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Contesting “White Slavery” in the Caribbean: Enslaved Africans and
European Indentured Servants in 17th-Century Barbados

Jerome S. Handler, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, Charlottesville, VA

22903, U.S.A. jh3v@virginia.edu

Matthew C. Reilly, Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World,

Brown University, Providence, RI 02912 U.S.A. Matthew_Reilly@brown.edu

Abstract:

Seventeenth-century reports of the suffering of European indentured servants and the fact that many were transported to Barbados against their wishes has led to a growing body of trans-Atlantic popular literature, particularly dealing with the Irish. This literature claims the existence of “white slavery” in Barbados and, essentially, argues that the harsh labor conditions and sufferings of indentured servants were as bad as or even worse than that of enslaved Africans. Though not loudly and publicly proclaimed, for some present-day white Barbadians, as for some Irish and Irish-Americans, the “white slavery” narrative stresses a sense of shared victimization; this sentiment then serves to discredit calls for reparations from the descendants of enslaved Africans in the U.S. and the former British West Indies.

This article provides a detailed examination of the socio-legal distinctions between servitude and slavery, and argues that it is misleading, if not erroneous, to apply the term “slave” to Irish and other indentured servants in early Barbados. While not denying the hardships suffered by indentured servants, referring to white servants as slaves deflects the experiences of millions of

persons of African birth or descent. We systematically discuss what we believe are the major socio-legal differences and the implications of these difference between indentured servitude and the chattel slavery that uniquely applied to Africans and their descendants.

Keywords: Barbados: White Slavery: Indentured Servants: Enslaved Africans: Irish

Irish journalist Sean O’Callaghan’s *To Hell or Barbados* is an account of the seventeenth-century English colonization of Ireland written for the general public. A major theme of this work is that prisoners taken by Cromwell “were not sent as indentured servants, but were sold in perpetuity to the sugar planters of Barbados. They became the first white slaves in relatively modern times, slaves in the true sense of the word, owned body and soul by their masters” (2000:93). This “white slavery” thesis has been echoed and elaborated in a number of articles and books, both fiction and non-fiction, as well as in television documentaries and blogs. It has grown in popularity in recent years and appeals to an apparently large audience in Ireland, Britain, the United States (Irish-America), and even, based on our own field experiences, among some in Barbados’s white population. In its most charged form, social media on both sides of the Atlantic reflect a highly racialized rhetoric that adopts the discourse of O’Callaghan and others to condemn or criticize calls for reparations to those of African descent whose ancestors were enslaved and who experience the repercussions of this past in the present (e.g., for former British colonies, see Beckles 2013; for the United States, Coates 2014). Some professional historians have also commented on the “slave-like” status of servants in English America because they “could be bought and sold” (Guasco 2014:166),¹ but we believe most, if not all, historians of the early Atlantic world would reject the racially-charged “white slave” thesis. Yet,

this thesis, which will be discussed later in this article, can also find its way into modern scholarship (e.g., Newman 2013:80, 95, 246), albeit not in the shrill, racist or intentional political terms voiced by some lay writers and popularizers.

In this article we challenge the notion of “white” or “Irish slavery” by examining the differences in social and legal status between servitude and slavery in early English America. Barbados is an apt case-study for this argument as it was home to the earliest and most sizable population of indentured servants in English America. We also address the emergence of the “white slavery” narrative and suggest explanations for its relatively recent transatlantic popularity. While historians of the seventeenth-century Atlantic world continue to dissect and explore the nuances of labor practices and the development of modern notions of race and slavery, segments of the population on both sides of the Atlantic have been attracted to an interpretation of the past that often serves racially charged political positions in the present. Through an appropriation of histories that speak to the sufferings of European indentured servants, such sentiments lead to a process in which trauma stories become the “currency” or “symbolic capital” that serves particular political positions while denying others (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997:10). We argue that indentured European servants were not slaves, and that it is misleading, if not disingenuous, to identify them as such.

Barbados: Historical Background

The story of Barbados’s early years is well known.² Settled by the English in 1627, the island initially produced food crops for local consumption and export crops such as tobacco and cotton. These were grown on relatively small farms, with the labor of free colonists, indentured servants, and occasionally enslaved Africans and Amerindians. Indentured servants, largely young males from England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales (i.e., the British Isles), were present

from the first year of settlement and continued to arrive in subsequent years. Whatever their occupational backgrounds, most expected to work in agriculture and, until the active growth of the sugar economy in the 1640s, many came voluntarily with some type of contractual agreement.

The shift from small-scale mixed crop farming to an export economy based on the large-scale production of sugar took place fairly rapidly, starting in the early-to-mid-1640s. To meet the greater labor demands, sugar planters increasingly relied upon the transatlantic slave trade and the labor of enslaved Africans. Nonetheless, servants continued to arrive and they included more females than in earlier years. Although their precise numbers are unknown, many servants came with contracts while many thousands of others, including children, arrived without contracts, often having been forced, duped, or lured into servitude in their home countries. At the same time, many thousands more of enslaved Africans were brought to Barbadian shores (e.g., Harlow 1926: 292- 307; Bridenbaugh and Bridenbaugh 1972:33, 59; Menard 2006:xii, xiii; Eltis 2000:215-16).

By the mid-1670s, when Barbados had reached the zenith of its sugar-based prosperity, its enslaved population of African birth or descent was approximately 33,000, and with about 21,500 whites, indentured and free, Barbados had become “the richest and most populous colony in English America” (Dunn 1969:4).³ The histories of enslaved Africans and European indentured servants are intimately tied to the emergence of the plantation complex and the economic success of the early English colony. Despite similarities in terms of labor exploitation, important legal and socioeconomic factors highlight the distinctions between the two systems of labor. The particulars of these distinctions are crucial in making a case against the “white slave” thesis and in attempting to clarify the rationale behind its continued popularity.

Servants: Voluntary and Involuntary

During the first several decades of Barbados's settlement, English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish nationals desiring immigration to the island, but lacking the means to pay their passage and sustenance, voluntarily indentured themselves. Usually they contracted their labor for five to seven years, sometimes less, sometimes more, in exchange for the Atlantic passage and food, clothing, and shelter during their indenture period (for clear explanations of indentured servitude, see Galenson 1981:3; Menard 2001:36-7; Tomlins 2010:32, n28). At the end of the period servants expected to receive a small piece of land, or a sum of money or, by the 1640s, its equivalent value in sugar provided, a contemporary observed, "if his master bee soe honest as to pay it."⁴ With the increase in sugar production and the expansion of the plantation system in the 1640s and 1650s, less land was available for ex-servants, thereby reducing an incentive to stay for those who had completed their indentures or for newcomers to voluntarily immigrate. Although there were still many free small farmers, the need for servants continued, particularly those with skills useful to the sugar industry and who could help maintain the strength of the island's militia (Sheppard 1977:27-39; Handler 1984). As Barbadian planters were transitioning to dependence on enslaved Africans in the 1640s, the servant trade still thrived, and Barbados was to receive "more servants than any other colony in the 1640s and early 1650s" (Dunn 1972:70). Over time dependence on enslaved labor increased as sugar plantations dominated the landscape, and fewer servants voluntarily came to the island. The plantocracy's concern with the diminished number of servants is reflected in laws enacted during the last three decades of the seventeenth century designed to encourage and facilitate the bringing of servants to the island (Hall 1764: 477-92 passim).

Many early servants had volunteered to migrate, but Britain (England, Scotland, Wales) and Ireland were also the source for many thousands of coerced or involuntary servants. Both voluntary and involuntary servants coexisted during most of the seventeenth century although the proportions and numbers of each at different time periods are unknown. Involuntary servitude was impressed upon vagrants or vagabonds, as defined by repressive sixteenth- and-seventeenth- century Vagrancy laws. These laws were overwhelmingly directed against the poor and the laboring class as well as those considered felons or “criminals,” many of who were also victimized by an exploitative social system heavily weighted against the underclass (Beier 1985; Slack 1974:360-79; cf. Handler and Bilby 2012:42-4). Thousands of children and teenagers from Ireland and Britain were kidnapped and shipped to the Americas, mainly to the sugar colonies (Blake 1943:267-81, 277; Harlow 1926:292-300; Donoghue 2010:201-22), and prostitutes from the streets of London were also rounded up and sent to Barbados.⁵

During the English Civil War (1642-51) and the following decade, when Barbados’s sugar economy was flourishing, many thousands prisoners of war were shipped to the island and sold as servants. These included Cromwell’s political enemies as well as thousands captured in military campaigns in Ireland and Scotland in 1649-50. Roughly 10,000 Scottish, English, Irish, and even German prisoners from the 1651 Battle of Worcester, the final battle of the English Civil War, were also transported to the Americas as servants (Royle 2004:602-3; Von Uchteritz 1666). In addition, in 1654 persons accused of participating in a Royalist plot in the West of England – the so-called Penruddock or Salisbury uprising -- greatly augmented Barbados’s servant population (Harlow 1926:295; Rivers and Foyle 1659). Prisoners of war and political prisoners could be sold for up to ten years of service, much longer than the customary five to seven years (Eltis 2000:76; Rivers and Foyle 1659; cf. Pitman 1689; Hall 1764:455).⁶

In 1655, a group of Barbados planters claimed they employed 12,000 prisoners of war (Planters of Barbados 1655). This figure may exaggerate the actual numbers, but even as an approximation, 12,000 would have constituted almost half of the “at least 25,000 Christians” then living on the island, the latter number reported in 1656 by an English merchant group (English Merchants 1656:446; Harlow 1926:338). The island’s 1680 census reported 2,317 servants, out of a white population of around 21,000 and close to 39,000 slaves. This is the only year for which there are systematically gathered figures on the servant population, but, as the Governor stressed, these figures referred only to “white men-servants” (Atkins 1680:503; Dunn 1969:7; Dunn 1972:88). Surely there were more servants at this period, including women and children, and one can assume that servants were even more numerous in earlier years (e.g., Atkins 1680; Dunn 1969; Beckles 1989).

Scholars agree that Barbados received most of the many thousands of servants of all nationalities who went to England’s New World colonies during most of the seventeenth century, but the actual number is unknown. Moreover, there are no figures or authoritative estimates in the primary sources on the numbers (both voluntary and involuntary) who came to the island during this period. Although the size of Barbados’s Irish population is also unknown, there is scholarly agreement that Irish nationals comprised the island’s largest group of servants.⁷ Most of the Irish were Catholic and from the laboring class. They suffered particularly harsh treatment and discrimination at the hands of English masters and colonial authorities who perceived them to be rebellious and undesirable even though their labor and service in the island’s militia was needed. The friction between the Irish and English in Barbados was fuelled by tensions that had begun many years earlier in Ireland, and were surely exacerbated by labor conditions in Barbados, the treatment that indentured servants experienced, and their reactions to this

treatment. These reactions included occasional violence against individual English masters, absenteeism and escapes from the island, as well as joining with slaves in several revolt plots and other forms of collective resistance.⁸

Treatment of Servants and Slaves

Despite general similarities in their material lives and work regimens, it is difficult, if not futile, to meaningfully compare the living conditions of slaves and servants over the seventeenth century. The “white slave” narrative largely hinges on the physical treatment of servants and the material conditions of their existence. Although there is evidence for harsh, even sadistic, treatment inflicted on both groups, there are simply insufficient qualitative/literary or quantitative data to make a thorough comparison.

In any case, some contemporary accounts indicate the actual treatment of servants could be quite severe, even vicious at times.⁹ Scholars of seventeenth century Barbados often rely on the account of the Englishman Richard Ligon, who lived in Barbados from 1647 to 1650. In his classic and much-quoted *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1657), Ligon comments on the “cruelty” that “some masters” inflicted on their servants. “Truly, I have seen such cruelty there done to servants,” he wrote, “as I did not think one Christian could have done to another.” Ligon, it should be stressed, is a major, sometimes *the only*, source for writers who discuss the treatment of servants, and they tend to ignore his comment in an earlier sentence that “merciful” masters “treat their Servants well, both in their meat, drink, and lodging, and give them such work as is not unfit for Christians.” Although Ligon does not detail what he meant by the treatment of “merciful” masters, nor offer an opinion on how numerous they were, he does describe the harshness of servants’ lives and some cases of cruelty against them. Yet, in another comment also usually ignored by writers, Ligon pointedly says “as discreeter and better natur’d

men have come to rule there [Barbados], the servants lives have been much bettered; for now, [¹⁰] most of the servants lie in hammocks [sic] and in warm rooms, and when they come in wet, have shift of shirts and drawers . . . and are fed with bone meat twice or thrice a week” (Ligon 1657:44-5).¹¹

In addition to Ligon, only a handful of seventeenth-century first-hand accounts are known in which servants, ex-servants, and foreign visitors briefly describe the lives of servants; none of these accounts is by the Irish.¹² All of these accounts stress the hardships of life and the stringent labor regime under which servants worked. None of these authors came from backgrounds involving manual labor and some of them, having been forced into servitude, may have/probably exaggerated the conditions under which they lived. To be clear, however, this is not to suggest that indentured servants were not subjected to hard labor or did not suffer, particularly prisoners of war and others forced into servitude.

However difficult it is to make meaningful comparisons between the material life and treatment of servants and slaves, it is the alleged cruel and harsh treatment of servants that underpins the narrative that servants, particularly the Irish, suffered under a regime of “white slavery.” Proponents of this thesis, however, ignore aspects of seventeenth-century Barbados that reflect more profound differences between servants and slaves and which implicitly question the appropriateness of associating the word “slave” with indentured servant. In this context, we believe it is crucial to discuss the legal distinctions and their implications for the lives of these two groups.

Legal Distinctions between Servants and Slaves

A case widely discussed by historians of early English America is that of the Royalists Marcellus Rivers and Oxenbridge Foyle (1659). They were English “gentlemen” transported to

Barbados because they had allegedly participated in a failed royalist plot. In 1659 they petitioned Parliament for their freedom “on behalf of themselves and three-score and ten more free-born Englishmen sold uncondemned into slavery.” The petitioners found Barbados a “place of torment” where they suffered the “most insupportable captivity.” Although their social backgrounds probably shaped their perspectives on manual labor and their living conditions (e.g., Stock 1924:250), what is important in considering the fundamental differences between servants and slaves is how their petition stresses that they were “free-born Englishmen” who had been unjustly “sold into slavery.” By the time the petition was submitted, Englishmen had long been acquainted with slavery in its many forms throughout the Mediterranean and Atlantic worlds (e.g. Guasco 2014: Sweet 2013), but in seventeenth-century England, “slavery was a metaphor frequently used as the antithesis of freedom to condemn the illegitimate use of power” (Amussen 2007:19; cf. Handlin and Handlin 1950:199-222; Morgan 1998:261). This was arguably the case with Rivers and Foyle and probably many others of their social class who were forced into servitude. Taking them at their word, Rivers and Foyle were unfairly arrested and badly mistreated in Barbados, but they could still claim legal rights as Englishmen, something no enslaved African could do.

Rivers and Foyle emphasized that their condition was unacceptable given their *English* citizenship and identity, a point agreed upon by some members of Parliament. Although the petition was debated at length in Parliament, it was denied because Parliament was mainly concerned with “the lack of due process” in sending the prisoners to Barbados, “not the fact that they had been sold and were working on plantations” (Eltis 2000:15n27, 71; Stock 1924:247-66; Guasco 2014:168-70). The rights that servants could claim in Barbados were often muted in the face of social realities and their relative powerlessness in the face of a judicial and legal system

that heavily favored the planter class (e.g., Beckles 1989:86-8), but there was no mechanism, legal or customary, whereby any slave could petition the governor or legislature of Barbados, let alone the English/British parliament, for anything.

In fact, slaves had no legally recognized rights. They were regarded as private property over which owners claimed absolute authority, a fundamental characteristic of slave status in all New World slave societies. Moreover, slaves were property for their lifetimes unless manumitted, a rare occurrence in Barbados slave society and particularly rare in the seventeenth century; manumission itself was also an extension of an owner's property rights (Handler 1974:29-74; Handler and Pohlmann 1984). Servants, in contrast, could be claimed as property only for the period of their indentures, during which time their masters controlled both their laboring and non-laboring hours (e.g., Harlow 1926: 293-94; Beckles 1996).

Both groups were itemized as property along with cattle and other goods in deeds of sale and wills, but if servants were "sold" or transmitted to other masters, it was for the time remaining in their indenture periods, unless the term was extended because of some legal transgression "or some other legal pretext to keep them longer" (Bridenbaugh and Bridenbaugh 1972:366). "Tis an ordinary thing there," Richard Ligon wrote (1657:59), for planters "to sell their servants to one another for the time they have to serve."¹³

Although never codified in Barbados law, slaves served for life and slave status was transmitted through the mother, regardless of the father's status (Handler 2016). These were critical features of New World slavery and highlight major structural distinctions between slavery and indentured servitude. By contrast, servitude was not heritable.

Both servants and slaves required written permission from masters to leave the plantation or place of their residence, a widespread restriction in early English America. After their indenture

periods were over, however, servants were free and could leave the island if they had the resources; slaves had no such option and no slave could ever legally leave Barbados without permission from an owner or civil authority. In fact, as Betty Wood (1997:17) has argued, “In many respects it would be the legally binding guarantee of eventual freedom that differentiated indentured servitude from chattel slavery.”

During the latter part of the seventeenth century, the colonial administration and plantocracy were increasingly concerned about the small numbers of servants arriving at Barbados, the reluctance of others to remain after their terms had expired, and the implications of these trends for the militia’s strength (e.g., Gorge 1674; Dutton 1683; Russell 1695). Efforts were made to ameliorate the condition of servants who were already there. A 1699 “act for the encouragement of white servants” (modified in 1703 with its substance intact) explicitly confronted a long-standing issue by addressing the “many complaints against the severe usage of Christian servants.” The law provided a path whereby “every Christian servant that hath any just cause of complaint . . . of severe or harsh usage” could bring the complaint before the judiciary. The process was cumbersome, but if the accused was judged guilty, the servant could be set free or “discharged from any further service whatsoever” and the guilty party fined (Hall 1764:157-9).

Regardless of how futile such complaints might have been in many cases, it would have been unthinkable to grant a similar right to the enslaved. Even before passage of this law, a servant of any national origin could institute a legal proceeding against a master in the event of mistreatment or disagreement over the indenture terms; one might even sue for freedom, something no slave could do. Although the system was heavily weighted against the servant, there are occasional reported cases in which a servant was able to get a judgment against a master and was “freed and compensated for damages” (Games 1996:168; Beckles 1989:86). A

slave never could have brought a master to court, let alone win a case against him; moreover, slaves could never testify against whites in any legal proceeding, a right held by servants as with any other white person (free people of color were denied this right from 1721 until 1830; Handler 1974:67-8, 82-102).

While many servants had come voluntarily with contracts specifying their terms of service, many others came without contracts. Upon landing in Barbados, they were given something of a contract under terms of the so-called “custom of the country.” In England this phrase referred to traditions or customary usages that had existed for so long that they had the validity or power of law. It seems to have usually applied to disputes concerning lease agreements between landowners and farming tenants.¹⁴ However, in early Barbados, Virginia, and Maryland the “custom of the country” applied solely to *voluntary* servants who had *not* paid for their passages and had arrived without written contracts or indentures. The costs of passage were then paid on arrival by planters or merchants “to whom the servants in question were bound on standard terms and conditions of service (‘the custom of the country’)” (Tomlins 2010:32n28; also, Smith 1947:19, 229-38; Galenson 1981:13, 190, 249n23). The “custom” was initially unwritten but specified the duration and the terms of service. It was not until the 1699 act referred to above that specific food and clothing allowances were defined as the “custom of the country” (Hall 1764:157-9).¹⁵ Regardless of how this law was actually followed or enforced, no slave was ever party to the “custom of the country,” slaves were never given contracts, and Africans did not come to Barbados voluntarily.

The two labor systems in Barbados, servitude and slavery, were early recognized in the island’s laws (e.g., Jennings 1654; Hall 1764) and significant differences emerged in how European and African laborers were categorized and governed, in addition to how racial features

were associated with laboring status. These laws provide clear evidence of the explicit distinctions between servants and slaves, regardless of how the laws were enforced in practice.

The Laws of 1661

By 1661 the economic significance of servants was diminishing as enslaved Africans were increasingly replacing them in the labor force. In September of that year two major pieces of legislation were enacted, one governed servants, the other the enslaved; these laws well illustrate the socio-legal distinctions between the two groups.¹⁶ Various clauses in both laws evolved from parts of acts passed in the 1640s and early 1650s (Jennings 1654; also Hall 1764:459-68). Other scholars have discussed the 1661 laws (Dunn 1972:238-46; Rugemer 2013; Handler 2016), but here we review features that underscore the significant differences in the status of the enslaved and the indentured, a line of evidence we consider crucial in discussing the issue of “white slavery.”

It is relevant to stress, in light of the “white slave” narrative, that every Barbadian law pertaining to servants applied to *all* servants regardless of country of origin or ethnicity, and no law ever distinguished between those who had come voluntarily and those who had been forced into servitude. Moreover, at no point in the history of Barbados does any law state, suggest, or imply that any servant, whether of Irish or of any other national/ethnic background, held the status of slaves or were considered comparable to enslaved Africans. In the eyes of the law, a servant was a servant.

The 1661 servant law was quite stringent; yet, it afforded servants limited rights which had not been specified in earlier laws. Some clauses well illustrate the differences in their legal status from that of the enslaved. Because children were often kidnapped to labor in the American colonies, those under 14 years old “of the English nation, or the dominions [including Ireland]

thereunto belonging” could not be landed in Barbados unless a legal document of consent or written authorization from the parent or guardian of the child could be produced. Captured Africans, of course, had no such option and slave buyers had no concern for the age of the child—unless it had relevance to the child’s marketability. Also, continuing and only very slightly modifying a law assented to by the governor in 1652, the 1661 law asserted that servants under 18 years old who arrived at the island without a contract made in England or “elsewhere” were to serve for a maximum of seven years. Those above 18 without a contract were to serve five years; at the end of the period they were to receive 400 pounds of muscovado sugar “for their wages.” (The term “freedom dues,” common in England’s mainland colonies, does not appear in the Barbados sources.) We have no idea how often such “wages” were paid, but there is no record that any slave ever had a contract specifying the duration of servitude and slaves were never offered or received “wages” for their labor (Jennings 1654:15-16; Hall 1764:39).

When a married couple migrated together as servants on the same ship, they were to be “sold and disposed of together, and not severed.” How much this clause, as others, was observed and enforced is another matter, but this was certainly not a consideration by slave traders in the acquisition and sale of captive Africans; nor was it a consideration by their purchasers in the colonies. When a master and servant disagreed about the duration of the latter’s period of indenture, the servant could take the master to court and even sue for his/her freedom—even though chances were great that a servant could not win against a master. A slave, in contrast, served for life and could not sue for freedom or question the duration of servitude; in fact, not until 1831 could a slave testify in the courts against a white person (Handler 1974:102). A servant could also institute a legal proceeding against a master in the event of mistreatment or disagreement over the terms of indenture, an option completely unavailable to the enslaved (Hall

1764:35, 37, 40).

Penalties for the same or similar crimes were also different. A servant convicted of assaulting a master or mistress was to serve one year beyond the indenture term. Extension of the term was a common punishment in the English colonies for all kinds of legal transgressions, and a “convenient” way in which masters could extract more labor time from their servants cf. note 6). Since slaves served a lifetime and could not be punished by extending their time of servitude, a slave who physically assaulted “any Christian,” except in the “lawful defense” of a master or mistress, their families, and property, would be “severely whipped” for the first offence; for the second, “severely whipped, his nose slit and be burned in the face”; for the third offence “such greater corporal punishment” that the governor and his council should decide. A servant convicted of stealing a master’s property would serve two additional years after expiry of the indenture period, while a slave would be executed if convicted of “heinous and grievous crimes,” including “murders, burglaries & robbing in the highway.” It is not difficult to find cases of slaves being executed for theft in the early records of the Barbados Council. A servant violating the law requiring written permission to leave a master’s property would have one day added to the indenture period for every two hours away without permission, but not to exceed three years. For a similar offence slaves received a “moderate whipping” – “moderate” being defined entirely by the slave owner.

When a servant was killed, efforts were made to ascertain if the homicide had been murder through “violence and great oppression.” Murderers sometimes escaped detection and punishment “by reason of the sudden interring of servants, so destroyed and murdered”; the law was designed to prevent or inhibit such hasty burials before authorities could examine the body. On the other hand, it was not until July 1818 that the intentional killing of a slave was considered

murder, punishable by death.¹⁷ For most of the slave period, such a homicide was handled as with the destruction of other chattel. A master, for example, who intentionally killed his own slave was required to pay a fine to the “public treasury”; if the slave belonged to another, the murderer had to pay the owner “double the value” of the slave and a fine of 5,000 lbs. of sugar. A white person who killed a slave at night claiming the latter had been caught stealing “provisions, swine, or other goods” could not be convicted of murder. However, slaves who were apprehended and convicted of “heinous and grievous crimes,” such as murder, burglary, robbery, arson of buildings and canes, were executed as were those convicted of plotting a revolt or actually participating in one.

Servants were accused of participating in plots or rebellions in 1634, the mid-1640s, and 1655 (White 1634 [1910]: 37; Ligon 1657:45-6; Handler 1982:9), but the 1661 servant law does not mention rebellions, reflecting how much conditions had changed from earlier years. In fact, only one of its 22 clauses addresses attempted escapes from the island “by any ship, bark, or boat”; persons convicted could be sentenced to three additional years of servitude and have their hair “shaved off” (Hall 1764:36, 39; Handler 1997:183-225). Conversely, most of the 23 clauses in the 1661 slave law deal in one form or another with “runaways” and their policing, reflecting an issue that Barbadian slave owners confronted until 1834, when the slave period ended (this was also a major issue for slave holders throughout the New World). The penalties could be quite severe, particularly for repeat offenders. Punishments specified in the laws included public execution, presumably by hanging, for repeat offenders (and certain long-term escapees), severe whipping, and branding.¹⁸ Also, slave masters had considerable latitude in inflicting the punishments they considered appropriate. Captured fugitives could be confined to plantation dungeons or placed in stocks for whatever period the slave master ordered. The whip was

regularly used. Although the maximum number of lashes for particular offenses varied in the laws over the entire period of slavery, there is no indication that slave masters felt legally or otherwise constrained or that such laws were enforced. Certain common disciplinary measures were not defined in law, but became well established in custom. For example, from the seventeenth century until 1826, when the practice was made illegal in Barbados, slave masters, following a widespread practice in New World slave societies, placed iron collars with long projecting spikes on the necks of captured runaways and/or fettered their legs with iron chains. Punishments could also include gibbeting and burning alive, decapitation, and castration for serious crimes, such as participation in revolts or plots. Such harsh penalties were apparently reserved for the enslaved; we have no evidence they were applied to servants although both servants and slaves could be whipped and placed in stocks (Barbados Council 1654-58; Handler 1982; Handler 1997).¹⁹

Terminology and the “White Slavery” Narrative

We are uncertain when the term “white slave” was first applied to indentured servants in England’s colonies. For the British Caribbean, however, the earliest mention of which we are aware is in an 1883 article in a British Guiana newspaper (Ellis 1883). Its author, Alfred B. Ellis, was a British Army officer who had been at one time stationed in the West Indies (see Ellis 1885). This article had a major influence on Sean O’Callaghan. In his *To Hell or Barbados* (2000), he relies on it extensively, particularly with his central thesis of Irish “white slaves” (see below). Ellis distinguished between “bond-servants” and “white slaves,” the former having come to the colonies voluntarily but “whose condition was little better than of the convict-slaves,” while the latter were largely political prisoners and prisoners of war shipped to the colonies where they were auctioned off for various terms of years “sometimes for life as slaves.”

In the Barbadian context, the term “white slavery” is also of uncertain origin. There is no

evidence that it was used in any official or unofficial capacity in the seventeenth century or later; and very flimsy evidence that it was ever a popular colloquialism (see note 20). In his monumental *The History of Barbados*, Robert Schomburgk (1848:144) writes, “Cromwell increased the number of the unfortunate Christian slaves, as the *engagés* were called.” However, Schomburgk erroneously translates the French term *engagé* as “slave” while “indentured servant” (that is, one who holds “un contrat d’engagement”) is a more precise translation. Additionally, his claim is more of an interpretation of the alleged treatment and material conditions under which these individuals lived rather than being an assessment based on the many socio-legal differences between servitude and slavery. In modern times, the Barbadian historian Hilary Beckles has been using the term “white slave” in his academic writing since the early 1980s (e.g., Beckles 1981:240; Beckles 1982), but in a 1996 publication (Beckles 1996:584n7) he supports his usage by citing John Eaden’s (1970:125) abridgement and translation of an early French source (Labat 1742:275); Eaden, however, erroneously translates “engagez” as “white slaves.”²⁰

In recent academic writing, although the term “white slave” is occasionally used, it does not explicitly carry the political overtones found in some popular literature and media. For example, a leitmotif of Simon Newman’s book *A New World of Labor* is the hardships and severe treatment of indentured servants in seventeenth-century Barbados. He refers to how “many of these bound white laborers became virtual slaves” and titles one of his chapters “White Slaves,” using the phrase several times within the chapter itself. Although Newman places the phrase within quotation marks, it is unclear from his writing how literally he interprets it. In any event, he surprisingly concludes: “It was white men and women from the British Isles who first experienced . . . a dramatic reduction of personal freedom, not African slaves” (2013:80, 95,

246).

The rise of the “white slavery” narrative in public transatlantic contexts, as we indicated in this article’s introduction, can be partially attributed to the publication of works like O’Callaghan’s *To Hell or Barbados* (2000) and Don Jordan and Michael Walsh’s *White Cargo* (2008) which stress the extraordinarily harsh seventeenth-century servant experience in Barbados. Despite being replete with historical inaccuracies, the frequent extension of documented information on enslaved Africans to all indentured servants without explanation or justification, distorted embellishments of historical incidents, reliance on questionable sources, and unsupported statements of alleged historical fact, O’Callaghan’s volume is widely cited by an unwitting readership which is receptive to the historical narrative that stresses Cromwell’s brutal subjugation of Ireland and the harsh experience of Irish indentured servants in Barbados. Jordan and Walsh’s volume written by a television director and a journalist, respectively, has been similarly influential amongst transatlantic audiences in its central thesis that American slavery was imposed “first for whites, then for blacks.” In his self-published work, essentially a number of quotations from a miscellany of sources strung together in a seemingly haphazard fashion, Michael Hoffman (1991), an American blogger-writer on miscellaneous subjects, proclaims his work “is a history of White people that has never been told in any coherent form, largely because most modern historians have, for reasons of politics or psychology, refused to recognize White slaves in early America as just that. Today, not a tear is shed for the sufferings of millions of our own enslaved forefathers.”²¹ Coupled with film documentaries aired in Ireland, England, and Scotland in 2009, these works have had tremendous public impact as evidenced by social media activity, blogs, online articles, and works of fiction and non-fiction.²²

Online publications and social media forums have been particularly fertile breeding grounds for sentiments that are largely politically-oriented and based on questionable and superficial historical research. Liam Hogan, a local historian and librarian based in Limerick City Library, has shown how online forums and social media activity in Ireland and the United States have generated hyper-nationalistic (in the case of the Irish) and overtly racist comments. In his blog on Irish history, Hogan has compiled twitter activity from both sides of the Atlantic in which users claim the existence and significance of “white” or “Irish slavery” (Hogan et al. 2016).²³ Referencing sources such as the volumes described above to make their case, one online user, broadly reflecting the views of others, states, “Irish were slaves before blacks. We just moved on and didn’t use it as excuse for crap life.” Other representative examples include, “There were more WHITE slaves in America than there were Blacks. This is a FACT!”

The significance of the “white slave” narrative becomes relevant to contemporary issues, we believe, within the context of the sentiments expressed above. In the midst of racial tensions on both sides of the Atlantic, the imagined or exaggerated history of “white” or “Irish slavery” is used to argue against protests of racial discrimination as experienced by African descendant groups and the legacies of slavery on their lives. At the same time, in projecting a sense of historical victimization, Irish-Americans, particularly those who adhere to the “white slavery” narrative, use it to highlight their own social mobility successes in the United States (for Irish-American social mobility and “whiteness,” see Roediger 2005; Ignatiev 1995). The narrative has been used to undermine arguments in favor of reparations for the injustices of slavery. Another telling post from a social media user asks, “I just learned that the Irish were the first slaves in America. Where's my compensation and my apology?” As a Barbadian academic, familiar with the issues, told us, “the concept of white slaves . . . can be read as serving the interests of those

whose primary concern is to dilute the African enslaved experience.” In fact, though not loudly proclaimed, for some present-day white Barbadians (albeit not descended from the island’s plantocracy), as for the Irish and Irish-Americans quoted above, the “white slavery” narrative stresses a sense of shared victimization which then serves to discredit or challenge calls for reparations focusing on the enslaved African experience.

Conclusion

The limitations of the documentary record, both quantitative and qualitative, make it difficult to determine with any certainty the degree to which the lives of seventeenth-century servants and slaves coincided or differed in Barbados. Both groups had difficult lives and suffered wide-ranging hardships. This article is not meant to minimize the plight of voluntary or involuntary servants, particularly the latter, or the oppressive conditions under which many lived. However, there is no indication that indentured servants were considered slaves as slavery was understood in seventeenth-century Barbados. Some may have viewed themselves as slaves metaphorically, as we noted earlier in the case of the Royalists Rivers and Foyle, but in the eyes of the English crown, colonial authorities, the Barbadian plantocracy, and English and Barbados legal systems, no resident European was ever considered a slave. Occasionally, proponents of the “white slave” narrative distinguish between voluntary and forced servants, but these distinctions are typically not highlighted in their writings. Moreover, their comparisons invariably rest on the alleged treatment of servants who were forcibly sent to the West Indies and not to the many who had voluntarily agreed to migrate, an experience they obviously did not share with enslaved Africans. We have argued here that not only were the social and legal statuses of both groups quite different, making the term “slave” inappropriate and misleading when applied to indentured servants, but also that in promoting or not challenging the “white slavery” narrative,

writers minimize or discount the historical experiences and conditions of enslaved Africans and their descendants.

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¹ Also, for example, Billings 1991:45-62, 51; Handlin and Handlin 1950:201-2; Beckles 1996.

² E.g., Harlow 1926; Dunn 1972; Gragg 2003; Menard 2006; Puckrein 1984; Davis 1887; Bridenbaugh and Bridenbaugh 1972; Innes 1970:1-22; Bennett 1965:9-29; Games 1996:165-81, 171-2; Sheppard 1977:7-39.

³ Based on figures collected in early 1673, the president of the Barbados Council reported 33,184 blacks and 21,309 whites (in both cases including men, women, and children). About half of the whites, he estimated, were “English and the rest Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, and Jews,” but, he opined, “one third of the negroes is not given” (Colleton 1673:495).

⁴ Anon., n.d.: 44; also, Bridenbaugh and Bridenbaugh 1972:20, 112; Eltis 2000:44; Galenson 1981:1-26; Smith 1947; Games 1996; Harlow 1926:293.

⁵ Lorenzo Paulucci to Giovanni Sagredo, June 28, 1655, *Calendar of State Papers, Venice, Volume 30, 1655-56* (London, 1930), pp. 61-73 (<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol30/pp61-73>; accessed January 6, 2015); Giovanni Sagredo, Relation of England n.d. [Miscellaneous 1656], pp. 299-313, *ibid.*; William Gorge, May 1655. In Thomas Birch, ed., *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe*, Volume 3, December 1654 - August 1655 (London, 1742), pp. 480-98 (<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/thurloe-papers/vol3/pp480-498>; accessed January 6, 2015).

⁶ In his classic study *Colonists in Bondage*, A. E. Smith (1947:171) wrote “there was never any such thing as perpetual slavery for any white man in any English colony.” This was quite true, yet in Barbados and other seventeenth century English colonies, servitude could theoretically be extended indefinitely because the major sanction for infraction of the laws was the addition of time to the indenture period; for specific examples, see various laws in Jennings (1654) and clauses in the 1661 servant act (Hall 1764:35-42). Nothing in Barbados laws suggests that these penalties could not be reintroduced should the crime have been repeated (for mainland colonies, see Tomlins 2010:299n7, 308-9n41).

⁷ In recent years, historians have uncritically cited unreliable statistics in secondary sources which usually copy from each other, e.g., Rodgers 2007:147; Shaw 2013:6; Donoghue 2010:205; Newman 2013:35. Cf. Bridenbaugh and Bridenbaugh 1972:17; Welch 2012.

⁸ For the Irish in seventeenth-century Barbados, see Shaw 2013; Dunn 1972; Beckles 1990; Newman 2013; Handler and Reilly 2015; Handler 1982.

⁹ E.g., Biet 1664; Ligon 1657; Rivers and Foyle 1659; Von Uchteritz 1666; Pitman 1689.

¹⁰ We are not clear what Ligon meant by “for now.” He is possibly referring to the period after he left Barbados, for which he relied on reports of others who been to the island. At this period, slaves usually slept on boards or on the ground in their wattle and daub cabins (which were drafty, leaky in rain and could hardly be described as “warm rooms”), rarely had access to any meat (fresh or salted), and were scantily clothed (e.g., Handler and Bergman 2009; Handler and Wallman 2014; cf. note 15).

¹¹ For the selective use of Ligon’s account on the treatment of servants, see Beckles 1981:238-9; *ibid.* 1985:36; Newman 2013:77, 92-3, 95; Shaw 2013:94-5; Dunn 1972:72, 247; Rugemer 2013:434-5; Burnard 2015:35, 56; but cf. Hatfield 2004:153-4. In comparing the lives of servants and slaves, scholars of seventeenth century Barbados (as well as historical writers for the general public) have placed great weight on Ligon’s observation, taking it at face value, that slaves “being subject to their masters for ever [they] are kept and preserved with greater care than servants, who are theirs but for five years. So that for the time, the servants have the worsen lives” (Ligon 1657:43; cf. Harlow 1926:302; Bridenbaugh and Bridenbaugh 1972:106; Dunn 1972:228-29; Shaw 2013:82; Newman 2013:77).

¹² Biet 1664; Rivers and Foyle 1659; Pitman 1689; Von Uchteritz 1666; Anon. 1667/1668.

¹³ For example, a 1643 will bequeathed “two Christian servants . . . for their full terme they have to serve and two women negroes . . . for the termes of their natural lives,” and a 1653 deed for sale of a 152-acre plantation included “12 Christian servants with their respective times to serve, twenty eight negroes, fourteen assenegoes two mares and two colts.” Recopied Deeds Books, RB3/1, fol. 61; RB3/3, fols. 869-70, Barbados Department of Archives.

¹⁴ E.g., Balfour Browne 1875; Woodfall 1814; Bird 1802:44, 85; Rose 1986:711, 742.

¹⁵ In fact, this is one point of comparison between what the plantocracy considered adequate material allowances for both groups. The 1699 act detailed the food and clothing allowances, viz., “six pounds of good wholesome and sound flesh or fish per week, with sufficient ground provisions, or other bread-kind; four shirts, three pair of drawers, two jackets of Osnabrigs, or blue-linnen, one hat, and four pair of shoes per annum; the shirts and shoes to be given quarterly, the breeches every four months.” A fine was levied for non-compliance (Hall 1764: 157). In contrast, the Barbados slave code never contained any provisions for food allowances, but a clause in the major 1661 law directed owners to provide slaves with “clothes to cover their nakedness once every year, that is to say drawers and caps for men and pettycoats for women.” This clause was incorporated into the comprehensive slave act of 1688, which remained on the books until 1826 (Barbados Assembly and Council 1661; Hall 1764:115). These laws may have served as normative guidelines but we doubt if they were ever enforced.

“Custom of the country” has been misunderstood in some scholarship where it is arbitrarily given a broader meaning in the Barbadian context and misleading, sometimes erroneous, inferences are drawn from it (e.g., Beckles 1985: 38, 40, 45; *ibid.*, 1996:575-6 [also, following Beckles, Newman 2013:75]).

¹⁶ “An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes,” September 27, 1661. This act only exists in manuscript (CO 30/2, 16-26, The National Archives, London). “An Act for the Good Governing of Servants, and Ordaining the Rights Between Masters and Servants” was passed on the same day but it was published (Hall 1764: 35-42). For earlier printed laws as well as those known by title only, see Jennings (1654) and Hall (1764:35-42, 459-70).

¹⁷ “An Act to Repeal and Amend Certain Acts Made for the Governing and Protection of Slaves,” July 29, 1818, CO 30/20, Act 370, The National Archives, London.

¹⁸ The minutes of the Barbados Council in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth regularly mention slave executions, particularly for theft. One could also be executed, it can be noted, for the same reason in England. Branding a runaway servant on the face or shoulder was also common in England and other English practices for controlling servants and slaves were also found in early Barbados – e.g., the stocks/pillory, hanging, beheading, burning at the stake, whipping, branding, amputation of limbs. Minutes of the Barbados Council, 1654–58, PRO 31/17/43 [1654–56], 31/17/44 [1656–58], The National Archives, London; *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial, America and West Indies, 1685-88, 1696-97; 1700* (London, 1899, 1904, 1910); <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol12>, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol15>, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol18> (accessed December 31, 2015); Rawlin 1699; Hall 1764; Barrett and Harrison 1999; Nicholson 1994:48.

¹⁹ For illustrations of neck collars used in various New World slave societies, see www.slaveryimages.org, category “physical punishment” (accessed October 10, 2015).

²⁰ Beckles also asserts that seventeenth-century observers described indentured servitude as “white slavery” and referred to servants as “white niggers” (an assertion he first made in 1985 and continues to repeat [Beckles 2015:x]). Aside from his dependence on the faulty French translation, there is no support for either phrase in the other three other sources he cites: Smith 1947 [1971]: 309; Harlow 1926:293; Williams 1944:18. (In fact, disputing a claim made by the novelist Daniel Defoe, Eric Williams explicitly argues that servants were *not* slaves.) Of the sources cited by Beckles, the term “white slaves” *only* appears in an anonymously authored account written in late 1667 or early 1668 (Anon. 1667/1668; cf. Handler and Shelby 1973). Noting the number of males available for militia duty, the account reports 8,000 “of which two-thirds are of no reputation and little courage, and a very great part Irish, derided by the Negroes and branded with the epithet of white slaves.” There is no other evidence to suggest use of this term by the enslaved in general, and in this context it appears to be used ironically rather than literally. Whether some slaves actually used the term, or something like it, or it was a construction of the author is uncertain. In any event, the term “white slave” was not used in any official capacity, is not found in other early sources (e.g., Handler 1971, 1991), and there is no evidence to suggest that it was a regular element in the speech of the enslaved or the wider Barbadian community.

²¹ Michael A. Hoffman, *They Were White and They Were Slaves: The Untold History of the Enslavement of Whites in Early America*. First published 1991; reprinted 1993 (Wiswell Ruffin House [https://openlibrary.org/publishers/Wiswell_Ruffin_House#sort=date_published]); <http://www.hoffman-info.com> (accessed January 18, 2016).

²² Plummer 2012; Akamatsu 2010; McCafferty 2002. *The Redlegs – Ireland’s Sugar Slaves*

(Moondance Productions: 2009); *Barbado'ed – Scotland's Sugar Slaves* (BBC 2: 2009). An online article from the Centre for Research on Globalization written by John Martin (2008: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-irish-slave-trade-the-forgotten-white-slaves/31076>) entitled “The Irish Slave Trade – The Forgotten ‘White’ Slaves,” has been shared nearly 500,000 times as of October, 2015.

²³ For Hogan’s blog see “The Prevalence of the Irish Slaves Mythology” (<https://storify.com/Limerick1914/the-prevalence-of-the-irish-slaves-mythology>; accessed October 7, 2015).