This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Atlantic Studies on 25th August 2021, available online: https://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14788810.2021.1899745

The savage slave mistress: Punishing women in the British Caribbean, 1750–1834

Trevor Burnard and Deirdre Coleman[1*]

Abstract

In 1775, on a tour of the West Indies, Henry Smeathman produced a sketch entitled *Creole Delicacy or The Domestic Felicity of Africans in the West Indies* (published 1788). Here we see a flogging presided over by an elegantly dressed white woman slave owner, standing tall in marked contrast to her spreadeagled and lashed victim. Smeathman's aim was to present a naturalistic portrait of an everyday event, one which reveals the white woman's 'private' flogging as continuous with the cruelty of the cane fields.

This article explores the contradictory ways in which white women were viewed in the late eighteenth-century British Caribbean. In uncovering representations of the cruel white slave mistress, the authors show that white women's agency regarding slavery has been 'profoundly underestimated', leading to a double erasure of them and the enslaved people they owned. The study draws upon both visual and literary depictions of the Caribbean from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including paintings, prints and drawings as well as travel narratives, diaries, and abolitionist and didactic literature. The authors conclude that, while the eighteenth-century Caribbean visual landscape was typically male-focused, white women were not invisible

[1*] Email: T.G. Burnard@hull.ac.uk and colemand@unimelb.edu.au

or spectral in West Indian slave societies. Nor were they innocent bystanders to slavery's brutality.

Keywords

West Indies; punishment; women; slavery; gender; Atlantic

Introduction

In her important book *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement* (2008), Kay Dian Kriz argues that the white West Indian woman was 'a specter within the regime of eighteenth-century visual culture'.[2] She adds that while the West Indian white woman appeared in histories and travel narratives, she proved 'amazingly resistant to visual representation before the 1820s, excepting printed satires'. Kriz attributes this resistance to several factors, such as the small number of white women who were resident in the West Indies, together with the perception that the whiteness of these women was problematic, undermined by a too close mixing with the blacks in their households. The eighteenth-century Jamaican historian, Edward Long, provides the most well-known tirade against this loss of racial caste among white women, describing the young white Creole mistress 'aukwardly dangling her arms with the air of a Negroe-servant, lolling almost the whole day upon beds or settees, her head muffled up with two or three handkerchiefs, her dress loose and without stays'.[3]

But for Kriz the main reason why the white woman was so resistant to visual representation was her inability to negotiate the 'sexual topography of slavery', marked

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[2]Notes

Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar*.

[3] Long, *History of Jamaica*, 2: 279.

as this was by the white male gaze on black and mulatta women. This male gaze is readily seen in the evocative works of the Italian painter, Agostino Brunias, whose crowded market scenes displayed exoticised and attractive mixed-race women. This focus on non-white women resulted in a 'highly fraught' domestic sphere that was itself very difficult to represent visually.[4]

When it comes to the issue of the printed satires before 1820 in which white women did appear, Kriz offers no examples, choosing to focus instead on ugly 'Black Humour' caricatures of African women in the pre-abolition period, such as James Gillray's well-known 'Philanthropic Consolations after the Loss of the Slave Bill' (1796). The most prolific producers of these grotesque images of large and sexually voracious black women were the publisher William Holland and his partner, Richard Newton. A conspicuous omission from Kriz's study of the prints of Holland and Newton is *A Forcible Appeal for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1792), an unusual and visually arresting work which substitutes for the usual black caricatures an attractive and elegantly dressed white woman. This figure looks on excitedly as two slaves, a male and female, are flogged by black overseers. While we see only the deep and bloodied stripes on the male slave's back and buttocks, the white woman gazes delightedly, with bright flushed cheeks, on his genitals (Figure 1). As Marcus Wood has noted, slave imagery in the period of abolition could sometimes generate a sexual frisson.[5] Here we see a rare example of the female `gaze' which echo aspects of the sexualised male `gaze.'

By examining images of white women in the British Caribbean both before and

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[4] Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar,* 6, 52–54.

[5] Wood, *Slavery, Empathy,* 89; Wood, *Blind Memory,* 236–237, 260.

after 1820, we suggest that Kriz's claim about the predominantly spectral appearance of the white West Indian woman is overstated. White women do appear in images before 1820, if fleetingly, and they appear in complicated ways that suggest their ambivalent role in British West Indian society.[6] These images also changed over time. After their initial depictions as wicked strumpets, white women came to be idealized in the mid-eighteenth century, valued at a premium for their key role as bearers of white children.[7] But Long's strictures on the insipidity and degenerate moral laxity of white women were so influential that idealization only thinly masked these women's otherwise suspect essential nature as 'not quite/not white Englishwomen'.[8] In economic terms, after the establishment of the integrated plantation with hundreds of slaves managed by male plantation operatives, white women appeared relatively unimportant. Moreover, as Barbara Bush noted, white men's fascination with the sexual charms of free women of colour or enslaved women eclipsed white women as sexual or matrimonial partners.[9] As Cecily Jones has argued, reflecting on the literature of the early twenty-first century, white women in the Caribbean have been 'conceptualized as insignificant subjects within the socio-economic processes of the colonial societies they inhabited and remain shadowy figures on the margins of Caribbean slave historiographies'.[10]

We argue here that these truisms fail to comprehend the contradictory ways in

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[6] Burnard, 'Rioting in Goatish Embraces'; Burnard, 'Gay and Agreeable Ladies'.

[7] Beckles, 'White Women and Slavery,' 68.

[8] Wilson, *Island Race*, 154–155.

[9] Bush, 'White "ladies", coloured "favourites"'; Burnard, 'Gay and Agreeable Ladies'.

[10] Jones, 'Contesting the Boundaries,' 204.

which white women were viewed in the late eighteenth-century British Caribbean. In this respect we respond to a new literature on representations of white women in the Caribbean that follows antebellum North American arguments that white women's agency regarding slavery has been 'profoundly underestimated', leading to a double erasure of them and the enslaved people they owned.[11] New work on white women in the eighteenth-century Caribbean has stressed how profoundly white women were involved in slavery and how they perceived slave ownership as an ordinary and necessary feature of slave life.[12] Christine Walker, Natalie Zacek and Sherrylynne Haggerty have all written on the working lives of white women in Caribbean port cities, showing that their roles as merchants, shopkeepers, house owners and money lenders was underwritten by their reliance upon slavery.[13] But in outlining the vital contribution of these white women to Atlantic commerce, Walker reminds us that these women and their slaves were 'embedded in a profoundly exploitative colonial society: one that was constituted through the daily exercise of coercion and violence by men and women'. As she argues, 'little distinguished the practices of female slave owners from those of their male counterparts'. Indeed, if we had as many sources available to us about white women in the Caribbean as there are in antebellum North America, Walker believes white West Indian women would resemble North American white women slave owners in subjecting enslaved people to

[11] Glymph, *Out of the House*, 25–31.

[12] Walker, 'Pursuing Her Profits,' 480.

[13] Walker, 'Pursuing Her Profits'; Zacek, 'Between Lady and Slave'; Haggerty, 'Miss Fan Can Tun'.

nearly incessant physical and emotional abuse.[14]

The literature on white women in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British Caribbean increasingly isolates gender and sex as crucial component parts of the making of race in racially hybrid societies, such as in the mid-eighteenth century West Indies, is enabling links to be made to a developing literature on white women and race making in antebellum America, as in works by Thavolia Glymph and a new book on the subject by Stephanie Jones Rogers.[15] Two important books on white women and race, by Christine Walker and Brooke Newman, outline how images of female cruelty came out of agitated concerns over the embryonic development of discourses of `whiteness,' in which female purity played an important role, and which developed in the British Caribbean as the mature plantation complex emerged and as the population of British Caribbean societies became overwhelmingly enslaved. Both Walker and Newman stress that there was a significant shift in how white women were viewed in this period, where they were seen less as real people than as idealized visions of femininity through which discussions about the effect of climate upon racial behaviour and the inability of white people in the tropics to create effective and lasting family relationships could be analysed. Negative portrayals of white women's actions in the British Caribbean, they argue, come out of a larger discourse, one skilfully outlined by Sarah Yeh as part of arguments about debauchery as an intrinsic part of white tropical society in which notions of gender, sex, race, nature and culture were tested as part of the odd and distinctly un-British and unfeminine environments created by Britons in plantation societies in the tropics.[16]

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[14] Walker, 'Pursuing Her Profits,' 480, 494; Glymph, *Out of the House*, 32–62.

[15] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Jones Rogers, *They Were Her Property*.

[16] Walker, *Jamaica Ladies*; Newman, *Dark Inheritance*; Yeh, "`ASink of All Filthiness'.

At the outset it is important to establish the long history of misogynist stereotypes of the hyper-sexed and cruel white West Indian woman, a history still strong in the mid-nineteenth century when Charlotte Bronte published her story of the West Indian Creole, Bertha Mason, in *Jane Eyre* (1847). The creation of Bertha Mason drew on a long tradition of representations of white female cruelty when it came to West Indian slavery. This stereotype, created in the seventeenth century, continued to be important in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We see how powerful this stereotype was in evidence taken by the House of Commons in their 1792 enquiry about the slave trade. Several visiting doctors and military personnel to Jamaica and other islands commented on the cruel punishments meted out to slaves by white women. Sometimes the floggings were for 'slight offences' and in two instances the slave was sentenced to death by flogging. Often these floggings and tortures were conducted at a distance, according to orders, but at other times the white mistress took a more active role, such as flogging any enslaved driver who 'did not punish the slaves properly'. A number of these cruel white mistresses were described as women 'of consequence', such as the clergyman's wife who, after flogging her enslaved people, dropped on them 'scalding hot sealing wax'. An engineer's wife even ordered her slave's nose 'to be slit in both nostrils out of jealousy'.[17]

Images of white women in the British West Indies

Initially, images of white women arose out of damning accounts of the Caribbean's 'intolerably hot and suffocating' climate, a 'Torrid Zone' of disease and licentiousness which led to physical prostration and legs indecorously akimbo to catch the breeze.

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[17] Lambert, *House of Commons*.

William Pittis summed up the scene in *The Jamaica Lady* (1720). Jamaica was a 'Sink of Sin, and Receptacle of all manner of Vices', meaning that a woman might arrive 'as chaste as a Vestal' but within two days be transformed into 'a perfect Messalina,' drawing on the well-known motif of the notorious and highly promiscuous wife of the ineffectual first century C.E. Roman emperor, Claudius. As for the white woman's character, a savage beating of a female slave on board ship prompts the Captain to reflect: 'I have heard talk of Furies with Whips of Steel, and Hair of Serpents, and if it be true the Devil does employ such instruments, a Negro had better live in Hell than with a *Jamaican* Termagant'.[18] The reason frequently given for such savagery was sexual jealousy. An early instance of the stock figure of the jealous wife appears in Edward Ward's satirical *A Trip to Jamaica* (1698) where the author travels alongside an '*Unfortunate Lady* . . . in pursute of a *Stray'd Husband*' who had bigamously married 'a *Lacker-fac'd Creolean*'. Had he married another woman 'Handsomer than her self, it would never have vex'd her; but to be rival'd by a *Gypsy*, a Tawny Fac'd *Moletto* Strumpet, a Pumpkin colour'd Whore' was too much to bear.[19]

This rivalry of complexions, where the white woman's skin is trumped by brown or black, leads to John Singleton's medical advice in the 1760s. Although torn with 'heart-rending jealousy' at a husband 'Too oft allur'd by Ethiopic charms', the slighted white wife must resist 'passion's gust' because such a 'hellish phrenzy, cherish'd in the mind,/Reason dethrones, and sets a daemon there'. Instead of giving way to a diabolical, insane rage against her 'truant' husband, she must be 'chaste, obedient, mild, sedate, and

[18] Pittis, *Jamaica Lady*, 10–11, 35, 38.

[19] Krise, *Caribbeana*, 83.

true'.[20] One desperate and 'impious act' of madness she must especially avoid is the cosmetic flaying of her face and hands with cashew nut oil, a procedure undertaken to remove sun-spots and other brown blemishes. Ironically, this attempt to retain the privileges associated with pure white skin involves the patient turning into a 'horrid spectacle', for when 'the skin or mask of the face comes off, it turns black'. This painful and secretive ritual of the white woman is also mentioned by natural historians, James Grainger and Patrick Browne.[21] Notably, none of these male commentators explain why the jealous white woman should strive for ever-greater whiteness when her husband has turned to brown and black women. A feminist postcolonial reading of the white skin/white mask dissolving into blackness enables us to explore this and other contradictions involved in demonizing the white West Indian woman. As the contemporary artist Joscelyn Gardner has explored in *White Skin Black Kin: A Creole Conversation Piece* (Figure 2) the creolization captured so vividly by Long—the white mistress 'aukwardly dangling her arms with the air of a Negroe-servant'—reflected a complex multiracial society in which there was a shared history and an absence of any strict dichotomy between black and white.[22]

The fundamental instabilities in white West Indian women's identity can be seen in texts and images published from the early eighteenth century. In 1711 Richard Steele published 'The Story of Brunetta and Phillis', a comic tale of rivalry between two white English women which enjoyed wide circulation in the 18th and 19th centuries. Twinned

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[20] Krise, *Caribbeana*, 308–311.

[21] Coleman, 'Janet Schaw,' 173–176.

[22] Gardner, *White Skin, Black Kin*.

in friendship and 'hardly distinguishable' in 'stature, countenance, and mien', these two young girls grow up to become 'rivals for the reputation of beauty'. After marrying rich West Indians and settling on neighbouring plantations in Barbados, their rivalry with each other is finally 'resolved' at a ball when Brunetta arrives with her 'beautiful negro girl in a petticoat of the same brocade with which Phillis was attired'. Here the twinning of white women is exploded by a cross-racial twinning via costume, a dramatic moment captured by Thomas Stothard in his painting *Brunetta and Phillis*, executed in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century (Figure 3). The inter-changeability of roles and the mischievous performance of femininity and race in the context of clothing and masquerade are also present in John Raphael Smith's painting, *A Lady Holding a Negro Mask* (1795–1800) (Figure 4). Here a fair young woman in a pink ball-dress poses with a black mask and domino, both of which are poised to swallow up her racial identity.

That creolization and the stereotype of the jealous wife went hand in hand is clear in the journal of the Scot Janet Schaw who travelled around the West Indies in the mid-1770s. With close family connections to the élite of St. Kitts, Schaw was determined to present the white female population in a positive light, one which emphasized their cool, dispassionate, and dignified tolerance of the quagmire which was miscegenation, evident in the 'crouds of Mullatoes' seen everywhere. Championing them for being 'modest, genteel, reserved and temperate', she emphasized, contra Long, that white women were vigilant in preserving themselves from any taint of transculturation. She also pointedly adds, with some clumsy repetition: 'Jealousy is a passion with which they are entirely unacquainted, and a jealous wife would be here a most ridiculous character

indeed'.[23] When it comes to the men she is as tactful as she can be. Mindful of the most damaging commonplaces, Schaw describes them as 'gay, luxurious, and amorous', their sole failing being 'the indulgence they give themselves in their licentious and even unnatural amours'. Although she describes this as a 'crime' at both the individual and public level, so keen is Schaw to redeem these men that she shifts the blame to the 'young black wenches' who lie in wait to ensnare them. Long, writing about the same time, adopts exactly the same strategy of blaming white men's racial philandering on the sexual prowess of black women, although he also blames white women for being too superficial, idle, and uneducated to be attractive to white men.[24]

The images of white men, like those of white women, changed with the growing popularity of abolitionism. Caribbean planters were seen before the American Revolution as gauche but useful nouveau riches. As Kathleen Wilson and Candace Ward have argued, following work by Wylie Sypher from the 1950s, the West Indian was a distinct `character' from the mid-eighteenth century, living in the British imagination and print culture as a laughable figure, desperately trying to use his wealth to overcome his (and the figure was usually thought of as male) social deficiencies that rendered him a laughing stock. The quintessential West Indian nouveau riche buffoon was the fabulously wealthy William Beckford, friend of William Pitt the elder and a power in British politics by virtue of his command over the voters of the City of London. The waspish Horace Walpole dismissed Beckford as `a heap of confused knowledge' whose `absurdities were made but more conspicuous by his vanity' and his `jovial style of good humour' rendered

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[23] Schaw, *Journal of a lady,* 112–114.

[24] Burnard, 'Rioting in Goatish Embraces'.

suspect through understanding that `he was tyrannic in Jamaica his native country.' As Wilson notes, the West Indian represented `in experience, imagination and representation' an `exotic otherness, counterposed to metropolitan politeness.'[25]

But as antislavery sentiment increased from the 1780s onwards, they came to be traduced as debauched sadists, obsessed with dancing, drinking, sexual excess and violence against blacks.[26] The allegations concerning the barbarity of the West Indian woman which circulated at this time can be seen in the journal of Jonathan Troup, a visitor to the West Indies in 1789 who remarked: 'The Creoles are imperious overruling women [who] know nothing but Eat drink Game Curse and beat the Negroes'.[27] Add in hypersexuality and this is the image produced by the eminent Dissenting writer, Anna Letitia Barbauld, in her *Epistle to William Wilberforce* (1791):

> Lo! where reclined, pale Beauty courts the breeze,
>
> Diffused on sofas of voluptuous ease;
>
> With anxious awe her menial train around
>
> Catch her faint whispers of half-uttered sound;
>
> See her, in monstrous fellowship, unite
>
> At once the Scythian and the Sybarite!

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[25] Walpole, *Memoirs*, 177-8; Wilson, *Sense of the People*, 274-5; Sypher, `The West Indian as a "Character',; Ward, *Crossing the Line*.

[26] Burnard, 'Powerless Masters'.

[27] Newman, *Dark Inheritance*.

> Blending repugnant vices, misallied,
>
> Which frugal nature purposed to divide;
>
> See her, with indolence to fierceness joined,
>
> Of body delicate, infirm of mind,
>
> With languid tones imperious mandates urge;
>
> With arm recumbent wield the household scourge;
>
> And with unruffled mien, and placid sounds,
>
> Contriving torture, and inflicting wounds.[28]

Since Edmund Burke had, in his influential gendering of the aesthetic categories of the sublime and beautiful, characterized women as most perfect and beautiful when lisping and tottering, and in general counterfeiting weakness, Barbauld's image raised a host of challenging issues around sentimental notions concerning women, including their supposedly superior, finely-tuned sensibility.[29]

Burke's definitions of innate sexual difference also infuriated Mary Wollstonecraft. Intent on exploding the 'libertine reveries' of Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1789), she reached for the highly topical figure of the white plantation mistress:

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[28] Barbauld, *Epistle To William Wilberforce,* 1:176–177.

[29] Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 91.

> Where is the dignity, the infallibility of sensibility, in the fair ladies, whom, if the voice of rumour is to be credited, the captive negroes curse in all the agony of bodily pain, for the unheard of tortures they invent? It is probable that some of them, after the sight of a flagellation, compose their ruffled spirits and exercise their tender feelings by the perusal of the last imported novel.[30]

In this richly suggestive passage, Wollstonecraft links the West Indian woman's erotic charge from witnessing a flagellation to the pleasurable consumption of romantic fiction. Inventiveness shifts from domesticity to the realm of the imaginary—from the body of the tortured slave to the woman's active self-identification with the novel's sentimentally beautiful heroine. But when it came to the reason for this behaviour Wollstonecraft understood that, instead of the cruelty being random or indiscriminate, it was structural to patriarchal society. The woman 'who submits, without conviction, to a parent or husband, will as unreasonably tyrannise over her servants; for slavish fear and tyranny go together'.[31]

Wollstonecraft helps us to connect to contemporary theoretical works on the operation of power between people in unequal situation and how violence, real or `symbolic,' structured such unequal encounters. Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, developed the concept of `symbolic violence' as a means of understanding such relationships, in which a key element is that such `symbolic violence' exercised by the oppressor was done so with the complicity of victim. In other words, symbolic and real violence within unequal structures such as slavery was conducted within structural conditions and

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[30] Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 111.

[31] Ibid.

constraints such as those Wollstonecraft notes within late eighteenth-century British patriarchy. As Bourdieu notes `symbolic violence is the *violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity* … If you think of domination in terms of freedom and determinism, choice and constraint, you get nowhere.'[32]

Symbolic violence allows us to understand how people in power (here white women slaveowners) promoted the interests of their group, even when that group was an intermediate position of power in overall power structures, as being synonymous with the interests of their workers. It helps to explain how class interests are maintained through psychological tools of domination, as much as through physical violence. Bourdieu's insights into how power structures are internalized by both victim and oppressor means we have to pay attention to how `the archive,' as post-colonial theorists' term it, is created and passed onto posterity. Saidiya Hartman has explored, for example, the difficulty of extracting truth from an archive in which power relations shape what is written or, as here, portrayed visually – only some `social agents, in Bourdieu's terms, get the ability to present their point of view. Hartman laments the silence of the archive towards what she calls the `violence of the banal,' noting that `the libidinal investment in violence is everywhere apparent in the documents, statements and institutions that decide our knowledge of the past.'[33] Wollstonecraft's sly and insightful evocation of a different archive than has survived, in which we know about `the voice of rumour' of `captive negroes' who `curse' their mistress `in all the agony of bodily pain' – reminds us that one

[32] Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 223.

[33] Hartman, `Venus in Two Acts,' 5.

voice – that of the whipped slave- is absent from our analysis, except where it intrudes within Bourdieu's notion of complicit `symbolic violence.'

The Surinamese adventurer, John Stedman, noting white men's preference for Creole African women over Creole white women, also remarked that it was small wonder 'the poor ill treated Ladies should be Jealous of their Spouses and so bitterly take revenge on the cause of their disgrace—the negro and Mulatto Girls whom they persecute with the greatest bitterness and most barbarous tyranny'.[34] The slave-master husband with rights of sexual access to his wife exercised the same dominion over his enslaved people, resulting in oppressed mistresses victimizing their even more oppressed house enslaved people. Variations on the theme of Wollstonecraft's savage plantation mistress were not, however, always so intelligently contextualised, as can be seen in Barbara Hofland's *Matilda; or the Barbadoes Girl* (1816), a tale for young readers which traced the reformation of an ignorant and despotic white Creole after her arrival in England. Even when Matilda is reformed, prejudices against her as a West Indian persist, especially when it comes to dancing, a pastime supposedly beloved of her kind, together with dressing up and coquetry.[35] Matilda's 'by no means decorous' waltzing at a ball with an elegant but 'shallow coxcomb' precipitates a taunt by some young men that in Barbados 'the most delicate ladies are waited upon by naked slaves whose bare backs are probably bleeding from the recent effects of a sound whipping, inflicted, probably, because Missy's dolly had fallen, and broken her nose, out of Missy's own hands'. Matilda's giddy dancing and the suggestion that she may have participated in such cruelties made

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[34] Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years*, 49.

[35] Leslie, *New and exact account*, 38.

her English entourage shrink from her ‘as from something monstrous and loathsome in nature’.[36]

If an English ball was a dangerous place for a reformed white Creole girl, then the Caribbean ball was even more dangerous for a white femininity at risk of degeneracy. William Holland’s depiction of a Jamaican ball at the Governor’s house, *A Grand Jamaica Ball! Or the Creolean Hop à la Mustee*, includes six lines warning white women against loose living. It shows Jamaican ladies cavorting in what to European eyes were wildly indecorous ways. They are shown reclining ungracefully, drinking to excess and dancing with arms and legs splayed in unbecoming ways. Holland makes the point in his print and in his accompanying moralistic verse that these women’s failure to uphold proper standards of comportment made them ‘charmless’. And he demonstrates in a vignette at the top right-hand corner of the image the ultimate consequence of such loose behaviour: illicit sex (Figure 5). His print neatly combines many of the metropolitan fears about how life in the tropics, where the climate encouraged excess, led to the standards of politeness in white society being abandoned, not just by men but, significantly, by white women, who in the standard tropes of politeness should have been the people upholding proper standards of propriety.

But best known for their representations of the white mistress are, of course, the slave narratives written by black and white women themselves. In *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1831), Prince reveals how her mistress taught her ‘the exact difference between the smart of the rope, the cart-whip, and the cow-skin, when applied to my naked body by her own cruel hand’. The subtext is sexual

[36] Hofland, *Matilda*, 180–181, 215, 226.

competition, with floggings interspersed with ‘dreadful blows to the face and head’ from a ‘hard heavy fist’ and being pinched by the mistress’ ‘pitiless fingers’ in the neck and arms. In short Prince’s owner was ‘a fearful woman, and a savage mistress to her slaves’.[37]

An unusually brutal and graphic instance of sexual competition can be seen in Ann Kemble’s antislavery novel, *Gonzalo de Baldivia* (1817), dedicated, as with the poem by Barbauld cited above, to William Wilberforce. The opening scene of volume 3, set in the Potosi silver mines of the Spanish empire, depicts a jealous wife kicking her slave girl ‘till the blood gushed from her nose and mouth’. With ‘savage violence’ and fiendish ‘fury’ the wife then threatens to flay off her skin, ‘cut the flesh off her bones’, and feed the pieces to her dogs.[38] The historical setting of this volume in the notorious Peruvian mines reflects a general belief in the early nineteenth century that the public had been ‘wearied into insensibility’ by years of ‘incessant discussion’ of Caribbean slavery. When it came to literary invention, the ‘frequent, minute, and disgusting exposure’ of the institution’s violence had robbed the artist of any opportunity to ‘awaken, suspend, and delight curiosity, by a subtle and surprising development of plot’.[39] What it also shows, by conflating the `black’ legend of Spanish brutality in the New World with the cruelty of a slave mistress is how entrenched the notion of the sexually jealous and violent white women in the tropics had become within British culture.

White women and the whip

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[37] Prince, *History of Mary Prince*, 14–15.

[38] Kemble, *Gonzalo de Baldivia*, III, 5–9.

[39] Montgomery, *West Indies*, i–ii.

Another way of enlivening antislavery discourse was to sensationalize and sexualize the whip, the most potent symbol of white authority in the slave colonies of the Americas. Such prurience—dubbed by Karen Haltunnen the 'pornography of pain' in purportedly antislavery works— can also be overdone in modern day scholarship. Zoe Trodd raises the issue precisely in an examination of prominent tropes, such as the kneeling slave of the Wedgwood medallion and the scourged back of an antebellum American enslaved man. She suggests that it is time for these images to be dropped. Urging contemporary antislavery artists to try and find 'a less abusive usable past', she argues that scenes of whipping too often put 'slaves on display, reaching for shock value but risking sensationalism and objectification'.[40]

In a pioneering text on slave management from the 1730s, Daniel Defoe wrote that slaves 'must be rul'd with a Rod of Iron, beaten with *Scorpions*, as the Scripture calls it' else they rise and 'murder all their Masters' due to the 'Rage and Cruelty of their Nature'.[41] In other words, the English were cruel because they had to be. Hans Sloane owned an assortment of whips, gifts from enthusiastic readers of his *Natural History of Jamaica* (1707). For instance, the master of Christ's College, Cambridge, gave him 'a manati strap for whipping the negro slaves'. Made from the hide of a manatee (sea cow), these whips cut so deeply that they were banned in Jamaica, not because of their cruelty but because badly scarred slaves sold for less.[42] According to some observers, the whip in general was so commonly used in punishing slaves that young white children used it as a

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[40] Halttunen, 'Humanitarianism'; Trodd, 'Am I Still Not,' 346, 352.

[41] Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves*, 266.

[42] Delbourgo, *Collecting the World*: 79, 191.

toy. James Walker described a game played in Berbice in the early nineteenth century in which 'a stick or stone is laid down as the supposed slave, and the pleasure of the young adept consists in lashing it with a whip'.[43] Records show that the major perpetrators of whippings of enslaved women were white men (or their enforcers). Isaac Cruikshank's infamous Captain Kimber cartoon (1792) illustrates the general pattern. Kimber stands with a whip in his right hand, laughing sadistically in anticipation as a young slave woman is prepared for punishment, suspended by her ankle via a rope.

The nature of plantation life, where white women were few in number and not as involved in the management of enslaved people than men, means that it was more likely to be men (either overseers or enslaved drivers) who were most actively involved in the physical punishment of enslaved people, Moreover, by the 1820s, the whipping of women was forbidden, enhancing how the punishment of whipping was increasingly a male-on-male activity.[44] Attacks on creole white women tended to focus on their supposed indolence and material extravagance, as much as upon their violence. Thus, the Anglican cleric, William Jones, condemned Creole ladies as being `as untaught, and almost as indelicate, as are those hapless Negroes they imagine themselves born to trample on.' He thought Creole Ladies `pettish, insolent and proud' and that `Domestic Oeconomy, one would suppose, had in it something which scared them; they detest its appearance.'[45] A previous generation of commentators drew on these statements about indolence to see white women as essentially parasitic. As Marietta Morrisey writes, `most

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[43] Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 39.

[44] Altink, `"An Outrage upon all decency"'.

[45] Christie, *Diary of the Reverend William Jones*, 31.

observers of Caribbean white women … claim they contributed little to their communities and benefited shamelessly from slave labor.'[46] These views have been modified, however, by a host of scholarship which sees white women as active agents in managing estates and in consequence in managing enslaved people.[47]

In such circumstances, it is not surprising that white women were also depicted whipping enslaved people, as can be seen in the sketch *Creole Delicacy or The Domestic Felicity of Africans in the West Indies*, drawn by the flycatcher and naturalist Henry Smeathman.[48] After four years of collecting on the west coast of Africa, Smeathman crossed to the West Indies in 1775 where the cruelty of plantation slavery appalled him. In *Creole Delicacy* he draws a flogging presided over by a white woman slave owner, standing tall at the centre of the scene (Figure 6). Elegantly dressed, décolleté, with an elaborate bonnet, this woman stands in marked contrast to her victim whose meagre clothing has been arranged to expose her buttocks. Spread-eagled on the ground with her torso deliberately raised up to reveal her breasts, her wrists and ankles are secured by her distressed house companions. Discreetly screened by a warehouse, and with a slave boy holding a large parasol over her for protection from the sun, the white woman looks towards the flogger, counting the lashes with a look of pleasure or satisfaction. She holds the hand of a young white girl (perhaps her daughter) who stares across at a second

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[46] Morrisey. *Slave Women in the New World,* 150.

[47] See the historiographical suveys of white women in Walker, *Jamaica Ladies.*

[48] Deirdre Coleman is grateful to Meredith Gamer for alerting us to this drawing, later engraved and published by a London dealer in 1788 at the height of abolitionism. See Coleman, *Henry Smeathman*.

smartly-dressed white woman whose hand is resting upon the head of a young, bare-breasted slave girl who is covering her eyes. This girl cannot bring herself to look at what is happening, either because she is the daughter of the victim or because her turn is next. Perhaps she endures the anguish of both predicaments.[49]

Smeathman's sketch was not published until 1788, when abolitionist sentiment was at its height. Its text reads:

> This plate represents a Creole Lady attending the private Whipping of her woemen Slaves and is taken from a Drawing done in one of the Islands by the late H. Smeathman Esqr. The Lot of these woemen is happy compared with those Wretched female Slaves who are employ'd in the Fields.

Smeathman's aim here is a naturalistic portrait of an every-day event, the horror of which is mitigated by the admission that the woman being whipped has less to complain about than a 'wretched' female field hand. Although the whipping is described as 'private', a busy marketplace appears to be close by. The foreground is littered with commodities such as a rum barrel, a corded box, and a large parcel, all giving the image its observational authority. There is also a large warehouse, at the side of which sits a woman with her legs in stocks, probably the next in line for a whipping. Despite the commonplace about the easier lives of house slaves, the fact that Smeathman's domestic

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[49] This image predates and prefigures the most famous art work depicting a white woman gazing at a slave being whipped, Marcel Antoine Verdier's 'Châtiment des quatre piquets dans les colonies', 'Punishment of the Four Stakes in the Colonies' (1843–1849). See Grant, 'Afterword,' 277–279.

scene of *Creole Delicacy* has a companion sketch in *British Humanity or African Felicity in The West Indies* (Figure 7) exposes the white woman's flogging as continuous with the cruelty of the cane fields.

In *British Humanity* the whipping of both black men and women is presided over by white men in full view of a busy market place in Grenada. In the background are warehouses and shops, with traders, children, and women with baskets on their heads moving around among barrels, trunks, and large parcels. In the centre of the sketch Smeathman depicts a powerfully built slave, lying on his stomach in a public square. Naked from the waist down with his buttocks exposed, his limbs are staked out and his head is lifted in supplication. He does not cry out to the fellow-African wielding the whip but to the well-dressed white man counting the lashes. Two other white men, arm in arm, look on casually from the slave's other side. At the front of the drawing, bottom right, there are three enslaved people waiting their turn, one male and two females. Although shackled with a chain, an overseer watches them closely. One, a woman, is removing her trousers, presumably because she is next. On the left we see two figures, a man and a woman, both of whom have just been flogged. The man at the bottom left of the plate is walking away, howling in pain while pulling up his trousers. The woman above him in the sketch is bent double with pain; her buttocks remain uncovered and she can only move with help from another woman. The text informs us that the 'shocking sight' of such 'Inhuman Punishments' is so common that, although executed in the public marketplace 'the People buy & sell as though nothing was doing'. Taken as a pair Smeathman's sketches contradict Kamau Brathwaite's claim that slavery was strictly

'male' and 'not a joint enterprise . . . not a family enterprise'.[50] Instead, Smeathman exposes the strong continuities between the violent slave master and the cruel slave mistress, just as Walker posits.[51] We also see the continuities between the labour regimes of the 'public' fields and the 'private' plantation household. Finally, Smeathman's sketches are at variance with the 'new and picturesque images' of West Indian marketplaces and women, created by commissioned artists in the 1770s, such as Agostino Brunias.[52]

As Smeathman hints in the ironical caption to his drawing, the whip should have been an instrument that offended female delicacy. Janet Schaw illustrates the complicated feelings that the whip engendered in white women. She noted that whips were used on men and women 'naked … down to the girdle', an offensive sight because 'you constantly observe where the application has been made'. Nevertheless, Schaw believed that, while flogging might appear dreadful 'to a humane European' and the whip itself a 'horrid' implement, its use on African enslaved people was an evil necessity. Indeed, the horror wears off when one becomes better acquainted with 'the nature of the Negroes'. Furthermore, in her determination to temper the cruelty of slavery's whip she argues:

> It is the suffering of the human mind that constitutes the greatest misery of punishment, but with them [the slaves] it is merely corporeal. As with the brutes it inflicts no wound on their mind,

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[50] Brathwaite, 'Caribbean women,' 2.

[51] Walker, 'Pursuing Her Profits,' 480.

[52] Kriz *Slavery, Sugar*.

> whose Nature seems made to bear it, and whose sufferings are not intended with shame or pain beyond the present moment.[53]

The assertion that `the Negroes,' like brutes, were a different order of creation, constitutionally 'made to bear' physical suffering, is shocking in its near acceptance of polygenesis rather than the customary Christian belief in monogenesis.[54] It goes beyond Sloane, for instance. Although Sloane could list neutrally the baroque brutalities ('exquisite torments') meted out to enslaved people, he at least acknowledged Africans' sensibility—that they felt pain.[55] As for Schaw's claim that no wound can ever be inflicted 'on their mind', she cites evidence of a slave auction where 'perfect unconcern' was the dominant note: 'The husband was to be divided from the wife, the infant from the mother; but the most perfect indifference ran thro' the whole'. But no sooner has she 'proved' this insensibility of 'Negroes feelings' than her somewhat incoherent shuffling between bodily and mental registers leads to an admission that enslaved people, being 'very nervous and subject to fits of madness', can often prove the 'ruin of many plantations'.[56]

Author and feminist Eliza Fenwick spent several years in Barbados in the early nineteenth century. Although she described slavery as a 'horrid' institution and claimed that she was never violent to slaves herself, she conceded that 'Nothing awes or governs them but the lash of the whip or the dread of being sent into the fields to labour'.

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[53] Schaw, *Journal of a lady,* 127.

[54] Kidd, *Forging of Races*.

[55] Delbourgo, *Collecting the World*, 78–79.

[56] Schaw, *Journal of a lady*, 128.

Refraining from employing these strategies she resigned herself instead to a 'regular course of negligence, lies & plunder, the latter of which they carry on with a cunning & ingenuity that is surprising'.[57] Inevitably, on account of her pro-slavery views, the Scotswoman Mrs. Carmichael was of a different mind. She pronounced that it was impossible to treat enslaved people 'as we treat English servants'. As for women of colour she had (like Schaw) nothing but contempt for the 'handsome and attractive' young mulattoes whose principal aim was to ensnare newly arrived, inexperienced white men.[58] Thus, Carmichael adopted conventional Caribbean attitudes to the whip, especially on the necessity of using it in order to get slaves to work and to behave.

White women in the landscape

When Janet Schaw and her young travelling companion visited an old friend, Lady Isabella Hamilton, on St. Kitts in 1775, the three women made an excursion one evening to a boiling house. The visit contravened established conventions in which wealthy white women stayed in the great house and concerned themselves little with the working spaces of the cane field and the processing plant. There were two reasons for the visit. The first was Schaw's curiosity about the sugar-making process, 'a business that requires years of study to become perfect in'. Not even the heat generated by the large kettles boiling at their height was a deterrent, the three women staying 'above an hour'. The other reason for their presence was to enable Lady Isabella to demonstrate the feminine virtues of compassion and mercy. 'There were several of the boilers condemned to the lash,' Schaw noted, adding that seeing their mistress's face 'is pardon'. While the scene invoked a

[57] O'Callaghan, *Women Writing*, 44.

[58] Carmichael, *Domestic Manners*, I: 325, 71.

miraculous intercession from the 'gentler sex,' it provided yet another confirmation for Schaw of the brute nature of Africans: 'Their gratitude on this occasion was the only instance of sensibility that I have observed in them'. Chillingly, she then informs us that their crime was 'the neglect of their own health which is indeed the greatest fault they can commit'.[59]

If Smeathman had published *Creole Delicacy* in the mid-1770s when he drew it, it would have been one of the very few occasions when white women were portrayed outside the confines of the home. The eighteenth-century Caribbean visual landscape was resolutely male-focused, as can be seen in a little-known painting by George Robertson from the early 1770s called *Two Gentlemen Surveying Their Estate*.[60] This painting is unusual insofar as it shows non-elite men (despite their being termed 'gentlemen') reclining on the verandah of their small frame house. Lounging comfortably and confidently, they oversee their surroundings. The painting seems innocent enough in its composition but the placing of the two gentlemen at the top of a hill from which they can survey the prospect suggests the importance of surveillance: the two men are perfectly placed to see and quell any disturbance. Other images from the period are similarly male dominated. Three engravings by John Boydell, of an anonymous artist making sketches of Jamaican scenes in the 1770s, all display men prominently. In one print the men are talking to each other while a male slave drives livestock in the foreground; another depicts a man on horseback in the parish of St Mary, riding on the road and paying little attention to a group of enslaved people talking and doing their washing; the final print

[59] Schaw, *Journal of a lady*, 128–129.

[60] This painting is in private hands and cannot be reproduced here.

shows white men on horseback promenading near Montego Bay, a ship-filled harbour behind them.[61]

Usually, when women were captured in the landscape, they were almost always black, engaged in agricultural work or carrying baskets of laundry and other objects on their heads. Such representations mimicked the ways in which the rural poor in Britain were represented. The English artist William Berryman, active in Jamaica during the period 1808 to 1816, drew two black women at work with their hoes in his sketch entitled *Digging Corn Holes* (Figure 8). Either at the same time or later, he also sketched a white woman sitting comfortably ensconced within the window frame of her house, looking out.[62] As John Barrell has argued, depictions of the English landscape 'darkened' in the eighteenth century, with cheerful peasants giving way to picturesque images of the ragged and pitiful poor. And as Steve Hindle has recently argued of English landscape painting, the poor were depicted as more idle than industrious from the mid-eighteenth century onwards and it was not infrequent to have wealthy women at the side of the landscape, their leisure contrasting with what workers had to do.[63]

Berryman's depiction of the industrious and the idle is racialized, but white women could also be out and about in the landscape. An unusual and disturbing map from the early 1780s contains an arresting image of a white woman abroad in one of its

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[61] Quilley, 'The lie of the land'.

[62] The two images may be connected but it is also possible that Berryman was conserving paper.

[63] Barrell, *Dark Side of the Landscape*; Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*; Hindle, 'Representing Rural Society'.

vignettes. Two horses with ostentatiously studded harnesses draw a handsome carriage along a coastal road. Inside the carriage sits a richly dressed white woman. She is not driving the carriage but is being driven by a well-attired black man, dressed in vaguely `oriental' costume, riding on a third horse. He holds the reins of the carriage horses and he also carries the omnipresent whip, symbol of white authority. Two black postillions, wearing the same livery as the rider at the front, bring up the carriage's rear. At the vignette's edge are two sorry black people, naked, suffering, and with chains. In addition, one wears a humiliating iron-spiked collar, an instrument of torture attached to the necks of captured fugitive slaves. The woman and her three black servants appear unaware of the suffering figures close by. The contrast between these figures and the white woman with her extravagant domestic service is sharp. It is a contrast between luxury and misery, mobility and thwarted movement. Despite the horror of this vignette the map depicts an idealized version of an absentee judge's plantation on the French West Indian island of Saint Domingue.[64] Although the actual plantation was land-locked, the painter Louis de Beauvernet places his vignettes of plantation life next to the sea. In this way he connects the making of sugar with Atlantic commerce, the latter represented by sailing ships moored in the harbour. The implication is that it is the cruelty of plantation life that keeps the wheels of commerce turning.[65]

The second noticeable absence from eighteenth-century landscape paintings is any reference to the customary violence of the Caribbean. Once again Louis de Beauvernet's map is unusual in showing slaves being whipped. In the same vignette in

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[64] Burnard and Garrigus, *Plantation Machine*.

[65] Ibid.

which the white woman is being driven, a black overseer is flogging a slave on what looks like a whipping contraption. But, as Louis Nelson argues, and as Geoff Quilley illustrates in his work on representations of slavery in eighteenth-century landscape paintings, the visible signs of corporal punishment on the bodies of enslaved people were seldom shown.[66] The pastoral picturesque avoids the violence of slavery altogether, suggesting that the pictured black people laboured in the way that they did willingly and without threat of punishment. Yet from the beginning plantations were sites of violence. In John Taylor's late seventeenth-century description of Port Royal in Jamaica, he noted that if any slave should 'commit robbery, prove sullen, or refuse to work' they would be flogged while tied to 'a whipping post, which they have in all plantations'.[67]

We never see a whipping post in any landscape painting, nor any other sign of violence, such as gallows, and yet these state-sanctioned symbols of violence were everywhere in the West Indies. Maria Nugent, the Jamaican governor's wife who kept an entertaining diary between 1801 and 1805, wrote that she nearly begged off going to church one Sunday because 'we were obliged to pass close by the pole, on which was struck the head of a black man who was executed a few days ago'.[68] Nelson provides us with a rare and unpublished draft drawing by a French visitor to Jamaica in the 1760s, Pierre Eugène du Simitière, a visit which possibly occurred in the aftermath of the last large slave rebellion before the Haitian Revolution. The sketch shows a local street, with a gibbet constructed and placed in the main road. Slaves found guilty of treason were

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[66] Nelson, *Architecture and Empire*, 125, Quilley, 'The lie of the land'.

[67] Buisseret, *Jamaica in 1687*.

[68] Nugent, *Lady Nugent's Journal*, 215.

sentenced to be placed in the gibbet—an iron cage suspended from a gallows-like structure—until they died from starvation. In Du Simitière's rough drawing, there are two gibbets or iron cages shown suspended in the town, one empty but the other occupied. The visual representation of this is disturbing in many ways. The execution of slaves was done so casually as to be almost routine in the landscape. While planters explicitly used whipping posts and gallows as mechanisms for controlling enslaved people and turned their plantation dwellings into semi-fortresses from which they could exercise surveillance, such images were avoided by artists in their arcadian visions of the West Indian landscape.[69]

Apart from the unpublished drawings by Smeathman, it is not until the early 1820s that we see white women situated outside the home. The landscape artist James Hakewill painted a selection of Jamaica's great houses which included well-dressed, respectable-looking white women in three of twenty-one prints. Kriz suggests that the inclusion of these respectable white women was a major symbolic moment in the representation of white women in the region. Before Hakewill (who was succeeded as a landscape painter by Joseph Kidd, who was more ready than Hakewill to make white women central to his paintings), white women were invisible in the many pastoral paintings that depicted the natural beauty of the West Indian islands. It is possible, however, that some of the women painted by Brunias were white rather than coloured, an

[69] Nelson, *Architecture and Empire,* 127; Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire*, 103–105.

ambiguity discussed by David Bindman.[70] Hakewill's partial redemption of white women as legitimate actors within the plantation picturesque was, for planters and their wives, a sign that the excessively negative view of the West Indies was abating. As Kriz notes, it was telling that as slavery came to an end, and as the Caribbean landscape was detoxified, painters were prepared to receive not only male adventurers (portrayed humorously in Heath's *Delights of Emigration,* 1830) 'but also that ultimate human marker of civility and refinement, who had been so conspicuously absent from the topographical views of the previous century – the white gentlewoman'.[71]

Conclusion

What does this gradual change say about the relationship between white women and the fraught subject of whipping? As Henrice Altink observes, the whipping of slaves and ideas of female delicacy and virtue were strongly connected in the early nineteenth century.[72] Female slaves, it was argued, should not be whipped and white women should certainly not be involved in whipping them. The 1826 Amelioration of Slavery Act made concrete prohibitions on the whipping of enslaved women. But the legacy of the cruel white mistress is not so easily passed over. We have moved past the stage where we 'search for the invisible woman', whether that woman was white, brown or black.[73] We have also left behind depictions of slavery in which 'the traditional conception of the

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[70] Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar*, 168; Nelson, *Architecture and Empire*; Bindman, 'Representing Race'.

[71] Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar*, 166.

[72] Altink, 'An Outrage'.

[73] Zacek, 'Searching for the Invisible Woman'.

slave owner as male remains unchallenged and the socio-economic limits of patriarchy not identified'.[74] Our study confirms a growing literature that argues against earlier views of white women as spectral in West Indian slave societies, returning us to the pioneering work of Caribbeanist scholars such as Cecily Jones, who insisted that the study of white women in the Caribbean told us much about slavery in general.[75] White women were not invisible. Nor were they innocent bystanders to slavery's brutality. In sum, there was as much continuity as change in the representation of white women in contemporary visual and written sources, with the image of the cruel white woman of the late seventeenth century persisting, albeit in changed form, after plantation slavery had taken hold in the British Caribbean. The representation of white women in the landscape and within written sources shows their full involvement in every aspect of plantation life, including such unwomanly behaviour as overseeing and luxuriating in the whipping of enslaved people. Although some depictions of white women were heavily invested in drawing on sentimental notions concerning innate sexual differences between men and women, Henry Smeathman revealed white women's complicity in slavery's violence. In resisting such sentimentality, Smeathman joined other artists in showing white women as enthusiastic upholders of slavery, thus strengthening the image of the cruel slave mistress that was becoming well-established in the late eighteenth century.

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[74] Beckles, 'White Women and Slavery,' 66, 68.

[75] Jones, *Engendering Whiteness*; Walker, *Jamaica Ladies.*

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Notes on contributors

Trevor Burnard is Wilberforce Professor of Slavery and Emancipation at the University of Hull. He is the author of eight monographs and numerous articles and edited works on Caribbean history. His principal publications are *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (2004); *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650-1820* (2015) and (with John Garrigus) *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint Domingue and British Jamaica* (2016). In 2020, he published *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution*. He is the editor-in-chief of the Oxford Bibliographies Online In Atlantic History.

Deirdre Coleman is the Robert Wallace Chair of English at the University of Melbourne. She has published widely on18th- and 19th-century literature and cultural

history, with a focus on women's writing, anti-slavery, colonialism, and natural history. Her publications include *Maiden Voyages and Infant Colonies* (1999), *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (2005; 2009), and *Henry Smeathman, the Flycatcher: Natural History, Slavery, and Empire in the late Eighteenth Century* (2018).