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Blood, Sweat, and Social Control: A Comparative Study of Virginian and Jamaican Slavery, 1740-1820

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Blood, Sweat, and Social Control: A Comparative Study of Virginian and Jamaican Slavery, 1740-1820

A Thesis by Paul Knaak

Introduction:

Few social institutions have had as much of an indelible impact on the demography, culture, and politics of the Americas as slavery. From the seventeenth through the nineteenth century, the forced migration of Africans to serve as enslaved laborers brought wealth, stability, and grotesque violence to the American continents. Notable among the European powers participating in the slave trade were the British, who were the largest players in the trade from approximately 1726 through 1800.¹ Two of Britain's largest and most profitable colonies, Virginia and Jamaica, will be the focus of this paper.

The differences between Virginia and Jamaica highlight the variability of slavery in the Americas. The demography, geography, and economies of the two regions forged institutions that served different purposes. In the latter half of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, Virginian plantation owners profited from slavery and utilized it to maintain social control. Although slavery was immensely lucrative for Jamaican planters, its underlying instability challenged rather than facilitated their social control. These inherent differences are reflected in the diaries of two slave-owners from the period: Matthew Lewis of Jamaica (1775-1818) and William Byrd of Virginia (1674-1744). The diaries of Lewis and Byrd are useful for examining the dynamics of social control in Jamaica and Virginia because both men were wealthy plantation owners and politicians. They were at the top of their respective social pyramids and their relationships with, and perceptions of, their plantations are important insights into how Virginian and Jamaican elites maintained control.

¹ David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 23.

For the purposes of this paper, social control will be defined as the degree to which plantation owners could reliably exert influence and maintain dominance over those below them on the social ladder, both black and white. This definition, while concise, could potentially encompass numerous aspects of life in Virginia and Jamaica. While facets of social control like cultural imposition are certainly important to the history of slavery in the two regions and will be touched on in this paper, they are not the central focus. The element of social control most pertinent to the arguments of this thesis is the ability of proprietors to get those below them to function as laborers and subordinates without violence. Understood in terms of this definition of social control, the main argument of this paper is that Virginian slave-owners were able to control those below them (both slaves and poor whites) more effectively and with less violence than Jamaican slave-owners could. The biggest factors influencing differences in social control between the two regions were demographics, the application of violence, and white identity.

Historiography

The most effective way to conduct a historiographical inquiry into Jamaican and Virginian slavery is to examine the two regions separately. This provides greater detail and makes up for the lack of scholarship directly comparing the two. In the case of Virginia, Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975) provides insight into the origins of slavery in the region. Morgan's argument challenged what was then the common assumption about the introduction of slavery into Virginia; that it was a progression from white indentured servitude driven by a drying-up of available labor in Britain. Morgan's thesis, based on population measurements and immigration records, was that the transition was not caused by

unavailability of European migrants, but rather was part of an attempt by white landowners of large estates to strengthen their social control in Virginia. He makes this argument in the context of Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, when poor whites rose up against the wealthier plantation owners. Morgan argues that the importation of more slaves made poor and rich whites allies through the creation of a racial hierarchy, which prevented future uprisings. Morgan's central argument thus underlines the foundation of Virginian slavery, it was as much or more about social control than it was about economics.²

Anthony Parent expanded on Morgan's work in *Foul Means, The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740* (2003).³ Using Bacon's Rebellion as evidence, Parent argues that the growing violence and insubordination of white servants was symptomatic of an unequal and unfair society. Large landowners saw the need to create some sort of division in the lower classes, particularly between slaves and poor whites, in order to weaken them, and so came up with the idea of permanent slavery to do so.⁴ Parent argues that English law at that time would not have permitted the enslavement of British subjects or other Europeans, forcing landowners to instead look to Africa as a potential source of labor.⁵ Literature and widespread perception of the time treated Africans as bad and dirty, which Parent states the slave-owners used as a personal and public justification for their actions.⁶ Once importations began large-scale, elite

² Morgan, Edmund S. *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. (New York: Norton, 1975). Morgan's book provides great detail and compelling arguments on Virginian slavery up through the 1720's. It is considered a seminal text on the place and period.

³ Parent, Anthony. *Foul Means, The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740*. (Williamsburg: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2003). Although Parent makes a similar argument to Morgan, his more Marxist approach provides an interesting different viewpoint.

⁴Parent, *Foul Means*, 4.

⁵ Parent, *Foul Means*, 5.

⁶ Parent, *Foul Means*, 106.

Virginians used legal codes to permanently create a gap between poor whites and slaves, thereby strengthening the white upper-class' hold over society.

Theodore Allen's work *The Invention of the White Race* (1994) provides a comprehensive overview of the development of the black-white racial dichotomy in slave societies across the Americas. As suggested by the title, the book's underlying premise is that a significant racial distinction between black and white people did not exist before the creation of African slavery in the Americas. Allen argues that attitudes and laws regarding class control and freedom developed in England before the colonization of North America laid the foundation for the development of racial slavery. Specifically, Allen argues that during enclosure (a phenomenon that will be discussed in greater detail later in the paper) wealthy Englishmen prevented major uprisings by peasants kicked off of their land by fostering a lower-middle class spectrum that would fight alongside them to maintain the social order.⁷ The system that developed in North American slave societies, where the non-slave owning whites allied with wealthy white proprietors to protect the system of racial inequality closely mirrored what existed in Britain. Allen also argues that differences in the development of slavery between Jamaica and Virginia were caused in large part by the need to incorporate people of African descent into the apparatus of social control.⁸ Like this paper, Allen utilizes the concept and term social control frequently. Allen's working definition of social control is similar to that of this

⁷ Allen, Theodore. *The Invention of the White Race* (London:Verso, 1994), 17.

⁸ Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 228-236.

paper, the ability of elites to project power and maintain control of the laboring classes through the exploitation of unequal class structures.⁹

A useful book to read to understand slave society in Jamaica is Trevor Burnard's *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* (2005). Burnard's work is a single-case study focusing on the diary of Thomas Thistlewood (1721-1786), a Jamaican plantation overseer and slave-owner. *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* is illustrative of life in eighteenth-century Jamaica and shows how slaves and overseers interacted. Burnard focuses on the physical and sexual violence in Jamaica, arguing that men like Thistlewood lived in a world of fear and used intimidation to hold it together. While Morgan and Parent's books show how slavery brought stability to Virginian society, Burnard shows how it constantly threatened to tear Jamaica apart.¹⁰

Vincent Brown's *Reaper's Garden* (2008) provides another example of how slavery made Jamaican society unstable through its exceptionally detailed examination of mortality and its impact on life in colonial Jamaica. Brown argues that the constant potential for death defined nearly all aspects of the experiences of those living in colonial Jamaica. For Africans, from their capture and forced migration across the Atlantic Ocean to the back-breaking labor in Jamaica's brutally hot climate, death was constantly nearby.¹¹ Brown also argues that death played daily into the lives of white people in Jamaica, as their exposure to tropical diseases like yellow fever

⁹ Allen, Theodore. *The Invention of the White Race* (London:Verso, 1994). Allen makes frequent use of the concept of social control throughout both volumes of this work. The first volume, which focuses largely on the English colonization of Ireland, was not as much a focus for my research. The second volume, which examines the development of racial slavery across the Americas was much more influential to my writing.

¹⁰ Burnard, Trevor *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004)

¹¹ Brown, Vincent. *Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 3, 31.

culled a significant amount of the population every year.¹² Brown builds on Burnard's work in his illustration of how Jamaica was a society defined by death and fear.

One of the few books to directly compare Jamaican and Virginian slavery is *A Tale of Two Plantations* (2014) by Richard Dunn. Based upon the records of the Mount Airy plantation in the Chesapeake and the Mesopotamia plantation in Westmoreland, Jamaica, Dunn's research makes a mostly demographic comparison of the two. The comparison of Mount Airy and Mesopotamia is relevant because both were, in many ways, plantations that were representative of the larger societies they were in. Like most Jamaican plantations, Mesopotamia produced sugar, was very large, had hundreds of slaves, and was owned by an absentee proprietor. Mount Airy, much like most Virginian plantations, was smaller and owned by a family that lived on it. Mount Airy's enslaved laborers grew a wider variety of crops, including tobacco and a number of grains. In Jamaica, Dunn argues, high mortality forced plantation owners to constantly buy new replacements from West Africa as their slave populations naturally declined. In Virginia, on the other hand, there was a surplus of slaves due to high levels of fertility, and these extra slaves were exported to other states during the rapid expansion of cotton production in the early nineteenth century. Once again this argument plays into broader themes of the social stability of slavery in both regions. Whereas Virginian slavery's strengthening of white-male patriarchal social institutions led to its expansion in the

¹² Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 13.

US, in Jamaica its purely economic usefulness declined significantly with the British abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807.¹³

While I don't dispute the central arguments of any of the above sources, my research will look at them in a context that is in some ways broader, and in some ways more focused. Morgan and Burnard's works look only at Virginia and Jamaica, respectively, but I will use them to tell the larger story of North American slavery, how it meant different things in different places and how its political and social power varied across regions. Similarly, I will use Dunn's examination of demographics and life on two specific plantations to analyze the wider social impact of the trends he describes. Allen's work, while hugely influential to my perception of race as a tool of social control, is extremely encompassing, and I will look more specifically at race and social control in two specific regions and two specific plantations. All of these works will also be funneled into the stories of William Byrd and Matthew Lewis; I will use the individual lives of two slave-owners to show the practical effects of the more expansive differences between regions, and its long term impact on life and politics.

Background: The Slave Trade

Gaining a full understanding of the slave societies that developed in Virginia and Jamaica is impossible without understanding the Atlantic slave trade. One leg of a system of trade that developed between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, the so-called "middle-passage" was the route that approximately twelve million involuntary African migrants took to the Americas from

¹³ Dunn, Richard S. *A Tale of Two Plantations: Slave Life and Labor in Jamaica and Virginia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 42.

the sixteenth through the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Although these migrants are generally referred to as “Africans”, such a sense of unified identity among the people of the expansive West African coast did not exist during the period. Hailing from a stretch of coastal and inland Africa that began at the Senegal River and ran south through Angola, captured Africans represented a smorgasbord of cultures and ethnicities at least as diverse as the European coalition that sought to exploit their labor.¹⁵

The trade is generally considered to have begun when the Spanish started transporting slaves across the Atlantic to their colonies in the Caribbean in 1501.¹⁶ Much of the initial trading was done in the region around the Senegal and Gambia rivers, which were the most northern points of significant trans-Atlantic slave debarkation. The regions that were most active in slave-trading at any given time tended to move generally south along the West African coast from the Senegal River as the era progressed. This trend was due to the fact that after decades of losing population to slavery, areas tended to become too depleted to continue trading at the levels they had previously. When that happened, traders began going to ports further south to fill their holds. Alongside these geographic shifts in the slave trade came shifts in the power dynamics and demand of the nations engaged in the trade, with the British being largely dominant in the eighteenth century and the Portuguese moving the largest numbers of involuntary migrants in the early nineteenth century.¹⁷ These two trends make it possible to generalize about the geographic origin of slaves during any given year and under the control of

¹⁴ Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 29.

¹⁵ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1998), 56.

¹⁶ Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 21.

¹⁷ Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 23.

any particular European power. For example, although the Portuguese took slaves from every region that participated in the trade, including southeast Africa, by far the largest proportion of slaves bound for Brazil in the nineteenth century came from West Central Africa, or the modern-day countries of Angola and Gabon.¹⁸ In fact, the Portuguese, alongside the Spanish, French, and a host of other nations, took so many slaves from West Central Africa that fully forty-five percent of all slaves moved to the New World came from there.¹⁹ Virginia and Jamaica, as British colonies receiving most of their slave imports in the eighteenth century, would have seen slaves mostly from the Bight of Benin and Bight of Biafra.²⁰ Two regions located roughly where the African coastline switches from running east-west to north-south, these regions compose parts of modern-day Togo, Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Although this seems to be a limited geographic region, it was composed of a variety of different ethnicities. Twi, Corromantee, Warri, Igala, Dahomey, and Igbo were but a few of those represented; most of which had different languages, different gender roles, and different cultural practices.²¹

The diversity of the Africans involved in the slave trade is significant because it highlights the nature of race as a social construct. While the perception of a sharp divide between black and white people is prevalent in the twenty-first century, it was not necessarily prevalent in the seventeenth or even eighteenth centuries. Just as the Europeans engaged in the trade viewed distinctions between nations like the Dutch and English as significant, so too were differences

¹⁸ Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 29.

¹⁹ Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 15.

²⁰ Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 22.

²¹ Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2004), 61, 63.

Eltis and Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 110.

between groups like the Twi and Warri significant to kidnapped Africans. The created perception of a single block of people known as “black” was not an acknowledgement of a pre-existing recognized social group. Rather, it was a tool used by Europeans to dehumanize a large number of diverse people and justify their forced labor.

Many individual slave ships even espoused some level of diversity. Since European influence in Africa in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was limited to the walls of their coastal forts, European traders relied upon on African raiders to capture the slaves they needed, who were usually sold to them in small numbers.²² The trip of the British ship the *James* from 1675-1676 is illustrative of this process. Travelling up and down the Gold Coast for many months, the *James* was unable to get more than a handful of slaves from any one location. It ultimately took thirteen months for the *James* to complete the trip from England to Barbados, with Africans wilting in the hold from the heat and stench.²³ The experience of Africans kept in the hold next to other Africans that may have spoken an unfamiliar language or been from an unfamiliar region was significant to the creation of the aforementioned idea of “blackness”. Whereas before their capture, slaves aboard the ships likely would not have identified strongly with those from different nations, the commonality of their dehumanization and pigmentation was made clear.²⁴ The creation of this new understanding developed alongside the forging of strong bonds of friendship between those who travelled the Middle Passage together, known as “shipmates”. The strong “shipmate” bonds formed amongst

²² John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World: 1400-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 214-215.

²³ Gomez, Michael Angelo. *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 157.

²⁴ Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 155.

captured Africans would be the first of many experiences of cultural alienation and reorganization that they and their descendants would experience for generations.²⁵ The strength of shipmate bonds is illustrated in a passage from the diary of Jamaican proprietor Matthew Lewis. When one of Lewis's slaves told him that she had a cousin on a different plantation, Lewis asked which of their parents were siblings. The slave told him that their fathers had been shipmates, which was considered to be a blood relation.²⁶

The diversity of the Africans forced to participate in the middle passage had a tangible impact when comparing slavery in Virginia and Jamaica. As will be discussed later, the differences in mortality and fertility in Jamaica and Virginia led to much greater numbers of Africans shipped to Jamaica than Virginia, despite having comparable enslaved population sizes in the mid-eighteenth century.²⁷ 9.7% of all slaves transported from Africa to the Americas landed in Jamaica, while the Chesapeake region only took in 1.2%.²⁸ This disparity created an entirely different social dynamic in the two regions due to a process known as creolization. Creolization, in simple terms, is the process by which immigrants from various nations synthesize a new culture in a new region.²⁹ In Virginia, where by the mid-eighteenth century

²⁵ Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 1976), 42-43.

²⁶ Lewis, Matthew Gregory *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor Kept During a Residence in Jamaica* (London: A. Spottiswood, 1845), 350.

²⁷ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 24.

²⁸ Despite common perception, the slave trade was more complicated than simply the movement of people from Africa across the Atlantic to the Americas. There also existed a significant trade within the Americas, both inside regions like the Caribbean and between different regions. Thus relying too heavily upon only the numbers of slaves transported directly from Africa to a given colony obscures part of the picture as colonies like Virginia also would have received slaves from other colonies to bolster their population. Ocean currents and seasonal weather conditions would have affected such trends. Unfortunately, a more detailed discussion of the full complexity of the slave trade would constitute an entire book in and of itself, and so cannot be included within the confines of this paper. The trends discussed above are still, of course, generally accurate, but it is important to note that reality was more nuanced than what the above writing may seem to suggest.

²⁹ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 23.

the majority of the slave population would have been born in America; African influences on culture and language were more muted. In Jamaica, however, where a significant proportion of slaves would have been born in Africa, West African cultural influences were noticeable. The unique Jamaican accent, still sharply discernable today from the English spoken in Virginia, is the grandchild of Jamaican creole; a combination of English, various British dialects, and a variety of African words and dialectic structures.³⁰ Distinctions in the language and culture of slaves in the two regions, while seemingly nuanced observations of verbiage, provide an example of how differences in the importation of slaves and the population density of Europeans impacted the ability of slave-owners and overseers to exert cultural control. The ability of white Virginians to better control the language and culture of slaves was a central piece of the social control they exercised.

It is important to note, however, that although African linguistic influences in Virginia tended to be more subtle than those in Jamaica, they were certainly not non-existent. Many Virginian slave owners reported, even late into the colonial period, that they struggled to make some slaves speak “proper” English. Indeed, as late as 1914 there were still some former slaves in the United States who still knew words and phrases in their ancestral African languages.³¹ The refusal of some slaves to fully speak the language of their captors represented both the maintenance of a connection to their African origins and an act of defiance against the pressures of assimilation exerted by white society.³² The comparison of slave language between

³⁰ Barbara Lalla and Jean D’Costa, *Language in Exile: Three Hundred Years of Jamaican Creole* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990). This book provides a more comprehensive look at how the various cultural influences in Jamaica created a unique language.

³¹ Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 175.

³² Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 171.

Jamaica and Virginia is not the only example of a nuanced argument in this paper. As with any two regions, Virginia and Jamaica were extraordinarily complex in ways that books and papers cannot fully capture.

William Byrd of Virginia and Matthew Lewis of Jamaica

The two main primary sources used in this research are the diaries of Matthew Lewis of Jamaica and William Byrd of Virginia. Although they lived very different lives, Byrd and Lewis are pertinent for comparison due to the fact that they both were wealthy and influential plantation owners. They sat at the heads of their respective societies, making their identification with, and control over, the regions key pieces of the application of social control.

William Byrd was a Virginian planter and slave-owner in Charles City County, Virginia, which is in the Chesapeake region. He lived from 1674 through 1744, although the part of his diary I will examine is from the end of his life during the early 1740's. He was a member of the House of Burgesses, which was the Virginian colonial legislative body, and held a variety of civic positions. Byrd lived on the Westover plantation, a fairly large farm where he grew both tobacco and some grains. He likely owned hundreds of slaves over the course of his life. He was a fairly typical Virginian patriarch in eighteenth century.³³

Analyzing Byrd's diary is difficult in a number of ways. Firstly, as mentioned, I am forced to use the latter years of Byrd's life and diary as the main evidence in this paper to keep the difference in time between Byrd and Lewis as short as possible. This means that Byrd was in his

³³ Byrd, William, Maude Howlett Woodfin, and Marion Tining. *Another Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1739-1741, with Letters & Literary Exercises, 1696-1726.* (Richmond, VA: Dietz Press, 1942) 12.

late sixties while he was writing his diary, fairly old for the time period, which could have affected his behavior. While he still records beatings and sexual forays in his later diary, they are not nearly as frequent as when he was younger. To account for his changing behavior, it is important to examine both his actions and his attitudes and more personal thoughts. For example, Byrd choosing not to beat a slave on a given day might not necessarily mean he was wholly please with the plantation's operations. But if he didn't beat anyone and seems to be in a good mood or expresses pleasure with the work of his overseers then he likely was pleased with how things were going.

Byrd's age is not the only complexity encountered during an analysis of his diary. Byrd's diary was secret and written in code. The fact that Byrd wrote the diary only for personal use creates problems because he may have neglected to mention things he would have found unimportant. For example, Byrd chose to meticulously note the weather and what he eats for breakfast; however he rarely mentions what he talks about with his slaves in his daily evening conversation with his slaves. While, as a planter, Byrd found the study of weather patterns fascinating, he did not seem too concerned about what his slaves had to say. Historians are thus robbed of recordings of potentially illuminating interactions. The private nature of Byrd's diary is also challenging because it is entirely possible that much of Byrd's writings were engagements in self-delusion. Byrd portrayed himself in his diary as a benevolent, pious, and intellectual patriarch. However, he may have been trying to justify his actions or boost his own self-esteem by portraying himself as such. Just as a more contextual analysis is necessary to counter the issues created by his age, it is also needed to determine when he was being forthright and when he was lying to himself.

Matthew Lewis, on the other hand, illustrates what a typical Jamaican plantation owner looked like in this period. He was an absentee owner; he lived in England where he focused more on writing and the pursuits of a gentleman than the details of running a sugar plantation. He owned two sugar plantations, one on the west end of the island in Westmoreland Parish and the other in the east in St. Thomas Parish. Both were exceptionally large and profitable, and utilized hundreds of slaves. Such large plantations were the norm in Jamaica at the time.³⁴ Lewis wrote his diary on a visit to his plantation around 1815 aboard the ship back to England of yellow fever.³⁵

Analysis of Lewis's diary is complicated by the fact that he has always intended to publish it upon his return home. Thus Lewis had a strong incentive to portray himself as likable and kind, especially considering the fact that by 1815 slavery had grown to be unpopular in Britain. Passages where Lewis recounted how kindly he treated his slaves and how much they loved him must be read with the understanding that if he had been cruel and disliked, he probably would not have written about it.

The differences in dates between the two diaries create obvious practical methodological issues. Ideally, the main primary sources for a comparison between slavery in Virginia and Jamaica would be contemporary accounts written for similar audiences. Unfortunately, not all slave owners kept diaries and those that did may have lost or destroyed them, or they may not be readily available for study. To compensate, other primary sources will be used to fill in gaps of time, namely the records of the Mount Airy and Mesopotamia

³⁴ Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 226.

³⁵ Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor Kept During a Residence in Jamaica* (London: A. Spottiswood, 1845)

plantations that stretch from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries and the works of William Beckford, a plantation owner who wrote a book about Jamaican slavery in 1790.³⁶ Mount Airy, a fair-sized tobacco plantation located roughly in the same area as Westover, can be considered broadly comparable to Byrd's Virginia plantation. Similarly Mesopotamia, a large sugar plantation owned by an absentee owner and located in the same parish as Lewis's Cornwall estate, is similar enough for comparison. William Beckford was not entirely similar to Lewis, as he spent far more time living in Jamaica and was not as wealthy. He also wrote his book twenty years before Lewis. Despite this dissimilarity, Beckford's different experiences and perspectives complement Lewis's to augment the analysis, as will be illustrated later.

The differences in the ability of slave-owners such as Byrd and Lewis to exert social control were influenced by numerous factors. The differing climates, geographies, and racial make-up of Virginia and Jamaica created a variety of conditions that compelled proprietors to adapt different approaches to running their plantations. The most important factors that influenced and exemplified differing social control in the two regions were demographics, the use of violence, and the identities of the proprietors themselves.

Demographics

The demographic differences between Virginia and Jamaica greatly impacted how social control was exercised in each region. Population composition advanced the planter's authority

³⁶ Beckford, William. *A descriptive account of the island of Jamaica : with remarks upon the cultivation of the sugar-cane, throughout the different seasons of the year, and chiefly considered in a picturesque point of view : also observations and reflections upon what would probably be the consequences of an abolition of the slave-trade, and of the emancipation of the slaves.* (London: Sabin Americana, 1790) Cengage Learning. College of St. Benedict/St. John's University. 02 October 2015

in each region by defining both how consistently across generations social control could be applied and the size of the white community that enforced it.

Perhaps the most important distinction between Virginia and Jamaica during this period, and one that indirectly touched nearly all other differences, were the contrasting fertility and mortality rates. Jamaica's tropical climate made labor conditions deplorable and fostered disease, particularly yellow fever. One of the assumptions that drove the enslavement of Africans and their transport to the Caribbean was that their upbringing in Africa made them immune to yellow fever. In actuality any immunity they had was localized to the specific region from which they hailed and didn't provide protection against the strains in Jamaica.³⁷ As a result, yellow fever and other tropical diseases like malaria and leprosy killed large numbers of people regardless of their race or social status.

As Englishman Robert Renny sailed into Kingston harbor in 1800, he was greeted by three or four black women who came to sell fruit to the passengers of the ship. As they paddled away, they began to sing as they paddled past the ship. In a call and response format, they sang:

"New-come buckra
 He get sick
 He tak [sic] fever
 He be die
 He be die"³⁸

³⁷ Watts, S. J. *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power, and Imperialism*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 84

³⁸ Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 1.

That these words were sung to the buckra (a pejorative word for white people) on the first day of their arrival by a canoe of black people is significant in a number of ways. First, it served to immediately and unflinchingly remind the passengers on board the ship that they were arriving in a land known as the “white man’s grave”, a place renowned for its high white mortality rate. Among white Jamaicans in the years between 1722 and 1774, there were 18,000 funerals and only 2,669 baptisms.³⁹ That it was sung by people who were likely slaves is also significant as it reminded the white newcomers that, whatever power their race might have entitled them to, they were just as fragile as anyone else to the ravages of disease. As another song popular among Jamaican slaves during the period aptly stated, “Black, white, brown, all de same, all de same.”⁴⁰ Perfectly illustrative of the irrelevance of the influence and power of white proprietors in the face of disease is Matthew Lewis. His grand wealth, status, and writing abilities did nothing to prevent his death of yellow fever on the ocean journey back to England in 1818.

The sometimes grotesque impact of disease on the island can be found in the diary of Matthew Lewis. In one passage he describes the effects of disease on a female slave. Lewis wrote, “He was succeeded by a poor creature named Bessie, who, although still a young woman, is dispensed with from labor, on account of her being afflicted with *cocoa-bay* [leprosy]... It shows itself in large blotches and swellings... which... moulder away the joints and toes and fingers, till they rot and drop off... [she is married to] John Fuller... by whom she had four children (all of whom are dead).”⁴¹ Nor was the loss of children in Bessie’s story entirely

³⁹ Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 2.

⁴⁰ Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 3.

⁴¹ Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 185.

unique in Lewis's journal. In another passage, Lewis described, "a negro woman, who has lost four children... brought the fifth... having caught a cold, and fever, and so on."⁴² One page later Lewis described, "One of his best deposed and most sensible Eboes," whose son, "died of dirt-eating."⁴³ The above quotes illustrate the dual impact of disease in Jamaica, not only did it kill large numbers of adults; it also created a high mortality rate amongst infants and young children. The inability to raise many children into adulthood was a major factor encouraging the continued import of slaves from Africa, and doubtlessly also increased the despair and anger of slaves on the island. A slave without a family or children was significantly less predictable and more dangerous than a slave with a family; as such slaves had far less to lose by rebelling and trying to overthrow the social order.

The fear of constant death in Jamaica was also reinforced by the natural disasters that struck frequently. In 1692, an earthquake struck Port Royal with such force that it literally liquefied the soil upon which the town sat, destroying nearly the entire city and taking scores of lives. Hurricanes also swept through Jamaica regularly and with force, destroying buildings and taking lives every few years.⁴⁴ Although hurricanes and earthquakes did not have as dramatic a demographic impact in Jamaica as disease, they reinforced the lack of control Jamaican overseers had over the world around them, and instilled even greater fear of the potential for unexpected death. This fear played a role in encouraging the brutal violence that characterized

⁴² Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 326.

⁴³ Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 327.

It's difficult to determine what exactly Lewis meant in this passage by "dirt-eating". He did not take the time to elaborate a little more fully what he meant. It could have been that the child was so hungry he was reduced to eating dirt, but were that the case it seems unlikely Lewis would be so straightforward. It is likely that the child was playing and got in to something, or started eating something, that made him sick.

⁴⁴ Leslie, Charles. *A new and exact account of Jamaica ... With a particular account of the sacrifices, libations, etc. at this day, in use among the Negroes. The third edition. To which is added an appendix, containing an account of Admiral Vernon's success at Porto Bello and Chagre* (The British Library, 1740), 136.

Jamaican slavery, as can be seen in Matthew Lewis's diary. Lewis wrote of a slave condemned to death who declared that, "his death should be revenged by a storm, which would lay waste to the whole island... It certainly did happen, strangely enough, that before the year was over the most violent storm took place ever known in Jamaica."⁴⁵ Lewis's use of the words "strangely enough" shows that he does not appear to believe the two were actually related; however, the fact that the slave chose to lay that particular curse illustrates that storms were regular enough and damaging enough to be on the popular conscience, and that they were a power beyond the ability of overseers and proprietors to control. The slave in question was an Obi man, or a practitioner of the religion of Obeah. Obeah was greatly feared and outlawed by white Jamaicans because it was both a non-Christian religion similar to voodoo and a tool of political resistance.⁴⁶ As seen above, Obi men used "magic", generally just poisons and appeals to natural anomalies, to create a sense among other slaves that they could utilize powers greater than those controlled by white people.⁴⁷ While Obeah will be discussed in greater detail later in the paper, its connection to the destabilization and challenge of white power similar to that of disease and hurricanes are worth mentioning here.

Low fertility rates also impacted demography in Jamaica. In part this was due to the diseases previously mentioned, but also it was caused by the nature of labor on the island. The large majority of work done on Jamaican plantations was centered on sugar cultivation. Planting the cane, cutting it down, and initially processing it in large boiling pots of water was hard work in hot weather and required long hours. Slaves often did this work while hungry, as

⁴⁵Earle, William, and Srinivas Aravamudan. *Obi, Or, The History of Three-fingered Jack*. (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2005) 185

⁴⁶ Earle and Aravamudan, *Obi*, 9.

⁴⁷ Earle and Aravamudan, *Obi*, 19.

evidenced by records of punishment against slaves by overseers for eating cane while working.⁴⁸ After many years of that kind of labor, slaves that made it into old age were frequently invalid, crippled by a lifetime of harsh conditions.⁴⁹ It is unsurprising that in such conditions slaves were often either too tired, or biologically unable, to reproduce. To some slaves, practicing contraception or abstaining from sex may have also been a form of protest, a way to limit the profit they brought their cruel owners.⁵⁰

Lewis mentioned the low fertility rates of his slaves in his diary. At one point he noted that, “among upwards of three hundred and thirty negroes... not more than twelve or thirteen births have been added annually to the list of births.”⁵¹ Lewis, who would never admit in a journal he intended to publish that harsh conditions existed on his plantation, instead blamed, “generally unhealthy” conditions all over the island, and in Westmorland particularly, for the low fertility.⁵²

While ill health and harsh working conditions provide convenient reasons for low fertility, it is important not to rob Jamaican slaves wholly of their agency in the process. A fair number of slaves probably did not have children because they did not want to. Such a decision may have been driven by the aforementioned horrendous child mortality rate. Slaves also may have abstained from reproduction as a rejection of their use as tools for profit by their proprietors and a refusal to bring ownership and degradation to a new generation. While it is likely that a combination of disease, hard labor, and the agency of slaves worked together to

⁴⁸ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 323.

⁴⁹ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 27.

⁵⁰ Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 166.

⁵¹ Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 320.

⁵² Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 321.

lower slave fertility, the agency of slaves and their identities as more than just laborers and reproducers is important to bear in mind.

Compared with the constant potential for sudden death in Jamaica, Virginian life in this period was relatively calm. Mortality was lower in Virginia than in Jamaica. The nature of the work and climate in Virginia was milder than in Jamaica, which lent itself to a higher fertility rate.⁵³ Although Virginian slaves undoubtedly faced hard labor, the cultivation of tobacco, corn, wheat, and other crops in weather milder than that of Jamaica led to labor conditions that were less destructive. While Jamaican proprietors gave newly arrived slaves time to acclimate before engaging in the most physically demanding labor, in Virginia this proved unnecessary and slaves began working in the fields as soon as they arrived.⁵⁴ These milder conditions allowed the Virginian slave population during this period experienced a natural increase.

Passages on disease in William Byrd's diary are distinct from those in Lewis's. At one point, Byrd spoke of the outbreak of an unspecified disease on his and neighboring plantations. He, along with a neighbor named Ms. Brun and a number of slaves, suffered from a fever and headaches.⁵⁵ Although Byrd and Ms. Brun recovered, one of Byrd's slaves died. Byrd wrote, "After dinner I was a little out of order but I visited my sick people again, who were better, thank God. I had a negro girl die. God's will be done."⁵⁶ The stark difference between this

⁵³ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 3.

⁵⁴ Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 168.

This practice may also have been affected to some degree by the phenomena, mentioned in a previous footnote, of the intra-continental slave trade between the Caribbean and colonies in North America. A slave accustomed to the harsh conditions of an island like Jamaica would not need time to acclimatize to Virginia. Such an explanation would not, however, make sense for the large numbers of slaves arriving from destinations outside of the Caribbean that would not have been seasoned in such a manner.

⁵⁵ Byrd, *Another Secret Diary*, 5-6.

⁵⁶ Byrd, *Another Secret Diary*, 8.

passage and the earlier Lewis passage on leprosy shows the contrasting impacts of disease in the two regions. Most obviously, the sickness of Byrd and his “negro girl” was far less debilitating than the leprosy that slowly rotted away Bessie’s limbs. Although the leprosy that afflicted Bessie was obviously particularly grisly and was not emblematic of all disease on the island, it still symbolizes the severity of tropical diseases afflicting Jamaicans, as opposed to the relatively less shocking, if still deadly, diseases in Virginia. The fact that Byrd, Ms. Brun, and almost all of Byrd’s slaves survived the outbreak also illustrates the less severe nature of disease in Virginia.

Although disease was not as prominent in Virginia as it was in Jamaica, Byrd still dealt with death and illness on a regular basis. In November of 1740, Byrd noted the death of John Grymes, a well-educated twenty-two year old with whom Byrd was well acquainted.⁵⁷ The same month, Byrd mentions that, “one of my people died in King William.”⁵⁸ In September of 1740 Byrd grew so ill that he subjected himself to bloodletting and did not write any journal entries for a month.⁵⁹

The differentiation between disease in Virginia and Jamaica is not drawn because death and illness were not a part of Virginian life. Mortality played a large role in Virginian daily life. The differences in disease between Jamaica and Virginia lay in the comparative severity and impact of disease on social control. Unlike eighteenth-century Jamaica, eighteenth-century

⁵⁷ Byrd, *Another Secret Diary*, 109.

⁵⁸ Byrd, *Another Secret Diary*, 110.

King William, in this case, refers to a nearby plantation.

⁵⁹ Byrd, *Another Secret Diary*, 104.

Virginia was not considered to be “the white man’s grave.”⁶⁰ While white Virginians continuously perished of diseases during the colonial era, they died far less than white Jamaicans.⁶¹ Disease and death in Virginia had a neutral effect, while it was obviously not good it did not have a tangible negative impact on the exercise of social control. On the other hand, the high mortality of both white and black Jamaicans was recognized by many slaves as a symbol of the frailty of Europeans’ power and the ultimate equality of all people, thus serving as a destabilizing factor.

Another significant result of the differences in fertility and mortality between Virginia and Jamaica were different patterns in the purchase of slaves from Africa. Between the colonization of Jamaica by the British in 1655 and the British abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807, approximately 1,017,000 African slaves were brought to Jamaica. Virginia, on the other hand, only imported 101,000 during the same period. Despite this huge disparity, both colonies had approximately 380,000 slaves in 1807.⁶² This difference is made even more remarkable by the fact that Virginia independently outlawed the slave trade in 1778. Virginian planters simply did not need more slaves.⁶³ In fact, Virginian slave-owners had so many slaves due to natural increase in the early nineteenth century that they began exporting them. Western southern states, recently opened up to cotton cultivation by the invention of the cotton gin and the expulsion of Native Americans from their land, developed a high demand for

⁶⁰ In the early seventeenth century, Virginia certainly was considered to be the “English man’s grave” (recall that the concept of whiteness did not yet exist at that time). The starvation and warfare at Jamestown and in the surrounding areas was brutal, to say the least. During the period examined in this paper, however, things were much less volatile in Virginia.

⁶¹ Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 2.

⁶² Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 24

⁶³ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 25.

slave labor. The natural increase of Virginian slaves was enough not only to make slavery in the state self-sufficient, but also to play a significant role in providing the bonded labor necessary to expand slavery throughout the western south.⁶⁴

The impact of these broader importation trends on individual plantations can be seen in Richard Dunn's *A Tale of Two Plantations*. Dunn looks at records from both the Mount Airy plantation in Virginia and the Mesopotamia plantation in Jamaica from approximately 1750 to 1850. Mesopotamia was a large sugar plantation near Savanna La Mar, on the western side of the island. Its owners were absentee, and there were around two to four hundred slaves. Mount Airy was a tobacco plantation in the Chesapeake region of Virginia. It had slightly fewer slaves than Mesopotamia. The owners of Mount Airy, the Tayloe family, were wealthy and influential Virginians. Mesopotamia and Mount Airy make for good comparison both due to their relative size and the fact that the owners of both meticulously kept inventories of what slaves were owned and how old they were. The two plantations tell different stories.

At Mesopotamia, new slaves were brought in almost yearly to maintain the sizable working population necessary to turn huge profits in sugar production.⁶⁵ Slaves died most frequently as young children, common in any society affected by disease and malnutrition, although many who made it past childhood lived well into their sixties, when their bodies grew too crippled from years of labor to continue working.⁶⁶ New slaves were regularly reported as having teeth that were filed or speaking poor, if any English; both of which are indicators of

⁶⁴ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 25.

⁶⁵ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 4.

⁶⁶ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 27.

African origins.⁶⁷ African slaves were intermingled with Africans of other ethnicities, as mentioned in previous sections, as well as “creole” slaves born in Jamaica. New purchases of African slaves ceased in 1807 with the British abolition of the African slave trade, which led to a corresponding decrease in the slave population on the plantation as well as its profits until the complete abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834.⁶⁸

On the Mount Airy plantation in Virginia, a much different story was told than on the Mesopotamia plantation. While African slaves were purchased for Mount Airy earlier in the eighteenth century, with the abolition of the slave trade in Virginia in 1778 the trickle of Africans stopped.⁶⁹ The end of the trade was irrelevant on Mount Airy, however, as the slave population was growing at a rate great enough that owners began sending excess slaves to a plantation they owned in Alabama in the early nineteenth century. In other words, the landholders became net exporters of slaves.⁷⁰

The difference in slave demography between Mount Airy and Mesopotamia, and Virginia and Jamaica generally, reveals significant differences in the role of social control in the two regions. In Jamaica, the main economic capabilities of the institution are clear. The constant influx of new slaves and mortality of old slaves made exerting a constant and encompassing control difficult. Plantation owners purchased as many slaves as they could to support their goal of maximizing profits, and the end of the slave trade led to the slow demise of the institution of slavery itself. Compounding the lack of continuity created by the need to

⁶⁷ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 458.

⁶⁸ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 5.

⁶⁹ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 50.

⁷⁰ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 25.

constantly import and break-in new slaves was the high mortality of white overseers. Not only did white mortality create a high turnover rate amongst plantation overseers, it also served as a challenge to white authority. Slaves like those that greeted Robert Renny in Kingston in 1800 recognized that white people were just as susceptible to disease and death as they were, and that their similarities in mortality were symbolic of the equality of all humans.

In Virginia, death and disease did not challenge white authority and the high fertility rates facilitated the exercise of social control. Lower mortality among both Europeans and Africans led to a greater continuity of owners able to impose their will. Higher natural increase and lower numbers of slave imports meant that most of the slaves on plantations such as Mount Airy were creoles, raised and socialized in a racially stratified society. Rather than facing the rapid turnover of white overseers and owners who fell ill and died, Virginian slaves were likely to see familiar white faces throughout their lifetimes. Such continuity allowed for stability in relationships and discouraged slaves from seeing whites as vulnerable to the extent that they were in Jamaica. And furthermore, the lower mortality and higher fertility in Virginia meant that many slaves had families, giving them something to lose if a violent rebellion broke out. In Jamaica the concern was getting more slaves, while Virginians were worried about limiting the number to allow whites to maintain control, as evidenced by the abolition of the trade in Virginia in 1778 over fears created by the Revolutionary War. And while the banning of the slave trade in 1807 hugely damaged Jamaican slavery, it was largely irrelevant to contemporary

Virginian slave-owners who were experiencing natural growth in their slave populations and were expanding their operations into new states.⁷¹

Another significant demographic difference between Virginia and Jamaica was the differing proportions of slaves versus white people. In Jamaica during this period, those of European descent were far outnumbered by those of African descent. The difference was so great that in some parishes there were nine slaves for every one white person.⁷² In Virginia during this period, however, the majority of the population was consistently white, although sometimes by a thin margin.⁷³ This was driven in large part by the nature of sugar production as opposed to tobacco and other crops. Sugar was more profitable to grow than tobacco, corn, or wheat and thus owners of sugar plantations had more cash to reinvest in more land and slaves and secure a larger holding. Furthermore, sugar cane requires a minimal level of processing within days of being harvested or it risks rotting. This meant that large boilers had to be built and extra slaves brought in to operate them on every plantation. Sugar was an economy of scale, the bigger the plantations that could be built and the more slaves that could be purchased the more profitable it would be.⁷⁴ A European family of modest means that hoped to own their own farm would be discouraged by these factors, as well as the higher mortality rate and land shortage existent on any island. Thus while there was a huge incentive to bring large numbers of Africans to Jamaica, there was little motivation for white families to come. European immigration to Jamaica tended to instead be composed largely of bachelors in search of fortune. Virginian agriculture was much less slave intensive and easier to turn a profit in as a

⁷¹ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 4.

⁷² Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 137.

⁷³ Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 24.

⁷⁴ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 4.

small landholder with few or no slaves, and was thus more enticing to white immigrants and necessitated the labor of fewer slaves.⁷⁵ Virginia's larger size also created greater opportunity to purchase land cheaply, which was important to Europeans from a land-hungry continent.⁷⁶

The differences in racial make-up between the two regions had a number of significant effects on the relationships between slave-owners and slaves. One impact was on slave and white culture and creolization. As mentioned previously, the languages, music, and celebrations in Jamaica reflected a cultural connection to Africa much less degraded by European influence than that in Virginia. White culture was also impacted, while interaction with other whites was noted almost daily in the diary of William Byrd, Jamaican overseers like Thomas Thistlewood could go months without seeing another white face. Some Jamaican whites were even recorded speaking creole; such was their isolation from other whites and constant interaction with slaves.⁷⁷

Population composition in the two regions also defined the extent to which social control could be enforced. Virginian society was in many ways modeled upon the social structures and norms in England during the seventeenth century. Both the owners of large Virginian plantations and seventeenth century English lords with grand estates had to contend with an agitated lower class with the potential to rebel. In Virginia this lower class consisted of African slaves and European indentured servants. In England, where attempts to enslave vagrants had been met by rebellion, low wages replaced slavery and the lower class consisted

⁷⁵ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 105.

⁷⁶Thomas William Heyck and Meredith Veldman. *The Peoples of the British Isles: A New History*. (Chicago: Lyceum Books, 2002) vol 4, p 208.

⁷⁷ Lalla and D'Costa, *Language in Exile*, 24.

of technically free peasants forced off of their land by enclosure.⁷⁸ Enclosure was a process that took place slowly, most notably over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by which large landowners consolidated their holdings. Land that had previously been inhabited and worked by a smattering of scattered peasants was turned into more centralized and efficient plots by British nobility. Commons formerly open to grazing were fenced off, and the increased efficiency of cultivating single large plots rather than dispersed small ones drastically reduced the need for agricultural labor and led to many peasants being kicked off their land.⁷⁹ Thus in both Virginia and England, wealthy landowners recognized that it was necessary to build some kind of middle-class to work with them to support the status quo in the face of instability. In England land and cash were used to create an economic middle-class with a vested interest in preserving society, and in Virginia racial rhetoric and law allied poor and middle-class whites with slave-owners.⁸⁰ While poor Europeans in Virginia may not have been economically motivated to side with proprietors, the sense of superiority created by the concept of whiteness pushed them to do so. Positive demographic factors and the alliance between poor and wealthy whites in Virginia created a sizable white population to call up as militias in the case of uprising or to capture escaped slaves. As Theodore Allen states, “The hallmark of racial oppression in its colonial origins... is the reduction of the oppressed group to one undifferentiated social status, a status beneath that of any member of any social class within the oppressor group.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 21.

⁷⁹ Heyck and Veldman. *The Peoples of the British Isles*, 74-76.

⁸⁰ Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 17.

⁸¹ Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 177.

The demographic conditions in Jamaica did not allow for elite white control through a pan-white alliance as in Virginia. For the variety of reasons previously mentioned, there simply was not a substantial enough white population for that kind of arrangement. White Jamaicans were forced to be substantially reliant on both mixed-race and free black people serving in militias and in a variety of skilled labor positions to maintain power structures in Jamaican society. The history of Jamaican maroons is emblematic of the limitations of white control on the island and the reliance on those of African descent to keep order. The term “maroon” refers to members of a community of escaped slaves that lived in the mountains of central Jamaica.⁸² In 1740, after numerous failed British military expeditions to eradicate the Maroons, the two sides agreed to the terms of a peace treaty. Included in this treaty was the stipulation that the Maroons would capture and return escaped slaves.⁸³ Thus after coming to terms with the limitations of their ability to project power in Jamaica, British authorities transformed a group that had symbolized resistance to white hegemony on the island into tools of social control. The utilization of those of African descent to act as buffers against the power of slaves in Jamaica created a less stable ideology of control than that seen in Virginia. The clear contradiction between ideologies of white Christian superiority that justified the enslavement and the practical need to use Africans to preserve white control was an unceasing and destabilizing symbol of white hypocrisy and weakness.

The differing demographics of Virginia and Jamaica played a large role in determining the level of social control in each region. Virginia’s natural population increase and large white

⁸² Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 225.

⁸³ Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 226.

population contributed to the consistency and stability of social control. In Jamaica, the constant influx of new African slaves and the scant distribution of white people across the island made the institution far less secure and far more defined by brutality and violence.

Violence

The end result of the population imbalance in Jamaica and relative parity in Virginia were stark differences in the use of violence to maintain social control. In Virginia, violence was used more sparingly than in Jamaica to reinforce, rather than establish, power. In Jamaica, violence was used as a tool of desperation to preserve slavery in the face of its underlying volatility.

The stability brought to Virginia by the alliance of poor whites and plantation owners can be seen in the relatively small number of major outbreaks of violence during the period.⁸⁴ Although slave revolts occurred in Virginia, most notably Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831, they were not nearly as existentially threatening as those in Jamaica. After Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 there were no major uprisings by poor whites.⁸⁵ Records from Mount Airy in Virginia also indicate that runaway slaves were an infrequent occurrence until the Civil War, as opposed to Mesopotamia where they were far more common.⁸⁶ While the number of runaways from Mount Airy is not an accurate representation of the frequency of slave escapes in Virginia as a whole, it nonetheless illuminates on a small scale how having a higher proportion of white settlers facilitated control over slaves.

⁸⁴ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 4.

⁸⁵ Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 308.

⁸⁶ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 337.

It is not a coincidence that Bacon's Rebellion constituted the last major uprising by poor whites against the plantation establishment. One of the defining features of Bacon's Rebellion was that both white and black bonded laborers rose up together against white elites. It was the fear of further interracial uprisings by poor whites and Africans in the aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion that provided the impetus for the passage of legislation that officially and permanently established a racial caste system in Virginia.⁸⁷ The effectiveness of such legislation is evident from the absence of major interracial uprisings after 1676.⁸⁸ Whites who lived in material poverty clung to and defended the socially-constructed elevated status they gained over those of African descent. Much as British authorities in Jamaica converted Maroons from violent usurpers into allies, Virginian elites turned rebellious poor whites into a force for the maintenance of racial inequality. In a letter to a man named Lord Egmont, Byrd acknowledged how important status over Africans was to European Virginians by saying that slavery, "ruin[s] the industry of our white people, who seing [sic] a rank of poor creatures below them, detest work for fear it shoud [sic] make them look like slaves."⁸⁹ Thus the fear of losing their gained status over other lower-class Virginians impacted, at least in Byrd's eyes, the labor poor European Virginians were willing to perform.

Byrd's diary provides an example of how Virginian slaveholders maintained control on the individual level. One day's entry reads, "I rose about 5, read Hebrew and Greek. I prayed

⁸⁷ Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 218.

⁸⁸ Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, 308.

⁸⁹ Byrd, William. "Colonel William Byrd on Slavery and Indented Servants" in *The American Historical Review* vol. 1, no. 1 (Oct. 1895) Accessed April 24, 2016 on JSTOR, 89.

and had tea. I danced. The weather was very cool and clear, the wind north. I beat my man Hampton for lying and other transgressions. I read Latin and wrote letters until dinner when I ate minced veal.”⁹⁰ Immediately evident in Byrd’s account is his casualness in addressing the beating. His tone and the almost off-hand way he referenced using violence against Hampton implies a lack of concern or fear. Although it may be argued that his casualness suggests that such beating was a regular occurrence, this is one of very few references to beating slaves in Byrd’s 1741 diary.⁹¹ Byrd was not, or at least did not perceive himself to be, a man cornered and afraid in a society he had no control over. Instead, this section reads as paternalistic, more an exercise in reminding Hampton of his dominance rather than asserting his control. Hampton’s “transgressions” like lying, while still acts of subtle rebellion, are hardly as severe as the poisonings that defined Jamaican slave society. Furthermore, instances of Byrd beating his slaves are relatively rare compared to the diaries of Jamaican overseers like Thomas Thistlewood. Thus while violence was a part of Virginian slave society, its application was not emblematic of a lack of other effective means of control. As Byrd himself wrote in a letter after admitting he used violence against his slaves, “We have, however, nothing like the inhumanity here that is practiced in the Islands, and God forbid we ever should.”⁹²

⁹⁰ Byrd, *Another Secret Diary*, 10.

⁹¹ As mentioned in the initial section on Byrd and Lewis’s diaries, Byrd’s diaries from earlier in his life record far more instances of violent punishments and beatings. It could be argued that the lack of references to beatings in his 1741 diary is simply a result of Byrd’s age, and that a younger slave-owner would beat his slaves far more often. But when Byrd records conversations with his overseers, he generally says that they report no issues with slaves or beatings. This means that both Byrd’s youth and the more unsettled and unstable nature of Virginia earlier in the eighteenth century contributed to the higher frequency of beatings in his previous diaries. Since this paper focuses on the mid-eighteenth century through the early nineteenth century, Byrd’s actions earlier in his life are not relevant enough to destabilize the main argument of this section.

⁹² Byrd, “Colonel William Byrd on Slavery and Indented Servants”, 89.

Jamaican overseers and proprietors were far more reliant on violence than those in Virginia. Many large plantation owners, men such as Matthew Lewis, were absentee. They lived in England, managed their account books, and received income from their plantations, but such was the limit of their involvement. They left the daily running of the plantations to white overseers in Jamaica.⁹³ The men who moved to Jamaica to oversee plantations were generally single, young, sexually and physically aggressive, men like Thomas Thistlewood. They came to Jamaica to make money, not to build a utopia. The high mortality rate and lack of whites to fill overseer positions created opportunities for employment and social mobility that far exceeded those available in England or elsewhere in the Americas.⁹⁴ The demand for white men was so great that even overseers who were known drunks and fired for incompetence were continuously rehired by plantation owners with few options.⁹⁵ For these reasons, Jamaica was commonly referred to as the, “best poor man’s country in the world.”⁹⁶

The previously mentioned racial imbalance in Jamaica frequently left overseers isolated, without direct oversight or reliable assistance in case of emergency. In a country with few European women, rape and consensual sex between European men and African women was commonplace despite the fact that the intellectual justification for the the island’s societal structure was, at least notionally, the inherent incompatibility of the white and black races. The journal of Thomas Thistlewood, a Jamaican proprietor and slave-owner, provides insight into the life of a sexually active man in Jamaica. Over the course of his approximately thirty years on

⁹³ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 44.

⁹⁴ Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 23.

⁹⁵ Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 165

⁹⁶ Brown, *Reaper’s Garden*, 24.

the island, Thistlewood had hundreds of sexual encounters with hundreds of slaves.⁹⁷ Many of the slaves he raped and had sex with only encountered him once, some were more frequent partners, and one, named Phibbah, was a long-term lover.

It is important to mention that sexual violence was not a uniquely Jamaican issue. Byrd, like Thistlewood, raped his slaves. On one day he says that he, “played the fool with Marjorie, God forgive me,” a different day he reports, “commit[ting] folly with F-r-by,” and yet another day he, “played the fool with Sally.”⁹⁸ The diaries of Byrd as a younger man show that this kind of behavior was more frequent in his youth, however the number of slaves Byrd raped was significantly smaller than that of Thistlewood.⁹⁹ Although Byrd and Thistlewood were similar in their seemingly insatiable appetite for sexual assault, Byrd’s choice to rape and beat slaves was made for different reasons than Thistlewood. Unlike Thistlewood, Byrd had a European wife and numerous other European women in the neighborhood to have sex with, consensually or not. Indeed, he frequently recorded encounters with poor European women in his earlier diaries. Thus he possessed, and exercised, the ability to be sexually active without blatantly violating the laws of Virginia and the ideological underpinnings of racial slavery. Byrd’s choice to ignore what was at least publicly considered acceptable behavior (even if sex between proprietors and slaves was privately common) thus constituted a conscious decision on his part. Thistlewood’s only option for sex was women of African descent, unless he intended to be celibate for thirty years. Given Thistlewood’s view of his slaves as his chattel and his penchant for brutality, he unsurprisingly tended to choose sexual assault as the means to gratify his sexual appetite. Thus

⁹⁷ Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 158.

⁹⁸ Byrd, *Another Secret Diary*, 31, 166, 172.

⁹⁹ Lockridge, *The Diary and Life of William Byrd II of Virginia*, 33.

Byrd's sexual violence was mostly an exercise in demonstrating his power over slaves and women of lower social status. His position at the top of the social hierarchy made it possible for him to rape, and so he did so to remind those around him that he was in charge. Certainly Thistlewood was motivated at least in part by the same factors, but his sexual violence was also driven by his isolation, desperation, and callousness.

Sexual violence was only one of the brutal tactics used to maintain control in Jamaica. Thistlewood's diary reveals near constant violence unleashed on his slaves, including having one defecate into the mouth of another.¹⁰⁰ These acts were the result of a deep-seated, and justified, fear of uprising and murder. In 1760, Tacky's Revolt rocked the island. Corromanttee slaves rose up against white overseers in an attempt to supplant the Europeans as the plantation proprietors. Many of the Corromanttee leaders of Tacky's Revolt were practitioners of Obeah, who were purported to believe that their magic made them immune to bullets.¹⁰¹ Over sixty Englishmen died, and it was only with the help of the Maroons, free blacks, and loyal slaves that the rebellion was suppressed.¹⁰² Thus not only was slavery not an effective method of social control on the island, it required the assistance of Africans to remain intact. The impact of Tacky's Revolt on the psyches of men such as Thistlewood was significant, they were made well aware of the fact that they could be overpowered and brutally killed by the black people that surrounded them at any time. The only way to maintain the control necessary to stay alive was, in the eyes of men such as Thistlewood, through the application of lead and the lash. The rebellions also served to reinforce fear of Obeah on Jamaica. Just as the Obi men's use of

¹⁰⁰ Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 104.

¹⁰¹ Earle and Aravamudan, *Obi*, 18.

¹⁰² Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*, 171-173.

poison and appeals to disease and natural disaster emphasized the limitations of white power, their insistence that Obeah would protect rebelling slaves from bullets undermined the fear of white guns and military capabilities that kept the peace on the island.

One of Lewis's most interesting passages on violence in Jamaican society involved the story of Dunbar. Lewis records that he, "happened to ask this morning, to whom a skull belonged, which I had observed fixed on a pole by the roadside, when returning back from Montego Bay."¹⁰³ The dismemberment and display of rebellious slaves was common in Jamaica, and acted as a way to discourage martyrdom.¹⁰⁴ Many slaves believed that they would return to Africa upon death, which was a frightening belief in the eyes of proprietors and overseers as it undermined their use of violent death as a means to inspire fear.¹⁰⁵ Since most slaves also believed that they would only return to Africa when they died if their bodies were intact, the dismemberment of rebellious slaves served as a tool of spiritual terrorism, an attempt by white Jamaicans to imply that their control over slaves extended into the afterlife.¹⁰⁶ The slave whose head had been put on a stake had attacked and killed his owner, a man named Mr. Dunbar, over, "discontent, in the article of clothing them."¹⁰⁷ He was ambushed while riding in his horse carriage on the way to a different plantation for dinner, and was beaten to death with clubs. Interestingly, Lewis reports that the slaves took one of Dunbar's ears out of, "a negro belief that, as long as the murderer had one of the ears of his victim, he will never be haunted by his

¹⁰³ Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 181.

¹⁰⁴ The practice of public dismemberment was not limited only to Jamaica during this period. It was also practiced in other parts of the Caribbean, as well as in Europe. However, none of the Virginian sources examined in this paper indicate that it was a common practice in Virginia, and at a minimum it was certainly not as indelible a piece of daily life as it was in Jamaica.

¹⁰⁵ Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 132.

¹⁰⁶ Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 131.

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 181.

spectre.”¹⁰⁸Just as European proprietors practiced mutilation on the bodies of their victims in the name of superstition, so too did Africans.

While the story of the murder of Mr. Dunbar alone provides insight into the instability and violence that defined race relations in colonial Jamaican society, it is its apparent impact on other slaves that is perhaps most fascinating. Lewis reports that,

“The overseer on a neighboring plantation had occasion to find fault with... a woman belonging to a gang hired to perform some particular work; upon which she flew into him with the greatest fury, grasped him by his throat, cried to her fellows, ‘Come here! Come here! Let us Dunbar him!’ And through her strength and the suddenness of her attack had nearly accomplished her purpose, before his own slaves could come to his assistance. This woman was also executed.”¹⁰⁹

Just as Obi men often won admiration from fellow slaves for their willingness to challenge white authority, the audacity and violence of Dunbar’s killers served as an inspiration for others seeking justice in an unfair and brutal society. That the murder of one slave-owner could serve as the inspiration for more violent acts against whites is revealing of the constant potential for the disintegration of Jamaican slave society. Furthermore, the decision of other slaves to save the overseer further illuminates that white Jamaicans were reliant on the support of those of African descent to maintain control in Jamaica.

Other quotes from Matthew Lewis’s diary also illustrate the use of violence in Jamaican society. One is found in Lewis’s description of the imprisonment of slaves on a neighboring plantation. Lewis wrote, “A neighboring gentleman, I hear, now has three negroes in prison, all domestics, and one of them grown grey in his service, for poisoning him with corrosive

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 182.

¹⁰⁹ Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 183.

sublimate, his brother was actually killed by similar means."¹¹⁰ Unlike the picture of control that Byrd painted in his description of beating Hampton, the poisoning of white Jamaicans shows their lack of control. The threat of being killed, by poison or other means, by slaves who far outnumbered overseers was real and inspired the kind of brutal violence men like Thistlewood unleashed. This fear is why practitioners of Obeah used poisoning to great effect in colonial Jamaica, preferring the mystery and suddenness of poison over more blunt violence like that used against Mr. Dunbar.

Another interesting passage on violence from Lewis's journal focuses on the complaints of slaves from a neighboring plantation. Lewis explained, "A large body of negroes from a neighboring estate came over to Cornwall this morning, to complain of hard treatment in various ways from their overseers and drivers, and requested me to represent their injuries to their trustee here, and their proprietor in England. The charges were so strong that I am certain they must be fictitious."¹¹¹ One challenging aspect of this quotation is that Lewis did not specify what kinds of "hard treatment" these slaves complained of; making it difficult to know for certain that the complaints given were legitimate. However, other primary sources, such as Thistlewood's diary, make clear that punishments and general treatment on Jamaican sugar plantations were frequently brutal, making it likely that the slaves had legitimate charges. The fact that the slaves appealed to Lewis shows how absenteeism affected violence in Jamaica. Not only did the isolation encourage the violence of overseers by seeding fear, it also made overseers far less accountable to proprietors overseas. The lack of accountability and control

¹¹⁰ Earle, *Obj*, 187.

¹¹¹ Earle, *Obj*, 184.

proprietors could exercise is another example of their limited ability to exert social control in Jamaican slavery. Lewis's disbelief of the slaves also exemplifies another important point: he was a foreigner on his own plantation. He had spent his entire life in England, and as such had limited understanding of day-to-day operations and acceptable practices in Jamaica. Lewis's outsider status, and its effect on social control, will be examined more deeply in the next section.

The variance between violence in Virginia and Jamaica reveals how the function of social control differed in the two regions. As William Byrd illustrates, violence in Virginia was largely a paternal exercise, not strictly necessary to maintain the authority of planters. The greatest existential threat to Virginian slave society, an alliance between poor whites and slaves, was effectively quashed in the aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion. The extremely unbalanced demographics in Jamaica created an entirely different dynamic. Matthew Lewis's diary demonstrates that the brutal violence that defined Jamaican slavery was a necessity to ensure discipline and order in a volatile world.

White Identity

Also critical to the exercise of social control in the two regions were the identities and involvement of plantation owners. As previously mentioned, Virginian proprietors generally grew up and lived on their plantations, whereas Jamaican proprietors tended to be absentee. Virginian planters thus had a stronger connection to slave-holding; it was a much larger part of their identity than Jamaican planters. How connected proprietors were to their plantations had significant bearing on the level of social control they exerted on them, as planters who were

disinterested or disconnected would obviously have much less impetus and ability to exercise authority in the region.

William Byrd's connection to white Virginian society and comfort with his identity as a slave-owner was significant in terms of his ability to maintain social control. A fairly typical passage from William Byrd's diary read:

"I rose about five, read Hebrew and Greek. I prayed and had coffee. I danced. The weather continued cold and clear, the wind north. I wrote letters and went not to church but the children went. About 12 came Captain Wilson and gave me bills of lading but would not stay to dinner but Mr. Wendey and John Ravenscroft came and I ate roast chicken. We walked in the evening when the company went away. I talked with my people, had raspberries and milk. A beef came down. I talked with my people and prayed."¹¹²

This dull, representative passage is revealing. For one, his life seemed to be fairly relaxed. Although he did have to deal with business, as seen in his interactions with Captain Wilson, it seems to be a small part of his day. He took time almost every day to read scripture (Hebrew and Greek), exercise (dance), go for walks, and socialize. These are not the daily activities of a man who feels as though he lives under the constant threat of slave rebellion, or who needs to spend the majority of his time intensively maintaining control of his plantation. Instead, he was a comfortable patriarch living in a mostly stable society.

This passage also illustrates Byrd's integration into slave society. He casually referred to his bonded servants as "my people". As will be demonstrated later, his comfort with his position of power over his slaves was in sharp juxtaposition to the attitudes of men like Lewis and William Beckford. Furthermore, as seen in this diary entry, Byrd regularly socialized with

¹¹² Byrd, *Another Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover*, 72.

other white people. Not only was he himself a comfortable member of a stable slave society, he was surrounded and interconnected with other white men in the same position. Owning and running a plantation was more than just his source of income, it was the Virginian way of life.

Byrd worked throughout his diary to paint himself as a benevolent patriarch. His attitude towards his slaves was condescending and superior, he viewed them as childlike and himself as fatherly. One of the most difficult aspects of interpreting Byrd is deciding whether his self-portrayal was an accurate representation of himself or a fantasy. It is entirely possible that Byrd's slaves and fellow proprietors viewed him with contempt or as incompetent, and had that been the case Byrd certainly would have never recorded it. Even so, the fact that Byrd was clearly at ease in Virginian slave society, and that he was comfortable fulfilling the role of slave-owner, is deeply revealing of the stability of the region and time period.

William Byrd's diary exemplifies why Virginian slavery proved to be so difficult to eradicate. To Virginians atop of the social order, slavery was an indelible piece of their daily life. Even whites who didn't own slaves were deeply tied into the institution through the post-Bacon's Rebellion legislation that divided them from slaves. Slavery and its accompanying racial separation was not economic to them, it was a social institution that gave them status over non-white Virginians. If white Virginians lost slavery, they would lose what little social and cultural status they enjoyed. Slavery served as a tool of social control for men like William Byrd because it was the basis of social identity, and without it Virginian society would be far less ordered.

When comparing Lewis and Byrd's attitudes towards slaves, it is important to remember the context in which each proprietor wrote. Byrd was writing his diary as a personal endeavor during an era and in a region where slavery was not controversial. Lewis, however, was writing his journal for publication during a time when slavery was a hot issue. In the first two decades of the nineteenth century in Britain, when Lewis was writing, the tide of public opinion was turning against slavery in the Caribbean. It is likely that Lewis was sensitive to the changing discourse and crafted his portrayal to make himself look more empathetic and his book more profitable.

Lewis's ability to identify as a slave-owner differed greatly from that of William Byrd. One of the things that most marked Lewis as different from Byrd was his foreignness on his own plantation. Before he sailed out to visit, Lewis had not ever been to Jamaica. He had spent his life writing fairly successful novels in Britain and receiving yearly checks from his holding across the Atlantic. When he first arrived on his plantation, it created a spectacle. One of his slaves told him, "[It's been] so long since none come see we Massa; good massa, come at last."¹¹³ Many older slaves had not seen their owners before at all, and Lewis noted that they told him, "now that they had lived once to see massa, they were ready for dying tomorrow."¹¹⁴ While the enthusiasm of the slaves at the arrival of Lewis was likely forced to some degree, the above quotes still illustrate how separate many Jamaican plantation owners were from their holdings. A slave even later confided in Lewis that she had, "always thought she had no massa."¹¹⁵ According to Lewis, if one slave leveled an accusation against another slave that they didn't

¹¹³ Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 61.

¹¹⁴ Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 62.

¹¹⁵ Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 68.

have an owner it was considered a grave insult. The existence of such an insult does not necessarily point to disdain for free blacks amongst slaves, but rather shows that in a social rung with few privileges, having an involved owner was considered a positive trait. It also shows that absenteeism among planters was widespread, as this language was used amongst slaves on different plantations.

The foreignness of Lewis on his own plantation can also be seen in his general discomfort with the idea of owning slaves. Whereas Byrd was raised in the violence and exploitation of slavery, Lewis grew up as a gentleman in England. Although familiar with social hierarchy, he was clearly not familiar or comfortable with the concept of owning another person, nor with the deprivation it brought. Lewis's interaction with a slave while staying in a hotel in Savanna La Mar was particularly revealing of that dynamic.

“Soon after reaching my lodging at Savanna La Mar, a remarkably clean looking Negro lad presented himself with some water and a towel: I concluded him to belong to the inn; and upon returning the towel, as he found I took no notice of him, he at length ventured to introduce himself by saying, ‘Massa not know me, me yo slave!’ - and really the sound made me feel a pang at the heart. The lad appeared all gaiety and good humor, and his whole countenance expressed anxiety to recommend himself to my notice; but the word ‘slave’ seemed to imply that, although he did feel pleasure in serving me, if he had detested me he must have served me still. I really felt quite humiliated at the moment and was tempted to tell him, ‘Do not say that again, say you are my negro, but not my slave.’”¹¹⁶

Another important aspect of this quote, and Lewis's journal as a whole, was his patriarchal portrayal of himself. While Lewis did not want the man who gave him a towel in Savanna-la-Mar to refer to himself as “my slave”, he still wanted him to maintain the possessive pronoun and call himself “my Negro”. Lewis's self-representation may have been as a man who

¹¹⁶ Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor*, 62-63.

is uncomfortable to some degree with slavery, but it was not as a person without any airs of superiority. Throughout the journal Lewis seemed to think of himself as an enlightened outsider, a man who recognized the ills of slavery but had the intellect to improve the institution. While this characterization was more endearing than that of a bumbling foreigner, it nonetheless revealed an underlying disconnect from Jamaican society and the forces that held it together.

Lewis was not alone in his uneasiness with slavery. William Beckford (?-1799) was a Jamaican plantation owner who spent nearly thirteen years personally overseeing his Jamaican plantation. Beckford wrote an entire book on the injustices of slavery in Jamaica that was published in 1790, before the tide of public opinion had completely turned. In his book, *Remarks Upon the Situation of Negroes in Jamaica, Impartially Made From a Local Experience of Nearly Thirteen Years on that Island*, Beckford decried the brutality of the middle passage, the destruction of families, poor care of the sick and old, and the excessive violence enslavers used to punish enslaved people. He wrote, "Political and national advantage will be the consequence of a system directed to the alleviation of their general suffering," and, "I am sorry to say, when treating of the fatal complaints of the negroes, that humanity is sometimes totally forgotten."¹¹⁷ Although there were certainly absentee plantation owners, including Beckford's uncle (also named William Beckford), who had no such qualms with owning people, the writings of men like Lewis and Beckford were still significant. They symbolized the

¹¹⁷ Beckford, William. *Remarks Upon the Situation of Negroes in Jamaica, Impartially Made From a Local Experience of Nearly Thirteen Years on that Island* (Whitehall: T. and J. Egerton, Military Library, 1788), 3, 16.

disconnect between absentee owners in Britain and the slave society in Jamaica that they sat at the head of.

The differences between Byrd and Lewis illustrate the larger differences between the regions in which they lived. One of the clearest examples of this is the language they used to describe their slaves. Byrd referred to his slaves as, “my people” in almost all of his diary entries. Although his use of the word “people” rather than a more pejorative term may seem to be a symbol of his compassion, it was instead a statement of power, patriarchy, and a perception of self-importance. Byrd was a man who read the Old and New Testaments daily, referring to his slaves in the same way that Moses referred to the Israelites was unlikely to be a coincidence. Just as Moses’s rule over the Jews was divinely sanctioned and inextricably linked to his image, so too was Byrd’s perception of his own place in society. Owning slaves was more than employment to William Byrd, it was his identity. His daily visitations of slaves, his personal beatings and raping of slaves, and his frequent socializing with other slave-owners show just how intertwined his life was to the ownership of people. Matthew Lewis’s uneasiness in thinking of the black people on his plantation as his “slaves” showed nearly the exact opposite. He identified himself as a writer and gentleman, not a slave-owner. His social prestige was tied to his wealth and status in Britain, not to his power over plantation workers. Even though Lewis still maintained a patriarchal attitude towards his slaves, he was more of an estranged father figure than an imbedded Jamaican leader. The connection of Byrd to his plantation meant that he was better able and more motivated to exert social control than a Jamaican absentee planter like Lewis, who would have been content to allow his overseers run things as they saw fit and keep the books balanced in England.

Legacy:

The different factors that affected the identities of Byrd and Lewis played significant roles in determining the fate of Jamaica and Virginia. Jamaica's high death rate and low proportion of white residents created a society where fear drove overseers to use brutal violence to hang on to power. Although Jamaican overseers and proprietors, tied into an export economy, faced the same kinds of British trade restrictions as mainland colonists, the lack of social stability on the island made challenging British authority impossible. After the British navy had proven instrumental in putting down Tacky's Rebellion in 1760, the fear of what might happen to Jamaica if isolated discouraged revolution.¹¹⁸ Simply put, Jamaican leaders were too heavily reliant on the British Navy and Army to maintain control over their slaves to even dream of political independence. Furthermore, many of the owners of the largest plantations in Jamaica lived in Britain, further derailing opportunities for disobedience. These factors were among those that kept Jamaica from achieving political independence until 1962.

Conditions in Virginia were, obviously, far more conducive to rebellion against the British Empire. Slave-owners in Virginia had the power and stability necessary to act upon their perceived injustices of the British trade system. Although violence was a major part of Virginian slavery, the alliance between the relatively large population of poor and rich whites meant that it was utilized far less to maintain stability.¹¹⁹ Virginian patriarchs had enough control over their world that they were confident they could survive without British oversight. Some historians argue that the Virginian abolition of the importation of slaves in 1778 reveals an underlying fear

¹¹⁸ Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 4.

¹¹⁹ Parent, *Foul Means*, 46.

that slaves would rebel during the Revolutionary War, which may be true. Even if Virginian slave-owners were comfortable with their hold on society, having a hostile army moving through the region and sending a large number of white men to fight elsewhere could have been enough to undermine their control. But the fear of uprising was not enough to prevent slave-owners like George Washington from rebelling and achieving full political independence from Britain in 1783, fully one-hundred and seventy-nine years before Jamaica.¹²⁰

How men like Byrd and Lewis saw themselves also played a role in how slavery ended in Virginia and Jamaica. Byrd and other influential Virginians identified strongly with their ownership of people, and poor whites clung to the socially-constructed privilege of whiteness in a society that gave them few other privileges. These factors lent Virginian slavery a level of institutional momentum that kept it from being abolished without bloodshed. The fertility of Virginian slaves, and the internal US slave trade it created, ensured that the social nature of slavery spread throughout the western South as well.¹²¹ When the Civil War came, wealthy Virginian patriarchs were able to rely on masses of poor whites who didn't own slaves to fight alongside them, whites who had been allies since the legal subjugation of Africans in 1670s. Slavery in the United States was so deeply entrenched that it required a bloody war to dislodge it.

As Lewis's diary and Beckford's book illustrate, many of the plantation owners in Jamaica did not necessarily view slavery to be as significant a piece of their identity as did the Virginian proprietors. While many absentee Jamaican plantation owners were economically deeply

¹²⁰ Blackburn, Robin. *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery: 1776 - 1848*. (London: Verso, 2000), 115.

¹²¹Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 323..

invested in slavery, it was not a piece of who they were. Thus with profits declining due to the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, and the outbreak of another violent slave uprising known as the Baptist War in 1831, British Parliament outlawed slavery in 1833. The economic interests and political influence of Jamaican proprietors can be seen in the massive reparations The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 paid out to slave-owners for each slave freed.¹²² When talk of abolition came to the US, Virginian slave-owners spilled blood to defend what they saw as the destruction of their way of life. Jamaican slave-owners only asked that the government cut them a check.

The differences between Virginian and Jamaican slavery have had significant impacts on the historical outcomes in each region. The social order slavery brought Virginia, and the close relationship it had with the most influential Virginians, played a role in the political independence of the entire United States.¹²³ It was also the primary cause of one of the bloodiest wars in American history. In Jamaica, the social instability slavery brought delayed independence from colonial rule until 1962. The influence and monetary interests of slave-owners made it so that the only reparations paid at the time of abolition were to those that had perpetrated human suffering, ensuring the continued poverty and suffering of the descendants of Africans kidnapped from their homes and forced into a system that dehumanized them.

Conclusion

At the heart of both Virginian and Jamaican society from 1740 through 1820 was the struggle for plantation patriarchs to exercise stable control over their labor force and maintain

¹²² Dunn, *A Tale of Two Plantations*, 333, 337, 353.

¹²³ Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, 111.

the profitability of their agriculture. In Jamaica, the labor pool was largely made up of those kidnapped from their West African homes and forcefully relocated to Jamaica as slaves. In Virginia, the situation was more complex as the laboring class consisted of both African slaves and poor Europeans, some of whom were also bonded labor. While in both societies ideologies of racial superiority and inferiority at least nominally justified the inequality of slavery, they had deeply differing impacts.

In Jamaica, a small elite class of Europeans waged a constant war to maintain control over the African majority on the island. Violence and intimidation were daily necessities in a region constantly on the brink of social disintegration. Ideas of white racial superiority, while needed to fuel the trans-Atlantic slave trade, were ignored when convenient to allow maroons, free blacks, and mixed-race persons to participate in the apparatus of social control that maintained the island's status quo. While racial slavery made Jamaican sugar production extraordinarily profitable, it also created an island defined by violence and instability.

In Virginia, racial slavery played a much different role. The significant proportion of the laboring class made up of those of European descent provided elites with an opportunity. Racial social constructions were used to provide poor whites with a level of imaginary status that allied them, against their best interest, with landed Virginian patriarchs against black slaves. Whereas in Jamaica the laboring class was effectively composed of a unified block of slaves, Virginian landed elites were able to divide and conquer their lower-class through racial ideology. Virginian slave society from 1740 through 1820 was thus racked by significantly less violence and instability than Jamaica.

Slavery in the Western Hemisphere was far from uniform. Although experiences like the Middle Passage and the disorientation of forcible cultural relocation were shared by African slaves from Brazil to the Chesapeake, the functioning of slavery and its legacy varied sharply across regions. The differing geographic, demographic, and social conditions in regions that practiced slavery meant that slavery was used for different purposes and maintained through different means in different places. The experiences of men like William Byrd and Matthew Lewis in Virginia and Jamaica in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries illustrate this concept. In one place, slavery created social stability and consolidated power in the patriarchs who embedded themselves in it. In the other, violence, death, and instability were the hallmarks of a system whose proprietors were mainly interested in lining their own pockets. The indelible impact of these differences can be seen in the politics, economics, and culture of each region to this day.

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