

The Worth of Female Barbadian Slaves' Fertility



Elisabeth Sandler, November '19

Persistent caws of exotic birds accompany faint rushes of palm tree leaves. Shadows, painted by the glowing mid-afternoon sun, dance on the sturdy brick walls of the mansion. And when closing my eyes, I can almost feel it: the history of St. Nicholas Abbey, a plantation house in the heart of the Caribbean island Barbados. It is a most peculiar place. Peaceful but not unburdened, another symbol of privilege on the cost of so many.

Having passed seashell chandeliers, a stuffed parrot, and sleeping cats on historic chairs, the almost all white tourist group, guided by a Barbadian woman, abruptly stops. I find myself in the middle of an inconspicuous, dim alley that connects the great house with the barrel stock rooms that are treasuring the plantation's finest rum. The fan above us makes the light flicker. Slowly, my eyes adjust to the half-dark and framed pieces of parchment paper attract my attention. Seven yellow pieces of paper list names, numbers, and pounds in scribbled handwriting.

By 1834 slavery was abolished in Barbados, a territory of British rule. In anticipation of freeing slaves, owners had to document the numbers and estimated worth of their slaves for the government to pay them out. I begin to realise: An estimation of human people's worth, black on white, is listed in front of me.

Gift, James, Pollydere, David. Among the highest amounts - 150 pounds sterling silver - are male slaves who "could basically run the farm by themselves", informs us our tour guide. They were considered indispensable workforces which is reflected in the high number of pounds allocated to them. Some women, in contrast, were considered worth much less, with one case even nothing.



Pieces of parchment paper (~1822) listing the estimated worth of their slaves (St. Nicholas Abbey, Barbados)

A Sugar Work Plantation called of Saint Peter containing 265 Acres being thereon Plantation Houses and included a £300000 of White Sugar a £300000 of Slaves

Men	
Gift	150 1000 ^l up
Cuffey	80 John
James	150 Abel
Ralph	80 Tom Post
Jack Bartles	75 Matt
Pollydore	100 Tomey
James	150 Stephen
Abraham	90 Cudjoe
Jonas	150 Luck
Tom Boyce	110 Henry
David	150 Edw ^d James

175	Jubbah	80
80	Lilla Leah	115
85	Sally	85
90	Lilly	130
135	Petty	170
125	Mary Sally	120
125	Mary Agnes	130
120		
7870		11235
		7980
960	1300 ^l up	1675
170	Saint Richard	95
170	Abraham	95
95	Beck	95
95	Cesar	80
95	Richard	80
95	Sam Noko	80
95	John Gooding	80

Pounds assigned to male slaves (left image) and female slaves (right image)

I am not surprised to hear that men were considered worth more than women - literally -, an event worth reflecting on itself. However, what does surprise me is to encounter very high amounts assigned to female slaves as well. Lilly, Rosey, and May Sally were considered worth 120 pounds and Mary Agnef even 130 pounds.

I ask the tour guide why, not knowing that her answer would accompany my thoughts for the rest of the day. These are the prices of fertile female slaves who could and, due to the seizure of the plantation owners, *would* produce offspring who immediately became property - workforce - for their owners. It is the women's fertility, considered a potential for future profit, which increased their worth.

And today? What is fertility worth today? The reasons for the worth of fertility might have changed compared to the 19th century Barbadian slaves which lives we slightly touched, but when I think of the booming fertility industry world-wide, I do not see fertility worth any less. Human beings are being paid for their fertility (e.g. some forms of egg- and sperm donations and surrogacy) and pay high amounts of money for fertility in form of fertility treatments and assisted reproduction.

What I consider so special and simultaneously haunting about the framed pieces of yellow-coloured parchment paper I unexpectedly came across, however, is the direct confrontation with something I believe people do not unfold openly: worth. I do think that we still assign worth to objects (e.g. houses, clothing, cars), subjects (e.g. family and friends when purchasing Christmas presents or weighing out the inconvenience we are willing to undergo for a favour), and constructs (e.g. marriage, education or degrees, fertility). But it is rare that these 'price tags', especially of people, are made public.

Experiencing this and, in a way, re-experiencing this incidence in writing about it does something to me, it does something *with* me. Yes, I find 'the worth of fertility' of scholarly interest, but encountering a black-on-white account evoked strong feelings I am still trying to name and understand. I can best describe my feeling as an unfamiliar amount of uncomfortable, physical alertness in my body. It is almost as if encountering the concept of "worth" in connection to people and their fertility is a desecration of something sacred, something so precious, meaningful, and vulnerable for so many people: their fertility and everything it stands for to them.

My thank goes to the team of St. Nicholas Abbey for allowing me to use one of their photos and for enabling these reflections in having opened their doors so generously and having provided answers to so many questions of mine.