

Global histories

a student
journal

‘They were laid down and flogged, their coats are stained with blood’: Making Enslaved Womanhood Through Punishment and Deprivation in the British Caribbean

Toyin Akinkunmi

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2021.459>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 7, No. 2 (January 2022), pp. 25-37.

ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2022 Toyin Akinkunmi



License URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Publisher information:

‘Global Histories: A Student Journal’ is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. ‘Global Histories’ is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

'They were laid down and flogged, their coats are stained with blood': Making Enslaved Womanhood Through Punishment and Deprivation in the British Caribbean

BY

TOYIN AKINKUNMI

ABSTRACT

Reproduction, embodied violence, and a raced experience of gender: these are cornerstone themes in the study of women under slavery. However, this emphasis has resulted in the body playing similar parts in studies of enslaved black womanhood. This article seeks to historicise the conditions by which the body could gain its importance. To this end, this article relies on a close reading of eleven complaint cases, recorded by the Fiscals and Protectors of Slaves between 1819 and 1830, in the British colonies of Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo. Through limited third-person testimony, I seek to explore the ways in which enslaved women perceived what was owed to them by their masters and the Protector. I argue that enslaved womanhood could operate as a process: one borne out of contradictions, where universal issues of overwork, material deprivation, and physical punishment were increasingly treated as having distinctly gendered causes. Moreover, I argue that the era of amelioration within the British Caribbean modified this gendering process. Finally, I evaluate the impact the workarounds that masters were repeatedly allowed when it came to the bodily vulnerability of enslaved women, and the resulting new definition of womanhood that was shared by slavers and colonial authorities alike.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Toyin Akinkunmi is a new graduate from the University of Cambridge, where she obtained an undergraduate degree in History.

INTRODUCTION

On 11 March 1819, the women Nelletje, Julie, Lea, and Mietje of plantation Gelderland complained about their workload to the Fiscal, the chief judicial officer in the colony. As nursing mothers, they argued, they should not have been given a similar amount of weeding as their fellow enslaved people, because they ‘were not able to perform consequence of our carrying our children on our backs’.¹ When Nelletje and Mietje lit a fire to drive away the ‘sand flies,’ they also stopped to breastfeed their children. Viewing this as laziness, their manager whipped them.² Nelletje and her companions further emphasised that among them were young mothers: ‘Julie was locked up in the stocks, because she did not keep up with the rest of the gang, and threatened to be flogged the next morning. She is a young girl, with her first child’.³ The Fiscal considered this case, going as far as visiting the plantation in person instead of sending his *dienaars*, the force of investigators.⁴ He concluded, however, that the complaints were ‘greatly exaggerated,’ and the case was then dismissed.⁵ Such was the reality for many other women who visited the Fiscal and, after 1826, the Protector of Slaves. Women complained due to excessive work, and as a result, they were punished in a way that often deprived them of food, clothing, or their health. The colonial official to whom they complained would perhaps give their owner a written admonishment (or in extreme cases, a fine), and tell the women to return to their owners. This article will argue that this cycle of overwork, punishment (by means of material deprivation and embodied violence), and the corresponding appeal to the Protector of Slaves was key in constructing the category and identity of black womanhood in Britain’s colonies of Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo.

THE BODY AND GENDER IN HISTORIOGRAPHIES OF SLAVERY

Bodily exploitation has endured as a theme of exploration for gender historians within the historiography of slavery. The literary critic Hortense Spillers highlighted the role of enslavement in disrupting the link between body and gender. Her argument in ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’, that the movement of Africans to the Americas severed them from their bodily existence, an essential part of their subjectivity, continues to animate the historiography.⁶ However, her argument that dehumanising treatment reduced the enslaved body to flesh,⁷ and that therefore enslaved women were outside of the gender difference,⁸ relies on a troubling conceptualisation of gender. In ‘Mama’s Baby,’ gender is interchangeable with biological sex, and with that, womanhood is immutably tied to reproductive ability. Nevertheless, focusing on ‘women’s issues’ has grown the historiography of gender and slavery. Issues of the body, reproduction, and lifecycle are fundamental in the work of Barbara Bush, Darlene Clark Hine, and particularly Jennifer Morgan.⁹ For example, low fertility rates do not indicate the low importance of black women’s bodies in Morgan’s study. Instead, she argues that their sexuality shaped the methods by which slavers augmented their power, but also the methods by which enslaved women could resist them. However, her emphasis on ‘gynaecological revolt’¹⁰ repeats a problem in the work of those who focused on ‘women’s issues’. The body is taken as an

essential constant in womanhood. So too are the themes of reproduction, family, and physicality in enslaved women's history. The reasons why such dynamics came to dominate the lives of enslaved women are thus far underexamined.

The focus on the experience of black womanhood is partly due to theoretical advances in wider gender history. The work of black feminists Angela Davis and Deborah Gray White,¹¹ which has shown that black women were subject to different realities of gender than white women, remains influential. The popularity of intersectionality theory, following the publication of Kimberle Crenshaw's 'Mapping the Margins,'¹² has only strengthened similar approaches to black women's identity in the twenty-first century.¹³ Seeing black women at the sharp end of all forms of brutalisation and marginalisation can, just as with issues of the body, make these processes seem natural. This naturalisation of the subordinate status of women, and black women in particular, is not exclusive to the historiography of slavery and women. Jeanne Boydston's important 2008 article 'Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis' noted that treating gender as a universally applicable category has fixed its meaning and obscured its difference across time and space.¹⁴ This article attempts to take up Boydston's challenge and explore how the sociocultural dynamics of slave society were processes, able to be contested even as it came to predominate lived experiences and realities. The slave societies on the Guyanese coast, between the abolition of the slave trade and the practice of slavery, are prime locations to examine such questions.

THE COLONIES OF THE 'WILD COAST'

Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo were united formally as a single colony of the British empire in 1831, as British Guiana. Earlier, in 1812, Demerara and Essequibo had been joined. Even before their unification, however, their status as colonies on the frontiers of empire had long connected them. Aptly named the 'Wild Coast' by Dutch merchants when they first established trading posts there in the 1590s,¹⁵ these Guyanese territories would live up to their name. The climate was wet, raining for six total months of the year across two rainy seasons.¹⁶ Artificial canals, ditches, and other drainage systems cut across the landscape, with enslaved people being tasked to weed old ones and dig new ones.¹⁷ Along with the three rivers which gave the territories their names, lesser rivers and creeks such as the Corentyne, Cange, and Mahaica wound towards the jungle highlands. With the water came heat, humidity, and disease. It was no wonder that it took thirty years for the Van Pere family, who founded Berbice on a hereditary lease from the Dutch West India Company, to move from their coastal trading post into the interior in 1627.¹⁸ The establishment of their plantation Peereboom on the Berbice would be followed by those of other planters. Settlement remained on the rivers, on the coast, and out of the back country, populated by six Indigenous peoples.

In these thinly populated, marginal colonies, the British Parliament allowed continuity in Dutch law and in Dutch bureaucracy. Governors remained the executive officers, appointed by the metropolitan government, the Court of Policy and the Court of Justice were the chief judicial bodies, and the Fiscal remained the chief judicial officer. Importantly, this decision helps explain the particular importance of Guyana's slavery archival records. Unlike in other British Caribbean colonies, the retention of Dutch laws preserved limited first-person testimony for those enslaved.¹⁹ Beginning after the 1807 abolition of the slave trade, Britain pursued a policy of amelioration in its colonies, which accelerated through the 1820s until the 1834 abolition of slavery. These efforts to improve the conditions of the enslaved further allowed for the grievances of enslaved people to be delivered to the Fiscal and, from 1826 onwards, the Protector of Slaves.²⁰ Fiscals and later Protectors of Slaves overwhelmingly sided with the decisions of owners, managers, and overseers. Yet these officials operated in a period when the mandate of amelioration supported their authority. The institutional dynamic of intercession created tension; the commitment to defending the status quo worked against their duty to improve the conditions for the enslaved. This tension often surfaced in conflicts regarding the treatment and behaviour of enslaved women. Importantly, enslaved people knew which concessions were owed to them under ameliorative laws; they used these tenets and structures alongside longer standing means of improving their existence. These tenets included newer discourses about the appropriate treatment of enslaved women. Emerging from these complaints was a seemingly contradictory discourse, wherein bodily vulnerability, which was supposedly peculiar to womanhood, incentivised brutal treatment.

GENDERED DIVISIONS OF LABOUR AND PUNISHMENT

Punishing enslaved people differently depending on their gender was common practice in Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo. However, the development of the abolitionist movement in Britain changed the punishment of women. The Bathurst Circular of May 1823 prohibited the flogging of women,²¹ and the 1826 Berbice Slave Ordinance applied this specifically to the colony. Notably, the 1826 Ordinance went further than the Circular by including an enforcement mechanism: for example, it induced slavers to keep a Punishment Record Book, which the Protector of Slaves collected biannually for better oversight. It also differentiated the Protector of Slaves from the Fiscal, presumably also to improve scrutiny by establishing a dedicated official.²²

For most women who were enslaved, field work was their likely lot in life. Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo, like many other British Caribbean colonies, increased sugar production around 1800.²³ As in Jamaica and the French sugar islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe,²⁴ unskilled field labour was usually assigned to women. Of course, enslaved women were not limited to agricultural work. Domestic service was an option; additionally, in Nieuw Amsterdam, Berbice, there was a small contingent of enslaved people working as semi-independent artisans ('winkel slaves').²⁵ Yet positions as artisans and domestics were

few and far between, as well as being fiercely guarded. For example, Christina, a woman enslaved to the Winkel department, complained to Berbice's Protector of Slaves David Power about her assignment to field labour on the Nieuw Vigilantie plantation, arguing she was 'never used to it,' on account of her 'being brought up as domestic' by her Dutch father.²⁶ The Protector of Slaves confirmed with the Fiscal and later the Superintendent of the Winkel department that like other 'slaves with European blood on the paternal side,' she should resume her seamstress work: her white paternity qualified her to join the ranks of the small cadre of people 'chiefly employed as domestics or mechanics'.²⁷ Yet Christina was forced into field labour because when her 'first husband... Mr. J.V. Mittelholzer' left the colony, his brother took the opportunity to put her on the fields.²⁸ Attempts to evade field labour therefore often proved temporary. The enslaved people favoured for domestic or artisan labour were in precarious positions, constantly under threat of being relegated to field work at the discretion of their enslaver.

Both men and women did field work, which included picking coffee, cutting cane, carrying the megass (the fibre left after sugar cane milling), and weeding the crops. Yet women were more likely to stay in these backbreaking positions whilst men were more likely to rise into skilled and managerial occupations.²⁹ The case of Jacoba, Julia, Dorothea, Una, and Effa exemplifies this. They complained to the Protector in October 1829 that the manager Mr. Rush had punished them for four days straight. Instead of carrying megass for a third day, as they were ordered to, they had defied Rush by cutting canes. Consequently, they were stocked throughout the morning, then transferred to solitary until the next day. This cycle of punishment continued from Saturday to Monday, when they were let out 'between one and two o'clock A.M.,' after which they were told to carry megass again.³⁰ They defied Rush as they viewed carrying megass as 'the hardest work on the estate'.³¹ To substantiate this claim, they named their mill supervisor, Nelson. Nelson testified to the difficulty of carrying megass: because of the size of the mill, 'the megass comes from the mill too fast... [though] they worked as fast as they could'. Eating breaks were short and interrupted by work; on that Thursday 'it stopped twice, an hour each time, and the women then had, if they chose, time enough to clear away the megass and eat their victuals.'³² Moreover, despite Rush's claim that megass clearing was easier work than collecting it in the logie, it often meant eighteen-hour workdays. Jacoba described their workday as 'commenc[ing]... in the morning at three o'clock' after which they 'kept on carrying until nine o'clock at night, without stopping'.³³ Crucially, Jacoba and her co-complainants argued that prolonged megass-carrying duties were atypical, asserting that Rush was 'harder upon them than upon the other people, and that he did not do fairly; that he should not give some light work, and kill others with the heaviest work'.³⁴ The Protector for Demerara-Essequibo at the time, A.W. Young, did take measures against Rush, fining him a thousand guilders. Yet this fine was only for violating an article in the Slave Ordinance which prohibited punishing enslaved people with two punishments on the same day. In essence, Rush was not penalised for ordering Jacoba and her co-complainants to do excessive work. Moreover, Young stipulated that Rush be punished with the 'lowest penalty,'³⁵ in a case where the punishment of the complainants was severe. Even when the Protector

acknowledged managerial wrongdoing, such admonishments were not meant to extend to the way in which a manager divided workloads.

Enslaved people were placed into field gangs based on expectations of strength and, therefore, productivity. Enslaved women were divided further based on these lines: pregnant women and new mothers filled the weak gang, along with older children and the elderly, while women deemed capable were, in contrast, placed in the strong women gang. Managers gave women the most physical forms of labour for a longer period of their lives compared to their male counterparts. This dynamic was not an irrational contradiction in ideas about gender, as Lucille Mair implies.³⁶ The Berbice Slave Ordinance of 1826 established that managers were not to whip new mothers. However, women a few weeks postpartum were still considered robust enough for eighteen-hour days.³⁷ This reveals an important element of the gendering process - setting conditions for further exploitation shaped the meaning of 'woman', not the 'fact' of the body itself.

No matter which gang a woman was in, managers expected her to do more work than was possible. This is illustrated by the complaints of Beckey and Lydia, two women who worked in plantation Le Penitence's weak gang for weeding work. Lydia complained to the Protector of Slaves in October 1829 about having been put in solitary confinement 'every night constantly for three weeks past, because she is not able to weed two rows of young canes, the task given her every day'.³⁸ Beckey echoed this, adding that she had 'begged the manager to lessen her work, but he said no, that she must do as much as the others' and that she was also not allowed 'time to get her supper' because 'she is put in the dark room as soon as she comes from the field at sun down'.³⁹ Their recent pregnancies were likely what placed them in that gang - Beckey was three months postpartum, and Lydia two. Whilst confined with no access to her child, Lydia also suffered from the 'milk sour[ing] in her breast'. This symptom could cause swelling in the breasts, as described by Rosey, also from Le Penitence, who complained about a similar physical ailment five months prior.⁴⁰ The justification behind dividing labour into strong and weak gangs and the predominance of women in the weak gang did not stem from a sensitivity to physical capabilities, or from the natural capabilities of each gender. Rather, it opened up a dynamic in which a woman's failure to meet standards led to punishment, which correspondingly increased pressure to work harder. In this way, the gendered rationale for such division helped to establish the conditions for further exploitation. That men rose into managerial positions consequently reinforced the validity of using physiological rationale to explain gender and divide labour.

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT AND MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

In the era of amelioration, there was official disapproval towards whipping women. However, this did not mean that they were treated more gently. Instead, their material deprivation and physical punishment increasingly took the form of stocking and solitary confinement. Often referred to as the 'dark hole' or 'dark room' by enslaved people,

confinement for three days (sometimes whilst in the stocks) became the highest form of punishment for enslaved women.⁴¹

A confined person was given the bare essentials to survive, and sometimes less. Judy, Betsy, and Mary-Ann of plantation Peter's Hall complained about this in late August 1829. 'Ordered into the dark room' after the manager and doctor claimed they were faking illness to miss work, they were confined from 'Monday morning at seven o'clock until Friday morning at seven o'clock'.⁴² During this time, the manager fed them with a dehydrating solution of salt and water, which the women refused to drink, 'because this was not a proper way to give them salts; that they ought to have got a dose each with a little water, and then they would have drank it'.⁴³ This is a more extreme case of deprivation, however. Those confined expected starchy staples such as 'plantains and water' as detailed by Diana of plantation Arcadia, who had complained two months earlier.⁴⁴ Still, the dismissal of all of the women's complaints indicates light regulation of confinement conditions.

Women's acts of insubordination were often considered to be manifestations of their femininity. When Syrinsky, Maria, and Susette of plantation Sandvoort were brought to the Protector in late November 1828, it was not out of their own volition. Instead, their manager Peter Nicolson complained of their insubordination, for which he had confined them.⁴⁵ In their defence, they argued that they did not follow the driver's order to collect coffee because it 'was on the ground, which was more difficult [to collect] than when it is on the trees'.⁴⁶ The Protector of Slaves saw this as a campaign of insubordination that included 'refusing' to do work, and upsetting the plantation hierarchy in an unwomanly way. The manager brought several enslaved men from the plantation to testify;⁴⁷ 'Mars, a tradesman' argued that they 'used such bad language as he had never heard before from women' against the manager.⁴⁸ In particular, Blaize argued that Syrinsky and her companions implied that Nicolson was a negligent father and a failed property holder: 'they said, that he has been a planter on the East Coast, No' nothing, and that he has a wife and children, whom he had killed by bad usage'.⁴⁹ Therefore not only were Syrinsky, Maria, and Susette's offences judged to be insufficient work, but also insubordination that impugned the masculinity of their manager and delivered in a way that was deemed as too coarse to be womanly. It was likely because of this challenge to the gender and labour hierarchy that the Protector of Slaves personally imposed the harsh punishment of being 'kept in solitary confinement until the ensuing Monday, and also to be confined during the holidays'.⁵⁰

Such a sentence probably included further material deprivation, including the loss of new clothing. Solitary confinement was peculiar in that the material deprivation did not end on release. Clothing was typically distributed on the holidays, most notably Christmas, Whitsuntide, and Easter, and as such was a coveted resource.⁵¹ In spite of this, it was relatively common to not receive clothing for a long time. On 1 February 1819, the enslaved man Kees complained with nine others that their mistress Mrs. Sanders had not distributed new clothing in two years.⁵² The Fiscal recognised this as an extreme case of material deprivation, fining Mrs. Sanders over 500 guilders.⁵³ The deprivation of clothing was so commonplace because there was no law that specified the amount of yardage which

enslaved people should receive annually. This meant that yardage differed by estates. At the lower end of the spectrum, men might receive two loincloths and a jacket, whilst sixteen yards was on the upper end in 1829.⁵⁴ Moreover, the Fiscal tended not to enforce the harshest penalties when faced with the extreme and habitual instances of material deprivations, such as what Mrs. Sanders inflicted on those she enslaved. The Fiscal took no action when the people she enslaved complained in 1820 and again in 1823.⁵⁵ In this way, by being confined, Maria, Susette, and Syrinsky could likely have lost their chance at their year's supply of clothing. The case of Syrinsky and her companions demonstrated a contradiction which shaped the experiences of enslaved women: they were expected to conform to the ideal of woman as the more delicate gender, yet were still subject to heavy physical labour and punishment.

SEXUALITY, MORALITY, AND THE POLITICS OF DEPRIVATION

Of course, men too complained of overwork. Remus and Paris of plantation Blankenburg complained to the Protector in August 1829. Paris's complaint that 'the task required of him daily is too much' and that 'the manager, Mr. Bascom, confined him every night in the stocks, if the thirty beds [of sugar cane] are not finished' is reminiscent of the complaints of Syrinsky and her co-complainants.⁵⁶ Remus's addition that 'in consequence of the task given him being too much, he has no time to eat his victuals' similarly reflects Jacoba and her companions' complaints about giving up break time in order to finish their task.⁵⁷ Managers also disregarded the health of the men under them. In the case of Brutus, who complained to the Fiscal in June 1819,⁵⁸ the manager leveraged his health against him by ordering him to work with those ill with yaws despite his repeated refusals and flogged him when he would not comply.⁵⁹

However, enslaved women were subjected to a particular embodied violence. Along with the impact of reproductive labour on their productivity, the threat of sexual violence was built into the working environment. Brutus, for example, complained after manager Robert McDermott flogged him. Yet Brutus was ultimately flogged for refusing to allow McDermott to rape his daughter Peggy, as McDermott had 'kept the wife of Rule... [for] a few nights' then discarded her.⁶⁰ In the end, Peggy was not taken by manager Robert McDermott. Brutus' young daughter Aequasiba revealed that a woman named Fanny took the place of the sisters: 'the manager sent aunt Grace to call Peggy, and to say if Peggy would not come, I must; we said, daddy said we must not, I was too young... The manager sent to call Fanny. Fanny went up and found him in his room'.⁶¹ Nevertheless, that the bodies of Peggy, Aequasiba, Fanny, and Rule's wife were proxies in the contest between Brutus and McDermott indicates the importance of sexual politics in assigning workloads. In addition, the way masters and the Protector punished women for resisting overwork and deprivation reinforced ideas of female morality. The case of Matilda, a cook to a Mr. Holmes of Georgetown, exemplifies this. She complained in late September 1829 that Mr. Holmes 'licked her yesterday with an umbrella stick, across her shoulder, arms and head' as a punishment for not serving dinner early enough for his tastes.⁶² After beating her, he

'stripped her of her clothes and burnt them, and left her quite naked'.⁶³ Mr. Holmes denied burning her clothes, and countered that he beat her only with a switch, rather than an umbrella. Hearing this, the Protector dismissed the case, including Matilda's assertion that her clothes were destroyed. Yet his dismissal was revealing as it included an admonishment to Holmes about the correct way to punish a woman. In telling Holmes about the 'impropriety of striking a woman, even with a slight switch, however great the provocation might be,'⁶⁴ Protector Young gave a message: a woman could be materially deprived, but she should not be punished like a man. In this case, the notion of a delicate woman worked to reinforce the legitimacy of excessive punishment. Mr. Holmes reduced Matilda to sites of flesh, upon which he could inflict punishment. He stripped her naked, to humiliate her and expose her to the elements, presumably to demonstrate to Matilda her lack of bodily agency. Yet the Protector did not understand Matilda as an ungendered body, and he did not treat her state of enslavement as turning her into simple 'flesh', which Spillers argues would be the case.⁶⁵ The idea that Matilda possessed a female body worked to reinforce her enslavement. Here, embodied violence did not serve to sever her from womanhood. Instead, the Protector reinforced the conditional access that enslaved women might have to the ideal of female bodily delicacy in the era of amelioration.

Stripping recalcitrant women of their clothes was seen elsewhere as a fitting punishment. Georgiana, along with Sebella, Mersey, Sally, and Dido, complained of overwork in mid-September 1828. Georgiana argued that she was unable to finish her work because she had been on the tread mill for several hours over the past eight days and had been insufficiently fed. The manager nevertheless stocked her. Alongside her, Mersey, Sally, Sebella, and Dido complained that they were also put in the 'house stocks' for failing to finish watering the sugar canes.⁶⁶ To counter Georgiana, the civil magistrate Mr. Alvers and the owner of Plantation Reliance testified to the Protector that Georgiana had eaten 'bread and beef'.⁶⁷ Other enslaved people of the plantation Reliance, such as William and Fidel, claimed that she had boasted of eating mutton and had 'brought a sheep's bladder to show that a sheep was killed'.⁶⁸ In essence, they claimed she had eaten better than the norm, as subsistence food tended to be mashed plantain, cassava, or other starchy root vegetables, along with salted fish.⁶⁹ As punishment for this, Georgiana was ordered by the Protector of Slaves to 'be deprived of all her finery, and not allowed to wear any other than the estate's working dress, and to be confined solitarily from Saturday evening to Monday morning, for one month'.⁷⁰ Georgiana's behaviour was seen as excessive enough that she needed to be made an example of: the Protector directly punished her, and the stipulation that Georgiana be stripped of 'all her finery' implies an element of public humiliation. Indeed, four out of the five punishments given out by the Protector of Slaves between 1 September 1828 and 28 February the following year were to women complaining of overwork.⁷¹ Thus, in the eyes of both her masters and the official meant to assure her good treatment, the worst thing a woman could do was feign material deprivation whilst also underperforming. This, along with Georgiana's appeal to the Protector being used against her, shows that deviant womanhood was associated with the resistance of material deprivation.

The connection between gendered experience and punishment is further illuminated when one considers the other maximum penalties and offences for men and women. Men cumulatively were punished more often than women for theft. In the Abstract of Offences for July to December 1828, 161 men and only 15 women were flogged for petty larceny and theft. Yet for the offence of receiving stolen goods, the ratio was flipped, with 6 women and 3 men being punished for it.⁷² That masters perceived theft as a male crime can be seen in which crimes received maximum punishment - whilst men could get ninety-nine lashes for stealing, the female equivalent was 'making false complaints.'⁷³ Universal human needs of shelter and sustenance were, through cumulative interactions and conflicts with the enslaving class, differentiated by gender.

CONCLUSION

Boydston indicated that, as a dynamic of social organisation, gender could be made and unmade.⁷⁴ Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo, in the era of amelioration, was one such period in which the shape of enslaved womanhood underwent redefinition. Particularly important in this redefinition was the emphasis on the enslaved woman as possessing a delicate, female body. In this period between the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, the Protector and Fiscal increasingly defined enslaved womanhood as encompassing vulnerability and motherhood. The resulting conflict this redefinition brought to matters of overwork, punishment, and material deprivation highlights a characteristic of gender in Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo: it needed to continually be reinforced and renegotiated. Therefore, when Nelletje and her companions complained to the Fiscal in 1819,⁷⁵ they were one of many who were incentivised by the ameliorative moment to appeal to the Protector of Slaves based on these tenets of womanhood. Yet because the material subordination of women was important to the form of production, such appeals on the grounds of womanhood were often brushed away. In this way, black womanhood under slavery can be seen as a process characterised by essentialising the body and all its needs as specifically gendered. Such characteristics of bodily delicacy were then used to justify their exploitation. Hence, Spillers's assertion that the denial of motherhood as 'female blood rite'⁷⁶ was key to the enslaved position has some validity. The body was important in creating a modality of experience specific to the enslaved black woman. But rather than women being ungendered through the denial of fundamental female needs, as Spillers argues, this case study shows such female needs were in the process of being created and inculcated as natural amongst the enslaved women of Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo. The exploitation of women's physicality strengthened the idea of enslaved womanhood.

NOTES

¹ Investigation of a Complaint preferred by the negresses Nelletje, Julie, Lea and Mietje, each having infants in their arms, belonging to plantation Gelderland, to the Fiscal, on the 11th of March 1819, in *Papers relating to Slaves in W. Indies: V. Record of Proceedings of Fiscals of Berbice in Disputes between Masters and Slaves*, House of Commons Papers 401, vol. 26, 19th Century House of

Commons Sessional Papers (Parliament sitting 1826): 8, The National Archives, <https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1826-010157?accountid=9851>.

² Investigation of a Complaint preferred by the negresses Nelletje, Julie, Lea and Mietje, *Proceedings of Fiscals of Berbice*, 8.

³ Ibid, 8-9.

⁴ Randy M. Browne, *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 35.

⁵ Investigation of a Complaint preferred by the negresses Nelletje, Julie, Lea and Mietje, *Proceedings of Fiscals of Berbice*, 9.

⁶ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (1987): 65-81, www.jstor.org/stable/464747.

⁷ Spillers, 68.

⁸ Ibid, 73.

⁹ See Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Kingston, Jamaica: Heinemann, 1990); Darlene Clarke Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912-21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174692>; Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 11.

¹¹ See Angela. Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (London: The Women's Press, 1981); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985).

¹² Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241-1299, doi:10.2307/1229039.

¹³ See Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris, eds., *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2018); Natalie Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Morgan, *Laboring Women*; Diana Paton and Pamela Scully, eds., *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Jeanne Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis," *Gender & History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 558-83, <https://doi-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2008.00537.x>.

¹⁵ Browne, *Surviving Slavery*, 19.

¹⁶ Allyson Stoll, "Thoroughly Tested and Carefully Tried: Cane Culture, Agricultural Technology and Environmental Change in Nineteenth-Century Guyana," *The Journal of Caribbean History* 45, no. 1 (2011): 96-97, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/883695100>.

¹⁷ Browne, *Surviving Slavery*, 25.

¹⁸ Ibid, 19.

¹⁹ Ibid, 5.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ David Barry Gaspar, "Slavery, amelioration, and Sunday markets in Antigua, 1823-1831," *Slavery & Abolition* 9 (1988): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01440398808574945>.

²² Browne, *Surviving Slavery*, 39-40.

²³ Stoll, "Cane culture", 92.

²⁴ See Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 35; Lucille Mathurin Mair, "Women field workers in Jamaica during slavery," in *Slavery, Freedom and Gender: The Dynamics of Caribbean Society*, ed. Brian L. Moore (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), 186.

²⁵ Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 135.

²⁶ Complaint, No. 8, *Reports from Protectors of Slaves in Colonies of Demerara, Berbice, Trinidad, St. Lucia, Cape of Good Hope and Mauritius*, 1828-1831, House of Commons Papers 262, vol. 15, 19th Century House of Commons Sessional Papers Collection (Parliament sitting 1830-1831), 228, <https://parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1830-012809?accountid=9851>.

²⁷ See Letter from M.S. Bennett, Esq., to D. Power, Esq. &c. &c. &c., under Complaint, No. 8, *Reports from Protectors of Slaves*, 228.

²⁸ Letter from M. S. Bennet, *Reports from Protectors of Slaves*, 228.

²⁹ For Berbice and Demerara-Essequibo, see Walter Rodney, "Plantation society in Guyana," *Review* IV, no. 4, (Spring 1981): 649, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40240885>; and Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 62. A similar dynamic was found by Mair in her study of cane workers in Jamaica. See Mair, "Women field workers in Jamaica during slavery," in Moore, *Slavery, Freedom and Gender*, 183-196.

³⁰ Complaint No. 57, *Reports from Protectors of Slaves*, 105.

³¹ *Ibid*, 104.

³² *Ibid*.

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 103.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 105.

³⁶ Mair, "Women field workers", 195.

³⁷ Trevor Burnard, "Toiling in the fields: valuing female slaves in Jamaica, 1674-1788," in *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas*, ed. Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 42.

³⁸ Complaint No. 58, *Reports from Protectors of Slaves*, 106.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 105.

⁴⁰ See Complaint No. 5, *Reports from Protectors of Slaves*, 48.

⁴¹ Abstract of Offences, *Reports from Protectors of Slaves*, 307-8.

⁴² Complaint No. 36, *Reports from Protectors of Slaves*, 78.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Complaint No. 17, *Reports from Protectors of Slaves*, 60.

⁴⁵ This was something slavers could do, under the 1772 code 'Rule on the Treatment of Servants and Slaves', which allowed for them as well as enslaved people to complain to the Fiscal and ask for redress of complaints. See Browne, *Surviving Slavery*, 34-5.

⁴⁶ Complaint No. 14, *Reports from Protectors of Slaves*, 231.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ List of Punishments directed by the Protector to be inflicted on slaves, from the 1st September 1828 to the 28th February 1829, inclusive, as appears on reference to his Book of Complaints for that period, *Reports from Protectors of Slaves*, 212.

⁵¹ Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 163.

⁵² Investigation of a Complaint preferred by Nine Negroes, the property of Mrs. J. Saunders, residing up the Berbice River, by his Honor the President and the honorable member Mr. Helder. Berbice, 1st Feb. 1819, *Proceedings of Fiscals of Berbice*, 6.

⁵³ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁴ Thompson, *Unprofitable Servants*, 85.