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The Slaves Worked, and so do we: So weh the difference? Reflections on Labor and Freedom in Post-Emancipation Jamaica

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Abstract

This paper will suggest that perhaps the overarching ideological framework for colonial policy makers about emancipation was that of free labor. Within this frame British colonial policy attempted to construct conceptions of a black subject that would be shaped primarily by missionary education. Both projects, policy framework of free labor and the creation of what has been called "Christian Black" subjects were profoundly contested by the ex-slaves. Using an 1860 *New York Times* article by W. G. Sewell, the paper will argue that the Jamaican slaves operating in different circumstances from the Trinidadian and Barbadian ex-slaves began to carve out a different conception of what free labor meant. This alternative conception was embedded in the understanding that the "result of labor belonged by right to the laborer." Conventional historical writings on Jamaican and the emancipation experiment have noticed this and called this particular conception of the ex-slave an attempt to create peasant

economies. While at the level of formal political economy this may be so the paper will argue that what was at stake was a different notion of free labor, one generated by the experience of racial plantation slavery.

The paper will also argue that emancipation was not freedom and that the emancipation act created the grounds for the ex-slaves to generate practices of freedom. These included the construction of an alternative black Jamaican subjectivity rooted in the development of Afro-Jamaican Christian practices like Mayalism. Finally the paper will suggest that in thinking about questions of slave freedom in Jamaica it may help to reformulate liberal repertoires about freedom as the primary historical narrative about freedom in the 19th century.