By Virtue of Descent.

A Microhistorical Approach to the Role of Kinship Networks in the Quest for Freedom across the Early Nineteenth Century British Atlantic

by

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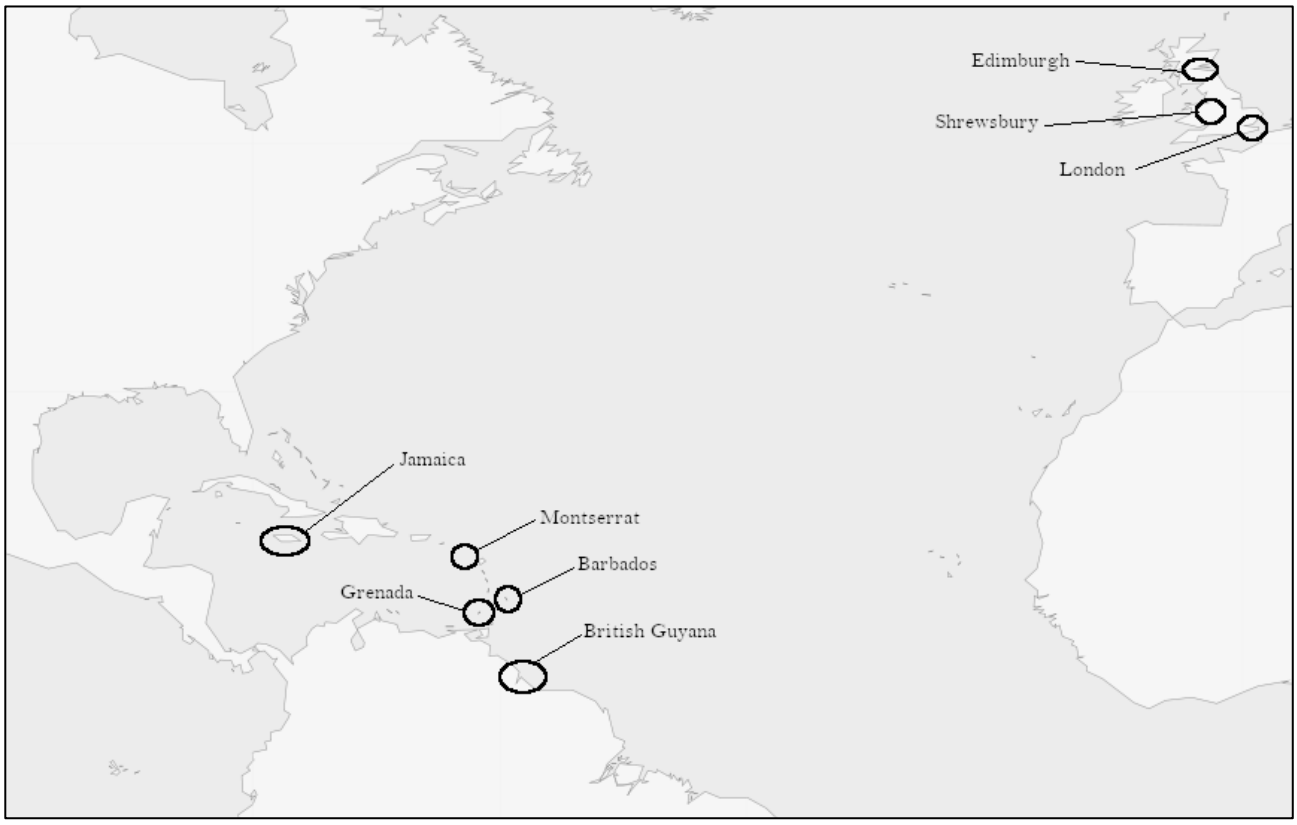

Figure 1: the diasporas of the Thomas and Ostrehan families across the Atlantic Ocean. (Google Maps, June 2020. Map edited by the author.)

Introduction

Tho' strong thy bow, dear boy,

Thy mingled shafts of black and white[1].

The excerpt comes from stanza eighteen of the *Ode to the Sable Venus*, composed in 1765 by Isaac Teale. While the poem describes the mythological landing on the shores of the American continent of a goddess with dark skin carried across the ocean by anthropomorphic creatures, the two verses hint at the offspring born from the union between the "sable Venus" and the god Neptune, represented as a man of white complexion. In order to be understood by its readers, any metaphor must contain, albeit concealed behind elaborate rhetoric, references to elements the audience is familiar with. In this case, features from ancient Greek and Roman mythology allude to the condition and the role of individuals of African or mixed ancestry in the colonial context, central topics in the contemporary political and cultural debates. It is not a coincidence that the *Ode to the Sable Venus* was included in Bryan Edwards's *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, of one of the most comprehensive analyses on the British Caribbean Atlantic published in the eighteenth century[2]. More than three hundred years after its publication, Edwards's work still represents a primal source of insight on the early modern Atlantic colonial context. The analysis draws both on numerical data (population surveys, import and export charts, financial transactions) and the author's direct experience across the British islands in the Atlantic, where he lived between 1760 and 1782 and again from 1787 until 1792[3]. While the former provides a direct perspective on long-term economic and social trends, the latter vividly captures the attitude of a male member of the colonial elite towards the contemporary tensions crossing the West Indies at the end of the eighteenth century. One year after sailing back to the metropole, Edwards published his comprehensive account in three volumes. Book IV analyses the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands under the British control, starting with an overview of the "four great classes" and then describing more in details the conditions of *mulattoes* and people of African descent[4].

Other contemporary sources added nuances to the ongoing debate. Janet Schaw, a Scottish woman who travelled across the British Caribbean and the northern colonies between 1774 and 1776, witnessed the living conditions of individuals of mixed origins and recorded her thoughts in

[1] Bryan Edwards, "Book IV", in *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies: With a Continuation to the Present Time*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 37.
[2] Edwards, "Book IV", 32-38.
[3] "Bryan Edwards," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, last modified 3 January 2008, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8531.
[4] Edwards, "Book IV", 1-2.

a diary published posthumously in 1904 as *Journal of a Lady of Quality Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina and Portugal in the Years 1774 -1776*[5]. Here, the author aligns herself to the voices blaming "the degenerate breed, neither fit for the field, nor indeed any work, as the true bred negro" for the supposed decline of the British colonies in the Atlantic. On the other side of the debate, advocates of emancipations included the end of discriminations against individuals of African descent among their demands. For example, Richard Barrett, member of the Jamaican House of Assembly, had a more ambiguous opinion on the matter: he supported the introduction of better living conditions for segregated ethnic groups, but also lobbied the institution of a period of apprenticeship before gaining full emancipation. His controversial position emerges from his *A reply to the speech of Dr. Lushington in the House of Commons on June 12 1827 on the free coloured people of Jamaica*, including a proposition to expand civil rights to the offspring of interracial couples[6].

While at the turn of the nineteenth century the debate over the condition of people born from unions between members of the colonial elite and non-European individuals intensified across the British Atlantic, the modern academical scholarship has tackled the issue only marginally. David Cohen and Jack Green in *Neither Slave nor Free: The Freedman of African Descent in the Slave Societies of the New World* engage more generally with the conditions of individuals of African origins in an imperial context that pursued sharp racial distinctions among its members[7]. Contemporary voices addressing this aspect of colonialism are considered by Marlene Daut in *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865*[8]. Similarly, Catherine Hall examines the metropolitan debate over non-European individuals living and working across the British empire in *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867*. The author demonstrates the influence of public opinion in shaping the lives of subjects spread across the West Indies[9]. The context delineated by the publications mentioned earlier is enriched of a new element to understand its inner tension through works examining the impact of gender on racial segregation—for example, Ann Laura Stoler in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* reveals how the sharp boundaries pursued by the colonial authorities

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[5] Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776*, edited by Evangeline Walker Andrews and Charles Andrews (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), 1-2.

[6] Richard Barrett, *A reply to the speech of Dr. Lushington in the House of Commons on 12 June 1827 on the free coloured people of Jamaica*, (London: Shackell and Baylis, 1828), 3.

[7] David William Cohen, Jack P. Greene, and Frederick P. Bowser, *Neither Slave nor Free: The Freedman of African Descent in the Slave Societies of the New World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), [exact page number to be checked as soon as I can access the volume again].

[8] Marlene Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 4.

[9] Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 78-79.

were redrawn in the local households, especially those including members of different ethnic origins[10]. Kit Candlin and Cassandra Pybus have analysed the experience of enslaved female individuals trying to avoid the worst aspects of captivity, seeking freedom or, more generally speaking, better living conditions, showing the different methods implemented and their degrees of effectiveness[11]. In particular, intimate relations with their owners or overseers emerge as a real chance to increase one's living condition. Not to be romanticised or idealised, the close contact between master and enslaved partner entailed a constant presence of unidirectional violence and abuse from the former on the latter. Primary sources, however, record numerous examples of women of African descent gaining access to substantial better living conditions and the upper strata of the colonial society through the intervention of their white masters-partners. Furthermore, in *Enterprising Women: Gender, Race, and Power in the Revolutionary Atlantic* the authors thoroughly highlight the agency of freed female individuals and their ability to create familial networks spanning across the British Atlantic and the metropole[12]. The two works by Kit Candlin here analysed, however, adopt a perspective focusing almost exclusively on the role of individuals as isolated actors in the colonial context. On the other hand, I believe primary sources present the evolution of familial networks founded on mutual assistance and cross-generational strategies as essential elements in securing individuals of mixed ancestry freedom from slavery, economic independence and influence on the Caribbean society. In this regard, my research follows the call by Robert Morris for a more comprehensive study on families of free individuals of mixed ancestry, whose members have been too often analysed as isolated individuals in the colonial context[13]. Finally, introducing a project focusing on familial *nuclei* of African and mixed ancestry, I cannot fail to mention the concept of "Atlantic creoles" introduced by Ira Berlin in her seminal article "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America[14]." Here, the author considers individuals of mixed descent who, "by experience or choice, as well as by birth, became part of a new culture that emerged along the Atlantic littoral [...] beginning in the 16th century," in order to explore the process of race construction[15]. Multiple common points between the subjects of Berlin's study and the individuals at the centre of my research can be highlighted: they were active members of the colonial society, successful in exploiting a broad spectrum of opportunities to improve their social status; they engaged in

[10] Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 42.
[11] Kit Candlin and Cassandra Pybus, *Enterprising Women: Gender, Race, and Power in the Revolutionary Atlantic*, (University of Georgia Press, 2015), 19.
[12] Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 19.
[13] Robert Morris, "Progenitors and Coloured Elite Families: Case Studies of the Belgraves, Collymores and Cummins," *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* XLVII (November 2001): 52.
[14] Ira Berlin, "From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (April 1996): 251-288.
[15] Berlin, "From Creole to African," 254.

economic activities connected to trans-Atlantic networks, such as trading and hospitality; (re)enslavement represented a constant looming threat to their existences[16]. However, one main difference suggests that an identification between Berlin's "Atlantic creoles" and the members of the families I here analyse would be inappropriate: the former emerge as deeply aware of their bond with the African continent, while the latter show no awareness toward this cultural heritage. Moreover, Atlantic creoles entered "societies-with-slaves" as one subordinate group among many others, while members of the Thomas and Ostrehan families struggled and raised in the Caribbean slave society, which theorised hereditary bondage and implemented stricter ostracism towards enslaved individuals[17].

My research begins where the study of Candlin and Pybus ended. By studying the conditions of individuals born from interracial relations in the colonial context, this study can assess the impact of relationship strategies implemented by their parents in order to gain better living conditions. In the decades between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the island of Jamaica represented the most populous dominion in the British West Indies and the focus of political debate in the British colonial empire. Jamaica had several large settlements, bustling port cities and extensive plantations scattered around the countryside. However, the primary sources considered demonstrate how a broader scope is essential in observing the evolution of familial ties originated from interracial relations due to their high degree of mobility. The inter-colonial networks of migration and trade make it necessary to include the other British colonies in the Caribbean, especially the settlements considered by Candlin the "last Caribbean frontier," such as Grenada, Trinidad and Demerara. Moreover, the documents analysed include the metropole as an active piece of the Atlantic puzzle. As a consequence, my research follows two parallel courses: first, the sons and daughters of formerly enslaved women resettled in colonised regions different from those of their mothers, either part of the same empire or under other European powers. This inter-Atlantic dimension demands an approach that considers the various colonial environments and the reasons behind the intra-Caribbean migrations. It will be shown how this phenomenon was shaped mainly by the prospect of better economic condition, the different consideration of black and coloured free individuals across the West Indies, the pre-existing networks of acquaintances and the new familial relations developed through time. Secondly, cross-Atlantic connections were established between the British colonies and the metropole by children borne from interracial relationships being sent to the metropole for educational purposes. In particular, England and Scotland, with their cultural institutions, represented expensive but wise options considered by free women of African descent. This choice, if successfully exploited, granted access to high-standards education and, as a

[16] Ibid., 259-263.
[17] Ibid., 284.

consequence, to the upper strata of British society in the metropole, establishing familial ties between the original household in the colonial environment and those among its members on the other side of the ocean. Together with proof of baptism, a period of education in the metropole appears in petition defending the role of mulattoes as members of the colonial white society[18]. The documents considered allow narrowing the timeframe from the last decade of the eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth. During this interval, the individuals discussed in my study experienced an initial period of close relations with the previous generation of their respective households; subsequently, patterns of intra-Caribbean and cross-Atlantic diaspora became dominant. Moreover, during the same years, the British colonial context saw the worsening of the debate on the role of free black and people of colour in colonial society. In particular, the controversy relegated mulattoes to a critical position because of their mixed ancestry: they embodied the racial tensions produced by the exercise of colonial power while redrawing and reordering imposed divisions[19]. The different voices in the public opinion, both in the West Indies and in the metropole, shaped the migration patterns of individuals born from interracial relations and determined which opportunities they could exploit.

As explained above, I have engaged with the subjects of my research from two interconnected perspectives: the personal – sometimes even intimate – experience of people borne from interracial relations and the public debate over their role and rights in the contemporary colonial society. Regarding the former, I relied on primary sources produced by the individuals considered or other members of their familial networks. This is the case, for example, of Susannah Ostrehan, born in Barbados from an enslaved woman of African origin and her owner. After being freed, she became a wealthy property holder and slave owner. The changing in social status during her existence, from manumission until the last years of her life, can be traced through the analysis of levy books from the Caribbean colony and her last will[20]. This last document represents a unique opportunity to assess her wealth and picture the network of people she interacted with[21]. Her intimate connections and the success of the long-term familial strategy have been further explored through the analysis of three other testaments drafted by female members of the Ostrehan family. The experience of the Thomas family is documented by the last will of Dorothy, *née* Kirwan. A woman of African origin born in slavery, she bought her freedom and gave life to a numerous family

[18] Cohen, Greene, and Bowser, *Neither Slave nor Free*, [exact page number to be checked as soon as I can access the volume again].
[19] Melanie Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies: Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 14.
[20] Johanne Mcree Sanders, *Barbados Records* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1984).
[21] Last Will and Testament of Susannah Ostrehan, February 22, 1809, Wills and Inventories, St. Michael, 1800-1850, BDA.

together with the merchant Joseph Thomas[22]. Dorothy Thomas's children spread across the Caribbean and even moved to the metropole, here accessing a higher social status mainly through education. Again, her last will represents an invaluable source of information on the offspring of this interracial couple and the network of support built between the Atlantic colonies they settled in[23]. The article "The use of wills in community formation by former slaves in Suriname, 1750–1775" by Karwan Fatah-Black has been crucial in directing my research towards testaments as invaluable sources of information about both their authors and the communities they were part of[24]. Differences have emerged between the body of sources considered by Fatah-Black and the last wills included in my research: manumission, a recurring concern among the former, hardly appears in the latter, more involved in avoiding the fall back to the misery of enslavement of its beneficiaries. Moreover, testators from Suriname frequently turned to individuals of higher status as executors, while the testaments from the Thomas and Ostrehan families show the central role played by kinship members even in these regards. However, one crucial common point should be mentioned: both communities struggled to release from slavery or secure the freedom of their members, but they never condemned the oppression at the base of the plantation economy. As highlighted in the following chapters, this in-between condition became a disputed topic in the public debate over enslavement and racial segregation across the British Atlantic empire.

The lives of these individuals were influenced not only by their closest family members but also through the political evolution of and the public debate in the colonial context. The claims of the author who took part in it represent an essential source in my research. One of the most prominent voices was Edward Long, a wealthy and influential Jamaican planter. His *History of Jamaica*, published in 1774 in three volumes, amply engages with the role of people of mixed ancestry in the British imperial enterprise. The author, based on the assumption the miscegenation strictly implied moral and physical degeneration, warned his readers from conceding any degree of personal freedom to a "breed of mongrels[25]." Two years later Janet Schaw finished her *Journal of a Lady of Quality Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina and Portugal in the Years 1774 -1776*, a lengthy record of her travels across the British Caribbean. Here, the author registered her thoughts interracial relations and their offspring, deemed "neither fit for the field nor indeed any work[26]." Twenty years later, Bryan Edwards recorded his considerations

[22] "Dorothy Thomas [*formerly* Kirwan]," Oxford Dictionaty of Bibliography, last modified 6 October 2016, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/109521.
[23] Will of Dorothy Thomas born Kirwan of Demarary, British Guiana, TNA: PROB 11/2077/434.
[24] Karwan Fatah-Black, "The use of wills in community formation by former slaves in Suriname, 1750–1775," *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* (December 2019): 3.
[25] Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica. Reflections on Its Situation, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws and Government*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 327.
[26] Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 112.

on mulattoes in Book IV of the *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* published in 1793. In this case, however, the author, while supporting the segregation between white people and individuals of African descent, highlighted the tension created in the imperial dominions by the complex and ambiguous system of racial classification[27]. The dawn of the nineteenth century brought with it an escalation in the fight for abolition across the British colonial empire. This element is relevant to my research for two reasons: first, the debate on the end of slavery reached its apex in the same period the Thomas and the Ostrehan families expanded their cross-Atlantic familial networks. Secondly, the cause for abolition progressed alongside the struggle of individuals of mixed ancestry towards the recognition of full civil rights. As a consequence, a brief overview of how these two tensions interacted, especially in the context of the colony of Barbados, is included. It stems mainly from the inspiring volume *The Children of Africa in the Colony: Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation* by Melanie Newton and considers the impact of the evolving legislation on the role of people of mixed ancestry in the Caribbean framework[28]. Finally, a short analysis of the evolution of the colonial legislation regarding the conditions of people of mixed ancestry at the dawn of the nineteenth century is included. In particular, attention is devoted to the evolving provisions regulating their right of inheriting wealth and properties and the different, when not antithetic, approaches adopted by the local colonial assemblies. These variations often sparked a heated debate between voices from the British Atlantic dominions and observers from the metropole.

The argument of my thesis is presented across two chapters. As discussed above, the division reflects the approach to the research question from two different courses. The first chapter assesses the research question from an external point of view: the primary sources included engage with the conditions of individuals of African or mixed origins as they were perceived by authors belonging to the colonial elite. First, the opinion of a wealthy and influent plantation owner is explored through the second volume of Edward Long's *History of Jamaica.* Subsequently, the analysis of *A Journal of a Lady of Quality* reveals the impressions of Janet Schaw, a member of the Scottish aristocracy vising the British West Indies in the late eighteenth century. Then, Bryan Edwards's *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies* witnesses how, two decades after the publication of the first two documents, the debate on the role and status of individuals of African or mixed ancestry sparked across the British colonial empire. Finally, a brief discussion on the evolving legislation on the same ethnic group is included. In the second chapter, I engage with primary sources produced by individuals of African or mixed ancestry and dealing directly with their relatives and long-term familial strategies. I start with a thorough analysis of Dorothy Thomas's

[27] Edwards, "Book IV," 23-24.
[28] Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies.*

testament and the broad kinship networks it depicts, retraced through the mentions in the document. Moreover, the wealth bequeathed helps in assessing the social and economic status of the testator at the moment of her death. A similar investigation involves four members of the Ostrehan family and the last wills they drafted. I start with the testament of Priscilla, then the focus shifts on the wills of her daughter Susannah and her grand-daughter Mary. Finally, the short example by Mary Ostrehan-Brett is analysed. These documents give a comprehensive perspective on the evolution of the family across four generations and a time span of nearly forty years. The conclusion highlights the common elements between the two approaches and how they help in better understanding the planning implemented by individuals of African or mixed ancestry across the Caribbean and the Atlantic Ocean. In particular, the focus is on the importance of kinship networks and long-term cross-generational strategies as critical tools to gain independence and improve social status. As a final point, potential directions to expand the research on this topic are provided.

To review, this research will explore the kinship networks built by free individuals of mixed ancestry across the British Atlantic environment. The microhistorical approach will bring back to the surface the vicissitudes of two families, the Thomas and the Ostrehan, their struggle to secure freedom and the strategies exploited by their members to remove the stigma of enslavement. In particular, this quest, involving several generations of each family, will emerge from primary sources produced by the subjects of my research. The study will apply a cross-Atlantic perspective in the light of the dispersion experienced by these free individuals of mixed ancestry: mobility represented a crucial element in their hands and allowed the expansion of familial networks from the Caribbean islands to the metropole. Parallel to the questioning of private documents, contemporary primary sources produced by members of the colonial elite will also be scrutinised. In particular, their enquire will look for depictions of free individuals of African and mixed ancestry. The role assigned them by the colonial authority and opportunities to subvert the order imposed by the plantation state.

Chapter I

At the end of the eighteenth century, the Caribbean islands appeared as a network of bustling hubs, such as ports and inland settlements, connecting the American colonies between each other and providing regular exchanges with the metropole, a region whose connections spanned from the coasts of West Africa to the banks of the Thames River. The intra-American and cross-Atlantic flow involved goods, information and people. European vessels sailing the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea carried actors from almost all strata of society: entrepreneurs from the metropole, wealthy plantation owners, indentured workers, free members of the colonial society and enslaved individuals. The high degree of interaction meant that events and debates in one of the hubs of this network rapidly reverberated across the other nodes of the colonial context. This chapter assesses the consequences of contemporary political and cultural changes on the opportunities offered to individuals of African or mixed ancestry by the Caribbean frontier, as Kit Candlin renamed the geographical context analysed between the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century[29]. In particular, two points of this broader perspective are enquired: the representations of individuals of African descent in the eyes of European members of the colonial elite, both from the British West Indies and the metropole, and the legal debate on their role in the Caribbean society. The first analysis will present contemporary primary sources and highlight the devices employed by white authors to describe individuals of African or mixed ancestry in the imperial framework. The features shared by these accounts help sketch the racial relations between different strata of the local society. The second branch of this enquire will engage with the attempts of the central authorities to regulate and shape the same relations. Eventually, a contrast between sharp juridical distinctions and the nuanced reality emerges.

1. "After them a parcel of monkeys." The consequences of interracial relationships in the eyes of a Scottish traveller.

On October 25, 1774, Janet Schaw left from Burntisland, on the northern bank of the Firth of Forth, for a journey through the Atlantic that would have brought her back to Scotland only two years later[30]. While little is known about her early life in Edinburgh, Schaw thoroughly recorded events and impressions from her trans-Atlantic travel in a series of letters. In the first entry, she wrote: "I propose writing you every day, but you must not expect a regular Journal. I will not fail to write

[29] Candlin, *The Last Caribbean Frontier*, xxi.

[30] Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776*, ed. Evangeline Walker Andrews and Charles Andrews (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), 1.

whatever can amuse myself; [...] as every subject will be guided by my own immediate feelings[31]." As emerging from the introduction, the author's intention was not a publication of her production. This theory is confirmed by the story behind the first edition of the diary: manuscript copies were first found by chance in the archives of the British Library in 1904 by Evangeline Walker Andrews and Charles McLean Andrews, who also contributed to the subsequent public edition, titled *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776*[32]. In my opinion, this source is relevant as it represents an unmediated reflection of the attitude of a member of the metropolitan elite crossing the very same context encountered by the Thomas and Ostrehan families. Especially in the urban centres of the British West Indies, Schaw came in contact with the environment, social structures and tensions Dorothy, Susannah, Priscilla and the other women considered in the previous chapter experienced on a daily base. However, trough the diametrically different experience, racial distinction emerges as a critical influence shaping lives in the Atlantic world. The respective cross-Atlantic familial networks represent a second parallel between the author of the diary and the subjects of my research. As it has been described above, members of the Thomas family had the opportunity, through the support of Dorothy, to study and settle in Britain. On the other hand, the first letter written by Schaw depicts the inversed diaspora lived by her family: she was married to John Rutherfurd, a plantation owner from Midlothian settled in North Carolina. From this union the couple had three children; after seven years in Scotland, they were sailing back to their father's household together with their mother[33]. The Schaw family, however, was only a small part of the passengers leaving the British island for the American colonies. As recorded by the author, the captain of the vessel had privately embarked families from the Highlands, migrants crossing the ocean in search of opportunities in the colonial context[34]. Finally, after surviving two storms and the ocean crossing, the ship first docked in Antigua, one of the Leeward Islands, on December 12[35].

The second book of the diary opens with Schaw first impressions of the British West Indies, in particular, she describes being welcomed on the wharf by "a number of pigs run out at a door, and after them a parcel of monkeys. This not a little surprised me, but I found what I took for monkeys were negro children, naked as they were born[36]." This early note, a meaningless episode in the eyes of the author, introduces Schaw's attitude towards non-European individuals of the settlements she visited. During her stay in Antigua, the author started a lengthy description of the

[31] Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 20.
[32] Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 3.
[33] Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 20-21.
[34] Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 28.
[35] Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 77.
[36] Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 78.

island, engaging with both its geographical features and the character of its inhabitants. Regarding the second, the contrast between the depictions of creole individuals, born on the island but of European descent, and people of mixed or African origin is striking. Through Schaw's pages, the first emerge as an idealised version of those people met daily in the metropole by the author. They are "most agreeable companions," untouched by jealousy and greed, extremely polite and happy. "As to the women, they are in general the most amiable creatures in the world," remarks the author[37]. The only spot on this candid representation is the influence of "young black wenches" that "lay themselves out for white lovers[38]." This explicit reference introduces Schaw's reflections on the role of women of African descent and the children born from their relationships with European and creole men, deemed immoral and unnatural. The author's blame, however, is not equally divided between the individuals of the couple. On the opposite, men are considered the victims of a seductive talent that closely remembers the spell cast on Odysseus by Calypso. The result of this mischievous attraction, or "crime" as Schaw called it, "appears too plainly from the crouds of Mullatoes, which you meet in the streets, houses and indeed every where[39]." The words chosen by Schaw undoubtedly create a sharp distinction among women in the colonial society: those part of the local elite are linked to adjectives recalling traditional virtues, such as chastity and empathy. At the same time, those of African descent are described as individuals whose only influence on social life is the supposed disruption of the enforced racial distinctions.

The miscegenation condemned by the author also had a second harmful consequence, namely the presence of a "degenerate breed, neither fit for the field, nor indeed any work, as the true bred negro[40]." As it can be inferred from this quote, short but dense of meanings, Schaw perceived the presence of offspring of mixed ancestry as a real threat to the stability of the colonial society. First, these individuals are labelled as "degenerate," highlighting the divergence from an ideal reality of racially segregated unions. The deviation is given as the fundamental source of the following assumptions. The "breed" (itself a term recalling animals more than human beings) of mulattos is then compared to individuals of African origin who did not engage in any relationship with creole or European partners. The latter called the "true bred negro," retained, in the eyes of the author, a higher place in the racial and moral hierarchy, and were considered free from the corruption plaguing the former. Furthermore, the quote hints at the supposed social burden represented by individuals of mixed ancestry believed to be unfit to work in the fields and thus a passive element of the local Caribbean plantocracy. The description of the author's visit to Mrs Hamilton, the wife of an Antiguan planter, finally defines Schaw's ideal model of interracial interactions: the young lady

[37] Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 113.
[38] Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 112.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.

welcomed the latter in her house accompanied by five years old girl of mixed ancestry, "whom she retains as a pet[41]." The words used to portray this scene prove how such a subordinate relationship represented the preferable scenario in the eyes of a member of the Caribbean elite.

2. The threat of *mulattoes* in Edward Long's *History of Jamaica.*

Janet Schaw's ideas on racial hierarchy and the role of people of mixed ancestry are shared by a second work on the British West Indies, published the same year the Scottish woman sailed back home. The three volumes of *The History of Jamaica* by Edward Long present a comprehensive view on the wealthiest British colony in the West Indies at the end of the eighteenth century[42]. Its author was born on the island in 1734 and in 1757 inherited the family sugar plantation of Lucky Valley estate, in the Cornwall parish[43]. Land ownership granted Long access to the colonial aristocracy, the same elite Janet Schaw so positively described in her letters. Moreover, he was elected multiple times between 1761 and 17666 a member of the Jamaican Assembly, an appointment he retained until 1769 when he moved to the metropole[44]. The involvement of Edward Long in the Caribbean elite is apparent, and he had interests both as a plantation owner and as a political representative. During his final years in Britain, Long worked on his *magnum opus*, writing chapters on the geography of the island, its population, the sugar production and trade, the role of the Assembly and the relations with the metropole. The second volume includes the author's discussion on the composition of the Jamaican society. As in Schaw diary, it is organised according to a hierarchical order based on race, ethnicity and ancestry. The European and creole elite, to which Long belonged, emerges as the natural ruler over the island. A white monopoly was considered the only possibility by him, establishing race as a critical element in conferring the right to govern: "it is a question easily answered, whether it would be more for the interest of Britain, that Jamaica should be possessed and peopled by white inhabitants, of by negroes and mulattoes?[45]". The comparison established is with the Spanish dominions across the American continent, considered a corrupted *milieu* of interracial relationships. The source of this degeneration is then traced by Long back to the presence of individuals of mixed ancestry, deemed vicious and brutal[46]. Moreover, this group of people is considered a corrupting force, so influent to endanger the social order established by the white aristocracy. As in Schaw's letters, seduction is the most severe threat, since "Europeans

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[41] Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 124.
[42] Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica. Reflections on Its Situation, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws and Government* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).
[43] "Edward Long," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, last modified May 29, 2014, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/16964.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 327.
[46] Ibid.

[were] too easily led aside to give a loose to every kind of sensual delight[47]." Again, men's role is passive, while the action of deceiving is exclusive of female actors. The eventual outcome of frequent miscegenation is seen by Long in the dispersion of estates and inheritances among large numbers of alleged heirs and descendants, thus undermining attempt of the local elite to limit access to wealth and influence[48]. His grim analysis ends with a laconic observation on the destiny of mixed-ancestry individuals, condemned by their nature to "fall back" to the status inherited by their mothers[49]. This last mention fully highlights the distance between the Caribbean society imagined by the white elite, based on sharp distinctions and a claimed natural hierarchy, and the contemporary reality. In this colonial context, individuals of mixed ancestry had the opportunity to challenge this rigid vision. The histories of Dorothy Thomas, Priscilla Ostrehan and their descendants describe a reversed pattern: they relied on strong familial bonds as the base for success and independence across generations. They challenged the model imposed by colonial regimes by gaining wealth and influence, breaking the racial segregation and affirming their role as active members of the imperial society, both in the West Indies and in the metropole.

3. *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*. The role of individuals of mixed ancestry across the Caribbean dominions at the dawn of the nineteenth century.

Published in London in 1793, Bryan Edwards's *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies* represents a comprehensive overview on the British Caribbean dominions at the dawn of the nineteenth century from the perspective of a white native of the island. Furthermore, before moving to the metropole, the author had been an estate owner and had been elected multiple times a member of the Jamaican House of Assembly[50]. As a consequence, his work can be rightly considered the voice of the contemporary colonial elite. In Chapter I of Book IV, Edwards describes the several ethnic groups and social classes inhabiting the British Atlantic islands. After an account on the conditions of European migrants and Creole individuals (intended as people of European ancestry born in the Caribbean), the author focuses on free people of African or mixed ancestry, enslaved individuals being considered only in the chapters engaging with the plantation system. Edwards's first note depicts the complex system employed to categorise inhabitants of the British West Indies based on their ancestry. The scheme included four classes based on the distance in their bloodline of any individual from the closest ancestor of African origin[51]. While of simple application, as explained by

[47] Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 328.
[48] Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 327.
[49] Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 329.
[50] "Bryan Edwards," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, last modified January 03, 2008, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8531.
[51] Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, 18.

the author, the system struggled to fit every person in a precise group, giving life to a plethora of sub-categories. Central to this research is the distinction made between "black" individuals, as Edwards called people of direct African descent, and "mulattos," defined as whoever was "less than three steps removed in lineal digression from the negro ventrem[52]." This generational distance was the primary requisite to abandon a condition of complete submission. However, the author highlighted how people of mixed ancestry were far from being recognised as functional members of the colonial society since different legal restrictions applied to their status. First, they were not allowed to present any evidence in cases against white people. Secondly, these individuals were not eligible for the local general assemblies and public offices. Finally, people of mixed ancestry were not allowed to inherit sums larger than £2000 from white people, with exceptions applying to those baptised and adequately educated[53]. This last clause is particularly relevant in the context of my research since it directly applies to the members of the Thomas and Ostrehan families. In particular, it reveals why so frequently in the last wills analysed the testators explicitly bequeathed shares of their wealth to provide for the education of their younger heirs. Instruction and culture not only represented useful tools to access the higher strata of contemporary society; most importantly, they were necessary conditions to obtain and secure freedom. While opportunities and offices restricted to white individuals were clearly stated by the colonial codes, Edwards highlighted the increasingly ambiguous status of people of mixed ancestry, in-between a condition of total segregation and oppression and the dignity of full-right citizens. According to the author, at the dawn of the nineteenth century, they were envied by the enslaved African community and, at the same time, ostracised by the European and Creole elite[54]. A solution to this uncertain condition is seen by Edwards in a paternalistic system of privileges based on "approximation to the whites" and proposing a partial inclusion of individuals of mixed ancestry in the colonial administration, fostering their attachment towards local colonial communities.

Ideally following the examples set by Edward Long and Janet Schaw two decades before, Bryan Edwards in the first chapter of Book IV linked the discussion on the relationships and tensions between different ethnic groups in the colonial context to personal comments on the condition of free women of African and mixed ancestry. However, he adopted a different approach compared to the first two authors mentioned: while still blaming extramarital and interracial relationships as a source of corruption, the author underlined how concubinage frequently represented the only opportunity for women from disadvantaged strata of society to avoid extreme poverty and improve their living condition[55]. From this point of view, Edwards abandoned the

[52] Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, 20.
[53] Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, 21.
[54] Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, 24.
[55] Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, 25-26.

vision emerging from Long's and Schaw's works of women of African or mixed ancestry as intrinsically tempting and devoted to the destruction of "natural" white relationships. However, despite this timid evolution in the author's perspective, the chapter here considered ends with the Ode to the Sable Venus, reaffirming a perspective on female individuals of mixed ancestry centred on oppression, sexual exploitation and malicious seduction[56]. The poem, composed by Isaac Teale and first published in 1765, describes the voyage from the shores of Angola to the island of Jamaica of a goddess of African descent[57]. The deity is compared to the Renaissance iconography of Venus as depicted, for example, by Sandro Botticelli in "Nascita di Venere." The description of physical features, however, conceals a blaming of the character's inclination, in particular of her sexual drive and her influence on male individuals[58]. The themes at the centre of the poem are even more evident in the illustration that accompanied it, "The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies" by Thomas Stothard (Figure 1). The engraving portrays a female individual with dark skin sailing on a shell pulled by a pair of sea monsters. At the two sides, cherubs and a figure identified with Neptune follow the goddess. Two elements of the colonial regime exploiting women of African descent are reflected by both the poem and Stothard's work. First, the "Sable Venus" sailing from Angola to the shores of Jamaica confers an idealised representation of the brutal transatlantic trade, transporting up to 44'000 enslaved individuals to the British Caribbean at the time of its publication[59]. Second, the focus on a female character exposes the paradox between the god-like status conferred to the "Sable Venus" and the widespread sexual violence perpetrated across the West Indies by the colonial elite against enslaved women. However, a third, less manifest clue connects the portray, the poem and the late-eighteenth century Caribbean context.

In the top left corner of Stothard's engraving, one of the cherubs depicted bears a bow and is portrayed in the act of shooting an arrow to Neptune, standing below it. The iconography supports its identification with Cupid, the god of erotic love and son of Venus. Teale's poem is less cryptic in suggesting a sexual relationship between the African goddess and the sea god: in stanza eighteenth, the latter is described while flirting with the former behind a "murky cloud[60]." Moreover, the following verses allude to Cupid as the offspring of this interracial union between gods from different continents:

She smil'd with kind consenting eyes; —

Beauty was ever valour's prize;

[56] Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, 32.
[57] Regulus Allen, "'The Sable Venus' and Desire for the Undesirable," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 51, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 668.
[58] Allen, "'The Sable Venus'," 669.
[59] Slave Voyages Database, http://www.slavevoyages.org/estimates/LtmXvdpW.
[60] Edwards, "Book IV," 36.

He rais'd a murky cloud:

The tritons sound, the sirens sing,

The dolphins dance, the billows ring,

And joy fills all the qrowd.

Blest offspring of the warm embrace!

Fond ruler of the crisped race!

Tho' strong thy bow, dear boy,

Thy mingled shafts of black and white,

Are wing'd with feathers of delight,

Their points are tipt with[61].

Another hint to miscegenation can be found in the engraving: the god of erotic love and Triton, often described as half human and half fish in classical sources, are the only characters not facing the audience. The double reference, in the portray and the poem, to children born from interracial relations suggest a widespread awareness among the audience engaging with the two artworks mentioned above. This assumption is supported by Bryan Edwards, which included his reflection on the status of mulattoes in Book IV of his *History of the West Indies.*

4. The conditions of individuals of mixed ancestry through the evolving colonial legislations.

The role of free people of mixed ancestry between the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century evolved not only in the eyes of external observers and influent local figures. During the same period, the legislative efforts of colonial assemblies and metropolitan authorities responded to the influences of the contemporary public debate. Long-term demographic trends influenced the approach adopted by the different British colonies towards the growing presence of individuals born from interracial couples and the consequent challenge they posed to the rigid racial segregation: in the island of Barbados, the locked white society did not feel the need to include the so-called "*mestizos*" in its ranks; on the other hand, the Jamaican elite opened to the inclusion of some mixed ancestry individuals in a bid to increase the ever-dwindling white population[62]. Moreover, key events brought with them sudden and unpredicted developments. As highlighted by Melanie

[61] Edwards, "Book IV," 37.

[62] Mavis Christine Campbell, *The Dynamics of Change in a Slave Society: A Socio-political History of the Free Coloreds of Jamaica, 1800-1865* (London: Associated University Press, 1976), 41.

Newton in her volume *The Children of Africa in the Colony: Free People of Color in Barbados in the Age of Emancipation*, the Haitian Revolution, ended in 1804 with the independence of the colony, shook the foundations of colonial dominions and spread fears of similar upheavals across Caribbean communities with a consistent number of free people of African origins. In this situation, the Jamaican elite answered by opening new opportunities to free black individuals. Far from being a move towards equality, the decision helped to preserve the high-class privileges[63]. Of one the consequence of this opening was the 1813 "Jamaica Act," that erased any limitation on inheritance for the "free people of colour in this island," a diametrically opposite stance to the "Inheritance Act" approved in 1762 by the same Assembly and setting to £2000 the limit of any sum or asset bequeathed to non-white beneficiaries[64]. The colony of Barbados, on the other hand, reacted to the perceived threat of the growing influence of free communities of African origins without imposing limitations on land ownership or inheritance, but by continually raising the fees required to manumit enslaved subjects. In 1801 they were incremented by 400% for male individuals and by 600% for female individuals[65]. Newton explains the different approach of the Barbadian elite by noticing how the local repressive legal and economical apparatus and the plantocracy monopoly virtually prevented the rise of a self-sustaining Afro-Barbadian elite[66]. However, these obstacles did not avoid the creation of a spread network of Afro-Barbadian communities across the Caribbean context that successfully managed to keep the topic of their segregation at the centre of the contemporary political debate[67]. As emphasised by Hilary Beckles in *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados*, the effort of families of mixed ancestry to rise the colonial social ladder intertwined with the contemporary struggle for the abolition of slavery. However, the former tended never explicitly to side with the anti-slavery cause. This decision is explained as a strategy to avoid a direct clash against the colonial elite that still detained a monopoly over the social and political life of the British dominion in the Caribbean[68].

[63] Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies*, 64.
[64] Campbell, *The Dynamics of Change in a Slave Society*, 48; 79.
[65] Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies*, 61.
[66] Ibid., 60.
[67] Ibid., 83.
[68] Beckles, *Natural Rebels*, 137.

Chapter II

The documents included in the previous chapter have provided a perspective on the public debates shaping the lives of individuals of African or mixed ancestry in the colonial context at the dawn of the nineteenth century. Their social status and path across the British Atlantic dominions directly depended on the flow of wealth from one generation to the next. The evolution of this chapter follows the migrations of members of two Caribbean families: the Thomas from Grenada and the Ostrehan from Barbados. As revealed by the primary sources, however, the places of origin only represent the starting point of a diaspora that saw people spreading across the colonial Atlantic while maintaining far-reaching familial ties. As demonstrated in the following pages, the inter-Caribbean and cross-Atlantic dispersion followed precise strategies, influenced by social and economic factors.

1. The testament of Dorothy Thomas and the cross-Atlantic diaspora of her family.

On August 5, 1846, Dorothy Thomas, *née* Kirwan, died in Georgetown, at that time the main settlement in the colony of British Guyana[69]. Borne a slave in Montserrat, part of the Leeward Islands archipelago, by the time of her death at 83 years old she was addressed as "the queen of Demerara" and left a substantial inheritance to her heirs, both in cash and properties[70]. The events that raised an enslaved individual to such a dominant position in the colonial context have been meticulously retraced by Kit Candlin and Cassandra Pybus in Chapter V of *Enterprising Women: Gender, Race and Power in the Revolutionary Atlantic*. The two Australian historians highlight her extraordinary ability in exploiting the economic opportunities open to an individual of African origin freed after being borne in slavery[71]. They also consider the importance of her relationship with the British merchant Joseph Thomas, started during her captivity and formalised around 1787 while the couple was living in Grenada. As mentioned in the chapter, Dorothy's family included nine children, who lived scattered across the Caribbean dominions and maintained strong ties with their mother[72]. Furthermore, she played a crucial role in determining their condition in the colonial society and, thanks to her extensive wealth, even provided financial assistance to her sons-in-law. Dorothy Thomas left no direct written sources, but her last will represents a mine of information

[69] "Dorothy Thomas [*formerly* Kirwan]," Oxford Dictionaty of Bibliography, last modified 6 October 2016, https://doi.org /10.1093/ref:odnb/109521.
[70] Kit Candlin, *The Last Caribbean Frontier, 1795-1815* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 26.
[71] Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 185.
[72] Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 92.

not only on her life: through its lines, reflections of her children's lives emerge. The copy I have analysed for this research comes from the Colonial Office records of the National Archives in Kew[73].

The first version was drafted February 25, 1843, in Demerara, with J. Smith, John Kennedy and D. Grierson as witnesses. The first two lines of the will concisely portray the life of its testator by recording the original surname of Dorothy, imposed on her at birth by her master, mentioning Montserrat as her birthplace and identifying her as a long-time resident of Demerara. The lasting and profound bond with this place is emphasised immediately after in the document by the donation of 22 guilders to the poor of the colony. The first members of the Thomas family mentioned in Dorothy's testament are the grand-daughters Charlotte Dorothea, Mary and Sarah King Fullarton, children of John Fullarton and Charlotte Thomas, who died prematurely before the will had been drafted. The testator bequeathed to each one of them an equal share of the sum in the hand of her correspondents in London, we can imagine in charge of Dorothy's investments and properties in the metropole. Moreover, the three children were also to share the half lot of land possessed by their grandmother in Cummingsburg, one of the central neighbourhoods of Georgetown. This place was also the last residence of Dorothy. As it can be already noticed, the first mention of the will perfectly introduces mobility and far-reaching connections as crucial common threads in the lives of free individuals borne from interracial relationships. In this case, two perspectives open. First, the three granddaughter's father was John Fullarton, son of the homonymous Scottish clergyman and member of an extended kinship group with different economic interests in the Caribbean Atlantic. The connection between the two families originated in 1805 when Charlotte started her relationship with John. Even though the latter abandoned Dorothy's daughter in 1826, the link between the Thomas family and Scotland had been cemented[74]. Secondly, the testator hints to another cross-Atlantic network of interests when mentioning the sum in the hands of her correspondents in London. At least two travels to the metropole are attested: first, Dorothy Thomas travelled through Britain around 1810 together with Henry and Christina to provide them with advanced instruction[75]. Fourteen years later, she sailed across the Atlantic Ocean once more to appeal the tax reform recently implemented in British Guyana, affecting the freedwomen in the colony[76]. It can be assumed that the testator, during one of her travels to the metropole, took advantage of the opportunity to entrust local agents with part of her assets, in order to exploit the trading opportunities available at the centre of the British colonial empire. Indeed, Thomas approached the two experiences in England as parts of precise strategies to gain an advantage for the colony she

[73] Will of Dorothy Thomas born Kirwan of Demarary, British Guiana, TNA: PROB 11/2077/434.
[74] "John Fullarton," Legacies of British Slave-ownership database, UCL Department of History, accessed April 2020, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/8475.
[75] "Dorothy Thomas," https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/109521.
[76] Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 104.

came from – by demanding the withdraw of taxation system deemed unjust – or for members of her familial clan – by securing them high-standard education.

The fourth member of the Thomas family to be bequeathed is another one of Dorothy's grandchildren, Ann Garraway. She was the only daughter of Dorothea Thomas and Robert Garraway, son of a wealthy planter of Grenada. The testator left her a second plot of land in Cummingsburg – including its buildings, the silverware and the furniture –, 4400 guilders and a golden chain, to be chosen among those belonging to the person making the will. This list of assets and properties ended with an explicit proviso: they could have never been transferred to the control of any husband or used to pay any debt contracted by the same. The clause was almost certainly included in the testament, not as a formality, but to protect Ann and her appanage from a very concrete threat: Robert Garraway, her late partner, and his brother John Gloster had been forced to sell all their estates in Grenada to repay accumulated debt[77]. Here, Dorothy Thomas demonstrates the intention to provide for members of her family while preventing the dispersion of a rather significant asset. The story of her grand-daughter Ann Garraway also shows one of the dangers in marriage strategies pursued by free people of mixed ancestry and the importance of strong familial ties of mutual support, essential in avoiding the worst consequences of bankruptcy in a context with almost no aids for destitute individuals. Subsequently, the mention of Henry Robertson, son of Eliza and grandson of Dorothy Thomas, gives us a glimpse on a different pattern chosen by members of the colonial society to obtain access to the upper strata of contemporary society. The testator bequeathed him the sum of 2200 guilders, exactly half of what left to Ann Garraway. As stated in the will, the difference was a consequence of the previous effort of Dorothy Thomas to provide Henry with education in the metropole. In particular, her grandson had the opportunity to move to the metropole and study at the University of Edinburgh, where he qualified as a doctor. He married in the metropole and eventually spent most of his life in Shrewsbury[78]. The fortune of Henry was not only the outcome of his personal talent and dedication to education, but it also represents the success of the strategy that raised members of the Thomas family from slavery to a wealthy condition in the span of two generations: Eliza, mother of Henry, engaged in a long-term relationship with Gilbert Robertson and moved to Berbice, where the English man owned Kiltrean estate[79]. It can be reasonably supposed that this union secured economic stability to the daughter of Dorothy Thomas and, as a consequence, allowed her to invest money in the education of her son. Similarly, the testator bequeathed the same amount, 2200 guilders, to her grandson

[77] "Robert Garraway of Grenada," Legacies of British Slave-ownership database, UCL Department of History, accessed April 2020, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146637555.
[78] "Henry Robertson," Legacies of British Slave-ownership database, UCL Department of History, accessed April 2020, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/6331.
[79] "Gilbert Robertson," Legacies of British Slave-ownership database, UCL Department of History, accessed April 2020, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146634210.

Joseph Garraway. As demonstrated before, the unions between Ann and Dorothea Thomas and the members of the Garraway family undermined the strategy started by Dorothy because of the debt accumulated by John and Robert. As a consequence of the financial insecurity, Joseph Garraway relied on the support from his grandmother to pursue an education in the metropole. Like his cousin Henry, he chose Scotland as the destination, and there he trained as a lawyer, before moving to Grenada and being appointed judge of the Assistant Court of Appeal[80]. Finally, the clause stating the testator's intention to leave him a golden chain to be personally chosen by Joseph demonstrates, in my opinion, an intimate bond between Dorothy and her grandson, more profound than the link created by an exchange of wealth.

The two last beneficiaries directly mentioned by the will are Ann and Harry Thomas, children of Dorothy. The former, at that time living in Grenada, received part of the clothes and linen owned by the testator. At the same time, the latter was bequeathed with two houses overlooking the sea in Georgetown, British Guyana. Finally, the clause included in the last paragraph of the testament prescribes the distribution of all the remaining assets in six equivalent shares. The beneficiaries are Dorothy Thomas's two children, Ann and Harry, and her grandchildren borne from Dorothea, Charlotte and Elisabeth, the only condition them being older than 21. Ann is also mentioned among the four executors, together with two gentlemen of Georgetown and one correspondent in London. The first and third amendments to the will, respectively from February 1843 and April 1844, do not modify Dorothy's dispositions but appoint different executors. On the other hand, the second codicil, from August 1843, indicates Catharina as the recipient of 75 dollars to provide for her son Orwen and entrust one of the children of Dorothea with 5 guilders in order to buy a mourning ring, independently from the other shares. In conclusion, the will of Dorothy, cited before as a unique window on the life of a free woman of African origin in the British Atlantic context, emerges here as a mirror that allows for a deeper understanding of the evolution of families of mixed ancestry. Despite its indirect point of view on the lives of the testator's children and grandchildren, it brings back to the surface the strategies, not always successful, pursued to obtain better living conditions. One characteristic is evident: opportunities lied across a densely interconnected chessboard that extended from British Guyana to Scotland and mobility played a crucial role. As stated in the first sentence of the testament, Dorothy Thomas was borne in Montserrat but built her fortune principally in Demerara. Her son Harry, on the other hand, had his estates in Georgetown, while her daughter Ann lived in Grenada, where she had married an English owner. Henry Robertson and Joseph Garraway, two of her grandsons, exploited the opportunity to study in the metropole to become part of the upper strata

[80] Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 207.

of society through their professions, respectively a medical practitioner and a judge. The sign of Dorothy Thomas at the end of her testament, a simple "X", marks how the testator never had the chance to get an education after being freed. Nevertheless, she started a long-term strategy that, together with the actions of her children and grandchildren, secured their hard-won freedom and the status of her family.

2. The Ostrehans: three generations and the legacy of freedom.

The stories of Susannah Ostrehan, her mother and her descendants unfold between the mid-eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century and present two important features already observed in the saga of the Thomas family. First, its main actor was borne in slavery, owned by the wealthy Ostrehan family[81]. Second, the assets bequeathed in the last wills examined were passed to female members of the family among younger generations. These two central similarities allow, in my opinion, for a comparison with the case previously analysed. The support of Dr Kit Candlin has been essential in working on the evolution of the Ostrehan family: through the transcriptions forwarded by him, I had the opportunity to analyse documents otherwise inaccessible to me due to the ongoing global crisis.

The testament of Priscilla Ostrehan is a good starting point to investigate the evolution of her kinship through the following generations[82]. She was borne a slave, the property of Thomas Ostrehan. The latter was part of one of the most influential families in the Barbadian plantocracy, with the exploitation of unfree labour as the primary source of wealth and prestige[83]. While her date of birth is unknown, the last will was signed on March 3, 1810, and records November 3, 1810, as the day of her death. Priscilla introduces herself as a "free woman of colour from the parish of St. Michael," but the early mention of Christian Blackman, another free woman of African origin the testator appears familiar with, hints at her struggle to obtain freedom[84]. According to the will, Blackman had been entrusted by Susannah Ostrehan with a total of £300, to be invested exclusively to provide for the latter's mother. However, in the first draft, the testator complained about Blackman's failure in following Susannah's dispositions. Apparently, of the original sum, only £10 were spent. This interweaving of interests and clauses had its origin in the opposed conditions of the Priscilla and her daughter: while the latter had been manumitted in the early stage of her life, possibly through an intimate relationship with one of the white members of the Ostrehan family,

[81] Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 83.
[82] Last Will and Testament of Priscilla Ostrehan, November 3, 1810, item 6, Wills and Inventories, St. Michael, 1800–1850, BDA.
[83] Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 87.
[84] Last Will and Testament of Priscilla Ostrehan, November 3, 1810, item 6, Wills and Inventories, St. Michael, 1800–1850, BDA.

the former achieved freedom only weeks before dying[85]. The remaining £290 were bequeathed to Mary Ostrehan Brett, great-granddaughter of Priscilla and one of the executors of the last will. Moreover, Priscilla left a consistent amount of furniture to her beneficiaries: Mary, her granddaughter, received all the pieces from the testator's house apart from those in the bedroom, received by the great-granddaughter, Susan Woolsey. Six chairs and other objects were given to Sabrina, a friend of Priscilla. If compared to the far-reaching personal network exposed in Susanna Ostrehan's testament, the set of intimate connections created by Priscilla appears limited. However, it still bears significant traces of the familial strategy to secure the acquired status quo and pass wealth through generations. Receiving £290, Mary Ostrehan Brett, great-granddaughter of the testator, emerges as the family member with the highest chance of pursuing this objective, as she entrusted with the responsibility of administering a large sum of money. Furthermore, her daughter, Susan Ostrehan Haynes, was bequeathed with an enslaved girl named Nancy, thus concentrating what the testator considered valuable assets in the hands of the same household. Susan Ostrehan Haynes is mentioned together with her siblings Henry Magee, Susan Woolsey and John Woolsey. As suggested by the different surnames, by 1810, their mother, Mary Ostrehan Brett, had engaged in at least three relationships with white members of the local plantocracy. The difference in surnames could explain the evident discrepancy between the sums given to each great-grandchild: the most valuable share was bequeathed to the only relative from that generation still bearing the original family surname and, we can infer, more intimate with the testator's household.

While Priscilla had to fight until her last days to become a free member of the Barbadian society, her daughter Susannah Ostrehan managed to escape slavery during the early stage of her life. Unfortunately, primary sources are silent on how she was manumitted. Nevertheless, her surname testifies a link with the same family that owned her mother. In my opinion, it can be cautiously implied that Thomas Ostrehan was not only engaged in a relationship with Priscilla but probably also involved with Susannah's manumission and early fortune. The earliest mention of parts of the asset she bequeathed in her last will emerges from the 1779 Bridgetown tax record: here, she is registered as the owner of a small property adjoining some of Thomas Ostrehan buildings in town, another hint to the possible link between the two individuals[86]. As in the case of her mother's testament, in the first lines, she identified herself as a free member of the colonial society residing in the parish of St. Michael, Bridgetown[87]. Again, Mary Ostrehan, granddaughter of Priscilla and niece of Susannah, is the first family member mentioned in the document. She emerges as the most successful in engaging relationships with members of the colonial elite and

[85] Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 87.
[86] Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 87.
[87] Last Will and Testament of Susannah Ostrehan, February 22, 1809, Wills and Inventories, St. Michael, 1800–1850, BDA.

enlarging the family. By the time the testament was drafted, she had given birth to four children. The testator left her £100 and Sary, an enslaved woman of African descent, together with her two children, James and Ann-Bell. The beneficiary has also entitled the right to possess the descendants born from the individuals acquired through Susannah's last will. The same privilege is conceded to Christian Blackman, a friend of the testator: she was bequeathed with Nancy, an enslaved woman, and her children. Besides, the woman is entrusted with the property of the testator's mother and £300 to buy a house for and look after her, at that time waiting for documents from the metropole to seal her freedom officially. This transaction represented, in the eyes of Susannah, the last step towards awarding her mother the status of a free individual. Nevertheless, as highlighted by Priscilla's last will, the procedure to escape legal slavery came to an end a few weeks before Susanna's mother passed away[88]. After that, other close relatives of the testator are mentioned, starting with the familial unit of her sister Lydia. In particular, the niece Susannah appears to have settled in Berbice before her aunt's death. Among the testator's nieces and nephews Henry Magee, Susan Woolsey, John Woolsey and Mary Ostrehan Brett, all cited as beneficiaries of equal shares, the first sibling received £300 to engage in trading "the way he prefers", while the fourth was bequeathed with an even more consistent asset: £200, three enslaved individuals, several pieces of jewellery and a golden watch "to be kept forever." According to the work of Kit Candlin and Cassandra Pybus, Mary Ostrehan Brett was among the first female entrepreneurs who moved to Guyana after the British conquest of the Dutch colony in 1796. There, she exploited the abundance of low-cost land lots and the economic opportunities of the growing settlement; notwithstanding the difficulties of life on the Caribbean frontier, Mary started a fruitful business providing accommodation to the individuals arriving in Guyana[89]. Finally, the testament includes four clauses leaving £100 each to other individuals close to Susannah: her doctor Gibson Beresford, the merchant William Willoughby, Lionel Parks, one of the executors, and Susanna Collymore, daughter of the planter Robert Collymore and Amaryllis Collymore, a free woman of African descent[90]. The final draft was signed on February 22, 1809, Susannah Ostrehan passed away before February 22 of the same year. In total, she left her heirs £2200, eight enslaved individuals, jewels, clothes and pieces of furniture. Compared to the asset bequeathed by her mother Priscilla, the more considerable amount of wealth demonstrates the testator's ability in exploiting the economic opportunities offered by the contemporary Caribbean context. The largest shares of her heritage passed to female family members, confirming the strategy started by her mother, Priscilla. Even if

[88] Last Will and Testament of Priscilla Ostrehan, November 3, 1810, item 6, Wills and Inventories, St. Michael, 1800–1850, BDA.
[89] Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 93.
[90] Last Will and Testament of Susannah Ostrehan, February 22, 1809, Wills and Inventories, St. Michael, 1800–1850, BDA.

she died childless, the privileged beginning, under the protection of the influent Thomas Ostrehan, and the productive investments allowed Susannah to support her heirs in their struggle for a higher status across a context that valued possession as a central element of social recognition.

A third will, drafted by Mary Ostrehan, allows us to assess the conditions of the Ostrehan family in 1829, exactly twenty years after the death of Susannah[91]. The testator, the granddaughter of Priscilla and mother of Mary Ostrehan, declares to be a free woman from Demerara, residing in the parish of St. Michael at her death. First, she bequeathed £25 to the poor of her colony of origin, then she ordered her dwelling house and all the other buildings in the lot 28 of Cummingsburg, in Demerara, to be sold within twelve months from her death. The sum obtained had to be divided among her three children Mary Ostrehan Brett, Susanna Woolsey and John Woolsey. Shares were also left for Mary's granddaughters, Susanna and Mary-Jane. In particular, the inheritance of the latter came with the explicit desire of the late grandmother to be invested in education for the young girl. The testator's long-term perspective is evident also from the decision to bequeath one house to Susanna Woolsey with the expressed intention to be passed to her children in the future. Unfortunately, Mary Ostrehan's will is less detailed compared to the two documents considered above. While it engages with the distribution of a consistent inheritance, the testament requires the sale of her estates and the subsequent division in equal shares instead of specific sums for each heir. However, one generation after Susannah's death her family was still following the strategy designed by Priscilla, bequeathing wealth to female members of the kinship network and opening new opportunities for the younger generations to support the rise of the Ostrehan family.

Finally, the testament of Mary Ostrehan Brett is analysed[92]. The woman, great-granddaughter of Priscilla, declared to be born in British Guyana but to be living in Barbados at the moment the last will was drafted. Unfortunately, no date is reported on the document; thus, the exact chronological distance from the other sources cannot be determined. The first clause in the testament bequeathed 22 guilders to the poor and orphans of Demerara and Essequibo, following the example of Mary Ostrehan. The consistent sum of 500 guilders was left to Susan Graham, goddaughter of the testator, while her mother received 220 guilders. Subsequently, Mary Ostrehan Brett entrusted her daughter Susanna Haynes with the remaining estates and personal properties. While she still followed the practice of bequeathing assets to female kinship members, from her last will, Mary Ostrehan Brett appears less successful in fostering an intra-Caribbean familial network compared to the previous generations: only three close relatives are mentioned as beneficiaries, namely her daughter, her sister and her niece. However, the last disposition of the testament,

[91] Last Will and Testament of Mary Ostrehan, November 3, 1810, Wills and Inventories, St. Michael, 1800–1850, BDA.
[92] Last Will and Testament of Mary Ostrehan Brett, November 3, 1810, Wills and Inventories, St. Michael, 1800–1850, BDA.

bequeathing a house in Demerara to the servant Louisa and her children, opens a new perspective on the Ostrehan family: three generations after Susannah had first gained freedom from slavery, one of her descendants had the opportunity to raise the status of another household considerably. The eventual destiny of Louisa is not recorded, but this transaction thoroughly depicts the new role of the Ostrehan family in the colonial context.

In conclusion, the four testaments from the Ostrehan family portray the story of a kinship network scattered across the British Caribbean and its struggles across different generations. Two attributes make it relevant to answer my research question—first, the condition of the oldest member of the family. Priscilla Ostrehan, of African origin, was borne in slavery, the property of Thomas Ostrehan. Although not explicitly declared by primary sources, her eldest daughter, Susannah, was almost certainly borne from this interracial relationship. Differently from her mother, she was manumitted in the early stage of her life and had access to ownership and business opportunities in the colony[93]. Her ability allowed Susannah to provide for Priscilla's manumission and, even more importantly, to bequeath in her testament consistent assets to the younger generations in her family. Mary Ostrehan and her daughter Mary Ostrehan Brett, in turn, demonstrated their aptitude by broadening the financial horizon of the kinship towards the contemporary Caribbean frontier. In four generations, the branch of the Ostrehan family here considered moved from a condition of slavery to successful elements of the colonial economy. As a consequence, the financial growth granted access to the most respected strata of the local society. The second relevant aspect is the exclusive role of female actors in gaining freedom, creating wealth and bequeathing it generation after generation. In the four wills examined male individuals, when mentioned, played a very marginal role. The responsibility to manage and possibly enlarge the assets of the family fell on Priscilla's daughters, granddaughters and great-granddaughters. They answered by crossing the Caribbean context in search of business opportunities and better living conditions while keeping strong bonds of solidarity with the other Ostrehan women.

[93] Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*, 87.

Conclusion

"It was in the reign of George III that the aforesaid personages lived and quarrelled; good or bad, handsome or ugly, rich or poor, they are all equal now[94]." In 1975 Stanley Kubrick chose this concise sentence as the epilogue for his historical drama *Barry Lyndon*. In his masterpiece, the American director portrayed the political and social tensions crossing eighteenth-century Europe through the vicissitudes of the homonymous Irish gambler; his adventurous and tragic attempt to climb the social ladder brings the spectator in close contact with the contemporary context of the space the main character navigates. Similarly, different authors have contributed to the historiography of the colonial Caribbean dimension by tracing and examining the lives of the individuals who crossed it. Frequently, the latter were guided in their inter-Atlantic migrations by personal relationships, new economic opportunities or, more in general, the perspective of better living conditions. Here, free individuals are again the focus of the research, but new attention is devoted to familial bonds. By extensively engaging with the intimate experiences of two families of mixed ancestry and their diasporas across the Atlantic Ocean, my work aimed at highlighting the importance of kinship networks in shaping the lives of free individuals and their patterns of dispersion. In these regards, inter-generational strategies emerged as essential elements in securing freedom and improving the social status of the family members involved.

The expansion of the context of my research closely followed the diaspora of the Thomas and Ostrehan families. For both of the households, their origins relate to the moments their eldest members exited enslavement and can be traced in the region of the British Atlantic dominions labelled the "Caribbean frontier" by Kit Candlin[95]. In particular, Dorothy Thomas gained freedom in Montserrat, while Priscilla Ostrehan was manumitted in Barbados. These two locations, however, are only the starting point of a dispersion process that encompasses the whole contemporary Atlantic network, from the shores of South America to the metropole. As in the case of Dorothy Thomas, for example, she was born on the island of Montserrat, lived in Grenada and Georgetown and visited England more than once during her lifetime. Even more emblematic is the migration of her grandchild Joseph Garraway, who could afford to study in Scotland and manage to gain access to the high strata of the English society through the financial support provided by his grandmother. Similarly, the Ostrehan family originated in Georgetown but its second and third generations spread across the whole Caribbean, from Barbados to Guyana, while actively interacting with the Atlantic network of connections. Clearly, mobility has emerged from the personal documents analysed above as a dominant characteristic shaping the lives of free individuals of mixed ancestry in the British Caribbean. They moved to exploit new economic opportunities, to enjoy

[94] Stanley Kubrick, *Barry Lyndon* (London: Hawk Films, 1975).
[95] Candlin, *The Last Caribbean Frontier*.

high-standards education or to follow their partners. However, the subjects of my research recurrently exploited their testaments to emphasise the importance of strong kinship bonds. This was remarked indirectly, by demonstrating a deep awareness of where beneficiaries lived at the moment the last wills were drafted, and directly, by bequeathing sums and assets to distant members of their families, often providing for the education of the younger generations.

The primary sources examined in this research have retraced networks of connections expanding not only across the geographical space of the British Atlantic territories but also through a chronological scope encompassing at least three generations at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This expansion across both spatial and temporal dimensions has proved fundamental in proving the influence of kinship bonds over the lives of individuals in the Atlantic colonial scenario. As a consequence, the struggle of members of the Thomas and Ostrehan families intertwined with the political and social tensions crossing the Caribbean context during the same period. The body of primary sources considered in the first chapter has shown how the condition and the role of free individuals of African or mixed ancestry in the colonial society became central in the public debate at the same time the two families exited enslavement and started climbing the social ladder. Both natives of the British West Indies of European ancestry and observers from the metropole took part in the discussion. The approach to the topic tended to highlight the supposed threat posed by these individuals to the rigid racial segregation theorised by the central authority.

In 1774, Janet Schaw, a woman belonging to the Scottish elite travelling across the Caribbean, and Edward Long, a wealthy planter born on the island of Jamaica, expressed their perspectives on the topic. Although included in two very different publications, a travel diary and a history of the most important British colony, their opinions have emerged as strikingly similar. Both the authors condemned miscegenation as a primary source of corruption among the white inhabitants of the Caribbean dominions: individuals born from interracial relationships were considered in their eyes as unfit for the plantation economy and ultimately a burden over the local society[96]. Nineteen years later, Bryan Edwards published the *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, a lengthy description of the British Atlantic colonies at the end of the eighteenth century. Book IV of the second volume includes an extensive digression on the condition of "mulattoes", such as whoever could prove to be "three steps removed in lineal digression from the negro ventrem[97]." Differently from the previous two observers, Edwards supported the introduction of a system of privileges and benefits for free individuals of mixed ancestry publicly, in order to foster their loyalty towards the European authorities[98]. The sources I have considered in my

[96] Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 112; Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 327.
[97] Edwards, "Book IV," 20.
[98] Ibid., 24.

research represent only a part of the voices animating the coeval public debate, but my decision to analyse them stemmed from the impact they had on the legislative effort of local assemblies and metropolitan authorities. The Thomas and Ostrehan families expanded their kinship networks during a period of radical reforms of interracial relations across the British Atlantic dominions: in 1813 the island of Jamaica through its Assembly, struggling with an ever declining white population, repelled the 1762 "Inheritance Act" limiting assets and sums that could be bequeathed to free people of African origins, opening new economic and social opportunities for that share of the local middle class that could not claim European ancestors[99]. On the other hand, the colony of Barbados through its plantocracy's monopoly made impossible the development of a free afro-Barbadian elite. Moreover, with the same intent, the Barbados Assembly in 1801 raised the fee to manumit enslaved individuals[100]. The inter-Caribbean turmoil sparked by the Haitian Revolution and the pressure of afro-Barbadian individuals spread across the British Atlantic eventually contributed to the eventual abolishment of the bill.

A third relevant point emerging from the diverse pool of primary sources consulted in the research is the role of gender relations in shaping the lives of free individuals of mixed ancestry in the British colonial framework. As pointed out by Edward Long and Bryan Edwards among the others, white male members of the colonial elite frequently engaged in extramarital relationships with enslaved females of African origin[101]. These bonds clearly reflected the peculiar power relations of the plantocracy and entailed recurrent violence and sexual abuse. In the eyes of contemporary observers, such as Edward Long and Bryan Edwards, among many others, the intimacy between individuals belonging to different ethnicities represented a significant threat to the highly segregated Caribbean society. Moreover, at the end of the eighteenth century, the offspring of these interracial relationships were considered unproductive members in the plantation economy, "neither fit for the field, nor indeed any work[102]." The Thomas and Ostrehan families obtained freedom through the relationships Dorothy and Susannah got involved into, respectively with William Foden and Thomas Ostrehan. Their status of female enslaved individuals imposed them submission towards their owners, but in these two cases, they were successful in exploiting their intimacy to wealthy members of the colonial elite as an opportunity to gain freedom for them and their close relatives. As demonstrated by my research, the manumission of Dorothy and Susannah had a critical impact across at least three generations of individuals of mixed ancestry. The legacies they started secured the status of free people to their descendants, allowing them to climb the social ladder progressively. As emerged from the testaments analysed, this success was the outcome of precise

[99] Campbell, *The Dynamics of Change in a Slave Society*, 48.
[100] Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies*, 60-61.
[101] Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 328; Edwards, "Book IV," 25-26.
[102] Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality*, 112.

strategies: multiple generations of the Thomas and Ostrehan families relied on female kinship members to manage and expand their wealth. This common choice appears even more peculiar since in each family it was replicated across at least three generations. As discussed in the second chapter, male individuals do appear in the last wills, but never as the beneficiaries of the core assets left by the testators. On the other hand, they were either bequeathed with smaller sums or mentioned as potential threats to the economic stability of the familial networks. As a consequence, the Thomas and the Ostrehan families show a peculiar matrifocal character that distinguished them in the contemporary colonial society, dominated by the hegemonic role both in public and in the private sphere of white male individuals.

This research adopted a microhistorical approach to explore the evolution of emerging kinship networks of free individuals of mixed origins across the Caribbean colonial context, and the role played within them by female members. Through the primary sources produced by these same actors, the vicissitudes of two families have been traced, from the manumission of the eldest members to the cross-Atlantic diaspora of their descendants. Although the interconnections between the two families and the broader socio-political context have been highlighted during the discussion, this work does not claim to be a comprehensive enquire on the conditions of individuals of African and mixed ancestry at the start of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, it represents an invitation towards a more comprehensive enquire on well-known characters of Caribbean history with the aim of highlighting the importance of familial networks. This broader effort would bring back to the surface of the academical debate individuals so far left on the background of the history of the British West Indies, expanding our understanding of the intra-Caribbean diaspora and ultimately advocating a perspective on the contemporary Atlantic ocean able to encompass multiple hubs along its shores. In conclusion, at the dawn of the nineteenth century, the colonial elite across the British Caribbean dominions claimed its privileges by virtue of descent: those of European origins inherited freedom and moral superiority, individuals of African or mixed origins oppression and degeneracy. The subjects of this research, however, exploited inheritance and familial networks to break this chain of submission, successfully subvert the order imposed by the ruling racial aristocracy and secure freedom for their descendants.

Images:

Figure 1: Thomas Stothard, *The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies*, c. 1800, engraving, 20,3cm x 16,4cm, National Maritime Museum, London.

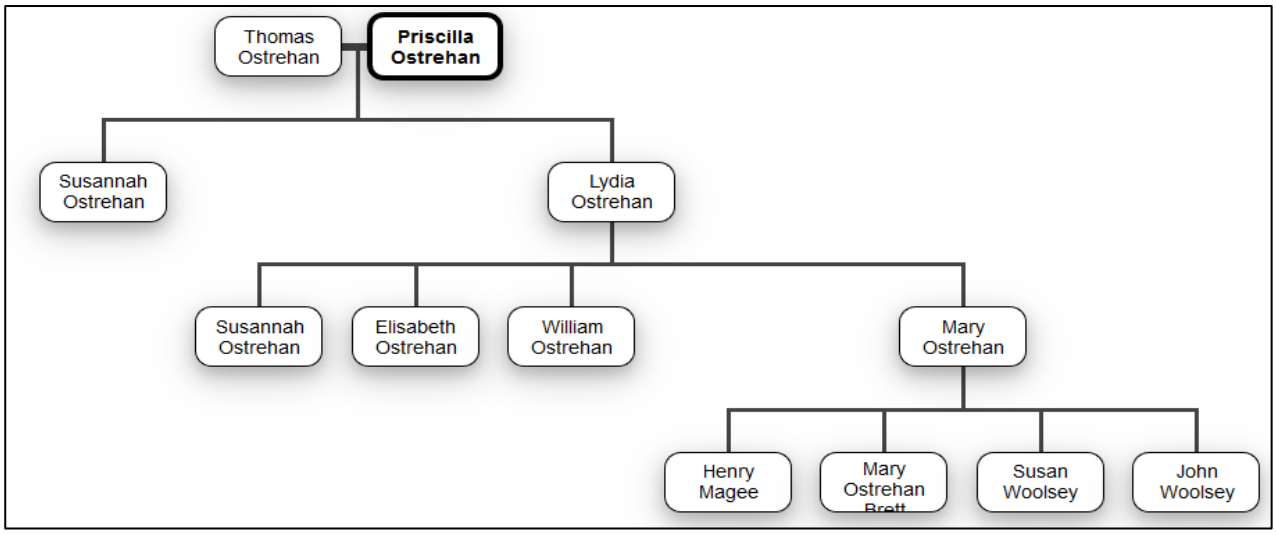

Figure 2: Priscilla Ostrehan's family tree.

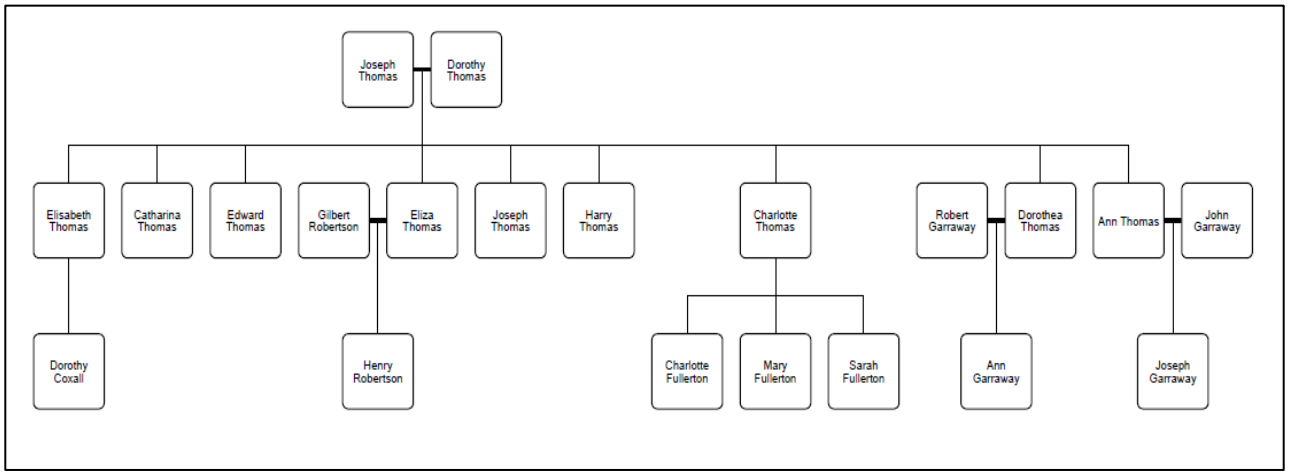

Figure 3: Dorothy Thomas's family tree.

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