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Clare Johnson Washington
Portland State University

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**Women and Resistance in the African Diaspora, with special focus on the Caribbean, Africa
and USA**

by
Clare Washington

Faculty Mentor:

E. Kofi Agorsah

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“Women and Resistance in the African Diaspora, with special focus on the Caribbean, Africa and USA”

CLARE WASHINGTON
KOFI AGORSAH, FACULTY MENTOR

INTRODUCTION

Resistance to the institution of slavery was very widespread, persistent, and to be found in almost every aspect of slave life (Beckles, 1989: 152). All groups of slaves, regardless of sex, color, or work had an anti-slavery mentality when it came to obeying their masters, and women were among leaders of resistance movements. Women’s leadership roles, however, have been minimized in writings about slave resistance.

As early as 1500, captive women become active participants in resistance to slavery. There are accounts of revolt during the middle passage. For example, an English slaver captain, John Newton, reports that ships that were under his command survived at least five revolts. One such revolt was aboard the "Thomas" in 1797. The women on board were released and let on deck to get exercise and eat. When they discovered that the armory was unlocked, they seized guns from this container and overpowered the crew. The men were then released and the ships eventually controlled by the captives. However, it should be noted that they were eventually recaptured because of their inability to navigate the seas (Beckles 1989: 155). Still this was an early indication of women’s unwillingness to accept their enslaved position.

Resistance history in the Caribbean and Americas in its various forms has always emphasized the role of men as leaders and heroes. Studies in the last two decades (Momsen 1996, Mintz 1996, Bush 1990, Beckles and Shepherd 1996, Ellis 1985, 1996, Hart 1980, 1985) however, are beginning

to suggest the enormous contributions of women to the successes of many of the resistance events. Also, research revelations are being made about the negative impressions and images of enslaved women depicted in colonial writings (Mathis 2001, Beckles and Shepherd 1996, Cooper 1994, Campbell 1986, Price 1996, Campbell 1987). Some of these new findings depict women as not only actively at the forefront of colonial military and political resistance operations but performed those activities in addition to their roles as the bearers of their individual original cultures. One group of special interest in the Caribbean consisted of the women of the “runaway” communities as in Jamaica and Suriname, where the rich heritage of the contributions of such women appear to continue to be significant. (Agorsah 1994, Craton 1992, Hart 1980, 1985, Zips 1999) The research done on the achievements of these communities, does not give much attention to the role and status of the women of those communities, except their role as house-wives and bearers of children.

For slaves, life was harsh and harsher still for slave women. Slave men, in Antigua, were the ones likely to hold non-agricultural and less arduous labor (Hector, 1996). Women had to take the full brunt. From age 14 or 15 every slave woman, like the men, were assigned a plot. The women were expected to produce no less than a man! Gender, differences in strength seemed to be of no account. Slave women bore the full weight of field work, while they were excluded from the factory and other skilled work. Slave women also had to compete with poor white women as hucksters. And naturally, (or perhaps, “un-naturally”) the law took the side of the poor white women against black slave women. So it was that black slave women could not sell sugar, cotton, rum, molasses or ginger without written permission. These were left, in the main, for poor white women. Of special note is how specific these white minority, and therefore, discriminatory laws were. They determined where black women could live and could not live, when they could be out of doors, and when they could not, who they could be seen with and whom they could not. Their sub-humanity was enforced

by law. But slave women were always the backbone of resistance in this and other Caribbean territories. Slave women filed more complaints in the courts than men. And slave women outnumbered men as offenders under Slave Laws. For example, in a Report on slaves in Guiana, the so-called protector of slaves in 1826 had this to say: "There is no question as far as has come within my reach of observation as to the difficulty of managing the women and they [the slave women] are irritating and insolent to a degree -- often instigated by the men -- to take advantage of the exemption from stripes and in town do little or nothing" (Hector, 1996).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Running away from the harshness of the fields, the masters and the overseers is what I learned about slavery in junior high and high school history books. Neither my teachers, nor any of the books I read talked about or even mentioned other forms of resistance to slavery by both male and female slaves, other than running away. Acts of murder, though not common, were also committed by black women against their white oppressors. Women have also been found to figure prominently in such events as suicides and mass poisonings (Klein, 1986: 94). Another excellent text which is full of information, first person accounts, and resources is Barbara Bush's book, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838*. It covers such topics as slave women in resistance, as transmitters of African culture, and their role in the labor force.

In Bush's study, new revelations regarding the female slave in Caribbean society were uncovered, which included: the vital and significant contribution she (the slave woman) made to West Indian slave society; how she exhibited strength and independence which wasn't previously accredited; how she struggled alongside her men-folk to live, maintain her dignity, to survive, and retain her integrity and culture; and her positive role in slave resistance.

Pero Gaglo Dagbovie notes in his article, "Black women, Carter G. Woodson, and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1915-1950", that "Woodson himself lacked background for broad historical writing; he was almost contemptuous of emotion; he had limited human contacts and sympathies." But several months after his death, W. E. B. Du Bois concluded this harsh criticism of the founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History adding:

"he had no conception of the place of woman in creation."

It is thought that Du Bois was criticizing Woodson for supposedly ignoring black women's role in history. In 1991, almost four decades after Woodson's death, historian Patricia Morton, in her book *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (1991) elaborated on Du Bois's provocative comment. She argued that starting in the nineteenth century and well into the second half of the twentieth, many black male historians have contributed to White society's most detrimental views, myths, and stereotypes of black womanhood. Though she notes that Woodson at times defended black womanhood, she stresses that the "Father of Negro History" largely omitted slave women and black female activists from his work. At the same time, she praises Woodson for challenging "conventional orthodoxies," specifically for deconstructing some of the myths pertaining to black women."

Woodson's views of black women may appear to have been at times ambiguous. But, overall they were quite progressive when compared to other black male scholars and historians of his time.³ While he did not publish monographs devoted to black women or fight actively and openly for women's rights, he did publish several important articles in the 1930s which sought to reconstruct the prevailing negative images of black womanhood. He welcomed black women with open arms into a movement very dear to him. He also supported and celebrated their efforts at

legitimizing and popularizing the study of African American life and history. Black female teachers, club-women, librarians, amateur historians, and social activists played vital roles in the activities of the ASNLH (Association for the Study of Negro Life and History).

Verene Shepherd notes in the Introduction of *Women in Caribbean History* (Shepherd, ed., 1999), that until the 1970s, Caribbean history books contained very little information about women. Some of the reasons, according to Shepherd, were 1). the main focus of the early historians was on issues relating to colonization, government, diplomacy, religion, trade and warfare. Men were more involved in these activities than women; 2). some historians did not think that women's issues merited inclusion in history books, therefore they did not write about the history of women apart from those who were great leaders or were involved in 'public' life; 3). social history techniques had not yet become widely used in the writing of Caribbean history. Social history pays more attention to groups which are not of the elite class and to topics such as family and reproduction – not at first considered suitable or important topics for history textbooks; and 4). many historians opted to write what they regarded as 'gender natural' history, believing that this was a more objective way of writing history.

Shepherd goes on to say that the factors that contributed to a change in the subjects chosen for history included: the slow acceptance of the methods of social history; the influence of the international women's movement with its attention to women's rights; the emergence of 'women's history' ('women's history' challenged the claim that only men should be written about and writers of women's history argued that our view of history would change if women were included in the historical accounts); the emergence of a group of demographic and social historians concerned with Caribbean women's history; and the need to project a more positive image of Caribbean women, especially black women; because stereotypes and negative images of Caribbean women abounded in

the journals of Columbus, the books written by the early colonizers and settlers, travelers, missionaries and others who visited the Caribbean in that period.

The writers who have contributed much to overturning the negative images of Caribbean women and increasing our knowledge of the history of the Caribbean women include pioneers such as Elsa Goveia, Lucille Mathurin-Mair, Barry Higman and Kamu Brathwaite. More recently we have benefited from the books written by people like Rhoda Reddock, Hillary Beckles, Barbara, and Marietta Morrissey. But Shepherd cautions that the current research still does not reflect the historical experiences of all groups of women in the Caribbean (Shepherd, 1999).

PRESENT STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

This project is a work in progress on women in slave resistance (a topic originating from my previous class studies started first as a general reading to identify issues and references of interest to this topic. This current study will extend that general background work). I became interested in slave resistance, particularly female slave resistance after spending a quarter in Professor Agorsah's Caribbean Female Slave Resistance seminar at Portland State University. In the course, I learned many things about slave resistance that I'd never heard of before. The most eye-opening information and material I found in the readings for the seminar, were those related to the many ways in which slaves (female and male) resisted the institution of slavery and harsh slave masters. Historical documentation such as missionary and baptismal record, deeds, colonial maps and military reports, "negro spiritual songs" and festivities, oral histories or narratives, photographic images and other archival material will be the main sources. Documentaries depicting colonial plantation and resistance history will also be critically examined in order to identify issues relating to the role of women in those episodes and the interpretations given about those events. Interviews will be conducted among the older people of the selected communities who have preserved the traditions.

ASPECTS OF WOMEN RESISTANCE

The accounts of African American slavery in textbooks routinely conflate the story of male and female slaves into one history. Textbooks rarely enable students to grapple with the lives and challenges of women constrained by the institution of slavery. The collections of letters and autobiographies of slave women in the nineteenth century now available on the Internet open a window onto the lives of these women, and allow teachers and students to explore this history. One such resource is the quarterly online journal, *History Now: American History Online*.

Students too readily accept everything that they read in books as "*the truth*". Teachers often hear, "*Well, I read it in the book. It must be true.*" or "*It was on the news, in the newspaper, or in a magazine.*" I certainly wasn't exposed to any of what I've learned since returning to higher education, when I was in junior high and high school. Unfortunately, too many students hear teachers say that if it's in the book, then it must be so. Much of what has been called history has been recorded by men of the dominant culture of that society. The men who write the text decided what should be recorded and what is important. There is little written about women, let alone minority women. A lot of students have deduced that since women and members of minority groups rarely appear in history texts, they contributed little to history.

Dr. Mary Pipher, a psychotherapist and New York Times best-selling author for her book, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1975), says that when girls and women read a history of Western civilization, they are essentially reading a record of men's lives. Pipher quotes Dale Spender, author of *Man Made Language* (1980; 1985), "Women's accomplishments are relegated

to the lost and found.” As girls study Western civilization, they become increasingly aware that *history* is the history of men. History is *His Story*, the story of *man-kind*. Pipher goes on to say,

“I discovered this when I read H.G. Well’s *Outline of History* and Winston Churchill’s *History of the Western World*. Both are primarily histories of war and the distribution of property. Women’s lives were ignored except as they influenced the course of men’s lives. I remember, Pipher continues, wondering “where were the women during all these events?” My daughter made the same observation about her history text: “It’s so boring, just a bunch of kings and generals fighting each other. What were the women doing anyway?”

Girls move into a culture with a Constitution that gave *white* men, not all Americans, the right to vote, and that has yet to pass an equal rights amendment. They (girls) join a culture in which historical documents proclaim the rights of *man*. As the writer and poet, Tillie Olsen observed, “Women’s voices have been silenced through the ages, and the silencing continues in the present.” (Pipher, 1975: 40-41).

Pipher notes that by junior high, girls sense their lack of power, but usually they cannot say what they sense.

“If I ask who writes most of the material they study at school, they know it’s men. If I ask who is more likely to be principal, they say a man. If I ask who has the most power, they say men. I encourage girls to think about these issues and bring me examples of discrimination.”

One girl noticed that the mountains in Colorado that were named for men had their *last* names. She brought in a map to point out Mount Adams, Mount Audubon, Babcock Peak, Mount Sneffels, and Mount Richtofen. The few natural features that are named for women are named with only the women’s *first* name, such as Mount Alice, Mount Emma, Mount Eva, Lake Emmaline, Lake Agnes, Maggie Gulch, and Mount Flora (1975: 41).

WOMEN RESISTANCE LEADERS

A lot of work has been done studying the lives of slaves and the slave system in the United States. From elementary school on through college we are taught the evils of slavery that took place right here in the Land of the Free. Slavery is a term most of us are familiar with. Most people are aware of the part America played in the business of buying and selling black people into forced labor, but the United Kingdom also had her part in this twisted scheme that yielded an enormous amount of money for certain people in the aristocracy and middleclass. Way back in the day England was well known for its ships and the advantages this gave her in terms of defending the seas and also transportation. The two main commercial activities that gave England its maritime advantage were sugar and slaves. Ships would leave Britain with cargo of cheap manufactured goods from Liverpool and Bristol and travel to West Africa where they would be exchanged for slaves. The slaves were then taken to the Caribbean where they were exchanged for sugar that was then brought back to Europe and sold for a very large profit. The huge monetary gain made sure people were not overly concerned with the humanitarian aspect of the slave trade or even the ethical issues. They were making money that enabled them to buy more ships and give Britain the advantage of being the world's most forceful naval power.

Human men and women – slaves – were the sacrifices for all of this. The map below (**Figure 1**) shows major areas involved as recipients of enslaved Africans (in the Caribbean) in the 18th century.



Figure 1

NANNY OF JAMAICA AND OTHERS

Most historical accounts about slaves and slavery are written and taught mostly about the men slaves and how they resisted and rebelled against the harsh and terrible treatment they endured at the hand of their masters. Besides here in the United States, there were slaves and slavery in other places also –especially in the Caribbean. It is important to note that female slaves were also not willing to tolerate being enslaved, and also rebelled, resisted and ran away as the male slaves did – oftentimes, even more so. But there is little written about these more obscure women. This same concept has continued throughout history, and especially where the African American female’s role in history is concerned. There are a few historical accounts of such female personalities as Nanny of the Maroons. Almost every slave rebellion involved African spiritual practices, and leaders such as Queen Nanny, usually practiced Obeah and were able to instill confidence in their followers. Nanny was born in Africa, and was from the Ashanti tribe, but was brought to Jamaica as a slave. Nanny is known to the Maroons of today as “Granny Nanny”. The Ashanti tribe was one of the powerful tribes in West Africa. They were well trained in fighting battles, and their women were greatly respected. Their women also knew about fighting battles. When Nanny arrived in Jamaica, rebellion against slavery was going on. Rebel towns (the towns of run-away slaves) were all over the island. The Maroon villages were the strongest of these rebel towns, and were well organized and defended.

Soon after arriving in Jamaica, Nanny and her five brothers escaped from slavery. Her brothers were Cudjoe, the great Maroon leader, Accompong, Johnny, Cuffy and Quao. This Ashanti

family soon became leaders of the Maroons and of many other free Africans. Nanny and her brothers decided that a movement should be started to drive away the British. Cudjoe went to St. James and built a village. This village was called Cudjoe Town. Accompong went to St. Elizabeth. Accompong in St. Elizabeth is named after him. Nanny and Quao went to Portland to organize the free Africans there. There were, therefore, two main groups of Maroons. There were those in the west of the island called the Leeward Maroons. Those in the east were called the Windward Maroons. Under her protection, many would hide in 'Girls' Town' or 'Women's Town' in the John Crow Mountains. Nanny made a vow on Pumpkin Hill in 1737 to fight the British to death.

For her role in resistance movements and rebellions, Nanny deserves to be written and talked about in the historical context; however, other women in Caribbean and African countries contributed much to the freedom of their families and communities as well. Some of these women include: Queen Yaa Asantewa of Ghana; Queen Nzingha of Ndongo of Southwest Africa; Mary Thomas a.k.a. Queen Mary of St. Croix, Virgin Islands; and two others who fought alongside Queen Mary were Alexina Solo aka Queen Agnes and Susana Abramson aka Queen Matilda (nicknamed "Bottom-Belly" also of St. Croix, Virgin Islands; and Queen Coziah Harmon (she along with her three sisters, Clara, Ezba and Lala, were coal loaders).

YAA ASANTEWA AND OTHERS

There are some pages of history which testify that having realized with dismay that the Ashanti kings were generally filled with cowardice to militarily confront the British colonial administration in the Gold Coast that had detained their king, Nana Prempeh I in 1896, five years later, Queen Mother Yaa Asantewa took up arms and led an Ashanti army in the Gold Coast to fight the British troops in the last and most bloody battle of the 10 Anglo-Ashanti wars. She was later

captured and banished into exile in Seychelles where she died in 1923. Her most famous words to the Ashanti kings were, *"If you the men of Ashanti will not go forward, then we will. We, the women will. I shall call upon you my fellow women. We will fight the white men. We will fight until the last of us falls in the battlefield."* It is this war that entered in the annals of history as the last war in Africa ever led by a woman.

QUEEN NZINGHA

In 1624, Queen Nzingha of Ndongo of Southwest Africa led her people to take control of their territory. She was 42 years old at the time. For the next forty years, Nzingha led her people into battle against the Portuguese from the rocky slopes of Matamba. Her sisters were captured during a battle, but with the help of slaves in Luanda, they escaped from slavery. Later, her sister, Kifunji, died from battle wounds.

Nzingha led many battles and peace treaties, some with the Portuguese, some with the Dutch, but she never resisted against slavery and the ill treatment of her people. She never returned to the ruins of Kabasa, and many remember her as the Queen of Matamba, because she ruled from the Matamba Mountains and countryside, never from the Ndongo territory, despite her titles. When she died in 1663 at age 82, her sister, Mukambu, took over the seat of power as head of the Mbundu people. Mukambu had Nzingha laid to rest in her leopard skins and with her bow over her shoulder and arrows in her hand.

QUEEN MARY THOMAS OF THE CARIBBEAN

Queen Mary Thomas, and the two others who fought alongside her, Queen Agnes and Queen Matilda (nicknamed "Bottom-Belly) of St. Croix, Virgin Islands, were leaders of the

Agricultural laborers Revolt in October 1878, also known as Fireburn of 1878. There is a road in St. Croix named “Queen Mary Highway” to commemorate this lady.

The title of queen was bestowed on these women because they were selected by the workers on the plantations to preside over all ceremonies, rituals and celebrations. These women were held in the highest esteem and were well respected as leaders by their fellow workers.

Nearly all the estates along Centerline west of Kingshill were burned out. Near Christiansted, Anna's Hope and Work and Rest went up in smoke, but the town itself was left unharmed. Not only the men were the heroes to the laborers this time, the women too, played their part in the action. The most famous was Queen Mary. After all settled down the Queens were led away to prison in Denmark, but were eventually returned to St. Croix.

QUEEN COZIAH HARMON

Queen Coziah Harmon, and her three sisters, Clara, Ezba and Lala, were all coal loaders on St. Thomas. For all intents and purposes, the coal-carrier strike on St. Thomas in 1892, embodied the principle of nonviolent protest, a concept that was to become a central ingredient of the civil rights movement of the 1960s under the inspired leadership of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (*The Virgin Island Daily News*, January 19, 2006).

THE LIVING AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY

On July 27, 2006, I interviewed Ann Whiting, a direct descendant of Queen Coziah's. Ann noted that at no time did Queen Coziah and her sisters want the coal strike to be of a violent nature. They were to accomplish the goals they set out by non-violent means only. She also noted (as does Eddie Donoghue, who wrote the play, “Queen Coziah”, notes), that it is considered ironic that

whereas Martin Luther King, Jr. drew many of his followers from black colleges, Queen Coziah and the participants in the coal-carrier strike had little or no formal education. Yet both groups had a disciplined commitment to nonviolent action and passive resistance.

Queen Coziah, was intuitively aware that given the size of the well-equipped Danish militia and fire corps arrayed against them, any collective violent action on the part of the strikers was doomed to culminate in bloodshed and a setback for their cause. Coziah was non-compromising in her approach. As she addressed the coal strikers gathered in the park ready to march on the three major ship-coaling companies with offices on Main Street, she emphasized the need for nonviolence. Violence, she insisted, would tarnish the moral justification for the strike.

ARONA PETERSEN

At this same interview with Ann Whiting about Queen Coziah, I learned of another famous Caribbean woman, and ancestor of Whiting's – Arona Petersen (sometimes spelled 'Peterson'). Arona Petersen was an herbalist and culinary specialist from St. Thomas, who wrote many books, of those, the most well-known being *Herbs and Proverbs*. "My Aunt Ronie got me started on learning about our family's history," Whiting recalls. "Any questions I had, I went to Aunt Ronie, and she always gave me an answer. This was from the time I was 9-years old. And she understood why I was asking questions. She understood that when I had began reading the Old Testament of the Bible, and reading about who "beget" whom, I wanted to know how our "begets" began. She helped me understand our family's history, and all of this has remained with me."

It was important for Arona Petersen to keep the history and culture of their family ancestors and family in the forefront at all times. She wrote *The Food & Folklore of the Virgin Islands* (Romik, 1990) so that the regional flavor of Virgin Islands fare could be captured in her recipes, and the

idiomatic dialogues of island people are perfectly re-created as she spun old island tales and wisdom. It is some of these island tales that Ann Whiting fondly remembers hearing from her 'Aunt Ronie'. St. Croix's Top Hat Restaurant also serves some of the food with an adaptation from Arona Petersen's *The Food & Folklore of the Virgin Islands* book. And in 1991, Roberta Q. Knowles, who teaches English at the University of the Virgin Islands, St. Croix campus, and a contributor to Caribbean Writer, wrote the book, *Arona Petersen: Famous Virgin Islander*. During Black History Month in 2005, the St. Croix's Carabana Ensemble Theater put on a play entitled, *Arona*, which was about the life and times of Arona Petersen. It is noted in the Summer 2005 issue of *Tidings*, a newsletter of Friends of Virgin Islands National Park, that the play was a smashing hit.

Ann whiting herself is contributing, and has contributed much in keeping her family's history and culture alive, as she notes in the mini-biography she sent to me. "I am an amateur genealogist; I began when I read the "begat" in the bible, and wanted to do my own Begat. I have been documenting my family history for the better part of 40 years. My database consists of over 1200 names thru 8 major families. The branches extend to England, France, Germany, Norway, Denmark, China, Russia and India. I have not yet been able to document a specific place in Africa, though West Africa is looking like a good jumping off place. My mentors in this quest have been my God Father, J. Antonio Jarvis, a historian, photographer, author and educator; and my Cousin, Arona Saunders Petersen, a world traveler, chief, painter, poet, author, a walking textbook on Virgin Islands history and Caribbean culture."

Ann Whiting shared a portion of her writing about her family's history with me in the manuscript she's been writing. She summarizes in her the mini-biography, "I am in the process of writing, what I wanted my grandchildren to know of their culture, but has taken on a life of it's own, and may become a book. The title, *The Other Caribbean History*, it is my attempt to explain, not from

a scholastic but a common sense point of view, how the Caribbean was colonized, and its affect on the world, then and today. I am, however, being pulled or swayed by my first love, genealogy, to slant it that way or to merge history with genealogy, my problem now is how to be analytical about both.”

THE UNITED STATES

In the U.S. Harriett Tubman and Sojourner Truth are the most well known and have the most history written about them. A great woman of African descent is Sojourner Truth who was born as a slave in 1797 in the USA. One day she left her home with only 25 cents in her pockets to launch a massive campaign against slavery. Though she was physically assorted and mudslinged for merely exposing the brunt of slavery, Sojourner Truth could not be swayed an inch nor be stopped outright. In 1843, she began a 40-year crusade against slavery.

There is also Harriet Tubman who was born in 1820 on one of the slave breeding plantations in the USA. She first freed herself, then later her brothers and sisters who were also in the shackles of slavery and went on to establish a route called the ‘underground railroad’ through which she rescued many other Africans to find the road to freedom. Angry slave owners to offered \$40,000 as a reward for Harriet’s capture. However this did not materialize.

Just as it is the Caribbean and in other countries, there were other heroines with little or no history written about them in the U.S. The list is long, but Ellen Smith Craft and Anna Kingsley are two of the many that I uncovered in my research.

ELLEN CRAFT SMITH

Ellen Smith Craft was born in 1826 in the town of Clinton, Georgia, and died in 1891. She was from the state of Georgia. On December 26, 1848, she pulled off a daring slave escape,

wherein she impersonated a slaveholder, and she and her husband, William Craft, walked off to freedom. Ellen Smith Craft is a Georgia woman whose life story reads like a Hollywood script of adventure and courage: an unlikely escape from the shackles of slavery followed by the selfless pursuit of justice despite continuing threats to her own safety and well-being.

ANNA KINGSLEY

Anna Kingsley was from Spanish Florida, and in March 1811, she became a landowner and slaveholder. Anna was the African wife of plantation owner Zephaniah Kingsley. At an early age, she survived the Middle Passage and dehumanizing slave markets to become the property of Kingsley. After manumission by her husband, Anna became a landowner and slaveholder. She raised her four children while managing a plantation that utilized African slave labor. She survived brutal changes in race policies and social attitudes brought by successive governments in Florida, but survival demanded difficult, often dangerous, choices. She was a woman of courage and determination. She is an example of the active role that people of color played in shaping their own destinies and our country's history in an era of slavery, oppression, and prejudice.

THE CARIBBEAN: DOORWAY TO SLAVERY

The Caribbean was the doorway to slavery here in the United States, and it is important that we study the hardships that slaves suffered through in this area. Slaves regularly resisted their masters any way they could. Female slaves, in particular, had a very strong sense of independence and they regularly resisted slavery using both violent and nonviolent means, even though, like the male slaves, they were considered property. Caribbean slave women exhibited their strong character, independence and exceptional self worth through their opposition to their tasks performed in the fields on plantations. This resistance was expressed in many different rebellious

ways including not getting married, refusing to reproduce, and various forms of other physical resistance.

In the Caribbean, the system of slavery sought to degrade women and womanhood in such ways as to force aspects of their resistance to take on specific forms. Maternity and fertility was at the core for plantation survival, and so women's resistance to these policies were all too common (Reddock, pg. 24). For this reason, slave owners were as fearful, suspicious and distrustful of women's activities as rebels, as they were of men's. Women were very visible participants to resistance movements.

There have been many myths, stereotypes, labels, and misleading images about slave women, including: they didn't have valid roles in slave resistance (which has been proven to be untrue). Some of the most common myths and labels were that the slave woman was: "promiscuous harlot", cruel, negligent as a mother, fickle as a wife, passive, downtrodden, had no moral codes, no single connection with the other sex, subservient, and a resigned slave who contributed little to the cause of slave resistance. Yet, as Moira Ferguson writes in *The History of Mary Prince*, women were very visible participants in resistance movements. Mary Prince ran away from her one master, Captain Ingham, although this proved to be unsuccessful. In the end, however, she eventually beat the system. She got her freedom, but she had to give up her husband for it (Ferguson, 1997). And new research by Edward Kamau Braithwaite (*The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, 1971), shows the contribution women made to slave cultural life. Also, cultural histories written by Eugene Genovese (*Roll Jordan Roll*) and others including Blassingame (1972), Rawick (1972-3), and Gutman (1976), have contributed to presenting the woman slave in more positive ways.

Female opposition to Caribbean slavery took on many different forms, both violent and nonviolent. Armed rebellions were the rarest form of resistance (Beckles, pg. 157). The more

ordinary day-to-day resistance was much more common and they were designed with two objectives in mind: First, actions designed to weaken the slave system and hasten its collapse; Second, actions designed to improve the efficiency of the system so as to extract greater benefits. Field women adopted the strategy of labor withdrawal, where they performed less productively than they otherwise could.

The greatest contribution women made for the resistance of slavery were individual battles for improved conditions and freedom, in addition to individual acts ranging from refusing to get married all the way to infanticide. Acts of infanticide were very frequent as both an act of resistance and an unwillingness to bring children into the world of slavery (Reddock, pg. 14). Slave women would just refuse to have children all together as an act of resistance. Another common anti-slavery action was running away. Those who not themselves take flight frequently assisted others in doing so.

PASSIVE AND NON-PASSIVE RESISTANCE

As has been noted, resistance to slavery and oppression was in several forms. Most notable, of course, was the aggressive resistance in the form of revolts and rebellions. But as discussed above, there were also passive resistance to slavery and oppression. Queen Coziah used non-violent, passive resistance in the Coal-Carriers Strike of 1892, in order to reach her goals for the workers. Ellen Smith Craft used passive resistance and non-violent means to free herself and her husband from enslavement; and Anna Kingsley, a free woman on the first day of March 1811, when white plantation owner Zephaniah Kingsley put his signature on a document that forever changed the life of a young African woman. The document was a manumission paper, which ensured her legal freedom. She then became a landowner and slaveholder herself.

The more violent rebellions, revolts and resistance movements weren't just carried out by male slaves. Female slaves played a big role in some of these movements, too.

Tim Hector, in his article, [Women & Youths in Antigua - The Hidden Story](#), points out some interesting facts about the status of women in Antigua. The articles talk about how her man contracted her to work for the planter, as if she were his property. Slavery had brought the woman to work, admittedly as chattel, but in her own capacity. Post-slavery, the man contracted his wife or woman to work for the same planter, as his property. The law forbade women to sign contracts in her own right. The personhood of the black women was assaulted and violated even though "freed" that same year of the Contract Act, namely, in 1834.

Women in Antigua retaliated and resisted. That resistance by women, often ignored by the men who write history is nonetheless one of the corner stones of our history. Men, both as historians or as men, glorify and sanctify women as "Mothers" to whom they swear undying love. But the same women, other than their mother presumably, they subordinate with a ruthlessness, exceeded only by that of the Planter (Hector, 1998).

How did Antiguan women resist? So as to eliminate any personal bias, as chauvinists might argue, let me quote an objective source. Louis Rothe, in a *Description of the Island of Antigua* wrote "on many estates the women had completely withdrawn their labour or worked only for a few days a week and they were unwilling to put their children to work in the fields. What a bold and heroic move in hard, very hard, indeed the hardest times!"

Men often see themselves as the motive force of history. But there clearly can be an argument here, that Antiguan women had done one of the most dramatic things in our history. They had, on several sugar estates, completely withdrawn from estate labour and prevented their children from engaging in plantation work. This is a good example of passive resistance.

It was mainly women who started the free villages in Antigua. They wanted to get away from the plantation "cottage," really the slave hut, and establish a home of their own in which they could raise their children, free from the dreaded plantation and planter control - in terms of manual labor and sexual labor. That "general capacity" in which women worked for the planter or his overseers involved sexual favors as well. Women dreaded it, and sought dignity, human dignity, in their own homes, however poor and without material comforts, but far from the dreaded plantation.

The more violent women resisters and rebellious leaders include: the Amazons of Dahomey, whom some have called a crack all-female troops. They were all females, who served also as royal bodyguards. They were also priestesses & wore crescent moon crowns; the Hausa had a number of warrior queens, notably Amina of Zau Zau; a woman named Bazao-Turunku led warriors and founded a town south of Zaria; and Nupe women warriors called Isadshi-Koseshi fought as fiercely as the men, opposing invasions of the Fulbe conquerors who raided the Nupe for cattle & slaves, especially women.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

These are the main questions addressed: Who were the major contributors in the selected resistance episodes in the selected areas? How did they relate to the events – politically, socially, militarily and economically? What exactly were their contribution and impact of those contributions?

I found that many of the more obscure female personalities in resistance movements have been overlooked and understudied by historians. Although research has been done of the achievements of many of the slave communities, not much attention has been given to the role and status of the women of those communities, except their role as housewives and bearers of children.

Further research needs to be done to fully examine the more important roles of the more obscure women that have simply been left out of history. In addition to examining these roles, the study will also examine similarities in personalities and strategies used by women among these communities as they headed toward the achievement of equality. Jamaica, Suriname and southern United States will be the initial geographical areas of focus. Women's spirituality as vehicle as well as weapon and its impact on the resistance activities will also be investigated.

The results of this study should help to explain that although there were many horrors witnessed by the women of these resistance movements, there were a large number who made it and contributed substantially to the labor force on the plantations, especially on the Caribbean sugar plantations.

Although they exhibited so much rebelliousness to the slave system, the nineteenth century women actually exceeded male slaves when it came to work and value (Beckles, 1989: 32). Slave women were the dominant force behind production and labor reproduction. The hardships of slavery and the coinciding opposition to the system helped to mold the Caribbean woman into what she is today. Rhoda Reddock, puts it even better in an excerpt from *Women, Labor and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago*:

“Despite the treachery and inhumanity of the plantation experience it brought to the fore the potentials for production, self-sufficiency, rebellion, and the relentless quest for personal autonomy still present in Caribbean women today.” (Reddock, 1994: 11)

The list is endless. Probably due to a large extent because of their skin color and to a certain extent because of their gender, there are many other great "queens" or rather, women of African descent, who have unfairly been denied the utmost veneration and great honor they deserve.

Among the many are those listed below in **Table 1**:

Female Personality	Location (U.S. or Other Country)	Major Contribution	Timeline (Year(s), etc.)	Other Information
Queen Kahina	North Africa	Fought Arab incursion in North Africa	Died in 705 A.D.	
Hatshepsut, Tiye and Nefertari, Nefertiti	Kemet (Land of the Blacks)			Otherwise known as ancient Egypt.
Nandi	Queen of Zululand	overcame many obstacles to raise to a power in all Zululand	1778-1826	Mother of Shaka Zulu
Empress Taytu Betul	Ethiopia	led the conservative faction that resisted the modernists	1889-1913	she was a key player in the conflict over the Treaty of Wuchale with Italy
Mary Church Terrell	Washington, DC	had been a leader in the fight to end Jim Crow segregation	1954	Born in 1863, during the Civil War, and died in 1954
Ida B. Wells	Tennessee	went on to lead the American anti-lynching crusade	1892	born the daughter of slaves in Holly Springs, Mississippi, on July 16, 1862
Queen Mother Moore	Louisiana	demanded reparations	1950s	Grandfather lynched
Louisa Picquet	South Carolina; Buffalo, NY	Worked to free her mother (in Texas)	May 1860	As a baby, she and her mother were sold to a plantation owner in Georgia

Table 1

The evidence needed to rescue slave women from the iniquity of oblivion is not only lost or hidden but often distorted by men. Inspired by the 'strong polemical articles' of women activists,

Barbara Bush, in her book, "*Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1835*", set out to analyze myths and 'the fallacious assumptions upon which they were based'. Her book is a thesis converted to instruct the general reader about the misconceptions of historical information as it is written female slaves in the Caribbean.

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