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The Price You Pay

Choosing Family, Friends, and Familiarity over Freedom in the Leeward Islands, 1835–1863

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Abstract

Planters and colonial officials throughout the Caribbean feared the consequences of emancipation in the nineteenth century, especially after the British abolished slavery in 1834. Concerns were particularly strong among the planters and colonial officials of the Dutch Leeward islands of St. Maarten, Saba, and St. Eustatius, as their geographical location left them vulnerable to the decisions of neighboring imperial powers. As early as 1825, when British law prohibited the extradition of foreign runaway slaves from their colonies, freedom was just a short boat ride away for the enslaved population of the Dutch islands, leading to worries that their islands would quickly become depopulated of their laborers. These fears were ultimately unfounded, however. As this article shows, the majority of slaves of the Dutch Leeward islands chose to either stay home or, after sojourning in another place, decided to return to their homes.

Keywords

slavery – emancipation – migration – Saba – St. Eustatius – St. Maarten – St. Kitts – Leewards

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Introduction

In 1832, nineteen planters from St. Eustatius (also known as Statia) sent a petition to the king of the Netherlands decrying "the wily measures and deluding schemes of visionary enthusiasts and designing men of other nations," as the planters so contemptuously termed British abolitionists.[1] These "wily measures and deluding schemes" meant that the enslaved population of the neighboring Dutch (and French, Danish, and Swedish) islands could—and did—flee to nearby British islands, secure in the knowledge that British government officials would respond as C.W. Maxwell—Captain General and Governor-in-Chief of St. Kitts, Nevis and Anguilla—had to Lt. Governor of St. Eustatius Spengler some years earlier in a case involving runaway slaves between the two colonies. Spengler wrote to his British counterpart on the 2nd of September 1825 that "Mr. Engle Heyliger [a prominent local slave owner] … having exhibited to me a letter from St. Kitts in which he is informed that a negro man named Jacob, [and his other] runaway slaves Jack and College should give the necessary orders for delivering said runaways up."[2] Only a day later, on the 3rd of September, a response time that emphasizes the proximity and close connections between the islands, Maxwell replied that "I have been instructed by the Minister for the colonies that persons arriving in any of His Majesty's colonies from any foreign island or place where they were lawfully held in slavery are not to be sent back thither as slaves, or to be dealt with as slaves."[3]

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1 Parts of this article have appeared previously in Jessica Vance Roitman, "Land of hope and dreams: slavery and abolition in the Dutch Leeward Islands, 1825–1865," *Slavery & Abolition* 37 no. 2 (June 2016): 375–399. Archivo Nashonal, Nationaal Archief Curaçao (hereafter AN NAC) 288, Apr. 1832.

2 Nationaal Archief Nederland (hereafter NL-HaNA), Ministerie van Koloniën, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 4313/114, 2 Sept. 1825.

3 NL-HaNA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 4313/114, 3 Sept. 1825. This sort of situation would continue to be an issue. For example, it was discussed in the British Parliament in 1834 in response to a request by the Government of Denmark to return escaped slaves. It was explicitly stated that, "It would be necessary that a change should be made in the existing Laws of this Country, because the Executive Government of England has not, at present, any power to deliver up a slave in any English Colony, in order that such slave may be conveyed away from that Colony and restored to his former Master … but when the Measure of Emancipation now actually in progress shall have been carried into full effect, there will, with respect to slavery, be no difference between these Colonies and the Mother country. It would, therefore, be as fruitless to propose to Parliament a delivering up of slaves in the Colonies as in Great Britain." Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons and Command, 1835, Vol. 511, 10 May 1834.

Although slavery was not abolished in the British colonies until 1834 (and, in reality for many of those enslaved, it continued until at least 1838 through so-called "apprenticeship" schemes), according to the "Act to amend and consolidate the Laws relating to the Abolition of the Slave Trade," which went into effect in 1825, it was against the law to return escaped slaves who arrived on British territory to their owners, and it was the passing of this act that the slave owners from Statia referred to in their petition.[4] The 1825 act viewed returning slaves to their owners in other places as tantamount to importing or exporting slaves, which was outlawed. Making specific reference to their geographical situation, the nineteen Statian slave owners further stated that, "The government of Great Britain has adopted a line of policy such as must eventually … destroy not only their colonies in the West Indies, but also of other powers in the immediate neighborhoods of them."[5]

Although British and, later, French, Swedish, and Danish abolition and emancipation had a massive and undeniable effect on the Dutch islands, this article shows that Dutch planters' and officials' concerns that one of these effects would be a depopulation of their islands proved to be baseless. To take but one example, a number of slaves fled to the French side of St. Maarten in 1852 but came back to the Dutch side of their own accord the following year.[6] Why would they choose to return to slavery? This article suggests that these, and many thousands of other enslaved people in the Dutch Leeward islands, chose to either stay enslaved or else return to lives of slavery for several reasons. Economics definitely played a role. There were very clear push and pull factors for choosing to leave or stay on the Dutch islands, depending largely on the economies of the nearby islands. But economics was not the only factor at play. Enslaved people chose to stay where they were because of the way in which slavery functioned on the Dutch islands, particularly St. Maarten after 1848, where slavery was *de facto* abolished. Lastly, enslaved people on the Dutch islands often chose the certainty of a life they knew and the familiarity of their friends and families over a life of insecurity and hardship—hardship possibly equal to or greater than that which they knew on the Dutch islands—as free laborers in other territories, especially Trinidad and Guyana. These decisions were made within the context of interconnected transimperial social and eco-

4 Acts of the British Parliament, Slave Trade Act 1824, 1824 Chapter 113 5 Geo 4 (24 June 1824).

5 AN NAC 288, Apr. 1832. It is interesting that the earliest of these antislavery "free soil" practices in the Caribbean seems to have been the Haitian. See Ada Ferrer, "Haiti, Free Soil, and Antislavery in the Revolutionary Atlantic," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 1 (Feb. 2012): 40–66.

6 *Tweede Rapport der Staatscommissie benoemd bij koninklijk besluit van 29 november 1853*, 306.

nomic networks that linked not only the Leeward islands but, increasingly, the Guyanas and the Windward islands. Furthermore, it was in this period that a shift from the (petit) marronage of enslaved people to the seasonal migration of a free labor force began.

From Slavery ...

M.D. Teenstra, who visited the Dutch Leeward islands in the 1830s, remarked that after British rule prosperity began to return around 1818, as local homeowners started to improve and beautify their houses.[7] This is not an improvement that the enslaved population of the islands would necessarily have benefited from. As Teenstra went on to note, the common slave lived in "a miserable hut, with walls made of twigs, smeared with mud, and roofs covered with leaves of sugarcane."[8] These dwellings were occupied by family units and were usually grouped in small settlements on the generally modest plantations—modest at least in comparison with the size of estates in other plantation colonies. For example, a sugar plantation in Suriname produced an annual average of 158,058 kg around 1836, and 187,566 kg around 1853. In comparison, the average annual sugar production of the eighteen largest plantations on St. Maarten taken together was 155,981 kg.[9] Although officially recognized marriages between enslaved men and women during this period were rare, families were certainly formed and maintained, as is evidenced by Teenstra's description of the huts in which enslaved families lived together.[10] Marriage between enslaved people was apparently "not a rare occurrence" and was encouraged by the Methodist (Wesleyan) Church. The children of these marriages were baptized and their paternity was recognized by both their owners and colonial officials.[11]

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7 The Dutch Leeward islands were in English hands from 1801–1802 and again from 1810–1816 as a consequence of the Napoleonic Wars. The Dutch islands were returned to the Netherlands. M.D. Teenstra, *De Nederlandsche West-Indische eilanden in derzelve tegenwoordige toestand* (Amsterdam: Sulpke, 1836–1837), 2 vols. Repr. Amsterdam: Emmering, 1977, vol. 2, 285. All translations from the Dutch have been made by the author.

8 M.D. Teenstra, *De Nederlandsche West-Indische eilanden*, vol. 2, 295.

9 Calculations for St. Maarten based on A.F. Paula, '*Vrije*' *Slaven*, 37–38. Calculations for Suriname from Alex van Stipriaan, "Suriname and the Abolition of Slavery," in Gert Oostindie, ed., *Fifty Years Later: Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity in the Dutch Orbit* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 117–142, 117 fn 3.

10 M.D. Teenstra, *De Nederlandsche West-Indische eilanden*, vol. 2, 295.

11 AN NAC 3757, Brieven van de gezaghebber van St. Maarten, 21 Apr. 1855.

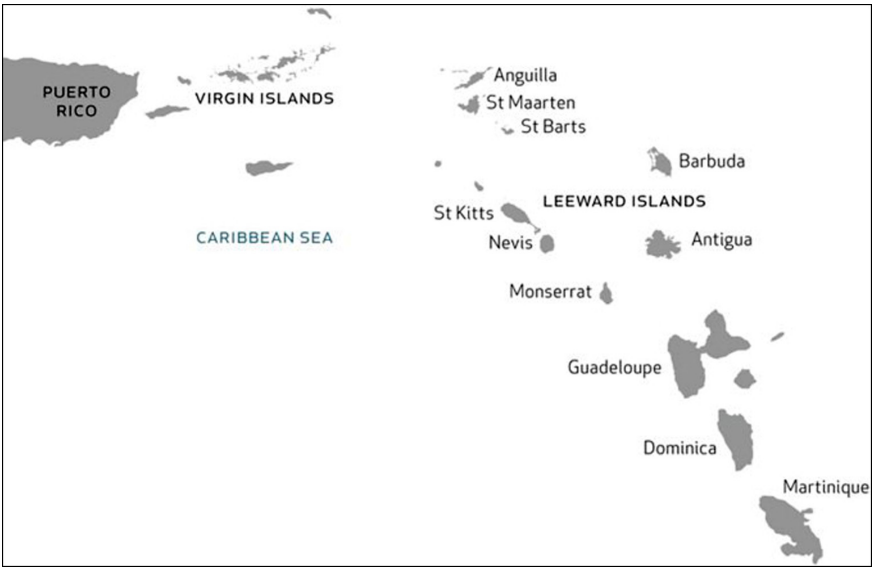

FIGURE 1 *Leeward islands*

Columbus first sighted the Leeward Islands in 1493, but settlement began only after the British arrived in the seventeenth century. Though the various islands changed hands frequently through the centuries, their dry climate caused their sugar production to remain relatively small. Thus, their economic importance was minor in comparison to Barbados and Saint-Domingue, as well as mainland territories on the Caribbean rim such as Suriname and Guyana. Saba and St. Eustatius did not participate in the sugar economy even as much as St. Maarten did. Sabans depended on subsistence agriculture and fishing, while St. Eustatius supported itself as a free port in the eighteenth century and, after the decline in trade following the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, tried cultivating cotton, sugar on a small scale, livestock raising, and subsistence agriculture.[12]

As Figure 1 and Table 1 show, the Dutch Leewards are small. Saba is, for example, only 13 sq. km and St. Eustatius is not much bigger at 21 sq. km. The Leewards were, and are, connected to each other by geography. The majority of these islands are within sight of each other. Nineteenth-century traveler George Coggeshall described how from St. Eustatius "may be seen St. Christopher's, Saba, and, on a clear day, several other islands. From St. Martin's may be seen St. Bartholomew, Anguilla, and several other small islands."[13] The islands were

12 Jessica Vance Roitman and Han Jordaan, "Fighting a Foregone Conclusion: Interest Groups, West Indian Merchants, and St. Eustatius, 1780–1810," *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 12, no. 1 (2015): 79–100.

13 George Coggeshall, *Thirty-six Voyages to Various Parts of the World, Made Between the Years*

TABLE 1 *Population of the Dutch Leeward Islands, enslaved and free*

Year	St. Martin (Dutch part)	St. Eustatius	Saba	Total of Dutch Leeward islands
1816	3559	2668	1145	7372
1850	2839*	1932	1663	6434
1863	3324	1977	1867	7168

*Lommerse and Hartog differ on this figure. Lommerse states 2839 while Hartog claims 2890. I follow Lommerse's more recent research.

SOURCE: JOHAN HARTOG, *DE BOVENWINDSE EILANDEN* (ARUBA: DE WIT, 1964), 704, AND HANNEKE LOMMERSE, "POPULATION FIGURES," IN GERT OOSTINDIE, ED., *DUTCH COLONIALISM, MIGRATION AND CULTURAL HERITAGE* (LEIDEN: KITLV PRESS, 2008), 315–342, 334.

also connected by shared ethnicity, language, economic interests and threats to security such as war, revolutions, or slave uprisings. There was a porousness of the social, economic, and legal boundaries between these island colonies. Most had relatively weak administrative and military infrastructures, relied on foreign trade, and had a demographic composition at odds with their colonial political affiliations.[14] This shared language facilitated the movement of people across the imperial borders, and it was this movement that was one of the integral aspects of the Leeward's system.

Teenstra also found that the slaves were, in general, better dressed than those in Suriname. Some planters on St. Maarten, for example, gave their slaves linen clothing of either Osnabrug or brown linen.[15] Sometimes the men received a sort of jacket and the women a kind of skirt of rough material that was called "bamboo."[16] Every adult slave on St. Maarten received 6/7 of a pint (about ½ a liter) of cornmeal or just corn per week and children received about half of that.[17] Planters usually gave their slaves salt fish or herring if they

1799 and 1841, Selected from his MS. Journal of Eighty Voyages (New York: Putnam, 1858), 252, 264.

14 Jeppe Mulich, "Microregionalism and Intercolonial Relations: The Case of the Danish West Indies, 1730–1830," *Journal of Global History* 8, no. 1 (Mar. 2013): 72–94, 74.

15 This was also the case in Suriname. See Gert Oostindie, *Roosenburg en Mon Bijou: Twee Surinaamse plantages, 1720–1870* (Leiden: KITLV, 1989), 153.

16 M.D. Teenstra, *De Nederlandsche West-Indische eilanden*, vol. 2, 295.

17 NL-HaNA, St. Maarten na 1828, 1.05.13.03, inv.nr. 41–43.

were available.[18] The amount of work slaves were required to do varied greatly depending on the time of year. Harvest time was clearly harder than the fallow season. Slaves were supposed to receive double portions of food during this time, particularly if they were working in the fields intensively.[19]

Slaves on the Dutch islands were rarely confined only to the plantations on which they labored. As agriculture declined in the early part of the nineteenth century, more and more slaves were sent to sell produce in the local markets, as well as to hire themselves out as day laborers, often loading and unloading the small crafts that came into the small harbors of the islands.[20] In fact, the relative freedom with which the slaves on the Dutch islands moved around alarmed some colonial officials, and led them to issue proclamation after proclamation demanding that the slaves carry passes, to be renewed daily, from their owners to show they were authorized to travel away from their homes.[21] The multitude of proclamations issued demonstrates just how ineffective they were on these small islands. Some slaves also served as sailors on the vessels that plied the routes between the islands, particularly enslaved men from Saba.[22]

The enslaved population of the islands joined those who were already free in forming, in the words of one inhabitant of the colonies, a "*zwervende bevolking*"—a roaming group.[23] His testimony was borne out by the commander of French St. Martin, who wrote to his colleague on the Dutch side in 1835 to say that he had noticed a great deal of communication between the blacks of St. Martin and Anguilla.[24] That is not to mention the fact that the land border between St. Martin/St. Maarten, an island shared by the French and the Dutch,

18 NL-HaNA, Gouv.-Gen. West-Indische Bezittingen, 1.05.08.01, inv. nr. 348, 25 Jan. 1830.

19 NL-HaNA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 3286/245, 26 Apr. 1828 and 3 June 1828.

20 Slaves hiring themselves out and a degree of spatial mobility within and even across the Leeward islands was quite similar to urban slavery in colonial Latin America. It certainly did not mean that slavery had vanished, but it does imply that the contours of slavery were different. This, in turn, illustrates that, to paraphrase Rebecca Scott, slavery and freedom had different gradations of grey. See Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba After Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005) and João Jose Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 175–186.

21 AN NAC 3746, 4 June 1845; AN NAC 4753 13 Sept. 1847; AN NAC 3897 3 Apr. 1848; AN NAC 4543 12 Oct. 1852.

22 NL-HaNA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 3865, 6 June 1835.

23 George Severijn Veer, *Iets over de emancipatie der slaven door eenen voormaligen bewoner der kolonie Suriname 1856* ('s Gravenhage: de Gebroeders Max Cleef, 1857), 171–172.

24 NL-HaNA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 3865, 6 June 1835.

was essentially open, and both enslaved and free people—black and white—passed freely between the two nations' territories.

To (Possible) Freedom ...

Yet despite this relative independence, slaves could and did avail themselves of the opportunity to escape from servitude on the Dutch islands and make a bid for freedom on the nearby British and, after 1848, French, Danish, and Swedish islands. Because the border with French St. Martin was so porous, and with the knowledge of freedom so close by, it was to be expected that slaves on the Dutch side would walk to freedom. One of the hardest hit was Lucas Percival, owner of the sugar plantation Diamond, who lost the entirety of his slave work force, estimated at around 90 enslaved people, within days of the declaration of French emancipation.[25] All of his slaves simply crossed over to the French side. Once there, they seemed to look for work wherever it could be found. Lucas Percival later reported that 26 of his former slaves were on the Mont Fortune plantation belonging to Mr. de Durat, which bordered the Dutch side of the border. Percival asked that they be sent back, but his request was refused.[26]

To take just another two of the myriad examples, on the 1st of September of 1840, Thome, Breiser, Adee, Edward, Ellick, Robert, and Quashiba and her two children, Sammy and Jane, were reported as escaping to Anguilla via the French side of St. Martin.[27] In fact, after she had escaped the island, Quashiba's lover, Matthew Stancliff, sailed to St. Martin to help her sister, Minny, and Minny's children escape.[28] In 1836, the lieutenant governor on Saba received a letter from the governor of St. Thomas and St. John saying that they had captured six slaves belonging to Henry Johnson Hassell of Saba in a boat in one of the outer bays of St. Thomas. A month earlier, a slave named Bomber, also from Saba, had arrived on the Danish islands.[29] They believed that the slaves had been intending to reach Tortola or one of the other British islands where they would be free. British Tortola was only 22 miles from St. Thomas and, at their closest points, only some five miles from St. John's.

But how many other enslaved people followed Bomber, Quashiba, and the others' lead? It is impossible to come up with any sort of exact figure for

25 NL-HaNA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 3878, 31 May 1848.

26 Archive of St. Maarten, Brieven van diversen, Jan. 1840–1845, 31 May 1848.

27 NL-Na-HaNA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 3865.

28 AN NAC 2134, 4 May 1840.

29 NL-HaNA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 3866, 10 Oct. 1836.

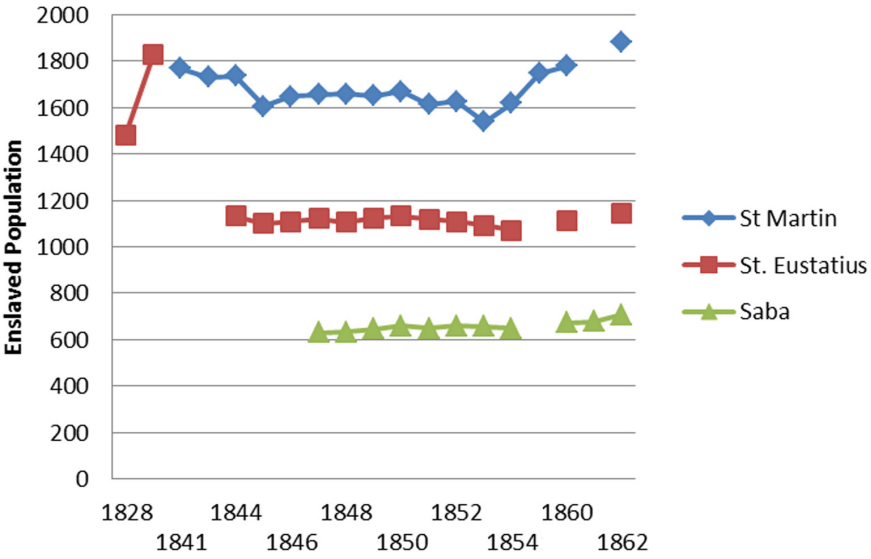

FIGURE 2 *Enslaved population of Saba, St. Eustatius, and St. Martin, 1828–1862. Data is available for the population of St. Eustatius for the years 1828 and 1829. Data for these years are not available for St. Martin and Saba. The x axis is not continuous because consecutive yearly data is not available.*
SOURCES: NL-HANA, GOUVERNEUR-GENERAAL DER NEDERLANDSE WEST INDISCHE BEZITTINGEN 1.05.08.01, INV. NR. 351, 345; AN NAC 3757; AN NAC 4 GOUVERNEUR 103 RT; *TWEEDE RAPPORT DER STAATSCOMMISSIE BENOEMD BIJ KONINKLIJK BESLUIT VAN 29 NOVEMBER 1853*, 186, 202–203, 305.

the number of slaves who escaped. Between 1840 and 1844 there was a clear decrease in the number of (attempted) slave escapes, but marronage began to increase again in 1844 to at least 120 runaways from St. Maarten alone.[30] The slave population on all three islands declined between 1844 and 1852, before increasing slightly in 1862 on the eve of Dutch emancipation. This decline occurred despite a positive birth versus death rate for all three islands—slave owners and local officials therefore attributed the decline to slaves who had escaped.[31] (See Figure 2) This increase in these years has to do with the push and pull demand for labor and the wages offered on neighboring islands, particularly on nearby St. Christopher (St. Kitts).

30 NL-Na-HaNA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 4313, 19 Apr. 1845, no. 144.

31 *Tweede Rapport der Staatscommissie benoemd bij koninklijk besluit van 29 november 1853*, 52, 186, 203, 305.

The majority of slaves who fled from the Dutch Leewards went to the British territories, most likely because of a perceived demand for labor there, as well as long-standing familial connections between the islanders. There were even rumors circulating that British agents were encouraging slaves on the Dutch islands to escape to the British territories due to expected labor shortages following their own abolition and the emancipation of their slaves.[32] The years immediately following emancipation in the British islands were chaotic, and British planters and colonial officials were concerned about a scarcity of workers to keep their plantations running. Just as on the Dutch Leewards, they need not have worried. In the end, there was an overabundance of labor, particularly on St. Kitts, the very island to which the majority of the Dutch escapees headed.

The key for local planters in the British colonies to keeping their formerly enslaved labor force working on the plantations was coercion in the form of restrictions on access to land. Where land was scarce, as in the old sugar colonies, this was relatively easy to do. The ex-slaves in Anguilla, Antigua, Barbados, Montserrat, Nevis and St. Kitts had little option but to offer their services to the plantation owners in return for accommodation and access to their own provision grounds.[33] This land monopoly became the main instrument of labor control for planters, who refused to sell the land to their laborers, who in turn were dependent on the estates for access to land not only for cultivation but also for housing. This provided one method of binding labor to individual estates. A planter in St. Kitts testified that employers provided laborers with a house and mountain land for free, or rented at "pepper corn rates," on condition that they performed regular labor year-round on the estates.[34]

This is not to say that everything went smoothly, and certainly not in the tumultuous years during and after "apprenticeship." A great many of the former slaves in St. Kitts refused to carry out the involuntary labor required under the apprenticeship system and many deposited "their hoes and bills near the dwelling of their respective [estate] managers, thus expressing their determination not to use them."[35] According to historian Thomas Holt, it was the attempts of planters to tie workers to the estates and force them to work steadily and con-

32 NL-Na-HaNA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. no. 20, 25 June 1817; 2.10.01, inv. no. 69, 21 Sept. 1827; 2.10.01, inv. no. 11, 16 Oct. 1827.

33 Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of the Caribbean since the Napoleonic Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 60.

34 *West India Royal Commission*, 1897. Evidence of E.G. Todd, 209–210.

35 Richard Frucht, "Emancipation and Revolt in the West Indies: St. Kitts, 1834," *Science and Society* 39 (1975): 199–214, 206.

tinuously by charging rents on the ex-slaves' houses and provision grounds that prompted many of these slaves to flee from the estates. This, in turn, led to labor shortages. In testimony after testimony made in the 1840s, ex-slaves declared their willingness to continue to work on the estates "providing in we getting what is right."[36] Douglas Hall argues conclusively that had the slaves been allowed to keep possession of their houses, gardens, and provision grounds but also to choose their employers irrespective of where they lived, they would not have left the estates.[37] The problem, as one planter described it, was that the ex-slaves were willing to work "only six hours a day, four days a week, and an unreliable number of weeks a year."[38]

It was this (perceived) unreliability that was the key concern for planters. They did not generally need a full contingent of laborers year-round. Planters instead needed seasonal labor when it was time to harvest and process the sugar cane.[39] This problem in labor supply on St. Kitts left room for people from outside the island to come in and fill the gap. Some Nevisians journeyed across the channel to St. Kitts for higher wages. St. Kitts, larger and more fertile, was—at least economically—better off at emancipation. In comparison, Nevisian planters, on their small stony island, were financially much harder pressed than they had been during slavery, and they paid some of the lowest post-slavery wages in the British Caribbean.[40] In 1842, "first-class" fieldworkers on Nevis received only sixpence (6d) as a daily wage whereas on St. Kitts they earned ninepence (9d).[41] A few free emigrants also went to St. Kitts from Anguilla, which had been devastated by a hurricane in 1842. Compared with other Leeward islands, St. Kitts' wages seemed reasonable. At the end of the 1840s, laborers could earn 7d in Antigua, Barbados, Montserrat and Tobago, while on Dominica, Jamaica, Nevis, St Kitts, St Lucia and St Vincent wages were around one and a half times that.[42] Laborers were said to be able to cultivate provision crops in rotation with sugar cane on "as much land as they wish."[43]

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36 Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 12.

37 Douglas Hall, "The Flight from the Estates Reconsidered: The British West Indies, 1838–1842," *The Journal of Caribbean History* 10 and 11 (1978): 7–24, 23.

38 Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 45.

39 Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of the Caribbean*, 59.

40 Bonham Richardson, *Caribbean Migrants: Environmental and Human Survival on St. Kitts and Nevis*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 84.

41 Douglas Hall, *Five of the Leewards, 1834–1870* (Lodge Hill, Barbados: Caribbean University Press, 1971)

42 Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of the Caribbean*, 74.

43 *Parliamentary Papers* 1842, XIII, Testimony of George Estridge, 229, 231.

Enslaved people on the Dutch Leewards were well aware of what was going on just a mere ten miles across the small straits between their islands. The shared language of the Leeward islands—Creole English—the frequency with which ships sailed between these islands, the extended family networks stretching over the islands, and the fact that some enslaved people worked as sailors meant that information networks were strong and efficient. Phillip Troutman describes how enslaved people throughout the Atlantic world acquired, disseminated, and applied geographic and geopolitical knowledge in a process he calls "geopolitical literacy."[44] The enslaved people of Saba, St. Eustatius, and St. Maarten had geopolitical literacy in abundance, and this literacy both mirrored and strengthened the black social networks stretching across the island chain. Thus it is hardly surprising that St. Kitts also received runaway slaves from nearby French and Dutch colonies that had not yet abolished slavery. Laborers from the tiny neighboring islands, seeking escape from poverty, social repression and/or ecological hazard could at least survive on St. Kitts. The island continued (in the mid-1840s) to receive a trickle of immigrants, both enslaved (from the Dutch and French territories), and free (from the nearby British islands). Among the more than 20,000 Kittitians counted in the census of 1855, 194 had been born in Anguilla, 179 in St. Martin, and 129 in Nevis, and this does not count the many who likely returned or went elsewhere, as will be discussed below.[45]

The maroons from the non-British islands came to St. Kitts because after the end of apprenticeship there was a steady rise in agricultural wages, with the daily rate for men increasing from 6d in 1838 to one shilling by 1846. There would seem to be a correlation in the number of escaped slaves from the Dutch Leewards and the concomitant drop in the enslaved population precisely during this period. As was the case in the rest of the Caribbean, when coercion on the local population was not sufficient, inward migration was needed to fill the gap. Planters were forced to raise wage rates temporarily in order to secure the labor that they needed.[46]

Policies designed to tie workers to their former plantation on St. Kitts and the other British islands worked to some extent but did not prevent the gradual

44 Phillip Troutman, "Grapevine in the Slave Market: African American Geopolitical Literacy and the 1841 *Creole* Revolt," in Walter Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 203–233, 203.

45 *The Reports … of Her Majesty's Colonial Possessions. Transmitted with the Blue Books for the Year 1854* (London: HMSO, 1855). Excerpt from "The Report of the Commissioners for Taking the Census," 158.

46 Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of the Caribbean*, 59.

emergence of a class of workers who were no longer entirely dependent. These workers exploited new opportunities after emancipation to acquire access to land through title, tenure, sharecropping or squatting, and produced mainly for themselves and the domestic market, again leaving room on the large estates for employment of escaped slaves from the Dutch islands. Many also participated in the plantation economy as the most efficient means of raising the cash income needed to buy essentials and pay taxes on the land on which they lived.[47] But they did not necessarily participate in their own islands' plantation economies. Instead, they availed themselves of the opportunity to sell their labor on the free market and go elsewhere for higher wages.

Daily wages in Trinidad and Guyana varied from 25d to 20d per day, respectively.[48] In the immediate post-emancipation period, workers from St Kitts and Nevis began an annual migration to Trinidad and, to a lesser extent, Guyana, in search of the higher wages paid on estates there during the sugar harvest.[49] The shift towards work in the southern Caribbean was helped by the precipitous fall in the price received for sugar following the passage of the Sugar Duties Act in 1846. This act reduced and, eventually, eliminated the preferential duty treatment that West Indian sugar had received. Prices fell from 35s (shillings) to 15s per hundredweight (cwt), which induced the St Kitts planters to reduce their outlays by cutting wage costs. At a public meeting, the planting body unanimously agreed to reduce the standard rate for male agricultural laborers from 1s to 10d per day.[50] Emigration began to accelerate after 1846 due to these wage reductions.[51] The male population of St. Kitts declined from 10,523 in 1844 to 9,525 in 1855.[52] The female population also declined but at a more moderate rate.

Between 1835 and 1863, 7,707 formerly enslaved West Indians went to Guyana, mainly from Barbados and the Leewards, and this figure excludes a considerable number of individuals and family groups of between ten and twenty persons who paid their own passages, but for whom no accurate record was kept. Trinidad alone received some 10,278 West Indians between 1839 and 1849.[53] The modern, steam-powered mills of the large southern colonies required thou-

47 Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of the Caribbean*, 58.

48 Ibid., 74.

49 Hall, *Five of the Leewards*, 40–41.

50 *West India Royal Commission*, 1897. Evidence of Solomon Shelford, 242–243.

51 Hall, *Five of the Leewards*, 113.

52 Richardson, *Caribbean Migrants*, table 5, 93.

53 Donald Wood, *Trinidad in Transition: The Years after Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 65–66.

sands of acres of cane—and a massive workforce—for efficient, profitable sugar production. Both Trinidad and British Guyana were recent British acquisitions, the former from Spain and the latter from the Netherlands. Neither had suffered the environmental degradation wrought by decades of cane cultivation on the "old islands" of the Caribbean, but both needed substantial pools of labor for factory maintenance, fieldwork, and the reorientation of rain forest and mangrove swamps to fields of sugar cane.[54] Their need was urgent. The situation in Guyana was typical of the crisis that the relatively less densely populated territories experienced after emancipation. Between 1838 and 1844, plantation production fell dramatically: coffee production was down 64.4%, sugar by 29.5%, rum by 36.5%, and molasses by 25%, while cotton had virtually gone out of production altogether.[55]

This crisis was occasioned by the new options available to formerly enslaved people in the colony. Guyana witnessed one of the greatest expressions of land hunger among the ex-slaves of the region. Settlements sprang up along the entire seacoast from the Corentyne River in Berbice, through Demerara, to the coast in Essequibo. Not only were there purchases of small plots of land, but, more remarkably, whole plantations were bought by large groups of ex-slaves who became joint-stock holders of the purchased estate.[56] By the end of 1840, the ex-slaves had nominally acquired 121 land titles in Berbice and 475 in Demerara and Essequibo.[57] So great was their demand for land that by 1842, the lowest price paid was US$240 per acre, and in many areas $US480 per acre was not unusual.[58] By the mid-1840s, there were about 38,000 ex-slaves still at work on the plantations, or around 43% of the work force at emancipation. The result was not a definitive stoppage in the supply of labor to the plantations, but no less problematic, a considerable irregularity in that supply.[59] Harvest times were particularly difficult. Ex-slaves prioritized the cultivation of their

54 Richardson, *Caribbean Migrants*, 81.

55 *First Annual Report of the Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society*, encl'd in Light to Stanley, No. 107, 15 May 1845, The National Archives of the UK(hereafter TNA), Colonial Office, (hereafter CO), 111/223; see also encl. in Light to Russell, No. 5, 11 Jan. 1841, 11/182.

56 Brian L. Moore, *Race, Power and Social Segmentation in Colonial Society: Guyana After Slavery, 1838–1891* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1987), 35.

57 For Berbice see, Encl. in light to Russell, No. 75, 4 June 1840, CO 111/171; sub. encl. in No. 10, 26 Jan. 1841, CO 111/177; report for District I, incl. in Light to Stanley, No. 31, 10 Feb. 1844, CO 111/208. For Demerara and Essequibo, see, Light to Russell, No. 48, 9 Apr. 1840, CO 111/171; and No. 4, 7 Jan. 1841, CO 111/177.

58 Light to Stanley, No. 75, 19 May 1843, CO 111/200.

59 Moore, *Race, Power and Social Segmentation*, 37.

own plots of land, and there was a shortage of labor on the plantations during the busiest periods.

This shortage was so acute that the British commonly sent some of the so-called "Liberated Africans" to Berbice and Demerara. These were people who had been enslaved and forced onto slave vessels heading for Brazil and Cuba that were captured by British anti-slaving squadrons. According to British regulations, they were then taken to Sierra Leone. There were around 100,000 of these "Liberated Africans," and an uncalculated percentage of them were sent on to fill the labor shortage in the Guyanas.[60]

But these "Liberated Africans" did not come close to meeting the need for labor in the area. Thus, coveting what they considered surplus labor in the densely populated British Leeward islands, southern planters began sending recruiting agents into the northeastern Caribbean already during the time of the apprenticeship system (1834–1838).[61] On free Antigua, planters complained bitterly in 1837 about the planters of Demerara enticing their workers in open boats to Montserrat and then to British Guyana.[62] One agent from British Guyana scoured the Leewards that year for likely emigrants, purchasing the unexpired apprentice contracts for blacks in Tortola, Montserrat, Nevis, and St. Kitts.[63] It should be noted that Trinidad was a far more popular destination than British Guyana. Ten thousand people arrived in Trinidad in around a decade, compared to fewer than 8,000 in a 28-year period for Guyana. Whether Trinidad or Guyana, however, southern Caribbean planters were willing to pay in cash, rum, and food for necessary labor, and they advertised these benefits throughout the British Antilles as full emancipation approached.

By late 1840, hundreds of black Kittitians and Nevisians were leaving for the southern Caribbean via small boats and large ships.[64] Although attracted by high wages at their destination, they were also impelled to leave because of

60 See Monica Schuler, *'Alas, Alas, Kongo': A Social History of Indentured African Immigration into Jamaica, 1841–1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 11–12, 22–23, 26, 114; and Monica Schuler, "Liberated Central Africans in Nineteenth-Century Guyana," in Linda Heywood, ed., *Central Africans and Cultural Transformation in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 319–352.

61 Moore, *Race, Power and Social Segmentation*, 37.

62 Robson Lowe, *The Codrington Correspondence, 1743–1851* (London: Self-published, 1951), 79.

63 Joseph Sturge and Thomas Harvey, *The West Indies in 1837, Being the Journal of a Visit to Antigua, Monsterrat, Dominica, St. Lucia, Barbadoes, and Jamaica* (London: Hamilton Adams, 1838), 9, 15–16.

64 In later decades, Trinidadian and Guianese estate owners relied upon the Indian subcontinent for thousands of indentured field laborers. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this but see, for example, Wanton Look Lai, "Asian Contract and Free Migrations

dissatisfaction with conditions at home. Lt. Gov. C.J. Cunningham of St. Kitts stated in 1840:

> I am sorry to believe that the peasantry are emigrating from this Island in considerable numbers … having made personal enquiries from many of the most intelligent of the Emigrants, as to the reasons for leaving their homes all assign the same cause—the uncertainty of the tenure by which they hold their houses and grounds.[65]

Trinidad and British Guyana planters paid cash bounties for foreign laborers delivered to their colonies. Bounties were paid to ship captains for passengers' "rates of passage and maintenance on board" the vessel, and payments increased with distance, providing incentive for seamen to roam throughout the Caribbean seeking laborers to bring south. For instance, in 1840 a ship captain bringing laborers to Trinidad received US $5 for each one imported from Grenada; $8 from St. Vincent; $14 from St. Kitts, Nevis, Montserrat, and Antigua; and $25 from the Bahamas.[66] Individual planters also commissioned ship captains to bring laborers. Planters in British Guyana were not allowed to tap their colonial treasury, but they pooled funds in a private immigration society. The Guyana Society expended more than $250,000 in a nine-month period in 1840–1841, thereby netting almost 3,000 West Indian immigrants.[67]

This thirst for labor in the southern colonies had direct effects for the enslaved people of the Dutch Leeward islands. First, as was discussed above, it meant that there was a need for their labor on the British islands, particularly St. Kitts. They could fill the gap left by the migrating Kittitians and Nevisians. Although wages fell after 1846, it seems that potential workers from St. Eustatius, Saba, and St. Maarten were still willing to accept the lower wages, at least temporarily, in exchange for some payment for their work—and, of course, the chance to earn wages at all, something largely reserved for freemen and women on their own island. In fact, it could be that wages did not rise, despite the out-migration of so many Kittitians and Nevisians to Trinidad and Guyana, because their places were filled by ex-slaves from the Dutch islands.

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to the Americas," in David Eltis, ed., *Coerced and Free Migration: Global Perspectives* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 229–258.

65 Cunningham to Legislative Council St. Kitts, St. Christopher Assembly Minutes, July 1840 to Sept. 1842, 72–73.

66 Parliamentary Papers 1840, XXIV, "Copy of a Circular Despatch … Relative to Immigration into Trinidad," 363.

67 Alan H. Adamson, *Sugar Without Slaves: The Policial Economy of British Guiana, 1838–1904* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1972), 43.

The second direct effect was that recruiting agents for the southern colonies also visited the Dutch islands. In 1837 one Mr. O'Donoghue, representing a trading company in Berbice, arrived on St. Maarten. He got in touch with J.C. and D.M. van Romondt, two men from a prominent family who lent many planters on the island money for their operations.[68] In addition, they served as local agents for speculators from British Guyana. O'Donoghue said that the plantations in Guyana were willing to buy entire troops of slaves and went into great detail about the requirements for selling the slaves to British Guyana.[69] The first such requirement was that the slaves themselves had to have complete say in their change of status, which would be from slave to indentured servant. This would prove to be vital. The slaveholders would receive as much in payment as the slave was considered to be worth. If the government refused to give the necessary permission for the export of the slaves, then these slaves would immediately be manumitted, depending on the rules and regulations of the given island. Every slave who was manumitted would receive a "doubloon," a gold coin used throughout the Caribbean, presumably intended to help the formerly enslaved get started in his or her new life of freedom. He or she would have to bind him- or herself for at least six years to work in the fields of the colony of Berbice. Though there was little or nothing stated in the contracts about what would happen should they refuse to work, various reports from the period detail brutal conditions and harsh punishments for indentured laborers who tried to leave the plantations on which they were working or who were otherwise deemed unsatisfactory.[70] As compensation for his or her service, he or she would receive a monthly extra payment of at least ƒ5 for the entire period of the contract, good food, housing, clothes and medical care, in keeping with the laws of the British colonies. This was all to be put in a written agreement signed by both parties.

In a report about the situation, the governor-general of the Dutch Antilles expressed his surprise at the large amounts of money the British-Guyanese speculators were willing to pay to purchase foreign slaves. He reported that he had heard via private correspondence that workers were being recruited on Curaçao for not less than ƒ700 per person, excluding the ƒ500 that was paid to

68 For more about the Van Romondt family, see Jessica Vance Roitman and Wouter Veenendaal, "We Take Care of Our Own: The Origins of Oligarchic Politics in St. Maarten," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 102 (October 2016).

69 NL-HaNA, St. Maarten na 1828, 1.05.13.03, inv. nr. 19, 3 Febr. 1837.

70 See, for example, John Scoble, *Hill Coolies: A Brief Exposure of the Deplorable Condition of the Hill Coolies in British Guiana and Mauritius, and of the Nefarious Means by which They were Induced to Resort to these Colonies …* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1840).

manumit each of them. With the cost of transport, food and clothing during the journey, not to mention their upkeep until they were productive, it was not an exaggeration to conclude that the total investment in one former slave would amount to around ƒ1,400.[71] Despite these high figures, the governor-general was convinced that the practice of freeing slaves and sending them to British Guyana would have a negative effect on the Dutch colonies.[72] Not only would the slaves be missed as laborers, but their exit would, in his opinion, lead to a lessening in the perceived value of Dutch governance. Those slaves who stayed behind would get the idea that there were better conditions to be had under other regimes.

The governor-general urged some sort of moderating measures to be taken. Because there were not any particular rules on the Dutch islands addressing the export of manumitted slaves, he suggested that there be a law enacted in which the export of manumitted slaves would be prohibited for a year after the manumission took effect.[73] He believed that if such a plan were put in place it would thwart the plans of labor speculators, as they would be unwilling to wait a year for the workers in whom they had already invested so much money. The governor-general went even further, however, suggesting the prohibition of the export of slaves outside the Dutch colonies. In this suggestion he received little support from The Hague. This was, in part, because it would have required a revision of the earlier decision made in 1832 that actually encouraged the export of slaves from the Dutch colonies. This 1832 regulation had been put in place after some Curaçaoan planters had pressured the government. Their most important argument was that due to the worsening conditions on the island, it was nearly impossible to feed the growing slave population. Interestingly, the governor-general's proposal against the export of slaves was an about-face. Only a few years earlier he had encouraged the export of 25 slaves belonging to F.P. Richardson from St. Maarten.[74]

Ultimately, there were two views on these offers held by officials and slave owners on the Dutch islands. One group saw this recruitment as a direct threat to the economies of the islands, just as their fellow planters and officials on the nearby British islands did. For example, the lieutenant governor of St. Maarten, as well as a few planters on the island, expressed doubts about how

71 Paula, *'Vrije' Slaven*, 66–67.

72 NL-HaNA, Gouverneur-Generaal der Nederlandse West Indische Bezittingen 1.05.08.01, inv. nr. 523, 22 Febr. 1837.

73 Nationaal Archief Suriname, Oud Archief Suriname: Gouvernementssecretarie, 1.05.10.01, inv. nr. 774, 16 Dec. 1816.

74 NL-HaNA, Ministerie van Kolonien, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 4245, 10 May 1837.

O'Donoghue operated. They were of the opinion that his offer would have dire consequences, especially if other traders from Berbice and Demerara were to take entire crews of slaves away from the island. They feared that, if his plan were to be successful, an ever-growing number of planters would sell their slaves so that in no time the island would be robbed of its slave population.[75] The other group saw the option of selling their slaves in Guyana as an excellent opportunity that offered them a way to divest themselves of their "human capital" that had lost value precipitously and that was well neigh impossible to sell on the islands.[76] In any case, the option to go to British Guyana—an option that would, in effect, mean that the slaves became indentured servants—gave these slaves a heretofore unavailable option to decide their own fates, as they had to agree to the proposal. This is an option, however, that the slaves of the Dutch Leeward islands did not choose.

… And Back Again (or Never Left)

The first slave owner to be approached on St. Maarten was H.D. Dervin, the owner of Bethlehem plantation. It was general knowledge that there was a high mortgage on the plantation, estimated to be around ƒ50.000, while the output from the plantation did not come close to even covering the most basic needs of the residents. Moreover, the debt grew daily because Dervin could not pay the interest.[77] More and more whites on the Dutch islands moved away from producing sugar cane and other crops and, instead, made their money in non-agricultural and less labor-intensive activities like shipping and trade

75 NL-HaNA, Gouverneur-Generaal der Nederlandse West Indische Bezittingen 1.05.08.01, inv. nr. 787, 6 Febr. 1837.

76 The price of slaves had plummeted. A male slave field laborer between 20–30 years old sold for ƒ340 in St. Eustatius in 1843. In 1853, such a slave would have only brought his owner ƒ85. Similarly, in Saba, a 31 year old male field hand sold for ƒ230 in 1843, while a 34 year old male field hand would only fetch ƒ104,40 in 1851. And even before the *de facto* emancipation of slaves on the Dutch side of St. Martin, the price of slaves had dropped precipitously. A male field hand on the island was sold for ƒ400 in 1843, while a similar slave's value had declined by close to two-thirds in 1847 to a mere ƒ150. *Tweede Rapport der Staatscommissie benoemd bij koninklijk besluit van 29 november 1853*, 196, 208, 313.

77 Slave owners on St. Maarten calculated that the value of the plantations had been reduced to about a quarter of their value before the emancipation of slaves on the French side. This claim was not exaggerated. Union Farm, a 180-acre sugar plantation with 58 slaves, sold for ƒ8,000 in 1851. Twenty-two years earlier, it had sold for ƒ30,000. AN NAC 3756 Ingekomen brieven van particulieren uit St. Maarten, 1845–1851, 16 May 1852.

because it was becoming increasingly difficult to turn a profit or even break even, as Dervin's case shows.[78] Therefore, Dervin was quite interested in the offer from British Guyana. He saw in the sale of his entire crew of slaves a fantastic opportunity to rid himself of his enormous debt. Another planter, M.W.H. Rink, the owner of the plantation with the greatest number of slaves on the island, stated that he wanted to work with the agent from British Guyana.[79] Yet neither these transactions, nor any of the others brokered by agents in the coming few years, came to pass.

This is because of that vital loophole in the regulations regarding recruitment of enslaved workers, which was that the slave him or herself had to have complete say in his or her change of status from slave to indentured servant. The enslaved workers of Dervin's indebted Bethlehem did not want to go to Guyana, and, therefore, the transaction did not go through. Likewise, the slaves on Rink's plantation were not in agreement with being sold into indentured servitude.[80] Thus, they stayed enslaved on St. Maarten rather than live as indentured servants, at least for a time, in Guyana. We know little else about what went on in these discussions amongst the enslaved people on Bethlehem plantation and on Rink's property. The reasons behind the enslaved people's decision not to choose to go to Guyana were not reported, a frustrating absence in the documentation. We do know from other reported incidents that their decision was not necessarily unique. For instance, Mary, an enslaved woman on board the brig *Creole* that was commandeered by enslaved African Americans held on the ship and taken to Nassau in the Bahamas in 1841, ultimately chose to return to slavery in the United States rather than stay in freedom on the Bahamas. Possibly, she thought, "better the devil you know than the devil you don't." Or maybe she chose not to abandon family ties there.[81]

Why would slaves not choose at least the modicum of freedom offered by going to Guyana? We have no further information on the case of the slaves of Bethlehem plantation, nor of those on Rink's plantation, and there is, in general, a dearth of narratives from these Dutch Leeward islanders. Never-

78 This was especially the case on Curaçao, as Willem Renkema describes in "De export van Curaçaose slaven 1819–1847," in P. Boomgaard, et al., eds., *Twaalf opstellen over de economische en sociale geschiedenis van Nederland en kolonien, 1800–1950* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 188–208, 199–203. But it was also true for the Leeward islands. See Alex van Stipriaan, "Suriname and the Abolition of Slavery," in Oostindie, ed., *Fifty Years Later*, 118–119.

79 NL-HaNA, St. Maarten na 1828, 1.05.13.03, inv. nr. 19, 6 Febr. 1837.

80 ibid.

81 Troutman, "Grapevine in the Slave Market," 217.

theless, one reason that seems likely is that they thought that British Guyana would be as bad as Netherlands Guyana (Suriname) in terms of working conditions. Suriname was known as a particularly brutal place to work. Turning the swampy ground into a viable place for plantation agriculture took enormous effort involving the implementation of complicated and labor-intensive hydraulic systems.[82]

Moreover, the communication networks between the inhabitants of the Leeward islands had no doubt brought to these Dutch slaves' attention that the journey was an arduous one. On the actual voyages, overcrowding was the rule, not the exception.[83] Local ship captains, anxious to earn the bounties offered by estate owners, packed prospective laborers on board their sailing boats. Unofficial migrants to Trinidad were, therefore, often not enumerated in the official records.[84] The danger was not only from sailing open waters in crowded boats. It took several days and nights to sail the 500 miles to Trinidad and even more to Guyana, an odyssey involving risks such as dealing with actions taken by hostile colonial officials—who tried to stop these migrants from leaving their home islands—along the way, unmarked rocks and shoals, navigation without the benefit of charts of compasses in crowded open boats, and the omnipresent risk of death by drowning. Upon returning home from Trinidad in mid-1845, a number of Nevisians indeed recounted stories of comrades' deaths.[85]

What is more, once in Trinidad or Guyana, an emigrant was under the control of foreign planters and overseers. Granted, for the enslaved people of the Dutch Leewards, this control would have been as an indentured servant and not as a slave, but there would have been little enough difference for the six difficult years they would have had to work before obtaining their full freedom, something they were no doubt well aware of. In 1832 a Surinamese slave escaped to British Guyana and was freed when he arrived there, as per the British regulations. To everyone's great surprise, the ex-slave returned to the Surinamese plantation from which he had left a few weeks later. When he was asked why he had returned to slavery, he apparently answered that he had discovered that as a free man, he still had to work hard to eat. Therefore, he

82 Gert Oostindie and Alex van Stipriaan, "Slavery and Slave Cultures in a Hydraulic Society: Suriname," in Stephan Palmié, ed., *Slavery and slave cultures in the Americas* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 78–99.

83 Parliamentary Papers 1846, XXVIII, "State of the Labouring Population," 295.

84 Parliamentary Papers 1842, XXIX, Testimony of Thomas F. Johnston, 453–454.

85 Parliamentary Papers 1839, XXXVII, "Papers Relative to the West Indies," 190.

preferred to return to slavery in his own land where he was at least familiar with the people and place.[86]

While this story was possibly an embellishment, the fact remains that even if a newly manumitted Dutch Leeward islander eventually prospered in Trinidad or Guyana, he or she was still a stranger there, without friends or family. The reports from the British islands, of which the populace of the Dutch Leewards were quite aware, were full of stories of how difficult people there found it to leave their homes and loved ones.[87] This difficulty was exacerbated by the heavily skewed migration pattern, with males much more likely to go to the southern colonies than females, as their labor was more in demand. Governor Cunningham of St. Kitts was horrified over the activities of "Sordid agents who persuaded heads of families to leave and thereby sever sacred domestic ties."[88] Nevis planters expressed similar (and possibly newly-found) concern about the sanctity of local black family life and its potential dissolution at the hands of foreign recruiters.[89]

In the end, while some of the migrants doubtless stayed on in Trinidad and Guyana, this migration was seasonal in character, and most of the workers returned at the end of the crop.[90] Again, all of which the enslaved population of the Dutch Leewards knew. Brutal work in an unfamiliar place with strangers, far from the support system provided by family and friends, was apparently not any more attractive than their lives on the Dutch Leeward islands, especially given the (very relative) freedom they enjoyed to travel around their islands and to form family units. Moreover, many may have felt responsible for dependent

86 NL-HaNA, Gouverneur-Generaal der Nederlandse West Indische Bezittingen 1.05.08.01, inv. nr. 608, 18 Apr. 1832. This security was not to remain in place for long. By 1865, only two years after emancipation, a process of social disintegraion began to occur. The population on the Surinamese plantations began to move and shift, contract laborers from other places began to arrive, and missionaries noted that "many marriages have collapsed due to men leaving the plantations." Oostindie, *Roosenburg en Mon Bijou*, 198–199.

87 Parliamentary Papers 1839, XXXVII, "Papers Relative to the West Indies," 190. The disintegration of the closely-knit social fabric of the slave plantation in the post-emancipation Dutch colonies was well-documented Families fell apart, and various family members migrated away to find work. See Oostinide, *Roosenburg en Mon Bijou*, 195–199.

88 Speech of Lt. Gov. C.J. Cunningham, 22 December 1840 in St. Christopher Council Minutes, Mar. 1838 to Jan. 1843, 316.

89 Nevis Council Minutes, 1840 to 1844, entry for 23 Dec. 1843.

90 Parliamentary Papers 1845, XXXI, "Colonial Population Censuses," 331; Parliamentary Papers, 1842, XIII, Testimony of George Estridge, 232; Parliamentary Papers 1845, XXXI, "Correspondence Relative to the Laboring Population of the West Indies," 575; Nevis Council Minutes, 1840 to 1844, entry for 23 Dec. 1843; Hall, *Five of the Leewards*, 40–41.

kin. In addition, the slaves who turned down the offers of indentured servitude in the Guyanas may have decided against leaving their island because they—quite erroneously, as it turned out—believed that the Netherlands' government would quickly emancipate them. This was a belief shared by some of their owners. This belief was furthered by the governor-general of the Antilles, who, in 1837, had made a case for the emancipation of the slaves in the Dutch colonies. He argued that it was not only inevitable, but also desirable.[91] The proprietors of plantations and all other slaveholders in the Dutch Leeward islands were well aware that their days as owners of humans were numbered, and many hoped to divest themselves of their debt-ridden plantations and expensive chattel with compensation to be paid with the abolition of slavery.[92] The hope of emancipation grew apace after 1848 when the French, Danes, and Swedes ended slavery.

Though their hopes were to be disappointed—slavery in Dutch territories was not officially abolished until 1863—slaves in St. Maarten were treated *de facto*, if not *de jure*, as free beginning in 1848. After a series of urgent meetings in the immediate aftermath of French emancipation, the planters of the island wrote to the governor in Curaçao that from the 1st of August of the same year they would treat their slaves as hired workers. They had decided on this because they feared losing not only their property but also their lives.[93] In the words of one desperate missive, "The spirit of insubordination rules and they are guilty of rebellion."[94] The white residents wrote an urgent letter to the colonial government about the "highly excited feelings of all the Slaves in this colony, loudly and vehemently demanding to be placed on a footing of freedom, with their neighbors, proof of which, that the gangs of several estates of Cul de Sac in the Dutch part of this Island, are now in the public roads and have struck work."[95] This *de facto*, if not *de jure*, freedom on St. Maarten—the island from which most of the slaves were recruited for Guyana—meant that enslaved people found a long and arduous trip to the southern colonies to labor amongst strangers even less attractive than it had been previously. Moreover, although the slaves on Statia and Saba were not treated as free in the same way as their fellows on St. Maarten were, there was almost certainly an amelioration of their condition due to this decision on St. Maarten. This, in turn, meant that the

91 NL-HaNA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 523, 22 Febr. 1837.

92 Jessica Vance Roitman, "Land of Hope and Dreams," 10–15.

93 NL-HaNA, Ministerie van Koloniën, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 3878, 20 June 1848.

94 Ibid., 12 June 1848.

95 NL-HaNA, Collectie C.Ph.C.E. Steinmetz, 1.13.21, inv. nr. 1A, 1 June 1848.

slaves on these islands were also less likely to choose for indentured servitude in Guyana.[96]

What is perhaps most surprising was that not more slaves on St. Maarten left the Dutch side for freedom on the French side. Or, if they did leave, that they returned of their own accord.[97] This is likely because there was little reason for the escaped slaves to stay on the French side of the island. Their situation would not in any real sense be different than it was on the Dutch side. In fact, it might have been better on the Dutch side because of the paid work provided by the salt pan and, moreover, they would have had some work for their owners from which they could support themselves.

This was not the case on the French side where there was little enough work to be had. In fact, the situation was fairly dire on the French side post-emancipation. In March 1849 the French planters had started to draw up employment contracts with their former slaves, but without lasting success. The plantations were closed down one after the other. While in 1847 there were still 23 sugar plantations with living quarters, by 1862 there were only three. Some companies had been formed immediately after the abolition of slavery, in 1848 and 1849, in which free cultivators participated. These were Union, Hope and Delight, Anse des Pères and Morne Fortune in Colombier, and Saint-Jean in Marigot, but these companies only prolonged the life of the sugar industry for a short period of time.[98] Furthermore, there was no salt pan. In fact, former slaves from the French side went to the Dutch side to work harvesting salt. In addition, slaves on the Dutch plantations had their own provision grounds, and could use the proceeds of anything they had extra to sell and buy clothes and other personal items, not something they were given on the French side. They could also raise cattle and goats on these so-called *negergronden*.[99]

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96 NL-HaNA, Ministerie van Kolonien, 1814–1849, 2.10.01, inv. nr. 3878, 12 June 1848.

97 *Tweede Rapport der Staatscommissie benoemd bij koninklijk besluit van 29 november 1853*, 306.

98 Y. Monnier, *"L'immuable et le changeant" étude de la partie française de Saint-Martin, Iles et archipels vol. I* (Bordeaux: Centre de recherche sur les espaces tropicaux de l'Université de Bordeaux III and CNRS, 1983), 40–41. Johan Hartog, *History of Sint-Maarten and Saint Martin* (Philipsbourg: The Sint-Maarten Jaycees, 1981), 69–70. See also the results of the descriptive studies of the sugar plantations in the French part of St. Martin conducted by the Groupe de Rercherche en Archéologie Industrielle de l'Académie Antilles-Guyanes, published by Denise and Henri Parisis, "Le siècle du sucre à Saint-Martin français," numéro spécial, *Bulletin de la société d'histoire de la Guadeloupe* no. 99–102 (1994), especially pages 23, 57–58, 90–92, 104, 108–110; Louis Sicking, *Colonial Borderlands: France and The Netherlands in the Atlantic in the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff: 2008), 33.

99 NL-HaNA, Gouv.-Gen. West-Indische Bezittingen, 1.05.08.01, inv. nr. 608, 25 Jan. 1830.

These conditions—provision grounds and a relative freedom of movement—were not unique to St. Maarten. They were the same on Saba and St. Eustatius. This also helps explain why it seems likely that many of the people who escaped to St. Kitts and the other British islands likely sojourned rather than migrated permanently. By the 1850s, planters on St. Kitts and the other islands were in a much more favorable position to control their labor force than most of their West Indian counterparts—and indeed than they themselves had been during the decade or so immediately following emancipation. On St. Kitts, there were no reserves of Crown land that could be occupied by the former slaves. The little vacant land that existed was in the central mountain range, where cultivation had been prohibited in an attempt at soil conservation. During slavery almost all cultivable lands had fallen under the ownership of the sugar estates and their monopoly of arable land did not diminish with emancipation.[100] Provision grounds were reserved for the ex-slaves who had worked on the plantations, and would have been difficult to access for workers such as those from the Dutch Leewards who were not from St. Kitts.

Moreover, by 1850, wage rates for estate workers had fallen everywhere compared with a decade earlier and were very stable for the rest of the century in the British colonies, including in St. Kitts.[101] This was due to the abovementioned Sugar Duties Act. Lastly, the initial enthusiasm for migration to Trinidad and Guyana had waned considerably by the 1850s. Despite the high wages offered in the southern colonies, the harsh work conditions, the arduous journey, and the necessity of leaving loved ones behind mitigated against large-scale permanent migration; hence, migration was seasonal and not permanent. Though the Dutch Leeward islanders seem to have filled this seasonal gap on St. Kitts in the 1840s and early 1850s, either fewer Kittitians went to Trinidad and Guyana in the 1850s—making the Dutch Leeward islanders superfluous—or else fewer Dutch Leeward islanders were able to make a living on the island and so returned home.

100 Land returns submitted to the West Indian Royal Commission of 1897 showed that the estates occupied 70% of the total land area of St. Kitts and 62% of Nevis. Uncultivable land made up 30% and 25%, respectively, of each island's land area. *West India Royal Commission*, 1897, "Memorial of statistics," 211.

101 Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of the Caribbean*, 73.

Conclusion

It is possible to say with a fair degree of certainty that the number of slaves who escaped from the three Dutch Leewards islands in the 1840s and 1850s—the period of time in which most of the escapes occurred—was never higher than a few percent yearly, at best. When estimates for manumissions and the number of slaves sold, illegally or legally, are factored in, it would have been expected that the population would have been even lower than it actually was (see Figure 1)—approximately 1688 for St. Maarten, 1088 for St. Eustatius and 611 for Saba.[102] This means that on average only one or two dozen enslaved people may have made a bid for freedom in any given year, and a number of these returned to their native islands within a short time. Even so, these escapes had an important psychological effect on both the slaves and their owners, as the numerous letters the Leeward islanders sent to the governor in Curacao show. This, in turn, suggests that even if a fair number of slaves did leave the islands, they returned. Thus, they moved as seasonal workers across the islands, much as was the case in post-emancipation settings in the British islands; only in the Dutch case these movements actually occurred pre-emancipation.[103]

This article has suggested that, by contrast, the great majority of enslaved people on the Dutch Leeward islands chose to either stay enslaved or else return to lives of slavery. They did so for several reasons. Economics was one clear reason. The economies of the nearby islands, particularly St. Kitts, both pulled enslaved people to, and pushed them away from, these same islands. As we have seen, when Kittitians refused to work on their old plantations and instead were lured

102 These figures are based upon a model in which the average births and deaths for each island for the years in which these numbers are available are projected, after factoring in the known manumissions, documented escapes, and sales of slaves. This method is necessarily rough because there is no consistent sequential data. Nevertheless, it provides a general picture of the population trends.

103 The other option—that they were replaced by new slaves—is highly unlikely. The importation of slaves from Africa was prohibited and as one inhabitant of St. Eustatius testified in response to a question about the import of illegal slaves onto the islands, 'it's too small a place and everyone would know'. *Tweede Rapport der Staatscommissie benoemd bij koninklijk besluit van 29 november 1853*. The proximity of the British islands and the Royal Navy which was ever vigilant in patrolling for illegal slave traders meant that the likelihood of there being any meaningful number of slaves brought onto the Dutch Leeward islands was slim, at best. The increasing restrictions on selling slaves between the Dutch West Indian islands made intracolonial transfers cumbersome. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Roitman, "Land of Hope and Dreams," 386–387.

by higher wages to Trinidad and Guyana, Dutch Leeward islanders filled the gap. They escaped to the British islands between 1844 and 1852 to supply much-needed labor. The availability of seasonal employment on the neighboring islands secured for these Dutch islanders a place to stay, likely with family and friends and, quite possibly fed into a sense of collective Leeward islanders social belonging. Yet, not surprisingly, when wages on the nearby islands dropped, fewer Dutch Leeward islanders journeyed to the British islands.

But other factors also played a role. There were certainly attempts to keep enslaved people from escaping, but they were largely ineffective. The colonial government, for instance, was uninterested in helping the islanders prevent their slaves from escaping. A petition was made by eleven slave owners from St. Eustatius (who said they comprised three-quarters of the slave owners on the island) asking for an armed boat to patrol the seas around the island. The petition went to the governor-general in Paramaribo, but it seems that in the end no action was taken.[104] Due to this governmental disinterest, a corps of mounted volunteers was set up in St. Eustatius in 1840 to stop slaves from fleeing. This did not help. In the five months after the installation of this volunteer corps, 22 slaves from St. Eustatius escaped to St. Kitts.[105]

Thus, it seems that most of the enslaved people chose to stay where they were because of the way in which slavery functioned on the Dutch islands, particularly St. Maarten after 1848, where slavery was, *de facto*, abolished. There was little reason to go elsewhere when one was, more or less, free already. Moreover, conditions might even have been better for them on their islands, even if they were still officially enslaved. Slaves on the Dutch Leeward islands had relative leeway to leave the plantations on which they were enslaved, and could also often sell what they grew or produced to make extra money. Running away to French St. Martin or the British islands meant no access to land on which to grow provisions, produce crops for sale, or build a place to live on. This is not to mention that there was a clear and reasonable, though erroneous, expectation that slavery would soon be ended on the Dutch islands anyway.

Lastly, enslaved people on the Dutch islands often chose the certainty of a life they knew and the familiarity and support networks of their friends and families rather than a life of insecurity and hardship—hardship possibly equal to or greater than that which they knew on the Dutch islands—as free laborers

104 NL-HaNA, Gouverneur-Generaal der Nederlandse West-Indische Bezittingen, 1.05.08.01, inv. nr. 523, 23 May 1841.

105 Ibid.

in other territories, especially Trinidad and Guyana. It seems, then, that the slaves of the Dutch Windward islands, in general, did not desire freedom at any cost, so to speak. Instead, they longed for freedom on their own terms. They wanted freedom, but with security, and this meant freedom in the place in which they lived, with their families and friends close by. This, then, meant choosing to either continue or return to their lives as enslaved, though semi-autonomous, laborers in a place known to them rather than be free in an unknown place, probably with the hope that full emancipation would soon be enacted. Freedom without their friends and family in familiar surroundings was often too high a price to pay.