

# The Children of Africa in the Colonies



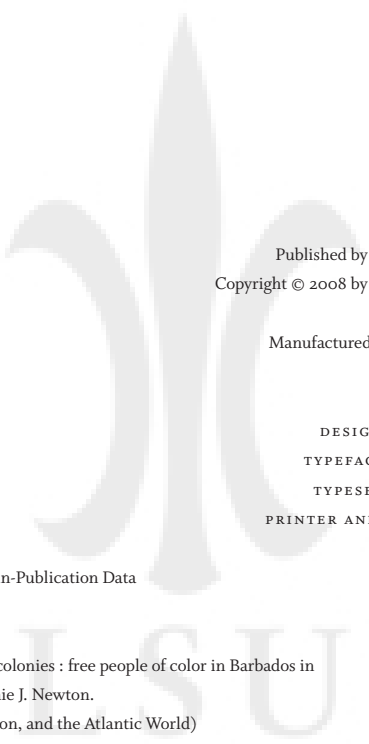
# The Children of Africa in the Colonies

FREE PEOPLE OF COLOR IN BARBADOS  
IN THE AGE OF EMANCIPATION

Melanie J. Newton



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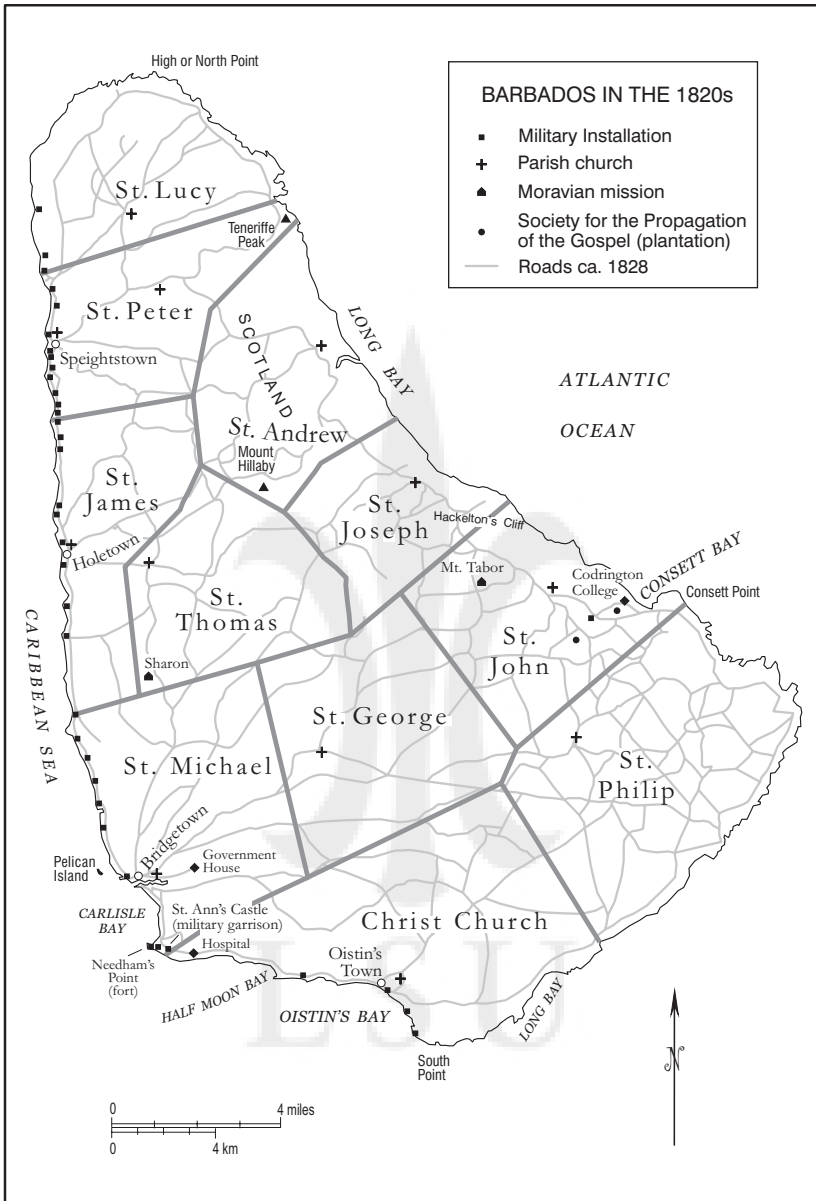
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## INTRODUCTION

**O**N August 2, 1838, one day after the act that ended slavery in the British Caribbean came into effect, “a large and respectable party of . . . gentlemen” dined at the Bible Depository of the Barbados Auxiliary Bible Society of the Free People of Color in the island’s capital city, Bridgetown. They came to celebrate the arrival of “full” emancipation and the end of apprenticeship—the period of transition from slavery to freedom that commenced on August 1, 1834, and ended on August 1, 1838. The newspaper report of this dinner provides a rich vignette of the expectations and hopes, social and ideological transformations, and socioeconomic and political tensions that slave emancipation in the anglophone Caribbean entailed.

One Thomas Harris Jr., co-owner of the *Liberal*, a newspaper owned and edited by men of color, organized the gathering. His newspaper carried the only report of the event on August 4. Only men of color free before emancipation were invited to attend. According to the *Liberal*’s anonymous journalist, the island’s “former free [!] people . . . with scarcely an exception, have greeted the first of August, as a day that brings them as well as their brethren liberty.” If whites, women, or any of the island’s more than eighty thousand recently emancipated people were present, their attendance was not acknowledged in the newspaper report. The *Liberal*’s other owner, Samuel Jackman Prescod, chaired the meeting, and Harris Jr. delivered the keynote address. Harris viewed British slave emancipation as a harbinger of better things to come for his “class” of society—Afro-Barbadians free before general emancipation:

I rise with a heart uplifted with gratitude to a merciful Creator, for the inestimable blessing this day vouchsafed me, of meeting to celebrate our Emancipation. I say our Emancipation, gentlemen, because I do assert, and that too, without the fear of contradiction, that this day in which . . . the legislature of this Island has granted freedom to the slave—also made us *free indeed*. For I feel quite certain, that every one present will agree with me

when I assert that we were heretofore only nominally free. . . . Gentlemen, by one Queen, the stain, that disgraceful stain of slavery and its horrors, . . . has been removed from the escutcheon of Britain. Long may she reign to witness the good effects of the blessing she has conferred upon a grateful though calumniated people. . . . Gentlemen . . . we must admit, to use the language embodied in an admirable resolution of the coloured people of America, "That [the late emancipated class] are our brethren by the lieu [sic] of *consanguinity*, of *suffering*, and of *wrong*."

Harris expressed his hope that emancipation would bring the "advancement of our class . . . the colored body," and that "the other class" (namely, whites) would reform the island's laws and grant people of colour equal "rights and privileges."<sup>1</sup>

Despite these lofty sentiments, biographical information about the men who addressed this dinner raises troubling questions regarding why they suddenly and publicly embraced former slaves as their "brethren" and adopted emancipation as the moment of *their* freedom. Four of the men were Afro-Barbadians who had been very active in the civil rights struggle for free people of color during slavery, but none of them appears to have been an active abolitionist before 1834. Three of them—Thomas Harris Jr., William Nunes, and Joseph Kennedy—actually had been slave owners.<sup>2</sup> Although he had not himself owned slaves, Samuel Jackman Prescod's wife, Katherine (née Cruden), was a slave owner who had also been executor of the estate of a deceased female relative, which included more than twenty slaves.<sup>3</sup> The only man whose abolitionist credentials predated emancipation was an Afro-Antiguan named Henry Loving, the editor of Antigua's *Weekly Register*, a newspaper that had promoted the causes of greater civil rights for Afro-

1. *Liberal*, 4 August 1838.

2. Barbadian slave owners had to register their slaves every three years between 1817 and 1832. Afro-Barbadian slave owners were denoted by the abbreviations "fm" and "fn," for "free mulatto" and "free negro," respectively, or less frequently with some variation of "fbw," "fbm," "fcw," or "fcm," for "free black woman [man]" and "free colored woman [man]." In 1817–1829, Thomas Harris Jr. is listed as owning one slave. However, in 1832 the name is listed twice, possibly referring to Harris Jr. and his father Harris Sr. One Thomas Harris owned twelve slaves and the other nine. T 71/520, 533, 546, 552, Barbados Slave Registries, 1817–1832. Nunes owned three slaves in 1832 (T 71/548, 1832); Kennedy owned nine slaves (T 71/533 and 552, 1823 and 1832).

3. T 71/520, 1817, Return of Jane Rose Cruden for herself (twenty-four slaves) and Katherine Rose Cruden, then in Europe (four slaves); T 71/547, 1832, Return of Katherine Cruden of twenty-one slaves, the property of Jane Rose Cruden, deceased.

Caribbean people and the abolition of slavery. Loving had recently completed his appointment as a special magistrate in Barbados during the apprenticeship period.<sup>4</sup>

The men who spoke at this gathering clearly did not view this as an opportune moment to account for their past involvements with slavery. They staged a public refashioning of the past and attempted to set the tone for all future relationships between “*free people*” and former slaves. In this new version of the past and the future there was to be no discussion of Afro-Barbadians as slave owners. The emancipation of slaves was publicly incorporated as a new chapter in the ongoing civil rights struggle of free people of color. That struggle was itself reinvented as unmarked by tensions of any kind or disagreements among free people of color themselves regarding their political goals. Afro-Barbadians were now presented, to themselves and to the *Liberal’s* reading public in the Caribbean and Britain, as a political community united by opposition to racial discrimination, regardless of differences of past legal status or socioeconomic position. Afro-Barbadians free before emancipation were being educated about their duty to safeguard the interests of former slaves. Whites were being served notice that emancipation was only the first step in the redefinition of freedom without slavery. They could now expect, so the report implied, to find Afro-Barbadians united behind a common vision of political reform.

The exclusion of the voices of women and the working poor illustrates the degree to which patriarchy and class paternalism defined this new unity between “old” and “new” free people. This movement was to be led by a small group of urban and bourgeois men who assumed for themselves the right to speak for an expanded constituency of Afro-Barbadians, including women and former slaves. Few well-to-do men of color saw the poor as legitimate political actors in their own right and no one raised the possibility of a formal political role for Afro-Barbadian women at this or any other public event. Harris may have indicated the “proper” housekeeping role he thought women of color should play in the civil rights cause when he invited whites to gain “a nearer association with our families. . . . [T]hey

4. PP 1831–1832, vol. 20, *Report from select committee on the extinction of slavery throughout the British dominions*, testimony of Henry Loving, Esq., f.c.m [free colored man], Antigua, editor of the *Weekly Register*, 28 June 1832. The special or stipendiary magistrates were appointed under the 1833 imperial emancipation act and the 1834 Barbados emancipation act to arbitrate in disputes between employers and apprentices and chair tribunals that heard apprentices’ manumission cases (for further discussion, see chapter 5, pp. 142–144).

will find, upon a closer intimacy, that our Drawing and Dining rooms are not inferior in comfort or refinement to their own.”<sup>5</sup>

The abolitionist sentiments expressed at this dinner emerged out of a more complicated history of entanglement with slavery than these men might have liked to admit. Yet these entanglements make it problematic to simply dismiss their antislavery statements as disingenuous. The lives of these four Afro-Barbadian men illustrate how intimate and multilayered relationships were between free people of color and slaves: Many free nonwhites owned slaves *and* counted slaves, former slaves, and slave owners among their kin.<sup>6</sup> These men would have been well aware of the political advantages they might hope to gain from emancipation, as it had long been obvious that British Caribbean free people of color could expect more civil rights concessions from abolitionists than from the proslavery lobby. They had less to lose economically from emancipation than did most whites as few Afro-Barbadians, even former slave owners such as Harris, Nunes, and Kennedy, depended entirely on slave ownership for their economic survival.

The 1838 dinner throws into relief questions that thus far have received relatively little attention from scholars. How did the rise of abolitionism and the lengthy collapse of the system of slavery impact the expectations and experiences that free people of color in the anglophone Caribbean had of freedom? In what ways might emancipation have transformed their conceptions of freedom, their interactions with slaves/former slaves and whites and their relations with one another? Was British slave emancipation a significant moment for the forging of new kinds of diasporic and imperial political consciousness among Afro-Caribbean people, as Harris’s references to the British Empire and “the coloured people of America” and the presence at this event of the Antiguan Henry Loving suggest? What became of the effort to forge a unified Afro-Barbadian political collectivity in the years after slavery? Finally, what are the implications of rethinking the role of free Afro-Barbadians and of race as a tool of popular mobilization in the transition from slavery to freedom? These are the questions this book sets out to answer.

Nearly seventy years ago in his classic and groundbreaking study of the Haitian

5. *Liberal*, 4 August 1838.

6. Either Thomas Harris Jr. or his father had been born in slavery, and Samuel Prescod once spoke of a great uncle who was a slave. Jerome Handler, Ronald Hughes, and Ernest M. Wiltshire, *Freedmen of Barbados: Names and Notes for Genealogical and Family History Research* (Charlottesville: Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy, 1999), 25; see Prescod’s reference to his great uncle in the *Liberal*, 23 January 1839.

Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, Trinidadian intellectual C. L. R. James alerted his readers to the importance of understanding slave emancipation as a crucial moment in the shaping of popular political consciousness and understandings of freedom in the societies of the Atlantic world, particularly among people of African descent. Despite the foundational place of James's work in the development of studies of slave emancipation, relatively few historians have seriously and consistently taken up his preoccupation with tracing changes in political consciousness.<sup>7</sup> The study of the process of slave emancipation and postslavery society in the British Caribbean has been dominated by debates about the role of abolition in the wider political and economic policy of the empire, the place of slave emancipation in the historical development of capitalism, and studies of postemancipation rural labor relations. These discussions are important, and I have no wish to appear to minimize their significance. However, insofar as questions of political consciousness have entered the debate, they have continued to be framed largely in terms of struggles between the newly freed and their erstwhile owners for the control of land and labor.

This study seeks to reintegrate analysis of popular political consciousness into historical understandings of the political dynamics of the long process of British slave emancipation. The contest between estate authorities and slaves, and laborers and employers—the traditional fault line for studies of struggles for power and personal autonomy in the postemancipation Caribbean—is central to the story told in this book, but I have sought to place examinations of rural labor dynamics within the broader context of insular, regional, and transatlantic intellectual and political currents and socioeconomic changes. I have situated struggles over, first, the future of slavery and, second, the order of things in postslavery society within an intracommunal context, focussing primarily on relations among Afro-Barbadians themselves. In so doing, this book has reexamined the role of free people of color in the development of slavery, challenging historiographical assumptions about the “marginality” of free people of African descent in Caribbean slave societies. Although free people of color were economically and legally mar-

7. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins; Toussaint L'Overture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938; reprint, Penguin Books, 2001). See also Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); Mimi Sheller, *Democracy after Slavery: Black Publics and Peasant Radicalism in Haiti and Jamaica* (London: Macmillan Education, 2000); Monica Shuler, “Alas, Alas, Kongo”: *A Social History of Indentured African Immigration Into Jamaica, 1841–1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

ginalized in Barbadian slave society, they were an integral part of the social structure, and crucially shaped conceptions of freedom and slavery in the island. Their presence challenged the planter-state's efforts to clearly delineate boundaries between free and slave and white and nonwhite, while creating avenues through which enslaved people could negotiate and claim spaces of freedom for themselves despite the severe legal limitations imposed by slavery.

This book traces transformations in the political consciousness and material circumstances of free people of African descent in Barbados, Britain's oldest sugar-producing colony, during the years of transition from slavery to freedom in the British Caribbean. Barbadian free people of color were not secondary actors in or passive observers of the drama of slave emancipation.<sup>8</sup> Rather, like their counterparts elsewhere in the Americas, they played a central role in the abolition debate and in the reordering of socioeconomic relations after slavery. Beginning in the 1790s, as Caribbean colonial governments responded to revolutionary upheavals in the French Atlantic world with repressive measures against free people of color, a small group of free Afro-Barbadian men began what would become a long civil rights campaign. In the half-century that followed, their struggle transformed Barbadian public life, challenging both slavery and the principle of white supremacy.

This book focuses on the period between the French and Haitian revolutionary wars of 1789–1815 and the aftermath of the cholera epidemic that swept through the Caribbean in the middle of the century, reaching Barbados in 1854. The analysis encompasses the period of legal reform of British Caribbean slavery known as slave amelioration, the apprenticeship period of 1834–1838 and the economic crisis that struck the older colonies of the British Caribbean after they lost their preferential trade status with Britain in 1846. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the societies bound together by the transatlantic slave trade were convulsed by a century of struggles over the future of slavery and the meaning of freedom. Abolitionism forever transformed the public sphere of Britain and its colonies and reshaped the way in which people of African descent in the British Caribbean, whether free or slave, conceptualized their sociopolitical position in their individual colonies, in the empire and in the wider world. People of African descent in the Americas and Europe adapted the ideals of liberal freedom and radical democracy in order to formulate new languages of equality with whites and novel ways of challenging slavery. British slave emancipation was a key moment

8. For general and comparative discussion of free people of color and emancipation in the Americas, see Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776–1848* (London: Verso, 1988).

in a century-long process through which people in the societies of the Atlantic world contested and redefined race, class, gender, colony-metropole relationships, subjecthood, and citizenship.

The analytical lens I have adopted in this study echoes Nicholas Thomas's observations regarding the study of colonialism. Thomas notes that "only localized theories and historically specific accounts can provide much insight into the varied articulations of colonizing and counter-colonial representations and practices. . . . [C]olonialism can only be traced through its plural and particularized expressions."<sup>9</sup> Thus the in-depth study of particular locations is essential to our understanding of the "plural and particularized" dynamics of emancipation and articulations of freedom in the societies of the Atlantic world. An understanding of local circumstances in older British Caribbean colonies such as Barbados, where slavery was largely internally regulated and structures of governance were complex, is essential for a grasp of the specific institutional, political, economic, and demographic context that shaped how local actors responded to and influenced emancipation.

Barbados is an important site for historical analysis because as Britain's oldest sugar-producing colony, the second largest exporter of sugar in the British Caribbean during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the seat of a consolidated governor generalship of the Windward Islands from 1833 onward, developments in Barbados had implications for other areas, especially in the eastern Caribbean. Yet such a study is most illuminating when it is informed by a perspective that highlights the interplay between transatlantic, imperial, regional, and local factors. The degree of the Caribbean's integration within the Atlantic system makes it impossible to grasp the dynamics of slave emancipation without taking account of the interaction between broader transatlantic connections and the particularities of individual Caribbean societies.

The contest over slavery was a constitutive struggle for free people of color, through which they came into existence as a political community. Yet the precise boundaries and even the existence of that community were neither stable nor the subject of universal consensus, since it was never entirely clear who exactly was a free person of color or whether some people, based on gender and property ownership, should have access to greater "freedoms" and privileges than others. As a result, this community-building process was expressed as much through in-

9. Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel, and Government* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), ix–x.

ternal fragmentation, exclusion, and disunity as through claims to a shared identity as free people of color. Inequalities of class and gender, competing claims to authority, disagreements arising from different personal and political relationships with slaves, and profound ambivalence toward both the pro- and antislavery struggles shaped how Barbadian free people of color constantly refashioned the limits of this community.

Free Afro-Barbadian participation in the debate over slave amelioration, through the establishment of missionary, educational and philanthropic institutions, was a key component in transformations that occurred in public life during and after amelioration. By presenting themselves as the agents of imperial reform against an intransigent white creole elite in the 1820s and 1830s, free Afro-Barbadians challenged planter authority and undermined white supremacy. At the same time, tensions between elitist and more democratic approaches to antiracist reform constantly threatened to unravel the community many civil rights campaigners claimed to promote. The 1820s witnessed public confrontations between a populist, mass-based, and democratic vision of freedom among free and enslaved Afro-Barbadians that reflected the more radical potential of the “age of revolution,” and a more limited vision of reform that generally appealed to bourgeois and wealthy free people of color. Bourgeois Afro-Barbadian civil rights reformers sought to distance themselves from, and often expressly repudiated, the revolutionary, disorderly, plebian, and antislavery visions of freedom circulating around the Atlantic world. Only in the face of white hostility and inflexibility during the 1830s did well-to-do Afro-Barbadians reluctantly associate themselves with the demotic politics of working-class free people of color and slaves.

Gender was as central to the struggle for greater civil rights and this conflictual process of community building as it was to the experience of being a free person of color.<sup>10</sup> White and Afro-Barbadian men may have fought one another over the civil rights implications of slave emancipation, but they shared a belief in new patriarchal codes of proper Christian conduct for men and women, centered on the suppression of “illegitimate” sexual relations between whites and people of African descent, the restriction of independent economic activity by women, and the

10. On gender, slavery, and slave emancipation, see Pamela Scully, *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, 1823–1853* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), 2; and Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

control of free laborers and laboring-class families. After emancipation, privileged white and Afro-Barbadian men viewed unmarried free women of color as a symbol of prostitution, social transgression, and the disorder of slavery. For many Afro-Barbadian men the community cohesion, “respectability,” and socioeconomic advancement of free people of color depended upon the “domestication” of nonwhite women. Afro-Barbadian civil rights campaigners and bourgeois families put their domesticity on display in civic organizations such as temperance and friendly societies. They deployed a gendered and sexualized political rhetoric based on notions of Christian respectability and orderly domestic arrangements to illustrate their moral superiority over both the nonwhite working classes and the white creole elite. Even though many women of color continued to exercise their economic independence and laboring-class people in general refused to conform to elitist conceptions of marriage and family life, they had to contend with increasingly repressive laws and social prohibitions that sought to enforce such views.

This study also examines the impact of cultural and political connections between colony and metropole on the politics and world views of Afro-Caribbean people. In recent years, by situating “colony and metropole in one analytic frame” scholars have rethought the social, cultural, political, and economic connections between the Caribbean and its various European metropolises.<sup>11</sup> Mimi Sheller’s observation that the political claims of Afro-Jamaicans after emancipation “were clearly grounded on an assertion of membership in the British Empire, and morally grounded in English law and constitutionality” applies equally to Afro-Barbadians.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, any examination of the interactions between Afro-Caribbean people and the empires of which they were subjects must take into account the fact that European empires was not the only “imagined communities” that shaped Afro-Caribbean political subjectivities.<sup>13</sup> Emphasizing the ideological impact of the imperial tie on nonwhite political consciousness without exploring the significance of other regional and transatlantic connections replicates imperi-

11. Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), preface, viii, and introduction, 34. See also Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833–1874* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), and Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

12. Sheller, *Democracy after Slavery*, 219.

13. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

alist perspectives on the process and meaning of emancipation.<sup>14</sup> Several scholars, notably researchers of the Haitian Revolution, have sought to move beyond the imperial divisions that continue to set the parameters of most scholarly analysis of the nineteenth-century Caribbean.<sup>15</sup>

This study seeks to nuance the analysis of colony and metropole in various ways. First, it highlights the importance of mobility, migration, and communication—within the island, around the eastern Caribbean, and to West Africa—to Afro-Barbadians’ conceptualizations of freedom both before and after general emancipation. The study argues that, within the island, interactions and movements back and forth between the rural and urban spheres of life crucially shaped Afro-Barbadian politics and modes of identification in slave and postslave society.<sup>16</sup> Second, it illustrates the political and economic significance of intra- and inter-island labor migration in creating long-distance kinship and communications networks and informing Afro-Barbadian conceptions of freedom. In the early years after emancipation, migration around the countryside to towns or to neighboring territories was vital to laboring-class Afro-Barbadians’ efforts to resist the increasingly repressive conditions of the island. These post-1834 migration patterns echoed those of the slavery era, when they were a defining characteristic of freedom for “masterless” people such as free Afro-Barbadians, runaways, urban slaves, and slaves with relatively autonomous or itinerant occupations.<sup>17</sup> The issue of labor migration was also pivotal to Afro-Barbadians’ engagement in imperial debates about the distribution of labor in the British Atlantic world. Civil rights cam-

14. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1–40; Julius Sherrard Scott III, “The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1987); John Thornton, “‘I Am the Subject of the King of Congo’: African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of World History* 4, no. 2 (1993): 181–214.

15. Barry David Gaspar and David Geggus, eds., *A Turbulent Time: The Haitian Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); James, *The Black Jacobins*; Scott, “Common Wind”; Sheller, *Democracy after Slavery*.

16. For recent analysis of the role of towns in the cultural and political life of the nineteenth-century British Caribbean, see Pedro Welch, *Slave Society in the City: Bridgetown, Barbados, 1680–1834* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2003) and Juanita de Barros, *Order and Place in a Colonial City: Patterns of Struggle and Resistance in Georgetown, British Guiana, 1889–1924* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003). See also Franklin Knight and Peggy Liss, eds., *Atlantic Port Cities: Economy, Culture, and Society in the Atlantic World* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

17. The use of the term “masterless” is taken from Scott, “Common Wind.”

paigners of color actively participated in and were deeply divided over Barbadian planters' policy of severely restricting emigration in order to maintain control over the labor force.

The idea of migration as an expression of freedom also informed Afro-Barbadians' political identifications with the African continent and other parts of the African diaspora. Support for the values of the empire was based on a belief in Britain's ability and willingness to follow through on its promises to further the cause of the political empowerment of "the children of Africa in the colonies." Afro-Barbadian imperialists expected the British government to pursue a vigorous antiracist and antislavery policy in the Caribbean and Africa. Prior to the 1820s, many free Afro-Barbadians, particularly those of the bourgeoisie, sought to downplay their skin color and African descent, emphasizing their legal position as free people and their status as property owners in their quest for civil rights reform. By contrast, particularly after 1838, African descent and the experience of racial oppression became bases for claims to equality with whites. Schemes for Afro-Barbadian emigration to Africa as agents for Britain's suppression of the slave trade and the "civilization" of Africa were a key means through which Barbadians of color expressed their sense of imperial and African diasporic belonging and their commitment to an antislavery agenda. During the final decade of slavery and in the years after emancipation, this racial consciousness also served to further the political ambitions of middle- and upper-class people of African descent. This imperialist expression of racial solidarity and African diasporic consciousness illustrates the ease with which the language of liberal freedom accommodated itself to metropolitan British claims to moral and cultural superiority over nonwhites elsewhere in the world.<sup>18</sup> The political right of the British government to maintain colonial power in the Caribbean and to establish it in Africa was assumed to be legitimate and, in fact, necessary in order to further the cause of liberating Africans on the continent and in the diaspora from European oppression and from their own "backwardness."

Immediately after emancipation, tensions of class and political ideology came to the fore over the issues of electoral franchise reform and labor migration, contributing to devastating political factionalism among people of color, and dashing the political and economic dreams of the plebian majority. This intracommunal discord was framed by wider transatlantic currents of debate regarding the con-

18. See Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

trol of labor and the role of nonwhite “subjects” in the state institutions of the empire and its colonies. As Holt and Sheller has shown, many postemancipation societies experienced a rapid process of “de-democratization” after an initial period of radical reformism, as state authorities reneged on earlier promises to support the aspirations of formerly enslaved people and instead supported an elite backlash against former slaves.<sup>19</sup> Although a tiny group of comparatively wealthy free men of color gained political influence as a result of emancipation, the absence of fundamental change in the distribution of land and wealth after emancipation left most pre-1834 free people of color and former slaves with little hope of political enfranchisement or socioeconomic betterment. In the dire economic climate of the late 1840s and 1850s, many Afro-Barbadians lost hope in the possibility of political reform in the island and came to see emigration to the African continent, as simultaneously agents of British liberal “civilization” and African liberation, as the solution to their difficulties.<sup>20</sup>

The experiences of Afro-Barbadian emigrants in West Africa—whether as missionaries or as parts of communities of migrants from the Americas—reflected the ambiguities of their attitudes about themselves as would-be agents of civilization, opponents of the enslavement of Africans, and defenders of Africa’s potential. Some Afro-Barbadians never lost their sense of attachment to their former homeland in the Caribbean or to the British Empire, while others committed themselves entirely to their new environment. As analysis of one especially remarkable family of Barbadian emigrants to Liberia illustrates, the Caribbean origins of these migrants shaped their lives and those of their descendants in crucial ways. The Barclays epitomized the wider phenomenon of the ambivalent yet important role of these first- and second-generation Barbadian West Africans in the aftermath of the “Scramble for Africa.” On the one hand, their civilizationalist and paternalistic attitude toward indigenous Africans brought them into conflict with African communities who fought the encroachment of Western cultural standards, laws, and political institutions as migrants from the Americas took over their lands and sought to influence their community structures. On the other hand, as key po-

19. Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press and Ian Randle, 1992), 215–309; Sheller, *Democracy after Slavery*, 6–7.

20. Some Barbadians emigrated to West Africa in the late nineteenth century, including people of color free before emancipation. See Nemata Blyden, *West Indians in West Africa: The African Diaspora in Reverse* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2000), and pp. 277–281 of the present volume.

litical figures in one of Africa's last sovereign states the Barclays in turn fought efforts by Western imperial governments, including Britain, to colonize Liberia and acted as cultural and political brokers between the Liberian state and pan-Africanists from the Americas.

Analysis of the involvement of free people of African descent in the reform of slave society and the abolition of slavery is also central to understanding the manner in which racialized categories of subject and citizen were reconfigured in the period between the Haitian Revolution and the mid-nineteenth century. Free people of color were a topic of great interest in British abolitionist circles at the height of the antislavery debate, when there was much discussion of their possible role as a "buffer" between emancipated people and planters. However, by the mid-1840s they all but disappeared from metropolitan discussions of postemancipation British Caribbean society, except in reference to contexts, notably Jamaica, in which the possibility of political power devolving onto the Afro-Caribbean majority loomed large in the imperial imagination. A similar pattern is evident in the historiography of emancipation.<sup>21</sup> With the exception of Samuel Jackman Prescod, editor of the *Liberal* and the first man of color elected to the colonial assembly, other people of color free before apprenticeship are seldom mentioned in the literature on postemancipation Barbados.<sup>22</sup>

This vanishing act stems from sources less mundane than the fact that every Afro-Caribbean person was, de facto, a "free person of color" following slavery's abolition. Rather, it is a manifestation of problematic notions about the position of free people of African descent in slave and postslave societies. Free people of color have long been represented as either marginal and somewhat out of place in slave societies, or as a group occupying the middle tier between free whites and enslaved blacks. Such depictions of marginality or inbetween-ness frequently in-

21. For exceptions, see Mavis Campbell, *The Dynamics of Change in Slave Society: A Socio-political History of the Free Coloreds of Jamaica, 1800–1865* (London: Associated University Presses, 1976); Gad Heuman, *Between Black and White: Race, Politics, and the Free Coloreds of Jamaica, 1792–1865* (Oxford: Greenwood Press, 1981); Susan Lowes, "The Peculiar Class: The Formation, Collapse, and Reformation of the Middle Class in Antigua, West Indies, 1834–1940" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1994); and Susan Lowes, "'They Couldn't Mash Ants': The Decline of the White and Non-White Elites in Antigua, 1834–1900," in Karen Fog Olwig, ed., *Small Islands, Large Questions: Society, Culture and Resistance in the Post-Emancipation Caribbean* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 31–52.

22. Alana Johnson, "The Abolition of Chattel Slavery in Barbados, 1833–1876" (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1994); Claude Levy, *Emancipation, Sugar, and Federalism: Barbados and the British West Indies* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1980).

volve a conflation of legal status, skin color, and class, with the “typical” free non-white subject assumed to be mixed-race and bourgeois—neither white nor black, rich nor poor, slave nor free.<sup>23</sup>

These assumptions have occasionally led to problematic representations of brownness and “free colored” identity as a state of racial indeterminacy with almost socially pathological repercussions. Some modern scholars have echoed the views of earlier generations of writers in suggesting that brown people in the Caribbean lacked a “complete” sense of identity because they were neither fish nor fowl. An 1820s novel on plantation life in Jamaica asserted that “brown man hab no country . . . only de neger and de buckra [white man] hab country,” because mixed-race Jamaicans lacked an ancestral focus in either Europe or Africa, unlike “pure” whites or blacks. Mavis Campbell reasserted such sentiments in her 1976 study of Jamaican “free coloreds,” stating that they strove for the impossible dream of being “white” and “by the nature of their birth [and] their phenotypic imprecision” lacked “identity focus” and “any self-conception or self-confidence they might have had.”<sup>24</sup>

Many European travelers and white creole writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries found the liminal position of free Afro-Caribbean people deeply troubling. Free people of color embodied the tensions of slavery and empire, representing a “liminal site of mixtures and crossings produced by the exercise of colonial power [on which] boundaries were redrawn and the colonizer/colonized divide was reordered.”<sup>25</sup> Europeans and creole whites wrote derisively and fearfully about their unpredictable political allegiances, their “imitation” of “European” cultural practices, their “anomalous” legal status as “unappropriated people” or the racial and sexual transgressiveness of “mulattoes.”<sup>26</sup> Such writings expressed imperial and white creole anxieties about the long-term repercussions of slavery and colonial rule over Africans and their descendants. On one hand, the presence

23. For a similar observation see Lowes, “Peculiar Class,” 119–120.

24. Quote from anon., *Marly, or The Life of a Planter in Jamaica* (Glasgow: Richard Griffin, 1828), 94, cited in Richard D. E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 35–36 and 42; Campbell, *Dynamics of Change*, 368, see also 49. See also Hilary Beckles, “On the Backs of Blacks: The Barbados Free-Coloureds’ Pursuit of Civil Rights and the 1816 Slave Rebellion,” *Immigrants and Minorities* 3, no. 2 (July 1984): 167–188.

25. Quote from Gyan Prakash, *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3.

26. Jerome S. Handler, *The Unappropriated People: Freedmen in the Slave Society of Barbados* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

of free African Americans actually confirmed the principle of white freedom and black enslavement. The power to manumit slaves was a central aspect of slave owners' authority, confirming their patriarchal power to confer rights on the "deserving" and withhold them from the "undeserving." On the other hand, free people of color embodied the possibility that slavery's race, class, and legal boundaries would be overturned, either because more and more of the descendants of Africans would be born free or would acquire freedom or because free Afro-Caribbeans would unite with slaves and violently overthrow the slaveholding order. Events in late-eighteenth-century Saint Domingue, where *gens de couleur* outnumbered whites and eventually allied with slave rebels, first against white counterrevolutionary colonists and then against the French empire, fueled white fears of "race war" across the Caribbean.

Brown, or "mixed-race," people were particularly disturbing to many Europeans, as a sign of the threat that slavery and prolonged encounters with nonwhite colonial subjects posed to white purity. As Catherine Hall argues, "[I]n a world in which sexuality was locked into racial and class thinking, with their complex logics of desire, the boundaries between rulers and ruled were necessarily unstable. Mixed-race children were particularly problematic, for how was the in between to be categorized?"<sup>27</sup> Brown people simultaneously titillated and terrified Europeans. The most dangerous of all, some argued, were free brown women, who were alleged to subvert all boundaries of class, legal status, and race by prostituting themselves to white male lovers, taking over the proper role of white women through these "illegitimate" relationships and reproducing the free brown population.<sup>28</sup> This obsession with so-called miscegenation continues, as Stephen Small has noted, to dominate the scholarly literature.<sup>29</sup>

The freedom of people of African descent challenged the national myths that

27. Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 10. See also Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 46.

28. See, for example, Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue . . .* (1797), quoted in Susan Socolow, "Economic Roles of the Free Women of Color of Cap Français," in Barry David Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds., *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 279. On the centrality of women's "reproductive identity" to the perpetuation of slavery and its socioeconomic relationships, see Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 3.

29. Stephen Small, "Racial Group Boundaries and Identities: People of 'Mixed Race' in Slavery

divided the boundaries of Europe and metropolitan freedom from the “racially impure” colonies and colonial subjugation. Many Europeans who wrote about the colonial Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries alternately represented free people of color, particularly brown women, as objects of sexual danger, desire, and distrust, with descriptions slipping back and forth between “mimicry—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite . . . to menace—a difference that is almost total but not quite.”<sup>30</sup> Free people of color symbolized what was most troubling about the Caribbean: The black and brown colonial population could not simply be categorized as “natives,” and white creoles seemed increasingly too alien to be considered European. They were emblematic of an uncomfortable sense that the Caribbean was an alarming extension of Europe, disturbingly close and familiar and yet irretrievably separate and different. This interplay between imperial power and anxiety about its implications is evident in the passage of discriminatory laws against free people of color at the height of the slave trade from the late seventeenth to late eighteenth century, notably laws outlawing interracial marriage, preventing free people from exercising a range of civil liberties, limiting their ability to travel to the metropole or restricting their opportunities for socio-economic advancement.<sup>31</sup> But the law was an unreliable ally in the struggle to keep blackness in chains and out of Europe: In the absence of explicit legal prohibitions, what was there to distinguish free people of African descent from whites? Why could not a free man of color of property and education from the colonies move from being a subject to being a citizen?<sup>32</sup>

After emancipation each colonial power found different solutions to the “problem” of whether or not to include Afro-Caribbean people within the limits of the imperial nation. British Caribbean emancipation delegitimized the principle of using the law to enforce the boundary between black subordination and white

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across the Americas,” *Slavery and Abolition* 15, no. 3 (1994): 17. Carl Campbell’s *Cedulants and Capitulants: The Politics of the Coloured Opposition in the Slave Society of Trinidad, 1783–1838* (Port-of-Spain: Paria Publishing, 1992), Campbell’s *Dynamics of Change*, Heuman’s *Between Black and White*, and Beckles’s “On the Backs of Blacks,” for example, are predominantly studies of mixed-race free people.

30. Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” in Stoler and Cooper, *Tensions of Empire*, 158.

31. Fick, *Making of Haiti*, 20–21; Sue Peabody, “There Are No Slaves in France”: *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 111–119; Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, 47.

32. The 1685 French Code Noir, the law regulating slavery throughout the French empire, granted full citizenship to free men of color who met the franchise qualification. Herbert S. Klein, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 238.

liberty but it did not eliminate the assumption that maintaining such a boundary was a valid political imperative. In the aftermath of abolition the political and ideological work of containing the danger posed by liminal categories of colonial subjects, like educated and propertied free people of color and brown people, was quickly taken over by a discourse about the inherent, scientifically indisputable and biological inferiority of people of African descent. Particularly after the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica, free people of color in the Caribbean, previously distinguished in the minds of colonizers by their legal status, property ownership, light skin color, and/or education, could be dismissed as lazy and unimportant at best or violent and ungrateful at worst.<sup>33</sup>

This study sheds light on the ways in which the activities of free people of color in the colonies informed and challenged these changing discourses of subjecthood and citizenship. In Barbados free people of color fought white supremacy by laying claim to forms of civic engagement and cultural practices that previously had been the markers of whiteness, one of the island's most basic citizenship requirements. Simply reducing the civil rights debates between Afro-Caribbean people and whites between the 1790s and 1850s to skin color misses the ways in which "race" and phenotype were informed by class, education, and certain cultural and gendered practices, notably forms of public religious expression, marriage practices, and household organization. By examining the interplay of these factors, this study nuances conflicts between free Afro-Barbadians and other sociolegal groups, as well as among free Afro-Barbadians themselves regarding who among them had a legitimate claim to citizenship.

I avoid the problematic language of free black and colored marginality and inbetween-ness, instead focusing on the diverse ways in which free Afro-Barbadians were integral to the society, intellectual life, and economy of the island before and after 1838. These multiple forms of participation complicated divisions of race, class, gender, and legal status. Additionally, I seek to examine how and why color hierarchies shaped the experiences, kin relationships, and social and political allegiances of Afro-Barbadians in late-eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century Barbados in *some* contexts but not, it seems, in others. I prefer this approach to attempts to draw a clear fault line between brown or "colored" and black free people, a perspective that misses the important subtleties and particularities of racial identification during this period.

This raises the important issue of terminology and I would like to offer expla-

33. Thomas Eudell, *The Political Languages of Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 107–120; Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 338–379.

nations and guidelines regarding some of the terms used in this book. The inconsistent manner in which terms describing Afro-Barbadians were used in this period makes it difficult to be conclusive regarding how phenotype, class, and legal status related to each other. It is often unclear from documentary sources whether terms such as “colored,” “black,” “Negro,” “mulatto,” and “person of color” are references to the legal status, class position, or phenotype of the person or group being discussed.<sup>34</sup> This lack of clarity itself illustrates that, even in Barbados, where the line between white and nonwhite was considered to be impassable, perceptions of skin color were highly susceptible to social rather than physical characteristics.<sup>35</sup> Analysis of the slave registration returns of 1817–1832, which stated the phenotype of Afro-Barbadian slave owners, reveals great variations. In one case, a very wealthy and possibly extremely light-complexioned planter of Afro-Barbadian descent was “whitened” in the slave registries, and was never listed as a “free mulatto” by the registrar of slaves.<sup>36</sup> The *Barbadian*, a nineteenth-century newspaper used extensively for this study, occasionally referred to all free people of color, regardless of phenotype, as “colored,” as opposed to “negro,” a term the newspaper usually reserved for slaves. Yet the same newspaper often referred to any apparently working-class Afro-Barbadians of whose legal status the editor was uncertain as “Negroes,” employing this term, therefore, as a description of working-class status and blackness.<sup>37</sup> In his will, the wealthy merchant of color London Bourne is described as “coloured,” yet during his lifetime various observers noted that he had an extremely dark complexion.<sup>38</sup>

I have elected to use the terms “free people of color,” “free Afro-Barbadians,” and “free people of African descent” most frequently throughout this study. “Free

34. See, for example, an 1824 advertisement for a domestic in the newspaper the *Barbadian* requesting a “steady, middle-aged Coloured Woman.” *Barbadian*, 10 January 1824.

35. See discussion of race as a socially defined rather than simply phenotypic category in the Saint Domingue context in Stewart King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-revolutionary St. Domingue* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 159.

36. This was Jacob Belgrave, the owner of the large Ruby plantation in St. Philip with 238 slaves. The registrar of slaves probably “whitened” him on account of his wealth and social prominence. See, for example, T71 520, Barbados Slave Registries, 1817.

37. *Barbadian*; see, for example, 8 October 1824 and 4 June 1834.

38. *Liberal*, February 9 1859, cited in Cecilia Karch, “A Man for All Seasons: London Bourne,” *JBMHS* 45 (1999): 19; J. A. S. Thome and J. H. Kimball, *Emancipation in the West Indies: A Six Months’ Tour of Antigua, Barbados and Jamaica in the Year 1837* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), 75; Will of London Bourne, 3 February 1869, RB4, BDA.

people of color” themselves often used this term in petitions and other documents, and the term “Afro-Barbadian” encapsulates the element of diasporic thought and experience. Both terms also seem to reflect the terminology current in the era of the writing of this book and are, I hope, therefore more meaningful and less offensive to the reader. I also use the expression “free coloreds and blacks,” a term that appeared on petitions. Occasionally, when all of the above terms seem cumbersome and repetitive, I use the term “nonwhite,” the chief merit of which is brevity. I have avoided the terms “freedmen” or “freedwomen” because not all free people of color had been born in slavery and many would not have seen themselves as “freed” people.

This study is divided into nine chapters and three sections and is organized chronologically, although there is some overlap in the time periods discussed in each section. The first section (chapters 1–4) concentrates on the period from the 1790s to the beginning of apprenticeship, section 2 (chapters 5–7) concentrates on apprenticeship and the very first years of “full” freedom, and section 3 (chapters 8 and 9) concentrates on the period from 1838 to the 1850s.

Free people of color remain an intensely charged subject in the modern Caribbean, as a metaphor for continuing entanglements with empire and the contradictions of our complex racial subjectivities. This book is an attempt to understand the experiences and perspective of the men and women who are the subject of what follows, even those aspects of their thought that do not sit comfortably with a twenty-first-century audience. It is also an engagement with current debates about race and racial tension in the Caribbean and the legacy of slavery and emancipation. It is my hope that exploring such complexity will offer readers material for thinking through the implications of the ways in which debates about race, gender, class, and empire from this era remain salient in our own time and to consider how, and to what ends, histories of slavery and emancipation are mobilized in politics and public life in the contemporary Caribbean.