had devastating effects for drivers and for their families. Some drivers, moreover, refused to give up the authority they had achieved.

Managers were quick to punish drivers they saw as weak or ineffective. Smart, the driver on plantation Friends, for example, complained to the acting protector of slaves that “he is punished whenever the gang of women under his charge fail to perform their tasks.” In the two months since a new manager had taken over, Smart had already been punished twice, most recently “for not supplying the [sugar] mill with a sufficiency of canes.”

57 “Complaint of the negro Scipio, belonging to plantation Friends,” CO 116/138, 34-36. La Rose denied that he had flogged Scipio with a carracarra, and the manager claimed that the overseer had “directed the driver to give him six lashes, which were inflicted in his presence.”
the acting protector visited Friends the following day to investigate, the manager told him
that Smart had been allowing women to leave uncut canes in the fields. “In order to induce
him to be more attentive,” the manager explained, “he found it necessary to have him
punished.” Smart’s failure to drive the cane cutters hard enough was hurting the plantation’s
productivity. “Were it not for the Indolence of the cane cutting gang,” the manager
calculated, he could make twice as many hogsheads of sugar. So when “Smart still
persevered with his negligence,” the manager had him flogged a second time.58

Managers also punished drivers they caught turning a blind eye to minor infractions
or granting slaves illicit privileges. The driver on one Canje River plantation, for instance,
was “punished and locked in the stocks” when the manager found out that he had allowed
Laura, an enslaved woman “with a child at the breast,” to leave the field to nurse her child.59
In a similar case, when the driver on plantation Port Mourant “allowed the women to come to
the house to get their breakfast,” one woman testified, the manager flogged him for not
keeping them at work all day without a break.60

Drivers in Berbice could be punished for almost anything other slaves did wrong.
Managers saw slave disobedience as an indication that a driver had failed to exert the
necessary authority. When an enslaved man named Thomas ran away from Beerenstein in
1820, for example, the manager took it out on the driver, Primo. The manager, Primo
explained, “locked him up in the stocks during the whole of the holidays,” one of the rare

58 Dec. 1, 1830, CO 116/147, 144-47.
59 “Examination of the negro woman Laura, belonging to plantation No 6, Cauje [sic] Creek,” Jun. 4, 1819, CO
116/138, 55.
60 “Examination of a Complaint Preferred By the Negroes Maria, Jane, Fanny, Marianne, Polly, Bella,
Caroline, Betsy and Nancy, belonging to plantation Port Mourant, against the Manager of said estate,” Mar. 3,
occasions slaves were allowed to celebrate with their friends and kin. Thomas’s escape, Primo protested, “was not his fault at all.” But the manager disagreed: it was a sign that Primo’s authority was lacking or that he had neglected his duty. The manager “ill-treated [Primo] very much, tore his clothes and licked [whipped] him.” By this point the manager-driver relationship had become so antagonistic that Primo decided to seek the fiscal’s help, effectively renouncing a position that had become unbearable and charging the manager with incompetence. Primo claimed that “he never complained before, but is now compelled, hoping that he may get another manager to live with.” Things had become so desperate that Primo refused to return to the estate after making his complaint, “preferring punishment in town to ill treatment on the estate.”

Challenging a manager’s power to punish was also dangerous, as Fielding, the driver on plantation Alness, demonstrated in August 1824. When the attorney made a routine visit to the plantation he was approached by a woman who had been “locked in the black hole,” per the manager’s orders. She asked the attorney to pardon her, claiming that she was confined “for some trifling fault,” he reported. The attorney, however, was unwilling to contradict the manager’s authority. He ordered the woman back to the stocks and asked her how she had escaped. She said that “Fielding the Driver had let her out.” When the manager learned this he ordered Fielding to be locked up for the night, too, despite Fielding’s insistence that he had not let the woman out. Fielding then “became very violent,” the attorney claimed, and “resisted being put in the stocks.”

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62 “Complaint of the Negro Fielding Belonging to Plantation Alness Corentine Coast,” Aug. 18, 1824, CO 116/140.
Later, Fielding went to the fiscal and complained that he had been punished without cause. But seeking the fiscal’s help only made matters worse. When the manager and attorney responded to his complaint, they claimed that Fielding was “a bad character,” undermining his credibility. The attorney asked the fiscal “to adopt measures to quell the insubordinate conduct of this man to prevent others following his evil & dangerous example.” Fielding had not simply been a negligent driver: he had directly contradicted the manager’s orders, implying that he had the authority to determine who deserved punishment and who should be pardoned. Curtailing the driver’s authority and reinforcing the manager’s were all the more important since, as the attorney pointed out, “the estate is at a remote distance from town,” on the Corentyne Coast, where colonial authority was presumably weaker. Fielding had become “too great a man,” and too much of a threat. Determined to make an example out of him, the fiscal ordered that he be returned to the plantation “in charge of a Dienaar of Justice” (a police officer attached to the fiscal’s office) and “recommended he should be broke as a Driver of the Estate.” He also “ordered [Fielding] to receive 39 lashes in presence of the whole gang & to be confined for four weeks in solitary confinement.” These punishments that must have been humiliating for a man who was accustomed to being shown a measure of respect by Europeans and Africans alike.63

The last resort for managers who were fed up with defiant drivers like Fielding was to demote them to a less prestigious position. For men whose status and very survival depended, in part, on the rewards they reaped as drivers, this could be a crushing blow. Demotion sometimes came as the final straw in a long series of manager-driver conflicts.

63 Ibid.
Take, for instance, the case of Jupiter, a forty year old driver on plantation Alness (the same plantation where Fielding had been “broke” as driver). One day in September 1830 Jupiter wound up in trouble with the manager when he claimed that he could not find a group of men in the evening to pass along the manager’s order to cut firewood. The consequence of issuing the order late was that work began two hours later than normal the next day. When Jupiter went to the waterside the next morning to begin work, the manager “ordered that [he] should be confined that night,” and the next morning Jupiter was flogged. The manager claimed that Jupiter could have found the men and issued the warning had he wanted to, and that “he had been pardoned for similar neglect on former occasions.” This was not a singular blunder that might have gone overlooked, and the manager was fed up. “For the repeated neglect & evident incapability of Jupiter to act as a driver,” the manager decided that Jupiter needed to be “broke from that charge.”

Firing a driver, however, was more complicated than it might seem.

Convincing the very people who had been encouraged to respect, if not fear, a driver that he was no longer a legitimate authority was extremely difficult. Managers often found, moreover, that the political consequences of replacing a driver were dangerous and far-reaching, as the following example illustrates. January was a driver on Demtichem who was publicly flogged and demoted for conspiring with an obeah practitioner to combat an epidemic in 1819. He never forgave the manager, Boas, for demoting him. Indeed, ten years later January began his lengthy complaint to the fiscal with a bitter recollection of his demotion, a punishment for having helped the obeahman Hans perform the “Mingie [Minje]

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64 Sept. 26, 1830, CO 116/146, 208-10.

65 “Complaint Against the Negro Hans,” June 17, 1819, CO 116/138, 60-63.
Mama Dance.” January blamed Boas for having been fired and “flogged under the gallows,” a humiliating punishment, especially for a driver. But despite not having been driver for a decade, January still commanded significant political power on the plantation. This illegitimate authority made continued friction with Boas unavoidable.  

According to January, his most recent conflict with Boas came about when a new attorney, Mr. Winter, arrived on the plantation in 1824. January and the other slaves “went up early last Sunday Morning to wish him good morning,” he explained. As was customary, they “beg[ged] that [they] may be allowed to drink a dram [of rum] at the door to welcome [him].” Winter sent a messenger to fetch the rum from Boas, who was on his way to a neighboring plantation. Boas’s wife, meanwhile, “called him and said...don’t you see the Gang are gone up to their Master’s door to complain against you.” Enraged, Boas returned to confront the slaves who were already jeopardizing his relationship with a new employer. According to January, he “cried out ‘you dogs, who gave you permission.’” January and the others tried to explain that they had not gone to Winter to complain but simply to ask for rum, but Boas did not believe them. He told Winter that “this man,” indicating January, “has given me impudence.” Boas then ordered January “taken to the stocks.”

The trouble might have ended there, were it not for the large group of slaves that stood up for January, their former driver. “The whole gang,” January claimed, “said if this man is locked up we must be locked up too.” They refused to leave the area, demonstrating their continued allegiance to January. According to Boas, “the moment [January] was sent to

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66 “Complaint of the Slave January Belonging to Plant. Deutichem [Demitichem],” Mar. 9, 1829, CO 116/142, 76-97. For the case of Hans and January, see chapter 2.

67 Ibid.
the Hospital” to be confined, “the whole gang with the Exception of the Drivers cried out, we must be put in confinement also.” It took more than two hours, and the help of the drivers and “a few well disposed slaves,” to get January’s supporters to disperse. By this point, January had apparently become too dangerous to keep on Demtichem. A few days later, Boas told January to “get every thing ready as I was going to Courantyne,” to work on a distant plantation where he would pose less of a threat.68

When Boas was questioned by the fiscal, he also began with January’s dismissal ten years earlier. It remained a singular event in their antagonistic relationship. “Since that period,” Boas told the fiscal, “this man has conducted himself whenever an opportunity occurred of treating me with the utmost disrespect.” Boas’s version of the most recent confrontation agreed with January’s in most respects, but the small discrepancies are telling. Boas claimed, for example, that when the messenger “came & asked for a dram for the people -- I said very well and went with him on coming in the yard, I said if these people wanted a dram, I think they might as well have come to me for it, as for me to go to them. One of the negroes cried out No! January says not to do so.” And when Boas confronted January, he met a direct challenge: “I said to January in English, you January how came you concerned in this, you are not a Driver.” January countered with a cutting insult of his own, pointing out that Boas was not a “master”: “His answer was, do I belong to you? Is the rum yours? or are you able to buy me? and such other remarks in presence of Mr. Winter and the whole of the gang, which was intended of course to lessen me in their opinion.”69

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
The struggle between Boas and January was, at its core, a decade-long battle over authority--its provenance, its legitimacy, and its limits--that had reached a boiling point. January posed a threat because he had not accepted his demotion and because he continued to challenge the manager’s authority in ways large and small. As Boas told the fiscal, “the [current] driver has declared that this man January told the negroes not to call me ‘Mr.’ but plainly ‘Boas’,” a symbolic yet effective blow to his status. Had January been an isolated, embittered slave, the situation might have been easy enough to control. But the real danger was that a significant number of people on the plantation continued to recognize January as a legitimate authority despite the fact that he no longer held an official position of power. January was, as Winter emphasized, “a disgraced Driver.” But only in his eyes, for January still “held an unfounded authority over the gang of slaves on Deutichem.”

When drivers were fired their entire families also felt the loss. Drivers’ wives therefore sometimes protested when their husbands were demoted. On plantation Everton, for instance, the acting protector of slaves investigated the complaint of Caroline and found that “there had been a combination formed by the creole part of the woman gang not to go their work, and that the Complainant was considered as the principal.” The reason, the acting protector noted, was that Caroline’s “husband the driver” had recently been “broken by the present manager, who has not been long on the Estate.” As the driver’s wife, Caroline seems to have had enough influence to convince the other women to follow her lead, which illustrates the extent to which drivers’ prestige and authority could carry over to their families. Less than a week after the acting protector’s first visit to Everton, the manager

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70 Ibid.

71 Nov. 26, 1830, CO 116/147, 130-33.
complained that “[none of them] have completed their work,” even though he had put them in the bedstocks every night. The manager reiterated his belief that “there exists a conspiracy amongst the women, not to finish their work.” The overseer agreed that “Caroline is the instigation of the rest, to set the authorities on the Estate at defiance.”

The manager on plantation Utile et Paisible faced a similar problem in 1831 with Barentye, an enslaved woman. Unable to control Barentye himself, the manager went to the fiscal for help. “This woman,” he told the fiscal, “is disaffected to all order and propriety, openly declaring lately in the field that she would not work well, not finish the task given her unless the Manager was removed, and that she would not be quiet or obedient because a man with who she cohabits...has been degraded from being Driver.” More dangerous, however, was that Barentye had “acquired such an ascendancy over the other Women that they do not finish a very reasonable task of work through fear of this woman.” Like drivers themselves, their wives could be powerful and potentially dangerous authority figures, even if they lacked an official title and even after their husbands were demoted.

Managers and colonial authorities knew that firing a driver could be dangerous, so they took steps to minimize the political impact on their plantations. The owner of plantation Broer’s Lust, for instance, decided that it would be too dangerous to let La Rose, the driver, return to the estate. The owner, J. P. Broer, had fired La Rose for repeated insolence and for disobeying orders, he said. But La Rose thought the manager had fired him because he believed La Rose had caused the death of a man on the estate. According to La Rose, two

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73 “No. 10,” Mar. 1, 1831, CO 116/142, 92-98.
enslaved men had told Broer that La Rose had given the sick man something to drink to combat “pain in the belly.” Broer told the fiscal that “the return of La Rose immediately to the Estate would be attended with bad consequences in as much as he appeared to believe that I had obtained information from the two negroes mentioned by him.” Losing his status as driver was a devastating blow for La Rose, so the owner had good reason to fear his retaliation. At Broer’s request, the fiscal ordered La Rose “to be worked for a few days on the public works until [Broer] found an opportunity of hiring him out” to another plantation.\textsuperscript{74}

For some drivers, the pain of losing their position and its corresponding perks was simply too much to bear. Perhaps the most poignant example comes from plantation Canefield, where in April 1824 the driver, Philip, was demoted. According to the plantation manager, Philip “was for some time back acting as a Driver to the Creoles [children] during which time lately he had been in the habit of neglecting his business and getting intoxicated.” “About 10 days ago,” the manager “put him in the stocks for the space of two days,” and threatened to flog him if he continued to perform poorly. When Philip failed to show up for work a few days later, the manager sent him to the stocks and demoted him from driver to field laborer. The next morning Philip was flogged--a punishment that must have been as humiliating as it was painful for a man accustomed to being on the other end of the lash--and ordered to the field. But Philip refused to join the field gang. He refused, in effect, to revert to being an ordinary enslaved man.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{74} “Complaint of the Negro La Rose, belonging to pl. Broer’s lust property of J. P. Broer” Jul. 10, 1826, CO 116/141.

\textsuperscript{75} “Copies of the Quarterly Returns of the Burgher Officers to the Council of Government Berbice From 1st January 1824 to 6th April 1826,” 1824-26, Report of Captain K. Cooper, CO 116/140.
Instead, Philip raced to the Canje River and dove in. The overseer thought Philip was trying to escape, but Philip had other plans. Soon after Philip entered the creek, the overseer ordered the other slaves nearby to enter the river and bring Philip back. But Philip was soon “about 50 feet from the Water Side,” and “before they could reach him he disappeared” below the surface, where he drowned. Philip’s wife, Abanaba, explained that Philip committed suicide because “he was ashamed of being put into the field after so long a Headman.”

Conclusion

Drivers in Berbice accepted the contradictions inherent in their job and its many challenges because of the rewards the position brought them. They struggled to navigate challenges from above and below without alienating managers or other slaves. To cultivate and maintain authority they used a number of strategies, ranging from negotiating better working conditions for their subordinates to crushing dissent with physical violence. Drivers also turned to Europeans to bolster their authority in the face of threats from other slaves. This was an effective strategy for reinforcing their power, but it also highlighted the limits of their authority. Some drivers became remarkably powerful, de facto “rulers of the estates” where they lived. Yet others, when they fell out of favor with European plantation authorities, faced a humiliating loss of status and privilege.

The driver’s predicament highlights a crucial layer in the complex web of power relationships that shaped slave society. A better understanding of the driver’s role helps

76 Ibid.
reveal how, at its heart, the slave system functioned. Intermediaries like drivers played an important--and often overlooked--role in shaping the relationships of enslaved people and their enslavers, and in buttressing the power of European plantation authorities. Alliances between drivers and managers, moreover, illustrate one of the many ways that different types of authority--European and African, free and enslaved--intersected, overlapped, and at times reinforced one another in surprising ways. That the plantation complex survived as long as it did probably had much to do with such unexpected cooperation.
CHAPTER THREE:
“ILL-TREATING WOMEN AND WIVES”

On Monday, April 9, 1827, an enslaved woman named Betsy went to the protector of slaves to lodge a formal complaint against her ex-husband, John William, for assault. According to Betsy, on Sunday around 11:00am she had been walking through the soggy streets of New Amsterdam, the colony’s rough and tumble capital, when she ran into William, who was noticeably drunk. William approached Betsy, and asked her “for whom [she] was pregnant,” but Betsy “told him it was not his business.” Or, as William recalled their encounter, Betsy “told [him] to kiss her a--e.” Betsy’s bold declaration of sexual independence enraged William. He beat Betsy, threw her to the ground, and “and kicked [her] under the belly,” she claimed, directing his violence at the most visible evidence of Betsy’s relationship with another man. Betsy defended herself as best she could, and the two fought and cursed one another until a passerby “parted them,” and “told John William not to beat the girl.” At the protector’s office, William admitted that he had given Betsy “three slaps,” but denied the fight was as bad as Betsy claimed. He “did not,” he was careful to point out, “kick her.” More importantly, he argued that his violent reaction was a justifiable response to a disrespectful remark from a woman he had until recently claimed as his “wife.” The protector, however, determined that William’s attack was unjustified, adding that he knew “John William to be a bad character.” Citing the “impropriety” of having assaulted
Betsy, he ordered William confined “in the dark room” during the upcoming Easter holidays.¹

One might assume that enslaved women like Betsy, who were significantly outnumbered by men in Berbice, would have had an easy enough time ending unsatisfying relationships and finding new partners given their demographic advantage.² But, as Betsy’s struggle to leave John William shows, women found their sexual and social mobility constrained by men who used violence and intimidation against them. Officers of the colonial government like the protector of slaves, meanwhile, intervened and mediated some domestic disputes as part of the imperial government’s broader effort to “ameliorate” slavery through increased regulation and surveillance of its colonial slave populations.³ Conflicts like the one between Betsy and John William, documented in rich detail in the records of the Berbice protectors of slaves and fiscals between 1819 and 1834, are thus microcosms of much broader power struggles over the character and state of enslaved people’s domestic lives in the early nineteenth century British empire. Disputes over marriage and sex, adultery


² Sex ratios in Berbice varied and became more even closer to emancipation (1834), but men outnumbered women throughout the period covered in this study. In 1817, for example, there were 128.4 males per 100 females; by 1831 the ratio was 114.5 males per 100 females. In Jamaica, for comparison, the ratios were 100.3 males per 100 females in 1817 and 94.5 males per 100 females in 1832. See B.W. Higman, Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834 (Baltimore, 1984), 116-17 (table 5.7 and fig. 5.1).

and domestic violence, sexual possession and jealousy, as they played out in the streets and in “negro yards,” on plantations and and in colonial offices, therefore provide opportunities to ask new questions about gender, slavery, and power in the Atlantic world and, in particular, about enslaved people’s domestic relationships with one another.

More specifically, the legal records of the fiscals and protectors of slaves—which together constitute the single largest body of slave testimony in the Anglophone world—raise important questions about the overlapping, intersecting, and at times competing goals of three distinct yet intimately linked groups: the British imperial government and its colonial officials, enslaved men, and enslaved women. What did these groups want when it came to marriage, sex, and the domestic lives of enslaved people? What interest did the British government have in monitoring and regulating enslaved people’s domestic relationships, and what strategies did its colonial officials use to try to shape these relationships? What kind of domestic arrangements did enslaved people themselves want? To what degree did the goals of enslaved men and enslaved women diverge? How did men and women deal with problems such as infidelity, domestic violence, and competition from rivals? To whom did they turn for support?

In answering these questions, this chapter argues that despite women’s demographic advantage, which could have plausibly expanded their authority vis-a-vis their domestic and sexual relationships with men, a range of forces combined to reduce their domestic bargaining power, circumscribe their sexual mobility, and shore up patriarchal authority. Men in Berbice, whether European or African, free or enslaved, often cooperated to uphold male privilege and reduce female power, which left enslaved women with limited options for
protecting themselves against abuse and exploitation. Though some women turned to
colonial officials for help, women often found that their most effective means of support was
their own kin. These arguments, taken together, contribute to a rich body of scholarship on
slavery and gender in Atlantic slave societies by highlighting some of the possibilities and
promises of examining gendered power struggles not only between Africans and Europeans,
or enslaved people and their enslavers, but between enslaved men and enslaved women—or
husbands and wives—theirmselves.4

Amelioration and Bio-Power

A major focus of the British campaign for the amelioration of slavery in the early
nineteenth century was the fate of the slave family. Antislavery reformers had long leveled
gendered attacks against the slave trade and slavery for separating mothers from children, for
degrading women’s “virtue,” and for denying enslaved men what they viewed as their right
to assume patriarchal authority and protect their wives. In the era of amelioration, reformers

4 Historians of slavery have, with notable exceptions, spent considerably more time exploring gender relations
between enslaved people and Europeans or whites than they have examined gender relations and especially
gender-based conflicts between enslaved men and women. Equally important, given the focus of this chapter, is
Caribbean historian Henrice Altink’s observation that “Caribbean historians have not yet explored in great detail
the nature of slave marriage,” an oversight she attributed to a “lack of sources that provide an insight into the
slaves’ intimate world” as well as historians’ greater interest “in dispelling the myth instigated by contemporary
observers that the slave family was overwhelmingly matrifocal and unstable than in the quality of the slaves’
intimate relationships.” See Altink, Representations of Slave Women in Discourses on Slavery and Abolition,
1780-1838 (New York, 2007), 210n5. Feminist scholars have long urged historians to pay greater attention to
the way gender shaped relationships between enslaved men and women, to the presence of domestic violence in
slave households, and to consider the extent to which patriarchy and sexism shaped enslaved communities. See,
for example, bell hooks, Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (Boston, 1981), 15-47; Barbara Bush,
Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838 (Kingston, Jamaica, 1990), 8; and Nell Irvin Painter, “Soul
Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting,” in Southern History Across the Color Line
(Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002). For enslaved people’s domestic lives and internal family conflicts in the U.S. South,
see Brenda Stevenson, “Distress and Discord in Virginia Slave Families, 1830-1860,” in In Joy and in Sorrow:
Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900, ed. Carol K. Bleser (New York, 1991),
103-21; Ann Patton Malone, Sweet Chariot: Slave Family and House Old Structure in Nineteenth-Century
Louisiana (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992) and Emily West, Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South
Carolina (Urbana, Ill., 2004), esp. ch. 2.
promoted the kind of family structures, marriages, and gender relations they deemed necessary to create an orderly, productive, and governable post-emancipation society. In particular, they encouraged solemnized, monogamous marriage and patriarchal, nuclear families. These were, of course, the same domestic arrangements that middle-class reformers were sentimentalizing in Britain at the time, and efforts to bring slave marriages under state control overseas mirrored similar metropolitan developments. Slave marriages were also promoted by the British government and some West Indian planters for pragmatic reasons, as many came to believe that encouraging slaves to marry would raise reproductive levels and pacify enslaved people. As the ban on the importation of African captives to British colonies after 1808 gave new momentum to pro-natalism, colonial governments and individual slaveowners developed a range of material incentives—from better houses for married couples to cash incentives for mothers—to induce men and women to marry and have children. By the 1820s, reformers, politicians, and planters had joined forces—if for very different reasons—to pressure enslaved people to conform to bourgeois British notions of marriage, sex, and family life.5

These efforts to use marriage as a form of population control in Berbice are best illustrated, at least in terms of official policy, by various provisions regarding marriage and

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family life in the colony’s first comprehensive slave code, adopted in 1826 and modeled on the imperial government’s 1823 recommendations. For the first time, slaves (who belonged to the same owner) were granted the right to apply for marriage licenses from the colonial government. Once solemnized by one of the colony’s few ministers, these marriages would be legally recognized and registered (unlike the common-law or “reputed” marriages enslaved people had long formed). New legal protections for married couples were also established, such as a prohibition on being sold away from one’s husband or wife (or without one’s children under age sixteen). These new rights, reformers hoped, would encourage slaves to adopt official, Christian marriage and form stable, (re)productive families. Another provision, aimed at promoting reproduction among a population that was declining precipitously due to high mortality and morbidity, low birth rates, and the export sale of slaves to neighboring Demerara-Essequibo, stipulated financial rewards to be given to enslaved mothers. Every woman who had a child “while she preserve[d] her fidelity in marriage” was to be rewarded with a “gratuity” of twelve guilders once the child survived for six weeks—a timetable indicative of the high levels of infant mortality in the colony. For every subsequent child, mothers were to be paid fifteen guilders; and if a woman gave birth to six children, upon the youngest child’s seventh birthday she was to be rewarded with an exemption from all other than “light” work.

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6 For the recommendations of secretary of state for war and the colonies Henry Bathurst, see Circulars, May 28 and Jul. 9, 1823, CO 29/20/246-264, 265-291.

7 The full text of the law can be found in The Berbice Royal Gazette, Sept. 30, 1826, CO 111/102 (hereafter Berbice slave code). For marriage licenses, see clause 19.

8 Ibid., clause 26.

9 Ibid., clause 21.
The corollary to encouraging enslaved people to embrace middle-class British family structures and produce more offspring was an unprecedented effort to criminalize a range of supposedly deviant or disruptive sexual and marital behaviors. Throughout the 1820s and 1830s the colonial government and, to varying degrees, plantation owners, managers, and overseers, attempted to document and punish a wide spectrum of sexual and domestic acts, ranging from infidelity and “fornication” to polygamy and spousal abuse. Indeed, punishment record books maintained by slaveowners or their agents and collected by the colonial government reveal that enslaved people could be punished for a range of seemingly private or domestic activities, including “lying with other men’s wives,” “seducing and attempting to seduce other men’s wives,” “infidelity to husbands,” “committing fornication,” and “ill-treating women and wives.” These “offences” appeared alongside several dozen other behaviors which, according to the colonial government, needed to be monitored, quantified, and curtailed. A civil magistrate who explained the 1826 amelioration reforms to Berbician slaves was explicit about the surveillance purpose of these punishment records in his report to the colonial government. “I made it a point,” he wrote, “to impress upon their minds that the Punishment record book was meant not only as a check on the conduct of the managers towards the slaves, but also as a record...to know such of the Negroes whose characters are really bad and that such as appeared often in that book would be debarred of many of the benefits afforded to the slaves of good characters by the provisions of this code.”

10 “Reports of the Civil Magistrates in the Several Districts On the Promulgation of the New Code of the 25th September 1826,” CO 111/102, 302-03.
Yet relatively few enslaved people were punished for sexual and marital offenses, especially when compared to other items listed on punishment records, which suggests that most plantation managers and overseers did not concern themselves with enslaved people’s domestic conflicts unless they threatened plantation productivity or caused disturbances that jeopardized managerial authority. (The other interpretive possibility—that there was hardly any extra-marital sex or domestic violence, for example, in a densely populated, highly stressed society of some 23,000 people—seems unlikely.) A few comparisons are illustrative. Between July 1 and December 31, 1828, for example, six men were punished for “lying with other men’s wives,” two men were punished for “attempting to ravish,” one man and three women were punished for “committing fornication,” and eight men were punished for “ill-treating women and wives.” These low levels of documented punishment for illicit domestic or sexual behaviors stand in stark contrast to the high rates of punishment for many other offenses, such as “theft, petty larceny” (176 punishments), “refusing to work” (204 punishments), “disobedience” (413 punishments), “absconding and running away from work” (249 punishments), and “bad work and insufficient [work]” (1,813 punishments).11 The results for the following six-month period were similar, with only six men punished for “attempting to ravish,” five men punished for “lying with other mens’ wives,” two men punished for “seducing and attempting to seduce other men’s wives,” two men punished for “infidelity to wives,” eight men punished for “ill-treating women or wives,” five women punished for infidelity, and no punishments for “committing fornication.”12 Recorded

11 “Abstract of Offences committed by Male and Female Plantation Slaves in the Colony Berbice...from 1st July to 31st December 1828...,” in PP 1831 (262), 19-20.

12 “Abstract of Offences committed by Male and Female Plantation Slaves in the Colony Berbice...from 1st January to 30th June 1829...,” in PP 1831 (262), 62-3.
punishments for sexual and marital offenses were, by Berbician standards, extraordinarily low. Moreover, the rate at which these offenses were punished varied widely from plantation to plantation or manager to manager, with some punishment books containing not a single marital offense while others listed several dozen. For most managers, promoting sexual morality or mediating domestic disputes among the enslaved people they supervised was not a high priority.

As a means of “bio-power,” the British metropolitan government’s efforts to regulate enslaved people’s sexual and domestic lives had a negligible impact on slave marriages. When it came to encouraging slaves to apply for official marriage licenses, for instance, early optimism soon gave way to the realization that solemnized marriage held few attractions for Berbician slaves, who had long formed (and dissolved) their own marital bonds without the colonial government’s acknowledgment or ministers’ sanction. In a January 1827 report to the governor, for instance, the protector of slaves claimed that “the aversion to marriage, which heretofore existed” among the Crown-owned or winkel slaves in New Amsterdam—those who had the most contact with missionaries and colonial administrators who might have pressured them to apply for marriage licenses—was “gradually disappearing.” The protector praised the efforts of the winkel superintendent and the London Missionary Society’s John Wray, whose New Amsterdam chapel was one of the few places in the colony where slaves received formal instruction in Christianity, in encouraging enslaved people to

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14 According to Michel Foucault, “bio-power” was characterized by a range of governmental strategies that focused both on disciplining individual bodies (“an anatomo-politics of the human body”) and an on regulating biological process as a means of population control (“a bio-politics of the population”). In the late early modern period, he argued, “there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking a beginning of an era of ‘bio-power’.” Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978), 139-40.
embrace formal marriage. But less than a year later, officials reluctantly admitted that the colony’s slaves had not, as a whole, shown much interest in formal marriage. In September 1828 the protector noted that he had only granted five marriage licenses in the previous six months, and that on rural estates—where the vast majority of the colony’s slave population was located—there were only 29 solemnized marriages (in contrast to more than 3,000 couples living in “reputed marriages”). Two years later the number of marriages had more than tripled, but 97 solemnized marriages in a population of more than 20,000 slaves was hardly evidence for widespread acceptance of formal, Christian marriage. As late as 1832, the secretary of state for the colonies admitted that “the almost total absence of marriage amongst the slave population” in Berbice was “a subject of serious regret.”

To the extent that the 1826 amelioration reforms promoted sexual reproduction, the record is only marginally better. Birth rates increased slightly in the years immediately following the enactment of incentives for marriage and childbirth, from 28.7 births per 1,000 (1822-1825) to 35.1 births per 1,000 (1825-1828), which coincided with the colony’s short-lived period of positive natural increase. Yet this trend did not last: a few years later birth rates had fallen to 31.8 per 1,000, and Berbice once again faced negative rates of natural

15 David Power to Henry Beard, Jan. 21, 1827, CO 116/143, 149-52. Winkel (the Dutch word for “shop”) slaves were owned and managed by the British government. See Thompson, Unprofitable Servants.

16 “Protector of Slaves Report, to 31 August 1828,” in PP 1829 (335), 29. For Berbice’s slave population, which peaked in 1819 at almost 24,000 slaves and declined to less than 20,000 by 1834, see Higman, Slave Populations, 415 (table S1.1).

17 PP 1832 (660), 41, cited in Alvin O. Thompson, A Documentary History of Slavery in Berbice, 1796-1834 (Georgetown, Guyana, 2002), 216n8.

18 Goderich to George Murray, Apr. 21, 1832, CO 116/148, 3-13. Rates of formal (Christian) marriage among Jamaican slaves, who could legally marry under the sanction of the Anglican church, were similarly low. Between 1808 and 1822, for example, only 3,600 marriages were registered by the Anglican church among a population of some 333,000 slaves. See Altink, Slave Women in Discourses on Slavery and Abolition, 93; and Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 101.
increase. Any link between colonial marriage policy and reproductive rates, moreover, is
tenuous at best.

The British metropolitan government had taken an unprecedented interest in enslaved
people’s domestic lives in the early nineteenth century. Through its colonial administrators it
tried to bring slave marriages under formal control and to pressure enslaved people to
conform to British notions of gender and family life. It extended incentives to enslaved
people who formalized their conjugal ties and to women who produced children, while
criminalizing, cataloging, and monitoring a range of supposedly problematic sexual and
domestic activities. Yet these coercive policies did little, on the whole, to reshape enslaved
people’s domestic lives, not least of all because colonial officials and plantation managers
were more concerned with plantation productivity and order than they were with promoting
morality. Nevertheless, official interest in slave marriage and the slave family generated
copious amounts of documentation about enslaved people’s domestic lives and especially
about the competing aspirations of enslaved men and enslaved women.

Male Rivalry and Sexual Control

Men in Berbice showed little interest in officially recognized marriage, but many of
them did want various kinds of sexual and domestic relationships with women. Yet they had
to contend with a demographic landscape that made finding female partners difficult. Like
other so-called “third phase” sugar colonies (e.g., Trinidad, Demerara-Essequibo) that

developed later than most West Indian slave societies and had majority-African populations in the early nineteenth century, Berbice was marked by high male to female sex ratios. Slave ship cargoes contained far more men than women throughout the course of the transatlantic slave trade, so in colonies like Berbice, which received large numbers of captive Africans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, enslaved men outnumbered enslaved women by a significant margin.\textsuperscript{20} The demographic difficulty men had finding female partners raises questions about how men tried to attract and retain women, how they competed with one another for female partners or wives, and what strategies they used to prevent women from leaving them or shifting their allegiances to other men.

Among the things men had to offer women were material support and protection. Evidence suggests that men who were willing or able to share their material resources--or exchange them for domestic labor--had an advantage when it came to attracting women.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} As Higman explained, “the Atlantic slave trade brought considerably more males than females to the New World. In the last decades of the trade to the British Caribbean, slave ship cargoes had sex ratios varying between 150 and 180 males per 100 females. Thus, the sex ratios of the slave populations differed primarily according to the proportion of Africans they contained, and these differences in turn were determined chiefly by variations in the stage of settlement.” Third-phase sugar colonies imported large numbers of African captives in the period 1780-1807, which meant that males outnumbered females in these colonies in the early nineteenth century. In the Caribbean as a whole, however, sex ratios were almost evenly balanced in 1817, when “the first reliable data became available through the registration system.” But in Berbice and other recently settled slave societies, males outnumbered women at least until emancipation. (In Jamaica, for comparison, which was more typical of earlier-settled Caribbean plantation societies, the ratios were 100.3 males per 100 females in 1817 and 94.5 males per 100 females in 1832). See Higman, \textit{Slave Populations}, 115-16 (quote), 117 (table 5.7 and fig. 5.1). See also Beckles, “Gender Ideologies in the Caribbean,” 175-76.

\textsuperscript{21} Scattered evidence suggests that enslaved men in the Anglophone Caribbean provided women material support in exchange for domestic labor. At the very least, men in Berbice expected their wives to perform most domestic chores. An enslaved man named Quaby, for example, cited his wife Arsenia’s failure “to perform her duties as a wife” as his reason for submitting a divorce petition. Quaby was explicit about Arsenia’s shortcomings: “she will not cook, wash, or even speak to him,” he testified. And he would rather be divorced than “live in that manner any longer.” When Arsenia answered the protector’s summons, moreover, the protector “made [her] sensitive of the obligations she owed to her husband.” See Nov. 9, 1830, CO 116/147, 104-06; and David Power, “General Observations,” Sept. 15, 1831, CO 116/148, 328-30. Another enslaved man, Brutus, complained to the protector when his owner ordered the women who had been cooking for the men on the estate to pick coffee instead. Brutus explained that “the loss of this we all felt, as we have no wives on the Estate.” See “Complaint of the negro Brutus belonging to J. F. Linde,” Nov. 25, 1827, CO 116/141. See also B.W. Higman, “The Slave Family and Household in the British West Indies, 1800-1834,” \textit{Journal of Interdisciplinary History} 6, no. 2 (1975), 284-85; Bush, \textit{Slave Women in Caribbean Society}, 98; and Altink, \textit{Slave Women in Discourses on Slavery and Abolition}, 95.
The comparative ease with which so-called privileged slaves, such as drivers and artisans, found wives and formed polygynous families probably had much to do with the social and material advantages such men enjoyed.\(^\text{22}\) Free men of color appear to have been attractive partners, too, for similar reasons. The free black man George, for example, had enough money to hire his wife, Minkey, from her owner, as well as pay for clothing and food that her owner did not supply.\(^\text{23}\) Another free colored man, Richard Walsh, similarly claimed that “he had spent a considerable sum of money” on his enslaved wife.\(^\text{24}\) Other men gave women material or symbolic gifts while courting, such as England, who wooed a woman with “a root of sweet cassava” when she was in the process of separating from her husband.\(^\text{25}\)

Even men with little in the way of material resources--which described the overwhelming majority of men in Berbice--sometimes shared what they had with women who depended on them. The enslaved man Command, for example, claimed that the women on the plantation where he lived “never get any allowance, only occasionally a small piece of fish,” and that he “ha[d] to give half of his allowance” to his wife.\(^\text{26}\) A complaint from a woman named Sankey, who protested her husband being sold without her because she would


\(^{25}\) “Examination of the Death of the Negro Richmond,” Mar. 18, 1822, CO 116/138, 97-98.

\(^{26}\) Other enslaved complainants corroborated that the women and children on the estate received no allowance, and the overseer admitted that the weekly allowance was distributed to the men. “Investigation of the Complaint of Nine Negro Men, belonging to Mrs. Ibon Sanders, residing in Upper Berbice; investigated this day before his Honor the President, and the honourable Member W. Halder,” Feb. 8, 1819, CO 116/138, 26-31.
be “unable to support” her “little child” without him, provides further evidence that material support was one of the most important things men could offer women.\textsuperscript{27}

It is also possible that men made themselves attractive to women by protecting women from physical abuse or seeking redress on their behalf. Sometimes this took the form of standing up to plantation authorities. A man from plantation De Resolute named Philip, for example, protested the way his wife and children were treated by “quitting his work without permission & presenting himself in a hostile manner armed with a cutlass, with his hat on his head to dispute with the manager.”\textsuperscript{28} Other men went over the heads of plantation authorities and complained to colonial officials about punishments inflicted on their wives. Claas, from the coffee plantation Op Hoop van Beter, for instance, went to the fiscal in June 1824 after the estate’s owner “flogged [his] wife Santje,” which he claimed led to her miscarriage.\textsuperscript{29} That same year a man named Willem, from plantation McRetrite, complained to the fiscal about “the manager punishing [his] wife...Kitty.” Willem had tried reasoning with the manager, he explained, and even admitted, according to the manager, that Kitty’s “mouth was very bad and at times he himself did not know what to do with her.” The fiscal “regretted the Manager found it necessary to punish [Willem’s] wife with the whip,” but ruled that since Kitty’s flogging was legal Willem had no reason for “abscond[ing] from the Estate,” and he would therefore be “confined for a fortnight.” We can only speculate about how the wives of men like Philip, Claas, and Willem interpreted or reacted to their husbands

\textsuperscript{27} “Examination of a Complaint preferred by the negress Sankey, belonging to plantation Vryburg, the property of Messrs. Wulff, Brown, and Co.,” Jul. 21, 1822, CO 116/138, 127.


\textsuperscript{29} “Complaint of the Negro Claas belonging to plantation Op Hoop Van Beter in Berbice River,” Jun. 22, 1824, CO 116/140.
protests lodged, but it is possible that the courage such men displayed and the risks they took on behalf of their wives made them attractive partners for women who lived in a world where violence against women was rampant.

When persuasion or seduction failed, some men in Berbice turned to physical violence to establish relationships with women or assert exclusive sexual possession of the women they claimed. This violence could be directed against women who left men, as in John William’s attack on Betsy, for example, or against other men, as the following cases of male rivalry illustrate.\(^{30}\) Evidence collected during an investigation into the mysterious death of an enslaved man named Richmond in March 1822 reveals that male rivalries over women could be intense and, potentially, fatal. According to the manager of plantation Herstelling, where Richmond lived, he had been woken “by a considerable noise” one night. When he went to investigate, he “learnt that the negro Richmond...had attempted to cut England’s throat.” Richmond “suspected [that] the negro woman Olivia, formerly his wife, had been connected with the negro England,” so he waited until nighttime, when England began his shift as watchman, to get revenge. He “endeavored to take [England’s] life by cutting his throat with a knife,” but England “wrestled with Richmond” and called for help. The drivers soon caught Richmond, and the manager then had him put in the stocks. While doing so he “received much abuse from Richmond, who threatened to bring him into trouble by taking him before the Fiscal.”\(^{31}\)

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\(^{30}\)The unfavorable sex ratios men faced probably intensified their rivalries over women, a point made by Claire Robertson in “Africa Into the Americas? Slavery and Women, the Family, and the Gender Division of Labor,” in *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington, Ind., 1996), 15.

\(^{31}\)“Examination of the Death of the Negro Richmond,” Mar. 18, 1822, CO 116/138, 97-98.
According to the manager, Richmond and Olivia’s problems went back at least several months. When the manager took over the estate four months earlier, he explained, Richmond and Olivia “came up to him to declare they could not agree together.” But he ignored them and, if they gave an explanation for their desire to separate, he did not note it. When they approached him a few weeks later with the same story, however, he relented. “If you cannot live with and are satisfied to leave each other,” he told them, “it is all good; but if I hear either of you disputing with any of the other negroes, in consequence of either of your taking up with some one else, I will punish you severely.”

Even if this was mere posturing for the fiscal—an attempt to portray himself as a competent, firm manager—it suggests that plantation officials knew or were expected to know that when enslaved women left men there was the potential for serious violence. Since Richmond and Olivia had separated, however, the manager claimed he had no problems with either of them until the foiled attempt to kill England. Olivia no longer lived with Richmond, but she continued cooking for him two or three times a week—a sign of some lingering commitment or, perhaps, affection. But when England began courting Olivia, the manager reasoned, Richmond’s “jealousy” had prompted him to lash out at England.

As it turned out, there was little time for the manager or anyone else to question Richmond. Just two days after England barely escaped with his life, when a group of militiamen arrived to investigate the attempted murder, they noted that Richmond appeared “drunk.” Richmond then “immediately...seemed to reel, and fell on the ground apparently in

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32 Here the manager revealed that he was less interested in promoting dissoluble marriage than he was in avoiding disorder caused by domestic disputes.

33 “Examination of the Death of the Negro Richmond,” Mar. 18, 1822, CO 116/138, 97-98.
a fit.” He was brought into the manager’s house, where two doctors “attempted to give him something,” to help him, “but in a very few moments he expired.” It is impossible to know what killed Richmond so suddenly, but it is conceivable that England or someone acting on his behalf (an obeah practitioner, perhaps?) poisoned Richmond in retaliation.\textsuperscript{34}

If some men, like Richmond, took matters into their own hands, others went to plantation authorities for help thwarting advances made by other men toward “their” women. This was a key part of their efforts to maintain domestic control and assert exclusive sexual control of their wives. Evidence reveals that plantation managers were willing to help enslaved men in such cases, for African and European men shared certain assumptions about patriarchal authority. In May 1831, for example, Mark, a field laborer belonging to plantation Providence, was punished in the stocks and then flogged for repeatedly courting the wife of another man. As the manager of Providence told the protector, Mark had been “in the habit of going to Pl[antation] Everton and disturbing the man Hyacinth’s wife,” Hebe, so he had asked the manager of Everton to “secure [Mark] and send him home to be punished” if he continued. The manager of Everton obliged, prohibiting Mark from coming to his plantation, “in consequence of his seducing Hyacynth’s wife Hebe, who has five children by her husband.” He then gave the driver “orders to bring Mark to [the manager] whenever he should come in the negro yard, in consequence of former disturbances.” So when an intoxicated Mark returned to the Everton “negro houses” one day, the driver led the effort to apprehend him, which only succeeded after a protracted fight with Mark and his friends, who

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
came to his defense. The protector dismissed Mark’s complaint, signaling his disapproval of Mark’s having disobeyed the manager’s order to leave Hyacinth’s wife alone.35

Enslaved men also faced competition from Europeans who refused to respect their marriages and who sexually exploited their partners. Warding off advances or sexual abuse from overseers and managers, however, was more dangerous and more difficult than fending off other enslaved men, not least of all because physical violence against Europeans was borderline suicidal. Perhaps the only feasible strategy in this situation, then, was to seek redress from the colonial government. Remarkably, this sometimes worked. In August 1822, for instance, a man from plantation Scotland, named Felix, went to the fiscal and complained that the manager was “always taking the negroes’ wives, particularly his wife” of two years. The manager “takes her from him, although he has a wife of his own,” Felix claimed. The manager had even impregnated Felix’s wife, and “since the child has been born, the manager is always punishing him and his wife without cause.” The men on the estate had tried to solve the problem before, but to no avail. “Some time ago,” Felix explained, “ten of the gang came to complain to their master...that the manager had connexion with their wives.” Their owner “promised to them that he would remove the manager from the estate,” but did not follow through. The acting fiscal, accompanied by Felix’s owner, went to Scotland, where he questioned the slaves and the manager. And though he determined that Felix had left the estate primarily to escape an impending punishment for not finishing his task the day before, and punished him “for his misconduct,” he also found that there was much truth to Felix’s characterization of the manager. The acting fiscal “severely reprimanded” the manager “for

35 May 24, 1831, CO 116/148, 191-93.
taking improper liberties with the women on the estate,” and “strongly recommended” that
the owner “discharge him from his employ.” For men like Felix and Hyacinth, who lacked
the ability to deter rivals on their own, seeking help from European authorities could be an
effective strategy.

When men blamed their wives, instead of their rivals, for jeopardizing their domestic
authority, however, they sometimes took out their anger on their wives’ bodies. Men appear
to have been particularly violent against women who left them to begin sexual relationships
with other men. And in some cases colonial authorities sanctioned violence as an acceptable
means of controlling women’s sexuality. In May 1832, for instance, a free black man named
Burnett beat his wife, Rosaline, in the middle of the street one morning “for having slept with
another man.” Burnett, apparently aware that even in Berbice there were limits on the
amount of domestic violence men might get away with, tried to reframe Rosaline’s complaint
by downplaying the level of violence and, more importantly, emphasizing his wife’s
infidelity. As Burnett told the protector, “he was very sorry for having raised his hand
against Rosaline; but the circumstances which led to it, he hoped would be taken into
consideration.” Rosaline “had been his wife for a certain time,” so when “he saw her coming
out of the man’s room, and being at the moment much irritated,” he “struck her a blow.”
Burnett also tried to counter Rosaline’s self-portrayal as vulnerable victim by pointing out
that she had “return[ed] [the blow] and tore his shirt and other clothes from him.” Once

36 “Examination of a Complaint preferred by the negro Felix, belonging to plantation Scotland, against the
Manager of said estate,” Aug. 23, 1822, CO 116/138, 131.
confronted with Burnett’s testimony, Rosaline “acknowledged she was wrong in intriguing from her husband.”

But Rosaline insisted that she no longer wanted anything to do with Burnett and that she would not tolerate his violence. She “requested that he (Burnett) might be cautioned not to molest her again; as she wished to separate from him--but at the same time that he might be punished for what had passed.” Unfortunately for Rosaline, the protector merely “reprimanded both parties for their improper conduct, and dismissed the complaint.” His decision suggested that infidelity and domestic violence were morally comparable in the eyes of the colonial government. It also indicated that officials treated men who used violence against women with little more than a slap on the wrist. Given this climate of tolerance for spousal abuse and the demographic difficulties men faced, it is not surprising that some men turned to violence to control their wives.

A similar case from September 1829 underscores men’s reliance on violence to control their wives as well as the extent to which enslaved men, plantation management, and colonial officials cooperated to reinforce patriarchal power. An “old woman” named Bella went to the protector to protest having been punished “in the hand and feet stocks” by her manager. She had only tried to protect her daughter, Elizabeth, from a brutal beating at the hands of Elizabeth’s rope-wielding husband, she said, when the manager punished her for interfering. The manager, however, explained to the protector that a few weeks earlier, Elizabeth’s husband, Barron, “went to him to complain that his wife was going off the estate to [plantation] No. 19, where she had an intrigue with another man.” Barron had sought the

37 May 14, 1832, CO 116/140, 172-75.

38 Ibid.
manager’s help, or at least approval, in disciplining his wife for adultery and reasserting his sexual control of Elizabeth.\textsuperscript{39}

The manager had agreed to help. He told Barron that if Elizabeth continued her “intrigue,” Barron should bring Elizabeth to him for punishment. So, when Barron reported a few weeks later that Elizabeth “had gone again to Plantation No. 19, and that he had just brought her back,” the manager gave Barron permission to lock her up in the stocks (and perhaps more). Bella “insisted on being locked up, too, to keep her daughter company,” and the manager obliged. The following morning, moreover, the manager decided “that because [Bella] had encouraged and countenanced her daughter’s infidelity,” she would have to trade her job taking care of the plantation’s children at the “Creole house” for more grueling work in the fields. Bella refused “and was very saucy,” the manager said, so he placed her in the stocks a second time. The protector apparently approved of the manager’s cooperation with Barron in punishing Elizabeth’s alleged infidelity, so he dismissed Bella’s complaint with a reprimand for “promoting the licentious pursuit of her daughter.”\textsuperscript{40}

Men in Berbice who wanted sexual or domestic relationships with women faced an uphill battle, given the relative scarcity of women and competition from rivals. Men who managed to attract female partners used a variety of strategies to control women’s sexuality and preserve such relationships, but a prominent one was physical violence. Men used physical force against other men they saw as threats and against their own wives or partners. Some men also turned to sympathetic plantation managers and colonial officials for help.

\textsuperscript{39} “Complaint No. 5,” Sept. 16, 1829, CO 116/145, 232.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
Men often found their aspirations frustrated, however, by women who refused to conform to their expectations.

**Abuse, Infidelity, and Female Networks of Support**

Enslaved women in Berbice demonstrated in a variety of ways their insistence on shaping the contours of their relationships with men. In their words and deeds they asserted their right to begin and end relationships as they saw fit, and insisted on certain minimum standards of treatment from their partners and their communities. Women faced a number of obstacles to forming the kind of relationships that they might have wanted, however, both from their own partners and neighbors as well as from outsiders. When problems arose that they could not solve on their own, which ranged from abusive husbands to other women who enabled their husbands’ infidelity, women turned to European authorities and especially their own families for protection and support.

Some of the most striking evidence for Berbician women’s efforts to control their sexual relationships with men comes from cases of polyandry. All but unheard of in the West and Central African societies from which captive Africans came (where polygyny, in contrast, was widespread), polyandry is usually also thought of as “extremely rare” in the Caribbean. It was thus the most extreme way that women in Berbice tried to take advantage
of the colony’s uneven sex ratios. The extent of polyandry in Berbice is difficult to
determine, but scattered evidence suggests that some women were unwilling to yield to
pressure from colonial officials, enslaved men, and plantation managers to dissolve
polyandrous relationships.

A woman named Mary, for example, complained to the fiscal in May 1826 that her
owner, L.F. Gallez, refused to allow her to keep two husbands. “I had a husband and a
Abadika a help mate or second husband,” she explained, “they quarreled about me they
wanted to fight with cutlasses.” Eventually “Gallez said I must leave one. I said I would
not.” Gallez threatened to lock Mary up, and then sent one of her husbands to work on a
woodcutting estate on the Canje River. When Mary’s “help husband” died, Mary “took up
with one belonging to the Estate,” and then refused to go to the Canje estate where the other
husband was unless her help husband accompanied her. “I come to you,” Mary told the
fiscal, “to get my right.” But the fiscal, consistent with British views of polygamy as
evidence of Africans’ supposed immorality and promiscuity, “informed [Mary] that she could
not be allowed to have two husbands. She must choose either the one of the other.” Gallez
had even agreed to let her live with whichever husband she chose so long as “she made a
selection.” But Mary refused to choose; “she knew it was the new Law,” she admitted, but

41 Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 97 (quotation). James H. Sweet speculated that in early colonial
Brazil polyandry “may have been as common as polygyny” due to the scarcity of African women (Recreating
Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441-1770 [Chapel Hill, NC, 2003],
43). To the extent that enslaved people in the Americas practiced polyandry as a result of high male to female
ratios, this process mirrored the well documented increase in polygyny in many African societies during the era
of the slave trade due to high female to male rations. For the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on African
family structures, see Herbert S. Klein, “African Women in the Atlantic Slave Trade,” in Women and Slavery in
Africa, ed. Claire C. Robertson, and Martin A. Klein, (Madison, Wis., 1983), 29-38; and John Thornton,
“Sexual Demography: The Impact of the Slave Trade on Family Structure,” in Women and Slavery in Africa,
“it was not right.”

Rosie, from the Gebroeders coffee plantation, similarly took advantage of the surplus of men on the estate in 1827. Rosie was described by the manager as “young but of the most abandoned character, generally having 4 husbands at time” and refusing, despite the manager’s repeated efforts, to “attach herself to one man.”

Even when women did embrace monogamous relationships, they claimed what they saw as certain fundamental rights, such as the power to begin and end relationships on their own terms and to select their own partners. Doing so, however, could be difficult, as the following cases demonstrate. In September 1825 a woman from plantation Rotterdam, Carolina, complained to the fiscal that her manager locked “her up every evening with her child on her coming from the Field in a dark room” because she refused to “take a Husband as the manager ordered.” She would, she explained, “take one of her own liking.” But she had good reasons to be selective when it came to men, since a previous marriage had not worked out. “The person by whom she has a child,” Carolina explained, “does not mind her nor the child, she therefore does not wish lately to have another husband.”

Women like Carolina, however, found their options severely circumscribed when it came to ending unsatisfying relationships or solving problems that arose in their marriages.

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42 “Complaint of the Woman Named Mary Belonging to L.F. Gallez,” May 19, 1826, CO 116/141.


44 “Complaint of the Negress Carolina belonging to Pl. Rotterdam,” Sept. 27, 1825, CO 116/140. The attorney and manager of Rotterdam sought to counter Carolina’s complaint by undermining her character as a mother and wife. They claimed that she was “a very bad woman,” that she “neglect[ed] [her] infant child to that degree that it nearly died,” that she allowed another woman to care for the child for several years and “never troubled herself about the child.” Carolina also, they claimed, “constantly create[d] disturbances on the Estate by cohabiting with other women’s men,” and her ex-husband had “left her on account of her making herself a common prostitute.” The fiscal ordered Carolina to be confined “for a month at night and during the approaching holidays.”
Women who faced partners who were physically abusive or who committed adultery were in a particularly difficult situation, thanks in no small part to the way European men tended to tolerate these behaviors. Even if Europeans frowned on spousal abuse—at least beyond certain limits—they did little to prevent or punish it. Plantation punishment records, for example, show that only a handful of men were punished in any given period for “ill-treating women and wives.” Overseers, managers and other slaves rarely interfered in cases of domestic violence. Testimony from the fiscals and protectors records similarly suggests that women who sought protection from violent spouses were unlikely to get much help from plantation management. The manager on plantation Herstelling, for example, criticized a man on his estate as “of notorious bad character,” having “treated his former wife so ill that he broke her ribs.” But it was only after this man’s wife’s “repeated request” that the manager felt “obliged to separate them.” (The man continued to beat his new wife, too, the manager added.)

Berbician women lived on estates where managers apparently felt that it was a man’s prerogative to use violence against his wife. On plantation Nieuw Vigilantie in January 1830, for instance, the manager punished an enslaved man, Ferdinand, for informing authorities that “his neighbor Dick beat his wife.” As Ferdinand explained, when he heard a commotion “he went to look what was the matter.” By the time he arrived at Dick’s house, Dick had gone, and Ferdinand “found the woman lying on the ground crying,” so “he went to

45 Some managers took more interest than others in punishing men who abused their wives. On plantation Best Coffee Land on Jan. 7, 1827, for example, a man named Hector was punished for “beating his wife in the negro yard,” and a man named Joe was punished for “having a cutlass in his hand & threatening to kill his wife.” CO 116/143, in Lean, “Secret Lives of Slaves,” 162.

46 “Enquiry Instituted By Authority of His Honor N. Musgrave President of the Courts of Justice, Into the Circumstance of Thirty Five Negroes (14 Men & 25 Women) Belonging to the Sugar Plantation Herstelling Situated Up the River Berbice, Having Absconded From Said Property,” Apr. 12, 1825 ,1825, CO 116/140.
the driver and reported it.” The driver told the overseer, who told the manager, and the manager then asked Ferdinand “what business [he] had to interfere between Dick and his wife, he was no driver.”

Even when the “informal public” of friends, neighbors, and kin did not condone domestic violence, some plantation managers did.

And yet in spite of a culture that condoned spousal abuse more often than not, some women took the considerable risk of lodging formal complaints against violent men. A woman named Annatje, a 35 year old domestic belonging to the winkel department, was one such woman who turned to officials for protection against her violent (and philandering) husband. Annatje told the acting protector in November 1830 that her husband, Frantz, had attacked her one night after she interrupted his tryst with another woman. After leaving work one night at the “Government House” and walking the short distance to her home, Annatje discovered her husband had gone out. She asked around at different houses for him--perhaps suspecting that he was up to no good--and eventually heard his voice coming from one of the “outbuildings.” So Annatje approached and, “the door being ajar, she pushed it open.” She “found Frantz in Criminal Connexion with a woman named Caroline.” Frantz “rushed out at the door,” but Annatje “got hold of Caroline & tore her clothes off” before she managed to

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48 The “informal public,” according to Nancy Cott, was “made up of family, kin, and neighbors [who] exercised practical control of marriage formation, preservation, and termination” and “exercised the forces of approval or condemnation that shaped prospective and married couples’ behavior.” Cott, Public Vows, 29 (quotation), 30, 37.

49 Annatje had successfully turned to the colonial government four years earlier--when an enslaved woman stole several articles of her clothing--and it is possible that this previous experience encouraged her to seek official help with her domestic problems. See “Complaint of the Negress Annatje Belonging to the Winkel Department Attached to the Governor’s House,” May 12, 1826, CO 116/141.
escape. Annatje then went home, where she waited for Frantz. When Frantz returned, “he beat [Annatje] with a stick,” apparently angry that his wife had dared interrupt his affair.\textsuperscript{50}

At the protector’s office, Frantz “admitted the charge laid against him by his wife to be correct.” Unlike other men who stood accused of abusing their wives, Frantz made no attempt to justify having beaten Annatje. Moreover, the acting protector noted, Frantz “shewed much contrition and before Annatje begged forgiveness, assuring her and the Protector that he would not be guilty of such offence in future” (it is unclear whether he meant adultery or domestic violence). The acting protector decided to dismiss the case “at the recommendation of [Frantz’s] wife,” which suggests that Annatje had gone to the authorities to send a message to her husband that she would not tolerate infidelity or abuse, and that she was willing to publicly shame him into changing his behavior. If this was the case, her strategy might have worked: the acting protector “reprimanded Frantz severely,” and this was the only time that Annatje complained about Frantz to colonial officials.\textsuperscript{51}

For most women, colonial officials were a last resort when other strategies to protect themselves from abusive men had failed. A woman named Cecilia, who belonged to the \textit{winkel} department, like Annatje, only sought the protector’s help after her own efforts to get free of her cheating, abusive husband had failed. As Cecilia told the protector in 1830, she found herself in serious danger after leaving her husband. She “was living with the free man Richard Walsh as his wife,” but when she “found out he had taken up with a free Woman,” she decided to end their marriage. She “desired he would not come to [her] house again,” and said she “would not on [her] part trouble or call on him for any thing.” But Walsh was

\textsuperscript{50} Nov. 30, 1830, CO 116/147, 114-17.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
not prepared to let Cecilia go. One morning, shortly after Cecilia announced her intention to leave him, Walsh went to her house, “and begged [her] to come to his, as he wished to speak to [her].” Perhaps afraid of Walsh, or simply unwilling to have anything more to do with him, Cecilia “at first...refused to” go to his house, “but he persuaded [her], and [she] promised to do so.” Cecilia went to Walsh’s later that day, where she waited for him until it grew late and decided to return home. 52

That evening Walsh went to Cecilia’s house, where he argued with her over money and then lashed out in a violent rage. According to Cecilia, Walsh asked her to “lend him two dollars,” which she did, and then he “began to quarrel with [her],” “destroy[ing] the cups, saucers, glasses &c in the House.” He “would have destroyed [her] Bedstead,” too, but Cecilia’s brother prevented him from doing so and, perhaps, protected Cecilia from a devastating assault. But Walsh returned later that night on horseback, “tipsy and ma[king] a great noise.” Cecilia “spoke to him,” probably trying to calm him down, but he “became outrageous [and] swore he would break every thing in the house as it was his property.” When Cecilia threatened to call the manager, Walsh “got more violent, and then began to cuff [her] about [her] face.”53

Walsh, when summoned to the protector’s office, “could not deny the correctness of [Cecilia’s] statement.” But he tried to minimize his culpability, or at least any potential punishment, by explaining that “he felt dissatisfied at [her] leaving him after he had spent a considerable sum of money on her.” He had also “entrusted her with goods for sale which he could get no account of.” But Cecilia’s efforts to see her abusive ex-husband punished were

53 Ibid.
successful: the protector sentenced Walsh to six days solitary confinement, and “seriously cautioned [Cecilia] not to have intercourse with him.”

Cases like Cecilia’s or Annatje’s, where Europeans intervened in enslaved people’s domestic conflicts in the name of protecting women by punishing violent men or simply to promote public order, were rare. Since plantation managers and colonial officials usually proved unwilling or unable to protect women from physical and sexual abuse, many women turned instead to their own kin- and gender-based networks of support. The relatively few women in Berbice who were fortunate enough to live with or near their immediate family members--and especially their mothers--often found that their kin offered the best, and sometimes only, help solving problems in their conjugal relationships.

Although brothers and fathers sometimes tried to protect their sisters and daughters from physical or sexual violence, it was more often mothers who stood up on behalf of their daughters. Sometimes they did so by intervening directly in their daughters’ marriages. Take, for instance, Bella’s efforts to prevent her son-in-law from beating her daughter, as discussed earlier. Mothers also tried to protect their daughters from sexual abuse by Europeans. Susanna, an enslaved woman who belonged to the governor, went to the protector on behalf of her daughter, Elizabeth, who was hired out to a Mr. Walker who forced her, “as well as other young women under his charge, to sleep every night in his house.” The sole night that Elizabeth had refused to sleep with Walker, moreover, he had punished her by keeping “her the whole night in confinement, and sen[ding] her this morning with her hands

54 Ibid.

55 For female support networks in the U.S. South, see Deborah G. White, Ar’ n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South, (New York, 1999 [1985]), esp. ch. 4, “The Female Slave Network.”
tied, to the colony hospital, to put her in the stocks.” As Susanna told the fiscal, “as a mother, the behaviour of Mr. Walker towards her daughter affects her very much.”

When mothers were unable to protect their daughters from abuse before it happened, as in the case of Susanna’s daughter, they could still try to hold men accountable through the colonial legal system. Some of the most vivid examples of kin-based support come from mothers who complained on behalf of their daughters in cases of rape or coerced sex. In October 1830, for example, a woman named Minkey went to the protector with a tragic story: her fourteen year old daughter, Susannah, had been ambushed and gang raped by a group of “boys” and men, enslaved and free, in the middle of New Amsterdam. According to Minkey, Susannah was visiting family “at her Aunt’s house in the Winkels” one evening when “the slave Boy John Quashie came there & told Susannah he was sent by Miss Brandes,” Susannah’s owner, to bring her home. Susannah left with Quashie, and when they “got opposite to the Market place, John Quashie whistled and immediately” a group of men “ran up,” and held Susannah down. She “began to cry out,” but one of the men “put his hands over her mouth & stifled her cries...Quashie then violated her person & was followed” by the others. “Susannah by struggling succeeded in getting loose & ran towards home, pursued by the slaves & free men,” who only let her go when a passerby “stopped them.”

56 “Examination of the negro woman Susanna, belonging to and in the employ of his Excellency the Governor,” May 16, 1821, CO 116/138, 82.

57 I have adopted historian Sharon Block’s definitions of “rape” and “coerced sex.” According to Block, “rape” was a legal term for forced heterosexual intercourse, whereas “coerced sex” applied “to acts not necessarily identified as rape in early America that nevertheless contained some degree of extorted or forced sexual relations.” *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006), 2-3.

58 Oct. 6, 1830, CO 116/147, 90-93.
The deputy protector, after listening to Minkey’s testimony and having Susannah examined by Dr. Beresford, who concluded that “the person of Susannah had been very much abused”, forwarded the case to the fiscal for prosecution. But Minkey’s complaint ultimately failed. The fiscal determined that “no evidence [could] be produced to convict...any of the parties accused by Susannah of having committed a Rape on her person,” so he decided not to prosecute the case.  

Mothers also played a prominent role in defending their daughters against physical attacks by other women. Many of these fights were the result of disputes over husbands or male partners. A particularly violent confrontation between Jeanette and the “Sambo girl” Ellen in October 1829 highlights the important role that mothers played in such conflicts. Ellen had apparently pursued Jeanette’s husband for some time, and might have had sex with him. Jeanette reached her breaking point the day that Betsey, who belonged to the same owner as Jeanette, “found Ellen making a Shirt, [and] on asking who it was for, Ellen said for [Jeanette’s] husband.” Betsey scolded Ellen for “beginning again to trouble with Jeanette’s husband” or, as Ellen recounted their conversation, for having “the damn impudence to have [sex with] Jeanette’s husband again.” Betsey told Ellen that Jeanette would “hold [her] and lick [her] like a child.” Ellen replied that “Jeanette and her man can go to hell,” an expression so offensive that Jeanette was reluctant to repeat it in the protector’s presence.

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59 Ibid.; Nov. 8, 1830, CO 116/147, 278-79. In a similar case from 1819, an enslaved man named Telemachus, aided by his wife and his daughter’s “adopted mother,” Caroline (Nina), went to colonial authorities after his 11 or 12 year old daughter, Elizabeth, died after having been raped by the manager of plantation Waaxhaamheid (or Warksaamheid), J.D. Luykens. The fiscal prosecuted Luykens in criminal court, where he presented compelling evidence that Luykens had raped Elizabeth and that he had conspired with the estate doctor and local militia officers to cover up the crime. Luykens succeeded in convincing authorities that Elizabeth had been “deflowered by the boy Jenkye,” and that she died of “a great nervous debility.” He was acquitted of rape. See CO 116/139, 195-219.

60 “No. 18,” Oct. 21, 1829, CO 116/142, 86-105.
When Betsey told her friend Jeanette about the argument with Ellen and about the shirt, Jeanette resolved to confront Ellen herself. Jeanette went to the house where Ellen lived, and when Ellen “became very abusive” she explained the situation to Ellen’s owner. “I am quiet at home Ma’am,” she began, “and have been abused by Ellen without giving her the slightest provocation...I am of a very hasty disposition, and if Ellen trouble me too much, and interferes with my business, I may take up something and chop her.” Ellen’s owner, however, refused to get involved. She “told me, she had nothing to do with our nonsense, we must settle it amongst ourselves.” Ellen and Jeanette then traded insults--Jeanette calling Ellen “a damned sow mouth b[itch],” and Ellen retorting that Jeanette was “a drunken b[itch]”--and challenged one another to a fight.61

A few hours later, Jeanette continued, she ran into Ellen and Peggy (Ellen’s “second”), both “half stripped (their Wrappers hauled down and tied tight round their Waists),” ready to fight. They exchanged words, and Jeanette’s “mother hearing this came out.” A crowd gathered, and they “began to fight. Peggy made several efforts to attack me also, but was prevented as well by my mother, as by the bye-standers, who said fair play, let the two fight they are both young, but no one must interfere--we fought for a considerable time.” Jeanette eventually “became quite faint” and left to get a drink of water.62

When Jeannette returned, Peggy came up with “a bit of rag” and “rubbed cayenne or stamped red pepper in [her] eyes.” (Ellen and Peggy, in turn, accused Jeanette of throwing a cup of pepper in Ellen’s eyes.) Blinded, Jeanette found herself trying to fend off both Peggy and Ellen at the same time. Her “mother seeing this interfered,” she said, at which point

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
Peggy began “to slap and cuff [her] mother.” Jeanette’s mother finally managed to free her daughter, who was in “the most dreadful agony,” and take her “home to Master, who gave [her] brandy and water to wash [her] eyes and neck.” Conflicting testimonies made it impossible for the fiscal to determine what exactly had happened, and he had little interest in exploring the root cause of the fight (Jeanette’s husband’s alleged relationship with Ellen) or questioning Jeanette’s husband. He ruled that Jeanette, Ellen, and Peggy were all “guilty of breach of the Peace by fighting in the Street, and it appearing they had rubbed Pepper in each other’s eyes” sentenced them to ten days solitary confinement.63 Cases such as this suggest that women in Berbice were left to sort out disputes over men on their own, or with the help of their friends and kin.

Peggy, who fought alongside Ellen, knew from personal experience just how dangerous women could be in cases of adultery, and how important a mother’s protection was. Just two years earlier Peggy had narrowly escaped a potentially fatal beating at the hands of a free black women, Mrs. Gallez, after she was caught in bed with Mr. Gallez. According to Peggy, who complained to the deputy protector, she had been “shamefully beaten” by Mrs. Gallez “and her negroes” for allegedly having been “in the habit of sleeping with [Mr. Gallez] every night,” a charge which she denied. Mrs. Gallez, however, described in vivid detail the events leading up to Peggy’s beating: returning home one evening she found “Mr. Gallez (my husband) lying with a girl (who I did not then know) on a mattress on the floor. As [Peggy] saw me she got up and hid behind a mosquito net. I locked the door to

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63 Ibid. This case represents a fairly common pattern for the colonial government’s handling of fights between women over men. In July 1831, for example a New Amsterdam domestic named Petite “quarreled with her and beat” a woman named Nancy because, Nanny claimed, “Petite is jealous of her, as [Petite] thinks Nanny intrigues with her husband.” The protector “reprimanded the parties, and dismissed the case” without questioning Petite’s husband. See Jul. 8, 1831, CO 116/149, 64-66.
prevent her getting out. I then caught her, she bit and scratched my hands; I of course in
return beat her.” Meanwhile, “Mr. Gallez held my hands, and opened the door to let the girl
out.” Mrs. Gallez and some of her slaves chased and caught Peggy, apparently aiming to
take her to the “barracks” (jail).64

Peggy’s mother, Betsy, however, soon received word “that Mrs. Gallez was killing
Peggy.” Betsy raced to help her daughter, but when she “asked Mrs. Gallez what was the
matter,” she received a slap in return. Mrs. Gallez told Betsy that she “should not attempt to
take [Peggy] away by force, as she was not aware where I had found her.” When Betsy
“tried to take away Peggy” anyway, she said, Gallez hit her a second time. Betsy “raised her
hand to return the blow,” she admitted, but a Mr. Mann pulled her back, “and said I must not
hit her, but go to complain, and I should receive satisfaction.” Meanwhile, Betsy’s “master’s
negroes” came to her aid, Mrs. Gallez claimed, and “a large negro...pushed [Mrs. Gallez] on
one side and loosed the rope from the girl.”65

Forced to let Peggy go, Mrs. Gallez went to the home of Peggy’s owner, Dr.
Beresford, where she told Mrs. Beresford she “had found her girl with my husband, and her
negroes took away the girl from me, and the mother had beat me when I attempted to take
her to the barracks.” If Mrs. Gallez expected Mrs. Beresford to sympathize with the plight of
a married woman who had found her husband in flagrante delicto, she was sorely
disappointed. Mrs. Beresford asked Gallez why she was “coming to annoy” her. Gallez

64 “Complaint No. 6,” Jul. 10, 1827, CO 116/143, 250-52.
65 Ibid.
replied that “whether I was a mulatto or white woman, that as I was married I had the same right.”

Peggy was fortunate that her mother intervened when she did, for colonial authorities were sympathetic to Mrs. Gallez’s violent reaction. The deputy protector, though he acknowledged that “Mrs. Gallez acted intemperately,” reasoned that “had she, in the irritation produced by finding [Peggy] and her husband in the situation described, attempted to destroy the lives of both, she would have been in some measure justified.” So instead of punishing Mrs. Gallez for beating Peggy, he chastised Peggy for having “violated the marriage bed of Mrs. Gallez,” a crime which earned her seven days solitary confinement. The deputy protector hoped this punishment would “pave the way to a change in [her] character, which at present is extremely bad.”

The severity of the punishment meted out to Peggy was made even more striking by the conspicuous absence of Mr. Gallez in these proceedings. What about his “character”? He was, after all, hardly an innocent man seduced by Peggy. According to “the slave boy John,” who belonged to Mr. Gallez, “on Sunday night [Mr. Gallez] said, I should look for a girl for him. I could not find one that night; but on Monday I got Peggy, and brought her to my master, who ordered me to open a bottle of wine, he gave her a glass of it, and then I went away.” Neither Mr. Gallez nor John, Peggy’s pimp, received so much as a scolding from the deputy protector. Given the highly gendered legal culture of Berbice, which essentially absolved men from any responsibility in cases of extramarital sex while justifying

66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
violence against the women involved, it is not surprising that women like Betsy took it upon themselves to protect their daughters.

The colonial government in Berbice offered scant protection for enslaved women who faced domestic problems. When conflicts turned violent, officials blamed women while ignoring the underlying sociological conditions—and men—that created them. A final example, from July 1829, poignantly underscores the gendered double standards and obstacles women faced. Nancy, who lived on plantation Alness, went to the deputy protector in the wake of a fight with another woman over the manager of plantation Waterloo, Mr. M’Donald. According to Nancy, “she was formerly in habits of intimacy with Mr. M’Donald,” and was “in fact with child by him.” But “last Friday she went to Plantation Waterloo, and found a slave, named Clarissa, in Mr. M’Donald’s bed.” Nancy immediately began “striking Clarissa with a yard measure,” and the women fought until M’Donald beat Nancy out of the house with a horsewhip. Three days later, moreover, Clarissa’s mother “beat Nancy with a shoe, because she had quarreled with her daughter.”

The deputy protector told Nancy that she had no grounds for complaint. Unlike Mrs. Gallez, a free woman who was justified in beating a woman she found in bed with her husband, Nancy was, after all, merely a slave and a “concubine.” She could not expect the manager or the colonial government to treat her like a legally married, free woman. The deputy protector therefore “reprobated, in strong terms, the conduct of the whole of the parties concerned in this disgraceful transaction,” and dismissed the complaint. But he also took advantage of this opportunity to argue that the domestic problems women like Nancy faced were not of a nature that should be addressed by the government.

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faced could be solved if they would only embrace formal, solemnized marriage. He
“contrasted the rights enjoyed by a married woman, with the treatment to which a concubine
is subject,” and “pointed out and explained to Nancy the law recognizing the marriage of
slaves, and the privileges that solemnity secured to them, the advantages she would derive
from being lawfully married; and exhorted her to quit the immoral life she had hitherto
pursued.” M’Donald, of course, was not subjected to a similar lecture. What the deputy
apparently failed to see was that some of the most vexing domestic problems enslaved
women faced--ranging from adulterous and abusive men to physical attacks from female
rivals--had less to do with whether their marriages were officially recognized and than they
did with a colonial government that cooperated with men to bolster patriarchy.

Many enslaved women in Berbice pushed back against men who tried to limit their
sexual and social autonomy. They asserted certain basic rights, such as the ability to choose
partners for themselves and end relationships marked by spousal abuse or infidelity. But
women often found that men refused to respect their choices and that colonial officials
offered little in the way of protection or support. So women turned instead to their own
families and especially their mothers for help. Even then, they faced a number of difficulties
and dangers in their efforts to create tolerable domestic relationships.

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70 Ibid.
Conclusion

Focusing on enslaved people’s domestic conflicts—as documented by the robust body of evidence generated by the British government’s interest in slave marriage during amelioration—highlights the gendered nature of power and authority at every level of Atlantic slavery. Tracing the competing, overlapping, and intersecting goals of the British government, slaveowners and managers, as well as enslaved men and women reveals, for instance, that men in Berbice, whether European or African, free or enslaved, often cooperated to uphold male privilege and reduce female power. Despite women’s demographic advantage, they often found their sexual and social mobility constrained by men who used violence, intimidation, and the law against them. In this context, it is not surprising that women turned to one another for support and protection. We often think—with good reason—of enslaved men and their European oppressors as adversaries who sought to limit one another’s political power in order to advance their own agenda. Yet we see that in conflicts that pitted men against women, enslaved men and their European owners or managers sometimes collaborated to control women and maintain control in their homes and on their plantations. They enhanced one another’s authority and acknowledged their mutual dependence, even as they pursued different goals. Unexpected conclusions such as this suggest that a better understanding of power and authority in the early modern Atlantic world must take into account the way that gender structured the culture and politics of slave societies.
CHAPTER FOUR:

“THE RIGHT OF A MASTER TO PUNISH”

In February 1819, an enslaved cooper named Tommy went to the fiscal to protest a brutal whipping. The owner of Tommy’s plantation, Goldstone Hall, had found Tommy taking a piece of sugar from the boiling house without permission, and he “immediately ordered him to be laid down, put two drivers over him, and [had] one hundred lashes inflicted upon him.” Three other slaves and the overseer, Tommy added, had witnessed the flogging and counted the lashes. After the whipping, Tommy’s owner had searched his house and discovered some nails that he believed Tommy had stolen, which prompted additional punishment. The owner had “his buttocks washed with brine, and ordered [him] to be locked up every night in the stocks” for three nights.¹

The fiscal responded to Tommy’s complaint by focusing not on whether Tommy was guilty of theft, but on the question of how many lashes his owner had inflicted. The owner maintained that he only ordered thirty-nine lashes--the legal limit--not one hundred, a claim seemingly borne out by the fiscal’s inspection of Tommy’s wounds. When Tommy “exhibited his posteriors,” the fiscal noted that “few lashes appear[ed], not more in appearance to sanction a supposition he ha[d] been punished beyond the limits of lashes prescribed by law.” The overseer, however, told the fiscal “forty-one lashes were given; I

¹ “Negro Tommy, belonging to William Fraser, complainant,” Feb. 9-10, 1819, CO 116/138, 32-34.
counted them, there were neither more nor less than forty-one.” This was fewer than Tommy had claimed but still above the limit. The overseer added that the whipping was brutal: Tommy “appeared much cut. I have seen negroes flogged before,” he explained, “but never with so much severity.” The fiscal concluded that although stealing sugar was “an act reprehensible and deserving of punishment,” Tommy’s owner “had exceeded the law, by causing a severer punishment to be inflicted…than the law sanctioned.” He fined the owner three hundred guilders (more than two hundred pounds sterling), ordered him to pay the court costs, and sent the records of his investigation to the lieutenant governor, who would soon forward them to the colonial office in England.2

Tommy’s legal victory--his ability to convince colonial authorities to penalize his owner--was made possible by the imperial government’s increased interest in monitoring and regulating the punishment of enslaved people in its colonies in the early nineteenth century. Official interest in punishment and discipline was part of a broader effort to “ameliorate” slavery through legislation and imperial surveillance. Tommy’s complaint is thus illustrative of a much larger battle over the role of physical violence in slavery during the era of amelioration. This struggle pitted the patriarchal authority of managers and slaveowners, on the one hand, against the legal power of the state, on the other. Caught in between were enslaved people like Tommy, who were quick to take advantage of legal protections and who tried to leverage the authority of colonial officials against overseers, managers, and owners.

Complaints like Tommy’s, hundreds of which can be found in the records of the fiscals and protectors of slaves, raise a number of questions about the relationship between

2 Ibid. For regulations on whipping, see Proclamation of Acting-Governor Dalrymple, Nov. 14, 1810, reissued by Lieutenant-Governor Bentinck on Oct. 4, 1814, Berbice Gazette, cited in Alvin O. Thompson, A Documentary History of Slavery in Berbice, 1796-1834 (Georgetown, Guyana, 2002), 197-198.
antislavery, penal reform, and the expansion imperial authority, and about the effect these developments had on power relationships in colonial space. When and why did the imperial government become interested in the treatment of enslaved people in its colonies? What affect did metropolitan debates about crime and punishment, and the domestic penal reform movement, have on antislavery ideology and activism? What kind of penal reforms did the imperial government propose for its slave colonies, and what was the rationale for these reforms? How did imperial pressure and colonial reforms affect plantation power dynamics and, more specifically, the process of negotiation between enslaved people, plantation authorities, and officials over the role that physical violence played in their relationships?

To answer these questions, this chapter first explores how, beginning in the late eighteenth century, the corporal punishment of enslaved people became an increasing source of concern for metropolitans. Central to understanding debates over slave punishment and the various reforms proposed or enacted are the connections between domestic penal reform and abolitionism. This chapter examines a variety of solutions proposed for reforming colonial penal policy and bringing slave punishment under greater official supervision, culminating with parliament’s endorsement of comprehensive ameliorative legislation in the mid-1820s. Finally, this chapter looks at the impact these reforms had on the ground, asking how enslaved people and their enslavers negotiated their relationships--and especially the limits of “the right of master to punish,” as one slaveowner described it--in the context of an interventionist colonial government. These developments reveal that the major aim of the imperial government’s amelioration program, which included efforts to better regulate the physical violence of slavery, was to expand its jurisdiction and power into new realms.
Softening slavery was a secondary concern. The penal reforms enacted during amelioration did not make slavery less brutal, but they did destabilize relationships between enslaved people and those who enslaved them.

The Problem of Slave Punishment

Efforts to regulate physical violence against enslaved people in the West Indies in the 1820s were the result of sweeping changes in the political culture of the Anglo-Atlantic world that went back fifty years. The rise of British and Anglo-American humanitarianism in the late eighteenth century, which made cruelty and physical suffering increasingly controversial and conspicuous, encouraged a variety of reform efforts on both sides of the Atlantic. These ranged from campaigns to prevent cruelty to animals to the penal reform and antislavery movements. Proponents of amelioration would draw on both the ideology of humanitarianism--and especially penal reform--and on lessons learned from failed early attempts to make slavery less physically violent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Examining the connections between domestic penal reform and antislavery activism thus informs our understanding of how metropolitans saw the problem of slave punishment.³

The British penal reform movement, which emerged in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, sought to replace the so-called “Bloody Code” of early modern justice--with capital punishment at its core--with a new system that eschewed physical violence in favor of purportedly more humane modes of “correction,” such

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³ For the temporal and ideological overlap of abolitionism and domestic penal reform campaigns, which drew support from Quakers and Evangelicals, see Diana Paton, *No Bond But the Law: Punishment, Race, and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780-1870* (Durham, N.C., 2004).
as incarceration. Reformers such as John Howard argued that the malleability of criminals’ minds required more modern methods of control and punishment. The new forms of disciplinary power and surveillance that arose across Britain and much of Western Europe after the Enlightenment, as Michel Foucault and others have shown, were supposed to target the mind, not the body.⁴

By the late eighteenth century, British reformers were well on their way to replacing a centuries-old system that relied on a host of corporal punishments, ranging from mutilation and branding to public floggings and hangings, with a new system that trumpeted the reformative potential of incarceration, hard labor, and confinement. Branding was abolished in England in 1779, for example, and whipping became much less common toward the end of the eighteenth century. To cite just one measure, whipping declined from seventeen to eleven percent of verdicts issued at the Old Bailey, England’s central criminal court, between 1775 and 1790. By 1805, the first year that national punishments statistics became available, whipping accounted for less than 5 percent of sentences at assize and sessions courts.⁵

The transformation of the British penal system and changing public attitudes toward corporal punishment only made the physical violence that West Indian slaves were subjected to seem deviant and backwards to many metropolitans.

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While corporal punishment was becoming less common for many people in the English-speaking world, whipping and other kinds of physical violence remained common on plantations and on the high seas. Slaves and sailors alike continued to labor under intense physical violence. In Britain’s plantation colonies in the Caribbean and North America, differences in punishment reinforced divisions of race and status: European versus African, free versus enslaved. Slave courts and individual slaveholders, determined to maintain order in the face of constant threats from below and given wide leeway by colonial legislatures, continued to employ centuries-old corporal punishments, including flogging, mutilation, branding, and execution, long after these practices became uncommon if not illegal in Britain. In some instances, enslaved people were burned alive or starved in gibbets, their mutilated body parts placed in prominent locations in efforts to terrorize other slaves into submission.\textsuperscript{6} Slaveholders knew that their control rested on terror, on spectacular displays of violence and power. As the Jamaican planter and politician Bryan Edwards observed, “In countries where slavery is established, the leading principle on which government is

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supported, is fear.”7 In the plantation societies of the Americas, then, Foucault’s so-called “gloomy festival of punishment” was not “dying out”; it was thriving.8

Colonial attitudes toward violence against enslaved people are perhaps best illustrated by the fact that until the late eighteenth century most West Indian legislatures did not “recognize the willful killing of a slave [as] an act of homicide or murder.”9 Despite the obvious financial loss, some plantation authorities flogged or beat their slaves to death, either as premeditated murder or the accidental result of a punishment taken too far. And, as antislavery activists argued, there was little that could be done to investigate and prosecute such deaths. In parliamentary hearings in the early 1790s, for example, William Wilberforce and his co-council referenced a proposed addition to the Jamaican Consolidated Slave Law (1787) which observed that “it frequently happens that slaves come to their death by hasty and severe blows, and other improper treatment, of overseers and book-keepers, in the heat of passion.” And in many cases “the victims are entered into the plantation-books, as having died of convulsions, fits, or other causes not to be accounted for,” with slaves buried quickly


8 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 8 (quotation); Fischer, Suspect Relations, 159-61, 175-81; J. H. Lean, “The Secret Lives of Slaves: Berbice, 1819 to 1827” (Ph.D. diss., University of Canterbury, 2002), 311-13. The notion that punishment should reinforce differences in status was not new in Britain. During the English Civil Wars, for example, the Levellers opposed whipping for free-born Englishmen and argued that it was a punishment “only fit for bondmen.” See Christopher Hill, Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England (London, 1974), 227.

“to conceal the real truth of the cause of death.”10 In Berbice, it was not until 1811 that the Court of Policy and Criminal Justice made “the murder or...maiming or wounding of a Slave... whether the Same is caused by Excessive punishment or otherwise,” a criminal offense. The goal of the law endeavored to place enslaved people “beyond the reach of violence and arbitrary infliction of Punishment tending to Endanger or destroy life.”11

European sojourners to the British Caribbean who shared their experiences in published travel narratives, meanwhile, made it difficult for metropolitans to ignore the prominent role that physical violence played in controlling the laborers who produced the cotton, coffee, and sugar they consumed. When the Scottish traveler Janet Schaw passed through St. Kitts in the 1770s, for instance, she observed that “every ten Negroes have a driver, who walks behind them, holding in his hand a short whip and a long one. You will too easily guess the use of these weapons; a circumstance of all others the most horrid. They are naked, male and female, down to the girdle, and you constantly observe where the application has been made.”12

The whip was the most common weapon used against slaves, but they were also subjected to the kind of spectacular public punishments that were common in Europe throughout the medieval and early modern eras, as travelers to Berbice and neighboring

10 An Abstract of the Evidence Delivered before a Select Committee of the House of Commons in the Years 1790 and 1790; on the part of the petitioners for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 2nd ed. (London, 1791), 3-4, in Brown, Reaper’s Garden, 185. The 1826 Berbice slave code contained a similar provision that “no person shall...bury or allow to be buried any slave who has died suddenly or under suspicious circumstances, or shortly after punishment, or who has committed suicide,” until a medical practitioner examined the corpse, certified the cause of death, and notified officials.

11 Minutes of the Court of Policy and Criminal Justice of Berbice, Jul. 1, 1811, Guyana National Archives, Georgetown, Guyana; Thompson, Documentary History, 196-97.

12 Janet Schaw, Journal of a Lady of Quality, Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776 (New Haven, Conn., 1921), 127.
Demerara-Essequibo observed. British army officer Thomas Staunton St. Clair observed one such spectacle in New Amsterdam. Behind the “Government-house,” St. Clair wrote, a crowd of “about a thousand black people…were gathered,” “as in Europe among the whites at these public shows.” The prisoner, “a stout, handsome, well-made young man,” was brought from the jail and “mounted the platform.” The “executioner of the law…declared that this slave had been convicted, before the Court of Policy and Criminal Justice, of the abominable, rebellious, and horrid crime of striking a white man, for which he was sentenced to have his right hand, with which he struck the blow, severed from his body.” St. Clair related in gruesome detail what happened next: the executioner “ordered him to lay his hand upon the block...No sooner was this done than, with one stroke, the hand fell to the ground. He then walked from the platform, his arm streaming like a fountain with blood, and a surgeon…bound it up, and conducted him to the hospital.”

Henry Bolingbroke, an Englishman who lived in Demerara from 1799 to 1806, also noted the “painful punishments” in use there and in Berbice in his *Voyage to the Demerary* (1807). Bolingbroke observed, for example, not only “the severe floggings with a cart whip,” but also “the inflicting of tortures by the rib rack...a horrid machine, with recesses made for the principal joints to be placed in, upon which the criminals are laid out and extended, when they are broken alive by iron bars, and left in that state to linger out a miserable existence till some one has the humanity to put an end to it.” According to Bolingbroke, however, punishments were becoming less brutal. Only one slave, he noted

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with patriotic approval, had been sentenced to the rib rack “since the colonies became British in 1796.” It would be “a source of gratification to every philanthropic heart to know,” Bolingbroke wrote, that such punishments—“the greatest evil which the negroes laboured under”—would “in a short time be completely eradicated.” Some metropolitans, like Bolingbroke, had come to see certain kinds of punishments as unacceptable, even for slaves, by the early nineteenth century. At the same time, some people expressed confidence in the absurd fantasy that slavery could be sanitized by making it less physically severe.

European colonists in the Caribbean, on the other hand, continued to defend physical violence as necessary and effective. The wife of a Demerara planter in the 1790s, for example, “expressed surprise” when her guest, the British soldier and doctor George Pinckard, “shudder[ed]” when he heard “the loud cries of negro suffering under the whip.” As the planter’s wife listened to her husband whip one of their slaves, “she exclaimed with a broad smile, ‘Aha! it will do him good! a little wholesome flagellation will refresh him.--It will sober him.--It will open his skin, and make him alert. If Y-- was to give it them all, it would be of service to them!’.” Many colonists, travelers like Pinckard noted, had few qualms with the physical suffering of enslaved people. According to Pinckard, in Demerara “the corporal punishment of slaves is so common, that instead of exciting the repugnant sensations, felt by Europeans on first witnessing it, scarcely does it produce, in the breasts of

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those accustomed to the West Indies, even the slightest glow of compassion.”\textsuperscript{16} As late as 1832, colonial authorities maintained that physical violence was part and parcel of their authority and, by extension, the foundation on which the slave system itself rested. Or, as the Jamaican overseer William Taylor explained it, that “the stimulus to labor is decidedly the fear of the lash.”\textsuperscript{17}

Changing attitudes toward corporal punishment of enslaved people in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, can be gleaned from minor modifications made to West Indian slave codes. Many of these changes, which represent the earliest efforts at amelioration, were a reaction to persistent criticism and pressure from antislavery activists.\textsuperscript{18} The Jamaican Consolidated Slave Act of 1787, for example, prohibited the use of “chains, irons, weights, or iron collars with projecting bars,” and set the legal limit for whipping at thirty-nine lashes, a number based on Biblical law and one that became common in the British empire.\textsuperscript{19} An 1800 ordinance in Trinidad, for example, also limited owners and attorneys to thirty-nine lashes.\textsuperscript{20}

The first effort to regulate whipping in Berbice was an 1810 law that stipulated that private persons (e.g., managers, drivers) could not administer more than thirty-nine lashes.


\textsuperscript{17} PP 1832 (721), 12, cited in B.W. Higman, \textit{Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834} (Baltimore, 1984), 200.


\textsuperscript{20} Higman, \textit{Slave Populations}, 200.
“on One Day or at One Time.” The framers of the law also recommended that slaves be treated “with such humanity, that Love and not Fear may operate, as motives for their good conduct to their Masters.” The law also described the way slaves were to be whipped: they were not to be flogged “on any other part than on the Breech [buttocks],” and they were to be “laid flat on the ground,” with “hands and feets [sic] tied sufficiently to prevent [their] vital parts being injured.” Violations could be punished with fines ranging from three hundred to one thousand guilders (approximately two hundred to seven hundred pounds sterling).21

Having laws on the books was one thing; enforcing them was another. Antislavery activists had long realized that the unenforceability of laws regulating slave punishment was a major obstacle to reform throughout the Caribbean. Colonial officials—many of whom were slaveowners—often lacked the political will or the resources to supervise plantation management and prosecute crimes against enslaved people.22 Some colonial authorities even admitted that there was often a large gap between the letter of the law and the daily realities of plantation life. The 1750 observation of the Jamaican governor, Edward Trelawny, that “many wholesome Regulations enacted in this Island for the Government of Slaves…as they can be enforced only by due Course of Law, they are not and cannot be enforced at all, and

21 These rules did not apply to members of the colonial government, who could exceed the limit of thirty-nine lashes as they saw fit. The framers of the law believed that some slaves “merit[ed] a more severe and public punishment,” and managers and owners were instructed to take such slaves to the nearest burgher officer (local militia officers) or captain, who were authorized to supervise floggings of up to one hundred lashes. See Proclamation of Acting-Governor Dalrymple, Nov. 14, 1810; Alvin O. Thompson, Unprofitable Servants: Crown Slaves in Berbice, Guyana, 1803-1831 (Kingston, Jamaica, 2002), 38-39. For the conversion of guilders to pounds sterling, see Mary Turner, “‘The 11 O’Clock Flog’: Women, Work and Labour Law in the British Caribbean,” in From Slavery to Emancipation in the Atlantic World, ed. Silvia R. Frey and Betty Wood (London, 1999), 57n9. 1 pound sterling was equal to 1.4 guilders.

every one in fact, does as he lists with his own Slaves,” remained a fairly accurate description into the nineteenth century.23

The only way to enforce the protective clauses of West Indian slave codes, some reformers claimed, was to create an external system of supervision for colonial slavery. This would be a radical departure for an imperial government that had, for two centuries, given its colonies and the planters who controlled them significant legislative autonomy and treated slave punishment as a private matter.24 One of the most provocative calls for such a change came from British politician Edmund Burke, who in 1780 drafted his own “Sketch of a Negro Code.” Burke argued that enslaved people should not “be under the sole guardianship of their Masters, or their Attornies [sic] and Overseers.” They should have the legal right, Burke insisted, to present their grievances before a “Protector of Negroes.” The protector would, Burke explained, be authorized to investigate slaves’ complaints and report violations of the law. He would also have help from official “Inspectors,” to be “placed in convenient districts in each island.” The inspectors would, moreover, visit every plantation in their jurisdiction and submit written reports to the protector twice a year regarding “the state and condition of the Negroes in their districts.” The protector would have the authority to sell slaves who had been “cruelly and inhumanely treated” or who labored under an overseer with “particular malice” to another, presumably better, owner.25 The kind of changes that Burke


24 For the lack of imperial management of colonial slavery and the tradition of colonial autonomy as an obstacle to amelioration and emancipation, see Christopher Leslie Brown, Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006), 240-46.

called for were far too radical for planters and for the imperial government in the 1780s, and
abolitionists were more concerned with drumming up the support needed to end the
transatlantic slave trade than they were with slavery itself, so nothing became of his “Negro
Code.”

Forty years later, however, support for the changes that Burke envisioned was much
stronger. In travel narratives and abolitionist propaganda, British readers confronted a slave
system that seemed more backward and barbaric than ever given the progress of domestic
penal reform. Antislavery activists, meanwhile, had shifted their focus to colonial slavery
after their success in campaigning for the abolition of the slave trade. They realized in the
decade after the 1807 Abolition Act that stopping the flow of African captives to their
Caribbean colonies had not, as some activists had hoped, forced self-interested slave owners
to treat their slaves more humanely to create a self-sustaining labor force. Nor was slavery
dying the natural death that some had predicted. Faced with entrenched and in some cases
expanding slave societies that were as brutal as ever—as evidenced by high mortality and
morbidity, low reproductive rates, and continued reports of severe corporal punishment—
antislavery activists redoubled their efforts to combat colonial slavery through metropolitan
intervention in the 1820s.

In 1823, antislavery activists reorganized themselves as the Society for the Mitigation
and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions (colloquially known as
the Anti-Slavery Society). With Thomas Buxton at the helm, the Anti-Slavery Society
petitioned Parliament to enact a comprehensive slave code for all British colonies that would
promote gradual emancipation, expand missionary activity, and prepare enslaved people and
European plantation authorities for the transition to wage labor. Colonial opposition to these proposed reforms was significant, with many colonists claiming that even rumors of emancipation or amelioration would weaken their grip on control, encourage enslaved people to rebel, and spell economic catastrophe.26

Absentee planters in Britain, represented by the Society of West India Planters and Merchants, responded to the Anti-Slavery Society’s proposal with their own, more conservative, piecemeal program for amelioration. They sought a compromise that would satisfy moderate calls for reform and soften the public image, if not the reality, of slavery just enough to deflect calls for emancipation. Under Foreign Secretary George Canning, Parliament adopted the “ameliorative measures” of the West India lobby as the basis for the imperial government’s amelioration campaign.27 In 1824 Secretary of State for War and the Colonies Lord Henry Bathurst sent circulars to colonial governors instructing them to model their own voluntary reforms on the imperial blueprint for amelioration. The government in


27 For the parliamentary compromise, see David Brion Davis, Slavery and Human Progress (New York, 1984), 183. As Davis argued, the British government’s ameliorative legislation “essentially disarmed its opponents by endorsing and absorbing two ideologies—the abolitionist ideology, which called for a wholly new dispensation attuned to moral principles revealed by the collective voice of the Christian public, and the proprietor ideology, which insisted on gradual change, minimal interference with local self-government, and compensation for pecuniary losses.” Davis, Slavery and Human Progress, 207.
Berbice, after procrastinating for two years, finally capitulated to imperial pressure, passing a comprehensive slave code in 1826.28

**Amelioration and Penal Reform in the 1820s**

Many of the provisions in the 1826 Berbice slave code concerned slave punishment. The code prohibited drivers and overseers from “carry[ing] a whip, or any other instrument of punishment, into the field or elsewhere, either as a badge of authority or a stimulus to labour.” It set the number of lashes a male slave could be given at twenty-five and banned the flogging of enslaved women. The code also specified acceptable alternative punishments, ranging from solitary confinement to public stocks. Slaveholders or managers were also required to keep a detailed “Punishment Record Book,” to be reviewed by the protector of slaves and the colony’s governor twice a year. These punishment records would then be sent to the colonial office for the secretary of state’s inspection.29 Anyone convicted of violating the new regulations could be assessed a substantial fine by the colony’s criminal court or the fiscal.30

Taken together, these provisions illustrate the major ways metropolitan reformers tried to regulate the physical violence of slavery in the era of amelioration. Each strategy


29 The full text of the code can be found in *The Berbice Royal Gazette*, Sept. 30, 1826, CO 111/102, (hereafter Berbice slave code).

30 The 1826 code also contained a number of measures unrelated to punishment, including provisions granting slaves the right to attend church, to enter into solemnized (Christian) marriage, to own certain kinds of property, to deposit money in a newly created savings bank, and to give evidence in court.
drew heavily on the ideology of domestic penal reform. The code reveals, first, an emphasis on regulating the style and subject of corporal punishment, especially whipping. Also apparent is an effort to promote the transition from flogging to supposedly more humane, modern technologies of punishment and discipline, such as confinement and the treadmill. Finally, the 1826 slave code highlights the creation of a surveillance apparatus that would give colonial and imperial officials unprecedented tools to monitor plantation discipline.

Reformers sought to modify whipping by making three types of changes. First, they called for reductions on the number of lashes that could be given, based on the straightforward reasoning that lessening the quantity of physical damage done to the body was a worthy goal. The 1826 code reduced the limit from thirty-nine to twenty-five lashes. Second, reformers concentrated on standardizing whipping, on making it easier to control its severity by depersonalizing it.\textsuperscript{31} Had they waited a few years they might have adopted Jeremy Bentham’s rotary whipping machine, described in his \textit{Rationale of Punishment} (1830) as a mechanized wheel with “rods of cane or whalebone, the number and size of which might be determined by law.” If a judge stipulated the speed and force that the wheel would turn, Bentham explained, then “everything which is arbitrary might be removed.” A major problem with whipping, Bentham and other penal reformers argued, was that its intensity was difficult to regulate because it was an intimately personal act of violence. The

\textsuperscript{31} Paton, \textit{No Bond but the Law}, 86.
severity of flogging depended too much on the strength and effort of the person
wielding the whip, as criminals, sailors, and slaves would have known all too well.32

Efforts to standardize whipping were linked to a broader shift in British
thinking about the role of emotion in physical violence. By the early nineteenth
century, even some West Indian officials had begun to frown on floggings and other
corporal punishments motivated by individual “passion,” consistent with metropolitan
arguments that punishment should be impersonal and dispassionate. In 1812, for
example, when the Barbados Agricultural Society drafted “a plan for the regulation of
plantations with a particular reference to the treatment of slaves,” it urged owners,
managers, and overseers to never strike slaves in anger. Punishment, the Society
explained, should be an “act of cool deliberation,” inflicted with “formality.”33

The 1826 slave code similarly tried to make the physical violence at the heart
of slavery more “rational” and clinical. When enslaved people were to be flogged,
for example, the code stipulated that “such punishment must be inflicted with reason,
and without cruelty or passion.” The code also stipulated that slaves were not to be
punished in the fields or immediately after committing an infraction, but on the

For similar efforts to standardize flogging in post-emancipation Jamaica, see Paton, *No Bond but the Law*, 144.
British interest in standardizing punishment of enslaved people is also evidenced by the Berbice deputy
protector of slaves Charles Bird’s criticism of the different types of stocks in use on Berbician plantations, a
problem the Berbice council of government suggested could be solved by having the fiscal produce a model set
of stocks that managers could copy. See Gordon Eton Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture in
Hydrologic Plantation Enterprises: A Study of Slavery in the British Colony of Berbice (Guyana)” (Ph.D. diss,
Howard University, 2004), 60.

33 Minute Book of the Barbados Agricultural Society, 115-146, Nov. 14, 1812, cited in Higman, *Slave
following day, presumably to ensure that flaring tempers did not lead to excessive violence.  

The third major change reformers sought regarding whipping was to place enslaved women beyond the reach of the lash. Antislavery activists had long criticized the flogging of African women on plantations and slave ships. Indeed, the lacerated, (semi)naked enslaved woman’s body, helpless and vulnerable, became one of the most enduring images of antislavery propaganda. Illustrations like William Blake’s “Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave” (Figure 5.1) were meant to horrify European viewers and generate sentimental sympathy for antislavery, though they also served to titillate and arouse. Abolitionists claimed that the public exposure of women’s bodies during whipping—either because women were stripped before being flogged or because the lash tore clothing as easily as it did flesh—prevented women from cultivating the sense of Christian purity and modesty supposedly required to establish stable, nuclear families.  

34 Berbice slave code, clause 13.

Figure 5.1: William Blake, “Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave” (copper engraving).

From John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam…*, 2 vols. (London, 1796), vol. 1, facing p. 326. Blake’s image, based on Stedman’s narrative, depicts the flogged woman as both helpless object of sympathy and an object of sexual desire.

By the 1820s, reformers had succeeded in persuading the metropolitan government to pressure colonial legislatures to ban the flogging of enslaved women. This was part of a larger process of imposing British gender ideologies on colonial subjects in the era of amelioration.36 “The system of [a]meliorating the condition of slaves,” Henry Bathurst explained, required “making a distinction of treatment

36 See chapter 4.
between the male and female slaves,” in order to “restore to the female slaves that
sense of shame which is at once the ornament and the protection of their sex, and
which their present mode of punishment has tended unfortunately to weaken if not to
obliterate.”37 The 1826 slave code conceded to metropolitan pressure and banned the
whipping of enslaved women. It did, however, allow girls (under twelve years old) to
“be punished & corrected for any fault or misconduct…in such & the same manner,
and in such & the same extent, as any child of free condition may be and usually
punished and corrected in any school.” Even then, the code stipulated that “such
punishment shall be inflicted by a female and any indecent exposure of the person
avoided,” which confirms that officials were more concerned with the implications
that whipping women had on gender relations than they were with the physical
damage done to women’s bodies.38 Many West Indian colonies, moreover, refused to
outlaw the whipping of women until emancipation.39

The prohibition on whipping enslaved women in Berbice was tied to the
second focus of penal reform: the promotion of new or previously underused
punishments. The 1826 code detailed a number of alternative punishments that could
be used in lieu of whipping, for women or for men. These included: solitary
confinement (for up to three days); the use of “public stocks” and “house stocks”;
handcuffs; and the application of “distinguishing dress,” and “distinguishing marks,”

37 Memo, 1823, CO 324/75/109, quoted in Murray, West Indies, 129. For Anglo-American thoughts on
enslaved people’s nudity and violence against slaves in the eighteenth century, see Fischer, Suspect Relations,
161-69.

38 Berbice slave code, clause 14.

such as metal collars padlocked to slaves’ necks. The supposed advantage of these punishments, according to the ideology of British penal reform, was that they could supposedly cause discomfort, curtail mobility, and encourage the subject of punishment to feel shame while inflicting minimal physical damage on the body. The reality, of course, was that these punishments could be every bit as dangerous as the whip, and in some cases even worse.

The most striking example of the new disciplinary regime in the era of amelioration was the treadmill or treadwheel, a device that exemplified the goals and unintended consequences of amelioration and penal reform (Figure 5.2). Invented in England in 1818 as a form of “hard labor” for prisoners, the treadmill was a large revolving cylinder with wide steps mounted by prisoners, who turned the wheel by walking continuously while gripping a bar to keep from slipping and being mangled by the wheel’s steps or gearing. Colloquially known as the “shin-scaper,” the treadmill operated for ten hours a day in many British institutions, with prisoners walking for twenty-minute stretches interrupted by twenty-minute breaks. The treadmill was promoted by the British Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline and adopted throughout England by the early 1820s, and it quickly made its way to the workhouses and jails of the British Caribbean. In 1828 alone, the year

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40 Berbice slave code, clause 14.

41 For the treadmill in England, see Robin Evans, The Fabrication of Virtue: English Prison Architecture, 1750-1840 (Cambridge, 1982), 295-309; and Ignatieff, Just Measure of Pain, 177-79. The treadmill was introduced to Trinidad in 1823 and to Jamaica in 1827. See Higman, Slave Populations, 201, 243-44; Altink, Slave Women in Discourses on Slavery and Abolition, 147; Paton, No Bond but the Law, 44-45, 88; and Thompson, Unprofitable Servants, 40-41
the treadmill began operating “as a Legal Mode of Punishment” in the New Amsterdam jail, thirty-six slaves were sentenced to be “worked” on the treadmill.\textsuperscript{42}

![Image of a treadmill scene from a Jamaica House of Correction](image)

Figure 5.2: Anonymous, “Scene from a Jamaica House of Correction” (engraving, 1834).

From James Williams, \textit{A Narrative of Events, Since the First of August, 1834, by James Williams, and Apprenticed Labourer in Jamaica} [1837], ed. Diana Paton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). Abolitionists commissioned and reproduced images like this to dramatize the torturous effects of the treadmill and the continued prominence of flogging in West Indian prisons during the period of apprenticeship (1834-38).

For a brief time, penal reformers and antislavery activists were united in their enthusiasm for the treadmill. One English justice lauded it as “the most tiresome,

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Berbice Gazette}, May. 14, 1828, Walter Rodney Archives, Georgetown, Guyana; Thompson, \textit{Unprofitable Servants}, 40.
distressing, exemplary punishment that has ever been contrived by human ingenuity.”

For abolitionists, as the historian Diana Paton has shown, “the treadmill represented the peak of regulated and civilized punishment.” It was, at least in theory, a very different kind of punishment than flogging, which was difficult to regulate because it usually occurred on plantations or in private homes, far from the gaze of colonial authorities. The treadmill, installed in public workhouses or jails, allowed colonial authorities to monitor punishment and take it out of the hands of owners and managers, at least temporarily. And its mechanical operation meant that the intensity of punishment could be standardized and controlled in a way that whipping could not (with the exception, perhaps, of Bentham’s whipping machine). People forced to “work” or “dance” the treadmill at a specified speed and for regulated periods of time would endure a uniform application of punishment. The treadmill seemed to be the perfect solution to many of the problems reformers had long identified.

In practice, however, the treadmill was a brutal instrument of torture on both sides of the Atlantic. Pregnant women often miscarried on the wheel, and so many

43 Quoted in Ignatieff, Just Measure of Pain, 177.

44 Paton, No Bond But the Law, 88.

45 In Berbice, the treadmill operated at two speeds: 3.5 revolutions per minute (RPM) and 2.5 RPM, the quicker speed reserved for younger prisoners. Slaves could be “worked” on the treadmill up to twelve intervals per day, totaling nearly three hours. See “Regulations for the Tread Mill, Erected in The Colonial Jail of Berbice, for a Legal Mode of Correctional Punishment,” encl. in Shanks to Earl Bathurst, Jul. 29, 1828, CO 111/107, 5-7.
prisoners fell or jumped off that prison superintendents regularly had them strapped to a bar above their heads and flogged by a driver if they tried to jump off.46

Missionary John Wray recalled the impression the treadmill made on the governor of British Guiana when he visited the jail in 1833. “Going to the treadmill, [the governor] examined the ‘cats’ with which females as well as males were flogged (some poor women of late dreadfully so), and quite shocked with those instruments of punishment, ordered them to be discontinued.” It is unclear why the governor was surprised, since the official 1828 “Regulations for the Tread Mill” stipulated that drivers armed with whips were to be present “for the purpose of keeping the refractory and stubborn prisoners on the wheel.”48 Still, the governor was right to note that the treadmill had joined, not supplanted, other forms of physical violence, and that the colonial jail could produce scenes of terror that rivaled those of any plantation. Reports such as these contributed to a rapid shift in metropolitan perceptions of the treadmill in British prisons and colonial jails in the decades after its introduction. Originally lauded as a symbol of progress and modernity, the treadmill quickly became evidence of the persistent use of physical violence in Britain’s uncivilized plantation colonies.49

46 Evans, Fabrication of Virtue, 301; Ignatieff, Just Measure of Pain, 177; Paton, No Bond But the Law, 105-06, 112.

47 John Wray, quoted in Thomas Rain, The Life and Labours of John Wray, Pioneer Missionary in British Guiana, Compiled from His Own Mss. And Diaries (London, 1892), 301.

48 “Regulations for the Tread Mill.”

49 Altink, Slave Women in Discourses on Slavery and Abolition, 149-53; Paton, No Bond but the Law, 83, 106-07.
The third major category of penal reform during amelioration is also the one that has received the least attention from historians: the creation of a robust imperial surveillance apparatus. Critics ranging from James Ramsay to Edmund Burke and William Wilberforce had, for more than half a century, argued that the metropolitan government needed to take a more active role in the management of colonial slavery, and that the enforcement of colonial laws was impossible without a strong, centralized government. The major significance of the 1826 code and the amelioration program more generally, therefore, was that West Indian colonies were forced to accept an unprecedented system of supervision and record-keeping that subjected owners and managers to the regular scrutiny of colonial officials and the imperial government.

The responsibility for supervising the punishment of slaves after 1826 fell to the protector of slaves, who took over and expanded the fiscal’s role in hearing slaves’ grievances. The Berbice slave code, following the metropolitan blueprint, made the protector a full-time, salaried position, prohibited the protector from owning slaves or plantations (unlike the fiscal), and divided the colony into districts with civil magistrates, who were also designated assistant protectors of slaves, in each one. Like the fiscal, the protector could examine witnesses in his New Amsterdam office or conduct investigations on plantations, and he could prosecute managers, owners,
and overseers who violated laws on the treatment of enslaved people in court.\textsuperscript{50} (The similarities to Burke’s “Sketch of a Negro Code” are striking.)

The other major responsibility of the protector and his assistants was the collection and inspection of a new type of document: the “Punishment Record Book.” The law required that all owners, attorneys, or managers in charge of more than six slaves keep records of all punishments they inflicted and their reasons for doing so. The colonial government distributed standardized forms with blanks for everything from the name and sex of the enslaved person punished and the time and place of punishment to the “offence” committed, the names of witnesses, and “the number of stripes actually inflicted on the offender.” Anyone found guilty of failing to record punishments or falsifying punishment records was subject to a substantial fine.

These punishment records were designed to subject the behavior of masters and slaves alike to the scrutiny of colonial officials. A civil magistrate who explained the 1826 amelioration reforms to Berbician slaves was explicit about the surveillance purpose of these punishment records: “I made it a point to impress upon their minds that the Punishment record book was meant not only as a check on the conduct of the managers towards the slaves, but also as a record...to know such of the Negroes whose characters are really bad and that such as appeared often in that book

\textsuperscript{50} The office of the protector of slaves was created in 1817, but the protector’s duties were handled by the fiscal until 1826. The 1826 code separated the offices of the fiscal and protector and made the protector a full time, salaried position (which paid one thousand pounds sterling per year). The fiscal continued to play an important role in prosecuting violations of laws on slave punishment. Berbice slave code.
would be debarred of many of the benefits afforded to the slaves of good characters by the provisions of this code.”

The protector of slaves, with the help of his assistants, collected and examined these punishment records twice a year. He used them when preparing reports for the lieutenant governor, which included “Abstract[s] of Offences committed by Male and Female Plantation Slaves.” The lieutenant governor then reviewed the protector’s reports, adding his own remarks and sending them to the Colonial Office in England. There the secretary of state examined the protector’s reports, writing the lieutenant governor and protector to alternately praise and criticize their application of amelioration reforms.

Metropolitan interest in these records of slave punishment is indicated by their regular publication in the House of Commons’s *Parliamentary Papers* and in abolitionist periodicals, such as the *Anti-Slavery Reporter.* The collection of records that reached Britain made it possible, in theory, for any literate metropolitan to know what was happening to enslaved people’s bodies on the other side of the Atlantic.

Punishment record books, moreover, were only one of several types of disciplinary paperwork generated by amelioration. The 1826 slave code also required, for example, that every plantation have a “hospital” or “sick-house,” and “that a book or register be kept in every such hospital, in which the names and treatment of all such slaves be respectively entered by the medical attendant.”

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51 “Reports of the Civil Magistrates in the Several Districts On the Promulgation of the New Code of the 25th September 1826,” CO 111/102, 302-03.

52 Berbice slave code, clauses 15-18. The only complete records of slave punishment to survive cover the period from Nov. 1826 to Jul. 1827. See Lean, “Secret Lives of Slaves,” 318 (table 7.1)
the treadmill began operating in the New Amsterdam jail in 1828, similar surveillance accompanied it. The Berbice government’s “Regulations for the Tread Mill” stipulated that a “Jail Surgeon” was to “examine all Persons before they are put to work on the Mill, and declare their fitness, and whether he considers them able to bear the full punishment that may be allotted to them or a more limited number of spells.” The regulations also provided that the “under-sheriff, or his Assistant, shall attend during the whole time the Mill is working,” and that he keep written “Mill Books,” or “Monthly Return[s] of Slaves Worked on the Tread Mill.” These records also listed a variety of details, including the names of prisoners, the “offences” they had allegedly committed, the number of spells to which they were sentenced, and the jail surgeon’s miscellaneous remarks. “Mill books,” like plantation punishment books, routinely made their way up the imperial food chain and across the Atlantic.53

Amelioration also entailed other efforts to make the physical violence inflicted on slaves more visible. The 1826 code stipulated, for example, that all punishments be administered “in the presence of one person of free condition, or of six slaves.” The protector could then call on such witnesses when investigating slaves’ complaints. The code also prohibited the use of the whip in the fields, and mandated that a medical practitioner approve of the location of solitary confinement. The public stocks, moreover, were to be placed “under cover in some conspicuous place

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53 “To His Excellency the Governor, Monthly Return of Slaves Worked on the Treadmill in August 1828,” CO 111/107, 11; “Regulations foe the Tread Mill.”
near the buildings” on plantations, presumably so that witnesses could more easily monitor punishment.54

The rationale behind these new types of record-keeping, the stipulations regarding witnesses, and the appointment of a full-time protector of slaves was the same: to give the imperial government greater control of slave punishment and, by extension, slavery itself. These were ways of asserting control one of the fundamental “rights” masters claimed: the prerogative to inflict violence on the people they owned. As such, these strategies reflected the domestic penal reform movement’s emphasis on the need to subject both criminals and those who administered punishment, such as jail wardens, to external supervision and state regulation. In the early 1820s, for example, the newly founded Society for the Improvement of Prison Discipline campaigned for legislation to establish uniform criteria for prison management and create a salaried inspectorate to monitor conditions and report violations.55

Penal reform and the amelioration of slavery thus both went hand-in-hand with the expansion of state power and the beginning of a shift from private to public control of violence.

Legislation introduced in Berbice and other crown colonies in the 1820s also represented a watershed in the antislavery movement. For the first time, abolitionists successfully pressured the imperial government to intervene directly in colonial slavery, forcing slaveowners to accept a bundle of reforms that forced them to give up no small amount of their long-cherished autonomy. With these reforms, the colonial government took a greater role in monitoring and regulating slave punishment and the relationships of

54 Berbice slave code.

55 Ignatieff, Just Measure of Pain, 77, 168.
enslaved people and European authorities more generally. Many of the specific reforms instituted in Berbice, ranging from changes in the way enslaved people were flogged to the adoption of new technologies of punishment such as the treadmill, were consistent with metropolitan moves to modernize its own penal system. The most important reforms, however, were the various surveillance mechanisms, such as the punishment record books and the protectors who collected them and heard slaves’ complaints. These changes made the physical violence of slavery more public than ever before and made it possible for enslaved people to use the colonial legal system as a means of protection against those who abused them.

**Slaves, the Fiscal, and the Protector**

For enslaved people, the regulations and institutions created during amelioration offered new possibilities for negotiating their relationships with owners and managers and in seeking redress for physical violence. Enslaved people were quick to take advantage of the legal protections they were granted and especially to turn to colonial officials, including the fiscal and protector, for help. Yet leveraging the power of the colonial government against one’s manager or owner was not easy, and the process of complaining was fraught with obstacles at every step.

Lodging a complaint with the fiscal or protector of slaves was dangerous and difficult. The first challenge was leaving one’s plantation or getting away from one’s owner, which was particularly difficult for the majority of the colony’s enslaved population, which was located on plantations several miles from the New Amsterdam offices of the fiscal and
protector. Traveling to town to complain either meant asking plantation authorities for a pass to leave, or leaving without permission and being considered a runaway. Either option was risky, and plantation management did everything it could to keep enslaved people away from the protector and fiscal. They rightly interpreted slaves’ complaints as direct challenges to their authority and autonomy. They also suffered a financial loss when slaves complained, even when complaints were dismissed. Owners incurred a twelve guilder fine for every slave that went to the fiscal and were charged even more when the fiscal punished slaves for making “unfounded” complaints.  

When plantation authorities could not prevent slaves from making complaints, they sometimes sought retribution after the fact. An enslaved man from plantation Philadelphia, for example, told the fiscal in August 1821 that his decision to complain about a flogging “brought [the manager] into such a passion that he sent all the negroes after him to catch him, but he escaped and came to town to complain.” In June 1825 a man named Donderdag, who complained to the fiscal about getting “too much work and not enough food” and about an owner who whipped him daily, similarly told the fiscal that when his owner learned he was on his way to town he “had [him] caught & locked up in the stocks.” Three men from Welgelegen reported in November 1823 that their manger, who frequently subjected them to “severe” floggings, mocked them for complaining to the plantation’s attorneys or colonial

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56 Pass laws confined enslaved people to their plantations unless they had written permission from management to leave. See Berbice Gazette, Jul. 16, 1814; and Thompson, Colonialism and Underdevelopment, 114


58 “Examination of a complaint preferred by the negroes Amsterdam and Simon,” Aug. 28, 1821, CO 116/138, 87.

officials, telling them that they “are fools for going,” since they would be flogged afterward.
“We are afraid to talk,” one man explained, “because after going we get severely punished.”

The fiscals’ and protectors’ records are full of accounts of enslaved people being punished for exercising their legal right to seek redress with colonial officials, which highlights slaveowners’ resistance to amelioration and especially to governmental interference in slave punishment. A slave named Cadet, for example, was one of many slaves punished by the authorities on his plantation for “leaving the estate without a pass and going to complain…without any cause.”

Four years later, a man named Edward similarly told the protector that “he was flogged...for having complained.” Even the colonial office in Britain recognized that managers who prevented or discouraged enslaved people from complaining rendered penal reforms pointless. Or, in the words of Secretary of State George Murray, “that the efficacy of the laws for the Protection of Slaves, must entirely depend upon their facility of access to the Protector and Assistant Protectors.”

If an enslaved person decided to accept the risk or complaining and managed to make it to the fiscal’s or protector’s office—which involved an arduous journey of several dozen miles—the next challenge was to convince authorities he or she was telling the truth. This was difficult given the racial bias of colonial officials. The fiscal and protector, like many Europeans, were skeptical of slave testimony and were reluctant to prosecute the managers, overseers, and owners who were their peers unless the evidence was overwhelming. Fiscal

62 Aug. 28, 1830, CO 116/146, 190-93.
63 Murray’s comment appeared in a letter to the governor of Berbice, Henry Beard, in which he also criticized a manager who had refused to give one of his slaves a pass to complain. See George Murray to Henry Beard, Oct. 6, 1830, CO 116/145, 249.
Michael Bennett, for example, believed that enslaved people were “in the habit of exaggerating their complaints and, indeed…very often [their complaints] are unfounded; nine times in ten they proceed from the most indolent and worthless negroes.”

The stakes were high when it came to convincing the protector or fiscal, since enslaved people who were suspected of lying found that seeking help could make a bad situation worse. In 1819, for instance, the fiscal accompanied Scipio, an enslaved man whose complaint was dismissed, to his plantation and had him publicly flogged “as an example to the gang of that estate” after he determined Scipio had lied. Four years later the fiscal had a group of men whose complaint was deemed “entirely groundless…flogged in the presence of the whole gang; who were all reprimanded for their disorderly behaviour.” The fiscal had the “unpleasant duty,” he explained, of “punishing slaves absconding from their work and preferring charges against their owners or managers which they could not substantiate.” And on multiple occasions officials criticized “the unnecessary severity with which [the fiscal] has usually punished the offence of making a groundless complaint.” Such risks help explain why more people did not lodge complaints.

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66 “Examination of a Complaint Preferred By the Negroes Caesar, Duncan, Hero, Bacchus, Watt, Hector, Jeffery, Welcome and Smith, Belonging to Plantation New Forest, Against the Manager of Said Estate,” Jun. 11, 1822, CO 116/138, 120.

67 Michael Bennett to Henry Beard, Mar. 15, 1819, CO 116/138, 42.

To convince officials that their complaints were legitimate and that they were telling the truth, enslaved people had to craft compelling narratives and be skilled plaintiffs. They had to demonstrate their awareness of the colony’s laws and produce enough evidence and witnesses to corroborate their complaints.

In many cases complainants coupled rights-based claims with charges that their managers or overseers had not fulfilled their paternalistic obligations. Central to the latter strategy was the effort to depict oneself as a loyal, obedient servant who toiled under an unreasonably cruel or incompetent owner or manager. Three people from plantation Beerenstein, for instance, claimed their manager was so violent, often “taking the whip out of the driver’s hand, and flogging us himself...at random,” that the entire “gang is extremely dissatisfied on account of the bad behavior of the manager.” They also framed their complaint as having been long overdue, one man claiming that “the manager is too hard against them, [they] cannot keep it out any longer.”

Some enslaved complainants tried to convince officials that their specific complaints were symptoms of a much larger problem: incompetent mangers who abused their authority. A man named Esterre, for example, told the fiscal in January 1821 that his “master” often assigned too much work and flogged them when they could not finish it. This was not, Esterre claimed, their fault, but their owner’s. After all, his had “been but a short time in this colony, and never was on an estate before.” So he “does not know how to deal with negroes, but lies always in trouble with them.” Moreover, Esterre added, “his former masters were never dissatisfied with him.” Samuel, who belonged to the same plantation, agreed that their

69 “Examination of the coloured Girl Magdaleentje, and the negroes Andries and Michael, belonging to the plantation Beerenstein, complaining against the Manager of the said estate,” Jun. 15, 1821, CO 116/138, 83.
owner “knows very little of negro work and treatment.” Their owner had also declared it his right to do whatever he wanted with his slaves, telling them that “he has no fear of Fiscal or any one else, but that he will flog them when he finds it proper.” Whether this was true or not, it was a rhetorical strategy that played into British notions of hierarchy and was designed to make the fiscal look unfavorably on the owner. Samuel’s request that he be sold to someone “who understands the working and treatment of slaves” underscored the fact that their complaint was aimed at the specific injustices they suffered under a particularly inept manager. Samuel knew, he added “that they would be able to please a reasonable master.”

Many complaints were framed in similar terms, juxtaposing loyal, hard working slaves with tyrannical, unreasonable managers. A man named Quassie told the fiscal in August 1821, for example, that his “extremely severe” manager, who had purportedly subjected Quassie to brutal floggings (one of 160 lashes, the other 230 lashes), did “not know how to manage negroes properly.” Four women from plantation Reumzigt claimed that “for the most trifling offence” they were punished with the cart whip, that they had too much work to do, and that they did “not materially object to the work...but to the manager’s exactness in examining the coffee after it is assorted.” He flogged them if a single bean was bad. “Every negro is ready to come to town,” they claimed, “so severe is the treatment of the manger.”

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70 “Examination of a complaint preferred by the negro Esterre against his master, Spangenburg,” Jan. 2, 1821, CO 116/138, 73-74.


Some enslaved people managed to lodge successful complaints about violent punishments with the fiscal or protector. In April 1824, for instance, an enslaved man named Dundas from plantation New Forest complained that the manager had attacked him with a cutlass. “The manager trouble me,” Dundas claimed, “he beat me with a soldier’s cutlass till fall down, I said Massa you want to kill me he replied I don’t care for Fiscal, or Governor or your own master.” The manager then ordered the driver to whip Dundas thirty-nine times—the legal limit at the time. The manager admitted that he had struck Dundas with a cutlass, but claimed the violence was warranted by Dundas’s disrespect. The manager had been giving Dundas instructions in the plantain walk when Dundas “paid no attention to my orders, [and] on saying do you hear me, he turned round grinning and asked if I thought he was a black ass on this I struck him.” The “few stripes” he ordered the driver to give Dundas were for not having finished his work. The fiscal ruled that although “no injury was sustained” by the manager’s assault, “the act itself however was most unlawful & unjustifiable & it being contrary to the court’s ordinance directing the manner in which slaves were to be punished,” he was fined 300 guilders.73

Many successful complaints followed a similar pattern, with managers or overseers claiming they had a right, if not responsibility, to use violent punishments to (re)assert authority, and enslaved complainants contending that the violence they endured was undeserved or illegal. A New Amsterdam “domestic” named Venus, for example, complained in May 1830 that her owner “beat her severely with a stick because he found fault with the manner in which she had boiled a ham.” Venus said “she boiled it as she

73 “Complaint of the Negro Dundas Belonging to Pln New Forrest the Property of Henry Smithson Situated on Canje,” Apr. 30, 1824, CO 116/140.
usually does, and tried her best to cook it properly.” Her owner admitted that he had, “on the irritation of the moment took a small stick with which he struck her three times.” But he claimed that he had not done so “violently so as to injure her.” He “requested to know if he could not accommodate the matter,” but the deputy protector told him “that the Slave Law gave him no power to compromise, that the Offence was a serious one and bore the heaviest penalty,” which in this case was a ten pound fine.74

The acting protector upheld a similar complaint from a man named Klaas in December 1832. Klaas said that the manger of plantation Nieuw Hope (or Nieuwenhoop), where he lived, had attacked him one night with a stick for not taking the manager’s horse to the stable. Other witnesses, however, explained that the manager lashed out in anger at what he saw as Klaas’s insolence. When the manager ordered Klaas to take the horse, Klaas refused, “saying he was not the horse boy.” The manager claimed that he had only “laid hold of him to make him” take the horse, and “positively deny[d] having struck him.” Moreover, he claimed, “he would not have used violent measures to get Klaas up if he had not been so insolent and set all authority at defiance.” Despite the manager’s claim that it was his prerogative to use violence, the acting protector ruled that “altho’ he considered the conduct of the man Klaas most reprehensible...nothing could justify the violent measures he had resorted to.” The acting protector also explained that “it was absolutely necessary to protect the negroes from such treatment, that [the manager] had violated the Law in doing so and that it would be the duty of the acting Protector to take proceedings against him for the assault.”75

74 May 31, 1830, CO 116/146, 106-09.
75 Dec. 11, 1832, CO 116/151, 193-96.
A complaint made by an enslaved man, Goodluck, in 1824, suggests that enslaved people did well to take British attitudes toward violence into account when framing their complaints. Slaves apparently knew that officials disapproved of punishments marked by unchecked anger. Goodluck told the fiscal that his owner “beat me with his fist all about my face struck me on my head…and reduced me to the state you now see me in.” Goodluck’s owner, aware that such outbursts were socially unacceptable, “expressed his sincere regret for having allowed his passion to get the better of him.” The fiscal concluded that Goodluck’s owner “had punished his servant in an unwarrantable manner and contrary to the court’s ordinance,” and issued him a 300 guilder fine. As the fiscal explained in a different case he took before the court of criminal justice later that year, “the Law of the Land and the Ordinances of the legislation of this Colony made and provided for the safety of the slave Population strictly prohibit the indulgence of wrath and anger towards slaves.” Slaves knew this, and used it to their advantage when they gave testimony before the Fiscal, often describing managers, owners, and overseers who “flew into a passion” or punished them in “a terrible passion,” knowing that this cultural script might improve their chances of success.

The majority of enslaved complainants, however, either failed to convince the protector or fiscal that a crime had been committed or led to an unsuccessful prosecution. By


77 CO 116/139, 504–505.

78 See, for example, “Complaint of the sambo girl Betsey, belonging to Er. J. F. Obermuller, inhabitant of this town,” May 8, 1819, CO 116/138, 46; “Examination of a complaint preferred by the negro Primo, driver of plantation Beerenstein,” 1820, CO 116/138, 72-73; “Examination of a complaint preferred by the negroes Amsterdam and Simon,” Aug. 28, 1821, CO 116/138, 87; and “Complaint of the negro [blank], belonging to Dr. Duggin” Oct. 20, 1823, CO 116/138, 113. See also Lean, “Secret Lives of Slaves,” 139-40.
one measure, some 70 percent of complaints failed. Enslaved people often lacked the
evidence or witnesses they needed to corroborate their allegations, and it did not take much
for Europeans to undermine their complaints, given the bias of colonial officials and their
skepticism of slave testimony.

Some managers successfully rebuffed complaints by undermining the character of the
people who lodged them. The manager John Cameron, for instance, claimed that his slave
Philip—who complained of “being too much punished”--was “frequently drunk,” a lazy
worker, and that he bore “a very bad character amongst the negroes.” The fiscal ruled that
Philip’s complaint was “frivolous and unfounded,” and he directed Philip to be punished for
making a false complaint. In a similar case the fiscal determined that a complaint from
three men on plantation Cotton Tree, “being contradicted by the manager,” was “unfounded.”
As he explained in a letter to the slaves’ owner, he “deemed it [his] duty to order the said
three slaves to be exemplarily punished,” since their complaint was “without foundation.”
So he ordered each of the complainants to receive seventy-five lashes in the public market
place. It was his “duty to attend to the complaints of negroes, and to cause redress in all
cases of oppression,” but it was also his “duty to inflict punishment on slaves who prefer
false and ungrounded complaints against their employers.”

79 J. H. Lean calculated that out of nearly 2,000 complaints made to the fiscal and protector of slaves between
1819 and 1827, only about 30 percent “were officially upheld and the defendant punished or admonished.” See

80 “Complaint of negro Philip, the property of plantation Canefield Carye,” June 14, 1819, CO 116/138, 53-54.

81 “Investigation of a Complaint preferred by the negroes Brutus, Goodluck, and Ambrose, belonging to
Plantation Cotton Tree, the property of W. Katz, Esq. to the Fiscal, on the 22d May 1819,” CO 116/138, appx.
14-15.
When a woman named Princess complained that she had been horsewhipped “for nothing,” her owner merely had to explain that he beat her “for insolence, of which she is guilty,” for the fiscal to reprimand her “for making this unnecessary complaint.” Moreover, he threatened “that if her master complained of her conduct again, she would be punished.”

Many enslaved people, like Princess, learned that seeking help from colonial authorities could backfire. The likelihood of failure must have discouraged all but the boldest--or the most desperate--people from lodging complaints.

Even when colonial authorities agreed with enslaved complainants that a punishment was excessive or unmerited, there was often little that could be done to hold managers accountable. Part of the problem, as colonial officials and enslaved people knew all too well, was that there was a wide gap between punishments that were socially unacceptable and those that were illegal, as the following cases illustrate. In February 1819 an enslaved woman, Minkie, told the Fiscal that her owner threatened that he would “put me down, and cut my ------, and would give me more than the law.” Minkie’s owner then had her “laid down and tied to three stakes,” and flogged by a driver with a cart whip, a notoriously brutal weapon described by one crown official as “the long cutting whip,” and a “horrid instrument.” The Fiscal examined Minkie’s body and noted that “her posteriors…[were]

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covered with a plaister by order of the doctor, and apparently lacerated to that degree, that the court judged it expedient to direct her not to uncover it.”

Minkie’s owner admitted that he had flogged her, but defended his actions as warranted and perfectly legal. He explained that in the two years that he had owned Minkie she had run away repeatedly, and that when he decided to have her sold “she became so Insolent that I was obliged to break her mouth to quiet her and for her continued Impudence gave her a flogging.” This was not an admission of wrongdoing: colonial law permitted owners to strike slaves “guilty of insolence or impertinence in speaking or replying to a white or free person,” provided that they only inflicted “One Blow.”

Aware of the legal restrictions on whipping, the owner said that he “counted the lashes and they did not exceed the Law, but I had them well laid on.” Nevertheless, the fiscal prosecuted the case before the court of criminal justice. The court was “highly indignant at the treatment of this female,” but because “no evidence…could be obtained to convict the proprietor of having inflicted severer punishment than that prescribed by law,” the fiscal could only scold Minkie’s owner. “Your conduct calls for redress,” the fiscal explained, but “sufficient evidence cannot be procured to inflict punishment on you.”

A woman named Princess, who went to the fiscal in 1823, similarly found that the fiscal’s ability to prosecute her owner hinged on the number of lashes he had inflicted. Princess complained that her owner, a doctor named Hugh McGee, beat her

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84 “Complaint of the woman Minkie, belonging to Thomas C. Jones,” CO 116/138, 39-40; “Investigation of a complaint preferred by the Negress Minkie, the property of Thomas C. Jones, to the Fiscal, on the 12th of February 1819, and examined before his Honor the President,” CO 116/138 appx. 9-10.

85 Proclamation of Acting-Governor Dalrymple, Nov. 14, 1810.

86 “Investigation of a complaint preferred by the Negress Minkie.”
with a cart whip. “My clothes were lifted up and I was flogged on my bare skin,” she told the fiscal, perhaps hoping that highlighting this physical exposure might improve her chances of success. “Afterwards,” she added, she had been “scrubbed...with lime juice.” McGee admitted that he had ordered Princess to be tied down to posts and receive twelve lashes for “Insolence and disobedience of orders.” Indeed, McGee reasoned that his “conduct toward the Negress Princess was solely in exercising the right of a Master to punish an insolent and insubordinate slave...within the bounds allowed by Law.” It was this right that men like McGee were unwilling to forfeit.  

Princess and other witnesses, however, told the fiscal that McGee had been upset by Princess’s refusal to have sex with him. Unfortunately for Princess, there was little that the fiscal could do, since she admitted that she did not “know the number of lashes [she] received.” McGee claimed that he “ordered her to receive 12 stripes but she got twenty one,” which was still under the legal limit. The court concluded “that the conduct of said Hugh R. McGee ha[d] been extremely improper, harsh and indelicate, and therefore deserving of reprehension.” But “there [was] not sufficient Evidence to convict him…of any breach of established Law.”  

Other enslaved people faced the same problem. Among them was Willem, an enslaved man who protested a flogging his wife had endured for having left the field to care for their sick child. The fiscal “regretted the Manager found it necessary to punish the complainant’s wife with the whip,” he explained, and “strongly

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88 Princess testified that she told McGee that she would not sleep with him because “she was just out of lying in and...it was too soon to take a Husband.” Ibid.
recommended the discontinuance of punishing females therewith,” but in 1824, when Willem complained, there had yet to be a ban on flogging enslaved women. The fiscal “had not authority to prohibit it.” There was, he told Willem, “no ground...to abscond from the Estate” and complain, so he ordered Willem to be confined for a fortnight.\(^89\)

Nearly a decade later, officials’ ability to regulate violence against enslaved people remained hampered by the colony’s legal codes. In August 1833, three “middle aged” men from plantation Rotterdam complained that they had been flogged for working more slowly than the driver demanded. Yet there was nothing the acting protector could do. As he explained, he could not “interfere in this matter, the punishment not being contrary to Law.” He could only “recommended in the strongest terms to give up corporal punishment except where it was found absolutely necessary, which he did not conceive it was on this occasion.”\(^90\)

Even in cases where the fiscal or protector determined that a punishment was illegal, there was no guarantee that a prosecution would succeed. In March 1827, for instance, a woman named Catherine complained that a free colored woman, Cecilia Benjamin, had brutally flogged her “because [she] did not come home every night to mind her child, and make coffee in the morning” while she was hired out to another person. Benjamin “said she would give [Catherine] a good licking,” and she “tied [her] two hands with a hammock rope,” then “threw the rope over a beam or rafter in

\(^89\) “Complaint of the Negro Willem Belonging to Plantation McRetrite in the River Berbice property of Fullerton,” Apr. 12, 1824, CO 116/140.

\(^90\) Aug. 10, 1833, CO 116/146, 221-24.
the room.” Catherine “was hauled up that [her] feet did not touch the ground...and
Misses [Benjamin] began to flog [her] with tamarind rods.” Catherine “was much
flogged,” and her “posteriors [were] much marked with the stripes” when she went to
the fiscal’s office. The fiscal determined that Benjamin was “guilty of an act of
Cruelty and had impugned the late slave Code,” so he “instituted Criminal
proceedings against the free black woman Cecilia Benjamin.” But the court ruled that
“it [was] not proven that she the said Cecilia Benjamin did commit the offence with
which she stands charged,” and acquitted her.91

Other cases confirm that even with the support of the fiscal or protector,
enslaved people’s efforts to prosecute managers or owners often failed. John
McDougald, for example, stood accused by the fiscal of having ordered a woman
named Louisa to be flogged in November 1832, six years after the Berbice
government made that punishment illegal. There was compelling evidence from
Louisa and other witnesses, including the man who had flogged her at McDougald’s
insistence, to corroborate her claim. Yet McDougald pled not guilty and was
acquitted.92 The manager of Goldstone Hall, James Beck, also escaped conviction in
May 1832 for allegedly having resorted to an “illegal, cruel, and excessive mode of
punishment” (i.e., confining two enslaved women in the stocks and hanging them by
their wrists for an hour, “to the great injury of the said slaves”).93

91 “Complaint of the Negress Catherine daughter to the negress Nancy also present,” Mar. 9, 1827, CO 116/141.
92 Nov. 14, 1832, CO 116/151, 169-71; “Charles Herbert First Fiscal R.O. Versus John McDougald,” Jan. 31,
1833, CO 116/152, 261-64.
116/149, 113-15.
Moreover, even when other authorities upheld the fiscal’s prosecution, slaveowners and managers could escape with light penalties. When the fiscal fined Henry Bird 1400 guilders for having flogged his slave, Phillis, with a “leathern strap” and a “chaise whip,” for instance, Bird “presented a Petition to...the Lieutenant Governor praying to mitigate the fine.” The lieutenant governor consented, reducing the fine by more than three-fourths to only 300 guilders.\(^94\)

People accused of inflicting even the most brutal corporal punishments could escape official inquiry with little more than a slap on the wrist, as the following case illustrates. Roosje, an enslaved woman, went to the fiscal in 1819 after a brutal flogging. The manager had ordered her to sort coffee, she said, although she was “too big” (too far advanced in pregnancy) to work. And when the manager discovered that Roosje and others had not sorted enough coffee by the midday break, he ordered the driver to flog them all.\(^95\) The driver hesitated when he came to Roosje, and pointed out that “this woman is rather big with child.” The manager, indifferent, told him to “give it to her till the blood flies out.”\(^96\)


\(^{95}\) The normal workday for slaves in Berbice was from 6am until 6pm, with a break from 11am to 1pm. Lean, “Secret Lives of Slaves,” 52n82.

\(^{96}\) “Investigation of a Complaint preferred by the Negress Roosje, attached to Plantation L’Esperance, to the Fiscal, on the 10th of June 1819,” CO 116/138, appx. 15-16; CO 116/139/113-189. Three years earlier the missionary John Wray commented on a similar case with a very different outcome, illustrating the extreme formalism that characterized laws on physical violence in Berbice. A pregnant woman, America, had been “cart-whipped in a most brutal manner,” receiving “at least 150 lashes” at the hands of two drivers because she had been “insolent” to the manager’s wife. The manager had smoked a pipe and casually watched while the drivers took turns flogging her, afterward putting her in the stocks for several days. The major difference in this case, however, was that the number of lashes exceeded the limit by more than one hundred, and the manager was therefore convicted of “excessive cruelty,” issued a three hundred guilder fine, and sentenced to three months in jail. See John Wray to Zachary Macaulay, Nov. 1816, enc. in Lieutenant-Governor Bentinck to Lord Bathurst, May 26, 1817, in PP 1818, XVII (433): 229-30; and “Sentence of the Court of Criminal Justice on Jacobus Overeem, manager of Sandvoort,” in PP 1818, XVII (433): 236-38. See also Thompson, Unprofitable Servants, 29-30.
The following day, Roosje said, “I told the driver I would not work as I had pains in my loins.” The manager sent her to the hospital, where “the doctor examined [her], and said there was nothing the matter with [her], sitting down was not good.” So Roosje was ordered back to work, only to miscarry a few days later. “I was five months gone with child,” she said. “The labour was heavy; the midwife had to force the child from me; the child was dead, one eye was out, the arm broken, and a stripe visible over the head, WHICH MUST HAVE BEEN DONE BY THE WHIP DOUBLED.”

The driver and other witnesses corroborated Roosje’s testimony, and the fiscal prosecuted the manager. But the court ruled there was no evidence that the owner knew of Roosje’s pregnancy when he ordered her flogged or, more importantly, that he had violated the regulations on whipping. It found him “not guilty of the charge of cruelty,” although it did convict him of the less serious charge of “indiscretion and neglect of his duty.”

Given the dangers involved in lodging a complaint and the unlikelihood that it would lead to a successful prosecution, one has to wonder why enslaved people continued to turn to the fiscal and protector year after year. A likely possibility is that enslaved people knew that even when their complaints failed, they still subjected the (mis)management of owners, managers, and overseers to external scrutiny. Any complaint, whether dismissed or upheld, was a reminder that the colonial government had the power to monitor slave-master

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97 “Complaint preferred by the Negress Roosje.”

98 CO 116/139/121-22.
relationships and that the authority of managers and owners was not absolute. Some victories were symbolic.

In March 1823, for example, nine women from plantation Port Mourant convinced the fiscal that their manager relied on the whip often and indiscriminately and that, by extension, he was a poor manager. “Sometimes the whole of the women are flogged for the sake of two or three not finishing their task,” one of the women explained. “One Saturday,” she added, “the Manager went to the field, and found that they had not finished their row, and immediately ordered four women to be flogged.” She “thought it very hard against those women, which were merely punished for nothing.” The fiscal’s investigation revealed that “the Manager was very severe upon them, and too frequently inflicted punishment without sufficient cause.” The manager had not violated the law, so the fiscal could not issue a fine. But he did warn the manager “that his conduct would be vigilantly looked after in future; and if he continued the same system, the attorney of the estate would be recommended to discharge him from the management.”

Managers, Owners, and Colonial Officials

European plantation authorities usually resented the intrusion of colonial officials, but they also took advantage of the colonial government’s increased powers for their own purposes. Some slaveowners and managers realized that there was a silver lining to the expansion of imperial power during amelioration that they had

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99 “Examination of a Complaint preferred by the negroes Maria, Jane, Fanny, Marianne, Polly, Bella, Caroline, Betsy and Nancy, belonging to plantation Port Mourant, against the Manager of said estate,” Mar. 3, 1823, CO 116/138, 136.
fought against. Colonial authorities could help them reassert control through public displays of violence and terror.

Some owners and managers turned to officials, including civil magistrates, the protector, and the fiscal, when their efforts to control enslaved people failed or when they wanted the colonial government’s help reestablishing their authority. Doing so conveyed a clear message to enslaved people that the authority of individual managers and owners was supported by even more powerful authorities. One such owner was Ann Bennett, who in August 1827 asked the protector for help with a woman named Mary Ann. “I am under the necessity,” Bennett explained, “of requesting you will inflict some punishment on this ungovernable slave, her temper is so irritable and insupportable that I have no peace whatsoever.” Bennett explained that Mary Ann would, “at the most trifling occurrence,” “[f]ly out in so passionate a strain swearing she will kill, chop and beat out the brains of every one, that I am myself quite alarmed.” When Bennett threatened that she would take Mary Ann to the protector, Mary Ann had replied: “do so and if the Protector can change my disposition get him to do it.” The heart of the matter, as Bennett admitted, was that her “own authority [was] insufficient to control [Mary Ann].” When Mary Ann was questioned by the protector, she “merely remarked that no one had a right to trouble her.” The protector sentenced her to five days solitary confinement “on bread and

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100 Managers frequently used the phrase “under the necessity” in justifying their use of physical violence against enslaved people. See Lean, “Secret Lives of Slaves,” 30.
water,” a punishment designed to show Mary Ann that the colonial government was
determined to buttress the power of slaveowners with legally-sanctioned violence.101

The protector and fiscal displayed their willingness in many cases to punish
enslaved people at the request of owners or managers, reinforcing managerial
authority and showing slaves that Europeans were united against them. When a civil
magistrate told the fiscal that a woman named Sophia “was in the habit of absconding
from the Estate for some days,” and that previous punishments “appeared to have no
effect on her,” he asked the fiscal to “check such indolent conduct.” The fiscal
consented, sentencing Sophia to six days on the treadmill.102 The attorney of
plantation Rose Hall, John Alves, sought similar assistance from the protector in June
1828 with a man named Fraser, who “had for some time back behaved in a very
unbecoming banner,” running away “for two or three weeks at a time” to avoid
punishment. Alves had pardoned Fraser several times “on his promise of better
behaviour,” he said, but Fraser continued to disobey him. So he asked the protector
“to interfere & prescribe such punishment as would make Fraser aware that such
behaviour cannot be tolerated on an Estate.” The protector sentenced Fraser to the
treadmill.103

Indeed, so common were such requests that the deputy protector of slaves
complained to the lieutenant governor in September 1827 about a widespread rumor
that he was responsible for handling the complaints of free people against slaves.

101 “Mrs. Ann Bennett prefers a Complaint against her slave Mary Ann,” Aug. 2, 1827, CO 116/141, 52-54.
103 “No. 25,” Jun. 16, 1828, CO 116/144.
This was, legally, the fiscal’s responsibility. The deputy protector realized the effect that punishing slaves at the request of free people might have on others who might wish to seek his help. “When the complaint is made by the master, and where such decision might direct punishment for the slave,” he explained, it “could not fail soon to excite universal distrust amongst the slaves toward the Protector, and make them shy in seeking his advice, or unfolding to him their grievances; in fact, they would view him merely in the light of a secondary Fiscal.”

The Colonial Office also recognized that this was problematic. As the secretary of state for the colonies wrote in 1829, “the Protector should be their guardian only and not their judge.”

As the deputy protector and Colonial Office noted, enslaved people saw colonial officials as both potential allies and as enemies. Plantation authorities continued to turn to the colonial government for help asserting their authority through displays of officially sanctioned violence during amelioration. The slaveowner William Grimes, for example, went to the fiscal in January 1829 and charged that his slave, Betsey, “is so very bad his own authority is insufficient to keep her within bounds.” She had used “gross and impertinent language,” he claimed, and “on his remonstrating with Betsey on her bad behaviour she abused him.” Betsey admitted in the fiscal’s office that “her temper is so very high when roused, that she does not know what she says or does.” The fiscal “reprimanded her for giving vent to such


105 The secretary of state explained that “when a slave prefers complaints against his master from an improper motive and without sufficient grounds he should incur punishment but for this offence he should be brought to trial before some regular tribunal which should investigate the specific charge of groundless frivolous accusation and award such punishment as the law may have previously prescribed.” Feb. 4, 1829, CO 114/5, quoted in Gill, “Labor, Material Welfare, and Culture,” 62.
unwarrantable conduct and sentenced her to twelve days solitary confinement on plantains & water.”

In a similar case from May 1831, the fiscal was explicit about his obligation to punish slaves who challenged plantation authorities. In this case the manager of plantation Mary’s Hope asked the fiscal to punish a man named George, who had left the field on day without permission and “liberated his mother [Bella] in defiance of my authority” from the stocks. The manager had locked George up to punish him, but he claimed that his conduct was “deserving of severer punishment than a Manager is authorised to inflict and as there is no District Magistrate in our divisions, I deemed it prudent to send him to you.” The fiscal told George that interfering when the manager put his mother in the stocks “was unjustifiable, illegal & deserving of punishment.” He was, he admitted, “inclined to make allowance for the feelings of a son witnessing the disgrace & punishment of a parent,” but “the remedy to which he resolved, to afford her relief could not be sanctioned.” Since George had disobeyed his manager, the fiscal sentenced him to ten days on the treadmill. It was his “duty,” he told George, “to support the authority of Managers on Estates when they acted conformably to Law.”

Conclusion

The penal reforms ushered in by amelioration had an ambivalent impact on enslaved people’s relationships with owners, managers, and overseers. These reforms

107 “No. 20,” May 9, 1831, CO 116/142, 143-52.
expanded enslaved people’s legal rights, offered the promise of protection against certain forms of physical violence, and provided official mechanisms for enslaved people to make their grievances known. In some cases enslaved people displayed a savvy ability to use the legal system to protest abuses and prosecute plantation authorities. Yet lodging a complaint with the protector of slaves or the fiscal was dangerous and difficult, not least of all because slaveowners and managers opposed efforts to circumscribe their autonomy and their prerogative to use physical violence. Managers and owners, moreover, turned to the very officials charged with protecting enslaved people for help punishing them. The colonial government thus alternately circumscribed and reinforced managerial authority.

These conclusions highlight the extent to which cultural and political developments in metropolitan Britain affected power relationships in its plantation colonies. The domestic penal reform campaign and a reinvigorated antislavery movement led not only to new imperial policies regarding colonial slavery and to new laws on slave punishment in the 1820s, but also to an unprecedented expansion of imperial authority. The final decades of slavery were marked by an increasingly interventionist imperial government which, through its colonial administrators, inserted itself into the relationships of enslaved people and their enslavers, disrupting the notion that the plantation was a private, domestic realm. Amelioration thus forced enslaved people and European authorities alike to negotiate their relationships in the context of a new disciplinary regime supervised and controlled by colonial officials.
CHAPTER FIVE:

“THE CUSTOM OF THE COLONY”

In May 1819, a large protest on the coffee plantation Recumzigt erupted. At issue were the customary property rights of the estate’s slaves. According to the plantation owner, A.J. Glasius, the protest began during the Whitsunday holidays, when the enslaved people had gathered to receive their customary “allowances” of food and clothing. The overseer was “giv[ing] the negroes their rations, namely, a tierce of beef, fifty stockfish, half a cask of barley, each a hand of tobacco, two pipes, and salt...and the men three ells [about four yards] of osnaburgs [a coarse fabric], the women five [ells], and the house people six [ells], and the children one and a half ells.” What Glasius offered, however, was less than the Recumzigt slaves had come to expect, and less than they needed, they claimed.¹

An enslaved man named August was the first to protest his allowance, which he believed was insufficient. “On its coming to the turn of negro August,” Glasius said, “he had taken up the osnaburgs, and after examining it, had exclaimed, ‘Is this the osnaburgs we are to receive? I will not have it’.” This defiance started a wave of protest. August’s “example had been followed by most of the others,” Glasius said, “and particularly by the negroes

¹“Investigation of a Complaint preferred by A. J. Glasius, Esq. Proprietor of the above Estate, against part of the Gang for insubordinate Conduct on Whitsunday past, on the occasion of Clothing and Rations being delivered the Gang on the above day. This investigation held in presence of the honourable William Helder, member of the court of Criminal Justice,” June 2-3, 1819, CO 116/138, 50-53. An ell was equal to about 1.25 yards. Note the variation in quantity of clothing provided according to age and status, which was common practice in Berbice.
Conraad and Virtus.” Glasius ordered the drivers and overseer to apprehend August. But August “cried out, ‘Come, my lads, let us be off;’ and he was immediately joined by five-and-twenty others, who proceeded off the estate towards the back. They took the beef, fish, barley, tobacco and pipes, and went off,” returning after nightfall.²

Testimony gathered by the fiscal, who investigated Glasius’s complaint against August and the other “ringleaders,” revealed that the Recumzigt people were fed up with an owner who had violated their hard-won property rights for too long. As Conraad explained, “they have had no clothing for years, and therefore seeing the quantity of three ells put out for them last Sunday after so many years disappointment, he with others had refused to take the osnaburgs.” The defiance of August and Conraad emboldened others. Jenny “refused to take the five ells of osnaburgs because it was not sufficient for a coat.” One man told the fiscal that “he took his osnaburgs, but seeing his mattys [friends or workmates] refuse to take it, he threw it down also.” In the end, this bold protest backfired. August and Conraad were flogged on the fiscal’s orders for having “create[d] much uneasiness, and evince[d] a spirit of disobedience which out to be checked, to prevent a recurrence of such conduct.”³

Conflicts like this, documented in the fiscals’ and protectors of slaves’ records, reveal that even under the desperate conditions of slavery in the West Indies, enslaved people developed and asserted notions of rights. Protests like the one on Recumzigt were, of course, “acts of resistance” and expressions of slaves’ “agency,” but these broad categorizations fail to capture the specific motivations and tangible goals of people like August and his brethren. August and the others did not mount an insurrection or permanently desert the plantation, nor

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
did they claim freedom or equality. Instead, they demanded just a little more food, a little more cloth. Such protests, which were aimed at specific economic injustices and which had concrete, modest goals, can be fruitfully approached through the lens of “moral economy,” a concept originally developed by British historian E. P. Thompson in the early 1970s to reinterpret food “riots” and the notions of economic justice that underlay popular protest in eighteenth century England.\(^4\)

As Thompson himself acknowledged late in his career, the moral economy concept spawned rich scholarship and inspired intense debate in many fields and disciplines, some of them far removed from the early modern European context he had in mind. Among the most notable of which has been anthropologist James C. Scott’s work on the “weapons of the weak” employed by southeast Asian peasants in the late twentieth century to safeguard customary rights and negotiate economic relationships with landlords.\(^5\) Moral economy also has the potential to illuminate enslaved people’s notions of economic rights and the strategies they used to protect and expand these rights within the considerable constraints and obstacles they faced.\(^6\) In particular, moral economy allows us to consider not only how enslaved


\(^6\) One of the few explicit applications of moral economy to slavery studies is Alex Lichtenstein, “‘That Disposition to Theft, With Which They Have Been Branded’: Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law,” *Journal of Social History* 21, no. 3 (1988): 413-40. Other historians have used moral economy implicitly, including Emilia Viotti da Costa, who highlighted enslaved people’s notions of rights and entitlements and their unspoken contracts with owners in nineteenth century Demerara. See Da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York, 1994), esp. 46, 63-73.
people resisted the fact of slavery, but how the very predicament of enslavement shaped their
goals and politics.

Exploring Berbician slave society in terms of moral economy raises a number of
productive questions about enslaved people’s customary and legal rights, their strategies for
safeguarding these and protesting infringements, and, perhaps most importantly, the process
by which enslaved people, managers, owners, and other free people negotiated their
economic relationships--and especially their mutual obligations and responsibilities--with
one another. What kind of property rights did enslaved people claim and how did they assert
these rights in their words and their actions? How did they try to compel managers and
owners, as well as other slaves and free people, to respect their rights? To what extent did
colonial authorities, such as the fiscal and protector, determine the contours of the slaves’
moral economy--the line between an enslaved person’s rights and a manager’s or owner’s
authority? Answering these questions is key to understanding not only slave resistance, but
also how slaves struggled to survive.

This chapter addresses these questions, among others, by looking at contestations
over three broad categories of rights or entitlements. These rights were codified in the 1826
slave code, which was a testament to the impact enslaved people’s hard-fought negotiations
could have on statute law. These rights included the right to be provided with food, clothing,
and other “allowances” by one’s owner or manager; the right to own, accumulate, and control
various types of personal property--such as livestock--without interference; and the right to
negotiate market relations--to sell or exchange one’s goods or services for a fee and recover
debts.
This chapter is organized around these three broad categories of economic rights. Each section focuses on a different type of claim, asking: how the right was defined and interpreted by enslaved people, owners and managers, and colonial officials; what strategies enslaved people used to secure the right; and how colonial authorities mediated property negotiations and determined the validity of enslaved people’s claims. First, this chapter examines enslaved people’s right to receive regular allowances of food and clothing and their reactions to allowances that fell below their expectations. Second, this chapter explores various types of personal property enslaved people claimed a right to own and control, including provision grounds and livestock. Finally, it looks at enslaved people’s efforts participate in the market, selling and exchanging goods and services with free people and other slaves, enforcing bargains, and recovering debts.

“A reasonable...allowance”

Among the rights enslaved people in Berbice claimed was the right to be given the basic necessities they needed to survive, including food and clothing. Slaveowners or their representatives were obligated under a nominally paternalistic system to provide the people they owned (or, as they often phrased it, “employed”) with at least the minimum they needed to survive. These customary rights--which were constantly being (re)negotiated--were given explicit legal protection in the 1826 slave code, which stipulated that enslaved people receive “a reasonable weekly allowance, according to the custom of the colony and as may be best
When allowances of food or clothing fell below what enslaved people expected or claimed they needed, they felt aggrieved. Sometimes they went so far as to openly protest. Their options, however, were limited and every strategy enslaved people used to pressure managers and owners to provide them the property they were entitled to came with its own risks. Slaves could try negotiating with managers or owners directly, as the slaves on Recumzigt had done. If that did not work, they could travel to New Amsterdam and seek recourse with the fiscal or protector of slaves. A third option was both the simplest and the most dangerous: stealing what they felt they deserved or might obtain without being detected.

Underlying all of these actions was the notion that the moral economy or, as historian Emília Viotti da Costa described it, the “unspoken contract” between slaves and their enslavers, had been violated. Enslaved people therefore framed their economic demands in terms of reciprocal obligations and responsibilities: if they complied with their duties—to work, to be obedient, to show deference—then their owners or managers had a responsibility to provide for their material welfare. This was particularly true of that most basic necessity: food.

According to the fiscal, the customary weekly allowance for adult slaves was two

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7 The full text of the 1826 code can be found in *The Berbice Royal Gazette*, Sept. 30, 1826, CO 111/102, (hereafter Berbice slave code). See clause 22. An 1806 law specified that slaves (except young children) were to receive at least two bunches of plantains each week, or two coffee baskets of “roots” (tubers such as yams and cassava). See Alvin O. Thompson, *Colonialism and Underdevelopment in Guyana 1580-1803* (Bridgetown, Barbados, 1987), 120-21. An 1833 law included more specific regulations for food and clothing allowances, and increased the quantity of food allowances for enslaved people over twelve years old. See Alvin O. Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants: Crown Slaves in Berbice, Guyana, 1803-1831* (Kingston, Jamaica, 2002), 157-8.

8 In her analysis of enslaved people’s complaints to the Demerara fiscal, Da Costa argued that “slaves perceived slavery as a system of reciprocal obligations. They assumed that between masters and slaves there was an unspoken contract, an invisible text that defined rules and obligations, a text they used to assess any violations of their ‘rights.’” When this contract was broken, slaves felt entitled to complain. *Crowns of Glory*, 73.
bunches of plantains or seven to nine pounds of rice, cornflour, or wheat flour. Slaves also customarily received, in theory, two pounds of salt fish (dried, imported cod). Supplying slaves with food was a customary and legal obligation that most owners accepted, at least in the abstract, out of self-interest if nothing else. There was a limit beyond which they could not starve enslaved people and still expect their plantations to be productive. Disputes over allowances thus usually revolved not around whether plantation authorities had an obligation to feed their enslaved labor force, but rather around the quantity and quality of food allowances. Evidence reveals, not surprisingly, that there was often a large gap between owners’ or managers’ and slaves’ definition of “a reasonable weekly allowance.”

Some enslaved people directly confronted managers and owners who shortchanged them. Take, for instance, ten men from Niew Vigilantie who in 1825 claimed they had not received the quantity of rations they deserved at Christmas. After Christmas they refused to return to work, in part because they felt entitled to “a day of rest” after celebrating. “This is our day,” they declared, “it is not a day or work.” They underscored their dissatisfaction with their allowance by leaving to “walk on neighboring plantations.” When they returned, the attorney-manager tried to put them in the stocks, but they resisted, and “made use of the most

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10 According to British soldier George Pinckard, Christmas in Berbice and Demerara was “as much a period of festivity” as it was in England. At Christmas enslaved people “usually receive[d] some indulgence of food, and some present of clothing to augment the happiness of the festival.” It was a time for “African dance[s],” for visiting friends, “relatives, lovers, and fellow-passengers who have voyaged together from their native Africa,” and “one moving scene of dancing gaiety.” Pinckard, *Notes on the West Indies: Written During the Expedition Under the Command of the Late General Sir Ralph Abercromby: Including Observations on the Island of Barbadoes, and the Settlements Captured By the British Troops, Upon the Coast of Guiana* (London, 1806), 2: 207-08.
insolent and abusive language,” according to the attorney-manager.11

The next day the three “ringleaders” accompanied the others to the fiscal’s office, where they defended their actions as a reasonable response to an attorney-manager who did not reward their efforts as custom dictated. As one of the men explained, they had “been in the habit of drinking before the door on Holidays,” when they generally received about twelve flasks of rum. But this Christmas, they claimed, the attorney-manager had reduced the quantity of rum, as well as food, that he distributed. They had done nothing to deserve this punishment. “We are a large gang and good people we worked well and therefore on Holidays we reasonably expect to enjoy ourselves & get a good supply of Rum, Fish, & Pork.” Yet they had only received “a piece of salt fish & a small Piece of Pork and a head of Tobacco.”12 This rhetorical strategy--portraying themselves as obedient servants wronged by an unjust, miserly master--failed to convince the fiscal, in part because the attorney-manager produced a long, detailed account of the purportedly generous rations he claimed to have distributed on Christmas Eve. The fiscal, satisfied that the people on Niew Vigilantie were sufficiently supplied, concluded that their “conduct...was reprehensible, & their complaint ungrounded.” It was his “duty,” he reasoned, “to inflict punishment on them,” an outcome that underscored the obstacles enslaved people faced in securing their customary rights.13

The Niew Vigilantie case also illustrates that when direct negotiations with managers

11 The men also told the fiscal that they were “always ridiculed and laughed at by the gangs on other properties,” presumably because they had to work when other slaves did not. The attorney-manager maintained that he only ordered his slaves to be “lightly employed” and that he did so to make sure everyone was on the estate and “to prevent any of them being guilty of further excess in drinking.” See “Complaint of the Negroes Bernard, Primo, Jacob, Adolf, Damon, Quasby, Basta, La Rose, Amsterdam, & Johannes belonging to Plan Nieuw Vigilantie,” Jan. 3, 1825, CO 116/140.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.
broke down, enslaved people sometimes escalated the dispute by going to the fiscal or protector. Some slaves, moreover, succeeded in leveraging the power of these officials against their managers, obtaining the food or clothing they demanded and sending a clear message that they knew how to use the colonial legal system to secure their customary rights. Even when slaves’ complaints failed to lead to any tangible change, moreover, they were powerful rebukes of managerial authority and reminders that the power of overseers, managers, and owners was, or at least could be, circumscribed by a more powerful colonial government. The fiscal and protector, officially charged with enforcing the colony’s laws and interested in mediating disputes with an eye toward compromises that promotes order and stability, therefore played a crucial role in establishing and clarifying the rights slaves claimed.

In September 1832, two men from the La Fraternite plantation succeeded where the Niew Vigilantie people had failed. Hendrik and Figo went to the protector and claimed that their manager had not given them “their grog as usual.” When they complained to him they were locked “in the darkroom.” They emphasized that this was an illegitimate deviation from custom, and that their manager had not kept his word. The manager had told them Saturday night, when they normally received their rum, that he would distribute it the following morning. So when Sunday came, Figo and Hendrik “went to cut firewood & grass, which is the custom on the Estate to bring to the Manager, before the weekly allowance is given out.” They expected their grog as usual. But when some people did not bring wood or grass, or “did not come so soon,” the manager decided that everyone “should have no rum at
as punishment. Figo and Hendrik refused to pay the price for other people’s crime. The driver “abused” the manager, according to the driver, “and made a great disturbance in the yard.” They “became very insolent,” the manager recalled, “for which they were punished.”

The protector dismissed Figo and Hendrik’s complaint, which might have otherwise been upheld, because of their “insolence.” He reminded them “it was their duty to be civil and obedient to those placed in authority over them.” But he also chastised the manager for “having stopt the rum of those who brought home what was required of them,” since “it was giving but poor encouragement to those who were willing to work to place them on a footing with those of an opposite disposition.” This was an implicit admission that Figo and Hendrik’s demand was not so unmerited after all.

In September 1823, seven women similarly went to the fiscal when negotiations with their overseer and manager had failed. Their grievances were many: they were overworked, they had too little time to eat, and they were “too much punished.” They also complained that they never received their allowance. The attorney or owner regularly sent plenty of plantains, tobacco, and other items, but they “do not get it,” presumably because the manager hoarded or sold them. Going to the fiscal was, they claimed, a last resort. When “the men” complained to the owner some time earlier, for example, they were flogged. The

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14 Withholding or reducing rations, or threatening to do so, was a strategy some managers used to extract additional labor from enslaved people. Ten field laborers from plantation Bestindigheid, for example, told the protector that their manager threatened to reduce their allowance of plantains from two bunches to fifty-six plantains (“barely a bunch,” they clarified) a week, as the “New Order” (an 1831 order in council) permitted, if they took advantage of the extra hour of rest from 8:00-9:00am the new law granted them. Feb. 22, 1832, CO 116/150, 120-22.

15 Sept. 22, 1832, CO 116/151, 130-33.

16 Sept. 22, 1832, CO 116/151, 130-33.
complainants also depicted themselves as loyal slaves who were “badly treated, which ma[de] them come to complain instead of going to the bush.”\(^{17}\) The mere mention of “going to the bush,” however, was also an implicit threat that if seeking redress through the proper (legal) channels did not work, they were willing to vote with their feet. Whether this rhetorical strategy worked is unknown, since the fiscal did not note his decision, but it shows that enslaved people believed that invoking a manager’s violation of the moral economy was one way they might improve their material condition, however marginally.\(^{18}\)

Other cases indicate that the fiscal agreed that it was unacceptable for owners or managers to withhold rations, even as punishment for incomplete or sloppy work. Take, for instance, a complaint lodged by a woodcutter named Klaas against his owner, J. V. Mittleholzer, in January 1823. Klaas told the fiscal that in November 1822 Mittleholzer sent him and others “in the bush [to] square wood” under a driver’s supervision. Mittleholzer left them “two bunches of plantains and a little salt-fish for each man.” But a month later, when he went to check on their progress, he was upset “that they had not done as much work as they ought to.” Mittleholzer left Klaas and the others in the bush without additional rations and ordered the driver to keep them there through Christmas if they did not finish their work. Klaas and the others “remained in the bush until the holidays were over, without any thing to eat.”\(^{19}\)

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\(^{17}\) This rhetorical strategy--juxtaposing the legally sanctioned method of protesting grievances through a formal complaint process with illegally running away--was relatively common. In August 1822, for instance, three men told the fiscal that they went to him because they “do not wish to go into the bush like bad negroes.” Examination of a Complaint preferred by the negroes Frederick, Jem, and Davy, belonging to the plantation Profit, against the Manager of said Estate,” Aug. 6, CO 116/138, 128, 129 (quote).


\(^{19}\) “Examination of a Complaint preferred by the negro Klaas, the property of J. V. Mittleholzer, against him,” Jan. 3, 1823, CO 116/138, 134-35.
After Christmas, Klaas and the others “all agreed to go home, and went to their master, and asked him what was the reason he kept them in the bush without anything to eat, and without giving them their holidays.” Mittleholzer ignored them, and when the driver “asked him to give something to eat for the negroes; for they had nothing,” Mittleholzer claimed he had “nothing to give them.” Klaas’s decision to “seek redress” with the fiscal was the result of this failed attempt at direct negotiation with Mittleholzer.20

The fiscal ruled in Klaas’s favor. Mittleholzer “had acted incorrectly,” he explained, “in keeping the negroes in the woods during the holidays” without rations. “If they had neglected their work,” the fiscal reasoned, Mittleholzer “should have punished them in some other way.” He also threatened that if any of Mittleholzer’s slaves “again complained of not receiving their regular rations he would be fined,” implying that officials would pay greater attention to Mittleholzer and that he would have a difficult time defending himself against similar charges in future.21

Bristol, “an elderly and sickly man” who lived on New Forest, also found going to the fiscal could be an effective means of securing his allowance of food. In June 1822 Bristol complained that his manager had withheld his allowance for several weeks as punishment. Bristol had been “watchman over the fresh water” for over a year (he was “not able to do hard work”), and “the manager never found fault with him” until the previous week, when he told Bristol to return home, “and that he should get a good flogging.” Bristol had “done nothing wrong,” he claimed, so he refused to submit to the whipping. But when he went for his allowance on Sunday, he learned that the manager was determined to punish him one way

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
or another. “So, boy,” the manager told him, “you did not come in on Friday to get flogged but you come to-day for your rations.” The manager withheld Bristol’s allowance, and when Bristol demanded it the next day the manager called the driver to flog him. “I don’t know what kind of work you do,” he told Bristol, “that you come here to claim your allowance.” Unable to get his food for several weeks, even after he went to the plantation attorney, Bristol “made [his] escape to town” to see the fiscal.22

The manager and driver, when questioned by the fiscal, claimed the right to withhold Bristol’s allowance as punishment. As they interpreted the moral economy, Bristol had not fulfilled his obligations, so they did not have to honor theirs. Bristol had “neglected the light duty assigned to him,” and refused to submit to the lash. Worse still, Bristol had run away for two days and “on Sunday morning, when the gang were receiving their allowance, he made his appearance, and demanded his.” The fiscal, who tried to mediate this dispute in a way that might satisfy both parties or at least prevent more dangerous outcome, ordered the manager to give Bristol his allowance and “warned [Bristol] to be more attentive in future to his duty.”23

The notion of moral economy also applied to clothing, as the following complaint from a group of men on plantation Foulis in May 1822 illustrates. Quashy, who spoke for the group, began by emphasizing how patiently he and the others had endured years of harsh treatment--including shifts of up to twenty hours in the boiling house--without complaining. They had “suffered this for many years, but at present...cannot suffer it any longer.” The


23 Ibid.
time had come to “declare before his Honor the Fiscal the way they are treated and clothed by their owner.” Their chief complaint concerned the quantity and quality of food and clothing their owner, William Munro, provided. They claimed that “before Dr. Munro went home [to England], four years ago, he gave them a round jacket for their clothing; and since that time until today they never received anything else.” Their food rations were also too meager. They only received “a small bunch of plantains” each week, and never “any salt fish,” a source of much needed protein.24

The acting fiscal, accompanied by a burgher officer, traveled some twenty-five miles to Foulis to investigate, underscoring the seriousness with which colonial officials sometimes handled complaints of material neglect. They dismissed many of the slaves’ complaints but found that “some irregularities were certainly chargeable against the overseers for not personally attending to see the allowance dealt out to the gang at a proper time, and in a proper manner.” As a result, “they were admonished.” The acting fiscal also gave Munro “a copy of the ordinance respecting the clothing and feeding of negroes,” along with a warning “that penalties would be rigidly enforced if the enactments were not strictly complied with.” But this victory--subjecting their owner to official scrutiny--came with a price. As the fiscal noted in his report, “two of the complainants, who it was proved, were guilty of insolence and disobedience of orders, were punished in presence of the whole gang.”25

Most owners and colonial officials agreed, in principle, that enslaved people were entitled to receive clothing allowances, but there was no general agreement as to how much

24 “EXAMINATION of a Complaint preferred by the negroes Quashy, Sharp, Dick, Thomas, and Spencer, against Dr. Munro, their owner,” May 30, 1822, CO 116/138, 118-19.

25 Ibid.
or what type. The 1826 slave code, for example, only stipulated that every owner or manager “shall provide such slave or slaves with proper clothing according to the custom of the colony,” a clause as difficult to enforce as it was vague.\textsuperscript{26} The best estimates, however, indicate that in the late 1820s the most generous owners gave male field laborers (as opposed to drivers and artisans) thirteen ells (about sixteen yards) of cloth and a jacket, and female field laborers eleven ells (about fourteen yards) and a jacket. Less generous owners were more likely to distribute two “laps” (loincloths) and a jacket to men and a wrapper and two petticoats to women.\textsuperscript{27} Laws on clothing allowances were so vague that as late as 1830 the deputy protector of slaves observed that “the consequence is that scarcely two Estates, if they belong to different proprietors, receive the same” allowance. There was, he conceded, “much difficulty in arriving at any degree of accuracy on this subject.”\textsuperscript{28}

The other consequence of not having more specific regulations on clothing allowances, as officials, enslaved people, and managers knew all too well, was that the quality and quantity of clothing slaves expected were worked out over many years of hard-fought negotiation and compromise.\textsuperscript{29} Some enslaved people looked to their neighbors, or to

\textsuperscript{26} 1826 slave code, clause 22.

\textsuperscript{27} Thompson, \textit{Unprofitable Servants}, 85.

\textsuperscript{28} Charles Bird to Henry Beard, September 1830, CO 111/110; Thompson, \textit{Unprofitable Servants}, 85. For enslaved people’s clothing in Berbice, see Thompson, \textit{Unprofitable Servants}, 163-71

\textsuperscript{29} Some owners and managers withheld or took away clothing from enslaved people as punishment. For example, Betsey, an enslaved “girl” who lived in New Amsterdam told the fiscal that her owner had taken a frock that her mother had given her and, the following day, torn her jacket off “saying she did not wish her to wear a jacket, or appear dressed.” See “Complaint of the sambo girl Betsey, belonging to Er. J. F. Obermuller, inhabitant of this town,” May 8, 1819, CO 116/138, 46. For the aesthetic and performative function of clothing in Berbice, see J. H. Lean, “The Secret Lives of Slaves: Berbice, 1819 to 1827” (Ph.D. diss., University of Canterbury, 2002), 355-6; and Thompson, \textit{Unprofitable Servants}, 163-4. See also Steve O. Buckridge, “The ‘Colour and Fabric’ of Jamaican Slave Women’s Dress,” \textit{Journal of Caribbean History} 33 (1999): 84-124; and Shane White and Graham White, “Slave Clothing and African-American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” \textit{Past and Present} no. 148 (Aug., 1995): 149-186.
people who belonged to the same owner but lived on other plantations, when determining the
amount of clothing they thought they could demand. Seven people from plantation Rosehall,
for example, told the fiscal that they were unhappy with their annual allowance—“a small
blue salempores cap, a jacket, a blanket, and a hat”—because the people on estate “No. 1,
belonging to the same proprietor, had check and osnaburgs added to their allowance.” As
with food, enslaved people and managers had different notions regarding what constituted
“proper clothing,” and the disputes that made it to the protector’s or fiscal’s office offer rare
glimpses of the ongoing process of negotiation that was at the heart of the moral economy in
Berbice.

When owners or managers withheld clothing or gave less than enslaved people had
come to expect, slaves sometimes made their disapproval known. And, as in disputes over
food, turning to the fiscal or protector could be an effective means of protest. In June 1830,
for example, twenty-five slaves from plantation Waterloo complained to the protector that
they had not received clothing for a year. They also complained that their mistress, who had
hired them out against their wishes to a distant plantation on the Corentyne Coast, had “told
them that their clothing was on board the schooner that was to convey they to Corantine,
which they did not believe.” The deputy protector said he was powerless to prevent their
owner from uprooting them, but he promised to intervene if she did not supply the clothing.
“If they...experienced any injustice,” moreover, they were welcome “to come to Town &
inform him of it.”

Other slaves who complained that their right to “proper clothing” had been violated sometimes fared even better. Juno, an enslaved women who lived in New Amsterdam, complained that “neither she nor her children receive any regular allowance of food or clothing from their owner.” They “had received a few things but not to the extent directed by Law,” a contention that displayed her awareness of colonial laws on allowances. Juno’s owner claimed Juno and her children had “been fed from his own table and they never complained to him of want of food,” but he admitted “that they had not been supplied with clothing as specified in the Law.” The acting protector therefore ruled that he was obliged to distribute double the amount of clothing as specified by law. He also told Juno and her children “what they were entitled to, and desired if they did not receive it, to return to his office.”

A woodcutter named John made a similar complaint to the protector in January 1834 “that his owner does not supply him with the lawful quantity of provisions or clothing.” John was specific: “last year he only received a jacket, a hat, 1 Ell of Osnaburg, & 1 pair of trowsers.” He also showed the protector a tin canister used to measure cornmeal rations). John’s manager said he had given John “1 lined jacket, 1 hat, 1 razor, 2 yards Osnaburg, [and] 1 pair trowsers.” The protector dismissed the complaint about the lack of food, since “the ten canisters of cornmeal [John said he received] were found to contain more than the

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31 Jul. 15, 1830, CO 116/146, 145-47. Two men from Golden Grove made a similar complaint in February 1834. They were about to be hired out and “they would prefer remaining on their own plantation, but if they received their proper allowance of clothing they would go.” They claimed they had only received one hat, one jacket, and one pair of trousers, and the protector ruled that they “must forthwith have the other articles of clothing” they were entitled to. Feb. 6, 1834, CO 116/153, 211-13.

32 Jul. 8, 1833, CO 116/152, 169-71. Three weeks after the initial complaint the acting protector confirmed that “the proper clothing has been supplied.”
law directed,” but upheld the charge of insufficient clothing. John’s manager was fined and “directed to give [John] twice the quantity prescribed by Law.”

Other slaves took a more direct--and more dangerous--route to get the property they wanted: stealing. Such actions were usually interpreted by Europeans as indefensible “thefts,” and plantation punishment record books are rife with lists of slaves punished for a “offences” such as “sheep, hog, and poultry stealing” and “killing and destroying stock.” These actions, which Europeans viewed as crimes, were economic survival strategies developed in response to extreme poverty and constant shortages. For enslaved people, there was nothing unethical about “stealing” from one’s owner, especially when it came to food. Food “thefts,” when viewed as political acts designed to redistribute wealth, thus open another window onto enslaved people’s notions of rights and their efforts to force owners to provide for the material welfare of the people whose labor enriched them.

When Peggy was locked in the stocks for allegedly having taken plantains without permission, she went to the protector to protest an unmerited punishment. Peggy explained that taking the plantains was an understandable reaction to hunger, which she blamed on the scant rations her manager provided. She “only gets one calabash of rice a week,” she said, “which is not sufficient.” So Peggy “and others planted a few plantain trees

33 Jan. 29, 1834, CO 116/153, 200-03.

34 As Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan explained, stealing from managers and owners was an important part of the slaves’ economy and was not seen by enslaved people as a violation of their value system. “Many slaves held as a matter of principle,” Berlin and Morgan write, “that their masters’ property was their own, or in the slaves’ idiom: ‘me no thief him; me take him from massa’.” Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, “Introduction,” in The Slaves’ Economy: Independent Production By Slaves in the Americas, ed. Berlin and Morgan, (London, 1991), 10. My analysis of slaves’ theft of food and its role in the slaves’ moral economy is also informed by Alex Lichtenstein’s analysis of slave thefts in the U.S. south. He argued that thefts were part of “the struggle between slaves and masters to define conflicting notions of authority, property, and customary rights,” and that “theft served as a potential means with which slaves could redefine and extend the bounds of paternalism.” See Lichtenstein, “Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law,” 413-40 (quote, 415). See also Alex Lichtenstein, “Theft, Moral Economy, and the Transition From Slavery to Freedom in the American South,” in Slave Cultures and the Cultures of Slavery, ed. Stephan Palmié (Knoxville, Tenn., 1995), 176-86.
on the dam” to supplement their allowance, but when they “went to cut a few branches for
their own use” they were put in the stocks. The manager, however, claimed that Peggy and
the others received plenty of “American Corn meal & rice” every week, and that the
plantains they took “were stolen out of the Estate’s plantain walk and taken by main force
from the watchman after maltreating him and not out of their own provision grounds.”
Siding with the manager, who reframed Peggy’s tale of hunger and desperation into one
about outright theft, the acting protector dismissed Peggy’s complaint.35

An enslaved man named Vincent wound up in similar trouble in May 1826 for killing
and stealing a sheep. The previous Sunday, Vincent told the fiscal, he had received his
weekly allowance of salt-fish and plantains, which he “locked...up in his house.” When he
returned from work the next day, however, he found his owner’s sheep inside his house,
eating his allowance. So Vincent “took a piece of wood about two feet and a half [long],” he
told the fiscal, “& struck one of the sheep. I said ‘Massa gives me allowance, manager’s
sheep come & break my house & eats it what sort of fashion is this.’” Vincent killed the
sheep, “skinned it and took out the entrails,” apparently planning to consume or sell the meat
as compensation for the food that had been destroyed.36

The overseers and manager, however, were determined to punish Vincent for what
they claimed was an inexcusable theft and destruction of plantation property. They flogged
Vincent and “locked [him] up in the stocks...till the holidays were over.” The manager knew
Vincent was “a bad subject,” he told the fiscal, who was “never on the Estate at night,” so the
sheep’s slaughter did not surprise him. And “with respect to saying the sheep broke his door

35 Mar. 12, 1833, CO 116/152, 106-08.
36 Complaint of the Negro Vincent,” May 25, 1826, CO 116/141.
it is ridiculous,” he explained, “the doors of the negro houses are made by the carpenters” out of crabwood or “American Lumber” and were “perfectly new, strong, and in excellent order.”

The fiscal, like the manager, viewed the 25 lashes Vincent received as justified. Misinterpreting Vincent’s justification for killing the sheep as a mere “confession” which “rendered the hearing of witnesses unnecessary,” the fiscal increased Vincent’s punishment, sentencing him to be locked up for one month at night, with only “6 plantains & a calabash of water” to assuage his hunger.

Jupiter, an enslaved man on Mary’s Hope, attempted a similar defense when he was whipped for taking plantains from one of the estate’s “walks.” Like Vincent, Jupiter was adamant that he had committed no crime: “I have been flogged by the Manager,” Jupiter told the fiscal, “for nothing.” He was hungry and had only taken a bit of food he desperately needed. “I did not think there was any harm in so doing,” he declared. The plantation manager, however, told the fiscal that the plantain walks were off-limits because they had recently been replanted and needed time to mature. Jupiter was, moreover, “a very worthless character” who needed to be punished, according to his owner. The fiscal was uninterested in Jupiter’s predicament or his motivation for taking the plantains. He agreed with the plantation authorities that “the crime of theft should be punished.”

In rare cases, however, enslaved people convinced officials that stealing food was an understandable response to a desperate situation. On plantation Golden Grove in February

37 Crabwood was “a light brown, straight-grained wood” obtained from hardwood trees native to Berbice and “widely used for furniture and house-building.” See Richard Allsopp, Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage (Oxford, 1996), 175.

38 Ibid.

39 “No. 4,” Jul. 8, 1829, CO 116/142, 9-11.
1825, for instance, a woman named Prudence and her husband grew tired of “seeing the[ir] child grow thin” as a result of the “scanty allowance” the manager provided. So they resolved to steal a bunch of plantains one night. But the watchman caught them and told the manager, who ordered Prudence’s husband locked up at night for four weeks. Even the watchman, according to Prudence, recognized the root cause of what were apparently ongoing thefts: “the watchman said massa if you give the creoles [children] each their allowance you would put a stop to this.” But the manager did not increase the amount of food he provided, and when Prudence refused to go to the field in protest, the manager had two drivers flog her “with a cow skin.” Prudence then traveled nearly thirty miles to the fiscal’s office, where she was careful to note that she had never complained but was “now under the necessity” of doing so to ensure her family’s survival. After a lengthy investigation the fiscal determined that Prudence’s complaint was merited. He recommended that the manager increase the allowances, to which the manager agreed.40

Like Prudence, enslaved people in Berbice asserted their customary and legal right to be supplied with regular “allowances” of food and clothing by their owners or managers. When European authorities did not honor their obligations, enslaved people sometimes registered their disapproval and tried to claim the property they were entitled to. Some people negotiated with plantation officials directly, whereas others simply took what they wanted or needed without asking. Both strategies were fraught with danger, as multiple complaints of punishment illustrate. Enslaved people also sought help from the protector or

fiscal, who in some cases forced plantation managers or slaveowners to fulfill their customary and legal obligations. Disputes over allowances, however, were only part of a broader, ongoing battle over enslaved people’s property rights.

“Our little property”

In July 1832, a man named Jacob went to the protector and complained that his manager had violated the sanctity of his private home. While Jacob was away cutting wood one day the manager had gone to his house, “opened his packall [basket], and took...a bottle of crab oil,” a natural insect repellant. Jacob, upset that the manager had violated his privacy and confiscated his personal property, went to the manager the next day and asked “the reason of opening & examining his packall.”

According to the manager, Jacob came to him “in a most insolent manner & demanded of him what right he had to open his packall.” Jacob was, in effect, protesting what he saw as an unreasonable search and seizure, drawing a line between his manager’s authority and his right to privacy and private property. The manager said that he had seen Jacob’s housemate “putting away something in haste, that he suspected it was rum and seeing a packall under the bed, it occurred to him that the rum might be secreted therein.” When he found that it was only crab oil, moreover, he had returned it before Jacob came home. But Jacob remained angry. He told the manager, “Sir, you are not a Buckra [master] Gentleman,”

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41 Jul. 20, 1832, CO 116/151, 85-88. A packall or pack-all was a small basket used by Berbician slaves to transport and store various items. Crab oil was was “a whitish, slightly smelly oil” made from the crushed nuts of the crabwood tree and used in Berbice as an insect repellant. See Allsopp, Caribbean English Usage, 175 (crab-oil), 423 (packall).
an insult made worse by the fact that it “was said before the gang,” the manager noted. 42

Jacob also declared that “it is no gentleman way to open negroes’ packall.” For this “extreme insolence,” as the manager saw it, Jacob received thirteen lashes. 43

Jacob failed to convince the protector that his rights had been violated. The protector also ruled that “Jacob deserved correction for his Insolence.” 44 Yet his complaint nevertheless highlights an extreme version of another economic right that enslaved people in Berbice claimed: the right to accumulate, control, and use various kinds of personal property without worrying that it might be taken away from them. This claim was based on the belief that despite being treated like commodities themselves, there were certain material things that belonged to them and no one else. Delineating these items, whether they were a bottle of crab oil, a chicken, or a pair of pants, as their own private property was a way of claiming a certain measure of economic and social autonomy, however small. Fiercely guarding one’s property was also a pragmatic survival strategy in a society where poverty was the norm and where opportunities to accumulate material goods were rare. Enslaved people therefore fiercely guarded their rights to raise crops and animals on gardens and provision grounds, to sell and exchange their produce, and to prevent other people—including managers, owners, and other slaves—from taking their possessions.

By the mid-1820s, the colonial government had recognized enslaved people’s customary right to own most kinds of property. The 1826 slave code specified that enslaved

42 Buckra (or backra) was the generic term in Berbice and other areas of the British Caribbean for Europeans, especially those who held positions of high authority. Used in this context, it was meant as an insult to the manager’s status and authority. See Allsopp, Caribbean English Usage, 61.

43 Jul. 20, 1832, CO 116/151, 85-88.

44 Ibid.
people could legally “acquire, hold, and enjoy property free from controul.” This was the “usage of this colony,” and that it was “expedient that the said custom should be recognized and as far as need be established by law.” Enslaved people were permitted to own and exchange a wide variety of things, including “lands..., money, cattle, implements, or utensils of husbandry, or household furniture.” The only prohibited items were boats, “fire arms, ammunition, and such colonial produce as is prohibited to be sold or bartered by the existing law.” These prohibitions were designed to limit enslaved people’s mobility, reduce the possibility of armed resistance, and ensure that enslaved people did not compete with Europeans in cultivating staple crops.45

Among the most important types of property enslaved people possessed were provision grounds. These plots of land were, on average, smaller in Berbice than in many colonies, such as Jamaica, where slaves were expected to subsist solely or primarily on their own produce. In Berbice, protecting low-lying, flood-prone land from saltwater was time and labor intensive, so Berbician planters devoted almost all the land they controlled to the cultivation of staple crops for the export market, providing enslaved people with weekly food allowances.46 Nevertheless, provision grounds were a common sight on Berbician estates, and the items enslaved people cultivated there—which included rice, corn, root crops such as yams and cassava, poultry, pigs, herbs, and various other vegetables fruits—served two

45 1826 slave code, clause 27. An 1810 governor’s proclamation, reprinted in the Berbice Gazette in 1822 because “little or no attention” had been paid to it, stipulated that “no Slave, under any pretence whatever, shall be permitted to own a Corjaal, or other small Boat, however named.” Berbice Gazette, Jul. 3, 1822.

crucial functions. First, they supplemented a diet that was monotonous and nutritionally
deficient at best, increasing slaves’ health and chances of survival. Second, selling or trading
independently produced foodstuffs and livestock, whether with one another, with itinerant
“hucksters,” or at large Sunday markets in New Amsterdam, provided enslaved people a
measure of economic autonomy and formed the backbone of a robust slaves’ economy.47
Enslaved people therefore had good reasons to defend their rights to cultivate provision
grounds and to protect and trade the crops and animals they raised.

Most managers seem to have granted enslaved people access to provision land, so
provision ground disputes more often hinged on particulars. In January 1825 on plantation
Augsburg, for example, Baron complained that his manager denied him access to a provision
ground inherited from his brother, who had left “his wife and two children under [Baron’s] care.” But “this piece of ground,” Baron told the fiscal, “was taken some time afterwards by
another negro,” Kees, which “caused a dispute between this negro and myself.” The
manager, however, decided that Kees could keep the land because Baron “had neglected to
plant this ground” and only claimed it once “the produce of the ground was about ripe.” The
manager offered to give Baron another piece of land, but Baron objected, perhaps because for
Baron the land had a spiritual, as well as economic, value. Such intrafamily land transfers
were, for many Africans and their descendants, crucial links to their ancestors, who were
sometimes buried on family provision grounds.48 Baron and his wife continued to claim the
ground as their own, causing so much trouble that the manager put Baron’s wife in the stocks

47 The variety of items enslaved people produced is suggested by a clause in the 1826 Berbice slave code that
mentioned “the sale of...meat, poultry, vegetables, provisions, fruits, herbs, wares, merchandize,” and other
goods at Sunday markets. 1826 Berbice slave code, clause 11.

48 Vincent Brown, The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery (Cambridge, Mass,
2008), 120-21.
and threatened to punish him, too, if he continued to insist that the land was his. The fiscal, unfortunately for Baron, reinforced the manager’s decision, sentencing Baron to thirty-nine lashes and dismissing his complaint.49

Another provision ground dispute from the same plantation in June 1832 also hinged on a technicality. Felix complained to the acting protector that “he had a quantity of cassave [cassava] & Indian corn growing on the Estate,” but the manager “rooted up the whole.” Felix admitted that “the manager desired him not to plant there” because the land supposedly belonged to the neighboring plantation, La Fraternite. But Felix was “certain the ground he occupied belonged to Plant Augsburg.” The acting protector’s investigation confirmed that the land belonged to La Fraternite. The manager, moreover, claimed that “Felix was several times...positively forbidden to occupy this piece of Land,” and that “there is a great abundance of provision ground laid out for the use of the slaves of this Estate.” The acting protector “pointed out to Felix the impropriety of his conduct,” and told him “it was impossible...to receive any damages for the loss he had sustained, as he had no right to occupy the ground without permission.”50

As these cases suggest, the right to provision grounds was not itself a major point of contention between enslaved people and managers. It was, after all, a legal requirement that all plantations set aside land for provision grounds.51 Far more common were complaints that enslaved people were unable to use their provision grounds profitably because other people stole their produce. Especially common were complaints that the livestock slaves

49 “Complaint of the negro Baron belonging to Plan Augsburg,” Jan. 19, 1825, CO 116/140.
50 Jun. 25, 1832, CO 116/150, 183-85.
51 The 1826 slave code required that every plantation dedicate one acre of land for every five slaves to provision grounds. See clause 22.
raised—almost always poultry or pigs—had been stolen or slaughtered without their permission.52

Two men from plantation Bertingdigheid, for example, lodged a complaint against their manager in 1821 for killing their hogs, likely the most valuable things they owned. One of the men alone had lost ten hogs. Worse still, the men claimed, the manager had refused to allow them to sell or exchange their hogs in town instead of slaughtering them, which would have at least brought the men some amount of compensation. Complaining to the manager only earned them confinement in the stocks.53

Protecting one’s private property from managers, as the men from Bertingdigheid knew, could be dangerous and difficult. In February 1819, for instance, a man named Bethune complained that his manager had taken his recently bought “Guinea-bird eggs.” Bethune told the fiscal that the manager “broke the doors of the negro-house open in search of Guinea-bird eggs, which he said had been stolen from him.” The manager thought Bethune’s eggs were the ones that had been stolen—even though Bethune pointed out that “the eggs in his house were old and nearly hatched” whereas the missing eggs “were fresh lain ones”—so he confiscated them. The manager then had Bethune locked up for three nights before giving him fifty lashes.54

Two years later, fifteen slaves from plantation Plegt Ankar faced a similar problem: their owner, John Quarles, routinely stole their chickens and ducks. As one of the

52 The 1826 slave code granted slaves the legal right to raise livestock but only with the consent of their owners or managers. See clause 27.

53 “Examination of the negroes Philip and Leander, belonging to plantation Bertingdigheid, complaining against their manager Luyken,” July 25, 1821, CO 116/138, 85-86.

54 “Complaint of the negro Bethune, belonging to plantation Tain,” Feb. 10, 1819, CO 116/138, 34.
complainants told the fiscal, “while the gang are at work in the field, Mr. Quarles goes to the negro-houses, and if he sees any fowls or ducks belonging to the negroes, he will take them and kill them for his dinner, and if the negroes speak about it, Mr. Quarles says the ground belongs to him, and not to the negroes.” These constant thefts made it impossible, or at the very least, unprofitable, for the Plegt Ankar slaves to raise livestock. Their complaint was a rejection of Quarles’s logic that his plantation and everything on it ultimately belonged to him.55

The acting fiscal, who traveled to Plegt Ankar to investigate the complaint, concluded that “the negroes were very hard worked” and that Quarles “frequently kill[ed] their ducks and fowls without paying them for them at the time he takes them.” The acting fiscal agreed with the slaves that they had a right to protect the property they produced on their owner’s estate and to be compensated for their losses. He threatened Quarles “that if any more complaints were made against him by his negroes for such treatment, he would be criminally prosecuted.” He also ordered Quarles “to pay them the full value for any of the their ducks or fowls that he had ordered to be killed.”56 This was a victory at once concrete and symbolic: the Plegt Ankar people were reimbursed for their stolen property, and they also showed their owner that they had the wherewithal to use the colonial government to uphold their rights.

Some of the most compelling evidence for the importance of provision grounds, livestock, and other personal property comes from the following two cases, in which large

55 “Examination of a Complaint preferred by the negroes Mourant, Joseph, Secondo, Frank, Mackay, Fanny, Susan, Louisa, Daly, Cuba, Coffy, Quajo, Elias, Quamy, and Fanny, a girl, the property of John Quarles, plantation Plegt Ankar,” Jul. 5, 1822, CO 116/138, 124-25.

56 Ibid.
numbers of slaves were to be removed from their home plantations. When the people on Catharinasburg learned in November 1828 that their owner had mortgaged many of them and that they were to be sold, they were determined to prevent being uprooted—from one another, of course, but also from their property: their houses, provision grounds, and the very land they knew as home. Their first strategy was to stage a symbolic exodus. On November 7, as the protector noted, “two hundred and twenty-six [people] had retired from the estate into the bush, determined not to be sold separately.”57

The protector accompanied the fiscal to Catharinasburg, at the governor’s request, and his account of their investigation highlights enslaved people’s attachment to their plantation and their property. They protested a move that would be socially and materially catastrophic, and even the protector and fiscal recognized the hardships they would soon endure. They “regret[ted] that the [financial] embarrassments of their proprietor, had led to a separation from the other negroes of the estate and from the houses and gardens, to which they were naturally attached.” But “wherever the British flag flew,” the protector explained “its laws must be obeyed.” And “if they were not disposed to come down with [the fiscal], willingly, he had the means of compelling him.”58

The people on Catharinasburg emphasized the loss of property they would suffer if removed from the plantation. According to the protector, they “admitted the necessity of obedience, [but] dwelt upon the hardship of their condition, with a sincerity to which every humane mind must have responded.” When they were first sent to Catharinasburg, a plantation far from New Amsterdam, “it was felt by them as a banishment,” but “time had

reconciled them to a separation from every other part of the Colony.” Moreover, “they had erected comfortable negro houses, and cultivated extensive provision fields,” which “were now in bearing.” They had, in short, “become a comfortable and contended negro community.”

The fiscal and protector, however, had no legal authority to interfere, no matter how sympathetic they might have been to the enslaved people’s plight. Mortgaging slaves and separating them from their homes, kin, and property were frowned on, but not illegal. So the protector and fiscal ordered the Catharinasburg people to prepare to leave, giving them time to say their goodbyes. (The slaves asked for two months, but the fiscal and protector refused to grant them more than a fortnight.) When the departure day came, the protector and fiscal accompanied the mortgaged slaves downriver, floating away from the plantation “amidst...the moanings and lamentations as well of the negroes that accompanied us, as those that remained on the estate.”

On plantation Ithaca, the physical removal of some slaves and the resulting property losses were also bitter points of contention between the owner and his slaves. In February 1828, more than fifty people—a number guaranteed to alarm European authorities—traveled to

59 Ibid.

60 The protector of slaves, David Power, included in his report to the governor a lengthy account of the “strong impression...this scene left upon my mind” and a forceful criticism of the laws which permitted slaves to be removed from their communities and their property. “I consider this forcible expulsion,” he wrote, “by the inexorable hand of the law, of improved and contented negroes, satisfied with their master and satisfied with their condition, in the enjoyment of those comforts which the fine waters and woods that surround them afforded, to be more pregnant with cruelty—to give a greater shock to the best feelings of our nature—to make the negroes themselves more hostile to White ascendance, than all the abominations of African piracy over the brute natives of that continent, or even the aggravated horrors of the middle passage...Until, then, this right of mortgaging the persons of negroes be made illegal, by the attachment of the cultivator to the soil, little indeed, in my humble judgment, can be done in the way of effective negro amelioration. What value, may I take the liberty of asking, can attach to the legal right of the negro to hold lands and to cultivate them, if it is in the power of any remorseless mortgagee, or an insolvent owner, to drag him from that soil and fix him for the rest of his life hundreds of miles, probably, from the very spot which was the entire object of his regard”? Ibid.
the fiscal’s office to complain that their owner, L. F. Gallez, planned to move them across the river, to Frederickslust. Their spokesman, the “elderly man” Midas, framed their grievances in terms of moral economy, charging that Gallez had violated an old agreement between them. When Mr. Gallez “returned from England some time ago he came here, called up the gang and asked if we would like to have him for an owner. We replied Yes if you take good care of us.” Gallez had “promised to do so,” Midas claimed, but he had violated that pledge. They had tried to “expostulate with Mr. Gallez,” moreover, but “he drove us away like dogs.” And when they “insisted to be heard,” Gallez told them “to go to the fiscal.”

And so Midas and the others went to the fiscal’s office, where they persuaded him to visit Ithaca. There Gallez, his attorney, his manager, and other slaves confirmed that the Ithaca people were regularly worked on Frederickslust. As the manager explained, “the negroes from here work there some times for two months sometimes for shorter periods.” The reason, according to the managers of both plantations, was that Ithaca was “an old cultivated estate,” where the “land [was] exhausted,” unlike Frederickslust. This practice had long vexed the Ithaca slaves, but the breaking point came when a rumor spread--which Gallez denied--that they would soon be moved permanently. Even temporary displacements, however, had serious social and economic and consequences for the people who had worked hard to make their lives and homes tolerable on Ithaca.

As they explained, they routinely returned after weeks or months away to find their provision grounds, stock, and homes damaged or stolen. As Midas said, “we objected [to

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61 “Fifty four slaves Men and Women belonging to Plantation Ithaca, the property of L.F. Gallez, having attended at the Fiscal’s Office to complain, he this day proceeded to said Estate to enquire into their grievances...,” Feb. 14, 1828, CO 116/142, 13-25.

62 Ibid.
being worked on Frederickslust] pointing out the many hardships we suffer...We are removed without any notice. We therefore have to leave our Stock, and provision grounds, and on our return we find we have been plundered during our absence, as every bad disposed negro in the neighborhood, and passers by, has it in their power to deprive us of our little property.” 63

Losing their “little property,” they said, was all the more painful because selling their surplus was the only means they had to supply themselves with clothing. As one man explained, “by these constant removals all our poultry and provisions out of our own ground is Stolen and we are thereby deprived of the means of buying anything whatever. Since we belong to Mr. Gallez, he has given us clothing but once, and we would not complain of this now, if we were allowed to work the Estate as formerly and raise our Stock and ground provisions, which we sold and were able to supply our own wants but we have lost everything.” 64

The people on Ithaca were determined not to be worked on Frederickslust, and certainly not to be moved there permanently. Midas was adamant: “Here we have lived all our lives, have made ourselves comfortable, and if [Gallez] intends to abandon this property we desire to be sold. We cannot go to Frederickslust.” Moving across the river would be even worse since the people on Ithaca “cannot agree with the negroes” on Frederickslust, according to two witnesses. The Ithaca slaves’ complaint failed, however, when the fiscal explained he did “not deem himself authorised to Prohibit such occasional removals from the Estate.” The silver lining in this case, however, was that the fiscal found their accusation that they “were not furnished with clothing...fully and satisfactorily proven.” He threatened to

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
fine Gallez unless he supplied the clothing. 65

Though the complaints of the enslaved people on Ithaca were primarily aimed at their owner, the charge that “bad disposed negro[es]” raided their provision grounds and stole their livestock reveals that enslaved people violated each other’s property rights, too. Theft within enslaved communities was a predictable reaction to intense competition for scarce resources in a highly stratified society. A small minority of enslaved people, especially so-called privileged or skilled slaves such as “domestics,” artisans, and drivers, were significantly better off, at least materially, than their peers. At one extreme were people like Frederick, a carpenter on Demtichem who amassed enough money to buy his own slave (to care for him when he went blind). 66 At the other end of the spectrum were people like Quaces, who was shunned by other slaves, the manager claimed, because he was “a notoriously idle and abandoned character, possessed of not the smallest property on earth beyond his annual allowance [of] clothing.” 67

These differences in wealth and status must have fed social tensions and created prime conditions for theft. And while the objects enslaved people stole from one another might seem trivial—a pair of pants, for example, or a chicken—the seriousness with which they sought to reclaim their property and the violence that often followed accusations of theft

65 Ibid. Gallez claimed “that it was extremely difficult to procure good Clothing in any store in town,” and asked the fiscal to give him until the Easter holidays, to which the fiscal consented.

66 For the higher standards of living of drivers, see chapter three. For Frederick and his slave, see “Complaint No. 9,” Dec. 12-13, 1826, CO 116/143, 155-56.

67 Instead of working in his spare time, Quaces was known for “prowling about the estate at night or during his leisure hours,” the manager claimed, and was “an annoyance to the industrious and well disposed negroes who attend to rearing ground provisions and fowls. No careful negro will allow him to spend a night in his house and he is known and distinguished from his rascality on the estate invariably by the name of Quaces s[on] of a w[hor[e].” See Apr. 9, 1825, CO 116/140.
are understandable given the small amounts of property most enslaved people possessed.⁶⁸
And if stealing from managers or owners could be construed as appropriating what was
rightfully one’s own, stealing from one another was a different matter.⁶⁹

Many property disputes between enslaved people were probably settled privately or
mediated by plantation authorities, leaving behind no trace in surviving documents, but those
that escalated enough to demand the attention of colonial officials reveal that property
conflicts could generate significant violence. The people on plantations No. 5 and No. 7 saw
firsthand how quickly an apparently minor dispute between Sampson and Mercy became a
nearly fatal fight. According to the manager, Peter McCulloch, the previous Saturday “a
boy” told him “that the man Sampson was fighting with a woman named Mercy in the negro
yard.” McCulloch found Sampson and Mercy “wrestling and then laying on the ground,”
and “Sampson had a knife in his hand, with which he attempted to stab Mercy.” When the
two were separated McCulloch “reprimanded [Sampson] for fighting & directed the [other]
men...to take the knife from him and to try to get him in the hospital.” But the could not
capture Sampson.⁷⁰

When Sampson “saw the woman Mercy at some distance & being in a very great

⁶⁸ Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan similarly noted the “divisive effects” of slaves’ independent economic
activities. The “scramble for wealth,” they wrote, “unleashed a variety of conflicts, great and petty, among
slaves, as some tried to gain advantage at the expense of others” (Berlin and Morgan, Slaves’ Economy, 17).

⁶⁹ Scattered evidence suggests that enslaved people in Berbice and elsewhere made an ethical distinction
between people who stole from Europeans and people who stole from other slaves. A woman named Kitty, for
example, admitted that she was “ashamed” when other slaves discovered that she had stolen clothing from
another enslaved women. See “Complaint of the Negress Annatje Belonging to the Winkel Department
Attached to the Governor’s House,” May 12, 1826, CO 116/141. Slaves who stole from one another often
earned a poor reputation within their communities. One man, for example, was known as “a very bad character
amongst the negroes,” according to the manager, because they “accused him of taking their fowls to procure
rum.” See “Complaint of negro Philip, the property of plantation Canefield Carye,” June 14, 1819, CO
116/138, 53-54.

⁷⁰ “No. 11,” Aug. 29, 1829, CO 116/142, 38-51.
passion,” McCulloch continued, “he made towards her with a knife in his hand.” One man tried to knock the knife out of Sampson’s hand with a bayonet, but Sampson seized it, “brandish[ed] it about,” and then ran after McCulloch, “no doubt with intention to do [him] some serous injury.” Sampson “cried out he would not rest unless he killed Mercy; some member of her family or me,” McCulloch said. McCulloch retrieved a gun from the house, which prompted Sampson, followed by the “whole of the men Gang,” to run to the water’s edge. Only there did Sampson, still “holding the bayonet in one hand, and the knife in the other,” surrender when he “stuck fast in the mud.” The fiscal soon sentenced Sampson to forty-five lashes in the marketplace and “to work on the Estate...with a light chain round his ancle [sic] for three months as a mark of disgrace.”

The fight that nearly ended Mercy’s life, the manager explained, began as a seemingly minor dispute “about some fowls.” Sampson, the plantation’s “stock-keeper,” had apparently accused Mercy of stealing two of McCulloch’s chickens. Mercy retaliated by taking three of Sampson’s own fowls, and soon Mercy and Sampson “began to quarrel about this story.” Mercy “asked him how he liked someone to take away his property,” she said, and Sampson “gave [her] a slap in [the] face.” Mercy “said [she] would not take it & on his giving [her] another [slap she] closed in and threw him on the ground.” The fight then escalated, as described above, highlighting how easily thefts could produce violence.

Some enslaved people turned to Europeans for help settling property stolen by other slaves. Complainants usually had two goals. First, they wanted to recover their stolen property (if they had not already done so) or receive some kind of material compensation for

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71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
their loss. Second, they wanted to see the alleged thief punished. Turning to European authorities, whether managers or colonial officials, could be a means of leveraging the authority of the most powerful to defend the economic rights of the most compromised.

In August 1822, for example, a man named James complained that his owner’s housekeeper stole his chickens and eggs. They were his only means of earning the money he needed to buy the things he needed to survive. In the four years since his owner had bought him, he claimed, “his master never gave him allowance of any kind for food or clothing.” He was “obliged to find himself in every thing,” which was only possible if the property he produced was respected. But recently, the housekeeper “was in the habit of every day killing a fowl belonging to him; and whenever she wanted any eggs, she would go to the fowl’s nest and take what she wanted; and that he has taken from him eight fowls and twenty-four eggs.” James’s owner, however, claimed that only “once or twice while he was ill” his housekeeper had taken “some eggs and chickens” from James, and that “he had been paid the full price he had demanded for them.”

Even if James’s owner was lying, his defense was an implicit acknowledgement that enslaved people had a right to be compensated when they were the victims of theft.

Trying to recover stolen property on one’s own could be frustrating and dangerous, as Harry, a *winkel* or crown slave, discovered in October 1820. Harry told the fiscal that while he and Quaco were hired out to the “market-master,” Quaco had stolen his goat. When Quaco learned that Harry had accused him of theft, he confronted Harry with “a bamboo stick,” giving him “four blows on his side.” The “licking” Harry had endured was so bad, he

73 “Examination of a Complaint preferred by the negro James, belonging to Dr. Smith,” Aug. 20, 1822, CO 116/138, 130.
claimed, that he had been in the hospital with a pain in his side for the past three or four months.\textsuperscript{74}

Leander, like Harry, had a difficult time recovering a pair of turkeys he claimed a man named Quashee had stolen. Leander reported the theft to the manager of Quashee’s plantation, and the manager said “he would see the complainant paid, knowing that Quashee was a thief.” Meanwhile, Leander found his turkeys at a woman’s house, but she refused to return them because “she had purchased them from a country negro for f6 each.” She offered to return the turkeys if Leander reimbursed her. But Leander was not inclined to pay to get his own property back, so he went to the protector. The protector, however, dismissed the complaint and recommended Leander “to avail himself of the promise made by [Quashee’s] manager.”\textsuperscript{75}

Baron, an enslaved man on Herstelling, wanted the manager to punish the man who had stolen his “cutlass” (machete). Baron “knew [Mathias] had done so but he denied it.” Baron first went to the driver, the highest (official) authority among the estate’s slaves. But “when questioned by the Driver [Mathias] continued to deny it.” Fortunately, Baron soon had the proof he needed: “Mathias’s wife called me showed me my cutlass & said her husband had brought it here,” he explained.\textsuperscript{76}

The following day, Baron went to the manager. He “said Massa I told you Mathias
had stolen my cutlass, he denied it he cursed & wanted to fight with me for accusing him. You inquired about it & he denied it, but here the cutlass is his wife showed it to me & I took it away.” Baron had already recovered the cutlass, so his goal was retribution. On this point he was adamant: Mathias “must be flogged,” he demanded. Baron entered the manager’s house, as the manager described it, “in a most violent passion with his cutlass in his hand brandishing it about & speaking very loud,” and declaring he would “not go away until you have Mathias flogged.” Instead, the manager whipped Baron “with a carracarra he had in his hand, & beat [him] all over [his] head, directed [him] to be confined in the stocks,” and then “confined [him] a whole week in the dark house.” The manager had seen Baron’s impassioned plea as an insolent demand that the manager do his bidding. Baron might have been justifiably aggrieved, but he had failed to show the deference the manager expected. The fiscal ruled that Baron had been “extremely impetuous, impertinent, and disrespectful,” and sentenced him to an additional thirty-nine lashes.77

Some complainants had better luck persuading the fiscal to use his power to punish thieves. Among them was Trim, an enslaved man who lived in New Amsterdam and whose house was robbed during the 1825 Christmas holidays by a man named Smart. Returning in the early morning hours on December 24, after having gone “out with the rest of [his] master’s people to a dance,” Trim found that someone had taken his blankets, trousers, shirts, and a night gown. “Massa heard about it,” Trim explained, but “told me not to make too much noise about it but as the two next nights were dancing nights all people were to look

77 Ibid.
out well wherever they went" for the stolen items.78

Sure enough, at a Christmas Eve dance Trim saw “the negro Smart...with [his] night gown on.” Trim “took hold of him,” he told the fiscal, and a fight was narrowly avoided when another man intervened, took the nightgown, and told Trim not to “make a disturbance here,” promising to hold onto the gown until morning. The next day Trim’s manager and the undersheriff, who had been summoned to investigate, confiscated two blankets and a pair of trousers from Smart’s house, which they returned to Trim. Like Baron, who wanted Mathias flogged, Trim went to the fiscal to see Smart punished. And he got what he wanted: the fiscal sentenced Smart to fifty lashes. Smart’s owner, moreover, declared his “intention to dispose of [Smart]” immediately, which likely meant a painful separation from his friends and kin.79

Some European plantation authorities punished slaves who stole from one another because they recognized the social turmoil that unpunished thefts could generate. In January 1830, for example, the manager of the *winkel* slaves in New Amsterdam told the fiscal that a man named Paul had stolen two turkeys from Toetoe, an elderly woman. Toetoe and her husband suspected the turkeys had been taken one night, so Toetoe went looking for them at nearby Fort St. Andrew (Andries) the next morning. There she found the turkeys “in possession of...the mess man,” who told her that he had “bought them from a man whose name he did not know, but who was to come at 11 o’clock for payment.” So Toetoe waited to catch the thief red handed. When “Paul came for the money” she “claimed the Turkies,

78 “Complaint of the Negro Trim Belonging to W. Scott Residing in the Town of New Amsterdam,” Jan. 7, 1826, CO 116/140.

79 Smart denied he had stolen anything and said the items he removed from Trim’s room were his. He had lent them to another man where Trim lived and had only taken back his own possessions, he claimed, and Trim “knew of it.” But this was apparently the final straw for Trim’s owner, De Costa, who told the fiscal that “amongst my own people [Smart] is not considered Honest & frequently accused of stealing their things.” Ibid.
accused him of stealing them, and reported the circumstance to the manager.” The manager then wrote the fiscal, who investigated Toetoe’s complaint and sentenced Paul to ten days of brutal “work” on the treadmill.80

Michael, a carpenter from plantation Providence, endured a similarly harsh punishment when the manager concluded that he had taken “some money, cloth and coral” from Jenny’s trunk. The manager “inspected the chest that had been broken open, and discovered that it was forced with a carpenter’s chisel.” Michael’s chisel “was evidently the one which had forced the chest,” he concluded, which was “sufficient proof for Michael’s guilt.” Moreover, Michael had a reputation for stealing. He “had committed similar offences before, and almost all of the negroes of the estate believed he was the person who had robbed Jenny,” the manager explained. So the manager ordered the driver to give Michael thirty-nine lashes (Michael claimed it was one hundred lashes) and then confined him in the stocks at night for the following week.81

Some slaveowners and managers recognized the devastating effect that even small property losses could have on their slaves. William Cort, the manager of Hampshire, for example, contacted a civil magistrate after a woman named Bella from the neighboring estate had attacked two of his enslaved women and damaged their clothing and jewelry. “The

80 “Henry Stocking Manager over the slaves attached to the Winkel establishment in this town informed the Fiscal that a young man named Paul attached to said department was accused of stealing two turkies from an elderly woman named Toetoe,” Jan. 19, 1830, CO 116/142, 9-15.

81 Michael maintained that he was innocent and that he had proof someone else had broken into Jenny’s trunk. After he was flogged, he claimed, Jenny “found a string of corals on the neck of a girl named Peggy,” who was the manager’s housekeeper. But “nothing was said to her,” and when Michael “went to the manager to be indemnified for a punishment he had received for nothing,” the manager ordered him to be quiet or be put in the stocks. Whether the fiscal believed Michael’s innocence or not, he chastised the manager for having handled the suspected robbery himself. “The manager was informed,” according to the fiscal’s notes, “that if he really considered [Michael] guilty of the robbery, he ought to have sent him to the Fiscal for trial.” See “Examination of a Complaint preferred by the negro Michael, belonging to plantation Providence, the property of William Henery,” Apr. 24, 1823, CO 116/138, 137-38.
aggressor Bella,” Cort complained, “has been allowed to go as yet unpunished.” And when Maria, one of Bella’s victims, had complained to Bella’s owner, he “most harshly and illegally, on Sunday, ordered her into the dark house, without any inquiry into the cause of the disturbance.” Cort was at least as concerned with the damage done to Maria’s clothing and jewelry as he was with the harm done to her body. “My woman Maria,” he told the civil magistrate, “has not only been severely beaten, but has suffered a serious loss to her in the destruction of her Christmas finery, ear-ring, necklace &c.” For an enslaved woman who probably had very little in the way of “finery,” this was a significant injury indeed. Cort demanded “restitution of the value of the articles destroyed, and the aggressor to undergo such punishment” as the civil magistrate saw fit.

The protector of slaves, who investigated Cort’s complaint, determined that the fight between Bella and Maria was the symptom of a longstanding and worsening hostility between the gangs of Hampshire and Albion. This tension had been caused, at least in part, by Maria’s relationship with Bella’s brother, which Bella disapproved of. To diffuse a rapidly escalating conflict, the protector “recommended...an amicable arrangement, not only between the slaves of two such neighboring properties, but also between those who were in authority over them, as an evil of that kind was calculated to extend itself into various tumultuous factions throughout the whole range of the coast.” His solution, it is important to note, acknowledged the central role that property played in the slaves’ moral economy and social system. Instead of punishing the women involved in the fight, the protector focused

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82 Bella similarly emphasized the alleged damage done to her property in the fight. As she told the protector, Maria “broke [exhibiting part of a string of coral beads] my rings and beads.” See “Complaint No. 18,” Jan. 3, 1829, CO 116/145, 15-16.

83 Ibid.
on material compensation. “As Mr. Cort’s negresses had suffered a loss of property,” he explained, “he was of opinion that they should receive a full compensation from the attorney of Albion.”

Enslaved people in Berbice asserted their right to control, accumulate, and exchange various types of personal property, ranging from clothing and jewelry to provision grounds and livestock. Their claims of ownership and possession are most visible in moments where these rights were contested, and especially in cases of theft. When Europeans or other slaves tried to deprive enslaved people of their property, arguments and violence often followed. And when enslaved people could not recover their property or secure compensation for their losses on their own, they sometimes turned to managers, owners, and the colonial government for help. Their complaints highlighted the extent to which the rights they claimed relied at least as much on litigation as they did on custom.

“The recovery of trivial debts”

In May 1819, seven men from plantation Rosehall went to the fiscal because their manager had refused to pay them for working Sundays, their legal day off. Nelson, speaking for the group, explained that “they were all engaged by the manager to gin cotton for himself on Sundays, for which he promised each f.3 a day.” But when they worked three Sundays in a row and “receiv[ed] no payment, they declined to continue with their work.” Their strike, however, did not prompt the manager to settle his debts, and when the men again

84 Ibid.
“demand[ed] the payment,” they said, “the manager called the driver, and gave them d____
good payment”: a flogging.\footnote{85}

The economic claim that the men from Rosehall made—the right to be paid for work
done on their own time—was part of a broader right enslaved people had won in Berbice: the
ability to negotiate market relations much like free people did. Even as slaves had an
inescapable obligation to do unpaid work for the majority of their waking hours, there were
limits to the claims that owners or managers could make on their labor and time. Any work
beyond what was customarily or legally required—such as ginning cotton on a Sunday—had
to be compensated. The same was true of personal property enslaved people sold or traded.
In numerous cases, enslaved people demanded the right to participate in the market—to trade
and sell their goods, to hire themselves and their services, and to enforce unwritten contracts
with buyers and sellers.

These customary rights were given explicit legal protection in the 1826 slave code.
This law made it illegal, for example, to employ slaves on Sundays without paying them cash
“wages,” the rates of which were established by the protector of slaves and approved by the
lieutenant governor.\footnote{86} The law also recognized enslaved people’s right to be compensated for
any property they sold, stipulating that fines and imprisonment could be imposed on anyone
who “defrauded” slaves, “unjustly appropriate[d]” their “land, money, or property of any

\footnote{85} “Investigation of a Complaint preferred by the Negroes Nelson, Milton, Simon, Ned, Cupid, Trim, and Jack,
belonging to Plantation Rosehall, to the Fiscal, on 27th May 1819,” CO 116/138, appx. 15.

\footnote{86} 1826 slave code, clause 9. In 1830, the deputy protector of slaves and lieutenant governor established the
following wages for Sunday labor: “One bitt per hour for potting sugar. One bitt per hour for turning and
drying coffee or cotton. For picking coffee—three bitts for a basket weighing 70 lbs. gross. For picking cotton—
three bitts for a basket weighing 30 lbs. gross.” Governor’s proclamation, Apr. 27, 1830, published in Berbice
Gazette, Jun. 9, 1830. Although wages and cash rewards provided some enslaved people an opportunity to earn
and save small amounts of cash, owners and managers also used them to stimulate overwork and increase labor
extraction. See Mary Turner, “Introduction,” in From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The Dynamics of Labour
kind,” or “disturb[ed] any such slave in the possession or free use and enjoyment” of their property.\textsuperscript{87} In short, the law granted enslaved people some of the same property rights that free people had. This move was consistent with the imperial government’s effort to began the transition to wage work and turn owner-slave relationships into employer-employee ones, but it was also a codification of practices that had already been established by custom.\textsuperscript{88}

Like the men from Rosehall, many enslaved people in Berbice turned to European authorities for help collecting outstanding debts.\textsuperscript{89} Even before 1826, slaves asserted the right to be paid for goods and services they provided on their own time. In February 1819, for example, an enslaved man named London went to the fiscal after Napier, a black soldier or “pioneer,” refused to pay him for taking him to the fort in his small boat. London had repeatedly asked Napier to pay, he said, but Napier always refused. The last time he tried to collect the debt, moreover, Napier “seized him tore his jacket and cut him in two places with a knife.” Napier, on the other hand, claimed that London owed him money, and that London had initiated the fight when Napier demanded his money.\textsuperscript{90}

As London’s complaint suggests, recovering debts was fraught with danger. When Nelly, a New Amsterdam huckster hired out to Mary Jane Campbell, was beaten by a man who owed her money, Campbell complained to the fiscal on Nelly’s behalf. Nelly explained

\textsuperscript{87} Berbice slave code, clause 27.

\textsuperscript{88} As Mary Turner observed, the Crown’s amelioration program entailed “beginning the transition to wage work, preparing slave workers and slave-owners to become servants and masters, employees and employers. This process required first and foremost that owner-slave relationships be defined by law and systematically applied to both parties by enhancing the powers of the colonial state.” See Turner, “The 11 O’Clock Flag”: Women, Work, and Labour Law in the British Caribbean,” in \textit{Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives From the Caribbean, Africa and the African Diaspora}, ed. Verene A. Shepherd (New York, 2002), 261.

\textsuperscript{89} Lean, “Secret Lives of Slaves,” 114.

\textsuperscript{90} “Complaint of the Negro London, the property of W. Kewley, Against Napier, a pioneer, lately belonging to the garrison,” Feb. 8, 1819, CO 116/138, 32.
that August, a slave hired to a cooper named John Cotton, had “bought calico from [her] for eleven guilders.” But when she “went to him two or three times for the money...he drove [her] away said he would not pay [her].” Determined to get her money, Nelly confronted August again: “I said you have bought my calico & you got money & refused to pay me to day you & I will have it. I won’t go away without it.” Nelly knew here was money in August’s jacket or hat, so she grabbed him and told him that she would “not let [him] go unless [he] pa[id].” August tried to persuade Nelly to leave him alone lest the fiscal, who was dining nearby, see the fight, but Nelly responded “that is what I want. The fiscal is a Gentleman & he won’t let you cheat me out of my money.”

The “scuffle” continued and Nelly soon heard someone “run down stairs & at once [she] felt blows all over [her neck].” It was John Cotton, the man who had hired August. Cotton beat Nelly with a stick “all over [her] head & shoulders,” then ordered her out of his yard. Whether the fiscal forced August to settle his debt is unknown, but he did rule that Cotton had violated regulations “respecting the mode & treatment of punishments to be inflicted on slaves,” for which the fiscal would prosecute him before the court of criminal justice. Though this prosecution was, at least explicitly, for assault, it was also an acknowledgment that people like Nelly had a right to recover debts and that Cotton’s interference was inappropriate.

Another huckster, Charmantye, faced similar problems collecting a debt. She explained to the fiscal that her mistress, instead of giving her a weekly allowance, allowed her to spend Saturdays “work[ing] for [her] own benefit.” One Saturday she agreed to sell a

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91 “Mary Jane Campbell complains by letter...,” Jun. 14, 1826, CO 116/141.
92 Ibid.
fowl to a Mr. Salmann on credit. Charmantye had protested, she said, that she “could only sell them for cash & did not like to trust, [but] he begged me so hard, that I gave him a fowl for one guilder.” Recovering the debt, however, proved impossible. She had to “demand payment” three times, and when “Miss Molly (Salmann’s housekeeper)” finally had one of Salmann’s slaves give Charmantye a guilder, Molly followed Charmantye and claimed that Charmantye owed her five guilders for an earring. Molly also claimed that Salmann only owed Charmantye a “bit,” not a guilder, for the fowl. The two women began to fight, each one later blaming the other for instigating it. Molly “cursed me & quarreled so much,” Charmantye told the fiscal, “that I returned the Guilder.” Molly, however, said that Charmantye threw her down and “nearly choked [her] by holding [her] throat.” Charmantye told the fiscal that “it was a great shame for them to buy things from a slave & not to pay for them,” revealing that she was at least as upset about being cheated as she was about being physically attacked. Charmantye’s mistress corroborated her account, and the fiscal referred the case to the court of criminal justice so that Molly could be prosecuted.93

Evidence suggests that many enslaved people, like Charmantye and Nelly, only went to the fiscal or protector after their own efforts to recover debts had failed. Many complainants were careful to point out that they had exhausted other means before turning to the government for help. Telemachus, for example, sought the protector’s help collecting payment for a hog he sold John Taylor because he “has not yet been able to receive the amount, although he made repeated applications.” The deputy protector wrote Taylor, “requesting an immediate settlement of the above claim, and Taylor agreed to pay as soon as

93 “Complaint No. 28,” Nov. 21, 1827, CO 116/144, 63-65.
he could get the money. A woman named Fanny similarly claimed that “Johanna de Vry owe[d] [her] one bit for one month,” and that when she went to recover the debt a few days ago de Vry threatened “that if she did not go, he would give her what she would not like.” De Vry then “pushed her out of doors, and slashed her with a rope several times,” only stopping when “the neighbours interfered.” The protector wrote the fiscal and asked him to punish de Vry, who had ruined his chances of mounting a successful defense by showing up several times at the protector’s office when it was closed, often drunk. The fiscal sentenced de Vry to a week in jail, hoping that it would “be an example to this worthless class of persons.”

An enslaved man named John Clark also went to the protector, he claimed, when all else had failed. He “held a claim for six guilders against one F Schmidt,” he said, “and although his master tried all his means to recover this sum for complainant he has not been able to do so.” The protector contacted Schmidt, who “promised to settle the amount as soon as he should have it in his power.” If the debt was not paid soon, the protector added, he would take Schmidt to court. A woman named Jessy also found the protector sympathetic to her complaint against a goldsmith, who had lost a pair of earrings Jessy had given him to repair a couple of years earlier. Jessy had, she claimed, “agreed to pay three guilders for the repairs, and has often called at Mr. Burmester’s [the goldsmith] for the ear-rings and tendered

94 “Complaint No. 4,” Jul. 10, 1827, CO 116/143, 250.
95 Complaint, No. 12,” Nov. 18, 1828, CO 116/145, 13. In 1820 de Vry was also accused of brutally assaulting an enslaved woman, her infant, and her free black owner. See “Examination of the negro woman Marencia, belonging to the free black woman Sarah Bourgeois,” Dec. 6, 1820, CO 116/138, 71; and “Examination of the free woman Sarah Bourgeois, preferring a complaint against the free man Johannes de Vry for assault, &c. &c.,” Dec. 6, 1820, CO 116/138, 71-72.
the money, but cannot get them.” The protector “thought Jessy was perfectly right in making the present application,” and told Burmester he “was to pay for [the earrings], to which he agreed.”

Recovering debts was made easier when the Berbice government passed a “Small Debt Enactment” in October 1829. This legislation was a direct response to enslaved people’s protests and complaints and, more broadly, one example of how enslaved people shaped the amelioration movement. This ordinance, which was enthusiastically supported by the imperial government, was also the brainchild of the protector of slaves, who hailed its passage as “a great and most important advance” which allowed an enslaved person “to enter a court of law, and recover without any expense whatever a small sum of money which may have been unjustly withheld from him.”

Previously, as the protector complained to the governor as early as 1827, “considerable inconvenience ha[d] been experienced from the want of some judicial court for the recovery of trivial debts at small expense.” The “inefficacy” of his “attempts to recover [slaves’] outstanding claims for the sale of pigs, poultry, &c.,” the protector lamented, was becoming “each day more perplexing.” The problem was that “few slaves, if any, [were] prepared to encounter the present heavy expense of attending a suit before the Court of Criminal justice,” so the Protector’s authority was “limited chiefly to threats,” which he claimed were “almost disregarded.”

The following year the protector repeated his complaint that his “power” to compel “persons indebted to Slaves in small sums” to

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99 Ibid.
“discharge their debt by installment...had become inoperative.”

The 1829 ordinance gave the protector of slaves as well as civil magistrates throughout the colony the authority to summarily “hear, try, and determine...all cases and complaints brought before them...concerning the recover of any Debt” of one hundred guilders or less.

Despite these legal changes, many complainants still failed to recover debts, usually because of conflicting testimonies or a lack of evidence. Susette, a woman who lived in the winkel village, for example, complained that “Cumba White a free Woman assaulted & beat her this morning for asking her payment for ironing clothes.” Susette claimed four witnesses had seen the fight, and they admitted that Cumba and Susette “were quarreling about money matters.” But Cumba claimed that she had paid Susette the two guilders she owed her. Since she only had a dollar she asked Susette to give her one guilder back in change, she said. “Susette was not pleased with this and became insolent,” Cumba claimed, so she “laid hold of her and thought of sending her to the Fiscal.” The men who had witnessed the fight, moreover, had “changed the money,” broke up the fight, and “took Susette away,” they claimed. The protector dismissed Susette’s complaint.

A complaint in November 1830 from John Hardman, a domestic living in New Amsterdam, fared no better. Hardman complained that “C. Kraan tore his coat last Easter at a dance, for which he promised to pay him, that Kraan had never done so, and therefore

100 David Power to Henry Beard, Sept. 1, 1828, CO 116/144, 27-30. Power also argued “that manumission can possibly confer no benefit on the Negro unless his industry accompanied his change of condition; and I know of no more active stimulus to that industry, than the certainty of his being paid for his labour.”

101 For the governor’s proclamation, see Berbice Gazette, Oct. 7, 1829. For the imperial government’s support of Power’s suggestion for a “Court of Summary Jurisdiction for the recovery of small debts due to slaves” and its criticism of the Berbice council of government’s delay in establishing such a court, see George Murray to Henry Beard, Sept. 1, 1829, CO 116/145, 22-23. See also Thompson, Unprofitable Servants, 43-44.

102 Jan. 1, 1832, CO 116/148, 103-06.
requests the Protector to compel Kraan to pay the damage done to his coat.” Kraan, however, claimed that John had attacked him, and that John “gave him several blows, & was going to throw him down stairs, when luckily for him he caught hold of John’s coat, which may thereby be damaged.” He denied that he ever promised to pay John, and when John did not show up with the witnesses he claimed would corroborate his account, the protector dismissed the case.103

Other complainants were more fortunate, in part because the protector now had the authority to compel debtors to pay. When Sally Kitty told the protector in January 1830 that “R. Akers owe[d] her eighteen guilders, for which she [held] his acceptance,” for example, the protector summoned Akers, presented Kitty’s evidence, and forced Akers to pay Kitty. Akers settled his debt the following week.104 In May 1830, a cook named Hannibal turned to the protector for help collecting a debt from Charles Ross. Hannibal claimed he had sold two sheep to Ross for thirty-three guilders, but Ross instead “offer[ed] his acceptance payable at the end of this year at the rate of thirty guilders.” Ross admitted that he owed Hannibal, but said he never agreed to pay thirty-three guilders. “It was at Hannibal’s particular request,” moreover, “that the took the sheep at f.30,” which he would “prove by a certificate of Mr. Oldfield, who was present when the bargain was stuck.” Oldfield’s certificate corroborated Ross’s account, and Hannibal accepted his “acknowledgment for sixty guilders payable in three months.”105

103 Nov. 29, 1830, CO 116/147, 141-43.


105 May 12, 1830, CO 116/146, 99-102.
These efforts to recover debts are illustrative of a broader claim enslaved people made to participate in the colonial economy for their own benefit. Although enslaved people largely accepted that they could not avoid working for European owners or managers without pay most of the time, they demanded the right to barter their labor and goods during their own time, as well as the right to enforce contracts and bargains with free people and with other slaves. The colonial government recognized these economic rights, but even with explicit legal backing enslaved people had a difficult and dangerous time protecting them.

Conclusion

Taken together, the three categories of rights or entitlements examined here—the right to be provided with clothing and food by one’s owner or manager; the right to own, accumulate, and control a wide range of personal property without interference; and the right to negotiate market relations—constituted an important part of enslaved people’s moral economy. These rights, forged through years of hard-fought struggle, negotiation, and compromise, were a means of trying to survive extreme conditions of poverty and deprivation. Enslaved people used notions of custom to articulate their rights and demand certain privileges, to negotiate their economic relationships with Europeans and with one another. And sometimes they succeeded in forcing others to abide by the (un)written, always-contested rules and expectations that governed their society.

Most interesting, perhaps, are the ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions of this moral economy. It was a system which only makes sense when understood in the context of a brutal, rapidly changing Atlantic slave society in its final decades, shortly before a new,
wage-labor economy would begin to take root as part of broader revolutions in political economy. Viewed from this perspective, the rights that enslaved Berbicians claimed—the minimum standards of economic fairness they sought to obtain in an inherently unjust, exploitive system—seem to contradict one another, or at least rely on competing social and economic models. Demands to be clothed and fed by owners in return for unpaid labor and deferent obedience make sense in the context of an older, seigniorial order. But these claims are more difficult to square with demands for some measure of economic autonomy and the right to exchange one’s time, labor, and goods for cash wages in a “free” market.

Yet ideological consistency was probably not high on enslaved people’s list of priorities. For people who lived in a world where disease and death were daily threats, where starvation, malnutrition, theft, and poverty were rampant, and where opportunities to acquire food, clothing, and other basic necessities were few and far between, it is not surprising that enslaved people used all the tools at their disposal to protect the fragile, yet important, property rights that gave them a better chance of survival.
EPILOGUE

The voices at the heart of this project--voices of enslaved Africans and Creoles, European managers and owners, colonial officials, and imperial administrators--reveal a complex set of power relationships and concerns. The story they tell is at once less romantic and more complicated than many histories of slavery, which take as their starting point the axiomatic relationship between enslavers and slaves, asking how the former dominated and how the latter resisted. The history of slavery presented here is therefore not one of rebellion or revolution, of enslaved people’s efforts to achieve freedom. The expansive and inclusive view of the politics of plantation life embraced in this project is unconventional, but it is central to understanding how Atlantic slavery functioned.

Enslaved people had their own politics, antagonisms, and hierarchies that were shaped, but not determined, by the predicament of enslavement and by their fraught relationships with Europeans. Owners and managers similarly sought to control enslaved people’s time, bodies, and labor, but their authority was not absolute. Like enslaved people, they were subject to more powerful colonial and imperial officials who shaped the contours of their relationships with slaves. Focusing on this broad range of power relationships, on the ways enslaved people and their enslavers struggled to control and influence not only one another but also their peers, and on the ways that these relationships intersected and overlapped with one another, allows us to develop a more nuanced understanding of Atlantic
slavery. It illuminates the complex ways that power and authority were constructed and negotiated at different levels and in different spaces, and the strategies enslaved people used to survive brutal conditions.

We usually think of slaves and their enslavers as enemies, and rightly so. But in many cases they cooperated or collaborated, reinforcing one another’s authority even as they pursued different goals. Slaveowners and managers relied on powerful drivers to carry out their orders and maintain discipline on their plantations. Enslaved men turned to managers for help controlling wives who left and thwarting the advances of male rivals, while enslaved women went to colonial authorities for protection against abusive husbands. Enslaved people asked managers, owners, and colonial officials for help recovering stolen property and collecting debts. Slaves also turned to the fiscals and protectors of slaves to protest everything from violations of their customary and legal property rights to excessively violent managers, drivers, and owners. In many cases slaves managed to leverage the authority of Europeans in their favor—against managers and owners and against other enslaved people. It was a bitter irony that enslaved people sometimes found their most effective means of improving their situation was turning to the very people who ran the plantation system that enslaved them.

The corollary to these unexpected areas of cooperation between enslaved people and enslavers were the internal conflicts and divisions of both groups. Slave communities were rife with their own antagonisms, hierarchies, and political struggles, with power and authority breaking down along lines of gender and status. Husbands and wives, drivers and field laborers, obeah practitioners and their clients—all struggled not only as enslaved people
against oppressors but as complicated human beings against one another. European colonial society in Berbice was similarly divided, especially in the era of amelioration. Managers and overseers resented and protested interventions from colonial officials who were bound to enforce ameliorative legislation, investigate slaves’ complaints, and prosecuted people who violated the colony’s slave codes. Enslaved people took advantage of these divisions and the legal rights they were granted during amelioration--many of which simply codified hard-won customary rights--to renegotiate their relationships with managers and masters. Plantation authorities, meanwhile, relied on the power of the colonial state to reinforce their authority, even as they knew that officials like the protector and fiscal also could circumscribe their autonomy.

Taken together, these observations reveal a disconcerting truth: many, if not most, of the things enslaved people did to survive did not threaten the slave system itself. Demanding a little bit more food or cloth, protesting a particularly brutal beating, using obeah to combat disease and death, asking colonial officials for protection against an abusive spouse, or stealing food, for example, were key to enslaved people’s efforts to get by. These actions, in some cases, helped make life more tolerable, but they were not blows against slavery so much as they were attempts to survive it. The majority of enslaved people’s political actions which were documented in the records of the fiscals and protectors of slaves were responses to the predicament of enslavement. Their goals and strategies, which were more pragmatic than ideological, were thus affected by the very conditions of slavery. Instead of asking how enslaved people resisted slavery, then, it is more illuminating to ask how they shaped it. In
their day to day interactions and struggles with one another and with Europeans, slaves helped make the world of Atlantic slavery.

The expansive view of the politics of plantation life that this study proposes also allows us to develop a richer, fuller understanding of antislavery. When we approach amelioration as a transatlantic power struggle instead of only as a problem in the political history of the British Empire, we see much more than the imposition of British values and customs on Atlantic slave societies. In particular, we are able to see how the antislavery movement--its ideology, its concerns, and its tactics--was shaped through the dynamic interaction of colonial and metropolitan priorities. Asking how amelioration was affected by political actors on both sides of the Atlantic highlights the extent to which enslaved people themselves shaped the antislavery movement through their day-to-day political activism. It also illustrates the many ways that the slavery debate was caught up in a range of other concerns which were both domestic and imperial.

Antislavery was heavily influenced by the political actions and concerns of enslaved people themselves. Many, though not all, of the reforms proposed by metropolitan abolitionists and enacted by colonial legislatures during amelioration were responses to the demands enslaved people had long made and to their grievances, which ranged from physical violence and separation from their families to material deprivations. Some of the legal protections enslaved people were granted in the 1820s were codified version of slaves’ customary rights, ranging from the right to own and exchange personal property to the right to be given food and clothing by one’s owner or manager. Yet legal protections were not irrelevant: they allowed enslaved people to make more forceful claims while simultaneously
narrowing the kinds of claims they could make to those defined by colonial legislatures. Amelioration thus reinforced a politics of survival focused on solving specific problems associated with the predicament of slavery instead of making broader attacks on the problem of slavery itself.

The transatlantic slavery debate was wrapped up in much broader discussions about humanitarianism and empire. At the same time that British politicians, abolitionists, and slaveowners were arguing over the role that slavery would play in the British Empire, Britons were engaged in bitter debates about crime and punishment, marriage and sex, labor and industry. Domestic and colonial issues, moreover, were entangled. Imperial efforts to shape enslaved people’s domestic lives by promoting formal marriage and criminalizing certain sexual behaviors, for instance, or the push to make colonial slavery less violent by enacting penal reforms, mirrored metropolitan developments.

At their heart, these were all responses to bigger debates about the proper role of government in managing populations, imposing values, and shaping individual behavior. The amelioration experiment thus marked not only the beginning of the end of slavery, but also a key moment in the expansion of state power and the shift from private to public control of labor that would come to characterize modern life. Many of the technologies first developed to manage colonial slave populations, moreover, eventually became the tools modern nations use to monitor and control their citizens. The reverberations of the power struggles at the heart of Atlantic slavery can thus still be felt today.
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