Forgery for Freedom:  
Enslaved Literacy and Resistance in the British Caribbean

by

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Abstract

This project explores the enslaveds’ avenues towards literacy and their utilization of literacy skills in resistance efforts through the Eurocentric structures within the plantation societies of Barbados and Jamaica during the late eighteenth and into the early nineteenth century. This work offers a greater understanding of enslaved literacy and illiteracy, literate enslaved navigation of their enslavement and resistance, and British colonial laws’ complicated relationship with enslaved education. Furthermore, it adds to the existing historiography by bringing a new perspective on the enslaveds’ relationship with literacy by reframing the existing conversation on enslaved education through the white colonial lens. Instead, it puts forward the connections between enslaved literacy education, anti-colonial knowledge, enslaved resistance, and large-scale revolt at the forefront of the historical conversation on enslaved resistance.
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Introduction

Caribbean historians have long argued that people of the region were capable of demonstrating an "intelligence of mind [and] a firmness and self-reliance." This is particularly evident during the period of slavery. From the seventeenth to early nineteenth century, evidence suggests that the enslaved of both Barbados and Jamaica utilized literacy to manipulate the legal parameters of their enslavement and to colour their expectations within the broader political dynamics of slavery.

This project will center on literate enslaved people as agents of change who applied pressure to the pillars of slavery and explore how the colonial government used literacy laws as a tool of oppression. This aligns with the idea that "resistance to the white power structure was (and continues to be) a fundamental feature of Black West Indian culture." The project focuses specifically on Jamaica and Barbados between the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (just before emancipation). This work emphasizes how the experiences of the enslaved were shaped by literacy and were part of "the incessant struggle of an underclass." Furthermore, the recognition of their efforts has generated "a pantheon of new national heroes" beyond those traditionally seen as responsible for making revolutionary political changes – namely, the abolitionists of Britain.

This project has several objectives. Firstly, it will offer a more nuanced understanding of how the white rationale that Africans were intellectually inferior, which informed everyday slavery practices, was based on their fear of how education and literacy could effectively undermine the systems of slavery and, ultimately, the colonial project. Secondly, the project will examine how the enslaved overcame the legal barriers and exploited avenues to obtain literacy skills. These avenues included conversion to Christianity and opportunities available through the
position they held in the hierarchy of slavery. In addition, it will examine how the enslaved who acquired a certain level of literacy were able to use these skills to plan and organize individual and communal acts of resistance within the plantation space. Thirdly, the project will explore how the enslaved used forgery as a tactic of resistance. The ability to use and obtain forged passes to leave the plantation aided the enslaved in their pursuit of temporary and permanent freedom. They were using literacy as a weapon of resistance and undermined and pressured alterations to colonial slave law. Fourthly, it examines the colonial news press as a policing structure of political knowledge and how the literate enslaved accessed this information to influence large-scale enslaved resistance efforts. Literacy enabled them to obtain political intelligence at the peak of slavery's fragile amelioration period. Literacy acquired by some of the enslaved influenced their individual experiences. Although small in number, the literate enslaved population played an important role in informing resistance efforts in Barbados and Jamaica.

There were two phases of amelioration in the British Caribbean (1788-1807 and 1820-1838), during which time, under abolitionist pressures, enslavers and politicians implemented laws to supposedly make slavery more humane. A narrative of "moral progress" was taken up by colonial powers to ameliorate conditions under slavery through statute. This project focuses on the period from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, characterized by parliamentary-initiated ameliorative laws. On the surface, amelioration appeared encouraging. However, the government implemented new anti-literacy laws concerning forgery to strengthen white control out of fear of enslaved resistance to their spatial and legal restrictions. Given the continued interest in sustaining slavery, lawmakers' vision for amelioration directly opposed the enslaved's vision for freedom.
This research undertakes a deeper analysis of how literacy influenced the unique experiences of the enslaved who were fortunate enough to gain some level of literacy in Barbados and Jamaica. It explores several questions, including: How was the experience of Atlantic slavery for literate enslaved peoples characterized by reading and writing skills? What were the tensions between literacy for religious instruction, literacy as a tool of resistance, and the laws against literacy? How did the enslaved use literacy to strategize to plan acts of resistance and increase their autonomy? These questions will inform a more extensive analysis of enslaved resistance and colonial action concerning enslaved literacy within the legal institutions of colonial Barbados and Jamaica.

**Historiography**

This project builds upon existing historiography on Atlantic slavery. It situates plantation communities and colonial legal institutions as sites of enslaved colonial knowledge. This study is built upon the foundation of two key works that look at literacy among the enslaved in the Caribbean. In 1982, historian Mary Turner analyzed the literary instruction of the enslaved in her book Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834. Turner's work focuses on Kensington Estate in St James, Jamaica, during "one of the largest slave revolts in the Caribbean." Her work traces the responses to mission work within the Jamaican plantation society, focusing on the connections between the enslaved and missionaries. She demonstrates the relationship between an enslaved uprising in relation to roles played by leaders of mission churches. The intention of the colonial government in their allowance for enslaved conversion was to use Christianity as a belief system to encourage obedience among the enslaved. Turner suggests a misunderstanding between the enslaved and missionaries, saying that the enslaved expected missionaries to support them in their efforts for freedom. However,
instead, missionaries remained neutral on the issue. This connection between enslaved rebel leaders and the church suggests that religious institutions on the island were anything but neutral, even if it was not the missionaries' goal to encourage resistance. While this project involves considerations of Christian instruction of the enslaved, it must be made clear that it does not exclusively examine literacy and resistance in connection with religious institutions. Instead, it highlights Christian teaching as one of the many pieces within a comprehensive history on the topic.

Dr. Rebecca Schneider's 2018 publication, Black Literacy and Resistance in Jamaica focuses on the latter part of Turner's work. Schneider analyzes how literacy, specifically reading, facilitated enslaved rebellion in Jamaica during the Baptist War in 1831. She draws upon the efforts of Samuel Sharpe, through his position as a literate enslaved Baptist preacher, to organize a "non-violent labour strike." An interesting contrast between Turner and Schneider's work is their different approaches to the relationship between the enslaved and missionaries. While Turner portrays this relationship as polarized by hegemonic power structures and intention, Schneider's focus on Samuel Sharpe shows that enslaved people reinterpreted Christianity for resistance within their communities. Both address the difference in the intentional use of religious education for rebellion against the oppressions of the institution.

In addition, Jennifer Palmer's 2020 publication "She Persisted in her revolt": Between Slavery and Freedom in Saint-Domingue grappled with similar questions concerning race, religious status, and autonomy within the legal system. Palmer's work concerns the French colony of Saint-Domingue and not the British Caribbean per se. Her work gives insight into how race, religion, and gender function in alignment to allow greater access to learned circles throughout the 18th century. Furthermore, suggestive that differing degrees of enslaved literacy
and illiteracy were not only determined by one's free or enslaved status. Her findings show that racialized women's learned autonomies were determined by unique and individualized factors of gender and skin colour, which encourages this project to incorporate a gendered lens.

This project builds upon this historiography by offering an analysis that explores Barbados and Jamaica in the final decades of slavery. It also puts the enslaved experience at the center of the analysis. This research project offers a nuanced understanding of enslaved literacy and an exploration of literacy as a tool of resistance. This need is met by moving away from monolithic narratives based on planters' economic perceptions and prioritizing narratives of enslaved resilience. The relevance of this eighteenth and early nineteenth-century project also helps to provide context to the legacies of racism and slavery in the present day. Today, The African Diaspora continues to face legal and educational challenges. It will be imperative to stay critical of the representation of voice throughout research sources and ask why barriers to the enslaved perspective present themselves in the archive. With this being said, what sources are not saying is just as important as what they are saying when attempting to gain a greater insight into the enslaved experience.
Chapter 1

The Threat of Knowledge: The Mythification of Racial Intelligence and Implementation of Anti-Literacy Laws

The ideological roots of Atlantic Slavery pre-dated the economic systems that made it possible for the first ship carrying captive Africans to arrive on the shores of the Americas. It is crucial to recognize the formation of racialized ideas that justified the enslavement and mass exploitation of human beings for European economic gain. It is necessary to acknowledge that ideas of human inequality originated before the Age of Enlightenment; however, ideas of inequality based on racial difference, which came to define slavery most prominently in the Atlantic world, are concentrated in the views of the Enlightenment period.

Enlightenment thought dealt with politics, philosophy, and science under the common consensus of reason.¹ The thoughts and ideas of this period, supposedly based on scientific reason, helped to form a pseudo-scientific discipline that served European interests in the slave trade. What would come out of the Enlightenment, known as racial science, the discipline's ideas continually influenced and aligned with European goals for economic gain at any cost. Breaking down the Age of Enlightenment into three phases, we see the evolution of what was happening within the institution of slavery parallel the development of Enlightenment thought. In the Early Enlightenment (1685-1730), the sugar boom massively altered the trajectory of enslaved labour production to match the economic demand of the system. Colonial authorities relied on European racial science rhetoric to falsely justify the growth of their evils. During the High Enlightenment (1730-1780), British Abolitionism was beginning to take hold, and its opponents used the ideas of racial science to challenge the movement. Finally, in the build-up to the Late Enlightenment

¹ I use the term "common," meaning the common thought of the white man in the Western part of the world.
(1780-1815) onwards, enslaved resistance, like the organization and success of the Haitian Revolution, challenged whites' ideas in racial science and caused them only to intensify their beliefs. The root ideas of scientific racism during the Enlightenment period were, at first, more directly concerned with perceptions of physicality rather than inward attributes like intelligence. However, it would be these racist perceptions of Black physicality that informed the formation of theories debating the intelligence of Black people.

**Racial Science in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century**

Planters adopted racial, economic, and cultural thought from contemporary Western thinkers who specialized in racial science to justify and maintain slavery throughout the Americas. As scholar Laura Brace notes, it appears evident through Enlightenment thought that "the understandings of humanity that emerged in the early nineteenth century were underwritten by the economics of racial slavery." To name a few of these prominent thinkers whose work reflects how white racists saw the world, more specifically humanity and race which bolstered the economic politics of slavery during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, notable influencers of their time were Charles White, Samuel George Morton, and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in the lead up to the popularity of Darwinism at the peak of emancipation.

Firstly, Enlightenment philosopher Linnaeus Kant (1724–1804) “defined European humanity in contradistinction to the inhumanity of slaves in the European colonies.” Kant presented his thoughts on Black intellect through his belief that Africans could not realize reason and rational moral perfectibility through education. Furthermore, expanding the intelligence gap

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between whites and Blacks in saying that “white Europeans have the necessary talent to be morally self-educated but innately idle Negroes were only capable of being disciplined, cultivated, and trained to be slaves but never civilized.” Kant's work reflects how white racists scientifically justified African dehumanization, trade, and slavery as an institution. Next, the work of British physician Charles White (1728-1813) took strong bias towards white superiority in the publication *An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man* (1799). White considered “whether Black Africans were products of the same act of creation as whites, proposing that Africans were inferior both physically and intellectually and were an intermediate form between true humans (white Europeans) and apes.” White's publication is one example of white considerations over Black intellect within the broader discipline of racial science of the time. Another noteworthy thinker was Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), who created the theoretical "shift from a geographic to a hierarchical ordering of human diversity" and ended up with a system with one single race with Caucasians assuming the top position, highlighting the basis of the white-superiority mindset. Lastly, the American anthropologist Samuel George Morton (1799-1851) proposed the theory that intelligence levels were directly linked to brain size, leading him to research the size of human skulls. Morton's work concluded that human cranial traits were fixed, and there was a "progressive decrease in cranial capacity" from whites.

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to Black Africans. Together, the covered theorists' work gives insight into racial science's impressions of the racist white minds of Caribbean planters.

Early publications by white academics on race attempted to demonstrate that Africans did not inherently have the intellectual capability to think for themselves and, therefore, could be taught to conform to the function of Black bodies as defined by the system of slavery's agenda. This idea that Africans did not have intellect was challenged and disproved through the evolution of plantation governance practices. The constant rewriting of best practices through slave law and plantation accounts to keep one's enslaved labour force compliant highlights African's intellectual ability and action. While colonial lawmakers believed early codification would guarantee enslaved obedience due to a lack of intellectual autonomy. Enslaved ability to apply knowledge and skill in pursuit of degrees of freedom challenged the standard practices of white enslavers, causing reactionary shifts in slaveowner's control practices and slave law. As the truth of liberating Black action was being told through these shifts, the actual capacity for self-governed intellectual power of the enslaved became feared by white supremacist society. Through an examination of various works, it can be said that perceptions of African's ill intellect in the Americas shifted from something to mould to something to fear when interested in sustaining white supremacist structures. Fear of slave knowledge and desire for freedom penetrated colonial society in which planters were in denial.

In the midst and aftermath of the Age of Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the validation of knowledge revolved around Europeans' attempts to justify racial hierarchy through a false sense of rationality and fact. Even though theological influence was

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still present, thinkers slowly became more detached from theology and sided with new conceptions of science. This shift is notable to white perceptions of enslaved intelligence because valued knowledge in society, knowledge equated with intellect, was accepted through culturally Eurocentric practices. Spheres of knowledge were validated through European normality, and any knowledge base outside those structures was disregarded as "savage" ignorance in the eyes of whites attached to white suprematism. Anthropological analysis of different cultural practices and conceptions of knowledge was never prioritized by white societies, especially in the plantation societies of the British Caribbean.

**The Plantation Society: Planter Fears and Exposure of Truth**

The myths of racial science are evident in the writings of white colonists and informed the practices of Atlantic Slavery. Early works such as Edward Long’s publication *The History of Jamaica* (1774) and William Beckford’s publication *Remarks Upon the Situation of Negroes in Jamaica* (1788), which were influential, reflect racist reproductions and had immense power in the formation of the white-supremacist logic of slavery. Not only was information produced to solidify racist views, but racist theorizations also sought to fill an agenda to falsely justify Europeans enslaving Black Africans so that the system making white empires rich would continue unwaveringly at the expense of Black lives.

A representative for the enforcement of racially hierarchal governance in Jamaica, author Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica* (1774) laid a foundation for the planter class in Caribbean plantation societies. His work reinforced white supremacist pro-slavery narratives. Edward Long was a British-born colonial administrator with the ear of the Governor of Jamaica, Sir Henry

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9 The European institution of slavery in a forced labour system that transported captive Africans from the West coast of Africa through forced dispersion throughout the Americas of the modern-day United States and the Caribbean during the 1400s to 1800s.
Moore, as his private secretary. The publication of Long’s instructive text came forty-four years before the first marked phase of amelioration. Thus, this period focused on enslaved obedience through punitive reinforcement for colonial magistrates and planters alike.

Long stated that Africans in the colonies "are void of genius and seem almost incapable of making any progress in civility. They have no plan or sense of morality among them, and their barbarity to their children debases their nature even below that of brutes. They have no moral sensations; no taste but for women; gormandizing and drinking to excess; no wish but to be idle."\(^{10}\) Furthermore, they were "marked with the same bestial manners, stupidity, and vices which debase their brethren on the continent."\(^{11}\) The thought that Africans' dark skin correlated with narrow intellect and bestial manners, in turn, formed the contrasting idea that fair skin was equated with intelligence, reason, and civility. Long's conscious choice of language around racial inheritance implies the permanence of knowledge as if one's intellect is fixed at birth by the colour of their skin. Long was not the first to hold this view, mirroring previous theories like the biblical curse of Ham theory which scholar Ibram X. Kendi identifies its believers as the first known separatists.\(^{12}\) The curse of Ham also projects the justification that the law of Christianity allowed for African enslavement as perceived through a Eurocentric religious lens apart from the white civilizing mission.

Long's text offered pro-slavery circles formulated racist theories suggesting Africans were inherently unintelligent within the confines of enslavement or freedom. We can view Long as an anti-assimilationist when assimilation is defined as the minority assimilated with the


\(^{11}\) Ibid.

\(^{12}\) The belief was that the biblical Ham and his descendants, the black Africans, had been cursed by God with eternal slavery, derived initially from the book of Genesis description.
dominant culture. He did not believe that moving Africans from one place to another would alter their intellect, as shown by saying that the Africans and Creoles in Jamaica carried the same "vices which debase their brethren on the continent,” meaning their ancestors in Africa. Long's segregationist ideologies aligned and inflamed planters' conceptions of African labour within the slavery system. Slave owners believed that Black people's physical features made them biologically superior for field work like planting, weeding, harvesting, and processing sugar into molasses and rum. Long-standing theories around African strength, physicality, and sexuality, pinned Africans as hypersexual beings, which overtook the use of reason or intellect. This belief perpetuated planter practices of enslaved reproductive labour to keep their enslaved workforces replenished and justify mass sexual exploitation done by planters themselves.

This perception of the hypersexual African was present in Long’s work in his statement that enslaved men had “no taste but for women”. This thinking reinforced this ideology and justified the reproductive forced labour of enslaved females. Sexual labour would come to reproduce the enslaved population of the West Indies after the abolition of the slave trade. The racist perception of the Black woman as being hypersexual and cut out for reproduction correspondingly contrasted with the image of the white woman as fragile and sexually pure.

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13 Early assimilationist theory had a biological element rather than more modern cultural critiques. For instance, Aristotle's Climate Theory said that extremely hot and cold places created intellectually, spiritually, and physically inferior people. Believers in climate theory thought that if African people were moved to colder climates, their skin would lighten, and their hair would eventually become straight through a sort of climate evolution, and Kendi identifies these believers as the first known assimilationists. Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. New York: Nation Books, (2016), pp 482.


15 People like Bartolome de Las Casas founded this type of segregationist theorization. Las Casas created the racist idea of the physically strong African that is still present in society today. Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, originally published in 1774, (2003), pp 354.


These labour theories created a fixed view of Blacks' socioeconomic roles, which did not involve the need for literacy. Therefore, reinforcing anti-literacy education arguments through a rhetoric of enslaved literacy being, what Minister Hugh Jones stated in his publication in *The Present State of Virginia* (1724), as “dangerous upon several political accounts, especially self-preservation” of slavery. Furthermore, stating that “Christians make Africans more humble and better servants, but “they should not be taught to read or write.” The language surrounding whites' enforcement of anti-Black literacy practices for slavery's self-preservation was an early sign of whites' realization of Black intellectualism and what that might mean for the balance of racialized power in the plantation society.

In the interest of pro-slavery parties of Jamaica, these views on enslaved restraint from literacy education were widely adopted as truth to fulfill the illogic of white supremacist social and economic goals. In an attempt to demonstrate that the enslavement of Africans was justifiable by the nature of slave labour, Long said, “the jurisprudence, the customs and makers of the Negroes, seem perfectly suited to the measure of their narrow intellect” and that the laws of the British colonies "have justly been regarded as the masterpiece of human genius." Colonial lawmakers and planters intertwined these physical and intellectual racist theories in their psyche to suit the system's reliance on exploiting Black bodies.

Race politics concerning the myth of racial science were crucial aspects of plantation management and determined space, place, and power for the Black and white plantation population. Long created a racial categorization scheme that would change not only plantation

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19 Ibid.
politics and law but also interpretations of the history of slavery from that point onwards. The chart entitled *Direct Lineal Assent from the Negroe Venter* dealt with miscegenation, outlining when a person would be considered entirely white and, in turn, determine one's imagined characteristics attached to the white persona, such as intelligence.

![Direct Lineal Assent from the Negroe Venter](image)

[| White Man| Negro Woman. |
| White Man| Mulatta. |
| White Man| Terceron. |
| White Man| Quateron. |
| White Man| Quinteron. |
| WHITE |

|MEDIATE OR STATIONARY, neither advancing nor receding. |
| Quateron=Terceron. |
| Tente-enel-ayre. |

| RETROGRADE. |
| Mulatto=Terceron. |
| Negroe=Mulatta. |
| Indian=Mulatta |
| Negroe=Indian. |
| Saltatras. |
| Sambo. |
| Mestize. |
| Sambo=Sambo de de Mulatta|Negroe. |

| Givero [o] |
| NEGROE. |

[0] Perhaps from *Gifero*, a butcher.

Figure 1, Data From Edward Long’s History of Jamaica

This chart presents race as a scientifically calculated equation on a biological colour scale in the measurement of whiteness, specifically in plantation societies throughout the Atlantic world. Because Long segregates different racial categorizations, we can view this chart as a segregationist tool. Although, it is also representative of an impossible generational biological assimilation project. Because Long’s chart one is based on myth, and two, outlines the category of white being reached so far down the generational line if complied to, it does not act as a guide but rather an ideological tool that sustains the supremacy of whiteness. Notably, this chart's assimilist and segregationist theorizations concerning African intelligence show that Long, in his
alignment with pro-slavery ideology, believed people's traits were fixed through the white lens by race and not flexible through learned Eurocentric practices. He reinforces this idea by saying, "it is astonishing that, although they have been acquainted with Europeans for so many hundred years, they have, in all these series of time, manifested so little...genius either inventive or imitative."  

Long did not recognize his definition of genius within the enslaved population; however, his ideology touches on two intelligence categories, inventive and imitative, that are imperative to this analysis of enslaved intelligence in their resistance efforts.

Although The History of Jamaica argues for the unintelligence of enslaved Africans, ironically, Long's writing shows sophisticated levels of cultural adaptation by the enslaved. In the text, Long refers to the linguistic behavior of the enslaved population, observing that "the Africans speak their respective dialects, with some mixture of broken English. The language of the Creoles is bad English, larded with the Guiney dialect, owing to their adopting African words, to make themselves understood by the imported slaves; which they find much easier than teaching these strangers to learn English."  

Long interprets the Creole language as not fulfilling the satisfactory European standard for linguistics; however, the ability of the enslaved to adapt their linguistic communication practices for better communication and collaboration between the culturally diverse enslaved community is intellectually inventive. This linguistic innovation gave the enslaved a communication tool that could limit masters' access to their interactions. William Beckford notes another example of enslaved linguistic communication in his descriptive account of Jamaica, saying that fieldwork was "accompanied by rhythmic song, the slaves were said to

21 Creoles are people that were born in the colonies and not on the continent of Africa. In this context, Creoles could be of mixed race due to forced sexual relations, most commonly between white masters and Black enslaved women. Edward Long, The History of Jamaica, McGill-Queen’s University Press, originally published in 1774, (2003), pp 355.

22 Ibid, pp xiii.
have raised their gleaming hoes all together," and in the exact time can be observed, "as the performance of a well-constructed orchestra." What he misses in his reflection is the alternative functions of said songs. It is widely known in the historiography of the Southern United States that the enslaved would use songs as an avenue of resistance instruction right under their master's nose, which is highly likely to have occurred in the Caribbean.

William Beckford, a wealthy planter and magistrate for Westmoreland parish from 1782 to 1786, also wrote about imported Africans and power on the plantation in his publication *Remarks Upon the Situation of Negroes in Jamaica*. In the text, Beckford stated that he had "observed that new negroes are particularly fond of power, and ill-exert it as if accustomed to severity raised to the authority of drivers upon a plantation, will be more despotic and inhuman than Creoles are." Later, rebellion would come to challenge this theory around race and the likelihood to rebel as the mass rebellions of the early nineteenth century are noted to involve strategization of the Creole population. For instance, Governor Coote of Jamaica reflected on a revolt that had taken place in Portland and St. George in 1806, writing that the “insurrection that has manifested itself among the negroes, on some estates…during the Christmas Holidays…I am sorry to remark are almost all Creole negroes.” It is reasonable to suggest that Coote's later observation of Creole resistance leadership was driven by their access to avenues of literacy education which debunked early white assumptions of slave resistance organization and created a

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domino effect of resistance leadership that future chapters will explore. 27 In white minds, Black organization of rebellions was disregarded as insanity, not a strategic expression of the human desire for freedom. This is notable in relation to white thought processes found in Long's racial ideology, as well as others like Jamaican John Dovaston's argument that the enslaved from the Gold Coast were "the best for the field [because] their disposition is dull and stupid and only fit for labour," suggesting darker toned skin equated to weak intellect. 28 Although whites may have openly promoted these ideas of Black intellectual inferiority, Beckford's acknowledgment of the same group's strategy and organization, as told through their mutiny attempts, challenges the notion that race correlated to intelligence levels and shows that white society had a narrow definition of intelligence.

The racial ideology behind Long’s chart caused many planters to inform enslaved labour roles based on a colour scale to whiteness as they differentiated between the "intelligent Creole" enslaved and "the ignorant uninstructed African" enslaved. Planters often reserved close contact domestic roles for Creole mixed-race women with this racial intelligence theory in mind. 29 On Beckford’s plantation, “seven women were domestics including Creole Phibba and Mulato Mary, both house wenches, along with Mulato Dolly who was a cook.” 30 Fear of presumed uncertainties surrounding newly imported Africans ran so deep that Beckford would profit off enslaved women's reproductive labour and "select those (though they be not thought to the most

27 Sir Eyre Coote was elected Governor of Jamaica in 1806.
valuable) who seem to be in a fair way to become mothers” all for the “encouragement of human treatment and the breeding of Creole slaves.”

In addition to his thoughts on newly imported Africans to the colonies, William Beckford generally had strong opinions on African intellect, arguing that “a slave has no feeling beyond the present hour, no anticipation of what may come, no dejection at what may ensue” and that “privileges of feeling are reserved for the enlightened.” Here, Beckford projects the idea that the enslaved could not reasonably comprehend their condition in slavery past the realms of their labour role in the system or logically foresee their future within it. Beckford contradicts himself in his conversation about the power dynamic between planters and the enslaved, suggesting that enslaved power was derived from their knowledge and collaboration.

To police enslaved power, Beckford asserted that Africans could assimilate into Eurocentric Christianity and not only did they have the ability to, but Christian instruction would also cause the enslaved to become "more obedient, more quiet, more attached, and happier." This statement from Beckford is just another example of contradiction in his text, on the one side arguing that enslaved conversion to Christianity would improve morale by increasing happiness in their enslavement. While at the same time arguing that Africans did not have the emotional intellect to feel for planters to consider in a failed attempt to deny human guilt or responsibility of enslavers. Furthermore, stating enslaved "introduction to the forms of our religion might soon become, not only universal but be the pledge of future security; but with this introduction, the

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doctrine of Christian kindness and forgiveness should be reduced to practice; the cloud of
darkness that now covers the minds of the negroes should be gently removed, that their
understandings might be prepared to receive new instruction, that they might feel comfort from
obedience and protection from power.”34 This excerpt's mention of slavery's security gives
insight into the planter's fearful mindset around the submission of the enslaved. While Beckford
framed power as something the enslaved feared, it is evident that the genuine concern lay with
those benefiting from their labour. He makes his understanding clear that the information going
into the minds of the enslaved determined slavery's security; therefore, he is cautious about
suggesting Christian instruction beyond the point of the lessons of servitude that Christianity
offered. Beckford draws attention to the threat planters saw enslaved knowledge to have on the
system and the denial of their conceptualization of enslaved human desire for freedom.

White ill-understandings of Black minds highlight the evolution of contradiction. Early
racial theorizations like the ones of Kant, White, Morton, and Blumenbach reinforced ideas of
Black intellectual inferiority, which influenced the plantation-based works of Edward Long and
William Beckford. Racist ideological frameworks of these texts exposed white fears of Black
intelligence through the repeated attempt to demonstrate a false case for white superiority. In
*Remarks Upon the Situation of Negroes in Jamaica*, Beckford leaves no mistaking of his fear of
Black intellectual power, speaking on Coromantin enslaved people's organization of mass revolt.
Furthermore, suggesting tactics for planter control to try and tame their self-inflicted power.

34 Ibid, pp 82.
**Black Intellectual Power**

Black intellectuals throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in particular, challenged these racist theories and demonstrated that they were based on faulty research time and time again as literate Blacks contradicted contemporary beliefs in racial inferiority as it related to intelligence. The literate African dealt a severe blow to the polygenetic theories propounded by writers such as Long, who were forced to defend their beliefs by concluding that Black literacy was no more than mimicry.\[^{35}\] The Society For the Purpose of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade of Manchester, England, sought to give an example of African humanity and intelligence by publishing a letter written first-hand by an anonymous ex-enslaved Black man to advance their abolitionist cause for ending the slave trade. The letter speaks to the small but impactful way the literate few attempted to improve the condition of the whole enslaved population through literacy. The anonymous author of said letter wrote, "ever since an indulgent matter rewarded my youthful services with freedom and supplied me at a very early age with the means of acquiring knowledge, I have laboured to… [possess] myself of the language of this country, to plead the cause of those who were once my fellow-slaves, and if profitable, to make my freedom, in some degree, the instrument of their deliverance."\[^{36}\] Here, the recognition of literacy as a tool is not affiliated with the fear-based outlook of disobedience but rather recognizing literacy skills as an instrument of deliverance through the lens of the Black perspective.


The intelligence of the enslaved is recognized in *The History of Jamaica* in Long's observations of Creole people's ability to invent intellectual tactics like language and dialect for stronger communication through code-switching to best survive in their white and Black worlds. Enslaved ability to apply knowledge and skill in pursuit of degrees of freedom was displayed both inside and outside Eurocentric societal norms and, in all cases, challenged the authority of their white owners and the institution at large. As the truth of liberating Black action was being told through these white debates, the actual capacity for self-governed intellectual power of the enslaved became feared by white supremacist society. Evidence of fear for enslaved education is found in societal discourse in the *Barbados Mercury* and *Bridge-town Gazette*.

Colonial newspapers often held space for opinion pieces from writers that expressed current political views. An example of the political tensions around educating the enslaved was published in an issue of the *Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette* on March 4th, 1809. A piece was written on behalf of the Fulham House, an episcopate branch of the Bishop of London in Barbados, in response to planters increasing discouragement against slave education efforts on the island. Under the heading "To the Clergy, and Proprietors of Plantations, in the British West India Islands," the Fulham House stated that:

Some objections have, I understand, been made to the introduction of my plan into the Islands, I shall here briefly state… The principal, and indeed only plausible objections to my plan, which have come to my knowledge, are…that the instruction of the Negro children will render them proud and insolent, disobedient to their masters, and indisposed to labour.\(^{37}\)

This excerpt identifies Black dissent from their position as a central fear surrounding slave education in Barbados. Whites knew the liberating effects of education first-hand, predicting and

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fearing the outcomes of an educated enslaved population that did not weigh in planters’ favour. Predictions that the enslaved would become more highly aware and critical of their place within the slave society were vindicated in white considerations of the enslaved perspective within a system defined by Black submission for white colonial profits. The acknowledgment of the humanizing impacts of being educated was made through this opinion piece. Furthermore, in alignment with slavery's objective to dehumanize Africans, it was not a question if the enslaved had the mental capacity for learning but whether the institution could survive if said enslaved learned of its inner workings. Another example comes from an anonymous writer under the signature Xa who wrote into the *Barbados Mercury* in 1818 on his opinion of enslaved literacy education, writing:

To the editor of the Mercury,

Care should be taken that modes of reform should correspond to the spirit of its institutions — otherwise, innovation, not improvement, will be the consequence…. The proposed institution which appeared in Saturday's Mercury is radically wrong from two points of view - first, in holding forth the same branches of education both to the free child and the slave; and second in assembling them together. To the free subject who may, in future life, have extensive dealings to manage, an acquaintance with the art of writing and the science of numbers, is requisite; but neither writing nor arithmetic can be necessary to the other, whose condition and ordinary occupations preclude their use. Writing cannot be beneficial to the slave, but it may be detrimental to his master, is the ability to read, in order that he may become thoroughly acquainted with his duty, and hopes as a Christian, and derive from religious mediation that consolation which is the sweetest solace of him whose lot is to labour….The slave, educated with the freeman, would naturally receive his notions, which, by rendering his condition painful, if not odious to him would dispose his mind for a change, and most probably prompt him to attempt it.

Signed X

It was said that “if ignorance is bliss, it’s folly to be wise” for someone whose life is bound by servitude in the December 8th, 1818, issue of the *Barbados Mercury and Bridge-town Gazette, December 1, (1818).*
An anonymous figure named Philanthropos wrote passionately and sternly in his position on the debate on universal enslaved literacy education. Philanthropos highlights the interests of those who saw enslaved education as setting a dangerous precedent for the slave society of Barbados, exclaiming that “the grand and fundamental objective is to properly instill into the slave, of his duty to God” through the art of reading, "but beyond this point of improvement, the slave is forbidden to proceed, by every argument of policy and humanity." The true power of literacy is acknowledged here, recognizing the double-edged sword that enslaved education promised. Not only appealing to planters' and missionaries' interests in the Christianizing mission but also the enslaved resistance mission. Through the advancement of enslaved literacy skills, enslaved people's "duty to man," as the slave society perceived it, was more easily challenged and "the groundwork of dissatisfaction to his owner or the government" flourished as a "consequence for the (slaveholding) community." This editorial piece blatantly encourages enslaved conversion but is vigilant about the tools that conversion offered. For Philanthropos and many others invested in the interests of slavery, the belief that the mental improvement of the enslaved was "a certain step towards mental misery" was prominent. As feared by this community, education, religious or otherwise, appealed to the interests of individual literate enslaved and the larger enslaved cause linked to greater autonomy and stronger resistance efforts. Proving that ignorance is not bliss, rather the oppression at the core of the institution of slavery distracting away from knowledge being the actual tool of freedom.

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39 Barbados Mercury, and Bridge-town Gazette, Reader Philanthropos, December 8th, (1818), pp 2.
40 Ibid.
41 Barbados Mercury and Bridge-town Gazette, Philanthropos, Ibid.
42 Ibid.
The issue of enslaved education in the British Caribbean was often inseparable from a white religious motivations and the “civilizing mission”. For instance, political rhetoric amplified in pro-slavery circles embodied the words of the Justice Criminel in France, which were posted in *The Barbadian* in 1833, three years after the Justice himself had expressed the view, saying “it is in the class of those who, according to their condition or means ought to have received the best education, that we find the greatest number of crimes against the person.” The newspaper's commentator, identified by the signature Senex, applied these words to the situation in Barbados, stating that "there is enough to inspire doubt as to the certain efficacy of education as an instrument of good morals, enough indeed! Intellectual education without religion- mere mental cultivation without morals- is the very devil's instrument to betray mankind." Senex does not directly state that they were applying this line of thought to the issue of enslaved education. However, he makes a clear statement on his beliefs of the evils of education when its uses fall outside the realms of the church. This passage from *The Barbadian* leads to the conclusion that those interested in maintaining slavery saw enslaved education as a threatening endeavour which the enslaved could utilize outside the white-designated barriers of control as the utilization of literacy skills by the literate enslaved commonly fell outside of these parameters. White ideological understandings of Black intellectual power in its threat against the institution of slavery would lead to intellectual policing from colonial lawmakers through the implementation of slave laws discouraging enslaved avenues for literacy education that could better allow the enslaved to understand and challenge their enslavement further.

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43 *The Barbadian*, July 20th, Barbados, (1833), pp 3.
44 Ibid.
Literacy and the Law for the Illiterate Enslaved

An analysis of British slave law, which followed the English judicial and common law model, is a crucial point of analysis that gives insight into the extent to which the planter also intended to make the possibility of enslaved literacy difficult. Slave codes enacted for white control over the education of the enslaved attempted to regulate the types of knowledge the enslaved accessed and practiced. General plantation practices encouraged knowledge concerning harvesting sugar cane, working in the boiling house, and layouts of neighboring plantations to increase labour productivity on plantations. Intentional barriers imposed and maintained through efforts to keep the majority of the enslaved illiterate by planters and colonial lawmakers intended to keep the enslaved population in the dark about the logistics of their legal condition. This tactic of keeping the enslaved ignorant was touched on by an anonymous ex-enslaved person's account in *A Letter From a Negro, and Other Papers Relative to the Slave Trade* (1788). He reflected on the wider enslaved population's comprehension of slavery in the British Caribbean, writing, "we have written laws indeed, composed in a language we do not understand, and never promulgated."45 Through the acknowledgement of the oppressions of slavery, thanks to his acquired literacy skills, the anonymous writer was able to explain literate Black’s frustration with the educational oppression of the larger population.

Black intelligence did not have a place in planters' conception of the role of Africans within the institution. Instead, planters' understanding of enslaved intelligence was primarily fixed in opposition to Black desires for educational and total liberation. The evolving formations of colonial slave law constantly aimed to match the planter classes' needs and understandings to

maintain control over their enslaved workforces. Slave law originally represented an overall ill-understanding of Black intelligence; however, its continual revision by white colonial lawmakers reflects intellectual action for liberation by the enslaved. British slave law was routinely revised from the 1600s to the early 1800s, and for this project, a few revisions within slave law concerned with enslaved education and literacy skills stand-out.

An Act for the better ordering and governing of Negroes, enacted in Barbados in 1661, sought to diffuse white fears by associating the enslaved as chattel and, in turn, produced stark perceptions of their ability for literacy and critical thinking about the system in which they were enslaved. The 1661 slave codes did not address enslaved literacy education; however, it did suggest that because they were "without knowledge of God," it was seriously considered "of the premises thought good to renew and revive whatsoever we have found necessary," suggesting lawmakers began laying the groundwork for enslaved conversion in Barbados and Jamaica.46 In retrospect, this clause can be viewed as the beginning of the legalization of enslaved religious education through the Christian faith, which later impacted broader literacy rates within enslaved communities of the British Empire.

After the passing of the Barbados Slave Code of 1661, a statement was made by the Bishop of London that said “efforts [were to] be taken among Church of England leaders in Barbados to Christianize Africans” which was met with heavy opposition from those with economic interests in slavery.47 Scholar Edward B. Rugemers presents an equitable interpretation

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of planter opposition to the Bishop's demand found in the *Journal of Lords of Trades and Plantations* (1680), writing:

> “Absentee Barbadians in London attended a meeting with the Lords of Trade to nip this idea in the bud. The planters blended racial assumptions and scaremongering, citing a recent slave insurrection as a warning against conversion. Africans were averse to learning, the planters argued, and because ‘converted negroes grow more perverse and intractable than others,’ allowing their conversion was dangerous.”

It is evident from this opposition's reasoning that planters were influenced by racial science but, at the same time, recognized the threat that any degree of enslaved education and a corresponding decrease in docility posed against white power over the plantation society. What the lawmakers writing the Barbados Slave Code of 1661 did not predict, therefore, did not plan for was enslaved innovation for the resistive uses of literacy through educational avenues the 1661 slave code had not yet regulated.

Eighteenth-century legislative debate and action were characterized by intensifying abolitionist efforts for the abolition of the slave trade, which, in response, called for massive legislative reform to maintain the order of slavery in the colonies. Certain Members of Parliament proposed that enslaved religious education would help to maintain the white hegemonic order. The proposed benefits of further legislation to advance efforts of enslaved religious education were driven by the idea of saving African's souls as it had in the seventeenth century and for the survival of slavery post-abolition.

Edmund Burke, in office from 1783 to 1785 in the House of Commons, drafted what is now known as the *Sketch of a Negro Code* sometime around 1780. This draft attempted to

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48 Ibid.

49 It must be noted that Edmund Burke’s Sketch was never actually officially enacted. My mention of it is meant to give insight into the quickly evolving political dynamics and legislative debates within parliament for legal regulations on slavery during the late eighteenth century. P. J. Marshall, “The Negro Code”, *Edmund Burke and the*
regulate slavery in the West Indies, at which time Burke anticipated the abolition of the slave trade and a need to preserve order amongst the existing enslaved population. In his sketch, Burke calls for the enslaved to have access to religious education, including opportunities for Africans to receive instruction in the catechism of the Church of England. Burke's wish for the advancement of enslaved education initiatives to be enacted in the slave code highlights late eighteenth-century political rhetoric around enslaved knowledge and its limited degrees of value for white slave-holding society.

In Barbados, Burke’s desire for order was felt amongst white colonial magistrates, many being planters themselves, who “had indicated as long ago as 1780 their appreciation of the extent to which manipulation of the judicial system could serve their economic and class interests” which above all was to have no disruption or decrease in their profits from enslaved labour. Governmental debates in the metropole and colonies on the best route for action through law were shaken up by the example of the Haitian Revolution in 1791. More importantly, the revolution’s influence on enslaved resistance efforts in the British colonies indicates that planters’ agenda for the religious education of the enslaved was ultimately inefficient in producing high degrees of enslaved obedience.

After continued enslaved resistance and several conspiracies for armed rebellion, the Barbados Assembly revamped its slave code with additional measures to enhance the power of the slave-holding regime. The government attempted to gain better control of the enslaved by

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enforcing harsher penalties for any form of enslaved resistance. However, after the legal intensification of punishment, British authorities in London were pressured by abolitionists and intensifying enslaved revolts such as Tackys War (1760) in Jamaica and Bussa's Rebellion (1816) in Barbados to ameliorate their slave codes in hopes of decreasing resistance to their enslavement.

The ameliorative Consolidated Slave Law was passed in December of 1826, and while this code was said to give the enslaved a "better" experience under slavery, the intention of the actual codes reinforced strict literacy laws, especially concerning literate resistance and marronage. This act made forgery by an enslaved individual a capital offence, punishable by death, along with murder, rape, and conspiracy to revolt. It can be viewed as a response to the increase in enslaved literacy, undermining previous slave law, which called for law reform to control. The ticket system was one of these liberation tools literate enslaved could utilize. For over a century, Barbados slave law permitted the enslaved to leave plantation grounds if they had a 'ticket' issued by their owner that specified the time of their expected return. Although it is unknown to what extent these written authorizations discouraged enslaved individuals from an unauthorized flight, the ticket system was a central feature of planter control from 1652 to 1826,

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53 Marronage is the act of freeing or extracting oneself from slavery by running away from the plantation in search of varying degrees of freedom. There were different types of marronage, including petit marronage, which involved short-term flight covering shorter distances (i.e., from plantation to town, plantation to plantation) rather than for permanent escape. This type of marronage usually resulted in the capture or negotiation of return and punishment. The other type, known as grand marronage, was first experienced primarily in Hispaniola in the sixteenth century; however, it was in 18th-century Jamaica that the "phenomenon of grand marronage reached its greatest extent in the Caribbean." Grand marronage involved the enslaved escaping plantations with the intention of permanent escape through long-distance flight (i.e. plantation to rural parts of the colony or plantation to intercolonial travel). Examples of the enslaveds' intent to commit grand marronage are identifiable in taking refuge in locations difficult to reach or escaping into the "circuits of interisland navigation, becoming maritime maroons." Verene Shepherd, and Hilary Beckles. *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World: A Student Reader,* “Introduction,” “The Haitian Revolution,” Rev. and expanded ed. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, (2000), pp 10 & 10.

when lawmakers eliminated the use of tickets and made forgery a capital offence. Eliminating the use of tickets and making forgery a capital offence can be seen as an immediate reaction by lawmakers (who were themselves slaveowners) to deter enslaved flight and resistance aided by literacy skills. Furthermore, the implementation of the 1826 Consolidated Slave Law reflects planter anxieties around the increase in enslaved literacy levels caused by missionaries' instruction of Christianity. Something the Barbados Slave Code of 1661 briefly proposed.

Continual revisions of British slave codes between the late seventeenth century and early nineteenth century suggest that enslaved interaction and resistive innovation around these codes forced their enslavers to reassess and tighten their controlling grip. Before the enslaved could tactically use literacy skills to challenge their enslavement, they first resisted against definitions of themselves as chattel and disproved their intellectual blind obedience by actively pursuing avenues for literacy education.
Chapter 2

**Avenues for Literacy:**
**Plantation Politics, Religious Instruction, and Enslaved Literacy**

The anti-literacy laws implemented by the British colonial government made illiteracy amongst the enslaved a common reality. Although the overwhelming majority were limited by their legal barriers, a minority of enslaved people found avenues for literacy through spaces dedicated to Christian conversion and through skilled and domestic enslaved labour. Literacy among the enslaved became a tool of resistance.

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<td><strong>Marronage</strong></td>
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Figure 2, Hilary Beckles, Verene Shepherd, *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World*, pp 1004.

**Missionaries and Enslaved Conversion in British Plantation Societies**

From the Reformation onwards, Protestant superiors' effort to connect with the common man encouraged literary knowledge amongst the lower classes. During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century people relied on the Catholic church for information and knowledge about the world. This reliance troubled many people in the intellectual community, amongst them Martin Luther, who believed that the authority held by the Catholic church was a
"theological anchor." The thought that lower classes should have access to the spoken word and the written scripture slowly expanded with this effort for change from Protestant missionaries toward the enslaved populations in the West Indies. This idea penetrated West Indian society, and an effort was made on behalf of missionaries to create a religiously learned lower class which was intimidatingly frightening to the planter class.

During a period of intensifying amelioration debates, Jamaican Wesleyans interpreted and addressed planters' fears about Christian missionaries at a meeting held in Kingston, Jamaica, on September 6th, 1824. An observation of the Jamaican Wesleyans meeting report highlights six "charges" made against the missionary community by the plantocracy that were points of tension between the two groups. First, missionaries' motives for Christianizing the enslaved and second, the belief that Christianity was incompatible with slavery. Incompatibility was an issue reckoned with by many white colonials who saw it best to separate the two institutions. For example, an excerpt from the Barbadian in 1832 defended this belief writing that slavery and Christianity were "incompatible, and the great body of the resident planters and managers viewed the manner in the same light and were opposed to the education…of their slaves; and lest these authorities should be slighted, as savoring too exclusively of dissent." Third is the interference of civil conditioning of the enslaved and its illegalities within this system; fourth, missionaries' connection with the African institution; and fifth, the belief that missionaries did not have the colonists' happiness in mind. Finally, the missionaries were stealing money from the enslaved. From the beginning of Christian mission work in the West

Indies, missionaries were expected to diffuse these points of tension between planter objectives and their objectives for enslaved conversion through a customized narrow version of Christianity.

Missionaries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were theological anchors within Caribbean slave societies through their preaching and teaching. When the enslaved were given religious education, scripture was often taught through a lens of compliance and servitude to bond them to an idea which was theologically anchored in the interest of sustaining the system of slavery. Missionaries viewed literacy education as "an essential and indispensable part of the education."58 Those representing the Fulham House were in favour of the Christianizing mission and strongly believed that “Negro children…should be taught to read” because “no effectual instruction can be given to them without it.”59 The representative even proposed a practical learning model in the paper, suggesting they learn to read by “making them first write the letters of the alphabet upon sand.”60 In response to the backlash against Fulham Houses’ enslaved education initiative, the house wrote a response to be published in the Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown-Gazette stating that, “scriptures (which they [meaning the enslaved] will be taught to read and to understand) God himself expressly commands them to be obedient and submissive to their Masters… be obedient says St. Paul to your Masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling in the singleness of your heart as unto Christ.”61 When preaching to the enslaved Methodist missionary William J. Shrewsbury, who resided in Barbados in the early nineteenth century, relied on scripture such as Ephesians 6:5, which said, "Servants, be obedient to them

58 Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, issue published “remarks by the Fulham House,” on Dec 13th, 1803, paper published March 4th, (1809), pp 3.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette, March 4th, (1809), pp 3.
that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good-will doing service…knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free."62 Whether interpreted by missionaries or the enslaved themselves, manipulation of scripture took place through isolation of scripture that exclusively conformed to planter ideology.

Aligning thought on the use of Christianity as a tool that would increase obedience among the enslaved, the planter William Beckford of Jamaica expressed his perspective on enslaved conversion, saying that when “treated as Christians, (the enslaved) are instructed in, and obtain a decent knowledge of religious observances, are consequently more obedient, more quiet, more attached, and happier.”63 This logic was utilized in planters' theorization to allow enslaved religious education on plantations. Although, through an examination of the enslaveds' experience, it becomes evident that they broke free from this theological anchor and innovated resistance efforts in response.

Enslaved literacy resistance practice has a long history in the Caribbean. For instance, in the Danish colony St. Thomas, in the mid-eighteenth century, a letter was written on February 15th, 1739, to the king by "the male slaves of St. Thomas as well as three women named Madlena, Rebecca (mulatto woman), and Anna Maria advocating for education on their behalf. These enslaved people actively advocated for religious education, writing:

Merciful Sir King! Now it is our hope his majesty the king will give the order that we may continue to learn about the Lord Jesus…. although we are very much oppressed by all who come to beat and hew us when we learn about the Saviour, and who say that negroes should not become blessed…but we do not believe this… we have robbed our lord, run maroon,

went to Porto Rico, have been naughty and deceived our masters with our daily rations. Many negroes have got their hands and feet cut off because of this evil. We will gladly lay our heads for the community under the axe, for the Lord Jesus, if our masters will kill us, like they say. God bless our most merciful king a thousand times.⁶⁴

Their advocacy for education for the enslaved shows their willingness to fight for better conditions and a degree of citizen participation. Addressing a figure like the Danish King was the ultimate attempt at affirming themselves while challenging European planters' and civil authorities' hierarchical social position. The letter is evidence to those of the time that even though it was common to believe that Africans had inferior intelligence, they were able to learn, articulate, and reason. Their reference to maroons escaping to Porto Rico shows recognition by the enslaved of the connection between their plea for religious education and an increased threat of marronage. This recognition was a conscious attempt by the enslaved to diffuse known anxieties around enslaved education that would ultimately work against them in getting a positive response. They tackled this by attempting to convince pro-slavery sanctions religious education would lead to increased obedience amongst the enslaved population. To the apparent eye, the motivation of the enslaved in writing this letter might be for religious instruction to form a better spiritual relationship with God. This is not necessarily a false motivation, as it holds validity; however, the knowledge that religious education was known to reap other benefits, such as literacy skills, knowledge advancement, and enslaved avenues for hope, cannot be ignored in enslaved persistence on the matter.

Literate Enslaved Preachers and Their Political Impact

⁶⁴ Victor Vazquez-Colon, Ibid.
One result of missionary influence in the British Colonies was an increase of people in leadership positions within the enslaved community. Certain members of the enslaved population took a particular interest in the teachings of Christianity and its potential uses in their condition. By the beginning of the second phase of amelioration, enslaved Christian practice was viewed as a regular part of the culture of the enslaved by those in power on plantations, and enslaved preachers were often seen as an unthreatening product of this. Enslaved Christian leaders were only supported by planters if they promoted a version of Christianity tailored to reinforce a servitude dialogue. The potential of enslaved Christian assemblies being coalitions of resistance was recognized by the upholding powers of the institution. Colonial governing powers set out strict restrictions around enslaved Christian assemblies, shown in Lord Bathurst's warning to the colonies that "precaution should be taken in permitting persons to preach the gospel to assemblies of Negroes…for the purpose of excluding from the exercise of such sacred functions all ignorant and ill designing persons who under the pretense of preaching the gospel may disseminate principals of peace and good order in society."65 Furthermore, only allowing religious meetings in places notified to the Supreme Court and registered.66 Not all enslaved preachers complied with these terms but rather interpreted their Christian teachings as guidance for resistance by utilizing the literacy skills that came with their religious education. For instance, literate interpretation of Christian scripture was at the heart of the resistance efforts of enslaved Baptist preacher Samuel Sharpe.

66 Lord Bathurst was a Member of Parliament from 1783 to 1794, Lord of the Admiralty from 1783 to 1789, Lord of the Treasury from 1789 to1791, Commissioner of the Board for Control for India from 1793 to 1802 and returned to office under Pitt’s administration from 1804 to 1827 as President of the Board of Trade, Secretary for the Colonies, and he was in charge of the Foreign Office.
Known now as the leader of the Baptist war (Dec 25th, 1831- Jan 4th, 1832) and then as ‘Daddy Sharpe,’ ‘Ruler Sharpe,’ and ‘preacher to the rebels’ by the enslaved, the life of Samuel Sharpe between 1800 and 1832 highlights the connection between Christianity, enslaved literacy, and resistance that incorporated both aspects within the plantation space.67 His owner, also named Samuel Sharpe, owned a plantation estate named Coopers Hill in Montego Bay in the parish of St. James. Planter Sharpe was one of the few slave owners who would often help educate his slaves, which is noted as “neither normative nor legal.”68 Here, the enslaved man Samuel Sharpe is recorded as a domestic enslaved person, and this is notable because it indicates a close physical and social proximity to his owner. He also experienced leniency and even encouragement for Christian conversion and practice from his owner. His literacy skills allowed him to self-interpret in a way other enslaved did not have the power.

67 These years are based on scholarly consensus, we do not know his precise date of birth. Delroy A. Reid-Salmon, Faith, and the Gallows: The Cost of Liberation, In Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity, Routledge, (2010), chapter 9, pp 2-3.
68 It was a common practice for the enslaved to take on the last names of their masters. Faith and the Gallows: The Cost of Liberation.” In Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity, Routledge, (2010), chapter 9, pp 2.
While the intent of the planter class was that Christianity would lead to enslaved obedience, Sam Sharpe interpreted the word of the bible through a freedom lens. His ability to read and interpret the written word conflicted with the planters’ agenda. He put his theological focus on scripture, such as the image of God (Gen 1:26-27), and all are made free by God through Jesus Christ (Gal 3:26-29), which formed his theological mission statement to promote Black freedom through a Christian frame. Reid-Salmon notes this as Sharpe asserting a "Black Christian theological anthropology" against the white supremacist Christian perspective. In his book *Death Struggles of Slavery* (1853), Reverend Henry Bleby reflected on the mass influence Sharpe's theological work had on the larger enslaved population of Jamaica, stating that:

I heard him two or three times deliver a brief extemporaneous address to his fellow prisoners on religious topics...and I was amazed at the power and freedom with which he

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spoke and at the effect which was produced upon his auditory. He appeared to have the feelings and passions of his hearers completely at his command.  

As Bleby's account recognizes his effectiveness as a public speaker, Sharpe often travelled to the various estates throughout western Jamaica to preach to anyone who would listen, whether that be the enslaved or free people. This rebellious adaptation of Christian theology eventually inspired Sharpe to put his conviction for Black freedom and equality into action.

In the lead-up to Christmas day, 1831, he held meetings after regular service hours to plan a massive revolt by the enslaved. His reasoning behind this action was heavily based on his theological conclusion that “whites had no more right to hold the Black people in slavery than the Black people had to make white people slaves; and, for his own part, he would rather die than live in slavery.” Sharpe sought support for his plans for rebellion by secretly networking with fellow leadership by preaching this message across the Western part of Jamaica, an estimated area of over 600 miles, to accepting church congregations. Plans were set, the word was spread, and the enslaved on the island's western half actively boycotted their owner's labour demands, as was the plan for resistance. On December 27th, the labour boycott turned into an enslaved uprising. The enslaved set fire to Kensington Estate in the hills of Montego Bay, lasting eleven days until colonial forces put it down.

Samuel Sharpe's role in the organization of the Baptist War is telling about how the enslaved utilized planters’ allowance for enslaved Eurocentric Christian practice and its prerogatives like literacy education to advance their desires for freedom. Sharpe's skillful ability

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72 Notably, those who Sharpe sought out were also literate to some degree through their congregations and were highly respected within their communities. Delroy A. Reid-Salmon, Faith, and the Gallows: The Cost of Liberation, In Black Theology, Slavery and Contemporary Christianity, Routledge, (2010), chapter 9, pp 2.
to read scripture through a freedom lens was a liberating tool that sent resistive ripple effects through the island's Western half, another example of literate enslaveds’ wide-reaching impact on systematic power structures within their communities. Considering his position of social and political leadership as well as literacy skills, Samuel Sharpe's experience of slavery was defined by degrees of privilege compared to the enslaved majority. Furthermore, analysis of his defined labour role as a domestic enslaved person and its influence on the trajectory of his path must not be overlooked as merely trivial fact. There are significant points of intersection between Christianity, the domestic labour sphere, and enslaved literacy within the plantation society that must be acknowledged.

The life of enslaved woman Mary Prince is an extraordinary case that highlights the relationship between enslaved adoption of Christianity, domestic labour experience, and literacy. Through her life in British Antigua during the late eighteenth and into the early nineteenth century, Prince was among the first known enslaved people in the British colonies to write a first-hand account of slavery. Her book *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*, was published in London at a pivotal time as the second phase of amelioration pushed for abolitionism throughout the empire.
Her writing gave insight into the horrors of slavery, which British abolitionists utilized as ammunition for their cause. Her story provides insight into how she became literate and succeeded in her literacy resistance.

Figure 5, a true picture of Mary Prince does not exist; however, this picture is often used to illustrate her story, Bermuda Biographies bm.

Prince reflects on her literacy education as being massively impacted by white women in the Moravian religious groups on the island, writing that, "the Moravian ladies (Mrs. Richter,
Mrs. Olufsen, and Mrs. Sauter) taught me to read in the class; and I got on very fast. In this class… most of them were free people. After we had done spelling, we tried to read the Bible."

The passage suggests that enslaved women in domestic positions had more access to free colonial society as most people in this class were free. Also, conversion efforts of these groups saw value or even necessity in understanding scripture, therefore, requiring literacy skills to become Christian. Furthermore, it is said in the footnotes of this text that while learning to read and write, Prince possessed:

a copy of Mrs. Trimmer's Charity School Spelling Book, presented to her by Rev. Mr. Curtin, dated August 30, 1817. In this book, her name is written as Mary Princess of Wales, an appellation which, she says, was given to her by her owners. It was common practice for colonists to give ridiculous names of this description to their slaves; being, in fact, one of the numberless modes of expressing the habitual contempt with which they regard the Negro race.

This mention of “white habitual contempt for the Negro race” is interesting when contrasted with the assimilationist's actions of enslaved conversion concerning intellectualism. While it is evident through this insulting sarcasm that Prince's owners did not view her as being able to meet European intellectual standards, planter's practice of converting their enslaved workforces placed Africans within teaching spaces at the center of Eurocentric societal thought. Prince's literacy education and resistance may have been the exception rather than the standard for the enslaved throughout the British Caribbean. Although, it offers critical points of intersectional analysis between domestic labour and avenues for literacy.

74 Sara Salih, The History of Mary Prince: a West Indian Slave, footnotes, pp 29.
75 Ibid.
Literacy in Domestic Labour Positions

Although the enslaved were all held in bondage, there was diversity in their experiences. This was determined by gender, age, and the kind of labour they were assigned within the system of slavery. The experience of slavery was largely determined by the enslaveds’ environment and its influence when examining plantations’ social and economic geographies. The increasing popularity of having household domestics on plantations was controlled by the changing economics of the slave industry with “the body, the house, gender relations… as well as gender roles… all becoming caught up in a wider symbolism constructed around space, time and value.”

Although the plantation fields were the major hubs of economic production and enslaved labour, the plantation house, or the Great House, was a defining environment of the plantation geography and many enslaved lives. Echoing the ethnic racism of Edward Long and William Beckford, David Collin’s publication Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves in the Sugar Colonies (1803) stated that slaves from the Congo were “totally unfit for laborious occupations” but “they made excellent domestic servants and tradesmen.” Domestic slavery created an overlapping dynamic between the enslaved population and the planter class, forcing domestics to become a part of the colonial picture of households in the Americas.

77 For an authoritative study on the demography of slave populations in the Caribbean and statistical data on enslaved persons who performed domestic duties, see Barry Higman’s study, Slave Populations in the Caribbean, 1807-1834, Mona, University of the West Indies Press, 1996.
**Literacy as a Tactic for Manumission**

Politics around the written word and manumission were bound to colonial societal perceptions of validity in legally defined and undefined practices about the social law. The written word held importance in manumission cases involving debates over legally defined civil documents like last will and testaments. In contrast, other manumission cases were concerned with spoken promises that were undefined in the eyes of the law. Before the eighteenth century, the right to manumit was established in custom and never required a specific legal definition derived from the legal right of a property holder. The right to manumission could be restricted by legislation, but not until fees were established in 1739 did the Barbados legislature try to curtail manumission.  

When considering this, manumission politics must be analyzed through the lens of white hegemonies’ political structure. The legal written word in Eurocentric institutions, such as wills, could further advance an enslaved person’s case for manumission. At the same time, legislation like the one passed in 1739 could limit their chances of success. Therefore, manumission was viewed as a legal process accessed and controlled by authoritative gatekeepers such as colonial lawmakers and planters who belonged to a free society. This is evident when examining the legalization processes of manumission in the British Caribbean. Through analyzing literate enslaved resistance in civil rights action through manumission, it becomes apparent that they had a political pull through the written word in their opportunity for legal freedom.

To understand manumission as a resistive legal structure, enslaved resistance tactics which utilized the manumission system must be traced from the eighteenth century into the nineteenth century. Jerome S. Handler and John T. Pohlmann’s historical survey of manumitted

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79 Williams, Ibid, pp 394.
Barbadian enslaved people from 1650 to 1700 offers evidence of correlations between manumission and specific plantation labour positions, particularly in the domestic sphere, through a sample of eighty wills that manumitted 123 enslaved people and eight deeds with ten manumissions. In reference to two types of avenues for manumission, first, being granted freedom after said owner’s death and second, freedom once the deed was recorded, they found that “both modes of manumission favoured domestic servants and adult females.” There is no denying that the factors influencing this finding are tied up with the more significant opportunities for social and intellectual autonomy exclusive to the domestic labour sphere, as discussed above. Besides the higher correlation between manumission and labour role, this study also highlights racial politics as influenced by this relationship. If the person were literate to any degree, those skills would have likely been acquired through personal relationships with one’s owner, the higher influx of European influence outside the realms of the plantation itself, and more access to literacy tools such as books and newspapers unique to the domestic environment. Enslaved utilization of literacy skills was an influential factor in the manumission of these women and those within their circles.

Literate domestics practiced legal autonomy through their resistance by directly petitioning their owners for manumission. In his work on enslaved women’s resistance, scholar Hilary Beckles draws attention to a specific manumission case that can be reframed in the context of enslaved literacy and resistance. This case is based on historical records from the Newton family plantation in Barbados dating back to 1654, when Samuel Newton acquired a
property in the Christ Church parish. The Newton family continued to be economically and politically active in Christ Church into the early nineteenth century, as the manumission requests in question ranged from 1807 to 1813. A literate domestic enslaved woman by the name of Old Doll was noted as a “well-known matriarch of its principal slave family,” on the Newton estate and petitioned for her freedom by writing to her owner:

Honoured Master,
I take the liberty of conveying these few lines to you hoping to find you my master and mistress and family well and requesting the kind favour of you to be so good as to take the trouble to have my manumission executed for me… sent to you from all your former kindness to me and my family, I would wish you to complete the business for your servant.

Hon’d Sir I remains
Your Humble Servant
Dolly Newton

Her use of literacy to was not only an act of resistance, but it was also persuasive enough to sway her owner to allow Dolly to obtain her manumission and become a free woman in 1810. Jenny, Dolly’s sister, preferring to use the surname ‘Lane’ rather than ‘Newton,’ had obtained her freedom in 1807 at age 39. She, too, had written a letter to Thomas Lane sometime in August 1804 requesting her manumission:

My honoured Master,
I hope you will pardon the liberty your slave has taken in addressing herself to you on a subject which I hope may not give you the least displeasure or offence. When my valued and good Master Wood was about to leave this country, I requested him to make a proposal to you in my behalf, which he most kindly promised to do, but as I understood he never had it in his power to make my request. I now with my Mistress Wood’s approbation, venture to address myself to you which favour I have to ask good Master is

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82 The National Archives, UK. Online database, the catalog description, the Newton family's papers, and administrative/biographical background.
84 Dolly Newton to Thomas Lane, 26 November (1807), Ibid, pp 1006.
this. I have a friend who has been generous enough to promise me if I can obtain your consent will pay for my freedom but first I must implore you to take another good slave in my stead, or sell me, which ever you please to do, and you shall be most honestly paid if it should please you to sell me. I should never have thought of changing my situation if I could be assured of always living as I have done with my master and mistress Wood, but as you are at a distance and I don’t know whose hands I may fall into, I hope you will not blame me for embracing this offer of my freedom. With all due obedience and submission I sign myself your humble slave,

Jenny Lane

Examination of these letters written by enslaved domestics Dolly Newton and Jenny Lane give insight into enslaved literacy resistance strategies through written approaches to manumission. Writing this request to an owner challenges the power dynamic between the owner and enslaved person. Digging deeper into the writing, we can make probable conclusions about Dolly and Jenny’s mindset. For instance, Jenny’s language choice and tone of writing show an evident awareness of the fragility of this effort on her part, as she is seemingly driven by the motivation to get her owner’s agreement. This is reflected in her statement asking her owner to “pardon the liberty your slave has taken in addressing herself to you on a subject which I hope may not give you the least displeasure or offence.” An effort was made through her words to keep the dual power dynamic unaltered enough not to threaten or discourage agreement. In reality, using this tone was ultimately self-serving, and her plea for manumission challenged the grander socio-political dynamic. Not only did the literate enslaved utilize their literacy abilities for their own personal gain, but also for those around them. In 1813, nine years after Jenny had written a request for her freedom, she requested the manumission of her sons Robert, aged 26, and Henry, aged 24.

Barbados, March 4th, 1813
Honoured Sir

86 Ibid.
I have taken the liberty to write to you, hope you will excuse me requesting the favour of your goodness to oblige me with my two Mullato sons at Newton’s; the Name of one is Robert, a joiner by trade, but one of his arms is affected and no use to the estate; the other is William Henry a taylor by trade and a poor constitution that I think is but little use to the estate. If I thought or knew they was any great use, you may depend I would not taken the liberty, but my having a little to depend on and they poorly would wish to have them to own it, which I have named to General Haynes [plantation attorney], and I knows what I say in this letter to be true. I remains your truly well wisher and very humblest.

Jane Lane

This letter hints at Jane’s knowledge of the value of mentioning trade as a tailor and joiner as well as their racial status as Mulattos when trying to convince planters of manumission as it has been suspected that these were favoured characteristics for owners when debating manumission approval. Dolly and Jenny could express themselves and their desire for freedom through writing. It is shown that they could utilize the English language in line with Eurocentric social mannerisms to better succeed in getting what they wanted, which was complete freedom or any degree of such. This adaptation of Eurocentric social mannerism within manumission requests exemplifies the literate enslaved culturally code-switching to serve their desired outcome best. Yet another point challenging the period’s Eurocentric belief of African stupidity through the intellectual activity of the enslaved. As shown through this section, the prestigious domestic realm of plantation life allowed avenues for heightened enslaved literacy rates and literate resistance in these enslaved labour roles. Another sub-field of plantation labour that offered the enslaved avenues to literacy is what was defined as skilled labour. Some enslaved labour roles can be highlighted as skilled trade labour in the labour hierarchy of the plantation system, like domestic labour, which usually but not exclusively took place away from the fields.


88 A person who constructs the wooden components of a building, such as stairs, doors, and door and window frames.
Skilled Labour and Literacy

For the large part, the economic basis for British plantations revolved around the goal of mass production of goods like sugar and tobacco. This meant planters heavily relied on their enslaved labour force to give all their energy to agricultural duties. The enslaved populations working in these field gangs fed the capitalistic beast at the heart of the institution. While the majority fell into this category, those working in the fields were not the only enslaved group the institution relied on for the plantation's upkeep. Owners also trained certain enslaved people as carpenters, coopers, masons, drivers, boat builders, shoemakers, tanners, distillers, bakers, and blacksmiths at an all-time high at the end of the eighteenth century. This sphere of plantation labour was inseparable from debates and observations of enslaved intelligence and the system's role in nurturing it.

In pro-slavery circles, teaching Africans learned skills like reading and writing in proper English and trade from European education structures was heavily criticized. This criticism derives from an anti-assimilationist mindset that believes these skills were explicitly tied to white ability and Black inability. Furthermore, it reinforces white desires for a stagnant racial place in society. Any learned skill that did not serve the plantation's agricultural needs was often questioned from fear of enslaved activity beyond the tactile repetition of working the plow. For instance, the Scottish economist James Steuart backlashes to owners' utilization of enslaved skilled labour in *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* (1757), writing that "slaves were the best option where simple manual work was needed, but industry required thoughtful work, and such labour had to be free to be effective. Slavery produced careless and mindless
workers who had no incentive to either learn a craft or practice it with dexterity. ⁸⁹ Based on the continued lack of racial socioeconomic integration in free British colonial society, it can be said that white contestation of teaching beyond agricultural parameters not only applied to the enslaved but extended to the free Black population living in slave-owning colonies. Like Steuart's, these beliefs of African intellectual incapability and its influence on outlooks of Black economic role within the society were a part of mainstream colonial debates in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The dialogue surrounding enslaved plantation labour roles was presented as a concern for efficiency. However, when a critical interpretation is taken, this theory is steeped in white fear of Black social and economic knowledge that would integrate said industry.

These debates were persistent, but "by the end of the eighteenth century, most planters were looking to adopt labour-saving devices and schemes, and they were increasingly looking to their enslaved workforces to accomplish the skilled work on the plantation."⁹⁰ Statistics suggest that “on Barbadian and Jamaican sugar plantations, approximately six to eight percent of the slaves served as tradesmen or drivers.”⁹¹ This population's experience of slavery in terms of resistive knowledge differentiated them from others in three ways. First, the skilled enslaved had access to forms of education through training in their labour. Second, the characteristics of skilled labour allowed greater access to environments that offered avenues to literacy. Lastly, they had the ability to use those skills to survive in ways others could not.

⁹¹ Ibid, pp 209.
Two takeaways from the experience of the enslaved driver are, first, their access to both spaces of privilege, which offered them greater access to protection and knowledge, along with communal enslaved space, which gave them a strong connection to the common plight amongst the wider population. Second, the feature of movement within positions of skilled labour is a key consideration when thinking about the movement of enslaved knowledge, literacy or otherwise. The affordance of movement within urban spaces was more likely to be given to skilled enslaved people than those limited to property-bound tasks. The skilled enslaved had differential means of access and agency between task scapes, making them essential carriers of knowledge between literate and illiterate enslaved circles.

**The Spread of Literate Knowledge in Illiterate Circles**

The literate enslaved who had greater access to these various avenues for literacy education, like Christian instruction and heightened literacy allowance of the domestic and skilled labour spheres, inevitably influenced illiterate enslaved life through their movement of literate knowledge, on and off plantations. Avenues for enslaved people to become literate is a crucial point of analysis to individual enslaved autonomy within the laws and customs of colonial plantation societies. Furthermore, showing how individuals innovated around the policing of knowledge on plantations through individual factors of one's experience of slavery. The intermingling of the literate and illiterate enslaved ultimately led to collaborative resistance efforts between the two groups. It is important to examine how the literate enslaved spread their knowledge through literacy skills within illiterate circles. To better understand the literate enslaved's communal impact within plantation societies, we must first examine their overlapping social geographies.
As previously mentioned, a point of communication within the plantation realms between the literate and illiterate enslaved was in spaces of religious expression. Enslaved leadership figures, like Sam Sharpe, had a greater allowance of movement between the social, political, and economically defined plantation space. Movement through religious outreach of preachers and their consistent work in stagnant sacred areas like churches allowed room for the literate to intellectually influence the illiterate. Apart from this intentional spread of knowledge linked to religion, there were also porous social-labour boundaries and significant overlap in the daily work routines between the people considered skilled, domestic, and those in field gangs.\textsuperscript{92} For instance, domestics or caretakers who usually laboured within the plantation house joined the field hands during harvest season. Labour overlap is noted in Jamaica's Somerset Estate records in 1787, stating that a domestic enslaved woman named Rose “was a very useful Negro in crop time but spent most of her time looking after slave children,” which highlights slave owners' disbursement of their enslaved within a variety of labour spheres.\textsuperscript{93} This example alludes to opportunities for the illiterate enslaved to infiltrate literate enslaved knowledge like literacy skills, current colonial politics, slave laws and regulations, Bible interpretations and so on for individual benefit or the benefit of the community at large. In thinking about the communal benefits of literate enslaved within illiterate circles, the transfer of knowledge in the build-up to large-scale acts of resistance and revolt is a crucial consideration of its influence.

These enslaved avenues for literacy, including conversion to Christianity and domestic and skilled access to white colonial modes of literacy education and knowledge, led to varying expressions of literacy resistance by individual literate enslaved people to advance their degrees


of freedom. Besides using literacy for self-advancement, the literate enslaved utilized their skills to aid the illiterate enslaved through the advantages that reading and writing could contribute to successful resistance efforts. This literate-illiterate collaboration happened in many ways, one way being the skillful manipulation of literacy, precisely the act of writing, in the plantation ticket system. Through cooperation in this system, the literate helped themselves, and the illiterate, to commit the crime of marronage for temporary and permanent freedom from slavery successfully.
Chapter 3
Forgery for Freedom: Marronage and Enslaved Literacy

In 1813, an advertisement was put in a Jamaican newspaper offering a monetary award for locating an enslaved woman named Nancy, who went by the alias Barbary or Fanny, belonging to Mr. Balfour from St. Ann's Parish. The advertisement stated that Nancy "was taken up with a forged ticket, going to Falmouth, from Kingston," along with physical descriptors describing her "blister mark behind her neck, and two black specks on her left breast." As this runaway advertisement for Nancy highlights, forgery was a tactic of resistance used by the literate and illiterate in marronage attempts, which undermined planter control of the enslaveds’ movement and attacked the system through the very laws that were put in place to control the enslaved.

Anthropologist Stephan Palmie, along with Historian Francisco A. Scarano reflected on a statement made by Jamaican sociologist Orlando Patterson (1982), which said that while slavery was a kind of “social death,” it did prompt new forms of “social life” in the New World generally and the Caribbean specifically. Palmie and Scarano recognized that among these forms of new social life were the maroon communities that rose out of and were a direct response to marronage. Maroon communities had the potential to transcend the "dialectic between master and slave elaborated in opposition to legal enslavement." This enablement of the maroon community to stretch their relations with the plantocracy beyond the normal

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boundaries for Black people in this white-supremacist society, which had strict limits on power
dynamics between Black and white people, acknowledges Maroons varying degrees of
engagement with the plantation system.

Building on Palmie and Scarano's argument that the maroon community was a sort of
micro-institution that transcended, and therefore challenged, the dialectic between master and
slave. The agreeable bounds for enslaved literacy knowledge in this dialectic transcended much
earlier in this process than suggested. An enslaved person deciding to commit marronage,
making tactical decisions as a runaway, and sometimes obtaining a degree of asylum as part of a
maroon community, as Palmie and Scarano reference, was all a part of this transcendence of
enslaved power within the plantation community. Just as maroon communities transcended the
dialectic between the owner and enslaved person, literacy was an immanent tool of resistance
utilized by the enslaved as a segue between plantation and free society and during marronage
attempts through the ticket system. Utilization of literacy tools while on the run was a
transcendent act of enslaved autonomy, signalling that the enslaved were working outside their
supposed intellectual and authoritative boundaries of possibility within the realms of the ticket
system.

**Revision of Runaway Laws & The Ticket System**

Enslaved possession of various forms of authorization papers highlights that white
society viewed official documents as a tool for the enlightened free population, determined by
status and ability linked to English literacy, to create a divide between them and the
“unenlightened” enslaved. Colonial lawmakers and planters policed the movement of the
enslaved through the creation and enforcement of legislation stipulating that the enslaved had to
have a ticket authorizing their whereabouts. Literacy was used as a tool by the literate enslaved
to transcend the bounds of legality, which led the British colonial governments of Barbados and
Jamaica to alter existing legislation and pass new laws out of concern about the enslaved forging
tickets in the early nineteenth century. The enactment of the forgery law in support of policing
the movement of the enslaved makes clear that colonial authorities believed that literate enslaved
people were chipping away at the effectiveness of the ticket system. Lawmakers had previously
believed that creating this control system would have been sufficient; however, the continual
reworking of pro-slavery parties' ticket system uses resulted from heightened enslaved
innovation and rebellious acts of autonomy using literacy through the basis of previous slave
law.

From planters' perspective, there were many logistical reasons an enslaved person may
pursue movement off plantation grounds. Common examples revolved around obedience ranging
from owners demanding enslaved drivers to bring another person into town, getting enslaved
domestics to buy food for the colonial household, or even delivering a message to another
plantation, acting mainly as an efficient service function within a more extensive economic
system. While planters' outlook held little space for enslaved movement based on non-intent to
serve their owner's wishes, the enslaved were motivated to participate in a different type of
movement defined by the freeing abilities of disobedient action, which sometimes involved using
literacy skills. Enslaved movement off plantation grounds, apart from labour duties, was often
resistance-based and determined by the enslaved themselves. The ticket system governed by law

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97 It must be noted that there were also enactments not only relating to the forgery of tickets by the enslaved but also
by white people, stating that whereas the more effectively to conceal runaways or prevent apprehended, tickets are
given by ill-disposed persons of free condition: Be it therefore enacted by the authority aforesaid, That any white
person, or a person of free condition, granting or giving a letter or ticket to enable any slave to absent himself or
herself from his or her owner or possessor, shall be liable to be tried for the said offence before the supreme court.
policed both obedient labour-based and, in the same vein, disobedient resistance-based
movement throughout the British colonies.

Seventeenth-century ticket system legislation included the Act to Restrain the Wandering
of Servants and Negro's enacted in 1652 in Barbados. This act enforced a ticketing clause which
required the enslaved to have written permission to go off plantation grounds in hopes of
reducing the number of runaways abandoning their plantations.\textsuperscript{98} Then followed up with the
Barbados Slave Act of 1661, which outlined the responsibility of the owner within the ticket
system, making clear that the law “required masters or overseers to write tickets for any slave
sent off the plantation… [and] those who failed to provide tickets were to be fined five hundred
pounds of sugar.”\textsuperscript{99} This advanced slave code allowed the enslaved “a day off from work on
Sundays, and could, on that day only, leave their estates; but if they did, they were required to
carry a ticket stating what hour their masters expected them back.”\textsuperscript{100} The requirement of the
enslaved to gain formal written and signed permission from their owners to pursue various types
of movement outside the plantation space was enforced in alignment with planters' obsession
with societal control. This legislation was imposed as a policing structure and was soon adopted
in other colonies to limit enslaved freedom and support planters in enforcing enslaved limitations
to societal exposure, self-emancipation, and community.

The first comprehensive slave laws of Barbados (1652, 1661) and Jamaica (1664)
“encouraged the formation of any number of men…to hunt down and apprehend or take

\textsuperscript{98} Barbados Slave Act, 1661, clause 1, in Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette, Slavery, 106, cited in Rugemer,
Edward B, “The Development of Mastery and Race in the Comprehensive Slave Codes of the Greater Caribbean
during the Seventeenth Century,” The William and Mary Quarterly 70, no. 3 (2013), pp 437.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid, pp 440.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
runaways either alive or dead."\(^{101}\) Apart from the legal policing of movement, these early acts alluded to an overarching goal of slave preservation to the extent to which owners perceived property would stay alive. The issue of slave preservation was a much greater concern after the abolition of the slave trade; however, a concern for slave preservation came to fruition once owners had invested interest in not losing their capital gains in human cargo. The ticket system was built on the premise of colonials' control over their enslaved workforce; however, legislation pertaining to the ticket system was revisited and reformed by lawmakers multiple times throughout the late seventeenth and into the early nineteenth century. This legal reform indicates that the effectiveness of previous slave law was eroding due to resistive action from below in the form of forgery.

As they were in Barbados, Jamaican colonial authorities and lawmakers were driven by the notion that "runaways posed the greatest challenge to the establishment of slavery in Jamaica."\(^{102}\) The ticketing clause had been altered to allow enslaved people a four-mile radius around their plantations to venture unmolested without a ticket. The challenge enslaved runaways posed to pro-slavery parties was addressed in May of 1670 in a report on the capture and return of large numbers of Africans who abandoned their plantations.\(^{103}\) The Council of Jamaica suggested that this extraordinary latitude of four miles was considered dangerous and in the interest of the "planters in this island does consist in restraining by all ways imaginable the


\(^{103}\) The two percent of long-term runaways in Jamaica at this monumental time for slavery reform acted as a small axe chipping away against the larger system of slavery on the island. Historical data shows that if in 1788, two percent of Jamaica's enslaved were absent, they would have numbered more than 4,500 runaways, almost equal to the island's entire population of free people of colour, corresponding to more than one runaway per square mile. Simon P. Newton, Hidden in Plain Sight: Escaped Slaves in Late Eighteenth Early Nineteenth Century Jamaica, Artwork by Anthony King, and video and photography by Marenka Thompson-Odlum, published on the OI Reader in June (2018). [https://oieahc.wm.edu/digital-projects/oi-reader/simon-p-newman-hidden-in-plain-sight/](https://oieahc.wm.edu/digital-projects/oi-reader/simon-p-newman-hidden-in-plain-sight/)
communication of the Negroes one with another.” 104 The council's suggestion brings attention to the opinion that this four-mile radius clause was a significant enough threat to planter control of enslaved movement, which called for a revision. While this measure of four miles was surrounded with concern, enslaved literacy would become a greater, more dangerous threat to not only planter control of enslaved movement but the system of slavery at large. Ultimately, rising pressure from the persistence of runaways in the British colonies, aided by literacy skills, led to the revision of previous runaway laws by British colonial governments to enforce movement permission systems to sustain power dichotomy.

By the late eighteenth century, it became evident to the Colonial Assembly that the literate enslaved population was utilizing their writing skills to imitate authoritative checks of the ticket system. Government legislation went from outlining the system's basic rules to creating evolving clauses to illegalize the undermining of the validity of the said system. The 1826 Consolidated Slave Law highlights both the reinforcement of the ticket system for policing movement through the upkeep of legal practices stating that “no slave is to be suffered (except on Sunday) to go out of his Master’s plantation, or travel from one town to another, unless he has a ticket from his Master, expressing the time of his setting out, where he is going, and the time limited for his return.” 105 Furthermore, stating that:

any slave or slaves who shall be absent from his owner or employer without leave for the space of five days, or who shall be found at the distance of eight miles from the house, plantation, or other settlement to which such slave or slaves shall belong, without a ticket

or other permit to pass, except as hereinafter excepted, in going to and returning from market, shall be deemed a runaway.  

Along with the continued enforcement of the policing of movement through written tickets, the evolution of what would become the 1826 Consolidated Slave Law criminalized the forgery of tickets in response to this type of literacy resistance used by the enslaved.

Legal clauses were enacted enforcing that “slaves harbouring runaways, or giving them false tickets, (will be) punished as court directs.” This was followed statute stating that “any slave or slaves who shall furnish a ticket or letter to such runaway slave or slaves, for the purpose of enabling them to evade detection, shall be tried.” Clauses about free white persons giving the enslaved forged tickets were applied in previous acts; however, what made the 1826 Consolidated Slave Law unprecedented was its inclusion of the enslaved in its concern for forgery and the decision to make forgery a capital offence. The 1826 Consolidated Slave Law made forgery by an enslaved individual a capital offence, punishable by death, along with murder, rape, and conspiracy to revolt. This enactment can be viewed as a response to the increase in enslaved literacy, undermining previous slave laws, which called for law reform to control. Colonial authorities’ decision to enforce the death penalty for any literate enslaved person who committed forgery speaks to the exponential severity of its effect on successful runaway attempts causing a notable loss in planter’s workforces. Colonial lawmakers generally acted to protect the planter’s interests which were to set an example through legislation for

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107 Ibid., pp 13.

108 Ibid.

outcomes of enslaved disobedience while at the same time attempting to preserve the planter's investment in human capital. This goal to preserve the owner's enslaved workforces may have been one reason why, until 1826, there was no death penalty for forgery by the enslaved or because the political climate did not call for urgency on the matter in the eyes of lawmakers. The political climate of slavery post-abolition from 1807 onwards in the colonies projected the need to focus more on preserving and reproducing the enslaved population. However, the losses in numbers of enslaved people from plantations taken by forgery of documentation by runaways outweighed lawmakers' and planter's interests in avoiding the death penalty to preserve enslaved workforces in the colonies. Acts of forgery by the enslaved killed the authority of the system colonial powers set up and greatly impacted the loss of planters' enslaved labour resources. The validating power that written documentation held within colonial society alludes to a continual white mindset which affiliated the enslaved population with illiteracy and ingenuity. The validating power of the ticket system was a false assumption, with scholars like Dr. Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy even going as far as to suggest that "at most authorization papers offered white residents the opportunity to indulge in a fiction of control and authenticity." The power an enslaved person had simply by acquiring written authorization from their owners or another literate figure within their circle was significant in their pursuit for greater access to move beyond the plantation for freedom, let alone being able to forge one themselves.

The presence of enslaved people in the urban spaces of the British colonies outside plantation boundaries was a normalized aspect of colonial life. They travelled on the roads authorized by their owners with letters, messages, and papers, which had dual functions. First, to actively fulfill the colonial ritual of confirming or fulfilling the white hegemonic power dynamic

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between enslaver and enslaved through owners' perceived permission and control of enslaved movement. Second, these documents offered a provision of opportunity for successful degrees of status concealment for some runaways. How the enslaved acquired material possessions of written authorizations and utilized them as marronage tools for increased movement was shown through colonial Caribbean runaway advertisements. For instance, fifteen or sixteen-year-old Jack was instructed to travel to Spanish Town to collect papers of consequence which he then seized an opportunity for higher success in marronage, which the papers granted him. Simon P. Newton points out that Jack's owner assents to the potential opportunity the papers gave Jack, in the warning that "he may have such papers about him, he may expect to pass unmolested on that account." Another example of the authoritative power of the written word is found in an ad searching for Nineteen-year-old runaway Dinah, with her owner informing any person meeting her that he had "given her a ticket to work out, which is false." Resistance efforts conducted through the ticket system caused planters' strife and fictionalized their control and authenticity, shown through the examination of runaway ads in colonial newspapers of Barbados and Jamaica.

**Self-Emancipation of the Literate: Runaway Advertisements**

For the enslaved, having literacy skills meant they could more easily pass for free. It also meant that they could exploit the ways in which literacy opened new avenues to attaining freedom. The literate enslaved had a skill generally associated with freedom and helped the

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112 Ibid.
illiterate enslaved gain access to documentation that would grant them the association with freedom by the colonial system. Urban environments away from the plantation offered fugitives a type of concealment that only a space with an array of people, status, and activity could supply. Allowing them to be present and interact in more status and racially diverse spaces, the ratio between free and enslaved was more fluid, had fewer constraints, and offered more opportunities for success in runaway attempts. Accounts of runaways in colonial newspapers offer a glimpse into the varying literacy skills of enslaved individuals and how these literacy skills were utilized and viewed as a functional resistance tool by the enslaved and their owners. Jamaican newspapers reported on a handful of literate enslaved runaways just before Barbados outlawed forgery in the early nineteenth century.

Networks of literate enslaved people fueled the supply of false documentation under the noses of colonial authorities, who were supposed to be the gatekeepers of the authorization of enslaved movement. The enslaved woman named Cuba camouflaged herself through the complex social geography of the market as a higgler within the colonial urban landscape.\(^\text{113}\) False documentation was part of Cuba’s marronage attempt as the assumed owner, Leah Phoenix, issued a notice for her return stating that Cuba “likely possessed a false ticket.” It can therefore be strongly assumed that Cuba utilized the skills within the literate enslaved community and the ticket system’s authoritative mechanism, the written word, simultaneously to “pass as a free person.”\(^\text{114}\) Cuba’s case gives an inherently unique perspective of female

\(^{113}\) “Higgler” is a person who travels around selling small items and derives from the West Indies. Women comprised more than 30 percent of all runaways advertised, and 50 percent of runaway women were directly linked to the internal marketing system. Shauna J. Sweeney, "Market Marronage: Fugitive Women and the Internal Marketing System in Jamaica, 1781–1834." The William and Mary Quarterly 76, no. 2 (2019): 197–222.

marronage and its overlapping nature with the liberating functions of forged documentation. A line mapping the female enslaved experience with literacy resistance is shown through the linkages between the available avenues for literacy education in majority female environments like the domestic sphere and urban markets and their utilization of forgery within this space to gain greater degrees of autonomy and freedom. Runaways' heightened ability for degrees of self-autonomy in this environment greatly increased if they had literacy skills or even acquired forged documentation from another literate enslaved person to navigate the systems better and present themselves as free within this space.

An advertisement put in the Jamaican newspaper *The Royal Gazette* in 1781 by Jacob Hill explained that an enslaved man named "Preston had escaped…he was of a yellow complexion; his breast very remarkable, appearing full, like that of a young girl; stout made; has very crooked legs."115 It refers to a second runaway named Sam who, a few days prior, "went in search of Preston with a ticket, but through a mistake did not mention when he was to return."116 Building upon scholar Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy's existing analysis which applies a lens of enslaved disability by rightly arguing that "bonds people's consistent pursuit of freedom speaks to the ways in which limit, and by extension disability, were regarded as meaningful forms of resistance to Atlantic slavery."117 An inference can be made about the strong connection between literacy ability and successful marronage. She concludes, "Sam took advantage of the ticket system to forge his own freedom and undermine the institution of slavery's attempts to limit bonds people's movement."118 This advertisement in search of Sam is one of many early

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116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
nineteenth-century runaway advertisements that give insight into how the enslaved undermined the ticket system and utilized forgery as an enabling tool in limiting situations.

An advertisement posted in The Royal Gazette in 1806 offered a reward in return for information regarding a runaway named Zachariah Bailey. The advertisement describes Zachariah as “a mulatto, by trade a carpenter, and can read and write, about five feet ten inches high,…aquiline nose, and the mark of a sore on one of his ankles is very plausible and may attempt to pass as a free man under the name of Plummer Quashie, or Beatrice Quashie.” The higher degrees of privilege he had been granted through his attributes of being a “mulatto,” meaning mixed-race, and working in a labour sphere outside of a field gang must continue to be acknowledged as a notable pattern in not only access to literacy education but also in literate enslaved marronage attempts. Another example of these overlapping categories of trade and skin colour in marronage attempts of the literate enslaved is presented in an advertisement republished for three months for a Mulatto Creole named Ark in The Royal Gazette in 1815. Ark, 5 feet 8 inches high, broke out of a workhouse having been described as a "sensible young fellow, and, from his long confinement, has more the appearance of a white man than a brown person; he can read and write, and understands the Spanish language; has been used to the sea, and will attempt to pass as free." Both advertisements for Zachariah and Ark address a perceived value in stating their literacy abilities alongside their identifiable physical features.

When thinking about how these two aspects of the runaway advertisements aid those

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120 Ibid.
121 The assumption that Ark's "appearance of a white man from his long confinement" reflects the false racial pseudo-science theorizations, including the assimilationist climate theory discussed in chapter one. The Royal Gazette, Runaway Slave Ad for a man named Ark, Trelawny Workhouse, Jamaïque, Le Marronnage Dans le Monde Atlantique: sources et trajectoires de vie, April 4 (1815), http://www.marronnage.info/fr/document.php?id=22557
searching for them, physical attributes make their identifiable traits clear. By recognizing that literacy could aid the enslaved mission to disguise themselves as free, in contrast to their identifiable traits, literacy abilities were made known, or even warned, to readers that Zachariah and Ark could use these skills to make themselves more unidentifiable. These advertisements touch on specific labour roles that hint at the historical imagination about their exposure to learned society. Alluding to the reality that enslaved people with lighter skin tones had a greater ability to weave in and out of free social circles. In examining several runaway advertisements for literate runaways, it is impossible to ignore the trends which support intersectional discussions around literacy, labour role, gender, and skin colour in the plantation society. The examples of Zachariah and Ark build on the correlation of personal characteristics and literacy with common linkages between the uses of literacy in marronage while on the run. These advertisements speak to the unique Creole experience; however, this is not to say that skin tone and literacy were exclusive to the enslaved experience.

A runaway advertisement was posted in *The Royal Gazette* in 1811 looking for a "Negro man" named William, who had formerly gone by the name Providence. The advertisement's descriptor of "Negro" gives no visual perception of William being mixed-race, as compared to the descriptions of Zachariah and Ark. This difference in physical appearance between the men is notable because it offers a lens on how the enslaveds’ experience of marronage was influenced by coinciding degrees of literacy ability and colourism (which played a part in one’s access to literacy education as a stand-alone factor). The advertisement stated that William was “of a pleasing countenance, speaks English fluently, can read a little and write his name. He was seen at Falmouth…from whence he was taken out by the master of a vessel but made his escape and
is passing himself as free." William’s experience of marronage suggests that how Black people carried themselves within free circles, specifically with pleasing expressions, was a crucial determinant of their success while on the run. In this manner, literacy skills were vital to pass as free based on whites' perception of undercover enslaved fugitives.

A runaway advertisement posted in 1811 in search for a man named Pope in the Jamaican *Saint Jago Gazette* positions literacy as a notable trait affecting measures of ability and success for both those on the run and those in search of them situated in the marronage politics of the island. The advertisement states that Pope "may attempt to pass as free, as he can read and write," acting as a warning of his ability and advising against "employing or taking him off the island" to anyone he may come across. This cautionary dialogue about Pope's literacy skills speaks to the perception of enslaved literacy as threatening to planter control even before said literacy skills were utilized. This advertisement shows that the mere possibility of using literacy by the enslaved in their resistance efforts threatened planters, let alone them actively using said skills to forge tickets. In highlighting planters' projection of these anxieties surrounding unutilized enslaved literacy skills as a function of resistance, there is an alignment with the thought that it would be most effective for the plantocracy to deny enslaved people an advancing education. Explaining white intentions to imbed false inferiority narratives about African's inherent intellectual capabilities both acted to enforce a racial hierarchy and weaken the supposed threat of enslaved literacy resistance in white minds. William and Pope's learned manner convinced those around them of their free status; however, many enslaved runaways

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122 The Royal Gazette, Runaway Slave Ad for a man named William, Jamaïque, Le Marronnage Dans le Monde Atlantique: sources et trajectoires de vie, June 25, (1811), [https://www.marronnage.info/fr/accueil.php#:~:text=Le%20«%20marronnage%20»%20est%20une%20forme%20d%e9se%20soustrait%20au%20pouvoir%20absolu%20de%20son%20maître](https://www.marronnage.info/fr/accueil.php#:~:text=Le%20«%20marronnage%20»%20est%20une%20forme%20d%e9se%20soustrait%20au%20pouvoir%20absolu%20de%20son%20maître)

signed the paperwork to legitimize their freedom, like the enslaved man William Thomas.

Education leading to literacy-based resistance that colonial authorities attempted to discourage is recognized in a runaway advertisement posted in 1817 on behalf of the Clarendon workhouse. The advertisement stated that William Thomas, a sambo-creole, produced a certificate of his freedom and baptism, which appears strongly to be a forgery from how it was worded.\textsuperscript{124} The documentation dated April 16th, 1781, stated that William Thomas was "a resident of St. Ann, and baptized there from the county of St. Thomas in the East, by the Rev. Mr. Williamson," followed by the listed witnesses "George Strawn, George Furnish, and William Russell."\textsuperscript{125} If the publisher's suspicions of forgery were correct, the freedom certificate and baptism records are a great example of how the enslaved used literacy as a tool of resistance. By forging these freedom documents, William Thomas took direct charge of fulfilling his desire for self-emancipation through the advantages of his writing skills.

A year later, on June 27th, 1782, \textit{The Gazette of Saint Jago de la Vega} (Spanish Town, Jamaica) printed a runaway advertisement in search of an enslaved man, estimated to be 18 years of age, by the name of Will. The advertisement stated that he was “supposed to be harboured on board one of his majesty's ships of war at Port Royal.”\textsuperscript{126} His owner, threatened by the “possibility to endeavour to pass as a free man,” was eagerly reassured by the protocol that “all negroes have certificates of their freedom saying that it is to be hoped that such a presence will


not induce any gentleman to countenance” Will.\textsuperscript{127} This owner's hopefulness diminishes with the mention that Will had "a permit from William Mitchell to hire himself out but has since run away from the person that employed him and may attempt to avail himself of the permit."\textsuperscript{128} The publisher's caution around forged certificates to anyone who may come across Will in the dockyards of Port Royal exhibits white recognition that the Black population was inventive and intelligent in their pursuits for freedom. The enslaved imagination and invention utilizing written material worked together to gain them higher degrees of freedom, becoming increasingly threatening if they had literacy ability, or possessions of literate material, such as official certificates, to resist enslavement within the framework of the status authorization system, which heavily relied on documentation set out by colonial powers.

Similar tactics were used in Barbados, where Barbados capital's newspaper, the \textit{Barbados Mercury, and Bridgetown Gazette} reported numerous enslaved people utilizing their literacy skills. An advertisement looking for a runaway named William, who went by the name Morris, was published two years after his escape in October 1817. The advertisement stated that Morris was a Mulatto-man, about 27 years old, with a sallow complexion, who has thick well-set limbs; remarkably quick and black eyes, timid look, persuasive speech, can read and write, affects fashion, and has a wound on his leg and thigh. He had been last seen in St. Lucia shortly after he absented himself and imitated that he was allowed his time to work for the purchase of his freedom.\textsuperscript{129} This mention of Morris's literacy skills and physical identifiers suggests that planters assumed literacy ability to be inseparable from or equated to the strategy of document imitation while on the run. The successful inter-colonial distance Morris could travel without being

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} “imitated” meaning copied or forged. William (Morris) Barbados Mercury, and Bridge-town Gazette, February 6th, (1819).
returned to his master was likely due to his ability to utilize literacy as a status-camouflaging tool. Forgery always played a key role in successful maritime marronage, a defining part of Morris's marronage experience and a rarity in Barbados.

An advertisement was placed in the *Barbados Mercury* for Sam, who ran away from his owner's plantation in 1819. The description provided in the advertisement is unclear on whether the crime committed was petit or grand marronage from the description; however, it is clear that resistive literacy was involved. Forgery was assumed to have been committed when "Sam's owner advertised for his return, claiming that Sam had obtained a forged letter in his owner's handwriting authorizing his absence. ”\(^{130}\) It is not known where Sam obtained this forged letter which could have been written by himself or a fellow literate enslaved person intending to secure his absence. While the letter's origins are unknown, this advertisement presents another example of how literate enslaved people undermined the ticket system by possessing documents authorizing their movement within and absence from the plantation space. This letter could have been written by Sam himself or another enslaved person working in collaboration with Sam to help him in his marronage attempt. Although how Sam obtained this letter is uncertain, both possible instances of forgery show that the literate enslaved utilized their writing skills to take control of their movement—also highlighting how they used the power of the written word in movement policing mechanisms to their advantage to chip away at planter control on the island.

These multiple runaway advertisements in the newspapers of the colonial British Caribbean demonstrate that the enslaved in Jamaica and Barbados created new documentation, for themselves and others, through literate manipulation and forgery in their freedom attempts.

Whether through the ticket system, or other forms of freeing documentation such as work contracts, manumission, or freedom papers, the enslaved innovated the function of these documents to increase their chances of successful marronage. Forgery was putting pressure on the pro-slavery governments in the British metropole and its colonies, motivating the passing of acts, such as the Consolidated Slave Law of 1826, that discouraged literacy to combat the authoritative autonomy of literate runaways. The intention for successful marronage attempts is recognized through calculated acts of forgery to gain the advantages literacy could offer while on the run. In this light, enslaved movement was inseparable from the geography of Barbados and Jamaica, which heavily influenced the enslaved experience of marronage and limited the extent to which literacy could aid the literate enslaved in this process. Furthermore, how the literate enslaved could better access information about political ongoings in colonies like Saint-Domingue supported the plight of the enslaved in the British Caribbean for Black Revolution.
Chapter 4

“We’re All to Be Free”: The Press, Politics, and Enslaved Literacy During the Amelioration Period

The current state of the historiography suggests that the act of reading by the enslaved was a greater phenomenon amongst the enslaved population of the United States than that of the Caribbean during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Numerous historical scholarly works exist on reading by the enslaved within the United States. Heather Williams, a professor in American social thought, clarifies the link between literacy and the possibility of liberation through the example of an enslaved woman named Mattie Jackson. Jackson's experience exemplifies that “being able to read enough to make out the news in the papers was a valuable tool for the enslaved who were supposed to have no knowledge of politics to suppress and limit resistance to their enslavement. Having the literacy skills to read news headlines gave the enslaved the autonomy to gain valuable information about their enslavement in a societal and political context. Therefore, it gave them the knowledge to strategically resist their oppression by "destabilizing the master-slave relationship" in gaining this autonomy. Arguably, William's point about the impacts of literacy among the enslaved and how it could destabilize the master-slave relationship in the context of the United States can also be applied to the Caribbean.

This chapter intends to show how literacy contributed to the spread of knowledge about current events – particularly as they relate to debates concerning emancipation – in Barbados and

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131 See “When I can read my title clear”: literacy, slavery, and religion in the antebellum South by Janet Duitsman Cornelius (1991), Self-Taught: American education in slavery and freedom by Heather A Williams (2005), and A Literate South: Reading before Emancipation by Beth Barton Schweiger (2019).


133 Ibid.
Jamaica. Awareness of these changing political winds, in turn, influenced acts of resistance and rebellion.\footnote{134}

**Literacy and the Spread of Information**

Literacy allowed the enslaved to access information in the newspapers or other written communication about rebellions happening elsewhere within the British Empire. This information could then be shared with the wider enslaved population. In fact, colonial authorities viewed the marronage attempts of the literate enslaved as a cause for concern. Furthermore, the enslaved who could read sometimes held privileged positions within the system of slavery and so sometimes had access to spaces in which information about colonial politics was shared and exchanged.

Jamaica's relative proximity to Haiti meant that there was a ready flow of information about the revolution in Saint Domingue during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. News reports coming out of Saint Domingue sometimes posed the possibility of intercolonial marronage between the two islands. Take the example of one report in *Affiches Americaines* that discussed a man named Moise who was apprehended by the colonial authorities of Saint Domingue for his attempt to make passage to Kingston. The newspaper reported that Moise could speak English and was “attracted by the anonymity of the capital city… and may have been attempting to secure passage to Jamaica.”\footnote{135} The runaway network between the two islands...

\footnote{134} Historian Daniel Woolf’s concept of history, the news, and how the news is a “construction of the present” in early modern England offers an analytical point of outset to ground the ability of the news press to shape and influence British slaveholding societies in the context of the enslaved fight for freedom. See Daniel Woolf, “News, History and the Construction of the Present in Early Modern England,” In The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe, Routledge, (2001), 88–126.

islands threatened to deteriorate the institution of slavery through the transfer of knowledge and the possibility of unification between the enslaved of revolutionary San-Domingue and Jamaica. The disbursement of literate enslaved people between the islands posed a threat to the British colonies from the ability of the literate enslaved to interpret the political climate and spread revolutionary ideas of freedom, forming in Saint-Domingue at the beginning of the Haitian Revolution.

A fugitive network between Haiti and Jamaica is made clear in a letter written by Governor Coote in 1807. It highlights how the proximity between Jamaica and Haiti led to a greater level of knowledge about the Haitian Revolution among the enslaved communities of Jamaica. In Coote's words, he would "not be surprised if the origin of this bad and dangerous spirit (in Jamaica) was in the vicinity of the one parish to the island of St. Domingo, and in the great number of French negroes settled in the other" quickly setting an example.136 Although intercolonial maritime marronage was challenging to accomplish, Jamaica's inclusion within the network of slaveholding islands, especially its proximity to Haiti, which became the first free Black republic, is notable when considering the resistive impacts of the knowledge obtained by literate enslaved people's activity in this space.

Historian Laurent Dubois brings attention to the role of marronage in forming and planning massive, enslaved rebellions. He argues that "petit marronage made possible the creation of a cross plantation community and collusion. If the uprising of 1791 succeeded in

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Saint Domingue, it was because its leaders were able to mobilize such cross-plantation networks to plan a massive, coordinated attack.\textsuperscript{137} Hence, petit marronage was a necessary stepping stone for creating networks and facilitated the formation of community coalitions among the enslaved. Literate enslaved acts of petit marronage made planning massive attacks on slavery within the confines of plantation societies possible. Hence, literacy was a significant threat in the British slaveholding colonies once news of the Haitian Revolution became known. The revolution in the French colony quickly sparked zeal among those who read and interpreted the written word as it related to the enslaved condition. Both the role of the press and how the literate enslaved interacted with its political knowledge played a part in an increase of fear amongst colonial administrators and planters, as well as increasing enslaved knowledge and resistance morale within Jamaica and Barbados.

**Literacy, the Newspress and Political Knowledge Among the Enslaved**

The plantation was a defining geographic, political, and social characteristic of the plantation society. However, events in urban centers such as Kingston and Spanish Town (Jamaica) and Bridgetown (Barbados) often had repercussions on plantations. In port cities, there was constant multi-layered interaction with inflows and outflows of people and news. Ports were not only a space where the arrival of African captives and outflowing sugar exports happened, but the docks were also spaces where information was shared. As Julius S. Scott notes:

The constant yet shifting stream of itinerant folk provided the masterless underground in the colonies with a crucial transatlantic connection. As developments in Europe began to affect the future of slavery in the colonies, sailors arrived with news that an anti-slavery

movement was gathering momentum in England, while French seamen had even more exciting stories to tell of political developments in France.\textsuperscript{138}

Verbal communication about new political formations between the free and enslaved was accessible to the illiterate and literate enslaved alike. However, most notable is the relation between enslaved knowledge of news and the literate enslaved experience fed through the print culture of the islands. In urban settings, enslaved individuals worked in the printers' shops or even ran away while delivering newspapers. Labouring in this space gave them first-hand access to information about acts of resistance elsewhere.

Printers' influence on early modern society revolved around the fact that they "offered new forms of literary sociability."\textsuperscript{139} Printers affirmed how knowledge was presented, dictating social exchange by literate people reading and vocalizing these texts to others or through direct consumption by the individual themselves. Both printers in the metropole and the colonies played a crucial role in growing the political knowledge of the free and enslaved population. Planters often relied on material from the metropole to keep up with political developments in Britain. For instance, in the second half of the eighteenth century, Thomas Thistlewood’s son, a planter, routinely received a "combination of annual shipments of books" brought into the port of Savanna-la-Mar from London.\textsuperscript{140} Other material coming into the colony from London included transatlantic mail packets that were a part of the colony's print culture.\textsuperscript{141} The threat of enslaved political knowledge lay in this diverse makeup of news and print culture, whether from verbal exchanges, local newspapers, or incoming material from the metropole itself. The news press


\textsuperscript{141} Ibid, pp 622.
was considered necessary for British colonials to keep ties with Britain and stay updated on local events to better police and ensure the security of the white hegemonic power structure on which slavery relied. Access to this information allowed the small literate enslaved population to communicate valuable information about social-political developments concerning anti-slavery news of the British Atlantic World.

**Literacy and Enslaved Knowledge of the Haitian Revolution**

British metropolitan and colonial newspapers reported on the events and political rhetoric of the revolutionary action coming out of the French slaveholding colony of Saint Domingue. Planters' perception of their power and control over British plantation societies was shaped by the white supremacist colonial legal system and violent practices, which made it impossible to imagine a large-scale rebellion or, even worse, a revolution aimed at uprooting the systems of slavery. Although, the prospect of an enslaved uprising was predicted by a handful of thinkers, including French Enlightenment thinker Abbé Raynal who stated, "nature speaks a more powerful language than philosophy or interests. Already have two colonies of fugitive Negroes been established, to whom treaties and power give a perfect security from your attempts. These are so many indications of the impending storm, and the Negroes only want a chief, sufficiently courageous, to lead them on to vengeance and slaughter."\(^{142}\)

Haitian freedom instigated fear amongst pro-slavery parties causing them to crack down on the perceived threat to the stability of slavery’s future within the British colonies. Planters' fears around enslaved education continued and were intensified by their “perennial paranoia about another Haiti,” creating anxious thoughts that religious and secular education “might unsettle their enslaved minds to the point of turning on their oppressors.”¹⁴³

The reporting of various colonial newspapers of the time fed a line of political information into Jamaica and Barbados. In 1791, the year the Haitian Revolution began, The Kingston Daily Advertiser printed the headlines “Extract From a Vindication of the Rights of Men in a tribute to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France” and a poetic piece entitled “Liberty” to the left of numerous runaway ads.

posted by planters looking for their escaped runaways. The irony of this page of the Daily Advertiser is an example of the contrasting political climate concerning definitions of citizenship, virtue, and freedom caused by revolutionary thought of the period, which would also shape the discussions about liberty in Saint Domingue and, ultimately, Haiti's independence. For the next thirteen years and beyond, the news press fueled the enslaveds' capacity to imagine their freedom as an attainable goal in the near future. Needless to say, this kind of information in newspapers was accessible to the few literate enslaved. They could then share this information with other enslaved persons.

Just a year after the end of the revolution in 1805, the Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette published the following summary expressing that “it now seems beyond all doubt that...St. Domingo...that ill-fated country...has again become the theatre of massacre and bloodshed, and the last remnants of French power almost completely overthrown.” Various interpretations of excerpts like this one from both pro-slavery and anti-slavery parties had the potential to spark revolutionary change elsewhere.

**Literacy and the Rumors of Emancipation**

Britain passed the Slave Trade Abolition Act on March 25th, 1807. This act officially made the importation of captive Africans into British territories illegal. The two phases of

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146 After the abolition of the slave trade, there continued to be illegal importation of captive Africans into British ports. For example, the Slave Voyages Database tracked the slave trading activity of the British vessel Lord Rodney,
amelioration (1788-1807 & 1820-1838) were periods of heightened dialogue concerning liberation in Barbados and Jamaica. Literate persons among the enslaved community shared what they had learnt, creating waves of optimism among the enslaved. It also engendered a boldness among the enslaved, who were willing to take more risks to fight for their freedom.

During this time, pro-slavery parties cracked down on the enforcement of slavery's policies and practices, while members of the enslaved population were led to believe rumours of total emancipation. As Governor of Barbados Lionel Smith argued, "they [the enslaved] always construe [news of political change as it] leads to emancipation, they have no other ideas of other intentions… and [accessible news] is a dangerous weapon… agitated in anything relating to their amelioration" based on the strengthening influence of the abolitionist opposition shown in news headlines and changing politics and practices.¹⁴⁷

The Slave Trade Act of 1807 was a monumental piece of legislation contributing to the enslaveds' interpretation of political change. This legislation was a significant achievement in the eyes of abolitionists and even more so in the eyes of the enslaved. There is a duality of reasoning around why there seemed to be an increase in large-scale resistance efforts by the enslaved after the Slave Trade Act was passed in the early nineteenth century. Firstly, the abolition of the trade instilled a sense of hope in enslaved communities, putting embers on the fire of the active and ongoing fight for freedom. Secondly, as supported by the white colonial view, there was the observation that many of the enslaved assumed that the abolition of the slave trade also meant

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¹⁴⁷ Lionel Smith became the Governor of Barbados in 1833 and stayed in this position for three years until 1836. Before he was appointed Governor, he had served in India for twenty years with the British Army. Letter written by Gov Smith to Stanley, Barbados. C.o.28/11, July 8th, (1833) found in the section titled The Emancipation Act- The Transition Period, Eric Williams, Documents on British West Indian History, 1807-1833, Trinidad Pub. Co., Port-of-Spain, (1952), pp 112.
the emancipation of those who were already enslaved in the Caribbean. In the words of Governor Coote, "the ill-disposed Negroes have instilled into the minds of the ignorant ones that the measure of the Abolition of the Slave Trade is nothing less than their general emancipation, and with such notions in their heads everything is to be apprehended." Regardless of how this was interpreted, one thing is certain: among the enslaved, there was increased awareness about changes in their favour and an intensifying desire for collective strategies that would ensure their freedom.

The passing of the 1815 Registry Bill is an important event that also highlights how the enslaved interpreted emancipatory politics in the early nineteenth century. This bill was proposed by abolitionist James Stephen, who was a part of the British abolitionist cohort that founded the abolitionist organization named the African Institution in 1807. This abolitionist organization, the African Institution, was established to promote the abolition of the slave trade to foreign nations and was made up of many influential abolitionists, including William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, and Granville Sharp. What first was an experiment in Trinidad was expanded into the legal practices of the remaining colonies. The Bill required the establishment of a public registry with the enrollment of all names and descriptions of the enslaved brought forth by their owners. If this responsibility did not cause dissent amongst planters enough, the stipulation that after the closing of the original registry, no person was to be held in slavery unless duly registered. The reality that "every negro not registered should be free"

150 The House of Assembly unanimously adopted the bill in Barbados on January 17, 1816, "An Examination of the Principles of the Slave Registry Bill and of the Means of Emancipation." proposed by the Authors of the Bill London (1816).
sent planters and abolitionists alike into an uproar. The bill that caused much tension in white society sent a new sense of optimism through the communication lines of enslaved communities.

The annual reports of the African Institution were routinely published in newspapers such as the *Edinburgh Review*. While it is most probable that enslaved knowledge of the bill spread through word of mouth and observation of enrollment, reports on the enactment of the bill in Barbados and Jamaica (like that in the *Edinburgh Review* and local news outlets) were undoubtedly read by those enslaved who were literate. Their access to this information was acknowledged in the *Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown Gazette* in 1816:

> ascertained that the principal instigators of this insurrection, but superior understands, and some of whom can read and write, availed themselves of the Slave Registry Bill introduced into parliament to instill into the minds of the slaves generally a belief that they were already freed by the King and Parliament, but that the Proprietors of Estates withheld their liberty from them; thus exciting them, by misrepresentations and persuasions to fight to obtain it.

Furthermore, in 1818 an excerpt from a committee of the House of Assembly in Barbados was published, which spoke to how written information in the English news press was a catalyst that led to rebellion:

> Towards the latter end of 1815, a report became generally prevalent among the slaves of this island, that the benefits of freedom would probably be extended to them through the interposition of their friends in England…Furthermore, the report stated the rebellion originated 'solely and entirely in consequence of the intelligence imparted to the slaves, which intelligence was obtained from the English Newspapers that their freedom had been granted them in England…in the mistaken idea that the Registry Bill was actually their Manumission…these hopes were strengthened and kept alive by the promises held out, that

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a party in England, and particularly Mr. Wilberforce...were exerting themselves to ameliorate their condition, and ultimately affect their emancipation.\textsuperscript{154}

Such commentary on behalf of white colonial planters around the Registry Bill made valid assumptions about its impact. Among the enslaved, it was believed that the bill was, in fact, a guarantee of their freedom.

**Literacy and Bussa’s Rebellion in Barbados**

In 1816, Barbados experienced the largest enslaved revolt to have ever taken place on the island. From April 14th to 16th, the island’s cane fields were set afire by the enslaved in collaboration with the key organizers of the rebellion. The leaders of the rebellion included an enslaved man named Bussa and three other literate enslaved men, Cain Davis, Roach, and Richard Sarjeant, who were involved in the planning and propaganda campaign. The two-day rebellion impacted over 70 properties across the island, each having a designated insurrection leader.\textsuperscript{155} The confessions of those captured revealed their actions were influenced by reading news of Haiti's liberation. The Barbados House of Assembly conducted an inquiry into the origins, cause, and progress of the rebellion in St. Philip that same year revealing that an enslaved person from Simmons plantation named Robert stated that "Nanny Grigg, a domestic slave [and insurrection leader] on the plantation, frequently read English and local papers, and informed other slaves on the developments in Haiti and in the metropolis."\textsuperscript{156} Robert directly

\textsuperscript{154} “Report from a Select Committee of the House of Assembly Appointed to inquire into the Origins, Cause, and Progress of the Late Insurrection,” April 1816 Barbados, (1818), pp 10 -12, Primary source information found in Hilary Beckles, “The Slave Drivers War: Bussa and the 1816 Barbados Slave Rebellion,” Published by: Centrum voor Studie en Documentatie van Latijns Amerika (CEDLA), Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe, No. 39 (1985), pp 102.


\textsuperscript{156} “Report from a Select Committee of the House of Assembly Appointed to inquire into the Origins, Cause, and Progress of the Late Insurrection,” April 1816, Barbados, (1818), found in Hilary Beckles, “The Slave Drivers War:
quoted Grigg’s words that “they were all damned fools to work, for that she would not, as
freedom they were sure to get, but if it didn't come the only way to get it was to fight for it,
otherwise they would not get it; and the way they were to do, was to set fire, as that was the way
they did in St. Domingo.”157 Robert's account of Nanny Grigg's intelligence tells of multiple
points of interest concerning enslaved literacy and rebellion.

The literate enslaveds’ political knowledge and interpretations of freedom in nearby Haiti
was just the beginning. British planter's concerns about the consequences if French ideas of
liberty made it to British colonies, were legitimate. Ideas about rebellion and freedom spread
among the enslaved of Barbados, aided by literate enslaved political knowledge and
interpretations of news. This relationship between literacy and resistance to slavery in the British
Caribbean also had parallels in Saint Domingue. It is no coincidence that both Grigg, who was
one of the leaders of Bussa's Rebellion and Toussaint Louverture, leader of the Haitian
Revolution, were both literate.

The Governor of Barbados, John Spooner, wrote a letter to Governor Woodford of
Trinidad explaining that an "insurrection of the negroes took place on the night of Sunday the
14th instant, and I regret to state to you that they have succeeded in setting fire to the canes and
destroying the buildings on several plantations.”158 Spooner placed blame for the insurrection on
widespread enslaved political knowledge and interpretations, stating that it was "impossible to
attribute such conduct to any other cause than the general belief which has impressed the minds

Bussa and the 1816 Barbados Slave Rebellion,” Published by: Centrum voor Studie en Documentatie van Latijns
Amerika (CEDLA), Boletín de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe, No. 39 (Diciembre de 1985), pp 103.
157 Rebecca Schneider, “Black Literacy and Resistance in Jamaica.” Social and Economic studies67, no. 1 (2018),
p. 49.
158 Gov. Spooner of Barbados wrote to Gov. Woodford of Trinidad, Trinidad C.O. 295/39, April 18th, (1816). Part
(iv) Barbados, 1816, 285. United Front within Eric Williams, Documents on British West Indian History, 1807-
of these unfortunate slaves, since the introduction of the Registry Bill, that their emancipation was desired by British Parliament" which the literate enslaved played a role in conveying such information.  

Knowledge of the political change brought on by the Registry Bill came from the literate enslaveds' ability to read the news, which supported enslaved conceptions of freedom and focused Black organizational efforts in Barbados. Colonel Edward Codd, the superintendent of British Honduras from 1823 to 1829, shows that the British colonial government was aware of the fact that enslaved knowledge of the abolition of the slave trade was a:

chief cause to which this unfortunate calamity is to be attributed to the general opinion, which has pervaded the minds of those misguided people since the proposed introduction of the Registry Bill, that their emancipation was desired by the British Parliament, and this idea seems to have conveyed by mischievous persons, and the indiscreet conversations of individuals on the measure.  

Following the revolt, the House of Assembly's inquiry into the insurrection gave insight into the literate enslaveds’ instigative role.

The Report from The Select Committee of the House of Assembly inquiry into Bussa's rebellion highlights specific examples of this leadership. The report states the uprising resulted from the information the enslaved man James Bowland obtained from the English newspapers. Through the knowledge that "had been so far extended, as to enable him to read and write," Bowland learned the abolitionist news having “read the papers which gave the intelligence that they were free; but (believed) that the white people would not give them their freedom.” While

\[159\] Ibid.  
\[160\] Letter from Colonel Edward Codd to James Leith, his report of the insurrection, Source 4a, 4b, UK National Archives, 25 April (1816).  
Bowland’s disposition bears his signature, “written by his own hand,” the testimony of white missionaries also identified enslaved agents of the rebellion.\textsuperscript{162}

The report notes that a literate enslaved man named Ben James was a prominent leader in uniting those around him to rebel against their enslavement, inspired by information acquired through his literacy skills. Similarly to how free people of colour made efforts to spread abolitionist propaganda, the collaboration between literate and illiterate circles commenced as “a small number of literate slaves were reported to have recruited and held meetings with other slaves... having obtained their information from English newspapers.”\textsuperscript{163} Ben James, who belonged to Ayshford plantation in St. Thomas, had recruited the rebellious efforts of the enslaved man Jack Groom and another driver at Haynesfeild in St. John by discussing his latest information obtained on the English Abolitionist Movement when visiting Bridgetown on Saturdays.\textsuperscript{164}

The impact Ben James had because of literacy skills in influencing attempts at resistance on a larger scale is amplified through the deposition of the 1816 revolt from the rector of St. Joseph's parish Rev. John Hamden Gittens.\textsuperscript{165} The reverend explained that an enslaved man within his vicinity named Ben James, “who had frequently told him that the negroes were all to be free,” was motivated into the revolt upon “his return one morning from town, showing Gittens a printed paper, and by which paper (James said) he heard they were all to be free: and the said convict acknowledged that to obtain his freedom had been the sole cause of his joining in the

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid, pp 10.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{165} “rector” means a clergy member of the Episcopal church who oversaw a parish.
Insurrection.”

Although James' interpretation of the paper was not factually correct as it related to slave law, his interpretation that he was to be free gives insight into legitimate understandings through the enslaved experience. Furthermore, it showed how the literate enslaved obtained helpful information about their condition, inspired liberation, and relayed this knowledge to other enslaved people. Highlighting the unique position of power that literate enslaved held within their communities shows how literate enslaved actions in actively attempting to gain knowledge instigated resistance, big and small, during Bussa's rebellion.

While the colonial government of Barbados was dealing with the aftermath of Bussa's Rebellion, enslaved knowledge of the Registry Bill had the same rebellious effects in Jamaica to the West. Planters not registering their so-called property set out a legal freedom narrative not ignored by anyone free or enslaved who could read the word "free" in the headlines.

A letter dated January 26th, 1816, written by Governor Manchester of Jamaica to Bathurst, addresses the outcome of enslaved knowledge of the Registry Bill by expressing frustration with the metropole's interference in colonial management. Manchester stated that the interference of parliament in the internal concerns of the colony has “certainly created a sensation amongst the slaves and a suspicion that the Registry Bill contemplates some dispositions in their favour which the Assembly here supported by the inhabitants generally are desirous to withhold… a considerable alarm prevailed during the Christmas holidays.” As this communication between various governors of the British colonies makes clear, enslaved reactions to ameliorative practices and evolving abolitionism, wary of calling it progressive

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enactment of legislation such as the Slave Trade Act (1807) and the Registry Bill (1815-1816), were determined through literate political knowledge and interpretation along oral communication amongst the wider enslaved population.

By 1816, the enslaveds' interpretations of ongoing ameliorative reform convinced colonial authorities and planters of the power the literate enslaved held in undermining the stability of slavery as a system. Hence, the colonial government of Barbados utilized print to communicate directly with the enslaved population in an article titled "An Address to the Slave Population of Barbados," printed in the *Barbados Mercury and Bridgetown-Gazette*. Government interests were to end mass revolts among the enslaved in Christ Church, St. John, St. Phillips, and St. George Barbados brought on by enslaved knowledge of slavery's fragility within the political climate of Amelioration. Governor James Leith's address spoke directly to the enslaved, a tactic deemed invalid if those supposedly strong and unwavering perceptions of Black unintelligence were persistent or factual.

Leith made clear his intention in writing the piece was to "entirely remove those erroneous impressions which appear to have been made on the minds of a great proportion of the slaves, by some designing persons, who have artfully endeavored to mislead them from the paths of duty, by misrepresentations which are as ridiculous in their conception, as they are false in their tenor." He wrote directly to the enslaved, saying that he "learned that a general belief had been mischievously propagated amongst you (the enslaved), that I was in possession of your manumissions, and that my return to Barbados would have put you in possession of your freedom." This article underscores that even the colonial government attempted to take

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169 Ibid.
advantage of the power of the literate in the enslaved community. He then validated the powerful impact enslaved literacy was having in trying to knock down the pillars of slavery, stating that there was never a more "delicate subject to touch on with you, than your condition as slaves, especially under the unhappy circumstances in which too many of you have involved yourselves, and by which the guilty had planned so much mischief to this colony."\textsuperscript{170}

The recognition and utilization of enslaved literacy skills by the colonial powers of Barbados are found in an issue of \textit{The Barbadian} published July 5th, 1833, where an attempt was made to promote enslaved obedience and limit their resistance through the newspaper. In reference to a work published in \textit{The Barbadian} titled "The Working Man's Companion," the editor writes, "many of our slaves now read: we hope those who have the opportunity of reading \textit{The Barbadian}, will not only read but mark, learn and inwardly digest the wholesome advice given in the following argument."\textsuperscript{171} In the years nearing emancipation, British colonials interested in keeping hold of their power in the colonies shifted their hesitant approach to enslaved literacy education into something more permissible. This increase in tolerance, and even promotion, of enslaved literacy education, came from rising colonial anxieties over losing their grip on white hegemony within British-colonial society. During slavery, enslaved literacy was seen as a threat to this power; however, the strong guarantee of emancipation formed a new need in the colonial mind for control. Enslaved literacy education became a tool for intellectual obedience (much like enslaved conversion) of the soon-to-be free Black population in post-emancipation society.

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{171} The Barbadian, July 5th, (1833), pp 2.
The importance of the news press for all people in colonial society is shown through its informative role within the enslaved community in considering evidence that the literate enslaved gained access to political knowledge that would have been otherwise difficult to attain. Mass reporting on the events of the Haitian Revolution and how the enslaved in Jamaica and Barbados interpreted Haiti’s liberation shows that its impacts were not isolated but instead spread the idea of liberty like wildfire throughout the British Caribbean. These highlighted instances of literate enslaved interactions with the news press show the true extent of political knowledge amongst Jamaican and Bajan enslaved populations. This knowledge, furthermore, situates the literate enslaved as middlemen between broader slavery politics and enslaved communities more greatly limited to the plantation space. Finally, after government observations of the increase in massive rebellions within Jamaica and Barbados, it can be said that this political intelligence from literate enslaved peoples significantly contributed to enslaved resistance within the British Empire during the first half of the nineteenth century.
Conclusion

The enslaved man Tomas Dove, otherwise referred to as Captain Dove by some in the enslaved community, confessed in the Jamaican colonial government’s *Inquiry into the Cause of, and Injury sustained by, the recent Rebellion in that Colony* (1832) that he was motivated to join in the rebellion because leader Samuel Sharpe had “read [about their freedom] in the newspapers, but [said that] unless they fought for it, they would not get it.”\(^{172}\) Dove’s enthusiasm for Sharpe’s mission is shown in his undertaking of a leadership role in the rebellion and relayed in the confession of enslaved man Thomas M’Neel who places Dove in the same light Dove had placed Sharpe in, saying that:

Dove had read in the newspapers that the people in England were determined that the negroes should be made free and would stand on their side. That at some meetings in England of the people to talk about their freedom, they said, ‘unless immediately granted, the slaves should fight for it, they would assist them…I have understood… Dove could read, and that several of the rebel chiefs could write well.\(^{173}\)

The relationship between Samuel Sharpe and Thomas Dove reflects literate enslaved collaboration and how the literate enslaved were able to convince their fellow enslaved people better and assemble strong resistance organization circles based on their literate knowledge. Furthermore, M’Neel's confession also suggests that the enslaved understood the value of literacy and appreciated how it opened new avenues for getting information. This relationship also hints at how the enslaved community generally relied on those who were literate to provide guidance and context to their contemporary moment. In the same inquiry, an enslaved man named Linton

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\(^{172}\) Copy of the Report of a Committee of the House of Assembly of Jamaica, Appointed to Inquire into the Cause of, and Injury Sustained by, the Recent Rebellion in That Colony; Together with the Examinations on Oath, Confessions and Other Documents Annexed to That Report. Cambridge Eng: Proquest LLC, original 1832, (2006), pp 32.

\(^{173}\) Ibid, pp 13.
stated, "those who cannot read always give a 5d. to those who can read the papers to them when they hear they contain good news for them."\textsuperscript{174}

Points of connection between enslaved literacy and resistance shaped the life experience of literate enslaved people in the British Caribbean. Enslaved literacy skills were often acquired in plantation spaces with degrees of privilege. Given these heightened opportunities to learn how to read, literate enslaved people were better equipped to strategize and negotiate without white supervision precisely because of their situational knowledge of the microsystem of their owner's plantation. As demonstrated in this study, for those among the enslaved who could read, their literacy skills gave them more opportunities to camouflage their legal status as enslaved people should they decide to run away.

Lastly, the literate enslaved were central to the spread of information among the communities of the enslaved about colonial political news and the debates concerning abolition and amelioration in British colonies. This attribute of literacy is especially true in the context of the volatile political climate for slavery in the years leading up to emancipation in 1833. This ability to gain knowledge from news sources and evaluate enslaved people's place within the slavery system based on this information placed the literate enslaved in a critical leadership position within resistance coalitions. Often the masterminds of large-scale enslaved insurrections, the literate enslaved took on leadership and organizational roles in those planned acts of resistance that involved the wider illiterate enslaved population.

Among the literate enslaved minority, the combination of education and a desire to resist their enslavement highlights how they were uniquely situated within the system of slavery and

\textsuperscript{174} It is unclear in the primary source what exactly 5d. is equivalent to in the past and present tense; however, it does show an exchange was made. Ibid, pp 29.
arguably were able to perceive and imagine the system of slavery beyond the limits of where they were forced to provide labour.

That said, the use of literacy as a tool of resistance did not end with emancipation in 1838. This historical discussion of enslaved literacy and resistance prompts opening an opportune space to make broader connections between this history and Jamaican literacy education, literacy resistance, and adaptation through different forms of knowledge production and communication from the second half of the twentieth century onward. While most of this research focuses on the literate enslaved minority, it also highlights the problem of illiteracy among the descendants of the enslaved long after emancipation was attained. Emancipation came with a new degree of intellectual freedom for the freed Black population; however, access to education was still severely limited as they were few opportunities to pursue formal education, and the white plantocracy continued to be concerned with controlling the descendants of enslaved Jamaicans in the post-emancipation period. Unfortunately, although there have been significant increases in literacy rates in the Caribbean, one of the legacies of slavery and colonialism is that literacy rates remained at an unacceptable level long after political independence was attained.

The scholar Edward Hutchinson found that "despite school development and organized literacy work among adults going back to the 1940s, it is estimated that upwards of half a million adult Jamaicans (40-50 percent of those over fifteen years old)" were "functionally illiterate."\textsuperscript{175} This literacy gap persisted into the 1970s, with Michael Manley, the fourth Prime Minister of Jamaica, estimating that "by the start of the 1970s, exactly one-quarter of the total Jamaican

population were functionally illiterate.” 176 Unsatisfactory statistics on the population's literacy rates continued to be a prominent concern in Jamaican society well into the modern period. There can be little doubt that Jamaica's history of anti-literacy practices during slavery has contributed to the problems of illiteracy.

There was a shift of understanding in the region around the 1940s, where conceptions of literacy education were slowly changing from being used as a continued mechanism for colonial control and the maintenance of the old system to giving the liberating functions of literacy skills more formal recognition and importance. In Elizabeth Best's work, she draws on the statement that between 1945-1964, “the perception of literacy as a skill to be acquired for its own sake” was changed to one which held literacy to be a “means of achieving economic development, an achievement expected to be marked by personal development and community progress.” 177 This research challenges this statement, or more specifically, its definition of community progress, in its idea that literacy became marked by Best's affiliation with "community progress" during this isolated period from the mid-1940s to the 1960s. This work shows that the value of literacy skills as a tool for community progress can be traced back to slavery. 178 Literacy may not have created economic progress for the enslaved community based on modern understandings of economic infrastructure. However, literacy was undoubtedly a contributing factor in the enslaved community's progress toward freedom which can be viewed as community progress.

What is interesting about the evolution of the understanding of the importance of education in the British Caribbean is that the action of the enslaved, and the fearful response of

176 Ibid.
178 Ibid.
colonial administrators, reflected this liberating value in literacy skills in the early nineteenth century; however, it was not until the twentieth century that this limited affiliation between education and colonial control over the population began to loosen on a governmental level. This shift differs from a conceptual change that translated into unflawed actionable advancement as there continued to be a sub-par investment in educational infrastructure. The continuation of a lack of educational investment and educational downfall poses the question of continued interest in colonial power imbalances, aided through this withhold, influenced government decisions on practices for successful literacy programming. This lack translated into unmet educational needs and weakened literacy education in Jamaica during the first half of the twentieth century. These statistics undeniably lead to questioning the degree to which slavery's anti-Black education agenda set back literacy education in the region.

Recognizing the continuation of this resistance in modern Jamaican society is vital to comprehend this particular history's lasting relevance better. Literate resistance networks are still present in modern Jamaican society, promoting the idea of the "self-sovereign learner." The Jamaican-based media channel I Never Knew TV interviewed literacy advocate I-Nation, associated with Inner City Dub and I-Nation Books and Necessities in 2016 in Western Kingston. He spoke to continual advocacy for using literacy skills as a resistance tool against lingering European oppression, saying:

Reading is key ya know, if you don't exercise your body you become prone to illness, the same way for the mind. Without reading your mind becomes lazy, and impressionable, and people can manipulate you. You can make more positive and concrete decisions for yourself…Jamaicans are in the eye of white supremacy… there's so much social engineering meant to keep you enslaved to the system.  

180 Ibid.
A continuation of understanding and advocacy of the correlation between literacy and Black autonomy, ill-literacy and white-supremacist manipulation is brought to the forefront of this conversation by Afrocentric thinking members of Jamaican society. This modern-day advocacy for literacy education is one example of how promoting literacy knowledge continues to be a resistance tactic in circles amongst the general public. A historical comparison can be drawn to this modern example of championing literacy education to the work of literate enslaved preachers and organizers horizontally spreading anti-colonial messaging to a broader audience against the vertical powers that be. The value put on literate knowledge-seeking persisted in the generations of Caribbean peoples who sought literate knowledge for increased freedom. Manifested in a physical capacity like enslaved runaways had, intellectually like enslaved preacher Samuel Sharpe had, or modern pan-African intellectuals, from the confines of slavery and ongoing colonial intellectual barriers.

The need for increased literacy in Jamaica continued after emancipation; however, the silver lining is that the people of the Caribbean had a vibrant oral culture of storytelling and music. People like Jamaican storyteller Louise Bennett-Coverley and reggae musician Peter Tosh have played an important role in depicting valuable social and political knowledge to Jamaican and broader international audiences. There is a telling duality between the encouragement of literacy education and pride in oral culture in the presence of a discourse on the country's complex relationship with literacy education and its link to the historical past within the oral culture itself. The British-Jamaican reggae band Greyhound released a song in 1971 called Black and White which reflects this duality:

“The ink is black, the page is white
Together we learn to read and write
To read and write
A child is black, a child is white  
The whole world looks upon the sight  
A beautiful sight  
And now a child can understand  
This is the law of all the land  
All the land  
The world is black, the world is white  
It turns by day and then by night  
It turns by night  
And now at last we plainly see  
The alphabet of liberty  
Liberty”\textsuperscript{181}

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPbYbW5uw&list=RDVPbYbW5uw&start_radio=1.
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