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Husbands and Fathers

The Family Experience of Enslaved Men in Berbice, 1819–1834

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Abstract

We know relatively little about enslaved men, especially African-born men in British West Indian slave societies, in their roles as fathers and husbands within slave households. A generation of scholarship on gender in slave societies has tended to neglect enslaved men, thus allowing old understandings of enslaved men as not very involved with families drawn from biased planter sources to continue to shape scholarship. This article instead draws on a rich set of records (both quantitative and qualitative) from Berbice in British Guiana between 1819 and 1834 to explore enslaved men's roles within informal marriages and as husbands and parents. We show not only that enslaved men were active participants in shaping family life within British West Indian slave societies but that they were aided and abetted in achieving some of their familial objectives by a sympathetic plantation regime in which white men favored enslaved men within enslaved households.

Keywords

slavery – British Caribbean – gender – masculinity – marriage – family – Berbice – Guyana

Introduction

How we do understand the texture of male lives under slavery in the Caribbean? In this article, we explore what the lives of enslaved men were like, focusing on their experiences as husbands, fathers, and members of families, as revealed by a rich set of records from early nineteenth-century Berbice (part of what in 1831 became the colony of British Guiana). Our contention is that contrary to planter stereotypes of enslaved men as feckless, irresponsible, and unconcerned with family life, enslaved men in early nineteenth-century Berbice were in fact significantly involved in families as husbands and fathers and that they sought to exert patriarchal authority, even if that patriarchal authority was compromised by the circumstances of enslavement. Our argument is that new kinds of sources, such as those employed in this study, provide hard evidence of the importance of enslaved men as husbands and fathers within slave communities during the period of amelioration.

Planter prejudices have strongly shaped how we see the family lives of enslaved men, even if we recognize planters' claims as self-serving racist justifications of their dominance over black men. Proslavery writers claimed that enslaved men had little to complain about in their family lives, because planters went out of their way to accommodate their desire to have wives, that they provided for them, and that they treated them so well that enslaved men ended up in old age contentedly enjoying a rich family life surrounded by grandchildren. Henry Bolingbroke, author of *A Voyage to the Demerary ...* (1807) and a visitor to Berbice, for example, wrote that he "had often contemplated with inexpressible pleasure, a grey-headed negro and his wife, sitting at the door of their cottage, fondly protecting and enjoying the active sports of their grand-children while the parents have been engaged pursuing their respective occupations in the field" (Bolingbroke 1807:59). The enslaved man's wife may have been kindly provided for him, Bolingbroke thought, by a generous planter who, recognizing enslaved men's desire for wives and a settled family life, would often make a "purchase of a lot of women [in the slave trade] to supply [enslaved men] with wives: each makes his choice, and the business is settled" (Bolingbroke 1807:59). Wives supposedly allowed slave families "of three or four generations" to flourish and encouraged enslaved men to have "a degree of interest in the estate which would scarcely be expected from an emigrated African" (Bolingbroke 1807:59). If family life was problematic, proslavery writers claimed, it was due not to the horrific conditions of slavery itself but instead to the weak characters of African men. As we outline below, it was indeed true that slave family life was full of constraints, but these tended to be related to the peculiar demography of slave societies and especially to the harsh conditions that slave owners forced upon their slaves.

Again and again, proslavery advocates and West Indian planters compared enslaved men to irresponsible children. John Stewart, author of an influential and well-regarded description of Jamaica in the 1820s, can stand in for a host of comments. Stewart described enslaved men as “patient, cheerful, and commonly submissive, capable at times of grateful attachments where uniformly well treated.” Furthermore, the enslaved man was also “possessed of passions not only strong but ungovernable ... a temper extremely irascible, a disposition indolent, selfish, and deceitful, fond of joyous sociability; riotous mirth and extravagant show.”¹ He was, in short, the perpetual child. It was African and African-Caribbean men’s supposed infantilization which was stressed most by proslavery writers in the early nineteenth century. And infants, of course, do not propagate families.

Planters’ claims about the character of slave family life have echoed down into current scholarship on slavery and the slave family, despite historians’ understandable skepticism about the ability of slave owners to accurately represent the lives and conditions of the people they enslaved.² The historiographical explanation for what has happened is simple. Slaves were generally treated by historians, at least until the last decades of the twentieth century, with little reference to gender and were generally coded male. The advent of women’s and gender history in the late twentieth century meant that some sustained attention was given to enslaved women, especially as mothers, and to their greater risk of sexual exploitation and abuse by white men.³ But this emphasis on the gendered experience of enslavement—for women—has meant that few scholars have given much attention to enslaved men, at least not in their capacities as husbands and fathers. Modern historians have thus unwittingly

1 Stewart (1823:249, 309) believed that the enslaved male was naturally promiscuous and inclined to polygamy, stating that “the negro, who does not profess himself to be a Christian, smiles at the idea of confining himself to one female, when his circumstances enable him, and his passions and taste for variety instigate him to half a dozen.” See also Williamson, “Introduction.”

2 Burnard 2010. For an intriguing suggestion that patriarchy among slaves in the British West Indies was diminished from what existed in Africa, see Mullin 1992:171–72.

3 Wood 2011:543–44. Some idea of previous attitudes can be seen in Craton 1978. *Searching for the Invisible Man* was a pioneering work on slave demography and family in Jamaica, but assumed, as the title indicates, that the representative slave was coded male. The best recent assessment of slave masculinity and men’s role within families is Jemmott 2015. She is especially insistent on countering what she sees, correctly, as a historiography that combines contemporary planter views on the feckless enslaved male with modern social science literature that assumes that black men are marginal to Jamaican family life. Her work provides copious references to this historiography.

replicated planter prejudices by following planter-created sources that equated family life with women.

As Sir Hilary Beckles pointedly argued, enslaved men have been made invisible, even as feminist-inspired scholars have recovered the lives of enslaved women and made historians aware of the highly gendered nature of Caribbean slavery.⁴ Beckles lamented, in particular, how little work had been done on masculinity and slavery. He charged that enslaved men “have been parked away by history in a derelict cul-de-sac, as far as the ideologies of modernity and development are concerned,” and that “fatherhood as an aspect of masculinity, therefore, is buried within the archival literatures of the estate” (Beckles 1986:5). The result, he suggested, was that “the slave male is the one who was rendered largely invisible.”⁵

Yet there are sources that allow us to make enslaved men visible—not as ungendered “slaves” but as men—and in particular that allow us to study their experiences as husbands and fathers. The copious but little explored records compiled between 1817 and 1834 of legal officials known as the Fiscal and the Protector of Slaves in Berbice allow us to see enslaved men performing a variety of roles—supportive and unsupportive—within family structures.⁶ These sources need some explanation, however, as most readers will be unfamiliar with them. These documents are the product of two developments that converged in Berbice in the early nineteenth century. The first development was the legal system that was in operation under the Dutch, who were the original colonizers of Berbice (and its neighbors to the west and east, Demerara-Essequibo and Suriname), in which enslaved people had limited legal rights and could bring their grievances before the Fiscal. This high-ranking official (only the Governor was more important within the Dutch and then British imperial structures in Berbice) was authorized to prosecute slave owners and plantation officials in court or to rule summarily on cases brought before him.⁷

4 For initial explorations into enslaved women in the Caribbean, see Beckles 1989; Bush 1990; Mair 1974; and Morrissey 1989. For more recent work, see Moitt 2001; Morgan 2004; and Paugh 2013.

5 Beckles 1986:10. But see Jemmott 2015. For children's experience of fathers, see Vasconcellos 2015.

6 Historians have not entirely neglected these records, but because Britain's Guiana colonies have attracted less attention than West Indian colonies such as Jamaica and Barbados they remain underused. Important works that have taken advantage of these sources include Browne 2011 and 2017; Da Costa 1997; De Barros 2004; Gill 2004; Lean 2002; Thompson 2002.

7 The records created by the thousands of slaves who made complaints to the Fiscal are

He performed, in short, a chancellery function within the legal system of the colony, determining cases brought primarily by slaves about whether managers or owners violated the slave laws and customary practices of the colony. When the British conquered Berbice in the early nineteenth century, they maintained much of the colony's legal structure intact as part of the terms of surrender, including the office of the Fiscal.⁸ The Fiscal (and later the Protector of Slaves) heard hundreds of cases each year from enslaved people complaining about their conditions and treatment and, most importantly, they recorded these complaints, often relatively unedited, in large volumes of testimony sent back to Britain.⁹ It is from these rich sources that our empirical evidence in this article is drawn.

Berbice is also an unusually well-documented nineteenth-century colony thanks to the British metropolitan government's experiment in "amelioration" in the decades after the abolition of the slave trade (1807) and before emancipation (1834), a period in which policymakers sought to reform slavery through new laws and new mechanisms of surveillance.¹⁰ The responsibility for enforcing the new regulations fell to a newly created office the British adapted from Spanish precedents in Trinidad: the Protector of Slaves.¹¹

preserved in 24 large volumes at The National Archives in Kew, London. See "Fiscal's Reports, 1819–1832" and "Reports of Protectors of Slaves, 1826–34," Colonial Office series (hereafter CO) 116/138–53 and Burnard & Lean 2002. We have concentrated on volumes 138–43. The remaining volumes are either less rich in detail about slaves' lives, tending toward formulaic statements of the outcomes of cases, or mainly concerning slave complaints from Demerara.

- 8 The Fiscal was responsible for ensuring that planters adhered to *The Rule on the Treatment of Servants and Slaves*, a treatise on how slaves should be treated that the Dutch instituted in 1772 in order to curb slave unrest—a significant issue given that Berbice had experienced a massive slave rebellion in 1763–64, in which the colony was rendered ungovernable for nearly two years. The history of the office is summarized in CO 116/155/appendix one. For Berbice's legal system, which continued to be based largely on Dutch laws and precedents after British occupation, see Shahabuddeen 1973.
- 9 For the use of similar sets of records in South Africa's Cape Colony, also a British colony seized from the Dutch during the French Revolutionary Wars, see Mason 2003 and Ross 1983.
- 10 Regarding amelioration, see Dierksheide 2014 and Ward 1984.
- 11 In Berbice, the office of Protector of Slaves was established in 1817, though the position built on and was initially staffed by the Fiscal. See Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 29. For Spanish (and French) antecedents of the British office of Protector of Slaves, see Spence 2014.

Taken together, the records of the Fiscals and Protectors of Slaves, which cover 1819 to 1834, comprise 24 large volumes that provide copious information about the lives of enslaved people, often quoting the words of enslaved people themselves about what concerned them. Nevertheless, they are far from being unbiased sources and, like all sources relating to slavery in the British Caribbean, were created and shaped by white people. Still, they provide more and better information about enslaved men as husbands and fathers than any similar set of sources available to the historian. There are no comparable sources for better known West Indian colonies, such as Jamaica or Barbados, where the voices of enslaved people are much harder to find and where enslaved people's legal rights were much more limited.¹²

Early nineteenth-century Berbice therefore offers an ideal vantage point from which historians can reconsider the gendered power dynamics of enslaved people's interactions with one another and in particular their family lives. The records of the Fiscal and Protector of Slaves that depict enslaved men's roles as husbands and fathers do not always capture the full range of their family experience nor depict them in the best light—judicial records tend to concentrate on points of conflict and crises rather than when people are cooperating—but they do show that many enslaved men lived with wives and within families, cared about those marriages and families and tried to influence the directions of such families. These conclusions may seem unremarkable, but given a longstanding historical literature in which the activities of men within enslaved families have been neglected, to state that men had important roles as husbands and fathers is to suggest a new view of the enslaved family in which patrilocality deserves as much attention as matrilocality. If we are to better understand the gendered experience of enslavement in the British Caribbean, and especially masculinity, we cannot ignore men's family experiences (Jemmott 2015).

Demography and Family Structures in Berbice

Nineteenth-century Berbice was a rapidly changing and unstable frontier slave society. Originally established by the Dutch in the seventeenth century and captured by the British in 1796, Berbice was, for a short time, at the center of a massive expansion of slavery in the southern Caribbean after the Haitian Rev-

12 Lazarus-Black 1993. For a useful examination of how Dutch legal sources created by Whites but accessed by Blacks should be assessed, see Davis 2011.

olution (1791–1804).¹³ Between British occupation and the close of the transatlantic slave trade to British colonies in 1808, some 268 voyages delivered at least 70,000 captives to British Guiana.¹⁴ At least 9,000 more slaves arrived from older West Indian colonies over the next four years, not counting those that were smuggled in.¹⁵ Slave traders probably delivered as many Africans to British Guiana between 1796 and 1807 as the Dutch had during the entire previous century (Thompson 1987:92). This massive importation of captives, combined with considerable investment of British capital as well as the famously fertile soil of the previously underdeveloped Guiana coast and river basins, made British Guiana one of the most productive and important colonies in the British Caribbean.¹⁶

The ending of the slave trade in 1807, however, produced economic difficulties for planters (though less pronounced in Berbice than in older colonies like Barbados or Jamaica) and made the demography of the slave population in Berbice very distinctive. As a late developing or “third-phase” West Indian colony, Berbice’s demographic structure was the result of its intense yet short-lived participation in the transatlantic slave trade under British rule.¹⁷ By 1817, Berbice had a preponderance of adult men over adult women and lots of men in their 30s and 40s, especially people aged between 35 and 39. These men would have been in their early 20s when transported to Berbice from Africa in the years immediately before the end of the slave trade. Virtually no slaves were aged over 60 and fewer than 3 percent of adults were in the prime childbearing years of 20 to 24; just over 10 percent were in their 20s. The unusual sex and

13 See Drescher 2010, esp. pp. 92–112. As Drescher (2010:xxiii) noted, the “decline thesis” in regard to West Indian economies largely ignored “British slavery’s enormous new frontier at the beginning of the nineteenth century.” See also Candlin 2012.

14 See Oostindie 2012:50; Van Welie 2008:66; *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, www.slavevoyages.org, accessed November 5, 2014.

15 Eltis 1972:55–56. According to Bolingbroke (1807:177), the colonies were “daily getting more negroes from the West Indian islands.”

16 See Oostindie 2012:50; Gill 2004:44. As Nicholas Draper (2012, esp. p. 68) has shown, the disproportionate emphasis on Jamaica—Britain’s largest slave colony but one that had stopped expanding by the late eighteenth century—has obscured the importance of Britain’s southern Caribbean colonies, which were far more productive than older colonies during the era of amelioration. See also Drescher 2010:94–96.

17 “Third-phase” colonies were those that Britain acquired from other European powers during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. The last colonies that the British established in the Caribbean, they included Trinidad, St. Lucia, Demerara, Essequibo, and Berbice. Under British rule, slavery, investment, and plantation agriculture—especially sugar cultivation—expanded rapidly in these colonies. See Higman 1984:44–45, 58–64.

age structure of the Berbice slave population derived from planter preferences in the Atlantic slave trade, where men were preferred over women, and from African preferences to retain female captives and sell male captives to European traders (Eltis & Engerman 1992 and 1993; Nwokeji 2001). The result was a slave population that was heavily male and was concentrated into peak age groups: 66 percent of male slaves were aged between 35 and 54 and 40.2 percent of all slaves were in this age group. The population divided almost neatly into two: adult Africans and children born in Berbice. The ratio of males to females was the highest in the British West Indies, at 128.4 males to females in 1810 and 114.5 males to females in 1831, nearly a quarter of a century after the abolition of the slave trade. For slaves aged over 45, the ratio of males to females was over 200. Consequently, many men found it difficult to find women with whom they might form partnerships (Higman 1984:44–45, 58–64, 116).

Enslaved men in Berbice tended to be African-born field laborers on large plantations with male majorities and inherently unstable family structures. Births were outnumbered by deaths, mortality was high, and many slaves were being transferred to the neighboring colony of Demerara. Their work demands were high—productivity rates in the three colonies that made up British Guiana were greater than anywhere else in the British West Indies.¹⁸ And their health was generally bad, with most enslaved laborers working barefoot and barely clothed in swampy conditions where waterborne illnesses thrived.¹⁹ Indeed Berbician slaves had the highest morbidity rate in the nineteenth-century West Indies (Higman 1984:298). In sum, enslaved men in Berbice who sought to create or maintain family ties faced no shortage of obstacles.

At the same time, the large size of Berbician slaveholdings and the continual rotation of managers on estates largely owned by absentees (most of whom lived in Britain or the Netherlands) meant that Berbician slaves were generally able to develop their own cultural and social practices relatively free from white interference. Berbician slave owners and their managers did not pretend to be paternalists. When it came to family life, they normally left enslaved men alone to discipline family members and make decisions about their wives and children unless they perceived such decisions as challenges to their authority or the stability of their plantations. The punishment records compiled on each estate for Berbice in 1827–28 and 1832—which plantation managers were

18 For the importance of British Guiana in the continuing vitality of the British West Indian plantation system in the early nineteenth century, see Draper 2012.

19 Modern scholarship has confirmed the impression of European travelers like George Pinckard (1816, vol. 11:183), who believed Berbice's disease environment was "singularly unhealthy." See also Gill 2004:chapter 6 and Higman 1984:344–45, 630, 678.

required to submit to the Fiscal—show just how little involvement Whites had in some aspects of slave family life. In 1827–28, 11 men and 28 women were punished for fornication and adultery, 29 men flogged or put in stocks for “ill-treating” wives, and three parents were charged for maltreating children. Such marital delinquencies accounted for only 0.8 percent of all punishable offences committed by slaves in that year. In 1832, just four men were punished for fornication and adultery and five women for maltreating children.²⁰ The numbers are so small that one suspects that managers let enslaved people sort out family issues by themselves, rather than slaves being models of parental and marital rectitude. By comparison, in 1827 60 percent of offences recorded by managers were for issues concerning work (Lean 2002:61). Berbician slaves, in contrast, were more concerned than their owners that their family rights were recognized. Of 336 complaints made by enslaved people to the Fiscal or the Protector of Slaves between 1819 and 1827, 92 involved some complaint connected to sexual, familial, or parenting issues (Lean 2002:155, 156, 163).

Enslaved men in West Indian slave societies were not, of course, able to establish the sort of male dominance that was customary in the African societies in which they or their ancestors were born. Moreover, while patriarchy was a strong operating principle in African societies during the period of the slave trade, recent scholarship has modified earlier studies of African family structures and gender relationships by noting the presence of significant matrilineal systems of kinship, suggesting that even in patriarchal systems of household organization, African households were essentially matricentric though not matriarchal.²¹ In Berbice and other plantation societies, the constraints of planter authority were considerable and the stresses of slavery—including uneven sex ratios and high mortality rates—made enslaved peoples’ family structures often chaotic and full of flux. Nevertheless, many enslaved men wanted to form sexual and marital relationships with women that were more than just fleeting encounters and they wanted to control or at least influence the contours of those relationships. They saw themselves, as far as we can tell from imperfect sources, as heads of households—responsible for providing for dependents, protecting wives and children from harm, and disciplining family members when they felt such discipline was necessary.

20 CO 116/144/38–40; CO 116/146/21–26.

21 See Amadume 2005 and Robertson 1996. For elaboration of such theories in relation to the Atlantic slave trade, see Shumway 2014. For an older scholarship that places more stress upon patriarchy see Bledsoe 1980.

Despite the travails of slavery, many enslaved men in Berbice between 1819 and 1834 were relatively successful in their efforts to establish an authoritative presence within slave households, as can be seen in the demographic records presented above and in cases brought before the Fiscal and Protector of Slaves analyzed below. They were able to do so in part because patriarchy was a universal and shared value among men in slave societies throughout British America, even though the extent to which enslaved men were able to enforce patriarchal desires was limited and even though European men in colonial slave societies did not view enslaved men as especially powerful patriarchs, at least when compared to themselves. Despite important differences between West African and Western European gender roles, there was broad agreement among the dominant social classes that women should be subordinate to men, and this common assumption had important consequences for the colonization of the Americas, including the British West Indies. As Melanie Newton argues, “the imposition of the political, legal and socioeconomic frameworks of European patriarchy is one of the defining features of the Atlantic World,” and “the history of the Atlantic world reveals that the basic contours of heteronormative European gender roles remained remarkably durable in the face of the dramatic upheavals of the fifteenth to the nineteenth century.”²²

Men and Marriage

The pressure put on enslaved men to marry in formal ways by advocates for the “amelioration,” or gradual improvement, of slavery suggests that enslaved men rejected formal forms of marriage, but not the institution of marriage itself. By the mid-1820s, thanks to the efforts of abolitionists and proponents

22 Newton 2015:221, 224. This general acceptance of patriarchal norms in the Atlantic World as a whole did not mean that there were not differences between enslaved and European families. Slaves’ conception of families included much emphasis upon extended and fictive kin. These opposed models, Higman (1998:115) argues, “were not mere products of slavery but mirrored differences between African and European cultural systems and understandings of the cosmos.” The structure and quality of the slave family unit has been a matter of great and sensitive interest, mostly because it has sometimes had implications for contemporary social policy. Our work does not pretend to deal with these larger issues. For early statements, see the pioneering work of Raymond Smith (1987) and his class-based understanding of “dual-marriage systems” and that of Peter Wilson (1969), who made a distinction between European ideas of “respectability” and Afrocentric ideas of “reputation.”

of amelioration, enslaved people in Berbice had a legal right to marry and to compel others to recognize the validity of their marriages. Berbice's first comprehensive slave code, adopted in 1826 under great pressure from the Colonial Office, sought to use marriage policy as a form of population control and especially as a strategy for promoting fertility, monogamy, and male-headed nuclear families.²³ One major innovation allowed slaves the right to apply to the colonial government for marriage licenses.²⁴ Once "solemnized" by one of the colony's few ministers, as was also required in early nineteenth-century England, these marriages were legally recognized. They were to be registered formally by colonial clerks (unlike the "reputed" or informal marriages enslaved people had long formed).²⁵ The 1826 code also offered new protections for married enslaved couples, including a provision preventing slaves from being sold away from their spouses or preventing children under age sixteen being separated from their families. Tellingly, the law extended the same protections against separation by sale to "reputed" husbands and wives—one indication that slave owners recognized, to a degree, enslaved people's claims of "marriage" whether or not slaves had any legal standing.²⁶

Colonial officials soon realized that formal marriage was neither attractive nor easily attainable for most Berbician slaves. Enslaved people had long entered into (and dissolved) their own relationships without the colonial government's acknowledgment and without a minister's blessing. In a January 1827 report to the Governor, the Protector of Slaves claimed that "the aversion to marriage, which heretofore existed" among the Crown-owned or *winkel* slaves in Berbice's capital and only town, New Amsterdam—those who had the most contact with missionaries, colonial administrators, and other European colonists who might have pressured them to apply for marriage licenses—was

23 The full text of the law was published in *The Berbice Royal Gazette*, September 30, 1826 (reprinted in Thompson 2012:206–28) [hereafter Berbice slave code].

24 Slave-owners or their representatives were required to provide written permission for their slaves to marry or, if they objected, to give "sufficient proof that such proposed marriage would be injurious to the well-being of the said slave." Berbice slave code, clause 19.

25 Berbice slave code, clauses 19 and 20. For parallels in England, see Green 2007:24.

26 The law required any slave who claimed "to have a husband or wife, or reputed husband or wife ... to prove the truth of his or her assertion, either by the evidence of the owner, manager, or overseer ... or by the evidence of the other slaves belonging to the same estate or plantation." It also stipulated that "in case the assertion is supported by the evidence of slaves only, but contradicted by that of the owner, manager or overseer," separation by sale could proceed provisionally pending an investigation by the Protector of Slaves. Berbice slave code, clause 26.

“gradually disappearing.” The Protector praised the efforts of the *winkel* superintendent toward “increasing the comforts of the married families,” and noted “the mental and religious improvement of the Winkel negroes ... under [John Wray’s] London Protestant Mission,” one of the few places in the colony where slaves received formal instruction in Christianity.²⁷ But less than two years later, the Protector admitted that the colony’s slaves had not 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 enslaved people lived—there were only 29 “solemnized” marriages (in contrast to more than 3,100 couples living in “reputed marriages”).²⁸ By 1830, the number of official marriages had more than tripled. Nevertheless, 97 “solemnized” marriages over four years in a population of more than 20,000 slaves was hardly evidence for widespread interest in formal marriage (Thompson 2012:216n8). As late as 1832, the Secretary of State for the Colonies lamented that “the almost total absence of [formal] marriage amongst the slave population” in Berbice was “a subject of serious regret.”²⁹

Several factors accounted for the low levels of formal marriage among enslaved people in Berbice. Enslaved women may have avoided formal marriage out of fear that it would further limit their autonomy and increase their husbands’ authority over them. As an Anglican missionary in Barbados observed in 1829, where there was similar pressure on slaves to formally marry, enslaved women “object[ed] to Christian matrimony, thinking that it gives them, as it were, a second master, and ties them for life to a man who may neglect or ill use them.”³⁰ Enslaved women or men in Berbice who wanted to marry legally, moreover, had to meet certain criteria and overcome several obstacles. They had to belong to the same owner, had to get their owner’s written permission, needed to travel to town and apply to the Protector of Slaves for a license, and then were required to find a clergyman to solemnize the marriage.³¹ In addition, they had to be Christian, or least pretend to be. An even more basic obstacle for enslaved men was finding available women to marry—a difficult

27 CO 116/143/149–52 David Power to Henry Beard, January 21, 1827.

28 “Protector of Slaves Report, to 31 August 1828, Extract of a Dispatch from Governor Beard ...” in House of Commons *Parliamentary Papers* (1829), 29. An estimated 20,700 slaves lived in Berbice in 1830. See also Higman 1984:418.

29 CO 116/143/149–52 Viscount Goderich to George Murray, April 21, 1832.

30 Anthony Hamilton, Codrington estate chaplain, “Progress of Religious Instruction in the West Indies,” *Barbadian*, June 9, 1829, cited in Newton 2008:92n17.

31 Berbice slave code, clauses 19 and 20.

task given women's scarcity and the fact that free men of color and European colonists claimed many women as wives or concubines. Slave owners' reluctance to allow their slaves to formalize their bonds, which would have limited their ability to separate married slaves by sale and which threatened other claims they made on slaves as their property, probably also played a part in preventing some slaves from seeking or securing marriage licenses (Green 2007:21–23).

The low rates of formal marriage among slaves in Berbice did not, however, indicate a lack of interest in being attached to another person and to family life. To the contrary, enslaved women and men actively sought relationships with one another, self-identified as “husbands” and “wives,” and sometimes succeeded in getting others to recognize the legitimacy of their marriages. While the demographic data from the slave registration returns shows that enslaved men in Berbice, even if not formally married, acted as husbands and fathers, there are many questions that such quantitative data cannot answer. How, for example, did men establish and sustain relationships with women? What was their experience of marriage and fatherhood like and how did they deal with the many challenges of being husbands and fathers in an unstable, competitive, and hierarchal society? To answer such questions, we must turn to the records of the Fiscals and Protectors of Slaves, which shine a rare light on the challenges men faced as they tried to establish authority as husbands and fathers in inherently unstable relationships.

Men as Husbands and Fathers

Enslaved men had many reasons for wanting to establish relationships with women and to form families. Women provided men companionship, sex, and the means to establish families. Moreover, for African men—who came from societies where wealth, power, and prestige were measured in people (rather than land or other material resources)—wives were important dependents for any would-be patriarch.³² Enslaved men also expected their wives to take care of most domestic chores, such as cooking, consistent with gendered assumptions about labor. 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 to the Protector of Slaves. “She will not cook, wash, or even speak to him,” he complained. When Arsenia answered the Protector's sum-

32 For wealth in people in precolonial Africa, see Thornton 1998:72–97.

mons, he “made [her] sensitive of the obligations she owed to her husband.”³³ Jeanette, an enslaved woman on plantation Providence, reported that she woke up each morning at 4:00am to “boil plantains for my man, myself and little child.”³⁴ Men who hoped to reap the various social, sexual, and material benefits of marriage, however, faced no shortage of challenges, even beyond the basic demographic problem the colony’s uneven sex ratio presented. Yet that did not stop them from trying.

A complaint from an enslaved man named Douglas, who went to the Fiscal in 1823 with his wife, Beneba, illustrates the importance enslaved men attached to their roles as husbands and fathers—and the challenges they faced in providing for their families. Douglas and Beneba lived on plantation Lochaber, although perhaps not in the same house. He began his complaint by saying he “was a man of family.” He had “a wife and four children” to support. Moreover, he had been, by his own telling, the man who had “made the greatest part of the negro-houses upon the estate.” Yet when the manager distributed houses, Douglas was left empty-handed. As a result, he was forced to live some distance from the plantation buildings and consequently was late one Saturday morning for work. He received 50 lashes—nearly twice the legal limit—with the manager screaming at him when he explained that he would not have been late if he had a house of his own. The manager told Douglas that he should “Go and be damned; you shall have no house, and you shall go to your work when the rest are going.” Douglas was aggrieved on three counts: he felt he had been whipped for no good reason; he had no house when he felt he deserved one; and, most important, as “a man of family” he could not satisfy his family responsibilities to provide his wife and family with a house. The Fiscal did not accept his arguments. He noted that carpenters on Lochaber “were getting on as fast as possible” with building houses and though Douglas had not yet got one, he would soon. Douglas’s whipping, the Fiscal felt, was deserved, as Douglas’s temporary residence was “not a quarter of a mile” from his workplace. Douglas was ordered back to the estate and “admonished to be more attentive to his duty in future.” Douglas did achieve a small victory, however: “the manager was requested to let him have the next negro-house that was finished.”³⁵

33 CO 116/147/104–06; CO 116/148/328–30.

34 CO 116/143/184.

35 CO 116/138/138–9. An 1810 law in Berbice stipulated that private citizens (e.g., managers, overseers) could not administer more than 39 lashes—the biblical standard—“on One Day or at One Time.” See Proclamation of Acting-Governor Dalrymple, November 14, 1810; Thompson 2002:38–39. A new slave code in 1826 would reduce the limit to 25. See Berbice slave code, clause 14.

Among the things men like Douglas hoped to offer women and children were material support and protection—critical responsibilities for any would-be head of household but problematic in a society where dire poverty and brutal violence were everyday realities. Men who had enough resources to share, or who were willing to exchange them for sexual access to women or their domestic labor, thus had an advantage when it came to finding partners. The comparative ease with which high-ranking slaves, such as drivers and artisans, found wives and even formed polygynous families in some instances probably had as much to do with the material advantages they enjoyed as with their social status.³⁶

An extreme example of the lengths to which some men were able and willing to go to provide for their families comes from plantation Demtichem, where an enslaved man named Frederick purchased his own slave. Thanks to a small bequest he received from a former owner, and perhaps to his ability to hire out his services as head carpenter, Frederick saved up the 500 guilders he needed to buy an enslaved man named Jacob to take care of him when he went blind.³⁷ Three years later, Frederick was dead, but Jacob was still alive. Even in death, Frederick was able to see that his daughter, Frederika, and Dorinda, his wife and Frederika's step-mother, were looked after. According to Frederika, who went to the Protector several months after Frederick died to figure out what she needed to do to legally sell Jacob, her father had "bequeathed the slave Jacob, then belonging to him," to her. The Protector's search of the Slave Registration Returns revealed that Jacob was still listed as Frederick's slave. Dorinda, who also testified, insisted that Frederick had told her—as she tried to nurse him back to health—that "when he died his slave Jacob should belong to Frederika, and that Frederika should, out of the profits arising from Jacob's labor, support her."³⁸ The Protector was persuaded to investigate their claim and, sure enough, other enslaved people on Demtichem confirmed that Fred-

36 Higman 1975:275, 284–85 and 1984:370–71; Lean 2002: 173; Morrissey 1989:89. Despite skewed sex ratios and opposition from European colonists, polygyny was not uncommon in Berbice, though the exact prevalence is impossible to establish. On the estates owned by James Blair, 7.7 percent of all slaves lived in polygynous families, T71/438–9/49–64. Richard Price calculated that in neighboring Suriname in the eighteenth century about 20 percent of adult male Saramaka Maroons had two or more wives at any given time, though "most men—for demographic, not ideological reasons—were limited to one or two" (Price 1990:382–83).

37 CO 116/43/155–56. Frederick's privileged position may have prompted other enslaved people on Demtichem to have accused him of using poison against them, see Browne 2011.

38 CO 116/145/232.

erick had intended his daughter and step-mother to benefit from Jacob's labor when he was dead.³⁹

Even men with little in the way of material resources—that is, the overwhelming majority of slaves—sometimes shared their marginally better provisions with the women and children they were obligated to support. The enslaved man Conraad, for example, testified that the women on the remote woodcutting estate where he lived “never get any allowance, only occasionally a small piece of fish,” and that “if they steal or secrete [sic] any of the roots of the cassavie, when preparing it, and detected, they get flogged, as was lately the case with his wife.” As a result, Conraad had to give his wife “half of his allowance,” which totaled just six cassava cakes per week. William, who complained to the Fiscal alongside Conraad, similarly testified “that his wife and children get no allowance whatever, that he is therefore obliged to give the greatest part of his allowance to them.”⁴⁰ Jeanette, from plantation Providence, told the Fiscal that “the men on the estate get better allowance than the women.”⁴¹ A complaint from a woman named Sankey, who protested her unnamed husband being sold without her and her children because she would be “unable to support” her “little child” without him, provides further evidence that material support, especially for basic necessities like food, was one of the most important things men could offer their families. Sankey's husband had boarded a punt a few days earlier, and she was terrified at the prospect of their separation and worried about providing for her children alone. The Fiscal's investigation, however, revealed that her husband had not been sold, only sent on an errand to their owners' “large mercantile establishment” in New Amsterdam and detained for a few days to work in town. Having located Sankey's husband, he “reprimanded her for making such a frivolous complaint” and sent them both back their plantation.⁴²

Men were able to make such provisions for their families both because they had greater access to skilled work than women, and thus more opportunities to barter or purchase goods, and also because managers' distribution of weekly allowances favored men, as Jeanette's complaint suggests. Plantation authorities assumed that married male slaves had an obligation, as quasi-patriarchs, to provide for their wives. Sometimes, European authorities even punished men

39 CO 116/145/237. Satisfied that Frederika was the rightful owner of Jacob, the Protector obtained the Lieutenant Governor's permission to make the appropriate changes to the Registry of Slaves.

40 CO 116/138/26–27.

41 CO 116/143/184.

42 CO 116/138/127. See also Bush 1990:98; Higman 1975:284–85.

who did not fulfill this responsibility. The enslaved man Leander was punished by his manager, for instance, for being “unwilling to provide the necessities for his wife and child and to live with them because he wants a divorce without agreement from his wife” (Lean 2002:167).

Other men went to considerable risks to provide for their families and promote their survival, such as a man on the ironically named plantation Goldenfleece—unidentified by the Fiscal—who in February 1825 resolved to steal some plantains one night with his wife, Prudence. They had grown tired of “seeing the[ir] child grow thin” as a result of the “scanty allowance” the manager provided, and were worried about the child’s life. Prudence had given birth to ten children, but five of them had already died. She and her husband were not willing to bury any more children, and taking the plantains seemed like their best option. Their boldness backfired, however, when the watchman caught Prudence’s husband and the manager ordered him locked up at night for four weeks. Prudence refused to work, protesting the manager’s treatment of her family members, and even took the small bunch of plantains they received and dropped them at the manager’s door. When he ordered two men to flog her with a leather whip, she resolved to make the 30-mile journey to New Amsterdam to make her complaint. After a lengthy investigation and hearing the manager’s testimony, the Fiscal upheld Prudence’s complaint. He also recommended that the manager increase the allowances, and the manager agreed. The risk Prudence’s husband took—which ultimately led to Prudence’s complaint—illustrates the lengths to which some men were willing to go to support their wives and children.⁴³

Men also offered their families protection from mistreatment and abuse, even from European plantation authorities. A man named Philip 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.”⁴⁴ Other men went over the heads of plantation authorities and complained to colonial officials. Avanturer, from plantation Leldenrust, went to the Fiscal in April 1819 with his family to deal with an owner that “ill-treat[ed] his children,” specifically by never giving them any allowance of food, and with the owner’s tyrannical housekeeper. Avanturer’s son, between eight and ten years old, told the Fiscal he got “no regular allowance of provisions, but lives only upon what he is able to get.” Avanturer could barely feed his children, he said, since he himself received

43 CO 116/140/127.

44 CO 116/143, March 27, 1827 entry, “Punishment record book of Plⁿ De Resolutie ...”.

“only one bunch of plantains a week and a small piece of salt fish, and no more.” Making matters worse, when the children’s mother, Wilhelmina (Avanturer did not specify whether they were married), “now and then” brought them something to eat, their owner’s housekeeper, Fanny, took it and threw it away. She was “very severe against them,” Avanturer said, and was hated by the entire family. Wilhelmina similarly testified that Fanny “treated her children very badly,” that they “never get any allowance of food nor clothing,” and that their owner and Fanny were “continually in the habit of licking them with bush-rope” (a vine), and that when she or her children were sick, “their master care[d] very little about them.” Fanny and the owner terrorized the children so badly that at least one of them, Ordinance, showed signs of trauma: he “linger[ed] very much, occasioned by the continual ill-treatment of their master and his housekeeper Fanny.”⁴⁵

As husbands, men also tried to protect their wives from physical abuse, especially in extreme cases where the violence was particularly dangerous. Even then, publicly accusing one’s enslavers before colonial officials was a risky move that could easily fail. Claas, a field laborer from the coffee plantation Op Hoop van Beter (literally, In Hope of Better), went to the Fiscal in June 1824 after the plantation owner flogged his pregnant wife so brutally that she miscarried. His exacting owner—who did not trust the overseer to insure that the field laborers had picked the coffee bushes clean—gave them 25 lashes if he found a single bean left in the field. “He flogged my wife Santje,” Claas told the Fiscal. “She was three months gone,” he emphasized, and “after punishment she went to work but miscarried.” The manager and driver, however, claimed they did not know Santje was pregnant, and the doctor who treated Santje claimed that she “miscarried at an early period of pregnancy from the usual causes—there was not the slightest violence.”⁴⁶ The Fiscal accepted the doctor’s explanation, but also understood Claas’s desire to seek redress on behalf of his wife. He “approved of [Claas’s] conduct in seeking explanation, but reproved him for

45 CO 116/138/43–44. Avanturer and Wilhelmina, who went to the Fiscal with their children and two other adults, also complained about being forced to work on Sundays and holidays, and about various incidents of violence at the hands of Fanny and their owner. The Fiscal visited Leldenrust to investigate the complaint and “found the complaint of their working on Sundays corroborated by all the negroes” and observed that “they were very much dissatisfied with the conduct of ... Fanny,” who was “a favourite house-servant of the proprietor’s.” He ordered the owner to stop working his slaves on Sundays or use the carracarra (bush rope) to flog them. CO 116/138/45.

46 CO 116/140.

not having in the first instance sought this enquiry from the Manager or the Attorney of the Estate.” Faced with little choice but to accept that his complaint had failed, Claas was “received in favor by the Manager and returned to the estate with him.”⁴⁷

Later that same year, a man named Willem complained to the Fiscal about a manager who abused his wife. “I come to complain,” he began, “of the manager for punishing my wife her name is Kitty.” Willem told the Fiscal about the latest incident, which began one Sunday morning. “The Driver told the Manager my wife ought to be locked up in the Stocks on ac[coun]t of her work,” so to avoid being punished Kitty “therefore went immediately although Sunday to work her row,” or complete her task. When Willem noticed their child was sick, he took the child to the manager, who called Kitty back from the field to care for it. But he also promised Kitty, “as soon as your child gets well, I’ll flog you, because you refused to go to the stocks when the Driver told you.” Kitty then spent three days in the plantation’s “hospital” with her child, where the manager had nailed the windows shut to prevent Willem from seeing, let alone visiting, his family. When Kitty refused to leave her child alone, the manager had her yanked out of the hospital and tied “down to the stakes,” where “she was flogged to the degree that all the skin is off her buttocks.” It was in that state that Willem found her after working all day in the field. According to the manager, who testified before the Fiscal, he flogged Kitty because she refused to work and was insolent to him. When Kitty had refused to leave her child alone in the sickhouse, the manager told Willem “his wife had been extremely impudent to me,” a warning, perhaps, that Willem had better control his wife. Willem had even admitted to the manager, he claimed, that “he knew her mouth was bad and at times he himself did not know what to do with her.” Like white authorities, enslaved men like Willem expected a certain level of deference from women and understood men’s use of violence against women who disrespected them. But Willem was desperate to protect his wife, and “begged” the manager “to forgive her,” the manager said. He agreed, but when Kitty refused to leave the “sick house” again the following day, he ordered a driver to give her 39 lashes—the maximum the law permitted (before 1826). 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 (Berbice would not ban the flogging of women until 1826, under the same law that reduced the legal limit on whipping to 25 lashes) Willem had no reason for “abscond[ing] from the Estate,” and he would therefore be

47 CO 116/140.

“confined for a fortnight.”⁴⁸ Challenging white authority even in the defense of generally held patriarchal assumptions—in this case, that husbands were the ones with the authority to determine when their wives needed “correction”—was difficult.

For enslaved men, finding female partners was only half of the battle, since the women they claimed as wives might conceivably leave them for a better arrangement at any time, in the absence of formal divorce and in light of a high gender imbalance. Men who risked losing female partners sometimes turned to violence—against women and against other men they perceived as threats. The Fiscal’s investigation into the mysterious death of an enslaved man named Richmond, a “bow legged” African in his late forties, reveals that male rivalries over women could be intense and potentially fatal. According to Robert Kennedy, the manager of the sugar plantation where Richmond lived, “a considerable noise” woke him one night around ten o’clock. When Kennedy 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” and nearly twenty years his junior, “had been connected with the negro England.” So Richmond waited until nighttime to get his revenge, when England, a gray-haired African, began his shift as watchman. But when Richmond ambushed England, knife in hand, England fought back, “wrestled with Richmond,” and shouted for help. Fortunately for England, the drivers soon caught Richmond and put him in the stocks. Meanwhile, Kennedy, standing by, “received much abuse from Richmond, who threatened to bring him into trouble by taking him before the Fiscal.”⁴⁹

According to the manager, Richmond and Olivia’s marital problems went back several months. When the manager took over the estate four months earlier, Richmond and Olivia, nurse to the plantation’s children, “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 mention it. After all, he had more than 500 other slaves to worry about and domestic quarrels among enslaved people were common. But when Richmond and Olivia approached him a few weeks later with the same story, 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 someone else, I will punish you severely.” Even if his tes-

48 CO 116/140/138.

49 CO 116/138/97–98; “Return of Slaves attached to Plantation Herstelling ...,” February 26, 1819, T 71/438/627–33.

timony was mere posturing for the Fiscal—an attempt to portray himself as a competent, firm manager—it shows that plantation officials knew that when enslaved women left their partners and began new relationships there was the potential for serious conflict. Nevertheless, once Richmond and Olivia separated, following a model of “self-divorce” commonly practiced by people who were not formally married in British America, the manager (Robert Kennedy) claimed that he had had no problems with either of them until Richmond’s foiled attempt to kill England. Olivia was no longer living with Richmond, but she continued cooking for him two or three times a week—a reminder of women’s domestic labor and the material benefits married men enjoyed. It was only when England began courting Olivia, the manager reasoned, that Richmond’s “jealousy” prompted him to attack England.⁵⁰

As it turned out, there was little time for the manager to get Richmond’s side of the story. Just two days after England barely escaped with his life, a group of militiamen sent to investigate noticed that Richmond appeared “drunk.” Richmond then “immediately ... seemed to reel, and fell on the ground apparently in 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.⁵¹

Most marital disputes were likely handled among slaves themselves and thus were never documented. Men in Berbice did, however, occasionally appeal to European authorities for help in maintaining their domestic authority over their wives. Plantation overseers and managers were often willing to help enslaved men, especially when they believed that not intervening would allow dangerous conflicts between men to escalate. In May 1831, for example, a man named Mark, a “well made” African field laborer belonging to the sugar plantation Providence, was punished in the stocks and then flogged for repeatedly courting or harassing the wife of another man on a neighboring plantation. 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

50 CO 116/138/97–98. For “self-divorce” in England (where official divorce was illegal until 1857) and early America, see Lyons 2006:chapter 1; Mays 2004:111–14; Menefee 1981; and Stone 1990.

51 CO 116/138/98.

Hyacinth's wife Hebe, who has five children by her husband." He also gave his drivers "orders to bring Mark to [him] whenever he should come in the negro yard, in consequence of former disturbances." Thus, when an intoxicated Mark returned to the "negro yard" on Everton one day, a driver led the effort to apprehend him, which only succeeded after a protracted fight against Mark and his friends, who came to his defense. The Protector dismissed Mark's complaint, signalling his disapproval of Mark's having disobeyed the manager's order to leave Hyacinth's wife alone.⁵² To an extent, there was a shared masculine culture in nineteenth-century Barbice in which white men, although insisting on their own perquisites and often acting as the worst culprits in violating enslaved men's perceived sexual rights, accepted the rights of black men to control and discipline their wives and children as quasi-patriarchs.⁵³

Enslaved men also faced more dangerous challenges from the many European men who refused to respect their exclusive sexual access to the women they claimed. And because physical violence against Europeans was borderline suicidal, perhaps the only viable option for enslaved men who wanted to prevent overseers, managers, or planters from having sexual relationships with their wives was to seek redress from the colonial government—a strategy that, remarkably, sometimes worked. In August 1822, for instance, a man from plantation Scotland, named Felix, went to the Fiscal's office and complained that the manager was "always taking the negroes['] wives, particularly his wife" of two years, even though the manager "has a wife of his own." The manager seemed to be displeased with Felix's wife having his child as "since the child has been born, the manager is always punishing him without a cause." He wanted the manager removed. 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 [owner] ... that the manager had connexion with their wives." Their owner, Dr. Broer, "promised to them that he would remove the manager from the estate," but never did. Dr. Broer may well have allowed his manager to have sex with—and perhaps rape—the enslaved women on the estate, so long as the manager ran a productive plantation. Felix and his wife were "daily punished, which has compelled them to come to your Honor for redress," he told the Acting Fiscal.⁵⁴

When the Acting Fiscal, accompanied by Felix's owner, went to the plantation to investigate, he found that there was much truth to Felix's character-

52 CO 116/148/191–93.

53 For the ubiquity of white men's sexual exploitation of black women, see Dunn 2014: chapter 2.

54 CO 116/138/131.

ization of the manager. And though he decided 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 “severely reprimanded” the manager “for taking improper liberties with the women on the estate.” Sympathizing with Felix’s complaint—which came down to a request that he be allowed to control the sexual availability of his wife—the Acting Fiscal “strongly recommended” that the owner fire the manager.⁵⁵

As fathers, enslaved men also had to deal with European men who sexually abused their daughters. An especially troubling case from plantation Waaxhaamheid (in English, “Vigilance Plantation”), where a young girl named Elizabeth died in 1819, illustrates yet another challenge enslaved men faced in protecting their family members. Telemachus, a field laborer, went to the Fiscal with his wife and daughter’s “adopted mother,” claiming that his dead daughter, Elizabeth, aged between 11 and 12 years, had died because the plantation manager had raped her, even though she “had not yet arrived at the state of womanhood.” He was not deterred by supposed medical evidence to the contrary (signs of interference in her “private parts” may have been the result of a 15-year-old boy trying but failing to “have a connexion to Elizabeth”), or the manager’s claim that Elizabeth died from “a great nervous debility”. A clerk noted that Telemachus and his wife “d[id] not want to hear it.” Understandably, they did not trust Whites to tell them the truth and were suspicious of their motives, knowing that many managers were like the one who had taken Felix’s wife for his own pleasure. He wanted justice for his dead daughter. He knew there would be consequences—a manager was hardly likely to take kindly to accusations of underage rape. Yet he persevered. Telemachus thought that doing right by his daughter was more important than the consequences.⁵⁶ His insistence on being heard underscores the extent to which enslaved men took seriously their responsibility to protect their children, especially under extreme circumstances that directly undermined their authority as patriarchs.

When enslaved men blamed their wives, instead of male rivals, for jeopardizing their domestic authority, they were likely to take out their anger against women physically. Men were particularly violent against women who left them for other men. And in most cases European plantation authorities and colonial officials alike sanctioned physical violence—what they viewed as “correction”—as an acceptable means of disciplining wives. Plantation punishment records show only a handful of men punished in any given period

55 CO 116/138/131.

56 CO 116/139/195–219.

for “ill-treating women and wives,” and most of these were extreme cases that threatened women’s lives or plantation order, such as when Joe was punished for “having a cutlass in his hand & threatening to kill his wife.”⁵⁷ Moreover, European colonists’ use of violence against women accused of “infidelity to husbands” signalled their approval of enslaved men doing the same. When the manager on plantation Philadelphia, for example, found out that a woman named Sally had left her husband and began “cohabiting with another man,” he punished her with sixteen hours in solitary confinement.⁵⁸

More commonly, enslaved men took it upon themselves to punish their wives for supposed transgressions, knowing that plantation managers believed that it was a man’s right to use violence against his wife and that they were likely to view “correction” of a female partner as a private matter. In choosing not to get involved, managers signalled their approval of men’s violence against women. In some cases, moreover, they even punished bystanders for intervening. On plantation Nieuw Vigilantie in January 1830 the manager, Mr. Noteboom, punished an enslaved man, Ferdinand, for informing authorities that his neighbor Dick had beaten his wife. As Ferdinand explained, when he heard a commotion at Dick’s house and went to investigate, he “found the woman lying on the ground crying.” Dick was gone, so Ferdinand reported the incident to the driver, which suggests that the assault must have been particularly serious. When Noteboom heard what had happened, rather than punish or even question Dick, he asked Ferdinand “what business [he] had to interfere between Dick and his wife,” especially since “he was no driver.” Noteboom, moreover, told the Protector that Ferdinand “was a very quarrelsome and obstreperous character,” and that “he was confined in the house stocks for quarrelling at night with the negro Dick, [and] for insolence to the driver, when he ordered Ferdinand to desist.”⁵⁹

A final case, from September 1829, underscores the extent to which enslaved men and European authorities cooperated to circumscribe women’s sexual mobility and reinforce marriage as an institution in which men had greater rights than women. The same case also illustrates, however, the challenges enslaved men faced in fashioning themselves as patriarchs in a society where they ultimately had to rely on the authority of their oppressors. An African field laborer named Bella went to the Protector to protest having been punished “in the hand and feet stocks” by her manager. This “old woman,” as the clerk

57 CO 116/143 January 7, 1827 entry, “Punishment Record Book of Pl. Best Coffee Land.”

58 CO 116/145/64–65. For a similar case see CO 116/145/232.

59 CO 116/145/242.

described her, had tried to protect her young daughter, Elizabeth, she said, from a brutal beating at the hands of Elizabeth's rope-wielding husband, but the manager punished her for interfering. The manager, however, claimed that Elizabeth was not innocent: a few weeks earlier, Elizabeth's husband, a carpenter named 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."⁶⁰ Women like Elizabeth, who sought to take advantage of the colony's skewed sex ratio to explore possible relationships with multiple partners, thus had to contend with men who wanted the exact opposite.

The manager, Andrew Ross, agreed to help Barron control his wife. He told Barron that if Elizabeth continued her "intrigue," Barron should bring her to him for punishment—simultaneously reinforcing Barron's authority as a husband while also demonstrating that it was ultimately his decision, as a European man and plantation official, to determine the contours of enslaved people's relationships. 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," Ross gave Barron permission to lock her up in the stocks (and perhaps more). It was at this point that Bella, no doubt concerned for Elizabeth's safety, "insisted on being locked up, too, to keep her daughter company," and the manager obliged. The following morning, moreover, Ross decided "that because [Bella] had encouraged and countenanced her daughter's infidelity," she would have to leave her job taking care of the plantation's children at the "Creole house" for more gruelling work in the fields. When Bella refused "and was very saucy," the manager said, he placed her in the stocks a second time. The Protector, after collecting testimony from several witnesses, dismissed Bella's complaint and reprimanded her for "promoting the licentious pursuit of her daughter," a decision that illustrated the challenges women in Berbice faced trying to negotiate their domestic relationships in the context of a patriarchal legal culture and a demographic environment that encouraged men to be especially vigilant about asserting their "right" to control women's mobility.⁶¹

Conclusion

Enslaved men might be barely visible in the historiography of slavery and gender in the British West Indies, at least in their family roles, but they were

⁶⁰ CO 116/145/232; T 71/444/495–498; T 71/438/555–562.

⁶¹ CO 116/145/232.

anything but invisible in real life. In Berbice in the early nineteenth century, they were commonly husbands and fathers who sought to exercise a degree of authority over their partners and children, to the extent that disadvantageous demography, the constraints of a harsh slave system, and competition from white men invested with the legal authority to use violence against them and their families made the exercise of any authority possible. Contrary to both planter propaganda and also an historiography on the slave family in the British Caribbean that tends toward seeing enslaved people's families as essentially matrifocal, men were not absent or unimportant figures within family life.

Enslaved men were neither feckless nor childlike figures who abdicated their presumed responsibilities toward wives and children. Like men in any society, sometimes they exercised those responsibilities irresponsibly, as we see in the tragic death of Richmond arising from his jealousy that someone else was now with his ex-wife. But more importantly, men were regularly active participants in establishing the norms through which families operated, even if they needed to work within the constraints of a white-controlled plantation environment. While some women coped by themselves in raising families, many others did so alongside male partners. Those male partners not only valued the attachments to women and children that they made; they insisted on having a say in how their families were run and in how individual members of families behaved and were disciplined. Planters often aided and abetted such exercises of authority within slave households, both implicitly (through indifference to marital strife, except when it disturbed order on a plantation) and explicitly, through supporting, as with Barron, men's efforts to demonstrate their power over dependents. Enslaved women therefore faced a double dependency and sometimes a dual exploitation, being both dependent on enslavers as slaves and on significant male figures within slave communities as women. Thus, if we are to understand more fully the ways that families functioned in Berbice and the many similar societies throughout the British West Indies, we should pay careful attention to what men wanted to do—and were able to do—as husbands and fathers.

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