

Disability and Enslavement: Representations of Enslaved Women's Reproductive Value in the British Caribbean

School of History, Classics, and Archaeology University of Edinburgh

Scarlett Kiaras-Attari

Supervisor: Professor Diana Paton

Background

- In the last decade of the 18th century policies were introduced to end Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.
- Prior to that, planters in the Caribbean relied on the labour of imported enslaved men to generate capital.
- After the introduction of new policies planters sought to rely on enslaved women's reproductive capabilities to replenish their enslaved labour force.

Research Questions:

- How did discussions around reproduction/motherhood in the late 18th and 19th century shape the nature of childbearing amongst Caribbean enslaved women?
- How do understandings of disability and value influence conceptions of reproduction for enslaved women?

Methodology:

Examined primary evidence from before and after the shift to pro-natal policies to decipher the role of disability discourse in the way in which women's reproductive capacities were regarded.

Built on previous secondary literature related to the politics of reproduction in the British Caribbean as well as literature that covered the relationship between perceived disability and enslavement. This research combines these fields.

Conceptualised disability by using the social model that characterises disability as being a product of various societal factors. Therefore, in the British Caribbean's capitalist slave society an enslaved labourer's disability is determined by their ability (or lack thereof) to reap economic gains



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Findings

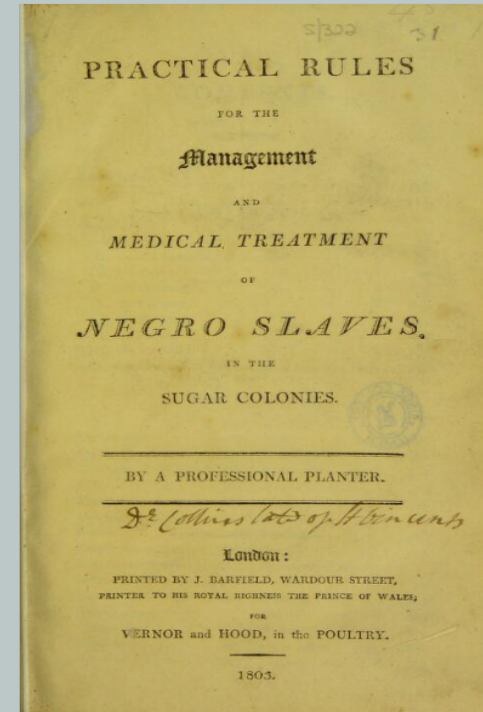
Before the rise of pro-natal policies in the Caribbean, Colonists expressed a preference for men over women. For example, John Terry, a manager of an estate in Grenada, stated that managers found it 'cheaper to buy African slaves than to breed [them]...they wished the [enslaved women's] children to die, for they lost much of the mothers work' during their pregnancy.



"Enslaved Woman, British West Indies, 1826", *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*, accessed July 1, 2021,

<http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/525>

After the emergence of pro-natal policies and the looming abolition of the slave trade in the early 19th century, planters sought to protect the fertility of their captives to repopulate their enslaved population. Fertile bodies were now seen as 'able' while infertile bodies were 'disabled.'



Planters deemed certain African ethnicities as being 'better breeders' than others and advertised ability to breed as a selling point. The fecundity of an enslaved women could increase value and attract buyers.

Cover of the book *Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves*

Published in 1803 by West Indies doctor, David Collins. Collins wrote about his preference for certain African ethnicities who were supposedly better breeders and advocated for plantation owners to purchase women to sustain enslaved populations. Collins actively discouraged the purchasing of enslaved people who he deemed infertile. Access via the Welcome Collection.

Conclusions

- ❖ Enslaved women's reproductive capacity was tied to economic value. Notions of 'able-bodiedness' and its connections to economic value help drive this shift from being anti-pregnancy to pro-pregnancy.
- ❖ Disability was the concept in which economic value was expressed and was used to benefit white colonists self-serving agenda.
- ❖ The shift in ideas surrounding pregnancy and able-bodiedness occurred as economic resources were changing. Before the gradual abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, planters viewed pregnancy as a tenuous condition that negatively affected their economic profit. After pro-natal policies were set, planters sought fertile women. The able body became that which was thought to be fertile while barren bodies were 'disabled.'
- ❖ Disability became the quantifier of wealth.
- ❖ The intentional breeding of specific ethnicities reveals a form of eugenics used to create the ideal labour force.

Further Research:

More research should be conducted on the intersections between reproduction, disability, and enslavement.

The emphasis in many of these sources is the physical body. However, some mention preferences for 'childlike' ethnicities. This has interesting implications for what it means to intellectually disabled in slave holding society and should be further explored.

References

Secondary:

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Primary:

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Witness examined- John Terry, of Afkrig, Yorkshire in *Abridgement of the Minutes of Evidence: Taken before a committee of the Whole House, to Whome it was Referred to Consider of the Slave Trade 1791* p.61