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Historical Power and the Enslaved Woman in Rowlandson's *Rachel Pringle of Barbadoes*
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In Barbados today exists a host of ephemera with one woman's face on them, from posters to cheap reproduction scrimshaw.¹ Worldwide, she remains subject of discussion on black female agency during the slave period: a formerly enslaved, free woman of colour running her own tavern in the capital of the richest British colony is an attractive narrative.² Rachael Pringle-Polgreen rightly deserves her place in the history books, but too often, her captivating mythology supersedes other women of the time who were denied agency because of their enslavement. The image on these souvenirs is taken from a print (Fig 1) by Thomas Rowlandson, but in the back of the original there is a figure of a woman (Fig 2), enslaved by Pringle-Polgreen and forced into sexual labour. Regardless of whether she was a specific person, she represents those silenced women who laboured under Pringle-Polgreen. The work of Marisa Fuentes in particular helps to inform this paper – her desire to “recover enslaved female subjects from historical obscurity” and her commitment to understanding the archival impact of slave societies and colonialism are foundational concepts for my work.³ Ultimately, this essay seeks to rectify Pringle-Polgreen's long-standing narrative eclipse in academic circles by investigating the depiction of the enslaved woman in Rowlandson's print. It will attempt to read the woman in the back through the context of Pringle-Polgreen; it will explain why Pringle-Polgreen's story is an extension of the colonial gaze; it will recognise how this distorting colonial lens, as well as archival silencing, affects the opportunity to understand the woman in the back; but finally, using Cécile Bishop's “lyric address,” it will begin to create historical power for her by re-centring her narrative – in other words, exploring elements of the print in order to translate the realities of forced sexual labour during the period.⁴

¹ Temi Odumosu, “This is how you see her? Rachael Pringle-Polgreen of Barbados by Thomas Rowlandson's Satirical Hand,” *Atlantic Studies* 19, no. 1 (2022): 12-26.

² Marisa J Fuentes, “Power and Historical Figuring: Rachael Pringle-Polgreen's Troubled Archive,” *Gender & History* 22, no. 3 (October 2010): 565.

³ Marisa J Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 4-5.

⁴ Cécile Bishop, “Portraiture, Race, and Subjectivity: The Opacity of Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Nègresse*,” *Word & Image* 35, no. 1 (2019): 8.

Rowlandson's print is set in the British colony of Barbados; the Barbados Slave Code of 1661 set the general standard for slave societies in Britain, specifying that enslaved people were to serve for life, including their offspring, and that they were legally deemed property; this meant owners had complete control over all aspects of an enslaved person's life – including, crucially to this paper, sexually.⁵ The capital, Bridgetown, was an important port city where the Royal Navy was stationed.⁶ Due to high maritime traffic and military infrastructure, there was a great demand for sex work from both sailors and soldiers. However, women made up the majority of the population on the island, and eventually, white women owned the majority of slaves – on average 20-30 each. Frequently, white owners – particularly those who were widowed or married to men of middling wealth or influence – would hire out their enslaved women for sexual labour, either through direct transactions or through brothels and taverns run by free women of colour.⁷ These brothels were often the most successful ways through which free women of colour could financially support themselves. Because a free woman of colour was still subject to racial and gender based discrimination, she was often restricted to marginalised industries like sex work. Typically, these women would also own slaves themselves whom they forced into sexual labour. Fuentes writes that these women operated in liminal spaces – they usually owned property (for example, buildings and enslaved people), but because of their forced economic reliance on an illegal industry, they were not truly considered to be members of the public.⁸ The subject of Rowlandson's print, Rachael Pringle-Polgreen, remains one of the most infamous of these tavern-owners.

According to the 1842 colonial novel *Creoleana* by J. W. Orderson, Pringle-Polgreen was originally born Rachael Lauder around 1753 to a white man and an enslaved woman.

⁵ Alissandra Cummins and Allison Thompson, "The Unnamed Body: Encountering, Commodifying, and Codifying the Image of the Black Female," *Nka* 1, no. 38-39 (November 2016): 112.

⁶ Fuentes, "Troubled Archive," 567.

⁷ Joycelin Massiah, "Living with Dignity: Barbadian Women in the Work Force," in *Emancipation IV: A Series of Lectures to Commemorate the 150th Anniversary of Emancipation*, ed. Woodville Marshall (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 1993), 7.

⁸ Fuentes, "Troubled Archive," 576.

Her father was both her master and abuser, until she was purchased by Captain Thomas Pringle who subsequently freed her and provided means to begin her business.⁹ It must be stressed that the source for this information is not considered authoritative; *Creoleana* was published over fifty years following Pringle-Polgreen's death, but it has been used throughout her histories to fill the archival gaps from her early life.¹⁰ Following her freedom, Pringle-Polgreen opened a hotel and tavern in Bridgetown which served the white sailors and soldiers who came into the port. For the rest of her life, Pringle-Polgreen remained a member of the Bridgetown elite, and upon her death her will was read and her estate inventoried, something which was usually reserved for the wealthier white population.¹¹

This print is the only known image of Pringle-Polgreen, which Rowlandson based on a sketch by an anonymous artist. It is unknown whether the original sketch was done from life, but Rowlandson's etching was done in London five years after her death. Rowlandson's catalogue of prints includes a host of rowdy and rude situations – for example, highly sexualised scenes at docks and taverns, and some that are even considered erotica.¹² It is important to understand that this image is influenced by the conditions of its artist: his nationality, race, gender, and political ideologies all play a part in its biases which do not represent its figures in accurate ways. The print shows four figures, but it focuses on the one in the bottom right: Rachael Pringle-Polgreen herself. She is depicted as large, with a low-cut white chemise à la reine, and a red and white striped hair piece called a tignon.¹³ She wears an abundance of jewellery: gold earrings, bejewelled rings on nearly every finger, and a cameo necklace. She seems to reflect the “market woman” trope to some degree – an overweight mulatto woman sat outside her business, staring directly at the viewer in an unabashed way.¹⁴ To intensify this depiction of her perceived transgressive character, there is a sign behind which reads, “Pawpaw Sweatmeats, & Pickles of all Sorts by Rachell P.P.” –

⁹ Odumosu, “Rachael Pringle-Polgreen,” 12.

¹⁰ Fuentes, “Troubled Archive,” 571-572.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 564.

¹² Odumosu, “Rachael Pringle-Polgreen,” 10-13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴ Andrea Elizabeth Shaw, *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 81-83.

and because it is clearly sexually suggestive, it helps to inform the scene to the left which takes place between a young mulatto woman and a white planter. The woman mimics Pringle-Polgreen in her skin colour, earrings and tignon, but she is both more sexualised and more fashionable; her chemise à la reine is even more low-cut than Pringle-Polgreen's, with a large blue bow that draws the eye to her décolletage, and she has a straw hat atop her tignon. She is clearly beautiful, and yet she has a blank look on her face. The man has a planter's hat, multiple chins, and a stringy plait down his back. He also suffers from Barbados leg, or elephantiasis, a sickness caused by parasites that produces extreme swelling in extremities. Elephantiasis during the period was associated with moral degradation; it was long believed it could not affect Europeans, but when it became clear it could, there became associated with it ideas of "indiscretion" and over-consumption of strong liquor.¹⁵ The image as a whole stimulates a variety of emotions and senses; Odumosu writes, "ultimately swinging between desire and disgust."¹⁶

Previously, the piece has been read as an allegory for Pringle-Polgreen's life, but Odumosu points out that this logistically is unlikely; the uncorroborated biographical information that informs this explanation comes from *Creoleana*, which was not published until after Rowlandson's print.¹⁷ Considering the role the woman in the back clearly had, this is a deeply problematic explanation in that it erases the reality of her identity. There are evidently extreme sexual overtones to the piece, due in part to Rowlandson's interest in the sexualised mulatto woman, but more significantly because Pringle-Polgreen forced the enslaved women she owned into sexual labour.¹⁸ Rowlandson signals through her conversations with the unattractive and diseased white planter and through the context of Pringle-Polgreen's presence that the woman in the back is enslaved.

¹⁵ B. R. Laurence, "'Barbadoes Leg': Filariasis in Barbados, 1625-1900," *Medical History* 33, no. 4 (October 1989): 484.

¹⁶ Odumosu, "Rachael Pringle-Polgreen," 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁸ Cummins and Thompson, "The Unnamed Body," 116, Fuentes, "Troubled Archive," 575-576.

Pringle-Polgreen's image is ubiquitous in colonial Bridgetown, but this saturation is based entirely on few archival documents and mostly narrative legend. The reality of her illustrious entrepreneurial success comes from the enslaved people she owned; and no matter how frequently historians, like Candlin and Pybus, attempt to de-emphasise the sex work that went on in Pringle-Polgreen's tavern, the fact remains that she owned women who were used for both forced domestic and sexual labour – and could be subject to violent actions at the hand of Pringle-Polgreen.¹⁹ In his statement to the Privy Council in 1791, a military official testified that he witnessed her violently punishing a young enslaved woman after she returned from a sexual encounter without enough money.²⁰ The woman was beaten with the heel of a shoe, and her face was shoved into a toilet before two officers patronising the tavern intervened to save the woman's life.²¹ There are other pieces of evidence which suggest Pringle-Polgreen did not care for those she owned. One woman in particular – Joanna – was enslaved under Pringle-Polgreen until a white man bought and freed her. Without any means, Joanna was forced to return to her former master to request a contract of indentured servitude. In the document, she specified she will be provided food, drink, and clothing – which Fuentes suggests could indicate Pringle-Polgreen had not done so sufficiently prior to Joanna's freedom.²²

The question then becomes whether we can hope to understand anything about the woman in the back because of Pringle-Polgreen's overwhelming legend and power over her; in other words, does the context of Pringle-Polgreen in Rowlandson's image act as a distorting lens for viewers who wish to understand the realities of the woman in the back? The answer, of course, is complicated; despite her violence, it is important to remember that nothing we know about Pringle-Polgreen comes from her own writings. I argue that there is a distorting lens, but in Rowlandson's image, it is not Pringle-Polgreen – it is the constructed colonial gaze. For my disagreements with elements of their argument, Candlin and Pybus

¹⁹ Kit Candlin and Cassandra Pybus, *Enterprising Women: Gender, Race, and Power in the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 47.

²⁰ Fuentes, "Troubled Archive," 575.

²¹ Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 46.

²² Fuentes, "Troubled Archive," 578-579.

successfully identify the purposefully biased mythology that surrounds Pringle-Polgreen, which is constructed by agents of the colonial slave society.²³ While this does not erase the violent power imbalance between the woman in the back and Pringle-Polgreen, any artistic distortion perceived is a product of the colonial gaze which supersedes Pringle-Polgreen's subjective, personal views. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's theory of historical power emerges frequently in conversations on the histories of enslaved people. He argues that historical power is made up of factual past (including archival evidence) and the narrative story of the past (or the legend).²⁴ Fuentes, Cummins and Thompson separately apply this theory to their work on Pringle-Polgreen and the enslaved Black female body.²⁵ What is known about Pringle-Polgreen comes only from archives – tax documents with property information, wills and estates, which show what white men desire – and a narrative which does not belong to her – Orderson's *Creoleana*. As a free woman of colour living in colonial Bridgetown, Pringle-Polgreen does not control her historical power, but it does exist. However, for those like the woman in the back, there has never been any historical power because she has been systematically denied personhood. The truth about Pringle-Polgreen is somewhere in between – she will forever be a complicated figure, but in the context of Rowlandson's print, the true distortion is that of the colonies.

These colonial distortions warp this image in particular, dictate the subjects' histories and permeated their lives; slave society sought to sexualise and dehumanise enslaved women, who were perceived by society as inherently sexual, unfaithful and consequently immoral. They were overly-sexualised – compared to animals, the earth, and unclean things in order to arouse disgust and intrigue.²⁶ The woman in the back of Rowlandson's print is equally sexualised: her décolletage highlights her sexuality in an anatomically impossible way – her arm has been removed by Rowlandson to allow the viewer to better explore her chest. Her

²³ Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 47.

²⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 28-29.

²⁵ Fuentes, "Troubled Archive," 568, Cummins and Thompson, "The Unnamed Body," 116.

²⁶ Kamala Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labour* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 31.

breasts are almost fully exposed, including the shadow of one areola, and there seems to be a keyhole in the bodice of her dress for better visual access. She is placed definitively far from demure and sexually conservative white Christian womanhood, a forced dichotomy which ultimately makes the Black body a commodity to be consumed.²⁷ The woman in the back has a blank facial expression, an artistic choice which suggests to the viewer that, while she does not care for the man, she also does not care that she will be forced to have sex with him. These racist misrepresentations of enslaved women's sexuality were used to justify sexual violence against them – allowing white men to obsessively project their sexual desires while continuing to demean and dehumanise them.²⁸ Interracial sex was seen as standard in this colonial context because it supposedly gave “social mobility and material security” to women of colour; however, “discussions of Black women, free or enslaved, using white men as an avenue to freedom often erase the reality of coercion, violence and the complicated positions Black women were forced to inhabit in this system of domination.”²⁹ Viewers are meant to laugh at the white planter for his moral transgressions, which are reflected in his ugliness and diseased legs, but they are not meant to sympathise with the woman in the back – continuing to distort her reality.

In the epilogue of *Dispossessed Lives*, Fuentes explains she visited Barbados “naïve and hopeful” with intent to rectify this gap in the archive – but the crushing nature of its colonial past denied her this. She writes, “I was drawn to each of these people by the loss of their histories and my unfulfillable desire to recuperate something about them.”³⁰ It is a sentiment reflected here, as I grapple with the understanding that Rowlandson's print reveals nothing concrete about one of the women it features. In order to rectify the lack of archival historical power as a result of denied personhood and anonymity, Fuentes's methodology includes re-structuring records by “switching the pronouns from ‘I’ (witnessed) to ‘she’ (saw)

²⁷ Ibid., 31.

²⁸ Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 134.

²⁹ Jerome S. Handler, “Joseph Rachell and Rachael Pringle-Polgreen: Petty Entrepreneurs,” in *Struggle and Survival in Colonial America*, ed. David G. Sweet and Gary B. Nash (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 382, Fuentes, “Troubled Archive,” 568.

³⁰ Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 145.

[to] create an epistemological reorientation.”³¹ This process is an important element to reforming historical power, but it does not alleviate narrative silence. Perhaps Cécile Bishop’s lyric address to the sitter in Marie-Guillemine Benoist’s *Portrait of Madeleine* provides an avenue through which we might begin to understand the woman in the back. As Bishop describes, the use of “you” does not suppose an accurate understanding of her life, but it does re-centre the narrative on a woman who has long been a denied first-person voice.³²

You worked in the Royal Naval Hotel – perhaps you were required to complete domestic work to keep the tavern running, but you were regularly forced into sexual labour. Pringle-Polgreen’s brothel was not an empowering space – regardless of whether you consented, she took advantage of the power imbalances inherent to your relationship, and the men who purchased sex with you took advantage of your position and agency.³³ When not at the tavern, you were told to go directly to ships or barracks to meet customers, sometimes barely disguised as a seamstress or sometimes outright about your assignment.³⁴ Once there, you were forced to fulfil any and all expectations of the purchaser, or you would be subject to violence by his hand or Pringle-Polgreen’s – and if someone refused payment, you would be beaten more. The omnipresent sign Rowlandson has placed behind you reinforces “the positionality of enslaved black women as sexually available and consumable.”³⁵ It was in the interest of white women and free women of colour running operations like Pringle-Polgreen’s to maintain and market this perception of your sexuality. You were also at risk for sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy, and the former was encouraged so owners could produce more slaves for free and make extra profit off of your body.³⁶ Fuentes writes, “the men who purchased sex from Polgreen’s enslaved women purchased the illusion of consent” – you

³¹ Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 127.

³² Bishop, “Portraiture,” 8.

³³ Fuentes, “Troubled Archive,” 577.

³⁴ Massiah, “Living with Dignity,” 12.

³⁵ Cummins and Thompson, “The Unnamed Body,” 116.

³⁶ Hilary McD. Beckles, “White Women and Slavery in the Caribben,” *History Workshop*, no. 36 (1993): 72-73.

were sexualised and dehumanised daily, with no concern for your wellbeing.³⁷ To some, you were not a person – but we know differently.

As research develops, we must continue to create methodology which re-centres you and other enslaved women like you. Giving context for Bridgetown, Rachael Pringle-Polgreen, and the warped colonial lens is necessary to understand why and how your history has been silenced, but it can contaminate the focus on your historical power – your facts and archive, and the story told about you. However, in Rowlandson's print, recognising the ways the piece sexualises (e.g. removing arms) and dehumanises (e.g. painting faces as emotionless) enslaved women is the first step; in other words, the more we discern and disentangle the ways the colonial gaze distorts, the clearer the path to creating or re-concentrating power is. While Pringle-Polgreen's face remains on tourist souvenirs in Barbados, this essay has begun the process of re-addressing the position of women enslaved under her in the context of their only known image.

³⁷ Fuentes, "Troubled Archive," 577.

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Images

Figure 1: Thomas Rowlandson after E.D., *Rachel Pringle of Barbadoes*, 1796. Lithograph. Royal Collection Trust



Figure 2: Details of Fig 1

