

**“AS IF SHE HAD BEEN ACTUALLY BORN FREE”
UNDERSTANDING MANUMISSION, SELF-PURCHASE, AND FREEDOM
IN 19th CENTURY BERMUDA**

by © Erin Mick

Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in the Department of History

Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador
January 2019

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The research for this thesis was funded in part by a grant provided by the
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

ABSTRACT

Despite its significant role since the early 17th century as a maritime center of the Atlantic economy, Bermuda and its role in the slave trade, particularly in the illicit slave trade after 1807, have been left largely unexplored by historians of enslavement. Those few histories, and historic travel accounts, which do focus on Bermuda tend to associate its small size, maritime economy, relatively low reported rate of severe physical punishment of slaves, and the rough parity of white and black demography, with a benign or mitigated reality of enslavement compared to other areas of the slaveholding world.

After cataloguing and analyzing documents from the Colonial Secretary's Books of Miscellany, held by the Bermuda National Archives, the volume of manumission and self-purchase records alone could easily make for an argument that bolsters the previous historiography of benignity. However, through discussing a number of case studies drawn from the Books of Miscellany, new perspectives on 19th century understandings of freedom and slavery bubble to the surface. This thesis aims to broach the topics of manumission, self-purchase, and slave-owner negotiation in an effort to reveal the sheer complexity of how freedom was understood, used, negotiated, upheld, withheld, and performed by Bermudians, both black and white, both slave and free, in the final three decades leading up to Emancipation in 1834.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'm surprised to find that after every hurdle overcome in writing this thesis, the most difficult page so far has actually been this one. Over the course of both my undergraduate and my Master's, I feel I've accumulated so much debt – emotional, scholarly, financial – to so many people in my circle, that I don't even know where to begin. I suppose therefore, I will start with the two people who have been the closest to this project since its beginning.

First of all, no acknowledgement would be complete without the vital recognition of those who support us not just through our degrees, but through our whole lives. As such, I must first send out the warmest gratitude to my vibrant, intelligent, hard-working, hilarious mother, Janeal Mick, who from the time I was a small child cultivated a home that valued learning, reading, curiosity, and critical inquiry. But these values would be nothing without love, generosity, kindness, and space for individuality to complement them – these things, too, my mother has always encouraged. For that, and all else, I owe everything.

I must of course acknowledge the contributions of my supervisor Dr. Neil Kennedy, who not only led me through this project with patience and understanding, but is also responsible for showing me the documents that drove this entire project.

As well, Dr. Phillip Reid, who I met when he was in Newfoundland for his dissertation defense some time ago, has proven to be a crucial strut in my support system, providing both life advice, consistent encouragement, and invaluable scholarly suggestions.

To my “sisters” Bria Graham, Jessica MacIntyre, and Kaela Hawker, thank you for always keeping me grounded in the real world and for reminding me that chosen family is just as important as the family we're born into. Through a program dropout, a GRE breakdown in the middle of a Calgary restaurant, a hundred hasty self-tapes, two-breakups, deaths, losses, birth, divorce, and huge distance, we've all, somehow, remained side-by-side. Thank you all for valuing me not because of my career aspirations, scholarly pursuits, or anything else, but simply because I'm me, and you're you.

Thank you to my best friend Doroteja Čupković, who always gets it, and always will, even in the silence, even in the rants. Thank you for Signal Hill hikes, collages, and ice cream, for late night ramen and early morning swims. I never thought glittery eye-shadow and existentialism would pair so well – yet here you are.

Gratitude to my platonic life partner (and dedicated acting partner) Shannon Kehler, who for some reason fell into my life two years ago while I was working on my secondary career, and has never left. For all the visits and all the hours-long video calls that kept me afloat during the loneliest moments of this degree, thank you. Also, for all the garlic bread.

Of course, I must acknowledge all those who contributed the vital element of financial aid not just these last two years, but during the course of my whole post-secondary adventure. Thank you especially to SSHRC and the CGS-M research grant, for which I am indescribably grateful. As well, thank you to Joël Madore and, again, Neil Kennedy, for providing the references that helped me to secure SSHRC funding in the first place. I must also thank my uncles, Ron Hopp and Bob Mick, and my grandmother Carolyn Mick.

A number of people have entered my life since 2016, and as people do, some have also left. I feel therefore that I would be remiss if I didn't still thank some of those who are no longer involved with this project at its current stage: namely, the Smith family, most especially Clayton Brandon. Thank you, C.B., for all the delicious meals while I was

writing, and all the evening wine tastings; thank you for being a supportive partner while you could, and for reminding me that I have a lot to offer in spite of often crippling self-doubt. To the rest of the family, thank you for all the generosity last summer while I was staying in Glovertown. Thanks to Becky, Barb, Clay Sr., Dan, Dorm, and of course, Stella, for much-needed relaxation time at the cabin, for holiday meals, hearty breakfasts, and for teaching me how to waterski – a skill I feel certain will be important at some point.

Thank you, most importantly of all, to the individuals whose stories are written in fragments and shards in the Books of Miscellany. You matter. Since I can't speak for you, and I can't speak with you, the least I can do is speak about you.

*For my Grandpa.
Who even at the end taught me that being human is complex.*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION & HISTORIOGRAPHY

1.1 Goals, Strategies, & Significance of Research

Although this study focuses primarily on Bermuda between 1800 and 1834, like most histories, it really begins in the present day. In its earliest form, this research was going to be about the criminalization of blackness in the slaveholding world – a historical reality, among many others, that has subsequently been in part responsible for the transmission of racism through the centuries and into our modern world. Even as I write this, discussions of North American and international politics are rife with racial anxiety, underpinned by themes of criminalization. Without dwelling for too long on our contemporary situation, and without slipping into a teleology of race-history, it is important to note that the themes in this paper are relevant today not only in the news, but in pop culture, the media, and in the everyday lives of millions of people – indeed arguably, of everyone.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, for a quick but poignant illustration of this, reports that black men in the United States between 1980 and 2015 were incarcerated at five times the rate of their white counterparts, and black women at twice the rate of white women.¹ This is only one statistic indicating the staunch race tensions currently at play in the United States and elsewhere – tensions that, albeit in different forms, have existed across cultures for centuries and are rooted most often in a common theme: that of trans-Atlantic slavery. This research, instead of focusing explicitly on the intersections between race and perceived criminality, used modern relationships

¹ “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet,” National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Copyright 2018, <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>

between class, conflict, and the social economy as a stepping-off point for thinking about the interactions between constructed blackness and historical freedom. After analyzing a set of documents from the Books of Miscellany, discovered in Bermuda's National Archives, this project has come to fruition.

With substantial assistance from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, this work was conducted over the course of two years, essentially in two stages. The project began with and centers on case studies derived from digital photographs of individual pages in five volumes of the Books of Miscellany, all of which amount to roughly three hundred records, spread between about 1800 and 1834. The first stage of this project comprised mostly of reading and cataloguing these records, ultimately entering short-form summaries of their most important details such as date, names and ages, parish, cost details, witnesses, and any special notes or observations into a digital spreadsheet. The second stage has consisted of gathering information from secondary sources, becoming more familiar with Bermuda's general history, trying to draw parallels between case studies in the Books and political phenomena documented in secondary research, and ultimately, writing this thesis.

This project did not begin with a pre-established conclusion about manumission in 19th century Bermuda that would assumedly be supported or refuted by selecting the Books as historical evidence. Rather, it began with some questions about the nature of slavery in Bermuda – stemming from a curiosity as to why Bermudian slavery has been somewhat under-studied – and the Books stood on their own as documents of interest that had not been previously analyzed; they seemed significant, and it seemed appropriate to dedicate a standalone study to the Books themselves.

It was through cataloguing and analyzing the content of the Books that the conclusion was drawn, in essence, that transitions to and meanings of freedom in 19th century Bermuda were diverse, ambivalent, complex, and often undefinable. Each one of the case studies that follow reveals a different face of slavery, a different face of freedom, and a distinct facet of Bermuda's peculiar 19th century epoch. These case studies simultaneously tell stories of manumission as a social commodity, or a symbol of familial love, as an economic strategy, a method of coercion, or sometimes as the deployment of oppressed agency, as displays of ostensible white benevolence, or as a lifeline to self-actualization.

The fact of these seemingly scattered meanings does not render the well-packaged interpretation or understanding of freedom and manumission for which researchers might hope, but it does demonstrate that populations, no matter how historically oppressed, no matter how marginal in the archive, still ultimately resist essentialization. It also demonstrates that socio-political phenomena such as manumission, although they frequently maintain characteristics of the oppressive social strata from which they were born, necessarily take-up meanings as diverse as the individuals they affect. Far from a disappointing result, conclusions such as these, which help build toward highlighting the complexity of a particular historical phenomenon, are vital stepping stones in the historiography of any subject.

As a secondary realization, therefore, this project demonstrates that subaltern stories such as those encased in the Books of Miscellany often resist blunt interpretation or clear narrativizing. This thesis is therefore, in many ways, simply a semiotic adventure, taking the form of an overview and interpretation of a number of case studies drawn directly from

the Books. Hopefully, the stories of these few individuals will serve as steps toward opening some new avenues of thought or curiosity in the history of Atlantic freedom. Tangentially, the result of this project may also serve as a cursory illustration of the myriad challenges associated with conducting historical research on previously unstudied archival records, which can often resist interpretation and are not always easily definable.

1.2 The Books and Bermuda's Importance

The Books of Miscellany are sitting, at this moment, in Bermuda's National Archives, almost completely unstudied until now. A collection of documents from Bermuda's Colonial Office, these hand-written copies of original papers were compiled in the 19th century by the Colonial Secretary, and are roughly organized and sorted according to date, in several volumes. Aptly named, each volume of these Books contains a miscellaneous array of documents concerning hundreds of enslaved individuals, including bills of sale, receipts of payment, conveyances, deeds of gift, certificates of self-purchase and declarations of manumission. Bermuda not only stands to be the subject of far more historical inquiry for the simple fact it has been largely under-researched in Atlantic studies, but also because, contemporaneously, Bermuda was an important geographical intersection in the Atlantic trade system, especially after it became a base for the Royal Navy in 1815. The records encased in the Books of Miscellany therefore proffer not just contributions to Bermuda's slaveholding history, but to the story of transatlantic slavery as a whole. This project is relevant to the greater body of literature because, firstly, it points directly to a noticeable gap in the literature on race in the pre-Emancipation Atlantic, and secondly, because it could make a small start toward filling that gap.

In 2016 when this project began, the goal was to catalogue and analyze the approximately three-hundred documents in the Books of Miscellany ranging from about the years 1800 to 1834, the latter being the year of Emancipation in the British Empire. After doing so, it was hypothesized that it would be possible to pull from the catalogue some fairly basic statistics about manumission in 19th century Bermuda leading up to 1834; it seemed reasonable to assume, for instance, based mostly on preliminary reading of secondary literature on manumission, that a pattern of description would emerge from the record. It was expected that there would be clusters of manumissions based on age, or skill, or gender, or even parish, and that there would be visible correlations between the cost of manumission and factors like age or race.

These assumptions were repeatedly disappointed, however, and more often than not it appeared that factors like the cost of self-purchase or even of slave conveyances were determined purely on a case-by-case basis, seemingly at the discretion of the executor of a given document (most frequently a white owner). This lack of any discernible quantitative pattern in the record was a large contributing factor in the ultimate form of this thesis itself which, as previously mentioned, is comprised of a series of case studies drawn from the Books of Miscellany. These case studies help to build a cursory picture of how freedom might have been understood in 19th century Bermuda. In looking at the record, it became clear that this could be a story not just about slave owners or legislative figures, not about historical facts or notable events, or even purely about the slave trade and capitalism, but about understanding the texture and complexity of the lived experiences of everyday Bermudians both black and white, both enslaved and free.

1.3 The Literature

Because Bermuda has so seldom been the focus of independent studies, the pool of secondary literature on Bermudian slavery is fairly limited and is currently dominated by a small handful of scholars including Neil Kennedy, Clarence Maxwell, Michael Jarvis, Quito Swan, and their main predecessors, Virginia Bernhard and the late Cyril Outerbridge Packwood. For the content of this thesis, heavy reference has been made to work by scholars outside the strict realm of Bermudian history, including modern academics whose work on slavery, gender, and race have formed a large portion of the foundation of the ideas in this text. Cited throughout are scholars like Jennifer Morgan, Saidiya Hartman, Ken Dawson, Sasha Turner, Colleen Vasconcellos, Mimi Sheller, Judith Kelleher Schafer, and many others, all of whom have recently contributed important ideas to the ever-growing canon of work on slave history.

One of the most substantive and foundational histories of Bermuda referenced for this project was not a strict history of a single topic or theme, but a set of two sweeping volumes published in 1973 by amateur historian Henry C. Wilkinson. *From Sail to Steam* details, broadly, Bermuda's most significant moments in the years when the British Empire was at its arguably most powerful.² Due to the wildly impressive detail and scope of these two volumes, they served this research mostly as a fact-checking tool and an accessible interpretation of some of the key political and economic moments of Bermuda's 18th and 19th century history. Understanding freedom and slavery – understanding life – in Bermuda starts with understanding the place itself, and a substantial portion of that understanding

² Henry Wilkinson, *From Sail to Steam: The History of the Island from 1784 to 1901, Volume 1 and Volume 2* (Oxford University Press, 1973).

came from the colourful details in Wilkinson's volumes. Without Wilkinson's work, this thesis would likely not exist, and yet his method of writing history was so out-of-fashion even when he wrote it that its importance is certainly not sufficiently reflected in the bulk content of this project. One contemporary book review of Wilkinson's volumes pointed out the "stupefying amount of detail about every conceivable aspect" of Bermudian life before going on to criticize its lack of analysis.³

Wilkinson's writing in *From Sail to Steam* essentially traces and recount the details of perceivably significant historical events, mostly involving elite white men or high-status colony officials. Wilkinson's work in the volumes manages to function as both a macro-history and a micro-history of Bermuda, telling us at once an overwhelming number of details about the island's factual history without very much critical discussion of that history at all. Regardless, these volumes were indispensable in getting a sense of Bermudian culture, traditions, and social geography, details that proved vital when dealing with otherwise contextless primary documents like the Books of Miscellany.

Since Wilkinson's history mostly takes the form of recounting and re-telling, it is his descriptive language choices that are revealing of some personal biases and opinions about Bermuda's culture; at different junctions Wilkinson calls Bermuda a "healthy" place or refers to Newfoundland as "hard-bitten," for instance – descriptors used in passing that are revealing perhaps of cultural stereotypes and/or cross-Atlantic relations.⁴ At one point in the text, Wilkinson mentions manumission specifically, glazing over the complex nature

³ Raymond Callahan, "Henry Wilkinson *From Sail to Steam*," review of *From Sail to Steam*, by Henry Wilkinson, *The American Historical Review*, 1974.

⁴ Wilkinson, *Bermuda From Sail to Steam Vol. 1*, 36; Wilkinson, *From Sail to Steam Vol. 2*, 609.

of self-purchase and manumission by focussing on the “kindly” white owners who “had been liberating their well-behaved slaves” since the 1790s.⁵ It is true that Bermuda throughout its history had an extremely low incidence of physical brutality toward its slaves, different, for instance, from the completely abhorrent conditions and extremely high mortality rates on sugar plantations in places like Jamaica, or portions of the southern United States. To equate this with “kindliness,” however, is still problematic.

Because of the limited genealogy of literature on Bermudians slavery, some of the work being done on the topic, even as recently as Michael Jarvis’ work for instance, takes for granted that Bermudian slavery existed in a milder or more benevolent state than in the rest of the Atlantic slaveholding world. Bermuda was unique as a slaveholding colony: as a tiny chain of islands with fairly crowded living quarters in its towns, and with rough parity in the black and white populations, Bermuda was an anomaly of sorts, and its particular brand of slavery was anomalous also – but this does not mean, as has been and is currently debated in the academy, that it was completely benign. It was different, evidence shows it was less physically deadly than slaveholding centers that relied on grueling plantation labour, but the notion that relative benignity equates to benevolence is a notion worth interrogating. This is another key motif of this thesis and is addressed throughout.

As a matter of fact, notion of Bermudian benignity has been challenged for almost as long as it has been around. In the 1970s, Cyril Packwood, a librarian of the New York Public Library system and nonprofessional historian, wrote *Chained on the Rock*, the first standalone monograph (and one of only two in the entire historiography) specifically

⁵ Wilkinson, *Bermuda From Sail to Steam*, 229.

concerning Bermudian slavery as a core topic. *Chained on the Rock* was written during a period of thick racial tension in the Caribbean and was ultimately published in 1975 outside of the academy. This political context is illuminated by historian Quito Swan in his essay “Black Power in Bermuda,” and helps to explain the careful manner in which Packwood’s book deals with topics of race, racism, manumission, and coercion in slaveholding Bermuda.

In the text, Packwood discusses manumission and self-purchase as desirable and legitimate routes to freedom. Fascinatingly, Packwood directly cites the Books of Miscellany, at several points even referencing documents catalogued for this project, but he largely uses the existence of these manumission records to illustrate that Bermudians were indeed seeking escape from the slavery institution. According to Packwood’s logic, if “slaves were treated benevolently” by their kindly owners, there would not and should not be evidence of slaves seeking avenues of escape in the form of self-purchase or truancy.⁶

Unfortunately, Packwood seems to have been so occupied with remaining non-inflammatory in his work, *Chained on the Rock* makes no theoretical space at all for change over time, or distinctness of slavery in different places and eras – this is unhelpful when examining a period such as the 19th century, when so much political particularity was at play in the public sphere: the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807 changed the fabric of Atlantic slavery, the contested amelioration of conditions for slaves in 1827 resulted in another shift in slaveholding culture, Emancipation the following decade came after years

⁶ Cyril Outerbridge Packwood, *Chained on the Rock: Slavery in Bermuda* (Eliseo Torres & Sons, 1975), xi.

of antislavery debate and abolitionist sentiment in Britain, and the Napoleonic Wars certainly influenced international politics for the first quarter of the 19th century at least. These are all important considerations in any analysis of 19th century freedom and slavery, but they are not addressed in *Chained on the Rock*.

This project is distinct from Packwood's understanding of manumission in that it attempts to focus on analyzing processes toward freedom as historical moments within themselves – as evidence of historical power discourses in a racialized system – rather than accepting the existence of manumission and self-purchase documents as uncomplicated routes to freedom. In Packwood's context, as a black scholar working without the security of the academy behind him, in a time of political strife, it is unsurprising that the nature of manumission remains largely unchallenged or uncomplicated in *Chained on the Rock*. By citing manumission documents without much elaboration and opening the door to skepticism about Bermudian slaveholder motives, Packwood might have been hoping scholars would go back and do more work on the subject.

The second monograph concerning Bermudian slavery came along in the late 1990s, when social histories of gender and race were beginning to emerge with more popularity and fervor than ever before. In *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, a social history focussing heavily on family, gender, and race, historian Virginia Bernhard conducts a fairly brief but enlightening discussion of Bermudian manumission, one that recalls and challenges the notion of the kindly Bermudian owner that was mentioned in both Packwood's monograph and Wilkinson's sweeping history.⁷ Because of the densely-

⁷ Virginia Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda: 1616-1782* (University of Missouri Press, 1999).

populated nature of Bermuda, Bernhard explains, 17th century legislation made it technically illegal for free blacks to remain on the islands. Bernhard notes that “the duly manumitted slave was required to leave Bermuda within six months.”⁸ While this does not seem to have been enforced in this project’s period of study – later than Bernhard’s monograph, which ends its narrative in 1782 – this detail should cause us to wonder about something Packwood perhaps considered but never really questioned in *Chained on the Rock*: could manumission have sometimes been used by slaveholders not as a promise but as a threat? And in the case of manumission as the creation of a symbolically illegal resident, did this discourage self-purchase, thereby explaining why so few enslaved merchant mariners – although they could accumulate some wealth – succeeded in achieving self-purchase? And if none of these possibilities are true, then why did slave owners allow for manumission at all? And why did some enslaved people choose it as their path through self-purchase even if it might have meant their status as a Bermudian could be challenged?

As for scholarship on manumission specifically, the topic itself is usually mentioned in passing, or as a supplement to grappling with notions of freedom within slave societies. But in 2009, Randy Sparks and Rosemary Brana-Shute edited a collection of essays dealing specifically with manumission, called *Paths to Freedom*. This collection contains a chapter by Orlando Patterson that contributes nuance to the discipline of manumission history in its discussion of the process as a sort of cultural ‘gift exchange’.⁹ This is a perspective Patterson admittedly takes directly from anthropology and folklore studies, aligning it with

⁸ Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders*, 230.

⁹ Rosemary Brana-Shute and Randy Sparks, eds., *Paths to Freedom: Manumission in the Atlantic World*. (University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 17.

the current state of historical studies as increasingly interdisciplinary, with anthropological, sociological, even psychological theories often being taught in graduate and undergraduate historiography classes. Patterson's approach certainly influenced the style of this project, which inevitably sometimes crosses the boundaries between disciplines to make a point. Generally, however, I have tried to ground this discussion in the Books of Miscellany case studies, all in an effort to keep the debate historicized, and rooted in archival evidence.

It is not necessary to entirely subscribe to the theoretical details of Patterson's concepts to agree that they carry analytical merit in terms of understanding the potential sub-meaning of cultural exchanges such as manumission.¹⁰ Patterson points out, for instance, that any fee an enslaved individual might present in exchange for his or her freedom would be utterly ideologically insufficient, given the sheer magnitude of the ostensible gift of freedom, which the owner had the god-like, indeed God-given, power to grant with a mere signature and seal. Patterson surmises that the fee for self-purchase might have been little more than a socio-political symbol, "a mere token, an expression of gratitude" for an act of such apparent mercy on the part of the owner, inherent in the "decision to release the slave from his eternal bondage" that the fee itself was merely a formality.¹¹

This is important theoretical work being done by Patterson in complicating the notion and symbolism of manumission, and I have tried to incorporate that theoretical complexity into portions of this paper while still having a stubborn, evidence-grounded discussion about enslaved Bermudians in order to break with any notion that they are silent

¹⁰ Brana-Shute and Sparks, eds., *Paths to Freedom*, 19.

¹¹ Brana-Shute and Sparks, eds., *Paths to Freedom*, 17.

in the record, and therefore that they require special or symbolic historical analysis to be considered relevant. Enslaved people did leave their mark. Enslaved people were not silent.

Problematically, the apparent ability of slaves to forge their own way toward lives of freedom through self-purchase and manumission – an ability which is examined in *Paths to Freedom* as inherently complex and sometimes unclear – has contributed to the notion of Bermudian benevolence. Jarvis falls into this trap in his 2010 historical survey of Bermuda, *In the Eye of All Trade* when he persuasively presents a case for Bermuda as a maritime center connecting vital threads of the Atlantic trade system, but, in his discussion of enslavement, slips into an analysis of Bermuda as a non-violent locale where slaves were treated with kindness or were granted more freedoms than in other areas of the slaveholding world.

Notwithstanding the fact that memoirs of Bermudian slaves, such as Mary Prince's famous account, cast doubt on the idea that Bermuda might have been non-violent anyway, interpretations like Jarvis' can act as ideological pitfalls, obscuring the fact that, regardless of the relative physical brutality of any particular breed of slavery (and there were very extreme variations throughout the Atlantic, it is true), enslavement always amounted to the stripping of freedoms and rights from an entire demographic. Still, Jarvis' love for Bermuda is clear throughout his text, and his focus really is on proving the significance of Bermuda as a site of Atlantic trade in the Age of Sail – work that was important for justifying the relevance of any further studies of Bermuda in broader Atlantic contexts.

Jarvis' book also complements Virginia Bernhard's research, but only briefly and early on in the text. When discussing Somers Islands Company Governor Sir John Heydon, Jarvis explains that Heydon was displeased with the ostensibly lenient freedoms of slaves

and free blacks in Bermuda, and that he strove for a clearly delineated, racialized stratification between enslaved and free. As a result, Heydon passed a proclamation in 1673 which “transformed freedom into exile for black [Bermudians].”¹²

After 1673, self-purchase and owner-granted manumission “would ironically force freed slaves to leave their homeland and families.”¹³ Jarvis, quoting the Somers Islands Company, describes enslaved Bermudians as having been “more numerous than convenient,” confirming that Bermuda was overcrowded.¹⁴ Yet few measures seem to have been taken – beyond Heydon’s un-enforced proclamation and the weakly enforced slave import ban of 1675 – to ameliorate this overcrowding.¹⁵ It seems that slaveholders in Bermuda were keeping slaves, and sometimes manumitting them against the island’s best interest. The challenge, of course, is explaining why.

In spite of Jarvis’ discussion of manumission as a potentially double-edged option for enslaved people in the first third of his book, he goes on later to still contribute to the notion of Bermudian slaveholding exceptionalism, claiming that due to the maritime character of Bermuda’s economy, “slave owners valued their prolific slaves and the vital work they did,” as if the labour was not fundamentally coercively acquired.¹⁶ Jarvis goes on to describe the myriad of ways slavery was vital to the functioning of Bermuda as a whole, and his point is valid – we must not forget that slaves are just as responsible as free-labourers for the building-up of societies – but he fails to point out that in spite of slavery’s

¹² Michael Jarvis, *Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680-1783* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 57.

¹³ Jarvis, *Eye of All Trade*, 57.

¹⁴ Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade*, 57.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 106-108.

importance, enslaved people were not creating and supporting Bermuda by choice, and nor were they afforded the same privileges and thanks as free workers for doing the exact same work, often under more duress.¹⁷

It is important to remember that demographics and regionality – and time, of course – are among a plethora of contingent factors that inevitably shape the history of places and people. The aim of studies such as this is not to imply that slavery in all areas of the world and in every period manifested in the same way, or that the particularity of cultures (even cultures of violence) is unimportant, but rather to make room for examinations of slave societies which might have appeared to be less physically violent as oppressive nonetheless.

Looking at the record, even the Books of Miscellany, harshness and cruelty are often replaced in bills of sale with legal boilerplate language, but the talk of conveyance, monetary exchange, and of “to have and to hold,” serves only to bury and silence the reality of sold human lives, oppressed political agency, and exploitative paternalism.¹⁸ We know these realities carried weight for enslaved people – we know because of Mary Prince’s memoir, because public slave auctions happened, because legal documents whisper about slaves having “smooth” complexions and because this implies a lash-inflicted alternative.

Clarence Maxwell wrote a substantial paper about Bermudian enslaved merchants for the journal *Early American Studies* in 2009 which calls into question black merchant mariner rationales for remaining enslaved when freedom was potentially gained at British foreign ports. Some explanations for this rest with the fact that enslaved people had families

¹⁷ Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade*, 109.

¹⁸ “To have and to hold” is a common phrase in the Books of Miscellany documents and seems to have been standard property law jargon in conveyances, bills of sale, and often manumissions.

to return to in Bermuda and lives they were not likely to walk away from, but it problematizes Packwood's implication that paths to freedom could be walked in straight lines.¹⁹

Since Bermuda, like anywhere, was a site of fluidity and process, with an ever-evolving political and social landscape, it would be wrongheaded to assume that slavery remained steady in character throughout three centuries of history. Although this project necessarily draws upon work concerning other areas of the slaveholding Atlantic, and other eras, the ultimate goal is to investigate and understand the years between 1800 and 1834 – the reality of which cannot and should not be blindly conflated with any other time or place. The need to avoid conflation, combined with the small pool of secondary research to draw upon pertaining directly to 19th century Bermuda, and other methodological reasons discussed in the opening section of this text, account further for the case study analysis form of this thesis.

To help rectify the challenges associated with conducting a study based largely on primary resources with little secondary-source backing, work on political languages was invaluable to this project. Joan Scott's work, for instance, in *Gender and the Politics of History* provided a theoretical framework for understanding analytical categories of identity in the past, but another helpful text was *The Political Languages of Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South* by Demetrius Eudell. Admittedly the text focusses solely on Jamaica and South Carolina, but Eudell's claim that "the methodological

¹⁹ See: Clarence Maxwell, "Enslaved Merchants, Enslaved Merchant-Mariners, and the Bermuda Conspiracy of 1761" in *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 140-178.

approached employed” in the monograph “provides a new intellectual departure” for any geographical area of interest offered some help in reading the particular language of manumission texts even in a purely Bermudian context.²⁰ Eudell is more concerned with how the language of manumission came to exist in North America and the greater British Empire on a political scale. This project is concerned more with freedom on an individual scale, but personal freedom and political freedom in the 19th century were intertwined, especially in the years immediately prior to Emancipation, so Eudell’s book came in handy, like Scott’s work, as a theoretical framework for reading historical texts.

In terms of where this research fits within the current historiography, there been a turn since the middle of the 20th century, especially within Social History, and even more especially the history of slavery, toward analytical theories of the body; take, for instance, Saidiya Hartman, whose monograph *Scenes of Subjection*, cited here with some frequency, deals extensively with the notion of corporeality and embodiment as it pertains to (and bears down upon) the ontological realities of enslaved people.²¹ Body-centric scholarship – such as Hartman’s, or Jennifer Morgan’s work on labouring (imbued with multiple meanings) women in New World slavery (2004), or more recently, Sasha Turner’s 2017 article “Slavery, Freedom, and Women’s Bodies,” – has doubtless influenced portions of this thesis, especially with regard to sections concerning reproduction and pro-natalism.²²

²⁰ Demetrius L. Eudell, *The Political Languages of Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 8.

²¹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

²² Sasha Turner, “Slavery, Freedom, and Women’s Bodies” in *Journal of Women’s History* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 177-187. Jennifer Morgan, *Labouring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Coming personally from a background in philosophy, the writing herein draws inevitably from fields like phenomenology and semiotics and so often takes a discursive tone in order to maintain a level of accessibility and, I hope, clarity. For the purposes of keeping this a work of history, however, and not of philosophy, the only staunch philosophical work truly drawn upon for this project is that of Michel Foucault, another very historically-grounded thinker, and one whose ideas about the ‘social contract’ and about power discourse are particularly applicable to studies on slavery.²³ To frame this in more historiographical language: this thesis really leans on Foucauldian post-structuralism and on current analytical theories of embodiment in the vein of Turner, Morgan, and Hartman, but is firmly rooted in and centered around close analytical readings of a sample of case studies drawn from the Books of Miscellany.²⁴

All of the existing literature on Bermudian slavery, limited though it may be – the language of the manumission records themselves, census reports, newspapers, and first-hand accounts such as Prince’s memoir – adequately sets the scene for a colony based on a system of coercive mastery; a small but very complex society that deserves examination. This is what will be explored within the pages of this thesis. It is important to the canon of

²³ The main Foucauldian text to which I am referring is his *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, the key themes of which I take to chiefly concern notions of social power (what Foucault in some of his lectures from the late 1970s refers to as ‘*biopower*’); and discourses of power (meaning the social strata which, in conversation with one another, either reify or constantly renegotiate socio-political dynamics of a population). It is from this Foucauldian rendering of socio-political hierarchies and the notion of power discourse that I came to conceive of or envision enslaved freedom as a kind of commodity – a notion explicitly discussed by Orlando Patterson in *Slaves and Social Death*, which is heavily referenced later in this thesis – but a commodity which is exchanged and sold not only within an economic context: therefore, ‘social commodity’ is a phrase used herein.

²⁴ See pp: 17 re: Sasha Turner and Saidiya Hartman, and my interest in focusing on the body’s relationship to subaltern/enslaved ontology.

history that we try to understand what manumission really meant for manumitted persons, or for the owner who manumitted his or her slaves.

In looking toward specific examples of manumission, we might actually be able to come to a more complete understanding of the countless, entangled complexities of 19th century slavery, and maybe even freedom as a whole. The motivation behind this research rests in the simple fact that, to date, a self-contained study of Bermudian manumission has not been done, meaning that any existing examinations of Bermuda, or of slavery, are fundamentally incomplete; this is the primary historiographical gap the subsequent paper is intended to fill. To paint a picture of the world that lives in the pages of the Books of Miscellany – to understand the stories housed there – it is important to understand the place that created the documents in the first place. So, let us begin there.

CHAPTER 2: BERMUDA

2.1 Bermuda in Transition: A Brief History of the Place

At the closing of the 18th century, Bermuda found itself transitioning between mainstays of economic stability. Failed crops with low-quality yields, crowded land, and competition from better markets all prevented Bermuda from developing its own sustainable export economy from the first half of the 17th century.²⁵ But Bermuda had cedar trees in natural bounty; nearly impervious to worms and resistant to rot, plus soft and pliable enough for building without the brittleness and splinter of other popular woods like teak, Bermuda cedar was a nearly perfect material for shipbuilding in the Age of Sail. The unassuming chain of small islands – with only 52 square kilometers of space – quickly grew crowded with the incoming numbers of both British colonists and enslaved workers.

After the importation of African slaves into Bermuda was banned in 1674 (and stopped almost entirely in practice by the 1690s) as an effort to curb overpopulation, subsequent generations of slaves became Bermuda-born locals, reared alongside educated white families, attending the same churches, and working in the same sectors.²⁶ This island-locked (and by extension, largely coerced) workforce, available for maritime labour, would become Bermuda's key mode of gaining economic headway in the Atlantic system, through to the 1780s.²⁷

²⁵ Henry C. Wilkinson, *From Sail to Steam* Vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 1973), 1-69; Michael Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680-1783* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 103-107.

²⁶ Virginia Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, (University of Missouri Press, 1999), 192.

²⁷ Michael Jarvis, "The Binds of the Anxious Mariner: Patriarchy, Paternalism, and the Maritime Culture of Eighteenth-Century Bermuda" in *Journal of Early Modern History* 14 (2010): 84, 88-89, 97.

With shipbuilding at its commercial centre Bermuda's seafaring colony identity evolved as part and parcel to its geography, which was both intrinsically separate from governance in England but central to the Atlantic economy; Bermuda sits at rough equidistance from several points of crucial early-modern global trade, which made it an ideal middle-ground for the passing of international goods, people, and ideas. It was this distance from Crown supervision and Bermuda's placement as an Atlantic intersection that came to underwrite a niche culture of quiet disregard for the Navigation Acts, unspoken aloofness toward London, and a tendency even of elite mariners toward privateering and smuggling.²⁸ Money trickled into Bermuda through the Crown for basic infrastructure and subsistence, and the colony was "distinctive in that its society was composed predominantly of mariners who had a deep understanding of the British imperial system," but also because of a corollary disregard for participating in many aspects of that very system.²⁹ In spite of embargos, duties, and bans, Bermudians continued amidst international disputes and outright wars to trade for a period as a Free Port with British competitors including, at various times, Dutch colonies in the Caribbean, American buyers, and French merchants.³⁰

Incoming British governors – especially more patriotically-minded men like Governor James Bruere in the latter part of the 1700s – were aware of these apparent transgressions, but could do little in the way of preventing them, often demanding changes in line with "proper order and decency of manners" but frequently remaining unable to affect any shifts within the island's culture.³¹ Gradually, Bermuda gained a reputation as a

²⁸ Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 235-236.

²⁹ Jarvis, "The Binds of the Anxious Mariner", 109.

³⁰ See: Wilkinson, *From Sail to Steam* Vol. 1, 1-69.

³¹ Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders*, 235.

colony of marginality, one that was “loosely structured and highly permissive” with criminal activity, and with enslaved residents.³² This reputation translated in 18th century euphemistic jargon to ‘drunkenness’, ‘outrage’, ‘squandering’ and ‘vice’, with one visiting New Brunswick minister declaring there to be “scarcely a show of religion” at all in Bermuda - formal Sunday worship, which whites and blacks commonly attended together, apparently did not suffice.³³

Without any way to easily control or stop the smuggling culture of Bermudian mariners – or perhaps more accurately, without much of a particular desire to do so, given its inarguable benefits to Bermuda’s overall wealth – officials in government positions often gave up and instead claimed ignorance of the practices of Bermuda’s commercial activity. In 1738, Governor William Popple “allowed himself to believe that the reason for the presence of Spanish *and French* currency on Bermudian sloops had little to do with French and Spanish trading” – in other words, he ignored the illicit trade that was happening, so to speak, right under his nose.³⁴ While some officials were directly critical of Bermuda’s smuggling activity, enough employees of the Crown were engaged in “collusive under-governing” that the illicit trade was able to continue.³⁵

Through ignoring the Crown’s wishes and demands, and through the complicit participation of enough members of government in illicit trade, islanders maintained economic independence and kept their tiny colony afloat, all while busying a large black

³² Jarvis, “The Binds of the Anxious Mariner”, 115.

³³ Wilkinson, *From Sail to Steam* Vol.1, 243-245.

³⁴ C.E. Smith & C.V.H. Maxwell, “A Bermuda Smuggling-Slave Trade: The ‘Manilla Wreck’ Opens Pandora’s Box” in *Slavery & Abolition* 23, no. 1 (April 2002): 66-67.

³⁵ Smith & Maxwell, “A Bermuda Smuggling-Slave Trade”, 67.

population (47 percent of the total population by the late 18th century) that was not engaged in plantation labour.³⁶ Without an agrarian foundation, nearly all Bermudian slaves were partially educated mariners, skilled workers such as stonemasons, or domestic servants; the free black population made a living in similar realms, as did lower class whites and people of mixed race (commonly called “Mulattos” or “people of colour”).³⁷ With governors like Pople willfully tolerating the reality of the Bermudian economy, they got to keep up appearances of control over the West Indies back in London, and Bermuda could develop its somewhat illicit, but culturally unique character as distinct from the rest of the British Empire, all while legitimately taking on the role of a shipbuilding colony. This went on for decades.

However, the American Revolution ended in 1783 and was accompanied by a drop not only in the cost of wooden vessels, but also in demand for *en masse* shipbuilding – this was the first strike to a (legal) Bermudian economy that had been relying largely on shipbuilding and seafaring for colonial revenue. The second blow came in the form of taxation on existing British vessels, which discouraged previously open trade between Bermuda and the United States, and also landed a swift blow to smuggling practices. While a brief turn to Northern markets and fishing for cod off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, as well as a foray into whaling, offered temporary reprieve to Bermudian sailors, ship owners, and merchants, the relationship was not to last. Newfoundlanders soon became perturbed by Bermudian sailors – many of whom were slaves – fishing for mass quantities

³⁶ Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 99.

³⁷ See: Cyril Outerbridge Packwood, *Chained on the Rock: Slavery in Bermuda* (Eliseo Torres & Sons, 1975).

of cod and using their shores for curing. By the 1780s, an invocation of the 1775 Palliser Act, according to Wilkinson, all but put a total stop to this new economic venture.³⁸

The salt-carrying and wrecking trades that took place in the area today known as Turks and Caicos had also become integral parts of Bermuda's maritime industry, but even they were put into a downturn in the late 1780s by increased enforcement of duties and taxes in the Dutch Antilles. This enforcement climaxed in 1786 with the seizure by a Nassau customs officer of more than \$35 000 dollars worth of materials that Bermudian wreckers had spent the whole summer collecting.³⁹

The following year, Britain itself outlawed trade at Dutch Caribbean Free Ports, effectively halting all key Bermudian trade activities in the broader Caribbean.⁴⁰ In 1787, in the context of drastically reduced shipping and a shortage of jobs for white mariners, the Crown demanded that at least two thirds of all shipping crews be white.⁴¹ With so many slaves on the island it was difficult to re-assign work to the enslaved workers who abruptly found themselves without a placement, and so landed the fourth blow to the traditional organization of Bermuda's post-war economy. Privateering continued into the 1790s, but privateers themselves all but severed their already-tenuous trading friendships with other countries by violating neutrality in desperate attempts at returning prize money to the islands. When privateers like Bridger Goodrich started actively capturing American vessels toward the turn of the century, it foreshadowed a swift end to Bermudian privateering.⁴²

³⁸ See: Wilkinson, *Bermuda From Sail to Steam* Vol. 1, 120-177.

³⁹ Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade*, 451.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 452.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 454.

⁴² Wilkinson, *Bermuda From Sail to Steam* Vol. 1, 120-177; Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade*, 453.

It was fortunate timing, then, that in 1795 a mapping venture commissioned by the Royal Navy proved the presence of deep-water channels and anchorages around Bermuda, providing the possibility for heavy, large-draught ships of the line to harbour there.⁴³ Jarvis points to this as a pivotal moment in Bermuda's economic history, when the Royal Navy – and by extension, London – trained its eye on Bermuda as the location for a new naval dockyard, more or less ending Bermuda's extra-legal maritime tradition, and marking a new era of Bermuda as a naval base.

With this new economic orientation came new opportunities. Fewer slaves were 'employed' as mariners and instead were placed at work on the dockyards as masons, builders, and sawyers. In the background, whaling and fishing continued as viable means of maritime employment on a smaller scale. In 1831, only three years prior to Emancipation, Francis Forbes Hinson manumitted several skilled slaves who were crewmembers on his whaler *Edward Goodrich* so that he could continue to Trinidad with a free crew.

Hinson's rationale for the manumissions entails a desire to comply with an 1824 amendment to the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, "An Act to amend and consolidate the Laws relating to the Abolition of the Slave Trade." This amendment speaks at length about the shipping and transporting of slaves, and explicitly outlaws the "the importing or bringing into any place whatsoever slaves or other persons, as or in order to their being dealt with as slaves."⁴⁴ While Hinson's ship was a whaler and not a slave-trading vessel,

⁴³ Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade*, 454-455.

⁴⁴ British National Archives, "Slave Trade Act 1824," Original text as enacted, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo4/5/113/contents/enacted>.

enough of the language in the Act is unclear enough that he might not have wanted to take any chances being caught at sea with a crew full of enslaved sailors. To avoid the possibility of incurring penalties for using slave sailors, the manumissions of Ephraim, Jimmy, Jack, Benjamin, and January, were, quite simply, in Hinson's best interest.⁴⁵

His action shows nonetheless that despite the economic hardships of the 1780s, seafaring did persist in Bermuda through to the 19th century, even if to a lesser extent; and, in Hinson's case at least, it could be said that by the 19th century, some shipmasters were more willingly compliant with Crown legislation. Perhaps the increasing presence of naval authority on the islands had an effect on the defiant culture Bermuda had come to abide in the 1700s, or perhaps the economic downturn was a hindrance to the unruly character of earlier Bermudian maritime activity. Or, as Jarvis posits, it is possible that the consequences of the American Revolution simply resulted in a de facto loss of independence for Bermuda.⁴⁶

Still, the 1800s saw the continuance of some minor smuggling which channelled goods through St. George's into Bermuda's marketplace right under the Royal Navy's gaze.⁴⁷ But for the most part, employment – especially of slaves – had become land-based. By Emancipation in 1834, only one in eight black men still went to sea, a far cry from the population of black seamen Bermuda set to sail in the early 18th century.⁴⁸ And despite the island's closer proximity to English rule of law via the presence of government hires

⁴⁵ Books of Miscellany, Volume 9, November 16th, 1831; In the 1827 register some of these men are listed as having other occupations – masonry, labouring, stonecutting etc.

⁴⁶ Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade*, 440-448.

⁴⁷ Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade*, 449-471.

⁴⁸ Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 148-190.

monitoring the dockyards, Bermuda's reputation as a colony of whites too permissive with their slaves continued up to Emancipation.

2.2 Bermuda and Slave Freedom

While Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba, Barbados, and more suffered the cumulative consequences of years of enslavement, Bermuda remained ostensibly peaceful. For over seven decades, its white population existed alongside an almost equally large black population that did not violently rebel, even during periods when revolts were happening nearly everywhere else in the surrounding waters. In an effort to avoid a narrative that could easily be propelled by the notion that the group in political and social power is the one that drives history forward, this thesis instead posits that the ostensible racial peace in Bermuda in the 19th century was not solely due to the relative benevolence or kindness of Bermudian slaveowners. Instead, this work has been done through a lens which cautiously assumes that Bermuda's ostensible lack of racial tension had more to do with the social influence of a black population that chose, for whatever reason, not to overtly, violently revolt – a theoretical notion upheld, as previously mentioned, partially by Packwood's work, but also by contemporary researchers such as Clarence Maxwell and Neil Kennedy. In such a context, operating under such a method, it is inappropriate to conclude, as Wilkinson did, that manumissions were conducted because “kindly Bermudian owners” were simply “liberating well-behaved slaves.”⁴⁹

This is not to say that manumission was a transaction that took place without a distinct imbalance of power, even in relatively calm Bermuda. Orlando Patterson addresses

⁴⁹ Wilkinson, *Bermuda From Sail to Steam*, 229.

the complexities of this issue in his 1982 monograph, *Slavery and Social Death*, by coining categories of manumission, and illustrating that manumissions were both culturally and socially variable depending on any number of considerations. This, of course, is why it becomes important in a project such as this one to contextualize the details of the society in which the manumissions took place – if we can isolate or outline the ideological character of manumission in Bermuda, then perhaps we can begin to define its purpose, and thereby start to understand its practical reality for the people who experienced it. For the manumitted Bermudian, was manumission an end in itself or a means to an end? What end? Freedom, or something more? Something less than freedom?

Patterson points out that while certain types of manumission were analogous to conveyance – a sale and purchase such as they are recorded in Bermuda’s Books of Miscellany – manumission differs fundamentally and ideologically from a typical conveyance because “the master does not convey dominium or power to the slave; he merely releases him from his dominium.”⁵⁰ Adding further to the complexity of defining the meaning of manumission to 19th century Bermudians are the many different types of manumission represented within the record. In volumes five through ten of the Books of Miscellany, over a mere thirty-year span, manumissions take several different forms: owner-granted manumissions upon that owner’s death (what Patterson would call “post-mortem” manumission); owner-granted for “faithful service” or some variation thereof; owner-granted freedom to a family member or to an infant; self-purchased freedom by a slave of any age or gender; freedom purchased by a slave’s already-free family member;

⁵⁰ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Harvard University Press, 1982), 210.

and the very peculiar instance of half-manumission, wherein a slave bought or was granted “half of her time” and labour.

This last sort of manumission, in which half of a slave’s time was relinquished (or granted, depending both on the wording of the document and on one’s perspective), is perhaps the most curious. As far as I have been able to determine, this sort of manumission might have been entirely unique to Bermuda; if half-manumissions happened anywhere else during the grip of Atlantic slavery, no scholarship of prominence appears to have addressed it. When half-manumission appears in the Books of Miscellany, it is easy to pass over without further consideration since the certificates themselves take the same general form of most manumission certificates. But upon closer reading, the language of these half-manumissions is interesting and deeply troubling. Take for example, the case of Dianna, who on March 15th, 1820, was half-manumitted by her owner Ann Richarson, with the other half of Dianna’s labour (and that of any of Dianna’s future children), to be divided among Ann’s four daughters:

Bermuda Alias
Somers’ Islands

[...] Know ye that I Ann Richarson of the parish of Pembroke in the Islands aforesaid for and in consideration of the love, good will and affection which I have and do bear toward my Slave Dianna Richarson of the same parish, have given and granted and by these presents do freely give and grant unto the said Dianna Richarson one half of her time as long as she lives without any manner of condition. Should the said Dianna Richarson have any children, they are to have one half of their time likewise as long as they do live. The other half of Dianna Richarson’s time, and should she have children the other half of their time, is to be appropriated to the use of Ann Richarson’s four children Viz: Nancy Tucker, Catherine Tucker, Margaret Ann Henderson and Elenora Gale. It is to be equally divided among them four. [...]⁵¹

⁵¹ Books of Miscellany, Volume 9, pp. 97. Some punctuation added for clarity.

The certificate is signed by ‘Nancy Richarson’ – Ann might have been a middle name by which she was locally known (note that two of her daughters carry the names Nancy and Ann). The witnesses to the transaction were two more women, Elizabeth Darrell White, and Susan Eliza Stubbs. All the women signed for themselves, except for Dianna – written consent was given, then, not by the person whose freedom was at stake, but by those deigning to grant and/or approve that freedom. There is no receipt, nor a notarization, and no follow-up entry that might expand on Dianna’s case.

Notice the reasoning behind Dianna’s manumission as a gesture of “love, good will and affection.” Declarations of love or good intention from parties who hold positions of power should arouse some suspicion – especially when those effusive claims appear in official documents. The nature of slavery as the delegitimizing of personhood through forced chattel status creates a clear gradient of power in the relationship between owner and owned. Different from 19th century marriages or the parent-child relationship, wherein one party might hold some form of power based on gender and legality or age and guardianship, slavery often required a substantial level of violence and/or coercion in order for the relationship to be maintained. Not only this, but a tendency toward self-justification is to be expected in documents such as these, which were created in the context of continued confrontation – especially in such close quarters as Bermuda – with slave humanity, individuality, and demonstrable agency. Enslaving a person who proved every day to be no different than his or her owner must have required an immense amount of self-justification, the presence of which renders declarations of love in manumission certificates very problematic, and ultimately untrustworthy at face value.

Make no mistake, to manumit a slave was in many cases to jettison a financial burden – but it was also to dismantle a complex and rewarding relationship of power for the owner. By manumitting Dianna in only a partial capacity and dividing her ‘time’ among heirs, Ann Richarson might have both released herself from any obligation to clothe or feed Dianna, while keeping her tied to the family through inheritance – not to mention maintaining that tie indefinitely by claiming partial ownership over Dianna’s children who at this point did not even exist.⁵² Even the claim that Dianna’s freedom was “without any manner of condition” reads as patently false in the context of her partial enslavement; it seems more likely that Dianna’s new half-owners were the ones who decided which ‘half’ of her time was being spent as a slave and which as a freeperson. If Dianna was the ultimate decision-maker on how her time was spent, that would be very surprising. Dianna’s freedom was anything but unconditional – her half-freedom was directly and necessarily dependent on her half-enslavement.

In fact, the act of dividing Dianna’s ownership among four different people strikes as odd also. While the practice seems to have been fairly common in Bermuda, it was highly unusual in the rest of the slaveholding Atlantic. As such, we know very little about how such arrangements operated – what was Dianna’s life like after this bizarre division of labour? Did she actually have any time to herself with which to enjoy her new ‘freedom’ or did she remain an overburdened, enslaved worker with the equivalent of four part-time

⁵² This is a notion that comes at its core from Jennifer Morgan’s monograph *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). In *Laboring Women*, Morgan explores, among related themes, the inheritability of slavery and how reproduction shaped slave women’s futures. While not explicitly referenced here, Morgan’s work has inevitably influenced much of this discussion.

jobs to oblige, unpaid? The conveyance document itself, while potentially rife with implications about the power dynamic at play in a manumission process, tells us nothing of Dianna's everyday life as a person with "half her time" at her disposal.

And this is where the myriad challenges of subaltern research truly rears one of its ugliest heads; after her half-manumission, Dianna Richarson as we know her disappears from the record. In searching through the 1821 and 1827 Bermuda slave registers trying to track her down, "Richarson", "Richardson", "Tucker", "Gale", "Dianna", "Diana", "Dianah", or "Dinah" and even "Darrell", "White", and "Stubbs" all returned zero likely results. Sometimes the searches returned nothing at all. "Richarson", for example, the way it is spelled in the manumission document, is not correlated with any registered slaveowners in 1821 or 1827. There is a 'coloured' Dianna (last name Tucker) who appears in the Church Register in 1826, in Pembroke, to baptize three of her children, and 1828, baptizing another. These four children, Dianna, Susanna, James, and William Thomas, are all listed as "free-born" and the 1828 entry for William Thomas's baptism is followed by a notation that declares both parents as free persons.⁵³

There is no specific reason for this not to be the same Dianna who was half-manumitted six years earlier in the same parish. She could very well have taken the last name of Ann's daughters – two of her partial owners – Nancy and Catherine Tucker. But to say definitively that these two Diannas are one in the same is rendered speculative by the lack of a transitional document such as a certificate of full manumission or an entry in the 1821 slave register. In nearly every way, we are at the mercy of the archive. In order to

⁵³ A.C. Hollis Hallett (indexed by), *19th Century Church Registers of Bermuda* Second Edition (Juniperhill Press & Bermuda Maritime Museum Press), 2005.

make the claim that Dianna Richarson of 1820 and Dianna Tucker of 1826 were the same woman, we would have to rely on the assumption not only that Dianna gained the other half of her freedom over the course of six years (or, indeed, a single year, given that she is not in the 1821 slave register), but also that any proof of this full manumission escaped, was destroyed, or was left out of the written record. With no way of confirming that the freewoman baptizing her children in 1826 and 1828 was the same woman who gained half her freedom in 1820, half-slave Dianna Richarson slips quietly from the record, simply standing as one example of the multitudinous realities of manumission in 19th century Bermuda; we are left with no window into the rest of her life as a half-free person.

As researchers with an investment in subaltern studies – I am thinking especially in the context of this project of scholars like Sasha Turner, Saidiya Hartman, Walter Johnson, and Jennifer L. Morgan, and Stephanie Camp – have pointed out, however, silences in the record can be as significant or telling as archival noise; the omission of certain details in documented history can in some instances be as vital to a narrative as actively-recorded events.⁵⁴ In the case of Dianna Richarson’s legal half ownership by Ann’s children, the vital and telling omission lies in the fact that none of Nancy, Catherine, Margaret Ann, or Elenora chose to claim Dianna as their slave when registration was mandated in 1821.⁵⁵ So

⁵⁴ For instance, in *Soul by Soul*, Johnson points out that the description of slaves in the Antebellum marketplace as “smooth-skinned” (or synonymous physical descriptions to this end) indicate a silent corollary – namely that of slaves *without* smooth skin. The omission of records pertaining to slaves without “smooth” skin, therefore, points to an important historical subtext. In this case, that of physically traumatic punishment (lashings, for example) that would lead to bumpy scarring, or of instances of skin-damaging illnesses such as smallpox. Similarly, in her piece “I Could Not Stay There” Stephanie Camp talks generally about the complexities about slave truancy, noting the flippant manner with which slaveholders often spoke of their chattel’s rebellion – indicating not that they actually felt flippant about slave truancy, but that they sought to downplay its rebellious or disobedient character.

⁵⁵ The possibility exists, of course, that the records of this half-manumitted person were simply lost or destroyed since the 1820s.

unless Dianna did indeed become entirely free between her half-manumission in 1820 and slave registration in 1821, the Richarson children made the choice to exclude their ownership of her from the record. Being that possession of slaves was a sign of wealth in Bermuda, this is a bit strange; it tells us something. But it also begs the question of if other half-manumitted people appear in the record as slaves or as free people. In two instances on the 1821 register, Tom, a mariner, and Will, a labourer, are clarified in a note as being “half-free.” Perhaps Dianna Richarson really did gain her full freedom before the register came to exist and thus had no cause to be recorded there.

Some owners did not bother to clarify half-freedom for their workers in the slave register. Thomas Butterfield, a mariner, granted his slave Nokey half-manumission in November of 1814, but registered him as a full slave – a sailor – in the 1821 registry:

Bermuda Alias
Somers’ Islands

Know all Men by these presents, that I Thomas Butterfield of Pagets Parish, in the Island aforesaid, Mariner, for and in consideration of the faithful return of my negro Slave called and known by the Name of Nokey Butterfield, after being captured and kept as a prisoner of War by the Spaniards at the Havanah eight years and upwards, Do hereby give and grant to said Negro Man Nokey, one half of his time from the date hereof, to the end of his natural life to enjoy the same with all priviledges and advantages together with the one half of all his wages and earnings of whatsoever nature or kind. [...]⁵⁶

The certificate is followed by an addendum declaring that Nokey would be entirely free upon the death of Thomas Butterfield. Judging by the register seven years later, with Nokey as a 55-year-old sailor, and at least on paper a full slave, half-manumission and the promise of eventual freedom, while perhaps valuable to Nokey in ephemeral, emotional, or

⁵⁶ Books of Miscellany, Volume 8, pp. 182, 183. Some punctuation changed for clarity.

psychological ways, might have in reality changed very little about the everyday minutiae of his life. The non-material value of manumission and half-freedom should not be understated, but it is important to address the physical circumstances of the lives of historical subjects as well – and it seems in Nokey’s case that despite being supposedly granted half of his freedom, his physical circumstances might still not have improved as a result.

Additionally, there is a subtle peculiarity that needs to be addressed in the wording of this certificate. Butterfield claims to be half-manumitting Nokey on the basis of his “faithful return” after being a “prisoner of war” in Cuba for nearly a decade. This implies first that Butterfield was aware of the undesirable nature of enslavement, because if an incentive is required to return somewhere from imprisonment, something about the place to which they are returning might be problematic; secondly, the language implies that Nokey’s return to Bermuda was a *choice* as such, but really, where else was he to go but home to Bermuda? If Nokey had truly been imprisoned in Cuba and saw an opening to return as a slave to his birth home, this was not a choice so much as a lack of options. It seems unlikely that Nokey’s return to Bermuda was an act of “faithful” service and might have instead been a weighing of options, or most optimistically, a return to his family. Even more plausible, in the case of a prisoner of war, is the possibility that Nokey was released and effectively deported back to Bermuda, and not that he just decided to wander back, as Butterfield would have it sound in the manumission certificate.

Butterfield contradicts himself in saying that Nokey was captured but implying that his return was a choice. This is a perfect example of an owner’s acknowledgement of his slave’s agency only insofar as it benefitted the presentation of himself as benevolent. In the

case of Nokey and Thomas Butterfield, it appears that Nokey's actual freedom was physically unaffected by his half-manumission. In the face of the 1821 register entry where he is not declared half-free, Butterfield's measure of granting Nokey partial emancipation reads as performative rather than practical. Yes, Butterfield was operating within the bounds of his situatedness, as was Nokey. Butterfield was not, in his circumstance and context, outside the bounds of normalcy to interpret Nokey's return as a testament to Nokey's loyalty and his own benevolence. In the context of a slaveholding society where slave ownership was considered logical and acceptable, his rationale was cogent.

The fact remains that from an historical perspective, Nokey's certificate of freedom is not a document actually proving his submissiveness and Butterfield's mastery, but instead serves as an illustration of the performative power of recorded language, and is demonstrative of owner-slave power dynamics and slaveholding justifications of the time. We cannot know for certain the exact landscape of Nokey's life after his half-freedom was granted, but we do know that from his assumed victory of half-freedom's acquisition, from the physical document which granted it, all that can be honestly gleaned is a further sense of the peculiar, slippery, individually-contingent nature of 19th century freedom.

2.3 Bermuda the Anomaly

With this sort of half-manumission, as in Nokey's case, the phenomenon of partial slave ownership being split among heirs, and a number of other factors, indeed, "Bermuda was an anomaly."⁵⁷ How extreme an anomaly remains to be seen, but the point stands that Bermuda's history with slavery and manumission is a curious one. Beyond the slipperiness

⁵⁷ Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 231, 275.

of the manumission record, Bermuda's past is notably devoid of blatant slave revolts.⁵⁸ The island did not and does not carry a brutal reputation for physical violence against slaves in the manner of many other British slaveholding colonies, or the southern United States, for that matter.

To investigate this incongruity, in *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, Bernhard turns frequently to examining legislation that was aimed at regulating or condemning the black population. The presence of laws targeting the "lax controlling and disciplining" of Bermudian slaves by their owners – such as appeared into the 1720s – stands in contrast to the image of plantation violence in sugar and cotton colonies, and repeated amendments imply failures at enforcement throughout Bermuda's history.⁵⁹ In other words, it seems to have been true that Bermudian owners truly were less physically violent toward their slaves relative to the broader Atlantic, and that violence and abuse were more often individually directed – such as the violence detailed by Mary Prince in her memoir – than enforced on a mass scale, as through overseers on a plantation. Bernhard's point is that this struggle, distinct from the struggles in other slaveholding centers, appears evidenced in these attempted legislative controls rather than in the bluntness of, for instance, a high slave mortality rate. In this sense, Bermuda appears to have been less physically violent than many other Atlantic slaveholding societies.

Violence in the theoretical sense, however, does not only happen at the end of a whip, and Bermuda's unique, quiet, perhaps often non-physical violence bears

⁵⁸ There were poisoning conspiracies, and of course this is not to downplay the importance of everyday forms of rebellion and resistance, but in terms of organized military-style slave revolts and overthrows such as seen in places like Haiti, Bermuda lacks a history of such events.

⁵⁹ Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 208-210.

consideration all the same, separate from the horrendous, physically violent conditions of many other slaveholding colonies. A key point, necessary for making this scholarly move, and established by historian Philip Morgan, lies in the fact that the reprehensibility of slavery stems not from its varying degrees of physical violence, but rather from its denial of freedom.⁶⁰ Bernhard handled this consideration by analyzing repressive legislation, and this project approaches the topic through the lens of manumission records, but the two are necessarily linked.

After the 1760s, Bernhard does not mention another law targeting permissive slaveowners, and the casual reader might assume that the period between the latter part of the 18th century, and Emancipation in 1834, proceeded peacefully in Bermuda. Some of this ostensible peace, as outlined in the historiographical section of this thesis, has been attributed by scholars like Jarvis and Bernhard to the fact that in Bermuda “from the beginning...slaveholding families and slave families had lived in closer proximity than most slaveholders and slaves in the Caribbean or on the North American mainland.”⁶¹

The idea that slaves and free whites who grew up side-by-side on the crowded islands formed familial ties through “shared schooling and chores, and running errands between parish households,” is not an unappealing one – it assuages historical guilt, it gives hope for a society that by modern standards was in nearly every way misguided with regard to its approach to human rights, and it tells an enticing but largely false story of a benevolent

⁶⁰ See: Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black culture in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁶¹ Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 234. See also: Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, eds., *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery* (Yale University Press, 2010).

and merciful type of slaveowner who stood in opposition to his violent society. But it also stands in direct contrast to the reality of nearly a century of slave-led poisoning conspiracies, public punishment of impertinent black workers, lashings, slaves being left in the stocks as persecution for stockpiling fruit, and more.⁶² It stands in direct contrast with the very notion of trans-Atlantic slavery, which was necessarily built upon the violent keeping of people as chattel – a by-definition denial of personhood, unless and when aspects of that personhood served the slaveholding order.

In order to problematize the notion of a peaceful and non-violent slaveholding society, one only has to read passages from Mary Prince’s memoir, in which she describes the dreadful lashing and subsequent death of one of her fellow domestic laborers by a white owner. Or look to Packwood, who describes as late as 1828 – only six years prior to Emancipation - ‘treadmills’ or ‘tread wheels’ arriving in Bermuda.⁶³ These machines stood as public threats of brutal and humiliating physical violence toward enslaved people who might dare violate one of the many laws preventing them from owning property, accumulating wealth, accruing stockpiles of food, speaking harshly to whites, or walking around without a white chaperone.⁶⁴

The difference between Bermuda, and nearly everywhere else in the slaveholding world, according to Bernhard, was that “both whites and blacks found ways to ignore or circumvent” the very laws that were being put in place to reinforce a slave society with a

⁶² Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 202-203.

⁶³ Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, ed. Moira Ferguson (University of Michigan Press, 1997). Packwood, *Chained on the Rock*, 139-140.

⁶⁴ See: Wilkinson, *From Sail to Steam* Vol 1, 241-249.

stark racial hierarchy.⁶⁵ But this is a statement that warrants some skepticism, especially given the inescapable fact that divisive, pro-slavery laws existed in the first place – an indication of an active paradox in reasoning. It is true, however, that Bermuda saw shockingly few instances of overt slave unrest, aside from the poisoning conspiracies of the 18th century.

To explain this peaceful period, it would be easy to fall into a thread of argument that aligns with Bernhard's theory of black-white cooperation in circumvention of racist laws – we tend to take for granted that slaves will naturally rebel if they are unhappy or mistreated, even though this logic in itself is problematic. The mistake would be to assume that this ostensible peace, and parallel appearance of white Bermudian kindness, had much at all to do with direct concern for the wellbeing of slaves and free blacks. As the manumission record demonstrates, slaveholder behaviour rarely had much to do with anything other than the wellbeing and best interests of the slaveholder herself. Within the Books of Miscellany, and as this thesis aims to further illustrate, every bestowal of freedom was an opportunity for a display of benevolence. Nearly every motion to emancipate a slave was written to be read as a show of thoughtfulness, a ceremonial act of white mercy, a re-enactment of the fantasy of the empathetic white hero enfranchising a sorry and crestfallen lot.

On paper, the granting of freedom was made to seem grand; in practice, manumitted freedom was often conditional and circumspect, and the reasons for owner-granted manumissions seem to have ranged from the disposal of economic burden, to the

⁶⁵ Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 275.

legitimizing of mixed-race children, to the skirting of complex employment regulations. It is true that in some cases, leading up to Emancipation in 1834, owners likely acted in forward-thinking ways. In the context of ever-approaching Emancipation, and the rising volume of discussions surrounding abolition in the 19th century, some white slaveholders might have begun to question the hierarchy they perhaps had previously taken for granted, but evidence of owners who distinctly fit this description is limited.⁶⁶

One man, a merchant and Paget parish slaveowner, agreed to place freewoman Sary Sterling on a plot of his land in 1833. Her rent was to be paid in an allotment of yields from working the land, plus an additional rental fee.

Bermuda alias
Somers Islands

[...] a certain piece of Land containing one, and one half acre... is given to a certain free Negro Woman known by the name of Sary Sterling... to occupy and improve, plant, reap and enjoy, for and during her natural life. [...]⁶⁷

Sary's rental stipulations prohibited her from cutting or using any of the highly valuable cedar trees that might be growing on her property – this was likely because they were to be used for shipbuilding by her landlord, William Lightbourn, and because of strict legal protections placed on cedar for the purpose of shipbuilding. All in all, this transaction has the appearance of a fairly equitable deal – even the language has the appearance, up to a point, of deracination. It does seem like a rental cost *and* an allotment of livestock and harvested goods in exchange for an acre and half of undeveloped land might be a little bit steep, but without any baseline comparison, this is difficult to say for sure. It is true that

⁶⁶ For more on this, see: Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (University of Georgia Press, 2010).

⁶⁷ Books of Miscellany, Vol, 10, pp. 62.

Lightbourn was in this instance willingly trusting a plot of his land into the care and maintenance of a free black woman, a sign of economic negotiation and symbiosis, given that land was scarce on tiny Bermuda, but whether it was out of interest in Sary's wellbeing – a desire for her to have a plot of land to “enjoy” – or out of sheer economic interest is a matter up for reasonable debate.

Of interest, too, is the condition of Sary's landholding which dictated that she build a stone house on the property “for her own use and occupancy.” The use of the phrase “her own” could be read as a generous granting of private space to Sary – a clarification that the space is *her own*. Or it could be interpreted as the requirement that Sary occupy the house on *her own*, without a companion. Most likely, the phrase simply stood as legal boilerplate language of the time, but even still, it implies a sort of limitation and an imposition of control. Ambiguous language like this, intentional or not on the part of William Lightbourn, standard boilerplate or not, opens up the meaning and purpose of the document for analysis. In spite of Lightbourn's ostensibly generous negotiations with a free black woman, might he seriously have been subtly stipulating that she stay on the land alone? If so, why?

This example of the wielding of language to both acknowledge and restrict black autonomy illustrates again that control in 19th century Bermuda might not always have been exacted through physically violent means, but it was exacted. In 1833, in the shadow of Emancipation, William Lightbourn was performing white benevolence on paper, in the context of what otherwise could have been a strictly economic exchange, an agreement between landlord and renter. Through the deployment of subtle language of supposed generosity, with just a touch of ambiguity, he was exerting power over a woman who was

free in nearly every way except, of course, that she relied on that very ‘generosity’ to make a living.

Once again, Sary’s example reveals the ontological complexity of a phenomenon like manumission for the freed party. Among all these documents, and despite an archive that whispers of white power and slaveholder posturing, slaves and free blacks continually found ways to claim the record as their own – and their stories are as much present in the Books of Miscellany as are those of the slaveholders. Problematic, complex, sometimes illegible, and often undefinable freedom is preferable to its total denial, and after all, in the words of Mary Prince, “All slaves want to be free – to be free is very sweet.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*, 94.

CHAPTER 3: FAMILIES

3.1 A Record Black and White

It would be inaccurate to paint a picture here of the Books of Miscellany as a record in which the only buyers and sellers and manumission-granters were white Bermudians. In reality, the record is speckled with manumissions and sales of enslaved people by their own free, non-white family members and spouses, examples which complicate and ultimately problematize not only the topic of manumission in 19th century Bermuda, but also the whole concept of 19th century freedom. Furthermore, these poignant, often heartrending examples offer insight into one of the many ways in which enslaved and black Bermudians made their mark on a record that was otherwise created by and for their free, white island cohabitants.

These records in which family members can be seen to battle directly with a long-standing property system with the specific aim of freeing their kin bear analysis not because they are unique but rather because they are strikingly common. Of the over three hundred documents catalogued for this project, more than a hundred of them explicitly mention kinship ties somehow relevant to the given contract for either freedom or sale. Even more imply familial relationships that can be gleaned or assumed by comparing surnames or the given names of young slave children. It is not clear from the record that there was a single manner in which family members supported each other on their paths to freedom, or in

which they negotiated freedom for the benefit of their entire family; the individual certificates are as unique and personal as the people named on the pages, and their stories cannot and should not be over-generalized. But what is clear from the prevalence of family manumissions and sales in the record is that the family unit was an important element of 19th century Bermuda, even, if not especially, with respect to the negotiated spaces between bondage and freedom.

This was true in the late 18th and early 19th centuries even beyond Bermuda and into the broader Caribbean-Atlantic, as Sasha Turner and others have pointed out, because of the rise of abolitionist sentiment in British colonies near the end of the 1700s. The slave family under paternalistic, pro-natalist slavery took on new meaning to slaveholders as well as to the slaves themselves, because it placed women, reproduction, and the future under both economic and social slaveholder scrutiny in an unprecedented way. Since “antislavery literature condemned hugely-demanding labor of enslaved people...without adequate supply of food, clothing, or family comfort,” and since a British colonies-wide ban on the slave trade was imminent at the close of the 18th century, this new, pro-natalist, and thus pro-family slaveholding culture necessitated that owners find different, less obviously mortal or fatal ways to control their human chattel.⁶⁹ It also meant, however, that slaves with families had both new concerns and new modes through which to negotiate boundaries, agency, and freedom for themselves and their kin. In Bermuda, as discussed to

⁶⁹ Sasha Turner, “Home-grown Slaves: Women, Reproduction, and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Jamaica 1788-1807”, *Journal of Women’s History* 23, no. 3, (Fall 2011): 42.

some extent in the previous chapter, this had been the case and the culture already for centuries by 1807.⁷⁰

As such, these records of black Bermudians – enslaved or free – purchasing or manumitting their relatives lend some vital nuance to the overall discussion of slavery and freedom, especially in the context of pro-natalist slavery culture. On a surface-level, the documents illustrate that black Bermudian families were sometimes seeking to have their freedom clearly and legally documented, which might tell us something about the nature of how freedom was understood in a tangible way. But the records wherein free black Bermudians manumit members of their families even after those members had been purchased out of a white owner's grasp demonstrates something even more important when trying to understand 19th century conceptions freedom: the absence of white ownership was not tantamount to the presence of black freedom.

It is tempting to assume that parental or spousal ownership amounted to a sort of freedom for the owned parties, but many of the documents in the Books of Miscellany indicate that 19th century slaves and freed people might not have held this perspective – as always, it was more complicated than that. In more than a few cases, family members purchased their enslaved kin only to manumit them shortly thereafter – a step that would have been deemed unnecessary if familial ownership was considered synonymous with manumitted freedom.

Still the problem remains that manumitted freedom was often, in many ways, a superficial sort of freedom anyway, and one that came with its own challenges.

⁷⁰ Refer within this thesis to Chapter 2.

Unfortunately, for as much as family could function as a support system and as emotional reprieve for enslaved Bermudians, it seems it could also at times be used against slaves as a pivot of control by white owners. Since an individual's desire to be manumitted could be seen by their owner as a moral reflection of the "quality of their ownership", and since it also resulted in the loss of free labour, it might have been in an owner's best interests, at times, to simultaneously appear to manumit their slave while still keeping them enslaved in other ways. One of these ways was through family.⁷¹

John F. Campbell writes in *Paths to Freedom* that in cases where one member of a family was manumitted while the rest of the family remained enslaved, the manumission itself "was often a hollow accomplishment."⁷² While freedom had been seized for the manumitted individual, "in a real sense he was still enslaved, by association, with the ongoing pain and suffering of his spouse and offspring."⁷³ According to Campbell, this catch-22 rested in the fact that "for manumission to succeed it had to take into account the human dimension of 'the enslaved people as people,'" which, of course, it seems it rarely did.⁷⁴ Manumission was a complex process precisely because it could symbolize the triumphant recognition of a slave's humanity in legal writing, but still necessarily relied on white recognition for that humanity to appear politically and socially legitimate. For this reason, and many others, cases in which manumissions were granted by black Bermudians

⁷¹ John F. Campbell, "How Free is Free?" in *Paths to Freedom*, eds. Rosemary Brana-Shute and Randy J. Sparks (University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 153.

⁷² John F. Campbell, "How Free is Free?", 153.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

to their enslaved kin are of particular interest to a project such as this, which aims at its core to simply highlight that very complexity.

It is clear from the record, therefore, that negotiations between slavery and freedom were just as multifaceted and slippery within the bounds of black families as they were between unrelated black and white Bermudians. As much as the record tells a story of families negotiating freedom for their loved ones, it sometimes also reveals stories of family turmoil and of the many lifelong challenges faced by free black Bermudians – especially with regards to the health and wellbeing of the elderly.

Regardless of race or social status in 19th century Bermuda, the financial and emotional burdens associated with aging family members were inevitable. But surely, the future was less secure for slaves and the freed elderly, who not only worked whole lifetimes under extreme duress, but also faced a different set of challenges than their white, wealthy counterparts. Elderly former slaves without sufficient economic resources or community support were left no choice but to rely on their younger relatives for care in their final years. One of a freed Bermudian's only forms of insurance for comfort in old age – especially in the event of debilitating illness or injury – was her ability and willingness to negotiate and deploy the freedom of her family members.

3.2 The Deployment of Freedom

Between 1789 and 1801, a free woman of colour, Cato Potter, appears in the record four times.⁷⁵ When I first catalogued Cato's case study at the beginning of my research, it appeared that in each of the four documents, she was simply rearranging the custody and/or

⁷⁵ The spelling of her name varies between Katoe, Cato, Catoe, and Catto in the record. It is clear from the documents that she is in fact a woman, despite the typically masculine name.

freedom of her daughter, Rose, and granddaughters, Ruth and Molly. But upon re-assessing the documents and recording full transcriptions, it became clear that Cato also had another priority: to secure comfort and care for herself in her elderly years. As a free black woman living in Bermuda, but also as a former seamstress, with the presumably deteriorating eyesight of older age, and perhaps even overall health decline, Cato's main resources rested with her younger, healthy kin: son Anfield, daughter Rose, and granddaughters Ruth and Molly.

First, in May of 1798, Cato grants, by a Deed of Gift, manumission unto her "little grand Daughter Molly Potter," Rose's daughter. In this first document she cites "love, good will, and affection" as her reasons for manumitting Molly, and also makes a point to mention, per a Deed of Sale from 1780, that Rose is her "sole right and property." Molly's custody after the manumission is unclear, and we are not given her age, or any information about another parent.⁷⁶

Two years later in September of 1800, Cato returns to the record in order to grant her daughter, Rose, half-manumission. Half-manumissions are an interesting phenomenon in and of themselves, as previously discussed, but in Cato's case, she explains very clearly that Rose's manumitted time is for Rose's "own proper use" and that the other half should be used for "support in my sickness and pay of my funeral charges."⁷⁷ The specific guidelines set by Cato on each half of her daughter's time are interesting because despite Rose's apparent partial freedom, her obligations to her mother still amounted to full-scale financial and practical care. Half of Rose's time may have been used to earn a wage, but it

⁷⁶ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 9, pp.18-19.

⁷⁷ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 9, September 6th, 1800.

is clear from the document that any of those wages would likely have gone toward paying for Cato's needs anyway. Within Cato's requirements, Rose may have been legally half-free, but was still clearly within her mother's full control insofar as how the fruits of that freedom would ultimately be used.

It seems a little bit curious, with this in mind, that Cato felt it necessary to bind her own daughter by law in slavery in order to guarantee that Rose would provide her with appropriate care, but she might have been concerned that, were she to give Rose her full freedom, her daughter would then be pulled away by employment obligations during working days. As half-free and half Cato's property, Rose could still seek gainful employment in order to save money but could also stay close by Cato during the other half of her time, providing care as her illness progressed. Put simply, and in spite of her ultimate circumstances and/or motivations, Cato can be seen here in the record to be actively deploying her daughter's time and freedom in a strategic way.

But Cato appears in the record yet again, just over a month later, once again dealing in the freedom of her granddaughter Molly, but also in the freedom of Rose's other daughter Ruth. On October 15th, Cato grants Molly and Ruth a Deed of Gift for their manumission but clarifies that since "they are young and not able to care for themselves, I deliver them over into the care and protection of my son Anfield... as he is their Uncle."⁷⁸ There is no mention of Rose and we are not told the specific ages of Molly and Ruth to surmise about how typical this guardianship arrangement might have been. Instead of providing any extra details, Cato simply reiterates that she is sick, and explains that she is freeing Ruth and

⁷⁸ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 9, pp. 20.

Molly and granting them into Anfield's custody because she is unable to care for them herself.

Cato's final contribution to the record is dated February 18th, 1801, and it both complicates and, in some ways, also clarifies elements of her story. In this longer entry to the Books of Miscellany, Cato sells her granddaughter Ruth – despite the fact that she had previously manumitted her – to a woman named Frances Gibson. In this final certificate, Cato explains:

...whereas being now very sick and Bedridden I am the necessity of taking some matters to get comforts for my relief, as my own Daughter Rose behaves unnatural and undutiful to me, and I do hereby bind myself my Heirs and Assigns, the said Frances Gibson, her heirs, Executors, Administrators & assigns for my right, title claim or demand of any person or persons whatsoever to said Negro Girl against all persons will warrant and for ever defend by these presents, so as the said Frances Gibson may have, hold, possess and enjoy said Negro Girl Ruth to her own proper use and disposal forever...⁷⁹

Not only does Cato go back on her months-earlier promise to manumit Ruth with this sale, she also accuses her daughter, Rose, of behaving “unnatural and undutiful” – a statement of a harsh veracity quite unusual in the Books of Miscellany, so it could very well be that we are dealing here with a gap in information that comes as a result of missing or damaged documents. Despite the extremely well-kept nature of the Books of Miscellany the record is still fragmentary, flawed, at times vague, and often selective. Without more information, we cannot presume to guess Cato's motivations in the continued enslavement of her daughter – we only know that Cato was demonstrably operating within the boundaries of her limited resources, strategically deploying her family's freedom, in order to secure her own comfort and care.

⁷⁹ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 9, pp. 15.

For better or worse, Cato's case shows us one example of a woman vying for her own interests over and above those of her grandchildren and daughter. While it is impossible to know with certainty the motives of historical figures, Cato made it fairly clear that her decision to sell a granddaughter out of the family was a decision she made in order to control Rose's time and loyalty, as well as to benefit personally. Without equal status to their white cohabitants in a slaveholding society, survival for 19th century black Bermudians sometimes depended on their willingness to knowingly operate within the oppressive system of whiteness. More often than not, however, their actions likely had less to do with willingness and more to do with the fact that black Bermudians like Cato were given few other options. Above all, however, Cato's story demonstrates how profoundly varied the meaning of manumission could be under individual circumstances. Manumission, as a phenomenon and as a social tool, meant something very different to Cato than it did, for instance, to Nokey's white owner, Thomas Butterfield, in a previous case study. And manumission meant something different still to Cato's daughter, Rose.

Rose also has a story to tell, and although Cato's version of events would paint Rose as a disloyal and maybe even neglectful daughter, Rose might have seen things in a different light. According to Bermuda's 19th Century Church Register, Rose died and was buried in 1829 in Pembroke Parish at the age of sixty years. This means that in 1801 when Cato was battling an illness and pawning the freedom of her descendants in order to secure proper care, Rose was a thirty-two-year-old adult woman responsible for two young children and a sick mother – and as far as I can tell, she had no help. Cato's documents never make mention of Rose's spouse, if she had one, and although Cato mentions Rose's brother, Anfield, it is unclear how much of the burden of familial care he was actually sharing. In

Rose's burial record she is listed, still, as "Sl Catto Potter" – slave to Cato Potter. Her mother never freed her.⁸⁰

The family dynamics at play between Cato – a free woman of color – and Rose - Cato's daughter and slave – bring into the mix the notion of family responsibility. In *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson talks about slavery as "natal alienation" – effectively positing that to be enslaved was to be relieved of all other duties and obligations outside of the needs and desires of a slave's owner, including familial, parental, and spousal obligations.⁸¹ When considering Cato's case, and others in which a free Bermudian owned one or more of his or her relatives, Patterson's conception of slave-owner obligation is both problematized and intensified. As Cato's slave and daughter, Rose was doubly bound to her mother as both caregiver to a 'master' and to an aging parent. Cato's choice to keep her daughter enslaved was in all likelihood a very strategic move designed to keep Rose 'free' from the obligations associated with any other owner (and thus *ideologically* unavailable for family caregiving), but also 'free' from a requirement to seek gainful, un-enslaved employment (and thus be *physically* unavailable for family caregiving). Cato's presence in the record is both domestic and political, both motherly and oppressive, both the mark of a frightened aging woman and the blueprint of institutional slavery in action.

And Cato's case is far from the only example that illustrates the many complex intersections between kindred obligation and freedom politics in 19th century families – particularly those with non-white or enslaved members. In September of 1814, Phillis

⁸⁰ 19th Century Church Registers of Bermuda, indexed by A.C. Hollis Hallett, pp. 653.

⁸¹ See: Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Harvard University Press, 1982), 1-14.

Roberts, within the span of a single week, purchased both her own manumission as well as legal ownership of her son, Ben, from a widow named Rebecca Roberts.⁸² The dynamics of the manumission and purchase are similar to Cato and Rose's case, in which a parent obtained her freedom while maintaining documented ownership of her child, but there are some key differences. First, as far as we know, Rebecca was a white woman overseeing and negotiating the bondage and/or freedom of her non-white slaves, whereas Cato was a free black woman deploying that of her likewise non-white kin. Cato's case is in some ways unique because, aside from witness signatures, it represents an insular example of a non-white family negotiating the bounds of freedom and slavery within family limits. Phillis' case, however, is a much more prevalent type of example in the Books of Miscellany, wherein the freedom of a black family necessitated an appeal to white authority in order to be legitimized.

Second, the phrasing of Phillis' document is revealing because of its clear demonstration that manumission did in fact challenge the ideological framework of a slaveholding society on some level. In documents where slaveowners were faced with acknowledging the autonomy of their enslaved property by relinquishing ownership, their difficulty with navigating toward an understanding of slaves being self-possessed is often present in the bodies of the certificates. Phillis' is a poignant example because we can see Rebecca struggling in many ways to manoeuvre the notion of property purchasing itself:

Know all Men by these presents that I Rebecca Roberts of St David's Island in the Parish of St. George, Islands of Bermuda, Widow, for and in consideration of the Sum of Fifty pounds Current Money of these Islands to me in hand paid at and before the sealing and delivery of these Presents by Phillis Roberts, also of St David's of the Parish of St. George of the Islands aforesaid, lately my Slave, the

⁸² Books of Miscellany, Vol. 8, pp. 26.

Receipt whereof I do hereby acknowledge, have bargained and sold and by these presents do bargain, sell, and deliver unto the said Phillis Roberts as aforesaid, one Negro herself the said Phillis Roberts, to have and to hold the said Negro Phillis Roberts unto the said Phillis *Roberts* her Heirs, Executors, Administrators and Assigns to her and their only proper use and behoof forever...⁸³

Phillis' particular manumission document is an example of the complexities 19th century people, both black and white, slave and free, encountered when navigating transitions between bondage and freedom; Phillis' certificate does not read like a Deed of Gift, nor is it worded like a typical manumission certificate. Rebecca chose to phrase Phillis' manumission, instead, like a conveyance – she maintained the language of a slave sale in the process of effectively selling Phillis her freedom. But as a self-possessed slave, was Phillis considered free? Or was she simply considered to be a slave owned by herself?

Luckily for the purposes of this research, those questions are somewhat addressed by Phillis and Rebecca in a second document, dated three days after Phillis' manumission, in which Phillis purchases her son, Ben, from Rebecca:

Know all Men by these presents that I Rebecca Roberts of St. David's Islands, in the Parish of Saint George, Islands of Bermuda, Widow, for and in consideration of the Sum of Fifty pounds Current Money of these Islands, to me in hand paid at and before the sealing and delivering of these presents, by Phillis Roberts (a Coloured person) also of the Parish of St George of the Islands aforesaid a free Woman [...] have bargained and sold [...] one Negro named Ben, the Son of said Phillis, to have and to hold the said Negro Ben unto the said Phillis Roberts...⁸⁴

It is in this second document, for the purchase of Ben by Phillis, that Rebecca confirms her conveyance of Phillis unto Phillis herself was indeed a manumission through her use of the phrase “free Woman.” It is not always so obvious that a transference of ownership was synonymous with the gaining of freedom; family ownership – as in Cato's case with her

⁸³ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 8, pp. 26.

⁸⁴ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 8, pp. 27-28.

grandchildren Ruth and Molly – could clearly still result in partial or even full lifetime enslavement. And while slavery at the hands of a family member was unlikely to carry with it the same kinds of race-power discourses that would come from a white owner possessing a black slave, it certainly did not amount to freedom. Nor, apparently, did all cases of manumission, as illustrated by the phenomenon of Cato’s apparent renegeing on the manumission of her granddaughter Ruth.

This begs the question of what the purchase of an enslaved child by a free parent could mean for the child. Could slavery ever be considered a sort of freedom? In the case of Ben and Phillis we cannot know, since they fade from the record after Phillis’ interactions with Rebecca Roberts. But other examples of re-enslavement further demonstrate the nebulous quality and multifaceted character of manumitted freedom in the 19th century. In the meantime, Cato, Rose and Phillis’ lives turn us back to the notion of family obligation.⁸⁵

3.3 The Shape of a Bermudian Family

Virginia Bernhard briefly tackled the issue of slave family obligation in *Slaves and Slaveholders*, and Michael Jarvis reiterated some of Bernhard’s points in *In the Eye of All Trade*, but both scholars discussed slave family without much or any emphasis on manumission or the politics of enslaved and free family dynamics. Rather, they discussed family life in Bermuda, and the relationships between black and white families on such a

⁸⁵ As mentioned earlier in the chapter, citing Sasha Turner, the high value of the 19th century family unit has been discussed in recent scholarship. This theory of the high-value family, however, has not always held true in the historiography of slave studies. For a historiography of how the slave family unit has been dealt with in historical scholarship, see Sasha Turner’s book *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

small island, emphasising that black and white children grew up near each other, that black and white families often attended the same churches, and that all Bermudians worked and lived in close proximity with one another. Furthermore, Bernhard and Jarvis both skirted and contributed to the myth of Bermudian benevolence in different ways, without ever fully diving into the core of the issue.

Bernhard, in her monograph, for instance, took steps to resist the notion that Bermuda existed in a more benign state than the rest of the slaveholding world, but relied on proof of Bermuda's historically violent punishment of slaves to illustrate this point, rather than demonstrating the ideological, often non-violent ways in which Bermudian slavery was malignant nonetheless.⁸⁶ Jarvis, across different works, at times contributes to the dialogue of Bermudian benevolence through his romanticizing descriptions of life on the island. Jarvis places emphasis on the relative mildness of Bermudian slavery by, at various points, describing side-by-side childhoods of black and white Bermudians, detailing "shared schooling and chores, and running errands between parish households," or by choosing euphemistic phrases over blunt ones.⁸⁷ For example, rather than describing violent retaliation against slaves as abuse or torture, Jarvis might describe Bermudian slave owners as having "physically disciplined" their slaves; rather than describing mixed-race employment such as seafaring for what it was – forced, enslaved, racially stratified labour – Jarvis describes the crews of Bermudian ships as "collective and racially integrated."⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 193.

⁸⁷ Michael Jarvis, "The Binds of the Anxious Mariner," in *Journal of Early Modern History* 14 (2010), 84.

⁸⁸ Jarvis, "The Binds of the Anxious Mariner," *Journal of Early Modern History* 14 (2010), 94. *Ibid.*, 88.

Although neither Bernhard nor Jarvis' historiographical perspectives are precisely in alignment with the perspective of this project, their work nonetheless laid the foundation for this thesis and helps to prop-up a discussion of slave family and the notion of familial obligation. Bernhard discusses in *Slaves and Slaveholders*, for instance, the phenomenon of slave sailors choosing (or appearing to choose) to return home to Bermuda rather than seize their freedom abroad.⁸⁹

Jarvis, parallel to and likely influenced by Bernhard's work, addresses the slave family also, detailing how "most Bermudian mariners remained remarkably committed to their homes, families, and island, regularly returning to them despite the siren call of opportunity elsewhere."⁹⁰ Still, here Jarvis is euphemising the reality of enslaved mariner life, downplaying the enormity of the so-called choice enslaved sailors must have faced: yes, they could hypothetically seize their freedom abroad, and live a life away from the clutches of slavery, but in so doing, they would leave behind an entire life, family, and home in Bermuda. This was not "remarkable commitment" in the face of any romantic "siren call" – this was both gargantuanly selfless, and also beautifully, simplistically, predictably human action.

Despite their conflicting understandings of the nature of Bermudian slavery, Jarvis and Bernhard's discussions of family are both of crucial importance. The notion of slaves feeling familial obligation to return, in particular, is important because the ability for slaves to free themselves while abroad became easier after 1772, when "a ruling in Britain by Chief Justice Mansfield, established the principle that any slave who set foot on English

⁸⁹ Bernhard, *Slaves and Slaveholders in Bermuda*, 275-277.

⁹⁰ Jarvis, "The Binds of the Anxious Mariner," 98.

ground became free.”⁹¹ Mansfield really only meant for the ruling to be applied to a single case, but black and white Bermudians alike took it to be universally applicable. This meant that any number of enslaved Bermudian mariners could have seized their freedom while at sea, in many cases simply by walking off the ship at a British port. Regardless, black sailors rarely took advantage of this ostensible loophole in their enslavement.

Long before Jarvis and Bernhard contributed to the scholarship of slavery, Packwood made the important point, as did historian Walter Johnson decades later, that that an enslaved life was still a life.⁹² It strikes that by questioning a slave’s choice to remain enslaved, that enslaved life itself is in the process devalued. All slaves wanted to be free, yes, but that does not mean their lives as slaves did not still hold personal value. A slave’s relationship with his or her slavery would have been complex and ever-changing, entirely individual, and wildly personal – dependent always on a number of constantly shifting factors: income, food supply, health, community support, mental wellness, relationships with owners, disabilities or lack thereof, skills, literacy, and routine. Freedom in a foreign place would have come with its own sometimes perilous consequences, but it would also require the acceptance not only of huge personal risk, but also of huge personal loss – of home, of family and property, of familiarity, and of any established stability back in Bermuda.

The point here is not to illustrate that slaves led emotionally rich lives and established human connections or complex family trees – this has been reiterated by

⁹¹ Packwood, *Chained on the Rock*, 166.

⁹² Walter Johnson, “On Agency” in *Journal of Social History* (Fall 2003): 113-124. Packwood, *Chained on the Rock*, 166-167.

scholars for years and does not bear, nor require, further proof. The aim here is simply to illuminate the lives of a few people through examples in the record, and to paint a cursory picture of 19th century freedom in all its unfathomable complexity. In trying to understand 19th century lives, it has been assumed that enslaved people valued family and community just as did their free, white, Bermudian counterparts, so as to avoid positioning this value in conceptual opposition to enslaved Bermudians' vie for (and right to) freedom. With all of this in mind, and in the context of the manumissions contained within the Books of Miscellany, it is important to remember that these records demonstrate that enslaved sailors were not always returning and choosing enslavement so much as they were returning to the possibility of eventual freedom in their home with their families nearby, and freedom for their loved ones.

In the same monograph in which Orlando Patterson discussed slavery as “natal alienation,” he also developed the notion that trans-Atlantic slavery amounted essentially to the institutional removal of a person’s right to a predictable future.⁹³ Patterson’s theory is both ideologically and evidentially applicable not only to Bermuda but to slavery nearly everywhere leading up to Emancipation. In Bermuda, as elsewhere, the effect of imposed whiteness upon black bodies and black lives resulted in the severing or weakening of predictable futures, family ties, and personal security. Paradoxically, owners relied on these very ties in order to keep their slaves under control. In the meantime, as the Books of Miscellany illustrate, enslaved Bermudians had their own ideas about family, freedom, and about what the future might hold.

⁹³ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 6-8.

As explained previously, Bermuda is a small chain of islands that even in the 19th century was crowded enough to leave residents living in tight quarters.⁹⁴ The fairly urban and mostly non-agrarian character of the islands made for a version of slavery that was mainly domestic and industry-based, with most men working as enslaved sailors (many of them ship pilots) or as dock workers, and most women working in laundry, housekeeping, and other domestic jobs. With the added element of near parity in the black and white populations, crowded slaveholding Bermuda was predisposed both geographically and demographically to the everyday, unrelenting surveillance of black bodies. This same panopticon-like effect was achieved on many southern plantations in the United States through the use of white overseers and the imposing vernacular design of plantation architecture – with the main estate appearing to loom menacingly over the slave quarters and fields.

Shortly after settlement in the middle of the 17th century, the nature of Bermuda's geography and population had already all but eliminated the need for white owners to employ surveillance workers such as overseers – Bermuda's citizens monitored each other basically from birth. Moreover, with such a small area, and one surrounded by water, running away or engaging in truancy were slightly more physically difficult options than

⁹⁴ Dr. Neil Kennedy has kindly provided the following statistics from his own research, taken from *The Colonial Blue Book: In Bermuda in 1833*, the population density was reported at 459 people per square mile (or approximately 178 per square kilometer). Colonial Office 41/28, 119, National Archives, United Kingdom. For comparative scale, Statistics Canada calculated Newfoundland's population density in 2011 to be less than 2 people per square kilometer. Focus on Geography series, 2011 Census, online resource, Statistics Canada.

on expansive mainland plantations surrounded by forest, and would have depended heavily on support and protection from the black community.⁹⁵

Figure 3.1 *The Old Plantation*, c. 1785-1790, Artist Unknown, (South Carolina); note the imposing main plantation house in the background.



Mary Prince did once run away after a particularly awful beating by her owner, retreating to her mother who was living at the time in a different household. Prince explains that it was thanks to her mother's willingness and ability to hide her in a nearby cave, and bring her food after work, that she could hide away for some time to recover from the physical brutality. It was Mary's father, living at Crow Lane, who eventually returned her to her owner, entreating him to "be a kind master to her in the future."⁹⁶ With few options for seizing freedom, no place on the island to run away and hide permanently, and in most cases little or no compulsion to abandon family, friends, and familiarity, one of the only

⁹⁵ Stephanie Camp has worked on the topic of slave truancy in the context of slave-owner negotiation and available geography. See: "I Could Not Stay There": Enslaved Women, Truancy and the Geography of Everyday Forms of Resistance in the Antebellum Plantation South", *Slavery & Abolition* 12, vol. 23, no. 3, (2002): pp. 1-20. See also: Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, eds., *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery* (Yale University Press, 2010).

⁹⁶ Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*, 69-70.

options left to enslaved Bermudians was that of manumission or self-purchase – but it was hard-won, if not all but impossible, and might have taken a very different form than the freedom envisaged when reading manumission certificates.

This is not to downplay the importance of manumission as a real and sometimes available path to freedom, but, as brought to life through the case study of elderly seamstress and free woman Cato, and as explained in *Paths to Freedom* with respect to other parts of the slaveholding world, “when manumission eventually came, the manumitted people were usually not fit enough to enjoy it to the fullest.”⁹⁷ By the time many slaves in Bermuda, as in other parts of the world, had accrued enough property or material wealth to buy themselves out of slavery, or their owners passed away having left their freedom in a will, or by the time manumission was granted, freed persons had in many instances lived out most of their lives under great duress and deplorable working conditions.⁹⁸

Aside from manumission, family for enslaved Bermudians was almost certainly a pivot of self-actualization (the freedom to be oneself, to speak plainly, to share stories and grief and excitement – all the things a family does together), as well as a means toward acquiring legal freedom (through teamwork, money-saving, steady cooperation, etcetera). However, these meanings are intersected by the fact that family was almost as often an outlet for the wielding of tightened owner control, especially if we accept that family and its corollary obligations were a vital and highly valued aspect of historical Bermudian society.

⁹⁷ John F. Campbell, “How Free is Free?”, 153.

⁹⁸ John F. Campbell, “How Free is Free?”, 153.

Bermudian laws governing slave marriages and enslaved family housing confirm this theory of surveillance and show the often-paradoxical nature of enslaved families as both freeing and damning. By the 19th century, slaves had long been legally permitted to marry in Bermuda, but “slaves could not live together unless owned by the same master,” and even married slave couples “either lived in a cabin on one owner’s estate or remained on their individual owner’s estates and visited each other on weekends.”⁹⁹

One of the more alarming realities of a tightly-knit, small, highly vigilant society rests with the fact that citizens both black and white would have been aware of each other’s strengths, weaknesses, values, fears, and desires. This means that for every slave sailor who chose to return to his family in Bermuda, or for every slave mother who asked to purchase her children, or every slave couple who petitioned to marry and live together, there was probably a white slaveholder who took note of the tendency and filed it away as a control strategy for later. In this way, family was both a coping mechanism and an important set of human relationships, but also a context that owners could intercept in order to maintain and wield power, further complicating the entire framework of manumission as a socio-political phenomenon.

3.4 The Tuckers & the Paradox of Family

Whether freedom was found in the solace of family support, or if it was legally achieved through self-purchase or owner-granted manumission, and regardless of the brevity with which freedom for a whole family unit was achieved, the process of freedom for a family required intricate navigations within an oppressive and deeply racialized

⁹⁹ Bermuda College, *Blacks in Bermuda* lectures, 1980, Chapter One: “Origins of Blacks in Bermuda.”, 6.

system of ownership. Since, as the Books of Miscellany demonstrate, paths to freedom were complicated to negotiate, any discussion of those paths is equally complex.¹⁰⁰ As frustrating as these short, obscure glimpses into the Books of Miscellany to examine early 19th century lives can be, and despite the fact that the predominance of white voices in the documents often serves to obfuscate black perspectives, the records in many ways do tell fairly clear stories of non-white Bermudians. Take for example the case of Mary Tucker, a thirty-two-year old mixed-race woman who in 1805 was manumitted by her mariner husband, Joseph.

Bermuda alias
Somers' Islands } To all to whom these presents shall come, Greeting.

Know Ye that I Jacob Tucker of the Town of Saint George in the said Islands, Pilot, for and in consideration of the Love and Affection which I have and bear unto my beloved Wife Mary Tucker also for divers other good Causes and considerations me thereunto moving, Have manumitted, discharged and set free and by these Presents do manumit, discharge and set free, in as full, ample, and beneficial a manner as I can or may do my said Wife a Mulatto Woman commonly called or known by the name of Mary Tucker aforesaid aged thirty two years or thereabouts of a yellow complexion and five feet six Inches high, being before the signing of this Instrument my property by Virtue of a Bill of Sale duly executed to me by Mr. Benjamin S. Hayward of the said Town and Islands.—
And I do hereby declare the said Mulatto woman Mary to be exonerated and released from all and all manner of Slavery and servitude whatsoever. And I do hereby earnestly request all Persons to treat her as a Woman actually and bona fide free.-¹⁰¹

From this succinct manumission, we know very little of Jacob and Mary Tucker, whether Jacob himself used to be enslaved, his race or his age, or if they have children. But Jacob does reveal that he had previously purchased his wife from Benjamin S. Hayward.

¹⁰⁰ For more, or to get a sense of the recent historiography of Emancipation, see: David W. Blight and Jim Downs, eds., *Beyond Freedom: Disputing the History of Emancipation* (University of Georgia Press, 2017).

¹⁰¹ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 6, pp. 324.

The bill of sale Jacob references does not appear to be in the Books of Miscellany, but B.S. Hayward shows up more than once in the historical record, both as a slaveowner and later as a witness for manumissions, including that of Jacob's daughter, Nancy, in 1807. Nancy's manumission is nearly identical in both content and structure to her mother's, including the details of her previous ownership, also by Hayward.

Bermuda alias

Somers Islands } To all to whom these Presents shall come, Greeting.

Know ye that I Jacob Tucker of the Town of Saint George in the said Islands, Pilot, for and in Consideration of the Love and Affection which I have and bear unto my Daughter Nancy, also for divers other good Causes and Considerations me hereunto moving, Have Manumitted, discharged and set free [...] my said Daughter commonly called or known by the Name of Nancy Tucker aged Thirteen Years and nine Months, of a Yellow complexion and Four feet five Inches high, before the signing of this Instrument my property by virtue of a Bill of Sale duly executed to me by Mr. Benjamin S. Hayward [...] I do hereby declare my said Child Nancy to be exonerated and released from all and all manner of Slavery and Servitude whatsoever. And I do earnestly request all Persons to treat her as a Person actually and bona fide free. ¹⁰²

In both Mary and Nancy's manumissions, Jacob cites "Love and Affection" as the chief reasons for the choice to free his wife and daughter. This sentiment, while fairly standard and not necessarily revealing in this specific case, is interesting nonetheless. The gift of freedom, with the sentiment of Love and Affection attached, takes on a different character within a family; no longer is it a token for services rendered, or even an economic choice under the guise of a benevolent gesture, nor does it seem to be a means to a particular end (such as the palliative care that Cato was seeking by deploying the freedom of her daughter and grandchildren). Instead, the manumission of one family member by another, in the case of the Tuckers, does seem to genuinely read like a gesture of love. In the case of owner-granted manumission or self-purchase an enslaved person was tasked with the

¹⁰² Books of Miscellany, Vol. 6, pp. 393. Some punctuation added for clarity.

impossible burden of proving oneself worthy of freedom by the standards of white society, and thereby was doomed to begin that life of freedom in a state of indebtedness. It might be postulated that a family of freed persons, on the other hand, would not so much be morally indebted to one another, but instead dedicated to and supportive of one another's freedom.¹⁰³ Once again it can be gleaned from this example that meanings of manumission and freedom were about as diverse as the individuals affected by it, and were contingent based on circumstance, race, kinship, gender, and any number of other social factors.

A notable symptom of the 19th century and the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807 was that slaveowners endeavoured (albeit probably not consciously) to construct the institution of "slavery as dependency rather than captivity."¹⁰⁴ This version of dependency-based slavery was in many ways a much more persuasive and insidious type of enslavement, difficult, perhaps, to maintain under the veneer of control and mastery, but very effective at deploying emotional warfare and abusive coercion to keep slaves in their assigned societal roles. Dependency, however, does not need to be coerced, waged as war, or purchased within the family unit, because it pre-exists to some extent between family members by the fact of their kinship. Dependency, therefore, would in an ideal circumstance not be threatened by the freed status of a family's individual members, and conversely, would not dissolve in the presence of their manumission. It is interesting, therefore, that non-white families like the Tuckers can be seen to have operated within the bounds of white legal traditions by having the freedom of their kin formally recognized in

¹⁰³ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 126, 130.

¹⁰⁴ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 137.

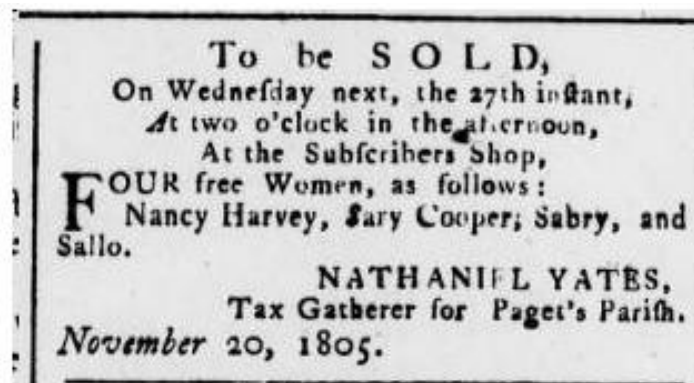
manumission certificates. Most likely, the important thing was not that these documents provided a sense of legal security within the families of manumitted people, or even within the black community at large, but within the white circles of society responsible for their enslavement in the first place.

In the historical scholarship on Bermudian slavery there does not seem to have been much consideration of the phenomenon of re-enslavement. Although we know freed people or free-born non-whites were sometimes ‘wrongfully’ enslaved even well into the 19th century in the United States – take the famous case of Solomon Northup, for instance – re-enslavement has not been investigated in the context of Bermuda.¹⁰⁵

Although re-enslavement is not the focus of this thesis, issues of manumission and re-enslavement are overlapping spheres of freedom politics. It is interesting to note that re-enslavement might have been something of which enslaved Bermudians were cognizant, and so it could have very plausibly been a factor in how the manumission record was built, especially when family members were manumitting each other. It is almost certain that re-enslavement did occur in Bermuda, and almost certain further that the public would have been aware of these re-enslavements, especially given notices and advertisements like this one from the *Royal Gazette* in 1805:

¹⁰⁵ I chose to put the word “wrongfully” in quotation marks because I do not want “wrongfully” in the legal sense or with regards to birth-right (to which I am referring), to be conflated with “wrongfully” in the modern humanitarian or moral sense – in which case there could be no “rightful” enslavement.

Figure 3.2 *Royal Gazette* Notice – Free Women for Sale in Paget’s Parish, 1805



It is possible that some discussions of abolition were circulating in the public sphere in 1805, but the important thing this notice demonstrates is that regardless of any political debates, the boundaries between freedom and slavery were occasionally being contested in a public manner. As it happened, March of 1807 marked the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, which prohibited the import of African slaves across the Atlantic to British colonies. Far from ending slavery, this Act simply shifted the slave trade in many places from a constant incoming stream of foreign slaves to a system that relied on localized slave reproduction to maintain itself.

Scholars have described this shift either directly or implicitly as the turn toward *paternalistic ownership* on plantations and in homes. But in Bermuda, paternalistic, pro-natalist slavery had existed on the overcrowded island for decades, maybe even centuries, already. By the time this advertisement appeared in the *Gazette* in 1805, the Atlantic existed in a context of simmering slave rebellions throughout the Caribbean. Even if the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was not anticipated in 1805, and even if public discussions of abolition were rare, issues of manumission, freedom, and re-enslavement could very well have been on many Bermudian’s minds.

Bermudians have never self-identified as specifically ‘creolized’ in the same way as do mixed-race generations in other former slaveholding colonies. Regardless of the lack of a specifically creole label, however, black and mixed-race born Bermudians were neither typically British nor essentially African by the 19th century, partly due to this longstanding hold on slave imports in Bermuda, and so they likely had a distinct perspective when it came to abolition that might have been unlike their Caribbean, American, and English counterparts. A creolized perspective would help to explain or at least illuminate the rationale behind some of the family-prompted manumissions that occurred leading up to the Abolition of the Slave Trade and eventually, Emancipation.

Barbara Bush discusses the approach of Emancipation in the 19th century, after the beginning of pro-natalist slavery, as the political change in the wind, so to speak, that prompted a majority of creolized slaves to begin to envisage “their freedom within the established framework of the existing society.”¹⁰⁶ This is reflected in case studies of families like the Tuckers who worked within a system of the normalized buying and selling of black bodies in order to establish freedom for themselves. Without absconding from a ship while abroad or poisoning an owner or mounting a rebellion, Jacob, Mary, and Nancy Tucker set their sights on a standard of freedom and gained it by manipulating the very system that would have, and had previously, allowed for their enslavement to take place at all. In other words, the story of the Tuckers in many ways seems to mirror the logic behind Bush’s notion of creolized expectations for freedom in the Age of Emancipation.

¹⁰⁶ Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Indiana University Press, 1990), 79.

Regardless of their racial and political situatedness in 1800s Bermuda, the Tuckers were nonetheless part of a larger discussion of freedom and abolition that was probably happening on the islands at the beginning of the century. More than one issue of the *Royal Gazette* in 1804 and 1805 ran copies or discussions of Haiti's newly declared Constitution; one such copy listed every article of the Constitution and was printed in an August 1805 issue of the *Gazette*. It specifically reads: "Slavery is forever abolished."¹⁰⁷ Abolition politics, to put it simply, seem to have been commonplace news in the early 19th century Atlantic world, and most Bermudians were aware of freedom movements happening elsewhere, notably, for instance, the Haitian Revolution.¹⁰⁸ The Tuckers were unlikely to have been an exception, and the timing of their manumissions might not be a coincidence.

Still, it would be flawed and unfair to associate all manumissions with political motives. Actions can carry political meaning without necessitating political radicality or astute political awareness in the people themselves. Discussions of everyday forms of resistance have been important to the historiography of slavery studies because they established that marginalized communities must still be considered as complex groups comprised of political actors. A slave woman who aborts her baby, for instance, proffers resistance to a pro-natalist slave society's expectations of black bodies. Her motives or intentions were not, however, political simply by the fact of her enslavement – rather they were political by the fact of her humanity. The implication that enslaved people were constantly, purposefully resisting leading up to Emancipation was an important stepping

¹⁰⁷ *Royal Gazette*, 1805-08-10, pp. 3.

¹⁰⁸ For more on this see: James Alexander Dun, *Dangerous Neighbors: Making the Haitian Revolution in Early America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

stone in the discipline's historiography; it prompted us to acknowledge that human beings in general tend to be resistant in the face of oppression, and it demonstrated that agency can take a nearly infinite number of forms.

With this in mind, cases like that of the Tuckers are important illustrations of how some families were acting to manipulate the system and resist enslavement, but it should never be assumed that they were doing it with political ends explicitly in mind. Rather, as historian Diana Paton suggests, family (and, I am suggesting, family-oriented movement toward freedom) was “a political site from which to struggle for a better life.”¹⁰⁹ While it is true that it would be unfair to press retrospective political intention on all the minutiae of 19th century subaltern lives, the Bermudians in the record generally seem to have been operating to strive for better circumstances either on behalf of their loved ones or for themselves.

Cases like that of the Tuckers, and of Cato and Rose, and of all the other case studies examined for this project, reveal something consistent about the nature of slavery in Bermuda: that despite its apparent mildness compared to enslavement on sugar and cotton plantations in other colonies, Bermudian slavery was still, first and foremost, slavery. Family was a political site from which Bermudians could seek freedom for their loved ones. It follows, then, if we are to accept Paton's understanding, that manumission – freedom, moreover – was sometimes seen and understood by 19th century Bermudians not just as a legal formality or a horizontal shift in a hierarchical society, but as a betterment of life. And

¹⁰⁹ Diana Paton, “Maternal Struggles and the Politics of Childlessness under Pronatalist Caribbean Slavery” in *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 2 (2017): 257.

thus, another intersection of meaning emerges that further complicates the social phenomenon of 19th century manumission.

Black Bermudian families left their mark on the record, and it is a record that indicates freedom in 19th century Bermuda was both highly valued and also intensely personal. Cases like the Tuckers demonstrate that freedom for the patriarch of a family did not amount to freedom for his wife and children, even if they had been purchased by him, away from third-party ownership, and away from enslaved life as such. For some reason, Jacob Tucker wanted to make it very clear not only that Mary and Nancy were free from enslavement by white owners, they were also free from him. Jacob did not want to have ownership of his family on paper, even if the fact of that ownership might not have changed daily life in practice.

But it should be considered that perhaps Jacob had some practical reasons for manumitting Mary and Nancy. By having documentation of his family's freedom, Jacob entered himself and them into a legal system that was forced to acknowledge that the Tuckers had some understanding both of its inner workings, but also their rights within its political boundaries. Additionally, documents like these might legitimately have been provided (or been thought to provide) some extent of legal protection for those who could have them drawn up. British travel writer Susette Harriet Lloyd discussed when she visited the island in the 19th century the perceived realities of enslaved-free marriages in her letters, emphasizing the "great misfortune to a slave if he happens to be married to a free woman" going on to explain that "his time is of course his master's, and yet he must find" and supply

resources and care for his family.¹¹⁰ It could simply have been that Jacob feared that if his wife was enslaved, perhaps their marriage was no longer valid or legal; if this were the case, maybe the manumission was more to function as a legal organ of their marriage, rather than an aspect of their family identity.

Lloyd also acknowledged and wrote about familial ownership, using the example of “a slave, after having obtained his own freedom by his industry” who “went to his master to purchase his wife.” In this instance, claims Lloyd, the husband refused to allow the wife’s owner to draw up a manumission certificate.¹¹¹ Just as we cannot know the motives for a refusal of manumission, we cannot know why Jacob Tucker chose the opposite action to free his wife and child. The point is, we are not required as historians to justify Jacob’s choice to manumit his family. The point of this thesis and this chapter is, rather, to examine the stories of people like the Tuckers in order to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between freedom and slavery leading up to Emancipation. Furthermore, the point is to attempt to grasp some of the many intersecting meanings behind freedom and slavery in the 19th century.

3.5 Freedom, Future, Debt

Mary Prince herself told us, in no uncertain terms, nearly two centuries ago, that all slaves desire to be free. The important detail is not so much that slaves sought freedom, but rather that their mark was made on the record through the struggle to obtain it. Freedom in the 19th century was not always an intangible or ephemeral concept for enslaved people, it was a visceral reality that was always either just out of reach or extraordinarily hard-won.

¹¹⁰ Susette Harriet Lloyd, *Sketches of Bermuda* (London: James Cochrane and Co., 1835), 98.

¹¹¹ Lloyd, *Sketches of Bermuda*, 96.

Moreover, the status of freedom was achieved through very physical means: stepping off a ship while abroad, paying a sum, referring to a certificate. In 1800s Bermuda, freedom was quite literally the most valuable possession an enslaved person could seek to own. This meant that while freedom was a highly valued ‘item’, it was simultaneously, necessarily, just another ownable commodity – albeit a slippery one – to be bought and sold, granted and received, or seized and taken. It is this slipperiness of the commodity of freedom that renders a succinct boiling-down of its multifarious meanings so impractical. As such, rather than being referred to simply as a commodity here, it will most often be referred to instead as a *social* commodity, in reference to/calling to mind Foucault’s theory of “social discourse” and his notion of ‘*biopolitics*’ or ‘*biopower*’.¹¹²

Enslavement and manumission rendered freedom a concept – or rather, a product – that was both far more desirable than modern, born-free people can imagine, and also far less valued than we now understand it. Modernity and all of its political moments have invented an understanding of freedom as an inalienable human right. For the 21st century person, freedom is literally priceless, yet we take its presence in our lives for granted in the day-to-day. For the enslaved 19th-century Bermudian, freedom could sometimes be purchased for the right price, and in this way, it was a commodity, but it was still so wildly out of grasp for many that it became the most revered and sought-after product on the

¹¹² See especially Michel Foucault’s 1975-76 lectures published under the title *Society Must be Defended*, specifically his lecture from March 17th, 1976, in which he elaborates for several pages on what he means by the notion of “biopolitics.” Extrapolating from this idea, when I was writing this thesis, I imagined the slave-owner relationship to be not unlike a biopolitical sphere, in which the slaveowner has the right to “make live and let die” (see pp. 241-243 of *Society Must be Defended*), and therefore, given my familiarity with Foucault, combined with Orlando Patterson’s notion of manumitted freedom as a “gift” in *Slavery and Social Death*, as well as comments from mentors in the process of revising this thesis, I have arrived at the term “social commodity” to describe the value of freedom as a material gift as well as its entanglement with social strata (something Foucault would related to biopolitics and biopower).

market. Therein lies an important detail in understanding how pre-Emancipation Bermudians conceived of manumission's meaning and modes: freedom as inherently paradoxical, and this paradox of commodified freedom is vitally useful when reading 19th century manumissions.¹¹³

As demonstrated again and again by cases in the Books like that of the Tuckers, Bermudian families rarely obtained freedom through straightforward means, and freedom rarely had a straightforward meaning. Most of the records in the Books of Miscellany likewise further contribute to the notion that paths to freedom in 19th century Bermuda were complicated, and that this was the case even when family members were able to offer support.

In 1816, a woman named Yarico paid forty pounds to have her daughter, Mary, manumitted. What stands as unique in this case study are the conditions of Mary's freedom, which stipulated that she would not actually be free until having reached the age of thirty-five. That is, seventeen years after the signing of the agreement.

Bermuda 22nd June 1816. Received from Yarico (formerly a Slave of John Esten Esq. dece'd, but now free) Forty pounds currency, as the full consideration for the time Services of her Daughter Mary (given by the Will of the said John Esten Esq. to Miss Catherine Esten Cooke of Virginia) until the said Mary shall attain the age of thirty five years, which will be on the 19th, October 1833, at Which time, it is the intention of the said Catherine Esten Cooke that the said Mary & any children she may have in the meantime shall be free.

James Christie Esten

For Miss Catherine Esten Cooke¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Once again, for more related to this topic see: Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (University of Georgia Press, 2010).

¹¹⁴ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 8, pp. 210.

The context of 19th century English colonies (and nearly anywhere else in the world) would have rendered a husband's 'ownership' of his wife – or parental ownership of children – commonplace. But the presence of records in the Books of Miscellany that detail husbands manumitting their enslaved wives or parents manumitting their still infant children problematizes the nuances of ownership present in a 19th century marriage and parenting, outlining the existence of a perhaps obvious but nonetheless important difference between familial ownership and slave ownership.

To deeper analyze the concept of intra-familial manumissions, it might be useful to recall, as outlined in Chapter One, Saidiya Hartman's understanding of the manumitted individual as permanently "burdened" and indebted to those who granted the freedom.¹¹⁵ Hartman here is speaking in terms of legislated emancipation, but many of her theoretical frameworks can be applied to records in the Books of Miscellany. Hartman says, for example, that white "beneficent gestures launch[ed] the stories of black freedom... and also establish[ed] the obligation and indebtedness of the freed to their friends and benefactors," an idea that stands at the forefront of many certificates in the Books.¹¹⁶ The idea that a freed person – either self-purchased or owner-manumitted – would be either emotionally or financially indebted to whomever 'allowed' that freedom to manifest, is a sentiment that stains many of the documents used for this project, even those documents concerning intra-familial manumissions. Think back to Cato and Rose, for instance, and Cato's insistence that Rose – her daughter and half-free slave – was not acting in a dutiful enough manner. Within each of these documents are themes of obligation, burden, value, control,

¹¹⁵ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 125-126.

¹¹⁶ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 130.

benevolence, and yes, even of family – especially in cases when children (and therefore, a legacy of either freedom or slavery) are involved.

Hartman’s notion of indebtedness fits nicely with Orlando Patterson’s notion of manumission as the exchange of a cultural gift, a theory influenced by the research of anthropologist Marcel Mauss, and an idea that Patterson expanded on in *Slavery and Social Death*. In his contributory chapter of *Paths to Freedom*, Patterson points out that although in manumissions a fee was often paid by the slave to her owner, thereby allowing the manumission to appear in the record like any other conveyance, this money was “a mere token, an expression of gratitude for the master’s freely given decision to release the slave” from bondage.¹¹⁷ The fact that this exchange was a falsity constructed by and through violence was and is beside the point, because it would have carried very real ramifications for 19th century slaves and freed people. Although some Bermudians might have viewed manumission as the giving of a ‘gift’, this gift was only the presentation of that which had been stolen from the slave in the first place – the selling of something back to a slave that was never truthfully the owner’s to give, and all with the expectation of gratitude.¹¹⁸

This gap between the actuality of exchanged ‘goods’ (the slave gives a fee, the owner sells a slave to him or herself), and the more ephemeral notion of freedom existing as somehow transferrable or purchasable, might account for some of the language of “love and affection” in the Books of Miscellany documents, and also goes further toward explaining why manumission certificates such as those in the Books are so seemingly

¹¹⁷ Brana-Shute and Sparks, eds., *Paths to Freedom*, 17.

¹¹⁸ At the risk of sounding anachronistic or presentist, let me clarify that I mean “freedom” in a sense beyond the legal. We have come to understand freedom as inalienable at least in theory because it is no one’s to *give*. It cannot be given or taken, only legally and coercively held for ransom.

resistant to precise interpretation of meaning. Phrases like this were the legal standard even in other forms of documents, but the phrase itself still seems to hold significance; there would be no need for a horse, or a vat of rum, or a bushel of grain to be sold under some pretense of “love and affection,” for instance. For all their efforts at seeming forthright and legally rigorous, Bermudians ultimately failed to disguise manumissions as regular, legal conveyances in the historical record.

Yarico’s case and those like it – records in which the executor takes up space to declare that he or she is bestowing freedom not only on the manumitted party, but also on the freeperson’s future children – exemplify the curious and troubling character of manumission as a phenomenon. In declaring freedom not only for Yarico, but also for any of her future children, Catherine Esten Cooke took responsibility and credit not only for Yarico’s freedom, but also for the freedom of people not yet in existence. In doing so, Catherine’s ‘benevolence’ was made to seem powerful enough to span generations – insurance that black Bermudians for decades after Yarico would carry with them an unrepayable indebtedness to the woman who freed their ancestor.

Diana Paton explained that “for enslaved women, the chattel principle extended beyond their own lifespan and into their childbearing potential” and into their children’s lives.¹¹⁹ After analyzing the language of manumissions, a parallel statement can be made: that for freed women, this principle of indebtedness extended into their potential for children, and into the lives of those children as well, and perhaps even their children after.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Paton, “Maternal Struggles”, 252.

¹²⁰ For more on this see: Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Through the support of family, freedom could be achieved, but contrariwise, it was also through the web of family ties that the hierarchy of whiteness above blackness – and moreover of free blackness beneath and indebted to benevolent whiteness – could be multi-generationally transmitted and maintained.

CHAPTER 4: THE POLITICS OF DEPENDENCY

“When you become men and women you will have full liberty to earn your living, to go, to come, to seek pleasure or profit in any way that you may choose, so long as you do not meddle with the rights of other people; in one word, *you are free children!* Thank God! thank God! my children, for this precious gift. Count it dearer than life.”

– *The Child’s Anti-Slavery Book*, pp. 9

4.1 A Record Past and Future

The genealogical realities of pro-natalist slavery implicated the lives of society’s youngest and little-discussed members: its children. Children, because of their importance to the future of any socio-political structure, wield a kind of power, as do their stories. Slave children in 19th century Bermuda might at first appear to be silent in the archive, but the Books of Miscellany contain a number of stories wherein young people can be seen negotiating the threshold between slavery and freedom.

Because infants and toddlers have no critical voice, even in our modern world, we seldom expect to hear from them when looking back on a written record. But the absence of their first-hand experiences – the ostensible absence of any subaltern voices – does not negate their social, institutional, and political relevance in this story of pro-natalist, slave-holding Bermuda. On the contrary, children are some of the key players in perceiving the slippery bounds of 19th century freedom, and because of this, there is an ever-growing literature focusing on children’s histories. Colleen Vasconcellos is a scholar of Caribbean history who has been working for some time on examining children as historical subjects. Her 2015 monograph *Slavery, Childhood, and Abolition in Jamaica* covers many aspects of enslaved childhood, ultimately tracing how, under abolitionism, “enslaved children gradually shifted from burden to investment,” with slowly-gathering anti-slavery sentiment in the British Atlantic after 1788, “the role of the children as a viable economic commodity

evolved by 1815 into a social investment as well.”¹²¹ This would have been true in Bermuda just as in 19th century Jamaica, especially given Bermuda’s longer-standing pro-natalist reality. As social investment capital, Bermudian slave children would have been both vital to and potentially threatening of the transmission of paternalistic slavery ideologies prior to Emancipation.

The prevalence of child manumissions in the Books of Miscellany is fairly striking. In some slaveholding places in the 19th century there was a legislated minimum age at which a slave could be eligible for self-purchase or manumission; in Louisiana, for instance, a slave child born to a slave mother could not be freed until the age of thirty. Some 19th century exceptions are documented even in New Orleans, however, and one historian points out that in these cases, the deeds “stated that the manumission take place ‘as if the slave had attained the age required by law’.”¹²²

No such language appears in the manumission and self-purchase records for Bermudian slave children, and the ages of freed youths in the Books of Miscellany vary greatly with no obvious pattern. Although still in a notable minority overall – less than a quarter of the entries catalogued for this project – known child manumissions account for a sizeable enough portion of the documents to raise questions and beg further analysis. Surprising, moreover, is the fact that there are a number of cases in which infants, sometimes not more than a few months old, were documented as manumitted slaves with fees recorded in their certificates, but not associated with any adult buyer.

¹²¹ Colleen Vasconcellos, *Slavery, Childhood, and Abolition in Jamaica, 1788-1838* (University of Georgia Press, 2015), 97.

¹²² Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846-1862* (Louisiana State University Press), 4-5.

In 1827 the Amelioration Act passed in Bermuda. Among other clauses for the improvement of slave conditions, the Act granted “a provision giving black males, whether slave or free, the right to purchase any of their children who had been born into slavery.”¹²³ So close to the year of Emancipation in 1834 this might have been, in a way, a first step toward a version of abolition. It could just as likely, however, have been seen by many people as a compromise that might actually prevent eventual Emancipation. Regardless, it makes sense that parent or guardian purchases of child slaves might have been documented as manumissions after the Act was passed, if for no other reason than to contribute to the notion of Bermudian slaveholders as benevolent and kindly. But child manumissions far precede the 1820s in the historical record, as do instances of parents purchasing their children or young relatives from white owners, so the 1827 Amelioration only explains some of the records.

Befuddling the issue of child manumissions further is the knowledge and recognition in recent slavery historiography that crowded Bermuda – unlike other slaveholding colonies – had seen natural increases in the slave population nearly from the colony’s inception; Bermudian owners understood both natural slave childbirth and slave population growth as economic and social opportunities, and yet there are enough instances in the record of owners manumitting child slaves to openly wonder about the meaning and purpose of child manumission in a pro-natalist colony.

Records directly concerning children are vastly in the minority in the documents catalogued for this project, but Jarvis points out that “children usually outnumbered adults

¹²³ Bermuda College, “Blacks in Bermuda, Historical Perspectives,” *a Lecture Series of the Bermuda College Extension Programme* (Island Press, 1981), 11.

on the island.”¹²⁴ If this was true, then, considering the roughly black-white parity in population throughout Bermuda’s slaveholding history, and the consistent population growth in the black half of the demographic, it stands to reason that the manumissions in the Books pertain only to a very, very tiny portion of enslaved children. This small sample of children explicitly documented in the Books, therefore, comprise a set of exceptions to some unspoken norm. Factors like employment, skill, education, and ability to make a livable wage or pay a manumission fee hardly apply to a baby – something else about these children must have set them apart from the vast majority of others who do not appear in the record.

We will likely never know with certainty what led this small sample of children into the Books of Miscellany, but it is important to investigate their stories because of their worth in constructing a nuanced picture of the peculiar multiplicity of meanings behind freedom in the 19th century. By looking to the records of child manumissions in the Books, we can at least begin to understand how freed children might have played a role in freedom-slavery negotiations, and by extension, in the political landscape of slaveholding culture in 19th century Bermuda.

4.2 Tom Fox and ‘Diseased’ Boy Sam

It can be complicated to broach the subject of consent in a discussion of enslaved persons because, while tied necessarily to the historiography of agency, the notion of consent can too easily lead to unhelpful claims about the willingness of slaves to remain enslaved, or the so-called choice to stay in bondage, while leaving behind issues such as

¹²⁴ Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade*, 280.

coercion, manipulation, abuse, trauma, knowledge, and all other aspects of the human condition that affected enslaved people. Recent histories of slavery have of course been careful not to imply that slaves were happy to remain enslaved or that it was truly a choice based on equal opportunity and uncoerced actions, but it is important to preface this section by acknowledging in no uncertain terms the potential pitfalls of a discussion on slave consent. It can difficult at times to tow the line between acknowledging the inherent agency of all people – even enslaved people – while also having a frank discussion about coercion and abuse.

At least one of the records in the Books of Miscellany, however, naturally brings the notion of slave consent to the fore, thereby adding a new dimension to this discussion of freedom, slavery, family, and the role of children in all of these. The case of Tom Fox, a slave pilot, and his young enslaved charge, Sam, simultaneously opens the discussion both to the notion of consent and to the issue of slave dependents such as children, people of ill health, or slaves living with disability.

In July of 1818, William Smith, a customs official in Bermuda at the time, drew up a document for Tom's manumission. The document itself begins unremarkably, with the usual legalities and jargon of any deed or Bill of Sale, but soon another subject is brought into the story, and Tom's future as a freed person is revealed to have come with some conditions:

I William Smith, [...] Esquire, Comptroller of His Majesty's Customs in the said Islands, [...] in consideration of the many faithful services to me rendered by my Male Negroe Slave commonly called Tom Fox, who is a Pilot [...] Do manumit, enfranchise, and set free from Slavery and any kind of servitude and bondage whatsoever the aforesaid Negro Man or Slave so called Tom Fox [...]: Provided always and upon this express condition that the said Negroe Tom Fox shall and will well and truly pay, or cause to be paid, unto me the said William Smith during the

natural lives of myself the said William Smith and my present diseased Negro Boy called Sam, formerly belonging to or in the possession of one Mr. Collins, to and for the sole use, maintenance, support and comfort of the said diseased Negro Boy Sam, at the expiration of every month from the day of the date of these presents at and after the rate of one shilling and sixpence current money of Bermuda per Day.¹²⁵

Overall, the imposition of conditions like this upon a manumitted person were fairly typical, at least in the documents catalogued for this project. What is unclear about Tom Fox's manumission is why Smith would manumit a man skilled in one of the most valuable professions of the time. It is not unusual in the Books of Miscellany to see manumissions attached to either a literal fee, or some future financial obligation, but Tom's daily fee for Sam's care was substantial. Lloyd wrote a little bit about slave wages in *Sketches of Bermuda*, detailing that the highest wage for skilled enslaved workers was generally about four shillings per day – and that was the maximum figure Lloyd provided.¹²⁶ This means, even assuming Tom was making the maximum wage of an enslaved sailor, that he was obligated to pay more than a quarter of his wages toward Sam's care, without any significant relationship between Tom and Sam explicitly mentioned. As a manumitted sailor, however, it is unclear the type of wage Tom could hope to pull.

Tom's case is curious, furthermore, because of a brief document following his deed of manumission:

I Tom Fox above named do hereby consent to receive and enjoy my Freedom upon the Conditions above expressed and no other. Dated this seventeenth Day of July one thousand Eight hundred and Eighteen.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 8, pp. 247-248.

¹²⁶ Lloyd, *Sketches of Bermuda*, 96.

¹²⁷ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 8, pp. 249.

Among the documents catalogued for this project, there are freed blacks manumitting their relatives, whites manumitting blacks, whites manumitting blacks who were already supposedly freed years prior, free blacks transferring ownership of enslaved blacks, children owning other children, and a whole array of ownership scenarios, all of which create a mosaic of experiences impervious to generalization; but in no other instance in the Books of Miscellany did I find another example of a manumitted person signing a declaration of express consent to receive his or her freedom, and in no other instance was an enslaved child explicitly described as “diseased” like Sam.

This is not to say that there were not other children with illnesses or disabilities in the record – on the contrary, it seems almost impossible that every single person in the Books of Miscellany was able-bodied and healthy. But William’s explicit declaration that Sam was diseased – not “ill” or “unwell” or “unlikely”, but “diseased”, a graphic word ripe with upsetting and longstanding connotations – is an unusual presence in the Books. Typical language of slave trade documents is coded, and often buried between layers of careful phrasing that amounts to at best, euphemism, and at worst, outright confabulation. It is truly rare in the records see the use of blunt descriptors like “diseased”. When William Smith described Sam thusly, he removed the veil of euphemism from the situation, and he placed a great responsibility on the fees paid by Tom for Sam’s care. But in doing so he also removed his own image as a perfect slaveholder with healthy, happy slaves.

Alternatively, it is possible that William anticipated the manumission to be interpreted as if he were selflessly releasing a highly skilled slave pilot in favour of finding a way to provide care for a disease-ridden child who likely had very little labour value. But there is so little information provided in the documents that we can never know the full

scope of Tom and Sam’s situation, and this is one of the most frustrating aspects of research based on fragmentary primary evidence. We have no idea the nature of Sam’s illness, if it was curable, or if he was disabled rather than ill, strictly speaking. Neither of the documents provide any details about Sam’s condition or Sam and Tom’s relationship – the only thing we know for sure is that their case, like all the others before it, acts as another brush stroke to the ever-growing and increasingly complicated portrait of 19th century freedom. Because the case involves a child – and a declaratively unwell child at that – and because of the deployment of consent, Tom and Sam’s case is striking.

Saidiya Hartman has much to say in the body of her work about the deployment of consent in the relationship between owner and slave, but a passage in her monograph *Scenes of Subjection* stands out as particularly relevant to the case of Tom Fox:

[In the owner-slave relationship] the brutality and antagonisms of slavery are obscured in favor of an enchanting reciprocity [which] renders the state of domination as an ideal of care, ... gratitude, and humanity. The ruthless use of labor power and the extraction of profit are imagined as the consensual and rational exchange between owner and slave. This is accomplished by representing direct and primary forms of domination as coercive and consensual – in short, by representing slavery as a hegemonic social relation.¹²⁸

In Tom’s manumission, the “direct and primary form of domination” (i.e. his initial enslaved state, and the expensive condition set upon his freedom in the form of paying for Sam’s care, *or else*) was imagined as reciprocity – as a hegemonic social relation – the moment he signed a document “consenting” to receive his freedom. This “enchanting reciprocity” served systemic paternalism two-fold, by appearing to elevate Tom to the level of his former owner (and demonstrating William’s goodness and fairness as an owner),

¹²⁸ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 53.

while simultaneously demanding from Tom the recognition that he is self-imposing a new obligation upon his life. Tom's consent to be free, to again use Hartman's language, burdened him with a new responsibility, and reinforces the notion that his freedom was a merciful gift to be received from his owner, but a frightening or potentially dangerous one that required his understanding and his "consent", rather than it simply being his birthright as a human being.

This is an entirely different understanding than our modern conception of how freedom operates and is transmitted; Tom's case demonstrates a construction in 19th century Bermuda of "freedom" both as a daunting responsibility and a massive privilege – but only, apparently, to those Bermudians born in slavery. To slaveowners, freedom was a possession they naturally owned in surplus and could willingly bestow upon the worthy from time to time, but only with their ultimately burdensome consent, or more commonly, it seems, with the guarantee of some financial reward or reprieve.

4.2.1 Freedom Capital and its Dependent Stocks

William Smith had both nothing and everything to do with Tom's manumission: Smith produced from thin air the social commodity of Tom Fox's freedom, which was never truly a tangible product to be taken and given, and in doing so, also relieved himself of the economic burden of caring for Sam, a slave who by all appearances might not have been in any shape to turn a profit. In the previous chapter, there was some discussion of freedom as a social commodity, but Tom Fox's case illustrates that freedom in the 19th century was truly a social commodity, but one with the potential for some economic profit without the requirement of any material expenditure, building supplies, or assembly costs whatsoever. It does beg the question of what might have become of poor Sam if not for

Tom's manumission and obligatory payments. Would he have been another manumitted child, without any obvious guardian attached to his case to take up the cost of his rearing? Tom Fox's ostensible freedom, and subsequent payments for Sam's care, might actually be one example of a missing piece in the puzzling trail of child and infant manumissions that speckle the Books of Miscellany.

Attempting to trace Tom Fox and Sam in other sources such as the Church Register, looking for any marriage or burial records, was mostly to no avail. William Smith turns up fairly regularly in early 1800s issues of the *Royal Gazette*, but only insofar as he was a customs officer signing off on imports and exports. Suspicious of how well manumissions stuck, so to speak, at the best of times in slaveholding Bermuda, skepticism is warranted as to the ability of Tom Fox to maintain his shilling and sixpence payments per day for Sam's care. I checked the 1821 Slave Register – the first Register taken in Bermuda – looking for evidence that Tom might have become re-enslaved at some point. Although William Smith declared ownership in 1821 of a slave by the name of Tom, this individual was listed as a “labourer” and not as a pilot. Curiouser still, “Tom” in the 1821 Register was recorded as female. This could be a clerical error, or simply a non-traditional name, but no matter the case, the entry fails to add any more detail to the story of Tom Fox's manumission, and his young, sick charge.¹²⁹ There was no “Sam” listed as William Smith's slave in 1821.

4.3 Work and Disability

¹²⁹ See: 1821 Slave Register (KW edits) entry #2260. Note that the next entry, #2261, for “Alice” was initially recorded as male, with “F?” next to it in the editor's notes. It is possible that the sexes of Tom and Alice's entries accidentally got swapped during the cataloguing process.

Tom Fox's manumission and his tie to Sam opened some avenues for thinking about illness and disability among slaves in the record. Prior to analyzing Tom's case, it was difficult to understand the purpose of manumitting an infant – it started to seem through the other case studies that manumission was almost always a relief of financial burden on the slaveholder, with self-purchase fees often helping to ameliorate the initial loss of free labour. But infants and young children would have no payment to offer their owners, and it seems counter-intuitive that in a paternalistic, pro-natalist slaveholding colony any owner would opt to jettison, either by manumission or by sale back to the parents, some of the most valuable assets to the slave economy: the children. This phenomenon is especially confusing given the tumultuous reality of Bermuda's economy in the 19th century.¹³⁰

And yet the examples are numerous. In 1800, James Hurt bought a seven-week old girl named Hannah from a spinster in Tucker's Town. It is unclear whether or not the infant was related to James, but as a mariner, it is difficult to understand what immediate use James might have had for an infant girl, and the baby's parents are not mentioned in the certificate. It is of course possible that James himself was Hannah's father, but the document has nothing to say about that. In 1802, Love Dickinson sold a five-month-old baby to a "Negro Woman" named Scillar, who might have been the infant's mother. In 1805, Lettice paid fifty dollars to her former owner, William Foot, in order to purchase her three-year-old son. In 1807, Jacob Tucker manumitted his thirteen-year-old daughter Nancy. In 1818, six-year-old Anna Matilda was manumitted by her owner, a widow named Sarah Yates – there is no manumission price listed and no parents are named, though Anna

¹³⁰ Refer to Chapter 2 of this thesis, in which the economic realities of 19th century Bermuda are discussed.

Matilda is described as “Mulatto”. The list goes on: owner after owner after owner choosing to sell off or give away their future-potential slave assets.

The historiography of disability in the context of slavery is fairly limited, but at least one historian, Jim Downs, considers that in Reconstruction America for instance, disabilities rendered it more difficult for slaves to gain their freedom – even when it was their legal right. In late 19th century America, claims Downs, “slaves were not free because the Civil War ended... slaves were freed because they were willing and able to do work.” For those who could not work, however, “slavery continued” and many former slaves with chronic illnesses or disabilities found themselves trapped on plantations, playing-out their same role as slaves to ostensibly-former owners against whom they had no recourse in cases of unfair or unlawful employment conditions.¹³¹ Downs points out that by keeping freed slaves on the plantation of their former enslavement, white planters were often viewed (in both history and in the historiography of Reconstruction) as doing so out of some kind of alleged good will toward their former slaves.¹³²

Sam’s circumstances were different in early 1800s Bermuda than 1860s America, but the point stands that William Smith’s choice to keep “diseased” Sam as a slave might have stemmed from a desire to flaunt an identity of selflessness and benevolence. Neil Kennedy suggested in reviewing this project that perhaps some slaveholder behaviour in the Books can be accounted for by considering the Methodist missionaries who visited Bermuda in the first part of the 19th century. One of the most notable of these missionaries

¹³¹ Jim Downs, “The Continuation of Slavery: The Experience of Disabled Slaves during Emancipation,” (Online resource): <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/112/112>.

¹³² Downs, “The Continuation of Slavery,” (Online resource): <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/112/112>.

was the Reverend Joshua Marsden, who arrived on the island in 1810 to preach Methodism to its residents, both black and white.¹³³ Marsden’s preoccupation with and focus on the welfare of black Bermudians meant that some white slaveowners – especially in St. Georges where Marsden predominantly worked – would have taken these sermons to heart but twisted the religious lessons into slaveholding logic. This could have resulted in cases, for instance, of the continued enslavement of unhealthy children like Sam under the pretense of religious charity.

4.4. Between Boundaries

Jennifer Morgan succinctly and clearly explains that since slavery “relied on a reproductive logic” this meant it was also “inseparable from the explanatory power of race.”¹³⁴ As such, it would be improper, and perhaps even impossible, to have a discussion about slavery, and moreover a discussion about enslaved children, without considering race. Looking through my catalogue of the Books of Miscellany, the vast majority of both sales and manumissions concern “coloured” or “Negro” people – in the minority, however, are manumissions of declared mixed-race or “Mulatto” slaves. Just as this project is interested in the liminal spaces between bondage and freedom, so too is it concerned with the mutable construct of race, and how that construct negotiated the liminal spaces between white and black. Of the few cases involving children in the Books of Miscellany, only three of those concern manumissions for mixed-race children, all of them between 1817 and 1818.

¹³³ Bermuda College, “Blacks in Bermuda” lectures, 59

¹³⁴ Jennifer Morgan, “*Partus sequitur ventrem*: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery,” in *Small Axe* 22, vol. 1, no. 55 (2018), 1.

Ann Maria, the first of these cases, is a poignant example of how race categories could be deployed in the record for varying purposes. First, Ann Maria was sold in July of 1817 by Mary Williams of Sandy's Parish to James Brearley of St. George's, a clerk in Bermuda's Commissariat Department, for the sum of nine pounds¹³⁵. In this initial bill of sale Ann Maria is listed as a "Negro or Mulatto Female child," with the rest of the document proceeding typically.¹³⁶ Not even a month later, Ann Maria and James Brearley appear again in the Books, this time, for Ann Maria's manumission:

Know all Men by these presents that I James Brearley of the Town of Saint George in the Islands aforesaid ... Have for divers good causes... manumitted and set free the said Female Mulatto child Ann Maria, from all Slavery, servitude, or bondage whatever, and that I the said James Brearley Do by these presents declare the said Female Mulatto child Ann Maria, to be manumitted and set free from all Slavery... as if she had been actually born free.¹³⁷

The difference is subtle, but between Ann Maria's two documents it is clear that the perceived reality of her race was being actively negotiated through the process of her sale and manumission. Whereas in the bill of sale, Mary Williams displays lack of surety about whether Ann Maria is a "Negro or Mulatto," James describes her in the manumission certificate as "Mulatto," without any verbal hand-wringing.

There is a substantial base of evidence from other areas of the slaveholding world indicating that "Mulatto" or mixed-race status resulted in a disproportionate likelihood of manumission. Orlando Patterson writes about this phenomenon at fair length in *Slavery and Social Death*, claiming that "there was a disproportionate number of persons of mixed race among the freed population" and that this tendency led in the historiography to the

¹³⁵ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 8, pp. 212-214.

¹³⁶ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 8, pp. 213.

¹³⁷ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 8, pp. 214.

“somatic theory of manumission” in which it seems that owners “favored slaves who appeared to be close to their own somatic norm.”¹³⁸ This theory, however, only makes the contradictory minority of “Mulatto” manumissions in the Books of Miscellany even more intriguing. Only thirteen Books cases involve declaratively mixed-race parties, plus not all of these cases are manumissions, and as mentioned earlier only three of those deal with freed children. Since mixed-race slaves were more likely to be manumitted in slaveholding colonies, it is difficult to understand why there are not more cases of these manumissions present in the Books. So, 19th century Bermuda once again seems to have been in some ways an anomaly of the Atlantic world.

The other two cases of mixed-race child manumissions are those of Clarissa Chappell and Anna Matilda who were manumitted in 1817 and 1818 respectively. It is interesting to note that all three of these children are female, but more interesting still that, aside from their gender and the general time frame of their manumissions, these children seem to have had little else in common. Even their specific ages cannot be compared because neither Ann Maria’s nor Clarissa’s were recorded. Anna Matilda’s age, however, was recorded with unusual specificity as: six years, one month, and twenty-one days. Sarah Yates, widowed by Captain Peter Yates prior to Anna Matilda’s manumission, did not list any associated fee with the child’s freedom, expressing that it was her will and intention that Anna Matilda “should be as free to all intents and purposes as any subject of His Majesty the King of Great Britain and Ireland.”¹³⁹ Anna Matilda’s parents are not

¹³⁸ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 268.

¹³⁹ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 8, pp. 388.

mentioned in the document, and as to the issue of her guardianship, Sarah Yates is predictably silent.

It should come as a surprise, then, that three years after her manumission, Anna Matilda can be found recorded in the first Bermudian Slave Register as the property of Captain Peter Yates' estate.¹⁴⁰ And yet, given the apparent frequency of failed manumissions, rescinded promises of freedom, and instances of re-enslavement thus far explored, Anna Matilda's presence in the Register resounded as somewhat unsurprising. What is surprising, on the other hand, is the absence of Ann Maria and Clarissa Chappell in the 1821 Register. Perhaps their freedom was actualized, but without more information, we can never be sure.

These three cases demonstrate to some extent the happy possibility that manumission was often a very real and achievable pathway toward freedom for enslaved people, even children, even people of contested racial identity, and even those without named families. But cases like Anna Matilda remind us of the real power and racial hierarchy at play in slaveholding colonies, where much of the time white slaveholders wielded disproportionate control over any navigations between slavery and freedom, and likewise they also lorded over similar negotiations between racial boundaries.

4.5 Children Owning Children

Manumission records are far from the only pieces of evidence in the Books that implicate children in the overall culture of slavery, but children's roles in the maintenance and transmission of slave-owner relationships, or enslaved-free movement, as well as their

¹⁴⁰ 1821 Bermuda Slave Register (KW edit).

level of awareness with respect to these prescribed roles, remain somewhat a mystery. What stands as clear from the documents, however, is that the stark social hierarchy of slaveholding society was taught to Bermudians, both enslaved and free, beginning in childhood. This is illustrated most poignantly by Books of Miscellany cases in which enslaved children, usually by way of Deeds of Gift, came to be owned by white children who in many instances were similar in age.

Mary Prince helps us to understand this phenomenon in her autobiography when she reflects on her own childhood as an enslaved girl. As an infant, Mary was gifted to the grandchild of her mother's owner, Captain Darrel. Darrel's granddaughter – Betsey Williams – was by Mary's own account about the same age as Mary herself. Prince clearly and poignantly explains the dynamic of her relationship with her first young owner, expressing that she “loved [Betsey] very much” but also describing herself as “quite the pet” of Miss Williams, implying that despite the inherent happiness and naivete of childhood friendships, Betsey and Mary were nonetheless, never quite equals:

[Betsey] used to lead me about by the hand, and call me her little nigger. This was the happiest period of my life; for I was too young to understand rightly my condition as a slave, and too thoughtless and full of spirits to look forward to the days of toil and sorrow.¹⁴¹

Mary also clarifies that despite her status as Betsey's “pet” and even in spite of their sometimes sibling-like relationship, her closest playmates were her little brothers and sisters, and that her mother, a domestic slave, was her primary caregiver.

When, at twelve years old, the Williams became too financially stretched to keep the whole Prince family under the same roof, Mary was hired out to the nearby Prudden

¹⁴¹ Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*, 57.

estate. “I was a child then” she writes of herself, going on to explain that her first form of employment with the Pruddens was as a nurse to one of their children, Daniel. Another of the Prudden children was a girl named Fanny, who Mary claims was so fond of her that she would relay all of her school lessons to Mary, so that after only a few months, Mary could “spell many small words.”¹⁴²

The way Prince describes her time with the Williams and the Pruddens is compelling because she uses the motif of childhood naivete to explain to the reader not only that enslaved children were unaware to an extent of their status as slaves, but on a grander scale, that children were ignorant in many ways to the whole system of slavery. The subject of the veracity (or debated lack thereof) of abolitionist accounts, like Prince’s, has been at the center of years of historiographical discussion. Regardless of the factual accuracy of narratives like that of Mary Prince, however, her descriptions of enslaved childhood are no less truthful or valuable than the coded language filling the Books of Miscellany. And the truth remains that Prince’s claim of being owned by another child is corroborated by some of the documents researched for this project.

Prince employs the motif of childhood, and child-child slave-owner dynamics, in a persuasive and compelling manner, using them both as literary devices to compel an argument about the immorality of slavery, and its existence as an *unnatural* state of society into which children were indoctrinated. In the Books of Miscellany, child-child ownership appears in several places, confirming that it was not an entirely uncommon practice. It is Prince’s writing, however, that prompts us to think about not only the practical, but the

¹⁴² Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*, 59.

hefty symbolic meaning of a child owning another child. Furthermore, Prince's autobiography, and her contemporaneous literary voice, demonstrates and confirms that an ephemeral notion of childhood innocence did, in fact, exist in 19th century Bermuda; by describing her childhood so vividly, Prince reveals not only that she remembers her own innocent period of childhood before she knew what it meant to be a slave, but also that she considered the white children she interacted with during her youth to have been, in many ways, equally as innocent.

There is a large and very current debate in slavery scholarship about how concerned slaveholders really were with approaching Emancipation. As Neil Kennedy pointed out during the development of this paper, owners even in Bermuda were purchasing slaves sometimes as late as 1833 – expenditures which, apparently unbeknownst to them, would be obsolete within a year under British Emancipation. The latest slave sale in the Books of Miscellany documents used for this research was indeed from 1833, but even that sale, of Minerva and her child to James Taylor, resulted in their manumission on the same day. In 1831, Nancy was sold to Vincent Biscoe – another very late slave sale in the Books. Nancy, too, however, was manumitted within the span of a year.¹⁴³

Nearly all the Books of Miscellany documents from between 1831 and 1834, aside from Nancy and Minerva's sales, are self-purchases and manumissions, one of the most striking being Lucy Harley's remarkable 1832 self-purchase, for fifteen pounds, at the estate auction of her late owner.¹⁴⁴ Despite these documents, it remains hard to say from

¹⁴³ Minerva & Child: Books of Miscellany, Vol. 10, pp. 29-30. Nancy: Books of Miscellany, Vol. 9, pp. 380-381.

¹⁴⁴ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 9, pp. 382.

the sporadic nature of records in the Books if in the years immediately preceding Emancipation there was truly a pattern of increasingly frequent manumissions.

The notion, however, that some slaveholders might have been aware, if not of approaching Emancipation specifically, then at least of rising voices in anti-slavery discussions throughout the Atlantic, is not especially far-fetched – information travelled quickly enough in the 19th century that news of slave politics such as the Haitian Revolution was reaching Bermuda's shores with relative efficiency and appearing in local newspapers. It is possible that some of the owners in the Books of Miscellany documents were operating, perhaps not in anticipation, but certainly with an awareness, of antislavery politics. More difficult to understand is how child owners and their child slaves fit within in the changing political landscape of 19th century slaveholding colonies, especially in the years between the Amelioration Act in 1827 and eventual Emancipation in 1834.

This brings us to the curious and compelling example of Hezekiah Frith, a prominent Bermudian privateer, who appears multiple times in the Books in 1827 transferring a number of slave youths into the ownership of his heirs. First, in March, Frith drew up Deeds of Gift for his two young sons, William Joseph and Merichel Keith, ten years old and seven years old, respectively, to take ownership of slaves David, fifteen years, and Aberdeen, six years. Then, in May, Frith granted ownership to his grandchildren of four slaves whose ages varied widely, the oldest being fifty-one and the youngest a newborn, only ten days old.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 9, pp. 106-109.

It seems an unlikely coincidence that these transactions took place in 1827 specifically. Not only did the Amelioration Act take effect in Bermuda that year, but 1827 also marked a time when the Frith family encountered substantial economic and familial strife. According to Sister Jean de Chantal Kennedy's biography of Hezekiah Frith Sr., 1827 marked the end of a long-standing business partnership between the Friths and the Tatems, mostly, according to Sister Kennedy, while under the control of Hezekiah's son, Hezekiah Frith Junior. This dynamic understandably led to some friction between father and son with regards to the running of the family business. That same year, "Frith lost his two remaining brothers, Isaiah and Edward" doubtless putting pressure on Hezekiah Sr. and Jr., who were the remaining patriarchs of the family. Since Hezekiah Jr.'s "business affairs were in such a bad state" in 1827, it makes sense that his father was feeling the financial squeeze of widowed sisters in law, raising young children as an aging man, and helping to keep his son's failing business afloat.¹⁴⁶

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that in 1827 Hezekiah made a mark in the record by attempting to divide ownership of, and therefore future responsibility for, family slaves during a time of recorded financial distress. But what Hezekiah was ultimately accomplishing through these Deeds of Gift was so much more than the practicality of ownership distribution. Setting aside for a moment the economic logic of slavery – which in recent scholarship has been challenged anyway – Hezekiah Frith Sr. was actually securing a family legacy of slave ownership, and therefore, of status. Granting ownership

¹⁴⁶ Sister Jean de Chantal Kennedy, *Frith of Bermuda: Gentleman Privateer* (Hamilton: Bermuda Bookstores, 1964), 159-160.

to his very young grandchildren was a strategic move, one designed to reinforce the structure of white ownership even as its eventual collapse was rapidly approaching.

4.6 Humane Inhumanity, Paternal Politics

The language of manumission varies to some degree across individual documents, usually taking the form of fairly un-emotional legal jargon designed, probably, to be clear in its meaning. Sometimes, however, executors of these manumissions slipped in details of their political opinions or feelings on the institution of slavery. This behaviour is interesting because it indicates not only an openness about these opinions, but also a desire to have them formally recognized and permanently recorded. For instance, William, who was first purchased at auction, and then freed by his merchant owner, James Taylor, a month later, in July of 1829, was freed by way of a manumission certificate in which Taylor interjects specifically to articulate a distaste for slavery:

Whereas – in consideration of my dislike to the practice of Slavery, and for divers other good causes me hereunto moving, I am desirous to set free and manumit my male Slave “William”, purchased at Auction on the twenty fifth day of June 1829.¹⁴⁷

Regardless of James Taylor’s feelings on the institution of slavery, he wielded the power to manumit or not manumit William simply by the fact of his whiteness and his wealth – a justification such as “distaste” for slavery was far from required, so it begs the question of why he felt the need or desire to express it in the first place. Furthermore, it might be important to ask ourselves what happened in the month between Taylor’s purchase of William at auction and his choice to grant William’s manumission. Regardless of his

¹⁴⁷ Books of Miscellany, Vol. 9, pp. 177.

“distaste” for slavery, Taylor seems to have been content to own William as a slave for a whole month before moving to formally free him.

The picture of slave ownership offered in this paper has been admittedly bleak. This unforgiving interpretation of slave ownership stems chiefly from a strong desire to veer away from any chance at conveying an apologist interpretation of manumission in the 19th century. This does not mean, however, that I am unaware that, just like their slaves, slaveowners were only human, and so prone as most humans are to waffling, or to convenient opinions, predictably unpredictable behaviour, and a tendency toward self-preservation. After the legislated Amelioration of 1827, it makes sense that some owners would have genuinely reconsidered their positions on slavery. In just the same way, it makes sense that many of them probably did no such thing. Perhaps James Taylor was one of the former, or perhaps his distaste for slavery came from some other source. Perhaps his declared distaste was mostly performative rather than practical. Truthfully, we may never know. What we do know is that the nature of ownership was fluid and ever-changing within the complex political landscape of paternalistic, pro-natalist slavery.

The complexity of the 19th century political landscape is illustrated particularly well in this excerpt from an 1829 issue of the *Royal Gazette* which recounts the case of slaveowners on a sloop, the *Adelaide*, who were taken into custody when the ship was seized under suspicion of illegal slave transport.¹⁴⁸

HIGH COURT OF ADMIRALTY, Dec. 13, 1828
The Adelaide Slave Case

Sir C. Robinson appointed a special sitting of the court for this day to hear the arguments in the above case.

¹⁴⁸ Recall that the slave trade had been formally outlawed in the British colonies in 1807 with the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act.

Dr. Dodson opened their case on the last court day and stated that it was an appeal from a judgement of the Vice-Admiralty Court of Bermuda. The exportations stated that on the 27th of January, 1827, Captain Jones, the commander of the H.H. Ship Orestes, seized the sloop Adelaide, of 107 tons, bound from the port of Hamilton to Trinidad. The arrest was made as the vessel was lying at anchor in the port of Hamilton, having cleared out for Trinidad – and the ground of seizure was, that the vessel had on board seven slaves, which were about to be imported to Trinidad contrary to the statutes for preventing the importation of slaves from one British colony to another. Two of the slaves taken on board belonged to Mr. Wainwright, a passenger, and the remaining five to Mr. McAllister, also a passenger. The prayer of Capt. Jones was, that the vessel should be forfeited, the slaves confiscated, and the owners and master of the vessel condemned to pay a penalty of 100 pounds for each of the slaves on board. The defence set up on the part of the owners was that the slaves were domestic slaves, taken on board to attend on their owners, and that they were certified as such by the Custom-house Officers in Bermuda, and the certificate inserted on the clearance of the vessel...

...Dr. Lushington said he appeared for Captain Jones, who had originally seized the ship and slaves, and brought them to Bermuda for adjudication. It [sic] opening the case it was unnecessary for him to say much more than that this was an appeal against a judgment which could never have been delivered by any judge of ordinary understanding or of common integrity who was no himself a slave owner, for it was founded on principles which would render the whole of our laws for the abolition of slavery, and preventing the importation of slaves, completely nugatory, and in fact, a dead letter... His arguments in support of the case would be founded on the letter and spirit of the act of parliament, under which he should contend that it was not competent for Mr. McAllister to purchase the slave Hannah and her four children, and that it was an illegal purchase – secondly, that no slave could be legally exported from Bermuda at this time, because there was no registry act in force in that colony... and lastly, that those slaves were non domestic slaves, but that, by a conspiracy, they were about to be fraudulently conveyed away in violation, of the law, by giving them the false character of domestic slaves when they could not have been so. The case was extremely important, as it would be proved that the custom house officers were nearly as culpable as the Judge, except that they ought to have known a little better perhaps, and have had some better understanding than they had of what was due to justice and the laws.

... McAllister had five slaves, Hannah and her four children, and it was important to consider their ages. One was only three years old, another five years, a third seven years, and a fourth ten years of age. Mr. Wainwright's two slaves were aged seven and a half and thirteen years; and yet the owners had sworn that slaves of these different ages were really and truly domestic slaves, in attendance on the persons of their owners. Another circumstance was that Mr. McAllister was domiciled in Trinidad, and only came to Bermuda on the 6th of December – and on the 29th of the same month he purchased those five slaves with whom he was about to return to Trinidad in the month of January. In conclusion he submitted that he should be able to prove that there was an absolute prohibition against the

importation of slaves under those circumstances, and he was confident that the court, upon hearing all the facts, would feel bound without hesitation to reserve the judgement of the court below, and to decree the penalties awarded by the act.

The article goes on for some length like this, recounting details of the case. It was decided, in the end, that although Mr. Wainwright and Mr. McAllister were certainly guilty of breaking – or more accurately, *misunderstanding* – some laws, that no matter the outcome of the case, they could not be hanged, and that the maximum sentence they could receive under any circumstances would be fourteen years transportation. Several paragraphs later, slave Hannah and her children re-enter the conversation:

The only question, therefore, was, as to the slaves belonging to Mr. McAllister, a woman called Hannah, and her four children... Her children were too young to have any particular description in the registry, but it was natural to suppose that, as the mother was a [registered] domestic slave, the children were also domestic slaves. But then it was said that one of those children was only three years old, and that it was impossible to contend that this child was a domestic slave. No doubt Mr. McAllister could not have derived any advantage from carrying this child with him; but from a motive of humanity he would not leave the infant and take the mother. Hannah had a son already in Trinidad, and was anxious to go there, and this infant, being of such tender age, necessarily accompanied her... It would have been a barbarous and cruel thing of Mr. McAllister to have taken the mother away on this occasion, and to have left the infant behind; and in doing so, but carrying the child with the mother, as it was a mild and human exercise of his power, and within the spirit of the law, which was intended for the amelioration of the condition of the slaves, ought to have been urged as an argument against him.

Further into the article still, the conversation shifts abruptly:

Upon the whole [it was contended] that the slave owners in this case had done the best they could to comply with the regulations imposed on them by the law, and had made no attempt to impose on the custom-house officers. Under those circumstances he submitted that the court was bound to affirm he sentence of the court below...

...I was extremely unjust, therefore, to impute improper motives to Mr. McAllister, because, when he purchased the mother, he respected her feelings and the laws of humanity, and burthened himself with her children likewise.

Mr. Wainwright was not so lucky as Mr. McAllister and was ultimately unable to construct a ‘humanity’ defense for his actions. For carrying on board his two slaves – a seven-year-old boy and a thirteen-year-old girl – bound for his home in Trinidad, without their mother in tow or any registered account of his intentions, Wainwright was sentenced to fourteen years transportation. With a case this complex and intriguing taking up nearly two full pages of Bermuda’s main newspaper, it demonstrates that perceivably proper slave ownership in the 19th century demanded substantial awareness and understanding of slave legislation, but all under the veneer of some level of defensible “humanity.”

After mass changes in the political realities of slavery over the first three decades of the 1800s, the solidity of slavery’s presumed righteousness was beginning to crumble, whether contemporary people were aware of it or not. Cases like that of the *Adelaide* display some of the ideological floundering that went on in an attempt to simultaneously continue to justify slavery as a legal institution while punishing owners who clearly went against British laws.

4.6.1 Fifteen

To pull the focus of this discussion back specifically toward child manumissions without leaving behind the story of the *Adelaide*, we should look toward the details provided in the *Gazette* article about Hannah and her children.

At one point, the author discusses the extremely young ages of Hannah’s children, first in the context of how Mr. McAllister must have been lying about their work as domestic slaves because of their youth. Then later the author reveals some details about the lives of slave children that simply cannot be gleaned from documents like the Books of Miscellany, stating that in cases of “legitimate” children at least, “the child frequently had

one parish and the mother another; but they were not separated,” because the law allowed for infants to be raised in the same parish as their mothers, “until the child had arrived at the age of seven years.”¹⁴⁹

This tiny detail in the *Gazette* article, an editorial which in many ways seems distant in its relevance to the topic of manumission, provided for this project an incredibly vital stepping stone for analyzing child manumissions in the Books of Miscellany. Namely, that until the age of seven years, slave children were unimpeachably considered to be dependents. Armed with a detail like this, it became possible to narrow down the Books of Miscellany catalogue to a list of manumissions of *known dependent children*.

Of all the some three-hundred entries catalogued for manumissions, sales, deeds of gift, and certificates of freedom, only fifteen explicit manumissions were attributed to individual children with known ages under seven years; and every single one of these manumissions occurred between 1818 and 1833.

Table 4.1 Individual Manumissions of Confirmed Dependents in the Books of Miscellany Volume 5 through Volume 10

Individual Manumissions with Known Age 7 Years & Under or Specified “Infant”			
Year of Manumission	Child’s Name	Child’s Known Age at Manumission	Details of Manumission
1818	Anna Matilda	6 years, 1 month, 21 days	Anna Matilda is listed as a Mulatto. There is no fee associated with her freedom. Note the exactness of her age.
1820	Julius	3 years	Fee of 17 pounds BDA, but no named purchaser.
1820	Elizabeth	4 years	Fee of 5 shillings BDA, but no named purchaser.
1821	George	3 years	Fee of 10 pounds BDA, but no named purchaser.
1827	Benjamin	1 year	Fee of 10 shillings BDA, but no named purchaser.
1827	Margaret	2 years	Fee of 2 pounds, 8 shillings, 4 pence BDA, but no named purchaser.

¹⁴⁹ *Royal Gazette*, March 10th, 1829, pp. 2.

1828	William	6 years	Fee of 19 pounds BDA, but no named purchaser.
1829	Ruth Mary Smith	“infant”	Released into the care of her parents Pleasant and Benjamin Smith. No fee listed.
1829	James William	6 weeks	40 shillings BDA, but no named purchaser.
1829	Mary Frances	7 months	No specific fee listed, but it is declared that her father, Jocco, will pay for Mary’s “expenses”
1830	Euphrenia	“infant”	Manumission for “expenses” paid by Euphrenia’s father, who is not explicitly named.
1831	Emily Elizabeth	3 years	Emily’s mother, a “servant” called Josephine, is named but it is not clarified if Emily will be in Josephine’s care. No fee listed.
1832	Susan Frances	5 years	Manumission “in consideration of the faithful services” of Susan’s mother Jane.
1832	Emily Jane	6 months	No fee listed. No caregiver listed. No parents named.
1833	Lilly	Either 7 years or 8 years (ambiguous language)	Declaration that Lilly will be manumitted upon “completion” of her 12th year. Until then, her owner shall be paid 8 pence daily BDA from His Majesty’s Custom.

Recall back to earlier chapters that amidst the Napoleonic Wars and into the 1820s, there was Atlantic-wide tightening of the Navigation Acts that put significant pressure on Bermuda’s economic stability as a seafaring colony.¹⁵⁰ This tightening of the Acts put parallel pressure on the slave:free ratios aboard Bermudian vessels, demanding a certain number of white sailors per ship, and this resulted in a shift in the geography of employment on the islands. With more enslaved and non-white men working at home instead of abroad, and more slave families, therefore, staying intact (or at least being able to visit family in nearby parishes with relative ease) on a full-time basis, paternalistic slaveholding methods needed to adjust to the new challenges of accommodating slave families while still wielding control over their members.

¹⁵⁰ Wilkinson, *From Sail to Steam* Vol. 1., 372-374.

This cluster of dependent manumissions in a known era of substantial economic and social change in Bermuda must have meaning, even if that meaning is obscure. If nothing else, these fifteen souls offer some proof: proof that manumission was not always something that could be “consented” to and was often far more about the owners of the freed slaves than about the wishes of the slaves themselves. Quite simply, it is impossible that six-month-old Emily Jane, or six-week-old James William were privy to the details and rationale behind their manumissions.

So too, however, these manumissions are proof that black families, even while stuck in the reprehensible clutches of slavery, wielded influence over their society simply by the fact of being a family. By using the slave family as a pivot of control, white slaveholders paradoxically included those slave families in the processes and mechanisms of slavery. In other words, the paternalistic strategies that frequently kept black families oppressed were the very same strategies by which other black families could negotiate for their freedom. These fifteen children were innocent pawns in a system that had already been in place, in some form, for centuries; but they were also precious symbols of hope for a better, freer future, especially in the eyes of their families.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

In a coded, ideological sense, manumissions were hardly ever about the wellbeing of slaves. Manumission, even self-purchase, except in those cases of free black families manumitting their kin, or instances of self-purchase, was almost always ideologically about the white Bermudian signing off on the document. It was about justifying their ownership of other human beings and feeling comfortable with the righteousness they performed through allowing for the freedom of their slaves. Manumission was almost always about how owners wanted to be perceived by the white community at large: as dignified, kindly, merciful, meticulous, but above all, masterful, powerful, and ostensibly generous with that power.

The fifteen dependents who gained their freedom between 1818 and 1833 – Euphrenia, Ruth Mary, Emily Elizabeth, Mary Frances, Anna Matilda, Julius, George, Elizabeth, Benjamin, Margaret, William, Susan Frances, James William, Emily Jane, and Lilly – were harbingers of freedom after a centuries-long battle, and perhaps to their families and loved ones, they were also symbols of the inherent right to liberty for all people, of all ages. Their detailed existence in the record is vindicating, important, and telling, even if at the time their stories were simply formalities, or strategic displays of white humanity.

Bermuda is a place of opposing realities: it boasts some of the most beautiful and mild weather, while still being famous for its jagged, stormy reef shorelines; it is simultaneously at the center of the Atlantic world, but separate and overlooked. In the 19th century, Bermuda was a complicated web of contradictions: economically unstable, but apparently at peace; racially cooperative, but brutally hierarchical; mild-mannered and

polite, but operating as a productive and valuable colony almost exclusively because of coercive subjugation. This thesis has covered only a small number of the contradictions that comprised 19th century Bermuda and its people, beginning with the strangely lenient temperament of many of Bermuda's governors which allowed for privateering and smuggling to persist even while Bermuda maintained a reputation of politeness. Chapter 3 focused on the Bermudian family unit, emphasizing that manumission among kin could be both the key to family freedom or the wrench that tightened an owner's hold over a family's future. Chapter 4 opened the discussion to ways of understanding children's roles in negotiating freedom, as well as the deployment of dependency as both a paternalistic tool and a way for families to operate within the slaveholding system to achieve freedom for their children.

In essence, 19th century freedom, perhaps especially in Bermuda, was yet another paradoxical reality for the people who strove to either seize theirs or to keep it from being seized. The construct of freedom in Bermuda, with all its diverse mechanisms and modes – race, manumission, skill, self-purchase, family, wealth, even luck – was not so much perceived as a human right like it is today, but as a tool and as a social commodity, albeit one with an ephemeral value, that was all too often used to garner performative mastery and ostensible prestige for white owners.

It was, perhaps, the very existence of this white desire to control freedom as a social commodity – and people as economic commodities – which allowed enslaved Bermudians to exploit the system, find ways to use it for their own ends, and ultimately try to forge paths out of slavery. By exploiting the white need to wield control, black Bermudians could negotiate for their freedom using other resources like finances or family. In cases when

manumission worked for the benefit of the freed party, they gained their freedom, but kept the overarching system of dominating whiteness and racial hierarchy intact under the social contract of burdensome independence and indebtedness.

The Books of Miscellany appear, through the lens of white performativity, as a decades-long chess match of emotional blackmail, gritty personal negotiations, and coercive relationships, rather than a straight-faced record of “what happened.” As with nearly all history, and nearly all records, the meaning rests not in what people said, but what they did not say, not in the shouts, but in the silences. This analysis of the Books of Miscellany has been far less about asking what freedom meant in the past, and instead turning to the question of what these historical subjects wanted freedom to mean under individual circumstances. The picture drawn here is one of manumission as a social phenomenon with multitudinous appearances, slippery boundaries, and innumerable intersections of meaning. The documents in the Books of Miscellany helped to establish and transmit freedom, in its myriad of meanings, not just across the cedar desk of the Colonial Secretary, and not just into the acid-free sleeves of a library, but across parishes, and oceans, and generations, into books, onto television screens, and into conversations around modern dinner tables. This history is at once very specific, but universal, small, but far-reaching, scattered, but specific to all individuals. All histories, even this one, end the same way. They end with us: reading, learning, writing, trying to reconcile our past, and being confronted with its imperceptibility. They end with us trying to do just a little bit better.

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