

Captivity, Power and Resistance in 18th Century Jamaica and New York

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Introduction

During the eighteenth-century, the English colonies of New York and Jamaica experienced tremendous conflict surrounding the ineffectual domination of enslaved people. The seizure of the black body was a difficult campaign resulting in mass violence, terror, and loss. During the 1700s, both colonies faced immense resistance that coincided the development of brutal systems of capture. By the end of the eighteenth-century, slavery begun to appear less rewarding, prompting the question of abolition in the English colonies. Destroyed cities, plantations, and life—eclipsed the productivity of black captivity.

For the past few decades, much scholarship has scrutinized the ability of enslaved people to resist and express self-agency. There has been a big push in academia to produce historiographies on slavery that “purposely subvert the overdetermining power of colonial discourses” produced by the archive.¹ This research will examine resistance and power as it relates to enslaved people, slaveholders and the colonial state. The purpose is to investigate the relationship between spectacular modes of domination, fear and the projection of power. The close examination of slave law and slave revolt reports, will be used to illustrate the slave’s crucial impact in shaping these spaces as social and political actors through their resistance. This analysis is important because it provides the impetus to demur the archive's production of dispossession and social death as it pertains to enslaved people.

Work by Vincent Brown, Diana Paton, Michel Foucault and Marisa Fuentes has been influential to this research in thinking about violence, projections of power and captivity. By comparing eighteenth-century Jamaica and New York, their scholarship provides important frameworks for inquiring into the socio-political power dynamics exhibited between slaves, the state, and slaveholders. Particularly, how does slave resistance affect the efficacy of captivity in these colonies? What role does the state play in administering control? What means of subjugation are being employed to besiege the black body. Moreover, how is power redefined, projected, and reallocated in these spaces of conflict?

Towards the end of the 1700s, the British Atlantic had experienced close to a hundred years' worth of destruction produced out of the clash between slaveholders and slaves. Elaborate means of control and domination were employed and continuously reinforced to prevent the rupturing of society dependent on the successful seizure of the black body. Yet, despite the strenuous efforts to establish an entire apparatus built on terror, violence and torture, slaves continued to transgress against the sovereignty of slaveholders and the state. This performance of power through acts of terror coincided the incessant breakout of rebellion and resistance thus demonstrating that power was contested as slaveholders struggled to besiege the black body. In 18th century Jamaica and New York, this conflict reveals that the power of slaveholders constantly needed to be reactivated through conquering the black body against unyielding slave resistance.

Overview of New York and Jamaica

English slave labor in the northern Atlantic colonies differed substantially from slave labor in the Caribbean. Ira Berlin referred to northern slavery as “one form of labor among many” that kept “the region’s pre-modern economy functioning and growing.”ⁱⁱ New York had a

commercial economy that engaged in large scale shipping, fishing and maritime trade. Slaveholders in this growing urban colony, were artisans, professionals, merchants and even politicians, which required slaves to perform various tasks and duties. This functionality of New York urban slavery meant that slaves "were highly mobile and multi-occupational."ⁱⁱⁱ

In contrast to New York, Jamaica was a slave society dominated by a wealthy and powerful slavocracy known as the Jamaican Plantocracy. Slaveholders owned massive plantation estates where they cultivated many acres of sugar cane. Sugar was the staple product of cultivation and export, making Jamaica one of the English's wealthiest colonies in the Caribbean next to Barbados. By 1799, the colonial office reported that there was a total of 101457 hogsheads (5,497,243 gallons) of sugar exported from Jamaica.^{iv} This figure illustrates that the sugar economy depended on incessant slave labor, defined Jamaica as a slave society.

By 1788 there were 256,000 slaves in Jamaica, making up 90.4% of the total population. Colonial Office records report that Jamaica "required an annual supply of 10,000 slaves to provide against the wear and tear of life that went on."^v In contrast, by 1790 New York's slave population was 21,329.^{vi} This made New York slavery, "the largest slave force in any English colony north of Maryland."^{vii} A census taken for New York, measuring population demographics throughout the 18th century, revealed that it's slave force was larger than Massachusetts, New Hampshire or even Connecticut, whose slave populations did not exceed five-thousand.^{viii}

The economic and demographic examination of Jamaica and New York illustrate that slave labor played an important role in both colonies. This also meant that the increased number of slaves heightened the threat of slave resistance and rebellion. Both colonies experienced numerous slave revolts throughout the 18th century. Memory of these events, associated with continued confrontation with slave deviance and subversion, exacerbated the fear of enslaved

people. In New York this coincided the difficulties of confining highly multi-occupational mobile slaves, and for Jamaica this coincided the presence of a massive slave population that outnumbered white colonists.

Slave Rebellions

Slaves throughout the Atlantic engaged in many forms of resistance on a daily basis. These included theft, sabotage, poisoning, running away and even suicide. Moreover specifically, white colonists were constantly afraid of the persistent threat of insurrection. Vincent Brown explains that “By the eighteenth century, the legislature had adapted their slave codes to local conditions, chiefly among them the persistent threat of open rebellion.”^{ix} The Jamaican legislators feared that the “permitting or allowing of any number of strangest negroes to assemble on any plantation or settlement, or any other place may prove of fatal consequence to this your Majesty's Island, if not prevented.”^x Likewise, in New York, legislators feared that the inability to restrain slaves would be a “very great hurt not only of the said masters but of his Majesties liege people owning negroes and other slaves.”^{xi}

On February 10th, 1708, four slaves had risen up and “murder'd their master and mistress and five children.”^{xii} This record is the earliest account of a New York slave uprising during the eighteenth century. Following this event, only four years later, New York would experience another slave revolt on a much larger scale. On April 6th, 1712, over twenty slaves rebelled. They were armed with "firearms, some with swords and others with knives and hatchets.”^{xiii} During the attack, the slaves "set fire to an outhouse of his masters" to attract frightened spectators, and upon their arrival "the slaves fired and killed them.”^{xiv} The last event was a slave revolt conspiracy that occurred in 1741, in which Judge Daniel Horsmanden exclaimed: “Yet this

is the second attempt of the same kind, that this brutish and bloody species of mankind have made within one age.”^{xv}

In Jamaica, there were two major Maroon wars in 1728 and 1795, and a long-fought slave rebellion in 1760 called Tacky’s War. Leading up to the 1730s, runaway slaves had fled their plantations, establishing Maroon communities in the Mountains since Spanish rule. To survive and thrive, they raided surrounding plantations and towns to provide support for their growing community. By “1730 they were grown so formidable, under a very able general, named Cudjoe, that it was found expedient to strengthen the colony against them by two regiments of regular troops”.^{xvi} After eight years of long-fought conflict, in 1738, "Governor Trelawney, by the advice of the principal gentlemen of the island, proposed overtures of peace with the Maroon chiefs.”^{xvii} Twenty-two years later, “two Coromantee Negroes, Tacky and Jamaica” initially assembled “ninety others” in their parish to initiate the second largest slave revolt in Jamaica.^{xviii} In the end, "fifteen hundred enslaved black men and women" rose up and "killed as many as sixty whites and destroyed many thousands of pounds worth of property.”^{xix}

These slave revolts were socially, politically and economically catastrophic events. For Jamaica, the colonial office reported twenty-one slave revolts in the 18th-century.^{xx} The expense of suppressing Tacky’s war in 1760 alone, cost one-hundred thousand pounds.^{xxi} This expense reveals two things. First, there was a struggle by Jamaican officials to put down the rebellion. Secondly, these rebels were actively recognized as a formidable force thus costing great expenditures to secure the colony. In New York, slave resistance forced colonist to create structures and systems aimed at constraining enslaved resistance. Jill Lepore in *New York Burning*, explains that “The body of legislation that constituted New York’s ‘Negro Law’ is a brutal testament to the difficulty of enslaving human beings, especially in cities.”^{xxii}

Projections of Power and Punishment

As enslaved rebels laid waste to the lives and property of white colonists and slaveholders, their resistance was an exertion of power. The rebels were taking control of their bodies against the will of their masters. In response, New York and Jamaican legislators mandated that "it is absolutely necessary, that the slaves in this island should be kept in due obedience to their owners, and in due subordination to the white people in general."^{xxiii} In fear of "slaves committing rebellious conspiracies and other crimes, to the ruin and destruction of the white people," white colonists used violence and the ability to punish to develop a systematic means of confronting the difficulties associated with subjugating slaves.^{xxiv}

Both New York and Jamaican Legislators gave slaveholders the ability "for any Master or Mistress of slaves to punish their slaves for their crimes and offenses at discretion."^{xxv} In Jamaica, slaveholders held massive estates that acted as independent sovereign domains. There, slaveholders were beyond the reach of law and surveillance in which "a barbarous Master or overseer has it in his power to evade them in various ways."^{xxvi} In 1717 Jamaica, an English physician observed that:

"the punishments for crimes of slaves are usually for rebellions burning them [...] whereby their pains are extravagant. For crimes of a lesser nature gelding or chopping off half of the foot with an axe. These punishments are suffered by them with great consistency."^{xxvii}

As "the treatment of the slave depends in a great measure upon the character and temper of his master or manager," slaves were subject to a broad spectrum of violations sexually and physically.^{xxviii}

While many Jamaican slaveholders exercised a level of autonomy outside the law, other slaveholders who were considered the wealthiest planters, served as members of the Jamaican assembly and supreme courts. John Stewart, a critic of English colonial slavery at the time, complained that neither the supreme court or assistant judges “are regularly bred to the law; they are appointed by the governor from among the most respectable gentlemen of property in each county.”^{xxxix} Diana Paton in *No Bond But the Law*, explains that this represented the “the conjoined power of slave owner and state.”^{xxx} Vincent Brown elaborates further, stating that “Slave codes and courts in Jamaica operated on behalf of a narrowly conceived public interest comprising little more than collective interests of slaveholders.”^{xxxi} As John Stewart pointed out in his exposé about Jamaica, “[...] state-operated penal and disciplinary mechanisms existed alongside “private” forms of punishment directed by slaveowners.”^{xxxii}

In New York, slaveholders "did not have the physical or financial means to supervise their chattel property.”^{xxxiii} Slaves in this colony were performing various tasks that put them outside of the surveillance of their masters. Thus, slave owners depended on support from courts and legislators to curtail and limit slave autonomy and mobility. A statute passed by the New York assembly mentioned that "many mischiefs have been occasioned by the too great liberty allowed to Negroes and other slaves.”^{xxxiv} The statutes in this act reveal that the assembly was concerned about the mobility of enslaved people that went unaddressed due to the "number of slaves" that "doth daily increase.”^{xxxv} Legislators also went to the extent to sanction the punishment against the “Lenity of the said master or person under whose care the said negroes or slaves are.”^{xxxvi} In response to previous slave revolts and the threat of wandering slaves, colonial authorities “set up a whole mechanism in order to better control the black population’s conduct

by staging arbitrary and expeditious trials, then by hardening the slave system and passing more severe slave codes.”^{xxxvii}

In both colonies, slaveholders either strongly depended on or made up the colonial government. Slave resistance and any act of subversion symbolized a threat to the entire British colonial system that was dependent on enslaved exploitation. In response, colonial governments were instrumental in reinforcing “violent and spectacular modes of power and domination.”^{xxxviii} In doing so, “The centerpiece of legal terror was punishment and execution used to set example” as a means of employing the “the most terrifying tactics of state control.”^{xxxix}

Following the suppression of the 1712 New York slave revolt, governor Robert Hunter sentenced some to be “burnt others hanged, one broke on the wheel, and one hung alive in chains in the town so that there has been the most exemplary punishment inflicted that could possibly be thought of [...]”^{xl} Jamaican law similarly required that all condemned slaves are “to suffer death, by hanging, burning, or such other ways or means.”^{xli} In both New York and Jamaica, state-administered punishment was a ritual and performance to restore their lost power over the black body. The public exhibition of burning bodies, mutilated limbs, and hanging corpses, was “needed only to compel the enslaved to respect the authority of fear.”^{xlii} In displaying the bodies of the ravaged and the dead to the public, slaveholders were using symbols to communicate their racial sovereignty.

Michel Foucault explains that “the exercise of punishment is carried out in such a way as to give a spectacle not of measure, but of imbalance and excess; in this liturgy of punishment, there must be an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority.”^{xliii} In Jamaica, laws mandated “that in all cases where the punishment of death is inflicted, the execution be performed in a public part of the parish, and with due solemnity.”^{xliv} Legislators wanted to

ensure that punishment was a spectacle and ceremony that dramatized the performance of their power. Foucault emphasizes that this exercise of punishment is an exertion of terror meant not to re-establish justice but to reactivate power that was lost.^{xlv} Yet, this power that slaveholders and the state sought to capture was never achieved. This was precisely because slaves continued to engage in resistance on an everyday basis, with periodic armed insurrections. Thus, throughout the rest of the 18th century, the black body would continue to be fought over, contested by slaveholders, the state, and the slaves themselves.

Conclusion

In 1832, "200 were killed in the field, and about 500 were executed" during the last slave revolt in Jamaica. The colonial office records estimated that the value of property destroyed was 161,596 pounds.^{xlvi} In order to rehabilitate planters, the British parliament granted a loan of 500,000 pounds to "assist the almost ruined planters."^{xlvii} Despite the success of suppressing the rebellion, the significant loss of property and life pressured parliament to eradicate slavery in 1834. In New York, the fear of insurrection created paranoid imaginations surrounding the perpetual difficulties of reinforcing captivity. Eventually pressured legislators passed the Gradual Emancipation Act of 1799, bringing New York slavery to an end in 1827. The eradication of slavery by the nineteenth-century is a testament to the high expenditure of battling against the enslaved for the seizure of their bodies throughout the eighteenth-century. Non-stop slave revolts alongside daily forms of resistance, pressured colonists to question the value of capturing the black body. These consequences reveal that enslaved people played a significant role in shaping the future of the Atlantic world through their acts of resistance as an exercise of power.

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