The art of medicine
Exotic abortifacients and lost knowledge

In a moving passage in her magnificent 1705 Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium, naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717) recorded how the Indian and African slave populations in Surinam, then a Dutch colony, used the seeds of a plant she identified as the flos pavonis, literally “peacock flower”, as an abortifacient:

“The Indians, who are not treated well by their Dutch masters, use the seeds [of this plant] to abort their children, so that they will not become slaves like themselves. The black slaves from Guinea and Angola have demanded to be well treated, threatening to refuse to have children. ...They told me this themselves.”

Altogether European bioprospectors identified eight abortifacients used by Amerindians and African slaves living in the Caribbean in this period.

Merian’s passage is remarkable for several reasons. The German-born Merian was one of very few European women to travel at this time in pursuit of science. Others voyaged, but as lovers, daughters, or wives to where their male companions happened to take them. The French Jeanne Baret, for example, became the first woman to circumnavigate the globe in 1776, but she sailed disguised as the male valet to Philibert Commerson, the ship’s botanist and the father of her illegitimate child. Merian, by contrast, voyaged from Amsterdam to the “Wild Coast” of South America in 1699 at the age of 52 years accompanied only by her daughter and in pursuit of her own scientific and economic interests.

Merian’s passage is also interesting for what it reveals about the 18th-century global political economy. Natural history was big science in this period; it was also big business. Merian’s work was devoted to cataloguing and describing the life-cycle of exotic moths and butterflies, to be sure, but she also sought what we might call “biogold”, valuable plants or insects that brought profit once developed for European markets. Quinine, the antimalarial alkaloid, made millions for the Spanish when discovered in Peru in the 16th century. In Surinam, Merian sought, among other things, exotic varieties of caterpillars that might produce fine thread to rival that of silkworms.

Europeans have long moved plants around the world—in vast quantities and to great economic effect. Long before Christopher Columbus set foot in the Americas, plants in the form of spices, medicinal drugs, perfumes, and dye stuffs of all kinds sped along trading routes that stretched from the Far East into the Mediterranean. Coffee, tea, sugar, cacao, jalapa, pepper, and nutmeg were all useful and profitable exotics developed for European markets. Did Merian’s peacock flower follow a similar route? Were newly discovered abortifacients marketed in Europe in this period? Was trade in these plants considered lucrative and medically profitable?

In her passage about abortion, Merian tells us that she learned about the abortive virtues of her flos pavonis directly from enslaved women—both Amerindian and African. We know very little about how and why native Americans developed abortive techniques. For many free Amerindians, abortion was used along with contraception to regulate the time and number of births. The German explorer Alexander von Humboldt was one of the first to encounter the “Indians” (he did not identify them further) living along the Orinoco river in modern-day Venezuela and Colombia. In his Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent, he reported that the young wives among them used “drinks that cause abortion”. To his surprise, Humboldt found that these women could time their pregnancies precisely, some thinking it best to preserve their “freshness and beauty” when young and to delay childbirth until late in life in order to devote themselves to domestic and agricultural labours. Others, he found, preferred to become mothers when very young, thinking this the best way to “fortify their health” and “attain a happier old age”. He was astonished that the “drinks” they used did not ruin their health. Typical of the learned men of his day, he assumed that all too often abortion ended in death.

By contrast with those living free, many enslaved Amerindians and the earliest Africans in the Caribbean practised abortion within a colonial slave economy. Abortion among these populations was not a matter of private
conscience as we might think of it today; slave women practised abortion, among other things, to resist slavery. Although many women miscarried spontaneously as a result of the hard work, poor food, and extreme corporeal cruelty, some at least induced abortion as a deliberate, desperate act of resistance of vanquished against victor. In an economy where planters sought to breed “Negroes” as well as horses and cattle, refusal to breed became a political act.

Enslaved women’s willingness to undergo the trials of abortion also resulted from a sexual economy where these women were used for European men’s pleasure. Janet Schaw, a Scottish woman who travelled with her kinsfolk to Antigua in the 1770s, similarly denounced the “young black wenches” who, in her words, “lay themselves out for white lovers” and remarked that to prevent a child from interrupting their pleasure, “they have certain herbs and medicines, that free them from such an incumbrance”. Many a contemporary observer found European planters dissolve, going to bed late, and passing the night in the arms of one or other of his “sable sultanas (for he always keeps a seraglio)”. Masters, whether married to European women or not, kept slaves for this purpose and offered them freely to male guests.

Knowledge about abortifacients alive in the Caribbean was not, however, selected for development in Europe. The flaming yellows and reds of the elegant peacock flower made it a favourite ornamental shrub among the Europeans. Seeds and live specimens of the plant were taken regularly into Europe, but the knowledge of its use as an abortifacient was not. Merian’s report of the abortive qualities of the flower was published in 1705. Caspar Commelin, director of the Hortus Medicus and professor of botany at Leiden, for example, reported “no known virtues” of this plant in 1727 in his Historia plantarum.

Why was this so? Why was potentially useful knowledge stopped at European borders? It would be wrong to think that abortifacients were illegal in Europe in the 18th century, or at least so morally distasteful that naturalists would not have collected them from abroad. No legal consensus governed early modern Europe concerning abortion or the use of antifertility agents. Many towns and rural areas had their own local laws and customs; many practices regulated in towns went unregulated in the countryside. Indeed, centralised statutory laws making abortion criminal in Europe were not passed until the 19th century. For legal purposes, a woman in early modern Europe was not considered pregnant until the child “quickened”, usually near the midpoint of gestation. Before the development of pregnancy tests, women enjoyed considerable freedom to judge for themselves when quickening, or in church parlance “ensoulment”, took place. Although Europeans had their own abortifacients (savin, Juniperus sabina, was a favourite), consumers, then as now, sought out exotic, new remedies.

Other historical forces, however, stopped the peacock flower from ever reaching European shores. The shift in the management of birthing in this period away from midwives to newly minted obstetricians curtailed women’s reproductive freedoms. Abortion had traditionally been practised by midwives as well as women themselves. As female practitioners lost ground to obstetricians (men trained primarily as surgeons) over the course of the 18th century, herbal remedies gave way to surgical procedures designed to induce abortion. As midwives were run out of the high-end of their profession (there was always work for them among the poor), abortifacients gradually disappeared from mainstream medicine.

State politics also spoke against developing exotic abortifacients for European markets. Mercantilist expansion mandated pronatalist policies celebrating children as “the wealth of nations, the glory of kingdoms, and the nerve and good fortune of empires”, as Joseph Raulin noted in his De la conservation des enfants de 1768. Given this mindset, neither agents of botanical exploration, trading companies, scientific academies, nor governments, sought to expand Europe’s store of antifertility pharmacopoeia. Mercantilist policies that guided global expansion did not define trade in such plants as a lucrative or desirable business, nor did the great East and West trading companies often place women in the field.

Here in this bit of history that did not come to pass we find a prime example of culturally cultivated ignorance—the unspoken but distinct configuration of events that converge to leave certain forms of knowledge unplucked from the tree of life. This curious history of Maria Sibylla Merian’s peacock flower reveals how voyagers selectively culled from the bounty of nature knowledge responding to national and global policies, patterns of patronage and trade, developing disciplinary hierarchies, personal interests, and professional imperatives. Trade winds of prevailing opinion impeded knowledge of New World abortifacients from reaching Europe. In this instance, gender politics lent recognisable contours not to distinctive bodies of knowledge but to distinctive bodies of ignorance. Bodies of ignorance, in turn, moulded the lived experience of women. European awareness of antifertility agents declined during the 18th and 19th centuries as development and testing of such agents were not embraced by mainstream medicine and pharmacology. In the process, much useful knowledge was lost and many lives shattered.

Londa Schiebinger
Michelle R Clayman Institute for Gender Research, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-8640, USA
schieb@stanford.edu

Further reading
Exotic Abortifacients

When I look to gather fruit, [I] find nothing but the savin-tree, too frequent in our orchards, and there planted by all conjectures, to destroy fruit rather.

THOMAS MIDDLETON, 1624

Such miserable creatures lose the natural desire to have children. Mothers, going against all natural instinct, kill their children to protect them from cruelty. Unhappy slaves listen less to the cry of nature than to their hatred for those who oppress them.

ANONYMOUS, 1795

For Europeans in the seventeenth century, importing exotics from Europe’s West Indian colonies was big business. Already in the 1680s, sugar, letterwood (so named for its black spots that resemble hieroglyphics), cotton, tobacco, indigo, pimento, various gums and resins, and Amerindian commodities such as hammocks and cassava promised substantial profits.1 By 1688, Surinam was exporting 7 million pounds of sugar annually. A century later, the French colony of Saint Domingue produced sugar worth 227 million livres per year.

Commerce in medicines was a trickle by comparison, yet it, too, was significant. In the 1760s, trade in Saint Domingue medicines such as guaiacum (along with the mahogany and logwood listed in the same category) amounted to 14,620 livres.2 Were herbs used to concoct exotic contraceptives and abortifacients among the precious cargoes brought into Europe? Was trade in such plants lucrative or desirable? In a sense, savin—one of Europe’s leading abortifacients—was an exotic, brought northward into Europe from the Mediterranean basin. Very early on it was cultivated in gardens all over Europe, readily available and inexpensive. Perhaps there was no need to import new anti-fertility drugs from Europe’s tropical colonies? But Europeans continued to search everywhere for the best medicines the world had to offer, and many people, then as now, were simply taken with exotics. To what extent did naturalists search for new anti-fertility agents?
Figure 3.1. A sugar mill circa 1660. The cane fields (#5) and mill powered by oxen (#1) are shown in the background, stoves and boilers used to boil the juice (#2) are in the foreground. Sugarcane stalks are first squeezed through rollers (#1). The juice then runs down a trough to a settling vat and on to four boiling pans, heated by four wood ovens (#2). The concentrated syrup is then ladled into conical forms (#3), which are later dried (not shown). A European overseer keeps the slaves moving with his stick. A slave hut (#10) is pictured in the lower right corner.
Merian’s Peacock Flower

My attention was first drawn to the topic of abortion by Maria Sibylla Merian’s vivid report of slave women (in this case both Amerindian and African) aborting their offspring, which appeared in a book on the metamorphosis of caterpillars. Merian immediately placed abortion within the context of colonial struggles, identifying the killing of slave progeny as a form of political resistance. According to Merian, slave women killed the children in their wombs for the same reasons that many of them hanged themselves from trees or ingested deadly poisons—to find release from the insufferable cruelty of New World slave masters.

Did naturalists introduce into Europe any of the exotic abortifacients they encountered in the Caribbean? To address this question I have chosen to trace the history of Merian’s peacock flower, known today by its Latin/Linnaean name as the *Poinciana pulcherrima* (L) or *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* ([L] Sw). The French call this plant the *fleur de paradis*; English speakers know it as the Red Bird of Paradise, Dwarf Poinciana, Flower Fence, and Barbados Pride (it is the national flower of Barbados and adorns that country’s coat of arms along with the bearded fig tree). The peacock flower grows profusely in Florida, Central and South America, India, and Africa, where in all these places it is still sometimes recognized as an emmenagogue (an agent that induces the menses) and an abortifacient. In some cases it is the flowers, in others the seeds or bark that are considered the effective part. Like most plants, the peacock flower has many uses. In Guatemala and Panama, for example, the leaves are used to poison fish and the seeds employed to execute criminals. The plant is also used as a remedy for sore throat, lung disease, fever, eye and liver complaints, constipation, and skin rashes, and for making black dyes and ink (allegedly “the most beautiful black ink in the world”). The brilliant beauty of its flowers has also made it a popular ornamental.

I have focused on Merian’s peacock flower because of her moving remarks and also because the plant’s abortive qualities were discovered independently in the West Indian colonial territories of the Netherlands (by Merian), England (by Sloane), and France (among others by Michel-Étienne Descourtilz, who confirmed Sloane’s and Merian’s findings with firsthand observations of his own). Sloane, working in Jamaica some years before Merian’s travels in Surinam, discussed a plant he called the “flour fence of Barbados, wild sena, or Spanish carnations” and identified it later in his published work as the same plant as Merian’s peacock flower. A pe-
rusal of his specimen in his herbarium, the largest extant collection of plant specimens from the pre-Linnaean period (now housed in the Natural History Museum of London), indicates that it is indeed the same plant. The history of the peacock flower, like that of other plants in this period, is fraught with ambiguities: it is not clear that the name always refers to the same plant or that varieties have similar medicinal virtues. Specimens labeled with this name, collected from all parts of the world and held in the Laboratoire de Phanérogame in Paris, vary in their appearance and characteristics.6

The very first European notice of the peacock flower was recorded by General Philippe de Lonvilliers, chevalier de Poincy, governor of the French Antilles from 1647–1660 (see Chapter 5). Poincy, not a naturalist but a military man concerned with the health of his troops, was taken with the plant’s ability to cure fevers and dosed himself “to good effect.” It was not until much later that Descourtilz, a French doctor sent by the government to Saint Domingue in 1799, highlighted the use of the *poincillade* as an abortifacient. This beautiful thorny shrub, he wrote, is cultivated in some gardens in Europe but grows naturally in the Antilles. He reiterated other French physicians’ reports that it was useful in treating lung ailments and fevers. After detailing its chemical properties and medical preparations, he added that a strong dose of the flower (not the seed, as reported by Merian) could be employed to induce the menses, but that it must be used with extreme caution: “ill-intentioned Negresses,” he added, “use it to destroy the fruits of their guilty loves.”5

What is of interest is that Merian and Sloane each independently collected this plant as an abortifacient. Although Sloane cited Merian in his *Voyage*, he did not learn about the abortive qualities of this plant from her (or vice versa); her *Metamorphosis* is cited only in an appendix which included things that Sloane learned after the body of his *Voyage* had been written. Sloane and Merian never had a scholarly exchange, although one assumes that Sloane saw the copy of her *Metamorphosis* purchased in 1705 by James Petiver, a fellow of the Royal Society of London when Sloane was president. Although the flower had been brought into Europe from the East Indies long before either Merian or Sloane traveled to the West Indies, Merian’s is the first European report of its abortive qualities (see Chapter 4) that I have found.

Although Merian, Sloane, and Descourtilz all mentioned abortifacients, they placed the peacock flower in very different social contexts. Merian and Descourtilz both located it within the colonial struggle; she empha-
sized the importance of this plant for the physical and spiritual survival of West Indian slave women, while he stressed the “ill intentions” of the “Negresses” who used them (see below). I examine first Sloane’s experience in Jamaica with the plant he called the flour fence.

John Stedman gave firsthand accounts of the extreme brutality slaves in the Caribbean endured. In Surinam in the 1770s, he observed a “revolted negroe” hung alive upon a gibbet with an iron hook stuck through his ribs, two others chained to stakes and burned to death by slow fire, six women broken alive upon the rack, and two slave girls decapitated. Slaves in French holdings were treated no better. The Code noir of 1685, celebrated at the time for its “humanity,” required that fugitive slaves at large for a month have their ears cut off and be branded on one shoulder with the fleur-de-lys. If slaves escaped a second time, they were hamstrung and their other shoulder was branded. A third offense brought execution. Sloane described how slaves in Jamaica were burned for running away, “by nailing them down on the ground with crooked sticks on every limb, and then applying the fire by degrees from feet and hands, burning them gradually up to the head, whereby their pains are extravagant.” For crimes of a lesser nature, a foot might be chopped in half with an axe. For negligence, slaves were whipped by the overseers “with lance-wood switches” after which pepper, salt, or even melted wax were poured into the open wounds “to make them smart.” John Dalling, a governor of Jamaica in the 1770s, estimated that “the Spaniards treat their slaves better than we do; we treat them better than the French; and the French treat them better than the Dutch.”

Although Sloane was well aware that slaves “cut their own throats” to escape such treatment, he did not see his “flour fence” in this light. Sloane wrote rather dryly, “it provokes the Menstrua extremely, causes Abortion, etc. and does whatever Savin and powerful Emmenagogues will do.” Sloane placed his discussion of abortive qualities of his flour fence in the context not of the colonial sufferings but of the growing conflict between doctors and women seeking assistance in abortion. In this instance, Sloane carried fully-formed notions concerning abortion with him to Jamaica; his attitudes toward abortion mirrored those of the majority of his male medical colleagues in Europe. Concerning his service as physician to the governor in Jamaica, he wrote:

In case women, whom I suspected to be with Child, presented themselves ill, coming in the name of others, sometimes bringing their
own water, dissembling pains in their heads, sides, obstructions, etc. therby cunningly, as they think, designing to make the physician cause abortion by the medicines he may order for their cure. In such a case I used either to put them off with no medicines at all, or tell them Nature in time might relieve them without remedies, or I put them off with medicines that will signifie nothing either one way or other, till I be furthered satisfied about their malady.

Sloane finished his passage on abortion with a strict warning: “if women know how dangerous a thing it is to cause abortion, they would never attempt it . . . One may as easily expect to shake off unripe Fruit from a tree, without injury or violence to the Tree, as endeavor to procure Abortion without injury or violence to the Mother.” Sloane did not discuss the social or political status of the women he treated in Jamaica in this regard, whether they were English, creole, or slave. Rather he accused “dissembling” women in general of seeking abortions from unsuspecting doctors. His attitudes were shared by many European physicians at this time. The German physician Johann Storch also reported “tricking” a pregnant woman, whom he suspected to be seeking an abortion, by prescribing only a mild laxative. Some physicians claimed that women even endured inoculation against smallpox, hoping that the operation would cause an abortion. Warnings to midwives, physicians, and apothecaries about giving unmarried women medicines that might induce abortion date to at least the sixteenth century.

European physicians who discussed abortion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries emphasized its dangers. It is possible that this correctly reflected their experience, since (male) physicians were generally called to attend women only when things went wrong. Sloane himself noted that when an abortion was absolutely necessary, he preferred “the hand” to herbal preparations. Following this ancient method dating back to the first century A.D. and perhaps further, a physician positioned a woman on her back across a bed where she was to be held down by three women with her knees pushed up to her chest (as advised by the seventeenth-century Parisian master-surgeon, François Mauriceau, who wrote extensively on birthing and female maladies). The doctor, sitting on a stool, anointed his hand with oil, fresh butter, or unsalted lard, and “gently” introduced his fingers, one by one, through the cervix and into the uterus until the whole hand slid inside. Herman Boerhaave suggested giving the woman opium to relax those parts. Once the physician’s hand
was in the womb, he broke the membranes, took hold of the feet of the fetus, and "pulled it away." Next he separated the placenta from the womb with his fingers and extracted it. Some physicians suggested that in the first few weeks of pregnancy, one finger, bent like a "blunt hook," would suffice to draw the embryo from the womb. European physicians also suggested other nonherbal methods to induce abortion, including excessive bloodletting, various douches, vigorous jumping and horseback riding, and applying pressure to the main artery in the thigh (a technique known as the Hamilton method). 

Given his disapproving attitudes toward abortion, how might Sloane have procured information in Jamaica about abortifacients? Merian informed her readers that she learned about the abortive qualities of the peacock flower directly from the enslaved women of Surinam. When I began my research, I had conjectured that abortion and contraceptives were women’s business and that Merian’s report on the abortive qualities of her peacock flower was as unique as her presence in the field. John Riddle, an historian of pharmacy, confirmed my notions in his fine two-volume history of contraceptives and abortifacients in ancient and early modern Europe. Likewise, Edward Shorter, an historian of medicine, argued in his history of women’s health care that birth control was women’s knowledge. And it is true that birthing in the Caribbean, as in Europe, was generally a female affair. A slave woman typically gave birth in her own hut with the assistance of a slave midwife, perhaps a nurse, and several of her kin or friends. After 1780, large Caribbean plantations offered infirmaries or "hothouses," as many were called, with lying-in rooms for slaves. These hospitals were typically run by a female slave, in the French islands called a hôpitalière, usually an older woman no longer able to work the fields. The hôpitalière generally took care of birthing and was assisted by several younger nurses (mostly female), a cook, and sometimes an additional midwife, either slave or free. As an observer noted in the 1790s, those attending slave births on plantations were "Negresses." Only if a birth were extremely difficult was a costly surgeon called. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century, local white physicians or surgeons visited the plantations under their care once or twice a week to supervise slave nurses. Planters’ wives (when present) might oversee preparations of medicines for the plantation.

Not only were European physicians removed from slave birthing, several physicians serving in the Caribbean mentioned that they did not deal with the diseases of women and children at all. Thomas Dancer, a Ja-
maican physician, wrote in *The Medical Assistant; or Jamaica Practice of Physic: Designed Chiefly for the Use of Families and Plantations* (1801) that modesty did not allow “the sex” (that is, women) to seek advice from physicians in the West Indies, the majority of whom were “young bachelors.” He encouraged women (and particularly the matrons among them) to learn “how to manage themselves in their various situations.” Philippe Fermin, working in Surinam in the mid 1700s, further confirmed that physicians and surgeons had “little to do with women . . . who hardly complain of anything but headaches or some constipation.” Apart from a terrible suppression of the menses (“which can almost never be cured”), according to Fermin, “the sex” in Surinam did not seek help from physicians.10

European doctors in the islands were far removed from slave birthing and so were European midwives, who generally lived in towns. Until the end of the eighteenth century, few European midwives set up practices in the colonies. In Saint Domingue, for example, of the 102 French medical personnel (physicians, surgeons, apothecaries, and the like) working there between 1704 and 1803, only five were midwives and these were typically under the supervision of a male royal physician and *accoucheur* for the colony. All five practiced in Cap Français. One of these midwives, a Demoiselle Renouts, cared for women in her home (an expensive proposition) and also taught “Negresses” from the plantations the art of delivering pregnant women. Charles Arthaud reported, however, that even where French midwives were available, “white” women often preferred the services of “women of color.” In some islands, such as Barbados, European (Quaker) midwives were more plentiful. They were at times called to attend slave births, but usually only when a slave woman was not available.11

Clearly much information concerning the use of contraceptives and abortifacients passed from woman to woman, neighbor to neighbor, midwife to client. But things were more complicated than they seem. Riddle’s own examples show that some men—some learned, some not—were privy to these secrets. In some instances, it was the male partner who provided a woman with a contraceptive herb—but he might hold that information secret so that she could not betray him with another man. In other recorded instances, women went to apothecaries, barbers, or even their priest lovers for contraceptives. Mauriceau noted that “the ancients, Avicenna and Aëtius, taught us many remedies to induce abortion when it is judged necessary.” And as we have seen through the examples of Sloane and Descourtiz, European physicians had firsthand experience with abortion.
Certainly Sloane collected reliable information about the abortive qualities of his “flour fence” while in Jamaica. He also treated numerous women during his stay. In his *Voyage*, he discussed cases involving some thirty-eight English women and four African women with various complaints. He also looked in on sick nuns when summoned en route by their abbess on Madeira, the Portuguese-held islands off the coast of northwest Africa. So although many women knew about abortifacients and often employed them, many men were also familiar with these herbs.\textsuperscript{12}

I do not want to make too much of the differences among the attitudes of Sloane, Descourtilz, and Merian toward abortion. Merian, to my knowledge, discussed only one abortifacient. Her chief interest was insects, and she described plants primarily as they related to insects (her passage concerning the peacock flower is devoted to the caterpillars that live on the plant’s leaves). Whether women “do science differently” is currently a topic of heated debate in feminist theory; distinctions should not be drawn too sharply between individual men and women scientists, however.\textsuperscript{13} Many European women—plantation owners’ or governors’ wives, for example—had little interest in their newly adopted countries, and most came and went without collecting any information from the indigenous populations or cultivating any special sympathies toward the women of the region.

**Abortion in Europe**

Before exploring further what Europeans knew about abortifacients in the West Indies, I will explore attitudes toward abortion in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Did Europeans have their own abortifacients? Or was abortion such a “heinous crime” and “abominable sin” that collecting such medicines was out of the question? Did European women need new and exotic anti-fertility drugs from abroad, or did they already possess effective abortifacients?

Today the word abortion generally means ridding a woman of an unwanted pregnancy. When this is done for medical reasons to save the life of the mother, we call it “therapeutic.” English speakers today generally reserve “miscarriage” for the spontaneous loss of a pregnancy. These distinctions were not made in early modern Europe, however. The words miscarriage and abortion were used interchangeably for any loss of the embryo, any birth before its time, and could apply to expelling a living or dead fetus. Now as then, “abortion” was also widely used to refer to an arrested
“Luxury in the fair sex,” he continued, “while it inflames perhaps the passion for enjoyment, seems always to weaken and frequently to destroy altogether, the powers of generation.”43 Perhaps it was something more specific than “luxury” that was curbing the powers of generation in these sexually active women.

Although we cannot say how widely savin and other abortifacients were employed in this period, evidence provided by herbals, Pharmacopoeia, Materia medica, trial records, and classical fiction, among other things, suggests that many European women regulated their fertility. Jaucourt was probably right in saying that the number who braved the perils of abortion in the eighteenth century was “considerable” and the methods “numerous.”44 Let us now to the West Indies and abortion practices there. To what extent did attitudes in Europe affect abortion practices and policy in these colonies? And to what extent did such practices and policies influence naturalists’ interest in collecting exotic abortifacients for sale in Europe?

Abortion in the West Indies

Abortion was more publicly discussed in the colonies than in Europe, in part because abortion in the colonies concerned principally slave (not European) women and was debated often in terms of property (not morals). As abolitionists threatened to shut down the slave trade from about 1770 onward, slave women’s suppressed fertility became a topic of growing concern among doctors, legislators, and planters. Edward Bancroft in his Essay on the Natural History of Guiana, in South America (1769) volunteered that on the Wild Coast “this unnatural practice is very frequent, and of the highest detriment to the planters, whose opulence must otherwise be immense.”45 Abortion, especially among slave populations, was not a matter of private conscience or “family planning,” as we might think of it today; it was rather a part of the colonial struggle of victors against vanquished and a matter of economy and of state.

Before turning to abortion among slaves, to what extent were contraception and abortion practiced by the native populations in the Caribbean and South America? There is good evidence that the indigenous populations of the Caribbean—the Taínos, Caribs, and Arawaks—knew and made extensive use of abortive herbs well before European contact. The first European accounts from the New World described how Taíno women aborted in the face of extreme circumstances. Bartolomé de Las Casas,
who sailed with the conquistador Nicolás de Ovando to the New World in 1502, perhaps exaggerated how the horrors of Spanish cruelty—the fierce attack dogs, the swords used to disembowel or to hack off arms, legs, noses, and women’s breasts—caused desperate Taino mothers to drown their infants. Nonetheless, he chose to frame Taino response in terms of abortion: other women, when they felt they were pregnant, he continued, “took herbs to abort, so their fruit was expelled stillborn.” An Italian adventurer, Girolamo Benzoni, who traveled to the New World in 1541, recorded how the Spanish extinguished the Taino in Hispaniola, causing such grief that the indigenes sought relief in suicide, infanticide, and abortion: “Many, giving up hope, went into the woods and hanged themselves from trees, having first killed their children; . . . the women, with the juices of some plants, interrupted their pregnancies, so as not to give birth.” Whether from experience at home or in the New World, these Europeans interpreted abortion—the willful ending of a pregnancy—as one response to desperate circumstances.46

But use of abortives (and contraceptives) was apparently also a part of Amerindian everyday life. During his travels in the New World from 1799 to 1804, Alexander von Humboldt reported extensively on the Indians (he named the Macos and Salivas) living along the “Oroonoko” (Orinoco) River, which flows through modern-day Venezuela and Colombia. The first European to describe many of the plants of this region, Humboldt deplored the young wives who did not wish to become mothers and their “guilty practice . . . of preventing pregnancy by the use of delerious herbs.” He deplored further the use of “drinks that cause abortion.” Humboldt reported being astonished that “these drinks do not destroy health.” As was typical of many of the learned men of his day, Humboldt had assumed that abortion ended in death. To his surprise, however, he found that the Indian women he observed were still able to bear children after using these herbs.47

We know very little about when or how natives of the extended Caribbean developed abortive techniques. Humboldt reported that native women aborted so as to time their pregnancies precisely, some women thinking it best to preserve their “freshness and beauty” when young and to delay childbirth until late in life in order to devote themselves to domestic and agricultural labors. Others, he wrote, preferred to become mothers when very young, thinking this the best way to “fortify their health” and “attain a happier old age.” Further north in Virginia, Thomas Jefferson reported that Indian women “learned the practice of procuring
abortion by the use of some vegetable" because they attended their men in war and hunting, and because childbirth was inconvenient for them.\textsuperscript{48}

Although European males on the whole did not approve of abortion, they reported it among Amerindians as noteworthy. Abortion was often observed among Amerindian populations throughout this period and still figures in the ethnographic record today. Women in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Dominica (where indigenous populations still exist) continue to use a variety of abortifacients—including some originally brought from Europe (such as rue), others from Africa (yam beans, for example), and some apparently indigenous (gully-root).

In the eighteenth century, however, the real struggle over abortion in the West Indies surrounded slave women. Europeans were well aware that African women in the Caribbean used "specifics," drugs designed to treat a particular ailment, to induce abortion. The naturalist priest Jean-Baptiste Labat, traveling in the French Antilles in the late seventeenth century, claimed that "Negresses" were adroit in the use of "simples" that ended pregnancy with "surprising effectiveness."\textsuperscript{49}

Even though abortion was more widely discussed in the colonies than in Europe, here too it is difficult to know much about the particulars of abortive practices. Women who underwent the trials of abortion did so quietly and rarely committed details concerning their experience to writing. Nowhere is information available on the number of abortions actually carried out on plantations. Abortion in the colonies as in Europe was largely female-initiated and beyond physicians' control. Reports, sometimes to legislative bodies, about the methods and frequency of abortive practices were prepared primarily by European physicians who lived and worked for many years on plantations. Historians also have notes and observations written by European voyaging naturalists, such as Merian, Sloane, and Humboldt, who were curious about plants and their uses in the region, and by miscellaneous European travelers to the area. Working with plantation records from the year 1795 kept by the owner of the Worthy Park Estate in Jamaica who, like many plantation owners in this period, was exceedingly concerned about slave fertility, the historian Michael Craton found that the rate of miscarriage (spontaneous and induced) for that year was 1 in every 4.6 births. Had all stillbirths, miscarriages, and abortions in that year been eradicated, he estimated that slave fertility rates would have increased 23 to 28 percent, a rate still insufficient to "grow the population" as the owner wished.\textsuperscript{50} Records such as the ones Craton used are rare.
It must be kept in mind that European physicians in the colonies were deeply involved in colonial rule. As noted above, physicians were employed by planters to oversee plantation health care (although slaves’ health was typically managed day to day by a female slave too old to work the fields). Physicians for their part healed when they could; they also policed slaves. In 1789, the Jamaican Assembly attempted to have surgeons register all instances of induced abortion. The act required “the surgeon of every plantation . . . to give in, on oath, to the justices and vestry, an annual account of the decrease and increase of the slaves of such plantation, with the causes of such decrease.”

Disciplining slaves, of course, was a horrific occupation, and one that often fell to the plantation doctor. John Stedman in Surinam in the 1770s pointed an accusatory finger at a Mr. Greber, a surgeon, who cut off one leg each of nine Negro slaves as a punishment for running away from their work at a plantation. Four of them died after the operation, and a fifth killed himself by plucking the bandages from the wound, and willfully bleeding to death during the night.

Merian’s poignant report of the use of the peacock flower cited in the introduction to this book placed abortion squarely within the colonial struggle, identifying it as a form of slave resistance. Contemporary observers and present-day historians have identified many forms of resistance. One of those was largely male-led armed insurrection. Stedman, for example, drew a vivid portrait of guerilla warfare in Surinam, where in the eighteenth century 5,000 Dutch employed 1,500 mercenary soldiers in the hopes of keeping in check the 75,000 slaves within the colony. The soldiers had their hands full, being also required to fight against the “maroons,” or slaves escaped into the hinterlands, who were said to burn plantations, slice open the bellies of their former mistresses large with child, and poison entire plantations—Europeans, slaves, cows, and horses—with invisible substances sometimes carried under a single fingernail.

Other observers emphasized the daily resistance of slaves, who shammed sicknesses, feigned inability to do simple tasks, were disruptively insolent, disobedient, and quarrelsome. Some even reported slaves committing suicide to spite their masters and find deliverance from their suffering in this world. Slaves were known to swallow their own tongues, to eat dirt, and even to leap into cauldrons of boiling sugar, “at one blow depriving the tyrant of his crop and his servant.” Abortion, then, was only one type of resistance among many, and a number of contemporary observers saw it in such terms. As historian Barbara Bush has emphasized, in
an economy in which planters sought to breed “Negroes” in like fashion as horses and cattle, refusal to breed became a political act.\textsuperscript{54}

Slave women’s desperate willingness to risk abortion responded to two aspects of a distinctive West Indian sexual economy: the pressure on slave women to “breed” themselves to enhance plantation property and wealth; and the pressure on slave women to provide sexual services to planters, soldiers, and sailors in the islands (also of course to their own husbands and lovers in an economy in which slave men far outnumbered slave women). By aborting, slave women were well aware that they saved their children from a life of servitude since, no matter who the father, the child inherited its mother’s legal standing. As early as 1671, the Dominican priest Jean-Baptiste du Tertre quoted a Guadeloupe slave woman who refused to marry even when her master agreed to purchase any man she fancied: “I am miserable enough without giving birth to children who may live a life more pitiable than mine.” Nearly a century later the political tensions had intensified dramatically, and Edward Long reported again that slaves “refuse to marry in order to avoid generating a race of beings enslaved to such [brutal] masters.”\textsuperscript{55}

The colonial sexual economy driving slave abortion was fueled by the notion among European men that black women were free for the taking; it was also fueled by the extreme youth of the colonial populations, by the lawlessness of life in the colonies, and, importantly, by the fact that colonial populations—both European and African, free and slave—were fiercely male. European settlements in the Caribbean from their beginnings in 1494 were heavily populated with men. In efforts to establish colonies in the New World, Christopher Columbus had brought 1,500 souls with him on his second voyage—an expedition of seventeen ships carrying livestock, seeds, plants, a doctor, a mapmaker, several clerics—but not a single woman. Columbus’s men exploited the Indians, demanding food, shelter, labor, and also sexual services from the women. The first Spanish women crossed the Atlantic in 1497, but only in a trickle. The shortage of Spanish women in the colonies coupled with a lack of laws or prejudices against intermarriage led Spanish men to take Amerindian wives, so that by 1514 one in three married men were cohabiting with indigenous women.\textsuperscript{56}

Dutch, English, and French settlements in the West Indies of the seventeenth century were quasi-military operations in which private soldiers planted and reaped under the command of their officers—an arrangement that kept the proportion of men inhabiting this region high. As these set-
tlements matured, the majority of the planters, soldiers, sailors, merchants, naturalists, physicians, surgeons, and slaves occupying the islands continued to be men. Figures for the ratio of males to females are not exact and vary from colony to colony, but everywhere men dominated: in 1613 only two European women were to be found in all of Saint Christopher, for example. In Martinique in the 1670s and 1680s, the ratio of European men to women was almost three to one (in 1671, 2,200 men versus 730 women), despite the fact that female orphans and women of “ill repute” were rounded up from the streets of Paris and shipped out to the colony in 1680 and 1682. In Guadeloupe the ratio was 2.5 men for each woman in 1671. These ratios began to equalize by the mid-eighteenth century in Martinique (120 men per 100 women) and in Guadeloupe (which reached parity), where settlement was encouraged. Saint Domingue, with its high absentee populations, remained heavily male with eight men for each woman in 1681, and still two to one in 1700. Du Tertre described the desperate search for wives in Caribbean islands in 1667: “the scarcity of women compels the inhabitants to marry the first who come; . . . the first thing demanded of ship captains is whether they have any women. No one asks questions about their birth, virtue, or beauty; two days after they have arrived, they are married, without anyone knowing anything about them.” Indeed the boatloads of Europeans sailing from France across the whole of the eighteenth century remained 85–90 percent male; women constituted only about one-third of the European population in Jamaica, for example, as late as the 1780s. Europeans, of course, were a minority of the population in the West Indies (with populations varying from about 30 percent in Guadeloupe to 8 percent in Jamaica in 1720).

Males also dominated slave cargoes. It is true that in the seventeenth century males and females were sometimes imported in equal numbers, but, as the slave trade increased, at least two-thirds of all slaves carried from Africa were adult males. Everywhere in the Caribbean, the preference for males increased as sugar monoculture spread. West Indian planters favored youthful males and paid high prices for them. Even as late as the 1790s, slave cargoes consisted of between 150 and 180 males per 100 females. There were a few exceptions to this male predominance. Towns harbored larger numbers of women. In the countryside, too, female slaveholders tended to keep more female slaves, sometimes breeding them for sale. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, with the number of creoles increasing and with political upheavals threatening to end the slave trade, sex ratios began to equalize. French colonies such as Martinique
and Guadeloupe experienced a greater degree of creolization than did French Guiana and Saint Domingue. So, in Guadeloupe, for example, the numbers of male and female plantation slaves had equalized by the 1780s, but in Saint Domingue sexual parity was not achieved until after 1791. Barbados was an exception, with male and female slave populations reaching parity in the late seventeenth century. In Jamaica this did not happen until 1817, the end coming only after the ban on slave imports.58

In addition to being predominantly male, colonial populations were also generally young. Sailors in the Caribbean died, on average, at age twenty-six; other Europeans in the colonies at age thirty-eight. The French islands were typical, with a majority of colonists aged twenty to thirty years. Not only were the vast majority of men young, they were also single. Reverend James Ramsay remarked concerning the British West Indies that plantation owners preferred unmarried overseers because they were cheaper than men with families, even though an overseer’s wife might take care of the sick, deliver slave babies, and cook for the plantation. “Planters,” Ramsay asserted, “have determined it to be better to employ perhaps a dissipated, careless, unfeeling young man, or a groveling lascivious, old bachelor (each with his half score of black or mulatto, pilfering harlots, who at their will, select for him, from among the slaves, the objects of his favour or hatred) rather than allow a married woman to be entertained on the plantation.”59

In colonies where the numbers of European women more nearly equaled those of European men, contemporaries perceived that greater moral order prevailed and that slaves more often replenished their own numbers. Barbados serves as a good example. It was one of the few among the British West Indian islands to attract large numbers of European women. Historian John Ward has argued that the high numbers of European women there enforced moral “decency,” so that their menfolk did not engage in profligate intercourse with the slaves under their command so much as in Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean. Barbados was also one of the few islands, after 1780, to “grow” its own slaves.60

Many of these relatively young men—planters, slaves, and the many soldiers required to defend Europe’s colonial interests—demanded sexual services. John Stedman commented extensively on the commerce in sex required of young black and mulatto girls in this regard. His diary, ringing perhaps with the bravado of a young lieutenant, detailed the number of women offered to him. He was hardly off the ship from Amsterdam when “a Negro woman offer[ed] me the use of her daughter, while here, for a
certain sum. We didn’t agree about the price.” The next morning he was “astonished” to see an elderly Negro woman enter his room and present him her daughter to be “what she pleased to call my wife.” Even his own beloved Joanna, a slave girl whom he eulogized as the “fairest creature on earth” and intended to take to England as his lawful wife, came to him through a bargain struck with her mother. Slave girls routinely provided sexual services as part of prearranged commercial transactions. In Surinam, this practice was raised to a quasi-official system of concubinage called the “Surinam marriage,” an arrangement Stedman noted that the “sedate European matrons” would deplore. To contract a Surinam marriage, a European man paid an agreed-upon price to a member of a slave woman’s family for her services as both his housekeeper and concubine during his residency in the colony. The “marriage” was generally concluded through a secular ceremony and continued until the man died or returned to Europe. European men rarely returned to Europe with these mistresses, partly because many already had wives back in Europe.61

A certain lawlessness also characterized the West Indian sexual economy. Stedman found the European male planter absolutely dissolute, going to bed late and passing the night in the arms of one or other of his “sable sultanas (for he always keeps a seraglio).” Masters, whether they had an European wife in residence or not, kept slave women for this purpose and offered them freely to male guests. Europeans jealously guarded these women for their own use: in Jamaica, should a male slave dare to trespass on the black mistress of the master or overseer, he faced castration or worse. Observers from as far away as the Cape of Good Hope confirmed these practices. Carl Thunberg noted that the Dutch soldiers there “ruin themselves” by connections with black women and that the Dutch East Indies lodges were full of children born of female slaves with European fathers. Historians today estimate that one in twenty-five infants born to slave women were fathered by whites on Saint Domingue’s sugar estates in the 1790s.62

Efforts had been made in the early years of colonial settlement to curtail European men’s intercourse with female slaves. The Dominican missionary Jean-Baptiste Labat, working in Martinique in the 1690s, reported that the Sisters of Charity compelled slave mothers to name their mulatto children’s (white) fathers, who would then be taken before a tribunal and fined. A particular priest became particularly skilled in extracting confessions from female slaves, even though masters carefully instructed their paramours in the art of deflecting such questions. One slave turned tables
Figure 3.2. Dissolute Surinam planter in morning dress, by the poet William Blake. Note the elaborate headgear. He is served by one of his slaves, who is perhaps also his mistress. This is one of thirteen images Blake did for John Stedman’s book about his experiences in Surinam.
on the clever priest, naming him the father of her child. He was dumb-founded, but had to admit that, in fact, he had overnighted at her master's plantation nine months earlier. Witnesses to the scene could not decide which was more outrageous: the pretended naïveté of the "Negress," the embarrassment of the outwardly pious priest, or the shaken dignity of the judge, who had to dismiss the case and send the Negress home with her master until further information was available. Well-counseled slaves often simply named as the white fathers of their children sailors whose ship had already left port, or soldiers whom they had encountered in the street but whose names they had never known. Midwives (most of them also slaves) were often part of the scheme, and many hid the color of mulatto babies when they brought them for baptism. It was commonly agreed that before the tenth day after birth all babies were white, and that only the genitalia and fingernails betrayed a baby's true complexion.63

Although officially illegal, prostitution—of all sorts—was common throughout the Caribbean. Plantation masters often leased out their own slave mistresses in order to obtain extra cash. European women in town—especially widows—also owned taverns and inns where itinerant males could find "washerwomen," "seamstresses," or "housekeepers" on short notice. Social custom and pocketbooks also dictated that masters not marry their slave lovers, even if they wished to. Father Labat reported knowing only two white men who married "Negresses" during his thirteen years in Martinique. Even these men soon left their African wives because of ridicule. Plantation profits discouraged masters from marrying slaves; the Code noir required that a master who married his slave mistress set her free, along with any children that might come from their union.64

Free sexual intercourse with slaves was less tolerated for European women. Early in the seventeenth century, when white women first emigrated to the colonies as indentured servants, some married black men. With the collapse of the system of indenture, fewer European women emigrated to the colonies, and over the course of the seventeenth century, relations between European women and non-European men became taboo. When a white woman did have relations with a male slave, the consequences could be severe. In Martinique in 1698, for example, a father found his daughter pregnant by one of his slaves. She was to be dispatched to Guadeloupe or Grenada to birth the child secretly; the slave was to be deported to Spain and sold. Shortly before the girl was to be sent away, a Polish man, newly arrived in the colony, offered to marry her and recog-
nize the child as his own. He declared himself the (unlikely) father in the church registry and that is as much as we know about this case.65

The Dutch were no more lenient in this matter. In the 1720s, when two women of European origins in Paramaribo gave birth to children of mixed race, they were banished from the city. Ten years later, the daughter of a Jewish planter in Surinam confessed to having had sexual relations with an Amerindian; she, too, was expelled from the colony. Writing in the 1770s, Stedman lamented that “should it ever be known that a female European kept a carnal intercourse with a slave of whatever denomination, the first is detested, and the last loses his life without mercy.”66

Free black women seeking to marry European men did not fare much better. Elisabeth Samson in Surinam, a fifty-year-old free woman of color and wealthy plantation owner, announced her intention to marry the thirty-year-old white organist of the Dutch Reformed Church—to gasps all around. Townspeople found it “repugnant” and “disgraceful” for a white to want, “perhaps from misdirected lust,” to marry a black. The historian Cornelis Goslinga reported that, during the dispute over this particular marriage, the white groom died.67 The wealthy Samson easily found another prospective husband.

Men of science—physicians, botanists, and naturalists—were by no means disinterested observers in this sexual economy. European biopirates who passed through these areas often presumed that indigenous and slave women, like other bioresources, were there for the taking. Nicolas-Joseph Thiery de Menonville, traveling in New Spain in the 1770s, fancied an Indian woman whose family had given him shelter for the night. Struck by her “perfect beauty,” he looked for “deficiencies” in her but could find none. Talking with her, he learned she was married, which “rendered her all the more interesting.” Finally, he reached into his pocket for a gold coin—but drew himself up short, not because he feared ruining the woman’s virtue and well-being, but rather because he worried that, should he yield to these “enervations of volupptuousness,” he would compromise his mission to win the coveted cochineal dye for France.68

By the late eighteenth century Thiery de Menonville’s encounter with an Amerindian woman was atypical for the Caribbean islands; the majority of the women with whom European men had sexual relations were African. Indigenous women sometimes held a privileged position in the colonial sexual economy. In the 1680s, the Surinamese governor Aerssen van Sommelsdijk, whose wife had refused to make the arduous journey to the “Wild Coast,” took a beautiful Carib girl as his concubine. Amerindian
girls were often much in demand, but this particular one was the daughter of a chief and taken to cement political allegiances between the two peoples. Some years later Edward Bancroft described how some of the most prominent Dutch families in Surinam descended from these marriages. In this way, Bancroft recorded, the Dutch acquired control over the Amerindians so that their governor, and not the indigenous chiefs, could broker agreements concerning trade, war, and peace in the colonies.69

Other voyaging naturalists also succumbed to the going sexual economy during their lengthy stays in the colonies. Jean-Baptiste-Christophe Fusée-Aublet, the French botanist working for the Compagnie des Indes on the Isle de France, was said to have married a Sénégalese woman, Armelle, whose freedom he purchased from the company. Other sources report that he freed his slave (which is likely, since he wrote passionately against slavery) and married a woman of color with whom he had numerous children. Still other sources say that he “abandoned his science for debauchery” and left 300 children in the countries to which he traveled—this would have required that he sire some thirty children per year. While unlikely, this latter report is not completely inconceivable when one considers Thomas Thistlemood, the promiscuous overseer in Jamaica, who left a thirty-seven-volume diary detailing his daily sexual exploits with multiple partners. Aublet’s alleged debauchery, however, was most likely a fabrication. Aublet, it seems, purchased Armelle and wished her to “share his bed,” but she refused until she became deathly ill, and Aublet nursed her with great devotion. Won over by his affection, she eventually had three children with him, one of whom survived to adulthood.70

Jean-Baptiste Leblond, another French biopirate who was later elected (by the white population only) first deputy of the Assembly in Guiana in 1790, also fathered two children of mixed race. Leblond sent his older son to France to be educated; this son later became secretary to the president of the Republic of Haiti. The younger son was born after Leblond had left Guiana; he never saw his father or bear his name.71

The West Indies, then, were wild, lawless places, populated by a good number of fortune-seeking males. Many European observers saw abortion as an outgrowth of this overheated sexual economy. Yet when abortions were discovered, blame was attributed not to the cruelties slaves endured or to the lawlessness of West Indian sexual customs but rather to what was seen as the natural licentiousness of Africans. Sir Hans Sloane, for example, reported two abortifacients during his short stay in Jamaica: his “flour fence” and the “Caraguata-acanga” (Bromelia pinguin). This latter grows,
he noted, "very plentifully in the Caribes and Jamaica. It is very diuretick, and brings down the Catamenia very powerfully, even in too great a quantity if the dose be not moderate. It causes abortion in Women with Child, of which Whores being not ignorant make frequent use of it to make away their children." 72

Edward Long, writing in Jamaica a half-century later, also saw abortion in these terms. "The women here are, in general, common prostitutes; and many of them take specifics to cause abortion in order that they may continue their trade without loss of time or hindrance of business." Long also assumed, as was common among learned European men at this time, that such numerous and "promiscuous" embraces necessarily hindered, or destroyed, future possibilities for conception. Janet Schaw, who traveled with her brother and kinsfolk from Scotland to Antigua in the 1770s, similarly denounced the "young black wenches" who, in her words, "lay themselves out for white lovers." Schaw remarked that in order to prevent a child from interrupting their pleasure "they have certain herbs and medicines, that free them from such an incumbrance." Governor Edward Trelawny of Jamaica added that these "Wenches" lie with "both Colours, and do not know which the Child may prove of" and, to avoid difficulties, procure abortions. 73

Like abortion, it is hard to know if prostitution was as widespread as Long and others implied. Sloane, Long, and the other European critics of African mores do not distinguish between prostitution required of slaves by their masters and prostitution initiated by the women themselves (usually for lack of other ways of procuring a livelihood). Prostitution—whether forced or chosen—was seen to result from a natural moral deficit in Africans and not from the desperate circumstances of their lives. One historian has estimated from figures given in the 1770s for Saint Domingue that one out every ten free (not slave) women of color and one out of every twenty women of European origins were prostitutes, but there are too many ambiguities in such categorizations to take these estimates seriously. 74

Bancroft, working on plantations on the "Wild Coast," again dismissed the idea that abortion among slave women resulted from hard work, poor food, and even the extreme corporeal cruelty. Coarse food and hard labor, he reminded his readers, "are ever accompanied with the blessings of increased health and vigour." Bancroft added his voice to the litany of complaints against "young wenches" who were said not to wish to lose their income from prostitution to the inconveniences of pregnancy. He wrote in
1769: "The 'true cause' of [slaves'] decrease results from the intercourse of the Whites with the young wenches, who derive no inconsiderable emolument therefrom; and as child-bearing would put an end to this commerce, they solicitously use every precaution to avoid conception; and if these prove ineffectual, they ever procure repeated abortions, which incapacitate them from child-bearing in a more advanced age, when they are abandoned by the Whites."  

Descourtitz, working in the thick of the Haitian revolution, devoted the final volume of his elaborately illustrated *Flore pittoresque et médicale des Antilles* to emmenagogues, or "hystériques" (as they were often called), many of which he learned about from his "mulatress" informant (Chapter 2). Plants in this class had a strong, penetrating, and disagreeable odor, and served to provoke the menstrual flux and cure illnesses (jaundice, migraines, "vapors," convulsions, and uterine spasms) caused by its suppression. Five of the nineteen emmenagogues discussed induced abortion when administered in higher dosages. Although Descourtitz, like his European confrères, saw abortion among slaves as issuing from the West Indian sexual economy, in which women aborted babies conceived in prostitution or rape, he also saw it as resulting from the West Indian political economy, in which women, worn down by the cruelties of slavery, aborted to spite their masters. The plants he discussed included the *Poinciana pulcherrima*. They also included the *Aristolochia bilobata*, which, he wrote, was regarded by physicians in the Antilles as pernicious because, as was known already to Hippocrates, Galen, and Dioscorides, it could provoke abortion. (Although this particular variety of birthwort is specific to Saint Domingue, other varieties were well known to Europeans.) Another emmenagogue in Descourtitz's pharmacopoeia was the *Trichilie à trois folioles*, or *arbres à mauvais gén* (literally, "tree of bad people"); the slave women in the colonies, he wrote, too often use this root to "destroy their fruit" and "wreak vengeance" upon their masters. The plant was so violent that he counseled against its internal use. "And the women who have been miserable enough to resort to its use are punished by it; most of them lose their life in atrocious pain and uterine hemorrhages that nothing can stop." According to Descourtitz, the plant also provoked violent vomiting.  

The *Veronica frutescens*, also used by slave women and known to the Caribs as the *cougari*, was, Descourtitz wrote, prescribed by "wise physicians with trembling and grave circumspection." Its virtues, he reported, were sadly too well known. It was used by "criminal matrons and by the
Negresses who are guilty of infanticide.” Finally, the *Eryngium foetidum*, Descourtiz wrote, had already been described by his predecessor, Pouppé-Desportes, who denounced those depraved persons who employed dangerous emmenagogues “with the criminal intention of taking the life of the very creature they are meant to protect.”

Given the political and economic dimensions of abortion, it would be interesting to know whether slaves owned by free persons of color aborted at the same rate as those owned by whites. Because records of induced abortions were not kept, this question cannot be answered. It should probably be noted, however, that we have no reason to believe that the treatment of slaves by freed persons of color was any kinder than that by whites. Free women of color regularly branded their slaves, sometimes in bold letters across their chests, just like their white counterparts. European women in the colonies were no kinder. Stedman in Surinam told of a plantation mistress, a Mrs. Stolker, who, disturbed by the cries of a Negro baby, held it underwater until it was drowned. According to Stedman, women of her ilk detested the quadroon and “Negro” girls for taking European men for their husbands and “persecute[d] them with the greatest bitterness and most barbarous tyranny.” A Doctor Jackson who went out to Jamaica in 1774 could not say enough about the cruelties of creole women (he did not specify, but probably of European descent). He reported them flogging slave drivers with their “own hands” if the drivers did not punish slaves harshly enough. Some slaves were tied down and stretched between four stakes on the ground. To accommodate a pregnant slave, “a hole was dug to receive the belly.” Owners who killed slaves by such maltreatment were considered “incautious,” but they were rarely punished—they were thought chiefly to have sustained a loss of property.

**Abortion and the Slave Trade**

Overwhelming evidence thus exists that women in the colonies, especially slave women and free women of color, practiced abortion in this period, though at what rate and for what reasons is less clear. Concerns about abortion intensified toward the end of the eighteenth century when European states threatened to cut off the planters’ supply of slaves from Africa. Until this time, planters had used slave women chiefly as “work units” by day and “sexual servants” by night but only rarely as “breeders.” According to Michel-René Hilliard d’Auberteuil, planters calculated that it cost more to breed slaves than to purchase them. The price of a slave woman’s labor lost for eighteen months (three at the end of the pregnancy and fif-
teen while she worked half-time nursing the baby) was estimated at 300 livres. A slave baby at fifteen months was valued at only 150 livres; at age ten, however, the child could fetch 1,500 livres, and at age fifteen, a full 2,000 livres. Whether this represented a profit in the long run depended on how much a planter spent feeding and clothing the child for fifteen years. From about the 1760s on, planters began to recognize that although it was more costly to breed slaves in the islands, “creole Negroes” were much less often sick than imported “salt-water Negroes,” and planters began urging plantation physicians to improve breeding practices.79

This was a very different situation from that in the southern part of the United States. African slaves in the Caribbean did not replenish themselves, even after planters implemented reforms aimed at improving conditions for pregnant women. According to Stedman, the mortality rate in Surinam was about 5 percent annually. This meant, by his calculation, that “the complete number of Negro slaves, consisting of 50,000 healthy people, goes extinct once every twenty years.” Aublet also noted that slaves in Saint Domingue reproduced only a “very small part” of their population. He figured that 20,000 slaves had to be imported each year to maintain a population of 200,000. Reports from the British West Indies put the loss of slaves to dysentery alone at one-fifth of the total slave population. By modern calculations, Caribbean slave populations would have disappeared every century or so unless steadily resupplied from Africa. Natural increase was not achieved in Jamaica and several other parts of the Caribbean until the middle of the nineteenth century.80

Historians today attribute the low rate of natural increase among West Indian slave populations to many things. Some emphasize the high death rate: life expectancy for slaves in French colonies was between twenty-nine and thirty-four years, compared to forty-six years for Europeans in this period in France. Other historians stress low female fertility rates among slaves. One Jamaican planter estimated that in 1794 and 1795, only half of his 240 resident female slaves at Worthy Park ever became pregnant. Of these, approximately a quarter (thirty-five) suffered miscarriages. More appalling still was that of the eighty-nine children born, only nineteen survived past infancy. Fifteen of these nineteen would be the only child that a particular female slave ever produced. Among the female slaves at Worthy Park in the eighteenth century, only two women produced two surviving children and only one woman produced three. In nearby Saint Domingue, fertility levels were among the lowest in the Americas; on sugar plantations, fewer than half of adult females ever gave birth.81

Amenorrhea (suppression of menstruation) and sterility among female
slaves were caused by disease, hard labor, poor living conditions, and long periods of suckling that suppressed ovulation. But abortion also played a role. Robert Thomas, who practiced surgery from 1777 to 1785 in the islands of Saint Christopher and Nevis, listed “frequent abortions” as the second major cause of the decrease of slave populations on sugar plantations (“free and early intercourse” among slaves he signaled as the first cause; “epidemical diseases,” alcoholism, and long periods of suckling followed as lesser causes). A Dr. Collins, who styled himself a “professional planter,” found “frequent abortions” to be the fourth most important cause of the decrease among slaves, following the unhealthy climate, the lesser number of imported females, sterility among females, and preceding high rates of infant mortality. Some historians have also pointed out that Africans may have selectively sold infertile women into slavery. The extreme brutality of plantation overseers, combined with the disruption and separation of families, must also have given slaves little desire to bear children. Whether driven by high death rates, abortion, or low fertility rates, conditions were such that planters were continually forced to purchase new slaves from Africa.\textsuperscript{82}

As criticism of the slave trade sharpened in the explosive atmosphere of the American (1776), French (1789), and Haitian (1791) revolutions, planters and government councils began to explore the questions of slave fertility and abortion practices. Population and its increase were considered matters of state, and colonial governments increasingly took action (see Conclusion). In 1764 the French king sent a new governor to Saint Domingue to study the causes of depopulation among the slave population. At the same time, French colonial officials attempted to improve the art of midwifery, establishing schools in the principal cities of the colonies in the 1770s where a professor of medicine trained and certified midwives. In British colonies, there was also discussion of establishing lying-in hospitals.\textsuperscript{83}

Government councils also investigated the causes of abortion. The Jamaican physician James Thomson returned again to the topic of promiscuity, suggesting that female infertility derived from slave women’s early and unbounded indulgence in venereal pleasures. “The parts are left in so morbid and relaxed a state,” he wrote, “as to be unfit for impregnation.” Many of these young females, he charged, “endeavor to procure abortion by every means in their power, in which they are too often assisted by the knavery of others. The effect of these repeated miscarriages operates dreadfully on the tender frame of the mother, and not unusually termi-
nates in death, or incapability of future impregnation.” If these women did finally “settle down,” Thomson wrote, they produced “weakly and diseased off-spring that perish in a short time, or prove incapable of propagating their own race.” It was also sometimes said that their “loose” sexual practices caused slave women to cease menstruating at an unusually young age. Edward Long added that the medicines slave women took to treat their repeated bouts of venereal disease often killed the fetus and sterilized both the woman and her sexual partner. Long further traced “Negresses’” frequent obstructions (of the menses) to their too-frequent bathing in cool water. Plantation slave midwives were also held accountable; their unskilled management of births was said to destroy women’s abilities to reproduce.84

But critics of slavery also echoed the theme that Merian had sounded a century earlier: slave women refused to reproduce in efforts to revenge their masters and to save their offspring from the horrors of bondage. Father Nicolson, a Dominican priest, attributed the cause of abortion among slaves to their “barbarous” masters. “One sees,” he wrote, “Negresses who abort themselves so that their masters will not profit from their condition.” While he did not approve of these “homicidal mothers,” he pitied them their vengeance in this act. To the planters he cried: “Inhumane hearts! These atrocious crimes recoil upon you.” The French physician Pierre Camper wrote similarly in 1802 that slave women’s miserable state of servitude extinguished from their hearts the maternal tenderness observed even among animals; their state of degradation made raising children “repugnant” to them. Hilliard d’Aubertcuil also blamed slave women’s frequent abortions on the tyranny of their masters: If “Negresses” often abort, it is almost always the fault of their master whose “excess of tyranny has suffocated their maternal sentiment.” By the late eighteenth century, even those not critical of slavery, like Dr. Collins in Jamaica, agreed that abortion resulted from slave women’s refusal to birth “a being, like herself, [into] the rigours of eternal servitude.”85

The anonymous author of *Histoire des désastres de Saint-Domingue*, too, denounced the cruelty of planters’ smothering in these “miserable creatures” the natural desire to bear children. “Mothers,” the author moaned, “go against all natural instinct and kill their children to protect them from cruelty.” These “unhappy slaves,” the author continued, “listen less to the cry of nature than to their hatred for those who oppress them.” There were many examples, the author reported, of women who commit hid-
euous crimes (abortion and infanticide) in order to avoid enriching those who oppress them. In a note to the text, this author added that suicide among slaves in Saint Domingue was common because many of them believed (as Merian had reported of the slaves in Surinam a century earlier) that upon death they return to the country of their birth. “But abortion and infanticide are even more common among slaves than suicide.” These crimes, this author added, have their source sometimes in the fear of giving birth and sometimes in the desire to have nothing impede their promiscuous love affairs, but the principal source is almost always the unhappiness and hatred inspired by a detested master. The “Negresses” have “numerous secrets” for doing away with the “seed of their maternity.”

Slave women also engaged in infanticide, though direct reports are rare. Jean-Bartélémy Dazille, royal physician in Saint Domingue during the upheaval of revolution, recounted how one mother sacrificed her two children in order to “steal them away from slavery.” Like so many others, she, too, believed that slaves were transported back to their African homes after death where their rank, fortune, parents, and friends were restored to them. Dazille warned physicians to be constantly on their guard against infanticide. He reported one particularly horrific case—the discovery of thirty-one dead infants at an otherwise thriving plantation in Saint Domingue, “one of our richest colonies.” The infants had all died within the first nine days of life, and tetanus was suspected. The surgeon responsible for the plantation found the thirty-second child well on the tenth day of life and sent his compliments to the plantation owner. The next day the owner replied that the child had died in the night of tetanus. The surgeon, finding this improbable, had the body exhumed. He discovered that the infant had been suffocated by much “vegetable matter” stuffed into its throat. The “abominable” mother said that she was no more culpable than the other Negresses who had killed their infants in the same manner. Descourditz, also witness to revolution in Saint Domingue, reported an even more horrendous crime: A midwife by the name of Adradan (slaves did not yet have last names) confessed to killing seventy newborns with her own hands. “See if I deserve death!” she challenged, “It is a shameful custom to raise children into slavery. My position as a midwife delivers them newly born into my hands . . . I plunge a pin into the brain through the fontanel, this brings on the deadly lock jaw that plagues this colony and whose cause you now know.”

The consequences for producing a dead infant, whether stillborn or euthanized, were severe: the attending midwife (usually a slave) was
Figure 3.3. A romanticized image of a female slave being punished. Note the pedestal, the anguished posture, the classical breasts, and the depiction of African women carrying burdens on their heads.
whipped as was the mother, who might also be placed in an iron collar, where she remained until she became pregnant again. Colonial law further required that all “Negresses” who became pregnant declare their pregnancy to a midwife, who was in turn to report the fact to a surgeon, who registered it. A “Negress” declared pregnant and known to have provoked a “miscarriage” (a common euphemism for abortion) was whipped and made to wear the iron collar. In 1785 Girod-Chantrans witnessed the chains and iron collars that afflicted Negresses suspected of inducing abortion; some women were obliged to wear these “day and night until they had given their master an infant.”

The British House of Commons held hearings on the slave trade in the 1780s and 1790s, and debated the question of slave abortion and infanticide. A Doctor Jackson, testifying before a select committee, did not find “Negro” mothers deficient in affection for their children, but described how slave women practiced abortion and infanticide to spare their children the “hard usage” and “cruel treatment” they could expect from a life in slavery. Most physicians, however, closed ranks around the planters and did not hold them responsible for declining slave populations. Stephen Fuller, agent to the island of Jamaica, reported to the Assembly of Jamaica in 1789 that the decrease in slaves was not “comprehended” in Great Britain. It did not arise, as charged by abolitionists, from ill treatment or insufficient care, but from three primary causes: the disproportion between the sexes in the annual importations from Africa (according to his count, five males transported for every three females); the high mortality among new Negroes imported into Jamaica from Africa; and the frequent deaths among the Negro infants born in Jamaica (one quarter of whom perished within fourteen days of birth). Three physicians, all trained in Great Britain, supported Fuller, testifying that deaths among infants in Jamaica were due to tetanus, want of cleanliness, insufficient linen, poor housing, and the custom of employing too few wet nurses to care for too many infants, not corporal punishments. The well-known physician John Quier provided extensive testimony, noting that “Negro women, whether slave or free,” simply did not breed as frequently as the women of the laboring poor in Great Britain. This he ascribed chiefly to the “promiscuous intercourse” that slave women supposedly indulged in. Although he did admit that abortion was “rather frequent among them,” he ascribed this to their natural promiscuity rather than to any ill treatment or excessive labor. He testified further that among the four to five thousand slaves under his care in Jamaica, he had never met with any cases of abortion that he could attri-
bute to ill treatment or hard labor. Moderate labor, he continued, was in fact beneficial to pregnant women and the best means of preserving general health.89

Historians today have no way of saying how many women killed their unborn children in the West Indies. That abortion was practiced is not in doubt, however. A keen observer like Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry believed that slave midwives routinely induced abortions. (Moreau de Saint-Méry himself sold syringes used to dilate the cervix and bring on abortion from his bookstore in Philadelphia, where he fled in 1801 during the Haitian revolution.) Historians suspect that reports of slave abortions, like reports of slave poisonings (of their masters, plantation slaves, and livestock), have been exaggerated. Indeed, Thomson in Jamaica found that when planters began offering incentives for slaves to become pregnant—a dollar, a silver medal, perhaps a scarlet girdle to be worn on feast days and holidays, and a relaxed work schedule—these allurements encouraged some slave women to feign pregnancies. When the pregnancy did not yield a child, these women produced "some bloody discharge in evidence." To end such practices Thomson advised appointing a "faithful" midwife who would not "connive" with them, and implementing "exemplary" punishment for the guilty.90

No one will ever be able to say how often women aborted their children in efforts to resist the desperate miseries of slavery. Slave women, no doubt, killed their unborn children for many different reasons, and not just from a desire to save their offspring from a world of hard labor, poor nutrition, frequent rape, disease, and moral and psychological dejection. Slave women were known to have used their sexuality as a political weapon in various ways: on the eve of the revolution in Saint Domingue, for example, some prostituted themselves to French soldiers in exchange for bullets and gunpowder.91 But there are many forms of resistance, and many forms of submission, and it is not always possible to discern among them. Slave women may have submitted to conditions they could not change, but they clearly also used a number of means within their power to control their own fertility, confounding their masters' efforts to have them reduced to breedable beasts of burden.