

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES
CENTRE FOR GENDER & DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
(ST. AUGUSTINE)

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF CARIBBEAN MASCULINITY: TOWARDS A RESEARCH
AGENDA - A SYMPOSIUM**



"BLACK MASCULINITY IN CARIBBEAN SLAVERY"

by

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January 11 - 13, 1996

We are engaged at this postcolonial juncture in several discrete but interactive discourses with respect to ideological constructions and social effects of black masculinities.

Historical representations of these masculinities, and relationships to the social texts of everyday life, have produced discernible cultural results over time. Some of these results have attained an intensive discursive status that have problematised popular behaviours of black males, now perceived as labyrinths, or laboratories, for detecting the origins of phenomenal cultural activities. A new language has evolved that identifies a startling 'discovery' of the extent to which black males are psychically defeated and socially at risk. The discourse claims the identification of socially dysfunctional masculine attitudes and cultural tendencies. Analytical subtleties apart, generalised is the notion that black men have been parked away by history in a derelict cul-de-sac as far as the ideologies of modernity and development are concerned.

In these conversations more about the historical perspective is ignored than stated.

Historical evidence is oftentimes condemned and discredited as it is considered the instrument of an apologetic voice for persistent expressions of particular anti-social types of masculinities. Linked to this posture is a suspicion of the traditional historians's craft as a supportive activity of patriarchy within gender discourses. What is proposed here is not an attempt to confront these positions nor to restate the case for an historical perspective. Rather, this 'labour' is to reinter the historical narrative at the juncture of the

slave society with different (self?) concerns in search of perspectives that may identify foundation structures, social and ideological continuities.

Definitional specification requires that since our concern is with black masculinities, analytic attention should focus on the terms 'Black' and 'male'. The proposal here is that we adopt them both at the general level of popular understanding, and take on board as an analytic utensil the view of Hare and Hare that discusses masculinity in terms of a culturally determined tendency to act as a provider and protector. We do this while recognising that the ideology of masculinity is largely "a socially produced script" on which role fulfillment is coded. While the text of this script is under constant revision, and is therefore unstable, certain fundamental elements can be identified. These constitute the rollers on which hegemonic ideologies travel through changing social realities. As male role fulfillment change over time, representations of masculinities are revised, an indication of the interactive nature of ideology and institutional power.

The intention here, then, is to discuss how the masculinities of enslaved blacks were constructed and violently repressed within the hegemonic structures of white male owned and ruled colonial capitalism. We are dealing therefore with differentiated, marginalised, subordinated and stigmatised masculinities that struggled also by violent means to develop what Messner describes as an "autonomous positional identity". This dialectical

process was driven largely by an intense concern for personal and collective survival, and a general quest for power and its privileges.

During slavery the right to life and social liberty was denied blacks not on the basis of gender, but by the race inequities of colonial culture. Gender differences, however, and inequalities among males and females, served to demonstrate how considerations of race differentiated black and white masculinities. At the same time it provides a lens through which to view attempts by men to construct and legitimise their domination and control of women in private and public social relations. Connell's concept of the "gender order" is relevant and useful. The "gender order" is presented as a turbulent, dynamic process that moves the analysis beyond static gender - role theory and reductionist concepts of patriarchy. It demonstrates, furthermore, how competing masculinities - some hegemonic, some marginalised, interact particularly with respect to the shared project of the domination of social culture, material resources and women. Not all men, however, consumed equally the produce of this ideological investment - hence endemic contests between masculinities across class, ethnic and cultural lines.

The enterprise of Caribbean colonisation was essentially a white male owned and managed project. The construction of agrarian and mercantile systems called into existence the institution of chattel slavery as the mechanism to exploit the labour services

of Africans. For most of the slavery period, Caribbean businesses displayed a preference for male labour. Establishing infrastructure for large scale production (land clearance, communications networks etc) in formative periods generated a relatively greater demand for muscle power. The slave trade, responsive to this preference, delivered a larger number of males to the region. Colonial societies were constructed therefore upon the demographic basis of a dominant white-black male encounter. Over time, the process of maintaining and reproducing these business diversified labour demands, which together with limited natural growth performance in a few places, helped to equalised sex-ratios. Most territories, however, were never normalised and males in both races predominated in rural and urban communities.

The origins of the institution of slavery, however, can be discussed in terms of the military defeat and subsequent violent subordination of blacks by white men. While it is true that the slave trade flourished, in part, as a result of voluntary commercial exchange between European and African male business elites, the fact of European military conquest and superiority in parts of West Africa provides a compelling explanatory context. In most West African societies during the period of the slave trade States were constructed and defended by armies drawn mostly from among men. The enslavement in the Caribbean of defeated male warriors, now required to labour on estates, symbolised the achievement of white male triumphalism. While women also participated in the

political and military rule of some West African societies, the prevalence of dominant patriarchal formations reinforce the significance of this development.

Black men, then, embarked on a Caribbean experience within the context of institutional environments that reflected the conquistadorial ideologies and interests of white patriarchy. Empowered white men ideologically represented their masculinities by reference to the dominant imperatives of their imperial project. Central to these representations was the quest for monopolistic control, ownership, possession of these societies. The possession of power, profits, glory and pleasure was specified a core element in the articulation of masculine ideologies in which black men were negated and relegated to otherness. Outnumbered by black men in West Africa, and the Caribbean, white men privileged the apparatus of mind power over body, appropriating for themselves an iconography of the former and projecting an imagery of black men with the latter. The conquest and control of the black male body, and its denial of a mind, therefore, reside at the core of the dichotomised masculine Caribbean contest.

The managerial logic of empire, established as a function of white patriarchy, fuelled forces that produced a complex apparatus for the ideological representation of black men. The control of slaves required it. The survival of colonialism mandated it. Black men, as the social majority, had to be 'kept', and kept down, in order to ensure the success of

these socio-economic operations. Africans, and their creole progeny, understood and shared important tenets of white men's ideologies of masculinity as represented within the colonial encounter. Political authority, economic power, and domestic dominance held together the values of a white elite masculinity that was culturally familiar to black men. Similarly, the denial of these states of consciousness and experience to disenfranchised and dispossessed white women within the colonial project set in place the conditions for the definition and subjugation of womanhood. Like the white woman, the black male was denied what was familiar, and his masculine impulses targeted by surveillance systems that directed the nature of everyday life.

Black masculinities, then, were politicised within the context of white patriarchal ideological representations. In social relations, the black male and his offspring were fed, clothed, and sheltered by white men whose hegemonic ideology determined that being 'kept' and "kept down" were symbolic of submissive inferiority, and gendered as feminisation. He received as a concession, in addition to his subsistence rations, allocations of leisure time; was denied consumer access to the night by strict regulatory systems; could neither claim nor assert any right beyond or outside those of his owner - in public or private social spheres. According to Patterson, he was natively alienated; his masculinity dishonoured, and his being rendered "socially dead". The condition of being 'kept' and "kept down", then, located black masculinities within white patriarchy as

subforms starved of role nourishment, and ideologically “feminised”.

Chattel slavery, then, an institution built upon private property rights in persons, was thoroughly gendered in its design and functions. Throughout the Americas, European enslavers decreed, for example, that the status of an infant at birth should not be derived from that of the father. Slaveholders had neither social nor economic interest in black fatherhood. Black children at birth entered into a social relation that was predetermined by the status of their mothers. Legally, it had absolutely nothing to do with the status of the father. Children fathered by free black men or white men were born into slavery once their mothers were slaves. Since white women, by virtue of their race, were not enslaved, their children under all paternal circumstances were born into freedom. Throughout the West Indies white women produced free-born children with enslaved men, as well as free black and free coloured men. Slavery, therefore, as a socio-legal status, completely marginalised and alienated fatherhood, and focussed its attention upon motherhood. Estate managers generally had no policy interests in the identity of the fathers of children. The documents on families, for example, are rich and detailed on the maternal dimensions of kinship, but silent on paternity. Fatherhood as an aspect of masculinity, therefore, was buried within the archival literatures of the estates.

Such issues raise the question of men’s ‘invisibility’ within historical records, a matter

that has been considerably underestimated. Describing the enslaved woman as essentially a 'submerged mother', Edward Brathwaite locates her 'invisibility' within the 'archival material' and suggests that it is but an 'aspect of that general invisibility which haunts [black history]'. For him, the slave woman, being black and female, suffered a "double invisibility" which in turn promoted an historiography of neglect. There is, however, a significant conceptual and empirical problem to be tackled with respect to the "invisibility thesis". It has to do with the fact that the evidence historians have (over!)used as base lines for social history narratives -- deeds, wills, manumission lists, diaries, plantation accounts, managers reports, etc -- says considerably more about enslaved women than it does about enslaved men. The slave male, in fact, is the one who was rendered largely invisible.

This characteristic of the evidence has to do with the female-centred nature of the slave system. Its principal concern was with maternity, fertility, the management of white households, and the socio-sexual expression of patriarchal power and ideology. More is recorded about slave mothers than slave fathers; more was said about female slave lovers of white males than about male slave lovers of white women. Certainly, in this last regard, enslaved men have been rendered fully invisible, though partly, it should be said, for their own safety. The general intimacy of slave women with the empowered agents of the colonial world -- white male and female -- placed them at the top of the

documentary queue . In these records women appear in diverse social actions other than those related to labour and crime. This condition, in turn, raises the more important question as to whether modern historians of slavery -- mostly male -- have contaminated historiographic discourse with gendered constructs about enslaved women's 'invisibility'. Slaveowners' fictional literature where these representations of black masculinities were constructed and ventilated used a language which made reference to the term 'infantilization' rather than "feminisation". Infantilization, however, was also a central concept used in slaveowner's representation and 'imaging' of women. The black male, by virtue of being denied dominant masculine roles and access to recognised institutional support systems on which to construct counter-concepts, and kept in a childlike welfare subsistence economy, was conceived to have degenerated into a pre-gender consciousness - a condition of nothingness associated with innocence and femininity.

In this literature, furthermore, slaveowners coined the terms 'Quashee' to represent their ideological characterisation of black men. Quashee was 'gay, happy-go-lucky, frivolous, and cheerful'. In his 1808 account of Jamaican slave society, John Stewart described Quashee as "patient, cheerful, and commonly submissive, capable at times of grateful attachments where uniformly well treated". He was also "possessed of passions not only strong but ungovernable ... a temper extremely irascible; a disposition indolent, selfish, and deceitful; fond of joyous sociality; riotous mirth and extravagant show." Stewart, in

addition was keen on informing his reader that “creole” white women exhibited many of the personality traits of “Quasheba” - the feminine of Quashee.

Quashee, then, was ideologically constructed and fixed within texts as the typical black male in a state of enslavement. He was “docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated by childish exaggeration.” In addition, his relationship with his master was one of dependence and childlike attachment; it was indeed this childlike quality that was the very key to his being.” Slaveowners’ archives assure us that black males as “a group of atomized, childlike individuals had no means by which to relate themselves to others save the integrative framework provided by the owner’s authority. The self-(slave) they related to was a direct function of the other (owner).”

The congruousness in the concepts of infantilisation and feminisation as systems of representation of the black male indicates clearly the direct nature of slaveowners’ political and ideological intention. As distortions of the relations of everyday life these representations operated as important weapons, with measurable political effects, in that they shaped the encounter between whites and blacks. By fixing reality through language and fantasy slaveowners denied that black men were ‘men’ in the sense of their ascribed normative characterisation of manhood. This discourse, as an apparatus of power,

provided slave owners with several privileges - particularly the psychic courage to manage colonial the enterprise.

The slaveowning community, considerably outnumbered by subordinated groups, devised systems of governance by which it could reproduce its dominance. Military might was important, but insufficient. The slaveowner had to walk among the slaves, eat what they cooked, and sleep within their reach. To function within this environment it was necessary to psychologically 'read', 'write', and imagine subordinate masculinities as inversions, represented within popularised gender ideology as, timid, passive, and submissive.

The systems of violent terror used to suppress and punish insubordination - burning alive, dismemberment, castration, lynching etc - were conceived to offer the slaveowner a functional degree of comfort in the assumption of success. When we enter the world of Thomas Thistlewood, for example, a English manager/planter in Jamaica, 1750-86, the language and political effect of this violent power is encountered: Thistlewood records in his diary:

- Wednesday, 28th January, 1756 - Had Derby well whipped, and made Egypt shit in his mouth.
- Friday, 30th July, 1756: Punch caught at Salt River and brought home.

Flogged him and Quacoo well, and then washed and rubbed in salt pickle, lime juice and bird pepper; also whipped Hector for losing his hoe; made New Negro Joe piss in his eyes and mouth.

- End of October 1766 - A Stout Negro man of Dr. Lock's is now gibbitted alive in the Square ... a resolute rebel.

Actions such as these highlight the contradictory and ambivalent nature of stereotyped representations as major discursive strategies. The physical violence directed persistently against black men by white men indicates the fact of their recognition of an irrespressible black masculinity, and their inability to fix behaviour to fantastic patterns of constructions. This disarticulation between social reality and imagination, however, provided the instability needed to constantly reconceive the constituent elements of representations in order to express changing forms of domination. In addition, it contributed to the evolution of complex language forms and perceptions that tracked and targeted the multiple forms and expressions of black masculinities. The thought-leader (sage, priest, obeah man) for example, was stripped conceptually of power within a representation of his role as indicative of a childlike ignorance of rational thought and scientific method. The Ashanti-Mandingo warrior was stereotyped and represented as easily tamed and subdued by caring friendship and compassion from an owner. In all cases, monopolistic power to possess and define was pursued by the dominant white

masculinity. Subordinate white males whose dependent social existence openly subverted from within the ideological texts of hegemonic masculinity were driven into colonial outbacks, and their condition accounted for in terms of the degenerative impact of tropical climates and intimate exposure to black culture.

Black men, furthermore, were expected to offer non-violent responses to the social effects of white men unrestricted sexuality. Mastery, it was understood, demanded unrestricted access to the sexuality of the enslaved as a right and benefit. Both male and female slaves were sexually exploited by white men who understood their masculine authority in terms of its power over the life, body, and mind of the enslaved. Patterson asserts:

“The sexual exploitation of female slaves by white men was the most disgraceful aspect of Jamaica slave society. Rape and the seduction of infant slaves; the ravishing of the common law wives of the male slaves under the threat of punishment, and outright sadism often involving the most heinous forms of sexual torture were the order of the day.”

Whitely, during his three months tour of Jamaica in 1832, was told by a white book keeper that he had 12 ‘negro wives’ in six months, and that this was expected of him by his peers. Slave husbands or partners who protested, noted Henry Coor, speaking in 1791

before a Parliamentary Commission on the Slave Trade, were flogged “under the name of some other misdemeanour.”

Non-slave owning observers of slavery paid particular attention to the impact of white men’s sexual culture upon black masculinity. The denial of black men the right to family and patriarchal status, and its occasional conferment as a concession for ‘good’ behaviour, meant that they could not expect to assert domestic “authority as a husband and a father”. His wife, Cooper noted in 1824, was the property of another, and her commitment to the owner took privilege over any duty to husband or family. “The net result of all this “, Patterson states, “was the complete demoralisation of the Negro male.” He concludes:

“Incapable of asserting his authority either as husband or father, ... the object of whatever affection he may possess, beaten, abused and often raped before his very eyes, and with his female partner often in closer link with the source of all power in the society, it is no wonder that the male slave eventually came to lose all pretensions to masculine pride and develop the irresponsible parental and sexual attitudes that are to be found even today.”

The anonymous author of an abolitionist pamphlet was explicit on the point: “Patent submission to the lash and manly feelings are incongruous”. The pamphleter asked

whether slavery had not destroyed any masculine feelings slaves may possess, and intimated that white men pursued this objective in several ways - particularly in the sphere of competition with black men for sexual access to black women.

A revisit to the diary of Thomas Thistlewood reveals three issues:

- (a) Thistlewood's claim of a right to sexual access to all black women on the estate, and the right to punish black men who confront or in any way question this right.
- (b) The right to allocate black women for sexual pleasures to his friends, irrespective of their domestic relations with black men.
- (c) The right to punish black men for physically abusing their 'wives' or 'partners', since this constituted a violation of his property rights in the female. With respect to the first of these, Thistlewood documents some of his sexual encounters with enslaved estate women during 1751:

8th January, "cum Phibbah".

9th January, "Pro. Temp. A nocte. Sup. lect. Cum Marina"

10th September, "About 2 am Cum Negroe girl, super floor

21st November, "about '1am. Cum Ellin, an Ebo, by the morass side, Sup. Terr. Toward the tittle plaintain walk'

1st October, "Last night cum Dido

11th October, Paid Dr. Joseph Horlock, for curing me of the clap, £2.75s. 6d

- yet am in some doubt if perfect. Was 44 days curing.

3rd December, Last night cum Jenny. Jenny continue with me as noctibus

21st December, In the evening cum Susanah (a Congo negro) Stans, in curing-house.

In the early part of 1752, he adds Sabina, Phoebe, Little Mumber, Warsoe, Little Lydde and Daphne to the list.

Many of Thistlewood's females lived with 'husbands', whose protests were occasionally recorded in his diary. Dido's 'husband' was flogged for beating her when he discovered that she slept with Thistlewood. When Jenny courted a negro man from a neighbouring property, Thistlewood took away a necklace and fine clothing he had given her. When she promised not to see her lover, he returned the gifts. On 6th March, 1754, he whipped Quacoo for severely beating his wife Yara, and on the 16th he advised Sancho not to beat his wife Quasheba, but to separate from her, when he found her sleeping with Morris the estate cooper. On April 2nd, however, he did not punish Cobenna for giving London "a good thumping" after he was caught having sex with his wife Rossanna. Lincoln, however, was less fortunate. He was severely dealt with by Thistlewood for twice beating his wife Violet after a domestic dispute. When he hired Robert Gibbs, a Barbadian, as overseer, he allowed him "use" of Nanny as a 'wife', and 'matched' Susanah with the Irish overseer, Christopher White,' for the same purpose.

That black men shared some basic patriarchal values with white men, expressed in terms of an assertion of masculine authority and power over women, seems evident from Thistlewood's and other accounts. Their inability, however, to 'live' this ideology outside the jurisdiction of dominant white authority, confirmed the subordinated status of their masculinity. There were areas, nonetheless, where black men were 'allowed' by white men to exercise male power in relation to black women. Moitt tells us that in the French slave colonies, especially Saint Domingue, "Courrir les filles" (girl-hunting) was a popular past time among male slaves who were given leave from estates by overseers and owners to wander through the countryside in search of sex. The rape and kidnapping of black women was a common enough expression of this activity. When the Barbados Council debated in 1823 a dispatch from the colonial office which called for an end to the unsupervised flogging of slave women by black drivers, councillor Hamden invoked the interest of black husbands in his opposition to the proposed policy. He told Council: "Unfortunately our black ladies have rather a tendency to the Amazonian cast of character; and I believe that their husbands would be very sorry to hear that they were placed beyond the reach of chastisement."

With respect to Jamaican slave society more needs to be known about the role of kidnapping and sexual exploitation of slave women in the formation of maroon communities. Maroon men did kidnap plantation women in order to secure wives and

force labour; this much figures prominently in the social history of all colonies that harboured maroon communities. Little is known, however, of the life-experiences of slave women who were integrated into the polygynous households of maroon males. It is entirely possible, however, that some maroon women experienced at the hands of black men a continuation of the kinds of occupational and resource discrimination, and sexual domination, that typified enslavement on the plantations.

Esteban Montejo, for example, the Cuban runaway slave, expressed views of women and sexual relations in his autobiography that corresponded to the ideological expression of his owner's masculinity, and that of other men within the slaveowning community.

Slaveowners, of course, knew this, and developed an obsessive interest in the sexual masculinity of black men. Terrified in their fantasies about the power implicit in this representation, white men developed a range of social attitudes and policies concerning relations between the white women and black men. Castration and lynching were placed before black men as an inevitable response by white male to sexual access to the white woman.

The hostility of colonial power, and the fetishism of black masculine sexually were but aspect of a wider discourse that involved the violent responses of black men in the projection of their own perceptions of masculine values. Violence was the principal

social action by which enslaved black men could subvert the security and stability of the slaveowner's project. Only violence by slaves could terminate the colonial mission as an act of self empowerment by the enslaved community. Black men could take away white men's lives and property through violence, and this became endemic to the discourse. It wasn't that black men needed violence to assert or secure their masculinities, but that the right to take life, which white men held as a constitutional privilege, could also be grasped by them - hence the function of the subaltern's violence as the ultimate equaliser.

Colonial masculinities, then, took social form within the context of a culture of violence which embraced all relations of social living and consciousness. It was the principal instrument of all contending parties; it held them together and tore them apart. It assumed a quasi - religious character as groups sought constantly to possess the balance of power and terror. Creole black males were socialised as infants within this crucible of death, blood and suffering. They learnt to use it as it was used against them. This explains in part the enormous loss of life this region experienced in near 100 slaves revolts that indicate how relations between black men and white men were characterised by ongoing psychological warfare and bloody battles.

Within the black community, emancipation provided a grand opportunity of reconstruction, particularly with respect to the perceptions of masculinity outside of

warfare and power conflict over life and liberty. At the same time it reduced the intensity of the struggle for political determination, economic power, and cultural self-definition. In most parts of the region, white hegemony within economic life, social institutions, and ideological discourse persisted. Black men remained marginalised and subordinated; today, the cultural values of these subordinate masculinities seem at odds with new social imperatives, many of which have emerged from the regenerative forces within women's and feminist movements.

Implosive community violence remains an expression of subordinate black masculinities. The seemingly rudderless quest for an inversion of the dominant agenda has left the streets of communities, the language of social discourse, sexual relations, political dialogue, and lyrics of popular music, shot through with violence, virtual and real. That it is phenomenal, the evidence is clear; that it is new or surprising is less obvious. New stereotypes of black masculinities are taking shape in much the same way that they did during the slavery period. Now, as then, these representations are part of a process of subjectification necessary for the perpetuation of forms of discursive and discriminatory power.

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