

“A SAD EPOCH IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL”: THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF
ENSLAVED WOMEN AND ITS IMPACT ON SLAVEHOLDING AND ENSLAVED
COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Shannon C. Eaves: "A Sad Epoch in the Life of a Slave Girl": The Sexual Exploitation of Enslaved Women and its Impact on Slaveholding and Enslaved Communities
(Under the direction of Heather A. Williams)

When white men exploited enslaved women's sexuality and sexual reproduction, enslaved men and slaveholding women were forced to bear witness, creating a web of pain, insecurity, jealousy, and contempt that entangled both slaves and slaveholders. I argue that through these experiences, enslaved women and men developed a consciousness of enslaved women's vulnerability to this kind of abuse that shaped their everyday decisions regarding marriage, family, and personal safety. Slave narratives and interviews and court documents reveal that they demonstrated a heightened concern about the sanctity of their romantic and sexual relationships and their limited ability to shield enslaved women from sexual exploitation. White men's sexual relations with female slaves also proved disruptive to slaveholding households and marriages. Court records and slaveholders' personal correspondence reveal that because of their social status as patriarchs and heads of household, white men often felt entitled to absolution for their illicit sexual behavior with female slaves. Yet, despite constraints of patriarchy, some slaveholding women felt empowered to express their grievances against "illicit" relations between white men and female slaves. Utilizing their authority as household managers, these slaveholding women inflicted physical violence and emotional abuse on enslaved women in retaliation. Divorce petitions also reveal the strife interracial sex caused within these marriages. Examining southern society's shared experience with enslaved women's sexual exploitation provides new perspectives on gender, race, and power in the antebellum era.

To my parents, Robert and Lil Eaves.
Your endless love and support made this possible.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LVA	Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.
NCDA	North Carolina Department of Archives, Raleigh, N.C.
SCC	Southern Claims Commission
SCDAH	South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C.
SCHS	South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, S.C.
SCL	South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.
SHC	Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C.
VHS	Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Va.

INTRODUCTION

In his prolific autobiographies, former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass described his owner Aaron Anthony as a complex man.¹ He said that at times Anthony could be kind, even occasionally revealing an affectionate disposition. Douglass recalled him “gently leading me by the hand—as he sometimes did—patting me on the head, speaking to me in soft, caressing tones and calling me his ‘little Indian boy.’” But, according to Douglass, Anthony’s pleasant moods were unpredictable: “They are easily snapped; they neither come often, nor remain long.” For the most part, Douglass considered Anthony a “cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding,” who was not averse to whipping and keeping his own slaves in the worst of conditions. Douglass, himself, suffered with hunger and lacked adequate clothes to protect him from the elements. “In hottest summer and coldest winter, I was kept almost naked—no shoes, no stocking, no jacket, no trousers.” said Douglass. Yet, whipping, underfeeding, and poorly clothing his slaves were just a few of Anthony’s transgressions. There were also whispers among Anthony’s slaves that he had a penchant for having sexual relations with his enslaved women.²

¹Frederick Douglass was born in Talbot County, Maryland in 1818 and was owned by a small scale slave owner named Aaron Anthony. Douglass’s family was originally owned by Richard Skinner, whose family was among Talbot County’s slaveholding elite. When his granddaughter, Ann Catherine Skinner, married Anthony in 1797, she transformed the poor, landless overseer into a slaveowner when her personal slaveholdings became his as a result of their marriage. Among the enslaved people Ann inherited were Douglass’s grandmother Betsey Bailey and mother Harriett Bailey. For more on Douglass’s early life, see Dickson J. Preston, *Young Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

²Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* in *Douglass Autobiographies* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 171-172. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* in *Douglass Autobiographies*, 33. *Douglass Autobiographies* is a compilation of Douglass’s three autobiographies and will serve as the source for all references to Douglass.

As a child, Douglass frequently heard rumors that Anthony was his biological father. His mother Harriet was around ten years old when Anthony moved her and his other slaves to his 200 acre farm, Holme Hill. She continued to live and labor for the Anthony family until her sudden death due to illness in 1825. Over the course of her short life, she gave birth to at least six children, including Douglass in February of 1818. Throughout his life, Douglass conceded that it was a likely possibility that Anthony was his father, but he was never willing to accept it for certain. However, any conjecture that Anthony was capable of sexually exploiting his female slaves was put to rest in Douglass's mind when, at the age of seven, he witnessed Anthony viciously whip his mother's fifteen-year-old sister, Hester, for resisting his sexual advances. Being so young and having to witness such a vile and bloody spectacle, Douglass described the scene as his personal entrance into the "hell of slavery."³

The year was 1825 when Douglass learned of Anthony's sexual abuse of his Aunt Hester. At this point in time, Douglass no longer lived at Holme Hill with his mother. He had been relocated to Anthony's brick house on Edward Lloyd's Wye House plantation, where Anthony's children and several of his slaves also lived. As Lloyd's chief overseer, it was necessary for Anthony to establish a residence on Lloyd's estate so that he could be available to him at all times. Yet, within the confines of his small brick house, Anthony was the head of the household, which consisted of his son Andrew, his daughter Lucretia and her husband Thomas Auld, and approximately twelve slaves. Anthony's wife Ann died after a prolonged illness in 1818, the year Douglass was born, so his married daughter Lucretia was the lady of Anthony's modest home. Douglass's Aunt Hester was among the slaves who lived and worked at the Anthony house on Lloyd's plantation. She worked in the detached kitchen that was directly behind the house and helped to prepare and serve the family's meals. Though Hester and Douglass served the

³Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 18-19.

Anthony's in their brick house, when their work was done they retired to the detached kitchen where they slept with the rest of the slaves.⁴

On the night in question, Anthony went to the kitchen in search of Hester, but she was nowhere to be found. According to Douglass, Anthony went looking for her as he had done on many previous nights because he "desired her presence." Douglass described Hester as a young woman of noble form and graceful proportions. He declared that she had few equals and even fewer superiors and her beauty rivaled that of any woman, black or white, on the Lloyd estate. As her owner, Anthony decided that no one should appreciate her form and beauty but him. For this reason, Anthony forbade Hester from going out in the evenings; he did not want to have to look far for her when he wanted to have sexual relations. In addition, he warned her to stay away from one of Lloyd's young enslaved males who also lived on the estate. The young man's name was Edward Roberts and Anthony knew that he and Hester were developing a strong attachment to one another. Douglass argued that most slaveholders would have promoted the marriage of two such fine looking slaves, but because Anthony wanted Hester to himself, he "took it upon himself to break up the growing intimacy between Hester and Edward." His orders to keep them apart reinforced the fact that, according to the law, Hester's body belonged to Anthony and, therefore, he could claim it for his gratification alone. Anthony's abuse of Hester was abhorrent, said Douglass, and because "his attentions were plainly brutal and selfish," it was "as natural that Hester should loathe him, as that she should love Edward."⁵

After an extensive search, Anthony finally found Hester. She was with Edward, even though she had been forbidden from seeing him. Douglass said that despite Anthony's threats, "it was impossible to keep Edward and Hester apart. Meet they would, and meet they did." Hester

⁴For more biographical information on the Anthony family see Preston, *Young Frederick Douglass*, 22-30.

⁵Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 19; Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 175-176.

likely found solace in spending time and being intimate with the man of her own choosing, even though there would be consequences if she were caught. Anthony, however, was determined to squelch any hope Hester may have had for exploring her sexuality on her own terms. And, because he had the authority, he “very easily took revenge,” said Douglass. Anthony dragged the defenseless woman into the very kitchen where she worked and slept. From there, he tore her clothes off, leaving her naked and exposed to her waist, tied her hands together, and hung her body from a hook secured in one of the ceiling’s joists. From the small utility closet in the kitchen where Douglass slept on the floor, he heard Anthony say, “Now, you damned bitch, I’ll learn you how to disobey my orders,” as he tore at her naked flesh with a heavy cowhide whip. Through holes in the wall, Douglass’s young and innocent eyes saw warm, red blood begin to pool on the floor and his ears heard his aunt give out “heart-rending shrieks.” Overwhelmed, he remained hidden in the closet, afraid the hells of slavery would fall upon him next.⁶

Though Douglass was merely a boy at the time of this attack, he soon came to understand the meaning behind this whipping and all of the subsequent whippings Anthony gave to Hester. Anthony had decided to make Hester his concubine or sexual servant. Perhaps because his wife had died seven years before, he felt the need to turn to his young and beautiful female slave to fulfill his sexual needs. When Hester succeeded in avoiding him, fighting him off, or seeking the company of Edward, Anthony settled for whipping her instead. According to Douglass, Anthony took great pleasure in whipping Hester, and on many occasions he was awakened in the middle of the night by his aunt’s screams. “The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped. And where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest,” Douglass recalled. Douglass surmised that Anthony whipped his aunt just to make her scream and then he whipped her to make her hush. It

⁶Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 18-20. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 175-177.

was somewhat of a performance—a production of Anthony’s twisted sexual fantasy where he was the director and Hester was the non-consenting player.⁷

Douglass’s account of Hester’s physical and sexual abuse is a relatively familiar one. Though people in the nineteenth century rarely spoke explicitly about sex and sexuality, discussion of sexual relations between white men and enslaved women can be found throughout the historical records of the antebellum period. Enslaved women and men spoke extensively about enslaved women’s sexual abuse in their writings, interviews, and testimonies. In addition, references to interracial sex between male slaveholders and female slaves can be found in the pro-slavery defenses, political debates, and divorce petitions of white southerners. It was the subject of rumors that white women shared in their letters and diaries; and, some white men even confessed to falling victim to the temptation of enslaved women in their correspondence as well.

Over the past thirty years, historians of slavery and women’s history have greatly expanded our understanding of how and why enslaved women were vulnerable to rape, sexual harassment, concubinage, and forced sexual reproduction. At its core, slavery in the antebellum South was a labor system designed to generate wealth through production; however, slaveholders often looked to slaves to provide services of a personal nature as well—waking them up, helping them bathe, and getting them dressed, for example. The expectation for this kind of personal attention often resulted in male slaveholders looking to enslaved women to fulfill their sexual needs. Legally, enslaved women’s bodies were not their own; as a result, white slaveholders and overseers alike felt entitled to exploit their bodies for sexual pleasure and to replenish the enslaved labor force through forced sexual reproduction.

Through my own studies, I too became entranced by enslaved women’s traumatic experiences with sexual exploitation and wanted to know more about how they coped with their

⁷Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 18.

vulnerability to this kind of abuse. But, as I read and reread accounts like Frederick Douglass's horrific memories of his Aunt Hester, I developed questions about how this sexual exploitation influenced not only the lives of enslaved women, but also the other members of the plantation community. For example, were Hester's visits to Edward an act of rebellion—her own way of asserting some sense of control over her own body and sexuality? Did Edward wish to protect Hester from Anthony's whip, but feared his interference would be more detrimental than helpful to both of them? Did he resent the limitations placed on him as a man to protect the women he loved? How did Aaron Anthony's sexual pursuits and vicious floggings of Hester impact his own family? When Douglass heard Hester's screams in the middle of the night, surely Anthony's family did as well, seeing that their house was merely a few steps away from the kitchen where these floggings took place. As a woman, did Anthony's daughter Lucretia feel empathy for the young female slave, or did she not concern herself with the plight of Hester, who as a slave was her social inferior?

As for the young Douglass, how did his early discovery of enslaved women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation influence his life? Based on the fact that he so vividly recalled the gruesome beatings of his Aunt Hester in more than one of his autobiographies, it is clear that he never forgot the depraved image of his aunt being tied up and hung by her hands from the ceiling where she was beaten unmercifully. Enslaved women's sexual exploitation became a part of his consciousness that he felt compelled to share with the world—a significant evil of slavery that deserved special attention. He knew firsthand that the antebellum South's system of slavery nurtured this culture of violence and exploitation through its laws and customs. He knew how vulnerable enslaved women were to sexual abuse and how flippantly white men committed these atrocities. Of his owner Aaron Anthony, Douglass said, "he was not by nature

worse than other men...the slaveholder, as well as the slave, is the victim of the slave system.”

As for Hester, her voice was never captured; only bits and pieces of her life are known and that is because her nephew went to great lengths to ensure that at least her tragic experience with sexual exploitation was captured in his life’s story. This dissertation developed as a means to answer the aforementioned questions and better understand the implications of enslaved women’s vulnerability for all members of the plantation community—not just enslaved men and women like Douglass and Hester, but slaveholders and the enslaved alike.⁸

In the pages that follow, this dissertation explores the sexual exploitation of enslaved women to better understand everyday interactions among slaveholding and enslaved men and women during the antebellum period. When white men exploited enslaved women’s sexuality and sexual reproduction, enslaved men and slaveholding women were forced to bear witness, creating what I call a web of pain, insecurity, contempt, and even jealousy that entangled both slaves and slaveholders. I argue that through these experiences, members of enslaved and slaveholding communities developed a consciousness of enslaved women’s vulnerability to rape, sexual harassment, concubinage, and forced sexual reproduction that shaped how these groups interacted with one another and influenced their everyday decisions, such as those regarding family, marriage, sexuality, and parenthood.

Using slave narratives, interviews, and court documents, I argue that enslaved men and women’s consciousness of sexual exploitation led them to demonstrate a heightened concern about the sanctity of their romantic and sexual relationships and their limited ability to shield enslaved women from sexual abuse. While enslaved women were challenged to evade and resist white men’s sexual advances, enslaved men battled with white men for the patriarchal authority to protect their wives, mothers, and daughters. Through resistance and negotiations, they fought

⁸Douglass, *My Bondage, My Freedom*, 171.

to control the most intimate aspects of their lives, specifically marriage, sexuality, and childbearing.

White men's sexual relations with female slaves also proved disruptive to slaveholding households and marriages and created strains on their relationships with their wives and children. Court records and slaveholders' personal correspondence reveal that because of their social status as patriarchs and heads of household, white men often felt entitled to absolution for their sexual interactions with female slaves. Despite these displays of patriarchy, some slaveholding women felt empowered to express their grievances against "illicit" relations between white men and enslaved women. Utilizing their authority as household managers, these slaveholding women sometimes inflicted physical violence and emotional abuse on enslaved women in retaliation, creating yet another challenge for these women to face.

This project provides evidence of a collective consciousness of enslaved women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation and illustrates how it was often at the center of moments of conflict, brutality, and negotiation between male and female slaveholders and slaves. Each chapter hones in on the experiences and interactions between specific groups in order to illustrate how race, gender, and power influenced the ways in which people experienced and defined enslaved women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation. *Chapter One* explores the prevalence and pervasive nature of enslaved women's sexual exploitation. Members of enslaved communities across the antebellum South spoke frequently of enslaved women's sexual abuse and defined it as one of the most horrific aspects of slavery. I contend that this widespread epidemic created within the minds of the enslaved a consciousness of these women's vulnerability to this particular type of physical and emotional trauma. As a result, enslaved women were challenged to find means to best navigate their lives and, at times, their consciousness of this vulnerability

informed their decisions regarding the most intimate aspects of their lives, specifically marriage, sexual relationships, and childbearing.

Historians have long debated how to best characterize long-term sexual relationships between enslaved women and white men. Some argue that the element of exploitation can never be removed from sexual liaisons between enslaved women and white men. Others argue that it does a disservice to female slaves to not consider their ability to resist sexually exploitive situations or pursue interracial sexual relationships, specifically for the purposes of challenging social norms or securing protection and economic security. Some scholars have even contended that some enslaved women *knowingly* entered into concubinage with expectations of receiving material benefits. In *Chapter Two*, I argue that this last argument is effective in expanding our understanding of enslaved women's agency, but fails to foreground the power dynamic that existed between male slaveholders and their concubines or sexual servants. Moreover, analyses that enslaved women actively pursued concubinage rarely employ the testimony of enslaved women. White men's wills and petitions for manumission—which are the sources largely used to make this argument about enslaved women's agency—shed more light on white men's power and less on enslaved women's ability to negotiate and secure physical and economic security for themselves and their families. This chapter examines sources produced by enslaved women, such as petitions to state and federal governments, written correspondence, and slave narratives and interviews, to illuminate enslaved women's agency and how they perceived their ability to negotiate the terms of engagement for long-term sexual liaisons with white men.

Scholars exploring enslaved women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation have focused primarily on the sufferings of the women, but less has been made of the challenges sexual exploitation created for enslaved men who vividly described their regrets of not being able to

provide widespread protection for mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. While antebellum society was founded on the tenets of patriarchy that empowered white, landholding men, enslaved men were denied these patriarchal rights to serve as household heads and safeguard their families. *Chapter Three* illustrates that enslaved men's subordinate status did not erode their desires to demonstrate their masculinity and assume the rights and privileges of southern patriarchy, largely the ability to protect and provide for their families. Though their efforts to protect enslaved women from sexual exploitation were largely suppressed by violence and fears of retribution, there were some cases where enslaved men lashed out against these sexual abusers, stepping far outside the bounds set for them.

Chapter Four focuses on slaveholding women and their responses to sexual relations between slaveholding men and enslaved women. For many women, the most appropriate response seemed to be silence. But for others, there was a desire to express grievance over what they perceived as their husbands' inappropriate sexual behavior with female slaves. Given the responsibility of being household managers, slaveholding women wielded much power over the enslaved people they owned. When confronted with slaveholding men's sexual relations with enslaved women, some slaveholding women utilized this authority to seek retaliation against enslaved women by inflicting violence or encouraging their sale, all under the guise of effective plantation management. This chapter explores these moments of contention in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of white women's power and agency within the system of patriarchy that ruled the antebellum South and argues that despite the confines of patriarchy, slaveholding women were able to utilize the authority of slave ownership to seek revenge for what they perceived to be wrongs committed against them.

Intimate relationships between slaveholding women and men did indeed suffer because of white men's propensity to engage in sexual relations with female slaves. While white slaveholding men operated under the assumption that they were entitled to engage in sexual relations with enslaved women, their sexual behavior created significant consequences not only for themselves, but also for the white women and enslaved people caught in their grasp. Using personal correspondence, divorce petitions, and slave narratives, *Chapter Five* argues that white men frequently pardoned themselves, at least in part, from taking responsibility for the consequences experienced by their families and enslaved men and women as a result of sexual relations with female slaves. Some considered having sex with enslaved women to be a right of slave-ownership, thus excluding them from societal and familial objections to interracial sex. Others blamed their flawed and sinful nature that led them to succumb to temptation, and argued that they should be forgiven readily, seeing that these forces were beyond their control.

Since historian Deborah Gray White first asked "*where were the women?*," in the studies of American slavery, historians of women and slavery in the antebellum South have taken great strides to continue to uncover enslaved women's experiences and contextualize them in broader themes of power and patriarchy, racial and gender othering, and identity formation.⁹ At the center of these discussions have been immense historiographical debates on agency, consent, and collective identity about the enslaved population in the antebellum South. My project contributes to these broader themes by unearthing how enslaved women were not only physically affected by sexual exploitation, but also emotionally affected. I illustrate how enslaved women developed a consciousness of their vulnerability to sexual exploitation that influenced their decision making and identity, particularly in regard to sexuality.

⁹Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 20.

Early scholarship on enslaved women, notably White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, developed largely in response to a group of scholars in the 1960s and 1970s who first incorporated, and validated in the process, slave-written sources in order to show that despite the brutality of slavery, the enslaved community created productive kinship networks through marriage, shared religious experiences, and child rearing.¹⁰ These scholars also set out to restore enslaved men's masculinity, which they felt was destroyed by Stanley Elkins's argument that the brutality of slavery robbed the enslaved man of power, reducing him to a childlike figure known as "sambo."¹¹ As a consequence, their analysis left little room for discussing the impact that antebellum racial and gender ideologies had on the lives of enslaved women. In her scholarship on enslaved women, White asserted that enslaved men were not the only victims of reducing stereotypes. Utilizing gender analysis, White argued that members of white society used the African woman's body and her nakedness to formulate the belief that she was innately licentious and hypersexual—a Jezebel. The Jezebel stereotype was used by white men and women alike to justify miscegenation between white men and African women. It was

¹⁰As a result of President Lyndon Baines Johnson's domestic agenda (The Great Society) to eliminate poverty, the Justice Department commissioned Daniel Patrick Moynihan to explore why African American families were disproportionately falling into a cycle of poverty. In his report, *The Negro Family in America: The Case for National Action* (1965), Moynihan argued that many black families were experiencing a structural breakdown, most notably the absence of a male figure in the household. He concluded that this breakdown was rooted in psychological and social damage caused by the institution of slavery. Historians Blassingame, Genovese, and Gutman utilized slave-written sources in an effort to discredit Moynihan's findings. Of the three, Herbert Gutman was the most interested in challenging Moynihan's conclusion that the problems of the black family in the twentieth-century were passed down from slavery. Gutman argued that the two-parent household was the typical arrangement for the black slave family during and after slavery. For more, see John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon books, 1974); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

¹¹Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 59. Prior to the 1950's, historians like Ulrich B. Phillips argued that slavery was a benevolent institution that civilized Africans. Elkins wrote in order to refute the benevolent institution argument. See Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (Gloucester, Mass.: Appaleton and Company, 1918).

permissible for white men to engage in sexual relations with enslaved women, though not always considered tasteful by certain members of society.¹²

Providing the context for why enslaved women were so vulnerable to sexual harassment, coercion, and violence, White's scholarship led to copious studies on enslaved women's experiences with sexual exploitation.¹³ In addition, it led to new studies that utilized gender, race, and class as categories of analysis, placing enslaved women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation in a greater context to provide explanations on race formation, labor constructions, and social boundaries. Some of the most salient studies were conducted by historians Kathleen Brown, Kirsten Fischer, and Jennifer Morgan.¹⁴ In *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, Brown argued that the division of labor by sex and the regulation of white women's sexual behavior were essential in the process of defining race. Because enslaved African women were employed in the fields and were seen as capable of doing "men's work," they were exempt from the English ideal of the "good wife." Instead, they were seen as inherently evil, lustful and licentious, which served as a means to create racial difference and justify racial slavery.

In *Laboring Women*, Morgan also examined the ways in which enslaved women and their labor, specifically their reproductive capabilities, shaped the development of racial ideology. She

¹²For more on the Jezebel stereotype, see White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 28-61.

¹³Scholarship that explores enslaved women's experiences with sexual exploitation include Thelma Jennings, "Us Colored Women Had to Go Through A Plenty: Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women," *Journal of Women's History* 1 (1990); Patricia Morton, ed., *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); and Brenda Stevenson's *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Nell Irvin Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Full Loaded Cost Accounting" in *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2002); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Edward Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men.': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *The American Historical Review* 106, no.5 (2001): 1625- 1626.

¹⁴Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2002); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women*.

argued that because the institution of slavery rested on the slave population's ability to reproduce itself, reproduction became a part of enslaved women's labor obligations, making them vulnerable to coerced sex and sexual violence. In *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial Virginia*, Fischer argued that through their sexual behavior, white colonists in Virginia revealed their assumptions about race, class, and gender, which led to the establishment of guidelines for acceptable race relations and a new racial order based on inherent biological difference. This new racial order linked a person's sexual prerogatives or sexual vulnerability to their race (in addition to their gender and status). My project builds on these scholars' use of gender, race, and class as interconnected categories that influenced relations between male and female slaveholders and slaves. The same racial and gender ideologies that empowered slaveholding men to sexual exploit enslaved women, placed limits on how white women and enslaved men and women could respond. Yet, even within the confines of patriarchy, enslaved men and women and white women found ways to resist, rebel, and seek vengeance for white men's exploitative behavior.

Enslaved women's ability to consent to sexual relationships has also created much discussion in the scholarship of enslaved women. Though revisionist scholars of the 1960s and 1970s acknowledged enslaved women's sexual exploitation, some qualified their discussions, arguing that not all relationships between white men and enslaved women were exploitive and in the case of long-term liaisons, they could even be based on love.¹⁵ This created a fire-storm within the broader academic community, sparking scholars to argue that any sexual relationship between a white man and an enslaved woman was sexually exploitive by default. In *Women, Race, and Class*, Davis argued that "by virtue of their economic position, [white men] had

¹⁵Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 415.

unlimited access to black women's bodies."¹⁶ Many scholars joined Davis, asserting that the notion of consent could not exist within the institution of slavery. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman asked, how can rape be separated from enslaved women's sexuality when "'consent' is intelligible only as submission?"¹⁷ To counter these arguments, historians like Clarence Walker asserted that to see all enslaved women as sexual victims is to rob them of their sexual agency. Certainly, there was sexual violence and exploitation during slavery, but for Walker, generalizations like Hartman's failed to acknowledge enslaved women's ability to resist or evade sexual abuse.¹⁸

Joshua Rothman's *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, an examination of interracial sex in antebellum Virginia, asserted that some enslaved men and women were active in their pursuits of sex "across the color line." Rothman argued that blacks, as well as whites, actively explored interracial sex to challenge the social norms that supported patriarchy, racism, and slavery.¹⁹ Though arguments like Rothman's have provided balance to the historiographical debate over consent, Clarence Walker has suggested that quibbling over whether or not enslaved women had consent is unproductive—it is indisputable that slavery robbed enslaved women of power. The more fruitful challenge is for historians to explore how enslaved women negotiated their sexuality—acted as agents—in the midst of subjugation.²⁰ Kathleen Brown has written that "the truth of many interracial relationships may lie somewhere between consent and exploitation,

¹⁶Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 26

¹⁷Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 85.

¹⁸Clarence Walker, *Mongrel Nation: The America Begotten by Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 46.

¹⁹Joshua Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003)

²⁰Walker, *Mongrel Nation*, 45.

with individuals making choices in a context warped and circumscribed by slavery."²¹ This project further explores this spectrum between consent and exploitation by exploring how enslaved women perceived their ability or inability to consent to interracial sex and negotiate terms of engagement within the bounds of concubinage and other short and long-term sexual liaisons with slaveholding men. By utilizing the voices of enslaved women themselves, this project will create new opportunities for understanding enslaved women's agency and their personal efforts to negotiate for themselves the meaning of sexual relations with slaveholders to protect and advance their lives and the lives of their families.

In the historiography of enslaved women, historians have thoroughly examined relations between sexually exploitive slaveholding men and enslaved women. However, less attention has been paid to understanding the impact that this sexual exploitation had on enslaved men. Though historians like Herbert Gutman and John Blassingame felt inclined to emphasize enslaved men's masculinity and their gendered responsibilities within the enslaved family, it is also important that we as historians balance these arguments with discussions of enslaved men's vulnerabilities. Historians of enslaved women have made the point that enslaved women experienced slavery differently from enslaved men. Their vulnerability to sexual exploitation and slaveholders' reliance on their reproductive capabilities were marked differences. However, this project interjects that enslaved women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation had implications for both male and female members of enslaved communities. In their sources, enslaved men reveal that the mental anguish of having to witness enslaved women's sexual exploitation caused them to question the merits in becoming husbands and fathers because slaveholders made it virtually impossible, through the use of violence, for them to aid wives and daughters. Acknowledging these men's feelings does not emasculate them but humanizes them. This project also illustrates

²¹Brown, *Good Wives*, 237.

that though the forces of slavery were constantly bearing down on them, some enslaved men turned their pain and despair into action. While consequences were virtually inevitable, at times, enslaved men struck back at slaveholders in order to provide protection and seek vengeance. Understanding enslaved men's consciousness of enslaved women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation and the impact of this on their psyche allows for new discussions on gender and sexual violence.

In regard to slaveholding women, scholarship like Ann Firor Scott's *The Southern Lady*, Catherine Clinton's *The Plantation Mistress* and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household* overwhelmingly took the position that slaveholding women were also victimized by the system of slavery, conflating slaveholding and enslaved women's oppression. In regard to slaveholding men's sexual exploitation of enslaved women, it was argued that patriarchy, which made enslaved women vulnerable to sexual abuse, also made slaveholding women vulnerable to their husbands' infidelity with the former.²² When confronted with evidence of slaveholding women acting violently towards sexually exploited women, Clinton suggested that these plantation mistresses could best be compared to child abuse victims who became child abusers themselves. For Clinton, "persons trapped within a system that psychologically handicaps them frequently strike out, not at their oppressors, but at those equally helpless [enslaved women]."²³

Recently, scholars like Thavolia Glymph have refuted previous historical arguments of white slaveholding women's powerlessness and their adherence to nineteenth century ideals of

²²See Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon books, 1982); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988)

²³Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 188.

womanhood and domesticity, including virtue, refinement, and delicacy. Glymph argues that, in fact, these women possessed the authority of slaveownership. They served as full-time managers of households and enslaved household laborers. Because their status as fine domestic figures was dependent on their ability to maintain an efficient household, they often utilized violence to gain the cooperation of their household servants in order to accomplish this. She argues that “slavery gave mistresses the power to be hard and cruel in punishing and humiliating slaves, and the prerogative to be indifferent,” which actually contradicted their “prevailing conceptions of white womanhood.”²⁴ Similarly, Stephanie Camp, in *Closer to Freedom*, argued that while slaveholding women’s tactics were more temperamental, as opposed to orderly, “they, like their husbands, sons, and fathers, understood that the making of ‘a better servant’ required ‘force and that of the strictest kind.’”²⁵ While slaveholding and enslaved women were bonded by gender, these historians have asserted that their race and class created a hierarchical relationship—white and free over black and enslaved—that gender could not erode.²⁶ Using the sexual exploitation of enslaved women as a lens, this project builds on this scholarship by illustrating slaveholding women’s capacity for malice and violence against enslaved women in retribution for white men’s sexual behavior.

²⁴Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 40, 5.

²⁵Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 58.

²⁶Elizabeth Spelman warns that there is a danger in additive analysis—the piling of categories like race, class, and gender, as well as means of oppression, on top of one another. This additive analysis treats the oppression of a black woman in a society that is racist as well as sexist as if it were a further burden when, in fact, it is a different kind of burden. She suggests that as long as race is seen as independent of sex, and therefore racism as independent of sexism, “we are bound to give seriously misleading descriptions of gender and gender relations.” Therefore, a relational analysis, which recognizes the complex interplay of race, gender, and class, must be applied for understanding how enslaved women’s sexual exploitation affected enslaved women as well as slaveholding women. Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Women: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (London: Women’s Press, 1990), 117.

The overall significance of this dissertation is that it moves sexual exploitation from the periphery to the center of slaveholders' and enslaved people's experiences and worldview, as well as the historiography. Sexual power was indeed central to the system of slavery in the antebellum South. This project provides an inclusive history of gender and slavery that moves beyond agency of women and the enslaved and shows how power differentials between slaveholders and slaves and men and women affected the lives of *all* of those living in plantation communities. By examining the experiences of oppressors and the oppressed side-by-side, we better understand how this system of power and enslavement worked—how people learned about power and how to use it; and, how they learned to navigate life in light of that knowledge. Through this study, we learn that the lives of slaveholders and the enslaved were inextricably linked and the consequences of violence, oppression, and exploitation were vast and wreaked havoc on all of their lives.

CHAPTER ONE

Enslaved Women, Sexual Exploitation Consciousness, and Its Influence on Marriage, Sexual Relations, and Motherhood

Enslaved women's status in antebellum society made them vulnerable to various kinds of sexual exploitation. This susceptibility to rape, sexual coercion, harassment, and forced sexual reproduction was the result of being legally defined as chattel property as well as having the perpetuation of the South's economic system resting in the fruitfulness of their wombs. Their status often induced white slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike to feel entitled to their bodies, robbing them of discretion over their sexuality.¹ The prevalence of these acts and their horrific nature created a consciousness of these women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation within the minds of both enslaved men and women. Members of slave communities across the antebellum South spoke frequently of female slaves' sexual abuse and defined it as one of the most dreadful aspects of slavery. As a result, enslaved women's consciousness of their vulnerability to sexual exploitation helped to shape their decisions regarding key aspects of their lives, including marriage, sexual relationships, and childbearing.

¹See Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Thelma Jennings, "Us Colored Women Had to Go Through A Plenty: Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women," *Journal of Women's History* 1, no.3 (1990): 45-74; Nell Irvin Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Full Loaded Cost Accounting" in *Southern History Across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2002); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Edward Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men.': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *The American Historical Review* 106, no.5 (2001): 1625- 1626; Adrienne Davis, "Don't Nobody Bother Yo' Principle" in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work* ed. S. Harley (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

As a slave living in Hillsborough, North Carolina, Elizabeth Keckley was repeatedly raped by a neighboring slaveholder. Based on her experiences, she characterized southern antebellum communities like Hillsborough as societies “which deem it no crime to undermine the virtue of girls in my then position.” In her autobiography, she recalled that her life had been an eventful one and her ongoing sexual assault was one of the most defining tragedies of her life. “I was born a slave—was the child of slave parents—therefore I came upon the earth free in God-like thought, but fettered in action,” said Keckley. Her owner, Colonel Armistead Burwell, descended from one of colonial Virginia’s elite families. The Burwells settled in the southeastern region of the state where they accumulated land, wealth, and many slaves. Burwell inherited a substantial estate from his father, John Burwell, which was located in Dinwiddie County along the Sappony Creek, just south of Petersburg. It was on this land that Keckley was born in 1818.²

Several years after Keckley’s birth, Burwell fell on hard economic times and had to accept a job as a steward at Hampden Sydney College in Prince Edward County in order to pay off his debts. His new responsibilities entailed providing students with meals, laundry service, and firewood. Among the servants whom Burwell took with him to Hampden Sydney were Keckley and her mother Agnes. Keckley’s mother had long served the Burwell family and resided in their home where she worked as a seamstress. However, her connection to Armistead Burwell extended beyond their relationship as owner and slave. He was also Keckley’s father. Keckley did not learn of her true paternity until she was an adult. The details of her conception are unknown, though it is likely that Burwell forced himself on the young Agnes as she went about her daily chores. She worked within his home, always in close proximity; and, as her

²Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and four Years in the White House*, ed. Frances Smith Foster (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 24, 9. For more on the Burwell family in Dinwiddie County, Virginia, see Jennifer Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First lady and a Former Slave* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 31-35.

owner, he possessed the authority to control her whereabouts and actions. Like her daughter, her slave status made her vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Regardless of the circumstances that brought Armistead and Agnes together, or the biological connection between him and his daughter, Keckley and Agnes were his property. And when he decided to separate the fourteen-year-old from her mother and send her to live with his eldest son, Robert, in Chesterfield County, Virginia, she had to comply.³

When slaveholders like Armistead loaned out a slave, they were extending the privileges of ownership to the individual now receiving their enslaved person's service, often in exchange for a lump sum or weekly payments.⁴ Though the slave was now under the control of someone new, the original owner did not forfeit his title to them. What did change was the span of domination that loomed over this enslaved person as the number of people who could now exercise the duties and privileges of ownership increased. This was the case when Robert Burwell and his wife Anna acquired Keckley from Armistead. Because Robert's calling to be a Presbyterian minister offered limited earning potential, he was not able to invest in human property for himself. Familiar with the stresses of economic hardship, Armistead was sympathetic to his son's needs and extended to him Keckley's services, a gesture that she herself described as more than generous. "I was their only servant, and a gracious loan at that," she wrote. "They were not able to buy me, so my old master sought to render them assistance by allowing them the benefits of my services." She learned quickly that her new owners had every intention of taking full advantage of their new and only servant. "From the very first I did the

³Keckley discusses her family and being separated from her mother in the first chapter of her autobiography. See Keckley, "Where I was Born" in *Behind the Scenes*. For additional details on the relationship between Armistead Burwell and Agnes see Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between a First lady and a Former Slave* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 28-31.

⁴Calvin Schermerhorn, *Money Over Mastery, Family Over Freedom: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), Prologue.

work of three servants, and yet I was scolded and regarded with distrust,” she wrote.

Unfortunately, she now had two more “owners” to contend with.⁵

Keckley arrived in Hillsborough, North Carolina in 1835. Robert Burwell relocated her, himself, his wife Anna, and their two small children, two-year-old Mary and one-year-old John, when the Hillsborough Presbyterian Church selected him to serve as their new pastor. Under the watchful eye of Anna, Keckley was charged with turning the church’s parsonage into a home for Robert, a pregnant Anna, and their growing family. She went about her daily tasks receiving very little praise, often greeted instead with distrust and contempt. She concluded that her mistress’ behavior was due to her belief that Keckley “regarded her with contemptuous feelings because she was of poor parentage.” Keckley did, in fact, describe Anna as a “helpless wife,” who came from the “humble walks of life.” But, if she harbored ill feelings for Anna or Robert, they most likely stemmed from her painful separation from her mother and other family and friends in Virginia. In a letter to her mother she expressed her grief. “I really believe you and all the family have forgotten me,” she wrote. “Nevertheless I love you all very dearly, and shall, although I may never see you again nor do I ever expect to.”⁶

Anna was determined to subdue what she perceived as an insolent spirit in Keckley. She looked to William J. Bingham, a nearby neighbor and congregant in her husband’s church, for assistance. Known for his strict management of the all-boys Hillsborough Academy, Bingham was an ideal person to break Keckley’s spirit, thought Anna; so, she hired out Keckley to Bingham to serve as a caregiver for his infant child. The number of hands that could exercise authority over Keckley’s person increased once more in that moment. She soon found herself confronted by Bingham, who made her follow him into his study and ordered, “take down your

⁵Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 18. Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*, Chapter 2.

⁶Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 18, 25.

dress this instant.” Next, he said, “Lizzie, I am going to flog you.” At first, Keckley was overcome by a sense of modesty. She described herself as a “woman fully developed,” and despite the expectation that she should obey his orders she felt it was inappropriate for him to see her naked body. She refused to obey his command and stated, “I shall not take down my dress before you. Moreover, you shall not whip me unless you prove the stronger.” Despite her efforts to fight off his advances, he succeeded in binding her hands and tearing her dress from her back. With a rawhide whip, he “cut the skin, raised great welts, and the warm blood tricked down my back,” wrote Keckley.⁷

Bingham’s command for Keckley to join him in private in his study and take off her dress was seemingly sexual in nature. At the very least, Keckley felt it violated the scope of their relationship. She described how he “coolly bade” her to remove her clothes. Her first instinct was to shield her body, not just from physical harm, but from the gazing eyes of a man who she felt was not entitled to such an intimate examination. If all he intended to do was flog her, removing her clothes should not have been necessary. After all, the layer of thin material her dress was likely made of would have done very little to soften the impact of his whip. She also questioned whether he had the authority to treat her in this manner. She conceded that as the property of Robert and Anna Burwell, they had the right to punish her, but no one else “has a right to whip me but my own master, and nobody shall do so if I can prevent it.”⁸

Did Bingham have the right to request a private audience with her? Did he have the right to demand that she undress in front of him and expose her body? And, did he have the right to inflict bodily harm on her when she had not committed a punishable offense? For Keckley, the answer to each of these questions was no. She had done nothing to violate Bingham, nor had she

⁷Ibid., 19, 21.

⁸Ibid., 9.

disobeyed him to that point. She quickly realized that his actions had been ordered by her mistress, who Keckley knew wanted desperately to break her resolve but did not have the stomach to do it herself. And while she believed that only Robert and Anna should be able to punish her, she learned that they had authority to extend power over her to whomever they chose. Antebellum cultural norms dictated that whites could inflict inconsequential physical and emotional distress on blacks simply because of their inferior status.⁹ Therefore, with or without the Burwells' explicit permission, Bingham's abuse of Keckley did not fall outside the bounds of tasteful society and he would not be the last outsider to gain access to her body.

In 1829, six years prior to Keckley's arrival in Hillsborough, the rights and privileges of legal slaveholders—as well as hirers—came into question in North Carolina when John Mann, a resident of Chowan County, was convicted of assaulting an enslaved woman named Lydia whom he had hired from her owner. Lydia was legally owned by Elizabeth Jones, a minor, and in 1828 Jones's guardian, Josiah Small, while acting on her behalf, hired out Lydia to Mann for a term of one year. In March of the next year, Mann accused the young slave woman of committing various small offenses and announced that he intended to flog her as punishment. Not wanting to be flogged, Lydia started to run in an attempt to flee. In order to prevent her escape, Mann fired his gun at her and wounded her in the shoulder, which brought her to an immediate halt. Angered that Mann had “damaged” Elizabeth Jones's property when he shot and maimed Lydia, Josiah Small brought charges against Mann in county court. Charged with assault and battery, the judge in Mann's case instructed the jurors to determine if his actions were “cruel and unwarrantable,

⁹Enslaved men and women were subject to the constant surveillance of whites who were empowered to question their physical movements and behavior at all times. As a result, slaves had to provide explanations for their whereabouts to anyone who asked, from other slaveholders to patrollers, who were hired for the sole purpose of monitoring slaves' movements and behavior away from the plantation. Without a note from their owner that specified their destination, time of arrival, and time of departure, slaves were subject to be questioned, seized, or inflicted with physical harm by patrollers and other slaveholding elites. See Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 25-26.

and disproportionate to the offense committed by the slave,” especially since as a hirer of Elizabeth Jones’s slave, he only had a “special property,” or limited interest, in the slave. Because one had to be a property-owning man to serve on a jury in North Carolina at this time, it is likely that many of the jurors on Mann’s case were slaveholders themselves and would have been invested in making clear distinctions between the rights of owners and hirers, reserving the right to inflict severe or permanent damage on slaves for legal owners. As an enslaved person’s value lay in his or her “soundness,” or health and productivity, it is reasonable that only a legal owner should have the right to diminish the value of a slave through physical harm. It is no surprise that the jury found Mann guilty of assaulting Jones’s enslaved property.¹⁰

John Mann ultimately appealed the verdict and the case was brought before the North Carolina Supreme Court. Judge Thomas Ruffin, who would later become the Court’s chief justice, issued a decision that overturned the lower court’s conviction of Mann. He ruled that total subordination of slaves to their masters was the only way to guarantee the maintenance and success of the institution of slavery and “such obedience is the consequence only of uncontrolled authority over the body.” Therefore, “the power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect,” he wrote. Further, he argued that the law guaranteed “the general owner, the hirer and possessor of a slave” the same extent of authority. According to Ruffin, though Mann was just a hirer, once Lydia fell under his guardianship he was afforded the absolute authority of ownership to punish her as he saw fit. Therefore, Mann was not guilty of assaulting Lydia. The *State v. Mann* decision expanded and strengthened the powers of slave-

¹⁰For a detailed description of the *State v. Mann* case, see Thomas Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 190-193; Helen Tunnicliff Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro: Cases from the Courts of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee* (Buffalo: William S. Hein & Co., Inc., 1998), 2:57; Sally Greene, “State v. Mann Exhumed: Thomas Ruffin and the Perils of Public Homage,” *North Carolina Law Review* 87, no. 3:701. Also, for more analysis on “soundness” see Sharla Fett, “Soundness” in *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

ownership for slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike, something that Elizabeth Keckley would experience firsthand just a few years later. While she believed that William Bingham should not have had the right to whip her because he was merely a hirer and not her owner, Judge Ruffin's ruling inscribed into law that Bingham's authority over Keckley was equal to that of the Burwells.¹¹

The beating Keckley received at the hands of William Bingham was only a foretaste of the violation she would soon experience. Describing the events that took place next in her life, Keckley wrote,

“The savage efforts to subdue my pride were not the only things that brought me suffering and deep mortification during my residence at Hillsboro...I was regarded as fair-looking for one of my race, and for four years a white man—I spare the world his name—had base designs upon me. I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I—I—became a mother.”

The specific details of Keckley's ordeal with this man whom she did not identify are unknown.

When writing her autobiography, she might have been too embarrassed to put on paper the things he did to her. She likely harbored shame over not being able to stop his attack, just as she had done over the incident with Bingham. It is possible that he harassed her over the course of months or years before forcing himself onto her. Or maybe, he raped her on their first encounter and proceeded to rape her over and over again as the years went by. While Keckley did not wish to disclose specific details, it is worth noting that she felt “persecuted” as a result of her four-year ordeal.¹²

¹¹*State v. Mann* 13 NC 263 (1830); Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*, 190-193.

¹²Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 24. Keckley's hesitation to speak on her sexual abuse and shift focus away from her sexuality can be attributed to what historian Darlene Clark Hine called black women's culture of dissemblance. She argued that black women's systematic rape and sexual abuse influenced their development of behaviors and attitudes that “created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.” Throughout her autobiography, Keckley refuses to expose intimate details of her sexuality and sexual relations, whether consensual or coerced. For more analysis on the culture of dissemblance, see Darlene

The man whom Keckley declined to identify was, in fact, Alexander Kirkland, a member of Hillsborough's slaveholding elite and heir to the Ayr Mount Plantation, just a short distance from the Burwell home. Kirkland was an intimate acquaintance of Thomas Ruffin, the ruling judge in the *State v. Mann* decision, who was also a resident of Hillsborough and owned plantations and slaves in surrounding Rockingham and Alamance counties. Twenty years before his *State v. Mann* decision, Ruffin married Kirkland's sister, Anne McNabb Kirkland, tying these two powerful families together by law. Alexander Kirkland was considered the black sheep of his family, having failed to complete his studies at The University of North Carolina and being kicked out of the next college he attended for fighting. He attempted to enter the family business but failed to be a profitable merchant like his father and grandfather before him. His severe abuse of alcohol and tobacco and his notoriously poor eating habits caused his body to deteriorate prematurely and prevented him from meeting his business and family obligations. He was known among his extended family to be abusive to his wife Anna and he provided very little emotional support for their two children. These were among his many shortcomings. He died shortly after Keckley gave birth to his son, George, who was Kirkland's third and last child.¹³

Keckley did not reveal how she first met Kirkland or where his sexual assaults of her took place. Like Bingham, he was a neighbor of the Burwells and his family attended Robert Burwell's church. It is possible that Keckley crossed paths with him in the streets of downtown Hillsborough while running errands for her mistress. Kirkland could have stopped by the

Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance" in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1994).

¹³Keckley Pension petition, Department of the Interior: Bureau of Pensions, National Archives (NARA). In Keckley's petition for her son's Civil War pension, she claimed that her owner *married* her off to Alexander Kirkland. She mistakenly identified her owner as Hugh Garland, rather than Robert Burwell. Burwell was her owner the entire time she lived in Hillsborough, which is when she was sexually assaulted by Kirkland and gave birth to her son George. For a transcription of the pension, see John Washington, *They Knew Lincoln* (New York: Dutton & Co, 1942), 209-210. For more on Alexander Kirkland, see Jean Bradley Anderson, *The Kirklands of Ayr Mount* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) and Freischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckley*.

Burwell's parsonage to seek counsel from Robert and caught a glimpse of Keckley doing her household chores. Or perhaps, he expressed his interest in her to Robert or Anna. It is possible that they granted him permission to engage in sexual relations with their household servant and promised to turn a blind eye. In the event the Burwells hired out Keckley to Kirkland, as they did with Bingham, he too would have been extended absolute authority over her body to discipline or exploit it in whichever ways he chose, a precedent established by Kirkland's brother-in-law, Thomas Ruffin. The law, coupled with the Burwells' willingness to extend power over their one and only slave, meant that Keckley was subject to abuse and exploitation by the hands of many. Her rape by Alexander Kirkland was evidence of this.

To their owners, enslaved women's bodies were conduits for production and economic security as well as sexual deviance and pleasure.¹⁴ According to former slave Henry Bibb, the law was responsible for devaluing enslaved women's sexuality and bodies and, at the same time, empowering slaveholders, and some non-slaveholders, to attack and deface these women for their own pleasure. He argued that "licentious white men, can and do, enter at night or day the lodging places of slaves; break up the bonds of affection in families; destroy all their domestic and social union for life." And this is allowed to happen because "the laws of the country afford them no protection," he said.¹⁵ By the start of the antebellum period, all Southern slave states had statutes defining the enslaved as chattel—personal estate that could be bought and sold and

¹⁴For further analysis on the vulnerabilities of enslaved women see Patricia Morton, ed., *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Brenda Stevenson's *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Catherine Clinton, "Caught in the Web of the Big House: Women and Slavery," in *The Web of Southern Social Relations: Women, Family and Education*, ed. Walter Fraser, Jr., R. Frank Saunders, Jr., and Jon L. Wakelyn (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985).

¹⁵Henry Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb: An American Slave* in Sterling Lecater Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives: An Anthology* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 2:365.

transferred from one party to another at slave owners' discretion.¹⁶ The commodification of human beings created a culture in which enslaved populations were dehumanized in the eyes of slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike. This process empowered slaveholders to deny their slaves the right to basic human decency and to disregard their pain and suffering. Instead, they were able to visualize slaves as tools for generating wealth and fulfilling personal needs. In the case of Elizabeth Keckley, it is clear that Alexander Kirkland saw her as a tool to fulfill his personal needs, and her putative owners, the Burwells, granted consent, even if it was silent.

When slaveholders across the antebellum South participated in the trade and sale of human beings, they affirmed their ability to conceive of enslaved Africans as property. This process of commodification, which was necessary to ensure the submission of slaves to their owners, allowed for the execution of slavery's most heinous practices, including the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. At the same time, many slaveholders, whether consciously or unconsciously, also demonstrated an ability to affirm the humanity of their human chattel. For example, slaveholders permitted slaves to engage in marriage, burial rituals, and religious celebrations, practices that they themselves also held dear. This paradox—simultaneously conceiving slaves as human beings and chattel—did not create conflict in the minds of most slaveholders. When a debt was owed, or a slave was no longer productive, many slaveholders

¹⁶In the early seventeenth century, colonies like Virginia categorized slaves as real property, which placed certain restrictions on how slaves could be transferred from one party to another. As real property, slaves were to be transferred to heirs and widows in the same way as land and other real estate. Virginia law declared slaves "to be real estate (and not chattels;) and shall descend until the heirs and widows of persons departing this life, according to the manner and custom of land of inheritance, held in fee simple." By the mid-seventeenth century, colonies began formally and informally regarding slaves as personal property, so that they could be separated from real property and used as assets to pay off debts or be sold to outside parties to generate capital. By 1792, Virginia's statute said, "all negro and mulatto slaves in all courts of judicature within this commonwealth shall be held, taken and adjudged to be personal state." William Waller Hening, *The States of Large: Being a Collection of all Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* (Richmond: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1819), 3:333; Samuel Shepherd, *Statutes at Large of Virginia, From October Session 1792, to December Session 1806, Inclusive, in three Volumes, Being a Continuation of Hening* (Richmond: Samuel Shepherd, 1835) 1:128. For more analysis, see M. Eugene Sirmans, "The Legal Status of the Slave in South Carolina, 1670-1740," *The Journal of Southern History* 28, no.4 (1962): 462-473 and Morris, "Slaves as Property in Morris" in *Southern Slavery and the Law*.

were ready and willing to set aside their slaves' humanity and auction them off to the highest bidder. Navigating this paradox was paramount to the perpetuation of slavery.¹⁷

At its core, slavery in the antebellum South was a labor system designed to generate wealth through production; but slaveholders looked to slaves to provide gratification of a personal nature as well. For example, those who could afford it frequently had enslaved individuals serve as personal body servants—ever-present aides who woke them up in the morning and helped them to bathe and get dressed. The expectation for this kind of personal attention often resulted in male slaveholders looking to enslaved women to fulfill their sexual needs as well. Former slave Harriet Jacobs wrote, “My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him.” Her owner, Dr. James Norcom, a respected physician and wealthy landowner in Edenton, North Carolina, found it important to remind her that she belonged to him—she was his property. According to Jacobs, Norcom spoke explicitly about his desire to have sexual relations with her and planted “unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of.” He believed that as his slave, she “must be subject to his will in all things,” including all things sexual.¹⁸

The sexual exploitation of enslaved women manifested itself in a variety of ways, including rape, subtle harassment, sexual coercion, and forced sexual reproduction. Also, severe flogging often accompanied the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. This was slaveholding

¹⁷For more analysis on the commodification of slaves see, Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996); Schermerhorn, *Money Over Mastery*; Baptist, “‘Cuffy,’ ‘Fancy Maids,’ and ‘One-Eyed Men,’” Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage From Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹⁸Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 27-28. For further discussion on miscegenation on the Norcom plantation and Norcom's sexual harassment of Jacobs see Jacobs, *Incidents*, 35. For more discussion on sexual harassment and slavery see Adrienne Davis, “Slavery and the Roots of Sexual Harassment,” in *Directions in Sexual Harassment Law*, eds. C. MacKinnon and R. Siegel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

men's most widely used means to subdue their victims or punish them for resisting. William Anderson recalled an incident in which his owner tied down an enslaved woman and whipped her with a handsaw "until he broke it over her naked body." According to Anderson, he "ravished her person, and became the father of a child by her." His owner was a cotton planter named Rocks who owned a plantation in Natchez, Mississippi, near the banks of the Mississippi River. Known for his cruel behavior, he often got drunk and "came out to the field to whip, cut, slash, curse, swear, beat and knock down several, for the smallest offence, or nothing at all," said Anderson. The enslaved women on his plantation had to be wary of sexual assault, in addition to being whipped and cursed. A former slave from Georgia said, "masters beat the slave women to make them give up to them." Another slave said that his owner, who was "all the time fooling with gals," used the whip to sexually assault his enslaved females. "You know in those times the women had to do what their masters told them to do. If they didn't they pick on them and whip them. If she do what he want he stop picking on them and whipping them," he said.¹⁹

Though rape was considered a heinous crime during this time, even punishable by death, the laws in most slaveholding states did not prohibit the rape of enslaved women. Eighteenth-century English common law, which served as the foundation for the American judicial system, defined rape as the "carnal knowledge of a woman forcibly and against her will." When southern lawmakers wrote rape statutes, they stipulated that the race, age, and enslaved status of both the victim and the accused were essential elements in determining if a crime had been committed. Most southern states had statutes prohibiting the rape of a white woman by an enslaved man, but

¹⁹William Anderson. 1857. *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson, Twenty-four Years a Slave*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/andersonw/andersonw.html>; Shang Harris interview in George Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 12.2 (Georgia), 117-125; Jacob Aldrick interview in George Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplemental Series 2* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 2.1 (Texas), 28.

none had statutes prohibiting the rape of an enslaved woman by a white man. There were virtually no protections against rape for any black woman, free or enslaved. The few exceptions were cases involving a free woman of color as the victim and an enslaved man as the accused assailant. Thus, white men were permitted to rape black women without consequence of mental anguish or legal repercussion.²⁰ In 1859, on the eve of the Civil War, the state of Mississippi finally provided some protections for enslaved females, but only from black men. It revised one of its rape statutes to prohibit “negro or mulatto” men from raping or attempting to rape “negro or mulatto” females “under twelve years of age,” an offense punishable by death or whipping. But, because the amended statute specified that the female victim had to be under the age of twelve, the law most likely reflected Mississippians’ disdain for the sexual abuse of children, regardless of color and status, and not a particular concern for the rape of enslaved women in general.²¹

Slaveholders also engaged in long-term sexual liaisons with enslaved women that often took on characteristics of traditional romantic partnerships—cohabitation, longevity, and multiple offspring, etc. According to former slave William Craft, “Any man with money (let him be ever such a rough brute), can buy a beautiful and virtuous girl, and force her to live with him in a criminal connexion; and as the law says a slave shall have no higher appeal than the mere

²⁰Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*, 302-306; Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006), 65-71; Diane Summerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Susan Brownmiller, *Against our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 162; Catherine Clinton, “Blood Terrain: Freedwomen, Sexuality, and Violence During Reconstruction,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 76, no.2 (Summer 1992): 313-332; Catherine Clinton, “Southern Dishonor: Flesh, Blood, Race, and Bondage,” in *In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900*, ed. Carol Bleser (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 65; Karen A. Getman, “Sexual Control in the Slaveholding South: The Implementation and Maintenance of a Racial Caste System,” *Harvard Women’s Law Journal* 7, no.1 (1984), 135; John D’Emilio and Estelle Freeman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 101; Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 9.

²¹*George v. State*, 37 Miss. 316. For additional information on *George v. State*, see Summerville, *Rape and Race in the Nineteenth Century South*, 65-66.

will of her master, she cannot escape, unless it be by flight or death.”²² These women were often referred to as mistresses or concubines. As Craft noted, these women were frequently required to live in the homes of their owners, forced to labor as household servants during the day and engage in sexual relations with their owners at night. A married slaveholder, however, might have chosen not to bring a concubine into the house he shared with his wife, opting instead to place the female slave in a private cabin to ensure privacy and accessibility. One enslaved man described concubinage as “another curse of slavery...which is carried on to an alarming extent in the far South.”²³

Early scholarship on the sexual exploitation of enslaved women often qualified the discussion with the argument that not all sexual relationships between white men and enslaved women were exploitive, citing concubinage as proof of long-term, loving relationships. Historian Eugene Genovese argued that most white men “who began by taking a slave girl in an act of sexual exploitation ended by loving her and the children she bore.”²⁴ In other words, a slaveholder might have initially coerced an enslaved woman to engage in sexual relations to fulfill his physical desires, but, with time and numerous sexual encounters, the slaveholder commonly developed loving feelings for their victim. Subsequent scholarship countered this by arguing that concubinage relationships started out as exploitative and they continued to be

²²William Craft, *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 3:902.

²³Anderson. *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/andersonw/andersonw.html>. More analysis on concubinage can be found in John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 83; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 415; White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 34-36; Wilma A. Dunaway, *The African American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 121-123; Cynthia Kennedy, *Braided Relations, Entwined Lives: The Women of Charleston's Urban Slave Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 111-112; Amrita Chakrabarti Myers, *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 132-138.

²⁴Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 415.

exploitative, even if slaveholders did not perceive of them as such. Scholar Angela Davis argued that, in fact, any sexual relationship between a white man and an enslaved woman was sexually exploitative by default. “By virtue of their economic position, [white men] had unlimited access to black women’s bodies. It was as oppressors—or, in the case of non-slave owners, as agents of domination—that white men approached Black women’s bodies,” argued Davis.²⁵

During a brief confinement in a Washington, D.C. slave pen, Solomon Northup encountered an enslaved woman named Eliza whose experience as a concubine could be used to justify Genovese’s claim that many slaveholders loved and cared for their concubines. Eliza had been brought into the home of her owner, Elisha Berry, to live as his concubine and “on the condition of her living with him” she and her children would be emancipated. She had given birth to a son named Randall shortly before Berry moved her into his home and over the course of the nine years she lived as his concubine she conceived one child by him, a girl named Emily. According to Northup, when Eliza arrived at the slave pen she was adorned in silk clothing and gold jewelry, all provided by Berry. When she lived with him, she had servants of her own who attended to her and she was “provided with every comfort and luxury of life.” Undoubtedly, her silk and golden adornments illustrate that her experience in slavery was vastly different from most other enslaved women during the antebellum period. But were these luxuries the evidence of Berry’s love for her? It is easy to see how scholars might interpret Berry’s generosity as love. Yet, slave narratives indicate that slaveholders raped and coerced countless enslaved women into concubinage and felt no such obligation to provide the material things that Berry did. So, perhaps Berry did love Eliza. But, according to Northup’s account, all of the material things Berry

²⁵Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 26; Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 85.

provided Eliza and his promise to emancipate her and her children were conditioned on her sexual servitude.²⁶

Eliza's lifestyle, the result of being Elisha Berry's concubine, was exceptional to say the least. It is possible that Berry did develop feelings of love for Eliza over the course of their nine-year cohabitation; and their story illustrates that concubinage did, in fact, have the potential to provide enslaved women with some material advantages. However, it did not make Eliza or other women immune to the consequences of their enslaved status. There was always potential for them to experience the most devastating heartbreaks of slavery, including sale and separation from children and other loved ones. Eliza was reminded of her vulnerability the moment Berry experienced an economic setback and was forced to give a portion of his estate to his daughter and her new husband. With this division of assets, according to Northup, Eliza and her children became the legal property of Berry's daughter, who quickly removed Eliza from the house she had shared with her father and sold her and her children to a slave trader. Though Berry had proposed to emancipate Eliza and her children, he lost the opportunity to do so once they became his daughter's property. However, he had plenty of opportunities to emancipate them during the nine years Eliza served as his concubine. But, it was to his advantage to continue to hold her as a slave because once he emancipated her he could no longer force her to be his concubine. In the end, Eliza never received emancipation; instead, she found herself in a slave pen, awaiting sale, and facing the possibility of being separated from her children forever.²⁷

Antebellum racial and gender prescriptions, which placed whites over blacks and men over women, permitted overseers, slave traders, and patrollers to be agents of power and

²⁶Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup in Puttin' On Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 245-247.

²⁷*Ibid.*

dominance, thus creating opportunities for them to sexually harass and coerce enslaved women as well. On the Virginia plantation where William Anderson was enslaved, the overseer also felt empowered by the authority granted to him by his employer to sexually engage with the women under his watch. Anderson described him as an “awful tyrant” who earned a reputation for brutally whipping slaves and “cohabitating among the women, both married and single.” When Minnie Fulkes reflected on her childhood as an enslaved girl in Chesterfield County, Virginia, she recalled her mother being tied up with her arms over her head with a rope in a barn by the overseer on their plantation. He would frequently take her mother there and beat her “till the blood run down her back to her heels.” Fulkes described the whip as “a piece of leather about as wide as my hand from little finger to thumb.” When she inquired about what her mother had done to receive such a flogging, her mother said she had done nothing, “other than she refused to be wife to this man.” According to Fulkes, the overseer’s threats of sexual and physical violence were a constant in her mother’s life. “If he didn’t treat her this way a dozen times, it wasn’t nary one,” she said. As long as he was employed to watch over and discipline her, he felt empowered to engage her sexually.²⁸

Rosa Maddox concluded that some white men just had a natural desire for black women. During her childhood as a slave, she observed that “some of them had a plumb craving for the other color.” In addition to having the desire, Maddox also knew that these men had access to enslaved women to satisfy their appetites. “I can tell you that a white man laid a nigger gal whenever he wanted her,” she said. For Maddox, the enslaved woman’s body appeared to be a training ground for which white men could gain sexual experience at an early age. She said that

²⁸Anderson. *Life and Narrative of William J. Anderson*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/andersonw/andersonw.html>; Minnie Fulkes interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 17 (Virginia), 11.

at the very least “they wanted to start themselves out on the nigger women.”²⁹ According to historians, white men’s perception of enslaved women as promiscuous and sexually alluring can be traced back to European settlers’ first encounters with African women. From the beginning of settlement in what would become the United States of America, African women and their sexuality were placed at the center of public debate. In her seminal work *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Deborah Gray White argued that during the colonial period, white settlers observed the African woman’s body, specifically her nakedness, to formulate the belief that she was innately licentious and hypersexual—a Jezebel. However, the perpetuation of this belief was just a means for early settlers to rationalize their sexual interest in these women. According to White, these men explained their sexual attraction and behavior by disparaging black women as seductresses with insatiable sexual desire. They argued that it was black women who “tempted men of the superior caste” because their “morals were so relaxed.”³⁰

When slaveholders purchased enslaved women, they planned to capitalize on not only their labor but also the fruits of their wombs. The success and perpetuation of slavery as a labor system rested heavily on enslaved women’s capacity to labor in the fields alongside men and physically give birth to new generations of slaves.³¹ As a result, an enslaved woman’s monetary

²⁹Jack and Rosa Maddox interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, suppl. ser. 2, 7.6 (Texas), 2531. During a visit to the state of South Carolina, northerner Ebenezer Appleton was told by southern men that when it came to sexual relations, black women were better in all aspects. He claimed that he was too much of a gentleman to indulge and find out for himself. But he felt the need to pass this information along to his friend. Ebenezer Appleton to Moody Kenty, April 7, 1804. Ebenezer Appleton Papers, South Caroliniana Library.

³⁰White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 38. For more analysis on the Jezebel myth, see White, “Jezebel and Mammy: The Mythology of Female Slavery” in *Ar’n’t I a Woman*. For more on gender and race and the creation of American slavery, see Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2002); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women*.

³¹In his diary, Dr. Richard Eppes of Virginia wrote about his plans to whip an enslaved woman named Milly. But, when he found out she was pregnant, he made arrangements to postpone her flogging as to not interfere with the pregnancy. Diary of Dr. Richard Eppes in Eppes Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

value was often defined in terms of her fertility. One male slave declared that “a good young breeding woman brought \$2,000 easy.” This was because “all the masters wanted to see plenty of strong healthy children coming on all the time,” he said. Historian Jennifer Morgan argued that “black women’s bodies became the vessels in which slave owners manifested their hopes for the future; they were, in effect, conduits of stability and wealth to the white community.” Therefore, enslaved women were placed under extreme pressure to bring forth new generations of enslaved laborers.³²

Slaveholders’ reliance on female slaves’ sexual reproduction made them that much more vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation. It was slave owners’ priority to have women of child-bearing age engaged in sexual relations by any means necessary. Though slaveholders frequently coupled male and female slaves for the purposes of sexual reproduction, enslaved witnesses reveal that some slaveholders took it upon themselves to impregnate their female slaves in order to increase their slave holdings. One former slave recalled slave traders who “often sleep with the best-looking female slaves among them.” In addition to fulfilling their sexual desires, these slave traders also aimed to get these women pregnant to “make an immense profit of this intercourse, by selling the babe with its mother.” Former slave Henry Box Brown claimed that male slaveholders were eager to impregnate their female slaves in order to sell the children for a profit. According to Brown, these slaveholders saw their enslaved offspring as “dollars and cents in their pockets.”³³

³²Willis Cofer interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 12.1 (Georgia), 202-211; Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 83.

³³Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, From American Slavery*, in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 1:70; Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped From Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery by Charles Stearns* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 2:457.

Though slaveholders were willing to force enslaved women into sexual relationships to ensure reproduction, in most cases they gave enslaved men and women the opportunity to form their own long-term partnerships. Slaveholders believed that slave marriages provided stability within the slave quarters. It was believed that married slaves were less likely to run away, and therefore, presented less of a disciplinary problem.³⁴ However, their primary reason for allowing enslaved men and women to form partnerships was to ensure the sexual reproduction of a new generation of slaves. In this way, slave marriage served as a tool for exploiting male and female slaves for their reproductive capabilities. When asked how slave marriages were performed on his plantation, one enslaved man said there were very few rules. “Boss man would just say: ‘don’t forget to bring me a little one or two for next year,’” he said. Another slave said there were no big celebrations for marriage. “They all want you to have plenty of children, though,” she said.³⁵

Despite being encouraged, slave marriages were very fragile. For one, they were not legally recognized. Extending the right to legal marriage to the enslaved would have undermined the entire slave system. Specifically, allowing slaves to enter into legally binding contracts would contradict the legal claim that enslaved individuals were property, not capable of possessing or executing civil rights. In addition, slaveholders had very little interest in allowing slaves to maintain romantic relationships that did not produce offspring. In instances where a partnership was not fruitful, enslaved women were separated from their husbands and forced to

³⁴For more on slave courtship and marriage, see Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 97-99; Jones, *Labor or Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 31-33; Herbert Gutman, *Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 70-75; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 156-170; Sudie Duncan Sides, “Slave Weddings and Religion: Plantation Life in the Southern States Before the American Civil War.” *History Today* 24 (1974): 77-87.

³⁵Marshal Butler interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 12.1 (Georgia) 166; Angie Garret interview in *Ibid.*, 6 (Alabama) 133-136.

take new sexual partners.³⁶ Not only did this practice attempt to destroy the bonds of love and loyalty that developed between many of these couples, but it also made enslaved women, as well as enslaved men, incapable of having full control over who they engaged with sexually. John Brown witnessed the anguish such a situation caused a fellow slave named Critty. She was separated from her husband by their owner Hugh Benford because they had failed to conceive any children. On her owner's command, she was "compelled to take a second husband," declared Brown. Despite Benford's matchmaking efforts, Critty and her new husband did not produce any offspring either. Because she failed to sexually reproduce with two different sexual partners, Benford quickly put into action a plan to sell her to the highest bidder. According to Brown, her "anguish was intense," and within four days "she died of grief."³⁷

In addition to enslaved women having little control over their sexuality and reproductive capabilities, many enslaved men and women found it distressing to be torn away from spouses at their owners' discretion. When Englishwoman Frances Kemble settled onto the plantation owned by her new husband, Georgia planter Pierce Butler, she crossed paths with an enslaved woman named Molly and learned just how distressing these forced separations were. While getting acquainted, Kemble asked her who she was. According to Kemble, Molly responded by saying she "belonged" to an enslaved man named Tony, "but proceeded to say that he was not her real husband." Her "real" husband, she said, had been sold away for attempting to escape. Though

³⁶Berry Clay interview in *Ibid.*, 12.1 (Georgia) 189-194. "When the selection was made, the master read the ceremony and gave the couple a home. He always requested, or rather demanded, that they be fruitful. A barren woman was separated from her husband and usually sold," said Clay.

³⁷John Brown. 1855. *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Now in England*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jbrown/jbrown.html>. Families were also largely separated because of growing demand for slave labor in the expanding lower and western South. For more on this see Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Johnson, *Soul By Soul*, Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*; Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

her owner “provided her with the above-named Tony, by whom she had had nine children,” Molly still had not accepted him as her own. Certainly, Pierce Butler profited from the offspring Molly and Tony produced, whether the couple was satisfied with the pairing or not. And though neither had a say in whether they would come together as husband and wife, Molly was additionally burdened with the responsibility of carrying their offspring in her womb. As Jennifer Morgan argues, under slavery pregnancy and childbirth stood beside the “more ubiquitously evoked scenes of violence and brutality at the end of a slave owner’s lash or branding iron,” and they were both the sole burden of enslaved women.³⁸

Yet, enslaved men were also victims of sexual exploitation. In the case of Tony and Molly, Butler forced these two enslaved individuals onto one another, and in this way they were both victims. It is true that Molly carried the additional burden of carrying their nine pregnancies to fruition, but it is likely that Tony also had a spouse who he did not wish to be separated from. They both found themselves forced together to fulfill their owner’s agenda to increase the reproduction of his slave labor force.³⁹ An enslaved woman, Carrie Davis, explained that young men and women were both valued for their ability to successfully produce offspring and slaveholders did not hide their intentions to partner those they perceived to be most fertile and capable of yielding strong, healthy children. Slaveholders “would do the men and women just like horses,” she said. Another slave revealed that if a man was known for siring “strong black bucks,” he “would be sent out as a species of circuit-rider to the other plantations.” For the purposes of impregnating as many available women as possible, he “would be ‘married off’

³⁸Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*, ed. John A. Scott (New York: Knopf, 1961), 245-246; Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 105.

³⁹For more on the sexual exploitation of enslaved men, see Thomas A. Foster, “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men Under American Slavery,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (2011).

again—time and again.” Therefore, this valuation based on fertility was inflicted on enslaved men and women alike.⁴⁰

However, the enslaved themselves placed less emphasis on the sexual exploitation of enslaved men like Tony in their narratives and interviews. Their overwhelming focus was on enslaved women’s vulnerability to sexual abuse. Enslaved men spoke in detail about their inability to protect their wives, mothers, and daughters from these conditions and the distress this caused them. According to Samuel Hall, one of the enslaved man’s biggest concerns was “how could our women live virtuous lives,” especially when enslaved husbands are sold away from their wives when they “attempt to stand up for their virtue” and shield them from sexual abuse. One enslaved man said that “should the colored husband say anything” about his wife being abused, “he is whipped or sold.”⁴¹

Despite any similarities in enslaved men and women’s experiences with sexual exploitation, the gender prescriptions of the day that privileged men over women did not totally escape the slave quarters. Though slaveholders granted their enslaved men and women the opportunity to form their own relationships, enslaved men were empowered to initiate these arrangements, giving them the upper hand in marriage negotiations. At times, enslaved women were not a part of these negotiations at all, but were the subjects of marital arrangements made between would-be male suitors and slave owners. In these cases, enslaved men were permitted to

⁴⁰Carrie Davis interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 6.1(Alabama), 105-107; John Cole interview in *Ibid.*, 12.1 (Georgia), 228.

⁴¹Samuel Hall. 1912. *Samuel Hall, 47 Years a Slave; A Brief Story of His Life Before and After Freedom Came to Him*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/hall/hall.html>; Israel Campbell. 1861. *An Autobiography. Bond and Free: Or, Yearnings For Freedom, From My Green Brier House. Being the Story of My Life in bondage, and My Life in Freedom*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/campbell/campbell.html>; Peter Randolph. 1893. *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit. The Autobiography of Rev. Peter Randolph: The Southern Question Illustrated and sketches of Slaves Life*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/randolph/randolph.html>.

circumvent enslaved women entirely and go directly to their owners to arrange these partnerships. Jefferson Franklin said that on the plantation where he was enslaved, if “a slave man saw a girl to his liking and wanted her to make a home for him, he just asked her owner if it was all right to take her.” And “if the owner said ‘yes’ then the man and girl settled down together and behaved themselves,” he said. John Cole exposed the following about courting practices in his slave quarter: “If the woman wasn’t willing, a good, hard-working hand could always get the master to make the girl marry him.” In this example, the enslaved man was not even concerned with the woman’s wishes. In fact, he knew she did not wish to be involved with him, but this did not stifle his efforts to make her his wife. His appeal to his owner only strengthened his prospects of making the woman his wife. This enslaved woman’s opposition to entering into this relationship was ignored by both her enslaved suitor and owner. Though ultimate power resided in the hands of slaveholders like Cole’s, enslaved men, at times, had leverage in negotiating long-term relationships that enslaved women did not have.⁴²

Regardless of who threatened them, some enslaved women were able to fight off would-be sexual assaults. When Henry and Malinda Bibb were thrown in a slaver’s jail for attempting to run away, Malinda was immediately met by the jailer who was known for having a “private house” where “he kept female slaves for the base[s]t purposes.” He demanded that she have sexual relations with him and, according to Bibb, when he made his “disgraceful assault on her virtue,” she refused. As a slave, obedience was mandatory; efforts to defy orders could not go unpunished. It was customary for slaveholders to resort to corporal punishment to convey the fact that their will, not the will of the enslaved, would be carried out. Malinda’s efforts to resist illustrate her desire to protect and maintain control over her body in the face of a labor and legal

⁴²Jefferson Franklin Henry interview in Rawick, ed., *The American Slave*, 12.2 (Georgia), 179-193; John Cole interview in *Ibid.*, 12.1 (Georgia), 226-230.

system that defined her body as not her own. When punishing Malinda with the lash was not enough to subdue her resistance, the jailor resorted to “threatening her that if she did not submit that he would sell her child.” Despite the stakes, she continued to resist “until her garments were stained with blood.” She persisted in establishing boundaries for what her body would and would not do. Her resistance proved effective and her captor released her, also leaving her child unharmed. Those enslaved women like Malinda who were, at least for the moment, able to evade sexual assault nonetheless suffered an assault to their bodies, character, and spirit.⁴³

Enslaved men and women developed this consciousness of enslaved women’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation through witnessing the sexual harassment and assault of their mothers, daughters, and wives over years in bondage. These acts of sexual abuse were not discrete events; instead, they reverberated within the collective memory of enslaved people, evoking feelings of sadness and indignation. The explicit and frequent recordings of enslaved women’s abuse within the historical records of enslaved people reflect the pervasiveness of these actions and the pain and suffering that they caused within enslaved communities across the antebellum South. Former slave Henry Bibb described antebellum society as a place where white men had the power to destroy the domestic bond between the enslaved by demanding sexual compliance from women, and robbing men of the right to protect their wives and daughters from such attack. He felt that such behavior was so pervasive that he declared, “be it known to the disgrace of our country that every slaveholder, who is the keeper of a number of slaves of both sexes, is also the keeper of a house or house of ill fame.” He claimed that sexual impropriety

⁴³Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 2:391. For more on resistance, see Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*.

escaped no slaveholder and this should have been enough to elicit feelings of shame within the public consciousness.⁴⁴

Harriet Jacobs's experience serves as a lens for seeing how the effects of sexual abuse extended beyond enslaved women to enslaved communities at-large. Jacobs learned early on about her vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Though she described her childhood in Edenton, North Carolina on James Norcom's plantation as exception—being afforded the opportunity to “share some indulgences” with her owner's children—she knew that as a maturing woman locked in bondage she would face unique challenges, specifically the threat of sexual harassment and assault. “I now entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl,” said Jacobs. Entrance into this sad epoch meant adopting a new state of mind—one that could best help her navigate the threats of sexual exploitation that now faced her. She needed to be wary of those men in her household and surrounding community who had reputations for sexually harassing enslaved women. She needed to know which manners or phrases had potential to generate unwanted attention from white men so she could avoid any actions that might be misconstrued as seduction. As a young enslaved woman, how Jacobs navigated her space mattered, and she quickly learned that being alone in the same room with her owner, James Norcom, made for a dangerous situation. “My master began to whisper foul words in my ear,” Jacobs said. “Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant to their import.”⁴⁵

Jacobs wrote that Norcom's daily debasement of her did not affect her alone, but her enslaved counterparts on his plantation as well. She described how they noticed that her light hearted nature had dimmed and she became “heavy with sad forebodings.” Yet, they did not need to inquire about the reason for her change in demeanor. According to Jacobs, “they knew

⁴⁴Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 2:364.

⁴⁵Jacobs, *Incidents*, 27.

too well the guilty practices under that roof” and they pitied her. Jacobs and the other enslaved men and women who lived on the Norcom plantation had to do nothing more than take note of the eleven enslaved children who were fathered by their owner to attest that his female slaves’ prospects of being sexually exploited were real and imminent. According to Jacobs, circumstances like this became embedded into their consciousness and elicited feelings of pity and helplessness towards those enslaved women who endured Norcom’s sexual advances.⁴⁶

One former slave argued that slaveholders were most motivated to “retain their iron grasp upon the unfortunate slave” so that they could have unlimited control over the enslaved woman’s body. He said, “the greater part of slaveholders are licentious men, and the most respectable and the kindest of masters, keep some of their slaves as mistresses.” Another enslaved man argued that it was nearly impossible for a person to be unaware that white men were having sexual relations with black women. He declared, “Who does not know, that in three-fourths of the colored race, there runs the blood of the white master—the breeder of his own chattels!” In characterizing white slave owners as breeders, he is claiming that these men raped and exploited enslaved women’s bodies for their personal gain. In exchange for the opportunity to amass wealth and influence, they greedily sacrificed enslaved women’s humanity on antebellum plantations and farms across the South.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Ibid., 18, 28.

⁴⁷Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*, 2:457; Austin Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 3:831. Former slave James Pennington provided additional analysis when he said, “But what is generally the fact of such female slaves? When they are not raised for the express purpose of supplying the market of a class of economical Louisiana and Mississippi gentlemen, who do not wish to incur the expense of rearing legitimate families, they are, nevertheless, on account of their attractions, exposed to the most shameful degradation, by the young masters in the families where it is claimed they are so well off.” See James Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 2:546.

When asked about her experiences as a slave, Fanny Berry asserted that contending with sexual advances from white men was a part of the enslaved woman's everyday life. So, when she was sexually assaulted by a white man, she was prepared and determined to fight back, knocking over chairs and eventually scratching the man's face until he left her alone. Though she declared herself "one slave that the poor white man had his match" in, she knew many enslaved women were not so fortunate. Some were beaten for resisting and there was always the possibility of death if one rebelled. "Us colored women had to go through a plenty, I tell you," Berry concluded. Another enslaved woman said that her sex and enslaved status made her "subject to the control of any licentious villain who may be able to purchase her person." She said, "If there is one evil connected with the abominable system of slavery which should be loathed more than another, it is taking from woman the right of self-defense." By declaring exploitation as one of the most formidable evils of slavery, she confirmed the existence of these horrors within the collective slave consciousness.⁴⁸

Enslaved men were aware of and particularly concerned about the possibilities of sexual exploitation for the enslaved women with whom they were intimately connected. Their expressions of fear for their mothers, daughters, and lovers suggest that the threat of sexual exploitation was not merely a part of their consciousness, but was often at the forefront of their minds.⁴⁹ James Pennington declared that his enslaved brethren were widely awakened to their inability to protect their own wives and daughters from predatory slave owners. Formerly

⁴⁸Fannie Berry interview in Rawick, ed., *The American Slave*, 16.5 (Virginia), 2; Josephine Brown. 1856. *Biography of an American Bondman, by His Daughter*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownj/brownj.html>.

⁴⁹Because the majority of slave narratives were written by men, we have a larger record of their thoughts and feelings about sexual exploitation. Though some historians have urged that we should use slave narratives with caution because they were tools for anti-slavery advocates, they undoubtedly should be seen as a rich resource for understanding how enslaved people experienced slavery and discovering which social ills they found to be most egregious.

enslaved in Maryland, Pennington wrote that enslaved men “are also conscious of the deep and corrupting disgrace of having our wives and children owned by other men—men who have shown to the world that their own virtue is not infallible, and who have given us no flattering encouragement to entrust that of our wives and daughters to them.” He acknowledged that in addition to him, the world knew how vulnerable his wife and daughters were in the hands of “licentious” slave owners. One male slave expressed that the frustration was in the fact that “the slave husband must submit without a murmur,” while he sees his wife “exposed to the rude gaze of a beastly tyrant.” Another expressed similar frustration, declaring that the enslaved man’s greatest tragedy was not being able to protect his female family members from sexual abuse. “If there is any one thing under the wide canopy of heaven, horrible enough to stir a man’s soul, and to make his very blood boil, it is the thought of his dear wife, his unprotected sister, or his young and virtuous daughters, struggling to save themselves from falling to prey to such demons.” Henry Bibb worried extensively about the possibility of his wife, Malinda, falling into the hands of an abusive man. “If my wife must be exposed to the insults and licentious passions of wicked slave drivers and overseers; if she must bear the stripes of the lash laid on by an unmerciful tyrant; if this is to be done with impunity, which is frequently done by slaveholders and their abettors, heaven forbid that I should be compelled to witness the sight,” Bibb wrote.⁵⁰

Further proof of this consciousness of sexual exploitation is enslaved men and women’s repeated claim that beauty was a liability for enslaved women, making them more vulnerable to white men’s sexual exploits. When Lewis Clark detailed his owner’s plan to make a young girl named Delia his concubine, he said “she was so unfortunate as to be uncommonly handsome, and when arrived at woman’s estate, was considered a great prize for the guilty passions of the

⁵⁰James Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith*, 2:550; Steward, *Narrative of Austin Steward*, 3:702; Craft, *Narrative of William and Ellen Craft*, 3:899; Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 2:366-367.

slaveholders.” Enslaved people frequently defined beauty for black women as having light-colored skin and straight hair, characteristics that often resulted from European ancestry. It appeared that white men found enslaved women with European-like features especially appealing.⁵¹ Elizabeth Keckley, whose father was a white man, attributed her sexual assault by Alexander Kirkland to being “regarded as fair-looking for one of my race.” This is not to suggest that darker-skinned women were not vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Enslaved women of every hue were victims of rape, sexual harassment, and forced sexual reproduction. However, slave sources suggest that white men fetishized light-skinned women, especially those who were classified as “mulatto” or of mixed-race, objectifying them not only for their sex but their physical appearance as well.⁵²

Perhaps the most extreme manifestation of beauty as a liability for enslaved women was the fancy girl trade. While most enslaved women were sold and purchased for their physical labor, some were traded specifically for sexual services and were known as “fancy girls.” And, according to William Craft, the more beautiful a woman was the more likely she was to be trapped in this horrific enterprise. For slave traders and potential buyers, beauty was also defined as what historian Walter Johnson called “the hybrid whiteness of the slaves.” One slave trader

⁵¹White people during this time defined African American beauty in similar terms. While living on a slave plantation near Columbus, Mississippi, Sarah Amis wrote in a letter to her grandmother about the birth of a new enslaved baby girl and says the child is “right good looking and not black of course.” Sarah Amis to her grandmother, January 4, 1840. Elizabeth Amis Cameron Blanchard papers, 1694-1954, Southern Historical Collection.

⁵²Lewis Garrard Clark, *Narratives of the Suffering of Lewis, During a Captivity of More Than Twenty-Five Years, Among the Algerines of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of America*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/clarke/menu.html>; Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 24. In her narrative, Octavia Albert said an enslaved woman was considered beautiful because she had “long black hair, a beautiful oval-shaped face, and was of a fine oily brunette complexion.” Richard Macks described an instance where “a mulatto of fine stature and good looks” was sold in order to be her new owner’s concubine, or sexual servant. Octavia V. Rogers Albert. 1890. *The House of Bondage, or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves, Original and Life Like, as they Appeared in Their Old Plantation and City Slave Life*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/albert/albert.html>; Richard Macks interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 16.3 (Maryland), 54.

said a female slave was “a very pretty girl, a bright mulatto with long curly hair and fine features...[she] was a fancy girl.” White men projected delicacy, modesty, and even intelligence onto light-colored skin. As a result, their fetish for light-skinned women deeply influenced the market. Craft said, the “more pious, beautiful, and virtuous the girls are, the greater the price they bring, and that too for the most infamous purposes.” Solomon Northup testified to slave traders’ preference for light-skinned women after he witnessed a slave trader named Freeman refuse to sell a young slave girl named Emily because, according to Freeman, she was beautiful—and not like “thick-lipped, bullet-headed, cotton-picking niggers.” According to Northup, Freeman explained that when Emily became older, she would be worth “heaps and piles of money.” He expounded that “there were men enough in New-Orleans who would give five thousand dollars for such an extra, handsome, fancy piece as Emily would be.” In her narrative, Harriet Jacobs explained that “That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave.” And she, like other enslaved women, depended on such wisdom to navigate her life—what she referred to as her “sad epoch.”⁵³

Vulnerability to sexual exploitation and the consciousness these conditions created within their minds informed enslaved women’s decision-making regarding the most intimate aspects of their lives. For those who were directly or indirectly affected by the trauma of sexual

⁵³Johnson, *Soul By Soul*, 155; Slave trader James Blakeny quoted in Ibid., 155; Craft, *Narrative of William and Ellen Craft*, 3:902; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 265, 268; Jacobs, *Incidents*, 18. For more on fancy girl trade see, Johnson, *Soul By Soul*, 113-115, 154-155; Baptist, “‘Cuffy,’ ‘Fancy Maids,’ and ‘One-Eyed Men,’” 1639, 1641-1649. In her monograph, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon*, Emily Clark argues that the fetishization of black women, particularly those with European ancestry, was not unique to New Orleans, which is often cited as the home base of the fancy girl trade, but was a nationwide phenomenon. By sequestering New Orleans as the center of concubinage and sexual exploitation of the mythically exotic and seductive quadroon, we have allowed the rest of the South to escape responsibility for interracial sexual relations and sexual exploitation. She further argues that a close examination of New Orleans’ free women of color during the antebellum period, reveals that most of these women were married or aspired to be married to other free people of color. Sexual liaisons with white men were more exceptional and less the norm than previously believed. See Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

exploitation, their thoughts about sexual relations, marriage, and childbearing were shaped by these experiences. Though female slaves continued to form sexual and familial relationships throughout the antebellum period, the consequences of sexual exploitation and its effects on the way these women conceptualized sexual relations, marriage, and child-rearing were significant.

For Elizabeth Keckley, the pain brought on by sexual assault and the knowledge that she had little control over her sexuality and fertility shaped her outlook on future sexual relationships and motherhood. Being forced into a sexual relationship with Alexander Kirkland and becoming pregnant with his child caused Keckley deep “suffering” and “mortification,” and it conjured up feelings of shame and regret. She lamented the birth of her son George most of all, for he served as the most tangible consequence of her sexual assault by Kirkland. “If my poor boy ever suffered any humiliating pangs on account of birth, he could not blame his mother, for God knows that she did not wish to give him life,” Keckley wrote. From that point on, Keckley associated sexual relations, whether coercive or consensual, with the prospects of conceiving and bearing a child into a condition of servitude. She did not want any child that she bore to experience enslavement—the very system that declared her sexuality and right to discretion unworthy of protection. Keckley explained that when a man named James proposed marriage to her, she refused to consider his proposal for a long time. “For I could not bear the thought of bringing children into slavery—of adding one single recruit to the millions bound to hopeless servitude, fettered and shackled with chains stronger and heavier than manacles of iron,” Keckley explained. Though Keckley eventually agreed to marry James, George Kirkland remained her only child. By unknown means, she ensured that she did not birth another child into a life of enslavement.⁵⁴

⁵⁴Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 24, 29.

Bethany Veney regretted her inability to protect her young daughter from the harsh realities of slavery. To the elite white women of her society, she declared: “My dear white lady, in your pleasant home made joyous by the tender love of husband and children all your own, you can never understand the slave mother’s emotions as she clasps her new-born child, and knows that a master’s word can at any moment take it from her embrace.” Giving birth to a baby girl only intensified Veney’s feelings of uncertainty. She believed that her daughter, by virtue of her sex, faced the specific threat of sexual abuse. A mother, “from her own experience,” knows that a girl’s “certain doom is to minister to the unbridled lust of the slave-owner, and feels that the law holds over her no protecting arm,” said Veney. She explained that the enslaved mother’s concern was not simply based on rumor or suspicion, but on her own experience with this kind of danger.⁵⁵ Similarly, Mary Walker, who was once owned by the Cameron Family of Raleigh, North Carolina, had a letter written on her behalf in which she begged for the opportunity to purchase her daughter’s freedom, for fear that her “blooming womanhood exposes her more terribly than the worst adventures happening to a young man.” Though Walker feared a “terrible calamity befalling either or both of her children,” she paid particular attention to her daughter’s added vulnerability to sexual abuse.⁵⁶

Veney and Walker reveal that some enslaved women’s experiences with and fears over the possibilities of sexual abuse led to reservations and even resentment over bringing children into the world. In some cases, enslaved mothers developed long lasting and conflicting feelings for their children that, at times, shifted towards regret and disdain. In an interview, former slave

⁵⁵Bethany Veney. 1889. *The Narrative of Bethany Veney: A Slave Woman*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1997. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/veney/veney.html>.

⁵⁶J.P. Lesley letter to Mildred Cameron in Cameron Family Papers, SHC; Veney. 1889. *The Narrative of Bethany Veney* <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/veney/veney.html>.

Mrs. Thomas Johns told the story of an enslaved woman named Phyllis, who worked alongside her mother on a farm owned by a man named Odom. According to Johns, Odom was never married, “but he had a nigger woman, Aunt Phyllis, she was called, that he had some children by.” Johns said that because Phyllis herself was “half white,” the children she had by Odom “was all nearly white.” While serving as Odom’s concubine, Phyllis gave birth to a son who, according to Johns, “was nigger black. His daddy was a nigger man.” Though all of Phyllis’s children were treated as servants by Odom, even those who shared his blood, Phyllis, herself, felt a special affinity for her “black child,” said Johns. According to Johns, Phyllis frequently shared her sentiments about her favorite child with those around her, not afraid of the repercussions of favoring one child over the others. “When she was drunk or mad she’d say she thought more of her black child than all the others,” said Johns. Though Johns did not explicitly provide an explanation for why Phyllis favored her “black” child over the others, she did find it essential to distinguish the children by their paternity. The child she favored was fathered by another slave and not her owner. Phyllis probably considered herself a willing participant in the sexual encounter with her black child’s father. This was the one child that was not born out of Phyllis’s sexual servitude to her owner. This factor alone was likely enough for her to hold this child in higher regard above the rest.⁵⁷

When it came to their own fate, some enslaved women contemplated death as a preferred alternative to being in a sexually coercive relationship. Lizzie Beaufort, an enslaved woman from Tennessee, declared that she would rather “die a thousand deaths” than serve as her owner’s concubine. Beaufort was admired for her large black eyes, long black hair, and beautiful oval-shaped face. Attracted to her beauty, her owner “bought her to be his kept woman.” When he

⁵⁷Mrs. Thomas Johns interview in Rawick, ed., *The American Slave*, suppl., ser. 2, 6.5 (Texas), 1973.

made his intentions known, she expressed her willingness to work hard and “do anything that was required of her,” other than be his concubine. She declared that he would have to kill her before she would submit to his “hateful lust.” Similarly, Solomon Northup recalled Patsey, a fellow slave on Edwin Epps’s plantation in Louisiana, requesting that he put her to death so that she could escape her master’s sexual abuse and the wrath of her mistress’ jealousy. According to Northup, if Patsey tried to resist Epps’s sexual advances, “the lash was resorted to at once, to bring her to subjection.” And if she was not watchful, “a billet of wood, or a broke bottle perhaps, hurled from her mistress’ hand, would smite her unexpectedly in the face.” Her suffering was enough to make her give up on life and “she tempted me with bribes to put her secretly to death, and bury her body in some lonely place in the margin of the swamp,” said Northup. Bethany Veney concluded that death was perhaps the only means of protecting herself and her infant daughter from a similar fate. “Rude and uncultured as I was, I felt all this, and would have been glad if we could have died together there and then,” she said. Though Veney did not act on her impulse, for her to reach such a conclusion illuminates the despair and helplessness that enslaved mothers felt regarding theirs and their female children’s futures.⁵⁸

A female slave named Delia also felt death was a possible choice when her owner Joseph Logan “proposed to make a mistress” of her and bring her into his home as a concubine after the death of his wife. Members of enslaved communities understood what was in store for a woman when her owner decided to make her his “kept woman.” At the very least, this realization did not escape Delia’s mother. When Delia consulted her mother about Logan’s plan, her mother “urged her to die, rather than give herself up to him.” When Delia resisted Logan, “she was repeatedly and most cruelly whipped,” preferring physical harm or death to being a concubine. Delia did not

⁵⁸Octavia V. Rogers Albert. 1890. *The House of Bondage*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/albert/albert.html>; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 328; Bethany Veney. 1889. *The Narrative of Bethany Veney*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/veney/veney.html>.

die in her efforts to resist Logan, but she was punished by being sold away from her mother to a New Orleans slave-dealer.⁵⁹

While these enslaved women shared the same conviction to face death over sexual assault, it is important to note that they did not often come to these conclusions on their own. Instead, they were informed by the consciousness and experiences of other enslaved people who could attest to the unfavorable conditions of being a concubine. Delia's mother did not have to live as a concubine to know this was an undesirable fate. Her understanding of the tragic nature of sexual abuse, which had become a facet of enslaved women's lives, led her to conclude that she would rather see her child dead than be subjected to those conditions. As many consider the death of a child the most intense pain a parent could ever experience, it is significant that a mother would be willing to suffer that pain in order to spare her child from rape and sexual coercion.

Though many enslaved women fought hard to escape their owners' sexual advances, some concluded that acquiescing to slaveholders' sexual desires was a means for securing a better life. Solomon Northup encountered such a woman on a slaver's boat headed to New Orleans. Maria was "a rather genteel looking colored girl, with a faultless form" who "entertained an extravagantly high opinion of her own attraction," he said. Knowing that light-colored skin and long, straight hair were characteristics that some white men enjoyed in an enslaved woman and were willing to pay significant money for, Maria identified her beauty as an asset that could be used to attract the most desirable buyer. According to Northup, Maria had no doubt that "some wealthy single gentleman of good taste would purchase her at once!" For this reason, he found her to be quite ignorant and naïve. Rather than fearing what these wealthy gentlemen had in store for her, which Northup knew to be a stint of sexual servitude, Maria

⁵⁹Clark. 1845. *Narratives of the Suffering of Lewis*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/clarke/clarke.html>.

seemed to embrace concubinage as an optimal condition. She was already living as a slave; she knew the path her life would take would overwhelmingly be determined by the individuals who owned her. She likely believed that her beauty and sex appeal were her most valuable tools for securing the best owner and best life possible.⁶⁰

When Henry Bibb learned that his wife Malinda was made the concubine of her new owner, he was forced to consider that she might have preferred her new station as a concubine over being thrown in jails and whipped, which is what she and Bibb had experienced as fugitives trying to escape slavery. Bibb wanted to believe that only he could provide Malinda with happiness and security, but he had to accept that perhaps she found safety and even happiness in her new position. For him, she must have been content with her circumstances “from the fact of her sending word back to her friends and relatives that she was much better treated than she had ever been before, and that she had also given me up.” “Poor unfortunate woman,” he said. “I bring no charge of guilt against her for I know not all the circumstances connected with the case. It is consistent with slavery, however, to suppose that she became reconciled to it”⁶¹

Bibb had earlier believed that Malinda could never become reconciled to being a sexual servant. He wrote about her numerous battles to resist sexual abuse and keep their family together. She resisted the sexual advances of a slave trader, even when he threatened to sell her child if she did not comply. According to Bibb, when Malinda thought of being separated from her husband, she said, “Oh my soul! My heart is almost broken at the thought of this dangerous separation. This may be the last time we shall ever see each other’s faces in this life, which will destroy all my future prospects of life and happiness forever.” However, it is impossible to know exactly what Malinda’s actual feelings were. Unlike Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley,

⁶⁰Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 255.

⁶¹Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 2:431.

Malinda Bibb was unable to write her own story. We receive this report instead from her husband. As a result, we are left to decipher what she may have felt. Bibb's report could very well be the conclusions of a hurt and disappointed husband. However, assuming that Malinda did send the message that she was better off as a concubine, her sentiments could have reflected a decision to no longer look to Bibb for protection and security. She may have really believed that being her owner's concubine extended her benefits that she would not have received otherwise, and perhaps she preferred that over her former labor and living conditions. Or, maybe she did not become resigned to her concubinage at all, as Bibb suggests, but wanted to ease her husband's mind and make him think she was feeling fine. After all, if she had issued a complaint, she knew he would have little recourse in changing her circumstances. Either way, it is possible that she viewed her current station as a concubine as more favorable than her previous condition.⁶²

Solomon Northup had good reason to question the notion that concubinage could provide a more favorable life. He had already witnessed the devastation of Eliza, who served as Elisha Berry's concubine. Northup could not deny that during the nine years she lived with Berry, Eliza "enjoyed opportunities such as are afforded to a very few of her oppressed class." And, she believed her owner to be a "man of naturally a kind heart" and "had no doubt [he] would grant it [freedom] to her" for serving as his concubine and giving birth to his child. Like Maria, she might have resolved that her sexual servitude to Berry was a means to an end; she was adorned with gold and silk and was promised a pathway to freedom. In the end, she was ripped from her home, sold to a slave trader, and forced to work as a field hand when Berry handed over his ownership of her to his daughter. For Northup, these were the harsh realities of slavery, and concubinage could not save enslaved women from them. Despite Eliza's hopes for emancipation,

⁶²Ibid., 2:383.

her “glorious vision of liberty faded from her sight as they led her away into captivity,” said Northup.⁶³

It is not difficult to understand why enslaved women like Eliza and Maria would place a high value on protection and security. The conditions of enslavement presented them with many challenges in addition to sexual exploitation—like the pressures of keeping their families together and avoiding the physical pain of flogging. A former slave named Rose, who was born into slavery in Bell County, Texas, told an interviewer that she engaged in sexual relations with an enslaved man named Rufus in order to avoid being whipped at the stake. When she was about sixteen, her owner informed her that she would now be sharing a cabin with Rufus. Being young, Rose did not fully understand the implications of her owner’s decree. “I thought that he meant for me to tend the cabin for Rufus,” Rose said. When Rufus attempted to climb in her bunk, she used her feet to give him a solid shove, causing him to tumble to the floor. Distressed by the events from the night before, Rose went to her mistress to report Rufus’s attempt to share her bed. According to Rose, her mistress said, “You are a portly girl, and Rufus is the portly man. The master wants you to bring forth portly children.” Despite this explanation, Rose still greeted Rufus with a fire poker when he tried to enter into their cabin that night, rejecting the idea of engaging in a sexual relationship with him. Her owner called for her the next day and made his intentions clear, explaining that he had paid a large sum for her with the expectation that she would have lots of children. He further explained that he had put her and Rufus together for that purpose and that unless she wanted a “whipping at the stake,” she better do what he asked.⁶⁴

⁶³Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 247, 269.

⁶⁴Rose Williams interview in B.A. Boykin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, 2nd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 160-162.

Prior to falling under this master's ownership, Rose and her family were owned by a man who she described as a cruel owner who would "whip the colored folks and works them hard and feed them poorly." When her first owner auctioned off all of his slaves at the start of the Civil War, her new owner made it a point to purchase Rose and her parents to keep the family intact. She credited him for not separating her family; this, coupled with his threat to whip her if she did not have sexual relations with Rufus, led Rose to conclude reluctantly that she would rather share a bed and produce children with Rufus than be flogged and risk separation from her mother and father. "There it is. What am I to do? I decide to do as the master wishes, and so I yield," Rose said. It is clear that Rose did not wish to engage in sexual relations with Rufus. In fact, she resented her owner for partnering her with Rufus and said, "I always hold it against him." Knowing, however, that the possibilities were limited to having sexual relations with Rufus or suffering physical violence and losing her family, Rose secured her physical safety.⁶⁵

Experiences like this could shape enslaved women's beliefs about marriage and relationships. Once the Civil War ended and Rose became emancipated and could legally marry a man she chose, she resigned to never get married and have any more children. Having to concede control over the most personal aspects of her life—whom she shared her body and produced children with—made her unwilling to ever do it again, even as a free woman. "After what I did for the master, I never want no truck with any man. The Lord forgive this colored woman, but he have to excuse me and look for some others to replenish the earth," said Rose. Likewise, an enslaved woman named Lavinia refused to ever get married when her owner sold her soon-to-be husband and demanded that she marry another man instead. According to a male slave on a nearby plantation, Lavinia's owner was determined to flog her until she complied and

⁶⁵Ibid.

he “whipped her in such a manner that it was thought she would die.” He reported that she did not die, “but it would have been the same if she had.”⁶⁶

Some enslaved women devised new ways to conceive of marriage that factored in their lack of autonomy over when and to whom they should be partnered. Pierce Butler’s slave Molly concluded that though her husband had been sold away and she had been forced to partner with Tony, her husband did not stop being her husband—at least in her mind. She maintained an attachment to him even though he was gone physically. When Butler partnered her with Tony, she became a part of two relationships—she defined the first as a marriage and the second as simply an arrangement made by her owner. Despite being forced into a new sexual relationship, as evidenced by the nine children she conceived with Tony, Molly chose not to divorce herself from the intimate relationship she shared with her husband.⁶⁷

Bethany Veney’s definition of marriage was similarly influenced by the fragile nature of slave unions which could be broken up by slaveholders at any time. While Molly defined marriage as a life-long unity, despite physical separation, Veney insisted that her marriage vows to a fellow slave named Jerry reflect the uncertainty of their future together. When Veney and Jerry prepared to go before a minister, she said, “I did not want him to make us promise that we would always be true to each other, forsaking all others, as the white people do in their marriage service.” Veney knew that as a slave her marriage would not be regarded with the same respect and legal standing as a white person’s marriage. She could be sold away from her husband or

⁶⁶Ibid; William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William Wells Brown: A Fugitive Slave* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 2:330.

⁶⁷Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 245-246. Before and after the Civil War, enslaved people held onto hope of reunification with spouses and children. Enslaved men and women spent years searching for lost loved ones, utilizing the Freedmen’s Bureau and even placing advertisements to reestablish contact with family members they had been separated from long ago. For more analysis on family reunification and the search for lost loved ones, see Heather A. Williams, *Help Me To Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

forced into the arms of another man at any time. She noted that though she and Jerry had known each other for a long time and desired to be together, they were only able to marry because “our masters were both willing.” She knew that “at any time our masters could compel us to break such a promise” as forsaking all others and, therefore, she did not want to enter into marriage conceiving of it as a permanent institution that she had control over sustaining.⁶⁸

As a young woman, Harriet Jacobs valued marriage, but soon realized that as a slave she would never be afforded the right to let her heart choose a romantic or sexual partner. Her views on sex and marriage changed when her owner vehemently rejected her request to marry a man whom she loved, a free-born carpenter who also lived in Edenton. “Why does the slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence?” Jacobs asked. “Don’t you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose that all men are alike to her?” Norcom declared that she must have thought more of herself than she was to ask such questions. Jacobs was reminded that as a slave her wishes did not matter. Additionally, as the subject of Norcom’s sexual advances, her wishes mattered even less to him. “Youth will be youth. I loved, and I indulged the hope that the dark clouds around me would turn out a bright lining. I forgot that in the land of my birth the shadows are too dense for light to penetrate,” Jacobs wrote. Though Jacobs temporarily indulged the idea of controlling her sexual destiny, she was conscious of the restrictions that enslavement placed on her. The dark clouds she wrote about represented her inability to control her own sexuality.⁶⁹

Jacobs believed that slavery not only robbed her of the opportunity to marry for love, but to preserve her virtue and remain chaste until marriage. “I wanted to keep myself pure; and under

⁶⁸Veney, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney*. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/veney/veney.html>.

⁶⁹Jacobs, *Incidents*, 37, 39.

the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect,” she wrote. But, when marriage was placed out of reach, Jacobs wrote, “I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair.” In light of her inability to choose her own spouse, she declared that her prospects of remaining a “virtuous” woman were slim. She no longer felt it necessary or possible to reserve sex for marriage. “If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery.” She confessed that at the age of fifteen she became the mistress of Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, a young white lawyer who lived near her grandmother’s home and later served in the United States House of Representatives for the state of North Carolina. She gave birth to two of his children. When explaining the efforts she took to remain pure she wrote, “I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me.” She became a mistress and the mother of two children, but never a wife.⁷⁰

Jacobs saw her relationship with Sawyer as a means to gain a sense of freedom and control. She had already given up on love, marriage, and preserving her virginity in light of James Norcom’s constant sexual harassment and his refusal to let her choose a husband. At that moment, she began to look for something other than love and sought to achieve autonomy over her body and sexuality, at least as much as any enslaved woman could claim. “There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he

⁷⁰Ibid., 37, 54; Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 27. For more information on Jacob’s relationship with Sawyer, see Jacobs, “A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl’s Life” in *Incidents*.

gains by kindness and attachment,” Jacobs wrote about Sawyer. She found him to be trustworthy and she valued the security their association provided.⁷¹

Jacobs made the decision to pursue a sexual relationship with Sawyer when she learned of Norcom’s plan to build her a private cabin separate from the other servants, where he could have uninterrupted access to her. “He talked of his intentions to give me a home of my own, and to make a lady of me,” she wrote. Norcom’s harassment caused her to place love aside and begin searching for an intimate relationship that could place her one step closer to having control over her body and her life. Though she still felt disappointment over having to abandon marriage and sexual purity, she concluded that slavery forced enslaved women to make difficult decisions. “There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible,” she wrote. Jacobs felt that she was forced to choose protection and kindness over virtue and love.⁷²

For those enslaved women who came face-to-face with the trauma of sexual exploitation, life could not stop. Obedience was mandated, hard labor still needed to be performed, and children—including those who were the product of coerced sex—still needed to be nurtured. Instead of crumbling in the wake of sexual exploitation, these enslaved women had to find means to navigate the various aspects of their lives, specifically marriage, sexual relations, and motherhood. Marriage continuously appeared as a contested topic. Some felt it best to avoid relationships and some held tight to memories of relationships destroyed long ago. Some were faced with impossible decisions, for instance, having to prioritize their safety over the sanctity of their sexuality. The unfathomable nature of these circumstances often led these women to make

⁷¹Jacobs, *Incidents*, 54.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 42, 53, 55.

choices that went against convention. It is hard to comprehend the kind of pain that would compel an enslaved woman to beg another person to end her life so that she no longer had to suffer sexual assault at the hands of her owner. As horrific instances of sexual exploitation were experienced and witnessed by enslaved women, they left impressions that continuously influenced life's most important decisions.

CHAPTER TWO

Enslaved Women and Agency Within the Confines of Concubinage

In 1861, Pierce Bailey, Jr. composed a will in which he bequeathed his house servant Adeline and her child Tolbert, who he described as “good, trusty, and faithful servants,” to his nephew Lawrence Battle. He requested that Battle “treat them kindly, and see that they are as comfortably provided for as their condition in life and their conduct and behavior will justify.” Battle was to “treat them just as he may at all times think I would treat them if I were in life,” wrote Bailey. It was when Bailey’s will was contested before the Supreme Court of Georgia that witnesses testified to the fact that Adeline was not only Bailey’s house servant, but his concubine as well.¹ They also testified that Bailey openly acknowledged Adeline’s son Tolbert as his biographical child and expressed desires to manumit the boy and his mother and provide the child with an education.² When Bailey wrote his will, he was 71 years of age and a seasoned bachelor, having never married, and it is likely that Tolbert was his only child.³ Apparently motivated by a desire to pass on some form of a legacy, he determined to provide for his son’s future regardless of his color and enslaved status.

It is not known if Bailey purchased Adeline for the specific purpose of being his concubine and house servant, or if she was born and raised on his estate and after catching his

¹Slaves, slaveholders, and even historians have assigned many names to enslaved women who had sexual relations with white slaveholding men—concubine, slave mistress, and kept woman, to name a few.

²*Cobb v. Battle*, 34 Georgia 458

³According to the 1850 Federal Census, Bailey was born in 1790 and was listed as unmarried in 1850. 1850 U.S. Federal Census of Warren County, Georgia—Slave Schedules, Bureau of the Census. National Archives, Washington D.C. (NARA). Accessed via Ancestry.com.

eye one day was taken to live in his home and fulfill her work duties there. Concubinage was a station of enslavement and it was often under one of the aforementioned circumstances that most enslaved women became live-in sexual servants. Adeline might have preferred the comforts of Bailey's home and doing household chores to laboring in the fields of his Warren County, Georgia plantation, but she could have simultaneously despised having sexual relations with him, a requirement he determined would come along with her post. On the other hand, she could have viewed having sexual relations with Bailey as a tolerable means for providing the best possible living conditions for her and her son. According to slave testimony, most enslaved women objected to having sexual relations with their white owners and overseers. Many also resented being forced into sexual relationships with enslaved men, preferring instead to feel a sense of control over their sexuality and determine for themselves with whom they would form romantic and sexual attachments. And, some enslaved women were able to do just that—form romantic partnerships and liaisons with men, black and white, that appealed to their emotional as well as physical sensibilities. However, their enslaved status fundamentally denied these women any real sense of autonomy over their sexuality and many were not afforded an opportunity to form sexual and romantic attachments of their liking.⁴

This chapter considers the condition of concubinage as a manifestation of one of the most brutal aspects of slavery: the forced sexual relationships between male slaveholders and enslaved women. However, because enslaved concubines sometimes lived in situations akin to pseudo-marriages with their slaveholders, historians have regarded concubinage as an ambiguous state in which enslaved women may have exercised more autonomy than under other conditions of servitude. The historical record shows examples of enslaved women serving as the ladies of their

⁴Pierce Bailey's last will and testament was entered into evidence for the *Cobb v. Battle* appeal before the Supreme Court of Georgia. See *Cobb v. Battle*.

owners' households, managing other slaves, and living as virtually free.⁵ There is evidence of concubines being exempt from the hard labor of the fields and receiving finer clothes and small gifts from their owners. While it is certainly true that concubinage provided some enslaved women with material benefits that came along with living within the plantation household and even leverage to negotiate the terms of their servitude, I argue that there is a danger in assuming the degree to which enslaved concubines exercised agency, either through their entrance into concubinage or in their daily lives as concubines. Indeed, the cases of concubines living autonomously as the quasi-wives of slaveholders are the exceptions, not the rule. Moreover, these exceptions are often drawn from the close reading of wills and manumission petitions, documents which were created by white men, rather than the testimony of enslaved women themselves. Ultimately, the conditions of slavery—the absolute power of slaveholders over the enslaved—prevailed over even the most seemingly benevolent examples of concubinage.

Pierce Bailey's last will and testament and the documentation of its subsequent appeal to the Supreme Court of Georgia provide tremendous insight into Bailey's efforts to provide Adeline and Tolbert with an exceptionally higher standard of living than the rest of his many slaves. Though he chose not to grant them their freedom, he did demonstrate a commitment to their comfort and Tolbert's education at a time when educating slaves was highly contested and violated state laws. However, because Adeline's voice and actions are not captured in these documents, we do not know what role she played, if any, in helping to devise Bailey's will, which had great potential to provide her with a lifestyle that would have been unimaginable for most enslaved people. Did Adeline petition Bailey for economic security for herself and her son? When she was required to share his bed at night, did she utilize those intimate moments when his

⁵I have adopted the term "virtual freedom" from Amrita Chakrabarti Myers in *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 13.

defenses were lowered due to his sexual arousal to suggest that the intimate nature of her service to him warranted his special consideration for her and her son? Or, did they have a loving relationship in which he respected her wishes for security?

Prior to writing out his will, Bailey consulted his attorney George Bristow on how he could manumit Adeline and Tolbert. Bristow informed Bailey that due to Georgia's strict manumission laws, he could not simply emancipate the slaves in his will. Rather, the state legislature would have to pass an act approving the manumission. Therefore, his most promising option would be to remove them from the state of Georgia and take them to a free state such as Ohio that permitted slaveholders to settle their slaves within the state.⁶ Bristow encouraged Bailey to pursue this course of action because he could do it immediately and while he was still alive to guarantee their emancipation. Bailey, however, was not amenable to this option. He was an extremely wealthy man in Georgia, the son of Pierce Bailey, Sr., who was known as one of Georgia's most prolific financiers.⁷ Bailey, Jr.'s real property was estimated to be worth over \$100,000, and according to the 1850 federal census he owned at least eighty enslaved persons.⁸ Being a part of such a wealthy and established planting family and a beneficiary of chattel slavery, Bailey was probably reluctant to leave the slaveholding South and jeopardize his wealth and reputation for the sole purpose of emancipating two slaves, no matter how fondly he viewed

⁶In 1801, the Georgia Legislature forbade slave owners from manumitting slaves without legislative approval. Owners faced strict fines for manumitting slaves without legislative approval. An 1818 law overturned slave owners' right to free their slaves in their last will and testament. For more on Georgia manumission laws, see Lacy K. Ford, *Delivery Us From Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2009), 195; Augustin Clayton, *A Compilation of the Laws of the State of Georgia, Passed by the Legislature Since the Political year 1800, to the Year 1810* (Augusta: Adams & Duyckinck, 1813); Lucius Lamar, *A Compilation of the Laws of the State of Georgia: Passed by the Legislature Since the Year 1810 to the Year 1819* (August: T.S. Hannon, 1821).

⁷William J. Northen, ed., *Men of Mark in Georgia: A Complete and Elaborate History of the State from its Settlement to the Present Time, Chiefly Told in Biographies and Autobiographies of the Most Eminent Men of Each Period of Georgia's Progress and Development* (Atlanta: A.B. Caldwell, 1912), 124.

⁸1850 U.S. Federal Census of Warren County, Georgia, NARA.

them or how much effort Adeline might have put forth in advocating for their freedom. He would not be the first slave owner to go to his grave while his concubine and biological child remained in bondage.⁹

Dismissing his attorney's suggestion, Bailey settled for another option, which did not emancipate Adeline and Tolbert at all, but merely transferred ownership of them to his nephew Lawrence Battle who promised Bailey he would treat his two slaves as "benevolently" as he had. Bailey's will specified that after his death, Battle was to establish a \$20,000 trust that should be used for the maintenance of Adeline and Tolbert. The interest earned from the trust would provide for their every need, including Tolbert's education. Though Bailey went to considerable lengths to ensure that his two servants would live more comfortably than most slaves, he did not guarantee the emancipation of Adeline or Tolbert, who was his own flesh and blood, though there were pathways for him to do so. In addition to not wanting to give up his position as a powerful slaveholder, perhaps he wanted to ensure that Adeline would serve as his housekeeper and sexual servant for the remainder of his natural life; the only way to achieve this was to hold her in bondage until his death. If he took her to Ohio or another territory where she could be emancipated or live as virtually free, she would have the option to break her ties to him, dissolving any obligation to serve him, sexually or otherwise. For Bailey, it was more important

⁹Slave testimony reveals that slaveholders' hearts were not often softened by sexual relations with female slaves. Rape and sexual coercion of female slaves was deeply entrenched into the culture of enslavement in the antebellum South. In addition, many male slaveholders demonstrated the capacity to reap the benefits of their enslaved children's labor and even place them on the auction block with little to no reservation. William Craft, *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom* in Sterling Lecater Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives: An Anthology* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001) 3:902; W. L. Bost interview in George Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 14.1 (North Carolina), 142.

to preserve her service as his slave than to provide her with freedom and the opportunities that would come with that.¹⁰

Empowering Adeline with the opportunity to dictate her own path ran contrary to the foundation of Pierce Bailey and Adeline's relationship. Yes, she was the mother of his child. She may have even slept next to him in the same bed every night, and perhaps they dined together at the same table for every meal. But, at the core, he was her owner and she was his slave. The evidence of this was made most clearly in Bailey's decision to forego guaranteeing her freedom and resting instead on his nephew's promises to respect his wishes that Adeline and Tolbert be treated with the benevolence that their conduct warranted. When Bailey placed Adeline and Tolbert's fate into the hands of another, to be determined long after he was dead, he willingly left their destiny up to chance. And, the outcome proved to be as uncertain as Bailey's lawyer predicted. In the years following his death in September 1863, Bailey's will, which bequeathed all of his assets to his nephew, was contested by other extended family members hoping to acquire a portion of his bounty on the grounds that it was unlawful for him to establish a trust on behalf of enslaved persons. The case went before the Supreme Court of Georgia during its June 1866 term. Though slavery had been legally abolished, the high court agreed that it was unlawful at the time Bailey made his will in 1861 to establish a \$20,000 trust to be used for the benefit of enslaved persons. Therefore, this portion of his will was declared null and void and the court ordered that the \$20,000 be collected from his nephew and distributed amongst the rest of the family according to the law. The rest of Bailey's will was upheld by the court, so Lawrence

¹⁰The state statutes of Ohio did not prohibit the intermarriage of blacks and whites; however, it did prohibit cohabitation. However, according to Chapter 86, Section 1 of the Ohio Statutes, Bailey could have taken Adeline into the state of Ohio as his servant and she would have been permitted to settle in the township where Bailey brought her. See Joseph Rockwell Swan, *Statutes of the State of Ohio, of a General Nature, in Force January 1st, 1854: With References to Prior Repealed Laws* (Cincinnati: H.W. Derby & Co, 1854), 569, 610.

Battle still inherited the whole of his uncle's estate, minus Adeline and Talbert and the \$20,000 designated for their upkeep.¹¹

Recent scholarship has argued that in cases like Pierce Bailey and Adeline we must consider enslaved women's agency and their ability to secure their advancement as a result of long-term sexual connections with white slaveholding men. Focusing especially on women like Adeline who served as concubines and lived and produced children with white men under conditions that at times resembled affectionate, pseudo-marriages, historians have placed emphasis on these women's ability to be power brokers within these households and negotiate for long-term economic security and emancipation for themselves and their children. Some scholars have suggested that these enslaved women, mostly housekeepers and seamstresses, *knowingly* entered into long-term sexual liaisons with white men with hopes and even expectations of receiving material benefits. They utilized their sexuality and proximity within the plantation household to negotiate for emancipation, property—both real and personal—or the ability to live as virtually free.

Historians have long debated how to best characterize long-term sexual relationships between enslaved women and the white men under whose authority they fell.¹² Scholars Angela Davis and Saidiya Hartmann have argued that we cannot remove the element of exploitation from sexual liaisons between enslaved women and white men. Yet, scholars like Joshua Rothman, Calvin Schermerhorn, and Cynthia Kennedy argue that it does a disservice to enslaved

¹¹*Cobb v. Battle*.

¹²In his seminal work, Eugene Genovese qualified the discussion of enslaved women's sexual exploitation by arguing that not all sexual relationships between white men and enslaved women were exploitive. According to Genovese, most white men "who began by taking a slave girl in an act of sexual exploitation ended by loving her and the children she bore." For Genovese, most relationships between slaveholding men and enslaved concubines were benevolent. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 415.

women not to consider their ability to pursue interracial sexual relationships, specifically for the purposes of challenging social norms or securing protection and economic security.¹³ The question is, how much agency is enough, or too much, for historians to assume that enslaved women like Adeline were realistically able to wield. On one hand, enslaved women were human beings who experienced pain and joy. Some of them had desires to form familial relationships, bear and nurture children, and seek love, comfort, and pleasure through sexual expression. On the other hand, there is the need to keep sight of the “chattel principle” that deemed enslaved women property, which reigned supreme in the antebellum South’s slave society.¹⁴ These women, whose bodies were legally not their own, could be bought, sold, and coerced into sexual relations and reproduction at their owners’ discretion. There is indeed a struggle by historians to consider every aspect of enslaved women’s humanity. Historian Clarence Walker has suggested that we nuance these debates over agency and consent by shifting our efforts to exploring how enslaved women, such as Adeline, perceived of themselves as agents in the midst of possible sexual subjugation.¹⁵

Despite Walker’s charge, some historical arguments about concubinage have pushed claims of enslaved women’s agency beyond reasonable limits. Scholars have taken to characterizing relationships like that between Pierce Bailey and Adeline as enslaved women’s

¹³For more on consent and agency see Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Joshua Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Cynthia Kennedy, *Braded Relations: Entwined Lives: The Women of Charleston’s Urban Slave Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Calvin Schermerhorn, *Money Over Mastery, Family Over Freedom: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 241, Clarence Walker, *Mongrel Nation: The America Begotten by Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 45.

¹⁴For more on the chattel principle, see chapter one of Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹⁵Walker, *Mongrel Nation*, 45.

exchanges of sexual compliance for special care, stating that they formed romantic alliances with their slave owners for protection and the hopes of emancipation.¹⁶ Historian Cynthia Kennedy has argued that “many women of color extracted tangible benefits from sexual connections with white men,” and that “they transformed sexual vulnerability and sexual license into effective tools of accommodation and resistance.” She contends that for concubines like Adeline, the line between housekeeper and concubine was knowingly blurred and that when these women *assumed* these positions they understood their duties to include sex and often expected to receive material rewards for this extra service. Indeed, these arguments are effective in expanding our understanding of enslaved women’s agency because it is true that sex between enslaved women and white men did not always fit neatly into one category. As Kennedy has argued, “sex between white men and black women was coerced; it as consensual; it was a combination of both.” They paint a picture that enslaved women had considerable control over their labor and sexuality; they intentionally sought romantic relationships with white men for the benefit of better living conditions or possible emancipation. However, these arguments rarely rely on the direct testimony of enslaved women themselves. How can we argue that any enslaved woman assumed or knowingly entered into any labor or sexual position, when evidence to the contrary is so overwhelming in slave testimony?¹⁷

Some white men and enslaved women did cohabit as husband and wife in what were for all intents and purposes pseudo-marriages. These couples raised and educated their children and in some instances, these enslaved women were acknowledged as the ladies of their household by their neighbors and the surrounding community.¹⁸ However, this version of

¹⁶Schermerhorn, *Money Over Mastery*, 108-110

¹⁷Kennedy, *Braided Relations*, 112-113.

concubinage was exceptional. In addition to most southern communities having little tolerance for enslaved blacks or free people of color assuming equal status to white people, most slaveholders were not eager to dismiss their position of authority over any slave, even the women with whom they engaged in sexual relations. It was slaveholding men's status over female slaves that afforded them the opportunity to buy fancy girls, establish enslaved women as concubines—at times bringing them into their homes to live alongside their lawful wives for the ostensive purposes of serving as housekeepers and seamstresses—and systematically rape and sexually harass female slaves.

In the case of Pierce Bailey and Adeline, his authority as her slave owner served as the initial and continual foundation upon which their long-term liaison rested. It is possible that Adeline utilized her position within Bailey's household and campaigned for the long-term security of herself and her son, but without her voice, we can not know for sure how much influence she was able to wield. Though Bailey attempted to secure a better life for Adeline and their child, he never lost sight of the fact that she was his property to be treated as he saw fit. According to one witness, Bailey whipped Adeline just like he did his other slaves, just to a lesser extent. Despite coming into more intimate contact with him than anyone else, black or white, she was still his slave. Being his concubine afforded her fewer whippings than his other

¹⁸Sarah Sanders lived as husband and wife with her slaveholder Richard Cogdell. They raised their children together and Sarah and the children lived as virtually free in Charleston, South Carolina. For an extensive description of Sarah and Richard's life together see, Myers, "A Tale of Two Women: The Lives of Cecille Cogdell and Sarah Sanders" in *Forging Freedom*. According to former slave Hattie Rogers, her owner lived with an enslaved woman named Lucy as though they were husband and wife. Rogers said Lucy was considered the mistress of the household and when her owner died, he left Lucy all of his property. Hattie Rogers interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 15.2 (North Carolina), 230. When interviewed about his experiences in slavery, John Elder testified that his owner, who was also his father, lived with his female slave, John's mother, and treated her as though they were legally married. John Elder interview in George Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplemental Series 2* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 1.10 (Nebraska), 314-315.

slaves and led to his consideration for her long-term economic security, but it did not dissolve her lifelong condition of servitude.¹⁹

Though it is important to emphasize enslaved agency, it is imperative to never lose sight of the tenuous nature of long-term sexual relations between white men and enslaved women. To argue that enslaved women often *entered* into these relationships obscures the power that white male slaveholders wielded over their enslaved females and the coercive conditions under which most enslaved women first came into sexual contact with their owners. Slave narratives and interviews reveal that slaveholders often purchased enslaved women for the sole purpose of serving as their concubines. Therefore, these women were not afforded the opportunity to pursue concubinage as a means for economic advancement or emancipation. According to Mary Reynolds, her owner made a special trip to Baton Rouge to purchase an enslaved concubine. He even went to the trouble of building her a private cabin away from the rest of his slaves in order to have a private space where he could have sexual relations with her,” said Reynolds.²⁰ According to Jack and Rosa Maddox, when their owner brought home a woman who they described as a pretty mulatto girl with straight black hair and who was dressed extremely neat, everyone, including their owner’s wife, knew he purchased the woman to be his concubine. Though his wife was not pleased, he brought the woman into their household anyway.²¹ In her narrative, Louisa Picquet recalled a slave owner in Mobile, Alabama, who traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, to purchase a woman to be his concubine. According to Picquet, it was known by everyone that he “bought her for himself.” Because he only intended to use the

¹⁹*Cobb v. Battle*.

²⁰Mary Reynolds interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, suppl. ser. 2, 8.7 (Texas), 3292-3294.

²¹Jack and Rosa Maddox interview in *Ibid.*, 7.6 (Texas), 2531.

woman for sexual relations, he did not even bring her to his home to work as a housekeeper, seamstress, or nurse. Rather, he kept her boarded at a separate location and when he wished to see her, he sent his male body servant to bring her from her living quarters to his office, which was the location he designated for having sexual relations with her. The enslaved woman had no say when these meetings took place; she was just expected to follow orders and to travel to her owner's office when requested.²²

Sis Shackelford's mother had the misfortune of watching her owner and another slaveholder engaged in an intense sales negotiation that would have determined whether she became a concubine or not. Sis Shackelford, who was a child in Virginia at the time, recalled Tom Greene coming to see their owner, a man named Berry, to inquire about her mother. According to Shackelford, Greene was a bachelor and he wanted an enslaved woman for a mistress. Greene proposed to Berry that he buy Shackelford's mother "for his woman," she said. Greene knew of her mother to be a nice looking woman and he also knew Berry would likely be amenable to selling the woman because his excessive drinking had gotten him into some financial trouble and he needed money. According to Shackelford, Berry was more than willing to sell her mother to be Greene's sexual servant, as long as Greene also agreed to buy her children. Considering the woman a valuable commodity, he said that he would be damned if he sold her and did not get money for her children as well, said Shackelford. Greene rejected Berry's proposal, saying he did not want children, just a slave woman. One can only imagine what was going through this woman's mind as she watched this intense standoff between these two slaveholders. An agreement in Greene's favor would not simply make him her new owner,

²²Louisa Picquet and Hiram Mattison. 1861. *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon, or, Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/picquet/picquet.html>. Picquet's narrative was created from a series of interviews she did with Hiram Mattison. Mattison compiled the interviews and published it as Picquet's narrative.

but would require her to have sexual relations with him as well. She also faced the possibility of being separated from her children. Yet, all she was permitted to do was watch as they decided her fate. In the end, Greene rejected Berry's terms and conditions. For the time being, Shackelford's mother would not have to serve as a concubine. The next enslaved woman Greene pursued, however, was not so fortunate. According to Shackelford, he purchased a woman named Betsy to be his enslaved mistress and in the years to come, she gave birth to three of his children.²³

Born in Churchland, Virginia in 1856, Virginia Shepherd said that her early life was very much shaped by the unstable and exploitative nature of enslaved women's sexual relations with white men. Her own mother was temporarily hired out to a doctor named Harvey King who had recently relocated to Virginia. Though King probably said that he wanted to hire out the young woman to serve as a nurse or aide, he had a personal agenda as well. According to Shepherd, within a year of her mother working for King, she became pregnant and gave birth to her. She described herself as "a white baby with a slave mother." Next, she told of a woman she knew named Diana who worked as a housekeeper for her owner, Gaskins. Even though Gaskins had a wife, he required that Diana live in the house with his family. In addition to being the family housekeeper, she was forced to have sexual relations with Gaskins as well. According to Shepherd, "he just wanted his Diana in every sense of the word."²⁴ It was not uncommon for slaveholders to look to housekeepers or seamstresses for long-term sexual liaisons. Housekeepers and seamstresses were ideal targets because their labor responsibilities required them to work

²³Sis Shackelford interview in Charles Perdue, Jr., ed. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-slaves* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), 250

²⁴Virginia Hayes Shepherd interview in *Ibid.*, 255-257.

and live in close proximity to their owners.²⁵ It was often while they were performing their tasks in the plantation household that male slaveholders would demand that they meet them in a bedroom, or some other private space to have sexual relations. According to Shepherd, Gaskins was notorious for sending Diana to the barn to shell corn so that he could isolate her and force himself on her. “He tried to cage her in the barn so she couldn’t get out,” said Shepherd, but she usually made every effort she could to fight back or escape. In her narrative, Harriet Jacobs said that her owner James Norcom would come up with a myriad of excuses to get her alone in his bedroom or his study so he could sexually harass her.²⁶

Like Gaskins, Louisa Picquet was determined to resist her owner’s sexual advances at all costs. She was familiar with the conditions of concubinage because her mother Elizabeth was forced to be their owner David Cook’s concubine. However, when Cook experienced a financial setback and was forced to hire out several of his slaves, including Picquet’s mother, he quickly turned his attention to Picquet and began requesting that she come to his bedroom at night. Having witnessed her mother give birth to three of Cook’s children, Picquet understood very well that Cook did not just want her in his bedroom, but in his bed where he could have full access to her body. Though Picquet was successful in avoiding Cook for a time, he quickly grew tired of her disobeying his orders and demanded that she make an appearance in his room that night. And, “if I didn’t, he’d give me hell in the morning,” said Picquet. When she did not show up again, Cook followed through on his threat and whipped her for her disobedience. In between lashes, he asked her what she was afraid of. He asked “if I could not sleep as well there as

²⁵Women’s work assignments more so confined them within the boundaries of the plantation and plantation household. This close proximity, coupled with notions of black women’s hypersexuality, made enslaved women, especially those who worked and lived in the plantation household vulnerable to sexual abuse. White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 89-90.

²⁶Shepherd interview in Perdue, Jr., ed. *Weevils in the Wheat*, 257; Jacobs, *Incidents*, 32-33.

anywhere else,” said Picquet. Under duress, she felt compelled to assure him that she was not afraid and that she would obey any future commands, though in her mind she was prepared to “take another whipping in the morning” because she had no plans of going to his room that night either.²⁷

To Picquet’s relief, Cook never made it to his bedroom that night because he spent the evening drinking and playing cards with friends into the late hours of the night. However, the next morning, she had no choice but to knock on his bedroom door and alert him that his breakfast was ready, which was one of her many duties. She knocked with caution, afraid he would chastise her for once again not coming to his room. To her surprise, he greeted her warmly, which was likely a residual effect of his heavy drinking the night before. He summonsed her to the edge of his bed, proclaiming that he had something for her. He took hold of her hand and placed a handful of half-dollars in it, which was more money than she could have ever imagined seeing at one time. In his drunken giddiness, he continued to hold onto her and asked if she would come to see him later. She promised that he would, shook her hand free of his grasp, and left the room.²⁸

From the moment Cook handed Picquet what she described as a fortune, she demonstrated uneasiness about the transfer that had taken place. Was Cook just being unusually generous in the midst of his drunkenness? Or, had he given her the money as incentive to finally obey his request for sexual relations and put an end to her resistance? Picquet was not ashamed to admit that she was enamored by the idea of having so much money in her possession, even though she knew the money was not a gift, but an attempt to bribe her into compliance, and that

²⁷Louisa Picquet and Hiram Mattison. 1861. *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon*.
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/picquet/picquet.html>.

²⁸Ibid.

he was not really *asking*, but requiring that she come to his room that night. Rather than hash out the implications of accepting the money, she decided to place her conundrum on hold and rushed into town to buy fabric to make a flowered muslin dress that she had been admiring for some time. She could not resist what felt like a once in a lifetime opportunity to buy the fabric that was “perfectly white, with a little pink leaf all over it,” she said.²⁹

When Picquet returned home, she had hopes that Cook would not remember giving her the coins that morning. Yet, despite his display of inebriation, Cook not only remembered giving Picquet the handful of half-dollars, but her promise to join him in his bedroom that night. And, though she denied knowing anything about the money when he asked, he reiterated his expectation that she join him that night in his bedroom. Picquet now found herself in a very compromising situation. Her desire to resist Cook’s sexual advances had not dissipated, but, in light of the fact that she had accepted and indulged in spending the money he gave her, she felt an awful and overwhelming sense of obligation to complete what felt like an exchange. “I guess I’d have to go up stairs that night,” she said. Confused, she consulted an acquaintance about her predicament. One question she might have asked was did his gift of half-dollars make his vile commands any less vile? Why should she feel obligated to fulfill a bargain she had not willingly entered into? How can someone give you a gift in exchange for your submission when they already own your person and possess tools like a cowhide whip or the threat of sale to enforce their agenda?³⁰

What Picquet ultimately realized was that her owner was trying to create the illusion that they had engaged in an exchange, a negotiation of some sort for her affection. When he realized that she was committed to resisting his sexual advances, he decided to refashion his demands for

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

sexual relations to look more like a request from one willing party to another—a deal that was sealed with a generous gift. His money was merely an attempt to coax her into being obedient, which was already required of her as a slave. Perhaps Picquet’s initial feelings of obligation to comply with his demand were really feelings of defeat for falling into Cook’s trap. After all, she had spent his money and in the most frivolous way. However, expressing her concerns to her friend only solidified her understanding that she and Cook were not in any sort of negotiation at all. Whether she had accepted the half-dollars or not, as her owner he held the power in his hands to beat to her death for not complying with his orders or rape her whenever he decided his patience had been worn too thin. At that moment, she determined that no amount of coins or fabric would ever make her agreeable to his plans to make her his enslaved mistress.³¹

These accounts of concubinage are important because they provide insight into how long-term sexual relationships between white men and enslaved women were imagined, initiated, resisted, or negotiated from the enslaved woman’s perspective. The experiences of Diana, Picquet, and Virginia Shepherd’s mother illustrate that being an enslaved mistress or “kept woman” was not always accompanied with status within the plantation household, material benefits, or hopes for emancipation. Women like Sis Shackelford’s mother were not eager to become concubines. Rather than being a negotiator, Sheckelford’s mother was forced to merely be a witness to white men’s negotiations over the future of her and her children. Each story reveals that enslaved women’s long-term sexual relations with white men ran many different courses and were each established and sustained under unique sets of circumstances that make it hard for historians to draw general conclusions about enslaved women’s experiences as concubines, enslaved mistresses, “kept women,” or sexual servants—which is the most inclusive

³¹Ibid.

and perhaps most accurate descriptor to use when referring to women who were enslaved and required to fulfill their owners' sexual needs on a regular basis, over an extended period of time.

It is true that some enslaved people viewed sexual relations between white men and enslaved women as beneficial—an opportunity to potentially receive material benefits, preferential treatment, and even emancipation for the children born as a result of these relations.³² Former slave Willie McCullough said, “some of the half-white and beautiful young women were used by the master and his men friends or who were the sweetheart of the master only, were given special privileges.” According to McCullough, some of these women worked very little and were given private quarters, and some even had great influence over the owner. One former slave said he and his parents received no trouble from their owner on account of his sister being their owner's “gal.” Their owner was not married and decided instead to “keep Deenie up to the big house” to fulfill his needs, he said. Though he provided no information on how his sister felt about being “kept” in the big house to serve as their owner's concubine, he openly acknowledged that he and his family reaped and enjoyed the benefits that resulted from his sister being their owner's live-in sexual servant. Another former slave said his owner traveled to Baltimore, Maryland, to purchase “a light one for him,” meaning an enslaved woman with light-colored skin to be his concubine. According to this witness, though their owner had a wife, he allowed this female to carry keys to his house, which was seen as a privilege to the rest of his slaves. In North Carolina, a slave owner bought a female slave to live in his house and provide care for his ailing mother. Unmarried, he sought sexual relations with the enslaved woman, and, according to another slave, the woman gave birth to eleven of his children over the years. This enslaved witness, along with the other slaves on the plantation, regarded her as their mistress, as

³²Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 240.

she was treated as the lady of the household. “Yes, sir he loved that woman, and when he died he left all his property to her,” he said.³³

Though concubinage, along with serving as a house servant, had potential to provide amenities, such as living and eating within the plantation household, that other labor positions did not, the leverage that enslaved women could acquire from these sexual liaisons was only as strong and effective as their owners permitted. Enslaved women relying on hopes that their sexual relations with white men would parlay into material gains was a risky and often disappointing endeavor. Many of their efforts to broker power as concubines, mistresses, or sexual servants were quickly unraveled in the face of white supremacy and domination. William Craft argued that slaveholders were eager to hand out trinkets to elicit enslaved women’s affections and trust or generate feelings of ease towards what were otherwise sexually coercive relationships. Some were willing to make promises to enslaved women that they would live as “husband and wife” and “if they have any children they will be free and well educated,” he said. And, while a few owners remained “true to their pledges,” the vast majority never lost sight of the fact that their concubines were their legal property. “As the woman and her children are legally the property of the man, who stands in the anomalous relation to them of husband and father, as well as master, they are liable to be seized and sold for his debts, should he become involved,” Craft declared.³⁴

While enslaved, William Wells Brown encountered an enslaved woman named Cynthia who was forced to become a concubine, but was promised a better life as a result. Brown’s owner, Mr. Walker, was a slave trader. While on one of his slave-trading voyages, Walker

³³Willie McCullough interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 15.2 (North Carolina), 78; Anthony Christopher interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, suppl. ser. 2, 3.2 (Texas), 719; Jacob Aldrich interview in *Ibid.*, 2.1 (Texas), 28; Hattie Rogers interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 15.2 (North Carolina), 230.

³⁴Craft, *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom*, 3:902-903.

purchased Cynthia and instructed Brown to put her in one of the ship's staterooms away from the other slaves. Brown hinted at his suspicions regarding this request. "I had seen too much of the workings of slavery, not to know what this meant," he recalled after receiving his orders. The intention behind Walker's request became clearer once Cynthia came face-to-face with her new owner. Brown overheard Walker make "offers" to Cynthia, which she rejected. "He told her that if she would accept his vile proposals, he would take her back with him to St. Louis, and establish her as his housekeeper at his farm. But if she persisted in rejecting them, he would sell her as a field hand on the worst plantation on the river," Brown wrote. The "vile proposals" Brown spoke of was a euphemism for sexual relations.³⁵

First, Cynthia had to decide if she wanted to serve her new owner as a housekeeper, or labor as a field hand at a notoriously harsh plantation elsewhere. There was a general perception among members of enslaved communities that house laborers received better treatment than field laborers and were a part of an elite class within the population.³⁶ Therefore, Cynthia likely considered the advantages that working in the house might afford. Next, she had to decide if accepting his "vile proposal" was worth securing the presumably less strenuous housekeeping position. After describing Cynthia's initial meeting with Walker, Brown wrote the following about her fate: "Without entering into any farther particulars, suffice it to say that Walker performed his part of the contract, at that time. He took her back to St. Louis, established her as his mistress and housekeeper at his farm." Though Brown referred to Walker and Cynthia's circumstances as the fulfillment of a contract, it was not an actual contract in the least. Cynthia's

³⁵William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William Wells Brown: A Fugitive Slave* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 2:314-315.

³⁶For additional information on the perceptions of field work and house work within the slave community see John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972)249-251.

terms were to enter into an unsolicited sexual relationship or face harsh working conditions as a field hand. Though it may appear that she made a choice, she had no meaningful choice at all. If she had been a free woman with full control over her body, Cynthia would have chosen neither option.³⁷

In the years to come, Cynthia labored as Walker's housekeeper, and as his concubine she gave birth to four of his children. It is possible that Cynthia settled into her position as Walker's concubine. In her mind, she may have concluded that it was better to have sexual relations with Walker and bear his children than face the unknowns of laboring in the fields of the worst plantation along the Mississippi River. This relationship, though not consensual, did provide Cynthia with security and protection. However, it is important to note that her sexual relations with Walker were protecting her from threats made by Walker himself. He was simultaneously a conduit for security and harm. And, any insulation from danger that Cynthia had as a result of her sexual connection to Walker came to an abrupt end when he decided to get married. Now that he had a legitimate wife to serve as the lady and domestic manager of his household, Walker chose to rid his house of any traces of Cynthia and his four enslaved children. According to Brown, Walker sold Cynthia and her children and they were never heard of again.³⁸

Virginia Boyd faced a similar fate when she and her youngest child were placed in a slave trader's yard in Houston, Texas in April of 1853. To her dismay, she had been put up for sale at the insistence of the Honorable Samuel Boyd of Natchez, Mississippi, though she had long served as his concubine and he had fathered three of her children, including the child that had been placed up for sale with her and the unborn child that was currently in her womb. In May, Virginia wrote a letter to Samuel's business partner, Rice Ballard, while she was still being

³⁷Brown, *Narrative of William Wells Brown*, 2:314-315.

³⁸*Ibid.*

held in Houston that revealed her disappointment that her service as Samuel's enslaved mistress had not at least elicited his consideration for the wellbeing of her children who were also his children.³⁹ Samuel was known for his cruelty towards his slaves and apparently Virginia was not exempt just because of the sexual nature of their relationship.⁴⁰ However, she anticipated that the intimate service she had been required to provide for Samuel would have at least earned some of his favor for herself and her children. "Do you think after all that has transpired between me & the old man, (I don't call names) that its treating me well to send me off among strangers in my situation to be sold without even my having an opportunity of choosing for myself," wrote Virginia. "Its hard indeed and what is still harder for the father of my children to sell his own offspring, yes his own flesh & blood," she concluded.⁴¹

Virginia's letter to Ballard did not provide immense detail about her relationship with Samuel. However, along with her expressions of disgust, she also expressed knowledge of Samuel possessing some redeeming qualities that she hoped would emerge in time to save her and her child from sale. "My God is it possible that any free born American would brand his character with such a stigma as that, but I hope before this he will relent & see his error for I still beleave that he is possest of more honor than that," she wrote. After all, the nature of their relations required her to come into the closest proximity with Samuel and she surely learned personal facets of his personality and character as a result. It is likely that over the years, she made concerted efforts to gain favor with Samuel as a means to be shielded from the very

³⁹Virginia Boyd to R.C. Ballard, May 6, 1853 in Rice C. Ballard Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

⁴⁰In a letter to Rice Ballard, J.M. Duffield begged to buy a female slave named Maria who was living under Samuel Boyd's control because of the cruel treatment she was enduring at the hands of Boyd. He wrote, "you will recollect the cruelties which you described to me once in confidence that had been perpetrated, by a certain person in whose power Maria is, and I recollect the horror you expressed of it. All these cruelties have been inflicted upon the feeble frame of that girl—and are frequently inflicted—she must die under them." J.M. Duffield to R.C. Ballard, May 29, 1848 in Ibid.

⁴¹Virginia Boyd to R.C. Ballard in Ibid.

predicament in which she now found herself. Each time she bore his child, she may have tried to facilitate a bond between him and the child, reminding him that they also shared his blood despite the fact that the law declared them slaves. If this was the case, her efforts to negotiate with him for freedom and security were in vain.⁴²

Virginia's hopes for herself and her children stood no chance against the domination of Samuel Boyd. In addition to being a judge, he jointly owned six cotton plantations and over 500 slaves in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas with Rice Ballard. Protecting his income of approximately \$100,000 per annum and his relationship with his wife who also hailed from a prominent slaveholding family was more important than entertaining any inkling of affection or obligation he might have developed for Virginia and their children over the years.⁴³ In August, three months after Virginia wrote her petition to Ballard, C. M. Rutherford, another of Samuel and Rice Ballard's associates, wrote to Ballard to confirm the sale of Virginia and her child. Her pleas for Samuel's and Ballard's consideration had fallen on deaf ears.⁴⁴

Cynthia and Virginia Boyd's owners never made any extensive efforts to manumit them or secure their long-term financial security. Yet, the last will and testament of Pierce Bailey, which attempted to establish a \$20,000 trust to provide for the maintenance of his concubine Adeline and their child Tolbert, illustrates that some slaveholders did in fact feel obligated or inspired to provide special care for their enslaved mistresses and children. However, last will and testaments, manumission petitions, and other property transfer documents—all records that were

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³William Kaufman Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth Century South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 133, 213.

⁴⁴Virginia Boyd to R.C. Ballard, May 6, 1853, C.M. Rutherford to R.C. Ballard, August 8, 1853 in Rice C. Ballard Papers, SHC.

produced solely by slaveholding men—cannot serve as primary evidence for the argument that these female beneficiaries willingly or knowingly entered into sexual relations with white men in exchange or in anticipation of such rewards. It is precarious to draw conclusions about the intentions of enslaved women like Adeline without documentation that captures their voices directly. Wills and petitions for manumission shed light more so on white men's agency and their sense of obligation to provide for the women who rendered them the utmost personal service and less on enslaved women's ability to negotiate and secure physical and economic security for themselves and their families.

An examination of sources produced by enslaved women or sources that capture their words and actions, such as petitions to state and federal government, written correspondence, and slave narratives and interviews, provide an opportunity to illuminate enslaved women's agency by gaining an understanding of how these women perceived their ability to negotiate the terms of engagement for long-term sexual liaisons with white men. Certainly, all enslaved women did not see themselves as totally powerless or void of the capacity to negotiate, at times utilizing and legitimizing these liaisons to secure the social and economic advancement of themselves and their families. For example, in her letter to Rice Ballard, Virginia Boyd made it clear that, at least in her mind, she was worthy of better treatment at the hands of Samuel Boyd. Though she omitted what had transpired specifically between her and Samuel, she asserted that she had earned the right to be treated better. Either through private negotiations with Samuel or faith in the fact that he genuinely cared for the wellbeing of her and her children, she felt it was inappropriate that she was sent off to strangers in Texas to be sold, especially while she was pregnant with her and Samuel's third child. Virginia's personal expressions of anger, shock, and

disappointment are evidence that she believed her service as Samuel's concubine should have saved her from the auction block and permanent separation from her youngest child.⁴⁵

Similarly, in 1876, Susan Flowers testified before the Southern Claims Commission (SCC) that while she was the house servant of Ignatius Flowers, they lived as man and wife and therefore, she was entitled to the \$25,155 in damages that Ignatius had appealed to the SCC for to compensate for property seized from his plantation by the Union army.⁴⁶ "I was a slave at the beginning of the war and belonged to Ignatius Flowers who afterwards became my husband," she said. Susan was born enslaved in Claiborne County, Mississippi around 1845 and was owned by Ignatius. He brought her to his 3,000 acre Spring Plain Place plantation six months prior to the start of the Civil War to serve as his house servant. Spring Plain Place was not that different from the other plantations nestled along the Big Black River, just a few miles outside the township of Rocky Springs in Claiborne County, Mississippi. While cotton production was the real money-making enterprise in Rocky Springs, the enslaved men and women living on Spring Plain Place also herded cattle, horses, and sheep, slaughtered hogs, and planted a sizeable corn crop.⁴⁷

Ignatius was a successful planter who never married. When he brought Susan into his home, his intentions were to have the young enslaved woman tend to his household as well as his intimate needs. Their relationship, initially defined as owner and servant, lasted for thirteen

⁴⁵Virginia Boyd to R.C. Ballard, May 6, 1853 in Ibid.

⁴⁶The Southern Claims Commission was formed as a result of Congressional legislation to compensate Union Loyalists for any personal property that might have been damaged or commandeered by the Union Army during the Civil War. The SCC began its operations in 1871. Petitioners had to prove that they were loyal to the Union during the war and that their property had been, in fact, damaged or used by the Union Army.

⁴⁷Susan Flowers Claim Petition, December 12, 1876, Claiborne County, Mississippi. Records of the Court of Claims, Record Group 123, NARA. Though Susan's petition started with the Southern Claims Commission, it was eventually appealed to the Court of Claims. Her petition records are therefore found in the Court of Claims Records. Records of the Southern Claims Commission can be found in Record Group 217, NARA.

years, extending beyond the Civil War and Susan's emancipation, and produced five children. Though Susan made the point that Ignatius became her husband after the war, the law was not on her side. The Mississippi Black Codes of 1865 stated that freedmen, free negroes, and mulattos could intermarry one another, but that it "shall not be lawful for them to intermarry any white person."⁴⁸ Though Susan and Ignatius's "marriage" was legally prohibited, what is important to note is that Susan appropriated the language of marriage to validate her relationship with Ignatius.

Validating their relationship was essential if Susan was going to successfully persuade the SCC to grant her Ignatius's compensation, which would have significantly secured the economic future of herself and their three surviving children, Washington, fifteen, Parilea, twelve, and Rosa Ann, eleven. Yet, the very fact that Susan was owned by Ignatius complicated her claim that they lived as man and wife before and after the Civil War. In a nineteenth century context, marriage was a contractual agreement between a man and woman that was recognized and upheld by individual states. And in the same fashion that white men and white women could enter into these contracts they could exit them, in most instances.⁴⁹ As an enslaved woman, Susan did not have the legal right to marry any man, black or white, and she had no court or legislative body to appeal to if she decided she no longer wanted to live with Ignatius as "husband and wife." Yet, Susan's declaration that Ignatius was her husband and that they lived as man and wife might lead us to ask if loving, consensual, and mutually beneficial relationships *could* exist between slaveholders and enslaved women. It is impossible to determine from the

⁴⁸ *Laws of the State of Mississippi Passed at a Called Session of the Mississippi Legislature held in the City of Jackson, October, November, and December, 1865* (Jackson: J.J. Shannon, 1866).

⁴⁹ The state of South Carolina did not permit divorce during the antebellum period, but men and women could appeal for legal separation and even spousal support. See Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 306, 445.

evidence whether Ignatius and Susan had loving feelings or, at the very least, mutual respect for each other. Perhaps sharing a common space led them to develop feelings that defied their social positions as black and white, slave and slave owner. It is even possible that Susan initiated the sexual relationship with Ignatius or received his sexual advances with ease and pleasure.

We know that their liaison produced five children and spanned the course of thirteen years and, most importantly, justified in Susan's mind that she was entitled to Ignatius's property and any compensation due to him by the federal government. But, Susan's testimony also reveals that even she never lost sight of the power dynamic that established and maintained her relationship with Flowers. She was his slave and housekeeper. She "belonged to him," she said. Despite Susan's claims of marriage, it would be impossible to completely declare her and Ignatius's relationship void of exploitation. Based on her characterizations, if their relationship were placed on a spectrum that ranged from beneficial to exploitative, it would likely not establish a stable position on either end, and would at times land in both places at once. Susan Flowers's testimony suggests that she personally did not view benevolence and exploitation as mutually exclusive.⁵⁰

It is clear that in 1873, when Flowers testified before the SCC, she was a woman accustomed to facing life's challenges. For one, she was appealing to a government agency for financial support during a time when the federal government's efforts to help former slaves transition into freedom were waning. By the early 1870s, Radical Republicans, black and white, were beginning to lose control of state and local governments. As ex-confederates became enfranchised, they were able to reorganize the Democratic Party. By 1875, states, such as Mississippi, where Susan lived, had been "redeemed" by southern Democrats and measures were being taken to solidify a new racial order characterized by black deference in economic, political,

⁵⁰Susan Flowers claim petition, NARA.

and social arenas.⁵¹ As for the SCC, it was created by Congress in 1871 and provided southern loyalists with the opportunity to seek compensation for property that was commandeered or destroyed by the Union Army during the Civil War. Ignatius petitioned the SCC for \$25,155 in damages for the corn, livestock, fodder, and cured meat he claimed the Union Army seized from his Spring Plain Place plantation. According to Susan, Ignatius died during a cold spell in 1873, shortly after submitting his petition and before a judgment could be made on his claim. At that time, Susan, who had become emancipated at the end of the war, assumed the role of administrator of the petition. All she had to do was convince a committee of white male commissioners that as the formerly enslaved “wife” of Ignatius Flowers, a prominent plantation owner, she was entitled to over \$25,000 of government money.⁵²

When Susan offered her deposition to an SCC commissioner, she took the initiative to define her relations with Ignatius in her own terms, even if they defied legal and social conventions. Though she said, “I claim to be the widow of Ignatius Flowers,” she was careful to acknowledge her formerly enslaved status alongside her declaration of marriage. She reiterated that her and Ignatius’s initial connection was that of owner and slave. This was possibly an effort on her part to present their liaison in a way that was less threatening to the South’s ante and post-bellum social sensibilities, which did not approve of white men and black women living openly as man and wife. In addition, she attempted to strengthen the legitimacy of their connection by emphasizing the fact that their relationship continued for eight years after the Civil War. Though she was emancipated, she continued to live with and conceive children by him. This was her way of claiming that despite her formerly enslaved status, her sustained ties to Ignatius had meaning.

⁵¹Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 2002), 560-563.

⁵²Susan Flowers claim petition, NARA.

When she declared herself his widow, she was trying still to build her case that their connection was legitimate, thus making her the rightful recipient of his federal compensation. Susan was actively shaping her relationship with Ignatius, which was founded on slave ownership, into an opportunity to seek economic and social advancement for herself and her children.⁵³

The SCC provided Susan with a grand stage on which to assert her agency. “There was no legal ceremony ever performed,” said Susan. “But under the Constitution adopted by the State of Miss., in 1869, we became man and wife.” The Mississippi Constitution of 1869 was drafted in order to satisfy the Republican-controlled United States Congress’s terms of reinstatement into the Union. Of marriage, it said, “All persons who have not been married, but are now living together, cohabiting as husband and wife, shall be taken and held for all purposes in law as married, and their children, whether born before or after the ratification of this Constitution, shall be legitimate; and the Legislature may, by law, punish adultery and concubinage.” Unlike the state’s 1865 Black Codes, the new Mississippi state constitution did not specifically prohibit the intermarriage of whites and blacks. However, the constitution’s crafters did not necessarily abandon their sentiments of anti-miscegenation that were reflected in the 1865 Black Codes. Rather, they had to appease Congress by producing a document that respected the Fourteenth Amendment’s provisions for guaranteed citizenship and due process for all Americans, black and white. Social customs still dictated, though, that interracial relationships were not legitimate in the eyes of most southern communities.⁵⁴

Regardless of social customs, Susan continued to plead her case. She said, “Before his death he made a will although not a legal one, in a letter to Bryant Willie in which he

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴B.B. Eggleston, *Constitution and Ordinances of the State of Mississippi*, Adopted in Convention. (Jackson: Mississippi State Journal Office, 1869), 17.

acknowledged me as his lawful wife and the children as his and wanted us to have his property.” Knowing that Ignatius had never entered into a marriage contract with a white woman or produced white heirs that could challenge her petition, she said, “No one beside myself and my children have any interest in this claim.” It was later revealed in testimony by W.D. Spratt, an acquaintance of Ignatius, that though he left no white heirs, he did “raise two colored families.” Susan’s testimony failed to mention the possibility of another family of color making claims to Ignatius’s estate. This would have gone against her intentions. She had motive to represent herself and her surviving children, as the sole claimants to such a hefty estate.⁵⁵

Despite Susan’s efforts to legitimize her “marriage,” the SCC finally determined that Susan and Ignatius were not legally married and therefore, because she was not legally his next of kin, she was not entitled to the compensation that would have been due to him had he not died. Though Mississippi’s 1869 constitution decreed all cohabiting couples, even those that did not have prior documentation of marriage, legally married from that moment onward, the SCC was not willing to acknowledge Susan and Ignatius’s union without concrete proof. Susan’s sworn testimony was not enough. The commissioners may not have wanted to acknowledge a black woman, a former slave, as the legal wife of a wealthy, white, former slave owner. In a fact-finding brief, the commission reported, “No letters of Administration appear to be on file and it is submitted that claimant’s testimony is not sufficient to prove that she has the legal right to prosecute this claim.” With this statement, Susan Flowers was denied her claim to the \$25,155 due to Ignatius Flowers’s estate.⁵⁶

In contrast to Susan Flowers’s attempt to prove the legitimacy of her marriage to her former slaveholder in order to secure federal monies, former slave Susan Bryant had to convince

⁵⁵ Susan Flowers claim petition, NARA.

⁵⁶Ibid.

the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Pensions that though her former owner was the father of her ten children, he was not, nor had he ever been, her legal husband, thus making her the legal wife of former slave William Bryant and entitling her to his federal pension for his military service in the Union Army during the Civil War.⁵⁷ The legitimacy of Susan and William Bryant's marriage came under question after William died in January of 1917. Susan filed a Declaration for Widow's Pension with the Bureau of Pensions a month later in order to continue receiving William's monthly pension of twenty dollars, which he earned as a result of his service as a private in Company B of the 66th Regiment of the United States Colored Infantry from December 1863 to March 1866. Though the Bureau of Pensions had documentation of William's service, they claimed not to have sufficient evidence that Susan was his legal wife and questioned whether she should continue to receive federal support in the form of a widow's pension.⁵⁸

In 1915, two years before he died, William Bryant was asked by the Bureau of Pensions to complete a form for the purposes of identifying his next of kin. A notice in type print at the top of the form, read: "The information is requested for future use, and it may be of great value to your widow or children." When asked his date and place of birth, William wrote "Claiborne County, Mississippi." Where he was asked to provide the full name of his wife and when and by whom they were married, he wrote, "Susan White" and "8 April 1875, by Rev. John Bertram." William also indicated that he had never been married to any other woman and Susan had never been married to any other man and that they "have lived continuously together since marriage."

⁵⁷According to the 1900 Census taken in Claiborne County, Mississippi, where Susan and William Bryant lived, there was a Susan and William Bryant registered as husband and wife; Though the date of their marriage listed in the census—1866—is different from the 1875 date that Susan and William both gave the Bureau of Pensions, this is likely the same Susan and William Bryant. The census listed that Susan was the mother of 10 children. 1900 U.S. Federal Census of Claiborne County, Mississippi, NARA.

⁵⁸Susan Bryant Petition for Widows Pension, Department of the Interior: Bureau of Pensions, Record Group 15, NARA.

Though William adhered to the Bureau's request to provide information about his next of kin and dated and signed the form on May 15, 1915, the form did not prove to be of great value to Susan after William's death as the form itself indicated.⁵⁹

When Susan filed her Declaration for Widow's Pension on February 17, 1917, she provided a deposition including what she felt was the most pertinent information to her case. She testified that, "she is the widow and heir of William Bryant—deceased, who was a pensioner, his certificate being 1039.101; that he died January 18, 1917; that said Bryant had no children or heirs except herself. And that she now makes claim for the pension money due said Bryant at the time of his death so that she may pay for funeral expenses and medical bills." Though her request for a widow's pension was not out of the ordinary for women, black or white, during this time, what likely alarmed the Bureau of Pensions' commissioners during their initial investigation was the discovery that Susan had given birth to ten children though she and William both deposed that William had no biological children, they had no biological children together, and Susan had never been married to any other man. The Bureau retained a special examiner, J.B. Steed, to find out who in fact fathered Susan's ten children and if she had ever been or still was legally married to this man, which would make her marriage to William and her request for a widow's pension null and void.⁶⁰

By the time the Bureau's special examiner, Steed, was able to convene witnesses to testify to the legitimacy of Susan and William Bryant's marriage, Susan's past marital history, and the paternity of her children, Susan had suffered a massive stroke that "rendered her wholly incompetent to give testimony in her case," reported Steed. Therefore, he had to rely on the testimony of people who knew Susan best, including her children and the white children of her

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

former owner, Thomas W. Brown, whom she had nursed as children. Her son Jack Brown testified that his mother had never been married until she married William Bryant. “They were married when I was a baby so my mother always said,” said Jack. He told Steed that, yes, his mother had in fact given birth to all ten of her children before she married Bryant, who he referred to as his step-father. When asked to explain who his father was, he said, “Thomas Brown, a white man, now dead, was the father of mother’s ten children.” He then testified that though she bore him children, “he and mother were never married to each other.” “She was the slave of Thomas Brown and he kept my mother as servant there in the home and she had the ten children by him. I am the youngest of the children,” said Jack.⁶¹

While she was enslaved, Susan had served as Thomas’s concubine. L.C. Fischer, a neighbor and acquaintance of Thomas, testified that he used to visit Thomas often and knew that he owned Susan and “kept her in his yard there on the place.” He then said, “Susan had ten children in all by her old slave owner. The children were known as the Brown children and I don’t think Thomas Brown made it any secret about his being the father of Susan’s children.” Fischer even added that Brown “kept Susan there on the place till she married William Bryant.” While Fischer’s testimony confirms that Thomas was Susan’s slave owner, it also generates questions about the extent of Thomas and Susan’s intimate relationship. For one, Thomas openly acknowledged fathering children by Susan, his female slave; secondly, Susan and her children continued to live on Thomas’s land in the same fashion they always had for almost ten years

⁶¹Ibid.

after the Civil War. It is not hard to see why the Bureau felt the need to investigate just how intimate Thomas and Susan's relationship really was.⁶²

In their depositions before Steed, Susan's sons, Jack and Lee, both testified that they were born after 1865, which means that Susan continued to have sexual relations and bear children by Thomas though the Civil War was over and she was no longer his slave. Like Susan Flowers, her intimate connection with Thomas lasted beyond their legal connection as owner and slave. However, Thomas was not a bachelor like Ignatius Flowers. He had a legitimate white family, consisting of his lawful wife Ann, whom he was married to during the entire time he was fathering children by Susan. Unlike Susan Flowers, Susan Bryant could not have claimed Thomas as her legitimate husband even if she wanted to. Actually, Thomas's legal marriage to his wife Ann only served to bolster Susan's claim that she was never married to him, despite bearing his children, and that William Bryant was the only husband she ever had. When asked to testify about the paternity of Susan's children, Thomas and Ann Brown's children were equally invested in legitimating Susan's union with William and squelching any suggestions of an intimate tie between their father and Susan. Thomas Brown, named for his father, said, "Yes, Susan had children before she married Bryant" and, "Yes, they were all known as the Brown children." He went on to say that though Susan's children were said to have been fathered by a white man, he had no idea who the father was. Wanting to divert as much attention away from his father as possible, he said, "I rather not discuss that feature of the case. I am sure though that all her children were begotten by some white man."⁶³

⁶²According to 1870 Census, Thomas W. Brown was 50 years old and was still married and living with his wife Ann M. Brown who was 43 in 1870. 1870 US Federal Census of Rocky Springs, Mississippi, NARA; Susan Bryant widow's pension petition, NARA.

⁶³Susan Bryant widow's pension petition, NARA.

Susan's economic security rested in her legitimate marriage to William. However, testifying that she was married to William was not sufficient for the Bureau of Pensions. Her children, on her behalf, were also motivated to define the nature of her long-standing sexual relationship with her former owner in order to retain monetary support for their mother. While Susan Flowers had the challenge of convincing the federal government that she lived as husband and wife with her former slave owner, Susan Bryant had the opposite challenge. With the help of information she had provided to them before her debilitating stroke, her children were forced to dispel any beliefs that she had been married or was intimately connected to her former owner. Though the evidence suggests that Susan and Thomas's relationship was rather close—he openly acknowledged their children, the children retained his last name rather than hers, and their liaison lasted for many years into post-war period—what is interesting is Susan's efforts to minimize the significance, if any, of her connection to her former owner. It was not her sexual liaison with Thomas but her marriage to former slave William that was going to sustain her financially in her old age. Because she and her sons had an opportunity to shape the narrative of her relations with Thomas Brown, explaining that she was indeed his concubine and the mother of his children but never his wife, they were able to convince the Bureau of Pensions that William and Susan had been truthful in their claims they had never been married before they married each other.

On December 6, 1918, the Bureau of Pensions granted Susan's request for back pay and future widow's pension payments, stating she was "entitled a pension at the rate of twenty dollars per month, to commence February 21, 1917 and twenty-five dollars per month from October 6, 1917 and to continue during her widowhood." Susan died two months before their ruling due to complications from her massive stroke. However, her efforts to obtain this money were not to go unrewarded. Susan's son Lee, who had taken care of her during her illness, filed a

petition to be reimbursed for all of the payments his mother would have received until her death in October of 1918. His request was granted and Susan's pension claim was officially closed on January 7, 1919.⁶⁴

How and when enslaved women demonstrated their agency as concubines is critical to our understanding of slavery and sexual exploitation, agency, and consent. Yet, even with an examination of enslaved women's voices, it is hard to look back into the past and fully understand the complexities of concubine, specifically the roles that enslaved women were able to play in shaping the nature of these relationships. Based on Susan Flowers's testimony before the SCC, in which she stated that she and Ignatius Flowers had lived as husband and wife, it appears that the former slave and slaveholder engaged in a relationship based on mutual affection. It is possible that Flowers did not view her relationship with Ignatius as coercive. Or, maybe she found it to be coercive in the beginning, but after years of living with him and serving as his housekeeper and pseudo-wife, as well as the mother of his children, she found the relationship to be beneficial, providing a sense of security for herself and their children. However, we are unable to decipher most of the details of their life together based on her petition alone.

When Susan Flowers assumed the role of executor of Ignatius's original petition and went before the SCC for her own benefit, she stood to gain a considerable amount of money. Considering the limitations placed on former slaves' labor and mobility after the Civil War, she was likely willing to go to the furthest extents, even claiming to be in a legal marriage to her former slave owner, in order to secure the money that had been awarded to Ignatius before his death. Though Flowers's testimony does not provide concrete evidence of the dynamics of their

⁶⁴Ibid.

life as slaveholder and enslaved concubine, it does illuminate how she was able to define for herself the meaning and terms of their relationship in its aftermath and utilize their connection to seek a substantial financial reward. The fact that Susan Flowers's status as a concubine had ended and that she stood to gain something when she characterized her experience as a concubine before the SCC is important to consider.

There is no ideal source that could answer all of our questions about agency or provide us with a comprehensive understanding of how each enslaved woman experienced long-term sexual relationships with slaveholding men. Susan Flowers's testimony does, however, illustrate her agency—not when she was first made to live in Ignatius's house on the eve of the Civil War, or the first time Ignatius required her to have sexual relations with him—but as a free woman who was presented with an opportunity to capitalize on her connection to her former slaveholder to claim monies that he was unable to collect. Sources like Flowers's require that we not only reconsider what agency for enslaved women looked like, but when and where that agency took place. Most enslaved concubines were not afforded much latitude to negotiate if, and for how long, they would be a sexual servant. And, most were not given free reign over their owner's households. Perhaps many concubines were like Flowers and their ability to shape and define the nature of their concubinage for their own benefit came once they were no longer bound to their slaveholders. Maybe their negotiations did not take place while they were within the plantation household, but outside of it. Slave narratives and interviews support the fact that slaveholders overwhelmingly dictated the terms of concubinage, deciding who would be their concubines and for how long. For Flowers, her most significant negotiations over what her concubinage meant occurred after her owner was dead. While we will never know the true dynamics of Flowers and Ignatius's relationship, we can conclude that during the moments she was before SCC

commissioners, she felt empowered to claim herself as his legal wife. To her thinking, as the mother of his five children, she was the only true claimant to the assets he had accumulated over the course of his life and this was a conclusion that she reached on her own.

CHAPTER THREE

“The men had no comfort with their wives”: Enslaved Men and Masculinity in the Midst of Sexual Exploitation¹

When Alfred, an enslaved resident of Hinds County, Mississippi, confessed to murdering John D. Fondren’s overseer, surely his words sent waves of fear and confusion through the four white men who heard his confession. According to court records, minutes earlier, Dr. James, a neighbor who was visiting the Fondren plantation, along with two of Fondren’s employees, had heard a loud commotion. The three men rushed towards the noise, running the 200 yards from the Fondren house to the stable lot. When they arrived, James asked Alfred, who was standing outside the stable, “what was the matter?” Without hesitation, Alfred replied, “I have killed the overseer.” When Fondren arrived on the scene a few minutes later, Alfred repeated his confession. His murder of a white man unsteadied the foundation on which American slavery rested—enslaved men’s absolute subordination to white men.²

When Alfred killed Coleman, the overseer, he was claiming, even if in an extreme and gruesome way, that he had rights and responsibilities as a man to protect and avenge any harm committed against his wife and family. After all, his murderous actions were not without provocation. His wife Charlotte was owned by John Fondren and was therefore also placed under

¹“The men had no comfort with their wives” are the words of former slave Peter Randolph. Peter Randolph. 1893. *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit. The Autobiography of Rev. Peter Randolph: The Southern Question Illustrated and sketches of Slaves Life*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/randolph/randolph.html>.

²*Alfred (a slave) v. State (1859)*, 37 Miss. 296. See also Helen Tunnicliff Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro* (Buffalo: William S. Hein & Co., Inc., 1998) 3:362.

the control of Coleman. Earlier that morning, Coleman, taking advantage of his authority to manage slaves, ensured that Charlotte would be alone. Then, he cornered her and raped her. When she shared details of her assault with Alfred, he thought it imperative for him to confront Coleman to protect his wife from any future assaults. He was her husband and she was his wife. Yet, the threads that held enslaved marriages together were delicate. The extent to which these men and women could be loyal to one another and enslaved men could assume the same patriarchal rights as white men to protect their wives and children was limited. This was made most evident by the routine separation of slave couples through sale and the rape, sexual harassment and sexual reproductive demands made of enslaved women.³ White men, such as Coleman, viewed enslaved women as subordinate and sexually accessible, and, as a result, enslaved women found themselves vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Enslaved men, also deemed subordinate to the slaveholding class, were rarely afforded opportunities to prevent or retaliate against these assaults on their wives, mothers, and daughters. Despite the limits slavery tried to place on him, Alfred fought back with the understanding that as a man he had a right and obligation to protect his wife.⁴

Alfred believed his commitment as Charlotte's husband to protect her from harm justified his killing of Coleman. But, because he and Charlotte were slaves, their marriage, as well as Alfred's assertion of his rights as a man to lead and protect his family, which would have been celebrated if he had been a white man, were not recognized by the slaveholding society. When

³For more on the vulnerabilities of slave marriage see Rebecca Fraser, *Courtship and Love Among the Enslaved in North Carolina* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 146-150; Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 239-240; John Blassingame, "The Slave Family" in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 52, 146-150.

⁴*Alfred (a slave) v. State.*

Charlotte wished to protect her husband by testifying before the jury as to why Alfred had taken such extreme measures to protect her, her testimony was rejected. The prosecutors justified their objection by arguing that her testimony was immaterial because of her and Alfred's enslaved status. They also noted that the use of her testimony to lessen Alfred's charge from murder to manslaughter would have no profound effect. For a slave in Hinds County, the penalty for manslaughter and murder was one and the same—death.⁵

Secondly, the prosecutors objected because Charlotte intended to claim that Alfred acted as an enraged husband who was provoked to murder Coleman because he raped his wife. According to the law, Alfred and Charlotte were not legally husband and wife and the prosecution wanted to make sure they did not benefit as though they were. If Charlotte's testimony about Alfred's provocation was deemed admissible, it had potential to tug at the heart strings of at least one member of the all-male, all-white jury, who, as a husband or father, might feel sympathy for Alfred's predicament and be willing to disregard his enslaved status when casting his vote regarding guilt or innocence. Therefore, it became imperative for the prosecution to solidify its point that Charlotte was not Alfred's wife—at least in the eyes of the law—meaning he was not entitled to have the unbridled passions of a husband provoked to commit murder in defense of his wife. If a white man in Hinds County had provided similar evidence, a judge or jury would have likely considered the lesser offense of manslaughter. However, as a slave, Alfred could not benefit from these privileges of patriarchy. He certainly felt provoked by a need to avenge his wife's rape, but this could not be taken into consideration. He was eventually found guilty and sentenced to hang for his crime.⁶

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

Marriage between enslaved men and women was not sanctioned by law, despite slaveholders' custom of partnering male and female slaves for the purpose of sexual reproduction and even performing marriage ceremonies to solidify the unions.⁷ In 1836, Thomas Ruffin, chief justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court, issued a ruling in *State v Samuel* that marriage among slaves was inconsistent with the institution of slavery.⁸ Because marriage was a contract entered into by individuals with consent and because the law did not recognize slaves as such, enslaved men and women could enjoy neither the burdens nor benefits of marriage. Samuel, the appellant in the case, claimed that his conviction for murder should be overturned because the prosecution's evidence hinged on his wife's testimony and because they were married she should not have been compelled to testify against him due to spousal privilege. Ruffin argued, "It has never been decided by our predecessors, that the marriage of slaves, such as existed in this case, and such as usually exist in this State, consisting of cohabitation merely, by the permission of the owners, constitutes the relation of husband and wife, so as to attach to them the privileges and disabilities incident to that relation by the common law." At best, he said, the relationships among slaves could be considered concubinage, "which is voluntary on

⁷For example, the 1831 North Carolina General Assembly's Act Concerning Slaves and Free Persons of Color did not have to specifically prohibit the intermarriage of slaves because previous statutes deemed them chattel property, unable to enter into contracts—of which marriage is one. The 1831 Act did, however, specifically forbid free persons of color, who had marriage rights, from intermarrying with slaves. See *Slaves and Free Persons of Color. An Act Concerning Slaves and Free Persons of Color*. Revised Code-No. 105, North Carolina General Assembly, 1831.

⁸In addition to being a businessman, attorney, jurist, and member of the North Carolina House of Commons, North Carolina Chief Justice Thomas Ruffin was a planter and slaveowner. By 1830, one year after being elected to the North Carolina Supreme Court, he owned 30 slaves and two plantations in Rockingham and Alamance Counties. Shortly after being elected to the North Carolina Supreme Court in 1829, he acquired a large plantation in Alamance County, NC. Between this and other plantations in the piedmont region of North Carolina, Ruffin owned upwards of one hundred slaves. 1830 U.S. Federal Census, Orange, North Carolina, National Archives (NARA). Accessed via Ancestry.com.

the part of the slaves, and permissive on that of the master.” It is the only union “with which alone, perhaps, their condition is compatible,” argued Ruffin.⁹

Though such a restrictive precedent regarding the legality of slave marriage had been set in North Carolina, Alfred’s attorney B. F. Trimble, in his appeal before the High Court of Errors and Appeals, later renamed the Supreme Court of Mississippi, sought to have Alfred’s conviction of murder overturned by asserting his right as a man and a husband, in particular, to become impassioned and provoked to violence at the knowledge that his wife had been sexually assaulted. He was careful, however, not to lose sight of his audience, a panel of white male jurists who were beneficiaries of the white supremacy that slavery ensured. One justice, William L. Harris, owned 14 slaves and became a staunch supporter of state sovereignty and Southern secession.¹⁰ Trimble had to appease the minds of slaveholders and societal elites, upholding their self-proclaimed authority over the enslaved and blacks in general. Their power rested in the subordination of the enslaved and it was evident to Trimble that Alfred’s murder of a white man chipped away at white men’s feelings of security.

To reassure the jurists, Trimble acknowledged that “it is inconsistent with the master’s right of removing his slave any distance from his wife, or her husband, that he or she, should claim the privileges of the marital relation.” It is also inconsistent with slavery “that the slave should be compelled to maintain his wife and children,” he said. He realized that legally recognized marriage among slaves would change the way slaveholders’ operated from day to day, preventing them from selling a slave in order to generate funds to pay off a debt or manipulating their slaves’ sexual behavior by breaking up old sexual partnerships and creating

⁹*State v. Samuel* 19 N.C. (2 Dev. & Bat.) 177 (1836).

¹⁰Bernie D. Jones, *Fathers of Conscience: Mixed-Race Inheritance in the Antebellum South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 99-101.

new ones in hopes of producing the most strong and healthy offspring, actions that were quite routine.¹¹ By legally permitting male slaves like Alfred to “maintain his wife and children,” they would be extending to them the same rights of patriarchy that white men enjoyed that gave them dominion over their wives and children. Trimble understood that these changes went against slaveholders’ social and economic interests.¹²

Still, his challenge was to get the jurists to see Alfred as a man, a human being, and not a slave, if only for one moment. “The humanity of our law regards them as human beings,” he said, “with lively emotions and social instincts.” Like white men, enslaved black men also had innate desires to protect their wives and children from harm, he argued. Therefore, the law should regard “with as much tenderness the excesses of outraged conjugal affections in the negro as in the white man.” After all, “the servile condition of the negro has not deprived him of his social or moral instincts,” he concluded. Despite his pleas for recognition of enslaved men’s masculinity and social and moral desires to be patriarchal, the High Court upheld the lower court’s decision that Alfred could not claim the rape of his wife as provocation for murder. Like Thomas Ruffin in North Carolina, Mississippi’s chief justice, Cotesworth P. Smith, argued that, as a slave, Alfred was not entitled to the benefits or burdens of marriage, which in this case was the right to avenge the rape of his wife.¹³

¹¹See Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Sexual reproduction was regarded as an important aspect of enslaved women’s labor responsibilities. Therefore, slaveholders were invested in the fertility and virility of their female and male slaves and often partnered those they felt would produce strong and productive children. In an interview, former slave Rose Williams said her owner partnered her with her husband Rufus because they were both “portly” and he anticipated they would produce portly children. See Rose Williams interview in B.A. Boykin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, 2nd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 160-162.

¹²*Alfred (a slave) v State*.

¹³*Ibid*.

Alfred's story reveals that enslaved women did not carry the burden of sexual exploitation alone. Enslaved men navigated life knowing that their wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers were vulnerable to sexual abuse and that they could offer little to no protection against these offenses. In the sources they left behind, men frequently described instances of white men having forcible sexual relations with female slaves and the physical and emotional trauma that was experienced. But, the story does not end there. These men also gave voice to their own feelings of insecurity and regret due to their inability to protect female slaves, a responsibility that many of them assumed as men.¹⁴ This is because white men put forth much effort to dismantle black masculinity to fortify their own rights as men to be masters over the white and black dependents in their households. And, their sexual exploitation of enslaved women was an abuse of the very patriarchal privileges that they denied enslaved men.¹⁵ Enslaved men's subordinate status did not erode their desires to demonstrate their masculinity and assume the rights and privileges of Southern patriarchy, largely the ability to protect and provide for their families.¹⁶ Nevertheless, their efforts to protect enslaved women from sexual exploitation were largely suppressed by violence and fears of retribution. There were some cases where enslaved men lashed out against these sexual abusers, stepping way outside the bounds set for them. These efforts, however, rarely went unpunished, which further served to dissuade enslaved men from

¹⁴Frances Foster argues that slave narratives were mostly written by formerly enslaved men who had joined the abolitionist movement. And, in their efforts to gain support for the abolition of slavery, they emphasized and at times overemphasized slave women's sexual vulnerability to appeal to white sympathetic audiences. I acknowledge that these slave narratives were written to serve a larger abolitionist movement. However, I do not believe we as historians should discredit these descriptions. Even if exaggerated, there is still truth in their stories. There is plenty of evidence of enslaved women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation in criminal trial records, divorce petitions, and interviews of former slaves after emancipation. Though I have taken arguments such as this into consideration, I still believe that these sources are invaluable to understanding the lives of the enslaved people we study. See Frances Foster, "Ultimate Victims: Black Women in Slave Narratives," *Journal of American Culture* 1, no.4 (Winter 1978): 845-854.

¹⁵Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 239-240.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 195.

challenging slaveholders' power. Enslaved men remained unauthorized by law and custom to protect women from sexual violence and harassment and forced sexual reproduction, a status they found deeply troubling.

When English-born Frances Kemble made her first visit to her husband Pierce Butler's Georgia slave plantations in 1838, she encountered an enslaved family consisting of a husband, Frank, a wife, Betty, and a son, Renty. She soon learned that Renty was not Frank's son, but the son of the Butler's overseer, Roswell King, Jr., who was notorious for coercing the female slaves under his charge into sexual relations. King, a trusted employee, had served the Butlers since 1819, working alongside his father, Roswell King, Sr., who first began overseeing daily operations in 1802.¹⁷ Kemble did not know how long "Mr. King's occupation of Frank's wife continued," but she became particularly concerned with how Frank "endured the wrong done to him." Without doubt she felt concern for Betty's wellbeing; but, her concern for Frank illustrates her awareness that the sexual exploitation of enslaved women had consequences for enslaved men as well. In fact, Kemble believed King's abuse of Betty to be an "outrage upon this man's [Frank] rights." Kemble believed that though Frank was enslaved, as a man in a patriarchal society he should have had the same rights as white men to protect his family and the right to guard his wife's sexuality was an essential one. According to Kemble, the denial of this authority left Frank a "grave, sad, and thoughtful-looking man."¹⁸

¹⁷Because Pierce Butler, and his grandfather before him, preferred to live in Philadelphia and reap the benefits of slave ownership from afar, they relied on the experience of the Kings to oversee their plantations as if they were their own. For additional biographical information on the Butler family and Frances Kemble, see John A. Scott, "Editor's Introduction," in Frances Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839*, edited by John A. Scott (New York: Knopf, 1961).

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 176.

In the years following American independence, enslaved men like Frank were forced to watch white men like Pierce Butler and Roswell King, Jr. indulge in patriarchy's privileges. White men's definitions of masculinity were deeply rooted in the concept of mastery, and the laws and conventional wisdom that ruled the antebellum South reinforced their mastery and empowered propertied white men to be heads of households. As fathers, husbands, and slave owners, they were permitted to have mastery over the bodies and labor of both their white and black dependents. According to historians Craig Friend and Lorry Glover, freedom, landownership, an independent household, and "a submissive wife and children, and ideally, slaves," were all marks of a man—a patriarch.¹⁹ White men discovered that the best way to display their masculinity and bolster their authority was to deem their dependents incapable of managing these responsibilities and inscribe it into law. They believed that only white men possessed the capacity for reason and self-control, qualities needed to manage a household. By claiming that women and black people lacked these qualities, they could perpetuate the belief that dependency was a natural component of their character.²⁰

The South's patriarchal structure also ensured propertied white men's dominion over local and state government and other public entities. While some free men of color were permitted to acquire land, participate in local economies, and even purchase and own slaves, their skin color placed limits on their mobility, claims of citizen, and participation in the legislative and judicial process. By law, free black men were not permitted to hold public office or vote. North Carolina, Maryland and Tennessee were the exceptions to the rule in regard to

¹⁹Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover, "Rethinking Southern Masculinity: An Introduction" in *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South*, ed. Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), ix.

²⁰Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Laura Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 3.

voting; however, by the 1830s, these states instituted statutes that prohibited free black men from voting as well. South Carolina required free people of color to pay an annual capitalization tax of \$2 and register their names with local courts, which served as a means to monitor the growth and movement of its free black population. The state also forbade free blacks from leaving the state unless they planned to relocate permanently.²¹ And while free blacks' status as citizens of the United States was always tenuous due to these restrictions, they were formally denied the claims of citizenship in 1857 when the Supreme Court ruled in the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case that African Americans, whether free or enslaved, were not citizens of the United States and therefore had no legal standing before the court. For free black men, being free and male was not enough to entitle them to all that southern patriarchy afforded.²² And though white women, especially those from landed and slaveholding families, enjoyed privileges of whiteness and social status, their gender also subordinated them to white men. Adolescent and unmarried women were dependents of their fathers, and, once married, they became dependents of their husbands. Laws

²¹For example, Article I, Section 6 of the South Carolina Constitution specified that "no person shall be eligible to a seat in the house of representatives, unless he is a free white man." Article I, Section 4 stipulated that only free white men of the age of twenty-one had the right to vote. These statutes are representative of most southern states. Benjamin James, *A Digest of the Laws of South Carolina: Containing the Public Statute law of the State, Down to the year 1822* (Columbia: Telescope Press, 1822), 28. In 1818, Maryland's constitution allowed all free men, black and white, to vote, stating, "all freeholders, freemen, and other persons qualified to give votes in the election of delegates, shall and are hereby obliged to be." However, by 1850 Maryland's constitution stated that only "every free white male person...shall be entitled to vote." The same happened in North Carolina and Tennessee. Virgil Maxcy, *Laws of Maryland* (Baltimore: P.H. Nicklin & Co., 1811), 18; Edward Otis Hinkley, ed., *The Constitution of the State of Maryland: Reported and Adopted by the Convention of Delegates Assembled at the City of Annapolis, November 4th, 1850* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1855), 18. For more on South Carolina capitalization tax, see Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 308; Amrita C. Myers, *Forging Freedom: Black Women and The Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 80.

²²For more information on how free people of color navigated their world, see Julie Winch, *Between Slavery and Freedom: Free People of Color in America from Settlement to the Civil War* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014); Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, eds. *No Chariot Let Down: Charleston's Free People of Color on the Eve of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). Also see Stevenson, "Free Black Family and Household Economy," in *Life in Black and White*.

of coverture limited white women's property rights and forbade them from keeping their own wages, making contracts, and even claiming parental rights over the children they bore.²³

While white women and free people of color had limited rights, the enslaved had neither the benefit of freedom nor white skin to save them from absolute subordination under the law. Enslaved men and women could not own property, make contracts—including the contract of marriage—or bring charges against white people in court. Legally categorized as property, they were non-citizens who had no civil rights in the eyes of the law and their fate was largely determined by their owners.²⁴ And, according to historian Edward Baptist, the emasculation of enslaved men was an essential element in establishing white men's patriarchal authority and slaves' subordination. Baptist argues that "concepts of white manliness that structured households, animated political conflict and consensus, and authorized violence [in America] depended on the disempowerment of blackness." White men justified their superiority to black men by arguing that because of their blackness black men lacked the material substance of masculinity and, therefore, were not entitled to independence. They were unfit to own property, control households and dependents, and hold political rights, all qualities that "marked men as men."²⁵

White men's devaluation of black masculinity—the effort to discredit black men's capacity to possess and exhibit qualities of reason, civility, and independence, which white men

²³For more on the restrictions of patriarchy and the laws of coverture see Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²⁴Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 263.

²⁵Edward Baptist, "The Absent Subject: African American Masculinity and Forced Migration to the Antebellum Plantation Frontier," in *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South*, ed. Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004); McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 153.

deemed essential to their own manhood, did not begin with Rowell King, Jr., and Frank, but began centuries before, even before the first Africans were brought to the colony of Virginia in 1619.²⁶ In the sixteenth century, western Europeans traveled to the coasts of Africa to establish trade relations. These newly formed networks afforded them the opportunity to observe the familial structures, strategies of warfare, hunting practices, and physical characteristics of the various groups of African people they encountered. These travelers acknowledged African men as strong, aggressive, and capable of establishing kingdoms and engaging in precise warfare, all masculine characteristics; but, they refused to see them as civilized, which was an essential quality to possess in order to be placed on par with white masculinity. Instead, they viewed African men's behavior as "savage," "bestial," and "brutish." They considered their semi-naked bodies and physical prowess to be animalist and hypersexual. They described African men's genitals as "large propagators," claiming that they were so large as to be "burthensome unto them." Similarly, they described African women's breasts and bodies as beastly, and noted their supposed ability to suckle their young over their shoulders and labor like men, which reinforced their beliefs about Africans' animalistic nature.²⁷ To these traders and travelers, African people's blackness was the only logical source for what they perceived to be their beastliness and lack of civility.

²⁶Edward Baptist argues that white men attributed the qualities of weakness and dependence, whether justified or not, to black people so that they could claim a position of authority over them. Forcing this condition of dependence and subordination on black men was the ultimate key to white men's success. White men were able to create this subordination of black manhood to white manhood through the use of violence, threats to separate families, and by seizing their wages for labor and all their possession. In other words, black men subscribed to ideologies of manhood, manliness, and masculinity; however, white men systemically tried to subordinate black masculinity and manhood to their own. Baptist, "The Absent Subject," 136-138.

²⁷Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550-1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973) 24, 28, 34; Jennifer Morgan, "Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder": Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (January 1997): 167-192; John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 86.

Over the next two centuries, as it became critical to secure a reliable labor force in British North America and the Caribbean, Europeans pointed to the color of Africans' skin and their cultural differences to make claims of their inherent inferiority to white people, thus making them suitable for perpetual slavery. In 1662, officials in Colonial Virginia passed a statute stating that a child's status as free or enslaved was determined by the status of its mother, which was a departure from traditional English common law that tied a child's status to his father. Therefore, the children born to enslaved African women would also be enslaved, even if their fathers were of British descent, a frequent occurrence. This was the first step in inextricably linking enslavement to blackness. The law made slavery an inheritable trait and now men and women of African descent were bound to this system that would serve as the economic and social foundation upon which American freedom for whites was won.²⁸

Enslaved men were very much aware of white men's devaluation of their masculinity and the limits placed on their ability to exercise authority within enslaved communities. Much of the authority they could have exercised as husbands, fathers, and household leaders was usurped by their owners. Historian John Blassingame noted that, "the master and not the male slave furnished the cabin, clothes, and the minimal food for his wife and children."²⁹ Though enslaved men most likely built these cabins and were often tasked with planting, hunting, and fishing in order to supplement the food their owners provided, slaveholders took credit for supplying their slaves with these basic necessities. It was essential for slaveholders to reinforce the notion that

²⁸With the increase in interracial sex between white men and African women, colonial leaders had to find a way to preserve the enslaved status of children who were claiming freedom as their birthright, given to them by their white fathers. This law set legalized, perpetual slavery into motion. For more on this and the correlation between blackness and savagery, enslavement, and hypersexuality see Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003); Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 108-110; Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2002).

²⁹Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 88.

enslaved men were just as much dependents as enslaved women and children. By formally robbing these men of patriarchal authority, white male slaveholders made clear their dominance over enslaved men as well as enslaved women. Former slave James Pennington called this state of being the “chattel relation” and argued that it indeed robbed the enslaved man of his manhood. Pennington argued that enslavement transferred an enslaved man’s “proprietaryship of his wife and children to another.” Pennington’s thoughts reveal that enslaved men desired and felt entitled to proprietaryship over their wives and children, but, as much as they were invested in gaining this proprietaryship, slaveholders were invested in denying them of it.³⁰

At the same time, enslaved men constantly received contradictory messages from slave owners concerning their roles as husbands and fathers within their communities, which created more uncertainty and pain. When crafting codes of conduct for their slaves, many owners instructed male and female slaves to assume the same traditional gendered responsibilities that took place in white households during the antebellum period. From the late 1830s to early 1850s, William Ethelbert Ervin, a cotton planter from Lowndes County, Mississippi kept very meticulous journal records concerning the buying and selling of slaves, crop cultivation, and other farming activities. He was especially diligent in recording his rules for slave conduct, including the duties of husbands and wives, and guidelines for punishing those who stepped out of line. In the entry titled “Rules to be observed on my place & after the First of January 1847,” Ervin revealed his expectations that within the slave quarters, enslaved men would function as patriarchal heads of households, responsible for providing for the basic needs of their family. His second rule dictated “Each family to live in their own house. The husband to provide fire wood and see that they are all provided for, wait on his wife.” In turn, the wife was to “cook & wash

³⁰James Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith* in Sterling Lecater Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives: An Anthology* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001) 2:549-550; McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*, 6, 14-15, 153; Baptist, “The Absent Subject,” 136-138, 142-143; Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*, 3.

for the husband and her children and attend to the mending of clothes.” But, to what extent could an enslaved man really serve as the head of his household under slavery. Though slave dwellings were typically built by the slaves themselves, they were made from materials purchased and provided by their owners and built on land owned by their owners. Though an enslaved man might establish a family with a wife and children, he did so only with the permission of his owner.³¹

Though Ervin instructed enslaved men to secure firewood and make sure their families were provided for, the reality is that these men could not shield their wives and children from any task he might assign or any punishment he might inflict. As Henry Bibb articulated, there was little a husband and father could do if an owner or overseer was determined to trample a female slaves’ sexuality under their foot with impunity. Despite Ervin’s charge that enslaved men serve as the heads of their families, his position as the ultimate authority over his slaves was made evident in his next rule: “failure on either part [of the husband or wife] when proven shall and must be corrected by words first but if not reformed to be corrected by the whip.” In other words, Ervin’s male slaves could act patriarchal only at the invitation and under the supervision of him. Maybe Ervin recognized his slaves as human beings with free will, but to acknowledge it would have weakened his own ability to effectively rule over his dependents, both black and white, and maintain a respectable and economically sound household. Therefore, it was necessary for him to dictate their every action. His fourth rule was that a horn would be blown every night at 9:00 p.m., “which is to be a signal for each to retire to his or her house and there to remain until the morning.” For those who failed to obey, “they shall be delt with as having broken the third rule and shall be delt with accordingly,” wrote Ervin. If any of Ervin’s male

³¹Diary of William Ervin in William Ethelbert Ervin papers, Southern Historical Collection.

slaves doubted that he was the ultimate patriarchal authority on his plantation, he held the power of the lash in his hands to resolve any confusion.³²

Like Ervin, Virginia planter Richard Eppes conveyed mixed messages to his slaves with his rules of conduct. His rules on sexual conduct serve as an excellent example. For one, he defined adultery among slaves in gendered terms, only establishing guidelines for how to proceed when a female slave committed adultery against her husband. Only acknowledging a woman's extra-marital relations as a punishable offense suggests that he applied traditional beliefs of women's dependence and subordination to men to his enslaved population. The penalties he outlined reflect similar sentiments. For a first offense, "the man shall receive from the husband of the woman on his bare back twenty stripes," he said, permitting the husband to impose consequences on the intruding man for disrupting his household, a right that white male heads of household would have possessed by default. By granting these enslaved men patriarchal rights under well defined circumstances, he was conveying that these limited rights could only be given and supervised by him. For the woman's part, Eppes instructed that she "shall receive fifteen stripes from her seducer." Though both the male "seducer" and the female slave were guilty of adultery, Eppes placed the male "seducer" in a position of privilege and authority over his female accomplice.

These penalties reveal that in some instances Eppes fostered a culture of male dominance and masculinity amongst his enslaved population. But, these moments of empowerment were not intended to suggest that his enslaved men could impede on his position of ultimate authority. In fact, Eppes was a meticulous owner who gave periodic lectures on proper moral conduct to his slaves and he monitored their behavior closely. His plantation journals provide detailed

³²Ibid.; Henry Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb: An American Slave* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 2:367.

descriptions of his slaves' misconduct and the actions he took to correct their behavior. This ritual he designed for punishing adultery was more so intended to humiliate the guilty parties and repudiate their immoral behavior than to empower male slaves. His male and female slaves likely understood these brief moments of male empowerment for what they were—a part of Eppes' compulsion to maintain strict control over his slaves, both male and female.³³

As the slave of Pierce Butler, Frank was expected to be subordinate to Butler as well as his overseer, Roswell King, Jr. Armed with a whip and the authority to use it, King had the capacity to punish Frank for any number of infractions including insubordination or not working at his full capacity. Showing objection to King's sexual advances towards his wife Betty certainly would have qualified as a reason for Roswell to use his lash to put Frank back in his place. Frances Kemble did not provide details in her journal about how or if her husband's slave attempted to shield his wife from King's advances. What we know for sure is that King possessed the capacity to make it difficult, if not impossible, through the use of violence or the threat of separation, for Frank to protect Betty. Former slave Harriet Jacobs emphasized the power of the whip in limiting enslaved men's ability to protect women from sexual and physical abuse. According to Jacobs, white men were able to "lash" manhood out of enslaved men. "Some poor creatures have been so brutalized by the lash," said Jacobs, "that they will sneak out of the way to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters."³⁴ Through the systematic use of violence against enslaved men, slaveholders were able to weaken many of these men's defenses and neutralize the barriers they may have wanted to form in order to protect enslaved women from attack. According to former slave Austin Stewart, this process of

³³Diary of Dr. Richard Eppes, January 2, 1853 and Dr. Richard Eppes Code of Laws, Section 69 in Eppes Family Papers, 1722-1948, Virginia Historical Society.

³⁴Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 44.

brutalization and emasculation began at birth and continued throughout an enslaved man's life, despite his becoming a husband or father. The enslaved man has "from his infancy been taught to cower beneath the white man's frown, and bow at his bidding, or suffer all the rigor of the slave laws."³⁵

Slaveowners and overseers put forth much effort in creating the "chattel relation" that James Pennington spoke of to destroy enslaved men's will to stand guard and provide physical protection for their wives and children. Primarily through the use or threat of violence, they made very deliberate efforts to diminish any threat enslaved men could pose when they sought to sexually exploit female slaves. William Ward's owner threatened him with murder, if necessary, to clear the path to have sex with Ward's wife if he so desired. "He told me that if my wife had been good looking, I never would sleep with her again because he'd kill me and take her and raise children off of her," said Ward. His owner found pleasure in assuring him that he stood no chance in preventing him from engaging in the most intimate of acts with his wife; she was his slave and that entitled him to the aforementioned privileges. It was important to establish this precedent not only among enslaved women but enslaved men as well. Though Ward's owner never made good on his threat, he succeeded in communicating the consequences his enslaved men would face if they challenged him. If he wanted to have sex with a female slave, he would, even if it meant killing enslaved men in the process.³⁶

Former slave Lewis Clark recalled how slave patrollers who were granted authority by slaveholders to police the behavior and whereabouts of slaves would enter slave cabins at night during their patrols with the intentions of sexually assaulting women. Even if husbands and

³⁵Austin Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave and Forty Years a Freeman* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 3:736-737.

³⁶William Ward interview in George Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 13.4 (Georgia), 133.

fathers were present, they “act just as they please with his wives and daughters,” said Clark. They knew they could enter these cabins with ease because the enslaved husbands had been conditioned through the use of violence to show no objection. According to Clark, if a husband did try to fight off a patroller, his hands were tied behind his back and he received “thirty-nine lashes.” He suggested that these patrollers’ actions were not only motivated by the possibilities of having sexual relations with the women, but by the prospects of provoking the men. Therefore, their sexual exploitation of the enslaved women was just as much about torturing the men as the women. According to Clark, when they attacked a woman, they looked to see if the man would get “cross,” so they could have an excuse to “give him a flogging.”³⁷

Slave-owners and overseers also took advantage of enslaved men’s primary duty to be obedient servants to place physical distance between them and their female family members when needed. All an owner or overseer needed to do was occupy a male slave’s time and attention with an arduous task like plowing a field or constructing a barn to separate him from his wife for an extended amount of time. This would give an owner all the time he needed to secure a moment of privacy with the chosen woman. While the enslaved husband possessed the faculties to disobey the command in order to be near his wife if he suspected she was in danger, he knew this course of action would surely come with consequences. Ishrael Massie said that while he was a slave in Virginia, masters and overseers were notorious for coming into the slave quarters and directing enslaved husbands to get out of bed and go to work “milking cows or cutting wood.” Then, they would get in bed with the women and force themselves on them, causing some women to “fight and tussle,” said Massie, while others offered no resistance for fear of being beaten. “My blood is boiling now at the thought of them times,” said Massie, when

³⁷Lewis Clark, “Leaves From a Slave’s Journal of Life” in John Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 157.

he was interviewed seventy-two years after slavery had ended. When he and other husbands learned of these attacks, they felt unable to do anything to stop them. According to Massie, it made no difference if a wife told her husband or not because “he was powerless.”³⁸

At times, enslaved men were forced to participate or aide in the sexual exploitation of female slaves. In Richmond, Virginia, planter John Francis made a habit of sexually harassing his slave Peggy. He retaliated against her efforts to resist him by chaining her to a block and even locking her up in his meat house. According to court documents, on one occasion, he ordered one of his male slaves Patrick to hold Peggy down so that he could sexually assault her. In that moment, Patrick found himself in the most unfortunate of positions. If he refused Francis’s order, he surely would be on the receiving end of some form of retribution. But, if he obeyed, he might have suffered a different kind of consequence—knowing that he aided his owner in committing an unconscionable act and causing Peggy great physical and psychological pain. The fact that Patrick and Peggy later conspired to kill Francis reveals that he had an inclination to protect Peggy from such vile and vicious attacks. In another instance, Henry Bibb’s owner, Francis Whitfield, a cotton planter who claimed to be a pious man, instructed one of his male slaves to flog a young female for resisting an unwanted sexual relationship. According to Bibb, Whitfield told the young woman that “he had bought her for a wife for his boy.” She rejected the partnership, however, claiming to have no sort of affection for the young man. It was in his fit of rage that Whitfield, displeased with her resistance, ordered his male slave to flog the young female until she agreed to comply with his wishes. The same enslaved man was later ordered to strip his own wife naked and whip her on her bare back for not following Whitfield’s orders. Surely, he found it extremely difficult to be forced to inflict these women with pain.

³⁸Ishrael Massie interview in Charles L. Perdue, et al, ed. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 207. Massie reported that he was eighty-eight years old at the time of the interview.

Lias Winning used one of his female slave's husbands to punish her for resisting his sexual advances. When the woman, mother of former slave Thomas Goodwater, managed to escape Winning's grasp, Winning went to her husband, Goodwater's father, and demanded that he chastise his wife for her disobedience. According to Goodwater, Winning was a mean man who "liked his women slave[s]." Therefore, it was no surprise to Goodwater's mother when Winning tried to attack her while she was working alone in the field. When Winning attempted to grab her, she "pulled his ears almost off" and ran, said Goodwater. Winning then went in search of the woman's husband and when he found him, he instructed him to talk to his wife and reprimand her for her disobedience and for injuring his ears. Winning's request that Goodwater's father reprimand his wife does demonstrate that some enslaved men were able to exercise patriarchal authority within their households and communities and that, at times, slaveholders like Winning even sanctioned it on the condition that it helped to promote obedience and order among their slave population.³⁹ Though Winning made it this male slave's responsibility to chastise his wife and exercise authority over her, his authority was still subject to Winning's approval. In fact, this male slave's authority was nothing more than an extension of Winning's dominance. Winning only sanctioned him to punish his wife so that she would be more likely to submit to his sexual advances in the future. It is easy to imagine that Goodwater's father was angered, or, at the very least, perplexed by Winning's audacious request that he rebuke his own wife for refusing to have sex with another man. Demands like this only served to further

³⁹On large plantations with a significant enslaved population, certain black men were selected to serve as drivers to assist owners and overseers with maintaining order and maximizing productivity among the enslaved population. Drivers were frequently required to whip their fellow slaves, a task that most found painful and excruciating. In other instances, drivers enjoyed their elevated place of authority, which created tension between them and other enslaved men. Mostly, slave drivers served as leaders within the slave quarters who served as a buffer between slaves and overseers and owners. This illustrates that enslaved men were not completely void of authority, especially over one another. See, John Boles, "Diversity in a Slave Society" in *Black Southerners, 1619-1869* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984).

complicate enslaved men's perceptions of themselves as protectors and providers for their families and communities.

Sometimes, enslaved men's sexuality was utilized by slaveholders to sexually exploit enslaved women, making men victims of exploitation as well. Slaveholders relied greatly on the natural increase of their enslaved labor force through sexual reproduction, and they were not above forcing men and women to engage in sexual relations to produce these new generations of slave laborers. In narratives and interviews, enslaved men and women often compared their treatment to that of livestock—horses, cattle, and dogs. When interviewed, former Kentucky slaves recalled how enslaved women were “bred like live stock to some male negro who was kept for that purpose because of his strong physique.”⁴⁰ The slaveholder wished to replicate the male's prowess “in order to get a good price for his progeny, just like horses, cattle, dogs and other animals,” they said. Enslaved men were penned up and used like stud horses, said another slave.⁴¹ Like enslaved women, male slaves were exploited for their reproductive capabilities and they too were forced to have sexual relations with enslaved women to produce new generations of slave laborers.⁴²

In an interview, former slaves Sam and Louisa Everett recalled that on their Florida plantation, if their owner “Big Jim” thought a certain man and woman might produce healthy offspring, he forced them to have sexual relations, even if they were married to other people.

⁴⁰Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 16 (Kentucky), 72.

⁴¹William Ward interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 13.4 (Georgia), 133.

⁴²For more on enslaved women and men's forced sexual reproduction see Morgan, *Laboring Women*; Thomas A. Foster, “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men Under American Slavery,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (2011). Martha E. Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) provides evidence of both coercive and consensual sexual relations between black male slaves and white women. Also see, Joshua Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) for more on coercive and consensual sex across the color line.

They noted that if either party showed the lightest reluctance, Big Jim would force them to have sexual relations in his presence. These men and women were essentially used to sexually violate each other and forced to disrupt the marital bonds that they had established with their respective spouses, which many men and women valued despite the fragile nature of these unions. Though unmarried at the time, Sam and Louisa were “brought together” under these coercive circumstances. According to Louisa, Big Jim called her and Sam to him and he “ordered Sam to pull off his shirt.” With this being his only article of clothing, Sam now stood naked before Jim and Louisa. It stands to reason that Sam was just as embarrassed and ashamed as Louisa, who said that she covered her face to shield herself from Sam’s nakedness. Next, Big Jim asked, “Do you think you can stand this big nigger,” meaning could she sustain sexual relations with him. Though Jim offered his words in the form of a question, Louisa, observing his “old bull whip flung across his shoulder,” knew it was not a question at all, but a command. She knew she had no choice but to “stand” Sam and take him as her husband and have as many children as possible. “So, I just said, yes sir,” said Louisa. “He told us what we must get busy and do in his presence,” she said. Like Jim’s other slaves, Sam and Louisa were forced to have sex in front of him, undoubtedly for his own personal pleasure. According to Louisa, he enjoyed watching his slaves have sex, and “often entertained his friends in this manner.”⁴³

When we consider the exploitation that both Louisa and Sam suffered, it is not difficult to understand why Frances Kimble felt the need to pay a particular amount of attention to Frank, wanting to assess how he too was physically and mentally influenced by Roswell King’s vile sexual relationship with his wife. Though she knew Frank would be severely punished if he challenged King’s behavior, she struggled to reconcile that with her belief that Frank should

⁴³Sam and Louisa Everett interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 17.1 (Florida), 127-128. When Sam and Louisa Everett were interviewed, the interviewer combined and summarized the vast majority of their reflections. Louisa is the only one whom the interviewer quoted directly.

have been able to act as a husband and protect his wife from King's misuse. Yet, slaveholders' desire to maintain the "chattel relation" was strong and denying or limiting enslaved men patriarchal rights and responsibilities, including the right to combat the sexual exploitation of enslaved woman, was one way of securing their power.

Enslaved men's desire to be heads of households, responsible for providing economic security and physical protection for their wives and children, is made evident in the sources they left behind. Scholar bell hooks described the image of black masculinity that emerged from slave narratives and interviews as "one of hard working men who longed to assume full patriarchal responsibility for families and kin." She contends that under slavery, black men were socialized by the example set by white men to believe that they too should become patriarchs, "seeking to attain freedom to provide and protect for black women, to be benevolent patriarchs." They sought a masculinity defined by their ability to provide protection and leadership rather than mastery, which spurred white men's definitions of patriarchal authority.⁴⁴ In his narrative, Henry Bibb expressed his belief that all men are "free, moral, intelligent, and accountable human beings." Undoubtedly inspired by Thomas Jefferson's impassioned claims over seventy years before in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, Bibb argued that a man had a right to wages for

⁴⁴bell hooks, "Reconstructing Black Masculinity" in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 90. For more of hooks's analysis on enslaved men, masculinity and patriarchy, see bell hooks, "Plantation Patriarchy" in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004.) hooks argues that there was a stark difference between the notions of masculinity that African men brought with them to the New World and the notions of masculinity and patriarchy that they were inundated with under the mastery of white men. For white men, mastery over women and the enslaved was an essential element of masculinity. Though African men were apart of communities that valued gender roles and placed men at a higher status than women, that status did not equate to the domination of women. She argues that over the course of slavery, black men unfortunately learned to mimic white men's dominance over women, which proved detrimental in the post-Civil War era. "When slavery ended these black men often used violence to dominate black women, which was a repetition of the strategies of control white slaveholders used," said hooks. hooks, *We Real Cool*, 3-5.

his labor, the right to pursue liberty and happiness, and “a right to his own wife and children.” Though Bibb was firm in his belief that he was endowed with these rights by “the All-wise Creator,” he was aware of the restraints placed on his manhood by man-made laws that bound him in slavery. “I was a slave, a prisoner for life; I could possess nothing, nor acquire anything but what must belong to my keeper,” said Bibb.⁴⁵

Though Bibb might have been inspired by the patriarchal rhetoric of the American Revolution, men of African descent shared a longer tradition that embraced masculinity and patriarchal authority. Historian Daniel Black argues that “the ideas of male dominance, power, and control were well-established aspects of the West African concept of manhood centuries before the European ever arrived in Africa.”⁴⁶ For example, the Mende, who lived in what is today Sierra Leone, organized themselves into patrilineal societies. A family’s identity was defined by its male line and it was through the male line that status and property were passed down. Mende men were expected to be rulers of their wives, children, and slaves. Also, these men were permitted to have more than one wife and the number of wives, children, slaves, and cattle a man had was a symbol of his wealth and status.⁴⁷ A multitude of cultural understandings and practices survived the Middle Passage from the west coast of Africa to British North America. Though these newly settled African slaves merged their various cultural understandings with influence from European cultural practices, many managed to hold on to

⁴⁵Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 2:356.

⁴⁶Daniel Black, *The Black Male Concept of Manhood as Portrayed in Selected Slave and Free Narratives* (Published dissertation, 1993), 143. Also see Daniel Black, *Dismantling Black Manhood: An Historical and Literary Analysis of the Legacy of Slavery* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997).

⁴⁷Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2012), 25-26.

some semblance of their African identity.⁴⁸ It is no wonder that many considered their owner's capacity to provide shelter, food, and clothes to their families as a direct challenge to their masculinity. And, white men's cavalier sense of entitlement to black women's sexuality just added insult to injury.⁴⁹

Enslaved men often had to grapple with their deep-seated desires for authority within their communities alongside their feelings of powerlessness and pain. Women's sufferings with sexual exploitation elicited some of the most heart-wrenching declarations of powerlessness from these men. To avoid the pain of being unable to protect his wife Malinda from sexual abuse, Henry Bibb determined that it was best for him to live apart from her. If he was powerless to prevent these actions, he felt it was best not to witness them either. But, when he was sold to William Gatewood, Malinda's owner, he found himself living on the same plantation as his wife for the first time. Previously, he had been owned by a man who lived seven miles away from Gatewood's plantation and because he was only permitted to visit with Malinda on Saturdays and Sundays, he was shielded from any abuse she might suffer during the rest of the week. Living on Gatewood's plantation meant he would be exposed to every whip of the lash or unwanted sexual advance from Gatewood or his overseer. This proved to be too much for Bibb to handle. "To live where I must be eye witness to her insults, scourgings and abuses, such as are common to be inflicted upon slaves, was more than I could bear," he said. "If my wife must be exposed to the insults and licentious passions of wicked slave-drivers and overseers; if she must

⁴⁸Historians have long debated the continuity or severance of African culture once enslaved African landed in the new world. For more on African American cultural as a creolization of African and European/New World traditions, see Sydney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). Stephanie Smallwood presents a compelling argument for social death of enslaved Africans and a rebuilding of culture within an enslaved experience. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁴⁹Black, *Dismantling Black Manhood*, 11-12, 29-31.

bear the stripes of the lash laid on by an unmerciful tyrant...heaven forbid that I should be compelled to witness the sight.”⁵⁰

After several attempts to escape, Henry and Malinda Bibb and their young daughter Frances were sold by William Gatewood to a slave trader named Madison Garrison. It was while under the ownership of Garrison that Bibb came face-to-face with his biggest fear. Garrison was known for raping the women he purchased and sold in the interstate slave trade. He had already attempted to rape Malinda once, but she was able to fight off his attack despite his efforts to subdue her with lashes from his whip and a threat to separate her child from her forever. According to Bibb, Garrison never succeeded in having sexual intercourse with Malinda but he settled for whipping her, which he considered the next best thing. “I have often heard Garrison say that he had rather paddle a female, than eat when he was hungry—that it was music for him to hear them scream, and to see their blood run,” said Bibb. He recalled a day when Garrison got angry with Malinda and dragged her off to a separate room with a paddle in hand. Left behind to imagine the horrible things that Garrison intended to do to Malinda, Bibb suffered with this thought: “I could afford her no protection at all, while the strong arm of the law, public opinion and custom, were all against me.” His fear became a reality; he was powerless to protect his wife from her lecherous owner and all he could do was be a witness.⁵¹

William Craft said that the thought of female slaves being forced to endure rape and sexual coercion, what he called “the greatest indignity,” was enough to shake a man to his core. His own wife being the product of a sexual relationship between a slave-owner and his female slave, he knew firsthand not only how vulnerable these women were, but how pained enslaved men felt as a result. “If there is any one thing under the wide canopy of heaven, horrible enough

⁵⁰Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 2:366.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 2:391-394.

to stir a man's soul, and to make his very blood boil, it is the thought of his dear wife, his unprotected sister, or his young and virtuous daughters, struggling to save themselves from falling a prey to such demons!”⁵² Another enslaved man described this sense of powerlessness as a wild throbbing in a slave man’s chest. He explained that a slave husband was forced to watch his wife “exposed to the rude gaze of a beastly tyrant,” yet his throbbing heart had to be suppressed and “his righteous indignation find no voice.”⁵³ Though these men articulated the pain and powerlessness they felt in these situations, they never lost sight of the fact that enslaved women carried the heavier burden. Josiah Henson said, “that of the female, compelled to perform unfit labor, sick, suffering, and bearing the burdens of her own sex unpitied and unaided, as well as the toils which belong to the other, has often oppressed me with a load of sympathy.”⁵⁴

Sources show that many men were deeply concerned about enslaved women’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation and that they carried deep regrets about their limited ability to prevent these incidents. However, in a few instances, enslaved men chose instead to emphasize what they perceived to be enslaved women’s complicity in sexual relations with white men. They argued that some women were calculated in their efforts to establish sexual connections with wealthy white men who could improve their condition or that of their children, even providing emancipation from slavery altogether. When Robert Smalls was interviewed by a member of the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, an agency tasked with integrating former slaves into the Union at the conclusion of the Civil War, he was asked very specific questions about female slaves’ sexuality, to which he responded that female slaves would rather

⁵²William Craft, *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 3:899.

⁵³Austin Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave*, 3:702.

⁵⁴Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 2:506.

have sex with white men than their male counterparts. “This intercourse is principally with white men with whom they would rather have intercourse than with their own color,” he said. When asked if these young women do this for money, he said “the majority of the young girls will for money” and start as young as twelve years old. According to Smalls, enslaved women were preoccupied with material gains, creating this interest in having sex with white men instead of black men. Smalls, himself, was born to an enslaved woman and fathered by a white man. Yet, despite his claims, his mother’s own sexual relationship with this white man did not provide her or her child with any substantial benefit. It was only by his own efforts that Smalls acquired his freedom in 1862 while working aboard *The Planter*, a Confederate transport steamer. He had worked his way up from deckhand to captain and in May of that year, with his wife and children in tow, he commandeered the steamer, leaving its white crew onshore, and sailed towards the nearest Union blockading ship.⁵⁵

Lewis Clark offered similar claims that enslaved women benefited from having sexual relations with white men. He said a master might provide them with fancy clothes, give them small presents, or extend more privileges, all “while the whim lasts.” However, he did not totally lose sight of the fact that enslaved women had little choice in whether to engage in these sexual relationships with white men. If ordered by their owner to have sexual relations, “they know they must submit to their masters,” said Clark. However, he suggested that they saw these small trinkets as consolation, feeling that it was better to receive something for their suffering than nothing at all. Regardless of what Clark believed, small presents and fancier clothes could hardly diminish the trauma of rape and sexual harassment.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Interview of Robert Smalls by American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission in Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 376.

⁵⁶Clark, “Leaves From a Slave’s Journal of Life” in Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 157.

This sense of powerlessness that most enslaved men experienced in the midst of sexual exploitation had real consequences, leading some to regret their decisions to become husbands and fathers. In his narrative, Henry Box Brown declared, “And here let me state, what is well known by many people, that no such thing as real marriage is allowed to exist among the slaves. Talk of marriage under such a system!” His conclusion that slaves could never maintain a virtuous and untainted marriage was inspired by a conversation he and his brother had with a group of enslaved men who all lived on the same plantation. They conveyed their owner’s refusal to let them marry women from neighboring plantations, choosing instead to make his slaves marry each other, “whether related or not.” One said that consequently, they were all related to each other and he could not distinguish whether a woman was his sister or not. For this reason, along with Brown’s belief that “the greater part of slaveholders are licentious men” who force their female slaves to serve as concubines, he saw no need for an enslaved man to pursue marriage. According to Brown, “The slave’s wife is his, only at the will of her master, who may violate her chastity with impunity.” Therefore, “the slave is placed under strong inducements not to form a union of love, for he knows not how soon the chords wound around his heart would be snapped asunder, by the hand of the brutal slave-dealer,” he said.⁵⁷

Despite his reservations, Brown eventually considered getting married and formed a strong attachment to a woman named Nancy who belonged to a man named Lee. He said he felt his chances for having a secure marriage were increased because Lee was a member of the Presbyterian Church and was known as a very pious man. Though Lee promised he would never sell Nancy, he confirmed Brown’s beliefs that a slave man’s wife was only his as long as the

⁵⁷Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery by Charles Stearns* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 2:457-458.

union satisfied the needs of the owner. Lee's "conscientious scruples" quickly vanished, said Brown, and he sold Nancy without mention or explanation.

Lewis Clarke met a fellow slave named Nathan who shared a similar experience and vowed to never marry another enslaved woman. While Brown's wife was sold, Nathan's wife was actually killed due to "hard usage," said Lewis. Though devastated by her loss, Nathan did not give up entirely on marriage, just the idea of marrying another slave. According to Clarke, Nathan vowed never to take another slave for a wife, and he selected a free woman as a companion instead. Though his owner was vehemently opposed to the match, Nathan stayed true to his vow and was eventually sold "down south" as a consequence. Though he was ultimately separated from his new wife, his wife's free status spared him from the burden of worrying about any ill treatment she might receive from a violent or lewd owner.⁵⁸

Henry Bibb expressed similar regrets about fatherhood. "If ever there was any one act of my life while a slave, that I have to lament over, it is that of being a father and a husband of slaves," said Bibb. The love he had for his daughter Frances could not be questioned. He described her as a pretty, playful, bright, and interesting child with "the very image of her mother was stamped upon her cheek." But, "I could never look upon the dear child without being filled with sorrow and fearful apprehensions," said Bibb. Like his wife, his daughter was a female slave, and, in Bibb's words, her female virtue could be trampled under foot with impunity. His wife had been previously sexually assaulted and beaten severely for her resistance and this made his concerns for her daughter that much more intense. In fact, Bibb became determined to never bring another child into slavery. "She was the first and shall be the last slave that ever I will

⁵⁸Ibid., 2:457-458, 471-472; Lewis and Milton Clarke, *Narratives of the Suffering of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, During a Captivity of More than Twenty Years Among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 1:173.

father, for chains and slavery on this earth,” said Bibb. “I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am only the father of one slave.”⁵⁹

Despite the consequences, some male and female slaves acted in ways that challenged the parameters set forth by slaveholders.⁶⁰ When placed in the precarious position of witnessing or even having to participate in the sexual exploitation of female slaves, enslaved men sometimes responded in ways that slaveholders did not anticipate or approve. Motivated by their desires to lead and protect their families, these enslaved men fought back to prevent and avenge sexual offenses against enslaved women. William Hayden, a former slave from Virginia, declared that despite white men’s expectations, he was a man and though the rights that came along with manhood were not freely granted to him, he intended to stand firmly on them anyway. Hayden was often challenged by his owner’s business partner, Mr. Stone, and Stone’s instigation generated anger within him. He already resented having to obey any man, much less one who did not lawfully own him. He was particularly angered by Stone’s abuse of “the poor oppressed slave, especially the female portion,” and felt it necessary to challenge Stone’s authority over him at every turn. However, he did not characterize his behavior as mere disobedience. He determined, he said, to “stand firmly upon the rights of my manhood.” According to Hayden,

⁵⁹Bibb, *Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, 2:367.

⁶⁰Great efforts were made to ensure the survival of slavery. Slaves were conditioned, mostly through violence, to not question or attempt to usurp their owners’ authority. The idea of slaves revolting against the establishment frightened slaveholders beyond belief, and they did all they could to make sure that slaves did not attempt to chip away at the control they had established. Yet, despite their efforts, enslaved people found ways to resist and rebel. For more on resistance and rebellion, see John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004),

Stone was surprised by his audacity and began foaming at the mouth and sweating and threatened “his deep revenge.”⁶¹

When Alfred stood before the Hinds County court in Mississippi and justified murdering his wife’s rapist, like Hayden, he was standing firmly on his rights as a man. His defense rested on the notion that as a husband, he was entitled to avenge this most vicious crime committed against his wife Charlotte. He could not point to any legal statutes to support his claims. But, his attorney, speaking on his behalf, pointed to a higher law, the laws of humanity that affirmed that even enslaved men like Alfred had an innate calling to be protective husbands to their wives. He argued that Alfred was answering this call when he attacked and killed Coleman. Alfred had to know he would face consequences when people responded to the loud commotion his confrontation with Coleman created and found him standing over Coleman’s body in John Fondren’s stable. Yet, his heart and mind were settled because he had claimed for himself the rights of masculinity, which included his right to defend his wife’s sexuality, one of her most precious and vulnerable facets.⁶²

Not completely on his own accord, but at an owner’s insistence, Ben, a slave from Chesterfield County, Virginia, killed the man who had been having sexual relations with his wife. In most instances, men like Ben were acting out against slaveholders’ authority, but in this case, John Bass, the man who owned Ben’s wife, not only instigated the murder but orchestrated it from the very beginning. Bass demanded that his slaves follow the traditional protocols of courtship. Acting in compliance, Ben, who lived on the neighboring plantation of William Ware,

⁶¹William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South. Written by Himself* in Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives*, 1:239.

⁶²*Alfred (a slave) v. State.*

sought permission from Bass to marry one of his female slaves.⁶³ Bass granted Ben permission to marry the woman and come on his property to visit with her weekly. After several years of living as husband and wife, their relationship was brought to an abrupt end when Bass banned Ben from visiting his wife. It appears that Bass no longer approved of the couple's relationship because Joe Gooding, a free man of color who had recently fallen into Bass's good graces, expressed desires to have a relationship with Ben's wife. Demonstrating his control over his slaves' most intimate interactions, Bass authorized Gooding to begin a sexual relationship with the woman; however, his favor was short lived. For unknown reasons, Gooding fell out of Bass's good graces and was no longer permitted to have a sexual relationship with his female slave.⁶⁴

Ben heard of the conflict between Bass and Gooding and, careful to follow protocol, he asked Bass once more for permission to commence his relationship with his wife. Seeing an opportunity to eliminate his new found enemy, Bass approved of Ben's request on the condition that he first "put Joe out of the way." Bass worked to incite feelings of jealousy within Ben, telling him that Gooding had "taken his wife from him," though in actuality it was Bass who had taken his wife from him with no regard for the bonds they had formed. It was Bass who had controlled their fate. He alone possessed the authority to approve of his slaves' marriages, which made Ben's ties to his wife so fragile. This realization would not have been lost on Ben. But, in that moment, he was being granted permission by his wife's owner to seek vengeance against

⁶³The murder case of Ben, a slave from Chesterfield County, Virginia, shows that even though some enslaved men were not afraid to act outside the parameters set for them by society and the law to protect women, the power slaveholders wielded was formidable and even when enslaved men wanted to react and operate according to their own devices, the grip of their owners' will was often inescapable.

⁶⁴"Tryal of Ware's Ben" in Thomas Watkins to James Monroe, Executive Papers, Letters Received, box 116, January—March 1801, Library of Virginia (LVA). For more analysis on Ben's trial, see Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 145-149.

Gooding, which he likely would have wanted to do with or without Bass's permission.⁶⁵ Ben agreed to murder Gooding and do Bass's dirty work. It meant restoring his relationship with his wife and ridding the world of the man who had been permitted to come between them in the first place. However, things went awry when Ben set his plan to murder Gooding into motion. Ben intended to poison Gooding's food, but Ben's wife ingested the poisoned food instead and died immediately. Stricken with grief over the death of his wife, Ben determined to rectify his mistake. He stole his owner's shot gun and went to Gooding's house where he shot him dead. For his crime, Ben was tried and found guilty of murder.⁶⁶

Court records reveal that sometimes enslaved women also played an essential role, alongside enslaved men, in committing these violent acts against the men who sexually abused them. Peggy, the female slave of John Francis, had more than enough motivation to put a permanent end to Francis's sexual abuse of her. Things reached a critical point when Francis ordered his male slave Patrick to physically restrain Peggy so that he could rape her. It was after this vicious attack that Peggy and Patrick conspired to kill him. Peggy was determined to no longer withstand his harassment, excessive punishments, and brutal sexual assaults. As for Patrick, being forced to aide in Peggy's assault proved to be too much to handle. According to witness testimony, Patrick and Peggy, armed with a stick and an axe, entered Francis's home and attacked him, beating and slicing him all over his body. Once finished with the physical assault, they left the house and proceeded to set it on fire. The house burned to the ground with John Francis inside.⁶⁷

⁶⁵Because Ben's actions were instigated by Bass, even his efforts to assume proprietorship over his wife were subject to a slaveholder's authority.

⁶⁶"Tryal of Ware's Ben" in Thomas Watkins to James Monroe, LVA.

⁶⁷Case of Patrick and Peggy, Executive Papers—Pardon Papers, box 316, May-September 1830, LVA. For more analysis on this case, see James Hugo Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South 1776-*

Soon after, Patrick and Peggy found themselves before the New Kent County court in Virginia in September of 1830. The court's main objective was to determine whose idea it was, Peggy's or Patrick's, to fatally beat and burn John Francis. In her testimony, Peggy admitted to beating her owner with a stick, but adamantly denied murdering him. She claimed to have been provoked by a severe beating Francis had given her and his threat to sell her away from her family some time before. She then pointed the finger at Patrick, testifying that it was he who attacked Francis with the axe and likely brought about his death. Likewise, Patrick told the court that he was the one who carried the stick and that it was Peggy who used the axe to slash her owner's body. Neither took responsibility for the fire but claimed that it had been set before they entered the house. Francis's other slaves offered testimony that made assigning fault even more difficult. One testified that Peggy had verbalized her intentions to beat Francis the day before the murder, but it was Patrick who they saw set the house on fire. Another said they saw them both enter the house with weapons and both placed straw at the base of the house and set it on fire. In the end, the court found them both guilty of murder. The reality was that Peggy and Patrick had motive to kill Francis. They were both his victims and together they decided to take his life because of his sexual exploitation.⁶⁸

In his narrative, Charles Ball recalled a similar incident in which an enslaved couple, Frank and Lucy, conspired to kill the woman's owner. While serving as her owner's concubine, Lucy developed an interest in Frank who lived on an adjoining plantation. Threatened by the presence of this young male slave, Lucy's owner forbade Frank from visiting his home in order to create distance between the enslaved lovers and protect his own interests in Lucy. His efforts

1860 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), 307-308; Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 149-163.

⁶⁸Ibid.

did nothing to thwart their passion and they designed a plot to “destroy the master.” With Lucy providing the means and opportunity and Frank providing the gumption to execute the murder, together they killed her owner. Familiar with her owner’s daily routine and the terrain of his house, Lucy knew exactly where he stored his shot gun and when it would be safe to place the weapon in Frank’s possession. Next, she created a gap between the logs of the house’s exterior through which Frank could nestle the barrel of the shot gun and shoot her unsuspecting owner in the back while he ate his supper. That evening, she served him his meal as she did every day, but what came next was a departure from the usual. At Lucy’s signal, Frank aimed the shotgun at his target and unloaded a round of buckshot squarely into her owner’s back. After jumping up from his seat, the maimed slaveholder fell to the floor and died right next to the dining room table. Lucy could finally enjoy a sense of freedom from her owner’s grasps, if only for a night. The next day she traveled to a neighboring plantation and gave word of his death.⁶⁹

Like Peggy and Patrick, Lucy and Frank felt no initial inducement to reveal their guilt. But, Lucy’s resolve proved to be greater than Frank’s. When the justice of the peace and coalition of neighboring planters forced Frank to come face-to-face with and touch the body of the deceased, he became overwhelmed with fear and cried out that “Lucy had made him do it.” Lucy remained steadfast and declared her innocence, insisting that if Frank did kill her owner, he did so without her “knowledge or advice.” The court officials and neighbors remained unconvinced. Living in close proximity to the deceased, they would not have been naïve to his sexual relationship with Lucy. They did not underestimate her capacity to conspire against the man who held her as a sexual servant. And, in light of her and Frank’s budding romance, he was

⁶⁹Charles Ball 1859. *Fifty Years in Chains, or, The Life of an American Slave*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1997. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/ball/ball.html>.

the logical co-conspirator. In the end, Frank's confession to their collaborative effort to kill her owner was sufficient evidence for a jury to convict and sentence them both to die.⁷⁰

Enslaved men like Alfred, Patrick, and Frank demonstrated incredible boldness for confronting the men who they believed had sexually exploited the female slaves in their lives, because acts of rebellion, disobedience, and vengeance were almost always met with grave consequences. When Josiah Henson's father viciously attacked the overseer who attempted to rape his wife, word immediately spread through their community in Charles County, Maryland that "a nigger has struck a white man," said Henson. Henson explained that when a slave showed aggression towards a white person, "that was enough to set a whole county on fire." According to Henson, no one cared to ask what had provoked his father to attack the overseer. Without question, "the authorities were soon in pursuit of my father," he said. The architects of American slavery considered slaves' use of violence against the white people who held authority over them or any form of rebellion as a threat to the survival of the slave system, as well as the slaveholding elite's lives and livelihood. To safeguard slaveholders and their agents from physical violence like Henson's father's attack, it became necessary to inscribe into law expectations of slaves' obedience and allegiance to their owners.⁷¹

As early as the colonial period, southern states outlined severe penalties for slaves who inflicted violence against whites or conspired to revolt. The 1690 statutes of South Carolina read:

"If any negro or Indian slave shall offer any violence, by striking or the like, to any white person, he shall for the first offense be severely whipped by the constable, by order of any justice of peace; and for the second offence, by like order, shall be severely whipped, his or her nose slit, and face burnt in some

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Josiah Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson*, 2:506. For white men, violence was the weapon of choice to assert authority. While white men could use violence to retaliate against slaves, slaves could not. According to Historian Edward E. Baptist, enslaved men using violence to fight back against white men invited death. Baptist, "The Absent Subject," 137.

place; and for the third offence, to be left to two justices and three sufficient freeholders, to inflict death, or nay other punishment, according to their discretion.”

Over time, the penalties became even harsher. By 1735, the statutes stipulated that for a first offense the slave would have the right ear cut off in addition to being severely whipped. And, “in case any negro or slave shall wound, maim, bruise, or disable any white person, such offender is to be tried by two justices and freeholders, as aforesaid, and, convicted thereof, shall be punished with death.” The statutes even addressed slaveholders’ responsibilities, instructing owners to keep all guns and other arms locked up and away from slaves or face a fine of three English pounds. The message slaveholders wished to communicate was that preserving the system of slavery and its economic and social benefits was far more important than preserving the lives of individual slaves who wished to challenge the system.⁷²

While going about his daily work, Henson’s father was aroused by a woman’s screams. He ran towards the commotion and soon found his wife struggling beneath the weight of their overseer. The overseer’s plan to attack Henson’s mother had been put into motion much earlier that day when he purposefully sent her to work in a remote location away from the other field hands. He then approached her and tried to persuade her to have sexual relations with him. When his efforts failed, he “resorted to force to accomplish a brutal purpose,” said Henson. It was at this moment that Henson’s father ran up on the scene and “furious at the sight, he sprung upon him like a tiger,” said Henson. Filled with rage, he was determined to kill the man and he would have had his wife not encouraged him to restrain himself. She knew what consequences her husband could face for killing a white man. His efforts to rescue his wife from a brutal rape would not be taken into consideration. He would not be honored for his valor or self-

⁷²Thomas Cooper and David McCord, *Statutes at Large of South Carolina* (Columbia: A.S. Johnston, 1836)7:343, 389. Further discussion in Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*, 267-268.

determination. As she suspected, the county authorities sentenced him to 100 lashes on his bare back and his ear was to be nailed to a whipping post and subsequently severed from his body. This harsh penalty served not only to reprimand Henson's father but to discourage other enslaved men from challenging white men's authority. At least one of these missions was accomplished. According to Henson, his father was never the same. Previously, he had been good humored and light-hearted. "But from this hour he became utterly changed. Sullen, morose, and dogged, nothing could be done with him," said Henson.⁷³

While Josiah Henson's father was cruelly beaten for attacking his wife's rapist, other enslaved men faced death for their actions. The Hinds County Court in Mississippi determined that death by hanging was the appropriate punishment for Alfred for killing a white man. Though his attorney worked hard to convince the court that he had acted reasonably, provoked by the vicious rape of his wife by her overseer, the court argued that there was no reasonable justification for a slave to act out in this way against a white man and, therefore, Alfred deserved to be put to death. His execution was ultimately postponed due to his appeal to the High Court of Errors and Appeals of Mississippi. As previously stated, the high court agreed with the lower court that Alfred could not use the rape of his wife as provocation for murder. In that regard, he was indeed guilty of murder. However, the court determined that one of the members of the jury that convicted Alfred was biased by rumors he heard before the trial. As such, he was incapable of rendering an impartial decision, disqualifying him for service. The court ruled that Alfred's judgment be reversed and that a new trial be ordered. It is unclear whether Hinds County elected to prosecute Alfred again for murder. His name does not appear again in Hinds County or

⁷³Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson*, 2:506.

Mississippi Supreme Court records. But, if the jury of Hinds County had initially had its way, Alfred would have hanged for his murder of Coleman, John Fondren's overseer.⁷⁴

Unlike Alfred, Frank was not able to delay his execution for the murder of the slaveholder who forced his lover Lucy to be his concubine. Wanting to live as husband and wife, free from the reigns of her owner, the couple murdered the man by shooting him in the back with a shot gun. A jury made up of planters in their Georgia community found both of them guilty and sentenced them to hang. The hanging drew a large crowd. Charles Ball, a slave living on a nearby plantation, was forced to attend by his owner. It was his hope, along with the other slaveholders, that slaves would remember the spectacle the next time they contemplated breaking the rules established for them. A preacher was commissioned to deliver a sermon. He likely beseeched the slaves assembled to avoid Frank and Lucy's fate by being obedient to their earthly masters as they were to their heavenly master. Next, the platform was pulled from beneath Frank and Lucy's legs. They dropped suddenly and the ropes around their necks squeezed the life out of their bodies. They were left to hang there for half an hour before their ropes were cut and their bodies fell into the two freshly dug holes in the ground beneath the gallows. As if to communicate their excitement over ending these two enslaved lives, members of the slaveholding community commenced in "music, dancing, trading in horses, gambling, drinking, fighting, and every other species of amusement and excess to which the southern people are addicted," said Ball. These exercises of power and displays of enjoyment were designed by white elite slaveholders to convey their reach and willingness to destroy the lives of those slaves who dared to challenge their authority. For Charles Ball, the message was received loud and clear.⁷⁵

⁷⁴*Alfred (a slave) v. State.*

⁷⁵Ball 1859. *Fifty Years in Chains, or, The Life of an American Slave.* <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/ball/ball.html>.

When Josiah Henson recounted his memories of his mother's rape and his father's subsequent beating, which was his punishment for trying to protect her, he paid much attention to the injurious and lasting impact the experience had on his father's spirit. His once jovial nature was forever changed and replaced by a sad and gloomy disposition. Henson claimed he no longer had the capacity to care about himself or anyone else. According to Henson, "the milk of human kindness in his heart was turned to gall." Certainly, the physical trauma he experienced, having his ear severed from his head and being beaten severely, played a significant part in creating his now sullen attitude. But, what may have been even more traumatic for this enslaved husband and father was being forced to accept the limitations that enslavement placed on his masculinity. Though he desired the right and responsibility to rescue his wife from an impending sexual assault, the system under which he lived dictated that his inclination to protect his family did not matter. His slaveholders considered him incapable of being a patriarch and punished him severely when he attempted to uphold his sense of obligation to provide guardianship for his wife and children. They felt it was crucial to remind him of his dependent status and that his actions needed to fall within the boundaries set by his owner. Enslaved men were forced to abide by these terms and conditions or face consequences that ranged from violent beatings to death. Deciding whether to preserve your own life or protect your wife from sexual exploitation could not have been an easy decision for any enslaved man to make.⁷⁶

When Henson's father prioritized his need to protect his wife from harm over his overseer's prerogative to abuse her, the local authorities determined that he needed to be reminded of his subordinate station. Yet, his penalty, a flogging on his back and the severing of his ear, served a much larger purpose. The floggings and death sentences issued to men like

⁷⁶Henson, *The Life of Josiah Henson*, 2:506.

Henson's father, Alfred, and Frank, were designed to implant feelings of fear and powerlessness in the hearts of all enslaved men who witnessed them. Of course, this intense violence was also intended to strike fear in the hearts of enslaved women and likely discouraged some women from sharing their experiences with sexual exploitation with others. It also served to teach enslaved children the importance of deference and obedience. Enslaved men's frequent confessions of powerlessness and regret in regard to the sexual exploitation of enslaved women prove just how effective these threats of corporal punishment were. For Henson's father and others who attempted to offer enslaved women protection from sexual abuse and challenged slaveholders' authority in the process, the emotional consequences sometimes proved to be too great. Though Henson's father managed to escape a death sentence, the sullen and disagreeable attitude he developed as a result of his ordeal was not well received by their owner who made numerous threats to sell him to "the far south" if his attitude did not improve, a threat that inspired great fear in the hearts of the other slaves in their Maryland community. His father's disposition, however, did not change. He probably did not feel that his physical location would make much difference to his broken spirit. Regardless of where he lived, he would still be enslaved and would still be denied fundamental rights he believed he deserved. To Henson's and his mother's dismay, his father was eventually sent off to Alabama and neither one of them ever heard from him again.⁷⁷

⁷⁷Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

“A Licentious Master and a Jealous Mistress”: Slaveholding Women, Sexuality Exploitation, and Power.¹

One of the first things Frances Kemble learned when she arrived at her husband’s slave plantations in Georgia was that his overseer, Roswell King Jr., was notorious for his sexual abuse of enslaved women.² She encountered an enslaved man named Frank and showed great concern for his inability to protect his wife Betty from King’s abuse. In addition to being concerned about how enslaved men were powerless in the face of their wives’ sexual assaults, Kemble felt great sympathy for the women themselves. She noted one female slave, Judy, who suffered greatly as a result of King’s passions. During one of their many talks, Judy revealed that though she had a husband, King frequently “forced her” to have sex and “flogged her severely for having resisted him.” As a result, she became pregnant and gave birth to a child named Jem, “her first born, the son of Mr. King.” On one occasion, after beating her for resisting his advances, he banished her to a remote and swampy section of the Butler estate called Five Pound as further punishment. Kemble called Judy’s life “a miserable story” under “Mr. King’s overseership.”³

¹Quote found in Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup in Puttin’ On Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 328.

²A slaveholder in his own right, Roswell King, Jr. relished the responsibility of managing slaves, which was reflected in his sense of entitlement to the bodies of the enslaved women who fell under his charge. He and his father Roswell King, Sr., were both successful slaveholders. At the time of his death in 1854, Roswell King Jr., owned 127 slaves. For more on the Kings, see Malcolm Bell, Jr., *Major Butler’s Legacy: Five Generations of a Slaveholding Family* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 531-532.

³Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, xxii, 238.

Kemble then learned that Judy's suffering had not ended there. In addition to being raped and harassed by King, Judy had to contend with the displeasure of his wife as well. Having given birth to another of King's children, Judy was recovering from her labor and delivery, alongside another female slave who also just gave birth to King's child, when she was confronted by King's wife, Julia Maxwell King. Julia had learned of the paternity of both women's children during her visit to the hospital ward. Enraged by their connection to her husband, she ordered that they be "severally flogged," despite their delicate condition, an act she "personally superintended," noted Kemble. It is unclear whether she harbored any anger or resentment for her husband and his sexual choices, but we know for certain that she believed the two enslaved women warranted her punishment. Julia was no stranger to slave management or discipline, owning over fifty slaves in her own name. Not satisfied with the flogging alone, she ordered that the women be transported to Five Pound—ironically, the same place where King had sent Judy when she resisted his sexual advances earlier—where an enslaved driver was to "flog them every day for a week." Julia was obviously convinced that a week's worth of flogging would provide both women with incentive to avoid sexual contact with King in the future. But, how much agency did she really believe these enslaved women possessed to restrict her husband's sexual advances? Though his sexual behavior disturbed her, Julia too had been unsuccessful in curtailing his illicit behavior.⁴

Kemble realized that the trauma enslaved women experienced as a result of sexual exploitation was not caused by male perpetrators alone. When some slaveholding women were confronted with white men's sexual exploits with female slaves, they directed their anger and frustration towards these women—who, as subordinates, were an easy target. According to Kemble, enslaved women had the misfortune of being caught between the "passions of their

⁴Ibid., 269. For more on Julia Maxwell King's slaveownership, see Bell, Jr., *Major Butler's Legacy*, 532.

masters and mistresses.”⁵ In regard to white slaveholding men, this passion can best be described as a sense of entitlement to every aspect of the enslaved woman’s body, leading some men to rape and sexually harass enslaved women, as well as force their sexual reproduction. This patriarchal authority, which made enslaved women vulnerable to such actions, also encompassed white slaveholding women, rendering them subordinate to their fathers, brothers, and husbands in the public and private sphere; however, white women were not completely powerless.⁶ Being household managers and slave owners in their own right, slaveholding women wielded much power over the enslaved people in their charge.⁷ And while their subordination to white men perhaps placed limitations on how they could confront them about their sexual relations with enslaved women, slaveholding women’s authority over slaves permitted them to direct their passions and rage towards enslaved women.⁸ To this end, Kemble, when contemplating the fate of enslaved women, argued that slaveholding men and women were “each alike armed with power to oppress and torture them.”⁹

⁵Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 269

⁶For more on patriarchy and white women’s subordination to white men, see Brenda Stevenson, “Marriage, For Better or For Worse,” in *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 4-5, 13-17, 127; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 36-38.

⁷For more on slaveholding women’s agency, see Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). In the first three chapters of *Out of the House of Bondage*, Glymph challenges the previous historiography that failed to see slaveholding women as figures of authority within the system of slavery. She argues that historians’ overreliance on patriarchy to characterize power in the antebellum South has obscured our ability to recognize slaveholding women as managers of households and enslaved laborers within those households. These women were afforded the same opportunities as slaveholding men to oversee slave labor and issue punishment as they saw fit. Glymph’s work provides a new framework for understanding slaveholding and enslaved women’s relations. Also see, Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1992); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 188.

⁸Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*. 52.

⁹Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 269.

Despite societal restrictions on white women's power, Kemble confirmed that white women did have power to oppress enslaved women whom they suspected or knew for sure had engaged in sexual relations with their husbands or sons. The extent to which these women exercised this power varied greatly. This chapter explores the range of slaveholding women's responses to the sexual exploits of their male counterparts with enslaved women to provide a more nuanced understanding of white women's power and agency within the system of patriarchy that dominated the antebellum South. Many women chose or felt compelled to remain silent about their discontent, acquiescing to expectations of submission and gentility. Others utilized gossip and private correspondence to generate private and public discussions about their dissatisfaction with white men's sexual behavior with female slaves. And while their subordination to white men might have limited their ability to shape or rebuke white men's sexual behavior, some white women sought vengeance against the enslaved women with whom their husbands had sexually relations, utilizing their authority as slaveholders and household managers to negotiate their sale and inflict physical and emotional abuse. While some of the historiography has suggested that white women were just as much victims of white men's patriarchal authority as enslaved women, this chapter argues that when it came to enslaved women, slaveholding women garnered much power, even within a social structure that deemed them subordinate to men.¹⁰

¹⁰See Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut, *The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). Chesnut complains of the burdens placed on slaveholding women. They must manage slaves and tolerate their husband's illicit sexual behavior. Historian Jacqueline Jones quotes that slaveholding women like Chesnut saw themselves as "slaves of slaves." Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 23. For more, see Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 6. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, however, argued that historians as well as plantation mistresses were often seduced into making this false comparison. See Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 47.

Silence was a frequent response of slaveholding women to slaveholding men's sexual relations with enslaved women. Historians have argued that while whites, especially white women, disapproved of interracial sex, they often tolerated and at times accommodated sex across the color line.¹¹ According to historian Joshua Rothman, "The systemic sexual abuse of enslaved women by white men, for example, normally went untouched by the law or the community in Virginia." Because slave owners were permitted discretion in how they treated their slaves, the sexual abuse of enslaved women rarely sparked interference from fellow slave owners, especially slaveholding women.¹²

In the case of Celia, she was fourteen years old when her owner Robert Newsom raped her for the first time. The year was 1850 and his wife had died the year before, leaving a sexual void that he intended to fill by making Celia his concubine. A native of Virginia, Newsom relocated to the Midwest in 1820 where he was able to establish a substantial farm. By 1850, he relied on the labor of five male slaves to cultivate his 800 acres, which rested along the Middle River in Callaway County, Missouri. Though the farm was a large undertaking for five men and boys, and Newsom could have benefited from more field laborers, he purchased Celia instead, prioritizing his desire to have a concubine to fulfill his sexual needs. Newsom made an effort to create a private space where he could have sexual intercourse with Celia outside of the view of his two adult daughters Virginia and Mary, who now served as the ladies of their father's household. He built Celia a private cabin that was located in a grove of fruit trees away from his other slaves and just a short walk from his own residence. Over the next five years, Newsom

¹¹For more analysis on the tolerance of sex across the color line, see Joshua Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008); Clarence Walker, *Mongrel Nation: The America Begotten by Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

¹²Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 9, 134; Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 211.

frequently made the walk from his home to Celia's cabin and demanded sex from her, usually at night after his daughters and grandchildren went to bed. Though Celia had the benefit of a private cabin and it possible that Newsom provided her with other material benefits that he did not give to his other slaves, she found no solace in being Newsom's concubine. Despite her repeated objections, Newsom continued to sexually assault her, which resulted in Celia giving birth to at least one child fathered by Newsom.¹³

Newsom's placement of Celia's cabin, separate from the other slave quarters and at least sixty steps from the Newsom household was strategic. Though he was a widower, his house was filled with plenty of people from whom he would want to keep his relations with Celia private. Around the time he purchased Celia in 1850, his oldest daughter Virginia, who was married and had three children, moved back into his house. It is unclear whether she had been widowed or was just estranged from her husband, but she moved back in with Newsom with just her children in tow. Newsom's son Harry also lived in the house at that time, but left around 1852 when he remarried and settled into a place of his own. Newsom's youngest children, a son named David and a daughter named Mary, were teenagers in 1850 and still very much dependent on their father for their care. David moved out in 1855 when he married, but Mary remained behind. She was nineteen and unmarried and likely assisted her sister Virginia in her duties as lady of the household.¹⁴

¹³Information about Celia's purchase and sexual assault by Robert Newsom can be found in the depositions and trial testimony of Celia's trial for the murder of Robert Newsom. The University of Missouri-Kansas City has digitized and transcribed the trial records of *State of Missouri v Celia, a Slave*. The records can be found at <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/celia/celiatranscript.html>. Also, Historian Melton McLaurin has written an extensive monograph on Celia's trial. See, Melton A. McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991). Celia gave birth to two children between 1850 and 1855. According to the trial testimony of Jefferson Jones, Celia's second child belonged to Newsom. McLaurin writes that at least one of Celia's children was fathered by Newsom, but there is a possibility that he fathered both children. McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 24.

¹⁴Virginia Wainscott (or Waynescot) testimony, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/celia/wainscotttranscript.html>. McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 8-9.

As Virginia and Mary were charged with overseeing the daily operations of their home, this placed Celia, who also served as the Newsom's house servant, under their direct supervision. It would have been their job to ensure that Celia did the cooking and cleaning to their satisfaction. Because Celia's household responsibilities placed her in direct contact with Virginia and Mary, she was most likely shielded from Newsom's sexual advances during the day, but when she walked the sixty or so steps to her cabin, she became more vulnerable. It is possible that Virginia and Mary were unaware of their father's routine sexual assaults on Celia in her cabin. According to Celia, Newsom usually came to her cabin around 10:00 p.m. after his family went to bed. I contend that they were aware of what was taking place, but felt compelled to feign ignorance about the happenings in the cabin in the fruit grove. They were Newsom's daughters and questioning him about his management of slaves, especially his sexual activities with them, would have been seen as improper, or uncomfortable at the very least. They knew the meaning of their father's frequent trips to Celia's cabin and any speculation would have come to an end when Celia gave birth to a child who appeared to be fathered by a white man. However, Virginia and Mary remained silent about their father's repeated rape of the young enslaved girl.¹⁵

According to a former slave from Georgia, his owner bought a "real pretty young gal" for the specific purpose of being his concubine. When he made the decision to establish the woman as his enslaved mistress, his wife remained silent about his decision because she "knew better" than to question his actions. Making little effort to disguise his intentions, the husband demanded that his concubine remain in their home, wanting to keep her nearby, and soon afterwards she became pregnant with his child. Over the course of several years, he continued his relations with the enslaved woman and she gave birth to two more children. Even if his wife was displeased

¹⁵Celia told William Powell, one of Newsom's neighbors that he came to her cabin around 10:00 p.m. at bedtime. See Powell testimony, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/celia/powelltranscript.html>. McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 18.

with this new arrangement, she was expected to yield to his authority as head of the household and not question his interactions with slaves, even those of a sexual nature.¹⁶ Perhaps fearful of losing her husband's financial support, according to the former slave, "his wife nor nobody else didn't say nothing about it."¹⁷

Placed under the guardianship of fathers and husbands, most white women were dependent on men for financial support as well as social respectability, rendering them subordinate within the household and the public sphere. As a result, many women felt inhibited to speak out against interracial sex, and thereby questioning the authority of the very men they relied on. Virginia Wainscott and Mary Newsom, for example, were widowed and unmarried, respectively, and were dependent on their father for financial support and protection. Perhaps they felt that remaining silent about their father's sexual abuse of Celia was their only option. As he was the head of their household, it would have been difficult to question his decisions regarding slaves, over whom he alone held legal jurisdiction.

The extent of married or single white women's financial dependence on men must be considered when assessing their response to enslaved women's sexual exploitation, particularly if it came at the hands of the men on whom they were dependent. When Celia made her impassioned plea to Virginia and Mary Newsom, asking them to protect her from their father's sexual advances, they could not claim to be unaware of their father's actions. According to the Newsoms's neighbor, William Powell, Celia said that she had told members of Newsom's family that he had been hurting her and that she would hurt him in return "if he did not quit forcing

¹⁶Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 204; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 43.

¹⁷George Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 13.4 (Georgia), 295.

her.” They had been confronted with the knowledge that, at least in Celia’s eyes, their father was sexually abusing her.¹⁸

Even though they were armed with this knowledge, they chose to remain silent and not confront their father, at least according to court documents. Though this could be classified as a case of two white women remaining silent and inactive due to their own feelings of powerlessness, their silence and inaction still had a significant impact on Celia’s life. It is not clear if Virginia and Mary decided not to speak out against their father because they were indifferent to Celia’s concerns or felt powerless to change their father’s behavior. By failing to sound any alarms, they did not create obstacles to deter their father from entering her cabin at night and forcing himself on her. Unable to secure the support of Newsom’s daughters, Celia argued that she had no choice but to physically restrain Newsom to save herself from another rape. On the night of June 23, 1855, Celia struck Newsom in the head with a wooden stick when he barged into her cabin as he had done so many nights before. Though she claimed she only wanted to hurt him, her blows to his head and body ended Newsom’s life, along with his sexual assaults.¹⁹

Just as Newsom’s daughters could not remain unaware of their father’s illicit behavior, other white women had ways of knowing about white men’s sexual involvement with female slaves. Georgia slave mistress Gertrude Thomas said of white men’s sexual relations with enslaved woman, “I know that this is a view of the subject that is thought best for women to ignore,” but how can we “when we see so many cases of mulattos commanding higher prices, advertised as fancy girls.” Similarly, Mary Boykin Chesnut, a prominent slaveholding woman

¹⁸William Powell testimony, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/celia/powelltranscript.html>; Jefferson Jones testimony, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/celia/jonestranscript.html>; McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 27-29.

¹⁹William Powell testimony, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/celia/powelltranscript.html>.

from South Carolina, declared that all a white woman of good standing need do is walk through any town square to witness black women on auction blocks, being purchased for sexual services by lusty-eyed men. Of one such occasion, she said, “I saw today a sale of Negroes—Mulatto women in silk dresses.” Noting that one of the enslaved women looked “coy & pleased” at the bidder, she knew immediately that these women were being sold for sexual purposes. Shifting her attention away from the auction block to the plantation household, she said, “Our men live all in one house with their wives & their concubines, & the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children.”²⁰

Living in close proximity to enslaved women and girls and the mixed-race children they bore by white men, white women were not ignorant of the fact that their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons were engaging in sexual relations with enslaved women on plantations and farms across the antebellum South. Former slave Harriet Jacobs argued that it would be impossible for white women born into slaveholding families to be truly unaware of interracial sex between white men and enslaved women because this was an aspect of slavery that they were acclimated to at a very early age. According to Jacobs, young white women were often “attended by the young slave girls whom their father has corrupted.” The very girls who served as their first playmates and personal body servants quickly became the targets of their fathers’ and brothers’ sexual advances. And, according to Jacobs, “they know that the women slaves are subject to their father’s authority in all things.” And, because these sexual relationships did not go unnoticed by their mothers, “white daughters early hear their parents quarreling about some

²⁰Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 168; Chesnut, *The Private Mary Chesnut*, 21, 42.

female slave,” she said. “They hear such talks as should never meet youthful years, or any other ears.”²¹

From generation to generation, white women of the planter class warned their daughters about white men’s sexual activities with enslaved women. When Mary Boykin Chesnut married James Chesnut, Jr., of Camden, South Carolina, in 1840, her mother-in-law, Mary Cox Chesnut, warned her of the dangers of sending her enslaved women into town unsupervised, saying they were easily tempted and led astray by white men eager to have sex with them. She said that the same advice had been given to her when she was a young bride, and though she was “very particular” in heeding to the advice, her efforts were not successful. Though she did not reveal any specific details about her own husband’s activities with enslaved women, she did relate that men, unfortunately, were rarely satisfied with just one woman, often looking to enslaved women to satisfy their sexual appetites. Chesnut’s mother-in-law compared white men to the biblical figure Jacob who was unsatisfied with his wife Leah and insisted on also marrying her more attractive sister Rachel. “So it is—flocks & herds & slaves--& wife Leah does not suffice. Rachel must be added, if not married,” she told Chesnut.²² Through this conversation, Chesnut’s mother-in-law warned her not only of the ills that might befall her female slaves, but also, though more subtly, of the temptations to which her own husband might succumb.

In order to maintain their silence, southern white women often pretended to be unaware of the sexual relationships between white men and enslaved women, particularly those that occurred within their own households.²³ And, according to former slave W. L. Bost, a plantation

²¹Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, edited by Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 51-52.

²² Chesnut, *The Private Mary Chesnut*, 42

²³Historian Deborah Gray White argued that because white women were able to do very little to stop their husbands’ sexual relations with female slaves, they feigned ignorance, especially in public. See White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 41.

mistress's ability to feign ignorance and maintain silence was very much contingent on a master's discretion about his interracial relations. If a mistress was forced to confront the fact that her husband was having sex with enslaved women, "she raised a revolution," said Bost. But, the expectation was that she should never find out, or at the very least, hear of the specific details on account of her husband's discretion. Bost said, while "plenty of colored women have children by the white men," slave mistresses "hardly find out," because "the white men not going to tell and the nigger women were always afraid to." All enslaved women could do was "just go on hoping that thing won't be that way always," he said.²⁴ So, while white men indulged in interracial sex and enslaved women held on to their hope, white women were to be shielded from these episodes of sexual abuse.

When husbands failed to be discreet, and their wives encountered concrete evidence of their sexual activities with enslaved women, some felt freed from any expectations of silence, which opened a door for them to air their grievances, even if in the most passive of ways. Mary Reynolds grew up enslaved on a large plantation in Black River, Louisiana, owned by a local physician named Kilpatrick, and while she and her fellow slaves knew of their owner's fondness for having sex with female slaves, their mistress appeared to be unaware of her husband's notorious behavior until she looked into the faces of two enslaved children who closely resembled her own children and concluded that they were undoubtedly fathered by her husband. But, such unawareness would have taken real effort on her part. According to Reynolds, Dr. Kilpatrick "took a black woman as quick as he did a white and he took any on his place he wanted and he took them often." As a result, he fathered many children who he also held in bondage. One enslaved woman, Aunt Cheyney, claimed to have given birth to four of Dr. Kilpatrick's children. He took extra measures to keep one enslaved woman, Margaret, separate

²⁴W. L. Bost interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 14.1 (North Carolina), 142.

from not only his wife, but his other slaves as well. When he returned home from a trip to Baton Rouge, where he purchased Margaret, who Reynolds described as a “yellow gal dressed in fine style,” he immediately began building her a cabin that was apart from the rest of the slave dwellings. It became clear to the other slaves that Dr. Kilpatrick intended to make Margaret his concubine and desired privacy for when he wished to have sexual relations with her. Their suspicions were confirmed when Margaret quickly became pregnant. And when the birth of that child was quickly followed by the birth of another and then another, Reynolds concluded that “this yellow gal breeds so fast and gets a mess of white younguns.”²⁵

It seems that Dr. Kilpatrick’s placement of his slave cabins, and Margaret’s in particular, “up the hill back of the big house,” a significant distance from the home he shared with his wife, allowed for the presence of Margaret’s children and the other mixed-raced children living in the quarter to go relatively unnoticed by his white, legitimate family in the ‘big house.’ But, the veil, however thin, was forcibly removed from Mrs. Kilpatrick’s eyes when she noticed a confrontation between her own children and two slave children from the quarters. According to Reynolds, from her window, Mrs. Kilpatrick called down, “what are you playing with them little niggers for?” Her son quickly explained that they were not playing; rather, they were chastising the two slave children whom they had caught playing with their doll house moments before. During the initial confrontation, one of the Kilpatrick boys proclaimed, “You can’t go in the doll house because that is for white children. Nigger children don’t have a doll house,” he said. One of the slave children quickly responded, with a corrective tone, saying, “we aren’t no niggers because we got the same daddy you got.” It was at this moment that the children captured Mrs. Kilpatrick’s attention. Looking up to her, her son pointed to one of the slave children and said,

²⁵Mary Reynolds interview in George Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplemental Series 2* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 8.7 (Texas), 3292-3294.

“he says that our daddy is their daddy.” The enslaved child, who belonged to Margaret, interjected, saying “he is our daddy and we call him daddy when he comes down to our house to see our mama.” That single phrase, uttered by this child whose presence served as irrefutable evidence of Dr. Kilpatrick’s sexual activities with slave women, ushered Mrs. Kilpatrick from a place of darkness to light, providing her with concrete information that she could not pretend to ignore. She had no choice but to face her husband’s sexual behavior in the quarters.²⁶

The Kilpatrick’s house servants reported that when Dr. Kilpatrick returned home that evening and greeted his wife, “his wife says howdy to him but she don’t say it so nice—or just like he thinks she ought to.” According to Reynolds, she spoke to Dr. Kilpatrick about Margaret, describing her as “the yellow nigger wench from Baton Rouge,” and her children with an accusatory tone. Apparently, Mrs. Kilpatrick had noticed Margaret’s children and their “white” skin tone prior to that day’s events. When the children identified Dr. Kilpatrick as their father, Mrs. Kilpatrick instantly thought of Margaret, indicating that she at least had an inkling that her husband might engage in sexual relations with the enslaved woman. And, after taking a close examination of the two enslaved children in her yard, she explained to her husband that it seemed too coincidental that these two slave children had the same kind of hair and eyes as her own children and they both had his nose. It is possible that women in Mrs. Kilpatrick’s position clung to a pretense of ignorance about their husband’s sexual behavior as a coping mechanism. Remaining silent, not addressing rumors or suspicions, or ignoring the presence of enslaved children with white skin might have made life more bearable. By not addressing suspicions, they could remain just that—suspicions—and not reality.²⁷

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

Coming to terms with her new reality, Mrs. Kilpatrick's first reaction was to threaten to leave her husband and their marriage. "Over in Mississippi," she said, "I have a home and plenty with my daddy and I have that in my mind." Coming from a wealthy Mississippi planter family, she probably figured that threatening Kilpatrick's access to her family's assets would garner his attention. Though he assured her that she could not trust the talk of little children, he felt compelled to extend a peace offering, buying her a "new span of surrey horses." Though Mrs. Kilpatrick did not follow through with her threat to leave her husband, she ushered in a new dynamic between herself and her husband. According to the Kilpatrick's household slaves, Mrs. Kilpatrick became cold and distant to her husband and put an end to their sexual relationship. Forced to labor in the Kilpatrick household, these house servants were privy to the most intimate aspects of the Kilpatrick's lives. They reported that prior to the confrontation, a new Kilpatrick baby had been born in frequent intervals, but afterwards, Mrs. Kilpatrick was no longer cordial to her husband and she had no more children. Though outside observers might have been unaware of any marital discord, within the walls of the Kilpatrick household, discontent was alive and well.²⁸

Betty Snead only confronted her husband, Ben, after she caught him in the act of having sex with their female slave Fannie. Well aware of his sexual relationship with the enslaved woman, she felt constrained to speak on her suspicions until she had irrefutable proof. Over the years, she noticed that her husband treated Fannie differently from the other slaves and that her children were "white" and bore a striking resemblance to her husband, but she remained silent. But now, having witnessed them having sex, she felt free to declare that she knew he had been having sexual relations with Fannie all along and that Fannie's three children looked just like him. Though Betty felt unable to express her anguish prior to this moment, she seized the

²⁸Ibid.

opportunity and like Mrs. Kilpatrick's, her response had lasting consequences within her household. She continued to express her fury and Fannie was sold the following week.²⁹

While Mrs. Kilpatrick and Betty Snead contained their grievance within their households, Isabella A. Kelly of Mobile, Alabama, decided to not only confront her husband about his sexual relations with enslaved women, but place their marital discord before the Alabama chancery courts. In 1859, Isabella filed for divorce from her husband, Edwin H. Kelly, accusing him of having "constant and undisguised" sex with a female slave named Matilda, with whom he had two children. It appears that Isabella was not merely upset that her husband had sexual relations with Matilda, but that he failed to be discreet about it. No longer able to turn a blind eye, she turned to the public sphere to get the retribution she desired. Edwin denied the charges and accused his wife of having unfounded suspicions of every female slave he purchased. Unfortunately, there is no record of the court's judgment regarding Isabella's petition for divorce. Whether she was granted a divorce or not, it is significant that she felt compelled to air her husband's sexual behavior and its effect on their marriage for the public record. When slaveholding women broke their silence about interracial sex, they usually did so in very subtle and passive ways. But, Isabella Kelly's response is a glimpse at the more assertive ways in which slaveholding women responded to interracial sex.³⁰

Some white slaveholding women were hesitant to acknowledge the possibility of interracial sex between white men and female slaves taking place under their own roofs, but were eager to point out the immoral sexual behavior of their neighbors and acquaintances. Considered a low-brow form of communication, gossip served as a tool for slaveholding women to express

²⁹Mary Wood interview in Charles Perdue, Jr., ed. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-slaves* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), 332.

³⁰Isabella Kelly divorce petition, March 26, 1859, Records of the Chancery Court, University of South Alabama Archives.

their grievances against white men's sexual conduct with enslaved women and offer critiques at the expense of others. For some, gossip served to deflect attention away from the illicit behavior taking place in their own households. Through gossip, these women reinforced their moral disdain for white men's infidelity and sexual relations with female slaves. Often unable to dictate social and legal policy within the public sphere, women utilized their speech in private spaces to generate information, regulate social behavior, and pass judgment upon each other.³¹

According to Mary Boykin Chesnut, when white women convened amongst themselves, one of their favorite indulgences was to report who the father is "of all the mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own, she seems to think drop from the clouds." While in fellowship at one another's homes, sipping tea or eating freshly baked biscuits and jam, these women indulged in shedding light on the sexual behavior taking place in other people's households. Drawing attention to the immorality of others not only served as a means to issue an indictment against interracial sex, but it enabled white women, if only for a brief moment, to ignore or distract others from the sins that might be taking place under their own roofs. Historian Kathleen Brown argues that these women defined themselves by the opinions of their female peers. What their friends, neighbors, and families thought and said about them mattered. It was at these intimate gatherings in each others' homes that women negotiated their status by analyzing the lives of others and passing the appropriate judgment. Though Chesnut claimed to despise gossip, confessing that, at times, it made her disgust boil over, she found no fault in these women for taking part in the activity, especially when it revolved around white men's sexual behavior. Rather, she pitied them for their connection to immoral men. "They are, I believe, in conduct the

³¹Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 285, 307.

purest women God every made,” she said. To her mind, it was not their behavior that should be judged, but that of white men who indulged in sexual relations with female slaves.³²

In 1864, Laura Gresham, a member of the Virginia slaveholding elite, engaged in this kind of gossip when she wrote a letter to her husband concerning her uncle’s recent death. She opened with the following quip: “Now how do you think he made his will? Don’t get nervous & disappointed as to the result.” Her statement, dripping with facetiousness, was not so much a question, but a way of signaling her husband to draw what she considered an obvious conclusion. Her uncle, Anderson Scott, was known to have had an enslaved concubine, so it was no surprise that he left the majority of his estate to “his mulatto negroes,” which was the description provided by Gresham and underlined for emphasis. This was her way of expressing irritation over her uncle’s decision to bequeath his property to his slaves, presumably his natural children, rather than his “legitimate,” white family members. She thought very little of Scott, stating “I only regret he should have wasted his talents, and led such a poor, unprofitable life,” a critique of his choice to form such intimate relations with slaves.

As his niece, she knew that her opinion mattered very little; however, this did not prevent her from forming an opinion, and writing this letter gave her an opportunity to share it. She discussed the possibility that his will could be contested. After all, his children—and beneficiaries—were enslaved, which presented problems for how they could collect their inheritance. She noted that even if they gained their freedom, they might not be permitted to stay in the state of Virginia, as the law required all formerly enslaved persons freed after May 1, 1806

³²Chesnut, *The Private Mary Chesnut*, 42. According to Chesnut, white women’s acute awareness of white men’s sexual relations with enslaved women, coupled with expectations of their silence and acceptance, created the need for them to develop passive, yet satisfying, ways to discuss the topic and communicate their frustration. Historian Kathleen Brown argues that because women were marginalized from the male worlds of taverns, courthouses, government, and muster, they participated actively in other venues of public life, conveying status through the company they kept (in their homes) and the clothes they wore. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, 284-285.

to leave the state or petition the local courts to remain.³³ Knowing her limitations as a woman and a distant relative, she said “I have ceased building ‘castles in the air’ as regards future wealth and do not anticipate any accession to my worldly estate from the old gentlemen’s possessions.” For Gresham, the confidential and intimate nature of a personal letter to her husband permitted her to openly express her disgust with her uncle’s choices. The topic of discussion also afforded her the opportunity to inform her husband of her general intolerance of interracial sexual relations, indirectly communicating that she would be dissatisfied if he ever chose to have sexual relations with enslaved women.³⁴

Speculating about the parentage of “mulatto,” “yellow,” or light-skinned children was also an intriguing pastime for slaveholding women. Privately, in her diary, Gertrude Thomas recalled an instance when a slave girl came to her door to deliver some jackets that her mother, a seamstress, had made for Thomas. Noting that the mother was a “coloured woman, a very bright mulatto,” owned by a neighbor, Mr. Towns, Thomas speculated on whether or not Towns was the father of the slave girl. “The child is very bright & there was only one inference,” said Thomas. Though Thomas did not appear to be upset by her neighbor’s potential involvement with the enslaved woman, she succumbed to a need to speculate about the possibilities. She even suggested that another white man in the neighborhood, and not Towns, could be the father because the little girl “bears too strong resemblance to someone else.” Though Thomas obviously put considerable thought into this child’s paternity, she also conceded that interracial sexual relations were “so common as to create no surprise whatever.”³⁵

³³Samuel Shepherd, *The Statutes at Large of Virginia* (Richmond: Printed by Samuel Shepherd, 1835), 252. The original 1806 statute required all emancipated slaves to leave the state of Virginia within a year or face re-enslavement. In 1837, the General Assembly amended the statute, permitting emancipated slaves to petition local courts for permission to remain in the state.

³⁴Laura Gresham to husband, September 21, 1864, Gresham Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

White women also wrote about their disgust with white men's sexual relations with slaves. Aware of the limitations placed on their speech, they placed their thoughts on paper where they often intended for them to remain private. On paper, they could express themselves openly and honestly without fear of reprisal from men and society at large. Sometimes fearful of the consequences of challenging men's authority and creating chaos in their marriages and households—these women settled for outlining their indictments about interracial sex in diaries, journals, and letters. They served as a space to offer seething critiques about white men's immoral sexual proclivities and their perceptions of enslaved women's hypersexual nature, without pulling at the threads that held southern antebellum politics, economics, and social customs together—placing white men at the very top, enslaved men and women at the very bottom, and white women somewhere in between.

“God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system,” wrote Mary Boykin Chesnut in one of her many diaries. Here, Chesnut lambasted white men's sale and purchase of enslaved women as sexual servants. “Who thinks any worse of a Negro or Mulatto woman for being a thing we can't name,” asked Chesnut. Understanding that enslaved women were the victims of this legalized form of prostitution, for which they did not reap the spoils, Chesnut pointed her finger instead to southern patriarchs who delighted in the sexual servitude of enslaved women and forced their wives, children, and concubines to live together without consequence. Questioning the fate of southern morality, she referred to the practice as a “wrong” and an “iniquity.” She then said, “Perhaps the rest of the world is as bad.” Ella Gertrude Thomas also turned to her diary to critique white men's sexual behavior, saying that enslaved women were subject to be purchased by men “with natures but one degree removed from the brute creation.” Thomas agreed with

³⁵Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 319-320.

Chesnut that white men's interracial sexual behaviors compromised the "standard of morality" in homes across the antebellum South.³⁶

In the pages of her diary Frances Kemble emphasized the hypocrisy of slaveholders who insisted "vehemently upon the mental and physical inferiority of the blacks," yet frequently engaged in sexual relations with enslaved women. According to Kemble, though they condemned the degenerate nature of the enslaved, their sexual behavior suggested that they were "doing their best, in one way at least, to raise and improve the degraded race," by creating a "bastard" population with forms and features "they derive from their white progenitors." While they claimed it was unnatural and repugnant for whites to form alliances with blacks, it was widely known that "almost every southern planter has a family more or less numerous of illegitimate colored children," said Kemble. She knew firsthand the prevalence of white men's sexual exploitation of enslaved women, having met several female victims of her family's own overseer.³⁷

Kemble also wrote in her journal that while she and her husband were touring the plantation, she was eager to discuss the possible parentage of Bran who served as one of the Butler's enslaved drivers. Observing that Bran was "himself a mulatto," Kemble thought that he might be the son of their overseer, King. Turning to her husband, Kemble asked, "did you never remark that driver Bran is the exact image of Mr. King," seemingly to determine if he also noticed the strong resemblance between Bran and King. According to Kemble, Butler replied that Bran was very likely King's brother, confirming the possibility of their relation, yet defusing attention away from the possibility of them being father and son. Kemble, annoyed by her

³⁶Mary Chesnut's diaries are the exception to the rule because while she might have initially intended for them to remain private, she eventually adopted hopes that they would one day be published. She even edited and revised some portions of her many diaries. Chesnut, *The Private Mary Chesnut*, 42; Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 168.

³⁷Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 10.

husband's nonchalance about the matter, stated that it made her uncomfortable to think that such relationships were "accepted as such a complete matter of course." This only served to heighten her and her husband's irreconcilable differences over the merits of slavery. Though she resolved to refrain from future conversations with her husband regarding the subject and "said no more about who was like who," her disgust over the matter was surely communicated. Discouraged from speaking about such matters with her husband again, she turned to her diary to express her discontent³⁸

It was known by whites and blacks alike on the McKiernan plantation that Bernard McKiernan "was extremely fond" of the women he enslaved and, according to Peter Still, an enslaved witness, they often became "victims to his unbridled passions." As a consequence, the "heavy hatred of their mistress" fell upon them as well. Still described Mrs. McKiernan as an impassioned woman who turned to alcohol to dull the pain she felt over her husband's sexual activities with the women he owned. "The demons of intoxication fanned the fires of hatred that burned within her," and with each passing year, "her jealousy ran higher, till at length reason seemed banished from her mind, and kindness became a stranger to her heart," said Still.³⁹

On one occasion, Mrs. McKiernan walked in on her husband fondling an enslaved girl named Maria who was thirteen years of age and said to be "a bright mulatto, and uncommonly pretty." Despite Maria's young age and the likeliness that Mr. McKiernan had sent for her and forced himself upon her, Mrs. McKiernan's attention was focused on the young girl. According

³⁸Ibid., 201. Pierce Butler's and Frances Kemble's disagreements over slavery played a major role in the deterioration of their marriage. Unable to reconcile, Kemble left the United States and returned to England. During that time, Butler filed for divorce. The couple's divorce was finalized in 1849 and as was customary, Butler retained primary custody of their two children.

³⁹Kate Pickard. 1856. *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and His Wife "Vina," After Forty Years of Slavery*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/pickard/pickard.html>.

to Still, “all the fierceness of her nature was aroused and she seized the trembling child and put her in a buck.” Mr. McKiernan fled immediately and “mounted his horse, and rode off to escape the storm,” leaving Maria behind to face the full impact of Mrs. McKiernan’s wrath. When Mr. McKiernan made his quick exit, according to Still, he knew well that his wife’s “full fury would fall upon the young head of his victim” and not him, which provided him little incentive to put an end to his lecherous conduct against the female slaves. Mrs. McKiernan was filled with contempt over her husband’s infidelity and she saw Maria as the most convenient target for her frustration.⁴⁰

As Maria’s mistress, Mrs. McKiernan had every legal right to discipline her as she saw fit. After all, the young girl was placed in her charge, responsible for completing whatever trivial task she ordered to be done. From fanning flies, to fetching glasses of water, to entertaining the household’s white children, young household servants such as Maria received most of their direction from their female slaveholders who were charged with the maintenance of plantation households.⁴¹ Armed with such authority, Mrs. McKiernan was afforded the opportunity to disguise her cruel intentions towards Maria as effective slave management. She declared it her responsibility to teach the young slave to avoid sexual contact with her master. Ignoring her husband’s culpability in the situation, she placed blame for these sexual encounters at the feet of enslaved women and girls like Maria. It is possible that Mrs. McKiernan was equally, if not more, angry with her husband, but, she turned her attention towards Maria, the only person in their triangular relationship over whom she had legitimate authority. When asked by some of the

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 52; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 24, 29, 97.

elderly slaves on the plantation what she planned to do with Maria, she said, “After I’ve done with her she’ll never do the like again through ignorance.”⁴²

What Mrs. McKiernan prescribed as punishment for Maria was nothing short of torture. According to Still, Mrs. McKiernan “whipped her till she was tired.” After a short rest, she whipped her again “till she had exhausted her own strength,” and then locked the young girl in the brick smoke-house. Mrs. McKiernan was calculating with her plans for Maria and was eager to share them with her slaves and “to every one else who chanced to come to the house while her wrath was burning,” said Still. She kept Maria penned up in the smoke house for the next two weeks, pulling her out only long enough to issue a daily flogging. She denied her food, water, and fresh air. The only nourishment the girl received were small pieces of bread and tiny vials of water her mother Jinny snuck her through the tiny holes found in the walls of the smoke house. Risking her own life to deliver these essential morsels, Jinny was determined not to see her child die of starvation.⁴³

Other slaves also petitioned on Maria behalf, telling their mistress “she’ll die, missus, if you keep her shut up there much longer.” But their pleas made no difference. In fact, Mrs. McKiernan explained that Maria’s death would be a welcome outcome. “That’s just what I want; I hope she will die,” she declared. Perhaps she saw this as an opportunity to warn the other enslaved women, or ensure that there was one less slave girl for her husband to engage sexually, or purge herself of pent up jealousy, anger, and frustration. It was her authority as a slave manager that afforded her the right to inflict pain and suffering on this helpless victim, and, clearly, word of her actions circulated amongst the slaves on the McKiernan plantation. These

⁴²Kate Pickard. *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/pickard/pickard.html>.

⁴³Ibid.

enslaved women were caught between a slave master, notorious for his sexual proclivities, and a slave mistress committed to directing all of her frustrations on his victims. If they resisted Mr. McKiernan's sexual advances, they risked harsh punishment; if they were unable to escape his grasp, they risked receiving Mrs. McKiernan's punishment. For the enslaved women on the McKiernan plantation, there was no way to win.⁴⁴

As Frances Kemble observed, enslaved women and girls like Maria were indeed caught between the passions of masters and mistresses. The passions that Kemble spoke of were the fruits of the heart and mind that sex and sexuality were known to elicit—specifically lust, desire, control, jealousy, anger, and pain. Though enslaved women were placed on most farms and plantations to provide labor and generate profit for their owners, when slaveholding men engaged them in sexual relations, their presence was felt throughout the spaces where they conducted their labor and settled directly between slaveholding husbands and wives. And enslaved women were placed in the center where these two sides converged, caught in the cross fire exchanged by white men and women.⁴⁵

According to Kemble, when slaveholding men and women came to battle over interracial sex with enslaved women, they were armed with more than just their emotions. Their passions were buttressed with their shared power and authority of slave ownership. Slaveholding men's legal ownership of the enslaved woman's body allowed them to justify the rape, sexual harassment, and sexual coercion of these women. The law afforded them the right to do whatever they wanted to enslaved bodies, even kill them if done in the name of discipline. Slaveholding men could even justify their sexual behavior with enslaved women as a means to maximize

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 269.

profit; the more children a slave woman gave birth to, the more enslaved laborers her owner acquired, which further incentivized slaveholding men to sexual exploit their female slaves.

Slaveholding women were also armed with the authority of slave ownership. Charged with the task of running an efficient plantation household, they could punish slaves and broker their sale for disrupting the management of the household.⁴⁶ Though historians have previously conceived of sexual exploitation as white men's crime against enslaved women, utilizing their authority of slave ownership to procure limitless access to enslaved women's bodies, it is important to also consider slaveholding women's victimization of enslaved women as they sought retribution for what they conceived as a wrong committed against their own marriages and households. Kemble acknowledged that within these moments of sexual exploitation of enslaved women, slaveholding women possessed the authority of slave ownership like their male counterparts to make the lives of enslaved women miserable.⁴⁷

Slaveholding women were known to use violence against enslaved people for the most trivial of offenses, so, why wouldn't they broker the sale of and issue punishment to women who they saw as a personal affront to their dignity and sanctity as wives and mothers?⁴⁸ In slaveholding women's infliction of physical and emotional violence, they exercised their mastery, articulating that they also had control over enslaved people's bodies.⁴⁹ Many of their actions were very methodical: plotting sales, banishing people from their homes, and inflicting

⁴⁶Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 32-33,66.

⁴⁷Kemble, *Journal of a Resident*, 269.

⁴⁸Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 5, 18-31; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 23-24; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 24, 132.

⁴⁹In an 1847 letter, Joseph James Pope of Charleston, South Carolina told a friend of a slave mistress who brutally murdered one of her female slaves. He said, "the act was very aggravated and the aggravating circumstances here produced an impression on the people which I have never seen equaled by a similar circumstances." He even presumed that the female slaveholder would be tried for the murder of the female slave. Joseph James Pope to James Morrow, January 18, 1847, Joseph James Pope Papers, South Caroliniana Library.

physical punishment to elicit change in enslaved women's behavior. Though these women knew on a conscious level that their husbands were the driving force behind sexual encounters with enslaved women, they knew that their power over the enslaved was stronger than any authority they could ever assume over their husbands. When confronted with instances of interracial sex between their male counterparts and enslaved women, they exercised their authority in several ways—ranging from violence to harassment to utilizing the auction block—to punish the enslaved women.

When white women acted out against their female slaves, they were motivated by a variety of emotions. Whereas historian Victoria Bynum argued that white men's sexual exploitation of enslaved women created "twisted strands of resentment and empathy" within the hearts of white women, in reality, interracial sex created a more complex braid with multiple strands of resentment and empathy, plus jealousy, self-pity, and a desire to seek vengeance against enslaved women.⁵⁰ While a few expressed empathy for the enslaved woman's plight, most white women in these circumstances were preoccupied instead with their own pain. They were forced to reconcile their beliefs of enslaved women's inferiority with their visions of enslaved women as viable competitors for their husbands' attention, able to elicit feelings of jealousy and threaten the integrity of their marital households. These women's repeated demonstrations of jealousy, anger, and contempt towards enslaved women illustrate that they did see enslaved women and their sexuality as a threat. As former slave Harriet Jacobs wrote, "slaveholders' wives feel as other women would under similar circumstances."⁵¹

Being confronted with slave mistresses' feelings of jealousy was a common occurrence for enslaved women. According to former slave Richard Mack, enslaved women had "many hard

⁵⁰Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 37.

⁵¹Jacobs, *Incidents*, 34.

battles to fight to protect themselves,” notably sexual exploitation at the hands of white men. And, at the same time, they suffered “impositions by the women of the household through woman’s jealousy.” Harriet Jacobs argued that though her slave mistress should have protected her from sexual abuse, she had no other feelings towards her but jealousy and rage. In fact, Jacobs would often wake up in the middle of the night and find her slave mistress, Mary Norcom, standing over her, watching her sleep. Jacobs slept on a makeshift mattress, likely made of moss or straw, at the foot of her mistress’s bed, a common sleeping arrangement for household servants. The purpose of Jacobs’s close proximity was to ensure that she could readily be available to serve her mistress’s needs—fetching a glass of water or reviving the flames of a dwindling fire—in the middle of the night. For household servants, a day’s work did not end at sundown, which placed these laborers under the constant supervision of their owners. Mrs. Norcom, however, welcomed the opportunity to scrutinize Jacobs’ every move, even her sleep. She was intent on finding signs of intimate contact between Jacobs and her husband. Assuming a man’s voice, she would whisper softly in Jacobs’s ear, “as though it was her husband who was speaking,” to see how Jacobs would respond. Not only did she want proof that her husband was sexually pursuing the slave girl, but that Jacobs was a willing participant in his scheme. She was willing to go to extreme means, including harassing Jacobs, to satisfy her suspicions. For this, Jacobs suffered greatly. She said it produced an unpleasant sensation to “wake up in the dead of night and find a jealous woman being over you.”⁵²

Mary Norcom did not forget her position of power and privilege over Jacobs, but she was also forced to confront the fact that Jacobs was a formidable and beautiful young woman—a possible counterpart—at least in the eyes of her husband. This raised insecurities about her own attractiveness and her ability to maintain fidelity within her marriage and household. For

⁵²Richard Macks interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 16.3 (Maryland), 55; Jacobs, *Incidents*, 34.

slaveholding women, the feeling of jealousy towards enslaved women was a strange byproduct of this paradoxical relationship that existed between these two groups of women. It might seem strange that a slaveholding woman, especially one of Mary Norcom's social standing, would harbor feelings of jealousy for a slave. Norcom was of the elite, slaveholding class in Edenton, North Carolina. She was born into a profitable slaveholding family and when she married James Norcom, a prominent doctor in his own right, she brought her family's prestige, money, land, and slaves to their union, including Jacobs, a gift from her mother's sister. She was charged with managing their in-town plantation household, the domain in which she wielded the most control. However, the one thing she could not control was her husband's proclivity for obsessing over Jacobs and his determination to conquer Jacobs to fulfill his sexual fantasies. When it came to capturing her husband's attention, she concluded that, in this instance, Jacobs had the upper hand.⁵³

White women were especially jealous of enslaved women they considered beautiful. Though beauty was a source of pride for some enslaved women, Jacobs contended, "If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse." While beauty affords white women respect and admiration, it only "hastens the degradation of the female slave," she said, which also encompassed white women's actions against enslaved women.⁵⁴ Jacobs, herself, was described by her owner as a "bright, mulatto girl," with "dark eyes, and black hair inclined to curl; but it can be made straight," features that resulted from her African and European ancestry. People classified as "mulattos" were often noted for having "bright" or light-colored skin, loosely curled or straight hair, thin noses, and slight lips, and these characteristics were

⁵³Jacobs, *Incidents*, 31-35.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 28.

frequently hailed as beautiful, by blacks and whites alike.⁵⁵ As a result, white women were often suspicious, questioning their husbands' intentions for purchasing or interacting with these enslaved women.

When Jack Maddox's owner, Judge Maddox, brought home a new woman he had recently purchased, who was described as a "pretty mulatto gal," his wife was instantly displeased. After taking one look at the woman's light-skin, and "long black straight hair," she asked, "What did you bring that thing here for?," with obvious displeasure. Judge Maddox explained that he had purchased the woman to serve as her seamstress and do her fine needle work. According to Jack, Mrs. Maddox quickly dismissed this explanation and outwardly showed doubt about the sincerity of his stated intentions. The moment Judge Maddox left the home and Mrs. Maddox could secure some time alone with their new female slave, she picked up a pair of scissors, grabbed the woman by the hair and cut her hair at the roots. Threatened by her beauty and the possibility that her husband might find her beautiful as well, with each cut she hoped to rob this woman of her appeal.⁵⁶

Former slave Rebecca Hooks's hair was also a source of jealousy for the white women in her life. Rebecca's mother Martha was the daughter of their owner William Lowe. As a result, Martha and Rebecca shared many physical characteristics with their white family members, a constant reminder to Lowe's wife and children of his sexual connection to Martha's mother. Rebecca recalled bearing a striking resemblance to one of Lowe's daughters, her aunt. They both had brown eyes and long dark hair, and the young mistress' clothes fit Rebecca "like a glove."

⁵⁵Former Slave Virginia Hayes Shepherd described another enslaved woman, Diana Gaskins, saying, "Diana was a black beauty if there ever was one. She had this thin silk skin, a sharp nose, thin lips, a perfect set of white teeth and beautiful long cole-black hair. Diana was dignity personified, the prettiest black woman I ever saw." According to Shepherd, because of Diana's beauty, her owner "wanted his Diana in every sense of the word." Virginia Hayes Shepherd interview in Perdue, Jr., *Weevils in the Wheat*, 257.

⁵⁶Jack and Rosa Maddox interview in Rawick, ed., *The American Slave*, suppl. ser.2, 7.6 (Texas), 2531.

Disturbed by the likeness, likely threatened by Rebecca's competing beauty, her mistresses insisted that her hair always be cut very short. When Rebecca finally rebelled against having her hair cut, her relationship with her mistresses changed. According to Rebecca, they intensified their dislike of her. As Rebecca's hair grew out, they lamented having to look at her long, straight hair, no doubt a trait she acquired from her grandfather, William Lowe.⁵⁷

In addition to jealousy, slaveholding women experienced extreme pain and humiliation when confronted with white men's sexual activities with their female slaves. An enslaved man named Aaron relayed a story of a slave owner who "cut up with his female slaves more than he did with his wife," and as a result, "his poor wife was almost crazy."⁵⁸ Former slave Savilla Burrell revealed that his South Carolina owner fathered multiple children with the enslaved women on his plantation and his ongoing involvement with these women caused his wife "so much grief." Her pain was exacerbated by the fact that rumors of her husband's "mulatto" children had circulated throughout their community. To silence the neighbors' gossip, he got in the habit of selling these children away, as they were the tangible evidence of his illicit behavior. Despite these efforts, his wife still suffered greatly. Whether it was her husband's relations with the enslaved women or the neighborhood gossip his behavior elicited, she would cry routinely, said Burrell.⁵⁹

Anger and contempt towards enslaved women were also frequent emotions. Harriet Jacobs witnessed a fellow slave woman suffer great pain due to complications after child birth. Her pain was compounded by the contempt her mistress displayed towards her after she gave

⁵⁷Rebecca Hooks interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 17.1 (Florida), 172.

⁵⁸Aaron. 1845. *The Light and Truth of Slavery. Aaron's History*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/aaron/aaron.html>

⁵⁹Savilla Burrell interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 2.1 (South Carolina), 150.

birth to a child, “nearly white.” The mistress, clearly convinced that the child had been fathered by her husband, showed no sympathy for the woman who lay dying before her. According to Jacobs, she looked at her like an “incarnate fiend.” When the slave woman cried out, in agony, “O Lord, come and take me!,” her mistress responded to her plea in a mocking tone. “You suffer, do you?” she asked facetiously; “I am glad of it. You deserve it all, and more too.” With this declaration, she insinuated that the woman brought the pain and agony on herself through her sexual relations with a white man. Rather than feeling sympathy for the woman, possibly reflecting on her own painful experiences with childbirth, or showing compassion for the human condition, she looked upon the dying woman with contempt and blame.⁶⁰

This slave mistress’s heart was not softened by the fact that this enslaved woman likely became pregnant as a result of being raped or sexually coerced by her husband. Though her husband had played a significant part in what she likely perceived to be a betrayal of their marriage vows or a breach of social and moral conduct, she found fault with the enslaved woman, at least according to Jacobs’ account of the events. With her expressions of frustration, she spewed vitriol at the enslaved woman, the most vulnerable person in the situation. Her contempt settled on the child as well, as it was the irrefutable evidence of the slave’s and her husband’s sexual contact. And when the enslaved woman’s child died shortly after birth, the slave mistress exclaimed that there was no heavenly reward “for the likes of her and her bastard.” When the mistress left the room, leaving the dying woman behind, a “scornful smile was still on her lips,” said Jacobs. Perhaps she found satisfaction in mother and child’s death because it eliminated any future contact her husband could have with the woman in question; it

⁶⁰Jacobs, *Incidents*, 13-14.

also meant she no longer had to lay eyes on the enslaved child that would have served as a constant reminder of her husband's illicit behavior.⁶¹

While their emotions ran high for enslaved women, slaveholding women also expressed much self-pity. When Mary Norcom learned of her husband's intentions to have their youngest daughter sleep in his separate bed chambers, along with their female servant Harriet Jacobs, who ostensibly was to serve as the girl's nursemaid, she immediately sent for Jacobs and inquired about the truthfulness of this new sleeping arrangement. When Jacobs confirmed that Norcom had ordered her to sleep in his room, Mary asked, "are you innocent of what I have accused you?" having previously charged Jacobs with submitting to Norcom's sexual requests. In reality, her husband had obsessively harassed Jacobs, threatening her with harm if she did not comply with his sexual demands. Laying her hand on a bible that Mary Norcom provided, Jacobs swore to her innocence. When she proceeded to tell her mistress of Norcom's intentions to have sexual relations with her, her mistress's "color changed frequently." As she spoke, Mary Norcom wept and occasionally groaned in discontent, according to Jacobs. At one point, Jacobs even felt "touched by her grief." But, Jacobs soon realized that Norcom had no compassion for her, "the poor victim of her husband's perfidy." She concluded that Norcom's tears were simply the result of her "anger and wounded pride," and feelings that "her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted."⁶²

In her diary, Gertrude Thomas also bemoaned the plight of the southern white woman, alleging that black women, aided by their sexuality, could capture the attention of white men and usurp white women's sexual position in good southern society. In this way, she conceived of a competition between white women and black women, in spite of the differentiation in their legal

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., 32-34.

and social status. Her fear was so incited that in January of 1865 she drafted an open letter to the wife of William Tecumseh Sherman, a lead general in the Union Army during the Civil War, and considered publishing it, but settled for inscribing her thoughts on the pages of her diary instead. Her letter warned Mrs. Sherman of her husband's own dealings with "coloured" women and stated that she and the security of her household were not safe from the influence of black women, something that had plagued southern white women for generations. "Enquire of Gen Sherman when next you see him who has been elevated to fill your place. Did he tell you of the Mulatto girl for whose safety he was so much concerned that she was returned to Nashville when he commenced his vandal march?" she wrote.⁶³

Rather than envisioning the "mulatto" woman as someone Sherman intended to sexually engage with outside of his marriage, merely supplementing the sexual and emotional role his wife already held, Thomas shed light on the possibility that this woman could replace his wife altogether. She conveyed that other "negroes" already referred to the mulatto woman as "Sherman's wife." Thomas warned that while northern women like Mrs. Sherman hoped for the "elevation of the negroes," they should be concerned that their "husbands are amongst a coloured race whose reputation for morality has never been of the highest order." With this admonition, Thomas welcomed her northern "sisters" to share in the so-called concerns slaveholding women conjured up about black women. In closing she said, "I will only add that intensely, Southern woman as I am, I *pity you*." Thomas implicated only the black women in these interracial liaisons, not acknowledging the position of authority that white men, northern or southern, held over black women, free or enslaved, before and during the Civil War. This perception that black women were the driving force behind sex across the color line was used to justify slaveholding

⁶³Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 253-254.

women's harsh measures against enslaved women in order to discourage these sexual connections.⁶⁴

Slaveholding women assigned responsibility to enslaved women for disrupting their marriages. Their expressions of jealousy and contempt reflected their interpretation of interracial sex as a true violation of their marriage vows; to them, it was not an excusable, accepted part of white male slave ownership. Wives saw their husbands' time spent in the slave quarter or in the little secret cabins they built for certain enslaved women as a violation that chipped away at the sanctity of marriage between white men and women. Divorce petitions filed by slaveholding women reveal that these women in fact saw these sexual relationships as disrespectful, depraved, and destructive. When Mary Lawry outlined her grounds for separation in her divorce petition, the first thing she listed was that her husband "withdrew his affections from her, and took up with a female coloured slave in the neighborhood." Though she found herself "poor and penniless" as a result of her husband's behavior, above all she felt disgraced by losing her husband's affections and being abandoned for an enslaved woman. In her divorce petition, Lucretia Chambers claimed that while she never knowingly gave her husband cause for complaint, he imposed on her "an ignorant filthy negro woman—thus compelling her to submit not only to his own caprices and tyranny, but to the oppression and insults of his negro paramour."⁶⁵ For Chambers, falling under the authority of an enslaved woman was improper and intolerable. In her divorce petition, Elizabeth Pannell referred to her husband's adultery with an enslaved woman as shameful, sinful, and degrading. She further contended that "her honor, her happiness, nay the good opinion and active benevolence of her natural friends" made her divorce

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Mary Lawry divorce petition, February 27, 1843, Legislative Petitions, Library of Virginia (LVA); Lucretia Chambers divorce petition, July 6, 1842, Records of the Chancery Court, Columbiana, Alabama County Courthouse; Elizabeth Pannell divorce petition, March 5, 1837, Legislative Petitions, LVA.

from her husband imperative. These examples further illustrate the paradoxical feelings that slaveholding women expressed for female slaves. Not only where their husbands abandoning them for other women, but enslaved women. To these wives, enslaved women, who were their subordinates, should have never been afforded the opportunity to disrupt or influence white slaveholding households and marriages.

The first instinct that many slaveholding women had was to insist that the enslaved woman in question be sold, or banished from the plantation household. In his 1818 petition for divorce, Henry Norrell alleged that the only way he could relieve his wife's feelings of jealousy toward their female slaves was to sell them. He said that shortly after they became married, his wife Delia "became obsessed with the idea that he was 'having illicit intercourse' with one of his slaves." To appease her, he sold the slave woman "at a very reduced price, & at great sacrifice." But he claimed this did not solve their problems. He was forced to sell another enslaved woman "for the same reason." He assured the court that her accusations were unsubstantiated and he demonstrated his faithfulness by selling the enslaved woman at a significant financial loss to ease her mind. He argued that despite his efforts, her "jealousy and charges of adultery and 'illicit connection[s] with other women," put an irreparable strain on their marriage. They "do not lie on the same bed nor have any connection as man & wife" due to her suspicions and for these reasons, he requested the court to grant him a divorce.⁶⁶

According to Harriet Jacobs, slaveholding women were also determined to exercise their authority through violence. "I knew that the young wives of slaveholders often thought their authority and importance would be best established and maintained by cruelty," said Jacobs.⁶⁷

⁶⁶Henry Norrell divorce petition, September 25, 1848, Records of the Chancery Court, Tallapoosa County Courthouse Archive.

⁶⁷Jacobs, *Incidents*, 92.

Richard Macks's mistress "severely" beat the enslaved woman her husband intended to make his concubine. According to Macks, his owner purchased the woman and "installed her on the place for his own use." His wife became angered by his decision to openly carry on a sexual relationship with this enslaved woman in or near their home. Upset that he would disrespect her in this manner, she turned her attention to the enslaved woman and flogged her instead. Yet, her acts of violence failed to dissuade her husband's sexual activities. She eventually left their household, claiming that his sinful acts with his female slave had come to haunt him and their home.⁶⁸

Similarly, Mary Robert Epps kept her sights on her female slave Patsey and tortured her on a regular basis, seeking vengeance for her husband's sexual attraction to Patsey. According to Solomon Northup, another of the Epps slaves, Patsey never had a restful moment, always on the lookout for Mary Epps's attacks. She was known to throw broken bottles and pieces of wood at Patsey's head, hoping to catch her off guard and inflict serious injury. As a result, "Patsey had no comfort of her life," said Northup. When she was not hurling objects at Patsey, she was encouraging her husband to punish her. According to Northup, Patsey often trembled with fear because when Mary would "work herself to the red-hot pitch of rage," Edwin would quiet her by promising to whip Patsey, "a promise he was sure to keep." As a result, Patsey's "back bore the scars of a thousand stripes," wrote Northup.⁶⁹

In some instances, slaveholding women's violence against enslaved women resulted in death. Octavia Albert recalled that when a fellow slave girl named Ella turned eighteen and started receiving unwanted attention from their owner, she also became the target of their mistress' rage. According to Albert, the mistress "had no more feelings for her than she had for a

⁶⁸Richard Macks interview in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 16.3 (Maryland), 54.

⁶⁹Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 188-189.

cat,” and found all sorts of ways to punish her for her husband’s transgressions. She often tied Ella up by her thumbs. This was her favorite form of punishment. But one day, “she tied her up and left her, and when she went back she found Ella dead,” said Albert. She claimed it was not her intention to kill the girl and that she “only wanted to punish her.” Regardless, her indifference towards Ella’s condition, evidenced by her leaving the girl dangling from only her thumbs, resulted in her death. Though she justified the outcome by invoking her right to punish slaves for the successful management of her household, her motives were of a far more personal nature. By pulling Ella’s ears “till they were sore,” and bloodying her brow, she communicated her discontent with Ella’s presence in her home and her husband’s decision to compromise the integrity of their marriage vows. Though Albert reported that her master and mistress “did not live good after she killed Ella,” she was likely satisfied with her efforts to deter any future activities between her husband and his female slaves.⁷⁰

Enslaved women like Ella not only had to fear for their safety, but the safety of their children as well. Enslaved children who were fathered by white men were also often looked at with contempt by white women. According to Moses Roper, his mistress had months to anticipate his birth. Though his paternity was not certain, Mrs. Roper had reason to suspect the baby might be her husband’s. When news came that the baby had arrived, Mrs. Roper sent one of her female slaves to check on the status of the mother and child. Her only inquiry was whether the child was “white or black.” She had long suspected that her husband was having sexual relations with Moses’s mother and was not pleased by the prospects of having to interact with the baby, a physical reminder of their sexual connection. When the young slave woman returned to her, she reported that the child “was white, and resembled Mr. Roper very much.” Dissatisfied

⁷⁰Octavia V. Rogers Albert. 1890. *The House of Bondage, or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves, Original and Life Like, as they Appeared in Their Old Plantation and City Slave Life*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/albert/albert.html>.

with this report, she grabbed a “large club-stick and knife” and stormed down to the birthing room that housed the child and mother. According to Moses, Mrs. Roper was intent on murdering him, hitting him with her knife and club. Having likely witnessed the wrath of other wives under similar circumstances, Moses’s grandmother was prepared for the unexpected. Moses reported that Mrs. Roper “was going to stick the knife into me,” but his grandmother “caught the knife and saved my life.”⁷¹ Though Moses Roper survived, the baby of a Georgia slave was not so fortunate. According to a fellow slave, the woman’s owner pursued a sexual relationship with her and as a result, she became pregnant with his child. His wife, angered by his behavior and the birth of his enslaved child, slipped into the enslaved woman’s room and, according to witnesses, “cut her baby’s head clean off.”⁷²

While Mrs. Roper was unsuccessful in her efforts to bring about the demise of Moses, she was successful in her negotiations to get the mother and child sold away from her household. Though Moses is specific in saying that his “father” sold him and his mother shortly after her confinement, there is no doubt that Mrs. Roper was a major broker in the transaction, if only by expressing her discontent or communicating her intentions to complete the murderous mission she started. Whether Mr. Roper agreed to the sale in order to quiet his wife’s anxieties, or to avoid the financial loss two dead slaves would have ensued, he and his wife together controlled the fate of Moses and his mother. Though Moses was fortunate to escape with his life intact, his and his mother’s quality of life was nonetheless infringed on by Mrs. Roper. In the event Moses was conceived through Mr. Roper’s rape or sexual coercion of his mother, his mother suffered

⁷¹Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, From American Slavery*, in Sterling Lecater Bland, Jr., ed., *African American Slave Narratives: An Anthology* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001) 1:7.

⁷²Unnamed interviewee in Rawick, ed. *The American Slave*, 13.4 (Georgia), 295.

life altering accounts at the hands of both her master and mistress. By virtue of her sale, she was ripped away from her mother and the only semblance of kinship she had ever known.

The recorded experiences of slaveholding women and the enslaved illustrate that when it came to enslaved women, slaveholding women did in fact garner a lot of power. Yes, their subordination as women did place limits on their ability to curtail white men's sexual behavior. And, at times, they curbed their own reactions to interracial sex between slaveholding men and enslaved women, opting to turn a blind eye, suppress their feelings, or express their discontent through gossip and the written word. However, their authority as slaveholders also provided them ample space to lash out, negotiate sales, and inflict violence on enslaved women. This authority served as a tool for expressing the emotional struggles, such as jealousy and anger, caused by white men's sexual relations with enslaved women. Some sought revenge in secret while others conducted very public displays of violence to serve as a warning to other enslaved women. And, their positions as household managers permitted them to inflict these punishments, all under the guise of legitimate plantation management.

Slaveholding women's varying responses to white men's sexual relations with female slaves illustrates that these women had a complex role to fill that included walking a fine line between finer womanhood and mastery, and gentility and cruelty—paradoxes created by the very system of enslavement from which they benefited. The enslavement of human beings by its very definition is cruel and unjust and it is no wonder that gruesome strategies were adopted to subjugate the enslaved. This was a brutal system and the dynamics it created, specifically the sexual exploitation of enslaved women, brought out the worst in both slaveholding men and women.

CHAPTER FIVE

Caught In a Web of Their Own Creation: Slaveholding Men, Sexual Exploitation, and the Notion of Consequence.

On January 15, 1843, five months prior to his marriage to Helen Brooke, Robert Hamilton, of Virginia, wrote his fiancé a detailed letter in which he expressed his anxieties about their upcoming nuptials. Apparently, they had never discussed in detail the delicate matters he intended to broach and he believed he needed to forewarn her of the earnestness of his disposition. “You will find this letter more serious in its tone than those which have preceded it,” he wrote. Robert wrote that it was only proper that he share his feelings now because they were about to enter into marriage, a compact that could be “dissolved only by death or by circumstances more painful than death.” He explained that he felt compelled to write her because her previous letter incited in him what he described as exceedingly unpleasant feelings. In fact, her letter had forced him to confront “peculiar feelings—my most unfortunate eccentricities,” he wrote. Robert’s peculiar feelings and unfortunate eccentricities were euphemisms for his sexual desires, which he now feared would not be compatible with those of his future wife.¹ In the letter Robert referred to, Helen had expressed concern about not being able to please Robert sexually and wrote, “we are about to take a step which will render us supremely miserable or happy.” In response, Robert communicated that he shared in her concern and that he could be surer “if I were like yourself in my temper & disposition—if I were like other honest & honorable men,” he

¹John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman argue that “polite society condemned the public discussion of illicit sex, but men’s private writings reveal a good deal of comfort with the expression of pure sexual desire, unrelated to love or intimacy.” In John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality In America* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 95.

wrote. Based on this statement, Robert had no misconceptions about the kind of man he was. Placing himself outside the realm of honorable men, he declared himself “the most unfortunately constituted being that was ever made in the human form,” a fact that he wanted to clearly communicate to his future wife.²

Though Helen satisfied all of Robert’s qualifications for an honorable wife, he was certain he did not meet hers for a husband and this letter was his first effort to lower her expectations of him, particularly where sexual fidelity and decency were concerned. “You are all that can be reasonably asked or that a reasonable man could need in a wife,” wrote Robert, regarding Helen’s character, noting that she was amicable, gentle, generous, and—most importantly—yielding.³ As for Robert, he predicted his character would not measure up to her expectations because his sexual needs and wants would be strikingly different from hers. “But alas! My peculiar disposition! Its like has never been seen before,” he warned, establishing that his sexual interests were broad and unconventional. It was not unheard of for elite white men like Robert, whether married or single, to engage in what was considered illicit sexual behavior for the time, such as soliciting sexual relations from prostitutes and having sexual and romantic relationships across the color line with black women—free and enslaved.⁴ As a member of the

²Robert Hamilton to Helen Brooke, January 15, 1843 in Helen Hamilton divorce petition, December 14, 1846, Richmond Virginia, Legislative Petitions, Library of Virginia (LVA).

³Based on Robert’s description, Helen’s qualities were already in line with what was expected of a married woman, or feme covert, during the antebellum period. As her husband’s dependent, she would be expected to honor and serve him. In turn, he would serve as her guardian, protect her, and provide her with a safe, upstanding, and prosperous household that she would be responsible for turning into a loving home. For more on patriarchy and the laws of coverture see Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon books, 1982); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴Joshua Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the*

slaveholding elite, leveraging authority over an enslaved woman and sexually exploiting her was certainly in Robert's realm of possibilities. Robert did not reveal the extent to which his sexual proclivities reached in this letter; however, based on his level of anxiety, he believed they extended beyond what Helen would consider respectable behavior for a married southern gentleman.⁵

Robert's purpose was not to dissuade Helen from marrying him, but rather to inform her of his true and unchanging nature and his unwillingness to change his "peculiar disposition" just to make her happy. "You cannot be happy with me. I am too exacting, too unreasonable, too monstrous in my requirements," he wrote. Not wanting to scare her too much, he immediately added, "some of them [his sexual desires], it is true, might be fulfilled & that very easily." He was determined to give his future wife hope that she *could*—if she were willing—fulfill his "monstrous" sexual requirements. After all, he believed his sexual satisfaction was indeed the key to their happiness as husband and wife.⁶

Robert, however, was careful to restate his doubt that he and Helen would ever attain true happiness because he was certain that she would refuse to oblige his eccentricities, as he called them. "But you will not fulfill them. Although I tell you that your happiness for life depends upon it, you will not," he wrote. With this statement, Robert was explaining to his future wife that she would never be truly happy with him, but the fault would not lie with him. The reason would be *her* unwillingness to indulge his sexual eccentricities. Therefore, he was placing the responsibility for their happiness and sexual compatibility in her hands and declaring that if she

Nineteenth-Century South (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); James Hugo Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970); Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 36.

⁵Robert Hamilton to Helen Brooke, January 15, 1843 in Hamilton divorce petition, LVA.

⁶*Ibid.*

failed or refused to fulfill his many desires, their unhappiness would be her fault and not his own. He also wished to be released from responsibility or consequence if he decided to seek gratification for his peculiar sexual needs with someone else, such as one of their female slaves. If she wanted happiness, she had two choices. She could either expand her sexual limits to align with his, or turn a blind eye and resist any feelings of jealousy and discontent when he decided to explore his sexual fantasies without her.⁷

Robert's final challenge was to convince Helen to willingly become the wife of a man with "peculiar" and "eccentric" sexual proclivities and not make their sexual incompatibility or any attempts he might make to satisfy his desires outside their marriage a major point of contention between them. "If you cannot unravel the secret mysteries of my character with the insight I have now given you, it must remain always a sealed book to you," he wrote. This was his diplomatic way of saying that once they became husband and wife he did not care to hear any of her complaints about the kind of husband he turned out to be. "I have now presented to you the worst side of this picture of myself," he declared. Therefore, his message to Helen became this: if you still want to marry me, you "need not expect to be happy with me unless you marry me with the determination to make up for the deficiencies in my conduct by your own."⁸

When it came to engaging in what antebellum southerners would have considered illicit sexual behavior, namely sexual relations with enslaved women, elite slaveholding men frequently found little fault in their behavior. Some considered having sex with female slaves to be a privilege of slave-ownership, thus excluding them from societal and familial objections to interracial sex. Of those who acknowledged wrongdoing, many made concerted efforts to minimize the significance of their actions. In their writings and pleas to family members, they

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

made distinctions between their true character and their flawed and sinful nature, which occasionally led them to succumb to temptation, and argued that they were entitled to absolution, seeing that the forces that drew them to enslaved women were beyond their control. The vast majority of slaveholding households where sexual relations with female slaves was a point of contention did not dissolve as a result. However, despite some men's best efforts, their insistence on maintaining sexual liaisons with female slaves caused cracks in the foundations of their marriages and households.

Robert and Helen Hamilton were married June 1, 1843. Less than a year into their marriage, Helen was confronted at last with her husband's forewarned illicit sexual behavior. While recuperating at her parents' home, a sizable plantation named St. Julien in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, near Fredericksburg, from what had been a difficult pregnancy and a delivery riddled with complications, Helen learned that her personal servant and nurse Louisa was pregnant by none other than her husband Robert.⁹ Prior to Helen's pregnancy, Louisa's daily responsibilities were to take care of all of Helen's personal needs, which would have included helping her bathe, pick out clothes, and get dressed, coiffing her hair, and making sure she received all of her meals. As Helen had just given birth to her and Robert's first and only child, Mary Champe Hamilton, a daughter named for Helen's mother, Louisa's duties probably became even more intimate in nature. She had to ensure that Helen was healing properly and remained free of infection and aide her with breastfeeding and diapering her infant daughter. Such intimate contact led to Helen's discovery of Louisa's pregnancy. It is unclear whether Louisa volunteered the news that she had been impregnated by Robert, or if Helen noticed her expanding midsection

⁹According to 1820 Census, Brooke owned 60 slaves between two properties, including St. Julien in Spotsylvania County. 1820 U.S. Federal Census, Spotsylvania, Virginia, National Archives (NARA), Accessed via Ancestry.com

and questioned her about the circumstances surrounding her pregnancy. Either way, according to Helen's mother, Mary Champe Brooke, the news that Robert had impregnated the female slave "threw my daughter into a paroxysm of grief."¹⁰

Louisa was actually owned by Helen's parents, the Honorable Francis T. Brooke, a jurist on the Virginia Court of Appeals, and Mary Brooke. She went to live with Robert and Helen after they moved to Richmond to live in the same boarding house that Judge Brooke and his wife stayed in while the Court of Appeals was in session. They loaned Louisa to Helen after her marriage to serve as her personal servant. When Helen originally left St. Julien to make a life in Richmond with Robert, she brought with her a different female slave named Priscilla to serve as her maid. Priscilla, who was around forty years-of-age, was experienced at serving the needs of the Brooke family and her selection to accompany Helen to Richmond meant they had confidence in her ability to perform any household tasks Robert or Helen required. Robert, however, was displeased with Priscilla, specifically her age, and considered her an "old settled servant." He requested that Priscilla be sent back to St. Julien and that she be replaced with the much younger Louisa.¹¹

At the time, Helen's mother Mary was not suspicious of her son-in-law's request to replace Priscilla with Louisa and said she did not make any objections. But, why did Robert Hamilton object to having Priscilla in their home, especially considering her main responsibility was to serve Helen and not him? Did he believe a younger servant would meet his wife's needs with more efficiency? Priscilla's experience belies any claims Roberts could have made about her effectiveness. Robert's request for a younger servant, and Louisa specifically, appears to have had more to do with his desire to be in the company of a more youthful and presumably

¹⁰Mary Champe Brooke deposition in Hamilton divorce petition, LVA.

¹¹Ibid.

more sexually appealing woman. He also probably assumed that with Louisa's youth came a certain naiveté, meaning she could be more easily manipulated into satisfying his sexual needs. Of course, Louisa's feelings about being separated from her family or potentially having to face Robert's sexual advances were never considered.

White men like Robert were intrigued by the myth that black women were innately more sexual than white women. According to historian Deborah Gray White, colonial and antebellum white society accepted and perpetuated the belief that black women were governed almost entirely about their sexuality, making them the “the counterimage of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady.” Therefore, black women, unlike white women, were supposedly more interested in matters of the flesh than piety and domesticity.¹² White men and women alike used this myth of black women's hypersexuality to justify what they classified as white men succumbing to black women's seduction. In this way, they too had a consciousness of black women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation at the hands of white men. While on a visit to Charleston, South Carolina, Ebenezer Appleton, a native of New Hampshire, wrote to his childhood friend about the bustling sex trade in Charleston and stated that “there is more illicit commerce on here with blacks & mulattoes than white girls.” Though Appleton assured his friend that he was too much of a “yankee” gentlemen to partake in the fancy girl trade, he was informed by “connoisseurs” that black women were “better in all respects” than white women, where sex was concerned.¹³

White southerners helped to create enslaved women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation by actively encouraging it. Accordingly, young white men and boys were practically exempt

¹²Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, (New York: Norton, 1999), 28-29.

¹³Ebenezer Appleton to Moody Kent, April 7, 1804 in Ebenezer Appleton Papers, South Caroliniana Library.

from judgment for having sex with female slaves. Enslaved men and women reported that white adolescent boys regarded the young girls in the slave quarters as their training ground for gaining sexual experience.¹⁴ A former slave named Walton reported that his owner actually took his son down to the slave cabins in order to teach him how to have sex with enslaved women. After the father selected one of his female slaves, “they both took her—the father showing the son what it was all about,” Walton said.¹⁵ Some pro-slavery advocates even actively encouraged interracial sex between white men and enslaved women, claiming that it would allow men and boys to explore their sexuality and indulge their lustful and illicit nature on the inferior enslaved woman, thus preserving the sexual purity and virtue of white womanhood.¹⁶ Chancellor Harper of South Carolina argued that the “warm passions” of young white men “give rise to licentious intercourse.” Though he condemned interracial sex in principle, he excused these young men’s behavior, arguing that “the intercourse which takes places with enslaved females, is less depraving in its effects, than when it is carried on with females of their own caste.” Chancellor argued that as long as the sexual intercourse was casual and a male didn’t become “tainted” from an enslaved woman’s habits and manners, he was excused. And, when the boy was ready to become a man, he would leave the enslaved females alone because, after all, “the female of his own race offers greater allurements.”¹⁷

¹⁴Jack and Rosa Maddox interview in George Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplemental Series 2*, 7.6 (Texas), 2531.

¹⁵Walton interview in Charles Perdue, Jr., ed. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-slaves* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), 301.

¹⁶Peter Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 55; D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 94.

¹⁷Chancellor Harper, “Harper on Slavery” in *The Pro-Slavery Arguments as Maintained by the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1853), 44-45.

Perhaps Robert Hamilton had the idea of preserving his wife's virtue in mind when he made his sexual advances towards Louisa. After all, the letter he wrote to Helen before they got married explicitly stated that she would likely find many of his sexual requests monstrous and outside the bounds of what a respectable lady would want to entertain. He needed to have a young female slave on hand to engage in the vulgar and undignified sex that he professed to need and shield his wife from such degrading behavior. In other words, Louisa did not need to be protected from his vulgarity. He might have felt that because of her color, she was equipped to withstand his crudeness, or he might have believed that her enslaved status did not entitle her to his concern. Though there is no record to confirm that these were Robert Hamilton's exact thoughts, his confessions of having an insatiable sexual appetite, coupled with his admission that he would not look to his wife to fulfill his urges, are strong suggestions that he considered sexually exploiting enslaved women as an ideal way to safeguard white women's virtue.

When Robert was confronted by his wife and various members of her family about his adulterous and illicit decision to have sex with their family servant, his inclination was to offer a myriad of excuses for his conduct. Court records do not provide details of what Helen said to Robert during their first encounter after she learned of Louisa's pregnancy. Helen's mother, Mary, however, revealed that when Robert left Helen's childhood bedroom, where the initial confrontation took place, he walked into the Brooke's parlor and looked at his mother-in-law and said, "Madam, can't you forgive a man for one sin?" According to Robert, that is all his action was, just one sin, which he quickly attributed to his flawed nature, saying he was just a miserable man and "not fit to be a husband to any woman," a detail he felt he never attempted to hide from his wife. During their confrontation, he likely made a similar claim to Helen that his behavior was not a malicious or controllable act for which he should be held accountable, but a sin—a

weakness or lapse in judgment—that should be forgiven without question. As God forgave sin, so should his wife and mother-in-law; Robert skillfully placed the burden of reconciliation in their hands.¹⁸

To further release himself from responsibility, Robert then assumed an accusatory posture with his mother-in-law and declared that the predicament surrounding Louisa would have never happened had she and her husband not obstructed his and Helen's early efforts to be married and permitted him to marry Helen years earlier when she was seventeen. It is unclear exactly what he intended to convey with this excuse. He could have been suggesting that his interest in Louisa could be attributed in part to his residual anger with the Brooke's initial rejection of him as a proper suitor for their daughter. Or, he could have meant that if he had married earlier, he would not have had a chance to explore his sexual proclivities. To his friend and trusted physician, Martin Burton, Robert offered a completely different excuse for his behavior. According to Burton, Robert told him that once Helen entered into the second trimester of her pregnancy, her mother insisted that they refrain from sexual activity to safeguard her health and that of the baby. As a result, he was prohibited from sharing a bed with his wife and having any intimate contact with her. Therefore, he offered his exclusion from his wife's bed chambers as justification for turning to Louisa for sexual gratification.¹⁹

In essence, Robert Hamilton felt absolved from all responsibility because he considered himself a flawed man who was weakened by his monstrous eccentricities and he never made any promises to his wife to be anything different than that. Though he was faced with consequences for devastating his wife with his behavior, shaming himself and the Brookes, one of antebellum Virginia's most prominent families, and providing fodder for gossip and additional shame within

¹⁸Mary Champe Brooke deposition in Hamilton divorce petition, LVA

¹⁹Ibid.; Martin Burton deposition in Ibid.

the Richmond community, he did not appear willing to fully shoulder the burden of these consequences. Though he employed multiple excuses, his primary position was that “his passions controlled his moral senses and left him, and did not return,” rendering him weak and a victim of temptation. This is what he reportedly told his father-in-law, Francis Brooke, when Francis forced him to explain why he “destroyed the happiness of one of the happiest families in the world.” His passions, not his conscious and moral self, drove him to have sexual relations with his wife’s personal maid, an infraction for which he expected to be forgiven. In fact, he told his father-in-law that his reason for confessing and being so forthright about being the father of Louisa’s unborn child was so that “it would reconcile his wife.” In other words, it was her responsibility to not only forgive, but to forget so that they could move forward with their lives. In the records, no mention is made of Louisa’s feelings. Though she was thrust in the middle of Robert and Helen’s marital discord, no consideration was given to how she should forgive or forget her sexual exploitation.²⁰

Like Robert Hamilton, many white men attributed their “illicit” sexual relations with free and enslaved black women to flaws in their character or their primitive nature as men—conditions they characterized as afflictions or states of being for which they had little control, and, therefore, could not be held fully responsible.²¹ In 1813, when William Kendall of Virginia wanted to emancipate and provide financial security for the mixed-race son he conceived with one of his female slaves, he sought mercy from the King George County court for what he knew

²⁰Francis Brooke deposition in Ibid.

²¹According to historian Suzanne Lebsock, in the nineteenth century, women were considered to be the moral superiors of men. These notions of female virtue, the “cult of true womanhood” or the “cult of domesticity,” created a discourse that allowed men to reference their flawed and inferior nature to explain intemperance, infidelity, and miscegenation. Susan Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: Norton, 1984), 51.

would be considered improper sexual behavior by declaring that “like many frail men, he hath fallen into a vice.” He wanted to convey that under normal circumstances, he would not have debased himself by mingling with slaves; therefore, he, nor his son, should be punished based on his actions during a moment of weakness. John Randolph, of Roanoke, Virginia, went so far as to blame the devil for his sexual attraction to a black woman. In a letter of desperation to his friend Henry Watkins, Randolph beseeched Watkins to come visit him and pray for him, “for the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much,” he wrote. He claimed to be “in extremis,” or on the verge of destruction, “because I am under the powerful influence of the Prince of Darkness who tempts me with a beautiful mulattress.”²²

These men utilized a language of affliction and weakness to justify their conscious choices to have sex with black women. Though interracial sex between white men and black women, free and enslaved, was rather commonplace, they felt compelled to offer these explanations to maintain their respectability. This is because preachers, politicians, and other moral torch bearers inundated the public sphere with rhetoric that denounced interracial sex—known then as the mixing of the races, amalgamation, or mongrelization—as an abomination before God, offensive to respectable society, and a threat to the purity and supremacy of the white race.²³ Thomas Jefferson, drafter of the Declaration of Independence, third President of the United States, and regarded as one of the most significant political strategists of his time, wrote extensively on what he believed to be African peoples’ moral and biological inferiority to whites in his highly regarded publication, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In 1814, he wrote to a neighbor

²²William Kendall emancipation petition, December 15, 1813, King George County, Legislative Petitions, LVA; John Randolph to Henry Watkins, April 11, 1832 in John Randolph papers, Virginia Historical Society.

²³Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household*, 55.

that “amalgamation with the other color produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent.”²⁴

In an 1845 letter to a British abolitionist, James Henry Hammond, former governor of South Carolina and pro-slavery advocate, also denounced interracial sex in an attempt to discredit abolitionists’ claims of slaveholders’ sexual abuse of enslaved women. Hammond argued that “this intercourse is regarded in our society as highly disreputable” and “if carried on habitually, it seriously affects a man’s standing.” And, “he who takes a colored mistress...loses cast at once,” wrote Hammond. Preachers of the gospel also warned their congregations that miscegenation would lead to the corruption of their society. The Reverend J.D. Long of Maryland, a critic of the South’s system of slavery preached that amalgamation was increasing at a horrible rate throughout the slave states and that “one of the reasons why wicked men in the South uphold slavery is the facility which it affords for a licentious life.”²⁵

Though some members of antebellum society, most notably enslaved women and men, truly did find white men’s indiscriminate pursuit of sexual relations with enslaved women to be horrific and exploitative, for the most part, white men’s pontification on the ills of interracial sex, such as that of Thomas Jefferson and James Henry Hammond, did very little to persuade white men from engaging in interracial sex and rarely caused significant damage to the character or credibility of those who did so. In fact, it did not persuade either Jefferson or Hammond from engaging in sexual relations with their own female slaves.²⁶ Former slave Lewis Clark said that

²⁴Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, in Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 46.

²⁵James Henry Hammond, “Hammond’s Letters on Slavery” in *The Pro-Slavery Arguments as Maintained by the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1853), 119; Rev. J.D. Long quote found in Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 210.

²⁶For more on Thomas Jefferson’s long-term sexual relationship with his female slave Sally Hemings, see Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University Press of

his slave owner, who also happened to be his grandfather, was considered a highly respectable man among his fellow slaveholders. “It did not render him less honorable in their eyes that he took to his bed Mary, his slave.”²⁷

One reason why white people’s criticism of and preaching against interracial sex failed to bring about any significant change in white men’s behavior is because these critiques were often accompanied with the caveat that men and boys were subject to being weakened by black women’s tempting allure. And, if they did fall into the trap of licentiousness set for them by these black temptresses, it was likely due to a momentary lapse in judgment that should be taken into consideration and forgiven by their families and communities at large. Former pastor John D. Paxton, before a congregation of worshipers in Virginia, reasoned that the “rapid increase in mulattos” in the South was due to the fact that vice and temptation prevailed. He argued that respectable parents needed not to fret, however, over their son’s sexual experimentation with female slaves because they “may trace the impiety and licentiousness and shame of their prodigal sons to the temptations found in the female slave of their own or neighbour’s households.”²⁸

It is significant that Paxton referred to the South’s young white men as prodigal sons. In the book of Luke, it is written that Jesus told a parable of a father who gave his two sons their inheritance before he died. One son squandered it, earning him the title of the prodigal or wasteful son. Despite his disgraceful behavior, he was forgiven by his father and welcomed back home where a lavish feast awaited him. Though Paxton considered sex with slaves to be

Virginia, 1997); Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).

²⁷Lewis Garrard Clark, *Narratives of the Suffering of Lewis, During a Captivity of More Than Twenty-Five Years, Among the Algerines of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of America*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999.
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/clarke/menu.html>;

²⁸John D. Paxton, *Letters on Slavery; Addressed to the Cumberland Congregation, Virginia by J.D. Paxton, Their Former Pastor* (Lexington, KY: Abraham T.Skillman, 1833), 129.

shameful behavior, like the father in Jesus's parable, he pardoned young men who were weakened by enslaved women's sexuality because he believed that the sinfulness and temptation was "found in the female slave." Therefore, the South's prodigal sons should always be welcomed back into the graces of respectable society. Once more, societal rhetoric shifted blame and responsibility away from white men and placed it squarely on the shoulders of supposedly seductive black women. However, the sources of enslaved women and men reveal that enslaved women were the victims the majority of the time. Women such as Elizabeth Keckley, Harriet Jacobs, and Patsey were rarely the seducers and initiators of sexual contact with white slaveholding men, but suffered due to limited means to fight off rape and sexual harassment.²⁹

The fact that white men often had the option of invoking their weakness and inability to resist temptation to explain away their improper or exploitative sexual behavior with enslaved women, suggests that the antebellum South's public condemnation of interracial sex was somewhat of a smokescreen. White slaveholding men could generally engage in sex with their female slaves and raise only minimal objections. Few had to offer any explanation or excuse. Their social status as slaveholders and patriarchs afforded them considerable power over their dependents, black and white. White men faced the most objections to their sexual relations with female slaves when they failed to be discreet about their engagements and threatened theirs and their families' status of respectability.³⁰

²⁹Ibid. The parable of the prodigal son is found in the Christian Bible, Luke 15:11-32. For more on these enslaved women's experiences with sexual abuse and harassment see Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and four Years in the White House*, ed. Frances Smith Foster (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup in Puttin' On Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1969). For more on the pervasiveness of enslaved women's sexual abuse see Thelma Jennings, "Us Colored Women Had to Go Through A Plenty: Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women," *Journal of Women's History* 1, no.3 (1990): 45-74.

³⁰According to D'Emilio and Freedman, "most southern moralists condoned white men's gratification of lust, as long as they did so discreetly with poor white or black women." D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 95.

James Henry Hammond, who was a formidable politician in antebellum South Carolina, is a perfect example of a public figure who helped to generate a public discourse of disdain for interracial sex, but, in private, acted in ways that completely contradicted his public vitriol. As a public figure, he opposed interracial sex and the dilution of the white race, primarily as a means to preserve the white superiority on which his own power rested, but as a man and a slaveholder, he respected the rights of his fellow slaveholders to do as they wished with their human chattel behind closed doors and he expected the same consideration. It was only when his sexual relationship with two of his female slaves became a major source of contention within his household, tore apart his family, and threatened to cause irreparable damage to his political image that James began to consider the implications of his actions. Yet, he too looked to find ways to deflect responsibility from himself for all the damage his behavior caused.

On December 15, 1850, Hammond, one term removed from the South Carolina governor's office, opened his diary to write about what he called the "difficulties betwixt my wife and me." For his contribution to their marital discord, he wrote that though he intended to be a good husband, he was the victim to his flawed nature. "I have not been immaculate," he wrote. "I could not be. I tried it—oh, I tried it fully, fully and failed wholly."³¹ The result of his flawed nature was his seemingly obsessive attachment to two of his female slaves, Sally Johnson and her daughter Louisa. Hammond purchased eighteen-year-old Sally for \$900 to ostensibly serve as the Hammond family seamstress in 1839, at the height of his political career—three years after serving in the United States House of Representatives and three years before being

Catherine Clinton argued that planters' slave liaisons were tolerated in private, but whites were required in their public lives to obey the plantation culture's rigid dictates concerning race and sex. Clinton, *Plantation Mistress*, 211. Joshua Rothman illustrates that white southerners tolerated and accommodated sex across the color line, especially when the parties were discreet. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood*, 5, 50.

³¹James Henry Hammond, December 15, 1850 in Carol Bleser, ed. *Secret and Sacred: The Diaries of James Henry Hammond, A Southern Slaveholder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 212-213.

elected Governor of South Carolina.³² Sally's one-year-old daughter came with her. But, when Hammond brought Sally and her baby to his Silver Bluff Plantation, he decided that she would also become his enslaved mistress, a role that was far more personal and exploitative than just being the family seamstress. Hammond's sexual exploits of Sally continued for years to come and produced multiple children, though the exact number is unknown.³³

Hammond's wife, Catherine Fitzsimons Hammond, was born into a wealthy slaveholding family. The Fitzsimonses were regarded among South Carolina's elite and owned considerable property in the Charleston and Barnwell Districts of the state. When Catherine's father died, she inherited several of his properties in Beech Island, a community in the district of Barnwell, just across the Savannah River from Augusta, Georgia, including the Silver Bluff Plantation that would come to serve as Catherine and Hammond's home. Her land holdings totaled to over 10,000 acres. In addition, she acquired approximately 150 slaves.³⁴ When she and Hammond married in June of 1831, he was hopeful that these land and slave holdings would become his, but her family made intense efforts to keep all of the property in Catherine's name, even after they married.³⁵ Hammond and the Fitzsimons family eventually had to enter into arbitration to

³²Bill of Sale for Sally Johnson and daughter, January 12, 1839, Hammond-Bryan-Cumming Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library (SCL).

³³In a letter to his son Harry, Hammond acknowledged that he fathered children by both Sally Johnson and Louisa Johnson and asked Harry to provide for the children. He did not suggest that they be emancipated but that they remain the property of the Hammond family, presumably for their own protection. He said, "Sally says Henderson is my child. It is possible, but I do not believe it. Yet act on her's rather than my opinion. Louisa's first child way be mine. I think not. Her second I believe is mine. Take care of her & her children who are both of your blood if not of mine & of Henderson." Hammond to Harry Hammond, February 19, 1856 in James Henry Hammond Papers, SCL. Full transcription of the letter can also be found in Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design For Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 87.

³⁴Bleser, ed. *Secret and Sacred*, 9.

³⁵South Carolina law allowed male family members to draft pre-marital contracts that protected a woman's property and allowed it to remain in her name, even after marriage. See Amrita Chakrabarti Myers, *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 140.

settle the matter; the decision went in Hammond's favor and he earned full rights to Silver Bluff and the rest of Catherine's inheritance, finally placing him amongst the ranks of South Carolina's slaveholding elite. Now that he was the patriarch of his own slaveholding household, he expected his wife to honor him and the decisions he made for their rapidly expanding family.³⁶

Though Hammond was the head of their household, Catherine likely did not approve or appreciate his decision to bring Sally to Silver Bluff in 1839 and establish her as his enslaved mistress. It is unknown whether she confronted him about his sexual liaison with the newly purchased slave, felt indifferent about his sexual activities in the slave quarters, or felt angry and disrespected, but decided to bury her feelings deep within and remain silent for the time being. If she did have any tolerance for his sexual relations with enslaved women, it came to an abrupt end in 1850 when Hammond began to also have sexual relations with Sally's daughter Louisa, who was now twelve years old. Catherine might have felt that indulging in interracial sex with female slaves was one thing, but to simultaneously engage in sexual relationships with a mother and her daughter, who still qualified as a child by antebellum standards, proved to be too much for her to ignore. Believing his behavior crossed the line between distasteful and depraved, she packed her bags and left Hammond and Silver Bluff with their two youngest children, Katherine and Elizabeth, in tow. In light of the fact that she did not take Sally or Louisa with her, she likely felt that her husband's behavior was disgraceful towards her rather than the enslaved mother and daughter. When Hammond made his diary entry in December of 1850, he wrote, "my wife has been gone to Charleston for a week or more, when to return is uncertain."³⁷

³⁶James and Catherine Hammond were married on June 23, 1831. Their first child, James Henry (Harry) Hammond II, was born approximately nine months later on March 30, 1832. See Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South*, 139.

³⁷James and Catherine had eight children in all. At the time of their separation, James Henry "Harry" was 18 and in college in Columbia, SC; their second born child, Christopher Fitzsimons died in 1848, two years before the separation. Their third and fourth born sons, Edward Spann and William were both away in college in Athens

Hammond was being sincere when he wrote that the date of his wife's return was uncertain. Catherine's departure started out as a short stay with family in Charleston, but by June 1851, almost six months later, she still had not returned to Silver Bluff and was now living with family in the Sand Hills area near Augusta, Georgia. Though Hammond purchased her a carriage horse as a peace offering and to persuade her to come home, her terms for reconciliation were clear: she would not return home until he terminated his sexual relationship with Louisa and removed her from Silver Bluff. However, this was a condition that Hammond would not agree too. In his diary, he wrote, "Concessions are demanded to which I am averse, because they involve injustice and cruelty to others concerned," presumably out of concern for the welfare of Sally and Louisa. He also attributed his decision to keep Sally and Louisa to his flawed and uncontrollable sexual nature. He explained that he loved his wife dearly and never intended to disrespect her. "As the mother of my children and mistress of my household I would not exchange for her anything in the world, and I have never failed in kindness and respect for her," he wrote. He argued that he had never sought to love another woman and did not love anyone but her. However, "God has given me tastes and appetites which she was not fitted to satisfy," he wrote, which served to justify why he had to look to Sally and Louisa to satisfy his sexual needs.³⁸

Just as Robert Hamilton did not anticipate that his wife Helen would be willing to fulfill his sexual eccentricities, Hammond did not expect Catherine to satisfy his "tastes and appetites"

Georgia. William, known as "Willie" would subsequently die two years later in 1852 of typhoid fever. The Hammons' fifth son Charles was born in 1836 and died in infancy. Paul, their sixth born son was away in boarding school in Augusta, Ga. in 1850. Katherine and Elizabeth were their last two children and only daughters. As they were only 10 and 1 year old, respectively, at the time of Catherine's departure, they accompanied their mother to Charleston. Hammond provides these details of Catherine's departure from Silver Bluff, his children's whereabouts, and his deep feelings of loneliness in his diary on Dec.15 and Dec. 31, 1850. See Bleser, ed. *Secret and Sacred*, 212, 224.

³⁸Hammond, Dec. 15, 1850 in *Ibid.*, 212-213.

either. And, just as Hamilton asked his wife to accept and turn a blind eye to his efforts to quench his needs, Hammond also believed it best for his wife to understand his defective nature and his choice to seek sexual gratification from his female slaves so that they could reunite their family and evade social and political humiliation. He felt it counterproductive to promise to terminate his relations with Sally and Louisa when he knew he was not disciplined enough to do so. “I should fail were I to try it again,” he wrote. “Shall I pretend to do it, knowing I cannot succeed?” he asked rhetorically.³⁹

Having been separated from his wife for more than six months, James Hammond still had a difficult time understanding why Catherine could not just accept him for the imperfect human being that he was. On May 25, 1851, he wrote in his diary about how much frustration this caused him. “No one *not* one, exercises the slightest indulgence towards me. Nothing is overlooked, nothing forgiven. I am never spared,” he wrote, declaring himself the victim and not the generator of his familial strife. He agreed that he was not perfect, though he rationalized that he had “striven as hard as *any one* to be so.” It was while in the midst of his self-pity that Hammond identified what he believed to be his true shortcoming. While Catherine considered it his inexcusable sexual liaison with his twelve-year-old slave girl, Hammond declared, “I have no *art* to conceal my faults.” According to Hammond, his deficiency was merely his failure to conceal his relations with his female slaves which led to his unfortunate and current state. His problem was not that he was a sexual deviant, but that he did not have the capacity to lie about his deviance. When Catherine first left their home in November of 1850, he declared, “I am wholly to blame, not so much, as I view matters, for what I have done as for what I left undone,

³⁹Ibid., 213.

for want of caution which led to discoveries.” In his mind, his lack of caution in remaining discreet was to blame.⁴⁰

Hammond’s indiscretion was the only thing in which he was willing to take complete ownership. Even after his wife had been gone for six months, he only somewhat took responsibility for causing her pain and distress as a result of his sexual indiscretions, maintaining that most of the blame fell on his insatiable desires. And, he remained completely unwilling to acknowledge fault in his conscious decision to maintain Sally and her twelve-year-old daughter Louisa as his sexual servants. For Hammond, his sexual relationships with Sally and Louisa were excusable offenses and “seem to me venial and in others are generally so considered,” he wrote. He agreed that his having sex with his female slaves was considered a breach of social mores, but he also understood it to be a common occurrence—an open secret—that was generally overlooked if one was discreet.⁴¹

By Hammond’s own estimation, it was his initial failure to be discreet that caused his wife to abandon him and their Silver Bluff plantation and seek shelter and support with her family. Yet, despite his lack of discretion, he fully expected that his wife would remain discreet about the cause of their separation. It was to his dismay that Catherine revealed the details of his affairs with his female slaves to her family. “My wife, who paralyzed me by her arrogance and violence at the critical moment in 1851 and who has ever since kept me in torment, has at last, managed to make our domestic difficulties apparent to the world, which of course throws all the blame on me,” he wrote. When he wrote this entry in May of 1852, Catherine had not lived with him at Silver Bluff for over a year-and-a-half. Surely, he did not expect that an elite family like the Fitzsimonses, who had a reputation of their own to protect, would not demand an explanation

⁴⁰Hammond, May 25, 1851 and Dec.15, 1850 in *Ibid.*, 231, 212.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

for why their daughter and sister felt compelled to take such a significant leave of absence from her husband, a former governor of the State who still possessed plenty of political aspirations. Rather than showing remorse for the pain and humiliation his actions caused his wife and her family, which prompted her departure in the first place, he obsessed over the damage her disclosure of their marital problem might cause to his reputation.⁴²

In this moment, Hammond, who had his sights on a United States Senate seat, was unwilling to accept full responsibility if he suffered any political consequences as a result of his liaisons with Sally and Louisa; rather, he was prepared to place the majority of the blame at the feet of Catherine and her family. “What a fatal thing it was when I connected myself with that low-Irish family,” wrote Hammond. He faulted them for always believing him inferior to them and attributed this to why they always showed such rage when he did anything to displease them. He believed that a family had an obligation to forgive each other and protect one another’s character from outside attack. But, he claimed that he had never been extended such courtesy from the Fitzsimonses. “They have been mean and base enough to expose what families of real pride and proper tone would have concealed; and, in blind, vulgar fury, and a conceited idea of their own elevation, they have for petty revenge utterly sacrificed themselves to ruin me,” he exclaimed.⁴³

The fact that Hammond held on to the expectation that he should be pardoned by his wife and her family without hesitation, reveals just how delusional he was about how much courtesy and absolution he was due simply because of his place among elite, slaveholding, and politically shrewd men. The Fitzsimonses had good reason for looking down on Hammond with disdain. Almost a decade before, in April of 1843, while Hammond was serving his term as

⁴²Hammond, May 21, 1852 in *Ibid.*, 254.

⁴³*Ibid.*

governor, it was discovered that Hammond was engaging, and had been for several years, in inappropriate sexual acts with four of his nieces, the daughters of Catherine's sister, Ann Fitzsimons Hampton and Wade Hampton II, a member of South Carolina's most wealthy and highly regarded family. The revelation that Hammond had molested the teenage girls over the course of several years created a tremendous rift between him and the Fitzsimons and Hampton families. But, being consistent in nature, Hammond sought to assuage his conscience and wrote that though he had been wrong in the matter his actions were "the result of impulse, not design." In fact, he asked, "is there a man, with manhood in him and heart susceptible of any emotions of tenderness, who could tear himself from such a clutter of lovely, loving, such amorous and devoted beings," referring to the Hampton daughters.⁴⁴

James Hammond seems to have truly believed he had no choice but to respond to what he perceived to be the Hampton daughters' affections. "Here were four lovely creatures from the tender but precocious girl of 13 to the mature but fresh and blooming woman nearly 19, each contending for my love, claiming the greater share of it as due to her superior devotion to me," he wrote. According to him, they rushed into his arms and covered him in kisses every opportunity they had. Further, they pressed "their bodies almost into mine, wreathing their limbs with mine, encountering warmly every portion of my frame, and permitting my hands to stray unchecked over every part of them and to rest without the slightest shrinking from it, in the most secret and sacred regions," wrote Hammond. His primary concern was not his violation of his nieces' "secret and sacred regions," but what he considered Wade Hampton II's desire to ruin him socially and politically as a result of the affair. According to Hammond, the Hampton and Fitzsimons families "pursued and are still pursuing me with the bitterest persecution," which he claimed placed a significant strain on his relationship with the South Carolina state legislature

⁴⁴Hammond, January 31, 1844, December 9, 1846 in *Ibid.*, 120, 173.

during the last year of his term as governor in 1844. Two years later, when Hammond failed to be elected to the U.S. Senate by the state legislature, he blamed the loss squarely on Hampton. Still unable to take accountability for his actions, he charged his in-laws with a desire to “black ball me and to mortify me and mine by keeping us out of society,” wrote Hammond. Of Hampton specifically, he declared, “I always thought him generous and magnanimous and for these qualities I loved him. I love him no longer. And from this source arises all the pain I feel in this affair.”⁴⁵

Destroying the bonds of trust within his extended family, alienating his wife from her sister and nieces, and losing an opportunity to serve in the U.S. Senate apparently was not enough to convince Hammond that there were consequences for his sexual behavior. If he could not humble himself enough to bear the full burden for sexually violating four white teenage girls who had the benefit of antebellum society’s commitment to safeguarding the sexual purity and virtue of white girls and women, it is no surprise that Hammond blatantly rejected his wife’s indignation over his sexual relations with his female slaves, Sally and Louisa, who were deemed his lawful property and subject to his demands. Though his molestation of his nieces did cost him the 1846 Senate seat, his sexual connection to Sally and Louisa cost him very little politically. In 1856, six years after Catherine’s initial departure, he was finally elected to serve as the junior senator from South Carolina. In regard to what his behavior ultimately cost his family, it is true that they remained sprawled across the state for several years rather than living together in a respectable manner at Silver Bluff, but he and Catherine eventually reconciled in 1855 and remained together until his death in November of 1864. And, he never gave up ownership of Sally or Louisa, despite his wife’s ultimatum. He continued his sexual relationship with both women and fathered children by both. The mother and daughter remained enslaved by the

⁴⁵Hammond, December 9, 1846, January 31, 1844, December 9, 1846 in *Ibid.*, 120, 168, 170, 172-173.

Hammond family until the end of the Civil War. Though Hammond wished to keep his connection to Sally and Louisa secret, as slaves, they were never permitted the right to decline his sexual advances and uphold their bodies as sacred.⁴⁶

Some slaveholding men felt no need to offer excuses, such as weakness of the flesh or failure to be discreet, or seek pardon for their choices to engage in sexual relations with enslaved women. Rather, this group of men appeared to feel exempt from judgment and showed little sign of concern for the consequences that might have ensued as a result of their choices. Their actions and words suggest that they believed that their status as patriarchs—household rulers of dependents both black and white—afforded them the prerogative to do as they wished and disregard the costs to themselves, their wives and children, and the enslaved women involved. This was certainly the case for Newman Roane, a planter from King William County, Virginia. According to his wife Evelina, in the summer of 1823, three months after their marriage, he made the bold decision to move his enslaved concubine Biney and their two children into the plantation home he shared with his wife. In her petition for divorce, she reported that Newman made it abundantly clear that nothing and no one was going to prevent him from providing his enslaved mistress and children with the comforts of his home.⁴⁷

Newman only adopted this audacious attitude towards Evelina once their marriage became official. Prior to getting married, he did all in his power, including requesting a private meeting with Evelina's brother, Dr. Fendall Gregory, to discredit any rumors the Gregory family may have heard concerning him having an intimate connection with one of his female slaves.

⁴⁶Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South*, 87. Hammond speaks of his reconciliation with Catherine Hammond and the purchase of their new residence Redcliffe, where Hammond lived until his death. See Hammond, May 12, 1855 in Bleser, ed. *Secret and Sacred*, 266.

⁴⁷Evelina Roane divorce petition, December 2, 1824, King William County, Legislative Petitions, LVA.

Fendall had, in fact, heard rumors that Newman had a “kept” female slave and fathered her two children and demanded to know if there was any truth to the rumors. Newman assured him that no such illicit connection existed between him and the woman, and he even promised Fendall that he would sell the woman and her children as a sign of his sincerity.⁴⁸ But, once he became Evelina’s husband, things rapidly changed. Newman was a modest planter before his marriage to Evelina, owning at least ten slaves; but, due to their marriage, he was now the head of a household and guardian of a legally dependent wife through whom he acquired even more land and slave holdings, which amounted to even greater status among the men in King William County. According to the 1820 federal census, Evelina’s father, William Gregory, owned over eighty slaves, and that same year he acquired Elsing Green, a notable estate in King William County, meaning he was more than equipped to provide his daughter with a generous dowry when the time came.⁴⁹ Empowered by his new status, Newman made it clear that he intended to run his household without interference from his wife or her family and without fear of their judgment.

Newman Roane did not parse words when he told his wife of his intentions to bring Biney and her children into their home to live with them side-by-side. According to Evelina, showing no regard for her feelings, he told her that “he had two mulatto children then at his brother’s who were much more comely and handsome than any she would ever have, and that he would bring the mother and her children home, and not permit them to suffer any longer.” He communicated that their comfort was more significant to him than hers and that he had no plans of hiding his affection for his female slave or the children they made together. He even considered himself standing “upon principle” when he determined that he would provide better

⁴⁸Fendall Gregory affidavit in Roane divorce petition, LVA.

⁴⁹1820 U.S. Federal Census, King William, Virginia, NARA.

care for his enslaved children than any “lawful” children that Evelina might give birth to. Of course, it is possible that Evelina exaggerated Newman’s statements. As she was seeking a divorce, it served her to characterize his words and actions in the most offensive way possible.⁵⁰

Newman appeared to feel empowered by the law and social customs, which made him guardian of his wife and his slaves, to force Evelina to not only share her home but her husband’s sexual affections with a female slave who she surely considered her inferior. Thomas Gregory, another of Evelina’s brothers, testified that it was not unusual to come to the Roane home and find Biney resting as though she were the lady of the house. In the beginning, Newman made thinly veiled claims that Biney was brought into the home to serve as the family’s housekeeper. Thomas, however, was not convinced. He recalled never seeing the woman do any kind of housework. “She was always idle,” and her oldest child was “generally at Mr. Roane’s heels, and constantly fed in the house, very much humoured and spoiled,” he said. When reflecting on what he witnessed in his sister’s home, all Thomas could conclude was that Newman saw himself as a man above reproach, exempt from any discontent his actions generated amongst his wife and her family. Evelina described herself as an unfortunate female who had been transferred to the power and possession of a husband without restraint. “He would often say to your petitioner that he did not care for consequences & that he felt no repugnance to the character of a man of violence and that the fear of consequences could not restrain him from the acts of assassin if prompted by his passions,” she stated.⁵¹

Newman Roane was determined to assert absolute authority over his household and made it abundantly clear that he would not be intimidated by any threats his wife’s family intended to make against him. According to Thomas, on one occasion, Newman was brazen enough to reveal

⁵⁰Evelina Roane petition in Roane divorce petition, LVA.

⁵¹Thomas Gregory affidavit and Evelina Roane petition in Ibid.

that Evelina feared being poisoned by Biney. When Evelina's father and brothers mobilized to secure her safety, Newman responded with indignation. According to Thomas, their father, William, made a generous offer to purchase Biney and her children from Newman and move them to his nearby estate, Elsing Green, where they could live and work. Next, he offered to replace Biney and her children with new servants so that his daughter could be free from the presence of this "obnoxious woman," said Thomas. In Thomas's words, Newman became "much incensed and declared that no respect was paid to his feelings." He demanded that people respect his prerogative to provide his concubine and his enslaved children with the lifestyle he desired for them to have, and declared that "those who wished to get this negro woman from him—only sought the opportunity of sending her to the backwoods." Though he had once admitted to Evelina that he only married her to gain access to her father's fortune, in this moment he asserted that "he would not part with the woman for all the estate of his father-in-law and in particular that his father-in-law should have nothing to do with her." In essence, he did not need anyone's approval of his intimate relationship with his enslaved paramour; asserting his right to prioritize his enslaved mistress over his wife was more important than any financial consequences he might face. Just to prove how little he cared about the prospects of losing his father-in-law's support, Newman pronounced that "if his feelings were not more respected, he would sell his estate in Elsing and remove to the Ohio," abandoning his wife altogether to "settle this woman [Biney] and children in an independent situation," recalled Thomas.⁵²

Despite Newman Roane's expectations for what his wife should tolerate, having to share her home with her husband's concubine proved to be too much for Evelina, and she petitioned the Virginia General Assembly for a divorce in December of 1824, less than two years after their marriage. According to the divorce records, Biney and her children lived, ate, and slept within

⁵²Ibid.

the Roane home. It is possible that Biney preferred living and working in the Roane's home to working in the fields, but Evelina communicated that the enslaved woman's mere presence in any part of her home was enough for her to want out of the marriage.⁵³

Divorce petitions reveal that some slaveholding men felt no qualms about not only bringing enslaved women into their homes, but into their marital beds as well. Lucy Norman stated in her 1848 petition for divorce that while she was sleeping in her bed, her husband, James Norman, "under the cover of night," brought their female servant Maria into their bedroom purportedly for the purposes of having sexual relations in her presence. According to a boarder living in their home in Henry County, Virginia, James "frequently slept with her said servant girl, sometimes on a pallet in his wife's chamber & at other times in an adjoining room of the house." Anne Wilson of North Carolina testified that her husband William had the habit of "indulging himself in sexual intercourse" in the bed where "she was in the habit of sleeping." In South Carolina, Sarah Ann Simpson testified that her husband Thomas often slept with one of their enslaved women in their bed. She considered the ordeal unendurable and said she suffered "with the pollution of her bed, in a manner the most offensive to the feelings of the wife—the disgusting intercourse of her said husband, with his own slave." Prioritizing her own discomfort, she did not report how she enslaved woman felt about the arrangement.⁵⁴

According to Lucy Norman, when she expressed her discontent with her husband James bringing their servant Maria into their bed chamber and engaging in sexual intercourse with the woman in her presence, he callously replied that "if she did not like it she might look out for

⁵³Mary Gregory affidavit, Thomas Gregory affidavit, Fendall Gregory affidavit, and Evelina Roane petition in Ibid.

⁵⁴Lucy Norman petition in Lucy Norman divorce petition, December 20, 1848, Henry County, Legislative Petitions, LVA; Anne Wilson petition in Anne Wilson divorce petition, November 19, 1840, Burke County, County Court Divorce Records, North Carolina Department of Archives; Sarah Ann Simpson petition in Sarah Simpson divorce petition, July 10, 1845, Fairfield District, Records of the Equity Court, South Carolina Department of History and Archives (SCDAH).

other quarters.” His message was that he did not plan to stop having sexual relations with Maria just because she disapproved. He saw their house as a space where he could do as he pleased and if she didn’t want to bear witness, she needed to leave. The liberties that he took did not stop with bringing Maria into his wife’s bed. According to witnesses, James felt no obligation to shield anyone inside his household from his sexual advances towards Maria. Boarders living in the Norman household testified that it was obvious that James had an intimate attachment to the house servant Maria. One said that he frequently embraced and kissed her in his presence and made it a habit to invite her to eat at the dining room table with family and guests.⁵⁵

Some slaveholders did not shy away from making boisterous and unapologetic demonstrations of affection towards female slaves. When the Virginia House of Delegates reviewed Ellen Shields Dunlap’s petition for divorce from Robert Dunlap, they would have had to notice that almost every deponent spoke of the ease with which Robert boasted about his sexual connection to an enslaved woman named Milly in front of his wife and others. According to two witnesses, “Dunlap from his own confession not only in the presence of these affiants but also in the presence of his lawful wife Ellen had repeatedly carnal knowledge of her the said negro woman.”⁵⁶ In Sopha Dobyn’s divorce petition, her neighbor Stephen Terry testified that in his presence, “the said Dobyns boast to his wife that in her absence he had taken one of his own negroe women into her bed and that he would do it again whenever it suited him.” In her 1862 petition for divorce, Elizabeth Wade confessed that her husband was his most brutal when he would have “criminal intercourse” with his female slave and then boast of it to her.⁵⁷

⁵⁵Lucy Norman petition, Wilmouth Edwards deposition, Catherine Carter deposition, and Elizabeth Murphy deposition in Norman divorce petition, LVA.

⁵⁶James Shields and Thomas Shields affidavit, and Peggy and Rachel Shields affidavit in Ellen Shields divorce petition, October 12, 1814, Augusta County, Legislative Petitions, LVA.

Though James Norman also wished to be unabashed about his sexual relationship with his female slave Maria, he remained quite intolerant to anyone's objections. As previously mentioned, one of the Norman's boarders testified that James was in the habit of inviting Maria to sit at the dining room table. On one particular occasion, Lucy Norman decided to adamantly object to having her husband's enslaved mistress sit at the same table as her and her guests. After all, slaveholders and slaves eating together at the same table would have been considered unthinking in almost any antebellum household. According to the witness, when Lucy attempted to uphold social decorum, "Mr. N. insisted that the said girl should be so seated & said to Mrs. N that if she broached her he would take the life of her Mrs. N." This time, he went beyond telling her that she could leave if she didn't like how he intended to rule their household, but threatened to take her life if she continued to question his authority. He made it clear that having the right to keep his enslaved mistress close at hand was more important than keeping his family intact, physically and figuratively.⁵⁸

Similarly, John Burwell of Mecklenburg, Virginia, was known to exhibit brash behavior towards his family when questioned about his sexual relations with female slaves. According to his wife Lucy Burwell, when it came to John's indulgence in adulterous intercourse with female slaves, "the actual presence of his wife and children has been insufficient to control him." She explained that on a recent occasion, he announced in front of her and their sons and daughters that he would not be sleeping in his usual bedroom with his wife that night, but would sleep in a different room. Then, he immediately requested that their female slave Lucretia join him in his temporary sleeping quarters, where the two remained for the rest of the night. Lucy testified that,

⁵⁷Stephen Terry deposition in Sopha Dobyns divorce petition, December 16, 1817, Bedford County, Legislative Petitions, LVA; Elizabeth Wade divorce petition, May 5, 1862, Franklin County, Legislative Petitions, LVA.

⁵⁸Catherine Carter deposition in Norman divorce petition, LVA.

“this girl has in this a few year past been the mother of two children, the offspring of a white father, and your oratrix has every reason to believe they are the children of her husband.” John and Lucy’s son Thomas also testified that over the years, his father had frequently treated his mother “unkindly and harsh,” and his habit of engaging in sexual relations with female slaves in the presence of their family only added insult to injury. Convinced that his father’s habits would not change voluntarily after twenty-three years of marriage, Thomas decided to confront him directly about Lucretia’s presence in the family’s home. He requested that his father “send off this servant girl Lucretia.” In response, John demanded that his son leave his home, infuriated that he would dare try to dictate his actions. Like James Norman, John Burwell considered his word final in his household and would not stand to be questioned about his relations with his female slave, even by his son.⁵⁹

John Prince of Charleston, South Carolina perhaps most clearly illustrated a blatant disregard for his wife and family when he abandoned his wife of over twenty years, Eliza, and their eight minor children in order to live in concubinage with his female servant Jemima. As a result of his move, John left Eliza virtually destitute. Though he earned over \$600 annually, he only occasionally sent a small sum of money for the maintenance of his lawful family. In the meantime, he purchased a new home where he could live openly with Jemima and not have the burden of a wife or children. Determined to fulfill his own needs, he forgot his obligations to be a protective husband and father. When his own son Alwin petitioned him for support on behalf of his mother and siblings, he threatened him with physical violence, claiming Alwin’s real intentions were to interfere with Jemima and her children. John Prince was no longer Eliza’s husband, nor Alwin’s father. He was a man who wished to live openly with his enslaved

⁵⁹Lucy Burwell petition, Thomas Burwell deposition in Lucy Burwell divorce petition, September 9, 1856, Mecklenburg County, Legislative Petitions, LVA.

concubine. Fortunately for John, as a slaveholding man in the antebellum South, he did not need the consent of his dependents—his wife, children, or enslaved concubine--to do so.⁶⁰

Whether slaveholding men tried desperately to offer excuses for their sexual relations with enslaved women or altogether rejected the idea that they needed to provide justification for their behavior, what is consistent is that these men were virtually never willing to assume the appropriate amount of responsibility for the consequences their sexual behavior caused their families, enslaved communities, or even themselves. Though they reveled in their responsibilities and privileges as patriarchs—the trusted protectors and providers for their families *and* slaves—they often prioritized their own wants and needs, even if it meant sexually exploiting enslaved women and causing pain, shame, and disruption within their own families. Enslaved women were that much more vulnerable to sexual exploitation because of white men's efforts to avoid taking responsibility and their ability to escape prosecution for these acts of terror and degradation.

⁶⁰Eliza Prince petition, Alwin Prince deposition in Eliza Prince divorce petition, June 27, 1837, Charleston District, Records of the Equity Court, SCDAH.

EPILOGUE

In 1909, Anne Burton, born into slavery in Clayton, Alabama, a few years before the Civil War, published an account of her enslavement in which she reflected that the greatest thing about emancipation was that the black woman was “no longer the easy victim of the unlicensed passion of certain white men.” Though slavery presented many challenges for men and women, Burton considered sexual exploitation the enslaved woman’s most significant challenge. With so much hopefulness for the future, she claimed freedom from sexual exploitation to be a great gain, “a sign of real progress.” For Burton, the progress of black women was essential to the overall success of formerly enslaved men and women after Reconstruction. She argued that, “no race can rise higher than its women,” and black women were the “mightiest moral factor in the life of her people.” Sexual exploitation during slavery had diminished their power, but Burton believed that with emancipation, freedom from this evil would allow black women to reach new heights.¹

Yet, seventy-three years after emancipation from his enslavement in Texas, James Green informed WPA interviewers that white men’s interests in having sex with black women had not dissolved alongside the institution of slavery. Burton’s prediction of black women’s freedom from white men’s unwanted passions had proven to be inaccurate. According to Green, “the white men in the habit of having negro girls still go on having them.” One notable difference

¹Annie L. Burton. 1909. *Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days*. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1996. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/burton/burton.html>.

that Green observed in 1938 was that white and black people in his home state of Texas tended to look down upon white men who pursued black women, whereas before the war, “nobody thought nothing about it.” According to former slave May Satterfield, however, the judgments that Green spoke of did little to protect black women from sexual exploitation in the twentieth-century. She argued that seven decades removed from slavery, black women still faced many of the same challenges as enslaved women: “The white man is still after them. And if she ain’t got grit in her craw, he gets her.”²

Though the Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution brought a legal end to slavery, they did not dismantle the racial and gender ideologies that empowered whites over blacks and men over women. Moreover, white men did not cease in their efforts to use sexual power to maintain white supremacy in the post-war era. The testimony of former slaves reveals that nearly halfway through the twentieth century, black women continued to be vulnerable to white men’s sexual exploitation. The consciousness of sexual violence was alive and well; even black women who did not experience sexual assault at the hands of white men knew of the possibilities—the pervasiveness of the horror had been made clear to them by their mothers, grandmothers, and female friends. What is more, African Americans developed a new consciousness regarding white society’s desire to police their sexuality once slavery ended.

African Americans’ continued consciousness of sexual exploitation was most poignantly articulated by former slave and anti-lynching advocate Ida B. Wells. In 1892, Wells embarked on a one-woman campaign for anti-lynching legislation on the heels of the tragic lynching of her friends—three black men who owned the successful People’s Grocery Company in Memphis,

²James Green interview in George Rawick, ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplemental Series 2* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 5 (Texas), 1577-1583; May Satterfield interview in Charles Perdue, Jr., ed. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-slaves* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), 245.

Tennessee. Whites justified their lynching of black men by arguing that black men lacked sexual control and, therefore, white women needed to be protected from their predatory nature. In her self-published pamphlet, *Southern Horrors*, Wells contended that lynching was the result of white men's perversion of black men's desires for economic and political equality into a desire for sexual equality—namely, sexual access to white women. For Wells, the irony of this black male rape myth was that it was merely a reflection of white men's historical record of raping and sexually harassing black women.³

Just as the sexual exploitation of enslaved women had implications for enslaved women *and* men, Wells understood that lynching was just as much about the sexuality of black women as it was about the sexuality of black men. In an effort to combat black women's sexual exploitation, along with lynching, Wells joined the black women's club movement, which was dedicated to the strategy of racial uplift, accomplished through the politics of respectability. For Wells, however, the politics of respectability and the practice of being models of true womanhood had never protected black women from white men's sexual aggression. She argued that respectability would not be enough, seeing that white men had been permitted since slavery to project myths of hypersexuality and promiscuity onto black women to justify their rape.

In the 1890s, Wells recognized that the lynching epidemic inherently tied whites and blacks together. White men and women's efforts to police both black men and women's sexuality were motivated by their need to solidify their long-standing authority over blacks. Likewise, this dissertation has demonstrated that despite power differentials between whites and blacks, tools of oppression such as sexual exploitation and lynching affect the lives of oppressors as well as the oppressed. At almost every turn, the everyday experiences of slaveholders and

³Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York: New York Age Print, 1892). For more on Ida B. Wells and her anti-lynching campaign, see Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

enslaved people were influenced by white men's sexual exploitation of enslaved women. By moving the sexual exploitation of enslaved women from the periphery to the center of slaveholders' and enslaved people's experiences, we learn how significant white men's sexual power over the enslaved was to the sustainability of slavery in the antebellum South. Sexual violence and harassment served to breakdown enslaved women and men's resolve and fortify slaveholders' authority. Yet, it also created tensions that were felt by all members of the plantation community. While white men's exploitative sexual behavior terrorized enslaved women and men, it also tested white women's tolerance and at times fractured slaveholding marriages and families. Consequences of this sexual abuse reverberated in the slave quarters as well as plantation households. Furthermore, the usefulness of sexual power to maintain white supremacy did not diminish with the end of the Civil War and the institution of slavery, as James Green, May Satterfield, and Ida B. Wells attested.

By examining the experiences of oppressors and the oppressed side-by-side, we are able to better understand the inner workings of systems of power—how people learned about power and how to use it; and, how they learned to navigate life in light of that knowledge. This dissertation demonstrates that the lives of slaveholders and the enslaved were inextricably linked and the consequences of violence, oppression, and exploitation were vast and experienced by all. It is my hope that scholars of slavery and beyond will continue to place oppressors and the oppressed side-by-side, acknowledging their shared humanity, but also exposing the universal consequences of inhumanity.

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