Several decades ago, the Caribbean historian Michael Craton described the endeavor of uncovering the lived experience of the West Indian plantation slave as an exercise in “searching for the invisible man.” This phrase could just as accurately be applied to the historian's attempt to gain a detailed and nuanced understanding of the lives of non-elite whites within the plantation societies of the Americas, and particularly those of the English colonies in the Caribbean. Although the past two decades have witnessed an efflorescence of scholarship on the part of historians, literary scholars, sociologists, and anthropologists on the subject of the history and culture of the British West Indies, to a large extent this work has examined either the lives of those who owned the islands' plantations or those of the slaves who labored upon them. Little attention has been devoted to the experiences of those who constituted these islands' white working classes. Some scholars have asserted that, by the middle of the

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1 Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the 2002 meeting of the Bi-Annual Southern Labor Studies Conference in Miami, and at the Staff Work-in-Progress Seminar of the Department of History at the University of Manchester, March 2007. I would like to thank these audiences, and especially Laurence Brown, for their valuable comments.


eighteenth century, nearly every niche in artisanal production, commerce, and manual labor had been filled by slaves or free people of color, encouraging those whites who lacked sufficient capital to establish themselves as sugar planters or as successful transatlantic merchants to try their luck in a “good poor man’s country” such as the less socioeconomically developed West Indian islands or the backcountry regions of Britain’s North American mainland colonies. Others have claimed that, although something that could be considered a white laboring class did develop in the islands, the nexus of capitalism and slavery rendered these white workers desperately poor, politically disenfranchised, and completely lacking in agency both in the public sphere and in their own lives.4

If non-elite white men have remained largely “invisible” within the historiography of the English, and subsequently British, colonies in the West Indies, this invisibility is still more characteristic of the experiences of working-class white women. As Trevor Burnard has noted, the existing historiography of gender relations in these societies has focused almost exclusively either upon the lives of elite white women, particularly the wives and daughters of the wealthier planters, or on the varying experiences of women of different races, rather than those of different classes within white society. The result has been a picture of the lives of West Indian women in the era of “sugar and slavery” which conceives of them as “white ‘ladies,’ coloured ‘favourites,’ and black ‘wenches,’” or more specifically as “consuming white women, producing black women, and parasitical brown women,” that is, as planters’ wives and daughters, African female slaves, and women of mixed racial heritage, many of whom became, whether by choice or coercion, the sexual partners of the wealthier planters.5 Although this tripartite distinction was first presented in the works of eighteenth-century commentators such as the Jamaican planter-historian Edward Long and Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, for many years a French colonial official in Saint-Domingue, they have remained largely unchallenged within the historiography of West Indian plantation society. Non-elite white women simply do not seem to

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