

Managing “Property”: The Colonial Order of Things within Jamaican Probate Inventories

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Abstract

Probate inventories helped to support the established social and economic order in colonial Jamaica. These documents were part of the legal process of winding up an estate after a death and presented an account of personal possessions that had belonged to a decedent. They facilitated the transfer of property to heirs and identified those parts of an estate that were available for the repayment of debts. The inventories contain lists of enslaved people, representing them as a type of “property,” and so these documents form a major part of the archive of Jamaican slavery. This article explores the practices, aims, and assumptions of the people who produced the inventories, developing our understanding of slaveholder culture in the British Caribbean and of the bureaucratic and accounting techniques that facilitated slave management.

Keywords

Jamaica – British Caribbean – slaveholders – probate inventories – archives – property

Probate inventories represent a fairly typical of example of an important genre of written documentation. Like other forms of accountancy that facilitated the global expansion of European commerce and colonization, inventories were functional documents that aided the reinscription of an established order: they made things work. In British colonial Jamaica, between the late seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, an inventory presented a list of the personal possessions that had belonged to a recently deceased individual, ascribing a cash valuation to items in the list as well as presenting a sum total for the whole of the decedent's personal estate. It was drawn up as part of probate—the legal process of dealing with the property of a person who had died—by independent assessors acting on behalf of the executors of an estate or, in the case of people who died intestate (i.e.: without having left a will), its administrators. Such documents are a mainstay of the Jamaican colonial archive. At the Jamaican National Archives in Spanish Town, there are few collections of documents from the period of slavery as extensive as the collection of probate inventories.

An inventory identified property, and so made it easier to control. It facilitated the transfer of property between an owner and their heirs, and it identified those parts of an estate that were available for the repayment of debts owed by the deceased. Two obvious parts of its function were, first, to maintain the useful fiction that individual people could alienate parts of a wider material world of plants, animals, and things unto themselves, as items of personal property; and second, to maintain the established convention that property did not normally cease to be property when its owner ceased to live: it lived on—passed to new owners and down through generations. The early nineteenth-century Jamaican probate inventories that provide the focus for this article also gave form to the prevailing idea of New World slavery: that not only objects and animals but also (certain types of) people could be rendered as “property,” and that (other than in exceptional circumstances) enslaved people remained the “possessions” of someone or other, even when their erstwhile master or mistress was dead.

Historians have used the appraisals in inventories to reconstruct and evaluate the material culture of the past, to explore patterns of property ownership, business activity, consumption, debt, family networks, even crop yields. They have also used them to estimate the wealth of individuals or of groups. Alice Hanson Jones, for example, used probate inventories to estimate the wealth of the thirteen mainland colonies on the eve of the American Revolution, and our best estimates of eighteenth-century Jamaican wealth come from Trevor Burnard's painstaking research using vast numbers of these documents.¹ The inventories also allow us to study how knowledge about belongings and their value was produced, shared, and put to use. As Burnard's work with these documents indicates, they provide rich evidence of attitudes towards and representations of certain types of "property," including enslaved people, as well as of the social contexts within which such knowledge circulated. They can be read, therefore, as more than just records of personal wealth, financial values, and objects owned; they must be understood, too, as "significant material artefacts in their own right"—as examples of writing that "was not simply a commentary on what happened" but that was, in fact, "very much part of the action."²

¹ Alice Hanson Jones, *Wealth of a Nation to Be: The American Colonies on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Trevor Burnard, "Prodigious Riches': The Wealth of Jamaica before the American Revolution," *Economic History Review* 54, no. 3 (2001): 506-24; Burnard, *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America, 1650-1820* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), especially 157-210. For discussion of probate inventories as a source for colonial American history, see Gloria L. Main, "Probate Records as a Source for Early American History," *William and Mary Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (1975): 89-99; Peter Benes, ed., *Early American Probate Inventories* (Boston: Boston University, 1989); Gloria McCahon Whiting, "Race, Slavery, and the Problem of Numbers in Early New England: A View from Probate Court," *William and Mary Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2020): 405-40. For further examples of how these documents have been used by historians of Jamaica, see Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1972), 264-72; Douglas F. Mann, *Becoming Creole: Material Life and Society in Eighteenth-Century Kingston, Jamaica*, (PhD thesis, University of Georgia, 2005); Christine Walker, *Jamaica Ladies: Female Slaveholders and the Creation of Britain's Atlantic Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

² Trevor Burnard, "Collecting and Accounting: Representing Slaves as Commodities in Jamaica, 1674-1784," in Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall, eds., *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 177-191, quote ("significant...") at 191; Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26. See also Burnard, "Slave Naming Patterns: Onomastics and the Taxonomy of Race in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31, no. 3 (2001): 325-346.

These characteristics of probate inventories remind us that slavery's archive is not only a location of information but also a locus of power. Marisa Fuentes points out that the principal function of its generic documents (including its countless accounts and ledgers) was to sustain an inherently brutal system. As Stephanie Smallwood recognizes, such accounts mobilize oppressive "representational strategies" to support the daily practices of treating people as commodities. Typically, social historians have attempted to read this archive "against the grain"—to try to find information about, for instance, enslaved families, communities, health, or demography that was not part of the documents' original intended functions. Fuentes has tried to take this further, seeking to accentuate the presence of enslaved people in the archive, even when they are "not explicitly mentioned." Working creatively with the evidence, she and other scholars have sought to represent the experiences of enslaved people from the faintest of archival traces, even absences, attempting to do what Smallwood calls the "recuperative work of restoring to the enslaved the capacity for biography."³ However, other techniques of social and cultural history can also be used to interpret this archive—techniques aimed not principally at recuperating the life stories of enslaved people but at better understanding the violent system that trapped them. The anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler has described this as reading "along the archival grain," treating documents like the inventories as "active, generative substances with histories." In common with the techniques of the historical geographer Miles Ogborn, this approach considers such texts as "material objects, produced by political technologies" and embedded in real-world practices. It is also in tune with some recent work on the history of accounting, understanding it not simply in technical terms, as though it is a neutral

³ Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 11, 156; Stephanie E. Smallwood, "The Politics of the Archive and History's Accountability to the Enslaved," *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 117-32, 118, 126. See also Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14. Classic examples of Caribbean social and economic history using lists of enslaved people include B.W. Higman, *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica, 1807-1834* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Michael Craton, *Searching for the Invisible Man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

mode of information technology, but rather as a set of practices that served specific people within particular political and moral contexts.⁴

This article reads early nineteenth-century Jamaican probate inventories “along the archival grain.” It examines them as manifestations of a culture of slave ownership and as an important component within transatlantic, state-sanctioned systems of identifying and accounting for enslaved people as “property,” in other words within broad structures of “slave management.” It begins by identifying the inventories’ essential functions before examining the institutional and practical contexts of their creation, showing how the production of these documents required white colonists to assert control over the lives of enslaved people by producing formal legal documents that defined them as “property,” to be bequeathed, devised, sold, and seized. It asks how Jamaican probate inventories reflect the shared assumptions and affective dispositions of the men who made them, concluding with an analysis of how these documents can help us to understand an Anglo-Jamaican version of what Stoler calls colonial “common sense.”⁵

Probate and Personalty

In early nineteenth-century Jamaica, when executors presented a will to be proved, the law required that they arrange for the return of a “just inventory of the testator’s estate,” and it made the same arrangements for the estates of those who died intestate. The earliest surviving Jamaican inventories date from 1674. An act of the Jamaican legislature defined them as an essential part of probate in

⁴ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), quote at 1; Ogborn, *Indian Ink*, 276. On accountancy and slavery, see Richard K. Fleischman, David Olroyd, and Thomas N. Tyson, “Monetising Human Life: Slave Valuations on US and British West Indian Plantations,” *Accounting History* 9, no. 2 (2004): 35-62; Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁵ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 3.

1711; and more than a century later the Attorney General of Jamaica confirmed that it remained standard practice in the colony to create an inventory for every estate that went through probate.⁶

The 1711 law provided a clear rationale for requiring executors to return “appraisements” of personal property (personalty), noting that, because it was considered necessary by many colonists to send their children to Great Britain for education, many such children had “considerably suffered in their estates,” losing parts of their distant property in the Caribbean due to a lack of accurate records. This is a problem that can only have worsened as the colony became more prosperous later in the century. Whether or not they were receiving a British education, Jamaican heirs, particularly those in a position to inherit plantations, were often absentees—their large family fortunes, wrought from sugar and slavery, having allowed them to move away from the dangers and discomforts of life in a tropical colony to reside in the British Isles. The preamble to the legislation also noted that sometimes executors died in possession of estates, which could then fall into the hands of new executors or administrators who were unable to identify the testator’s property. Heirs could then discover their property “very much wasted and impaired,” and in some cases be “entirely ruined, notwithstanding that their parents have died possessed of very large personal estates.” This was another problem that must have continued in the years that followed. Jamaica had a well-earned reputation as a sickly country: a place with a rapid turnover of population, in which estates in probate could easily fall into the hands of “strangers.”⁷

⁶ Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town, Inventories, 1B/11/3 (JAI); *The Laws of Jamaica: Comprehending all the Acts in Force Passed between the Thirty-Second Year of the Reign of King Charles the Second and the Thirty-Third Year of the Reign of King George the Third*. vol. 1 (Spanish Town: Alexander Aikman, 1802), 118-19: 10 *Anne*, xviii, 3 November 1711 (“An act for the better securing the estates and interests of orphans and creditors; and to oblige executors to give security, and to return appraisements into the secretary’s office of this island”); Parliamentary Papers 1826-7 (559) XXIV, “Commissioners of Enquiry into the Administration of Criminal and Civil Justice in the West Indies: Jamaica,” 29 June 1827, 69. The commissioners were in Jamaica between March and July of 1825, and between December 1825 and February 1826. In answer to one of their questions, the Attorney General confirmed that inventories were a regular part of probate.

⁷ *Laws of Jamaica*. vol. 1 (1802), 10 *Ann*, xviii. On absentees and demography, see Trevor Burnard, “Passengers Only: The Extent and Significance of Absenteeism in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica,” *Atlantic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2004): 178-195; Burnard, “A Failed Settler Society: Marriage and Demographic Failure in Early Jamaica,” *Journal of Social History* 28, no. 1 (1994): 63-82; Burnard,

Finally, the preamble to the 1711 legislation stated that an inventory was of essential value to creditors, especially British merchants, who advanced capital to colonists on the island but, when those borrowers died, found it impossible to discover any record of the property from which they could hope to “recover the value” of their loans. Significantly, the Act noted that this lack of information was harmful not only to those individuals who had advanced credit but also to Jamaican “trade in general,” because of the “discredit it brings upon the inhabitants here.” That disincentive to investors was also a discouragement to settlement, because to settle land and do business in Jamaica required capital, which usually meant access to loans. Creating or buying a sugar estate required such a huge capital outlay that few would-be planters could set up in business without borrowing, and they also depended on credit when purchasing enslaved African laborers from British merchant ships. Local and transatlantic systems of credit therefore underwrote a Jamaican economy built on sugar and slavery, as it grew during the middle decades of the eighteenth century as well as during a period of continued profitability that lasted into the nineteenth century. The legislation making inventories mandatory for probate in Jamaica was, therefore, one important part of wider legal and economic infrastructures that aimed to support the prosperity of colonists and reassure their creditors.⁸

Only the estates of those free adult residents of the colony who were eligible to make a will were inventoried, which excluded children and married women. The generally paltry possessions of the enslaved majority, who made up about 90 percent of the overall population, were therefore never enumerated in such documents. Some heirs and executors are also likely to have evaded or neglected a bureaucratic process that entailed financial expense.⁹ Nonetheless, the many thousands

“The COUNTRY Continues Sicklie’: White Mortality in Jamaica, 1655–1780,” *Social History of Medicine* 12, no. 1 (1999): 45-72.

⁸ *Laws of Jamaica*, vol. 1 (1802), 10 *Anne*, xviii; Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*. vol. 1 (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), 533-4.

⁹ Responsibility for the property of children who died fell to parents or guardians. In this period, the law empowered husbands to claim responsibility for the property of their wives. It seems probable that the friends or relations of poor people, who died with few possessions and no significant debts to recoup, would have sought to evade the process of probate, particularly if the deceased had not prepared a will. The Island Secretary’s Office charged nearly £2 currency for the various official forms

of Jamaican inventories recorded by the Secretary's Office and archived at Spanish Town represent the estates of a wide multitude of people: from widows and lowly sugar-estate employees to the wealthiest plantocrats and merchants.

The inventories were functional texts about things (broadly defined) and their values (narrowly defined). Each of these documents was unique, in the sense that it delineated the particular property of a specific individual; but in essence all inventories had to be similar. They were generic documents that had to be easy to read and use. They conformed to a rubric, beginning with a formulaic preamble in which the deceased was named. Then came lists of property, generally in the style of an account, with figures in pounds, shillings, and pence expressed in local currency, all enumerated and neatly inscribed on the right-hand side of the page, opposite the descriptions of the items in question. By the early nineteenth century there was a usual sequence: enslaved people were listed first, followed by livestock, household effects, and other moveable items, with cash, investments, and debts owed to the deceased coming last. Not every estate contained property under each of those headings, and there were numerous deviations from the norm, particularly in shorter inventories. But even those were presented in the style of accounts, with periodic subtotals appearing in a right-hand column. Each document ended with a statement of the total value of the inventoried estate.

Jamaican probate inventories were defined by law as appraisals of "all and singular the goods and chattels, rights and credits" of the deceased. In other words, they were expressly concerned with personal property; and it is very rare for them to reveal any substantive details about real estate in the form of land or buildings. The direction to appraise "rights and credits" led to the inclusion of recorded debts owed to the deceased, but appraisers were not required to list liabilities, and so did not mention debts that the deceased might have owed to others. As such, inventories are not statements of the total value or equity of an estate. Instead, their clear function was to offer an

required for probate. There were also additional charges, including that for recording the will, which increased at a rate of 2s 6d for each legal sheet copied. Inventories were recorded at a rate of 1s 8d per sheet. JAI; "Commissioners," 266, 273.

itemized statement of personal wealth for the use of executors or administrators working on behalf of heirs or beneficiaries.¹⁰ Part of the work of an executor was to clear the estate of debts, which they usually did by releasing capital from the personal estate (i.e.: calling in loans or selling off property). Executors were known sometimes to embezzle from estates; appraisers ignored or missed items (especially those of very low value); and relatives or creditors could help themselves to property before the estate was inventoried.¹¹ Nonetheless, probate inventories must have been useful documents for colonists in Jamaica, who sacrificed their time and took great trouble to make and record them over a span of several generations. And whatever information these documents may have withheld from contemporaries, the surviving evidence they contain allows us to make sense of how a broad range of the free inhabitants of colonial Jamaica categorized, represented, and evaluated personal property.

That work of categorization, representation, and evaluation was defined by strict rules and solemn ritual. It was organized from the administrative capital of Jamaica, Spanish Town, the island's second largest town (after the port of Kingston, which lay some twelve miles to the east) and the site of the legislative assembly, the Governor's mansion, and the island's major courts. Those included the Court of Ordinary, under the authority of the Governor and with the Island Secretary as its clerk, which was responsible for all aspects of probate.¹²

The people empowered to play a part in the process of probate were identified by law and by common conventions. An early eighteenth-century act of the Jamaican legislature barred Jews and black or mixed-race men from working as clerks in the Island Secretary's Office, which ensured

¹⁰ By the 1820s, there was standardized template wording for all of the legal documents required for the creation of an inventory. "Commissioners of Enquiry," 270-71.

¹¹ Long, *History of Jamaica*. vol. 2, 12. One eighteenth-century commentator recorded his own exaggerated complaint that the typical executor was unscrupulous and often only arranged for an appraisal of property after "embezzling every article he possibly can with secrecy." J. B. Moreton, *West India Customs and Manners* (London: J. Parsons, 1793), 70. On these and other shortcomings of appraisals, see also John Bedell, "Archaeology and Probate Inventories in the Study of Eighteenth-Century Life," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31, no. 2 (2000): 223-45, at 229, 238.

¹² See Long, *History of Jamaica*, vol. 1, 9, 26, 82; J. Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1823), 146-47; "Commissioners," 13, 69-70.

that the process of recording and filing wills and inventories was managed exclusively by Christian white men.¹³ Executors, appointed by testators in their wills to administer their estates, could be either men or women, and there was no formal bar on people of color performing these duties. Most executors were white men; but some men nominated their wives, single women sometimes appointed other women, and the few black or mixed-race people whose estates went through probate had often chosen other free people of color to take on the responsibility.¹⁴ These represented often fateful choices about whom to entrust with property at a vulnerable moment. Jamaican executors assumed responsibility for property that was more often than not tangled in complicated webs of credit and debt.¹⁵ Among their responsibilities was the nomination of two appraisers who would be tasked with the job of creating an inventory. Appraisers were, with few exceptions, white men who had been neighbors of the deceased.¹⁶ We can assume, given the nature of their duties, that appraisers had to be literate, with arithmetical and accounting skills along with a working knowledge of local prices.

The two appraisers did most of the work of creating inventories. A writ (known as a *dedimus*) named them and empowered two magistrates to administer oaths to them, requiring appraisers to promise to “well and truly and according to the best of their judgement and consciences” create an accurate record of the personal property of the deceased at the point at which he or she had died. Simultaneously, the Court of Ordinary created a warrant of appraisement requiring the appraisers to act “in His Majesty’s name” to make an inventory of the property shown to them by the executor or administrator of the estate, or which they otherwise knew had belonged to the deceased at the end

¹³ “Commissioners,” 14.

¹⁴ JAI. Administrators, appointed to take care of intestate estates, were also usually men, although widows frequently administered the estates of their deceased husbands.

¹⁵ The planter-historian Edward Long commented that white settlers viewed the ubiquity of debt as a fact of colonial life. See Long, *History of Jamaica*, vol. 2, 266.

¹⁶ There is evidence of rare exceptions when free men of color or women were appointed as appraisers. For instance, in 1828 the Montego Bay slaveholder and merchant John Manderson, a free man of color, appraised the property of John Rose Palmer, a prominent white man who had recently died at Rose Hall sugar estate. Another exception was the appointment of Sarah Cox Blackford to appraise the property of Fairlie Christie in 1812. JAI, vol. 114 (1828), John Rose Palmer; vol. 121 (1812), Fairlie Christie.

of his or her life. On completion of their task, these inventory makers returned the warrant of appraisement, along with a signed and sealed copy of the inventory, to the Island Secretary's Office.¹⁷

In most cases, appraisers appear to have been of broadly similar social standing and occupation to the deceased, and in the tight-knit communities of colonial Jamaica it is likely that they were well known to those who appointed them. When George Plowright, a plantation overseer from western Jamaica, died in 1809, his personal possessions were appraised by two fellow plantation managers. The personal possessions of Richard Oulton, another white plantation manager who died at around the same time, were appraised by a local carpenter and by the supervisor of the parish workhouse. When a cooper working for a salary on a sugar estate in the parish of St James died in 1825, his property was appraised by two white plantation managers.¹⁸

White men of the social elite tended to appraise the estates of other elite white men.¹⁹ This is well illustrated in the case of one of the wealthiest sugar planters of the early nineteenth century, Simon Taylor. Following Taylor's death in 1813, because his property was spread over several parishes in different parts of Jamaica, separate inventories identified and evaluated his estate in each parish. In the parish of St Thomas-in-the-East, the location of two of Taylor's large sugar plantations, the appraisers were Kenneth Macpherson and Peter Robertson, two prominent local slaveholders. Macpherson owned a rural property called Moffat, along with 80 enslaved people, in the Blue Mountain division of St Thomas-in-the-East, and served as an officer in the local militia. Robertson

¹⁷ These documents were later transcribed into the large leather-bound volumes of about 300 folio pages that now make up the JAI series.

¹⁸ JAI, vol. 115 (1810), George Plowright; vol. 115 (1810), Richard Oulton; vol. 141 (1825), William Mathie. A plantation overseer was the senior white manager on a property and of similar social standing to a skilled white craftsman, such as a cooper, carpenter, blacksmith or mason (or indeed of a salaried official, such as the supervisor of a workhouse). Lower-ranking managers, known as bookkeepers, were in a lowlier occupation but nonetheless part of the same broad peer group.

¹⁹ In formal documents like those associated with the creation of an inventory, most white men were named along with their occupation (e.g.: "Thomas Stennett, Carpenter"), whereas white men of the social elite took the appellation "Esquire." Evidence from a sample of 60 inventories for the estates of men identified as "Esquire" indicates that the majority of appraisers of such estates were also "Esquires." The triennial sample of inventories from the parish of St James covered the years 1807 to 1834 and was taken from JAI, vols. 108 to 150.

owned the nearby Weybridge sugar estate, along with an enslaved workforce of over 100 people. He was a magistrate who also held the high rank of Major General in the island militia and had, like Taylor himself, once represented his home parish as a member of the House of Assembly.²⁰ Thomas Addison and Robert William Harris, who appraised Taylor's estate in St Mary, owned or managed land and slaves in the parish and were magistrates.²¹ James Dick, one of the men responsible for appraising Taylor's property in St Andrew, was a Kingston merchant, and so too it seems was his co-assessor, Charles Oswin. Both were prominent men within the elite social networks of Kingston and Spanish Town, as well as long-standing associates of the Taylor family.²²

We do not know precisely how appraisers went about their work. The structure of some inventories appears to reflect the movement of the two men through houses, room by room; but it is likely that, as well as viewing property for themselves, they relied heavily on the knowledge provided by executors and administrators. White managers and overseers sometimes helped, as revealed by the comment in one inventory that the cattle on a property were "stated by the overseer to be so wild at present that they cannot be collected to be valued."²³ Usually appraisers' work was more straightforward, and occasionally they found all they were looking for in one small space. When he died in 1816, William Lawrence, a plantation overseer, had few worldly goods beyond two horses and tack, a portmanteau and trunk, and his clothes. Most of his personal items, valued together at about £55, are likely to have been found in a single building, perhaps even inside a single room on

²⁰ JAI, vol. 123 (1814), Simon Taylor; *Jamaica Almanac*, 1812, Returns of Givings in for 1811, 162, 167; *Jamaica Almanac*, 1813, 181, 185; John Roby, *Members of the Assembly of Jamaica, from the Institution of that Branch of the Legislature to the Present Time* (Montego Bay: Alex Holmes, 1831), 73.

²¹ *Jamaica Almanac*, 1812, Returns of Givings in for 1811, 128; *Jamaica Almanac*, 1816, Returns of Givings in for 1815, 10; *Jamaica Almanac*, 1813, 149-50.

²² Dick was connected to the Kingston merchant house Dick, Orr and Clark. He borrowed money from Taylor's relative, Robert Taylor. See Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library, London, Taylor Family papers (ICS), XIII/D/5, James Dick to Robert Taylor, Kingston, 14 March 1812. Charles Oswin, the other assessor for Taylor's property in St Andrew, was also well known to Robert and Simon Taylor. See ICS, XIII/A/208, Robert Taylor to Simon Taylor, London, 9 January 1805.

²³ JAI, vol. 131 (1819), John McIntosh Senior.

the plantation where he had worked.²⁴ Even when the deceased had owned land, it was usual for appraisers to find personal property in a confined space. One Jamaican widow left behind jewelry, mahogany furniture, and clothes, as well as four slaves on “a lott of land with a shop and small dwelling house thereon.”²⁵

The longer inventories of larger estates required more work. The owners of plantations typically owned many more possessions than other colonists, dispersed over a wide area. A single plantation represented several hundred acres for appraisers to explore, encompassing a village of rudimentary buildings for enslaved workers, a central works area, storehouses, fields of crops, pastures, dwelling houses for white staff and, sometimes, a “great house.”²⁶ One fairly typical planter’s inventory listed 157 enslaved people, followed by livestock, a truck and two carts, plantation stores and utensils, and household furniture.²⁷ Some planters had property scattered across more than one plantation, and the very large estates of planter grandees were even more complex, representing a near impossible task for appraisers. The property of John Cunningham, for example, was located at multiple rural properties and a peri-urban house in north-western Jamaica. His inventory listed nearly 2000 enslaved people and calculated his personal wealth at almost £200,000. The appraisers of Simon Taylor’s estate created an even larger set of documents, including lists of 2248 enslaved people. They travelled to multiple locations, some of them more than 100 miles apart and at opposite ends of the island, trying to capture an account of personal property within Taylor’s vast and shifting plantation empire.²⁸

²⁴ JAI, vol. 128 (1816), William Lawrence. All cash values are stated in Jamaican currency: £1.4 currency was worth £1 sterling.

²⁵ JAI, vol. 108 (1807), Mary Fivey.

²⁶ On these places, see B.W. Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed: Plantation Maps and Plans of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2001); Louis P. Nelson, *Architecture and Empire in Jamaica* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Christer Petley, “Plantations and Homes: The Material Culture of the Early Nineteenth-Century Jamaican Elite,” *Slavery & Abolition* 35, no. 3 (2014): 237-57.

²⁷ JAI, vol. 128 (1816), Jacob Graham.

²⁸ See Petley, “Plantations and Homes,” 437-457.

Such men engaged in what was considered a sacrosanct business. The various writs and rituals required to create a probate inventory involved the portentous invocation of royal authority, the swearing of oaths, and the careful presentation of documents. These reminded appraisers not only to perform their tasks honestly but also to recognize that they were doing them as a public duty. The stern legal language was characteristic of how the colonial state went about protecting and endorsing the rights of one broadly defined group of imperial subjects: free property-holders. The ritual elements underlined the great importance attached to the freedoms and rights of those people within the colonial culture of British Jamaica whilst also affirming bonds of reciprocal duty between white men, who were the only colonists permitted to perform a full range of public roles. By creating a probate inventory, therefore, appraisers not only carried out a commonplace public service but also came together in a formalized and state-sanctioned set of practices that buttressed white minority rule on the island. It was one of many such quotidian sets of practices that reinscribed and visibly enacted institutionalized white privilege, and it is significant that one of the most common jobs of Jamaican inventory makers was to examine, evaluate, and appraise non-white people as items of “property.”²⁹

Appraising People as “Property”

Probate controlled the legal transfer of property at death in a society in which property was deeply precious as a source of wealth and a signifier of status, often subject to competing claims, and understood to exist in manifold different forms. In Jamaica, enslaved people were a distinct form of property, for several reasons. One was that they were treated both as personal and real property in

²⁹ On the institutions and rituals that facilitated the reinscription of white male solidarity in the Anglophone Caribbean, see Christer Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica: Colonial Society and Culture during the Era of Abolition* (London: Routledge, 2009); David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics, and Identity during the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and his Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

local law, which derived from earlier Barbadian statutes. English colonists in seventeenth-century Barbados had been at pains to define enslaved people as a form of real property, synonymous with freehold land, mainly because the law offered better protection against seizure by creditors of real than of personal property. Jamaican law deviated from the Barbadian precedent by being more favorable to creditors. A 1684 act of the Jamaican Assembly stated that enslaved people could be sold or seized for the payment of debts, in the same manner as “all other goods and chattels,” defined, therefore, for these purposes, as personalty.³⁰ But in other respects, as in Barbados, enslaved people in Jamaica were defined as real property: they could be mortgaged, entailed (bequeathed, with their children and descendants, to specified heirs over several generations), or form part of a dowry settlement. Moreover, in order to qualify to vote in elections for members of the Assembly, white freeholders with plantations had to own not only land and buildings but also “negro or other slaves thereon”—a clause that conflated slaveholding with land-owning, highlighting a common principle in the Caribbean sugar islands that plantation lands were productively settled only when populated with enslaved workers.³¹

Jamaican lawmakers were ultimately ambivalent about whether to treat enslaved people as realty or personalty. They defined them, therefore, as both, torn between countervailing desires: on the one hand to protect their property, keeping plantation estates productive and intact; and on the other to secure the interests of creditors, and so help assure the supply to colonists of borrowed capital. Sometimes those interests were at odds in intricate ways, such as when a third-party creditor

³⁰ Edward B. Rugemer, *Slave Law and the Politics of Resistance in the Early Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 49-50.

³¹ *Laws of Jamaica*. vol. 2 (1802), 263: 21 *Geo iii*, xv, 30 December 1780. This qualification remained in force until 1830 and differed from English laws that associated freehold rights solely with land and rents. The definition of enslaved people as a type of realty is further illustrated in the categories assigned to claims for compensation by slaveholders following the Emancipation Act of 1833. These were classified according to the nature of property claims on enslaved people, the most straightforward being “owner-in-fee” (i.e.: in fee-simple), along with nineteen other classifications, including “tenant-for-life,” “tenant-in-tail,” and “mortgagee.” Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington, and Rachel Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Appendix 1, 256.

tried to force the sale of enslaved workers on a mortgaged estate—a threat both to the income of the mortgage-holder and to the capital investment of the mortgage lender.³² Jamaican statutes sought to navigate between such competing concerns. One result is that we find brief descriptions and careful evaluations of enslaved people both in the property deeds, alongside sales and conveyances of land, and in the probate inventories, alongside lists of plate, furniture, and plantation equipment. The crucial point with regard to inventories, however, was explained by the Jamaican planter-historian Bryan Edwards in 1793: “in respect of debts, slaves are considered as chattels,” and executors and appraisers were duty bound “to inventory them like other chattels.”³³

Edwards’s comment is a clear explanation as to why enslaved people appear in inventories. It also expressed some of the fundamental assumptions of the culture that produced these documents. Reading the inventories along the archival grain allows us to acquire a deeper understanding of that “common sense” but also requires us to understand its often disturbing logic—confronting what Fuentes aptly terms the “corruptive nature” of slavery’s archive.³⁴ Jamaican probate inventories were structured by distressing equivalencies and comparisons, drawn between money, objects, animals, and people.

Most early nineteenth-century Jamaican inventories contain lists of enslaved people. They show that slaveholding was ubiquitous amongst the wealthy—e.g.: the owners of sugar estates and of other types of large landholdings—and common across the rest of free society, with many craftsmen, shopkeepers, widows, free people of color, and white plantation employees in possession of slaves.³⁵ Pages of lists of enslaved people form the major part of inventories of planters’ estates. The start of a list of 225 “females,” women and girls, forming part of the inventory list of 443

³² See *Laws of Jamaica*, vol. 2 (1802), 306-11: 23 *Geo iii*, xiv, 21 December 1782 (“An act to remedy the evils arising to mortgagees and mortgagers, by the removal of slaves, mules, cattle, stock, and plantation utensils, under mortgage, and levied on junior writs of *venditioni*; and for other purposes”).

³³ Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*. vol. 1 (London: John Stockdale, 1793), 222. Deeds are held in the Island Records Office, Twickenham Park, Jamaica.

³⁴ Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 5.

³⁵ Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica*, 22-24.

enslaved laborers living on Simon Taylor's Llanrumney estate in the parish of St Mary, is typical: "Cecily—[£]50; Flora—70; Old Olive [no value]; Kitty—80; Bess [no value]; Amba—50; Penelope—50; Sally [no value]." Enslaved workers usually represented the single most valuable form of property in planter inventories. But other colonists also invested heavily in slaves. We find, for instance, "a negro man named Tom £180," followed by "John £180," "George £150" and, finally, "Dick £60," at the top of a carpenter's inventory: four enslaved men representing about half the overall value of the appraisal and whom this particular tradesman may have trained to work on carpentry jobs.³⁶ The 22 enslaved people listed in the inventory of Samuel Moran's estate were valued altogether at £2665, while his "twenty acres of land & house" were valued at £300. It is possible that Moran derived an independent income from these enslaved workers by hiring their labor to other colonists, a common practice among smaller settlers. One recent study estimates that as many as one in ten enslaved people in the British Caribbean were hired out in this way during the final quarter of the eighteenth century, usually to perform dangerous and arduous jobs on sugar plantations; and enumerations of debts due for "negro labour" or "jobbing labour" in many early nineteenth-century Jamaican inventories indicate that this remained common. This practice, commonly known as "jobbing" and described by Nicholas Radburn and Justin Roberts as "one of the most ruthlessly exploitative forms of slavery in the Atlantic world," was an essential element of the Jamaican economy and of colonial society. It allowed slaveholders to convert the labor of the people they held as chattel into cash or credit, and it provided a means for even landless slaveholders to secure a substantial independent income, along with the opportunity to accumulate significant wealth and so enhance their social status.³⁷

³⁶ JAI, vol. 123 (1814), Simon Taylor; vol. 115 (1810), John Mills.

³⁷ JAI, vol. 122 (1813), Samuel Moran; vol. 115 (1810), George Plowright ("negro labour"); vol. 128 (1816) Gabriel Gray ("jobbing labour"); Nicholas Radburn and Justin Roberts, "Gold versus Life: Jobbing Gangs and British Caribbean Slavery," *William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2019): 223-56, quote at 227. The eighteenth-century Jamaican diarist and slaveholder Thomas Thistlewood derived income from hiring out his enslaved workers as sugar-estate laborers, and as domestic servants to urban whites. See Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*. On jobbing labor, see also Heather Cateau, "The New 'Negro' Business: Hiring in the British West Indies, 1750-1810," in Alvin O. Thompson, ed.,

It is hard to know precisely how appraisers evaluated enslaved people. On large estates, perhaps the workforce was somehow “paraded past” them, although it is also conceivable that the appraisers relied more on the knowledge of plantation managers, including pre-existing written records.³⁸ Certainly the listing of enslaved people by appraisers in probate inventories was one among many forms of record-making whereby enslaved people were counted as units of labor and registered as items of property: a characteristic feature of slavery in the Atlantic world. As Stephanie Smallwood has argued, “the traumatic echo of commodification” reverberated through that far-flung system, beginning in the West African slave markets, where slave-traders routinely used forms of violence—physical, social, epistemological—to deracinate captives from communities, seeking to transform them into atomized commodities. Traders aimed to impose a kind of “social annihilation” that turned daughters, sons, mothers, fathers, husbands or wives into individualized and saleable units of labor.³⁹ In the New World, enslaved people did what they could to carve out new social lives for themselves within the grinding pressures of Caribbean slavery; but the countervailing efforts of slaveholders to impose alienation and commodification unavoidably shaped their lives. The writing of a probate inventory was one of the moments in which the powerful idea that enslaved people were a type of personal “property” was most starkly re-instantiated and re-inscribed. It was a clear-cut moment, whether or not enslaved people were compelled to stand face-to-face with their appraisers. Drawing on their knowledge and experience of buying, selling, managing, or owning enslaved people, appraisers had to make a simple decision about each of the people they assessed—a decision in which the complex lives and social relations of enslaved people were relevant only in so far as they helped determine their value.

In the Shadow of the Plantation: Caribbean History and Legacy (Kinston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2002), 100-120.

³⁸ Fleischman, Olroyd, and Tyson, “Monetising Human Life,” 43.

³⁹ Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 7, 60. See also Sowande’ M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

Almost all enslaved people were valued in increments of £10 and occasionally of £5. Only very rarely were more fine-grained assessments made. It was an unusual break from convention, for instance, for the two appraisers creating an inventory in the parish of Clarendon to choose to value three out of the 75 enslaved people on the property at £19, and not to round those assessments up to £20.⁴⁰ The logic behind both the convention and such deviation is now not known. Neither is it clear why appraisers routinely listed enslaved people whom they considered to be of no monetary value to an estate. One possibility is that they knew the values they ascribed to enslaved people were, at least to some degree, subject to change, and subjective (e.g.: dangerously ill people might recover, or runaways return; and it was impossible to anticipate precisely what any potential buyer might pay). Another is that there was, by the early nineteenth century, an “agency” function to some inventories: in other words, distant inheritors, particularly of large numbers of enslaved people, might have looked to these lists not only as a source of information about the value of personalty but also as a comprehensive register of an enslaved workforce, containing summary information about each and every worker.⁴¹

Accounts of enslaved people within the inventories are much more detailed than accounts of any other type of “property.” By the early nineteenth century, enslaved people listed in inventories were individually identified by a name and a value, and occasionally by additional comments.⁴² Infants were listed with their mothers (e.g.: “Rosetta and her child”), presumably because they were either not weaned or were too young to be considered separately; but that was the only common exception to individualized evaluations, which, as Burnard notes, had not been general practice for

⁴⁰ JAI, vol. 123 (1814), William Ewbank.

⁴¹ As Burnard notes, it was only a secondary purpose of inventories to provide “agency information” to distant slaveholders during the mid-eighteenth century, when most Jamaican sugar planters lived on the island (Burnard, “Collecting and Accounting,” 188). A rise in rates of absenteeism meant that it probably became a more important part of their purpose during the early nineteenth century. By the time of emancipation about four-fifths of Jamaican sugar planters were absentees living in the British Isles. On the rise of absenteeism, see Petley, *Slaveholders in Jamaica*, 31.

⁴² The 1814 inventory of Robert Anderson, a plantation employee in St Thomas-in-the-East, is an extremely rare exception to this almost universal rule. The appraisers of his estate listed “two negro women and a female child,” valuing them collectively at £320. JAI, vol. 123 (1814), Robert Anderson.

inventory makers a century earlier and were not strictly necessary in order to appraise the overall value of a person's property.⁴³ Appraisers often, but not always, identified individual horses by color or age (e.g.: "chestnut," "grey," "sorrel," "old"), but only very rarely did they name them. They generally lumped livestock together for valuation (e.g.: "3 heifers £51," "4 sml steers £39," "4 hogs £10").⁴⁴ Enslaved people received more detailed attention from the appraisers, which conforms with Burnard's observation that the gap between enslaved people and animals (as well as other types of property) in the white Jamaican imagination was "distressingly small," but not non-existent.⁴⁵

One probable reason for the individualized treatment of enslaved people in the inventories was that differences in valuation could be so extreme from one enslaved person to another. Field hands valued at £100, £120, or £140 appear very frequently. The head driver at Taylor's largest sugar plantation, a man named Emanuel, was appraised at £300. That was an exceptionally high value, but there were a number of skilled men on most sugar estates valued at £200 or above. For instance, Frank, a carpenter at Etingdon plantation in the parish of Trelawny, was appraised at £230, and Joe, a mason at a different property in the same parish, at £200.⁴⁶ Towards the other extreme were people like Maria, appearing in a mariner's inventory and described as "old and crippled," and William, "an invalid" in the inventory of a Kingston widow: each was appraised at £10.⁴⁷ To make sense of those valuations in the context of the local material culture in which they were produced requires us to notice some of the disturbing equivalences it drew: between "an old gold watch" worth £10 and Maria or William; between the £300 valuation ascribed to Samuel Moran's "twenty acres of land & house" and Emanuel; or between the £150 annual salary owed to a plantation overseer and Lucy's Pompey, a man living on Hyde Hall sugar estate in the parish of Trelawny, who was also valued at

⁴³ JAI, vol. 123 (1814), Archibald Crow; Burnard, "Collecting and Accounting," 187.

⁴⁴ JAI, vol. 127 (1815), Nicholas Robson.

⁴⁵ Burnard, "Collecting and Accounting," 190. See also Philip D. Morgan, "Slaves and Livestock in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica: Vineyard Pen, 1750-1751," *William and Mary Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (1995): 47-76.

⁴⁶ JAI, vol. 123 (1814), Simon Taylor; vol. 123 (1814), Henry Shirley.

⁴⁷ JAI, vol. 123 (1814), Thomas Eades; vol. 123 (1814), Jane Orr.

£150.⁴⁸ What we learn from such comparisons is that, in cash terms, almost all enslaved people were worth a lot to Jamaican slaveholders. But as people—varied in gender, age, experience, skill, health, strength, rebelliousness, creativity, and countless other characteristics—some were considered to be of much greater value than others.

Appraisals of enslaved people reinforce Daina Ramey Berry’s observation that slaveholders were mainly interested in the value of enslaved people as commodities.⁴⁹ The appraisers’ individualized accounts may supply more detail about enslaved people than about other “possessions,” but only in ways intended to represent and evaluate people as a particular form of “property.” Even the names attributed to enslaved people in these documents are those imposed by slaveholders and plantation managers (and not those chosen, or necessarily even used, by enslaved people themselves).⁵⁰ Sometimes the children, women, and men in the lists were identified not only by name but also by role (e.g.: “carpenter,” “boilerman,” “field”), by their physical condition or age (e.g.: “able,” “sickly,” “old”), by noting whether they were African or “creole” (i.e.: survivors of the transatlantic slave trade or locally born), or with some note on their complexion (e.g.: “mulatto,” “sambo,” or “quadroon”). But only very rarely did appraisers note any precise ages or provide any further personal information.⁵¹ They were interested in family relationships only when mothers and infants were inseparable, or when a note about such relationships could help to identify an individual (e.g.: “Flora’s London,” as distinct from another man, also named London; “Lucy’s Pompey,” as

⁴⁸ JAI, vol. 122 (1813), Samuel Moran; vol. 115 (1810), Alexander Balcarres Hay (“gold watch”); vol. 115 (1810), George Plowright (“salary”); vol. 123 (1814), Henry Shirley (“Lucy’s Pompey”).

⁴⁹ Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017).

⁵⁰ Burnard, “Slave Naming Patterns.”

⁵¹ Simon Taylor’s inventories include examples of the ways in which work roles, physical condition, and appearance differentiated individuals within large cohorts of enslaved people. This involved a common shorthand to describe color (e.g.: “mto” for “mulatto” and “qn” for “quadroon”) as well as for slaveholders’ understandings of African groupings (e.g.: “cte” for “Coromantee” and “mdg” for “Mandingo”). The inventory of the estate of a widow from the parish of St James provided an unusual level of detail by listing enslaved people along with their years of age. See JAI, vol. 123 (1814), Simon Taylor; vol. 116 (1810), Ann Warren. On white creole ideas about distinctions of complexion, and the terms they used to describe those, see Long, *History of Jamaica*, vol. 2, 260-61.

distinct from “Penny’s Pompey”).⁵² This method of organizing information enhanced the “agency” function of these documents: helping to delineate the overall composition of a workforce, providing heirs with cursory remarks about every worker and with a brief rationale for each monetary evaluation. Burnard also argues, convincingly, that Jamaica’s active internal slave market provides an explanation for this atomization of enslaved communities in the inventory lists—that is, for the individualized naming, description, and pricing of people. This feature of the local colonial economy allowed heirs to choose to sell off their inheritance, and itemized inventories helped them see whether or not they were getting satisfactory prices for any enslaved people whom they chose to auction.⁵³ For the same reasons, it must also have helped executors seeking to sell enslaved people to clear debt.

It was impossible, however, even for these bald lists to represent enslaved people only as individualized commodities and eschew all aspects of social or political life within enslaved communities. It is apparent, for instance, that family attachments were known to whites and were at least one of the means they used to differentiate enslaved people; and there are other fleeting insights into the social connections of the people in the lists. Appraisers of Simon Taylor’s property in St Thomas-in-the-East listed the name of the head driver at Holland plantation as “Emanuel,” but also noted his Christian names: James Reid. Parish registers indicate that Reid had been baptized by the Anglican parish rector, a privilege that Taylor remarked was reserved for “the best negroes on almost all estates,” and that he claimed made them better disposed towards their work. The same inventory lists another enslaved man, John Welch, as “free by Mr S Taylor's will.”⁵⁴ Taylor had indeed

⁵² The men named London and Pompey were listed in the vast inventory of Henry Shirley, a planter who had owned sugar estates in western Jamaica with a combined workforce of nearly 1,000 enslaved people. The character of their relationships with Lucy and Penny are not defined. JAI, vol. 123 (1814), Henry Shirley.

⁵³ Burnard, “Collecting and Accounting,” 188, 190-91.

⁵⁴ JAI, vol. 123 (1814), Simon Taylor; Family History Centre, London, England, Copy Register of Baptisms, Marriages, Burials, St Thomas, Jamaica, vol. 1: 1708-1817, 20 November 1802; Cambridge University Library, Taylor and Vanneck-Arcedeckne Papers, 3A/1783/38, Simon Taylor to Chaloner Arcedeckne, Lyssons, 10 October 1783. Some other inventories also list names of enslaved people manumitted in wills. See, for instance, JAI, vol. 123 (1814), Smart Aldred.

directed that Welch, along with an enslaved woman named Becky McKay, should not only be manumitted but also allowed to “have any slaves which he or she deems & considers to be his or her own property”—another unusual but stark illumination of the complex disparities of status and power that divided enslaved communities and that connected a small minority of favored slaves to slaveholders.⁵⁵ Inventories can also contain glimpses of subversion or resistance. Charles, an enslaved man in the inventory of a free woman of color from the parish of St Thomas-in-the-Vale, was described as “runaway.” A woman identified as Sabina had “runaway 3 years” ago from one of Simon Taylor’s sugar estates; and a man named Titus had done likewise from the same property.⁵⁶ But despite such brief insights into the rare instances whereby some individuals escaped or evaded slavery, the inventories show that almost all enslaved people were trapped in the system and subject to commodification. Although John Welch and Becky McKay were apparently soon to be freed, even their names appear in the lists; and the names of self-emancipated people such as Charles, Sabina, or Titus were also recorded in these appraisals of “property.”

Probate was an anxious moment of reckoning in various ways. For the estates of deceased planters, most of which carried debts, it determined whether or not properties remained viable financial concerns. Planters in Jamaica considered their land valueless without enslaved workers,

⁵⁵ National Archives, Kew, England, Probate Records, 11/1548: Will of Simon Taylor, 2 December 1808, at f. 165. On hierarchies within enslaved communities on Caribbean sugar plantations, see Randy M. Browne, *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Justin Roberts, “The ‘Better Sort’ and the ‘Poorer Sort’: Wealth Inequalities, Family Formation and the Economy of Energy on British Caribbean Sugar Plantations, 1750-1800,” *Slavery & Abolition* 35, no. 3 (2014): 458-473. On relationships between slaveholders and the enslaved elite, including bequests and manumissions, see Walker, *Jamaica Ladies*, especially 154-57; Daniel Livesay, *Children of Uncertain Fortune: Mixed-Race Jamaicans in Britain and the Atlantic Family, 1733-1833* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018). In 1818, an inventory was made for the estate of John Welch, a free black man who had died in Kingston. His personalty was valued at £226 and included two enslaved people. It is plausible, though by no means certain, that this was the same John Welch who had been enslaved and then freed by Simon Taylor. JAI, vol. 131 (1818), John Welch.

⁵⁶ JAI, vol. 123 (1814), Isabella Coombs (Charles); Simon Taylor (Sabina, Titus). On the subversion of commodification and the day-to-day politics of plantation slavery, see Vincent Brown, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” *American Historical Review* 114 no. 5 (2009): 1231-1249; Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 113-124; Browne, *Surviving Slavery*.

who were “the sinews of a plantation,” “the *principal*, and the *principle*, of a planter’s wealth.”⁵⁷ But in probate, enslaved people were more vulnerable to sale or seizure than the land on which they were forced to labor. In this process, executors faced the challenges of extending loans or repaying lenders, and things could be taken out of their hands by insistent creditors willing to use the courts, as indicated by the blunt comment in one inventory: “negroes & stock taken & sold by the marshall.”⁵⁸ At the home of one deceased planter the appraisers found only eleven enslaved people, described as “invalids,” along with old and broken furniture. They recorded that the man’s widow had seized possession of 122 enslaved people, who were subject to a suit in the Court of Chancery, and that other items at her former husband’s plantation had been seized by the receiver of the court.⁵⁹ Most inventories were made before such wrangles began, and few contain information about whether or not estates were eventually passed intact to heirs. But it seems safe to assume that many enslaved people were forced to suffer as a consequence of the indebtedness of an erstwhile master or mistress, particularly during a period of economic crisis for Jamaican sugar planters in the early nineteenth century. By that time, metropolitan abolitionists certainly had a clear sense that “slave life and planter debt were intertwined,” as Nicholas Crawford notes.⁶⁰ Edwards pointed out that slaves in Jamaica were liable to be “sold by creditors, and made subject, in the course of administration by executors, to the payment of all debts both of simple contract and specialty.”⁶¹ For enslaved people, the creation of a probate inventory can therefore only have been a process redolent both with the indignity of objectification and the terror of uncertainty. In any case, it came at a moment of unusually intense vulnerability. The death of a slaveholder always led to the

⁵⁷ Morgan, “Slaves and Livestock,” 47; William Beckford, *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica*, vol. 1 (London: T. and J. Egerton, 1790), 173.

⁵⁸ JAI, vol. 128 (1816), John Ingram.

⁵⁹ JAI, vol. 121, (1812), Fairlie Christie.

⁶⁰ Nicholas Crawford, “‘In the Wreck of a Master’s Fortune’: Slave Provisioning and Planter Debt in the British Caribbean,” *Slavery & Abolition* 37, no. 2 (2016): 353-374, quote at 354. On the economic crisis of the early nineteenth century, see Ahmed Reid and David B. Ryden, “Sugar, Land Markets and the Williams Thesis: Evidence from Jamaica’s Property Sales, 1750–1810,” *Slavery & Abolition* 34, no. 3 (2013): 401-424.

⁶¹ Edwards, *History*, vol. 2, 148.

imposition of some new “owner;” but it also often presaged the unimaginable horror of seizure, sale, and separation.

Conclusion

Throughout the first four decades of the nineteenth century, we find people represented as property in the Jamaican colonial archive. They were most commonly represented there as chattel possessions. But even during the 1830s, as the British government deconstructed the system of slavery in its Caribbean colonies, enslaved people continued to appear as property in probate inventories. When it came into effect on 1 August 1834, the Emancipation Act freed only enslaved children under the age of six. In Jamaica, all other enslaved people became re-designated as “apprentices,” the majority of them bound to labor for their former masters or mistresses for six years, before the apprenticeship system came to an early end in 1838. The Act also provided cash compensation payments to slaveholders for each enslaved person they had owned. In an 1834 inventory of the estate of a woman in the Jamaican parish of St James, made days after the Act came into effect, we find: “Twelve apprentices amount of compensation unknown,” their labor valued at £10 each per year.⁶² Four years later, the inventory of the estate of Alexander Aikman Senior, a local plantation owner who had once been the official printer to the Governor and House of Assembly, included: “Amount of balance of monies in the hands of John Hall & Co of Liverpool arising from compensation money received by them.” That part of Aikman’s compensation for the 354 enslaved people he had once “owned” was more than £6100, nearly half the value of his personal estate.⁶³ Though no longer defined as *chattel*, therefore, records of the *rights* of former masters to the work of “apprentices” and of the cash *credit* those former masters claimed in compensation meant that

⁶² JAI, vol. 150 (1834), Ann Ricketts.

⁶³ JAI, vol. 153 (1838), Alexander Aikman.

people represented as forms of “property” continued to appear in this colonial archive, even after emancipation.

These lists were drawn up by white masters and copied out by the busy clerks in the Office of the Island Secretary, who intended to write only about property. Nonetheless, evidence about other matters also leaked into their lists. We find terse comments about family ties, manumissions, and runaways; about types of work, not only on plantations, but also on other rural properties, as well as in urban or maritime settings; about hierarchies of religious denomination, gender, age, skill, and “value” that differentiated enslaved people on a property or within the internal slave market. And we can assume that enslaved people well understood how their oppressors evaluated them as saleable commodities, and that they also knew the various ways in which that calculation of their “value” could shape their lives.⁶⁴ But despite this suggestive evidence about enslaved people, these documents offer more eloquent testimony about “indifference to violence against and the silencing of black lives.”⁶⁵

Reading these documents along the archival grain is part of a scholarly process of trying to expose and understand the indifference inherent in such writing. Stoler recalls that, when looking through official documents from the colonial archive, “one is easily blinded by their flattened prose and numbing dullness.”⁶⁶ But these were once live documents. Studying them recalls the process of acculturation that accompanies acts of atrocity: turning people into commodities—including representing them as names and numbers in a ledger—had to be learned and put into action. Making sense of that process requires a focus on practices of purposeful record-keeping within slaveholder culture. Perhaps it should also prompt us to consider whether, in trying to make sense of how early nineteenth-century slaveholders understood, saw, and represented enslaved people, scholars have focused their attention on the wrong kind of writing. Certainly, the mannered justifications of slavery

⁶⁴ On the uses of probate records for understanding the lives of enslaved people, see Whiting, “Race, Slavery, and the Problem of Numbers.” On enslaved people’s understanding of their perceived cash “value,” see Berry, *Price for their Pound of Flesh*, 2-3.

⁶⁵ Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 12.

⁶⁶ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 23.

in published proslavery polemics, or the narratives presented in the travel accounts and plantation journals produced by a small number of wealthy slaveholders, offer very different sorts of evidence to that found in the tens of thousands of probate inventories in the Jamaica Archives. Countless colonists, most of them slaveholders, helped create these commonplace legal instruments. The resulting documents were fundamental to the process of transferring property to new owners, and in “sustaining slavery’s social institutions and basic practices,” sharing qualities that the archaeologist Anne Yentsch attributes to other artefacts: “disclosing beliefs so fundamental that they were taken for granted” by those who made them—beliefs that formed “the bedrock of human social action.”⁶⁷

The process of probate, including the inventorying of enslaved people, was defined in Jamaican law, administered by local representatives of the imperial state, and carried out by ordinary men. It represents one of the ways in which slavery was institutionalized, routinized, and normalized. To make an inventory it was necessary to be part of a slaveholding community, bound together not necessarily by the direct experience of slaveholding (or even of slave management) but by a shared sense of group affinity and by modes of knowledge. In quite banal ways appraisers, administrators, and executors were brought together by their shared task, which necessitated the maintenance of an affective barrier between them and the enslaved people they “appraised.” Evaluating an enslaved child, woman, or man for the purposes of an inventory required a judgement of the monetary value of another human being that allowed little scope for sympathetic feeling.

Probate inventories—conventional ledgers, recorded by those relentless clerks’ pens and bookended by stultified officialese—were as important as any other tool within the complex technologies that made slavery work, and as such they shed light on the management of enslaved people in its broadest sense. They are direct evidence of how slave management worked in practice. The management of enslaved labor in British Caribbean colonies certainly involved quotidian personal encounters and negotiations. But systems of slave management were also heavily

⁶⁷ Fleischman, Olroyd, and Tyson, “Monetising Human Life,” 57; Anne E. Yentsch, *A Chesapeake Family and Their Slaves: A Study in Historical Archaeology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4.

dependent on identifying and valuing enslaved people in lists, and for the benefit of people whom they might never meet in person. Ultimately, therefore, Jamaican probate inventories offer some of the best available insights into a British Atlantic culture of slaveholding—a culture in which people, animals, and objects were so conflated that all could be listed together as “personalty” and sold off, together or one by one, to settle a debt.

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