

The Caribbean Slave Women
Resistance as a Form of Preservation:
Taking a closer look at pain and how it applies to history and the
preservation of self

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Abstract

The woman I am today, can only be attributed to the women they were. Who are these women I speak of; Caribbean Slave women. They survived the middle passage, told stories of the past and passed on traditions for the future. They were forced to work relentlessly in the hot Caribbean sun and provide their capturers with the means to obtain their lavish wealth. Despite of their inhuman treatment they kept all their hopes and dreams in the pit of their stomachs, envisioning the day when they or their decedents would be free; they are my ancestors.

Historically the Caribbean slave women have been viewed as victims however; she represents something more phenomenal; she embodies resiliency, resistance, agency and perseverance. By deconstructing the experiences of the Caribbean slave women I will acknowledge her strength and perseverance to survive whilst enduring unspeakable violence, hate and oppression that have produced pain.

This paper will focus on the Caribbean slave women and her various forms of resistance. My focus will be guided by three themes: sexual exploitation, spirituality and revolution.

Key Words: Caribbean, slave, sexual exploitation, spirituality, revolution, pain, resistance, survival.

“Old pirates, yes, they rob I;
Sold I to the merchant ships,
Minutes after they took I
From the bottomless pit.
But my hand was made strong
By the hand of the Almighty.
We forward in this generation
triumphantly.

Bob Marley, Redemption Song, 1980¹

1. Introduction

This song encapsulates resistance as a form of perseverance and speaks to the experiences of the Caribbean slave women's capture, suffering, pain and triumph. Bob Marley describes her enslavement, the middle passage and the strength and perseverance given by a higher being to move forward and survive. The Caribbean slave women's stories are not unlike my great, great, great grandmother who was enslaved and survived the middle passage, and arrived on the island of St. Vincent in the early 1800's. She died in 1812, when the La Soufrière volcano erupted, killing her while her 10 day old baby (my great great grandmother) suckled on her breast. The importance of this story and how it relates to resistance is how she saw the need to preserve her 10 day old baby's life even to her death. Moreover, my lineage was able to go on and as a result I am here to tell my story today.

The Caribbean slave women have historically been exploited on multiple levels; she shared a commonality with other Black women in the Diaspora who were subjected to white patriarchy. For many people when they think of a slave, they perceive someone who has relinquished their entire agency into the control of their capturers. This was not the case for the Caribbean slave women, despite being exploited economically, sexually and even forced to disregard their indigenous spirituality they still prevailed.

This paper focuses on one of the Black Canadian Feminist Thought Principles, "Resistance". I will discuss the Caribbean slave women and the use of "Resistance" as a form of preservation of self, spirit and community. I will use three themes to discuss how they resisted, sexual exploitation, spirituality and revolution. In doing so, I demonstrate the importance of resistance as a form of preservation from both a historical and present day perspective. I will begin my discussion by looking at sexual exploitation and how it was one of the most frequent abuses and indignities that she was forced to contend with and resist, even to her death.

2. Resistance to Sexual Exploitation

Signs of resistance were evident as early as the middle passage. The refusal to perform sexual acts led to the Caribbean slave women receiving harsher workloads, flogging, rape and even death². Bush describes a case in Jamaica where a small plantation owner made sexual advances to a slave that was his father's natural child. The slave refused, which led to her being placed in the stocks, a mechanism used to confine one's feet. Her continuous refusal resulted in a brutal flogging. Once released, she stated her case to the magistrate, hereby her case was dismissed and her half brother was left unpunished. The information regarding the case was removed from the minutes of the Jamaican Assembly. President Chief Justice of the Royal Court of St. Lucia, John Jeremie stated that the possible rationale for the removal of the case could be that it "reflected upon the morals of white

society and had to be expunged for propriety sake”³. This case was indicative of how incest and bigotry of white planters was tolerated under the law and reflected societal views. The Caribbean slave women were eroticized and often viewed as the 'Forbidden Fruit', according to hook (1992), "what is clear now is that the West's fascination with the primitive has to do with its own crises in identity, with its own need to clearly demarcate subject and object even while flirting with other ways of experiencing the universe"⁴. Upon her arrival to the New World, the Caribbean slave women resistance became a necessity to preserve one's self from sexual exploitation. As a result, upon her arrival to the *New World*, the Caribbean slave women's resistance became a necessity to ward off sexual advances by her slave master.

3. Spirituality

The Caribbean enslaved Africans were forced to renounce all indigenous practices and beliefs. African spirituality was viewed as an evil pagan practice. The perception was that slaves required guidance in all aspects of their lives; in particular, their salvation became a major focus for their oppressors. Mazama 2002, validates this point stating,

Christian missionaries were among the first and largest plantation owners...[christian] missionaries undertook to exorcise African gods and their rites associated with them from African culture. This again is quite consistent with Christian arrogance, which cannot entertain, even for a second, the idea that the gods of African pantheons and African spiritual beliefs and practices meet our needs.⁵

Despite the Europeans attempt to perform spiritual 'purification', the Europeans did not prevent the slaves from practicing their African spirituality, but forced them to create one of their strongest forms of resistance. Slaves practiced some of their traditions and beliefs by finding innovative ways to disguise their African spiritual practices within Christian practices by creolizing the forced religion of Christianity into their own African spirituality. For example, in Caribbean islands colonized by the French and Spanish, Roman Catholicism was widely practiced, slaves used Catholic saints as a mask to represent and worship African gods, goddesses and deities. The religion which emerged from the marriage between African spirituality and Christianity in these regions of the Caribbean took on the name of *Santeria* (Spanish) and *Voodoo* (French). On islands colonized by Britain which were predominantly protestant, *Obeah*, became the descriptive word to define the practice of African spirituality. In other parts of the black Diaspora, such as Brazil, which was also Roman Catholic but colonized by the Portuguese, the religious practice of *Condomble* emerged. All these forms

of religion still exist even today and possess an intertwined relationship between African spirituality and Christianity.

Consequently, the use of African spirituality was not exterminated, but rather hidden through creolization which was necessary for its survival. According to Lorde (1994), Black women “[became] familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection “while hiding a self-defined standpoint from the prying eyes of dominant groups”⁶. It was an extremely important role to hold the knowledge of indigenous spirituality and practices in Caribbean slave society. Caribbean slave women played a significant role in instructing African spirituality, as practitioners by creating resistance throughout slavery. The majority of African spirituality practitioners were usually older women within the slave population. These women possessed extensive knowledge of African spiritual and indigenous practices. They were often viewed by the white population as a leader amongst the slaves and held great influence within the slave community⁷. These practitioners possessed an innate strength and ability to create forms of resistance through sustaining and engaging in their African spirituality.

Wane 2007 quotes Zulu Latfia, an African spiritual healer response to her question, “What is the basis of our spirituality?” to which Zulu Latifa responded, “I believe Black women are born spiritual. The nature of our spirituality is based also on our innate ability to nurture...[a] higher level of spirituality, like wisdom, comes with age and exposure over a significant amount of time to many life experiences”⁸ It was with this innate ability to nurture wisdom and strength that Caribbean slave women as practitioners were able to connect with their people. She was able gain her strength from her indigenous identity and perform acts to inform “resistance to all forms of oppression, their nurturance of family and community, their resilience in the face of racism and discrimination, and their ability to move on and survive in the midst of adversities”⁹.

The Caribbean slave women as practitioners have been described as Obeah women, priestess and/or healers. By having a considerable connection to African indigenous knowledge and identity, the practitioners had the ability to invoke solidarity and community amongst the slaves as she had the knowledge that connected them to their homeland and ancestors. Just by keeping the slaves connected to their spiritual origins, she helped to preserve one of the most important parts of the human being, the spirit. Resistance included concocting poison to either injure or kill their oppressor the slave master. In this regard, solidarity was pivotal in administering the poison through fostering allegiance between the domestic and field slaves¹⁰. According to Walter Rucker, in “The Influence of Afro-Atlantic Religious Practices on Slave Resistance and Rebellion:

Obeah conjurers would later inspire rebellions throughout the British, Dutch and Danish American colonial possessions, including important revolts in Jamaica in 1733, 1738 and 1760; Antigua in 1736; and Berbice in 1763. No less than 20 rebellions in the Americas were attributed to Akan speakers in locations including Dutch Guyana, the Virgin Islands, Barbados...a sizable number of these Akan slave revolts were intertwined with the practice of Obeah¹¹.

4. Revolution

The Caribbean slave women showed their ability to survive in an insensitive and unfair environment. Due to the continuous inhuman acts enforced upon slaves, a revolt became necessary. Caribbean slave women took on the role of a revolutionary leading to emancipation. Two remarkable female figures that fought for the freedom of their people, and chose to engage in an active form of resistance were Carlota of Matanzas, Cuba in the 1843 slave rebellion and Nanny of the Maroons in Jamaica.

Carlota, along with her comrades, Evaristo and Fermina organized the great rebellion of 1843 in Matanzas, Cuba.¹² Slaves were encouraged to take part in the rebellion; a significant amount of planning was required by Carlota and her companions to execute a successful rebellion.¹³ Carlota used drums as a strategy and a means of communicating to the enslaved population when the rebellion would begin and what steps had to be taken at that time. Word of this rebellion spread across Cuba inspiring other slaves to revolt against a forced system of human exploitation¹⁴. As a result, there were increased guerilla attacks by slaves in Sabanilla del Encomendador, Guanabana and Santa Ana¹⁵.

These acts of liberation had the European oppressors in a state of fear, anger and experiencing a lack of control which led to the hunting down of Carlota and her army¹⁶. In 1844, Carlota was found, tied to four horses and ripped apart into pieces and her army of liberators were shot and killed¹⁷. Although Carlota and her army met their death their actions created a sense of consciousness and strength amongst the slave populations leading to more rebellions on the island, and ultimately leading to the emancipation of slaves.

There are other examples of Caribbean slave women who took part in smaller rebellions where they demonstrated their courage and tenacity in fighting for freedom even when the stakes were high. For instance, in Suriname 1728, a group of eleven Seramica rebels (*a.k.a. fugitive Negroes*), took refuge in the woods and participated in the looting of estates for two years. In 1730, these rebels were captured, eight of them were women.¹⁸

Another slave rebellion was Nanny of the Maroons. She was one of the most important female revolutionaries in Caribbean history. She was born in Africa's Gold Coast around 1680. The interesting fact about Nanny is that

she arrived in Jamaica as a free woman, and it has been stated that she was of royal African blood¹⁹.

Nanny played a significant role in uniting Maroons across the island of Jamaica during the time of slavery. She was respected by her people for her military, spiritual and political attributes²⁰. Her mastery of guerrilla warfare enabled Nanny to train Maroon troops to fight fiercely against the British troops²¹. Legend stated that due to her supernatural abilities as an Obeah woman she was able to catch bullets with her hands as her enemies attempted to take her life²². Politically, Nanny did not displace her headmen of her people, but served as an advisor on decisions that had serious implications on her people. Bush 1990 states at the end of the Maroon wars in 1739, Quao, the leader of the Windward Maroons, refused terms of treaty based on the advice he had received from Nanny²³. She held a significant amount of power with her people through her tactician, political and spiritual knowledge by ensuring that the Maroons were not enslaved and were able to maintain their freedom.

5. Conclusion

The Caribbean slave women may have been forced into slavery and experienced many indignities and obstacles. However, she found ways to resist, make sense of her pain and persevered herself, her spirit and fought for the freedom of her community. Caribbean slave women's legacy has continued and Black women throughout the Black Diaspora have embodied her strength, making sense of their own pain in a complex Western world. Thus, as Black women of the Diaspora, our ultimate goal for ourselves and our community is to have a good quality of life and longevity.²⁴

The Caribbean slave women have clearly assisted in establishing a strong foundation for Black Canadian Feminist Thought. It is through these historical experiences we are able to understand the notion of Black Canadian Feminist Thought and how it applies to racialized groups. This theory is based on the analysis of one's experiences and the networks that are used to overcome obstacles placed in the way of survival²⁵. The forms of resistance carried out by the Caribbean slave women speak directly to this theory.

My ancestors have shown me the way to create my own feminism, resist the status quo and make sense of my own pain from a political and social context. As a Black woman, I am aware of the legacy of oppression, and the pain that stems from it and the relentless resistance of my ancestors, giving them a voice in this contemporary moment I too, carry on their legacy.

By articulating our histories, understanding the pain and forms of resistance performed by our ancestors, we can develop, empower ourselves and gain agency. The Caribbean slave women established a strong foundation for resistance for herself, her community and generations to follow. Her legacy to resist injustices as a form of preservation became the basis of

movements to follow. hooks 2000 points out that resistance engenders the awakened of the spirit of rebellion and resistance in progressive females lead towards contemporary women's liberation²⁶.

To conclude, I re-iterate that resistance for the Caribbean slave women were not at all easy but allow us to acknowledge our experiences and perseverance through the plethora of trials and tribulations, most importantly the triumph of the human spirit.

Notes

¹Album: B Marley, 'Uprising', Island/Tuff Gong 1980.

²Book: B Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838*, Indiana University Press, 1990.

³— *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838*(Indiana University Press, 1990 p. 114.

⁴Book: b hooks, "*Black Looks: Race and Representation*", South End Press, 1992, p.22.

⁵Journal article: M.A. Mazama, 'Afrocentricity and African Spirituality'. *Journal of Black Studies*, 33;2,(2002), pp.229-230.

⁶Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2000, p.97.

⁷Book: B Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838*(Indiana University Press,1990 p.74.

⁸Book: N Wane, "Practicing African Spirituality: Insights from Zulu-Latifa, an African Women Healing" in *Theorizing Empowerment: Canadian Perspective on Black Feminist Thought*, 2007 pp.50.

⁹Book: N Wane, "Practicing African Spirituality: Insights from Zulu-Latifa, an African Women Healing" in *Theorizing Empowerment: Canadian Perspective on Black Feminist Thought*, 2007 pp.48.

¹⁰Book: B Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838*(Indiana University Press, 1990 p.75.

¹¹Journal article: W Rucker, Conjure, Magic, and Power: The Influence of Afro-Atlantic Religious Practices on Slave Resistance and Rebellion. *Journal of Black Studies*, 2001, 32(1), p.89.

¹²Godfried, E. (2006). *Carlota: Lukumi/Yoruba women fighter for liberation massacred in matanzas, Cuba, in 1844*. Retrieved July, 2006, from <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/Carlota.htm>

¹³Godfried, E. (2006). *Carlota: Lukumi/Yoruba women fighter for liberation massacred in matanzas, Cuba, in 1844*. Retrieved July, 2006, from <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/Carlota.htm>

¹⁴Godfried, E. (2006). *Carlota: Lukumi/Yoruba women fighter for liberation massacred in matanzas, Cuba, in 1844*. Retrieved July, 2006, from <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/Carlota.htm>

¹⁵E Godfried, (2006). *Carlota: Lukumi/Yoruba women fighter for liberation massacred in matanzas, Cuba, in 1844*. Retrieved July, 2006, from <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/Carlota.htm>

¹⁶ E Godfried. *Carlota: Lukumi/Yoruba women fighter for liberation massacred in matanzas, Cuba, in 1844*. Retrieved July, 2006, from <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/Carlota.htm>

¹⁷ —*Lukumi/Yoruba women fighter for liberation massacred in matanzas, Cuba, in 1844*. Retrieved July, 2006, from <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/Carlota.htm>

¹⁸ Book: B Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838*(Indiana University Press,1990 p. 71.

¹⁹D Gabriel, *Jamaica's True Queen: Nanny of the maroons*.2004,from <http://www.jamaicans.com/articles/primearticles/queennanny~print.shtml>

²⁰ —*Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838*(Indiana University Press, 1990 p.69.

²¹ Book: B Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838*(Indiana University Press,1990 p.69

²² D Gabriel, *Jamaica's True Queen: Nanny of the maroons*.2004,from <http://www.jamaicans.com/articles/primearticles/queennanny~print.shtml>

²³ —*Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838*(Indiana University Press,1990,p. 70

²⁴ Book: N Wane, “*Practicing African Spirituality: Insights from Zulu-Latifa, an African Women Healing*” in *Theorizing Empowerment: Canadian Perspective on Black Feminist Thought*, 2007 pp.52.

²⁵ Book: R Terborg-Penn & A Benton Rushing, *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, Howard University Press,1989, p.4

²⁶ Book: b hooks, “*Feminism is for Everyone: Passionate Politics*”, 2000, p.3

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