



The University of  
the West Indies  
Institute for Gender and  
Development Studies



CARIBBEAN REVIEW OF GENDER STUDIES

*A Journal of Caribbean Perspectives on Gender and Feminism*

Issue 7 – 2013

# Women and Gender in Caribbean (English-speaking) Historiography: Sources and Methods

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## Abstract

In 1974, Lucille Mathurin Mair completed her doctoral thesis at the Jamaica campus of the University of the West Indies (UWI). In 2006, it was published for the first time under the title *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica, 1655-1844*; it was the first full-length work on Caribbean women's historical experience. In 1993, Verene Shepherd organized a symposium, also at the Jamaica campus of UWI, out of which emerged the collection of essays, *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective*, published in 1995. These two events symbolized the development, from the early 1970s onwards, of a significant body of work on women and gender in the history of the English-speaking Caribbean; research and publication in the field have grown considerably between the mid-1990s and the present (Mathurin Mair 2006; Shepherd, Brereton and Bailey 1995; Brereton 2002, 129-44).

## Introduction

In keeping with international trends, there has been a movement from the ‘women’s history’ approach to that of ‘gender history’ in this body of work. In the earlier phase, in the Caribbean as elsewhere, the focus was on recovering/retrieving information about women in past societies. The women’s history approach concentrates on women’s special historical experiences and insists on their centrality to the research: from women without a history to women in history, as Jean Stubbs puts it. The gender history approach, of course, tries to analyse significant differences in the historical experiences of men and women in a given society and chronological period; it concentrates on gender roles and ideologies, how they develop and are transformed over time, and how they help to shape historical change. This approach aims not only to ‘put women into history’—though this will always be the foundational spade-work—but also to redefine and reconstruct the historical narratives. In general, the work on the English-speaking Caribbean over the last 40 years has followed this progression from women’s to gender history, but in practice, of course, the two approaches are often combined, whereas, the need for the first approach, the ‘retrieval and recovery’ work, has by no means disappeared (Stubbs 1999, 95-135; Brereton 2002, 129-44).

Both types of historical investigation are embedded in the so-called ‘new’ social history which has dominated the discipline for many decades. Caribbean historiography has leaned more towards social history over the last 30 years, affecting research on virtually all the themes and periods, in particular, those pertaining to the post-Emancipation nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many historians have probed the patterns of social formation in the different colonies, trying to tease out the interrelations between ethnicity, class and gender. The turn to social history has led to a focus on themes such as race relations, the construction of ‘race’ and ethnicity, social stratification, gender ideologies and their repercussions—often in the form of ‘micro’ studies of specific colonies or (at times) specific groups. More recently, one may detect a ‘cultural turn’, a focus on cultural history, studying the material and expressive cultures of past societies. Of course, this emerged out of—and is often indistinguishable from—the ‘new’ social history, and is also closely related to the discipline of ‘cultural studies’. Research into women’s historical experiences and the construction and significance of gender in the past, in the Caribbean as elsewhere, is part and parcel of the broader work on social and cultural history (Brereton 2006, 187-209).

In general, then, women’s and gender history in the English-speaking Caribbean has shared the concerns and forms of social scientific and ‘structural’ historiography. But one important counter-trend has been the continuing interest in writing the life stories of individual women of the region, especially, though not solely, those of significant leaders in public life. Biography as a historical genre, of course, lies at the opposite pole from ‘structural’ and ‘social-scientific’ approaches to the past; but it has always been an important methodology for women’s history, and is often more accessible to a non-academic readership. We now have well-researched biographies on, or volumes of essays about, such prominent twentieth-century regional women as Una Marson, Amy Ashwood Garvey, Amy Jacques Garvey, Edna Manley and Mary Seacole of Jamaica; Eugenia Charles and Phyllis Shand Allfrey of Dominica; Nita Barrow of Barbados; and Elma Francois, Claudia Jones, Nesta Patrick and Christina Lewis of Trinidad and Tobago—and

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this is by no means a complete list (Autobiographies, memoirs and diaries by Caribbean women will be considered as sources later in this article.) (Jarrett-Macauley 1998; Taylor 2002; Martin 2007; Brown 1975; Manley 2008; Robinson 2005; Higbie 1993; Barriteau and Cobley 2006; Paravisini-Gebert 1996; Blackman 1995; Barriteau and Cobley 2001; Reddock 1988; Boyce Davies 2008; Sherwood 1999; Joseph 2004; Cummings 2009).

This article will focus, not on the theoretical contributions or even the empirical findings of the body of work produced on women's and gender history in the English-speaking Caribbean, but on the sources and methods employed. It will argue that historians have used the full range of sources—and therefore of methods—typical of the 'new' social history. They have not, in my view, 'invented' new methodologies or utilized hitherto unknown sources; but they have asked new questions of those sources, brought different perspectives to bear on them, and extracted insights and information from them in which previous historians had shown little interest. In seeking to illustrate this conclusion, I will consider both those works falling explicitly into the category of women's and gender history and those which are more generally about social history but have much to say on women and gender. Needless to say, the examples chosen will reflect my own interests and my own reading, and will by no means adequately represent the full range of relevant published work which has appeared since the early 1970s.

#### **Archival sources: Official records**

History is an empirical discipline: its findings must be based on primary sources, traces or 'tracks' of past human activities and experiences which have survived to the historian's present. For nearly all studies of the post-Columbian Caribbean, the sources have been mainly written. Whether we like it or not, the document holds a privileged place in the historian's work; the archive largely shapes the scope and success of her investigations. And it has been official records, documents generated by government bodies or persons writing in an official capacity, which have dominated the archive, for the Caribbean as elsewhere. By the eighteenth century, the British and colonial governments had developed fairly efficient record-keeping systems, ensuring the survival and accessibility of a huge amount of official documentation. The sheer abundance, the relative accessibility, and the intrinsic value of all this governmental documentation have ensured the dominance of the official archive as the base for most Caribbean history writing, including social, women's and gender history.

Of course, this presents inevitable problems: the official view; the metropolitan eye; the white, male gaze may dominate the historiography. For all who research women's and gender history—or indeed, social and cultural history more generally—questions of interpretation and standpoint are critical. A conscious effort to decode, deconstruct and read against the grain, to extract usable data about people's real lives and thoughts from the archive, to tease out a subaltern history from perhaps unpromising sources, is always required. As Mathurin Mair wrote in 1974, historians were obliged to revisit the 'conventional sources' in order to open up 'new emphases and new interpretations relating to' the black Jamaican woman, and to decode the real world of enslaved and free women so as, eventually, 'to shift the parameters of traditional historiography' (Mathurin Mair 2006, 234-35).

One category of official documents which has been fruitfully mined in this way, by historians probing women's lives in the English-speaking Caribbean, comprises deeds, land patents, wills, inventories, assessment rolls and levy (tax) records. We can point to examples relating to Jamaica, Barbados and Tobago. Mathurin Mair was able to find the Jamaican Land Patent of 1740 which recorded the government grant of 500 acres to Nanny of the Windward Maroons and her people, establishing the 'historicity' of this famous, legendary personage, the only female National Hero of Jamaica. She used legal inventories in the archives to detail the extent of property ownership by Jamaican free coloured women during slavery, probing how they inherited land, slaves and other property, and how they in turn amassed wealth and bequeathed it to their children; and wills showed how white male Jamaicans disposed of their property among their wives, their legitimate sons and daughters, their non-white mistresses and their illegitimate, mixed-race children. For a later period, Veront Satchell based his detailed study of land transactions between 1866 and 1900 on 12,492 conveyance deeds, allowing him to probe the extent of female participation in Jamaica's land market in this period, and to track changes in that participation as the reviving plantations tried to concentrate land ownership in the hands of fewer people towards the end of the century (Mathurin Mair 2006, 62, 90-97, 152-55, 173-75; Satchell 1990, 3-10, 151-55).

Shifting to Barbados, two recent works have used similar documents to establish property ownership patterns among white and free coloured women during slavery. Pedro Welch considers the Barbados Levy (Tax) Books to be the 'best available source for tracing the fortunes of the coloured people', and he has used them to establish the property holdings of free coloured women, especially during the last decades of slavery, along with other legal documents. For the same period, Cecily Jones used deeds, wills and inventories to examine the extent to which white Barbadian women owned property, including enslaved persons, and actively participated in the property market. She succeeds in showing clearly that they were active participants in the colonial economy, despite the well-known legal restrictions on married women's rights to hold or control property independently of their husbands: single, married and widowed women all carried out property transactions of many different kinds, though widows were especially active. (Welch 2000, 13; Jones 2007, chapters 3 and 5)

In her magisterial study of Tobago, Susan Craig-Jones also utilizes wills to probe how free coloured and free black women inherited property and in turn bequeathed it. But especially impressive is her intensive study of the Tobago Assessment Rolls for 1881/82, which provide detailed information on female ownership of taxable property—the Rolls indicate the sex of the owner. (Overall, 30 per cent of all properties were owned by women, but they owned only 19 per cent of properties assessed at over two pounds and ten shillings, and only 16 percent of those assessed at ten pounds or above). Craig-Jones extracts from this very detailed source valuable data about the role of gender in the acquisition and utilization of land in post-Emancipation Tobago, which was becoming a mainly peasant economy by the 1880s (Craig-Jones 2008, 1, 44-49, 121-31).

Another category of official documents which have always been immensely valuable to demographic and social historians, and of course to those researching women and gender, is the colonial census. In the colonial British Caribbean, governmental censuses began in

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1844 or 1851 and continued to be taken, usually every ten years. Again, Craig-James has subjected the Tobago censuses to immensely detailed analysis, yielding a huge body of data about women's occupational and economic situation between 1844 and 1946. Women were well over half of the waged agricultural labourers in the late nineteenth century (58 percent in 1891 and 59 percent in 1901), but only 13 percent of persons recorded as 'skilled' were women in 1901. The census data show, Craig-James concludes, 'the extraordinary importance of low-waged female labour in Tobago's agrarian production in the century after Emancipation', giving 'major significance to gender as a factor interacting with social class for any meaningful analysis of Tobago society'. In their fine work on Jamaican social history between 1865 and 1920, Brian Moore and Michele Johnson use the censuses and the Registrar-General's Annual Returns to establish the empirical realities with respect to 'legitimate' versus 'illegitimate' births, and legal marriages, in this period (Craig-James 2008, 1, 278; 11, chapter 7, 187-202; Moore and Johnson 2004, chapter 4).

When slavery was formally abolished by Britain in 1834, Special Magistrates were appointed throughout the colonies to oversee the transitional 'Apprenticeship' scheme which succeeded slavery; when it in turn was ended in 1838, most continued in office under the designation Stipendiary Magistrates. These men often wrote very detailed, and very frequent, reports on conditions in their districts, most of which have survived, and in many cases these reports continued into the late 1840s. Their reports are probably the best single source for understanding the situation of ex-slave women after the end of slavery, their contestations with the planters, and their 'withdrawal' from plantation wage labour. The reports were indispensable, for example, to the research on these developments by Swithin Wilmot for Jamaica, and by myself on the British Caribbean generally. Mathurin Mair also used the 'SM' reports to probe the treatment of black Jamaican women during the Apprenticeship, concluding that 'the harassment of the black female became one of the most notable features of the first years of a free society'. For the Windward Islands, both Craig-James (Tobago) and Nicole Phillip (Grenada) used these reports to examine the strategies and actions of the freedwomen during and after the Apprenticeship (1834-38). (Brereton 1999, 77-107, 275-81; Wilmot 1995, 279-95; Mathurin Mair 2006, 307-09; Craig-James 2008, 1, 63-64; Phillip 2010, 42-45, 48-50)

In Jamaica and Barbados, where the Anglican Church was firmly established as the 'official church', the Anglican Vestry in each parish carried out many functions of local government. Their records (Minute Books and other papers), going back to the seventeenth century in some cases, can illuminate aspects of women's lives in the early period of colonization, especially white women. In her study of white Barbadian women, Jones used Vestry Minute Books for two parishes to probe how poor relief was administered to indigent white women. She argues that the Vestries, run by propertied white men, manipulated relief in order to regulate the sexual conduct of poor white women, to discourage them from unions with black men (free or enslaved), in the interest of the white patriarchy. Mathurin Mair also found that Jamaican Vestry Minutes and Proceedings shed light on the administration of poor relief to white women, who were the recipients of most of this relief—non-white (free) women rarely benefited from money grants ('outdoor' relief) nor were they admitted to the parish poor houses. Vestry records from St Michael parish, Barbados, in which Bridgetown is situated, were also a useful

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source for Welch in his examination of free coloured women in pre-emancipation society. (Jones 2007, chapter 1; Mathurin Mair 2006, 140-48; Welch 2000)

For historians in the tradition of the ‘new’ social history, records of law courts, trial transcripts or reports and related documents have provided a lens into people’s actions and beliefs in the past; crime and criminality can open up new insights into social and gender dynamics. David Trotman pioneered this approach for the British Caribbean with his work on post-Emancipation Trinidad; he was especially interested in how both Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian women were victims of crime, and frequently also deemed criminals before the colonial courts, in the second half of the nineteenth century. One historian who followed up this approach, applied to Jamaica both before and after Emancipation, is Jonathan Dalby, who utilized Jamaican Assize Court records as his main source. He considered patterns in the prosecution of sexual offences, and of domestic violence murders and assaults, especially in post-Emancipation Jamaica—clearly highly relevant to any analysis of gender norms in the society. For an earlier period, Mathurin Mair mined the records of the parish Slave Courts in the 1820s and 1830s, and the Kingston Court of Quarter Sessions between 1787 and 1812, for evidence of court-ordered punishments of enslaved women in Jamaica. And Verene Shepherd has used the evidence given to a special Commission of Inquiry, held in Guyana at the end of 1885 to probe the death of a young female Indian immigrant on board ship, apparently as a result of rape by crewmen, to consider the whole issue of Indian immigrant women’s exploitation in the nineteenth-century indenture system. Very usefully, she has reproduced most of this evidence as appendices to her book (Trotman 1984, 60-72; Trotman 1986; Dalby 2008, 2011, 2000; Mathurin Mair 2006, 223-25, 237-39; Shepherd 2002, appendices, 83-153).

Of course, there are several other categories of official or governmental records which have been fruitfully mined by many historians of women and gender in the Caribbean: Colonial Office correspondence, especially between the governors and the Secretary of State; reports from official commissions; official publications like the colonial Blue Books and Handbooks; papers and minutes of the colonial legislatures; laws; British Parliamentary Papers. But I hope I have done enough to show that the ‘conventional’ sources, the official records in the archives, can yield exciting insights and detailed empirical information about the lives of women in the past and the operation of gender. It is unlikely that the official records will be supplanted as the single most important category of primary sources for the history of the colonial Caribbean. But, as Mathurin Mair wrote so long ago, what matters is the determination of the historian to ask the right questions of the documents and read them against the grain.

#### **Archival sources: Unofficial records**

Undoubtedly, official or governmental records constitute the mainstream of primary sources for historians of the English-speaking Caribbean, because of their abundance, their relative accessibility, and their immense evidential value. But there are many types of written sources generated by non-official bodies, and of course by private individuals, which are of great value to historians, and have been frequently and fruitfully used by historians of women and gender in the region.

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Newspapers are clearly one of the most important types of unofficial written sources—excluding here the government Gazettes which were not true newspapers but organs for governmental notices and other publications. The British Caribbean colonies possessed a lively and extensive newspaper press, beginning in the eighteenth century, but especially dynamic in the post-Emancipation period into the twentieth century. Articles, editorials, letters to the editor, advertisements of all kinds, serialized novels, short stories, poetry, and birth, marriage and death notices—these are only some of the material to be found in the colonial newspapers. They have proved to be tremendously valuable for historians of women and gender, especially but not only in the post-Emancipation period.

Moore and Johnson have edited two compilations of articles from the two leading Jamaican newspapers of the day which provide vivid and detailed descriptions of social and economic conditions in the colony as a whole in 1890, and in ‘squalid Kingston’ between 1890 and 1920. They are an excellent illustration of the value of newspaper sources, and naturally include considerable material on women’s lives. But it is their magisterial two-volume study of Jamaican society and culture between 1865 and 1920 which really proves how indispensable this source is for social and cultural historians of all kinds, including those mainly interested in women and gender. To focus on one or two examples out of many, Moore and Johnson describe the lively debate in the *Daily Gleaner* (Jamaica’s oldest paper, still going strong) on gender, proper wifeness, the ‘new woman’, marriage and female independence, which took place in 1904; and more generally, they use the newspapers to show how the ‘Victorian gender ideology’ was imposed on Jamaica through newspaper letters, articles and reports of speeches. Reports in the papers on court cases involving domestic violence and female misbehaviour like drunkenness, articles and letters describing how people of different classes celebrated births, deaths and marriages, newspaper coverage of Indo-Jamaican culture and life—all this and more, highly relevant to understanding women’s historical experiences in Jamaica—illustrate the value of this type of source material (Moore and Johnson 2000a and 2000b; Moore and Johnson 2004, 108-13, 137-40, 159-60; Moore and Johnson 2011, 57-61, 320-22, 375-81).

For the period of slavery, newspapers provide a wealth of material on the lives of enslaved women. Advertisements for runaway slaves have long been recognized as an important source, and Mathurin Mair was able to examine a series from 1791 to 1829 to probe to what extent women ran away, what kinds of women, why, and where they were hoping to go. Hilary Beckles and Barbara Bush also used this source for their studies of women in slave society. Though Tobago’s newspaper press was not substantial, Craig-James finds some useful data in the *Tobago News*, which struggled to survive in the last decades of the nineteenth century, about middle-class women’s occupations, including running guest houses. They were the pioneers of the island’s hospitality industry, she concludes. Melanie Newton studied early nineteenth-century Barbadian newspapers to show how philanthropy and charitable organizations were gendered, and how they contributed to constructing ‘proper’ gender ideologies in that island before and after Emancipation. For St Vincent, Sheena Boa has probed contesting views of culture and gender in Kingstown, in the post-Emancipation decades, using that island’s newspapers (Mathurin Mair 2006, 246-49; Beckles 1989; Bush 1990; Craig-James 2008, 1, 275-77; Newton 2005, 225-46; Boa 2005, 247-66).

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The records of the Christian churches which were active in the colonial Caribbean, especially from the late eighteenth century, have been very thoroughly mined by many historians, in particular for the closing decades of slavery and the post-Emancipation nineteenth century. Missionaries and clergymen of all stripes wrote copiously—to each other, to their superiors and the parent bodies in Britain, to their relatives at home—and much has survived in various public and church archives, mostly in Britain. Moreover, they were often close to ‘their people’ and were capable of shrewd observations, even if these were always coloured by ethnocentric and religious biases and prejudices. Mathurin Mair used these sources extensively; for instance, the records, correspondence and published narratives of the Wesleyan (Methodist) Mission shed light on the roles of free coloured women in the Jamaican congregations of this denomination. They were often lay leaders and significant supporters of the clergymen; but the latter were warned to beware of the temptations they represented, and legal unions between a white minister and even a ‘respectable’ mixed-race woman were frowned on. The London Missionary Society records for Jamaica in the 1830s also yielded valuable data about the clergy’s ideas on gender, the role of the missionary wives and teachers, and attitudes to Afro-Jamaicans’ practices relating to sex and marriage. (Mathurin Mair 2006, 287-90, 298-303)

Moore and Johnson used a very wide range of church records for their study of Jamaican social and cultural history after the 1860s: they examined those of the Anglicans, Methodists, Moravians, Baptists, Quakers or Friends, Roman Catholics (the Jesuit mission), Presbyterians, Church of Scotland and Congregationals. Evidence from this immensely rich collection on women’s lives and on the operation of gender ideologies is to be found all through their two-volume work, especially in their chapter on ‘Christianizing Jamaica’. Women were the majority of the church-going population in colonial Jamaica, and the special target both of evangelism, and of the wider moral mission to make them into decent, respectable, God-fearing wives and mothers. Taking a somewhat different line, Mimi Sheller used the reports of meetings, correspondence and petitions from the records of the Baptist and Methodist Missions to probe the construction of subaltern masculinities in post-Emancipation Jamaica (Moore and Johnson 2004, chapter 6, 167-204; Sheller 2005, 79-98).

Contemporary publications, including travel books, novels, ethnographic descriptions and general works about the islands, have always been recognized as valuable primary sources for social historians. Jamaica is especially rich in this regard, especially for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and these sources are often full of insights into gender dynamics and the lives of women, notwithstanding the inevitable Eurocentric and (usually) male biases. Moore and Johnson make full use of this type of source in their social history of Jamaica between 1865 and 1920. One of the publications they cite frequently is *Black Roadways*, the pioneering ethnographic study of Afro-Jamaicans by the American anthropologist Martha Beckwith, published in 1929—a rare (at that time) academic text by a woman. Other female-authored books, which are especially rich in data about Caribbean women, include Mrs A. C. Carmichael’s text on her experiences as a planter’s wife in St Vincent and Trinidad in the 1820s, and Frances Lanaghan’s interesting study of Antigua society just after the end of slavery (Moore and Johnson 2004 and 2011; Brereton 1995, 63-93).

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One of the most important categories of sources for the history of Caribbean slavery comprises plantation papers, correspondence and accounts. Because so many plantation owners lived in Britain, their agents in the colonies wrote frequent reports about their properties, often including detailed accounts, inventories of assets including enslaved labourers, and similar information. In many cases these documents have survived and are now in various public and private archives in Britain. They yield rich data about enslaved women's lives and work. Mathurin Mair was the first to use these documents specifically to extract material about the enslaved women and the gender dynamics on the Jamaican plantations. It was on the basis of plantation papers that she established that women outnumbered men in the field gangs of Jamaica's sugar estates at least by the 1790s, for instance, and that female slaves endured chronic ill health under the punishing regime of gang labour. To take another example, the Holland House Papers, dealing with the several Jamaican estates owned by the aristocratic family of Lord Holland, were used by Mathurin Mair to probe the behaviour of women during the Apprenticeship scheme between 1834 and 1838. Phillip's study of enslaved women in Grenada utilized plantation papers, and she is unusual in also finding some estate records of the 1950s to 1970s as a source for examining the working lives of Grenadian women field labourers in this period (Mathurin Mair 2006, 198-210, 210-23, 306-07; Phillip 2010, 18-43, 83-87).

In writing women's history, researchers have been especially keen to find personal documents written by women—autobiographies, memoirs, diaries and journals, and family correspondence. Such sources have been central to the reconstruction of women's lives in the past. They are not abundant in the English-speaking Caribbean, certainly not for any period before the mid-twentieth century, but those that do survive are immensely valuable for providing what I have called 'gendered testimony': insights into aspects of female lives which are not generally written about by men, or in the official record. The autobiographical writings of Mary Prince and Mary Seacole have become well known, and so has the diary of Maria Nugent, the wife of the governor of Jamaica in the early 1800s. There are other such works, including unpublished collections of family letters by women, which have been used to provide this kind of testimony on the private and usually hidden aspects of female life, in different social and ethnic groups—though the majority of these letters, memoirs and diaries were, inevitably, written by upper-class, usually white women, or educated mixed-race persons like Seacole. Prince is the exception; her short memoir is the only account we know of written (actually dictated) by a former enslaved woman from the English-speaking Caribbean (Brereton 1998, 143-62).

Mathurin Mair was able to use some of these female-authored personal documents in her pioneering study of women in Jamaican slave society. Family letters by white Jamaican women, both Creole and British, allowed her to reconstruct the lives of upper class females during this period. For instance, a series of letters from an elite woman to her daughter in England, published in 1938 as *Letters to Jane from Jamaica, 1788-1796*, proved to be a valuable source, along with other similar but unpublished collections of letters by women. Family papers, containing letters by men and women, such as the Ricketts Family Papers, shed much light on the gender dynamics of plantation households; and diaries and letters of men were used to illustrate family relationships, conjugal affection, and attitudes to girls and women in this sector of Jamaican society. The diary of J. H. Archer, an early nineteenth-century pimento planter and country

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doctor, yielded interesting information about his mother's life as an active farmer and estate manager, who sometimes clashed with her son on slave management issues, including how to punish troublesome female slaves. And naturally Mathurin Mair frequently turned to the Nugent diary for insights into the private and domestic lives of white Creole women, including pregnancy and childbirth; Nugent herself provided a lively and much-quoted description of her first 'Creole confinement'. (Mathurin Mair 2006, 101-05, 117-19, 127-34, 167-69)

A unique type of personal document, heavily used by Moore and Johnson, is the collection of 312 essays written by Jamaicans from widely different social and ethnic groups. Known as *Jamaican Memories* and housed in the country's National Archives, these were submitted to the *Daily Gleaner*, in 1959. Contributors were asked to write on their memories of life 50 years ago. The essays provide rich data on gender and women's lives at the start of the last century (and, of course, on much else); they are comparable in many ways to transcripts of oral history interviews, except that the authors were all literate men and women (Moore and Johnson 2004 and 2011).

### **Oral history and oral traditions**

The most important non-written sources for historians of women and gender in the English-speaking Caribbean have been oral history, and to a lesser extent, oral traditions. (The former refers to interviewing individuals about their personal recollections of the past; the latter to communally held knowledge, handed down orally over at least three generations.) While these historians certainly did not 'invent' the oral history methodology, nor are they by any means the only ones to use it, the oral record has always been especially important to those researching women's lives in the past. The reason is simple: until recently, in virtually all societies, far fewer women than men were literate, so that documents written by them have always been much rarer. Women spoke far more than they wrote. Moreover, the official archive, generated overwhelmingly by men holding positions of authority, usually has little to say about most aspects of women's lives in the past, especially those relating to family life, childbearing and raising, domestic work, and so on. The oral record can capture data on those aspects, and much else. Of course, there is a major limitation: oral history can only be employed when the period being studied is within the living memories of individuals now alive (or alive when the interview was carried out). We cannot interview enslaved women; the last women to come as adults from India as indentured immigrants have gone.

Many Caribbean historians have eloquently written, or spoken, about the need for oral sources to illuminate women's lives in the past. In a 1989 public lecture, Blanca Silvestrini pointed out that women were often ignored in the archival sources and their voices could rarely be heard in the documents. She urged us to utilize the oral history method, not merely to supplement other sources, or to obtain information, but so that the voices and the life histories could help shape the historian's discourse and interpretation. Her own work in interviewing women involved in Puerto Rico's famous needlework industry in the middle decades of the last century was offered as an example. In an important article published in 1995, Mary Chamberlain discussed some of the issues in the use of oral evidence in gender history. She suggested that women's spoken testimony and narratives of their lives may follow distinctly different patterns from those by men,

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patterns the historian must recognize and respect even if they seem at times ‘illogical’ or preoccupied with ‘trivialities’ such as feelings, affections or appearances. Chamberlain has followed up these insights with a body of important work based largely on oral history interviews of Barbadians living in Britain and at home (Brereton 2002, 131; Chamberlain 1995, 94-110).

Craig-James is among the many Caribbean social historians who have made the oral history method integral to their work. For her study of Tobago society, she conducted 96 interviews with elderly Tobagonians about their memories of the period 1890 to 1950. As she points out, ‘the basic problem with most of the written documents is not simply that they cannot answer the questions we ask, but that the majority of the population were excluded from having a direct input into their creation’, a statement even more true for women than for men. Much of the ‘significant information on the texture of social and cultural life in Tobago survives only in the oral record’, she concludes. Her oral history interviews are rich sources used throughout her two-volume study. Rhoda Reddock, in her pioneering study of women in twentieth-century Trinidad and Tobago, made considerable use of the oral history method. A younger historian who has studied the lives of Indo-Trinidadian women in the first half of the twentieth century, Shaheeda Hosein, makes much the same point as Craig-James when she notes that the rural women she studies appear ‘only as statistics’ in the official written records. Their ‘lived reality remained invisible within the discourse of traditional historiography’. Oral narratives were crucial to gain a rounded picture of the rural Indo-Trinidadian women, secured through conversations with persons who were 80 or older when interviewed in 1997–98, and who ‘came of age’ in the 1920s. ‘Through the use of oral narratives I was able to analyse the historical experiences of the women through their eyes and in their sphere: the private domain’, she writes, to show their real lives, previously either taken for granted, or seen as ‘not the stuff of which history is made’ (Craig-James 2008, 1, 20-22; Reddock 1994; Hosein 2011, 101-02).

Erna Brodber, the Jamaican novelist and historian, has brilliantly illustrated the value of oral interviews for illuminating social and cultural history, and revealing the multi-faceted operations of gender systems in the past. For her 1985 doctoral study on what she called the ‘second generation’ of free men and women in Jamaica, she conducted 90 interviews of men and women born between 1890 and 1910. The original transcripts are lodged with UWI’s Mona (Jamaica) campus, and have been used by historians such as Moore and Johnson. In 2003, Brodber published 24 ‘self-portraits’ of Jamaican men; she chose 24 interviews with men from her 90 accounts and published edited transcripts of them. Much was revealed in these accounts about Jamaican ideas of masculinity, fatherhood and gender in the first half of the last century. In 2004, she published a revised version of the doctoral thesis, based, as noted, mainly on the 90 oral history interviews. A more recent study of the small village where Brodber lives combines archival research with 17 oral history interviews with individuals as well as some group interviews. Her lead has been followed by Craig-James, who, it has been already noted, conducted 96 interviews with Tobagonians about their lives in the early twentieth century. While these interviews enrich the entire work, she devotes a whole long chapter to oral testimonies about peasant agriculture and trading in the first half of the last century. Most of these came from women, and they illustrate female roles in traditional Tobago peasant farming

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and the operation of gender in this vanished agrarian world. From these testimonies, Craig-James concludes ‘there was a clear sexual division of labour in virtually every sphere of activity’. Some of the testimonies describe the unique Tobago system of barter, called ‘exchange’, which was dominated by the women who did most of this traditional cash-less trade between villages and districts, as well as trafficking in agricultural produce and livestock between Tobago and Trinidad (Brodbber 2003 and 2004a and 2004b; Craig-James 2008, 11, chapter 2, 37-72).

The oral history method has been used extensively to research the life of indentured Indo-Caribbean women and their descendants in the post-indenture era. Since indentured immigration only ended in 1917, until fairly recently it has been possible to interview surviving immigrants and their children, the first post-immigration generation. The leader here has been Patricia Mohammed, whose fine book *Gender Negotiations among Indians in Trinidad, 1917-1947* combines archival and newspaper research with over 60 interviews with Indo-Trinidadian men and women, mostly carried out in the early 1990s for her doctoral thesis. (The original transcripts are in UWI’s St Augustine, Trinidad, campus library). Mohammed’s work has revealed the value of the oral history method, as well as making important theoretical contributions to gender history in the Caribbean. Younger historians researching Indo-Trinidadian women’s history have followed Mohammed’s lead. Sherry-Ann Singh, using oral sources, has shown how the *Ramayana* cycle of stories, and the folk theatre based on it, helped to shape the Hindu Trinidadian view of gender roles, especially ‘proper’ relations between husband (Rama) and wife (Sita). Halima Kassim, in her study of marriage and dowry in the Trinidadian Indian Muslim community, leaned heavily on oral history interviews, especially with women, and included ‘conversational narratives’ derived from them in her analysis. We’ve already noted that Hosein found oral interviews to be the most important source for her study of rural Indo-Trinidadian women involved in peasant agriculture and marketing in the early twentieth century. Based mainly on these interviews, her findings countered the traditional view that these women were largely subservient, passive and dependent. Rather, they revealed women who earned their own livelihoods, and often supported whole families, owned land in their own right, and in general exercised considerable independence in their economic, domestic and personal lives (Mohammed 2002; Singh 2011, 21-51; Kassim 2011, 52-97; Hosein 2011, 101-20).

Capturing oral traditions—as opposed to oral history interviews—to research Caribbean women’s lives in the past has been more difficult, in practical terms. But two recent works by the anthropologist Jean Besson and the historical linguist Maureen Warner-Lewis tap into Caribbean oral traditions. Besson’s book on the ‘two histories’ of Martha Brae, a village in Jamaica, consolidates and extends her many previously published articles on this area and on the evolution of the ‘family land’ system. ‘Although oral tradition cannot be assumed to be an entirely accurate account of past events’, writes Besson, ‘combined with historical and anthropological research it can illuminate the past’. She taps into the oral traditions of several of Martha Brae’s ‘Old Families’; as one of their members told her, ‘most of the history of the black people don’t come in big log-book. They keep it themselves and grandparents told their children and grandchildren’. Her oral sources yielded rich material on gender within the family land system and on the lives of Jamaican peasant women (Besson 2002, chapter 5, quotations 159, 172).

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In her ambitious study of ‘Central Africa in the Caribbean’, Warner-Lewis utilizes ‘oral records’ of the descendants of enslaved or indentured Central Africans brought to the Caribbean: folktales, proverbs, songs, language and rituals, captured in Trinidad, Tobago, Jamaica and Guyana. Much of her data retrieved from oral traditions and testimonies illuminate the social, cultural and gender history of African-Caribbean people after slavery ended, and after Africans ceased to arrive in the region. Craig-James also taps into the rich oral traditions of Tobago people, overwhelmingly descended from enslaved Africans. In particular, she heard several very old folk songs, nearly all sung to her by women, who had long lost the context and significance of their words. Her research into the documentary record allowed her to ‘explain’ the meaning and historical context of some of these songs to the women who had learnt them from older relatives. Several of these songs, which are presented in Craig-James’ text, deal with marriage, courtship, and ‘proper’ behaviour of girls and women (Warner-Lewis 2003; Brereton 2006, 196-97; Craig-James 2008, 1, 20-21, 66-67, 214-15, 282).

### **Other non-written sources**

Visual sources—paintings and drawings, photographs, tombstones and statues, video and film—have long been recognized as valuable, especially for social history. Some historians have utilized them to probe gender history in the Caribbean, especially as they illustrate modes of dress and body and hair ornamentation. A useful article published by Glory Robertson in 1995 points to the importance of pictorial sources for nineteenth-century women’s history in Jamaica; dress, she wrote, was ‘a mirror of attitudes to women’. Her article includes several very revealing photographs of Jamaican women of different social and ethnic groups and probes what they tell us about changes in gender roles and social expectations of ladies and ‘other’ women. This lead was taken up by S. O. Buckridge, whose full-length study of ‘the language of dress’ in Jamaica between 1750 and 1890 depends heavily on photographs, paintings, drawings and postcards of women during that period. He sees the choices Jamaican women made about dress, and hair and body ornamentation, as revealing of their choices between ‘resistance’ (rejecting European modes) and ‘accommodation’ (accepting them). While this may be too rigid a dichotomy, his book certainly points to the value of pictorial sources for gender history (Robertson 1995, 111-22; Buckridge 2004, *passim* but specially 135-64).

Both Moore and Johnson, and Craig-James, respectively, in their fine studies of the social history of Jamaica and Tobago, enriched their work with many fascinating illustrations. In each of her two volumes, Craig-James has many wonderful paintings and photographs of Tobago worthies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including many of her oral informants. Moore and Johnson also include many illustrations, often showing women of different social classes and engaged in different (or no) occupations. Especially fine are the colour plates of Jamaican women painted around 1905 and reproduced from a book published in that year. Many of these illustrations, in both works, can be ‘read’ like a written document to reveal intricacies of class and gender operations. (Craig-James 2008, *passim*; Moore and Johnson 2004, plates between 156-57 and *passim*; Moore and Johnson 2011, 49, 52, 62, 66, 217, 286).

In a recent article, the anthropologist Kenneth Bilby has suggested that when we study Caribbean cultural history, we should ‘move beyond one-sided modes of historiography

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that depend exclusively on written forms of documentation’; we might use ‘contemporary ethnography to overcome the limitations of written sources’ and thus grasp otherwise inaccessible dimensions of traditional cultural forms (like Junkanu, the subject of his article). By using ‘ethnographic methods’, he believes he was able to grasp the spiritual foundations of what has become an ostensibly secular performance—something he could not have done if he had relied only on ‘historical documents written by uncomprehending European observers’ in the past (Bilby 2010, 180, 216-17).

The work by Besson, noted earlier, certainly succeeds in integrating anthropological or ethnographic approaches with those of history. She combines conventional archival research with oral history and oral traditions and her own painstaking, ‘insider’ ethnography conducted over many decades. Using all these sources and methods she is able to tell the ‘two stories’ of Martha Brae: the story of the plantation town founded in the eighteenth century, which is well documented in the colonial archive, and the story of the post-Emancipation peasant village, which is not. Also with regard to Jamaica, Diane Austin-Broos bases a book on Pentecostalism in that island on oral history testimonies, newspapers, anthropological fieldwork and participant observation, which she describes as ‘ethnographic historical writing’. Her work presents a considerable amount of historical data on the Jamaican indigenous religious tradition from about 1860, and the place of Pentecostalism in that tradition after its introduction from the United States in the early 1900s. Since the great majority of the adherents to Pentecostalism in Jamaica were and are women, her study sheds much light on the intricate connections between gender and religion in Jamaica, and on the role played by these churches in Jamaican women’s lives. The work by Warner-Lewis already mentioned combines the methods and approaches of anthropology or ethnography, history, and historical linguistics. (Besson 2002; Austin-Broos 1997, chapters 1 to 5; Warner-Lewis 2003)

A recent book on Jamaica by Diana Fox, an anthropologist, seeks to reveal how gender lies at the root of ‘everyday life’ there, how it is the ‘cultural DNA’ of Jamaicans’ lived reality. In her efforts to understand the cultural history of her chosen fieldwork location (Frankfield in Clarendon), Fox seeks ‘stories’ about its history, collected from ‘folktales’, the archives, and ‘cultural memory’ (such as stories about Nanny, the Maroon leader). She believes that both oral traditions and ethnographic studies can help to write gender into history. Moreover, in her otherwise academic text, she includes ‘personal narratives’ from her informants. One of the writing strategies and methodological tools of the new ‘feminist ethnography’, she points out, is to present the stories of ‘ordinary’ people in their own words, showing how they negotiate gender, revealing the ‘lived experiences’ of gender. This collaborative process between researcher and researched, so salient in more recent ethnographical work, is usually impossible for the historian; but something like it can be achieved through using oral traditions, oral history interviews and ethnographic fieldwork to illuminate the cultural history of gender in a specific locality (Fox 2010, 1-13, 60-82, 123-37).

### **Conclusion**

As Fox makes clear, more recent anthropology/ethnography has developed distinctive methods or approaches, influenced by feminism and post-colonial guilt about the close links between traditional anthropology and the imperial enterprise. The feminist

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ethnographer is concerned about self-reflexivity and the researcher's 'positionality'. She accepts that all scholarly findings are subjective; she searches for 'empathetic understanding' of her subjects; she aims at participatory and collaborative research with those she is researching. She employs writing strategies like personal narratives and life histories, she embraces multivocality, and she aims at a multi-authored text (ethnographer and research subjects). And these approaches and strategies have been widely adopted by feminist social scientists in general, I believe (Fox 2010, 1-26).

However, the case of the historian is different. Her major sources will always be mainly written and archival. Oral history cannot be used to study periods beyond living memory, and oral traditions are of limited use for most historians, and most fields of investigation. Ethnographic studies can be very useful but will rarely become a major source for historical research. Above all, most historians study people who are no longer alive, and this simple fact makes it difficult to adopt the approaches and strategies outlined briefly in the last paragraph. This of course helps to explain the attraction of the oral history method: it does allow the historian direct, unmediated contact with her subjects, and it does open the possibility of a 'multi-authored' text. But, to repeat: many, perhaps most, historians study periods too remote in time to make oral history feasible. 'Empathetic understanding' with the people she studies is, or should be, a given for all historians, and can hardly be seen as a specially gendered or feminist approach.

In my view, historians of women and gender, in the English-speaking Caribbean as elsewhere, have not developed any unique or special methodologies, nor have they 'discovered' any previously unused sources. Instead, they have utilized the full range of methods and sources typical of social and cultural history as it has developed over the last 50 years. They are particularly drawn to the oral history method, but they are hardly unique in this. What they have done is to ask new questions of the sources, read them consistently against the grain and with critical (feminist) eyes, chosen new areas for investigation, and insisted on different perspectives. In these ways they have changed Caribbean historiography and will continue to do so.

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