

Loyal Men, Licentious Women: Ameliorating Reproduction, Resistance, and Religion in the
British West Indies, 1801-1833

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I. *Amelioration Politics of Slavery in the British West Indies*

In April 1802, Dr. John Williamson wrote in his personal diary on the state of an enslaved woman he cared for while working on a plantation in British ruled Jamaica: “A woman, at Dovehall, complained of fever, severe spasmodic contractions in the lower part of the belly and considerable hemorrhagy of the blood from the uterus. She was believed to be pregnant; but then had been suspected of using means for abortion... It is probable that abortion did take place.”¹

Dr. Williamson would not be the first or last to publicize works that recorded abortions across plantations in Jamaica. This experience of this enslaved woman possibly seeking out means for an abortion serves as an example of numerous accounts that would follow throughout the early nineteenth century British Caribbean. The emergence of these written testimonies witnessing abortions in enslaved communities would become politicized in debates about the abolition of slavery in Great Britain between the 1780s and the 1830s. Abortion’s supposed prominence amongst African women in the British West Indies became a key issue for both provincial proslavery interests and metropolitan abolitionists.²

In the wake of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, it became apparent that enslaved populations were declining in fifteen of the twenty British West Indies colonies.³

¹ Williamson, John. *Medical and Miscellaneous Observations Relative to the West India Islands*. Vol. 1. Alex Smellie, 1817.

² Bryan Edwards, one of the most prominent members in British Parliament and member of the colonial assembly in Jamaica leading the movement for implementing amelioration measures in the British West Indies, wrote in a letter in 1795: “The consequence of the redundancy of males say you is shocking licentiousness and profligacy; among the women who are exposed to temptatious which they cannot resist – barrenness, frequent abortion, and want of maternal tenderness to their children.” Although abortion had been discussed in Parliament as early as 1789, Edwards’ raising the issue of abortion became pertinent toward the rising concern around abortion in relation to ameliorating the conditions of slavery through the British West Indies.

Source: Preston, William. A letter to Bryan Edwards, Esquire : containing observations on some passages of his history of the West Indies. London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1795. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive. https://link-gale-com.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/apps/doc/CY0105086655/SAS?u=viva_uva&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=5020b088&pg=15.

³ Burnard, Trevor, and Kit Candlin. "Sir John Gladstone and the Debate over the Amelioration of Slavery in the British West Indies in the 1820s." *Journal of British Studies* 57, no. 4 (2018): 771.

Britain's largest colony in the West Indies, Jamaica, had the largest population of enslaved people at 1.2 million. In the year following the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, the population fell to less than 350,000. Similarly, Britain's second largest colony of Barbados captured 600,000 Africans from the Golden Coast between 1640 and 1807. But the population of enslaved laborers in Barbados declined to account for 69,000 to 75,000 individuals.⁴ Scholars attribute this population decline across the British West Indies to the brutality of the living and working conditions.⁵ However, instead of enslavers recognizing the baneful effect that plantation conditions had on enslaved populations, they instead attributed the decline to Obeah and abortions.⁶

In response to this decline, metropolitans sought to implement legislation to ameliorate slavery. The planter elite class and their associates interpreted amelioration as reducing the number of abortions among enslaved women. By reducing the number of abortions and reversing the population decline, planters saw amelioration as a means to perpetuate slavery and agreed to implement the measures. On the other hand, abolitionists perceived enslaved women having abortions as evidence that supported their assertion that slavery was retrograde. Ameliorating slavery to abolitionists offered solutions to preventing abortions and abolishing slavery. Parliament shared the view with abolitionists that amelioration would eventually lead to the abolition of slavery.⁷

⁴ Fergus, Claudius K. *Revolutionary Emancipation: Slavery and Abolitionism in the British West Indies*. LSU Press, (2013): 8.

⁵ Mason, Keith. Review of Demography, Disease and Medical Care in Caribbean Slave Societies, by B. W. Higman, R. B. Sheridan, and K. F. Kiple. *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 5, no. 1 (1986): 109–19. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3338787>.

⁶ Bryson, Sasha Turner. "The Art of Power: Poison and Obeah Accusations and the Struggle for Dominance and Survival in Jamaica's Slave Society." *Caribbean Studies* 41, no. 2 (2013): 80. <https://doi.org/10.1353/crb.2013.0030>.

⁷ Dierksheide, Christa. *Amelioration and Empire: Progress and Slavery in the Plantation Americas*. University of Virginia Press, (2014): 159, 180.

Note: amelioration refers to the betterment or improvement, in this case referring to slavery and reforming the conditions of the institution.

This essay contributes to a plethora of scholarship focusing on African American women, medicine, religion, and enslavement in the British West Indies. Kathleen M. Brown emphasizes that British and American abolitionists' shared concerns over "preserving" the enslaved body. Abolitionists viewed slavery as a threat to the health and lives of enslaved laborers. In the context of Great Britain and its colonies, Parliamentary legislation addressed the increasing mortality rate in the British West Indies to ameliorate slavery and reverse population decline.⁸ Similarly to Brown, Jennifer Morgan identifies the inhumane conditions enslaved laborers faced in the British West Indies. Enslaved women responded to the violence of the institution of slavery differently from their male counterparts. Because enslavers depended on enslaved women to continuously produce offspring to add to their productivity and capital, African women resisted slavery by refusing to bear children.⁹ As perceived by the white elites, enslaved women procured abortions from herbs and plants as a form of resistance against slavery.¹⁰ More particularly, Katherine Paugh has argued the British elite depended on the continuous childrearing of enslaved women because it protected the capital of British plantation owners and their adherents.¹¹ The emergence of new fields within the social sciences informed the debates surrounding the abolition of slavery. As Seymour Drescher argues, abolitionists and proponents

⁸ Brown, Kathleen M. *Undoing Slavery: Bodies, Race, and Rights in the Age of Abolition*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023.

⁹ Morgan, Jennifer. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

¹⁰ It must be stated that what white elites perceived as an abortion may not have been intentionally carried out as an abortion. Because of poor diet, labor conditions, and the prevalence of disease amongst enslaved laborers, this could also lead to enslaved women miscarrying unintentionally. Regardless, women experiencing an abortion or miscarriage are still perceived as a threat amongst those who wanted to uphold the institution of slavery because it meant a loss in productivity and capital. There are many productive conversations around agency amongst enslaved women and unfortunately, for the scope of this paper, that cannot be discussed in depth. Please see *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* by Jennifer L. Morgan and *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* by Stephanie M.H. Camp for a further discussion on the agency of enslaved women in the Caribbean and U.S. South.

¹¹ Paugh, Katherine. *The Politics of Reproduction: Race, Medicine, and Fertility in the Age of Abolition*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

of slavery relied on social scientists and statistics to bolster their opinions on abolition.¹² Finally, Christa Dierksheide has argued that enslavers in the British West Indies supported amelioration as a means of reforming and perpetuating the institution, while metropolitan abolitionists in Britain asserted that amelioration would be a means to end slavery.¹³

This essay seeks to augment the scholarly literature on women, reproduction, resistance, and the antislavery debate in the British Empire. I argue that in response to the Registry Bill of 1815, which indicated a statistical decline in the enslaved populations, doctors and missionaries in the British West Indies took on new, politicized roles in the abolition debate in Britain. Through written testimonies attributing the population decline to enslaved women procuring abortions as well as the African Obeah religion, doctors and missionaries provided evidence for both antislavery and proslavery interests.¹⁴ Doctors and missionaries supported amelioration measures to end abortion and Obeah practices, but while some saw these measures as a means to simply reform slavery, others saw amelioration as a means to abolish it altogether.¹⁵

II. *Obeah as a Religious Practice*

As a result of the transatlantic slave trade, between 12 and 15 million African men, women, and children were torn from their homeland and forcibly sent to New World plantations between the 1400s and 1890. Women and men of the Gold Coast of Africa sold into slavery did not relinquish their identities when traveling across the Atlantic Ocean and arriving in the British West Indies; rather they brought their religious and herbal practices with them. Obeah,

¹² Drescher, Seymour. *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor Versus Slavery in British Emancipation*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

¹³ Dierksheide, 159.

¹⁴ Higman, Barry W. *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834*. University of the West Indies Press, 1995.

¹⁵ Paugh, 85.

commonly interpreted to mean “medicine, remedy or healing power”, is an herbal-centric indigenous religion that was continuously practiced amongst enslaved women and men residing in the British West Indies. The religion encompasses the channeling of supernatural powers and acquiring a vast knowledge of medicine and herbs. Amongst enslaved laborers in the Caribbean, Obeah was commonly practiced and influenced the development of other indigenous religions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁶

The role of women as medical practitioners in the Obeah religion began in their homelands of the Gold Coast where elderly women would prescribe sacred juices, stones, fruits, and herbs for oral or vaginal use.¹⁷ Londa Schiebinger has argued that the colonial trade of medical products was flourishing subsequently as enslaved women claimed authority over their bodies and reproduction by using abortifacients such as the peacock flower.¹⁸ With the influx of British doctors arriving to the Caribbean in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the presence of white men with medical training challenged the authority and bodily autonomy of women in Obeah. There was an emphasis during this period on contributing new scientific findings, particularly on the phrenology of Black bodies in the medical field.¹⁹

Although many enslaved women sought out an abortion from Obeah women in their communities, what white elite planters perceived to be an abortion by consuming herbal emmenagogues could have also been a miscarriage due to the harsh working conditions of plantations in the British West Indies. Low calorie and nutrient-deficient diets, brutal and labor-

¹⁶ Bilby, Kenneth M., and Jerome S. Handler. "Obeah." *The Journal of Caribbean History* 38, no. 2 (2004): 153-183.

¹⁷ Schiebinger, Londa. *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World*. Harvard University Press, 2007.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 140.

¹⁹ Schiebinger, Londa L. *Secret Cures of Slaves: People, Plants, and Medicine In the Eighteenth-century Atlantic World*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017.

Note: For further studies on slavery and gynecology, see *Proving Pregnancy: Gender, Law, and Medical Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century America* by Felicity M. Turner and *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and The Origins of American Gynecology* by Deirdre Cooper Owens.

intensive work, and the spread of disease were the main contributors negatively impacting the health of enslaved women, making many pregnant laborers more susceptible to miscarriage.²⁰ Regardless if pregnant laborers intentionally procured an abortion with the help of Obeah women or if they miscarried, the white elite planter class and their associates interpreted abortion as an act of resistance against the institution of slavery.²¹

Because Obeah was a common religion among enslaved laborers, British plantation owners became aware of the practice and were fearful that it portended racial violence and resistance. Proponents of slavery benefited from creating a link between the practice of Obeah to abortion because of Obeah practitioners' history of leading revolts in the Caribbean. Fears of Obeah heightened during Tacky's Revolt in 1760. Because of Obeah men's involvement in the uprising, the Jamaican government passed an act to limit the religious practice on the island.²² With the population already feeling weary of the religious practice, proponents of slavery stating abortion as the main facet of Obeah furthered their interests. Attributing the population decline to abortion, allegedly a key Obeah practice as claimed by planters, prolonged slavery by diverting attention from the poor living and working conditions driving the decline.²³

In response to whites' perceived high rate of abortion amongst enslaved women, the British Parliament passed the Malicious Shooting or Stabbing Act of 1803, commonly referred to as the Ellenborough Act, which prohibited the creation of abortifacients pre-quickening and the consumption of poisons to procure an abortion after quickening.²⁴ This law threatened Obeah

²⁰ Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, 129-132.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² O'Neal, Eugenia. *Obeah, Race and Racism: Caribbean Witchcraft in the English Imagination*. The University of the West Indies Press, 2020, 45.

²³ Turner, 80.

²⁴ For the definition of quickening, courtesy of R. Sauer: "a foetus had no independent life until the mother could first feel its stirrings": 83.

For the source of legislation: Sauer, R. "Infanticide and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century Britain." *Population Studies* 32, no. 1 (1978): 81-93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2173842>.

practitioners in helping those within their community who wanted or needed an abortion, but it did not halt the distribution of emmenagogues. Enslaved women continued to have abortions and miscarry after the passage of the Ellenborough Act. Enslavers and those working for enslavers in the British West Indies were aware of the continued and rising mortality rate on plantations. Enslavers recognized the importance of enslaved women for their manual and reproductive labor in continuing to birth descendants. Without the continuation of reproductive labor, enslavers could not depend on a constant resupply of enslaved laborers, especially after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.²⁵

As the birth rate decreased and the overall mortality amongst enslaved laborers increased in the early nineteenth century in the British West Indies, Parliament questioned the cause. Enslavers and their associates continued to worry about mortality rates in the early nineteenth century, especially when the 1807 Slave Trade Act abolished the Atlantic slave trade in Great Britain and its colonies. The abolitionist and main contributor to the creation of the 1807 Slave Trade Act, James Stephen, asserted that British elites unfairly targeted Obeah practitioners as the cause for the high mortality rate:

But there is another, and really existing practice, which should first be mentioned, because it has commonly been treated as a crime of the same species with that of poisoning...Obeah, and poison, are the more deserving of a particular consideration, because they have not only been made subjects of calumny against the unfortunate negroes, but have been seriously alleged by the agent of Jamaica, and other colonists, as *great causes of the dreadful mortality which prevails among the slaves of our islands.*²⁶

British planter elites blamed the religious practice of Obeah for the rising mortality rate in the Caribbean. Enslavers tried to deflect blame away from their enforcement of grueling living and laboring conditions. Until the emergence of statistical evidence in the 1810s, this rhetoric was

²⁵ Morgan, 83.

²⁶ Stephen, James. *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated: Being a Delineation of the State in Point of Law*. Vol. 1. J. Butterworth and Son, 1824: 352.

successful amongst enslavers and their associates because of the decades-long campaign to try to rid Jamaica and the surrounding British colonies of Obeah.²⁷ As a part of a group of acts passed in 1787, one piece of legislation stated that “in order to prevent the many mischiefs that may arise from the wicked art of the negroes... who shall pretend to have any supernatural power... or any other materials relating to the practice of obeah or witchcraft, in order to affect the health or lives of others, or promote the purposes of rebellion... shall... suffer death.”²⁸

The use of “poisons” – typically blood, eggshells, animal bones and teeth, feathers, shattered glass, rum, and grave dirt – among Obeah practitioners became a symbol of resistance to advocates of slavery. As recorded by doctors and missionaries in personal diaries and written testimonies throughout the early nineteenth century in Jamaica, the consumption of “poison” procured by enslaved laborers was seen as attempting to have an abortion. Testimonies publicized in pamphlets and books from those who worked with enslaved laborers daily and witnessed abortions became highly politicized in Parliament. Doctors and missionaries working on plantations in Jamaica were able to provide professional insights to the British Parliament on the health and religious lives of enslaved laborers. Doctors emphasized the dangers of abortion in their testimonies; herbal methods consumed by enslaved women were more threatening to their lives than non-herbal methods such as bloodletting, vigorous exercise, and horseback riding.²⁹

²⁷ O'Neal, 45.

²⁸ Jamaica. The act of assembly of the island of Jamaica, to repeal several acts, and clauses of acts, respecting slaves, and for the better Order and Government of Slaves, and for other Purposes; commonly called the Consolidated Act, as Exhibiting at One View Most of the Essential Regulations of the Jamaica Code Noir; which was passed by the Assembly on the 19th day of December 1787, and by the Lieutenant Governor and the Council on the 22d of the said Month. Respectfully communicated to the public by Stephen Fuller, Esq. Agent for Jamaica. London: printed for B. White, and Son, Fleet-Street; J. Sewell, Cornhill; R. Faulder, New-Bond-Street; and J. Debrett, and J. Stockdale, Piccadilly, M.DCC.LXXXVIII. [1788]. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive. https://link-gale-com.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/apps/doc/CW0123700833/SAS?u=viva_uva&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=4620133c&pg=22.

²⁹ Schiebinger, 111.

III. Legislation Leading to Amelioration

In response to the rising mortality rate of enslaved laborers in the majority of the crown colonies in the British West Indies, members of the British Parliament sought to draft and pass legislation to alleviate problems created as a result of the conditions of the Atlantic slave trade and later on the plantations. London metropolitans proposed amelioration measures with the plan to move toward the gradual abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery.³⁰ Population decline began on ships crossing the Middle Passage from the prevalence of disease and poor living conditions on board. Parliament emulated ideas of amelioration by addressing the conditions of the ships. In 1788, Parliament passed the Slave Trade Act, commonly referred to as The Dolben's Act, which sought to decrease the number of enslaved passengers on board and increase the number of doctors traveling to treat any illnesses among passengers.³¹

With this change, the belief held by Parliament members was that the prevalence of disease amongst enslaved laborers would decrease because the ships were carrying fewer enslaved laborers and the presence of doctors would aid in caring for passengers. The passage of the Dolben's Act served the interests of proponents of slavery and abolitionists, though they interpreted the legislation differently. Benefactors of slavery and the slave trade saw the law as necessary to improve conditions on ships to prevent laborers from dying before reaching the Caribbean. As for abolitionists, they wanted the Dolben's Act to make a path toward ending the Atlantic slave trade. From data recording the mortality rate of enslaved laborers during the Middle Passage on British ships before 1790, the loss overall came out to around fifteen percent.

³⁰ Dierksheide, 159.

³¹ The Dolben's Act of 1788 [Government Document], " in Children and Youth in History, Item #146, <https://cyh.rrchmm.org/items/show/146>. Annotated by Colleen A. Vasconcellos.

Members of Parliament as well as the planter elite class understood if there were no remedy brought forth for the conditions of ships, it would lead to more loss.³²

After the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, attention turned to the Black population decline on West Indian plantations. After the passage of the Slave Registry Bill of 1815, censuses taken in each Caribbean colony painted a statistical picture of decline. Due to the bill requiring the reporting of enslaved laborers' mortality rates and prohibiting the slave trade between colonies, planters had to depend on the reproduction of enslaved women to sustain their workforce.³³ Enslaved women struggled with giving birth to offspring due to the brutal living and working conditions of the plantations. Abolitionists politicized statistics provided by the Registry Bill that demonstrated a continual decline of the enslaved communities in the Caribbean, bolstering their argument that slavery caused harm rather than growth. The publication of the census showing a decline propelled forward abolitionists' platform to move toward the abolition of slavery.³⁴

New parliamentary amelioration legislation was intended to reverse this population decline. While metropolitan abolitionists believed that these laws would serve as a precursor to emancipation, proslavery interests in Parliament and West Indian planters argued that amelioration would reform British West Indian slavery in order to perpetuate it. In particular, the 1807 Slave Trade Act and the 1815 Registry Bill were precursors to the eventual passage of the 1823 Amelioration Proposal. The end of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807 in Great Britain ceased the constant resupply of captives to work in the British West Indies. The proposal of the 1815 Registry Bill would have required enslavers in the British West Indies to produce a census and

³² Cohn, Raymond L. "Deaths of Slaves in the Middle Passage." *The Journal of Economic History* 45, no. 3 (1985): 685–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050700034604>.

³³ Paugh, 177.

³⁴ Paugh, 155.

keep a record of statistics such as the population of the plantation, the mortality rate, the birth rate, and the sale of enslaved laborers. The planter elite class was in opposition to the passage of the bill as it suggested wider implications of the eventual abolition of slavery, but they eventually implemented the bill.³⁵

The 1823 Amelioration Proposal passed in Parliament sought to address the still-rising mortality rate amongst enslaved laborers. What differentiated the 1823 Amelioration Proposal from all previous legislation was its focus on “improving” the conditions of the plantations in the British West Indies. Given that Parliament planned for amelioration to lead to gradual abolition, one of the main measures stated that all obstacles for enslaved laborers to free themselves would be removed. Other measures included: “That an effectual provision shall be made for the religious instruction of the slave... That marriage [of enslaved laborers] should be enforced and sanctioned. That the Sunday should be devoted by the slave to repose and religious instruction; and that other time should be allotted for the cultivation of his provision-grounds.”³⁶

Missionaries’ roles were delineated in the proposal by giving Christian instruction, removing barriers to religious education, and encouraging marriages in enslaved communities. Doctors’ roles were not as clearly defined except with the last measure stating, “measures should be taken, to restrain the authority of the master in punishing his untried slave, and that some substitute should be found for the driving system.”³⁷ With fewer enslaved laborers sustaining injuries from punishment, doctors could focus on improving the fertility rates of enslaved women and the overall mortality rate of enslaved communities. The proposal marked the transition of the

³⁵ Beckles, Hilary McD. “THE SLAVE-DRIVERS’ WAR: BUSSA AND THE 1816 BARBADOS SLAVE REBELLION.” *Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe*, no. 39 (1985): 104. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25675274>.

³⁶ Buxton, Mr. F. “Abolition Of Slavery.*.” <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1823/may/15/abolition-of-slavery>.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

British Parliament focusing on ameliorating the Atlantic slave trade to the plantation where they pursued increasing the population of the enslaved population.³⁸ Ultimately, the intention behind this legislation was to increase productivity and population growth, since the population of enslaved laborers declined rapidly onward from 1807 until the abolition of the institution in 1833.³⁹

In 1823, Parliamentary abolitionists proposed enacting laws in the British West Indies to address “improving” the conditions that enslaved laborers faced. Enslavers witnessed a steep decline in the population of enslaved communities from 770,000 to 665,000 in the British West Indies from 1807 to 1834. The 1823 Amelioration Proposal included measures such as increasing the need for Christian instruction and lessening severe physical punishments of enslaved laborers. The 1823 law created a demand for doctors and missionaries in the region to help increase the enslaved population by converting Black people to Christianity and preventing Black women from seeking or obtaining abortions from Obeah practitioners. Though both Parliament members and the planter elites shared concerns over the high mortality rate, their visions for what the 1823 Amelioration Proposal would become differed. Parliament’s vision of amelioration, aiming for the gradual abolition of enslaved laborers, conflicted with the planter elites’ intention to implement amelioration measures primarily to maintain their income from slavery.⁴⁰

In May 1823, Parliament enacted the Amelioration measures to “improve” the institution of slavery in the British West Indies. Measures of this proposal included increasing missionary trips to the region with an emphasis on providing Christian instruction to enslaved laborers,

³⁸ Dierksheide, 180.

³⁹ Burnard, 771.

⁴⁰ Burnard, 761.

eliminating markets on Sundays to encourage enslaved laborers to attend Christian church services, and promoting monogamous marriages amongst enslaved communities. Beyond trying to convert the enslaved community from practicing their indigenous religions to Christianity, the measures underscored not flogging and whipping enslaved women. Physical punishments that could harm reproduction were prohibited in the British West Indies after the passage of the Amelioration Bill.⁴¹

Elite planters in the British West Indies were suspicious of Parliament's amelioration measures. In all British colonies except Trinidad, each colony's legislature was directed to enforce measures from the Amelioration Proposal. To their disadvantage, Parliament imposed many restrictions that would diminish enslavers' power and alter the operations of their plantations.⁴² Although some planters resisted Parliament's stipulations in the 1823 law, amelioration also provided an opportunity to reform and continue slavery. To their benefit, amelioration provided a path for slaveholders to uphold the institution and continue to compete in the Caribbean sugar industry, particularly with Spanish Cuba, which had established a sugar economy by 1820.⁴³ The implementation of the amelioration measures came with the expectation that by lessening the brutal punishments amongst enslaved laborers and exposing them to Christianity, Africans would feel less likely to resist their bondage and increase their productivity.⁴⁴

Before 1823, doctors and missionaries had been actively contributing to Parliamentary sessions, colonial legislatures, and pamphlets about slavery and abolition; they had witnessed

⁴¹ Blouet, Olwyn Mary. "Slavery and Freedom in the British West Indies, 1823-33: The Role of Education." *History of Education Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1990): 625-43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/368950>.

⁴² Blouet, Olwyn M. "Earning and learning in the British West Indies: An image of freedom in the pre-emancipation decade, 1823-1833." *The Historical Journal* 34, no. 2 (1991): 391-409.

⁴³ Tomich, Dale. "World Slavery and Caribbean Capitalism: The Cuban Sugar Industry, 1760-1868." *Theory and Society* 20, no. 3 (1991): 304. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657555>.

⁴⁴ Blouet, "Slavery and Freedom in the British West Indies, 1823-33: The Role of Education."

abortions among enslaved women. In a session of the House of Assembly of Jamaica in December 1815, members responded to the proposal of the Registry Bill in the British Parliament. Members, many of whom were planters, resisted the potential passage and implementation of the Registry Bill. As a part of the session, allies of elite planters such as doctors employed on plantations attributed the population decline amongst enslaved laborers to abortion. When questioned by a member of the Jamaican House of Assembly about the “permanent or peculiar causes of greater mortality” and “why fewer children” were born among the enslaved population, Dr. William Sells of Jamaica answered:

...he considers there are several permanent causes of a greater mortality among the negro population of this island than takes place among the labouring people of Great Britain... of the causes preventative of fewer children being produced by negro women, one of the principal he considers to be the promiscuous intercourse between the sexes, and that arising chiefly from the disparity of numbers between the sexes, both preventive of conception, and causing abortion...⁴⁵

Testimonies from members of the professional class held value, particularly if the individual had first-hand experience on plantations. Dr. Sells would not be the only doctor, missionary, or enslaver who would attempt to blame population decline on African women’s promiscuity and susceptibility to engage in polygamy and abortion practices. Doctors’ testimonials that enslaved women were resistant to monogamy, Christianity, and motherhood compelled the British Parliament to send mission groups to encourage Christianization and civility. By allowing missionaries to evangelize enslaved communities, the planter elite class expected enslaved women to stop engaging in what they deemed to be promiscuous activities, which in their view

⁴⁵ Thome, James A. Further proceedings of the Honourable House of Assembly of Jamaica, relative to a bill introduced into the House of Commons, for effectually preventing the unlawful importation of slaves and holding free persons in slavery, in the British colonies : to which are annexed examinations, taken upon oath before a committee of that House, for the purpose of disproving the allegations of the said bill. London: Printed for J.M. Richardson and J. Ridgeway, 1816. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive. https://link-gale-com.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/apps/doc/DS0103781855/SAS?u=viva_uva&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=243eaa5f&pg=64.

had a direct impact on manual and reproductive labor. Without enslaved women's dual labor roles, the plantation model would collapse because they depended on their progeny to constantly resupply their labor force.⁴⁶

Doctors were as important to the implementation of the 1823 Amelioration Proposal as were missionaries. Missionaries worked to convert enslaved communities, particularly women, to become Christians and condemn their involvement with promiscuity, polygamy, and supposed abortions. The role of doctors in the British West Indies was to provide medical treatment to enslaved communities and prevent patients from choosing medical care from Obeah women, whose treatments were supposedly driving the rising mortality rates. If a doctor suspected that an enslaved woman was trying to procure an abortion, they could treat the patient to prevent the abortion. However, as historians have suggested, this proved to be a difficult task for many doctors working on plantations in the British West Indies.⁴⁷

Abortion was perceived as a major reason for the rising mortality rate in the British West Indies; the British Parliament believed they could work to reverse this practice through amelioration legislation. Doctors and missionaries produced similar testimonies that were grounded in observations rather than in personal ideologies. Regardless, the intention behind providing testimonies on the population decline was to pressure the British Parliament to draft a solution to increase the birth rate so that enslavers would not experience a continual loss in labor.⁴⁸

IV. Perspectives of Doctors

⁴⁶ Morgan, 83-91.

⁴⁷ Turner, 82.

⁴⁸ Paugh, 94.

As a part of the 1823 amelioration measure, doctors were necessary to “improve” the conditions on plantations for enslaved laborers. The planter elites worried about the rising mortality rate amongst enslaved laborers in the British West Indies for two main reasons. First, enslavers witnessed a decline in the output of labor thereby affecting their income. With amelioration measures, planters felt a renewed hope for seeing an increase in the enslaved population and labor output without ending slavery. On the other hand, abolitionists in Britain used the decline of the enslaved population in the British West Indies to support their argument for full emancipation. Second, all legislation coming from London about slavery had planter elites in the British West Indies interpreting legislation as impeding on their authority over enslaved people. As a part of amelioration, the main duties of doctors sent to the British West Indies were to ensure that enslaved laborers did not endure fatal injuries and illnesses.⁴⁹

Through these close interactions, doctors kept records of the types of injuries and illnesses they witnessed on plantations. Having plantation doctors publicize records about the continuous increase in the mortality rate of enslaved laborers was crucial. As British planter elites conflated Obeah with the increase in the mortality rate because they were providing abortifacients to women within their communities, records from doctors supported the sentiments of the plantation owners residing in the British West Indies.⁵⁰ The testimonies from doctors espoused racist stereotypes of African women being licentious by nature, thereby conflating promiscuity and polygamy with their inability to be mothers and their desire for abortions.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Dr. John Williamson serves as one example of this through his published journal in 1817: *Medical and Miscellaneous Observations Relative to the West India Islands*.

⁵⁰ Paugh, 85-94.

⁵¹ Yu, Shelley. 2022. “Morality, Gender, and Politics: Pronatalist Dichotomies of Abolitionists and British Caribbean Planters, 1775-1825”. *The Mirror - Undergraduate History Journal* 42 (1): 75-76. <https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/westernumirror/article/view/15202>.

The link between abortion and death was recorded as early as 1789, the year that debates surrounding the abolition of slavery and the slave trade adjourned in British Parliament. Dr. John Quier worked in Jamaica for twenty-one years caring for four to five thousand enslaved laborers in the parishes of St. John and St. Thomas. In a testimony provided to the Board of Trade in Great Britain, he remarked that he believed abortion to be frequent among enslaved women, and attributed the main reason as “the promiscuous Intercourse which the greater Number of Negro Women indulge themselves in with the other Sex.”⁵² He attributed the principal reasons for abortions among enslaved women to the practice of polygamy, enslaved women’s tendency to be idle and free from pain, and their resistance to chastity. Dr. Quier concluded his testimony by stating that the conditions of the plantations had changed to treat the enslaved laborers with “humanity and tenderness”; he did not believe the rising mortality rate was due to the lack of food or the severity of labor.⁵³

Quier died in 1822 after working on multiple plantations for over fifty years. In his will, he left enslaved laborers and land at Chard in Somerset, the Shady Grove estate, and other properties in Jamaica to his daughter, granddaughter, and grandsons.⁵⁴ Quier’s connections to slavery influenced his proslavery stance, as he directly benefited from the income he earned as a doctor treating enslaved laborers on plantations across Jamaica. He died one year before the passage of the Amelioration bill, but much of his testimony anticipated how slavery might be reformed. He argued that preventing polygamy, encouraging marriages within their

⁵² Great Britain. Board of Trade. *Report of the lords of the committee of council appointed for the consideration of all matters relating to trade and foreign plantations; submitting ... the evidence and information they have collected ... concerning the present state of the trade to Africa, and particularly the trade in slaves.* [n.p.]: n.p., 1789. *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive*. https://link-gale-com.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/apps/doc/U0103768438/SAS?u=viva_uva&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=145c33c9&pg=323.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 322.

⁵⁴ 'Dr John Quier', Legacies of British Slavery database, <http://www.depts-live.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146642727>.

communities, and eliminating abortions amongst enslaved women could “improve” the mortality rate in the British West Indies.⁵⁵

Quier would not be the last doctor working on plantations in the British West Indies to share testimonies or accounts of his work experience with the British public. Following Quier, Dr. John Williamson published fourteen years' worth of his experience working in Jamaica in *Medical and Miscellaneous Observations Relative to the West India Islands* in 1817. He worked on a handful of plantations in Jamaica during his long-term residency in the colony. The longest plantation Williamson stayed at was at the estate of Williamsfield in the parish of St. Thomas in Vale, Jamaica under the Lordship of the Earl of Harewood, to which he dedicated *Medical and Miscellaneous Observations* in the acknowledgments. He lived at Williamsfield for four years out of his fourteen-year stay in Jamaica. In his personal account, Williamson said he resided there without having to pay rent and could afford any comforts he wanted.⁵⁶ Throughout his fourteen-year residency, he moved around plantations to live and work. In the following account from September 1806, he wrote of an incident at Francis Smith's plantation in Jamaica involving an enslaved woman named Caroline who likely attempted to have an abortion:

A negro wench of Mr. Francis Smith's, *Caroline*, supposed to have been in her seventh month of pregnancy, became hysterical, on account of some dishonest imputations brought against her by her fellow servants. Her throat was a little inflamed; and she complained that deglutition was difficult; for which a blister was applied to the external fauces. The other house negroes reproached her with an act of dishonesty; and added a more severe insinuation in negro opinion, that she had taken some violent ingredient to procure abortion.⁵⁷

Williamson continues to suggest that an ingredient taken to procure an abortion would have likely “deranged her system more.” By this, he casted doubt on the effectiveness of the

⁵⁵ Paugh, 88.

⁵⁶ Williamson, John. *Medical and Miscellaneous Observations Relative to the West India Islands* (1817). 76.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 439. Additional note: Obeah has multiple spellings such as “Obi” in this context.

abortifacients. However, later in this same entry, he wrote, “They are extremely liable to mental depression from ill usage; improper interference with their amours; the curses of those whom they consider Obi characters. And it is well known that, where depressed spirits are established in negroes, the consequences are not only fatal to individuals...”⁵⁸ Dr. Williamson perhaps discounted Caroline's use of a natural ingredient effective enough to allow for an abortion. He commented on how enslaved laborers were susceptible to mental depression from "ill usage" of natural herbs, as well as their tendency to engage in polyamorous relationships with multiple partners, claiming these tendencies or "curses" were common among Obeah practitioners.⁵⁹

Beyond this entry, Dr. Williamson witnessed and wrote about what he believed to be another abortion by an enslaved woman working on a plantation in Jamaica in January 1801:

A woman, at Dovehall, complained of fever, severe spasmodic contractions in the lower part of the belly and considerable hemorrhagy of the blood from the uterus. She was believed to be pregnant; but then had been suspected of using means for abortion: said she had been costive, which was relieved by Epsom salt in solution: was using the vegetable acids freely; cool applications to the back and vagina: was excessively low; her pulse intermitted; thirst moderate: after operation of the laxative, an opiate procured rest; by cordial remedies she got well. It is probable that abortion did take place.⁶⁰

Williamson concluded that he believed that the woman intentionally took an emmenagogue to procure an abortion. He did not know if an abortion happened, but he believed that she likely had one once she left his presence after caring for her. This woman's symptoms likely differed from those of Caroline's because she likely used a vaginal supplement over an oral supplement to have an abortion due to the lack of symptoms in her throat. Both forms of abortifacients were common in Obeah practice.⁶¹ Overall, Williamson's encounters with abortion amongst enslaved

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ The concept of Obeah practitioners engaging in polyamorous relationships is an issue raised mainly among missionaries in the region, which will be discussed more at length in the next section: “Perspectives of Missionaries”.

⁶⁰ Williamson, John. *Medical and Miscellaneous Observations Relative to the West India Islands* (1817). 129-130.

⁶¹ Bush, 140.

women in Jamaica did not stop at these two accounts, as he continued to document more cases of abortions among enslaved women in *Medical and Miscellaneous Observations in the West India Islands*. Dr. Williamson's accounts reached the British public by 1817 and helped support amelioration efforts: preventing women from continuing to have abortions as a form of resistance against enslavement.⁶²

In 1823, after the passage of the Amelioration Proposal in Great Britain and its colonies, a pamphlet in favor of abolishing slavery published a written testimony of Dr. Williamson's experience in Jamaica. This pamphlet was published at a crucial time as Great Britain and its colonies were reeling in the aftermath of the Demerara Revolt in August 1823. Continuous uprisings planned by enslaved laborers in the British West Indies served as evidence for abolitionists who did not see any benefit to "improving" the conditions of slavery. Before introducing Dr. Williamson's testimony, the pamphleteer wrote, "The testimony of Dr. Williamson will be less liable to exception, in the estimation of West Indians, as he shows himself, on all occasions, a sturdy advocate of their system."⁶³ This disclaimer by the abolitionist underscored Dr. Williamson's experience in witnessing abortions amongst enslaved women and his support and endorsement of proslavery interests.⁶⁴

Williamson observed that African women "in that unrestrained and corrupt line of conduct they are apt to pursue, on arriving at puberty, contract habits inimical to all decency, and particularly adverse to all probability of increasing numbers on the estate."⁶⁵ From this analysis,

⁶² Ibid, 139.

⁶³ Negro slavery, or, A view of some of the more prominent features of that state of Society, as it exists in the United States of America and in the colonies of the West Indies, especially in Jamaica. London: Printed for Hatchard and Son, and J. and A. Arch, 1823. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive. https://link-gale-com.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/apps/doc/DS0103759805/SAS?u=viva_uva&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=12c3b860&pg=74.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 75.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 75.

Dr. Williamson deduced that upon reaching puberty, enslaved women were more apt to practice habits that would harm themselves, their communities, and their enslavers. He indicates that the decrease in the enslaved population on plantations in the British West Indies should be attributed solely to the habits “contracted” by these women. What he was likely referring to, as is evident within the next few pages of his testimony, was these women’s desire to procure abortions.⁶⁶

On the topic of abortion amongst enslaved women, Williamson stated, “The diseases of pregnancy... are aggravated in Negro women. Abortion is so frequent as to lead to an opinion, that means are taken to procure it, *an account of ill disposition to their masters, and other barbarous reasons, for which there can be no excuse.*”⁶⁷ Dr. Williamson attributed the high rate of abortion among African women to their natural “barbarous” disposition and the discontent they felt toward their enslavers. Williamson asserted that there can be “no excuse” for women to procure abortions, thereby trying to cast that the conditions on plantations as fair and just. It was in Dr. Williamson’s interest, along with other British doctors living in Jamaica, to put the conditions of plantations in a positive light, since these professionals relied on planters for their livelihood.⁶⁸

To support his statements, Dr. Williamson suggested that abortion be prevented as a means to “improving” slavery in the West Indies. His first suggestion was that enslaved women on plantations should be supervised until they chose to marry one man of their race. Enslavers and their adherents thought favorably of this measure; women would refuse polygamy and would instead engage in a more traditional, Christian marriage that would promote reproduction. They

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 76.

⁶⁸ Paugh, 85.

believed indigenous religious practices such as Obeah promoted abortions and multiple partners as normative and accessible.⁶⁹

In multiple reports on the conditions of slavery in the British West Indies through 1832 and 1833, Dr. Sir Michael Clare produced testimonies about his experience working on plantations throughout Jamaica. Similarly to Quier and Williamson, Clare stated that he believed medical treatments to be sufficient and that the enslaved laborers he cared for never seemed to be unhappy.⁷⁰ Similar to Quier, Clare attributed polygamy as the root cause of abortion. He viewed enslaved women as “all very licentious; and proprietors... had no power, and made no attempt to stop it, or to prevent the Negroes from engrossing several women.”⁷¹ Linking the supposedly “lustful” nature of enslaved women to polygamy and abortions absolved enslavers from blame. Enslavers refused to admit that enslaved women would seek abortions or have miscarriages due to the brutal working and living conditions on plantations.⁷²

As Katherine Paugh has argued, enslavers and doctors colluded to create medical knowledge that supported the notion that many enslaved women were infertile due to

⁶⁹ Bush, 139.

Note: Dierksheide also discusses this in *Amelioration and Empire* by stating that Obeah had a reputation for being associated with rebellions led by enslaved laborers.

⁷⁰ Legion, and Charles Gordon-Lennox Richmond. *A letter from Legion to His Grace the Duke of Richmond, &c. &c. &c. Chairman of the Slavery Committee of the House of Lords : containing an exposure of the character of the evidence on the colonial side produced before the Committee.* London, United Kingdom: S. Bagster, [1833]. *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive.* https://link-gale-com.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/apps/doc/DS0100298402/SAS?u=viva_uva&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=1c30d6d0&pg=202.

⁷¹ Great Britain. Parliament. House of Lords, and Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions. Abstract of the report of the Lords committees on the condition and treatment of the colonial slaves : and of the evidence taken by them on that subject : with notes by the editor. London, United Kingdom: Sold by J. Hatchard and Son, 1833. *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive.* https://link-gale-com.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/apps/doc/DS0100169456/SAS?u=viva_uva&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=ad776bd6&pg=37.

⁷² The association between African women and their perceived “nature” to be licentious, lustful, and promiscuous has origins in colonists settling in Virginia in the early seventeenth century. For a longer discussion on the colonial perspective of the association between gender and race, see Kathleen M. Brown’s monumental *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (1996). For discussions on enslaved women choosing to have abortions as a form of resistance, see Jennifer L. Morgan’s *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (2004).

promiscuity, venereal diseases, and procuring multiple abortions.⁷³ Writing and publicizing medical knowledge about the reproductive health of African women elevated British doctors residing in Jamaica as experts in explaining the increasing mortality rate amongst enslaved women. Earning this title of expertise about the reproductive systems of African women could be seen as a motive of doctors in the British West Indies to continue their residency considering that the field of gynecology was still developing.⁷⁴

In another report published in 1833, Clare testified about slavery and plantation conditions in the British West Indies. To his knowledge, he “scarcely recollected any slaves sent into the hospital in consequence of punishment” and “never even heard of an instance of the whip being used to stimulate labor, or of any insufficiency of food, or of any waste of life from overworking or underfeeding.”⁷⁵ Testimonies from proponents of slavery tended to negate any notion that enslaved laborers were unhappy due to their low calorie diets, poor medical treatment, and excessive labor. Placing blame on the enslaved laborers for the population decrease helped expand the rhetoric that Africans were inferior to the white population and must stay enslaved to “civilize” them through measures such as monogamous marriages within their race and practicing Christianity.⁷⁶

Clare’s statements attempted to portray the institution of slavery in the British West Indies as productive. This was a crucial point, since the British Parliament was in the midst of debating whether slavery should be abolished. Reports such as Clare’s attempted to persuade the British Parliament to reconsider abolishing slavery and be persuaded by testimony from

⁷³ Paugh, 88.

⁷⁴ Brown, 158.

⁷⁵ House of Lords, and Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions, 35.

⁷⁶ Schiebinger, 139; Brown, Kathleen M. *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*. UNC Press Books, (1996): 1.

individuals who worked and lived on plantations for years. Doctors' first-person experiences and belief that the conditions of slavery were generative in the British colonies bolstered proslavery interests and suggested that colonial slavery should be reformed rather than abolished.⁷⁷

A year before the British Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, Dr. Sir Michael Clare died. In his will, he left a marriage settlement of 5,000 pounds sterling to his wife along with multiple annuities to his wife, daughters, and sisters. His estate in Jamaica was left to his wife and nieces.⁷⁸ Although Clare may not have owned enslaved laborers, he and his family directly benefited from the institution of slavery as it generated enough wealth for Clare and his descendants to live comfortably. Many of Dr. Clare's testimonies for the Parliament portrayed slavery in the British West Indies as productive due to the lack of physical beatings, excellent medical treatment, sufficient diets, and fair expectations of labor. Yet these doctors' testimonies about little to no brutality toward enslaved laborers in the colonies ran counter to witness testimony offered by formerly enslaved people and abolitionists.⁷⁹

Although many doctors did not invest in the slave trade or own enslaved laborers on plantations in the British West Indies, their motivations to speak in support of slavery had foundations in protecting their livelihood as colonial doctors. Their incomes depended on being able to continue to reside in the colonies and work for enslavers. Through abolishing slavery, doctors working for plantations would have had no choice but to return to Great Britain to start their lives over again after decades of living in the Caribbean.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Paugh, 94.

⁷⁸ 'Sir Michael Benignus Clare M.D.', Legacies of British Slavery database, <http://www.depts-live.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146642543>

⁷⁹ Paugh, 85.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

V. Perspectives of Missionaries

The role of missionaries to successfully “improve” the conditions of slavery in the British West Indies was one of the main tenets of the Amelioration Proposal in 1823. Converting enslaved men and women in the British West Indies to Christianity would promote the fertility rates of enslaved women during a time when the mortality rate was continuously rising. Missionaries had been residing in the region prior to the Amelioration Proposal, but the measures launched an increase of evangelical missionaries in the British West Indies. The central goal of missionaries moving was to begin Christian instruction with enslaved laborers in the hopes of converting enslaved communities. This conversion process would eliminate indigenous religions that the planter elite believed to be perpetrating abortion and polygamy. Both metropolitan abolitionists and some planters believed that by sending missionaries to promote Christianity, abortion would subside and the population would increase.⁸¹

The increase in the number of missionaries arriving to the Caribbean was not favorable to all planters, as many missionaries during this period were abolitionists. Planters feared that the presence of more missionaries would encourage enslaved laborers to revolt.⁸² Missionaries showed support for amelioration because they viewed the measures as a means for the eventual abolition of slavery. Similar to doctors residing in the region, missionaries relied on racist notions in their testimonies that depicted African women as supposedly lustful and promiscuous. Missionaries associated Africans’ sexual activity with the perceived high rate of abortion on plantations, which justified religious instruction to enslaved communities.⁸³

⁸¹ Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834*.

⁸² Dierksheide, "Missionaries, Evangelical Identity, and the Religious Ecology of Early Nineteenth-Century South Carolina and the British Caribbean" 71.

⁸³ Paugh, 202.

Christa Dierksheide has emphasized the importance of missionaries to the goal of ameliorating slavery both to reform and end slavery, and has written, “the increased urgency of the slave question made slave conversion and improvement an immediate concern for sympathetic whites. As ‘civilizers,’ it was the duty of missionaries ‘to carry not only Good Manners, but the purest Light of the Gospel, where Barbarism and Ignorance totally prevailed.’”⁸⁴ Missionaries sought to convert enslaved laborers to Christianity, many of whom felt an attachment to the religions they brought with them from Western Africa after being sold into slavery. Religion was multifaceted to enslaved laborers, as it was a means of bringing together a community under oppression while also providing cures for mental and physical illnesses.⁸⁵

In response to abolitionists calling for the British Parliament to abolish slavery in 1817, a report entitled “A defence of the Wesleyan Methodist Missions in the West Indies” compiled the testimonies of missionaries in the British West Indies. Although this report was published before the passage of the 1823 Amelioration Proposal, the report held many of the same sentiments of proponents of amelioration. The editors wrote in the introduction of the report: “It is indeed surprising, that, after repeated expressions of public sentiment on the subject of the Slave Trade had induced the legislature of this country to adopt the great measure of Abolition... it should appear sufficient to have destroyed the traffic in slaves on the coasts of Africa...”⁸⁶ This statement written with the endorsement of the Wesleyan Methodist Missions in the British West

⁸⁴ Dierksheide, Christa. "Missionaries, Evangelical Identity, and the Religious Ecology of Early Nineteenth-Century South Carolina and the British Caribbean." *American Nineteenth Century History* 7, no. 1 (2006): 63-88.

⁸⁵ O'Neal, 1-2.

⁸⁶ Watson, Richard, and Joseph Marryat. *A defence of the Wesleyan Methodist missions in the West Indies; including a refutation of the charges in Mr. Marryat's "Thoughts on the abolition of the slave trade, &c." and in other publications; with facts and anecdotes illustrative of the moral state of the slaves, and of the operation of missions.* London: Printed by T. Cordeux, 1817. *Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive*. https://link-gale-com.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/apps/doc/U0107849070/SAS?u=viva_uva&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=57c007a9&pg=6.

Indies supported the notion of the 1815 Registry Bill having planters register all their enslaved laborers and abolishing the slave trade between the colonies. This bolstered the antislavery position of missionaries who supported gradual abolition. The Registry Bill held promise for those who were abolitionists because it would force planters to continue reporting the rising mortality rate, thereby making the case for why the institution should be abolished.⁸⁷

The editors acknowledged that enslaved laborers were living and working “without any religious instruction... without education of the lowest kind; without any attempt to civilize or moralize them; without even the forms of marriage... the general neglect of a Christian people, to promote, in any efficient degree, their [enslaved laborers] moral happiness.”⁸⁸ What the report described as aspects of the Christian life that enslaved communities lacked would eventually be addressed as the main measures of the Amelioration Proposal in 1823.⁸⁹ From the view of this report, Christians were failing enslaved communities and calling for action to “civilize” enslaved communities. This report echoed the sentiments of missionaries that had already been in the region working toward “civilizing” enslaved laborers such as encouraging monogamous marriages, acquiring new habits and skills, and preventing abortion amongst enslaved women if possible. With more missionaries, they had the potential to reverse the population decline.⁹⁰

The report was also a response to those who placed blame on missionaries and mission trips for the outbreak of the Bussa Rebellion in Barbados in 1816. The editors wrote, “The alarm produced by the insurrection of the slaves in Barbadoes, has encouraged the enemies of missions to attempt to bring the missionary system itself into discredit.”⁹¹ Missionaries became targets

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Watson and Marryat, *A defence of the Wesleyan Methodist missions in the West Indies*, 6.

⁸⁹ Buxton, Mr. F. “Abolition Of Slavery.*.” <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1823/may/15/abolition-of-slavery>.

⁹⁰ Paugh, 202.

⁹¹ Watson and Marryat, *A defence of the Wesleyan Methodist missions in the West Indies*, 11.

because the public believed that they were abolitionists preaching about eventual emancipation and the promises that the passage of the Registry Bill could offer to the enslaved community. The editors of the report pleaded that missionaries were apolitical figures and claimed that they never had heard of the Registry Bill before the Bussa Rebellion. The Wesleyan Missionary groups wanted to refute the public's opinion of them by outlining their initial observations of the enslaved communities in the British West Indies and logging the difference that Christian instruction made in enslaved communities.⁹²

The editors inserted an extract from a Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly in Jamaica in 1815 to illustrate one of the initial observations of enslaved women in the British West Indies: "The evil produces another; a greater degree of promiscuous intercourse, and more difficulty in correcting it by rewards of punishments... The young women are averse to any restraints on their pleasures and profits; and often have recourse to means for procuring abortion, until they become unable to carry children for the full period of gestation."⁹³ This statement showed missionaries displaying concerns over enslaved women procuring abortions and miscarrying frequently as well as their admonition that "punishments" would do little to curb the practice. Conversion to Christianity, by contrast, offered a more permanent solution.⁹⁴

The report showed the "improvements" seen among converted enslaved communities in the British West Indies. In one statement provided by a missionary named William Gilgrass, the enslaved community in the British West Indies received Christian instruction from the Wesleyan Methodist Mission:

The religious slaves build good huts, obtain decent furniture, and beds. They are more cleanly; not laying out their money in rum, they do not destroy their health, and take regular meals. The men do not indulge in fornication and adultery; the women become

⁹² Ibid, 29.

⁹³ Ibid, 31.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

chaste, instructing their children, exceeding thousands in Europe; when pregnant they do not seek abortion, so common among others.⁹⁵

This testimony claimed that Christianized enslaved people mimicked Europeans by building furniture, practicing monogamy, displaying modesty, and avoiding abortions, it vested hope in the British Parliament that missionaries would be successful in their ventures to continue converting enslaved people in the British West Indies. Other missionaries reported that religious instruction also helped teach the importance of “industry and economy,” and that enslaved laborers were less prone to absconding because the physical punishments were less severe with the presence of missionaries in the region.⁹⁶

The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society sent a message to all its missionaries in the British West Indies in 1823: they asked how successful religious leaders had been in promoting marriages among enslaved laborers. This was likely done on behalf of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society to bring attention to the successes of their mission groups and as a way to continue supporting their presence in the Caribbean. The Amelioration Proposal was in the process of being drafted in 1823 and missionaries wanted to prove that they were crucial to increasing the fertility rate and decreasing the mortality rate by showing the impact of Africans’ conversion to Christianity.⁹⁷

Religious conversion as a means to ameliorate the conditions of slavery in the British West Indies appeared to be one of many ways that the British Parliament decreased the mortality rate in the region. The British Parliament, missionaries, and the planter elite class had limited views and knowledge about African religion already practiced amongst enslaved laborers besides portraying the practices as causing abortions and polygamy. By introducing Christianity to

⁹⁵ Watson and Marryat, *A defence of the Wesleyan Methodist missions in the West Indies*, 133.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Paugh, 210.

enslaved populations across the British West Indies, enslaved laborers would relinquish “dangerous” African religions, and also eliminate abortion and polygamy to increase the fertility rates of enslaved women and reduce the threat of slave revolt. Such an emphasis was placed upon Christian instruction and conversion as leading to the “amelioration” of slavery in the Caribbean — adoption of Christianity and monogamous marriages would lead to an increase in the enslaved population.⁹⁸

Much like doctors, missionaries also perpetuated stereotypes that Obeah was the cause of abortions happening in the British West Indies. Placing blame on Obeah continued through the end of the decade and followed in debates surrounding the abolition of slavery in Great Britain and its colonies. Reverend Henry Beame in Jamaica produced this testimony in 1826: “The procurement of abortion is very prevalent. . . there being herbs and powders known to [slaves], as given by obeah men and women... these observations respecting abortion have been collected entirely from Negroes, as the white medical men know little, except from surmise.”⁹⁹ This testimony emerged three years after the implementation of the 1823 amelioration measures and from this account, the mortality rate was still increasing while the birth rate was decreasing. For missionaries, the decreasing birth rate remained a problem even after mission groups spent three years attempting to convert enslaved men and women to improve the fertility rate. Unless this trend was reversed, critics of evangelical missionaries in the British West Indies might question whether Christian instruction did indeed lead to the amelioration of plantation conditions.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Canning, Mr. Secretary. “Amelioration Of The Condition Of The Slave Population In The West Indies.”. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1824/mar/16/amelioration-of-the-condition-of-the>.

⁹⁹ Bush, 139.

¹⁰⁰ Dierksheide, “Missionaries, Evangelical Identity, and the Religious Ecology of Early Nineteenth-Century South Carolina and the British Caribbean” (2006): 69.

The shortcomings of amelioration policy continued to surface in the 1820s. A report entitled “Report of the Society for the Conversion of Negro Slaves” surfaced in 1829: “St. Dorothy, (5,000 slaves.) The report from this parish is sufficiently meagre. Though the proprietors are held up as more generally alive to the necessity of affording their slaves religious instruction, yet all their efforts seem to end in utter abortion.”¹⁰¹ This report from a parish in Jamaica serves as one example of how missionaries ultimately failed in their efforts to convert the enslaved communities in the British colonies to increase the fertility rate.¹⁰²

Missionaries lived and worked every day amongst enslaved laborers in the British West Indies, making them lead figures in providing testimonies in the abolition debates. Despite that the missionaries sent on behalf of the Amelioration Proposal held antislavery views, their testimonies describing racist notions of the culture and religion in enslaved communities contributed to the speculation that Obeah and abortions were the main reasons for the rising mortality rate. The purpose of missionaries was to eradicate religions such as Obeah amongst enslaved laborers and instead foster monogamous marriages, discourage abortions, and promote the teachings of the Bible to address the population decline.¹⁰³

VI. Conclusion

The roles of doctors and missionaries were necessary in implementing amelioration measures in the British West Indies. Their shared beliefs that eradicating abortion and Obeah was critical to enacting amelioration and reversing the population decline in enslaved communities. Depending on what the outcome of implementing amelioration would be, it could

¹⁰¹ Macauley, Zachary, ed. *Anti-slavery Monthly Reporter*. Vol. 4. London Society for the Mitigation and Abolition of Slavery in the British Dominions., 1831.

¹⁰² Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834*.

¹⁰³ Bush, 101.

have led to either the perpetuation or abolition of slavery. Amelioration measures were not enough for the enslaved communities in the Caribbean though, as their visions for “improving” the conditions of their lives meant more than receiving Christian instruction and less severe physical punishments.¹⁰⁴

In November 1815, abolitionists in Parliament legislated the Registry Bill in an effort to hold enslavers accountable for recording the birth and mortality rates on plantations. Information regarding the Registry Bill circulated amongst the planter elite and enslaved communities within British-colonized Barbados in late 1815. Newspapers in Barbados misinterpreted the Registry Bill as a part of a larger scheme for the emancipation of enslaved laborers. Enslaved laborers interpreted the proposal of this bill as the beginning of gaining emancipation in the British West Indies because it forced enslavers to record the brutal aspects of plantation living. The possibility of emancipation sparked hope within the enslaved community. However, upon learning that the bill would not free them, enslaved laborers in Barbados planned and led a revolt in an attempt to emancipate themselves. In April 1816, the enslaved community carried out a revolt against the Barbadian elites which led to the executions of 144 enslaved laborers, 70 sentenced to death, and 123 enslaved laborers sentenced to transportation. This revolt would come to be known as the Bussa Rebellion. Despite the rebellion ultimately failing amongst the enslaved community, this revolt was symbolic of enslaved laborers’ resistance to amelioration measures.¹⁰⁵

Three months after enacting the measures of the Amelioration Proposal in the British West Indies in 1823, a revolt led by enslaved laborers in the British colony of Demerara, modern-day Guyana, made abolitionists question the effectiveness of amelioration measures.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Buxton, Mr. F. “Abolition Of Slavery.*.” <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1823/may/15/abolition-of-slavery>.

¹⁰⁵ Beckles, 104.

¹⁰⁶ Matthews, Gelien. *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement*. LSU Press, (2006): 82.

Throughout the ten years between carrying out measures as a part of the Amelioration Proposal in the British West Indies, uprisings led by enslaved communities such as the Bussa Revolt in 1816, the Demerara Revolt in 1823, and the Jamaican Revolt of 1831 to 1832 negatively impacted proponents of amelioration politics. The continuous struggle and resistance on behalf of enslaved communities despite receiving Christian instruction, increased medical attention, and less severe physical punishments, enslaved communities across the British colonies showed how unsatisfied they were with their working and living conditions by revolting against the planter elite class. No matter how many measures addressed fostering a sense of “humanity” amongst enslaved laborers, enslaved communities resisted in the hopes of achieving freedom.¹⁰⁷

The accumulation of revolts led in masses by enslaved laborers across the British colonies between 1816 and 1832 revolting against the planter elite class after implementing amelioration measures proved their dissatisfaction with the new policies. Enslaved laborers rejecting Christian instruction, relying on their indigenous knowledge of medicine, and continuing to practice polygamy outraged doctors, missionaries, enslavers, and advocates of amelioration politics because their livelihoods were at stake without slavery. The efforts of proponents of amelioration and slavery continued to fail in the fight to sustain slavery without having to accept abolishing the practice completely. Revolts led by enslaved communities and the continued population decline helped lead to Parliament legislating the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Beckles, 104-106.

¹⁰⁸ Slavery abolition, a bill introduced, an act for the abolition of slavery throughout the British colonies, for promoting the industry of the manumitted slaves and for compensating the persons hitherto entitled to the services of such slaves. [London]: [s.n.], 1833. Slavery and Anti-Slavery: A Transnational Archive. https://link-gale-com.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/apps/doc/DS0103715932/SAS?u=viva_uva&sid=bookmark-SAS&xid=f531bfb7&pg=2.

The passage of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 in the British Parliament marked the demise of individuals who were proponents of slavery, whether they were concerned with ameliorating the conditions of slavery or not. The efforts on behalf of the elite planter class and their hired employees such as doctors and missionaries in the British West Indies ultimately failed in proving that measures implemented from the 1823 Amelioration Proposal would succeed in addressing the perceived high rates of abortion, the low birth rate, and rising mortality rate amongst enslaved laborers. The presence of doctors and missionaries along with reducing physical punishments, giving Christian instruction, and encouraging monogamous marriages in enslaved communities in the British West Indies provided little to no contribution in addressing the rising mortality rate in the region. The failure on behalf of the planter elite class to recognize that low calorie diets, poor medical treatment, and excessive labor were likely the main contributors to the mortality rate allowed for the continual loss of enslaved lives in the Caribbean.¹⁰⁹

Doctors and missionaries residing and working on plantations in the British West Indies had a profound impact on the evolution of the abolition debates in the British Parliament that have been historically overlooked. Their testimonies in the British Parliament and pamphlets on the abolition debates were received with such gravity because of their experiences interacting daily with enslaved laborers and witnessing the conditions of the plantations. The occupations of doctors and missionaries and years worth of experience led the Parliament members and British citizens to trust their insights and observations. Reporting abortion as a leading issue amongst the conditions of the plantations in the British West Indies rose to such prominence with proponents

¹⁰⁹ Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834*.

of abolition, amelioration, and slavery because it explained potentially why the mortality rate in the region was continuing to grow yearly.¹¹⁰

Ultimately, their roles as witnesses in British Parliament sessions and contributors to pamphlets on the abolition debates shaped how the London metropolitans and British citizens understood the conditions of slavery and the behaviors of enslaved communities despite being over four thousand miles apart from the British West Indies. Enslaved women and their supposed licentious nature coupled with their indigenous medical knowledge from religions such as Obeah became the scapegoats as to why women chose to procure abortions. No consideration was given toward how the environment of the plantation could have as easily affected the pregnancies of women, thereby leading to miscarriages unintentionally.¹¹¹

Instead of reforming the diets and extreme working conditions of enslaved laborers, the focus on the mortality of enslaved laborers and the continual loss of children led to implementing measures that did not change the rising mortality rates. Doctors and missionaries who witnessed the everyday operations of the plantation and the brutality of labor came to the defense of amelioration measures because their livelihoods depended upon it. Those who resided in the British West Indies and were sent as a part of amelioration measures that called for more doctors and missionaries stayed in the region for many years if not multiple decades. Doctors' lives formed around their occupations as employees of enslavers being paid for their labor and working toward ensuring the plantations operated to increase productivity. Conversely, missionaries supported amelioration because of their antislavery views. This led to implementing

¹¹⁰ Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834*.

¹¹¹ Bush, 140.

Note: As stated before, there will not ever be a way to distinguish when enslaved women were intentionally trying to procure an abortion or if they experienced a miscarriage because of their environment and working conditions. We must contend between the two options and validate both as viable options for many enslaved women during this time. However, it must be noted that the planter elite class and those associated did not distinguish between the two as a miscarriage could be perceived as an attempt to have an abortion.

measures that emphasized Christian instruction and monogamous marriages, but the measures in practice caused more harm to enslaved communities in the British West Indies.¹¹² The planter elite class, doctors, and missionaries cared for enslaved laborers' quality of life not out of humanity, but to sustain productivity and promote their views on abolition.¹¹³

Discussions surrounding abortion in response to the rising mortality rate in the region amongst enslaved laborers were not exclusive to proponents of amelioration and slavery as abolitionists also fostered conversations around abortion amongst enslaved women. For those who supported amelioration, their reasoning for supporting the Amelioration Proposal was to overall remedy the response enslaved laborers had to their conditions. Abortion and the loss of children were taken as a response to their conditions to resist their enslavers in addition to organizing and executing rebellions in the colonies. To prevent these responses, focusing on sending doctors to elevate medical treatment and sending missionaries to expose enslaved laborers to Christianity with the expectation of converting came to the forefront of solutions. The rising mortality rate and the continuous outbreak of rebellions organized by enslaved communities backfired against proponents of amelioration who believed that implementing such measures would resolve the conditions of slavery. In addition to the response from enslaved laborers who experienced amelioration measures, the progression of legislation predating the 1823 Amelioration Proposal foreshadowed why eventually the measures would not be sustainable. With legislation emulating the Amelioration Proposal as early as the 1788 Dolben's Act and progressing toward passing the 1803 Ellenborough Act, the 1807 Slave Trade Act, and the 1815 Registry Bill, the Amelioration Proposal never stood a chance in lasting long term.

¹¹² Paugh, 230.

¹¹³ Paugh, 85.

Legislation during the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century trended toward the eventual emancipation of enslaved laborers in Great Britain and its colonies.¹¹⁴

Abolitionists used continued resistance from enslaved laborers to support their stance that amelioration measures were not working because of other compounded factors such as the quality of food and laborious work days for enslaved communities. Their justification as to why abortions amongst enslaved women continued to happen was because they did so in response to the living and working conditions of the plantation. Continuing to witness the failure of the Amelioration Proposal worked in favor of abolitionists as it served as direct evidence that no matter what was done to try to “improve” slavery, enslaved laborers would not respond positively or accept their statuses as enslaved.¹¹⁵

Abortion was crucial to debates surrounding abolition as abolitionists and non-abolitionists alike bolstered the issue to their benefit. Doctors and missionaries in particular contributed to the abolitionist debates in a unique way because of their status and experience living in the region. Their shared views on abortion as the main contributor to the decline of enslaved populations tried to explain the rising mortality rate without having to mention other factors that could explain the death toll. Doctors and missionaries’ complicity in underscoring the brutality of slavery casted enslaved women as villains to the narrative of the abolition debates in Great Britain, whether it was women practicing Obeah or women experiencing an abortion or miscarriage. Their silence in calling attention to low calorie diets and extreme labor was out for the sake of protecting what was important to the planter elite class, doctors, missionaries, and

¹¹⁴ Burnard, 764.

¹¹⁵ Beckles, 104-106.

others who supported amelioration: their livelihoods and not having to face the truth of how they actively played a role in the rising death toll of enslaved laborers.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807-1834*.

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