



# Troubling Freedom

ANTIGUA AND THE AFTERMATH OF BRITISH EMANCIPATION

Natasha Lightfoot

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OF BRITISH EMANCIPATION

Natasha Lightfoot

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TO THE PEOPLE OF ANTIGUA & BARBUDA  
& FOR MY SONS



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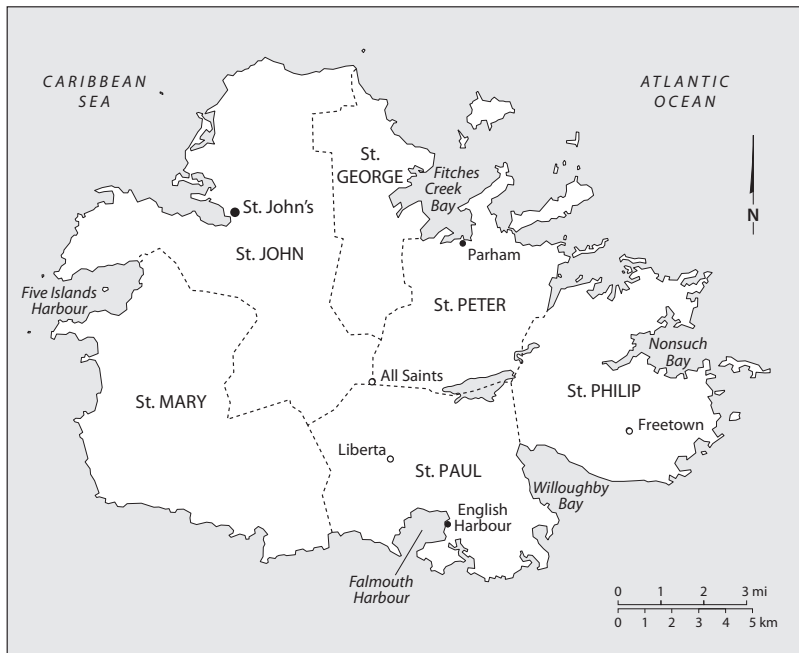
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## INTRODUCTION

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### “ME NO B’LONGS TO DEM”

#### *Emancipation’s Possibilities and Limits in Antigua*

Antigua’s thirty thousand enslaved people, alongside those in all other British colonial territories, were freed on August 1, 1834. Shortly after emancipation, Juncho, an elderly black Antiguan woman previously enslaved on MacKinnon’s Estate in the Parish of St. John, described the differences between slavery and freedom.<sup>1</sup> The very moment of freedom rendered Juncho both jobless and homeless. Abolition ended her daily toil in the fields but undermined her material security. Since 1834, she had lived in poverty with her daughter. Juncho declared: “So you see . . . dat make me say me no [love] slabery. Now wen me [young], me hab to work hard, hab dig cane [h]ole, weed cane, pick grass, do ebery ting; but now me ole, and no able to work, dey take away me house, ’cause me no b’longs to dem, but den me [know] me free, and me bless God me am free.”<sup>2</sup>

Juncho insisted that, despite the hunger and privation she encountered in freedom, slavery had been worse. She mentioned examples of two harrowing situations that as an enslaved mother she typically faced. She could not nurse a sick child back to health because she was required to toil in the fields all day. When her child transgressed a rule of the plantation, she had to watch, powerless to intervene, as the owner tied Juncho’s child to a tree and meted out a violent whipping. In Juncho’s account, freedom relieved the sorts of stresses on the mother-child relationship that being the property of another often involved. The impoverishment she endured while living with her daughter and several grandchildren, however, attests to other kinds of stresses black families encountered after 1834.

The striking utterance “me no b’longs to dem” signals that she took solace in the self-mastery that legal freedom brought. As a freedwoman, she had control of her body and her time. Reportedly, Antigua’s freedpeople used the phrase “me free, me no b’longs to you!” as a “constant boast” when they ignored or defied whites.<sup>3</sup> The phrase also evokes black women’s relief at the freedom to protect their bodies from sexual violation. Juncho and her formerly enslaved compatriots relished their new status and the liberty to express it publicly to all whites within earshot.

Yet Juncho’s story, rather than hailing abolition as an unalloyed blessing, also underlines the many difficulties that black working people faced following their legal release from enslavement. She explained: “It true me better off den dan me am now, for since me free, me no get much; sometimes me no eat bread all day, for me daughter hab so many pic’nees (children) she no able to gib me much; but . . . me [know] God gib me free, and slabery is one bad something sometimes.”<sup>4</sup> Juncho admitted that some aspects of her circumstances in bondage proved better than those she experienced in freedom. As a slave, she had access to her own house and a private garden, where she grew produce and raised poultry. When emancipation came, her then-former owner expelled her from her home and reclaimed her provision ground as his own. Too old to be employed profitably, she became a liability in this new regime of wage labor.

Her words poignantly convey the paradox of freedom for ex-slaves. Emancipation from chattel status into poverty and continued subjugation meant that freedom, while long awaited and celebrated, entailed material distress and personal uncertainty. Her story also highlights the particular difficulties of freedom for Antigua’s black women, who faced an unreliable labor market that favored black men, while the women shouldered responsibility for their children and extended kin, often without assistance from male partners. Essentially, these inadequacies meant that freedpeople similar to Juncho had to imbue freedom with deeper meaning through new social, political, and ontological struggles.

Her testimony reveals that self-ownership marked only the beginning of such struggles. Freedpeople were still poor and bereft of the resources required to improve their material and social circumstances. Their continued efforts were central to the lived experience of emancipation. This book tells the story of how Antigua’s black working people struggled to realize freedom in their everyday lives, both before and after slavery’s

legal end, as well as the transformative nature of their many letdowns and few triumphs along the way.

### *An Unfinished Freedom*

*Troubling Freedom* explores how newly emancipated women and men defined freedom by tracing its uneasy trajectory in Antigua over nearly three decades. After an overview of the island in the nineteenth century, the book moves to a slave rebellion in 1831 that foreshadowed emancipation's complexities. It continues by chronicling freedpeople's quotidian survival tactics from 1834 through the 1850s, and it closes with an 1858 labor riot that reinforced freedom as an incomplete victory. Studies of freedom in former slave societies throughout the Atlantic World frequently posit emancipation as the start of black people's labor organizing and pursuit of political rights.<sup>5</sup> Framing short-term strategies after slavery within the long-term struggle to obtain political and economic citizenship is vitally important, but it tells only part of freedom's story. The moments just after slavery's end, flooded with chaos and uncertainty for both former slaves and masters, formed a critical juncture that begs closer examination. In this time of flux, both groups made fitful attempts to configure distinct practices of freedom, which bore stark differences that triggered clashes between them for decades afterward.

Impoverished and illiterate freedpeople just emerging from bondage may have held far-reaching goals, but they were in no position to make drastic changes to their new status. Still, they conceived of a freedom that granted them ownership over their bodies and their time, autonomy in their labor, enjoyment of their leisure, and legal and economic inclusion in society—if not as equals with their erstwhile enslavers, then at least as protected subjects. Furthermore, historians have argued that there were greater political and economic constraints among freedpeople in small islands such as Antigua, because freedpeople's universally blocked access to land immediately forced them into underpaid plantation labor.<sup>6</sup> While indeed their landlessness constrained freed Antiguans, this book complicates that sweeping narrative by highlighting their myriad efforts to define and expand their freedom in the face of such constraints. I ask how, despite being mired in poverty, subject to coercion, and denied even the most basic rights at every turn, freedpeople still found spaces in their ordinary lives to feel free.<sup>7</sup>

Freedpeople had to carve out their own forms of liberation. Despite unyielding obstacles, black working people practiced their freedom through struggles to claim space, uphold community, acquire property, and reorganize their time and labor. I have found that ordinary encounters not only between blacks and whites but also among black people evidenced the transformative impact of emancipation in their daily lives. Freedpeople's interactions within and beyond the plantation workplace—such as intermittent strikes, independent provisioning and marketing, the simultaneous practice of obeah and Christianity, efforts to educate themselves and their children, public socializing and amusements, and the founding of all-black villages in Antigua—all show the many contestations over freedom's multiple meanings. Freedpeople's practices of leisure, forms of spirituality, family relationships, and new modes of consumption complemented their struggles against the colony's elites to assert their senses of freedom. Their quotidian survival strategies fed into black working people's rare yet revelatory moments of collective and violent public protest.<sup>8</sup>

Everyday life among black working people manifests the dynamics of British emancipation most profoundly, making plain the disruptions, possibilities, and failures wrought by freedom.<sup>9</sup> Through their daily experiences, freedpeople honed their ideas about freedom, making the exploration of ordinary life critical to our understanding of freedom's complexities. Black working people's quotidian acts reveal that, despite being legally free, constant efforts were still necessary to secure and expand their material resources, their autonomy, and their sense of community. Prior to the genesis of formal, institutionalized modes of political and economic struggle, everyday life in postslavery Antigua was the laboratory for black working people's politics.

Existing histories of the transition to freedom in the Atlantic World do critical intellectual work to define freedom, to expose its inconsistencies when juxtaposed with citizenship as a concept and a practice in former slave societies, and to reflect on existing racial, gender, and class hierarchies that abolition's passage built on and exacerbated. These stories have framed freedpeople's efforts to give freedom meaning within a well-known dialectic of communal unity and consistent opposition to unsympathetic state structures and hostile former owners. I trace black working people's efforts to achieve a more meaningful freedom by reinterpreting a variety of ordinary acts that literate observers often viewed as "resistance" to colonial law and order. The two remarkable moments

of civil strife in 1831 and 1858 that bookend this story are also critical to how I rethink this trajectory of resistance. I label these moments as riots, in line with colonial parlance of the time. I also name them as *uprisings*, *revolts*, and *rebellions* interchangeably to indicate that they were widespread and prolonged, attracted many participants, targeted the white establishment as well as rival laborers on occasion, and threatened the social hierarchy embodied in property and enforced by law.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately I complicate the concept of resistance, in both mundane and spectacular forms, by pointing out its unintended and restrictive consequences for oppressed communities.<sup>11</sup> The narrative of valiant and unified subaltern struggles against domination by the powerful, while recognizable and seductive, does not account for the range of acts chronicled in this book, which in this chaotic period were as ambiguous as they were courageous.

While freedpeople constantly tried to protect their own interests, their efforts were not always clear-cut acts of opposition to power and did not always advance the broader cause of social justice. Black working people did not consistently subvert the control of colonial elites, as becoming free embedded them even more deeply in the structures of colonial domination. The end of enslavement prompted new forms of accountability to the state, Christian missions, and employers. At the same time, freedpeople tried—often in vain—to force that accountability to flow reciprocally by becoming engaged with colonial law and the public sphere. They acted on an unfulfilled hope that the Crown and local authorities would accept or even facilitate their desire to provide for themselves and their families and to conduct their lives as they wished. Their intermittent collusions, whether intended or not, with the same repressive structures they at other points opposed reveal the broad scope of black working people’s immediate practices of freedom. This book explicates the various forms of power that framed freedom, “the shaping quality of the power that comes to reconstruct, or make over, the lives of the ex-slaves.”<sup>12</sup>

Freedpeople at times oppressed one another while navigating the multiple forms of oppression that abolition unleashed. The desperation resulting from the subjugation that pervaded their public and private lives prompted them to commit individualistic and competitive acts along with cooperative and communal ones. People of the same race, class, or gender, living in the same plantation or neighborhood or even within the same family, experienced constant pressures to which they periodically responded with violence and confusion, aimed not only at the powerful

but also at each other. Release from enslavement did not automatically forge collective bonds of solidarity and struggle; rather, it linked the fates of similarly degraded individuals. Community, when it appeared among formerly enslaved Antiguans, did so in spite of the brutal economic, social, and political constraints of the transition from slavery to freedom. Black working people's efforts to improve their circumstances, whether through collaboration or conflict with their community, still largely resulted in their exclusion and degradation.

*Troubling Freedom* offers an unromanticized account of aspects of the past that have remained unstudied because of the discomfort that facing them honestly entails. It recounts freedpeople's experiences of freedom as a truly human, complex, and at times contradictory story of lives conducted within the state-imposed limits of emancipation. As Juncho's narrative so powerfully suggests, severe material privation, black working people's compromised volition, the treachery rife within the empty promise of emancipation, and the chronic violence that punctuated life's rhythms within this plantation society all exacted a serious toll on relations between freedpeople and colonial elites, and among freed men and women. However inconsistent their intent or results, such interactions reveal as much about what freedpeople thought freedom meant as do the laws, intellectual currents, and economic practices of the states and empires that institutionally oversaw the dismantling of black bondage.

### *On Violence*

Public disorder and individual and collective violence were crucial elements in freedpeople's troubled pursuit of liberation. In a former slave colony such as Antigua, the power to wield violence was critical to the assertion of freedom. Positing violent acts as a window to freedpeople's politics demands recognition of the centrality of violence to political expression and social organization in societies with a history of slavery. Africans' incorporation into colonial life in the Atlantic World was marked by brutality at the hands of Europeans at every moment, from capture through the process of transport, sale, and seasoning, and culminating in the toil of commodity production under the most terrorizing of circumstances.<sup>13</sup> From the earliest phases of European settlement in the Caribbean, the plantation determined the structure of life for people of all social classes. Each territory's spatial layout, legal procedures, and local economy were shaped by the commercial enterprise of sugar, an in-

dustry built on the work of a commodified, racialized, and dehumanized labor force of Africans and their descendants. Notoriously, Caribbean slave owners extracted greater profits from working an enslaved person to death and purchasing a new one than from providing for a slave until old age and creating the conditions for natural reproduction. The mental, physical, and sexual abuse of Africans and their descendants fueled the expansion of Britain's colonial economies.

The advent of an abolitionist movement and legal emancipation did little to change the pervasive yet casual nature of violence in Caribbean life.<sup>14</sup> Black working people understandably resorted to violence to convey their grievances against the colonial state and society, not only seizing the public platform consistently denied them but also reflecting their sense of violence as the language of power that everyone across the class and race spectrum readily understood. I tell a story of the violent undercurrents of everyday living in the context of a freedom so compromised as to mirror slavery in endless ways. Violence punctuated interactions between freedpeople and powerful whites, as shown by the uncanny ease with which ordinary acts of survival were recast as crimes and the swift and excessive punishments meted out to those freedpeople deemed criminals. Brutality also underlined relations among differently placed sets of black people during the postslavery transition, as shown by instances of freedmen's abuse of freedwomen and the collective assault in 1858 by Antiguan working people on working people from Barbuda, Antigua's sister island.

This endemic violence and coercion demonstrates that the official version of freedom in the British Empire was in theory and in practice a strictly bounded condition. Freedom as concocted by the state and executed by colonial authorities did not guarantee stability and autonomy for black people. Rather, it amounted to a test that by design freedpeople would never pass.<sup>15</sup> Elites' discourse about emancipation was rife with assumptions about the cultural deficiencies of Afro-Caribbean people and their inability to function as fully free participants in colonial society.<sup>16</sup> In elites' minds, freedpeople were always already failures at freedom from its very inception. Freedpeople constantly tried to expand freedom, but in many ways, their actions instead shaped how it would fail.

While exploring the pitfalls of freedom as they affected all emancipated people, the book highlights moments in which men's and women's experiences diverged, exploring the gendered inequities that emancipation intensified.<sup>17</sup> In the British Empire, metropolitan elites

and Christian missionaries envisioned that abolition would remake male subjects into waged workers, heads of nuclear households, and (eventual) political citizens while turning women into their domesticated dependents. Planters, in contrast, encouraged black women to labor exclusively within the sugar industry, as hard as men and for lesser wages. Freedpeople lived a different reality from elites: women were equally present in the workforce and were substantial or sole contributors to their household livelihoods. They engaged in a multiplicity of occupations within and beyond the sugar industry to make ends meet. Yet in other respects, freedpeople's ways echoed colonial gendered hierarchies, as freedmen often asserted their dominance in freedwomen's lives, especially through physical violence. Ideologies and practices from both inside and outside their communities suppressed black women. Emancipation, while falling short of all black working people's hopes, especially failed to free black women.

### *The Wider Geography of Freedom*

Freedpeople's ways of life, oppositional acts, and protracted subjection in Antigua occurred within the context of groundbreaking changes sweeping the entire Atlantic World in the era of abolition. Antigua's emancipation process remained distinctive while still fitting into the broader trajectory of the postslavery Atlantic World. Significantly, Antigua was the only Caribbean sugar-producing colony to reject the apprenticeship system devised by the British Parliament to give slave owners and their allies continued control over freedpeople's labor and mobility; only Bermuda and the Cayman Islands, which did not depend on sugar plantations, also proceeded to immediate emancipation. The apprenticeship system suspended hundreds of thousands of the empire's African-descended subjects in a liminal space between enslavement and freedom from 1834 to 1838. In theory, it apprenticed former slaves to their former owners to prepare them for free labor; in practice, it extended their bondage, requiring them to work for a stipulated number of hours without pay in exchange for rations and housing. Although African-descended Antiguans avoided the experience of apprenticeship, the freedom bestowed on them remained quite restrictive.

West Indian planters and colonial legislators across the islands shared strategies to contain and regulate freedpeople, and Antigua, the first

sugar island to initiate “full” freedom, offered authorities elsewhere a model for methods used to control black working people when apprenticeship ended in 1838.<sup>18</sup> This island’s history confirms that immediate emancipation foiled authorities’ and freedpeople’s divergent objectives as much as gradual abolition did, extending our understanding of black life as well as colonial power in the postslavery Anglophone Caribbean. Historians have heralded Jamaica as the economic and policy-making center of the region and asserted that its history is essential to our understanding of British emancipation.<sup>19</sup> Yet Antigua demonstrates the acutely damaging effects of colonial peripherality on black working people as they transitioned to free status. In a place as small as Antigua, emancipation held different implications for freedpeople’s mobility, land acquisition, socialization, and economic advancement compared with Jamaica, where a peasantry emerged and the path to independence from the estates, though equally impeded by poverty, was clearer.

But, despite the distinct conditions and possibilities within various abolition processes, freedpeople in former slave societies throughout the Americas met their emancipation without widespread access to land, citizenship, education, stable wages, or labor rights. *Troubling Freedom* broadens our sense of the strategies for securing freedom in post-slavery societies by complicating freedom’s definition and the sites of its expression. Indeed, freedom rang hollow in the entire Atlantic World, and Antigua vividly exemplifies freedpeople’s attempts to challenge freedom’s contradictions. The struggle for freedom from multiple forms of degradation has animated black popular politics throughout the African diaspora, from its beginnings in forced migration through the present.<sup>20</sup> Emancipation constituted a crucial transition in this longer-term process. As nations and empires shifted from slavery and into various kinds of formally free labor with many embedded unfreedoms, freedpeople protected themselves by strategically engaging this changing context. The book’s investigation of the politicized intricacies within freedpeople’s survival strategies in Antigua allows us to better understand how emancipated women and men approached the many obstacles they encountered in various postslavery societies.

A close look at everyday life after emancipation confirms that self-definition and community formation among Antigua’s black residents did occur despite a milieu directly inimical to these developments. The conferral of freedom expanded their cognizance of the racial, gender,

and class inequalities impeding their progress. Freedom also enabled their efforts to undo such inequalities, the effects of which both undermined and reinforced their internal hierarchies and external subjugation. White elites anticipated unbroken economic productivity and social deference from blacks in response to the “gift” of emancipation. But freedpeople troubled such visions in the ways they led their daily lives, as they tried to create the conditions for a tangible liberation. That freedpeople expressed their will to be free at all, however inconsistently, remains historically significant given the harrowing circumstances that plagued their progress.

### *The Hostile Context*

Black working people’s senses of freedom were framed not only by their everyday survival tactics but also by the conditions elites affixed to emancipation. Understanding freedpeople’s struggles requires an exploration of both their self-interested efforts and the hostile context within which they had to act, which was shaped by their fraught interactions with Antigua’s other social groups. Local planters and their representatives, who held steadfastly to their socioeconomic dominance, and public officials, who advanced planters’ interests, thwarted black working people’s exercise of freedom. Protestant missionaries offered freedpeople outlets for self-improvement but also evangelized to prompt submissiveness. Conversations among these groups showed emancipation’s deliberate and insuperable limits.

To white elites, the abolition of slavery did not translate into blacks’ full political or economic membership in colonial society. Antigua’s small but powerful circle of whites believed that abolition meant only that formerly enslaved people would be paid low wages for toiling obediently. They were only to produce sugar, the singular crop on which the island’s entire economy hinged. According to local whites, emancipation, instead of conferring automatic rights on blacks, entailed no more than the possibility of earning privileges in the distant future as freedpeople lived up to the state’s and colonial society’s expectations for their public and private pursuits in their economic livelihoods, spiritual practices, and personal conduct. Emancipation was intended to refashion African-descended slaves with strange habits and “uncivilized” culture into westernized, Christian, and industrious subjects. The standards for achieving this transformation, however, were exacting and undesirable

for freedpeople to fulfill. As freedpeople attempted to comprehend and respond to the conditions that local and metropolitan authorities built into abolition, whites altered those conditions to maintain their own power.

In addition to dealing with whites, Antigua's newly freed people had to negotiate with the numerically small but socially visible set of middle-class people of color, who had been born into freedom or were manumitted before 1834. The leading members of this group, who were of mixed European and African heritage, had some property and social standing, as did their counterparts in most other British Caribbean isles.<sup>21</sup> Mixed-race middle-class Antiguan often fluctuated between advocating for the advancement of black working people as they transitioned out of slavery and heaping as much disdain on them as did local white elites. Their ambivalence toward freedpeople stemmed from the uncertainty of their own position in Antigua's social hierarchy. Whites viewed people of color either as a buffer class to manage the "unruly" emancipated masses or as hostile competitors who, despite their ancestry, had the education, resources, and savvy to challenge white dominance in the colony. Newly emancipated people could make only intermittent alliances with this group during their quest to secure a more meaningful freedom. Freedpeople could just as often encounter onerous demands from mixed-race middling Antiguan that they become "civilized" subjects and willing workers, amid the latter's unyielding maintenance of their status distinctions.

The complexities of Antiguan emancipation also stemmed from the structures of and fissures within British imperial control in the Caribbean. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Atlantic slaveholding states were engaged in an international dialogue about the relative merits of enslaved versus formally free labor.<sup>22</sup> The British, who often led this conversation, chose to experiment with state-regulated emancipation and a wage-labor economy long advocated by many metropolitan thinkers and policy makers. State oversight helped the empire avoid the pitfalls of freedom achieved by force, as exemplified by Haiti's unprecedented slave-led revolution. Metropolitan and colonial authorities agreed that emancipation should produce a tidy social order and a cheap and willing proletariat to continue the sugar enterprise. It should not disrupt the structures of white privilege in the West Indies.<sup>23</sup> In turn, local administrators managing British colonies in Antigua and across the Caribbean crafted a freedom replete with customary and legal inequities

that delimited blacks' livelihoods and blocked their progress beyond the lowest rung of the social order.

Emancipation in theory guaranteed black working people's bodily freedom as individuals and freedom of contract as wage laborers. But their extreme disadvantage relative to their employers and their severe disfranchisement through law and social custom, which flowed from the Caribbean's legacy of slavery, severely limited those freedoms. It hindered the formal organizing necessary to surmount these obstacles and secure citizenship for many generations to follow. Antigua's black working people did not gain universal adult suffrage or legalized labor unions until a full century after abolition, which mirrors the prolonged delay in obtaining these rights that the descendants of slaves endured throughout the Atlantic World.<sup>24</sup>

Emancipated people's beleaguered efforts at self-preservation after 1834 were further inhibited by the declining profitability of British Caribbean sugar within the world economy through the rest of the nineteenth century. Cuba and Brazil, as slaveholding territories, brought stiff competition to the English colonies, generating greater quantities of cheaper sugar. Comparatively, British Caribbean sugar plantations were undercapitalized and technologically outdated. Overall, from the 1840s on, the Caribbean region found itself increasingly on the periphery of rapidly shifting global trade networks. The centers of European empire were moving eastward to Africa and Asia. Both increasing challenges within the global market and Antigua's continuous economic decline after 1834 exacerbated internal conflicts over the meaning of freedom.

All social groups had a limited range of options for their advancement in the postslavery era, which rendered freedpeople's struggles even more difficult. Missionaries operated on shoestring budgets; people of color increasingly slipped out of middle-class status and into financial and social insecurity; planters balanced precariously on the brink of ruin—all at the same time that black working people were even more deeply ensnared in poverty. In such desperate times, freedpeople who encountered their supposed social superiors were often met with disdain and suppression, as planters and local authorities criminalized their conduct. The island's legislature blocked freedpeople's search for new occupations and their attempts to modify the routine of estate work through the passage of coercive labor legislation. Missionaries policed freedpeople's personal interactions and frequently condemned their ways of life as unChristian. Continued pursuit of their self-interest as the sugar

economy plummeted made freedpeople into adversaries of the state-sponsored emancipation project and disqualified them from citizenship.

### *Interrogating the Archive and Framing the Narrative*

*Troubling Freedom* assembles many seemingly incongruous documents to construct its detailed portrait of black working people's besieged quest to realize freedom. Most of the sources used in this study—including government correspondence among public officials in Antigua and Britain, planters' records and letters, missionaries' correspondence, and local newspapers—display ambivalence or even outright hostility to black working people's efforts. Such records originate from and represent the power of colonial elites as they impeded freedpeople's progress.<sup>25</sup> These sources mostly obscure the depth and heterogeneity of black thought and action, as black voices appear in the record in brief and secondary fashion. Without reexamining these flawed documents, however, their stories would remain permanently silenced. *Troubling Freedom* explores freedpeople's lives and labors by inverting the perspectives of the literate observers who chronicled Antigua's past to excavate black survival tactics, ways of life, political beliefs, and senses of self.

The archives of the immediate pre- and post-1834 era remain distinct from other periods in their intense focus on black life. The buildup to and passage of emancipation in the British Empire fostered a rare visibility of black working people in the records, as white elites' concerns about public safety and economic productivity after 1834 bred greater scrutiny of black communities' ordinary affairs. Elites' obsessive documentation of black people's labor and public comportment formed a means of control aimed at ensuring that emancipation maintained existent social inequalities, but inadvertently created an abundance of information on otherwise invisible subjects. Yet these records still share with the broader archive of Atlantic slavery and freedom an acute lack of insight into black working people's interiority and their ideological perspectives on freedom.

To examine how Antigua's working people tried to stretch freedom's possibilities and circumvent its limits using such challenging sources, I investigate the plausible politics behind their self-interested acts. The responses such acts elicited among literate observers allow me to parse in detail the significance of mundane black life. Elites knew all too well that freedpeople regularly attempted to contest the status quo as they

lived, labored, and socialized in the towns and on rural estates. Elites' disdain at the changes they perceived in freedpeople's labor practices, consumer habits, demeanor, and lifestyles provides rich evidence of these changes as they occurred. On rare occasions, sources feature the lives of specific freedpersons that lend particularity to the broader issues considered in this book. But, more often than not, the study engages the indirect and generalized ways in which freedpeople's daily lives surface in archival documents, retelling elites' anxieties through a different analytical lens, as stories of black working people's survival, aspirations for self-determination, and ultimate frustration.

My interpretation of the sources explores the complex interplay between elite power and subaltern subversion within many aspects of colonial Antiguan public and private life. In this vein, elite laments over freedpeople's expensive new clothing document freedpeople's sartorial expression of their new status and desire for a life beyond fieldwork, but the laments also reveal notions of illegitimacy that haunted black attempts to mimic the fashions of their social superiors. Elites' anxiety over the pervasiveness of "superstition" among freedpeople evinces their continued adherence to obeah despite the vigor of Christian evangelizing, as well as whites' claims of black "savagery" that undercut any efforts to assert their rights in freedom. This book extracts multilayered connotations from the actions and interactions that elites recorded, and it shows that there was far more to black working people's story than has previously been told.<sup>26</sup>

*Troubling Freedom* engages two interconnected scholarly conversations central to the study of the African diaspora in the Atlantic World: the quotidian lives and cultures of African-descended people and their ideas about freedom. The first has been dominated by scholars of slavery, who have debated the influence of African antecedents as against the effects, both productive and destructive, of forced migration on the identities and cultures of diasporic communities.<sup>27</sup> This book does not focus on that debate, but such scholarship has helped to shape my understanding of African-descended Antiguan's cultural identity from the 1830s onward. At the time of emancipation, the island's largely creolized freedpeople shaped their lives and cultures from a blend of West African and European customs in a Caribbean colonial setting. After the close of the international slave trade in the first decade of the nineteenth century ended the steady stream of African-born slaves arriving on the island, cultural hybridity intensified.<sup>28</sup>

Exploring freedom's meanings sheds equal light on the culture of black working people. Just as knowledge of precolonial African cultures can illuminate community formation in Atlantic slavery, much can be gleaned about diasporic people's social worlds by examining their culture-building practices immediately after emancipation. *Troubling Freedom* reconstructs the material culture of black working people as a means to better comprehend their concepts of freedom, which distinguishes this book from many Atlantic postslavery studies that strictly focus on political and economic activities. Literate elites of postslavery Antigua were not always reliable reporters of black working people's folkways. Yet even with their limited knowledge of and biases against black communities, elite observers recognized that the conferral of freedom was transformative, reverberating in all aspects of freedpeople's lives. Indeed, to assess who black people were becoming and how they lived in the decades after 1834 is to investigate the significance of freedom.

In engaging the second major scholarly conversation on how freedpeople themselves defined freedom, I build on the fitting characterization of freedom as "no fixed condition but a constantly moving target."<sup>29</sup> Over time, black colonial subjects found their ideals of freedom increasingly difficult to attain, since British imperial ideas about freedom contracted markedly rather than continuing to expand. In Britain, the project of freeing the slaves was begun in the late eighteenth century by an assemblage of disparate interests, including lawmakers, evangelists, economists, and the literate public. Abolition served as the strategic means to many political ends, including economic modernization and imperial unity, that were equally if not more important than the goal of liberating Africans.<sup>30</sup> Upon abolition's legal enactment by Parliament in the 1830s, imperial reformers implemented a freedom for Caribbean enslaved people based on liberal, abstract notions of how proletarian workers should labor and live. When freedmen and -women did not respond as expected, colonial elites ascribed the problem to an ever-present sense of blacks' cultural and social "deficiencies."<sup>31</sup> The depressed sugar economy from the mid-1840s onward further impaired freedpeople's ability to challenge freedom's limitations. By the late 1850s, whites in Antigua concluded that emancipation was a failure and that freedpeople were unfit for citizenship. They were destined instead for poverty, crime, and civil exclusion. Given the impossible circumstances freedpeople faced from the moment of abolition, this amounted to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Despite this predicament, black working people harbored a political awareness bred in the context of their quotidian strategies for survival. Contrary to the opinions of whites, black working people before and after 1834 did not enjoy their freedom primarily through “criminal” acts. They also sought to change the colonial order by claiming rights in accordance with their sense of the law and of themselves as Crown subjects. Freedpeople’s assertions of their legal rights were based on their belief in the law as a protector of their interests. They were developing a “legal sensibility,” a conception of “how things ought to be and what to do if they are not.”<sup>32</sup> Antiguan freedpeople attempted to use colonial law to attain their objectives despite their familiarity with its inequities. At the same time, freedpeople persistently engaged in illicit activities in response to the exclusionary tactics of the state and white-dominated society. Their simultaneous legal and illegal acts took place in the yawning gap between what they believed freedom should mean and what freedom actually allowed. Tactics such as theft, arson, and the serial quitting of estate employment all buttressed their efforts to expand their freedom. The moments of open popular resistance that came in 1831 and 1858 were forceful reiterations of the politicized conflicts and the routine violence that marked black ordinary life in freedom.

Antigua’s moments of collective protest that challenged freedom’s contradictions reflect a broader trend in British Caribbean history. Between 1800 and 1834, mass uprisings in Barbados in 1816, Guyana (Demerara) in 1823, and Jamaica in 1831 were precipitated by inflammatory ideas that slaves held about freedom and revealed to imperial authorities the problems that would accompany general abolition. Almost every colony in the Anglophone chain was rocked by violent uprisings after 1834, including riots in St. Kitts and mass strikes in Trinidad in response to the inauguration of apprenticeship. The infamous 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica, a bloody struggle with a high death toll, prompted a drastic restructuring of British colonial governance in the Caribbean.<sup>33</sup> Freedpeople consistently used physical aggression to express their anger at emancipation’s many inadequacies. The divergent targets of Antiguan black working people’s violent acts in the 1831 and 1858 uprisings, the first instance destroying whites’ property and the second attacking other black working people, show the stark shift between their hopefulness on the eve of emancipation and their despair after several decades of living with its shortcomings. Violent conflict showcased freedpeople’s responses to the conditional nature of colonial abolition, a conditionality

that eventually delimited their own visions of freedom and their sense of who could share in its practice.

### *Charting Freedom's Course*

The language I use to tell this story of emancipated people's frustrated efforts before and after 1834 is deliberately chosen to highlight how race and class, as well as gender, played critical roles in shaping Antigua's social hierarchy and delimiting freedom. I refer to Antiguans with any African ancestry as *African-descended people* because skin color was the most salient marker of difference in the colony. Racial categories defined distinct groups subject to white planter control. Those Antiguans who had both African and European ancestry are termed *mixed-race people*, *people of color*, or the *mixed-race middle class*, a status held by the leading members of this stratum. I refer to Antiguans of European ancestry as *whites* or as *white elites*, which indicates the economic and social control over the colony's affairs exercised by prominent planters and officials. I also call white and mixed-race middle-class observers *elites* to denote these two groups' shared demand that slaves-turned-freedpeople adopt "civilized" ways and act in accordance with elite conceptions of law and order.

For the period prior to 1834, I call the historical actors most central to my study *slaves* or *enslaved people*. For the period after 1834, I refer to these women and men as *freedpeople*, *newly freed people*, or *emancipated people* to signify the paramount importance of emancipation in their daily lives. I also call them *black working people* to connote their racial and class status in the colony while still centering their humanity.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, the sources show British colonial officers, planters, missionaries, and other literate white and mixed-race observers calling them *laborers*, *Negroes*, or, later, the *peasantry*. The European term *peasant* especially did not apply to the condition of black working people on this island. Lack of access to land and the dominance of sugar planting prevented Antigua's freedpeople from practicing the independent subsistence and commercial agricultural production that characterizes a peasantry. At best, Antigua had a *semipeasantry*, with a significant proportion of people pursuing multiple occupations, combining small-scale provisioning with employment in the sugar industry or other jobs in the parishes and towns.<sup>35</sup> Elites' use of this misnomer rings ironic in light of their endeavors to prevent black working people's self-sufficiency and independence from the