

VIOLENT WOMEN, VIOLENT CULTURE:
GENDER AND RESISTANCE
IN THE WPA NARRATIVES

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council
of Texas State University-San Marcos
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

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San Marcos, Texas
May 2004

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2004

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to those voices of the 1930s that had the courage to speak.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my parents for supporting me throughout this task, and allowing me the time and resources to accomplish my goals. I would also like to express my thanks to friends and family for pushing me to complete this endeavor.

I am extremely thankful to the members of my thesis committee. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Brennan who helped me develop the founding ideas of my thesis and helped me to understand research methodology. My deep appreciation goes to Dr. Watson who not only offered guidance throughout the writing of my thesis, but readily gave invaluable advice on the meaning of being a graduate student, and the need for diligence in academic work. Finally, I am most thankful to Dr. Bynum, my primary thesis advisor, who helped turn a set of disconnected ideas into a working and realistic thesis topic.

This manuscript was submitted on April 9th, 2004.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

WPA Slave Narrative Project, Alabama Narratives	WPAAL
WPA Slave Narrative Project, Arkansas Narratives	WPAAR
WPA Slave Narrative Project, Florida Narratives	WPAFL
WPA Slave Narrative Project, Georgia Narratives	WPAGA
WPA Slave Narrative Project, Indiana Narratives	WPAIN
WPA Slave Narrative Project, Kentucky Narratives	WPAKY
WPA Slave Narrative Project, Maryland Narratives	WPAMD
WPA Slave Narrative Project, Mississippi Narratives	WPAMS
WPA Slave Narrative Project, Missouri Narratives	WPAMO
WPA Slave Narrative Project, North Carolina Narratives	WPANC
WPA Slave Narrative Project, Oklahoma Narratives	WPAOK
WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives	WPASC
WPA Slave Narrative Project, Tennessee Narratives	WPATN
WPA Slave Narrative Project, Texas Narratives	WPATX
WPA Slave Narrative Project, Virginia Narratives	WPAVA

INTRODUCTION

A HISTORY OF SLAVERY AND RESISTANCE

From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century blacks from various regions of Africa arrived in the Western Hemisphere. For the overwhelming majority the purpose of their forced migration was simple—to serve as slaves.¹ While slave labor was certainly not unknown in the history of mankind, the racially-based system instituted in the Americas differed in many ways from its Old World counterpart. But Old and New World slavery paralleled one another as well. One of their similarities was resistance by slaves to the institution of bondage.²

This work focuses in particular on bondswomen's violent resistance to slavery as illustrated in oral interviews of former slaves conducted under the direction of the Federal Writer's Project between 1936 and 1938.³ Research in these slave records reveals that resistance to slavery continually occurred in the antebellum South and during the Civil War. Former slaves reported instances of violent resistance by themselves or by others. Focusing on bondswomen illustrates that to fully understand and appreciate resistance

¹ Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Trade, 1440-1870* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1997). Thomas records the shift of slavery from a universal exercise to one that begins to focus primarily on Africans by the 15th century.

² In this work bondage and slavery will be synonymous, hence bondswoman and slave woman.

³ Pioneering modern work on the WPA Slave Narratives was done in the late 1970s by historian Paul D. Escott. Through a careful examination of the existing narratives, Escott found numerous acts of resistance on the part of both bondsmen and bondswomen, refuting earlier notions that the oral interviews were disadvantageous to slave studies. See the attached addendum for a more detailed history of the narratives and Escott

one must analyze the impact of gender on slavery's various forms. To begin this process, we must first review the historiography of United States slavery.

Resistance was as much a part of United States slavery as any other facet of the institution. But its relevance was underestimated for years by inaccurate portrayals of slavery and a misunderstanding or ignoring of the totality of the slave record. Studies of antebellum slavery from the early twentieth century were influenced by the triumph of the New South in the wake of the defeat of Reconstruction. Historians were polarized both regionally and politically, with northerners generally portraying antebellum slavery as backwards while Southerners painted a picture of paternalism. Many works on slavery by Southern white authors were little more than apologia that sought to deny any harsh or oppressive elements of the institution of slavery.

As late as the 1930s historian Frank Owsley depicted slavery as a benign system that operated on the periphery of society. "Slavery," he wrote, "was part of the agrarian system, but only one element and not an essential one."⁴ Owsley was only following in a then well-established Southern historical tradition. In 1918 Southern historian Ulrich B. Phillips had published the classic apology for Old South slavery. Intended to be a full treatise on Southern slavery, his work *American Negro Slavery* presented the issue only from the perspective of the slave owner and not the slave. Phillips portrayed plantation life as filled with generally kind masters and a few abnormally cruel overlords. In fact,

⁴ Frank L. Owsley, "The Irrepressible Conflict," in *Twelve Southerners I'll Take My Stand The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1930), 73. Twelve Southern writers of the period set about to state unequivocally what they felt was the truth about antebellum history and the South.

Phillips dedicated a significant portion of his work to showing why it was not economically feasible for masters to mistreat their own property.⁵

Phillips continued this line of argument in his 1929 essay, “The Central Theme of Southern History.”⁶ Again portraying the antebellum South from the planters’ perspectives, Phillips relegated slaves to the periphery: mere back drops upon a white canvas. Slavery’s importance in Southern history was central according to Phillips, but only in as much as it affected whites in the maintenance of their wealth and domination. In fact Phillips asserted that slavery came into being primarily as a means by which whites could control problematic blacks. Slavery, he wrote, “arose as soon as the Negroes became numerous enough to create a problem of race control in the interest of orderly government and the maintenance of Caucasian civilization.”⁷ The greatest victim of this sort of historical revision would ironically be the most pivotal figure of antebellum society, the slave.

At the same time that slavery was depicted as free from brutality, slaves themselves were portrayed in unflattering stereotypes. The actual lives of the enslaved were ignored completely, replaced with descriptions of malevolent subversives forced onto the South by European slavers and presenting a peril to white civilization. Africans, Phillips wrote, were “impulsive and inconstant, sociable and amorous, voluble, dilatory, and negligent, but robust, amiable, obedient and contented, they have been the world’s

⁵ Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1918), 382-386. Phillips was a student of the Dunning School, named for Professor William A. Dunning of Columbia. A Southern apologist, Dunning argued that Radical Republicans of the Reconstruction Era were largely responsible for racial conflicts in the South. See also Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan Carl, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

⁶ Ulrich B. Phillips, “Central Theme of Southern History,” *The American Historical Review*, 34 (October 1928 to July 1929): 30-43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

premium slaves.”⁸ Frank Owsley followed by describing Southern blacks as “former slaves, some of whom could still remember the taste of human flesh and the bulk of them hardly three generations removed from cannibalism.”⁹ According to such early writers, blacks were inherently inept and thus slaves were stupid and docile. They concluded that Africans, once taken from what they deemed a savage jungle life, were by nature a submissive race destined for all of history to serve as slaves for white masters.¹⁰

The formula and reasoning thus was simple. If slavery as an institution was benign and civilizing rather than oppressive and dehumanizing, there was essentially no need for resistance. Slaves were either untamed savages from a jungle land, or docile and infantile beings. Either by force or through contentment, those enslaved had supposedly accepted their condition without complaint. Any resistance to slavery could be dismissed as an aberration—the peculiar act of a bad slave, either insane or corrupted by outside elements.¹¹ Such explanations were offered even after slavery, when white Radical Republicans like Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner were blamed for instigating many racial conflicts of the Reconstruction era.¹² As ever, blacks were portrayed as dull-witted brutes, spurred into action only by Northern Republicans and their scalawag allies. Yet not all observers of history accepted this version of slavery. As early as 1903 African-American historian W.E.B. DuBois countered the standard benign portrayal of the peculiar institution. Looking at slavery from the perspective of the slaves, DuBois

⁸ Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 8.

⁹ Owsley, “Irrepressible Conflict,” 62.

¹⁰ Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 264-67.

¹¹ Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975), 129-45 Oates discussed in depth the legacy of the Nat Turner revolt of 1831 in which Southern writers, both past and present, attempted to cast major slave revolts as either the result of insanity or an abolitionist conspiracy.

¹² Owsley, “The Irrepressible Conflict,” 62.

tackled numerous issues of race and class.¹³ He not only challenged New South orthodoxy by proclaiming that slavery was the cause of the Civil War, he also categorized slavery as an oppressive, brutal, and dehumanizing institution that had robbed blacks of their dignity.¹⁴ Because DuBois challenged mainstream thought, he and others who wrote in a similar vein were either attacked or ignored by the mainstream academic world.

Disdain for black scholars' perspectives on race and class was regularly displayed in published book reviews from this era. In a 1927 review, Jerome Dowd described black historian Carter G. Woodson's work, *The Negro In Our History*, as having "a bias in favor of the radical type of Negroes in discussing all racial questions."¹⁵ In contrast, Avery O. Craven gave positive acclaim to Ulrich B. Phillips' *Florida Plantation Records from the Papers of George Noble Jones*, a benign account of slavery. Of Phillip's work, Craven stated that "the overseer rightly holds the center of the stage."¹⁶ Craven had no problem with Phillips' reliance on "overseers' reports, plantation journals, and miscellaneous documents such as slave lists, contracts, inventories, etc."¹⁷ Thus in mainstream academia the words of slave masters and other whites were the only relevant voices of the slave era. Historians created a slave past devoid of the slave's perspective, devoid of oppression, and thus by default, devoid of any need to examine slaves' resistance. Disobedient or subversive slaves were anomalies; their behavior an aberration.

¹³ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Putnam Penguin, 1903), 45-50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54-78. DuBois was one of several blacks of the era who dissented with the New South version of slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction. See also John R. Lynch, *Some Historical Errors of James Ford Rhodes*. (Boston: The Cornhill Publishing Co., 1922), Alrutheus A. Taylor, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia* (Lancaster Press: Lancaster, 1926).

¹⁵ Jerome Dowd, Review of *The Negro In Our History*, by Carter G. Woodson. In *American Historical Review*, (October 1927): 192.

¹⁶ Avery O. Craven, Review of *Florida Plantation Records from the Papers of George Noble*, by Ulrich B. Phillips. In *American Historical Review*, (October 1927): 203.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The 1940s through 1950s brought shifts in the mainstream approach to slavery. A minority of academia abandoned the apologist approach to antebellum history, and also began seeking out the voices of slaves. Though Clement Eaton by no means offered a thorough revision of slavery and race in the antebellum period, his 1942 essay “Mob Violence in the Old South” marked a shift in the historiography. In critiquing the race relations of his era, he linked mob violence and lynching to the antebellum period. Yet, Eaton’s attempt to portray common whites as the chief perpetrators of racism, thus linking the lower class to racism, drew back on established notions of the benevolent master. “The slave-owning class in the South,” Eaton wrote, “did not share the poor whites’ hatred of the Negro.”¹⁸

In 1954 historian Kenneth Stampp began to examine slavery more critically, and to study slave life, religion and culture.¹⁹ Stampp described slavery as a method of exploiting labor, and showed how slaves were treated, how they resisted, how they related to their masters and many aspects of their daily lives. In 1959 historian Stanley Elkins offered no apologies for slavery, portraying it as an oppressive and brutal system, and moving far away from Owsley, Phillips and past historians. Yet Elkins’s analysis of the psychological personality of the slave class, mainly male slaves, created controversy. In Elkins’s view the master class held absolute power in the slave system, making slaves absolutely dependent upon them. This dependence, Elkins concluded, created a slave class that remained in a perpetual state of infancy.²⁰ The end result was a docile, lazy and

¹⁸ Clement Eaton, “Mob Violence in the Old South,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 24 (December 1942): 367.

¹⁹ Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Random House, 1956)

²⁰ Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 130.

irresponsible slave class that was analogous to the Southern stereotype of Sambo. Thus Elkins asserted that Southern depictions of slaves were not merely caricatures, but a truthful representation of what antebellum society had created: a subservient laborer who was the product of indoctrination and conditioning. Elkins's theories came under criticism as overly dependent on the perspective of the master class in Southern society. His reliance on accounts of the master class, and his failure to seek out slaves' words and perspectives resulted in the distorted perception that slaves' individual personalities had been swept away by Nazi-like conditions.²¹

By the 1960s and 1970s, the Civil Rights and Black Protest Movements were affecting even academic circles. A resurgence in the study of slavery brought new methods and analysis of the institution and its participants. Namely, historians began to look to slaves themselves as a window into the antebellum period rather than relying solely on the perspective of the dominant society. Like Phillips, historian Eugene Genovese stressed the important impact of slavery on the development of Southern society. Genovese, however, put the slave institution at the epicenter of his work, stating that "slavery gave the South a social system and a civilization with a distinct class structure, political community, economy, ideology, and set of psychological patterns."²²

Despite this agreement with Phillips, Genovese's work refuted the work of apologists for slavery. Rather than blame slaves' low production levels on African inferiority, Genovese asserted that blacks came from societies complete with complex agricultural, political, and cultural systems. He blamed the brutality of slavery for its low

²¹ Elkins's misinterpretation of the psychological mind of the slave has been the subject of numerous criticisms. See also Robert Douglas, "Myth or Truth: A White and Black View of Slavery," *Journal of Black Studies* 19, no. 3 (1989): 343-360.

²² Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (New York: Random House, 1965), 3.

productivity, taking into account that low production itself may have been a form of resistance.²³ A decade later in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Genovese took a more thorough look at slave life, becoming one of the first mainstream historians to utilize the extensive slave narratives. His attempt to find a group consciousness among slaves that resulted from a blending of African with American culture harkened back to DuBois's ideas about a black double consciousness.²⁴ At the same time, Genovese's "organic society," emphasized a symbiotic and paternalistic relationship between master and slave, and would come under criticism as a theory that once again refused to consider the lives of slaves outside the boundaries of their masters' world.²⁵

Whatever the criticisms of Genovese, his method of looking at slavery represented a dramatic methodological transformation. The days of Ulrich B. Phillips and Frank Owsley were gone. No longer was the history of slavery or the South being written from an apologist point of view. No longer was slavery seen as either benign or peripheral to the American experience. Most importantly, no longer did slave masters speak solely for the history of slavery and the South. Once slavery was recognized as an oppressive and dehumanizing institution, the voices of slaves themselves were sought in written and oral narratives. In the late 1970s historian Paul D. Escott made a critical examination of the WPA ex-slave narratives to gather insight on the nature of antebellum slavery.²⁶ Listening to the voices of former slaves in turn brought the topic of slave resistance into the foreground.

²³ Ibid., 70-84.

²⁴ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 18-20.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

However incomplete the historical record on slavery, with its witnesses and its participants, it speaks volumes on the fallacy of ascribing a puerile and fatalistic nature to the slave. Many historians have theorized that the exploitative nature of slavery necessitated slaves' resistance. "Struggle is the core of history. . . .," Gary Okihiro states, "the principal dialectic in that struggle is between oppression and exploitation, on the one hand, and resistance on the other. Resistance thus constitutes a fundamental theme of history."²⁷

Thus it became understood that slavery, defined as an oppressive system, inherently generated resistance. Historians shifted not only to studying slavery as an institution, but as an active force in history that shaped the lives of its victims and perpetrators, and the overall society in which they lived. Government documents, slave master accounts, plantation records and eventually the narratives of slaves themselves illustrated that the historical record was not silent, but replete with evidence of acts of resistance.

Early African-American scholars like DuBois and Woodson recognized slaves' resistance as reactions to their experiences of exploitation and oppression. But for the most part, these scholars' works were ignored or heavily criticized by academic contemporaries.²⁸ Vindication would come later as more mainstream historians agreed that slavery was an oppressive institution, and found that resistance to it was not an aberration but rather a normal reaction.

As early as 1938, historian Joseph Carroll questioned not only the popular myths about benign slavery, but the image of the docile and subservient slave:

²⁷ Gary Y. Okihiro, ed., *In Resistance. Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 1.

²⁸ Dowd, Review of *Negro in Our History* by Woodson. 192.

I have long since questioned the popular theories in regard to Slavery and the character of the Negro. . . . the paternal nature of slavery and the contentedness of the Negro under the system have been overstated. . . . the subject of Negro Slavery Insurrections has been an almost neglected phase of American history.²⁹

To Carroll, to deny the existence of slave insurrections was to deny the humanity of the slaves.

In reexamining America's slave history during the 1940s, historian Herbert Aptheker criticized works that presented the black response to slavery as one of passivity and docility as lacking merit and overall truthfulness. "The evidence, on the contrary, points to the conclusion that discontent and rebelliousness were not only exceedingly common," wrote Aptheker, "but, indeed, characteristic of American Negro slaves."³⁰

Kenneth Stampp agreed; during the 1950s he dismantled and deconstructed established Southern ideas about the docility of the slave, in the process reshaping Southern history.³¹

By the 1970s, as methodology shifted towards looking at the words of the slaves themselves, historians like Eugene Genovese also challenged the myth of the docile slave. Applying Marxist theoretical concepts to the antebellum South, Genovese cast slaves as a type of proletariat that constantly tested slavery's boundaries and helped to shape the master-slave relationship to their own benefit through various methods of

²⁹ Joseph Carroll, *Slave Insurrections in the United States 1800-1865* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1938), 5. Carroll not only documented evidence of revolts and resistance to slavery, but also framed his work in the form of a critique of the then state of Southern history as well as common racially-charged academic theories regarding blacks. The conclusion of his book in fact stressed that blacks were never satisfied with slavery and repeatedly reacted against it. He used this to argue for the humanity of slaves, highlighting complex and intricate insurrection plots as evidence of a black capacity for leadership.

³⁰ Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 374

³¹ Stampp. *The Peculiar Institution*

resistance. Genovese's view of slaves working within the system, however, rather than attempting to dismantle it, would put him at odds with Aptheker.³²

Due in part to the work of Carroll and Aptheker, slave resistance was equated with rebellions and revolts. In order to dismantle images of the docile slave so enshrined in Southern history by earlier writers, Carroll and Aptheker focused on documenting major slave revolts in North America. They included more geographically-limited insurrections, such as that of Nat Turner, and large scale plots that never reached fruition such as those led by Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey. Eugene Genovese would do much the same, tracking the effects of black slave revolts on the American historical map.³³

Yet, while revolts were a significant aspect of the history of slavery, they were not the only forms of resistance. Enslaved men and women reacted against servitude through a variety of means. Slave resistance could take the form of a singular violent act against one's oppressor. This act could be as daring as verbally or physically assaulting a white master. These assaults could at times be lethal. Violence could also be carried out against the instruments or property of the slave regime, which commonly included the breaking of tools and killing of livestock. Even more common were non-violent acts of resistance, which included feigning illness to slow down labor or production, stealing plantation

³² Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 587-660. Genovese's theory proposed that most slaves worked within the boundaries of the system to gain privileges but did not attempt to do away with the system itself. He attributed this to what he called an "organic" slave society, where white masters and their slaves shared a symbiotic relationship. Aptheker strongly disagreed, contending that acts of slave rebellions and resistance were each attempts to subvert and do away with the slave system rather than merely to gain special individual or collective favors.

³³ Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana University Press, 1979). Genovese asserts that the slave revolts of North America helped shape many US ideas of freedom, federalism and more.

property, running away, retaining one's African culture, or breaking slave codes and laws.³⁴

In essence slave resistance was varied and widely encompassing. Thus the term "resistance," when used in regard to slavery, refers to the totality of methods used by the enslaved to resist, to whatever degree, their enslavement, oppression, and dehumanization. Violent resistance, however, is the subject of this study. It includes those slaves who participated in or assisted acts of violent resistance, whether as an individual or as part of a group.³⁵

This study also takes a gendered approach to slave resistance. Largely because of the Civil Rights and Black Protest Movements of the 1960s, both race and class became historical paradigms through which US slavery could be analyzed. No longer was the history and voice of American slavery primarily that of the white slave owning population. No longer were the victims of the slave institution relegated to the position of bystanders rather than historical participators. Through analysis of both race and class the lives of the slaves themselves were examined. History was viewed through the lenses of the oppressed and thus brought resistance into focus. But just as class and race were earlier ignored as categories of historical analysis, so also has gender, until recently, been largely ignored by US historians in regard to slavery.

³⁴ For further understanding of the varied methods of slave resistance in slave life see Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974), Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower. A History of Black America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), John Blassingame, *The Slave Community Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), Michael Mullin, *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

³⁵ "Resistance as a concept can be used to apply to slave behavior that cannot be equated with cooperation to slavery," state David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, *More than Chattel Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 220.

That is not to say that the inclusion of gender in the examination of slavery was completely absent. In 1903 DuBois wrote about the often unspoken and controversial issue of sexual exploitation of black slave women.³⁶ Numerous other writers discussed women as part of the overall examination on slavery. But gender-specific approaches were rare. The resurgence of the study of slavery in the 1960s and 1970s would lead to greater investigation into the lives of black women of the Old South, both slave and free. Gender-specific approaches would become more prevalent among historians over the next two decades.

In 1985 Deborah Gray White used the narratives and other slave accounts to piece together the lives of enslaved black women and to deconstruct traditional myths of Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire.³⁷ In 1988 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese delved into the plantation household itself to examine the lives and interaction of black and white women. In 1991 Melton A. McLaurin's *Celia: A Slave* examined sexual abuse and antebellum law in the case study of a nineteen-year-old slave woman convicted in the murder of her master. In 1992 Victoria Bynum examined the impact of slave society on both black and white women, and included examples of female slaves' resistance. In 1997 Kimberly S. Hanger analyzed how slave society shaped the lives of free black women in colonial New Orleans.³⁸ Despite these works, our understanding of slave women's resistance remains incomplete. In large part, this is because of the manner in which resistance is defined, studied, and applied in regard to female enslavement.

³⁶ DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45-50.

³⁷ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985). Jezebel, Sapphire and Mammy were common US stereotypes of black slave women. Jezebel was a sexually promiscuous and deviant black woman. Sapphire was the impudent and sharp-tongued emasculating black woman. And Mammy was the sexless, benevolent, content and doting mother figure.

³⁸ See also Patricia Morton. *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

As shown, most works on slave resistance in the US focused greatly on large-scale slave insurrections led by male slaves. Women were secondary participants, if examined at all. In his work on slave revolts, Aptheker diligently attempted to document any evidence of female participation. When he could not find it, he nevertheless insisted that women must by simple human nature have been involved.³⁹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out that Aptheker's method, though admirable, was inherently flawed because he did not approach slavery from a gender-specific paradigm.⁴⁰ Using gender as a category of analysis, rather than simply including women, is a recent phenomenon. Pioneered by feminist scholars, gender analysis offers a new disciplinary paradigm similar to that of class and race.⁴¹ Together, the three disciplinary perspectives provide a more thorough historical analysis of slave resistance.⁴²

As Fox-Genovese argues, "It is impossible to discuss the specific roles of women in the general struggle of Afro-American slaves without taking account of male and female roles—gender roles—among the slaves."⁴³ In similar fashion, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn stresses that the African dimension of slave revolts was directly connected to black

³⁹ Aptheker quoted in "Strategies and Forms of Resistance: Focus on Slave Women in the United States" by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in *In Resistance Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History*, ed. by Gary Y. Okilhiro (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 143.

⁴⁰ Fox-Genovese, "Strategies and Forms of Resistance," 144-45. Fox-Genovese points out that Aptheker's works were primarily about revolts, a greatly male dominated enterprise, and not about resistance where women played larger roles.

⁴¹ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in Scott, J. W., *Gender and the Politics of History*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 28-50. According to Scott, the use of the word gender appeared among American feminists stressing fundamentally social distinctiveness with regards to sex. Gender was used in order to reject notions of biological determinism often associated with the words sex or sexual differences.

⁴² Ibid. Scott contends that studying class, race and gender provides the historian with an inclusive analysis of the oppressed and an understanding of the multi-faceted dynamics of power inequality.

⁴³ Fox-Genovese, "Strategies and Forms of Resistance," 145.

women's resistance and thus requires an examination of gender.⁴⁴ Barbara Bush also argues for a gender-specific approach to slave resistance stating that, "women had a vital role to play in sustaining not only African-derived cultural practices but also a more general spirit of resistance that enabled slaves to survive slavery."⁴⁵ Clearly, the key reason that women were marginalized in earlier works on slave resistance was because women's specific forms of resistance were not understood by historians untrained in gender analysis.

Fox-Genovese points out that even male-led slave revolts cannot be viewed in a vacuum. She contends that any examination of slave revolts remains incomplete if historians fail to recognize that steady acts of resistance occurred on a daily basis. "Explicit political and military revolts," she writes, "cannot be understood in isolation from the backdrop of steady resistance that could, at any moment, be both collective and violent."⁴⁶ Thus Fox-Genovese locates outright rebellion in daily forms of slave resistance on the part of the general slave population, in which women played no small part. It was these everyday actions of resistance that helped to inspire, shape, and develop large-scale insurrections against the slave regime. To ignore daily resistance in favor of only studying large scale revolts leaves the examination of slavery, and even the revolts themselves, incomplete. Thus it stands that to minimize or fail to thoroughly investigate bondswoman's roles with regard to slave resistance leaves the study of slavery fragmented, disconnected, and less understood in its holistic capacity.

⁴⁴ Rosayln Terborg-Penn, "Black Women in Resistance: A Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *In Resistance. Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History*, ed. by Gary Y. Okihiro (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 188-90.

⁴⁵ Barbara Bush, "'The Family Tree is Not Cut': Women and Cultural Resistance in Slave Family Life in the British Caribbean," in *In Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History*, ed. by Gary Y. Okihiro (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 127.

⁴⁶ Fox-Genovese, "Strategies and Forms of Resistance," 145.

Taking a gendered approach to slave resistance requires that one look at resistance differently. To this end some historians proposed that two main factors be considered when studying women and slave resistance: first, that bondswomen faced issues that were rarely or never faced by their male counterparts, and second, that bondswomen resisted slavery in gender-specific ways. Sexual harassment and rape were important examples of women's issues. While sexual abuse of men or boys was not unknown during slavery, sexual exploitation of females was far more commonplace.⁴⁷ Enslaved girls and women confronted the daily possibility of rape from both enslaved and free men. In regard to white men, particularly their owners, black women were essentially powerless. Thus, many resisted through blatant acts of resistance, or through more subtle means. Another issue unique to slave women was that of sexual reproduction. Owners sought to strictly regulate when and with whom slave women would reproduce by attempting to control their very bodies. Resistance to this by slave women took various forms; some of them, such as infanticide, were quite drastic.

This thesis does not generalize about the lives of the majority of slave women; nor does it assume that the oral accounts of individual slave women can speak for all slave women. The WPA narratives represent less than 2 percent of all ex-slaves alive at the time. While these oral interviews are valuable, they are not representative of the majority of bondswomen or the totality of Southern slavery. In fact the interviewees are mostly limited to discussing the waning era of antebellum society and the Civil War era. Thus,

⁴⁷ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 36-39 See also White, *Ar'n't I a Woman* (1985). White discusses the convergence of sexuality and race in antebellum Southern society and its impact on perceptions of black women See also Bennet, *Before the Mayflower* (1993), 297-325. Bennet takes a strong stance on sexual exploitation of black women, calling all such encounters between slave females and white males *de facto* rape See also Gaspar and Hine, *More than Chattel* (1996), 148, 158-59 and Fox-Genovese, "Strategies and Forms of Resistance," 145.

this study is limited by the scope of its research and in its ability to draw generalized conclusions in regard to physical resistance and gender.⁴⁸

The study does not address every aspect of violent resistance on the part of bondswomen nor does it claim to document each and every case of violent resistance that exists in the historical record. Such an exhaustive and monumental a task could not properly be presented here, nor can the WPA narratives be utilized as an adequate source to complete such a study. Rather, this work presents a cross-section of female slave life in the antebellum South. It investigates the methods and forms that violent resistance took among bondswomen as described by ex-slaves themselves. It argues that there were bondswomen who not only participated in traditional forms of violent resistance, as did their male counterparts, but also resisted slavery in unique ways directly tied to their gender status in the larger society.

This study focuses primarily on enslaved black women. Although there is ample evidence that free black women also resisted slavery, this work examines the forms of resistance practiced among black women who were held in bondage during the nineteenth century.⁴⁹ Bondage in this work is defined as any act of involuntary servitude dictated by Southern law that robbed individuals termed “slaves” of human freedom and control over the totality of their lives.

Given that this study’s primary source is the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives, it focuses primarily on the antebellum era of the Old South. Because New World slavery spanned both continents and the Caribbean of the Western Hemisphere, numerous and complex

⁴⁸ See the addendum for more on the history of the WPA narratives, its strengths and weaknesses.

⁴⁹ For analysis of free black women and their role in slave resistance as abolitionists and more, see Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet Tubman The Moses of Her People* (Massachusetts: Applewood Books, 1993); Shirley Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

slave systems emerged. For instance, the Portuguese slave system, its laws, tactics and approach, differ significantly from those of the French or the English. To avoid over-generalization, this study is limited to the US antebellum South.⁵⁰

This study is divided into three parts. Chapter one analyzes the culture of violence that existed in antebellum Southern society. The questions addressed include the following: What was the social atmosphere in which bondswomen lived and labored? What role did gender play in determining the assignment of labor tasks and sorts of violence committed against bondswomen? Who were the main authority figures in the slave regime that inflicted violence upon bondswomen? What was the relationship of violence between bondswomen and their mistresses? What sorts of violence were meted out to bondswomen? What reasons were given for such severe punishment?

The second chapter explores slave women's violent resistance to slavery. Issues to be addressed include the following: What reasons did slave women and others give for their acts of physical retaliation or murder? Against whom did these slave women most often carry out their acts of resistance: the slave masters, overseers or male slaves? Was this retributive violence spontaneous or premeditated? Could slave women influence other slaves to act violently, either directly or indirectly? Did slave women carry out their acts of violence alone? Is there any evidence in the narratives that slave women played

⁵⁰ The study is limited to those states that contributed ex-slave narratives: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. Louisiana was never included in the WPA ex-slave narrative collection and remains the only Southern state that was excluded. However there are interviews of ex-slaves that claim to be from Louisiana and recount their time in bondage there, thus Louisiana is included in this work. Louisiana did have its own Writer's Project and the narratives of ex-slaves can be found within. See also Ronnie W. Clayton, *Mother Wit: The Ex-Slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writers' Project*. (P Lang, New York 1990), Lyle Saxon comp. *Gumbo Ya Ya A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales*. (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1945).

key roles in larger scale revolts? How reliable are these narratives for separating historical fact from folklore? Finally, what connection could slave women's folklore have to violent resistance?

The third chapter examines the unique problems faced by slave women. It studies the various methods by which slave women resisted either rape or forced sexual reproduction. It also explores the folklore of violent resistance that was passed on to younger generations of women, thus creating a network and heritage of resistance.

Finally, I have included an addendum that reviews the history of the WPA narratives and their use in historical studies.

CHAPTER ONE

A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

Examining acts of physical and violent resistance on the part of enslaved black women requires that one first consider the social atmosphere in which these women lived and participated. The exploitative nature of slavery rendered the antebellum society in which it flourished one of systematic brutality and violence. Essentially, to procure free and forced labor from humans held in bondage demanded an ethos in which violent coercion was accepted as normal. “Given that profit was to be made from the labor of slaves,” states historian Herbert Shapiro, “they had to be maltreated in order to extract from them the labor that could be turned into more land and more slaves.”¹

Violence against slaves was committed by masters, mistresses and numerous underlings such as drivers and overseers. It was connected to a system of social mores, customs, and values that protected the master’s rights of property. The slave’s dual status as both property and as a human being caused Southern courts to struggle between what legal historian Mark Tushnet calls “the competing pressures of humanity and interest.”² Tushnet asserts that Southern lawmakers’ limited concern for the slave’s humanity

¹ Aptheker quoted in Herbert Shapiro, “Historiography and Slave Revolt and Rebelliousness in the United States: A Class Approach,” in *In Resistance. Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History*, ed. by Gary Y. Okihiro (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 140.

² Mark Tushnet, *The American Law of Slavery, 1810-1860 Considerations of Humanity and Interest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 6.

consistently clashed with greater concern for the slave owner's rights of property. Tushnet further states that due to the social relations and unequal concepts of race that pervaded antebellum society, these two pressures "could not be integrated into a unified social formation" and thus were characterized by "internal contradiction."³ What resulted were Southern slave laws that allowed masters to retain control over their property, and devalued the slave's humanity. In the landmark decision of *State v. Mann* (1829), which upheld the right of a master to beat his property, North Carolina Chief Justice Thomas Ruffin stated that "the power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect."⁴ Thus, slavery was predicated upon violence that was often sanctioned by Southern law or part of common custom that favored the slave owner. Simply put, wrote Tushnet, "the law of slavery supported the social and economic systems of slavery."⁵ Slaves therefore could be beaten, whipped, or shot, if it served the property interest of the master class.⁶

Southern law did allow for the prosecution of a master who murdered his slave, as demonstrated in *State v. Hoover* (1839).⁷ But the force of this statute could be diminished if the slave was deemed insolent or if the murder was not intentional.⁸ In the decision of *State v. Tackett* (1820), for instance, a slave master was sentenced to death for the murder

³ Ibid.

⁴ Thomas Ruffin quoted in Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 70.

⁵ Mark Tushnet, *Slave Law in the American South State v Mann in History and Literature* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 6.

⁶ Andrew Fede. "Legitimized Violent Slave Abuse in the American South, 1619-1865: A Case Study of Law and Social Change in Six Southern States." *American Journal of Legal History* 29, no. 2 (1985): 93-150.

⁷ *State v Hoover* quoted in Tushnet, *Slave Law in the American South*, 33-34. Ruffin upheld the conviction of Hoover for the murder of a pregnant slave, stating that there was intent to kill on the part of Hoover.

⁸ *State v. Tackett* quoted in Tushnet, *Slave Law in the American South*, 14-15. A North Carolina statute defined the willful killing of a slave murder, unless it occurred while the slave was resisting, or during a master's "moderate correction for misconduct." The law grew by the nineteenth century to differentiate murder from manslaughter.

of his slave, but the conviction was later reversed on the grounds that the slave owner was provoked.⁹ In examining court cases from several North Carolina counties between 1830 and 1860, Victoria Bynum found that “white men who murdered black men were generally convicted of manslaughter if convicted at all.”¹⁰ Thus while the murder of a slave may have been prohibited, it did not necessarily mean that a master would face equitable legal action for the crime.¹¹

Though Southern law seemed to wrestle with the inherent contradictions of human beings as property and the rights such individuals should be afforded, the courts almost invariably sided with the master class. As Melton McLaurin points out, Southern slave law was “used to create the illusion that slaves possessed certain human rights, and thus to assuage the conscience of white society.”¹² This legal inequity bred a culture in which brutality maintained the control of those whose labor was to be exploited, and an inconsistent court system that could not be counted upon to protect humans defined as property.

Gender did not protect bondswomen from the brutality of slavery. The slave institution’s primary goal was the exploitation of labor, and to that end any individual held in bondage was subject to the harshness that such a goal required. Though white Southern leaders touted the ideals of the “cult of true womanhood,” these virtues did not apply to black women, most especially those under the yoke of bondage.¹³ Abolitionist

⁹ Tushnet, *Slave Law in the American South*, 14-15.

¹⁰ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 82.

¹¹ Exceptions to this could occur if a master killed the slave property of another owner.

¹² McLaurin, *Celia*, 141.

and ex-slave Sojourner Truth attacked the blatant racial hypocrisy of the nineteenth century patriarchal philosophy at the 1851 Woman's Convention in Akron, Ohio. "I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man," she declared in reference to much of her past life, "I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed."¹⁴ Sojourner Truth thus critiqued one of the greatest contradictions of antebellum Southern society. On the one hand, Southern slaveholders proclaimed the purity and sanctity of white womanhood; on the other hand they held black women in bondage within a harsh and brutal system.

Some eighty years later, ex-slaves who lived during that era would attest to this reality and give voice to their exclusion from Southern definitions of womanhood. "When it come to field work," an unnamed ex-slave from Richmond County, Georgia said, "you couldn't tell the women from the men."¹⁵ White owners had no qualms about working bondswomen on a level equal or above that of bondsmen in order to receive the full benefits of their labor. Slave women were forced to work alongside men under conditions that gave no consideration to Southern ideals of gender. "Honey, I worked in

¹³ The cult of true womanhood, also known as the "cult of domesticity," arose in American society from 1820 to the time of the Civil War. Stressing piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity, it advocated that women should lead sheltered lives in the sphere of the household. See Barbara Welter "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* Vol. 18 (1966). Welter not only discusses the nature and impact of the patriarchal philosophy, but makes a critique that its repressive ideals sowed the seeds of its own eventual destruction.

¹⁴ Carleton Mabee and Susan Mabee Newhouse, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend* (New York University Press, 1995). This version of the speech was taken by the authors from the Salem, Ohio, June 21, 1851, *Anti-Slavery Bugle* and is believed by them to be a more accurate account of the famous speech often deemed "Ain't I a Woman." See also Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996). Painter points to instances where white abolitionists and women's rights advocates purposefully changed Truth's words, and emphasizes a need to use the newspaper version of her speech.

¹⁵ Anonymous, "Work, play, food, clothing, marriage, etc.," Interview by Louise Oliphant. *WPAGA, Vol 4, Part 4* (1937), 357. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 044/359355, accessed 2003.

the field and anywhere,” ex-slave-Nannie Jones recounted, “I worked like a man.”¹⁶ Even when slave women were given female-specific tasks, the work was still laborious and harsh in nature. Ex-slave Elizabeth Sparks recalled how her aunt was made to stand on her feet and knit all throughout the night. “She [the mistress] work her [the aunt] so hard that she’d go to sleep standin’ up,” Sparks said, “an’ every time her haid nod an’ her knees sag, the lady’d come down across her haid with a switch.”¹⁷

The case of Sparks’ aunt demonstrates that just as slave women were excluded from the definition of Southern womanhood in terms of required labor, they were not spared the harshness of punishment. “Beat women! Why sure he beat women,” Sparks said of her former master, “Beat women jes’ lak men. . . . Beat women naked an’ wash ‘em down in brine.”¹⁸ Ex-slave Irene Coates of Florida recalled how women were treated no differently than men when it came to punishment, and how they were tied by their thumbs to a tree limb and whipped.¹⁹ Mary Brown remembered the lack of concern for gender when it came to the treatment of her grandparents. Her back was “cut all to pieces where she had been beat by her master,” Brown stated of her grandmother, “Both of them was whooped.”²⁰ When asked if slave women were put to the lash, ex-slave Sylvia Durant replied in the affirmative: “hear bout dat more times den I got fingers en toes.”²¹ Ex-slave Susan Hamilton recounted many of these experiences she witnessed as a child.

¹⁶ Nannie Jones, “Interview with Jones, Nannie,” Interview by Mrs. Bernice Bowden. *WPAAR, Vol. 2, Part 4* (1936-1938), 165. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 024/168164, accessed 2003. Use of brackets [] added by author.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Sparks, 51-52.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁹ Irene Coates, “Irene Coates,” Interview by Viola B. Muse. *WPAFL, Vol. 3* (1936), 78. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 030/077074, accessed 2003.

²⁰ Mary Brown, “Interview with Brown, Mary,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol. 2, Part 1* (1936-1938), 299. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 021/304299, accessed 2003.

²¹ Sylvia Durant, “Ex-Slave 72 years,” Interview by Annie Ruth Davis. *WPASC, Vol. 14, Part 1* (1937), 344. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 141/345342, accessed 2003.

“I see women hung from de ceilin’ of buildin’s an’ whipped with only supin tied ‘round her lower part of de body,” Hamilton said, “until w’en dey was taken down, dere wusn’t breath in de body.”²² Slave women like Sallie Crane recounted personal stories of near daily incidents of repetitious abuse:

I been whipped from sunup till sundown. They whip me till they got tired and then they go and res’ and come out and start again. . . .They kept a bowl filled with vinegar and salt and pepper settin’ nearby, and when they had whipped me till the blood come, they would take the mop and sponge the cuts with this stuff so that they would hurt more.²³

The constant abuse of Crane reveals that the whipping of slaves had an almost ritualistic nature.

Whippings were by far the most common forms of reprimand for both slave men and women, and thus they appear frequently throughout the narratives. To the Southern slave owner, and those charged with enforcement of the social order, whipping was a means to discipline those deemed insolent and to instill terror and assure subservience. Simultaneously, whipping was an act of authority to be wielded by men of honor against those to whom authority and honor was denied. In a culture where violence was a legitimate tool for the coercion of both labor and obedience, the whipping served as an enduring symbol of the nature of the social order. As historian Kenneth Greenberg notes, “Masters preferred whips to prison.”²⁴ The term “whipping,” however, did not necessarily refer to an actual whip. Instruments for beatings could include sticks, lashes, thick cowhide straps, or any object that was handy. The usual reason given for a

²² Susan Hamilton, “Ex-slave 101 years of age has never shaken hand since 1863,” Interview by Augustas Ladson. *WPASC, Vol 14, Part 2* (1937), 235. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 142/237233, accessed 2003

²³ Sallie Crane, “Whipped from sunup to sundown,” Interview by Samuel S. Taylor. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 2* (1937), 53 [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 022/054050, accessed 2003.

²⁴ Kenneth Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, The Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting and Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1996), 48.

whipping or beating was the claimed offense of impudence. Such a thing was defined solely by those endowed with authority in the slave system to render judgment.

“Impudence,” said abolitionist and escaped slave Frederick Douglass, “might mean almost anything, or nothing at all, just according to the caprice of the master or overseer at the moment. . . . But, whatever it is, or is not, if it gets the name ‘impudence,’ the party charged with it is sure of a flogging.”²⁵

The violence and rage that allegations of impudence could incur were tied directly to antebellum Southern ideas about paternalism and gratitude. In the patriarchal slaveholding society the master saw himself at the apex. He was not simply an owner of property or the head of a household, but a father figure who governed his slaves and provided for their needs. In return the master expected the thankfulness and respect owed to any patriarchal father figure. When a slave indulged in an act of impudence, he not only challenged paternalist expectations of reciprocity but displayed a lack of gratitude for his master’s beneficence. Eugene Genovese pointed out that the problem with this system was that “paternalism rested precisely on inequality.”²⁶ Kenneth Greenberg expands further on the ideology of the master class:

Paternalism was less about love than about the depth and intimacy of the masters’ intrusion into the lives of the people they owned. The tendency of the paternal impulse was to push masters to intervene everywhere. They sought to control food, housing, clothing, marriage, naming, medical care, religion, the organization and pace of work, law and order, visitation, and much more on the plantation.²⁷

What slaveholders could not see, or refused to acknowledge, was that slaves had not entered into this pact of paternalism of their own free will, but had been forced into an inequitable contract. Thus gratitude could not be expected from humans bound to an

²⁵ Frederick Douglass, quoted in Bennett, *Before the Mayflower*, 94

²⁶ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 146.

²⁷ Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery*, 46-47.

unequal paternalist system not of their choice or making. “Gratitude implies equality,” Genovese stated, but “slaveholders had committed the grotesque blunder of assuming that it could be forthcoming from a people who had an acceptance of inequality literally whipped into them.”²⁸ Slave owners misunderstood or ignored this basic facet of their forced contract and viewed any act of rebellion by the enslaved as impudence, and, by default, ingratitude. For the master class paternalism and gratitude were the only means by which they could place slavery into a justifiable context. “The masters desperately needed the gratitude of their slaves,” Genovese noted, “in order to define themselves as moral human beings.”²⁹ Slaves who upset this social order and its driving philosophy could expect to be branded as ungrateful and deserving of the master class’s wrath. For black women, the threat of whippings and beatings was a daily reality; they might be whipped by any given authority figure within the slave regime for any act of perceived impudence that threatened the paternalist social order.

A whipping could be administered if a slave did not meet required labor quotas. “I seed one my sisters whip ‘cause she didn’t spin ‘nough,” recounted ex-slave Campbell Davis, “Dey pull de clothes down to her waist and laid her down on de stomach and lash her with de rawhide quirt.”³⁰ A whipping could equally erupt over a minor dissatisfaction with the work provided by a slave. Frank Cooper recounted the severe beating of his mother who was rendered unconscious by three white women using a whip and a heavy

²⁸ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 146.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Genovese found numerous accounts of slave owners who complained about slave ingratitude. He went on to link this to various forms of paternalism outside of slavery, like, for instance, colonization.

³⁰ Campbell Davis, “Ex-Slave Stories (Texas),” Interview. *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 1 (1936-1938)*, 286. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 161/292285, accessed 2003.

board, “because they had no butter for their biscuits and cornbread.”³¹ William Moore related how his mother was beaten by her master with a handsaw, the teeth of the instrument being applied to her back, over displeasure with her cooking. “Marse Tom got mad at the cookin’ and grabs her by the hair,” Moore said, “and drug her out the house and grabs the saw off the tool bench and whips her.”³² At times these violent acts seemed to have no cause or reason other than to inflict terror and abuse, which in the minds of the slave authorities ensured subservience. Sallie Crane’s beatings came not at the hands of her owner, she claimed, but from other whites in the family, and for no perceivable cause. “They jus’ whipped me ‘cause they could—‘cause they had the privilege,” she said, “It wasn’t nothin’ I done; they jus’ whipped me.”³³

When it came to beatings and whippings, age was as meaningless a defense as gender for black women. In the eyes of many slave owners and their enforcers, slaves required constant discipline from the time of their youth to their elder days, even for what may seem a minor offense. Ex-slave Eda Rains said she was struck in the head as a girl, which resulted in a permanent scar, for falling asleep over the mistresses’ children.³⁴ Mary Estes Peters’ mother was beaten over the head with a skillet as a child for not completing labor tasks left for her while the mistress was at Sunday mass.³⁵ An anonymous ex-slave related how her master beat an old woman severely, breaking a

³¹ Frank Cooper, “Slavery days of Many Cooper of Lincoln County Kentucky.” Interview by Wm. R. Mays. *WPAIN, Vol. 5* (1937), 62. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 050/065061, accessed 2003.

³² William Moore, “Ex-Slave Stories (Texas),” Interview. *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 3* (1936-1938), 134. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 163/137132, accessed 2003.

³³ Sallie Crane, 53.

³⁴ Eda Rains, “Ex-Slave Stories (Texas),” Interview *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 3* (1937), 225. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 163/230225, accessed 2003.

³⁵ Mary Estes Peters, “Interview with Peters, Mary Estes,” Interview by Samuel S Taylor. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 5* (1938), 325. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 025/328323, accessed 2003.

“long piece of iron” over her head.³⁶ Numerous accounts within the narratives demonstrate that even pregnancy did not lessen the likelihood of a whipping or beating. Rev. Wamble of Gary, Indiana recalled the treatment of pregnant slave women on the Mississippi farm of his birth. “When the women slaves were in an advanced stage of pregnancy,” he said, “they were made to lie face down in a specially dug depression in the ground and were whipped.”³⁷ Marie Hervey said much the same of her time in slavery. “They used to take pregnant women and dig a hole in the ground,” Hervey recounted, “and put their stomachs in it and whip them.”³⁸ The whipping of pregnant slave women in such a fashion asserted the power of those in authority to do as they wished with what was deemed their property, or property in which they were put in charge. It also highlighted the degree to which Southern ideals of femininity were wholly ignored in regard to women held in bondage. Thus, antebellum white Southerners denied enslaved black women their humanity in distinctly gendered ways.

As commonplace as whipping was in this culture of coercive violence, it was but one type of punishment. Various methods of sanctioned brutality were employed to maintain control and assure subservience of the slave populace. Some acts of punishment were meant to both humiliate and torment. Former slave Mrs. Thomas Johns recounted a white mistress who would pin the lower lip of slave women to their bosom as

³⁶ Compilation, “Mistreatment of slaves,” Interview by Louise Oliphant. *WPAGA, Vol 4, Part 4* (1937), 295. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 044/294290, accessed 2003.

³⁷ Rev. Wamble, “Ex-slaves. Rev. Wamble, Gary, Indiana ,” Interview by Archie Koritz. *WPAIN, Vol. 5* (1937), 200. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 050/203198, accessed 2003 According to those interviewed this act was done to inflict punishment upon the slave without causing harm to the child, which was valuable property.

³⁸ Marie Hervey, “Interview with Hervey, Marie E.,” Interview by Samuel S. Taylor. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 3* (1936-1938), 231. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 023/232231, accessed 2003.

punishment.³⁹ “The woman would go ‘round all day with her head drew down thataway and slobberin’,” said Johns, “There was knots on the nigger’s [sic] lip where the needle had been stuck in it.”⁴⁰ Sallie Crane recalled that she was made to wear a buck and gag in her mouth for three days, which she said resulted in maggots eating away at her flesh. “I couldn’t eat or drink,” she recounted, “couldn’t even catch the slobber that fell from my mouth and run down my chest till the flies settled on it and blowed it.”⁴¹ These brutal acts of degradation were invented with the sole purpose of reminding slave women that those with authority over them had the ability to persecute or debase them as they saw fit.

Sometimes the whim and anger of an individual resulted in the maiming of slaves. Ex-slave Ida Henry of Oklahoma for instance recalled how the mistress of the house stabbed a female cook in the eye with a fork and put it out, because a potato was not fully cooked.⁴² Furthermore, in a culture where brutality was sanctioned and accepted, severe abuse could easily cross the line into death. For white slaveholders the ability to determine whether a slave would live or die was primary to the paternalist social order, even if it was at times prohibited by law. Because enslaved black women lacked the honor bestowed on white women, they, too, were in mortal danger, despite their monetary worth in the slave system.

Once again, age and physical condition were of little consequence in avoiding such hazards. Ex-slave Mittie Blakely of Indiana related the story of an elderly woman who was placed on wooden boards above a pit and beaten by her master “until the blood

³⁹ Mrs. Thomas Johns, “Ex-Slave Stories (Texas),” Interview. *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 2* (1937), 207. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 162/210205, accessed 2003.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Sallie Crane, 53.

⁴² Ida Henry, “Ida Henry. Age 83. Oklahoma City, Okla.,” Interview. *WPAOK, Vol 13* (1937), 135. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 130/139134, accessed 2003.

gushed from her body” and she “bled to death.”⁴³ Leah Garrett recounted how her master, after becoming angry with her young cousin for dropping a white infant, “picked up a board and hit dis pore little chile ‘cross de head and kilt her right dar.”⁴⁴ Mary Armstrong recalled vividly the gruesome killing of her infant sister by her mistress. “She come and took the diaper offen my little sister and whipped till the blood jes’ ran,” Mary said, “jes ‘cause she cry like all babies do, and it kilt my sister.”⁴⁵ Ex-slave Analiza Foster of North Carolina recalled the beating death of a pregnant woman as passed down by her mother:

De ‘oman wuz pregnant an’ she fainted in de fiel’ at de plow. De driver said dat she wuz puttin’ on, an’ dat she ort ter be beat. He takes de long bull whup an’ he cuts long gashes all over her shoulders an’ raised arms, den he walks off an’ leabes her dar fer a hour in de hot sun . . . den de driver comes out wid a pan full of vinegar, salt an’ red pepper an’ he washes de gashes. . . . De ‘oman faints an’ he digs her up, but in a few minutes she am stone dead.⁴⁶

Foster’s account indicates that this type of brutality was so normalized that there was at times a blatant disregard to the individual’s state or humanity. It does not seem as if the overseer set out to intentionally kill the slave woman, but neither did he take into account her pregnant condition and the possibility that death could result.

A similar incident was recounted by Henry Cheatam, who as a boy was witness to the repeated abuse of his mother and the forced miscarriage of his aunt—at the hands of a fellow slave who held the position of overseer. “Lots of times I’s seen him beat my mammy, an’ one day I seen him beat my Auntie who was big wid chile,” Cheatam said,

⁴³ Mittie Blakely, “Folklore,” Interview by Anna Pritchett. *WPAIN, Vol 5* (1938), 15. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 050/017013, accessed 2003

⁴⁴ Leah Garnett, “Richmond County ex-slave interview. Leah Garrett,” Interview by Louise Oliphant. *WPAGA, Vol 4, Part 2* (1936-1938), 13-14. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 163/213208, accessed 2003.

⁴⁵ Mary Armstrong, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” Interview *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 1* (1936-1938), 15. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 161/030025, accessed 2003

⁴⁶ Analiza Foster, “Ex-slave story,” Interview by Mary A. Hicks *WPANC, Vol 11, Part 1* (1936-1938), 312-313. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 111/315311, accessed 2003.

“an’d at man dug a roun’ hole in de groun’ an’ put her stummic in it, an’ beat an’ beat her for a half hour straight till de baby ome out raught dere in de hole.”⁴⁷

For other bondswomen, these acts of brutality were by no means accidental. At a young age, Ben Simpson was witness to the brutal murder of his mother on a forced march from Georgia to Texas. “Mother, she give out on the way,” Simpson recalled, “massa, he jus’ take out he gun and shot her, and whilst she lay dyin’ he kicks her two, three times and say, ‘Damn a nigger [sic] what can’t stand nothin’.”⁴⁸

Whether the abuse of slave women involved whipping, beating or maiming, such acts were both accepted and normal parts of antebellum culture, rooted in the exploitation of both slave labor and reproduction. In this heavily patriarchal and race-based social order bondswomen were placed at the bottom rung of the hierarchy. Whatever the touted ideals of the “cult of domesticity,” these principles did not apply to enslaved women; rather, they were deemed less than human and equated with common chattel, to be beaten at one’s whim and discretion for showing ingratitude for the unequal paternalist order. Though Southern laws existed to protect against the outright murder of slaves, the master’s right to control his property more often took precedence. Bondswomen thus faced the daily possibility of abuse, maiming or even death at the hands of their owners and other authorities. It is not surprising that ex-slave Malindy Maxwell, when speaking of how her parents’ master abused his white wife, used the treatment of black women as a

⁴⁷ Henry Cheatam, “I heard Lincoln set us free,” Interview by Ila B. Prine. *WPAAL, Vol 1* (1937), 66. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 010/072066, accessed 2003.

⁴⁸ Ben Simpson, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” Interview *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 4* (1936-1938), 27. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 164/033027, accessed 2003.

fitting comparison to show the level of debasement in his actions. She said that her master “beat her, his wife, like he beat a nigger [sic] woman.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Malindy Maxwell, “Interview with Maxwell, Malindy,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol. 2, Part 5 (1936-1938)*, 15. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 025/062057, accessed 2003.

CHAPTER TWO

VIOLENT RESISTANCE AND SLAVE WOMEN

In the antebellum social culture, where violence was normalized and sanctioned, it is not surprising that for many bondswomen the idea of retributive violence was normalized as well. “Slavery always has, and always will, produce insurrections where it exists,” asserted abolitionist Angelina Grimke in her 1836 *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, “because it is a violation of the natural order of things, and no human power can much longer perpetuate it.”¹ Yet beyond insurrections, slavery also produced a culture of general resistance. Those held in bondage understood their human identity, matched slaveholder rhetoric against perceived reality, and engaged in continued resistance against a system that defined them as property.² In fact, enslaved people, including women, at times met violence with violence.

When it came to whippings and beatings, numerous accounts within the ex-slave narratives show that many women did not merely submit quietly to abuse. “Aunt

¹ Angelina Grimké, “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” quoted in Bettina Aptheker, *Woman’s Legacy Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 23

² Shapiro, “Historiography and Slave Revolt and Rebelliousness in the United States,” 135. Shapiro employs a Marxist analysis of slavery that takes a class approach to slave resistance

Catherine . . . was very unruly, no one could whip her,” ex-slave America Morgan stated, “She fought so hard, it was as much as the men could do to tie her.”³ Evelina Smith said her father’s mother “wouldn’t be conquered. When they got ready to whip her, it would be half a day before they could take her.”⁴ George Selman described a fellow slave woman named Sallie who was “so mean she had to wear a chain.” Former slave Adelaide J. Vaughn said her mother boasted that her mistress couldn’t whip her alone. “She wanted to whip mother,” Vaughn said, “but she was ‘fraid to do it while she was alone.” Susan Snow of Arkansas recounted of her mother, “Dey couldn’ whup her widout tyin’ her up firs.” Ex-slave Margaret Nickerson said that when it came to the authorities of the slave regime her sister “didn’ stand back on non’ uv em; when dey’d git behin’ her, she’d git behin’ dem; sh wuz dat stubbon’.” Henry Essex said simply that when the overseer tried to whip his grandmother, “he can’t.” Fannie Clemons proudly claimed much the same: “Nobody tried to whip me cause they couldn’t.” Emma Watson related the story of how her mother simply refused to be whipped. “One day Miss Tilda get de buggy whip to whip my mammy,” Watson said, “Maw grabs de whip and says, ‘Miss Tilda, you ain’t gwine do dat.’”⁵

³ America Morgan, “Folklore,” Interview by Anna Pritchett. *WPAIN*, Vol 5 (1938), 124. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 050/145141, accessed 2003

⁴ Evelina Henrietta Smith, “Interview with Smith, Henrietta Evelina,” Interview by Samuel S. Taylor. *WPAAR*, Vol 2, Part 6 (1936-1938), 193-194 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 026/198193, accessed 2003.

Verbal resistance and outright physical disobedience to a whipping often went hand in hand. James Abbot Monroe said that when the young master of his mother told her to “swallow dat tobaccy” she was chewing, not only did his mother refuse but she retorted to the slave owner “You chewing tobaccy? Whyn’t yuh swaller dat?”⁶ Former slave Caroline Richardson said her “mammy would sass dem all,” in reference to whites, and then refused to let her mistress “whup her.”⁷ Lila Nichols related the story of a slave woman who not only refused to submit to a whipping, but insulted the mistress in the process. “I know one time do’ missus ‘cides ter whup a ‘oman fer somethin’,” Nichols recounted, “an’ de ‘oman sez ter her, ‘No sir, Missus, ‘ain’t ‘lowin’ nobody what wa’r de same kind of shirt I does ter whup me.”⁸ In this case the bondswoman not only resisted brutalization by the slave system through physical threat and disobedience, but skillfully demeaned her mistress’s dress to indicate the white woman’s lack of wealth and class.

Verbal resistance and disobedience could easily turn to threats, a common form of resistance by slave women. Threats of retaliatory violence were a way of

⁵ George Selman, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” Interview *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 4* (1937), 16. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 164/021015, accessed 2003 The term “mean” often indicated a slave that was especially rebellious; Adelaide J Vaughn, “Interview with Vaughn, Adelaide J.,” Interview by Samuel S Taylor. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 7* (1936-1938), 7-8 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 027/010007, accessed 2003, Susan Snow, “Susan Snow, ex-slave, Lauderdale County,” Interview by William B Allison *WPAMS, Vol 9* (1936-1938), 136 [collection-online], LOC, accession no 090/139135, accessed 2003, Margaret Nickerson, “Margaret Nickerson,” Interview by Rachel A. Austin *WPAFL, Vol 3* (1936), 253 [collection-online], LOC, accession no 030/252249, accessed 2003, Henry Essex, “Ex-slave story (Texas),” Interview by Mary A. Hicks *WPANC, Vol 11, Part 1* (1937), 395 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 111/397393, accessed 2003, Fannie Clemons, “Ex-slave story (Texas),” Interview by Mary A Hicks *WPANC, Vol 11, Part 1* (1937), 395. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 022/032028, accessed 2003, Emma Watson, “Interview with Clemons, Fannie,” Interview by Pernella Anderson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 2* (1936-1938), 28. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 164/153147, accessed 2003

⁶ James Abbot Monroe, 2.

⁷ Caroline Richardson, “Caroline Richardson,” Interview by Mary A. Hicks. *WPANC, Vol 11, Part 2* (1937), 199. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 112/202198, accessed 2003

⁸ Lila Nichols, “Plantation Life,” Interview by Mary A Hicks *WPANC, Vol 11, Part 2* (1937), 149. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 112/151147, accessed 2003

avoiding whippings, beatings, or any other form of abuse. When Leonard Franklin's mother was told by her master to obey or "get that bull whip," she warned him sternly, "Yes, and we'll both be gittin' it."⁹ When Annie Griegg's mistress picked up a cord of switches to whip her, the bondswoman in turn picked up a pan of boiling water. "She got scared of me," Griegg recalled, "told me to put the pan down. I didn't do it."¹⁰ Mamie Thompson said that her mother threatened to kill her master rather than take a beating. "Master Redman got her in the kitchen to whoop her with a cow hide," Thompson said of the incident, "she told him she would kill him; she got a stick."¹¹

Violent resistance did not always end with threats however. According to accounts within the narratives, some black women carried out their warnings or gave none at all before lashing out at the person responsible for their abuse. More often than not, this was the overseer and or some enforcer of slave discipline. Not surprisingly, individuals responsible for punishing slaves were most often the subjects of slave attacks. Addie Vinson of Georgia said of the overseers, "When dey beat my Aunt Sallie she would fight back."¹² Anna Williamson told of how her mother fought an overseer, ripping off all his clothes in the process. "A ridin' boss went to whoopin'

⁹ Leonard Franklin, "Mother whipped overseer," Interview by Samuel S Taylor *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 2* (1936-1938), 337. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 022/340336, accessed 2003.

¹⁰ Annie Griegg, "Interview with Griegg, Annie," Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol. 2, Part 3* (1936-1938), 115. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 022/340336, accessed 2003. Griegg claimed she did not intend to harm her mistress with the scalding water and had picked it up only by happenstance while going about her chores. However when her mistress told her to put the water down and submit to a whipping, Griegg refused. An intentional threat or not, the incident frightened the mistress who immediately sent for her husband

¹¹ Mamie Thompson, "Interview with Thompson, Mamie," Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 6* (1936-1938), 318 [collection-online], LOC, accession no 026/323318, accessed 2003

¹² Addie Vinson, "Plantation life As viewed by an ex-slave," Interview by Mrs Sadie B. Hornsby. *WPAGA, Vol 4, Part 4* (1936-1938), 104 [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 044/101097, accessed 2003

her once and she tore every rag clothes he had on offen him,” Williamson said of the incident, “I heard em’ say he went home strip start [stark] naked.”¹³ Ex-slave Waters Brooks told a similar story passed down to him. “I remember a woman that they said fought with the overseer for a whole day,” Brooks recounted, “and stripped him naked as the day he was born.”¹⁴ Whether all of these claims are wholly accurate or exaggerated is not easily ascertained. But they do show that the use of physical violence by black women against enforcers of the slave system was deemed acceptable, even heroic, by the slave community. Defiant stories of resistance were passed from one generation to the next.¹⁵

Leonard Franklin recalled that when an overseer tried to whip his mother, “she knocked him down and tore his face up so that the doctor had to ‘tend to him.”¹⁶ Pitted against a man who may have been more than her physical match, an enslaved woman might use whatever tool was at her disposal to fend off her attacker. For example, when an overseer threatened Celestial Avery’s grandmother with a whipping, she snatched a fence rail and broke it across his arms.¹⁷ Richard Jackson claimed that his mother fought back often, even once using hot coals. “She was bad ‘bout fightin’ and the overseer allus tended to her,” Jackson said. “One day he come to the quarters to whip her and she up and throwed a shovel full of live coals from the

¹³ Anna Williamson, “Interview with Williamson, Anna,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 7* (1936-1938), 193 [collection-online], LOC, accession no 027/198193, accessed 2003

¹⁴ Waters Brooks, “A railroad worker’s story,” Interview by Samuel S. Taylor *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 1* (1936-1938), 255. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 021/260255, accessed 2003.

¹⁵ It is unknown if Brooks and Williamson are telling the same story. Though both ex-slaves resided in Arkansas during the time of their interviews neither were original residents of the state. Williamson’s mother hailed from either North Carolina or Tennessee and Brooks never gave the location from which he migrated. He did however name the slave woman in question, calling her Nancy Ward. This name does not appear in Williamson’s account

¹⁶ Leonard Franklin, 336

¹⁷ Celestial Avery, “A few facts of slavery,” Interview by Ross *WPAGA, Vol 4, Part 1* (1937), 25. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 041/026022, accessed 2003

fireplace in his bosom and run out the door.”¹⁸ Martha Bradley recalled that when an overseer began to whip her, she “jumped on him and bit and kicked him” until he let her go.¹⁹ For ex-slave Lily Perry of North Carolina the act of biting was a common method of resisting abuse, and her weapon of choice. “When dey’d start ter whup me,” she said, “I’d bite lak a run-mad dog so dey’d chain my han’s.”²⁰ Perry recounted a particular incident with an overseer. “De oberseer . . . grabs me ter whup me,” she said, “De minute he grabs me I seize on ter his thumb an’ I bites hit ter de bone”²¹ Contrary to conventional white beliefs of the time, these violent acts of resistance were not simply committed by “bad,” “mean,” or singularly temperamental bondswoman. Rather, they are better viewed as natural reactions to a culture of violence and a system of brutality; they were forms of resistance to an entire social order. When bondswomen chose to resist beatings in a direct and violent manner, however, lives might be lost.

Murders of overseers, slave bosses, and drivers by slaves are occasionally described in the narratives. Many slaves shared the dominant society’s disdain for lower class whites and may have calculated that they could more easily get away with murdering them.²² Because overseers and drivers worked closely with slaves, they were also vulnerable to slave violence. Sometimes a single act of violence on the part

¹⁸ Richard Jackson, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” Interview. *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 2* (1936-1938), 195. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 162/200195, accessed 2003. The claimed use of hot coals as a weapon is seen often throughout the narratives, and seems unique to women.

¹⁹ Martha Bradley, “In slavery times (Martha Bradley),” Interview by Mabel Farrior and Lois Lynn. *WPAAL, Vol 1* (1936-1938), 46. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 010/052046, accessed 2003.

²⁰ Lily Perry, “Slavery days in Franklin County,” Interview by Mary A Hicks *WPANC, Vol. 11, Part 2* (1937), 163. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 112/166162, accessed 2003.

²¹ *Ibid*, 163-164.

²² More than a few ex-slaves referred to common whites and slave enforcers as poor whites and lowly “white thrash,” considered even beneath slaves. Some slaves even tested how far they could go in disobeying an overseer

of a slave boss brought on a spontaneous reaction of murder. When one overseer lashed a woman severely for talking back, ex-slave John Henry Kemp said she “became sore and took her hoe and chopped him right across his head, and child you should have seen how she chopped this man to a bloody death.”²³ Irene Coates told of a slave woman who, after witnessing an overseer strike another woman with a whip, warned him “that if he ever struck her like that, it would be the day he would die.”²⁴ After hearing the remark, the overseer called her bluff and struck the woman with the whip, at which point she allegedly knocked him from his horse with a hoe and decapitated him. “She went mad for a few seconds and proceeded to chop and mutilate his body,” Coates recounted. “That done to her satisfaction, she then killed his horse.”²⁵ Anna Huggins claimed that during a severe beating her mother turned upon the overseer and engaged in a fight that would eventually kill them both.²⁶ Because they directly punished slaves, overseers and drivers served as symbols of the most brutal aspects of the slave institution. Acts of violence by bondswomen upon overseers, slave bosses, and drivers were not merely blows against individuals, but a form of resistance to the culture and social order that such persons served, represented and protected.

Some bondswomen, however, went beyond attacking such symbolic underlings, and instead exacted revenge upon those in the higher echelons of the antebellum regime. In the hierarchal slave society, the slave owner had the greatest

²³ John Henry Kemp, “‘Prophet’ John Henry Kemp,” Interview by Rebecca L. Baker. *WPAFL, Vol 3* (1937), 185 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 030/187184, accessed 2003.

²⁴ Irene Coates, 76.

²⁵ *Ibid.* According to Coates the slave woman voluntarily reported her act to her master and went unpunished.

²⁶ Anna Huggins, “Interview with Huggins, Anna,” Interview by Mary D. Hudgins *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 3* (1936), 76. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 023/352351, accessed 2003.

level of authority. Yet he was not exempt from slaves' violent acts of resistance. Status did not matter to some bondswomen, who reacted violently against whomever abused them. Sarah Wilson of Oklahoma said that when her master "started like he was going to hit" her aunt, the aunt retaliated and "jabbed him in the belly."²⁷ Hattie Matthews related that her grandmother "got whipp'd only onc't and de master wus sorry cause she fought back."²⁸ When James Monroe Abbot's aunt was struck by her master across the shoulders he said "she grab huh fingers roun' his throat," and proceeded to choke him severely.²⁹ When others wrestled his infuriated aunt from the object of her ire, Abbot said the master ordered some nearby white men to help him restrain her in order to administer a whipping—which met with little success. "When one o' em tells muthuh to put her han's togedder so he tie em'," Abbot recounted, "she grabe him by de collar an' de seat o' he's pants an knock's his haid agin a post like a batter'n' ram."³⁰ Ex-slave Lulu Wilson of Texas claimed her mother knocked down and bloodied their master when he tried to whip her. So fierce was the resistance on the part of Wilson's mother that when the master attempted to enlist the aid of relatives one of them allegedly refused, replying "I don't want to go up there and let Chloe Ann beat me up."³¹

A slave's rebellious attitude and refusal to submit to beatings could develop at a young age. Eliza Washington said that as a teenager her mother got into a fight with

²⁷ Sarah Wilson, "Sarah Wilson Age 87 yrs Fort Gibson, Okla.," Interview *WPAOK, Vol 13* (1936-1938), 346. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 130/351344, accessed 2003.

²⁸ Hattie Matthews, "Tales," Interview *WPAMO, Vol 10* (1936-1938), 250 [collection-online], LOC, accession no 100/254249, accessed 2003.

²⁹ James Monroe Abbot, "Interview with Abbot, James Monroe," Interview. *WPAMO, Vol. 10* (1936-1938), 2. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 100/006001, accessed 2003.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Lulu Wilson, "Ex-slave stories (Texas)," Interview *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 4* (1936-1938), 191. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 164/196190, accessed 2003.

her young master and “whipped him clear as a whistle.”³² Georgia Johnson not only got into a fight with her young master but also struck him with a rock in the process.³³ Josie Jordan of Oklahoma asserted that her mother preferred to fight to the death if need be, rather than submit to a whipping. “Mammy fought back,” recalled Jordan of a particular incident, “and when the ruckus was over the Master was laying still on the ground and folks thought he was dead.”³⁴ His mother’s violent defense of her self resulted in her being sold, but it did not diminish her rebellious spirit. When her new master tried to whip her she knocked him through a door. When the new master’s wife hit her with a broomstick, Jordan said that “Mammy’s mule temper boiled up all over the kitchen and Master had to stop the fighting.”³⁵ These repeated incidents on the part of Jordan’s mother illustrate a pattern of violent resistance directed toward any member of the slave regime. As the latter encounter showed, this could also include the mistress of the house.

Many bondswomen labored as domestics, placing them in close proximity to the mistress of the household or at times directly under her supervision. As seen in previous accounts, slave mistresses, like male authority figures, did not hesitate to use force to uphold the slave regime in which they as white women were fully invested. Historians David Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine assert that white mistresses were especially harsh towards bondswomen because of the patriarchal structure of society

³² Eliza Washington, “Slave memories - birth, mother, father, separation house,” Interview by Samuel S. Taylor. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 7* (1936-1938), 54. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 027/054049, accessed 2003.

³³ Georgia Johnson, “Georgia Johnson. Ex-slave – age 74,” Interview by Grace McCune. *WPAGA, Vol 4, Part 2* (1938), 332. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 042/330327, accessed 2003.

³⁴ Josie Jordan, “Mrs. Josie Jordan Age 75 yrs,” Interview *WPAOK, Vol 13* (1937), 160. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 130/165160, accessed 2003.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 161

and white men's sexual behavior. "Subordinate to white male authority and facing sexual competition from colored and black women for their husbands' favors," write Gaspar and Hine, "white women were arguably more brutal in their treatment of slaves than white men."³⁶

As with male overseers and masters, black women at times reacted with violence against white women's violence toward them. Ex-slave James V. Deane recalled that when the mistress slapped his aunt one day, the aunt "struck her back."³⁷ Leah Garrett told a similar tale about a bondswoman. "One day Mistess jumped on her 'bout something," Garrett recalled, "and de gal hit her back."³⁸ Some slave women fought their mistresses when they felt they had been brutalized without just cause. Jenny Proctor fought back when her mistress attempted to beat her with a broom handle for eating a biscuit.³⁹ When Sophia Word's mistress attempted to drag her forcibly into the house, Word said "I grabs that white woman . . . and shook her until she begged for mercy."⁴⁰

These violent reprisals by bondswomen challenged the authoritative role that mistresses held within the plantation household, at times turning the tables completely. Ex-slave John Rudd said that when his mistress began to whip his mother without just cause, his mother proceeded to chase after the authority figure with a knife. "Ole Missus run so fas' Mamma couldn't catch up wif her," Rudd recalled, "so

³⁶ Gaspar and Hine, *More than Chattel*, 194-195

³⁷ James V Dean, "James V Deane, ex-slave," Interview WPAMD, *Vol 8* (1937), 7. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 080/009006, accessed 2003.

³⁸ Leah Garnett, 14

³⁹ Jenny Proctor, "Ex-slave autobiography," Interview *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 3* (1937), 209-210. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 163/213208, accessed 2003

⁴⁰ Sophia Word, "Interview with Word, Sophia," Interview by Pearl House. *WPAKY, Vol. 7* (1936-1938), 66. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 070/069066, accessed 2003

she threw the butcher knife and stuck it in the wall up to the hilt.”⁴¹ In this upset of the antebellum social order, the mistress was forced to flee the wrath of her slave and lock herself into an upstairs room out of fear for her life.

The mistress of the household could expect resistance to beatings not only from older bondswomen, but younger ones as well. Ex-slave Mary Armstrong said that when her mistress tried to whip her at the age of 10, “I picks up a rock ‘bout as big as half your fist and hits her right in the eye and busted the eyeball.”⁴²

Armstrong’s young age at the time is evidence not only of a natural human response to a culture of brutality, but also suggests behavior nurtured within an atmosphere of resistance.

In some instances, the conflicts between mistresses and their bondswomen continued even after slavery had ended. Rhody Holswell of Missouri said that when her former mistress struck her, she “grabbed her leg and would have broke her neck.”⁴³ When Minerva Davis’ mother was threatened with a beating by her former mistress, her mother retorted quite stiffly that “Miss Sallie Ann, we is free; you ain’t never got no right to whoop me no more care what I do.”⁴⁴ For many enslaved women, forced to endure stifling oppression during slavery, such acts of abuse after emancipation were intolerable.

⁴¹ John Rudd, “Told by John Rudd, an ex-slave,” Interview by Lauana Creel. *WPAIN, Vol. 5* (1936-1938), 170-171 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 050/174169, accessed 2003. The master of the household returned to find his wife locked in an upstairs room and was defiantly shown the butcher knife by Rudd’s mother.

⁴² Mary Armstrong, 26 Armstrong said she proceeded to tell her mistress that her act was in retribution for the beating death of her infant sister

⁴³ Rhody Holsell, “Ex-slave story,” Interview by J Tom Miles. *WPAMO, Vol. 10* (1936-1938), 192. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 100/205200, accessed 2003.

⁴⁴ Minerva Davis, “Interview with Davis, Mmerva,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 2* (1936-1938), 128 [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 022/130126, accessed 2003.

Overseers, masters and mistresses were the most immediate authorities in the slave regime, and thus were key targets of slaves' violent resistance. Yet they were not the only persons with power over slaves. Harriet Mason of Kentucky reacted violently when the mistresses' brother attempted to give her a beating. "Missis told her brother Sam one day to whoop me," Mason recalled, "Every time he hit me, I'd hit him."⁴⁵ Ex-slave Bryant Huff of Georgia said that his mother threw sticks at one of the "bosses," a fellow slave put in a place of authority over other slaves, when the man "approached her in a threatening manner."⁴⁶ Leonard Franklin claimed his mother threw a "shovelful of hot ashes" on a "paterole," a member of one of the many groups of white men in antebellum society given authority to punish slaves.⁴⁷

In the southern slave hierarchy, not only did white adults wield authority; even white children were given power over the lives of those held in bondage. These young figures not only witnessed the brutality that pervaded antebellum society, but learned as well to be brutal toward adults who might at one time have nursed or raised them. For some enslaved bondswomen, the indignity of being abused by the children of their masters and mistress incited violent resistance. When the young master of the plantation began to beat ex-slave Ellen Cragin's mother with a stick, the one time nursemaid is said to have turned upon the boy and nearly beat him to death. "I'm

⁴⁵ Harriet Mason, "Story of Aunt Harriet Mason, age 100 – a slave girl," Interview by Sue Higgins. *WPAKY, Vol 7* (1936-1938), 32 [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 070/034031, accessed 2003

⁴⁶ Bryant Huff, "Bryant Huff Old slave story," Interview by Adella S. Dixon *WPAGA, Vol. 4, Part 2* (1937), 240. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 042/241238, accessed 2003.

⁴⁷ Leonard Franklin, 337 Pateroles, or pattyrolers—probably patrollers—were groups of white men charged with the civic duty of controlling the slaves. The narratives are filled with recounts of these patrols that would whip any slave found away from his or her owner or gathering for illegal functions. Many ex-slaves, either through accident or intention, referred to the Ku Klux Klan as pattyrollers and vice versa. The act of throwing hot ashes or coals on these figures, to ward them off, is so common throughout the narratives it is most likely a folktale.

goin to kill you,” Cragin recalled her mother saying angrily to the boy; “these black titties sucked you, and then you come out here to beat me.”⁴⁸ When Delicia Patterson was slapped by one of her master’s daughters, she picked up a hoe and chased the girl all the way to the big house.⁴⁹ An anonymous slave woman sought revenge on the daughter of a jailer after the girl kicked her. “Whenever they sent you to the courthouse to be whipped,” the ex-slave said, “the jail keeper’s daughter give you a kick. . . . She kicked me once and when they took me out I sho did beat her. I scratched her everywhere I could.”⁵⁰ These acts of physical violence by bondswomen symbolized resistance to any agent of the slave system who attempted to brutalize them, no matter their authority, status, gender, race or age.

Yet these incidents of retribution must be viewed in context, as they do not reflect the behavior of all or even most enslaved black women. As stated previously, the WPA narratives only offer a minute cross-section of slave life in the final years of slavery. Furthermore, bondswomen had to weigh the choice of physical resistance against the reality of the power structure aligned against them. Each decision to react in a violent manner brought the risk of even greater brutality or other punishment by the white master class. Nearly all the women discussed within this chapter in fact paid in some way for their choice of resistance. The mother of Bryant Huff, mentioned above, succeeded in frightening off the slave boss through physical resistance. However, when he returned later that night, accompanied by the master, there was little she could do to fend off both men, who gave her a severe beating for her prior

⁴⁸ Ellen Cragin, “Escapes on cow,” Interview by Samuel S. Taylor. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 2* (1936-1938), 42 [collection-online], LOC, accession no 022/046042, accessed 2003.

⁴⁹ Delicia Patterson, “Delicia had some temper,” Interview. *WPAMO, Vol 10* (1936-1938), 270. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 100/274269, accessed 2003

⁵⁰ Anonymous, “Mistreatment of Slaves,” 298

insolence.⁵¹ That the slave master took the flouting of an underling so seriously illustrates that Huff was punished not so much for her actions against the slave boss, but for her rebelliousness against the system that the slave boss represented.

Sending away slaves deemed impudent or uncontrollable was also common, as such individuals were seen not only as bothersome but a dangerous influence upon the larger slave populace. Such a punishment could result in a bondswoman being permanently separated from family members. After John Rudd's mother confronted her mistress, she was sold away by their master, and it is uncertain if Rudd ever saw her again.⁵² Resistance to violence could also be lethal for bondswomen. Henry Essex stated that when his grandmother refused to be whipped, the master "hauls off an' kicks granny, mashin' her stomick in," causing her death three days later.⁵³

Enslaved women were thus aware that their actions could affect not only themselves, but also their families and other slaves. This may account for the reluctance or inability of many to engage in physical resistance. Yet the risk of such penalties did not wholly deter some bondswomen from meeting violence with violence. Sophia Word almost shrugged off the whipping she received by her master for her act of violent resistance to his wife. "I wuz given a terrible beating with a whip," she said, "but I did'nt care fer I give the mistress a good'un too."⁵⁴ The Georgia bondswoman who beat the jailer's white daughter was aware of the consequences of her actions, but favored revenge over caution. "I knew they would

⁵¹ Bryant Huff, 240. Huff said the black slave boss and master apprehended his mother from their cabin, tied her up and took her down the road where she was severely beaten.

⁵² John Rudd, 171. Rudd said he grieved at the loss of his mother over this incident but was heartened later in life to learn she was treated well after she was sold. Yet the narrative does not implicitly reveal whether mother and son were ever physically reunited.

⁵³ Henry Essex, 395

⁵⁴ Sophia Word, 66-67

beat me again,” she stated, “but I didn’t care so long as I had fixed her.”⁵⁵ Another anonymous Georgia bondswoman stripped naked and whipped for fighting her master used her predicament to rebuke antebellum society:

After they finished whippin’ me, I told them they needn’t think they had done somethin’ by strippin’ me in front of all them folk ‘cause they had also stripped their mamas and sisters. God had made us all, and he made us just alike.⁵⁶

This bondswoman thus not only criticized the slave system, but also pointed out the hypocrisy of southern ideals of white womanhood.

Key to the indignation of those who resisted bondage was the firm belief that slavery was a moral wrong. Despite the pious tone assumed by Southern white leaders, passages from the narratives show that there were enslaved women who saw only hypocrisy. Leah Garrett recalled that after her master hung a slave woman on a pole and beat her unmercifully “he left her swingin’ dar and went to church, preached, and called hisself servin’ God.”⁵⁷ For these bondswomen divine violent retribution upon hypocritical authorities of the antebellum social order seemed only fitting. Leah Garrett in fact believed that her brutal master was killed by God.⁵⁸ Former slave Julia Brown said that when a cruel and brutal slave master died “we all said God tired of Mister Jim being so mean and kilt him.”⁵⁹ In the minds of these bondswomen, divine retribution sometimes manifested itself in acts of equalizing justice. Annie Page, for instance, recalled that after her master attempted to gouge her

⁵⁵ *Mistreatment of Slaves*, 298

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 292-294

⁵⁷ Leah Garrett, 12

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Julia Brown, “Ah always had a hard time,” Interview by Geneva Tonsill. *WPAGA, Vol. 4, Part 1* (1936-1938), 145. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 041/145141, accessed 2003.

eyes out, his wife gave birth to a blind infant that “just lived ‘bout two weeks.”⁶⁰ Page claimed that the physical affliction and death of the child was the fault of its father’s cruelty. Ex-slave Sophia Word claimed that after a slave woman died at the hands of a cruel owner, her spirit returned to haunt him until “he hung himself.”⁶¹ These bondswomen viewed any act of violence or death that befell white authorities as evidence of the divine or the supernatural at work. For them, personal acts of retributive violence and physical resistance were thus morally just and no different than acts of God.

Under an oppressive antebellum slave regime, some bondswomen resorted to violence not only to stop a beating or exact vengeance, but because of a perceived moral wrong. An unfair rule or request, for example, sometimes led a bondswoman to contemplate or carry out an act of violence. Ex-slave Mary Estes Peters of Arkansas remembered that her mother quietly pondered getting a gun to kill her owners after she was denied the right to see her injured child.⁶² Mollie Moss of Tennessee claimed that when a master told a slave woman to stop nursing her sick infant and return to work, the woman flew into a rage, picking up a shovel and beating the master over the head.⁶³ Former slave Smoky Eulenburg of Jackson, Missouri, said that when the mistress of the house came to his mother’s cabin and tried to sell her, his mother “jes’ pushed her out de door and said she wouldn’t go . . . so dey had to call it off.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Annie Page, “Interview with Page, Annie,” Interview by Mrs. Bernice Bowden. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 5* (1936-1938), 239. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 025/240235, accessed 2003.

⁶¹ Sophia Word, 67.

⁶² Mary Estes Peters, 327

⁶³ Mollie Moss, “Subject – ex-slave stories,” Interview *WPATN, Vol 15* (1936-1938), 58-59. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 150/058055, accessed 2003.

⁶⁴ Smoky Eulenburg, “Eulenburg, Smoky,” Interview. *WPAMO, Vol 10* (1937), 112. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 100/114109, accessed 2003.

The narratives also record instances in which some slave women used violence to preserve their dignity against perceived grievous insults. As a child, Ellen Cragin claimed she got into a fight with one of the mistress's daughters after being teased over her Native American heritage. She further threatened to beat any child who dared say her father had been whipped.⁶⁵ Martha Bradley also demanded that whites speak to her in a respectful manner. "One day I wuz workin' in de field and de overseer he come 'roun and say sumpin' to me he had no bizness say," she recalled, "I took my hoe and knocked him plum down."⁶⁶ Susan Hamilton told the story of a domestic slave named Clory who "didn't take foolishness from anybody."⁶⁷ When the mistress of the house found fault with the manner in which the bondswoman laundered her clothes, Hamilton related that "Clory didn's do a t'ing but pick her up bodily an' throw 'er out de door."⁶⁸ The narratives also give evidence of slave women who refused to be treated like chattel or mere property, and reacted violently when those in the slave authority attempted to do so. Frank Cooper said that when a white bidder at a slave auction placed his "two dirty fingahs" into his mother's mouth to inspect her teeth, she responded by clamping down and biting him.⁶⁹ Some former slave women especially demanded respect after emancipation, and lashed out violently against abuse. Peter Clifton of South Carolina said that when a former

⁶⁵ Ellen Cragin, 43

⁶⁶ Martha Bradley, 46

⁶⁷ Susan Hamilton, 234

⁶⁸ Ibid Hamilton further related that Clory begged to be sold following this incident, not because it seems she was sorry for her actions but because she claimed she would eventually kill the mistress if continually harassed in such a manner. She was beaten severely as a result, to the point of near death, but was said to become only more obstinate and uncontrollable.

⁶⁹ Frank Cooper, 62

master cursed an ex-bondswoman, “she turnt on him wid de hoe and gashed him ‘bout de head wid it.”⁷⁰

The narratives also describe bondswomen who not only used violence to resist personal assaults, but who lashed out on behalf of others, especially children. Lucindy Allison related such a case as told to her by an old slave named Aunt Mandy. When an overseer threatened to whip Mandy’s pregnant sister, their mother warned him that, “if he put her daughter there in that hole she’d cop [chop] him up in pieces wid her hoe.”⁷¹ Former slave Fannie Moore of North Carolina claimed that her mother often fought the overseer for whipping her children.⁷² When former slave J.T. Tims bit his mistress for trying to beat him, she called another slave to whip him. His mother, however, came out with a butcher knife and threatened, ‘That’s my child and if you hit him, I’ll kill you.’⁷³

The narratives suggest that some slave women threatened persons who sought to inflict harm on their spouses. An anonymous ex-slave in the narratives related that when overseers appeared at her cabin to force her sick husband to work, she warned that if they touched him, “they wouldn’t touch nothin’ else.”⁷⁴ At times, these bondswomen also used violence to intervene on behalf of non-family members whom

⁷⁰ Peter Clifton, “Ex-slave 89 years old,” Interview by W W. Dixon *WPASC, Vol 14, Part 1* (1937), 208. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 141/208205, accessed 2003. According to Clifton the former master shot the ex-slave woman in turn. In a turn of fate, the new authorities of the post-antebellum society arrested and imprisoned the former master in nearby Charleston, where he was subjected to abuse by black jailers

⁷¹ Lucindy Allison, “Interview with Allison, Lucindy,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 1* (1936-1938), 42. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 021/046041, accessed 2003.

⁷² Fannie Moore, “Interview with Fannie Moore, ex-slave,” Interview by Marjorie Jones. *WPANC, Vol 11, Part 2* (1937), 130 [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 112/131127, accessed 2003.

⁷³ J T Tims, “Interview with Tims, J.T.,” Interview by Samuel S Taylor. *WPAAR, Vol. 2, Part 6* (1937), 336-337. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 026/341336, accessed 2003.

⁷⁴ Anonymous, “Mistreatment of Slaves,” 300

they felt were being unjustly treated. While witnessing the severe beating of a male slave by his master, John Day said his mother grabbed a butcher knife and warned the man “Iffen you hits him ‘nother lick, I’ll use this on you.”⁷⁵ The case of Day’s mother is not only of interest because she placed her own life in peril to save another slave with whom she shared no stated relation, but also because she dared threaten a white slave owner who was not her master.⁷⁶ These acts of aggression on behalf of others suggest a larger pattern of resistance to an entire system and institution that oppressed all enslaved people. It appears that some slave women recognized themselves as part of a community, and perhaps a subjugated class, whose members they sought to protect.⁷⁷

Slave women’s resistance to slavery directly affected their relations with children. Historian Deborah Gray White suggests “relationships between mother and child . . . superseded those between husband and wife.”⁷⁸ In a culture that could easily separate wife from husband and parent from offspring, there were no guarantees that any mother could not lose her child at any given moment. “I have seen mothers sold away from their babies and other children, and they cryin’ when she left,” recounted former slave Charity Austin, “I have seen husbands sold from their wives, and wives sold from their husbands.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ John Day, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” Interview *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 1* (1936-1938), 302. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 161/309302, accessed 2003

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* Day stated his mother referred to the slave only as Taylor, who lived on an adjoining farm. There was no mention of a familial tie, used often throughout the narratives to indicate kinship.

⁷⁷ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 119-141. White speaks of the existence of an interdependent and cooperative private female slave network

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 159

⁷⁹ Charity Austin, “A slave story,” Interview by T Pat Matthews *WPANC, Vol 11, Part 1* (1936-1938), 59. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 111/062058, accessed 2003 See also Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1995)

It is evident from the narratives, which offer glimpses into the lives of slave women through recollections of their sons and daughters, that familial bonds between mothers and their children generally remained strong and intact—despite the strain placed upon them.⁸⁰ Slave children who lived in close proximity to their mothers at times witnessed gross acts of violence committed upon them. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, young Ben Simpson of Texas witnessed the brutal murder of his mother by her master.⁸¹ Many other former slaves attested to similar traumatic experiences during their childhood. Oliver Bell of Alabama related that his first memory in life was that of his mother being whipped.⁸² As a child in slavery Mattie Curtis repeatedly saw her mother beaten by their master. “I’ve seen him whup my mammy wid al de clothes offen her back,” Curtis said, “He’d buck her down on a barrel an’ beat de blood outen her.”⁸³ For Charlie Hunter, who spent his childhood as a slave in North Carolina, the sight of his mother being beaten by her master left a profound impression. “He would get mad ‘bout most anything, take my mother, chain her down to a log and whup her unmercifully,” Hunter recalled vividly, “while I, a little boy, could do nothing but stan’ there an’ cry, an’ see her whupped.”⁸⁴

Such images of abuse left a powerful impact on the psyche of bondswomen’s children, who in turn sometimes harbored anger and resentment of authorities in the slave regime. For ex-slave Minnie Fulkes of Virginia, vivid childhood memories of her mother being repeatedly whipped caused a hatred of whites that lasted well into

⁸⁰ Historian Barbara Bush suggests that these strong mother-child bonds may have a basis in West African societal norms. See Bush, “The Family Tree is Not Cut.”

⁸¹ Ben Simpson, 27.

⁸² Oliver Bell, 41.

⁸³ Mattie Curtis, “Before and after the war,” Interview by Mary A. Hicks. *WPANC, Vol. 11, Part 1* (1937), 217. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 111/220216, accessed 2003.

⁸⁴ Charlie H. Hunter, “Charlie H. Hunter,” Interview by T. Pat Matthews. *WPANC, Vol. 11, Part 1* (1937), 454. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 111/457453, accessed 2003

old age. “Dis ol’ man, now, would start beatin’ her nekkid ‘til the blood urn down her back to her heels,” she recounted. “Lord, Lord, I hate white people and de flood waters gwine drown some mo.”⁸⁵ Recalling the abuses dealt to her mother, Eliza Hays commented “that’s the reason I ain’t got no use for white folks.”⁸⁶

The hatred induced by such trauma sometimes led to murderous thoughts of vengeance from many of these children. “I’m glad I was not old in that time,” Eliza Hays declared, “I would have killed anybody that treated me that way.”⁸⁷ Even in her old age former slave Ellen Cragin was moved to anger by the childhood memory of her mother buried stomach down into a pit and whipped by her master, Tom Polk. “I’m an old woman,” Cragin said, “but Tom Polk better not come ‘round me now even.”⁸⁸ Cragin claimed to have entertained murderous thoughts towards Polk and to have come close to acting them out. “I went out one day and got a gun,” she recounted. “I said to myself, ‘If you whip my mother today, I am goin’ to shoot you.’”⁸⁹

Sometimes roles were reversed, and enslaved women found themselves the protected rather than the protector. After watching his mother’s severe beating, and witnessing the forced miscarriage of his aunt by a fellow slave who held the position of overseer, Henry Cheatam swore a childhood oath of vengeance. “I promise myself when I growed up,” he recounted, “dat I was agoin’ to kill dat nigger [sic] iffien it was

⁸⁵ Minnie Fulkes, “Interview of Mrs Minnie Fulkes,” Interview by Susie Byrd *WPAVA, Vol 17* (1937), 11 [collection-online], LOC, accession no 170/014011, accessed 2003

⁸⁶ Eliza Hays, “Interview with Hays, Eliza,” Interview by Samuel S. Taylor *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 3* (1937), 223. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 023/222221, accessed 2003

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ellen Cragin, 45.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

de las' thing I eber done.”⁹⁰ When former slave Douglas Dorsey witnessed his mother's brutal attack with a butcher knife by their white mistress, the boy made up his mind to kill his owner by putting strychnine rat poison into her coffee.⁹¹

While there is no direct evidence in the narratives that slave mothers prodded their children to have such thoughts of violent reprisal, these bondswomen were nevertheless at the center of these matters. Thus, in an indirect fashion tied to gender and women's roles as primary caregivers, some children of bondswomen were influenced to plot violent retribution against the slave institution. Ex-slave George Brown, for example, related that as a boy he threw bricks at an overseer to stop him from beating his mother.⁹² A young Warren McKinney also “did not approve” of the switching of his mother, and threw rocks to stop his master's actions.⁹³ “I hated him,” McKinney recalled, “She was crying. . . . I chunked him with rocks.”⁹⁴ Sometimes the perpetrators of these acts of violence were successful in their goals. Ex-slave Hal Huston said that when his older brother heard their mother crying from a beating, he “came running, picked up a chunk and that overseer stopped a' beating her.”⁹⁵ William Moore also ran to his mother's aid as a boy, taking on the master of the household in a physical confrontation:

I see Marse Tom got mammy tied to a tree with her clothes pullded down and he's layin' it on her with the bullwhip, and the blood am running' down her

⁹⁰ Henry Cheatam, 66.

⁹¹ Douglas Dorsey, “Douglas Dorsey,” Interview by James Johnson *WPAFL, Vol 3* (1937), 94-95. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 030/096093, accessed 2003. Speaking for Dorsey, the interviewer claimed the boy's plan was only averted by the coming of freedom.

⁹² George Brown, “Interview with Brown, George,” Interview by Bernice Bowden. *WPAAR, Vol. 2, Part 1* (1937), 282. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 021/286281, accessed 2003.

⁹³ Warren McKinney, “Ex-slave - history,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 5* (1936-1938), 30. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 025/035030, accessed 2003

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Hal Huston, “Hal Huston Age 90 yrs. Oklahoma City, Okla.,” Interview *WPAOK, Vol 13* (1936-1938), 146. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 130/150145, accessed 2003

eyes and off her back. I goes crazy. . . . and sees a big rock, and I takes it and throws it and it catches Marse Tome in the skull and he goes down like a poled ox.⁹⁶

These instances of physical resistance, on the part of children in defense of their mothers, shows that not only could slave women utilize violence in order to protect themselves and others, but that their gender-based roles could incite others to act similarly on their behalf.

In the matter of slave insurrections and the role of bondswomen in such events, there is no documented evidence of a large-scale plot being led and centrally implemented by a woman in North America.⁹⁷ That is not to say that slave women were not often participants in insurrections. One of the first major slave rebellions in North America occurred in colonial New York in 1708. A slave woman was executed for having participated in the uprising. In fact, although the slave men were hanged, this slave woman was burned alive for her act of violent resistance.⁹⁸ In a New York Revolt that took place in 1712, twenty-three to twenty-five slaves armed with guns, hatchets, and swords, set fire to a building in the middle of town. The rebels lay in wait, attacking white colonists when they gathered to extinguish the blaze. At least nine whites were killed while another six were wounded. The rebels dispersed but

⁹⁶ William Moore, 134-135

⁹⁷ In the Caribbean and South America, where slave insurrections were more numerous and aided by a host of geographic and demographic factors, there are several cases of slave rebels led by women. A key example was the Jamaican slave maroon and rebel leader dubbed 'Nanny' See also Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 63-73, and Karla Gottlieb, *The Mother of Us All: A History of Queen Nanny, Leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2000)

⁹⁸ Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 169. Burning at the stake for women involved in slave insurrections or acts of murder, rather than hanging as was reserved for their male counterparts, occurred on more than a few occasions for reasons undetermined

were soon captured. Six of the captives committed suicide and one of these was a woman. The rest, including a pregnant woman, were captured.⁹⁹

In 1739 yet another rebellion took place in New York under the leadership of an Angolan born slave named Jemmy, whose band of slaves numbered over one hundred. They killed some twenty-five whites before encountering a militia force that resulted in the death of thirty of their followers and the execution of near all the rest. As in the aforementioned case, a good number of these rebels were women.¹⁰⁰ Participation in revolts continued into the antebellum era; one of the forty slaves to join Virginian slave rebel Nat Turner's band was a woman.¹⁰¹

Often overlooked in major North American slave revolts were those slave women who were the mothers and wives of male ringleaders. In the case of Gabriel Prosser's slave plot of 1800, his wife Nanny was a known co-conspirator.¹⁰² Nat Turner's African born mother and American born grandmother were both instrumental in shaping his outlook on slavery and resistance.¹⁰³

However, the WPA narratives are inadequate for documenting bondswomen's involvement in major slave plots. First, they contain almost no information on incidents of large insurrections because North America provided significant obstacles

⁹⁹ Angela Davis, "Reflections of the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar*, 3 no. 4 (December 1971) 2-15.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Johnson and Patricia Smith, *Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 94-106

¹⁰¹ Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee*, 80. A survivor of Nat Turner's insurrection, a white mistress named Mrs. Barrow, testified that one of her slaves—a woman named Lucy—tried to stop her from escaping the insurgents.

¹⁰² Bennett, *Before the Mayflower*, 125. See also Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder: Gabriel's Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992)

¹⁰³ Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee*, 10-13, 29-30

to large-scale uprisings.¹⁰⁴ Not only did the slave owning class build the military and police force needed to sustain the system, enforce its laws and put down any insurrection, so also did whites hold a numerical advantage. Even as late as 1860 slaves made up only 34 percent of the population of the Southern states as a whole, and in only two of these states were they a majority.¹⁰⁵ For these reasons large-scale slave revolts did not occur in North America at the same rate or magnitude as in other slave owning regions of the New World—each of which had its own physical and social dynamics. Furthermore, it must be remembered that the ex-slaves interviewed by the WPA accounted for only 2 percent of slaves alive before the Civil War. Given these basic facts, it is not surprising the collection sheds little light on the role slave women may have played in large plots and insurrections.¹⁰⁶

While the WPA narratives do not speak of large-scale plots, they do report acts of physical resistance by bondswomen that were either premeditated, carried out in conjunction with others, or both. Jake McLeod of South Carolina claimed that an old slave woman named Peggy plotted to poison her master and mistress because they were “mean to her.” McLeod understood that Peggy planned and acted alone.¹⁰⁷ Yet in other plots, slave women were described as having worked in league with other slaves, either in pairs or small groups. As was the case in the large-scale plot led by Gabriel Prosser, whose wife Nanny was involved, individual accounts within the

¹⁰⁴ There is some mention of large-scale slave insurrections in the narratives, even that of Nat Turner’s famed revolt, but they are relatively small

¹⁰⁵ Shapiro, “Historiography and Slave Revolt and Rebelliousness in the United States,” 135.

¹⁰⁶ Norman R. Yetman, “Race and Representativeness,” in *An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives*, par. 4. [online] (LOC, Manuscript Division, 2001). Accessed 2003, available from <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro00.html> See also Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*.

¹⁰⁷ Jake McLeod, “Jake McLeod Ex-slave, 83 years,” Interview by Lucile Young and H. Grady Davis. *WPASC, Vol 14, Part 3* (1937), 158. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 143/160157, accessed 2003.

narratives describe slave women who conspired with their husbands to strike out at the slave regime. Former slave Dave Lawson of North Carolina told of how his grandmother and grandfather, Lissa and Cleve, conspired and carried out an ingenious plot to murder their master after he threatened to separate the pair by auctioning one away.¹⁰⁸ The two kidnapped their master, tied him up, and then forced boiling water down his throat through a funnel in hopes of murdering him without leaving behind any evidence. Though the story was told as though Cleve was the main conspirator, Lawson clearly implicated his grandmother in the final deed. “She didn’ tell Cleve not to do it nor nothing;” Lawson said, “she jus’ filled de pitcher wid hot water, den she went over an’ set down on de floor an’ hol’ Marse Drew’s head so he couldn’t move.”¹⁰⁹ While Lawson claimed Cleve may have done the pouring, he also claimed his grandmother was a willful accomplice who felt justified in her actions. “Lissa brung another pitcher full [of boiling water],” Lawson told his interviewer, “an’ dey wuzn’ no pity in her eyes as she watched Marse Drew fightin’ his way to torment, cussin’ all niggers [sic] an’ Abraham Lincoln.”¹¹⁰ The details of the Drew murder were passed down to Dave Lawson; Neither he nor anyone but Cleve, Lissa and Master Drew were witnesses to the event. Though court records attest to a similar incident of a slave couple murdering their master by pouring boiling water down his throat, the level of detail in regard to motive and intent, as given by Lawson, cannot be verified.¹¹¹ There is no way to discern exactly how involved Lissa

¹⁰⁸ Dave Lawson, “Dave Lawson. Ex-slave story,” Interview by Travis Jordan. *WPANC, Vol 11, Part 2* (1937), 43-50 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 112/047043, accessed 2003.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

was in this plot or how she reacted to her master's death. Rather, what we do know is that she was a participant and accordingly punished for the alleged crime.¹¹²

Former slave Elijah Green of South Carolina told a similar story about a couple named Jane and Harry, who plotted to kill not only their master but his entire family in retribution for a whipping. "They poison the breakfast one morning," Green said, "an' if two of the family hadn't over sleep, they would a been dead. . . . The others die almos' instantly."¹¹³ In this case we have a slave woman who worked in concert with her spouse to exact revenge upon not only the perpetrator of brutality against them, but numerous other figures in the household who symbolized the slave regime.

Slave women did not always collaborate with men to carry out acts of violence. As Deborah Gray White points out, "the organization of female slave work and social activities not only tended to separate women and men, but it also generated female cooperation and interdependence."¹¹⁴ Thus in terms of violent resistance, there were times that bondswomen relied only on each other. In the following instance, women worked in a communal fashion to save another. Former slave Bell Butler of Indiana said her mother, Cheney, and her aunt maimed their master to resist brutal treatment. "After whipping them very hard, he started to throw them down, to go after their eyes," Butler stated, "Cheney grabbed one of his hands, her sister grabbed his

¹¹¹ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 114-115. Bynum points to a court account of a murder in 1857, similar to that described by Lawson, which involved two male slaves. Lawson's account some eighty years later claimed that his grandparents, Cleve and Lissa, were the actual murderers. Bynum proposes this could indicate that four slaves were involved in the murder, but only two of them were given the benefit of a trial

¹¹² Both Lissa and Cleve were found guilty and executed by hanging.

¹¹³ Elijah Green, "Ex-slave born December 25, 1843," Interview by Augustus Ladson. *WPASC, Vol 14, Part 2* (1936-1938), 198. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 142/199195, accessed 2003.

¹¹⁴ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 124.

other hand, each girl bit a finger entirely off each hand of their master.”¹¹⁵ Ex-slave Chana Littlejohn claimed that when an overseer tried to force two women to go back to work, “Dey flew at him an’ whupped him.”¹¹⁶ Former slave Fannie Alexander recounted a tale told to her by a mother-in-law in which several slave women chased away an overseer, intent on beating one of them. According to Alexander, “the women started with the hoes to him and run him clear out of the field,” and further, “they would have killed him if he hadn’t got out of the way.”¹¹⁷

Some slave women enlisted the aid of others to carry out acts of conspired or spontaneous violence. Ex-slave Charity Morris told how her cousin Sallie plotted and murdered her master, who would beat and lock up his slaves at night, and then called upon the aid of a fellow slave to dismember and hide the body. “Dat mawnin soon when he come tuh let em’ out she cracked him in de haid wid de poker,” Morris said, “an made little Joe help put his haid in de fiuh place.”¹¹⁸ Dianah Watson said that during a brutal whipping her aunt turned the tables on the overseer and incited other slaves to assist in his murder. “Aunt Susie Ann . . . fall at his feets like she passed out and he put up the whip and she trips him and gits the whip and whips him till he

¹¹⁵ Belle Butler, “Folklore,” Interview by Anna Pritchett. *WPAIN, Vol 5* (1937), 40 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 050/044040, accessed 2003.

¹¹⁶ Chana Littlejohn, “Chana Littlejohn,” Interview by T. Pat Matthews. *WPANC, Vol 11, Part 2* (1936-1938), 57. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 112/058054, accessed 2003.

¹¹⁷ Fannie Alexander, “Interview with Alexander, Fannie,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 1* (1936-1938), 30. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 021/035030, accessed 2003.

¹¹⁸ Charity Morris, “Slavery days – cruel master murdered by slaves,” Interview by Pernella Anderson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 5* (1936-1938), 149. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 025/154149, accessed 2003.

couldn't stand up," Watson stated, "Then some of the niggers [sic] threwed him off a cliff and broke his neck."¹¹⁹

Altogether, such events come closest to fitting the common conception of insurrection, albeit on a smaller but no less significant level. They provide evidence of bondswomen conspiring singly, in pairs, or in groups to attack authority figures who abused them. Slave women who resisted the social order with physical force could have a profound effect on the slave community, which might perceive them to be heroes or martyrs. Jennie Hendricks remembered a slave woman whose refusal to submit to a whipping by an overseer benefited the entire slave community. "Once he tried to whip one of the women," Hendricks recalled, "but when she refused to allow him to whip her he never tried to whip any of the others."¹²⁰ When a master killed Henry Essex's grandmother for refusing to be whipped, the slaves on the plantation gave her an elaborate funeral in spite of the master's wishes. "De slaves puts de coffin on de cyart," he recounted, "hin' de two black hosses an' wid six or maybe seben hundert niggers [sic] follerin' dey goes ter de Simms' graveyard an' buries her."¹²¹ The aforementioned Sallie, cousin of Charity Morris, is immortalized in song for her murder of a cruel master. Morris recounted the ditty as follows:

If yo don' bleave Aunt Sallie kilt Marse Jim
de blood is on huh under dress.¹²²

The manner in which these stories were passed down suggests that slave women who violently challenged the boundaries of slavery were sometimes

¹¹⁹ Dianah Watson, "Ex-slave stories (Texas)," Interview. *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 4* (1936-1938), 145. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 164/150144, accessed 2003.

¹²⁰ Jennie Hendricks, "Ex slave Jennie Hendricks," Interview by Edwin Driskell *WPAGA, Vol 4, Part 3* (1937), 5. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 043/004001, accessed 2003.

¹²¹ Henry Essex, 395-396.

¹²² Charity Morris, 149 Morris went on to say that the song's popularity led to Sallie's eventual capture for the crime of killing her master, and she was hung.

immortalized with praise by their descendants. David Lawson recalled with dramatic flair his grandparents' murder of their master, as though it were an epic tale.

"Everytime I shut my eyes I seed Marse Drew Norwood wid dat funnel in his mouf," Lawson said, "an' de hot steam blowin' up like a cloud 'round' his wicked face an' skeered eyes."¹²³ Ellen Cragin made repeated reference to the beating her mother gave to her young master with a sense of pride: "I was sure glad when she beat up young Tom."¹²⁴ The mother's violent defiance influenced her daughter well into freedom. Cragin recounted that when her second husband slapped her in an act of domestic abuse, "I went to the drawer and got my pistol out. . . . I told him to leave there fast."¹²⁵ After enduring the brutality of slavery, it seemed some slave women refused to endure abuse from anyone ever again.¹²⁶

Some ex-slaves elevated tales of defiant female forebears to folkloric heights. Lula Jackson's description of how her sister Crecie defied an overseer's whipping stretched the imagination:

Early Hurt had an overseer named Sanders. He tied my sister Crecie to a stump to whip her. Crecie was stout and heavy. She was a grown young woman and big and strong. Sanders had two dogs with him in case he would have trouble with anyone. When he started layin' that lash on Crecie's back, she pulled up that stump and whipped him and the dogs both.¹²⁷

Lulu Wilson of Texas likely also exaggerated when she bragged that her mother "was chased by them bloody hounds and she jus' picked up a club and laid they skull

¹²³ Dave Lawson, 44.

¹²⁴ Ellen Cragin, 45.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 48

¹²⁶ See also White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 177-189 White discusses issues of sexism, the dissolution of the female slave network, attempts at imposed patriarchy, domestic abuse and the multifaceted nature of gender interdependence that freedom and marriage brought to ex-slave women following emancipation.

¹²⁷ Lula Jackson, "Whippings," Interview by Samuel S. Taylor. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 4* (1936-1938), 18 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 024/021018, accessed 2003.

open.”¹²⁸ Pauline Powell claimed that her aunt killed not one but two overseers by emasculating them both. “The last one was whipping her with a black snake whip and she grabbed him,” Howell said, “Grabbed his privates and pulled ‘em out by the roots. . . . That the way she killed both the overseers. . . . Cause she knowed that was show death.”¹²⁹

The folkloric nature of these recollections makes them no less significant. They revealed that physical resistance by slave women was viewed with admiration by others held in bondage. Violent incidents carried out by bondswomen against the slave regime did not appear to surprise these ex-slaves, but were remembered as natural occurrences that dotted the landscape of antebellum society. Since most slaves dared not express their resistance in a physical manner, they may have sought to live through the acts of these legendary women. Perhaps the highest honor accorded an act of resistance was to have it enter the annals of myth, thus highlighting its profound impact and importance. Passing down such tales in itself functioned as an act of resistance.

Whether fact or folklore, women’s resistance stories transcended slavery and continued into the tumultuous era following emancipation. William Hamilton of Texas said that when the Ku Klux Klan came to terrorize a former slave woman named Jane Benson, she filled a pail with ashes from the fireplace and “lets dem have de embers in de face.”¹³⁰ The legendary exploits of Lulu Wilson’s mother also continued on as well after slavery. “My maw was in her cabin with a week old baby

¹²⁸ Lulu Wilson, 191

¹²⁹ Pauline Howell, “Interview with Howell, Pauline,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 3* (1936-1938), 342. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 023/342341, accessed 2003.

¹³⁰ William Hamilton, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” Interview. *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 2* (1936-1938), 107. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 162/111106, accessed 2003.

and one night twelve Klu Kluxses done come to the place,” Wilson said, “They come in by ones and she whooped ‘em one at a time.”¹³¹

The object of a slave woman’s retribution was not always the individual who abused or offended her. A few lashed out at symbols of the institution, which included the white infants of their owners. Mollie Malone claimed she would pinch her mistresses’ small children while tending them.¹³² Former slave Mattie Fannen said that she had received so many whippings by the age of five that when put in charge of her mistresses’ infants, she would “drap e’m, leave ‘em, pinch ‘em, quit walking ‘em and rocking ‘em” as retribution for her treatment.¹³³ Slavery’s brutality drove some slave women to even more drastic actions. After all, their owners’ infants would one day grow to hold authority over them. Waters Brooks said that when the master’s child refused to obey his mother’s orders, she picked up the boy and threw him into a river.¹³⁴ Years earlier, Brooks revealed, his mother had been victim of a severe beating in which she was strung up by a meat hook and whipped by three men repeatedly “from seven in the morning until nine at night.”¹³⁵ Although Brooks did not claim that this traumatic event contributed to his mother’s later actions, his juxtaposition of the incidents suggests he believed it did.

The tale told by Amy Chapman of Alabama certainly ties in murderous intentions towards masters’ infants to prior acts of brutality suffered by slave women.

¹³¹ Lulu Wilson, 194.

¹³² Mollie Malone, “Mollie Malone – ex-slave interviewed,” Interview by Henrietta Carlisle and Alberta Minor. *WPAGA, Vol. 4, Part 3* (1936), 104. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 043/107104, accessed 2003

¹³³ Mattie Fannen, “Interview with Fannen, Mattie,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 2* (1936-1938), 269 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 022/268264, accessed 2003
Fannen’s actions may have derived from daily acts of resistance she claimed to see in her early life, most noticeably numerous fights between the overseer and male slaves.

¹³⁴ Waters Brooks, 256.

¹³⁵ Ibid

“I will tell you . . . ’bout a mean man who whupped a cullid woman near ‘bout to death,” related Amy, “She got so mad at him dat she tuk his baby chile whut was playin’ roun’ de yard . . . and th’owed it in a pot of lye.”¹³⁶ It is difficult to discern whether this latter tale actually occurred or whether it is a folktale passed down among former slaves. In either case it illustrates the lengths to which some enslaved women were prepared to go in resisting a culture of abuse. The fact that such tales are told without condemnation or moral judgment of the slave women involved suggests that the narrators condoned their actions, or at least sympathized with them.

When authorities of the antebellum regime, be they master, mistress, child or overseer, were not accessible some bondswomen attacked another symbol of the social order: property. Property was destroyed for various reasons. Adelaide Vaughn claimed that when her mother was made to do unreasonable work, “she rattled the dishes ‘round in the pan and broke them.”¹³⁷ Other bondswomen damaged crops and livestock. Ex-slave Susie Johnson related the tale of her mother who “danced all over Masta’s cotton patch” in a fit of religious fervor.¹³⁸ Rhody Holsell said that as a bondswoman, she and another old woman went into a destructive bout of happiness upon learning of emancipation. “Me and another little old woman done some shoutin’ and hollerin’ when we heard ‘bout de freedom,” Holsell recounted, “We tore up some corn down in de field.”¹³⁹ There were other bondswomen, however, whose violent acts were much more damaging. “Once an old slave woman lost her mind,” said Lee

¹³⁶ Amy Chapman, “De master’s good but overseers mean,” Interview by Ruby Pickens Tartt. *WPAAL, Vol 1* (1937), 60 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 010/064058, accessed 2003. According to Chapman the child died from its wounds.

¹³⁷ Adelaide Vaughn, 8.

¹³⁸ Susie Johnson, “Susie Johnson – ex-slave,” Interview by Mary A. Crawford. *WPAGA, Vol. 4, Part 2* (1936), 344 [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 042/346343, accessed 2003.

¹³⁹ Holsell, 191.

Guidon, “She set his [master’s] barn fire and burned thirteen head of horses and mules together.”¹⁴⁰

A common method of trickery used by the slave community to both resist and outwit the slave system was theft. Historian Paul Escott defines theft by slaves as “the appropriation or re-appropriation of forbidden goods.”¹⁴¹ In the eyes of many of those enslaved, theft was a morally justified act of retribution upon an institution that was based on injustice. “Dey talks a heap ‘bout de niggers [sic] stealin,’” commented ex-slave Shang Harris, “Well, you know what was de fust stealin’ done? Hit was in Afriky, when de white folks stole de niggers [sic]”¹⁴² Within the WPA narratives there are well over one hundred accounts of theft spoken of by former slaves—though the actual amount was probably much larger.¹⁴³

To effectively carry out many of these deceptions, slaves relied on each other. The importance of secrecy in these acts of theft and subterfuge was highlighted in the folktale of bondswomen and the talkative parrot. This story often included a tattle-tale parrot—the property of white authorities—that revealed an act of theft on the part of a bondswoman and was consequently the victim of a violent revenge.

Former slave Angeline Jones of Arkansas claimed that a talkative parrot often revealed slaves’ thievery, for which they would receive a whipping. One bondswoman resolved to stop the parrot’s tattling. According to Jones the woman

¹⁴⁰ Lee Guidon, “Interview with Guidon, Lee,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 3* (1936), 121. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 023/120119, accessed 2003. See also Gregory B. Druling, “Female Labor, Malingering, and the Abuse of Equipments under Slavery: Evidence from the Marydale Plantation Diary,” *Southern Studies* 5 (Spring-Summer 1994): 31-49

¹⁴¹ Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, 76

¹⁴² Shang Harris, “Ex-slave interview,” Interview by Velma Bell. *WPAGA, Vol 4, Part 2* (1936-1938), 119. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 042/120117, accessed 2003

¹⁴³ Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, 76. Escott points out that the proportion of theft accounts changes with the race of interviewer, with there being more such accounts with black interviewers than with white interviewers

“sewed the parrot up” and “clipped his tongue at the same time so he could never do no good talking.”¹⁴⁴ Ex-slave Lucy Key, also of Arkansas, told a similar story of a troublesome parrot that her aunt scared “till he took bad off sick and died.”¹⁴⁵ After a parrot told on ex-slave Sophia Word of Kentucky for stealing cookies, for which she received a whipping, Word claimed she “killed the bird.”¹⁴⁶ A nearly identical tale was told by Hattie Matthews of Missouri, who recalled that a fellow bondswoman took a parrot “an wrung its neck” after the bird informed the mistress of a particular theft.¹⁴⁷ The folkloric tradition of the tattle-tale parrot served to legitimize acts of violence against symbols of the slave regime.

Some bondswomen resorted to even more drastic acts of retribution, than those involving mere physical violence. Understanding their own value as property in the eyes of their owners, these women sought to rob slaveholders of their most prized commodity—themselves. Ex-slave Margaret Bryant said her mother threatened she would “rather drowned” her self than “take a lick.”¹⁴⁸ Delicia Patterson threatened suicide to avoid being bought by a cruel slave owner. “Old Judge Miller don’t you bid for me,” Patterson recalled herself telling him while standing on the auction block, “cause if you do, I would not live on your plantation, I will take a knife and cut my own throat from ear to ear before I would be owned by you.”¹⁴⁹ Patterson’s skillful

¹⁴⁴ Angeline Jones, “Interview with Jones, Angeline,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 4* (1936-1938), 134 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 024/138134, accessed 2003.

¹⁴⁵ Lucy Key, “Interview with Key, Lucy,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 4* (1936-1938), 134 [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 024/202198, accessed 2003.

¹⁴⁶ Sophia Word, 67.

¹⁴⁷ Hattie Matthews, 250

¹⁴⁸ Margaret Bryant, “Some recollections of ‘the Reb time day’ given by Aunt Margaret Bryant,” Interview by Mrs. Genevieve W. Chandler. *WPASC, Vol 14, Part I* (1936-1938), 147. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 141/148145, accessed 2003.

¹⁴⁹ Delicia Patterson, 270-271.

threat of suicide worked, as the cruel owner in question is said to have backed away and let someone else bid upon her.

There were other bondswomen, however, who took their violent acts of self-sacrifice beyond the level of threat. Ex-slave Nancy Rogers Bean gave a particularly graphic account:

One of my aunts was a mean, fighting woman. She was to be sold and when the bidding started she grabbed a hatchet, laid her hand on a log and chopped it off. Then she threwed the bleeding hand right in her master's face.¹⁵⁰

The aunt's act of self-maiming robbed the slave system of her maximum labor. Not only did she reveal the lengths some women would go to retaliate against their bondage, but shed light on the brutality of the system that drove her to such lengths.

Some women went beyond self-mutilation and committed suicide. Sophia Word recalled that she knew a master that "wuz so mean to his slaves that I know of two gals that killt themselves."¹⁵¹ T.W. Cotton also recounted the suicide of his Aunt Adeline during slavery. "She hung herself to keep from getting a whooping," Cotton explained, "She told mother she would kill herself before she would be whooped. . . . She took a rope and tied it to a limb and to her neck and then jumped. . . . Her toes barely touched the ground."¹⁵² Ida Hutchinson told a similar tale of a fellow slave girl who "went on down to the slough and drowned herself" rather than take a beating.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Nancy Rogers Bean, "Nancy Rogers Bean Age about 82. Hulbert, Okla.," Interview. *WPAOK, Vol 13* (1936-1938), 13. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 130/016012, accessed 2003.

¹⁵¹ Sophia Word, 67

¹⁵² T.W. Cotton, "Interview with Cotton, T.W.," Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 2* (1938), 40 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 022/043039, accessed 2003.

¹⁵³ Ida Blackshear Hutchinson, "Interview with Hutchinson, Ida Blackshear.," Interview by Samuel S. Taylor. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 3* (1938), 374 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 023/370369, accessed 2003.

Others committed such drastic acts for reasons other than avoiding a beating. Ex-slave Annie Tate claimed that her grandmother “killed herself ‘cause dey sold her husban’.”¹⁵⁴ Mary James said that her grandmother chose a similar fate and “drowned herself in the river” upon learning her husband was to be sold.¹⁵⁵ For these bondswomen suicide may have served a double purpose. They made a profound statement about the brutality of slavery, while at the same time they robbed slaveholders of ill-gained labor and property.

Physical resistance by slaves was both a reaction to normalized violence and a means by which to resist brutality and control. Every time an enslaved woman retaliated against bondage, she risked punishment, even death. This limited the frequency of violent retribution, but did not suppress it completely. While the WPA narratives cannot tell us how many bondswomen in the antebellum South resorted to retributive violence, they do indicate that such incidents occurred. The narratives show that some bondswomen fought back, attacked, even murdered overseers, masters, mistresses and others who oppressed and degraded them. Violence was employed to save one’s self or to save others, both from within and outside one’s familial sphere. These bondswomen were cast in the role of protectors of themselves, their children, their husbands and, in general, the slave community. Further, their role as primary caregivers at times led to their children committing violent assaults on their behalf.

¹⁵⁴ Annie Tate, “Annie Tate Ex-slave story.,” Interview by Mary A Hicks *WPANC Vol 11, Part 2* (1936-1938), 333. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 112/336332, accessed 2003

¹⁵⁵ Mary James, “Mary Moriah Anne Susanna James, ex-slave,” Interview by Rogers *WPAMD, Vol 8* (1937), 248 [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 080/040037, accessed 2003.

Finally, although the WPA narratives do not contain accounts of women leading large-scale insurrections, there is evidence of bondswomen's participation in organized and premeditated acts of rebellion. Over the years these varied acts of resistance were remembered and even celebrated by other slaves. In their willingness and ability to employ violence against the slave institution, bondswomen were little different from their male counterparts.

CHAPTER THREE

SEXUAL VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION AND RESISTANCE

At the core of violence against slave women was women's unique vulnerability to rape and sexual exploitation. Thus gender played a distinct role in shaping the nature of women's resistance. The Southern "cult of true womanhood" excluded bondswomen from the female sphere of domesticity, denying them the female virtues of sexual purity and chastity, while relegating them to an almost sub-human level in the antebellum social hierarchy. "We hardly knowed our names," recalled Sallie Crane, "We was cussed for so many bitches and sons of bitches and bloody bitches, and blood of bitches. . . . We never heard our names scarcely at all." Such treatment underscored the manner in which black slave women were viewed: as outside the Southern cult of womanhood, and within a system that exploited and abused their sexuality.¹

Relationships between black women, whether bonded or free, and white men, were fundamentally tied to slavery in the antebellum South. Even when mutually attracted to one another, patriarchy, bondage, and gender and racial inequality permeated their relationships. In the case of slave women, Lerone Bennett asserts that any relationship with white men was defined by these disparities:

¹ Sallie Crane, 52. See also Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Land From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970)

Despite what some commentators say, every sexual contact between a slaveholder and slave woman was a symbolic or *de facto* rape for the simple and obvious reason that the institution of slavery and the power of slaveholders destroyed the possibility of free choice.²

Deborah Gray White sees the matter as more complex, stating that, “not all white male-black female relationships were exploitive.”³ Yet she tempers this by pointing out that “most began that way, and most continued that way.”⁴ White asserts that some bondswomen maintained a limited degree of power over their bodies, and may have willingly chosen miscegenation over “the worst experiences” of slavery.⁵ David Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine agree, asserting that slave women entered into such relationships to gain leverage in their resistance to sexual exploitation. “Sexual harassment is intimately linked to the institution of concubinage,” they write. It is “widely recognized as one of the few means that some slave women might use to better their status.”⁶ Using sexual favors as leverage, these slave women bartered for better treatment and benefits from white males, even their manumission. “There was no reason for them to believe,” White states, “that even freedom could not be bought for the price of their bodies.”⁷ However, even these complex relationships of power were inherently unequal and risky:

While some women remained the concubines of their white lovers and eventually obtained freedom for themselves and their children, just as many, if not more, were sold off to plantations where they shared the misery of all slaves.⁸

Slave women’s lack of choices over their sexuality, or limited options, and the inequities of antebellum Southern society inevitably affected their relationships with white men.

² Bennett, *Before the Mayflower*, 308.

³ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 34

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.* White is quick to point out that many such women were choosing between the lesser of two evils.

⁶ Gaspar and Hine, *More Than Chattel*, 24.

⁷ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35

Thus the line between bondswomen's intimate relationships and their sexual exploitation could easily blur.

For slave women the prospect of rape and sexual exploitation was a daily possibility, with little if any means of redress. In examining the life of a Missouri slave named Celia, Melton McLaurin found that no state laws shielded bondswomen from rape. "In Missouri, sexual assault on a slave woman by white males was considered trespass, not rape," McLaurin states, "and an owner could hardly be charged with trespassing upon his own property."⁹ This assumption was not unique to Missouri. Throughout the antebellum South, as Eugene Genovese asserted, "no such crime as rape of a black woman existed at law."¹⁰ Southern law also generally ignored the rape of slave women by male slaves. The conviction and death sentence of a Mississippi male slave for the rape of a ten-year-old female slave was reversed on grounds that it was an unknown offense.¹¹ Slave women's place outside the realm of white womanhood meant there was no protection of her "purity" by the state.

Like other acts of violence, rape and sexual exploitation reinforced white men's control over black women. "Power over women was exercised through control of their sexuality," write Gaspar and Hine, "a form of oppression rarely experienced to the same degree by slave men."¹² This gendered form of dominance was central to slavery and the institutions created to maintain it. Edward Baptist asserts that white control over slaves and white men's rape of bondswomen cannot be separated: "to them, one act symbolized

⁹ McLaurin, *Celia*, 110

¹⁰ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 33

¹¹ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 152-153. White does point out that the Mississippi state legislature later passed a law making the rape of a female slave by a male slave criminal, and punishable by death or whipping—but only if the victim was under the age of twelve.

¹² Gaspar and Hine, *More than Chattel*, 194

another, together in a cloud of buying, selling, raping, and consuming.”¹³ Clearly, gender-specific acts of violence were intrinsic to the culture of human ownership, dominance, and power that pervaded the slave institution as a whole. Rape and sexual exploitation cannot be viewed as peripheral to an examination of antebellum society; nor can the perpetrators and victims be seen as abnormal or rare. Rather, the culture of normalized violence that pervaded antebellum society was strongly tied to ideas of sexuality. “The rape of slave women by white men,” writes Victoria Bynum, “marked the distinct convergence of racial, sexual, and economic systems.”¹⁴ More specifically, slave masters sought to control black women’s bodies through sexual force.

Examples of sexual control can be seen in the stereotypes of Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire, all of which sought to contain black slave women’s sexuality by compartmentalizing it. Mammy was the motherly archetype, a bondswoman devoid of sexuality except in her ability to produce and care for children. “Mammy is first and foremost asexual,” writes Marilyn Yarbrough, “By doing this, male slave-owners could disavow their sexual interests in African American women.”¹⁵ In essence antebellum society demonstrated its sexual power over black women by creating a caricature that had been de-sexed and rendered harmless. The Mammy stereotype was thus that of a black woman, and more importantly her sexuality, firmly under the control of the patriarchal

¹³ Edward E Baptist, “‘Cuff,’ ‘Fancy Maids,’ and ‘One-Eyed Men’: Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States,” *American Historical Review*, 106, no. 5 (2001) 1619-1650.

¹⁴ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 5.

¹⁵ Marilyn Yarbrough and Crystal Bennet, “Cassandra and the ‘Sistahs’ the Peculiar Treatment of African American Women in the Myth of Women as Liars,” *Journal of Gender, Race and Justice*, no. 3 (2000) 626-655.

social order. As Deborah Gray White notes, “Mammy was the centerpiece in the antebellum Southerner’s perception of the perfectly organized society.”¹⁶

Where Mammy was asexual, Jezebel was her diametric opposite, the wanton and sexually voracious depiction of black womanhood. Jezebel’s sexuality was considered wild and untamable, out of the firm control of the social order, out of the control of the lustful black women themselves, and thus requiring domination through sexual exploitation and violence. Jezebel was the perfect caricature of the slave woman’s sexuality in the patriarchal antebellum society. Her need for male partners and her sexually rapacious appetite at once negated the possibility of rape or exploitation, thus voiding her ability to be a victim and casting her as the aggressor against whom white males had little resistance. As White observes, “The image of Jezebel excused miscegenation, the sexual exploitation of black women, and the mulatto population.”¹⁷

Sapphire was the third stereotype of black slave women, and featured “a domineering female who consumes men and usurps their role” in the patriarchal social order.¹⁸ Like Jezebel, Sapphire existed outside of the “cult of true womanhood,” yet was also an interloper in the white male sphere. Sapphire’s ability to emasculate men made her threatening, and her sexuality itself thus jeopardized patriarchy. To dominant whites, Sapphire symbolized the ultimate danger that could arise if black womanhood was not controlled through asexual caricatures like Mammy or through sexually exploitable ones like Jezebel. A woman who acted like Sapphire was thus vulnerable to violence—including sexual abuse—meant to subjugate her fiery nature and remind her of her lowly status in a white male dominated society. “As Sapphires, black women were placed

¹⁶ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 176

beyond the pale of womanhood,” notes White, “and violated with impunity.”¹⁹ Many of the whippings and beatings inflicted upon bondswomen arose from what was seen as the natural impudence of Sapphire.²⁰ Accounts within the WPA narratives attest to these social methods of control and sexual abuse.

In the antebellum Southern culture of sexual violence, any bondswoman was a potential victim and any male—particularly white males—was a potential perpetrator of rape. Although rape was not clearly labeled as such in the narratives, it was identified in other ways. Because of the oppressive racial politics of the 1930’s South, the incidents reported within the WPA narratives most likely under-report the sexual violence and exploitation that pervaded and helped define antebellum society. When it came to identifying rape, an issue that is still taboo in our society today, there is the strong possibility that victims of sexual abuse were unwilling to share such intimate and personal aspects of their lives.²¹ Yet the WPA narratives provide clear enough descriptions of such acts to confirm their frequent occurrence in antebellum society.

When asked about slave marriage, former bondswoman Betty Powers of Texas commented with indignation on the politics of sexual abuse and race in antebellum society. “Dey thinks nothin’ on de plantation ‘bout de feelin’s of de women and dere ain’t no ‘spect for dem,” Powers said. “De overseer and white mens took ‘vantage of de women like dey wants to.”²² Quite often incidents of rape in the narratives are discussed by women, who were more likely than men to describe acts of sexual abuse they had

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 33. White makes the case that many beatings administered to black slave women were psychosexual acts of violence, often with the victim stripped naked in the presence of the male aggressor

²¹ Claims of rape and sexual exploitation in the narratives were mostly second-hand, with the interviewer discussing someone else’s experience rather than their own

²² Betty Powers, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” Interview. *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 3 (1936-1938)*, 192 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 163/195190, accessed 2003.

witnessed or were told about. Ex-slave Laura Thornton recounted that in regard to bondswomen, “old massa kept one for hisself.”²³ Former slave Shang Harris stated that some masters “beat the slave women to make ‘em give up to ‘em.”²⁴ Even more harrowing accounts of rape on a mass scale were told by other former slaves. Louisa and Sam Everett told of how their master Big Jim treated rape almost as a type of recreation: “quite often he and his guests would engage in these debaucheries, choosing for themselves the prettiest young women. . . . Sometimes they forced the unhappy husbands and lovers of their victims to look on.”²⁵ Former bondswoman Ellen Cragin told of how her master raped bondswomen indiscriminately, perhaps even without regard to committing incest. “He would have children by a nigger [sic] woman,” Cragin said, “and then have them by her daughter.”²⁶

For some interviewees, tales of rape were intensely personal, involving one of their own family members. Ex-slave Mary Williams said that before her mother was married, “her master forced her to go wrong and she had a son by him.”²⁷ Victor Duhon related that his mother was threatened by his white father, her owner, to be “his woman till he marries a white lady.”²⁸ In a culture where rape was normalized, it is not surprising that various authorities in the slave regime—even the children of slaveholders—took part

²³ Laura Thornton, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” Interview by Samuel S. Taylor. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 6* (1936-1938), 326. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 026/327322, accessed 2003.

²⁴ Shang Harris, 118

²⁵ Sam and Louisa Everett, “Everett, Sam and Louisa,” Interview by Pearl Randolph *WPAFL, Vol 3*, (1936), 127. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 030/129126, accessed 2003

²⁶ Cragin, 45 It is uncertain whether Cragin was alluding to possible incestuous relationships between her master and his children.

²⁷ Mary Williams, “Interview with Williams, Mary” Interview by Irene Robertson *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 7* (1936-1938), 180. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 027/184179, accessed 2003.

²⁸ Victor Duhon, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” Interview. *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 1* (1936-1938), 307 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 161/314307, accessed 2003.

in the practice. Former slave Mary Estes Peters told of the brutal rape of her mother as a young teen by her mistress's sons:

My mother's mistress had three boys, one twenty-one, one nineteen, and one seventeen. . . . While she [mother] was alone, the boys came in and threw her down on the floor and tied her down so she couldn't struggle, and one after the other used her as long as they wanted for the whole afternoon.²⁹

For Peters the rape of her mother was especially personal; as she stated, "that's the way I came to be here."³⁰

Peters' sensitivity in regard to the sexual assault of her mother by her own father was demonstrated by her repeated evasion of the issue. "She is very reticent about the facts of her birth," wrote interviewer Samuel Taylor, "The subject had to be approached from many angles and in many ways and by two different persons before that part of the story could be gotten."³¹ The WPA narratives may be filled with individuals who, unlike Mary Estes Peters, could not be coaxed into sharing such a painful part of their family's history. Former slave Fannie Berry probably spoke for many who kept silent about sexual violence when she stated that, "Us Colored women had to go through a plenty, I tell you."³²

Because the threat of rape was a common part of life for bondswomen, resistance was commonplace. Some bondswomen appealed to other authority figures, hoping that they would intervene on their behalf. Others looked to male slaves such as husbands for protection. Neither of these groups, however, could be wholly relied upon. Many

²⁹ Mary Estes Peters, 328

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 329

³¹ *Ibid.*, 323

³² Fannie Berry, "Interview of Mrs Fannie Berry," Interview by Susie Byrd *WPAVA, Vol 17* (1937), 2 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 170/004001, accessed 2003. See also Thelma Jennings, "Us Colored Women Had To Go Through A Plenty. Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women," *Journal of Women's History* 1 (Winter 1990): 45-74, Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and The Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West Preliminary Thoughts on The Culture of Dissemblance " *Signs* 14 (Summer 1989): 912-920

authorities in the slave regime either turned a blind eye to rape or condoned it. In the case of male slaves, most lacked the power to stop acts of rape and might be severely punished, or killed, for interfering or even insinuating that such incidents took place:

Only the uncommon bondman mustered suicidal courage and took revenge on the white man who had whipped or raped his wife. More common . . . was the man who slipped away and feigned ignorance of the attacks on his wife.³³

Most bondswomen thus understood that there was no one to rely upon but themselves; some actively took matters into their own hands. Because rape and sexual exploitation were predicated on force and violence, it is not surprising that bondswomen would react with violence in defense of themselves.

Ex-slave Fannie Berry related a personal experience of sexual assault from which she was forced to physically defend herself. “Dese here ol’ white men said, ‘what I can’t do by fair means I’ll do by foul,’” Berry said, “We tusseled an’ knocked over chairs an’ when I got a grip I scratched his face all to pieces; an der wuz no more bothering Fannie from him.”³⁴ Ex-slave Mamie Thompson said that when a white overseer attempted to “carry on” with her mother, he learned the hard way that “he couldn’t overpower her.”³⁵ Richard Macks told the story of a bondswoman who castrated a slave trader who attempted to rape her, an act that resulted in his death. “She could not be coerced or forced so she was attacked by him,” Macks said, “in the struggle she grabbed a knife and with it, she sterilized him and from the result of injury he died the next day.”³⁶

³³ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 146.

³⁴ Fannie Berry, 2.

³⁵ Mamie Thompson, 318.

³⁶ Richard Macks, “Richard Macks, ex-slave,” Interview by Rogers. *WPAMD, Vol 8* (1937), 53 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 080/054051, accessed 2003 The aforementioned ex-slave Pauline Howell claimed her aunt de-sexed two overseers in a similar manner as the bondswoman in Macks account. While Howell did not mention rape, it is possible that the de-sexing of the two men symbolized resistance to sexual abuse

At times slave women bonded together to foil attempts at rape. Former slave Gus Feaster recounted such an incident involving his mother and another bondswoman. When an overseer threatened them both with a whipping the women are said to have grabbed “him by his goatee and further down and hist [hoist?] him over” into some bushes.³⁷ Bondswomen may also have conspired with their husbands in a premeditated fashion to resist sexual exploitation. The case of Lissa and Cleve’s murder of their master as told by Dave Lawson (see Chapter Two) may be an example of such an act. Though Lawson claimed that the couple murdered Lissa’s master to stop him from selling her away, the allusion to sexual exploitation was clear. Dave Lawson recounted the following:

Cleve watched Marse Drew on de sly. He seed him watchin’ Lissa. He seed de lustful look in his eyes, but ‘twuzn’ Lissa he lustin’ after; ‘twuz money he seen in her slender swayin’ body, in de smooth warm brown skin, an’ de quick, clean way she gleam de wheat. Stripped to de wais’ on de Alabama auction block she would bring near ‘bout a thousan’ dollars.³⁸

Lawson’s account may not be entirely accurate since he was relating an incident that occurred years before his birth. The exact details behind the motives for Lissa and Cleve’s murder of their master are unknown. Lawson claimed Drew was motivated by money rather than sexual desire for Lissa. Yet the sexual imagery he used in describing the manner in which Drew gazed at Lissa is unmistakable, tying together white male lust and the act of selling a slave in one psychosexual act. In any case, the master intended to profit from the exploitation of Lissa’s sexuality.³⁹ Thus—if Lawson’s story is accurate—Lissa and Cleve premeditated their master’s murder because of his direct or indirect sexual exploitation of Lissa.

³⁷ Gus Feaster, “Folk-lore: Negro slave” Interview by Caldwell Sims. *WPASC, Vol 14, Part 2* (1937), 65-66 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 142/058054, accessed 2003.

³⁸ Dave Lawson, 47.

³⁹ For more on the sale of black slave women for sexual exploitation see Baptist, “‘Cuff,’ ‘Fancy Maids,’ and ‘One-Eyed Men’”

Using violent force to resist sexual abuse invariably placed bondswomen in danger. Punishment for such defiance was likely to be quite severe. “De overseer and white mens took ‘vantage of de women like dey wants to,” said Betty Powers, “De woman better not make no fuss ‘bout sich. . . . If she do, it am de whippin’ for her.”⁴⁰ Former slave John Finnely recounted the level of anger white men could be driven to if a bondswoman physically resisted a sexual advance. “De worst whuppin’ I seed was give to Clarinda,” Finnely said “She hits massa with de hoe ‘cause he try ‘fere with her and she try to stop him. . . . She am put on de log and give 500 lashes.”⁴¹ Ex-slave Martha Allen said that when her mother resisted her younger master’s sexual advances “he chunks a lightwood knot an’ hits her on de haid wit it.”⁴² Former slave Minnie Fulkes recounted that her mother was beaten severely by a white overseer on a repeated basis for “nothing, tother [sic] than she refused to be wife to dis man.”⁴³

In turn, some women resisted being punished for acting in their own defense. The aforementioned mother of Mamie Thompson felt fully justified in her violent resistance to sexual exploitation and refused to submit to a whipping by her attacker—the overseer. When her master attempted to administer the punishment she tells him “she would kill him” if he tried.⁴⁴ Mamie Thompson’s mother was to be sold for her impudence and self-defense, until the white mistress of the house interceded on her behalf. This, however, was a rare occurrence of gender solidarity across racial lines.

⁴⁰ Betty Powers, 192.

⁴¹ John Finnely, “Ex-slave stories (Texas)” Interview. *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 2* (1936-1938), 36-37 [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 162/040035, accessed 2003.

⁴² Martha Allen, “Ex-slave story” Interview by Mary A Hicks. *WPANC, Vol 11, Part I* (1937), 14. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 111/017013, accessed 2003.

⁴³ Minnie Fulkes, 11

⁴⁴ Mamie Thompson, 318.

Within the antebellum culture of rape, any authority within the slave regime—even white women—could participate in the sexual abuse of bondswomen by merely sanctioning it. Fannie Moore remembered an incident where the slave mistress condoned an overseer’s sexual assault of her aunt. “When Aunt Cheney not do what he ask he tell granny Moore [her mistress],” Moore said. “Ole Granny call Aunt Cheney to the de kitchen and make her take her clothes off den beat her till she jest black an’ blue.”⁴⁵ An anonymous Georgia slave woman said that when she resisted her young master’s attempt to rape her, “his mother got mad with me for fightin’ him back . . . then she sent me to the courthouse to be whipped”⁴⁶ In the case of these two slave women, neither the bonds of gender nor ownership garnered them protection from their mistresses. Instead, white women in these instances abetted sexual violence against enslaved black women.

Similar scenarios show that many bondswomen were not only vulnerable to sexual assault from men, but also the often violent reactions of jealous white wives who blamed rape victims for the deeds of their husbands. Deborah Gray White states that some Southern white women “did strike back, but not always at Southern patriarchs, but usually at their unwitting and powerless rivals, slave women.”⁴⁷ Ex-slave Nannie Madden claimed that her mother was forced to have “three white children by her master,” and that because of this his white wife “disliked her very much.”⁴⁸ An anonymous bondswoman described similar tensions between herself and the white mistress of the house:

⁴⁵ Fannie Moore, 131-132.

⁴⁶ *Mistreatment of Slaves*, 293.

⁴⁷ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 41. See also Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University, 1982), 153.

⁴⁸ Nannie P. Madden, “Interview with Madden, Nannie P.” Interview Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 5* (1936-1938), 39 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 025/044039, accessed 2003.

She was jealous of me because I was light; said she didn't know what her husband wanted to bring that half white nigger [sic] there for, and if he didn't get rid of me pretty quick she was goin' to leave.⁴⁹

Quite likely the white mistress understood well her husband's purpose for buying a deemed "fancy maid," and her jealousy was based on more than the slave woman's skin color. Victoria Bynum asserts that the stereotype of Jezebel often led many white women to believe that slave women were in league with their white husbands to victimize and humiliate them. That these slave women were actually being sexually exploited and abused was seldom taken into consideration. Often unable, or unwilling, to confront their white husbands some of these women "assailed and assaulted black women suspected of miscegenation."⁵⁰ Ex-slave Julia Rush attested to this, recalling that because her mistress thought she was intimate with her husband, the woman "constantly beat and mistreated her."⁵¹

Not only were slave women accused of sexual relationships often the victims of the misdirected anger of jealous white mistresses, so also were the children born to them as a result of sexual abuse. As Bynum points out, jealous white mistresses "ensured that the mixed-race children of slave women were sold away."⁵² Some of these children faced severe or even fatal punishment. Alice Davis recounted such an incident from her own childhood:

When I was one month old they said I was so white Mandy Paine [her mistress] thought her brother was my father, so she got me and carried me to the meat block and was goin' to cut my head off.⁵³

⁴⁹ Mistreatment of Slaves, 294.

⁵⁰ Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 37

⁵¹ Julia Rush, "Julia Rush, ex-slave" Interview by Bernice Bowden *WPAMS, Vol 2, Part 2* (1936), 230 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 043/232229, accessed 2003

⁵² Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 37.

⁵³ Alice Davis, "Interview with Davis, Alice" Interview by E.F. Driskell *WPAGA, Vol 4, Part 3* (1936-1938), 97. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 022/101097, accessed 2003

Davis claimed to have been saved by her probable white grandmother, who interceded and bought the child from her irate daughter. According to a former bondswoman from Georgia, not all children of these unions were so fortunate. “One white lady that lived near us at McBean slipped in a colored gal’s room,” the former slave related, “and cut her baby’s head clean off ‘cause it belonged to her husband.”⁵⁴ As Deborah Gray White notes, these incidents not only reveal the sexual oppression of slave women, but “also demonstrate the white mistress’s complicity with a system that made victims of all women.”⁵⁵

Perhaps because of such dangers, and yet despite them, a few bondswomen resisted sexual exploitation through any means possible. Flight may have been used by some, such as ex-slave Anna Baker’s mother, who ran away to escape the sexual advances of male black overseers.⁵⁶ Mothers also struggled to protect their daughters from rape. Adah Isabelle Suggs said that her mother planned and carried out her daughter’s escape as a young girl, fearful that Adah would become a victim of sexual abuse by the age of puberty.⁵⁷ An ex-slave in Georgia recounted that a black mother did all she could to save her daughter from the sexual advances of a lecherous white overseer, including helping her run away.⁵⁸

Memories of rape and resistance were often passed down from mother to daughter in the form of stories or pleas for caution. Ex-slave Alice Bratton said that her mother

⁵⁴ *Mistreatment of Slaves*, 295.

⁵⁵ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 42.

⁵⁶ Anna Baker, “Anna Baker” Interview by Mrs Richard Kolb. *WPAMS, Vol 9* (1936-1938), 13. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 090/015011, accessed 2003. In the rape culture of the antebellum South, any male figure given authority could serve in the capacity of a rapist. In Anna Baker’s mother’s case, the threat came from black male overseers given authority by the slave regime

⁵⁷ Adah Isabelle Suggs, “Escape from bondage of Adah Isabelle Suggs,” Interview by Lauana Creel. *WPAIN, Vol 5* (1936-1938), 190. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 050/194189, accessed 2003.

⁵⁸ *Mistreatment of slaves*, 292.

warned her sternly about rape by telling of a personal experience related to them both, and urged her daughter to resist sexual abuse fiercely:

My pa was a white man. . . . and he overcome mama. . . . I don't remember the man but mama told me how she got tripped and nearly died and for me to never let nobody trip me up that way.⁵⁹

Bratton's mother was not alone in passing on stories of rape and survival to a daughter in which the father and rapist were one and the same. For former slave Hannah Travis, such tales left a lasting impression of resentment and fueled her drive to resist a similar fate:

I hate my father. He was white. I never did have no use for him. I never seen him. . . . I never heard my mother say much about him either, except that he was red-headed. He was my mother's master. My mother was just forced. I hate him.⁶⁰

For bondswomen like Hannah Travis rape could become synonymous with any intimate relationship with a white man. When ex-slave Virginia Sims was asked by her white mistress to kiss her white Master goodbye before he went off to war, she replied, "I ain't goin' to kiss no white man."⁶¹ Sims's response should not be viewed simply as the verbal retort of a child, for she displayed an understanding even as a young girl that any form of intimacy with a white man was to be avoided. Her conduct seems indicative of a learned behavior passed from women to girls in the slave community. The importance of this culture of resistance to sexual exploitation was indicated as well by the pride some bondswomen's expressed about their resistance to white men. Former slave Mattie Aldridge, for instance, declared proudly to her interviewer that "there ain't nary drap a

⁵⁹ Alice Bratton, "Interview with Bratton, Alice," Interview by Samuel S. Taylor *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 1* (1936-1938), 190. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 021/254249, accessed 2003

⁶⁰ Hannah Travis, "Interview with Travis, Hannah," Interview by Irene Robertson *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 6* (1936-1938), 352 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 026/351346, accessed 2003

⁶¹ Virginia Sims, "Interview with Sims, Virginia," Interview by Bernice Bowden *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 6* (1936-1938), 165 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 026/168163, accessed 2003

white blood in none of us.”⁶² Sally Newsom expressed similar pride that “there ain’t a speck of no kind of blood about me . . . but African.”⁶³

Boasts about racial purity were part of an overall black folklore of resistance, similar to those about bondswomen who violently retaliated against the slave institution. Even after slavery such tales, true or exaggerated, may have helped sustain the black community in an era where racial violence, including sexual violence, was commonplace. Deborah Gray White states that the assertion of black dignity following slavery was harshly punished by whites:

Like black men, women were ridiculed and scorned, murdered and terrorized for exercising their rights. White Southerners wanted them back in their fields and kitchens; they wanted their Jezebels and their Mammies, and they would beat, rape, and kill to turn back the clock.⁶⁴

Although emancipation released black women from bondage, it provided no protection under the law from rape or sexual exploitation by white men. White asserts that “as during slavery, black women had to rely upon survival instincts that ran counter to dependence.”⁶⁵ Thus folkloric tales of resistance to beatings or rape transcended the slave era and remained important to black women and the black community as a whole. Even during the 1930s, stories of bondswomen’s resistance may have served as both a source of pride and a warning against continued threats of sexual exploitation.

Yet these boasts were problematic in that they made the dignity of a family dependent on a woman’s ability to thwart her sexual victimization. Resistance thus could become a burden to slave women and even a source of shame if the attempt was not

⁶² Mattie Aldridge, “Interview with Aldridge, Mattie,” Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 1* (1936-1938), 22 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 021/027022, accessed 2003.

⁶³ Hattie Rogers, “Rogers, Hattie,” Interview by T. Pat Matthews. *WPANC, Vol 1, Part 2* (1937), 229. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 112/230226, accessed 2003.

⁶⁴ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 173-174

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 176.

successful. This may indicate that a stigma was placed on bondswomen who were victims of sexual abuse, and might explain why more personal accounts of sexual assault do not appear in the narratives.

Intertwined with slave masters' sexual abuse of bondswomen was their exploitation of slave women's reproduction. In 1808 the trade in slaves was abolished in the United States. The end of this traffic, however, did not lessen the South's dependence on slave labor. Although illegal smuggling of human contraband continued, the primary means by which slavery grew was through reproduction. The slave regime not only sought to dominate the sexuality of bondswomen through rape, but claimed sole rights and control to her reproductive capabilities. "Power over the black woman's body in its productive capacity as an asexual labor machine," write Gaspar and Hine, "was thus combined with sexual power to control both production and reproduction on slave plantations."⁶⁶ The reproductive capacity of a bondswoman in essence became an asset as valuable, perhaps even more so, than her labor capacity.

Bondswomen well understood the value of their reproductive abilities to slave holders. Ex-slave Hattie Rogers stated that:

If a woman was a good breeder she brought a good price on the auction block. The slave buyers would come around and jab them in the stomach and look them over and if they thought they would have children fast they brought a good price.⁶⁷

Bondswomen also understood that slave masters' benevolent treatment of them was at times directly tied to their sexual reproduction. Ex-slave Virginia Davis, for example,

⁶⁶ Gaspar and Hine, *More than Chattel*, 194.

⁶⁷ Sallie Newson, "Interview with Newsom, Sallie," Interview by Irene Robertson. *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 5* (1936-1938), 214 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 025/218213, accessed 2003

recalled that her grandmother “was a good breeder, so she didn’t have to work so hard.”⁶⁸

Former slave Willie McCullough understood the profitable ends of reproductive exploitation as well. “If a slave woman had children fast she was considered very valuable,” McCullough said, “because slaves were valuable property.”⁶⁹ Much of McCullough’s understanding of reproductive exploitation seems to have been passed down to him through his mother and grandmother, both of whom shared similar experiences of being forced to marry in order to bear children for their masters:

Mother tole me that when she became a woman at the age of sixteen years her marster went to a slave owner near by and got a six-foot nigger [sic] man, almost an entire stranger to her, and told her she must marry him . . . This was done without getting her consent or even asking her about it. Grandmother said that several different men were put to her just about the same as if she had been a cow or sow. The slave owners treated them as if they had been common animals in this respect.⁷⁰

Such subhuman treatment, designed to hasten reproduction, was never lost on the slave community, particularly bondswomen who were the primary victims. As ex-slave Lulu Wilson put it, whites “wanted niggers [sic] to breed like livestock.”⁷¹ Wilson recounted that when her father, a free black, became unable or unwilling to produce more children with her mother the slave owner became directly involved. Her mother’s owners declared her father “too old and wore out for breedin’,” and set dogs upon him to drive him away from their property, giving her mother over to a slave man of their liking to bear more children.⁷² The demand by slaveholders that slave women even change husbands demonstrates their strong need to control reproduction in order to maximize profits.

⁶⁸ Virginia Davis, “Interview with Davis, Virginia (Jennie),” Interview by Irene Robertson *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 2* (1937), 132 [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 022/135131, accessed 2003.

⁶⁹ Willie McCullough, “McCullough, Willie,” Interview by T. Pat Matthews. *WPANC, Vol 11, Part 2* (1937), 77 [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 112/080076, accessed 2003.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷¹ Lulu Wilson, 190

⁷² *Ibid.*

Former slave Thomas Johns recalled another example of ultimate control over the marital lives of bondswomen and men:

If a owner had big woman slave and she had a little man for her husban' and de owner had a big man slave dey would make de little husban' leave, and make de woman let de big man be her husban', so's dere be big chillen, which dey could sell well.⁷³

Controlling sexuality in the above manner may have served not only a practical need, but a psychosexual one as well. Just as rape by a slave master upon a slave woman demonstrated his superior power, the ability to force a male slave to engage in de facto rape seemed to provide a similar satisfaction. Louisa and Sam Everett claimed that if their master Big Jim believed a certain slave man and woman would produce him healthier offspring, “he forced them to have sexual relation, even though they were married to other slaves.”⁷⁴ It is not surprising, then, that male breeders who participated not only in the abuse of slave women but also the destruction of their chosen marriages, were often reviled. “Dr. Ware had a fine man he bred his colored house women to,” related ex-slave Emma Barr, “The women hated him, and the men on the place does as well. . . . They hated him too.”⁷⁵

The exploitation of slave women’s reproductive capabilities was also achieved through their direct rape by white masters. The children of such unions could easily be sold away, allowing the master to gain an economic profit through the sale of his own progeny. Ex-slave Amy Patterson recounted painfully how her father, a slave owner, consented to sell her as property:

⁷³ Thomas Johns, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” Interview *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 2* (1936-1938), 203. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 162/206201, accessed 2003.

⁷⁴ Sam and Lousia Everett, 127.

⁷⁵ Emma Barr, “Interview with Barr, Emma,” Interview by Irene Robertson *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 1* (1936-1938), 119. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 021/124119, accessed 2003.

That was the greatest crime ever visited on the United States. It was worse than the cruelty of the overseers, worse than hunger. . . . when a father can sell his own child, humiliate his own daughter by auctioning her on the slave block, what good could be expected where such practices were allowed?⁷⁶

Such incidents were especially likely to occur in cases when the biracial offspring of a slave holder could possibly cause him problems with his wife and family.

As with other forms of sexual abuse, there were bondswomen who did not merely submit to attempts at forced breeding. Ex-slave Silvia King said she refused to be paired with a male slave not of her choosing, telling her master she “got a man and three chillen back in de old country [Africa].”⁷⁷ Some bondswomen were quite skillful in their resistance. Former slave James Martin, for instance, told the tale of his mother who not only refused to marry someone not of her choosing, but managed to manipulate her owner into allowing her to marry a free black man—knowing this would allow her children to be born free.⁷⁸

Because violence was often used to coerce slaves into unwanted sexual unions, some bondswomen engaged in reactionary violence. Rose Williams used physical force against an older male slave named Rufus after she was given to him at the age of sixteen. When he attempted to sleep with her, she said that she grabbed a poker and “lets him have it over de head.”⁷⁹ The violent ordeal between Williams and Rufus went on for several days, during which time she claimed to keep a steady vigil—with the poker ever ready. Williams attempted to plead her case to her mistress and master, both of whom

⁷⁶ Amy Elizabeth Patterson, “Memories of slavery and the life story of Amy Elizabeth Patterson,” Interview by Lauana Creel. *WPAIN, Vol 5* (1936-1938), 151. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 050/155150, accessed 2003.

⁷⁷ Silvia King, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 2* (1936-1938), 291. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 162/295290, accessed 2003

⁷⁸ James Martin, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 3* (1936-1938), 62-63 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 163/067062, accessed 2003

⁷⁹ Rose Williams, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” *WPATX, Vol 16, Part 4* (1936-1938), 176-178. [collection-online], LOC, accession no. 164/180174, accessed 2003.

insisted she submit to Rufus or face severe punishment. Seemingly out of options, Williams eventually yielded to her owners' demands. "What am I's to do?" she recounted of the experience, "So I cide's to do as de massa wish and so I yields."⁸⁰

Like Rose Williams, many bondswomen found they could not continue the fight against slave owners' wishes, and were often threatened if they did not comply.

Punishment for not engaging in forced marriages was as severe as any other act deemed to be impudent, as indicated by ex-slave G.W. Hawkins:

There were slave men kept that forced slave women to do what they wanted to do. And if the slave women didn't do it, the masters or the overseers whipped them till they did. They women were beat and made to go to them. They were big fine men, and the masters wanted the women to have children by them.⁸¹

Hawkin's account highlighted the stark choices that many bondswomen faced: sexual victimization at the hands of fellow male slaves on the one hand, and attempts by masters to exploit their reproduction on the other. Former slave Sarah Ross told a similar tale in which her master—who was also her father—frequently beat her mother because "she would not have sexual relations with the overseer, a colored man."⁸²

It should be pointed out that not all slave men allowed themselves to be cast so easily in the role of willing rapist. There were some in fact who resisted these forced unions. Ex-slave Ambrose Douglass, for instance, took a beating from his master rather than accept the bondswomen given to him, "with the instructions to produce a healthy boy-child by her."⁸³

⁸⁰ Ibid , 178.

⁸¹ G.W. Hawkins, "Interview with Hawkins, G.W.," Interview by Samuel S Taylor. *WPAAR Vol 2, Part 3* (1936-1938), 218 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 023/213212, accessed 2003.

⁸² Sarah Ross, "Slave Interviews," Interview by Alfred Farrell. *WPAFL Vol 3* (1936), 168. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 030/171168, accessed 2003.

⁸³ Ambrose Dogulass, "Ambrose Douglass," Interview by Martin D. Richardson. *WPAFL Vol 3* (1936-1938), 168 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 030/104101, accessed 2003.

Many slaves, however, male and female, may not have had the opportunity to resist or refuse these forced sexual liaisons. Ex-slave Louisa Everett told of how her sadistic master not only forced her into marriage with her husband, but stood by and watched threateningly to make sure the two consummated the union:

Marse Jim called me and Sam ter him and ordered Sam to pull off his shirt . . . and he said to me: Nor, ‘do you think you can stand this big nigger [sic]? ‘He had that old bull whip flung acrost his shoulder, and Lawd, that man could hit so hard! So I jes said ‘yassur, I guess so,’ and tried to hide my face so I couldn’t see Sam’s nakedness, but he made me look at him anyhow. Well, he told us what we must git busy and do in his presence, and we had to do it. After that we were considered man and wife.⁸⁴

Louisa Everett’s justifiable fear of severe punishment limited her choices and ability to resist. It seemed that her master feared both she and Sam would resist, and thus forced the two to engage in sex under his watchful supervision. “If there seemed to be any slight reluctance on the part of either of the unfortunate ones,” Louisa and Sam Everett recounted, “‘Big Jim’ would make them consummate this relationship in his presence.”⁸⁵ This mechanism of control may have also held a sexual component, as it allowed Big Jim to indirectly take part in the rape of both slave women and simultaneously emasculate slave men. For Louisa violent resistance did not seem to be an option, given the brutality that could result. In fact, due to her master’s sadistic nature, she considered herself more fortunate than others. “Me and Sam was a healthy pair and had fine, big babies,” she said, “so I never had another man forced on me, thank God.”⁸⁶

Bondswomen who could not resist forced marriages may have contented themselves with denying the slave regime complete control as best they could. Ex-slave Mack Brantley called himself a “stole chile,” because his mother “had a husband master give

⁸⁴ Sam and Louisa Everett, 128.

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Ibid

her” but chose another male slave to be his father.⁸⁷ Former slave Mose King claimed that although his mother endured a forced marriage throughout her enslavement, upon freedom she immediately married a man of her choice.⁸⁸ Ex-slave Henry Nelson said his mother was only thirteen when she was forced into a marriage with an elderly male slave by her owners, but that she “left him when she was freed.”⁸⁹ For some bondswomen, like the aforementioned Rose Williams, the traumatic experience was enough to cause them never to marry again:

I never marries, ‘cause one ‘sperience am ‘nough for dis nigger [sic]. After what I does for massa, I’s never wants no truck with any man. De Lawd forgive this cullud woman, but he have to ‘scuse me and look for some others to ‘plenish de earth.⁹⁰

Deborah Gray White suggests that reluctance by some emancipated black women to take up their prescribed, subordinate role in the patriarchal order may have been misunderstood by whites, thus contributing to the Sapphire stereotype.⁹¹

Some bondswomen carried out their resistance to forced marriages by denying the slave regime that from which it sought to profit—children. Knowing that her owners wanted her to reproduce for profit, former slave Sarah Graves said her mother purposefully married a fellow slave whom “she knew had a disease and could not be a father.”⁹² There are folktales as well about violent supernatural acts that denied slave owners the ability to benefit from forced marriages and reproductive exploitation. Former

⁸⁷ Mack Brantley, “Interview with Brantley, Mack” Interview by Irene Robertson *WPAAR Vol 2, Part 1* (1938), 241 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 021/246241, accessed 2003

⁸⁸ Mose King, “Interview with King, Mose” Interview by Irene Robertson *WPAAR Vol 2, Part 4* (1936-1938), 207. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 024/211207, accessed 2003.

⁸⁹ Henry Nelson, “Interview with Nelson, Henry” Interview by Samuel S. Taylor. *WPAAR Vol 2, Part 5* (1936-1938), 207. [collection-online], LOC, accession no 025/202197, accessed 2003.

⁹⁰ Rose Williams, 178

⁹¹ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 180.

⁹² Sarah Frances Shaw Graves, “Slave and Negro lore,” Interview. *WPAMO Vol 10* (1936-1938), 135 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no 100/140135, accessed 2003

bondswoman Ida Hutchinson claimed that the masters on her plantation “took all the fine looking boys and girls that was thirteen years old or older and put them in a big barn after they had stripped them naked. . . . Out of that came sixty babies.”⁹³ Then came a mysterious storm, she continued, that ended with all sixty of the babies “floating ‘round in the water drowned.”⁹⁴ While Hutchinson’s tale seems more myth than reality—or at least gross exaggeration—what is telling is her final analysis of the claimed incident. As she put it the slave owners “never got nary a lick of labor and nary a red penny for any one of them babies.”⁹⁵ Hutchinson’s tale illustrates that some bondswomen viewed such tragic violent events as moral retribution against the slave regime. It is thus not surprising that when the Divine force did not intercede, some slave women took matters into their own hands.

Infanticide was such an act, and not unknown among bondswomen. In circumstances where an unwanted pregnancy was caused by sexual abuse or reproductive exploitation, abortion was both a personal solution and a means to thwart the slave regime. It may have been used to assert that sexual exploitation would not to be tolerated, or at least that it would not benefit the slave system. Even if the sexual act was consensual, abortion may simply have been a practical choice for a host of reasons. Historian Liese Perrin finds several examples within the WPA narratives of contraceptive use among bondswomen. She points to ex-slaves who speak of slave women that “unfixed themselves by taking calomel and turpentine” or by chewing cotton root.⁹⁶

⁹³ Ida Hutchinson, 374.

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ Liese M Perrin, “Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South,” *Journal of American Studies* 35, no 2 (2001), 260-262

While there is some level of consensus on these matters of abortion, the topic of infanticide as a form of resistance is much more controversial.

The theory that slave women were more willing than white women to kill their own children emerged partly from slave owners' depiction of black women as deranged, and partly from romantic notions of bondswomen driven to such ultimate ends by a brutal system. Pro-slavery and anti-slavery proponents alike used the 1856 act of infanticide by Kentucky slave Margaret Garner to make their respective arguments, depicting Garner as a savage on the one hand and a tragic living martyr on the other.⁹⁷ Garner murdered her children, claiming she would rather for them to die than endure slavery. Such a drastic action bolstered anti-slavery proponents' assertion that the slave holding institution was responsible for such desperate acts.

Life for slave children could certainly be quite harsh as the WPA narratives themselves attest. Many bondswomen—cast in the role of primary caretakers by the social system—would have witnessed the abuse of their children directly. Former slave William McWhorter said that his Aunt Mary was required to nurse her master's infant over her own, and that if she did not comply the master would “snatch her baby up by the legs and spank him, and tell Aunt Mary to go on and nuss his baby fust.”⁹⁸ Such incidents could be heart wrenching for many bondswomen who may have felt powerless to stop the abuse of their child. “Aunt Mary couldn't answer him a word,” McWhorter said, “but my ma said she offen seed Aunt Mary cry 'til de tears met under her chin.”⁹⁹ Other slave

⁹⁷ For more on Margaret Garner see also Steven Weisenburger, *Modern Medea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998). For a fictional story inspired by these accounts see also Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1998 [originally published 1987]).

⁹⁸ William McWhorter, “William McWhorter. Ex-slave – age 78,” Interview by Mrs. Sadie B. Hornsby. *WPAGA Vol 4, Part 3* (1938), 96-97. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 043/094091, accessed 2003

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 97.

mothers endured much worse than the beating of their children. Ex-slave Parthena

Rollins recounts a tragic case of infanticide committed by the slave mother's master:

Once when the 'nigger [sic] traders' came through, there was a girl, the mother of a young baby; the traders wanted the girl, but would not buy her because she had the child. Her owner took her away, took the baby from her, and beat it to death right before the mother's eyes, then brought the girl back to the sale without the baby, and she was bought immediately.¹⁰⁰

In a society that countenanced such violence against even the most defenseless of its members, it is plausible that some slave women sought to spare their progeny a life of such brutality. Attempts at "mercy infanticide," for instance, are mentioned in the history of slave insurrectionist Nat Turner, whose mother allegedly attempted to kill him as an infant rather than let him grow up under slavery.¹⁰¹

However, there are alternative explanations. Historians like Liese Perrin have questioned just how prevalent mercy killings of infants were, pointing out that infanticide was probably quite rare among bondswomen. "While slave women often expressed profound sadness at having given birth to children who would grow up in slavery," Perrin notes, "few were desperate enough to kill them."¹⁰² Perrin asserts instead that medical accidents like Sudden Infant Death Syndrome or cot-death may have played a key role in deaths of slave infants. The stereotypes and politics surrounding slave women caused whites—both pro-slavery and abolitionist—to erroneously classify all accidental deaths as infanticide.¹⁰³ The WPA narratives seem to support Perrin insofar as reports of infanticide are quite rare in them. Of course, like sexual abuse, infanticide may have been a topic that many bondswomen were unwilling to discuss. Whatever the case, the *idea* of

¹⁰⁰ Parthena Rollins, "Folklore," Interview by Anna Pritchett. *WPAIN Vol 5* (1936-1938), 167. [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 050/172167, accessed 2003.

¹⁰¹ Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee*, 11

¹⁰² Perrin, "Resisting Reproduction," 272.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*

infanticide as a means of denying the slave regime full control was part of slave women's culture—albeit perhaps a small one.

Descriptions of infanticide were not always meant literally in the narratives. Symbolic infanticide could be practiced by bondswomen through dissociation with children who were conceived as a result of sexual exploitation. Mary Reynolds recounted that her aunt abandoned such a child in an attempt to escape slavery. “Aunt Cheyney was jus’ out of bed with a sucklin’ baby one time and she run away,” Reynolds said, “Some say that was ‘nother baby of massa’s breedin.’”¹⁰⁴ Former slave Evelina Smith said that upon gaining freedom, her great-grandmother abandoned both her children in a similar manner:

Her master would take her out behind the field and do what he wanted. When she got free, she gave both of her children away. She had two children by him. . . . She didn’t want them ‘round her because they reminded her of him.¹⁰⁵

Smith’s great-grandmother may not have taken the lives of her children, but the act of severing her ties with them provided an emotional form of resistance to sexual abuse, even if a drastic one.

There were, however, a few bondswomen who viewed the deaths of their children as a merciful alternative to the harsh realities of slavery. Celia Robinson said her mother’s inability to sufficiently care for her newborn infant led her to “pray de child would die.”¹⁰⁶ There were even slave women who committed the ultimate act of murdering their children. Lou Smith recounted the tale of a bondswoman whose children were repeatedly sold away by her master. Determined to keep her fourth child the woman

¹⁰⁴ Mary Reynolds, “Ex-slave stories (Texas),” Interview *WPATX Vol 16, Part 3* (1936-1938), 243 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 163/241236, accessed 2003.

¹⁰⁵ Evelina Smith, 195.

¹⁰⁶ Celia Robinson, “Celia Robinson,” Interview by T. Pat Matthews. *WPANC Vol 11, Part 2* (1936-1938), 218-219 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 112/220216, accessed 2003

is said to have declared she was “not going to let old Master sell this baby; he just ain’t going to do it.”¹⁰⁷ Smith said that the desperate mother gave the baby something from a bottle, “and purty soon it was dead.”¹⁰⁸ In this case the slave woman’s act of infanticide expressed a desire to spare her child the brutality of being separated from its family, and also denied the slave regime control over her reproduction. Smith noted that the bondswoman’s actions were kept secret in the community of slaves. “Course didn’t nobody tell on her,” he said, “or he’d [master] of beat her nearly to death.”¹⁰⁹ It seems that many of the slaves strongly empathized with the position of the bondswoman; they did not pass judgment on her drastic actions, but rather placed the ultimate blame on the slave regime.

In the violent culture of the antebellum South, sexual abuse and exploitation were common dangers that each and every bondswomen faced. Denied the protection of the “cult of true womanhood,” slave women were reduced to stereotypes that in turn justified their physical abuse. Such stereotypes made it easier for authorities within the slave regime to exploit slave women, shifting blame to the victims of their deeds. The very structure of the slave system encouraged white males to commit rape, and made many white women and black bondsmen complicit in such acts of violence.

While incidents of rape and other forms of sexual exploitation are not frequently cited by name in the WPA narratives, they are frequently alluded to. The lack of more

¹⁰⁷ Lou Smith, “Celia Robinson,” Interview by T Pat Matthews. *WPANC Vol 11, Part 2* (1936-1938), 302 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 112/220216, accessed 2003

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

detailed information about sexual abuse is more likely due to the stigma of sexual politics of the 1930s rather than a lack of occurrence.

Within a system that sanctioned the sexual abuse of black women, bondswomen derived various methods for maintaining control over their bodies. Just as violence was often employed to carry out acts of sexual exploitation, some bondswomen reacted with violence to protect themselves and others. These acts of resistance were sometimes woven into black folklore and passed down as lessons of survival and portraits of heroism. In the case of reproductive exploitation, there were bondswomen who fought back against forced marriages and forced pregnancies. A few slave women even resorted to infanticide as a means to deny the slave system control of their reproduction.

Yet violent resistance to sexual abuse and exploitation was the exception rather than the rule for enslaved black women. As Kenneth Greenberg asserts, “fear of local gossip, or a Christian ethic, or a watchful white mistress, or a knife hidden under a dress might sometimes prevent a rape,” but it was limited protection at best.¹¹⁰ Thus the common slave woman had to devise more ingenious means to defend against the continuous reality of sexual violence and coercion. Forced to live under such oppression, some formed complex relationships with white men that enabled them to maintain a level of control over their bodies.

¹¹⁰ Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery*, 37.

CONCLUSION

The study of antebellum Southern slavery has shifted greatly in the past fifty years. In the early twentieth century historians such as Ulrich B. Phillips and Frank Owsley depicted slavery as a benign system of servants and masters, bound by a pact of patriarchy and gratitude, and defined by the inherent inferiority of blacks and the innate dominance of whites. These apologists for Southern slavery were challenged by black historians of the era such as WEB DuBois and Carter G. Woodson.

While historians like Phillips and Owsley relied mostly on the perspective of masters and mistresses to tell the story of slavery, black researchers of the time were beginning to seek out the voices of the slaves themselves. At Fisk University black sociologists Ophelia Egypt and Charles Johnson set out to record the oral history of ex-slaves still alive in the 1920s. By the 1930s their pioneering efforts were joined by the WPA Federal Writers' Project, which sought to similarly record the lives of ex-slaves over eighteen states.

Though the WPA ex-slave narratives remained almost wholly ignored for decades, shifts in methodology and attitudes about slave studies in the latter twentieth century revived their importance. The Civil Rights and Black Protest Movements of the 1960s, combined with the popularization of social and oral history, sparked interest in the narratives as a source for examining the history of slave life.

By the 1950s and 1960s historians like Kenneth Stampp and Eugene Genovese had begun to define antebellum slavery differently from earlier Southern apologists. As historians depicted slavery as an oppressive and exploitative system, they followed the lead of Herbert Aptheker and others in the 1940s, and began to also examine slave resistance. In the 1970s historian Paul D. Escott conducted a thorough examination of the WPA ex-slave narratives, documenting, among other things, numerous incidents of slave resistance.

Beyond race and class, gender eventually became one of the new perspectives through which to view antebellum slavery. By the 1980s and 1990s, historians Deborah Gray White, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Kimberly Hanger and others began to more thoroughly examine the lives of slave women in Southern society, bringing to the forefront gender-related issues of slave family life, marriage, child-rearing and more. Through gendered perspectives, various topics ranging from the sexual division of labor to sexual exploitation became part of the larger historical study of slavery. Included in these examinations were the methods by which black slave women resisted slavery, and the ways in which they were ways similar and different from male styles of resistance.

The WPA ex-slave narratives cannot speak for the totality of enslaved black women in the antebellum South. However, the oral transcriptions do allow for a window into the lives of some bondswomen, offering a representative cross-section of the female slave population. Through the words of these ex-slaves, both men and women, slavery is portrayed as a violent and exploitative system. The narratives provide evidence that not only was labor no less rigorous for slave women, but that neither was punishment. Like

their male counterparts, enslaved black women were whipped, beaten, maimed or even killed, with little if any protection provided by the law.

Also like their male counterparts, enslaved black women resisted slavery through a variety of methods, one of which was violence. The WPA narratives provide instances where bondswomen lashed out violently against those in the slave regime, be they masters, mistresses, overseers or drivers, at times with deadly results. Enslaved black women also directed their violence towards symbols of the slave regime, including white children, their owners' property, or even fellow black slaves who worked for the slave system. A few bondswomen even resisted through maiming themselves or taking their own lives, thus robbing the slave system of their labor. This violence was used by bondswomen not only for personal protection, but for the safety of children, male spouses, family members and other bondswomen. These acts of physical defiance by slave women served an important role in the slave community, at times evolving into a folklore of resistance, passed on well after emancipation.

Enslaved black women also faced unique challenges due to their gender. Sexual exploitation was a common threat that faced each and every bondswomen, including both rape and forced reproduction. To justify this abuse, antebellum society created stereotypes to devalue and control black women's sexuality. Enslaved women were thus forced to develop varied defensive methods to resist not only these gender-specific forms of exploitation, but to assert their equality and rights as women. The WPA narratives provide evidence of bondswomen violently resisting both rape and forced marriages. At least one account speaks of a slave woman who took the life of her own child to resist

reproductive exploitation, highlighting the desperation that the oppressive culture of slavery could breed.

At the same time that the narratives provide instances of enslaved black women engaging in violent resistance, what is clear is that such resistance always carried a risk. Violent resistance, even a verbal threat, could result in a bondswoman being sold and separated from her family. Physical acts of resistance could bring about greater retributive violence from the slave system, and result in beatings, whippings, maiming or death. Yet even under such threats, many former slave women attested that they believed slavery to be a moral wrong, and saw their violent acts as wholly justified

The WPA narratives show that violent resistance by slave women was a direct reaction to the oppressive culture of antebellum slavery. Slave women lived under a system that not only sought to control daily aspects of their lives, but which could also at any time inflict harm upon themselves, their loved ones, or the slave community as a whole. Denied a place in the southern Cult of True Womanhood, slave women were not shielded through gender from the harshness of labor or the punishment that slavery entailed. The narratives show that, even understanding the risk, there were bondswomen who lashed out physically against the slave institution and their abusers. They did so by attacking the numerous figures granted power and authority in the social order, no matter their status, gender, race or age. Furthermore, these slave women were willing to threaten, assault, or even murder if needed.

Though smaller acts of violent resistance were not comparable in scale to the larger uprisings more popularized in historical texts, they were no less important in understanding slave life and slave community. Historian Betty Wood in her analysis of

slave women's resistance and its impact on the overall antebellum society emphasizes this point. "The murder or attempted murder of just one white person," Wood states, "the burning down of just one house 'served to reinforce white fears and to remind [whites] of the arbitrary and often unpredictable violence that might be indulged in by any of their slaves.'"¹ Former slaves like Ellen Brass understood this well. In her mind, white southerners should have been grateful that those they held in bondage were not more violent. "The white folks ain't got on reason to mistreat the colored people," Brass proclaims, "If we'd a wanted to kill 'em, they'd a all done been dead."²

¹ Betty Wood, "Some Aspects of Female Resistance to Chattel Slavery in Low Country Georgia, 1763-1815," *The Historical Journal*, 30, no. 3 (Sep., 1987). 622.

² Ellen Brass, "White folks want niggers [sic]," Interview by Samuel S. Taylor *WPAAR, Vol 2, Part 1* (1938), 248 [collection-online]; LOC, accession no. 021/251246, accessed 2003.

ADDENDUM

A HISTORY OF THE WPA NARRATIVES

Throughout the slave era, narratives of blacks who had gained freedom were popular. Often these narratives were used by abolitionists to highlight not only the evils of slavery, but the humanity and intelligence of the authors. These autobiographies were most popular during the three decades that preceded the Civil War. In 1845 the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* became known internationally as the ex-slave and author toured both US and European cities to recount his life in bondage.¹

In 1858 an escaped slave, Harriet Jacobs, completed a manuscript detailing her controversial life of sexual abuse and bondage.² Both Douglass's and Jacob's works, like numerous others, were supported and published by abolitionists and other anti-slavery interests. The autobiographical narratives of ex-slaves were eagerly sought by abolitionist journals; not only were they popular, their sales helped to fund the anti-slavery cause.³

With the end of slavery, however, interest in the narratives lessened. The era of fierce debate that preceded the Civil War had contributed greatly to the slave narratives' popularity, giving them a reason and purpose. Without such political and social

¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (New York: Yale University Press, 2001)

² Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000)

³ Norman R. Yetman, "Slave Narratives during Slavery and After," in *An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives* [online] (LOC, Manuscript Division, 2001) Accessed 2003

sensationalism, the narratives no longer appealed to a mass audience that had become weary of talk of war and bondage. “The typical antebellum narrative had served as an exposé of the horrors of the ‘peculiar institution,’” writes Norman Yetman, “but the Civil War settled the issue of slavery and destroyed the narrative's *raison d'être*.”⁴

It is not surprising then that the slave narratives became important once again when they began to fill a new need: to counter a resurgence of the proslavery ideology. The works of early Southern historians like Ulrich B. Phillips and Frank Owsley, which offered a view of slavery from the perspective of white planter society, were popular during the early twentieth century. The earliest challenges to this interpretation of southern history would come from key black scholars of the Harlem Renaissance like W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson.⁵ This signaled the era of a new line of black authors who were beginning to rewrite the rules of southern history, particularly in regard to slavery. To many of these black writers, the best tool to counteract the voice of the white antebellum planter was the collective voice of those that had stood at that society's epicenter, the slaves themselves. Thus the slave narratives began to enjoy renewed popularity as a source for contradicting the popular academic view of slavery.

Black scholars, however, were a minority, and their opinions carried little weight with their white peers. Phillips himself dismissed the slave narratives as unreliable. “The lapse of decades has impaired inevitably the memories of men,” he would write, thus “the asseverations of...aged survivors are generally unsafe even in supplement.”⁶ Given the level of Phillips' influence in the academic circles of the era, many southern historians followed suit. Nevertheless, the narratives were slowly gaining recognition even if they

⁴ Ibid , par. 3

⁵ Yetman, “Slave Narratives and the New Debate about Slavery,” par 3.

⁶ Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, 6.

were not being utilized to their full potential. In large part, this was due to the cultural movement of early twentieth century Black America, The Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance not only brought a flowering of black culture to the African-American community, it also sparked great interest from mainstream society. Whites began to discover black musical expressions such as jazz and literary expressions that gave insight into the black historical existence in America. Along with the influence of African-American culture on white society, academic interest in black life and folklore grew. As anthropologists and sociologists rejected blatantly racist ideologies, they discovered that the voices of ex-slaves helped them to better understand the roots of African-American culture. “The convergence of these several currents fostered a climate receptive to efforts to obtain personal testimonies concerning antebellum slave life,” writes Norman Yetman, “and it was from within this cultural milieu that interest in the collection of ex-slave narratives arose.”⁷

A key feature of some anthropological and sociological studies was the collection and maintenance of documented interviews to be used as source material for larger studies into African-American culture, mores and folkways. Much of this work would be carried out by early black scholars. For example, Zora Neale Hurston trained under the father of modern day anthropology, Franz Boas. Hurston conducted extensive research into African-American and Afro-Caribbean folklore largely through interviews of blacks, many of whom were ex-slaves.⁸

⁷ Yetman, “Slave Narratives and the Waning Authority of Racism,” par. 2.

⁸ Hurston carried out interviews with blacks, many of whom were ex-slaves, to compile a listing of African-American folklore. Boas provides an introduction for her work on the topic. See Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-Tales from the Gulf States* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).

The historically black Fisk University also carried out some of the earliest interviews of former slaves. Similar to the case of Hurston, many of these interviews were gathered as source material to be used in larger anthropological and sociological studies. Such was the case in 1927 when a graduate student in anthropology, A.P. Watson, set about gathering the religious conversion experiences and autobiographical accounts of former slaves.⁹ The unexpected result of these studies was also the beginning of an ex-slave narrative collection.

In 1929 another researcher at Fisk, Mrs. Ophelia Settle Egypt, interviewed over one hundred ex-slaves and produced nearly forty transcripts.¹⁰ Egypt's work was done under the auspices of Fisk's Social Science Institute headed by Charles S. Johnson. The purpose of the initial research was not to collect slave narratives, but instead was part of a wider sociological study of African-American communities located near the Fisk campus in Nashville. Johnson, however, soon recognized the unanticipated benefit of his research. He also began to recognize the importance of the slave narratives not only for larger studies, but as valuable documented historical information. Thus, narratives were collected not simply for use in specific studies or projects, but to preserve an important aspect of African-American history.

Johnson, foremost among early researchers in recognizing the importance of the narratives, began a campaign to preserve them. Although his ultimate goal of publishing

⁹ Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, 3. Watson spent two years compiling the interviews of over one hundred ex-slaves.

¹⁰ Ibid.

an extensive volume of narratives was never realized, the Institute's *Unwritten History of Slavery* reproduced one-third of the narratives that had been gathered.¹¹

Elsewhere, at Southern University in Louisiana and Prairie View University in Texas, historian John B. Cade was pursuing interviews as early as 1929. In 1935 he published an article in *The Journal of Negro History* titled “Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves.”¹² With these individual researchers, the preservation of ex-slaves’ life stories had begun. Their institutions, however, lacked the resources and manpower to carry out an exhaustive and detailed collection process. Still, their pioneering efforts paved the way for the largest set of ex-slave narrative interviews ever conducted, those by the Federal Writer’s Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Between the Great Depression years of 1936 and 1938, the WPA Federal Writers' Project (FWP) created jobs for writers by sending them to Southern and Midwestern states to interview common people in order to document their life stories. In the beginning there was no direct interest in compiling the autobiographies of ex-slaves. Such interviews were conducted sparsely and independently, usually by black employees of the FWP, and undertaken through their own reconnaissance. It was not until a set of interviews from Florida were submitted for editing, the state incidentally with the highest percentage of black interviewers, that the potential for studying the lives of former slaves became evident to the larger WPA body.¹³

¹¹ Yetman, “Collections that Led the Way,” par. 2. See also Ophelia Settle Egypt, J. Masuoka, and Charles S. Johnson, *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves* (Nashville, 1945), Fisk University Social Science Institute, *God Struck Me Dead: Religion Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-Slaves* (Nashville, 1945)

¹² Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, 3-4

These narratives of ex-slaves, however, were mostly ignored for several decades. A major problem for historians was simply gaining access to the documents. It was not until the 1960s that microfilmed copies of WPA interviews of ex-slaves became available.¹⁴ And it was not until the 1970s that the narratives began to reach a significant viewing audience, including academic researchers.¹⁵ But the greatest reason for neglect of the narratives centered on controversies surrounding oral historical research, most specifically whether memories were a reliable resource for documenting the past, given their subjective nature.¹⁶ In history, a field dominated by written word, first-hand accounts conducted through interviews were viewed as unprofessional and simply undependable. In fact, it was only as recently as 1948 that oral history was established as a legitimate resource for historical research.¹⁷

By the time of the WPA interviews the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of slavery were some seventy years removed, making former slaves elderly men and women. Not only was it feared that old age would impair recollections of slavery, but it soon became apparent that many of those interviewed were children or adolescents whose

¹³ Yetman, "The WPA Begins Collecting Slave Narratives," par. 1-3. The State Director of the Florida Writers' Project, Carita Doggett Corse had by chance conducted her own independent interview of an ex-slave earlier during historical research on Fort George Island. Upon appointment as Director of the Florida FWP in 1935 she pulled upon her former experiences to push for interviews upon ex-slaves. In 1936 black Florida FWP members, including novelist-anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, interviewed former slaves in the region as part of a larger research project on African-American folklore. It was the submittal of these types of independent interviews to Washington DC in 1937 for editing that brought it to the attention of John A. Lomax.

¹⁴ There were also recorded interviews of ex-slaves that have only recently been restored in the 1990s. See also Ira Berlin, M. Favreau, S. Miller, eds. *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).

¹⁵ Yetman, "The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection: Problems of Memory," par. 1-2.

¹⁶ David E. Faris, "Narrative Form and Oral History. Some Problems and Possibilities," *International Journal of Oral History*, 1, no. 3 (1980): 159-180. Faris points out inherent flaws within oral history, particularly the ease at which memories of the past may be distorted.

¹⁷ Alistair Thomson, "Fifty Years On: An International Perspective on Oral History," *Journal of American History*, 85, no. 2 (Sep., 1998): 581. The North American Oral History Association states that oral history as a modern technique for historical documentation began in 1948.

experiences of slavery were brief. Many were passing on memories of childhood in slavery, or accounts passed on to them by parents and other adults. Historians like John Blassingame worried that such accounts would not provide fair representations of slavery, since a significant number of interviewees had not lived their full lives in bondage.¹⁸

Historians also worried about the intersecting and controversial elements of race and politics in the era in which the interviews were conducted. Not only were the overwhelming majority of former slaves interviewed during the 1930s elderly, people with distant childhood memories of slavery, but most were living in extreme poverty as a result of the Great Depression. Poverty and segregation caused many older blacks to recall a more benign slave era.¹⁹ The 1930s was a period of blatant racism and violence against blacks. Because ex-slave interviews were conducted in an era of white supremacy, many blacks were often mindful of what they said to white WPA agents. “The etiquette of Southern race relations influenced the definition of the interview situation for these aged African Americans,” writes Norman Yetman, “and some of their interviewers were even members of the former slaveholding families.”²⁰

Research has shown that the race of the interviewer directly affected how former slaves responded to questions. Paul Escott compared the Fisk and WPA ex-slave narratives and found that 72 percent of those interviewed by whites described their food during slavery as good, while only 46 percent of those interviewed by blacks did the

¹⁸ John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History* 41, (1975) 490

¹⁹ Yetman, "Problems of Memory," par 3

²⁰ Yetman, "The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection. Race and Representativeness," par.

same.²¹ Similarly, when responding to white interviewers only 6 percent of slaves rated their former masters as very unfavorable while 20 percent of slaves said the same to black interviewers.²²

Though several states employed at least one black interviewer and some states contracted a majority of black interviewers, most WPA interviewers were white. In fact, black participation in the FWP only occurred after complaints from blacks themselves about their lack of inclusion. An Office of Negro Affairs was established and the aid of Howard University English Professor Sterling A. Brown was enlisted to make certain that “the Negro [was] not neglected in any of the publications written by or sponsored by the Writers' Project.”²³ Though blacks may have been significantly represented in some states like Florida, in most they were not.

This disparity, coupled with many interviewers' lack of racial sensitivity, has been roundly criticized by historians. Even black WPA interviewers may not have won the full confidence of former slaves, who may have seen them as working in coalition with the existing white power structure. Escott, for instance, finds that ex-slaves' tactic of “puttin on” WPA interviewers is entirely absent in the Fisk narratives. The Fisk interviews were gathered by blacks working under the auspices of a historically black university and not part of a federally directed project that was staffed primarily by whites.

²¹ Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, 10 A list of the known race of interviewers is available from Escott, 188-191 See also Yetman, “Appendix II. Race of Interviewers.”

²² *Ibid.*, 11. The choices were divided into Very Favorable, Favorable, Unfavorable, Very Unfavorable and Ambivalent One has to also take into account how the answers to these questions may have been affected by the perceptions of former slaves, who may have defined things differently from the interviewer Escott points out former slaves ranked their masters in comparison to harsh slave owners about whom they had heard A good master was not necessarily a benevolent one, but a man who “didn't whip much.”

²³ Eugene C Homes, Assistant Editor for Negro Affairs to the Editor, *The Spokesman*, San Francisco, April 10, 1938, Negro Studies File, Record Group 69, National Archives; Sterling A Brown to author, interview, July 20, 1965 Quoted in Yetman, “The Black Presence in the Writer's Project,” par 2

Even more troubling than the possibly flawed memories of ex-slaves was the possibility that southern racial etiquette may have caused some interviewers to censor anything they deemed inappropriate.²⁴ In addition, many interviewers were amateurs with little or no skill at the work they were assigned. Recognizing this, director John Lomax created a questionnaire to be used as a guide by interviewers. Most, however, used the guide only in part or ignored it altogether.²⁵ Historians thus were skeptical of both the former slaves' statements and the interviewers' commitment to accurately recording and submitting the information gathered.

Finally, some historians remained skeptical of the WPA ex-slave narratives because of the small sample they represented. Overall, the narratives include over 2,000 interviews, but represent only 2 percent of former slaves who were alive at the time.²⁶ Questions remain about how ex-slaves were chosen for interviews. Were those who lived close to large cities more likely to be interviewed? Were interviewers steered away from blacks who may have been more hostile in their replies? Did interviewers, particularly white workers, choose samples from blacks who were deemed more "friendly" to whites? The answers to these questions and others remain unanswered, as no description of sampling is mentioned anywhere in the records of the WPA.²⁷

It is not hard to see why then many historians remained skeptical of the ex-slave narratives. Even some oral historians negatively reviewed the WPA narratives. David Henige stated that, "the combination of weaknesses that characterizes the ex-slave

²⁴ George P. Rawick, Jan Hillegas, and Ken Lawrence, eds., *The American Slave*, Supplement Series 1, 2 vols (Westport, Conn., 1977). Rawick finds discrepancies in versions of interviews sent to Washington DC from their original content, obviously altered, revised and censored to conform to existing concepts of southern race etiquette in the 1930s.

²⁵ Yetman, "Problems of Memory," par. 5.

²⁶ Yetman, "Race and Representativeness," par. 4

²⁷ *Ibid*

narratives restricts their reliable data to such matters as childhood under slavery, some aspects of family life, some details on slave genealogies, and some unintended insights into the nature of memory and of interview psychology."²⁸ Henige's final assessment of the WPA narratives was that they were an important resource, but so poorly gathered that they were almost useless.

Despite all these problems the growing acceptance of oral history, and new questions posed by southern historians, made the WPA narratives a resource that could not be ignored. The Civil Rights and Black Protest Movements of the 1960s and 1970s helped to spark, if not outright demand, a more in depth examination of the lives of the slaves. At the same time, the field of history was experiencing an upheaval as historians shifted their focus toward the common man and woman. Social history, as it would be called, was written according to Yetman "from the bottom up—from the perspectives of the unlettered, the undistinguished," and "the powerless."²⁹

These combined forces propelled the WPA narratives to the forefront of what was in vogue in historical studies at the time. The ex-slave narratives, however flawed, were rediscovered by mainstream historians looking for a window into the lives of enslaved people. As stated by Yetman, "if one wishes to understand the nature of the "peculiar institution" from the perspective of the slave, to reconstruct the cultural and social milieu of the slave community, or to analyze the social dynamics of the slave system, then these data are not only relevant; they are essential." Indeed, in the hands of responsible

²⁸ David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (New York: Longman, 1982), 117, 118. Quoted in Yetman, "Should the Slave Narratives Be Used," par. 1.

²⁹ Yetman, "The Slave Narrative Collection and the Recreation of the African-American Past," par. 2

historians the narratives provide direct insights into the lives of slaves that are unparalleled by any other body of records.

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