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Restoring Miranda: gender and the limits of European patriarchy in the early modern Atlantic world*

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Abstract

Atlantic history has become fashionable as a way of linking the histories of Europe and the Americas. However, much work in Atlantic history does little to challenge the national biases of traditional colonial and imperial history. This article argues that gender provides an important conceptual tool for a trans-imperial and comparative exploration, just as it provided important conceptual structures for all the peoples of the Atlantic world. An examination of the research on two gendered issues – work, and family and sexuality – demonstrates that while Europeans attempted to impose their ideas on the various societies that they encountered in Africa and the Americas, such attempts were rarely successful. Gender not only provides the basis for a trans-imperial analysis of the Atlantic world but also enables us to reorient our scholarly perspective in the Atlantic, highlighting the agency of non-European peoples and exposing the limits of European patriarchy.

Keywords Atlantic world, gender, imperial, patriarchy, sexuality

In a forum in the American Historical Review, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra invoked Shakespeare’s Tempest to illustrate the entangled histories of Spanish and English colonization in the Atlantic world. Prospero, he argued, was modelled ‘after the Spanish conquistadors, who were capable not only of setting their terrifying hounds loose on Caliban, but also of wielding awesome preternatural powers to calm or set off storms’. However, The Tempest is not just about imperialism; access to Miranda’s sexuality is also central to the play. Caliban is enslaved because of his attempted rape of Miranda, and her promised marriage to Ferdinand resolves the conflicts between Prospero and King Alonso. Prospero stirs and then calms the storms to provide a husband for Miranda.¹ Like much of

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Atlantic history, Canizares-Esguerra’s focus on national histories obscures gender by focusing on European men.

Recently, the Atlantic has become a major conceptual framework for the study of early modern history, particularly for historians of the Americas hoping to incorporate European perspectives. While Atlantic history includes a wide range of specializations and the full range of imperial powers, the confusion about whether the Atlantic represents a ‘field’ or a ‘framework’ has limited its analytical power. If the Atlantic is ‘a zone of exchange and interchange, circulation and transmission’, then its history should be comparative and trans-imperial. Yet much of what is called Atlantic history represents revised imperial or colonial narratives focused primarily on the Americas, rather than on broader comparisons. Even the most assertively Atlanticist scholars have found the linguistic, religious, legal, and cultural differences among the European empires, as well as the diversity of African and indigenous American societies, difficult to overcome. Although J. H. Elliott’s exploration of the parallel developments of the Spanish and English empires and the history of New World slavery both reveal the utility of the paradigm, for the most part, Atlantic historians have, to quote Ann Stoler, ‘engaged less in comparison than in parallel play’.

In this article, we will argue that gender is a particularly useful analytical category for transcending national and imperial frameworks. First, gender provided all circum-Atlantic peoples with conceptual and practical structures for organizing work, family, and society. Furthermore, because gender was organized in similar ways across Europe, it provides a compelling basis for trans-imperial analysis. Ideas about gender were then implicated in a broad array of interactions as Europeans came into contact with societies in Africa and


the Americas and formed new settler societies. Just as importantly, attention to gender also allows us to think about how Atlantic engagements transformed relationships within societies, not just between them. Finally, gendered analyses reorient our scholarly perspective in the Atlantic, highlighting the agency of non-European peoples and exposing the limits of European patriarchy.6

Many studies of Atlantic history privilege Europe as the subject and Africa and the Americas as the objects of European activity. We also begin our discussion with Europe, but for other reasons. First, the extensive scholarship on European gender expectations provides a fruitful starting point for trans-imperial analysis. Moreover, Europeans and their ideas supplied the initial, albeit not the only, source of connections among the societies of the Atlantic world. Finally, although Europeans experienced some changes in gender expectations over the course of the early modern period, those subtle and gradual changes were not primarily the result of interactions with non-Europeans, nor were they evident in the Atlantic exchanges.

In fact, ideas about gender differed surprisingly little across early modern Europe. According to the patriarchal ideal, men were expected to exercise political, social, and economic authority, and women were expected to submit to male authority in all aspects of life. Even the confessional differences that emerged after the Reformation had little impact on European gender norms. The natural superiority of men over women and the importance of female chastity were confirmed by both scripture and science. Protestant theologians denied the primacy of celibacy over marriage and the authority of the Virgin Mary, but they did not reconsider the fundamental nature of the gender hierarchy. Across confessional lines, the religious and prescriptive literature of the period was largely unanimous in its articulation of female weakness and the need for female subordination.7

From the beginning of the early modern Atlantic world, European men used such gendered ideas to define non-Europeans.8 The Italian navigator Ca’ da Mosto (1432–1488) described African men who washed and spun cotton as womanly.9 Similarly, Gomes Eanes de Zurara, in the Chronicle of the discovery and conquest of Guinea (1453), associated domination with the masculine Portuguese and captivity and slavery with feminine African bodies.10 However, that gendered discourse did not reflect the reality of their interactions. Time after time, despite their supposed effeminacy, African men successfully defended their


people and territory against Portuguese incursions and dictated the terms of trade with the European invaders.  

Europeans relied on similarly gendered notions to describe the native peoples of the Americas. Columbus’s description of the hairless, seemingly androgynous bodies of Arawak men made for an effortless association of indigenous peoples with the feminine. Later explorers, such as Sir Walter Raleigh, also portrayed both the lands and the peoples of the Americas as female and virginal, waiting to be possessed and dominated by Europeans. This early feminization of indigenous peoples not only established the power hierarchy in the Americas in the minds of Europeans but also came to define European dominance over the globe. Representations of masculine, muscular Europeans subduing submissive, feminine continents and non-European peoples were common in Spanish, Portuguese, and English cartographic and geographic imagery.

Indeed, these gendered representations readily justified the conquest of the Americas. The Spanish cleric Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda asserted that the peoples of the Americas were ‘in prudence, talent, and every kind of virtue and human sentiment … inferior to the Spaniards as children are to adults, or women to men, or the cruel and inhumane to the very gentle’. In battle, native peoples were ‘so cowardly and timid that they can scarcely offer any resistance … and have fled like women’. From the European perspective, only conquest could bring such peoples in line with the divine order.

When Europeans interacted with patriarchal and patrilineal peoples across the Americas, their expectations of the gender order were confirmed, but when they encountered peoples whose gender systems differed from their own, assumptions about normative patriarchy blinded them to the subtleties of indigenous gender structures. In Aztec culture, gender roles were reciprocal or complementary, while in Inca culture, parallel gender hierarchies distinguished men’s activities from women’s; however, the Spanish could not understand, and lacked vocabulary to describe such gender systems. As Theda Perdue has noted of the

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17 On gender complementarity, see Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett, eds., Indian women of early Mexico, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. On gender parallelism, see Irene Silverblatt, Moon, sun, and witches: gender ideologies and class in Inca and colonial Peru, Princeton,
English interaction with the Cherokee, ‘gender parity and sexual autonomy were concepts that they simply could not fathom’.\(^{18}\) With each encounter, Europeans interpreted these incomprehensible gender structures as failures that only reinforced European superiority.\(^{19}\) Subsequent interactions between Europeans and native peoples created a series of ‘gender frontiers’, in which competing expectations clashed and were renegotiated.\(^{20}\) As a result, the Americas became the stage for complex interactions among gender cultures with competing norms and standards, more informed by the realities of daily life and the gender expectations of non-European peoples than by European patriarchal ideals. Indeed, the research on women and gender presents a dynamic of personal and cultural interactions that transcends both imperial divisions and simplistic notions of European patriarchal domination.

**Work**

Work provides one important context for understanding the limits of European patriarchy in the Atlantic world. In Europe’s household economies, although women worked, it was assumed that women and men did different work. In the words of the Englishman Richard Brathwait, ‘In employments ech have distinct shares/ Nor she to his, nor he to hers should goe.’\(^{21}\) Most authors of prescriptive literature asserted that women’s labour was to be limited to the home, as keeping women within the home was a critical symbol of male authority and was thought to protect female chastity. A male interlocutor in Alberti’s *Libro della famiglia* (c.1432) explained that ‘nature thus provided for our well-being, arranging for me to bring things home and for women to guard them. ... The man should guard the woman, the house, and his family and country, but not by sitting still.’\(^{22}\)

Moreover, women’s presence outside the home was, by nature, corrupting to both the women themselves and to society more broadly. The sixteenth-century humanist Juan Luis Vives asserted that a single woman should ‘appear in public on occasion, but as rarely as possible’, and worried about the ‘occasions ... for corruption and misconduct’ in public.\(^{23}\)

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Luther similarly emphasized the restriction of women’s activities to the home, praising Sarah, the wife of Abraham, for being in the tent when God asked for her, and arguing that ‘a woman should be a domestic … who stays in her home and looks after her own affairs’.  

According to the English clergyman Matthew Griffith, ‘The good Woman is called an House Wife because she commonly keepeth the house; … or if she go abroad, it is snailie-like, with her house upon her head, and it is about household considerations.’ To support this ideal, European societies developed a variety of means to control women’s work that varied in form but not intent. In England, legal codes constrained some aspects of female inheritance, property ownership, and access to courts. In Spain and France, prohibitions on guild membership codified restraints on women’s economic activity.

Despite the enthusiasm with which these ideals were promoted, demographic and economic realities forced most Europeans to ignore constraints on women’s labour. Both partible inheritance and male mortality regularly left households, from the poorest to the most powerful, in the hands of women. Widows of all classes administered family estates and protected the economic interests of their children. Across Europe, customs or legal norms allowed wives to run households in their husbands’ absence, and women regularly exercised economic authority in place of feeble or incompetent men.

Moreover, most women, whether single, married, or widowed, engaged in productive work inside or outside the home to help support themselves and their families, participating in most occupations, either formally or informally as the wives and daughters of merchants and artisans. In addition to traditional women’s work such as food retailing and cloth production, women provided credit, ran shops, and healed the sick. The failure to conform

to the ideal gendered division of labour was particularly visible at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy, where female fieldworkers were so common that travellers across the European countryside rarely noticed their presence.30

Despite the fragility of the gendered division of labour at home, Europeans expected other circum-Atlantic cultures to organize their work around that same ideal. In parts of Mexico, as the arrival of the Spanish accompanied the intensification of agriculture, indigenous men took over fieldwork (traditionally women’s work), while women were forced into herding.31 European insistence that hunter-gatherers engage in sedentary agriculture altered both diets and gender hierarchies. Late in the colonial period, Native American women in California, who traditionally gathered acorns (the mainstay of their diets) lost status as the Missions established European-style farming. Sometimes, European influence on the gendered division of labour was less direct but no less severe, changing societies in ways not consonant with European patterns. For instance, in response to contact with Europeans, the Comanche relegated women to horse herding, meat curing, and other undesirable tasks.32

Yet, more often than not, Europeans failed to completely undo native ways. Native groups resisted change, and demographic realities accentuated the need for women’s labour. Female agriculturalists persisted among the Cherokee and Iroquois into the nineteenth century. In the Texas borderlands, Spanish missionaries’ desire to promote female domestic seclusion was superseded by the demands of agricultural life: men and women had to work together in order to provide for their families. Other Europeans did not even try. In the Great Lakes, where the French were more interested in the fur trade than in changing gender norms, agriculture remained women’s work.33


33 Juliana Barr, Peace came in the form of a woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas borderlands, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007, pp. 138–9, 142. Daniel Usner, Indians, settlers, and...
Indigenous women often adapted traditional work to new economic circumstances. Women’s market activities fell within both European and native gender expectations, allowing some indigenous women to participate in the expanded economies in ways that benefited their families and their communities. In the Great Lakes region, native women exploited their relationships with French traders; Cherokee women incorporated the deerskin trade into traditional food redistribution practices. Across the Americas, both European and indigenous communities often depended on the goods that women produced and marketed. Indeed, the Spanish were no more or less able to transform native gendered divisions of labour than the Portuguese, the French, or the English. In the end, these interactions relied much more on the gender hierarchies and economic expectations of indigenous peoples than on the gendered assumptions of European imperial agents.

The gender frontier also highlighted competing notions of masculinity and work. Most of the Spanish conquistadors were not military men but artisans, merchants, and other professionals. They measured their masculinity in terms of financial success, good credit, and sound household management. However, in many of the native societies that they encountered, women were more central to markets and credit than men. Conversely, the Englishmen who made up the majority of early settlers in North America were generally farmers, whose masculinity was closely connected to the acquisition and cultivation of land. They ridiculed as unmanly native men who refused to work in the fields, while native men disparaged English farmers for engaging in what they saw as women’s work.

On the other side of the Atlantic, European contacts with African peoples had a limited impact on traditional gendered divisions of labour. However, where women had

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34 Sleeper-Smith, *Indian women*, ch. 3.
traditionally engaged in agriculture, such as in Central Africa and some parts of the Bight of Biafra, the growth of the slave trade and the consequent sexual imbalance led to women’s ‘near total domination of agricultural labor’. Among the Aja in the Bight of Benin, where women were less likely to farm, the slave trade pushed them into commercial activity.42

The expansion of economic activity between Africans and Europeans also provided new opportunities for some African women who exploited contacts with European men. As bicultural agents, Luso-African women often played important roles in the slave trade; their ability to interact with both Africans and Europeans made them both power-brokers and mediators between cultures.43 Other women found new opportunities in transatlantic connections. Fenda Lawrence, a Gambian slave trader and widow of an Englishman, migrated to Georgia with her children and five slaves, possibly to escape the African patriarchal traditions that hindered her business interests. The English slave captain with whom she had worked in Gambia provided her with references when she settled in Savannah.44 In such ways, African women creatively adapted existing expectations to engage the new reality of the Atlantic economy for their own economic security and that of their families.

African gender expectations also influenced European activity in the slave trade. In Africa, female slaves provided kinship networks and agricultural labour, and were valuable as wives in polygynous societies. Moreover, warfare and other demographic factors often decreased the number of male slaves available.45 Thus, although the Royal Africa Company directed its agents to obtain two men for every woman, women regularly made up 40–50% of the slaves available. In turn, these sex ratios forced Europeans to reconsider their expectations about women and work.46

On plantations, the exigencies of commodity production superseded gender ideologies; slave owners regularly ignored both European and African gender expectations when it suited them, often assigning heavy work to women.47 Each commodity made different

demands, but masters typically assigned female slaves to ‘unskilled’ field labour alongside men. In sugar production, whether in Guadeloupe, Barbados, or Peru, women and men worked together in the gangs that planted, weeded, and cut sugarcane, and both tended the fires at the mill. Yet the skilled work of sugar production, especially the boiling process, was defined as the domain of male slaves who had specialized knowledge, and who thus gained status, as well as opportunities to earn additional wages.  

However, women’s work was not limited to field work. Insofar as slave women were considered sexually available to their masters, and children born to them served those same masters, sexuality and reproduction were also forms of work. Although outside continental North America the slave workforce never reproduced itself, some masters saw reproduction as a value that slave women brought to plantations. As we will discuss below, sex and childbearing was a particularly fraught area of slave life, where gender and family expectations played out in complicated ways.  

Even enslaved women could employ traditional skills for their own benefit. Where slaves grew crops for personal consumption, enslaved women, like their counterparts in Africa (and indigenous women), dominated local markets. Urban society allowed enslaved women to engage in traditional female domestic work, as cooks, washerwomen, seamstresses, and wet nurses. They could also be hired out as day labourers and pay a fixed amount to their owners. In Spanish and Portuguese America, enslaved women


regularly worked for wages, and used the Spanish system of coartación (and a similar system in Brazil) to purchase their own freedom. Once freed, they often used their earnings to purchase their own slaves. 52

At times, European masters invoked gendered expectations about work to punish uncooperative male slaves. In late seventeenth-century Guadeloupe, Père Labat, the French Dominican priest and writer, punished men for laziness by assigning them women’s work, feeding cane to the mill. 53 Such punishments were not unique to European masters. The Natchez often assigned male slaves to women’s work and the Mohawk ridiculed the Anglo-American adopted captive James Smith for working in the fields alongside women. 54 In the 1730s and 1740s, with the expansion of rice production in South Carolina, men who had previously herded cattle or cleared forests – work that paralleled African practices – were asked to do work in rice cultivation that women typically did in Africa. 55 This shift in the gendered division of labour was one source of the conflicts that culminated in the Stono Rebellion in 1739. 56

Curiously, as Europeans settled in the Americas, they did not build their new creole societies around the ideal gendered division of labour as articulated by authorities on both sides of the ocean. English pamphleteers may have claimed that white women’s work in the Americas was centred on ‘domestique imployments and housewifery as in England’, but that was rarely the case. 57 As much as European women in the Americas may have aspired to a life of domesticity and even leisure, and their husbands and male relatives may have struggled to make it happen, frontier life meant that, like their European counterparts, women from Boston to Buenos Aires were regularly engaged in economic activity. Wealthier women owned and managed properties, while the majority of rural women tended and harvested crops on small farms. Poor white women in the English West Indies cultivated land that large planters did not want, and sold produce alongside slave women. In towns, women were engaged in both local and Atlantic economies. In British North America, women participated in retailing, artisanal work, and service occupations; they ran boarding houses, sold local and imported goods, and extended credit. In French New Orleans, even upper-class women engaged in commerce. Spanish law allowed women of all races and classes


53 Moitt, Women and slavery, pp. 49–50.


57 Cited in Brown, Good wives, p. 85.
extensive legal authority, which they turned into economically productive activity across the colonies.\textsuperscript{58} Throughout the Americas, the strength of indigenous gender structures, the realities of subsistence farming, and the struggles of frontier life hindered any rapid, widespread adoption of the ideal European gendered division of labour. Instead, the interactions among circum-Atlantic societies created a world of contested gender adaptations in which the nationality of the imperial power mattered less than the local economy and the gender cultures of the various local populations.

**Sexuality and the family**

 Attempts to control female sexuality were another manifestation of European patriarchal authority in the Atlantic world. Throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period, philosophers and theologians described women's bodies as naturally uncontrolled and dangerous. Thus, the regulation of prostitution, the end of municipal brothels, and laws against fornication were aimed specifically at the control of women's sexuality, clearly articulating the notion that patriarchal authority should govern both women's minds and their bodies.\textsuperscript{59}

 Nevertheless, conceptions of honour and sexual purity were readily and regularly circumvented by desire. Lust and unsanctioned love drove peasants and princes to pre-marital and extra-marital sex that led to the birth of children out of wedlock. Peasants cohabitated, sometimes to avoid marriage, sometimes out of poverty, while their noble counterparts tended mistresses and named illegitimate sons to positions of power.\textsuperscript{60} Although the Catholic Church inveighed against non-marital sexuality, it allowed illegitimate children full rights as Christians; moreover, illegitimate children in Spain, Portugal, and many parts of France could inherit both moveable goods and real estate, so ecclesiastical admonishments had little practical impact. Europeans thus came to their interactions with other circum-Atlantic peoples with some ambivalence about sexual norms. Although sexual activity, especially for women, was ideally limited to marriage, they knew and even expected that men and women regularly engaged in a wide array of relationships outside marriage.


This ambivalence set the stage for a variety of interactions between European men and indigenous women. As a part of broader attempts to subjugate the peoples of the Americas, European men imposed their patriarchal ideals through the use of rape and forced concubinage, employing mechanisms of dominance familiar to them. As John Lynn has pointed out, in European warfare, ‘Women’s bodies were also regarded as forms of plunder.’ However, in crossing the Atlantic, European assertions of sexual power were intensified by ethnic and cultural differences. Europeans often saw non-European practices of sex and marriage as savage, and used unfamiliar dress to define non-European women as naturally libidinous, thus allowing them to satisfy both their consciences and their physical desires. On Columbus’ second voyage, the Italian nobleman Michele de Cuneo vividly recounted his intense desire for a naked Carib woman and the violence that he used to overcome her resistance. The connection between violence and sex with native women was not limited to Spaniards. Although the English often portrayed themselves as unwilling to engage in such behaviours, they too raped women as a part of conquest.

However, in native communities, sexual violence had a complicated role as a tool of warfare. Some indigenous groups forbade the rape of enemy women, although female captives were common. For instance, English accounts of native atrocities during King Philip’s War include almost boilerplate accusations of savagery, but do not allege rape. The English captive Mary Rowlandson acknowledged that ‘not one of them ever offered the least abuse of unchastity to me in word or action’. Often, native warriors integrated women and children captives into native society. When James and Susanna Johnson and their children were captured by Abenaki warriors in 1754, her Indian master was the son of New Englanders who had himself been captured as a child. In other native communities, sexual violence and sex with female captives were strategies in their engagements with Europeans.


64 Wood, ‘Sexual violation’, pp. 11–12.

65 Montrose, ‘Work of gender’, pp. 18–20; Block, Rape and sexual power, p. 82–3; Godbeer, Sexual revolution, p. 181; Snyder, Slavery in Indian Country, pp. 89–90.


67 Block, Rape and sexual power, pp. 210 and 221–2; Godbeer, Sexual revolution, pp. 168–9.

68 Mary Rowlandson, A true history of the captivity and restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, London, 1682, p. 32; Godbeer, Sexual revolution, p. 168.
The Comanches raped female captives to pressure the Spanish to ransom them, and such violence was so common that some matrilineal Navajos even trace their lineages back to captured Spanish women.69

Native women often countered the violence of conquest by using their sexuality in ways that were meaningful to them and/or useful to their societies.70 In Pueblo culture, women willingly gave themselves to men whom they considered holy, sometimes leading Franciscan friars away from their vows of chastity.71 In Virginia, Indian women used sex as a ‘weapon of war’, luring Englishmen into situations in which they could be killed.72 The famous scene in which Captain John Smith was ‘rescued’ by Pocahontas enacted a Powhatan ritual whereby Smith was adopted into their family.73

Sexual alliances between European men and native women could bring advantages to both partners. Indigenous peoples, like Europeans, were accustomed to marriage and sex as tools of diplomacy and commerce,74 and sexual relations between Spanish men and Indian women often served as strategies of alliance formation familiar to all participants.75 French traders who married Indian women ‘à la façon du pays’ (‘according to local customs’) became part of indigenous kin networks (not vice versa), improving both the woman’s access to European goods (and therefore her status in her kin group) and the man’s economic connections.76

The desperate reliance of many European men on indigenous women for survival belied any overarching imposition of female subordination. For instance, when provisions failed to arrive, French garrisons in Louisiana relied on local native groups for food, and formed relationships with native women in their own villages and under the supervision of their kin.77 Indeed, the extensive literature on women who served as economic and cultural

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74 Godbeer, *Sexual revolution*, p. 177.


mediators between indigenous groups and Europeans highlights the agency of women rather than their subjection in cross-cultural relations.

Gender tensions are also evident in the interactions between European and native men. When indigenous men, particularly elite men, were defeated in warfare, they suffered a loss of manhood. Their status as warriors, rulers, and spiritual leaders was compromised, if not obliterated, by European conquest. This diminished authority affected their place in families, lineages, and communities. European and indigenous men were fighting not only for territory and economic gain but also for their place in the gender hierarchy and their understanding of the natural order.

With the stakes so high and military victory always uncertain, both sides resorted to accusations of homosexuality and insults about the other’s masculinity. The Spanish had long accused enemies of sodomy and femininity, and such charges became common topoi of Spanish descriptions of native men. As early as 1494, Diego Alvarez Chanca accused the Caribs of emasculating boys and using them for sodomy, and only slightly later Las Casas admonished Spaniards for having ‘defamed the Indians, having accused them of being infected with sodomy’. The English viewed native men as ‘lacking in manly ardor’ and gentle with their wives to the point of effeminacy. Native men also employed gendered insults as a way to demoralize their enemies, both European and indigenous. The Pequots impugned English manhood by saying ‘you dare not fight, you are all one like women’. Apache men shouted insults at Spaniards that referred to them as female genitalia, and Natchez men and women mocked French men for speaking the Natchez language with the feminine pronunciation. Across the Americas, native men countered European domination with their own definitions of power and masculinity.
Native peoples’ resistance to the European patriarchal household was equally strong. They proved reluctant if not completely unwilling to relinquish their complementary family roles and reliance on extended kin networks when they joined Spanish mission communities. Despite English opposition, the Seneca maintained tribal membership based on the matriline.85 Both the French and the English encountered ongoing resistance to their attempts to end traditional marriage practices of polygyny and serial monogamy. The Jesuits in New France were constantly frustrated by their inability to alter native marriage traditions.86 In other places, European contact had unintended effects on indigenous families. In the Comanche empire, for example, interactions with Europeans seem to have led to an increase in native polygyny.87

Intermarriages between European men and native women reveal the frustrations inherent in European attempts to assert their patriarchal authority. For Spanish elites, intermarriage was not just a mechanism for alliance creation; it was also a way to ensure Spanish heirs to lands and titles, Christianization, and Hispanization.88 As a result, mixed-race children were often taken from their indigenous mothers and either placed in convents or sent back to Spain.89 However, outside the elites, Spanish men preferred concubinage with non-European women to marriage, and admonitions from the authorities did little to change their minds. Such families bore a closer resemblance to many families on the Iberian peninsula, where consensual non-marital relationships were common, and male mobility more often led to female-headed households and serial monogamy than to the ideal patriarchal family.90

The Portuguese also initially encouraged interracial relationships, largely as a means to populate Brazil; however, with few secular or ecclesiastical structures to monitor behaviour, these relationships were not usually formalized and did not necessarily lead to Europeanization.91 Similarly, French policy originally encouraged intermarriage to promote conversion and francisation, and to prevent French men from adopting native ways. Yet, because coureurs de bois (‘woodsmen’) became integrated into the tribes of their wives rather than the other way around, these marriages often frustrated French officials. Even as official opposition to intermarriage grew, marriages between coureurs de bois and native women continued, as neither group was willing to give up the economic benefits that such relationships provided.92

87 Hämäläinen, Comanche empire, pp. 246 ff.
91 Metcalf, Go-betweens, pp. 85, 96.
In British America, early conflict with native peoples made interracial marriages in New England almost unthinkable, and some colonies even banned the practice.\textsuperscript{93} However, such proscriptions did not prevent English men, often on the frontiers of settlement, from marrying Indian women in order to gain access to the goods and services of native society, as well as greater security, or from engaging in an array of marriage-like relationships with them.\textsuperscript{94}

At times, differences in gender expectations mitigated the desirability of interracial marriages from the native woman’s perspective. Although European men believed that they were the heads of their households, native women sometimes had other views of parental authority. For instance, matrilineal native cultures expected wives and their families to exert authority over children. Late in the eighteenth century, Benjamin Hawkins complained that Creek women ‘were in the habit of assuming and exercising complete rule, such as it was, over their children, and not attending to the advice of their white husbands’.\textsuperscript{95} In fact, European men’s assumption of patriarchal power sometimes made them unattractive potential spouses to native women.\textsuperscript{96} Similarly, European men came to prefer Indian women who had already been Europeanized.\textsuperscript{97}

Over time, all the imperial powers came to agree that intermarriage was a hindrance to the imposition of European patriarchy, and that the migration of European women was the best way to establish European patriarchal families in the Americas. As early as Columbus’ third voyage, the Spanish crown expressed its desire for women to accompany their husbands in the settlement of the Caribbean. Even before it understood the scope of its American involvement, the crown knew that women’s reproductive abilities were central to the success of any colonization and that their presence would help tame new lands filled with unruly men, both European and indigenous.\textsuperscript{98} The same was true in British North America, where the Virginia Company acknowledged the importance of families to a productive settlement as early as 1619.\textsuperscript{99} Even so, European men in the Americas were not very good at forming strong patriarchal households. Not only were they not necessarily the norm in Europe, but weak ecclesiastical and political structures, reliance on native

\begin{itemize}
\item Perdue, ‘Race and culture’, p. 706.
\item Barr, ‘From captives to slaves’, p. 36.
\end{itemize}
women for survival, and the mobility of European men all undermined their formation in the Americas.

It was not only European men and indigenous women who resisted forming patriarchal households. Female European migrants, mostly from the middle and lower classes, also often failed to acquiesce to the expectations of male authorities. At times, in fact, the gap between gender ideology and individual sexual behaviour was greater in European creole society in the Americas than it was in Europe. Although puritan morality kept premarital conceptions low in New England, rates were considerably higher in the Chesapeake and New Orleans, while, in the English West Indies, the shortage of Anglican clergy often led to concubinage. In Spanish and Portuguese America, illegitimacy and concubinage were far more common than on the Iberian peninsula. At one point, in Mexico City, illegitimate births among white women reached 37%.

In response, authorities attempted to enforce stricter sexual and gender expectations. The Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions regulated sexual activity by pursuing bigamists, fornicators, and men who had sex with other men. They were also concerned with asserting control over women whose spiritual activities seemed to challenge patriarchal control, especially non-white women who practised witchcraft or engaged in mystical activities. Protestant communities also attempted to enforce their ideas about sexuality and patriarchy. However, such interventions were sporadic, and did little to constrain the sexual activities of white creole women.

The patriarchal household was further challenged by the male mobility and mortality that often left women in charge of households and estates. By the end of the colonial period,


in some parts of Spanish and Portuguese America, more than one-third of households were headed by women and, in many areas, white women were as likely to be heads of households as women of colour (or even more likely). Female-headed households were also common in English cities such as Philadelphia and Boston, and in French New Orleans.\textsuperscript{105} Patriarchal households might have been the ideal, but they were not the norm anywhere in the Americas.

In West Africa, European patriarchy, like European power more generally, never gained much of a foothold. However, the slave trade did present gendered challenges to West African women and their families, since it created skewed sex ratios among those who remained. In response, women took on increased burdens, and polygyny may have increased.\textsuperscript{106} In Guinea Bissau, women headed powerful matriclans in which they practised ‘strategic engagement’, using Portuguese and African alliances to advance their own interests and those of their families.\textsuperscript{107} Often, African kinship structures shaped the opportunities open to mixed-race children: the matrilineal descent of the Akan, for example, meant that the children born to intermarried couples in Elmina could rely on maternal kin, while children born to women from patrilineal groups faced greater challenges.\textsuperscript{108} On the Slave Coast, an ‘Atlantic’ community emerged as a result of marriages between Europeans, white Brazilians, and former Brazilian slaves on the one hand, and elite women from the Slave Coast ports on the other.\textsuperscript{109} With the expansion of the slave trade, African women found mechanisms to engage their new social and economic circumstances that protected their families and their status in their communities.

African slavery in the Americas created a different series of conflicts over patriarchal authority. European and white creole men’s relations with slave women may have reflected patriarchal authority, but they did not replicate European expectations about marriage and sexuality. As was the case with indigenous women, the rape of enslaved women by European


men—masters and others—enacted hierarchies of both gender and race. Evidence from throughout the Americas demonstrates that white men assumed the sexual availability of slave women.\textsuperscript{110} The Jamaican Thomas Thistlewood’s diary recorded 3,852 sexual encounters with 138 different women during the 37 years he was in Jamaica; he considered two of those women his wives, one for 33 years.\textsuperscript{111} Neither his sexual exploitation nor his long-term slave concubines are unique. In 1736, the \textit{South Carolina Gazette} suggested that bachelors were waiting for the next shipment of slaves because of the sexual stamina of African women.\textsuperscript{112} European men’s sexual access to African women signified the convergence of masculine privilege and racial power.

Although rape re-inscribed the power of men over women and masters over slaves, concubinage could be a source of individual power, wealth, and sometimes freedom for enslaved women or their children. Phibbah, Thistlewood’s ‘wife’, acted as a mediator between him and his slaves, but also used her position to benefit her family. Thistlewood purchased her freedom at his death, and gave her two slaves and a plot of land. Slave women across the Americas similarly turned their relationships with white men to their advantage.\textsuperscript{113} Enslaved women in Spanish America used the legal system to complain of rapes by masters and to press for their rights to marry.\textsuperscript{114} The French \textit{Code noir} provided for the manumission of women who bore children to free men, as well as freedom for their children.\textsuperscript{115} Taking advantage of such opportunities did not mitigate the trauma of enslavement, but it gave some slave women agency in the creation and control of their families.

Male slaves often urged owners to bring more female slaves to plantations, as, without partners, African men could neither have relationships nor procreate, particularly emasculating those who came from polygynous societies.\textsuperscript{116} Moreover, they could not exert the kind of authority over women that was expected in both European and African patriarchal traditions.\textsuperscript{117}


\textsuperscript{117} Burnard, \textit{Mastery}, pp. 203–4.
As early as 1650, male Barbadian slaves would not work effectively without wives, and on one Brazilian sugar plantation, the Benedictine owners purchased female slaves to accommodate the demands of their male slaves. By the eighteenth century, sex ratios on plantations were increasingly balanced. In the French Caribbean, the number of women on plantations was often equal to that of men, and in some cases there were more adult slave women than men. In colonial Latin America, female slaves outnumbered men in cities, and natural increase led to more balanced ratios in some areas. By the early nineteenth century, women outnumbered men on Barbados, St Kitts, and Nevis, while in Jamaica and St Vincent the numbers were roughly equal. Only on Trinidad and Demerara, frontier colonies that had only recently begun sugar production, was there a skewed sex ratio in favour of men.

Even with women present, the formation of European-style families was not necessarily a priority. Although Catholic sensibilities and Iberian law favoured the creation of slave families, the low cost of slaves gave planters no incentive to promote marriage. Nor were all slaves eager for marriage. In Guadeloupe, one woman refused to marry because ‘I am miserable enough as it is without having to bring children into this world to be more miserable.’ In most areas, legal marriages were relatively rare, and when stable family units were created, they might follow African rather than Christian models: Thomas Thistlewood’s slave Lincoln’s household consisted of his wife, Sukey, his partner, Abba, and her five children (three of whom were his); Lincoln also had a partner on a neighbouring estate who bore him a child. Outside mainland North America, birth rates were low and, for the most part, slave populations did not reproduce themselves. Thus, multiple factors connected to slavery mitigated against the formation of patriarchal families among slaves.

The Atlantic world also created relationships between Africans – enslaved and free – and Indians that circumvented European influence. In eighteenth-century Virginia, local officials complained about free blacks living among the Ginkaskin Indians, and worried about the corruption of pure Indian ancestry. In Louisiana, Indian–African couples created networks that encouraged other slaves to run away. In Spanish Florida, African–Native

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American couples found ready homes both in indigenous communities and among other runaway slaves. In central Mexico, relationships between Africans and Indians created a multiracial society that constantly subverted Spanish attempts to distinguish between racial and ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{128}

**Conclusion**

European assumptions about family and sexuality did not go uncontested in Europe, so it is not surprising that patriarchal expectations were ignored or thwarted elsewhere. The creation of the Atlantic world did not involve the imposition of European norms on non-Europeans, but rather the creation of a wide range of familial and sexual relationships that reflected the interplay of all of the circum-Atlantic gender cultures. Moreover, those relationships were the product not only of cross-cultural interactions but also of the priorities and tensions within each of the Atlantic societies. Thus, a focus on gender allows us to move away from a simplistic model of European dominance towards a more sophisticated and inclusive theoretical framework for Atlantic history.

Prospero, it turns out, could set off storms or calm the seas, but he could not control Miranda. Similarly, the early modern Atlantic was not merely a stage for contests among European empires. A trans-imperial analysis reminds us that the military, political, and mercantile success of Europeans in the Atlantic was not accompanied by cultural conquest. As Europeans came into contact with non-European peoples, they may have represented their interactions through the language of prescriptive codes, but those codes did not define behaviour; the family structures and gender norms of Native American and African peoples proved to be remarkably resilient. Amid the violence of the conquest and enslavement, interactions among people across the Atlantic created a dynamic of ideology and practice in which European expectations of gender and family were contested, negotiated, and ignored by Native Americans, Africans, and even European settlers. This dialectic ultimately limited the influence of European patriarchy and contributed to the creation of the rich cultural tapestry of the Atlantic world.

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