“Dat’s one chile of mine you ain’t never gonna sell”: Gynecological Resistance within the Plantation Community

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Abstract of the Thesis

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The study of gynecological resistance as an integral part of the slave community has frequently been ignored in studies of the plantation South. Slave women actively engaged in both collective and individual acts of gynecological resistance. This work, "Dat's one chile of mine you ain't never gonna sell: Gynecological Resistance in the Plantation Community", explores enslaved women's use of birth control, abortion, and infanticide as a means to gain personal autonomy and control over their bodies. This study seeks to forge a collective narrative about the secret practices of slave women, while attempting to give them a voice of their own.

Relying primarily on the WPA slave narratives, as well as the Virginia Plantation records, this thesis first seeks to examine cases of gynecological resistance, as well as the motivations behind these acts. This thesis argues that enslaved women used gynecological resistance as a means to maintain some personal autonomy and control over their bodies, as well as the bodies of their children. The study illustrates that these individual acts became collective resistance, when the community worked to aid and protect women, who committed acts of gynecological resistance by keeping their secrets from the master. Finally, this thesis demonstrates how individual acts of resistance became collective, or day-to-day, in the forms of oral narratives about gynecological resistance that were passed along for the purposes of instruction.

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"Dat's one chile of mine you ain't never gonna sell: Gynecological Resistance in the Plantation Community"

Introduction

Resistance can be defined as "the act of striving or working against; to oppose actively." Historians use this definition when they study actions that enslaved people took to work against or actively oppose the institution of slavery. The word "resist" evokes images of revolt or revolution. It provides imagery of a smaller group trying to overcome the larger more powerful group. One expects the resisters, who are in active opposition to this greater force, to be more empowered or more in control of their situation. They perform actions that undermine the ruling power, and do so successfully. This definition falls short, though, in describing the situation when we apply it to the struggle between female slaves and their owners. In the case of enslaved women, the word resistance should be extended to include "withstanding," or "fending off." Resistance should take on a more defensive meaning, as in a body resisting germs. When we use the word in this way it is a more accurate description of the type of resistance that slave women performed. Slave women were not overthrowing the institution, but their resistance prevented the master's will from overcoming their entire beings.

One form of resistance slave women used in order to maintain some autonomy or control over their bodies was gynecological resistance. For the purposes of this paper, gynecological or reproductive resistance is any action that a slave woman takes in opposition to her owner's authority over her reproductive life or her role as a mother. Gynecological resistance includes actions such as birth control, abortion, infanticide, as well as avoiding the master's sexual advances. These actions were ways in which enslaved women, as well as the slave community, could reclaim control over their bodies and the fate of their families.

Based on the findings of scholars such as Raymond Bauer, Alice Bauer, Eugene Genovese, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Darlene Clark Hine, Deborah Gray White, and Brenda Stevenson, gynecological resistance was used by slaves to challenge the master's authority over enslaved women's reproductive lives. In 1942 Raymond and Alice Bauer in their article, "Day to Day Resistance," cited the possibility of slave mothers killing

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their children to protest slavery.[1] In 1974, Eugene Genovese found that "slave women, who did not want children, knew how to abort or arrange to have a child die soon after birth."[2] Genovese argues, though, that there were more cases of natural abortion and deaths of slave infants than acts of gynecological resistance. Herbert Gutman's 1976 study, *The Black Family in Slavery and in Freedom,* documented entire generations of slave women who refused to have any children.[3]

In 1981, Darlene Clark Hine and Kate Wittenstein argued that slave women abstained from sex, induced abortions and committed acts of infanticide to resist their sexual exploitation. Arguing that infanticide was perhaps the "most psychologically devastating means" of resistance, the authors suggested that more in-depth studies of infanticide would allow historians to better understand combined resistant strategies between black men and women and their relations with the plantation society.[4] In Deborah Gray White's groundbreaking 1985 study of female slaves, *Aren't I a Woman,* she argues that no one will know what drove slave women to murder their own children or how many women actually committed infanticide. But women who "killed their children claimed to have done so because of their intense concern for their offspring."[5]

Most recent scholars such as Jacqueline Jones, Thelma Jennings, Brenda Stevenson, Dorothy Roberts, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Mary Ellison have come to similar conclusions that slave mothers may have induced abortions and used infanticide as effective ways to resist slavery.[6] Despite the research on these resistive measures,

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[1] Alice Bauer and Raymond Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance," Journal of Negro History, (October 1942), 417.

[2] Eugene Genovese Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made, (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 496. Genovese goes on to say that infanticide was not a common occurrence.

[3] Herbert. Gutman. The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1759-1925. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 81.

[4] Darlene Clark Hine and Kate Wittenstein, "Female Slave Resistance: the Economics of Sex," Black Women Cross Culturally, ed. Filomena Chioma Steady (Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing, 1981), 296.

[5] Deborah Gray White, Aren't I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985), 88.

[6] Jones, Jacqueline. Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present. (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Thelma Jennings, "Us Colored Women Had To Go Through A Plenty": Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women. Journal of Women's History, Vol 1. No.3 (Winter 1990): 44-74.; Stevenson, Brenda. Life in Black and White: Family Community in the Slave South. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.); Dorothy Roberts, Killing the Black Body, Race Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty. (New York: Pantheon, 1997.); Fox-Genovese, "Strategies and Forms of Resistance: Focus on Slave Women in the United States." In Black Women in American History. ed. Darlene Clark Hine, (Vol.4) 409-431. (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1990.) Mary Ellison,

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evidence does not detail what women were thinking when they took their children's lives and what circumstances drove them to choose this type of resistance.

Using the WPA slave narratives, as well as the Virginia Plantation records, this thesis first seeks to examine cases of gynecological resistance, as well as the motivations behind these acts. Second, this thesis argues that enslaved women used gynecological resistance as a means to maintain some personal autonomy and control over their bodies, as well as the bodies of their children, if even for just a few minutes. Third, this thesis illustrates that these individual acts became collective resistance, when the community worked to aid and protect women who committed acts of gynecological resistance by keeping their secrets from the master. Finally, my thesis demonstrates how individual acts of resistance became part of collective memory, in the forms of oral narratives about gynecological resistance that were passed along for the purposes of instruction and inspiration.

Many historians argue that infanticide and abortion were not frequent occurrences and when they did happen they were the exceptions rather than the norms.[7] This thesis agrees that the number of instances was not quantitatively significant. The examples of gynecological resistance should be valued, though, for the same reasons that historians study the three slave revolts that occurred in the United States or racial lynchings, quantitatively few but immensely significant in their impact. Everyday resistance is equally valuable and significant to study as slave revolts because it reflects not just individual acts of frustration and resistance, but a community working together to undermine the authority of the master. Acts of gynecological resistance reflect the frustration of women within the oppressive world of the plantation south and therefore should be given equal attention. By studying the relationship between acts of resistance and the motivations behind these actions, historians can get a fuller picture of the frustrating lives of enslaved people.

"Resistance to Oppression: Black Women's Response to Slavery in the United States," Slavery and Abolition. (May 1983): 56-83.

[7] Genovese Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made,496-497; John Campbell, "Work Pregnancy and Infant Mortality Among Southern Slaves," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, (Spring, 1984), 794.

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Special attention also needs to be paid to the direct link between acts of gynecological resistance and the emotional and physical abuse female slaves had to endure as women and as mothers. One must also recognize the impact that this abuse had on the fathers, brothers and husbands in the community. Slave owners used rape as an assertion of power over female slaves. These enslaved men would feel a sense of powerlessness to protect their daughter, sisters and wives from rape by the master. Similar to feudal practices of the jus primae noctis, when the feudal lord asserted his power by maintaining the ability to have sex with any of his female serfs, the rape of slave women was a means of psychological torture for slave men and women.[8] In order to understand gynecological resistance, therefore, we must study this abuse.

Chapter one discusses the pervasiveness of rape and sexual abuse within the plantation community. Using Nell Irvin Painter's concept of "Soul Murder" and Darlene Clark Hine's culture of disemblance as frameworks for analysis, this chapter argues that there was great psychological impact as a result of rape and the threat of rape. This constant threat motivated women to commit acts of gynecological resistance. Chapter one also highlights the popular image of the Jezebel, the oversexed African woman, and how this image became an integral part of the pervasiveness and justification of sexual assaults. This chapter further argues that the existence of slave breeding inspired enslaved women to make decisions regarding their reproduction in an attempt to have more control over their bodies. This section discusses the impact that this constant threat of sexual violence had upon the slave community, and how when slave owners raped slave women they also attacked the masculinity of slave men. Finally, chapter one looks at stories of resistance to sexual attacks by slave women. I contend that these stories became forms of resistance themselves because slave women used them to educate their daughters and other young slave women on how to protect themselves from the sexual advances of men.

Chapter two considers issues involving pregnancy and motherhood within the plantation community. This chapter seeks to analyze the psychological effects of continual abuse on slave women's notions of pregnancy and motherhood. It examines

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[8] Angela Davis, "Reflections in Black Women's Role in the Slave Community" Black Scholar 3: Vol. 4 (1971): 13

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the treatment of female slaves when they were pregnant and the practice of feigning illness in order to get out of work. It provides examples of pregnant women who were beaten while they were pregnant, as well as women who were punished because they were unable to work when they were in labor. Chapter two maintains that pregnant women were very vulnerable within the plantation system and this is illustrated through their double responsibility as producers and reproducers. It also argues that abuse while pregnant, as well as the dangers involved in childbirth, were motivating factors for women to practice forms of birth control and abortion. Chapter two also looks closely at the challenges and sorrows that enslaved women had to face as mothers. It looks at abuse of children, a lack of control as parents, and the fear of possible separation as motives that slave women had to protect their children from these horrors by committing acts of infanticide.

Chapter three addresses types of gynecological resistance used by slave women. I assert that methods of birth control, abortion and infanticide were carried over from African cultural practices, but took on new meaning as forms of resistance in the United States. I argue in this section that the number of stories of this type of resistance occurring does not matter, but the ways that these stories were passed on through slave communities is important because the stories themselves became inspirational forms of resistance, as well as examples for further acts of defiance. Also, these stories should be looked at as a direct reflection of the horrific nature of slavery. For a woman to kill her child rather than have it live within the plantation world, that world must have been horrible. All of the abuse and terror that women endured, as discussed in chapters one and two, motivated slave women to commit acts that would protect their children. One must understand the unique environment in which slave women existed in order to understand the decisions that they made.

When I began my research, I was convinced that women had unique and more horrific experiences within slavery, and that they also rebelled in ways distinctive to their gender. What I discovered was that the unique ways that women responded to their oppression, particularly gynecological resistance, was a direct reflection of the horrors that they faced as a result of their dual roles as producer and reproducer within the plantation community. But these acts of resistance were not merely individual resistance. Instead,

the entire slave community took part, whether through the telling of stories or keeping secrets from the master. The effect of the abuse that slaves endured, was not gender specific, but effected the entire community, including men, women, and children. These everyday acts of resistance are therefore equally valuable to study as slave revolts because they reflect the horrors of the institution of slavery, as well as the ways that the community of slaves maintained some personal autonomy within this oppressive regime.

Chapter 1 – Sexual Abuse and Resistance in the Slave Community

Tremendous amounts of work, poor diet, physical abuse, and emotional trauma: these are a few of the horrors faced by enslaved men and women in the nineteenth century South. In addition to these terrors, female slaves faced possible sexual abuse from the overseer, her master, or other male slaves. Harriot Jacobs, in her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* observes, "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own."[9] The female slave was both *woman* and *slave* within the patriarchal institution of slavery in the Old South. Males and females were unequal in this environment, regardless of whether they were black or white.[10] Being black and female just made black women's unique horrors stand apart from the other brutalities of slavery.

One such horror that was inflicted upon slave women was rape. Rape is defined as "sexual intercourse with a woman by a man without her consent and chiefly by force and deception."[11] Rape by their masters or forced sexual relations with men they neither loved nor were attracted to prompted many slave women to take control of their bodies.

"Soul Murder" is the terminology Nell Irvin Painter uses to describe the effects of sexual abuse upon female slaves. Soul Murder within psychoanalytic literature is the "violation of one's inner being, the extinguishing of one's identity, including sexual identity."[12] According to Painter, the violence and sexual abuse had a tremendous impact upon the entire plantation community. Without taking a full account of the psychological impact of the sexual violence, we will never truly understand the world of slavery, specifically that of the female slave. Psychologists claim that women and children who

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[9] Harriot Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, ed. By L Marie Child (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1973, orig. pub. 1861), 79.
[10] Thelma Jennings. "Us Colored Women Had to Go Through A Plenty": Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women. Journal of Women's History, Vol. 2. No. 3 (Winter 1990): 44 -74.
[11] Merriam Webster, Webster's Dictionary, (Merriam Webster's Publishing: Springfield, 1990), 975.
[12] Nell Irvin Painter. "Soul Murder and Slavery" U.S. History as Women's History, Ed. By Linda Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Katherine Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: 1995), 128.

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are sexually abused have very low self-esteem, resulting from blaming themselves for their victimization. "Recent scholarship outlines a series of long-term psychological experiences of sexual abuse and incest: depression, difficulty sleeping, feelings of isolation, poor self-esteem, difficulty relating to other people, contempt for all women including oneself, revictimization, and impaired sexuality that may manifest itself in behaviors that can appear as frigidity or promiscuity."[13] While there is danger in applying our twentieth century understanding to nineteenth century psyche, it is unlikely that slave women were any more equipped to deal with these traumas than victims today.[14]

Deborah Gray White, in the introduction to the latest edition of *Aren't I a Woman,* writes, "Still today, I would pay more attention to the psychological impact of violence and abuse as a way to emphasize the resistance waged against it."[15] By using the concept of Soul Murder as a framework for analysis in studying sexual abuse against slave women in the plantation society, we can illuminate how the sexual abuse they experienced helped to shape their mindset, as well as their actions. These actions included the ways they attempted to control their bodies, their interactions within the female and male community, as well as in the ways they raised their children, particularly their daughters. As Deborah Gray White also argues, "the self-reliance and self-sufficiency of slave women, therefore, must not only be viewed in the context of what the individual slave woman did for herself, but what slave women as a group were able to do for one another."[16] By examining how slave women responded to abuse and rape, as well as how they raised their daughters, it becomes apparent that their actions contributed to and were influenced by a tradition within a community of female slaves.

The Jezebel

An image of black women emerged in white southern society that was diametrically opposed to that of white women. This image of black women is frequently referred to as the Jezebel. Edward Long, an influential and widely published Jamaican historian and scholar of "scientific" racism, writes extensively on the relationship

[13] Painter. "Soul Murder and Slavery," 138.
[14] Ibid, 138.
[15] White, Ar'n't I am Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South, 10.
[16] Ibid.,119-120.

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between Africans and animals.[17] In his "Candid Reflections" published in London in 1772, " a common known proverb, that all people on the globe have some good as well as ill qualities, except the Africans…devoted…in short, to every vice that came in their way, or within their reach." Africans, according to Long were closely related to orang-otangs. These qualities came with them to the New World, where women became notorious as "common prostitutes."[18] Female slaves lived outside of the world of nineteenth century womanhood.[19] They were frequently viewed as animals and almost always perceived as highly sexual. Early explorers to Africa connected the warmth of the climate and the differing clothing fashions of African women as a result of this climate as a sign that black women were by nature promiscuous. Also, these men confused many African cultural practices such as tribal dances and polygamy as signs of African women's over-sexed nature.[20] Angela Davis argues that "aspiring with his sexual assaults to establish her as a female *animal*, he would be striving to destroy her proclivities towards resistance."[21] Therefore, southern white men categorized black women as animal-like because it justified their sexual actions. These acts of rape became symbolic act of conquering.[22]

This image was even further strengthened by perceptions that white owners had of their female slaves. For example, a direct correlation was established between the sexual promiscuity and the apparent fecundity of female slaves, as seen in the natural increase of slaves in the United States.[23] In addition, the image of slave women dressed in loose fitting rags or with their skirts "reefed up" around their waist while they worked in the fields, stood in direct contrast to the several layers of modest cloth that covered all southern white women. As a result, black women were viewed as lewd, lascivious and overtly sexual.[24]

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[17] Philip D. Curtin, The Image of Africa, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 38-45.
[18] Lucille Mathurin Mair, The Jamaican Woman under Slavery. (University of Florida Press, 1974), 122.
[19] Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter (New York: Banthum Books, 1985),43.
[20] Deborah Gray White, Ar'n't I A Woman, 27-46.
[21] Angela Davis, "Reflections in Black Women's Role in the Slave Community,"13.
[22] Angela Davis, "Reflections in Black Women's Role in the Slave Community,"13.
[23] White, Ar'n't I A Woman, 31.
[24] Ibid., 33.

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The slave market also encouraged the image of slave women as highly sexual. [25] Robert Williams recalls witnessing the sale of a slave woman:

> De woman would have jus a piece around her waist (something like tights); her
>
> > Breast an' thighs would be bare. De seller would have her turn around and plump her to show how fat she was and her general condition. Dey would also take her by her breasts and pull dem to show good she was built for raisin; chillun. Dey would have dem 'xamined to show dey was in good health. De young women would bring good money such as $1000 or more 'cause dey would have plenty chillun an' dat whar dey profit would come in.[26]

Fertility and sexuality were one and the same in the slave auction, as white men judged both to decide whether a slave woman was a worthwhile investment.

Slave auctions was not the only place where sex entered owners' views of their female slaves. Punishment of slave women also revealed their place in the plantation world as a highly sexual one.[27] Women were often publicly whipped. These whippings took on a sexual nature because slave women were forced to strip. Mrs. Minnie Folkes remembers the beating of her mother:

> Honey, I don't like to talk 'bout dem times 'cause my mother did suffer misery. You know dar was an overseer who use to tie mother up in de barn wid a rope aroun' her arms up over her head, while she stood on a block. Soon as dey got her tied, dis block was moved an' her feet dangled, you know, couldn' tech de flo. Dis ole man, now, would start beatin' her nekked 'til the blood run down her back to her heels. I took an' seed de whelps an' scars fer my own self wid dese heah two eyes. (This whip she said, 'was a whip like dey use to use on horses: it was a piece o' leather ' bout as wide as my han' f'om little finger to thumb.') After dey beat my mother all dey wanted, another overseer Lord, Lord, I hate white people and de flood waters gwine drown some mo'. Well honey, dis man would bathe her in salt an' water. Don' you know dem places was a hurtin'. Um! Um![28]

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[25] Ibid., 33.
[26] Charles Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 326.
[27] White, Ar'n't I A Woman, 33.
[28] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 93.

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Requiring female slaves to strip not only emphasized the sexual nature of the act, but these whippings also reflected the sexual domination the master or the overseer had over the woman.

In direct opposition to the image of the Jezebel, white women were enveloped in the ideals of the Cult of True Womanhood. Southern women were inundated with its tenants: purity, piety, submission, and domesticity. In the eyes of white southern society, these qualities did not apply to black women.[29] In fact the two images helped to define and strengthen each other. The more lascivious the black woman appeared, the more pure white women became in contrast. White men used the image of the Jezebel to justify their actions toward female slaves. White men blamed their infidelities on slave women, who were viewed as "black temptresses." They used rape as a means to terrorize and assert their control over their slave women. The stereotypical images of black women as highly sexed beings helped to feed these controlling actions. Some white men's wives, in turn, held the female slaves responsible for luring their husbands with their overt sexuality. Thus, words such as "seduction" and "luring" took the place of "child abuse" and "sexual abuse."[30] The image of the Jezebel characterized white perceptions about black female sexuality.

Production and Reproduction

In reality, white owners raped their female slaves to increase their property and to exert their power over them.31 The act of rape robbed slave women of their dignity, their self-esteem and frequently placed them in a position to continue slavery's legacy through the birth of their master's illegitimate children. As Nell Painter suggests earlier, through these frequent rapes white men not only attempted to control the bodies of female slaves, but control their spirits as well.32 Barbara Omelade explains that the female slave's:

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[29] Scholars such as Gerda Lerner, Black Women in White America (New York: Vintage Books, 1972); Dorothy Sterling, We Are Your Sisters, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Marli Weiner Plantation Mistresses and Female Slaves: Gender Race and South Carolina Women 1830 – 1880, (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International); Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter, 43, argued the effects and limitations of the Cult of True Womanhood and the slave women's use of it in their own lives.
[30] White, Ar'n't I A Woman, 30-31.
[31] Dorothy Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 24.; Davis, "Reflections on Black Women's Role in the Community," 13.
[32] Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery," 13.

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> vagina, used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment – the capital investment being the sex act, and the resulting child the accumulated surplus, worth money on the slave market.[33]

Angela Davis argues that, "Rape, in fact was an uncamoflaged expression of the slave holder's economic mastery and the overseer's control over Black women as workers."[34] When a master raped his slave, he claimed her both for his possession. Raping slave women could also be a part of men's initiation into manhood. Walton, a slave in Virginia recounts:

> Ethel Mae was a yaller gal, an I should of know better. But she couldn't help herself. She told me 'bout Marsa bringing his son, Levey, down to the cabin. Hey both took her-the father showing the son what is was all about-and she couldn't do nothing 'bout it.[35]

One young slave told her sister that she was made to "lay on a table and two or three white men would have sex with her before they'd let her up."[36] When asked about her mother Hattie Douglas remembered, "My mother was young you know and I think he [her Irish white master] seduced her…this seducing business been going on ever since the world began, hasn't it."[37] Mary Peters' mother spoke to her about being raped by young white boys. Her mother told her that she (Mary) was conceived when:

> The mistresses' boys came in and threw her down on the floor and tied her down so she could not struggle, and one after another used her as long as they wanted for the rest of the afternoon."[38]

Peters' mother probably told her of this encounter and warned her to avoid contact with white men when at all possible.

Beaten, raped, and sometimes sold away from their families, slave women realized that masters had no regard for them as human beings. Masters believed that because slave women were their property, that afforded them the right to sexually abuse them. Mrs. May Satterfield remembers:

> See all de ha'f white niggers walkin' 'bout now. Dey ain't no 'cuse fo' it now,

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[33] Barbara Omelade, "Heart of Darkness," Words of Fire, ed. Beverley Guy-Shefthall, (New York: The New York Press, 1995), 366.
[34] Angela Davis, Women, Race and Class, (New York: First Vintage Books, 1981), 7.
[35] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 301.
[36] Dorothy Sterling, We Are Your Sisters, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984) 35.
[37] George Rawick, The American Slave, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1941) vol. 1 Sup.2, 62.
[38] Ibid., 68.

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> but dey was in slav'y time. Ma mama said that in dem times a nigger 'oman couldn't help hersef, fo' she had to do what de marster say. Ef he come to de field whar de women workin; an' tell gal to come on, she had to go. He would take one down in de woods an' use her all de time he wanted to, den send her back to work. Times nigger 'oman had chillun for de marster an' his sons and some times it was fo' de ovah seer. Dat's whar ha'f white niggers come from den. But now it's diffunt, I don't ha'f to tell you whar dey come f'om.[39]

Slave women had no one to turn to for help. Even their white mistresses had little power to aid them and would rarely have been considered an ally.[40] Slave women frequently had little choice but to succumb to the wishes of their masters. Mrs. Virginia Hayes Shepherd recalls:

> Diana was the house maid for the Gaskins and lived right in the house with the family. This girl was old master Gaskins Diana. He had his wife and children, but he just wanted Diana in every sense of the world [word?]. He was really master of all he surveyed. He made demands in Diana just the same as id she had been his wife. Of course she fought him, but he wanted her and he had her. He use to send Diana to the barn to shell corn. Soon he would follow. He tried to cage her in the barn so she couldn't get out. Once she got away from him, went to the house and told her mistress how Gaskins treated her. The mistress sympathized with the girl, but couldn't help her, because she was afraid of her own husband. He would beat her if she tried to meddle. Indeed he would pull her hair out. Once when Diana was successful in fighting him off, he bundled her up, put her in a cart, and took her to Norfolk an out her on the auction block.[41]

Mrs. Gaskins realized what her husband was doing, but was unable to stop the abuse because of the fear that she too would be abused. Slave women sometimes spoke to the plantation mistress about the sexual abuse that was occurring between themselves and the master or overseer. This almost never had a positive outcome. [42] The mistresses become angry upon hearing about her husband's infidelity and took out their frustration by treating their female slaves cruelly or forcing their husband to sell the slave. She also could choose to ignore the situation, as Mrs. Gaskins did in the case of Diana because she feared her interference might turn her husband's wrath upon her.

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[39] George Rawick, The American Slave, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1941) vol. 1 Sup.2, 245.
[40] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 325-327.
[41] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 257.
[42] Catherine Clinton in Plantation Mistress, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in Within the Plantation Household,231.; discuss the relationship between mistresses and slave women.

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Punishment could also act as a guise for masters to have access to their female slaves without their wives' suspicion. Mrs. Mary Wood tells the story of a female slave who finds herself in such a predicament. She says:

> Grandma's sister was a slave. Her name was Fannie and she 'longst to Snead too and ole Snead thought so much of her he wouldn't never let de overseer whip her. But his wife caught up wid grandma's sis Fannie. She would get stubborn sometimes. Her ole mistress would tell her to do something and if she didn't feel like hit, didn't do hit. Ole misus got mad dis time wid her and tole marse Ben dat he jes had to whip Fannie. So he told her, 'You come to de barn dis evening, Fannie. I'm going to whip you.' She knowed better. Ole missus thought his strange to take Fannie to barn all de time when others were kept away whenever Fannie is to be whipped. Betty, his wife, thinks something curious; watches his moves; and follows hit 'cause Fannie had three white chillun. His wife believed dey was Ben's, Fannie's marster's. So marse Ben makes hit comfortable fer Fannie on de flo' in dis barn, takes his coat off, next his pants. Ole missus standing outside barn peeping through a crack. Ole devil starts on his knees. Says to Fannie, 'Dis is de way I like to whip you.' Ole miss speaks, 'Yes, I jes knowed you and Fannie been doing that all the time! Them three brats of hers is jes like you!' Ole lady rared and charged so the next week they sold Fannie and the marster carried her somewhere down South.[43]

In this example, the mistress suspects her husband's infidelity because of the presence of light-skinned children on the plantation. Betty takes the situation in her own hands and upon discovering her husband "in the act" she ensures that the guilty party, the slave woman Fannie, is sold down South the next day. This story shows how slave women really had no where to turn when faced with sexual abuse. The discovery of this abuse could even result in a slave woman being separated from her children, as in the case of Fannie and her three children. Whether succumbing to the abuse or attempting to resist it, slave women faced horrible consequences in either case.

Much of historian's knowledge of the sexual abuse that went on in the antebellum south comes from the slave narratives. Descriptions of sexual abuse are somewhat infrequent because the women who were interviewed were often uncomfortable talking with a white male or female about issues of rape and sexual abuse.[44] This is also true of the black woman who was writing her slave narrative to a predominantly white audience.

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[43]Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 332.

[44] The Virginia slaves narratives found in *Weevils in the Wheat* were gathered by primarily African American interviewers which might account for the frequency that sexual abuse is discussed. Out of the twenty WPA interviewers, six were white. See Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, Appendix 4

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Early African American female writers had to combat the image of Jezebel and place their narrative within the context of "the Cult of True Womanhood." Hazel B. Carby writes, " Black women in gaining their public presence as writers, would directly confront the political and economic dimensions of their subjugation. They had to define a discourse of black womanhood which would not only address their exclusion from the ideology of true womanhood but, as a consequence of this exclusion, would also rescue their bodies from a persistent association with illicit sexuality."[45] As a result of this need to avoid reaffirming the myth of the Jezebel, black women often neglected to tell the real story of slavery with all of the horror and sexual abuse. Feelings of shame and embarrassment, frequently found in rape survivors, also might have made black women hesitant to discuss their experiences.

Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave who became the dressmaker to Mary Todd Lincoln, tells a story of sexual abuse when she was a slave in Virginia in her autobiography, *Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House.* She writes, "I was regarded a 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 on this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I – I – became a mother."[46] Keckley joins a group of other female authors who speak very reservedly about the sexual abuse they experienced during slavery. These women were reticent because they wanted to shed any association with the image of the Jezebel.

The rape of enslaved women had the overall affect of creating a cycle of abuse. The resulting children of such encounters would, if they were female would, in urn be raped themselves. Before her death, Keckley's mother informs her that Col. Burwell, her master, is also her father. When Keckley's master and mistress deem her insubordinate, she is sent to a neighboring gentleman who finds her attractive. By sending her to the neighbor, who will repeatedly rape her for many years, her owners are using sex as a means to assert power over her. Her gender and near proximity to the neighboring man

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[45] Hazel V. Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: the Emergence of the African American Novelist, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 32.
[46] Elizabeth Keckley, Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave and Four years in the White House, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 38-39.

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made Keckley very vulnerable to repeated rapes. In the world of slavery, any slave daughter who worked close to the master would be even more susceptible to rape and sexual coercion. As Eugene Genovese writes, slave women, who were, "young, shapely and usually light in color, went as house servants with special services required."[47] Thus, rape was used to exert power over female slaves and their light skin and nearness to white males placed enslaved females even more at risk to this danger.

Brenda Stevenson specifically notes how white owners viewed the light skin of enslaved women as sexually attractive. She documented James Pennington explaining concubinage of light skinned female slaves. He writes, "It is under the mildest form of slavery, as it exists in Maryland, Virginia and Kentucky, that the finest specimens of coloured females are reared…for the express purpose of supplying the market [to] a class of economical Louisa [sic] and Mississippi gentleman, 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."[48] These "fancy girls," or light skinned female slaves, were sold as prostitutes in markets in New Orleans and frequently commanded higher prices than many skilled male slaves. In her study of Loudoun County Virginia, Brenda Stevenson discovered that "by 1858, Loudouners who were selling slaves demanded and received $1500 for a blacksmith, $1,590 for a woman and her two small children, and $1,350 for a prime male field worker."[49] She also used records from an Alexandria, Virginia Company named Bruin and Hill "who placed Emily Russell, a beautiful mulatto…on the market for $1800."[50] She also found two sisters, Mary Jane and Emily Catherine Edmondson, ages fourteen and sixteen who were sold for $2,250."[51] These examples illustrate the value placed on light-skinned female slaves. The tremendous worth placed on light-skin embodied one of the great ironies of the sexual abuse that existed in slavery. Female slaves raped by their masters would produce fair-skinned daughters that would in turn be raped by a white male. In this way, the circle of sexual abuse within the plantation world continued.

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[47] Eugene Genovese documented the practices of concubinage in Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made, (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 416.
[48] Brenda Stevenson, Life in Black and White, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 180.
[49] Ibid., 180.
[50] Ibid., 180
[51] Ibid., 181.

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Slave Breeding

White men were not the only perpetrators of sexual violence towards slave women. Black men also were forced to have sex with slave women in an attempt to breed more slaves to increase the white owners property. [52] Scholar Richard Sutch defines breeding as any practice of the slave owner, "intended to cause the fertility of the slave population to be higher than it would have been in the absence of such interferences."[53] This intervention became an integral part of the sexual abuse and rape of slave women. There are many debates between historians about whether or not breeding took place, but evidence that it did occur is found in the testimonies of slaves. For example, Slave Tempie Durnham knew her value to her master, "I was worth a heap to Marse George 'cause I had so many chillen. De more chillen a slave had de more dey was worth."[54] A former slave from Texas, Katie Darling, reported," massa pick out a p'otly man and a p'otly gal and just put 'em together, What he want am the stock."[55]

U.B. Phillips concluded that the claim of slave breeding was exaggerated by abolitionist groups and that it is highly doubtful that a large number of owners attempted to increase their wealth in such a manner.[56] In *The Peculiar Institution*, Kenneth Stampp claimed that while incentives were given for having children, there was no direct interference in normal sexual activity.[57] Robert W. Fogel and Stanley Engerman also claim that direct interference with the sexual activity between slaves is a myth.[58] Eugene Genovese claims that forced marriages or sexual relationships between slaves affected only one out of ten marriages because masters allowed their slaves to choose their own mates.[59]

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[52] Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 4.
[53] Richard Sutch "The Breeding of Slaves for Sale and the Westward Expansion of Slavery, 1859-1860." Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies, edited by Stanley Engerman and Eugene Genovese, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 173.
[54] Sterling, We Are Your Sisters, 31.
[55] George P. Rawick, From Sundown to sunup: The Making of the Black Community (Westport: Greenwood, 1972), 88.
[56] Ulrich B. Phillips, American Negro Slavery, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969, orig. pub. 1918), 361-62.
[57] Kenneth Stampp, The Peculiar Institution (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 245-51.
[58] Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, Time on a Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery, (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1974), 78-86.
[59] Eugene Genovese, Roll, Jordon, Roll, 173.

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Some historians, however, argue that slave breeding did occur. In *From Slavery to Freedom*, John Hope Franklin argued that females were forced into sexual relationships and cohabitation with men not of their choosing.[60] Jacqueline Jones argues that masters practiced a form of eugenics by withholding their permission to marry.[61] bell hooks claims that breeding was a common practice. [62] Thelma Jennings in "Us Colored Women Had To Go Through A Plenty" also argues that slave breeding took place. In fact, Jennings breaks down the percentages of the slave narratives by male and female interviewees who reported slave breeding and concludes "what is quite significant is that six of the twenty-five women and four of the six men made remarks that specifically indicated 'eugenic manipulation'."[63] She concludes that slave breeding occurred across the South in no particular region.

After reviewing the ample evidence provided in the slave narratives, one cannot help but conclude that slave breeding did occur in many forms in the south. Many historians debated over the frequency, but an examination of the emotional impact these acts had on enslaved women has yet to be addressed. Being forced to have sex with a man that one does not love or are not attracted to for the process of breeding was an additional horror faced by slave women.[64] It also highlights how important a bondwoman's reproductive ability was to her white owner. Dorothy Roberts discusses the negative impact infertility, either planned or unplanned, had on an enslaved woman. She writes, "women who did not produce children, were often sold off - or worse. Slaveholders, angered at the loss on their investment, inflicted cruel physical and psychological retribution on their barren female slaves."[65] Former slave Hilliard Yellerday recalls, "When a girl become a woman, she was required to go to a man and become a mother…a slave girl was expected to have children as soon as she became a woman."[66] James Green recalls:

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[60] John Hope Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1967), 204.
[61] Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 34-35.
[62] bell hooks, Ain't I a Woman, (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 39.
[63] Thelma Jennings, "Us Coloured Women Had To Go Through A Plenty: Sexual Exploitation of African-American Women," 47.
[64] This is not to contend that this would not be a terrible experience for the male slave. But for the purposes of this thesis, the author is focusing on the sexual abuse of women.
[65] Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 26.
[66] James Mellon, Bullwhip Days, (New York: Avon Books, 1988), 147.

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> More slaves was getting' born dan dies. Old Moster would see to dat, himself. He breeds de niggers as quick as he can – like cattle 'cause dat means money for him. He chooses de wife for every man on de place…If a woman weren;t a good breeder, she had to do work wid de men. But Moster tried to get rid of a woman who didn't have chillun. He would sell her and tell de man who bought her dat she was all right to own.[67]

Mrs. Katie Blackwell Johnson discusses the value of a slave woman who produces many children. She remembers:

> Some good masters would punish slaves who mistreated their womenfolk and
>
> some didn't. No man, they didn't marry, 'twas almost as bad then as 'tis now. The masters were very careful about a good breedin' woman. If she had five or six children she was rarely sold.[68]

Mrs. Johnson highlights three important aspects of the breeding process of female slaves. First, she touches on the importance that slave owners attributed to the fertility of a female slave. If she had enough babies she wouldn't be sold. (Her children might be sold, though). Secondly, she speaks to the fact that the slaves did not necessarily marry, which highlights the fact that masters encouraged their female slaves to have sex with many men to increase the likelihood that they would become pregnant and add to their wealth. Finally, Mrs. Johnson speaks to the abuse between slave men and women and says that some good masters did stop it, but others did nothing to prevent the violence. Charles Grady, an ex-slave from Norfolk Virginia, recalls:

> Marsa used to sometimes pick our wives fo' us. If he didn't have on his place enough women for the men, he would wait on de side of de road till a big wagon loaded with slaves come by. Den Marsa would sop de ole nigger-trader and buy you a woman. Wasn't no use tryin' to pick one, cause Marsa wasn't gonna pay but so much for her. All he wanted was a young healthy one who looked like she could have children, whether she was purty or ugly as sin[69]

This story demonstrates how slave women were often purchased for the purpose of breeding with a male slave. These women were dragged from their previous home and forced to marry a man they did not even know for the purposes of breeding and producing more children for the master. Charles Grady even mentions his frustration at

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[67] Ibid., 296.
[68] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 161.
[69] Quoted in The Negro in Virginia, (New York: Hastings Publisher, 1940), 83-84.

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the lack of choice that slave men had in this process. Virginia Yarbrough, a former slave, remembers one woman who refused to mate with her breeding partner. When the owner found out he beat her. Rather than see her whipped for refusing to sleep with him, the mutually agreed "to his sleeping on the floor and her in the bed, of course neither one tol the master."[70] They successfully fooled the master who never understood why they did not produce children.

Another slave West Turner tells the story of a male breeding slave. He recounts:

> Joe was 'bout seven feet tall an' was de breedinges' nigger in Virginia. Didn't have no work to do, jus' stay 'round de quarters sunnin' hisself 'till a call came fo' him. 'Member once ole Massa hired him out to a white man what lived down in Suffolk. Dey come an' got him on a Friday. Dey bring him back Monday mo'nin. Dey say dat de next year dere was sebenteen little black babies bo'n at dat place in Suffolk all on de same day.[71]

We will never know whether Joe actually fathered seventeen children in Suffolk in one day. What is striking about this story, though, is that the slave community *believed* that Joe's sole purpose was to impregnate seventeen different women at the same time. The fact that Joe is the subject of the story, rather than one of the seventeen women, speaks to the silent torture that slave women went through as a result of their reproductive responsibilities on the plantation. West Turner almost speaks in a boastful manner about Joe's virile nature. This might have been a result of the powerless feeling many male slaves felt towards protecting themselves and their families. Instead of highlighting this powerlessness, they instead celebrated their reproductive power as men. Once again the female slave is a victim of sexual violence and abuse.

A Community of Violence

The sexual violence that was a part of the plantation affected not only the women who were being abused, but the children and the men in the community as well.[72] Angela Davis writes, "In launching the sexual war on the women, the master would not only assert his sovereignty over a critically important figure of the slave community, he would also be aiming a blow against the black man. The latter's instinct to protect his female

[70] Mellon, Bullwhip Days 148.
[71] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 291.

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relations and comrades (now stripped of its male supremacist implications) would be frustrated and violated to the extreme."[73] Slave owners would either secretly abuse the wives of slave men or make sure that slave men knew of their actions. Rev. Ishrael recalls:

> Did de dirty suckers associate wid slave wimmen? I call 'em suckers-feel like saying something else but I'll 'spec [respect] ya, honey. Lord chile, dat common, Marsters an' overseers use to make slaves dat was wid deir husbands git up, do as det say. Send husbands out on de farm, milkin' cows or cuttin' wood. Den he gits in bed wod slave himself. Some women would fight an tussel. Others would be 'umble-feared of dat beatin'. What we saw, couldn't do nothing 'bout it. My blood is bilin' now [at the] thoughts of dem times. Ef day told dey husbands he wuz powerless. Are ya tellin' me God ain't er-er-punishing 'em? Lord, Lord, I keep telling ya dem wuz terrible, terrible times. When babies came dey ain't exknowledging 'em. Treat dat baby like 'tothers-nuthing to him. Mother feard to tell 'cause she know'd whar she'd git. Dat was the de concealed part. I know our overseer we all thought wuz de concealed part. I know our overseer we all thought wuz doin' wrong wid dis slave gal but we wuz feard to say it. When de chile come 'twas white[74]

There was also a great deal of confusion as to the paternity of the children that enslaved women produced. Bondwomen would frequently try to disguise the parentage of their children in order to prevent their husbands from finding out about the rape by their masters. This was often very difficult to disguise because these children would have obvious white characteristics such as light skin or blue eyes. Rev. Ishrael continues:

> One day all de little chillun wuz in yard playing-running 'roun. An de gal's husband wauz settin' near de do' wid de baby in his arms-rockin' away-looking in child's face an' at de chillun playin' in de yard. Wife wuz tendin' to sumpin in de house. All at once he called her an' sed. 'Ole lady, dis chile ain;t like our other chillun.' She say, 'Ole man, er-er-stop stedin' [studying] ao much foolishness.' He dar rockin' de chile looking down at hit and says, 'Dis chile is got blue eyes. Dis chile is got white fingernails. Dis chile is got blue eyes jes like our overseer.' 'Ole man, I don' tole ya, stop settin' dar stedin; so much foolishness! Ole man, you kno' jes as well as I kno', de mornin' I sent ya to Aint Manervia's to get dat buttermilk. Dat was six months gone-March an' setch, April an tetaple, may an' dat'- Ha, ha, ha. Dats 3 months she counted. Ha! Ha! Ha! Foolin' de ole man.-He sed, 'Yas, dat is nine months.' Den he satisfied hit wuz his chile. De pint I'm at is, she wuz feard to tell an overseer den. I don' witness everything I tell ya an' knowd de gal.[75]

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[72] Stevenson, Life in Black and White, 240.
[73] Angela Davis, "Reflections on Black Women's Role in the Slave Community," 13.
[74] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 206.
[75] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 207.

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The slave father also faced the challenge of trying to protect his daughter from possible abuse from the master or the overseers. Slave men not only had to worry about the sexual abuse of their wives, but of their daughters as well. Robert Ellet reports:

> In those days if you was a slave and had a good looking daughter, she was taken from you. They would put her in the big house where the young masters could have the run of her…One strange day a white man came down around our cabin and tried to get my sister out. Father jumped him and grabbed him in the chest. He pointed at the big house and said, 'If you don't git in that house right now, I'll kill you with my bare hands.' The white man flew.[76]

This is an example in which the father was successful at preventing the abuse of his daughter, but it was more likely that most fathers would have been powerless to prevent the rape of their daughters from occurring.

Darlene Clark Hine contends that, "rape, the threat of rape and the abuse of black women contributed to the culture of dissemblance whereby black women created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from oppressors."[77] Additionally, she argues that the angle of black women's vision of their lives forced them to assemble an arsenal of womanist strategies that shattered the demeaning stereotypes of their humanity and their sexual condition.[78] Hine talks about the culture of dissemblance in reference to the post Civil War South, but the concept can be used with equal accuracy when discussing slavery because the sexual abuse and rape of black women began then.

The slave narratives suggest that slave women resisted not only the sexual exploitation of themselves, but sought to protect their daughters, as well. As a response to this sexually violent culture, slave women developed a community of women's resistance. By telling stories about themselves and others who resisted sexual exploitation through physical confrontation or by committing other acts including abortion and infanticide, slave women created and developed their own folk heroines.[79]

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[76] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 84.
[77] Darlene Hine Clark, Hine Sight, (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994), 51.
[78] Ibid. 51.
[79] Brenda Stevenson, "Gender Conventions, Ideals and Identity Among Antebellum

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These stories served the purpose of arming slave women and their daughters with the knowledge and the tactics to fight for themselves. The stories also served as monuments to represent the importance that female slaves attached to resisting the sexual advances of their white owners.

Resistance to Sexual Attacks

Female slaves lived in constant fear and with an awareness of their vulnerability to rape by the white owner.[80] While female slaves must have accepted the reality of their lives, the slave narratives show that they did not always submit without a fight. These stories serve as reminders for the slave community that they would not be willing victims.

The sexual abuse of slave women and their responses to it comprised a power dynamic of sexual exploitation, abuse and retaliation both on their part and on the part of their owners. As plantation masters and overseers forced sexual relations, slave women resisted mentally, verbally, and at times physically. As a young slave, Cornelia's mother Fannie, told her, "Fight and if you cant' fight, kick; and if you can't kick, then bite," in order to resist sexual confrontation. Fannie told her daughter, "don't be abused Puss." She went so far as to tell Cornelia that is she did not try to stand up for herself that she could kill her herself. [81]

Former slave, Mrs. Fannie Berry remembers:

> I wuz one slave dat de poor white man had his match. See Miss Sue? Dese here ol' white men said, "What I can't do by fair means I'll do by foul." One tried to throw me, but he couldn't. We tussled an' knocked over chains an when I got a grip I scratched his face all to pieces; an dar wuz no more bothering Fannie from him; but oh, honey, some slaves would be beat up so , when dey resisted, an' sometimes if you'll 'belled [rebelled] de overseer would kill yo'. Us colored women had to go through a plenty, I tell you.[82]

Virginia Slave Women," More Than Chattel. Eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.), 169-183.

[80] bell hooks, Ain't I a Woman, 24.
[81] Gerda Lerner, Black Women in White America, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972),35. See also Mary Ellison, "Resistance to Oppression: Black Women's Response to slavery in the United States," Slavery and Abolition, (May 1983), 57.
[82] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 36.

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Another former slave, West Turner tells the shocking story Aunt Sally, a headstrong female slave who uses violence to win her freedom. He recalls:

> Ant Sallie ain't sayed nothin' but de nex' mornin' she ain;t nowhere 'bout. Finally Marsa come down to de quarters an' git my pa an' ast him whar was Ant Sallie. Pa say he don' know nothin' bout her. Marsa didn' do nothin' to pa, but he knowed pa was lyin' cause he done heard dat pa been feedin' Ant Sallie in de nighttime. Well, pa used to put food in a pan 'neath de wash bench side de cabin, an' it was so dark Ant Sallie come on inside to eat it. I was laying on the pallet listenin' to her an' pa whisperin an' jus' den dere come abangin' on de do'. It was wedged shut an' dar was ole marsa bangin'. 'Come on out dere Sallie,' he yelled 'I know you is in dere.' Didn't nobody come dere an' catch Sallie else he gonna whup 'em all. Dey all come, too, and gathered 'round de do', pa didn't know what to do, But Ant Sallie ain't ketched yet. She grabbed up a scythe knife f'om de corner an' she pulled de chock out dat do' an' come out a-swingin'. An' dose niggers was glad cause dey didn't want to catch her. An' marsa didn't dare tetch her. She cut her way out, den turned roun' and backed off into de woods, an' ole marsa was just screamin' an' cussin' an' tellin' her one minute what he's gonna do when he ketch her an' de nex' minute sayin' he gonna take her back in de big house ef she stay. I was peekin' out de slip of de winder, an' de las' I saw was Any Sallie goin' into de bushes still swingin' dat scythe. Didn't no one foller her neither.[83]

This story demonstrates a strong female slave who uses violence in order to achieve her freedom. Most stories of slave revolts do not include the image of women using violence in their resistance. This story if passed around the community would serve to include women in the tradition of violent resistance.

Fannie Berry tells a very vivid story of a woman resisting the sexual abuse of her master. She writes:

> Sukie was her name. She was a big strappin' nigger gal dat never had nothin' to say much. She used to cook for Miss Sarah Ann, but ole marsa was always tryin' to make Sukie his gal. One day Sukie was in the kitchen makin' soap. Had three gra' big pots o' lye jus' comin' to a bile in de fireplace when ole Marsa com in for to git arter her 'bout somep'n. He lay into her, but she ain't answer him a word. Den he tell Sukie to take off her dress. She tole hime no. Den he grabbed her an' pull it down off'n her shoulders. When he done dat, he fo'got 'bout whuppin' her, I guess, 'cause he grab hold of her an' try to pull her down on de flo'. Den dat black gal got mad. She took an' punch ole Marsa an' made him break loose an' den she gave him a shove an' push his hindparts down in de hot pot o' soap. Soap was near to bilin', an' it burnt him near to death. He got up holdin' his

[83] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 289.

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> hindparts an' ran from de kitchen, not darin' to yell, 'cause he didn't want Miss Sarah Ann to know 'bout it. [84]

This story shows how a black woman could successfully fend of the advances of her white owner. Slave mothers in the community might have passed this story along to their daughters in an attempt to inculcate them with a spirit of resistance toward sexual advances. Sukie's story may have served to encourage mothers to resist as well.

Fighting off the master does not end Sukie's story of resistance. The story continues:

> Well, few days later he took Sukie off an' sol' her to de nigger trader. An' dey put Sukie on de block, an' de nigger traders 'zamined her an' pinched her an' den dey opened her mouf, an' suck dey fingers in to see how her teeth was. Den Sukie got awful mad, and she pult up her dress an' tole ole nigger traders to look an' see if dey could fin' any teef down dere. Ole Jim, Marsa's coachman, tel' us 'bout it, cause he done see it. Marse never did bother slave gals no mo'.[85]

Not only has Sukie protected herself, but she has saved future slave women from similar attacks by this master because after this incident the master is said to never bother slave women again. She even further takes a stand in resistance through her actions on the auction block. By asking the slave traders if she had any teeth down there she is making reference to the sexual abuse that is inflicted upon slave women. By telling the slave traders to look for teeth down there she is telling them that she will continue to resist any sexual advances from her future owners.

What is also interesting about this story is how it was transmitted to other slaves. The coachman witnessed that actual incident at the slave auction, but the entire community of slaves hears the story. This is an example of how stories of resistance were retold in slave oral tradition as sources of instruction and as a means of inspiration for additional acts of resistance.

Another powerful example of slave women using violence to resist the power of their masters is the example of Celia, a slave from Missouri. She was purchased at age thirteen in 1850 to serve primarily as mistress of her master. For five years Celia served in this function giving birth to several of his children as a result. Celia at one point found herself pregnant and was unsure of the baby's father. Under pressure from her new lover,

[84] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 49.
[85] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 49.

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George (also a fellow slave), Celia attempted to end her master's sexual visits to her cabin. Celia repeatedly asked him to stop his visits claiming that she was sick due to her recent pregnancy, but to no avail. On June 25, 1855, despite Celia's threats and demands, her master once again entered her cabin for the purpose of having sex with her. She grabbed a large stick she had placed before the fireplace and beat him over the head until he was dead. To conceal her crime, Celia cut her master up into pieces and burned his body in her fireplace.[86] The story of Celia serves as the ultimate act of physical resistance to rape.

Mothers might tell their daughters the story about Fannie, Sally, Sukie and Celia in an attempt to instruct their daughters in successful forms of resistance. In an environment where mothers had little control over raising and protecting their children, they used stories as an instructional means in an attempt to protect their vulnerable daughters from masters.[87] By telling stories about themselves and others who resisted physical abuse and rape, slave mothers erected and developed their own folk heroines and armed their daughters with the knowledge and tactics to fight for themselves.

Jennifer Fleishner contends that the stories also functioned symbolically for the narrator. She writes, "(t)hey provided the space for the narrator to dramatize their individual ongoing internal and external efforts to construct a sense of self and a relation to an audience out of the confluence of ideological, social, and psychological conditions."[88] The stories allowed the listener and the narrator to at least verbally gain a sense of control over their bodies. These stories passed on through the community helped to define black womanhood. As Brenda Stevenson writes,

> through the vehicle of the 'autobiographical story' slave women were able to construct what, for them, was an operative, legitimate identity, a 'counterimage' of what black womanhood that flew provocatively in the face of popular contemporary images of black female degradation, promiscuity and passivity. [89]

These stories helped enslaved women regain their sexual identity and create a new image of womanhood that ran counter to that of the Jezebel.

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[86] Melton A. McLauren, Celia, A Slave. (University of Georgia Press, 1991), 24-31.

[87] Stevenson, "Gender Conventions, Ideals and Identity Among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women,"80.

[88] Jennifer Fleishner, Mastering Slavery, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 182.

[89] Stevenson, "Gender Convention, Ideals and Identity Among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women,"196.

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By looking at the stories that are retained about slave women's acts of resistance to abuse and rape, it becomes clear that their stories contributed to and were influenced by a tradition within the community of slave women. With the horrors of sexual abuse and rape a regular part of their every day life, slave women redefined the boundaries of acceptability and used stories in order to do so.[90] Debrorah Gray White contends, "Treated by Southern whites as if they were anything but self-respecting women, many bonded females could forge their own independent definition of womanhood through the female network, a definition to which they could relate on the basis of their own notions about what women should be and how they should act."[91] Through stories of resistance to sexual advances, individual acts of resistance became community acts, especially in this tight knit female community.

Slave women faced additional horrors within the institution of slavery. Rape and sexual abuse were an integral part of their experience. Not only did they face the sexual advances of their masters and overseers, but slave women faced possible forced breeding with other slave men. In response to this oppression, many slave women were able to resist mentally and physically. These tales became important weapons that enslaved mothers used in an effort to protect their daughters against similar sexual abuse. In a world where mothers had little control over their bodies or their children, these stories served as a means to carve out a definition of what was acceptable behavior within their community.

[90] Ibid., 181.
[91] Deborah Gray White, Ar'nt I aWoman,141.

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Chapter 2 – Pregnancy and Motherhood

In addition to the sexual abuse that slave women had to endure, bondwomen had to deal with issues involving pregnancy and motherhood. The result of the repeated sexual abuse by masters, overseers, and other slave men was often pregnancy. A variety of emotions must have been felt by the pregnant slave woman, depending upon the circumstances of her conception and the situation on the plantation where she was residing. A woman who was pregnant as a result of sexual abuse by her master or by forced breeding with another slave man, might see the pregnancy as another one of the horrors of her situation. This additional physical burden would be symbolic of the lack of control over their bodies that enslaved women faced. Physical fatigue and discomfort, in addition to the extensive toil that slave women endured, might have made women dread the possible outcomes of their sexual activity. Even a mother who welcomed her pregnancy would still feel anxiety about the process of childbirth and the frightening world in which her child would grow up.

Many factors combined to make pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood very difficult for slave women in Virginia. First, the potential for a woman, black or white, to loose her child was very high.[92] Within the slave community, infant mortality was relatively high for a variety of reasons. John Campbell argues that there was a direct relationship between labor demands and intensity and the incidence of maternal and infant mortality. Campbell concludes that this connection contributed to the high infant mortality among slave women.[93] Similarly, scholars such as Michael Craton postulate that measles, small pox, and other diseases reduced the ability and willingness of slave women to bear children.[94] Whether white or black, childbirth was also a dangerous procedure in the nineteenth century. In his study of Virginia slave medical practices, Todd Savitt found that the negligence of doctors and midwives who failed to sanitize

[92] Deborah Gray White, Ar'nt I aWoman,111.
[93] John Campbell, "Work Pregnancy and Infant Mortality Among Southern Slaves," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, (Spring, 1984)794.

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their hands after delivering children in succession, contributed to many slave women contracting puerperal (or child bed) fever.[95]

Secondly, in 1662, a Virginia law was passed making the legal status of a child the equivalent of its mother, thus making slavery hereditary. Any child that a slave mother bore would add to the wealth of her master, thus perpetuating the cycle of slavery. This meant that a mother had little control over the fate of her children. This included a lack of power over the violent punishment of her children. A slave woman faced with a helplessness to prevent sexual abuse, as well as the inability to prevent separation from their children through sale. All of these factors contributed to the ways that a female slave viewed her reproduction. She must have realized the lack of control that she would have over the child's life from the moment that he/she entered the world.

In order to understand the types of gynecological resistance that some female slaves used in order to regain control over their bodies, it is important to analyze the roles of pregnancy and motherhood in a slave woman's life. Just as Nell Irvin Painter recommends that historians look at the psychological effects of sexual abuse on slave women, it is important to look at ramifications of an unwanted pregnancy due to rape. There is an important link between the sexual abuse that a woman was forced to endure and the resulting pregnancy. Women, who already felt out of control of their bodies and sexuality, would feel even more helpless with the resulting pregnancy. In addition, it is also valuable to examine issues concerning motherhood and the psychological impact it had on slave women. The lack of power women had to protect their children from the horrors of slavery impacted the decisions they made to resist. Unhealthy work and childbirth condition, high infant mortality, and psychological factors reduced women's desire to procreate. By examining slave women's roles as women and as mothers, the motivations behind acts of gynecological resistance, including birth control, abortion, and infanticide become very clear.

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[94] Michael Craton, Searching for the Invisible Man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 102-112.
[95] Todd Savitt, Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases of Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978).119.

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Treatment of Pregnant Slaves

The treatment of pregnant slaves differed from plantation to plantation. Thelma Jennings argues, "Inasmuch as bondwomen were well aware that they were cogs in the plantation regime's reproductive machine, the treatment they received during pregnancy and childbirth certainly affected their view of the patriarchy."[96] The treatment of pregnant women and their newborn children also may have influenced the ways in which these women chose to respond to their situation.

Some owners recognized that women who were expecting children might need some respite from hard labor and extra food. For instance, pregnant women usually did less work and received more attention and rations than non-pregnant women.[97] The overseers and managers illustrate this policy in their plantation records. Richard Corbin, a planter from Virginia, told his overseer that "breeding wenches more particularly you must instruct the Overseers to be Kind and Indulgent to, and not force them when with child upon any service or hardship that will be injurious to him."[98] *The Plantation and Farm: Instruction, Regulation, Record and Account Book* from Richmond Virginia instructs slave owners, "Pregnant women should be exempt from any but the lightest labor for several months before and after confinement - mothers be allowed time to attend to their infants until weaned."[99] These instructions demonstrate that some planters made a correlation between the demand of labor and a healthy baby.

Many owners, though, did not recognize that their slaves were pregnant until they begin to show at about six months. The lessening of the work would have the greatest effect upon the baby in the first months of the pregnancy. Therefore, any reduction in work or increase in food would not have that great of an effect upon the development of the baby in its later stages. Also, there was limited knowledge of prenatal care in the

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[96] Thelma Jennings, "Us Colored Women Had to Go Through A Plenty," 54.
[97] Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 25.;White, Ar'n't I a Woman, 100.;
[98] Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., Plantation and Frontier Documents, 1649-1863, (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clarke, 1990), 1:312.
[99] Plantation and Farm: Instruction, Regulation, Record Inventory and Account Book, Richmond VA, J.W. Randolph, 121 Main Street, 1852.

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nineteenth century. Even if owners wanted to take special care of their pregnant slaves, they did not have the medical knowledge to deal with prenatal care.[100]

The desire to increase their wealth also often impacted a planter's treatment of pregnant slaves. More important than future profit, owners focused on the immediate profit. If the crop needed to be harvested and additional labor was required, the impending profit of a successful crop often became more important than the health of a slave woman and her new child. In Loudoun County Virginia, "owners typically did not allow parents to reduce their labor quotas in order to care for their children. New mothers usually spent about two weeks with their infants before they had to return to their hectic work schedules."[101] According to Thelma Jennings, "Slave owners faced a conflict of interests. They deplored the loss of time granted to a pregnant field worker, yet they faced the possibility of the loss of both mother and child if she were forced to work too long and too hard. The two objectives, immediate profits and long-term economic considerations, therefore, clashed at times."[102] Many slave owners justified their treatment of their pregnant slaves by claiming that hard labor was healthier for slave women. In her dual responsibility in a slave community, a slave woman's production frequently was more important than her reproduction. Even if slave owners didn't think that harsh labor was good for pregnant women, they blamed the resulting loss of children on the incompetence of slave mothers. They accused mothers of smothering their infants in their sleep, blamed them for miscarriages, and accused them of abortion and infanticide.[103]

Punishments of Pregnant Slaves

Pregnancy did not excuse female slaves from harsh punishments. In fact, their condition made them more vulnerable in many cases. Many slave owners did not have a problem with whipping their female slaves who were pregnant. Thelma Jennings suggests, "there was unfortunately a fit of sadism, in some slave owners, as well as

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[100] White, Ar'n't I a Woman, 111.
[101] Brenda Stevenson, Life in Black and White, 250.
[102] Jennings, "Us Colored Women Had to Go Through A Plenty", 54.
[103] See Michael P. Johnson "Smothered Slave Infants: Were Slave Mothers at Fault?" The Journal of Southern History, November, 1981), Vol. 4.

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overseers and drivers, which was directed at the weaker members of the slave community- pregnant women, children, and the elderly. Thwarted in their desires to discipline a strong male, these slave owners punished the pregnant women who fell behind with their work."[104]

A former slave, Lizzie Williams remembered the beating of a pregnant woman in Mississippi. She says "I[']s seen nigger women dat was fixin' to be confined do somethin' de white folks didn't like. Dey [the white folks] would dig a hole in de ground just big 'nuff fo' her stomach, make her lie face down an whip her on de back to keep from hurtin' de child."[105] Soloman Bradley, a slave from South Caroline recalled, "I have seen a woman in the family way punished by making a hole in the ground for her stomach when she was stretched out for whipping."[106] Anne Clark recounts, " when women was with child they'd dig a hole in the groun' and put their stomach in the hole, and then beat em'"[107] These stories illustrate the duel nature of slave women as producers and reproducers.[108]

Mistresses were also not afraid of using harsh punishments on their pregnant slaves. Mrs. Liza Brown from Petersburg, Virginia remembers the pregnancy of her mother and her mistress' harsh treatment. She says,

> when mother was in pregnant stage, if she happened to burn de bread or biscuits Missus would order her to the granery, make her take off all her clothes…sometimes 'twon but one piece. After she had stripped her stark naked she would beat mother wid a strap. You know it had so many prongs to hit you wid. She beat all de slaves cruelly, dat 'hell pigeon' did. Nigger whip was what she used.[109]

The mistress had no regard for the health of the mother or the baby in this story. She was more concerned with disciplining her domestic servant rather than what would happen to the unborn baby as a result of the whipping. It is interesting that it was her mistress that

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[104] Jennings, "Us Colored Women Had to Go Through A Plenty", 57.
[105] Rawick *et al.,* eds., American Slave, X: Mississippi Narratives, pt. 5, p. 2337.; Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 40; Michael P. Johnson, "Smothered Slave Infants: Were Mothers at Fault?" Journal of Southern History 47 (1981) 493, 513.
[106] Blassingame ed., Slave Testimony, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1977), 372.; Johnson, "Smothered Slave Infants: Were Mothers at Fault?" 493.
[107] Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller ed., Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Freedom, (New York: The New Press, 1998),91.
[108] Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 40.

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whipped her. One might assume that a woman, who probably experienced or had first hand knowledge of pregnancy, might not resort to such a harsh form of punishment over a seemingly slight infraction. The harsh treatment and the nature of the domestic infraction suggest that the mistress might be taking out additional frustration on the slave possibly because she is pregnant with the master's child. The resulting child would be a physical reminder of her husband's infidelity. Therefore, the mistress would take her anger and frustration out, not on her husband, but on the pregnant slave.[110] This story demonstrates that the pregnant slave, either working in the house or in the field and her unborn child were not protected from the abuses of slavery.

Henrietta King, a former slave woman from West Point, Virginia remembers:

> An' dey was jes' as bad here 'bouts. Dere was uh young woman named Lucy
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> > lived on de nex' plantation dat was in chile birth an' in de moanin's was so sick she couldn't go tuh de field. Well, dey thought dat huh time was way off an' dat she was jes' stallin so as tuh git outa wukkin'. Fin'lly de overseer come tuh huh cabin one moanin' when she don' line up wid de other field niggers an' dragged huh out. He laid huh' cross uh big tebaccy barrell an' he tuk ho rawhide an' whupt huh somepin terrible. Well suh, dat woman dragged huhse'f back tuh de cabin an' de nex day she give birth tuh uh baby girl. An' dis ain't no lie, 'cause ah seed et, dat chile's back was streaked wid raid marks all criss-cross lak. De nex' day Lucy died.[111]

This is another example of a folk story that would have helped to define black womanhood within the plantation community. The story shows how production became more important than reproduction. Lucy was punished because she was unable to work, despite her advanced state of labor. Thus, in fulfilling her expected role as reproducer, she failed in her role as producer. This is the constant conflict that slave women were forced to balance within their lives. Even more important is the symbolism used within the story of the baby with the whipping marks on the child's back. These marks symbolize that the fetus was already marked with the horrors of slavery before it was even born and that the owner has already laid claim to it. The fact that Lucy died as a result of the abuse shows how pregnancy and childbirth made her very vulnerable to the

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[109] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 63.
[110] Jones, "My Mother Was Much of a Woman: Black Women, Work, and the Family Under Slavery, 1830-1860."248-49.

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abuses of slavery. This also illustrates how important reproducing was to enslaved women's owners because even though her master lost one slave, he gained another in the birth of her child.

What is valuable about this tale, is that it was part of an oral tradition and would be passed around the community. As a result, this story would help to define the identity of the black woman within this plantation community. It demonstrates the conflict between the slave woman's role as producer and reproducer. The story shows that even when a woman was pregnant she was not protected from the physical abuse that is such an integral part of the institution of slavery. Finally, Lucy's story suggests that enslaved women recognized that the horrors that they experienced would be passed on to their children. Just as Lucy's child bore the marks of her whipping, any child born to a slave mother, would face similar abuse. Stories such as Lucy's helped to create the identity of black women within the institution of slavery and helped to define the types of resistance they would use in response.

Feigning Illness

Many slave owners found their female slaves were faking illness in order to get out of working.[112] Historians will never know how often female slaves were actually sick due to pregnancy or female illness and when they were faking it in order to get out of work or hold up the smooth running plantation system. What is important, though, is that slave owners *thought* that women used this type of resistance. Feigning illness is of particular interest because it was typically a female form of resistance that is intricately tied with women's roles as producers and reproducers. Some slave women might have pretended to be pregnant or complained of a "female malady" relating to reproduction in order to get out of work in the fields that day. Owners, who wished to balance their two goals in owning female slaves, immediate profit and long term profit, would be faced with the decision to reduce or maintain their work loads.[113]

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[111] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 190.
[112] White, Ar'n't I a Woman, 79-84; Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 46:
[113] Jones, "My Mother Was Much of a Woman: Black Women, Work, and the Family Under Slavery, 1830-1860," 238.

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Many historians such as Todd Savitt, Michael P. Johnson, and John Campbell maintain that because of harsh working conditions, poor diet, and poor medical treatment that many slave women were legitimately sick and therefore unable to work.[114] While this may be true in many of the cases involving days when female slaves were allowed to get out of work, there are a number of instances in which female slaves deliberately feigned illness. Owners thought that slaves were deliberately using illness as a means to resist their authority. This suspicion highlights the importance of the actions. Also, the instances of feigning illness as a means of resistance served a much more important role within the slave community. These stories once again became symbolic for the slave community (particularly the close knit female community) in instances where the slave woman had taken control of her body and her life in a small way. These instances did not by any means overthrow the institution of slavery. They did not necessarily make the life of the resisting female slave any easier. These instances of resistance are valuable, though, because they illustrate a female slave refusing to contribute to the cycle of slavery.

These stories of feigning illness as a means of everyday resistance are equally powerful as the story Mrs. Virginia Hayes Shepherd tells about her mother. Mrs. Shepard says in reference to her mother, "one day she had worked and worked and worked until she just couldn't go any faster. The overseer told her to work faster or he'd beat her. She said she simply stopped and told them, 'Go a-head, kill me if you want. I'm working as fast as I can and I just can't do more.'"[115] By playing sick or really being sick these women also resisted by stopping and refusing to continue to work.

Many slave owners refer to instances of their female slaves getting out of work for more than nine months while consecutively pretending to be ill or with child. In his diary, Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hill wrote:

> The two sarahs came up yesterday pretending to be violent ill with pains in their sides. They look very well, had no fever, and I ordered them down to their work upon pain of a whipping. They went, worked very well with no grunting about pain but one of them … taking advantage of Lawson's ride to the fork, swore she would not work any longer and run away and is still out. There is a curiosity in

[114] John Campbell, "Work Pregnancy and Infant Mortality Among Southern Slaves"; Michael Craton, Searching for the Invisible Man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica,; Todd Savitt, Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases of Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia.

[115] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 259.

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> this Creature. She worked none last year pretending to be with child and this she was full 11 months before she was brought to bed. She has now the same pretence and thinks to pursue this same course but as I have full warning of her deceit, if I live, I will break her of that trick. Wilmot of the fork whenever she was with child always pretended to be too heavy to work and it cost me twelve months before I broke her[116]

In this example, the two Sarahs have become very skilled at avoiding labor at Sabine Hill. It illustrates how this form of resistance put a wrench in the labor system on plantations. When a female slave was feigning illness she was one less body in the labor force which in turn hurt the master's profit. Slave women could never completely control the use of their bodies, but for a brief period of time they could have a small say in how their bodies were used.

One female slave who belonged to William Bailey, Paulina, used her pregnancy to try and get herself back to the plantation where her children were. In a correspondence between Bailey and Joseph Pointer, Pointer wanted to return Paulina because he claimed that she was ill. He writes,

> I write you a few lines to inform you one of the negro girls I purchased of you last count has been complaining very much indeed. Ever since I left the count house…But I find that she still is complaining very much and I have had a doctor to see her two and three times and she says that she was very often complaining in the same way before you sold her. I very much faced that she is diseased so that I shall have her to auction back to you…[117]

A couple of months later Joseph Pointer writes again to tell William Bailey that Paulina is not diseased but in an advanced state of pregnancy. Pointer writes,

> My opinion of Paulina's health now is that it is restored as far as constitutional or local disease is concerned. She is in an advanced state of pregnancy and subject to the usual symptoms of disarrangement accompanying such a state. This is not strictly speaking as diseased condition [118]

Neither Joseph Pointer, nor the doctors he hired, were able to diagnose Paulina with pregnancy until four months after her original purchase. It is most likely that she began to show, thus revealing her state. The plantation records from 1847 indicate that Paulina

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[116] American Negro Slavery: A Documentary History. ed., Michael Mullin (University of South Carolina Press, 1976), 107-108.

[117] William Bailey papers ALS 1847, June 7

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was the mother of three other children. It is interesting that a woman who had been pregnant three other times would not associate her symptoms with being pregnant. One might suspect that Paulina, aware that she was pregnant, might have attempted to convince her new master that she was diseased and therefore, should be sent back to her original owner, and her three children. Paulina probably knew that Pointer intended on returning her once he discovered that she was diseased in exchange for another slave. She used this to her advantage, hoping that she could disguise her pregnancy until she was sent back to her family. The white owners did not recognize that Paulina was pregnant either. They associated the symptoms that accompany pregnancy with those involved with a disease. This demonstrates that even though owners attempted to control the reproduction of their slaves, they fundamentally did not understand the workings of the female body, so deception and therefore resistance by the female slave was often possible. Unfortunately, in the case of Paulina she was unable to keep up the pretense that she was diseased. Her attempts to return to her family failed.

The Fear of Childbirth

The process of childbirth was also a very daunting one for the female slave. Fear of death and other complications involved with pregnancy and childbirth may have persuaded slave women to avoid or terminate their pregnancy. Nineteenth century medicine was not much beyond traditional midwifery practices. Deborah Gray White contends that "whether black or white, pregnant women had as much to fear from medical doctors and midwives as they had to gain."[119]

In addition to general worries about the dangers involved in childbirth in the nineteenth century, enslaved women also had to contend with the fear of how their delivery would be handled by their owners. The treatment of slave women during and after childbirth differed greatly from plantation to plantation. Deborah Gray White writes, "It was widely believed by whites that slave women gave birth more easily and quickly than white women, and thus needed less attention during pregnancy and labor."[120] She uses the example of a planter along the Mississippi who told Frederick

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[118] William Bailey papers ALS 1847, Oct. 6
[119] White, Ar'n't I A Woman, 111.
[120] Ibid., 112.

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Olmstead "that because female slaves got so much exercise in their field work they 'were not subject to the difficulty, danger and pain which attended women of the better classes in giving birth to their offspring.'"[121]

Instead of employing a doctor, plantation midwives were employed in order to reduce costs. Mrs. Mildred Graves from Richmond, Virginia was a former slave and midwife. She remembers,

> Well I was always good when it came to de sick, so dat was mostly my job. I was also what you call a midwife. Whenever any o' de white folks 'roun' Hanover was goin' to have babies dey always got word to Mr. Tinsley dat dey wany to hire me for dat time. Sho he let me go-twas money fer him, you know.

Slave midwives used traditional as well as untraditional methods during childbirth. For example, some would place axes under the bed during labor in order to cut the pain in half.[122] Slave midwives could do nothing for the slave woman who had a difficult childbirth due to her mistreatment during her pregnancy. As a result of the many dangers involved in childbirth, many women did not survive the ordeal and this increased their anxiety about becoming pregnant.

Even if slave women did survive, they were faced with medical complications that caused great suffering. In Virginia in the early nineteenth century, slave women had to worry that they might be involved in the medical experiments of Marion J. Simms. Simms was doing research on trying to repair torn vaginal fistulas that occurred during childbirth. He used slave women to practice his gynecological surgery without any anesthesia. Slave women who complained of any discomfort might be sold or lent to Dr. Simms and be forced to participate in his surgical torture. This is another example of the lack of control that slave women in Virginia had over their bodies and their reproductive selves. As a result, this fear served as motivation for various forms of gynecological resistance.[123]

Motherhood within the Plantation Community

As parents, slave women faced heavy responsibilities. They not only had to survive, but as Wilma King writes, "they also had to ensure that their children survived

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[121] Ibid., 112.
[122] White, Ar'n't I A Woman, 111.
[123] Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 175-176.

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under conditions that were tantamount to perpetual war."[124] This battle resulted in "slaveholders fighting to control their chattel while the bond servants were struggling to free themselves from the control of others."[125] Mrs Caroline Hunter a slave from Portsmouth, Virginia, remembers, "During slavery it seemed lak yo' chillun b'long to ev'ybody but you. Many a day my ole mama has stood by an' watched massa beat her chillun 'till dey bled an' she couldn' open her mouf. Dey didn only beat us, but dey useta strap my mama to a bench or a box an' beat her wid a wooden paddle while she was naked."[126] Slave parents frequently had to witness their children being beaten and abused and they had no way to stop it unless they chose to get beaten themselves. Children also had to witness their parents stripped and beaten. The violent world into which slave women were forced to bring up their children, exposed these children to the horrors at an early age. Thus by giving birth to children, mothers became a part of a twisted mire of tradition and greed.[127] To avoid participation in the evil institution, slave mothers used many different ways to resist the control that the institution of slavery had over their lives and their children's lives, including gynecological resistance.

Wilma King suggest that "children were the most vulnerable members of the slave community because their size and strength…often made their physical resistance impotent."[128] The punishments inflicted upon children served a number of purposes for the slave owner. First, it established the base of authority of the children with the master and not the parents. Children learned at an early age that the master was the ultimate authority. Secondly, the punishments of children made the older slaves tow the line. A slave would more readily obey his/her owner if the owner threatened to beat their children. Finally, punishments of slaves and their children were attempts to control the slave family. Mothers could do nothing to prevent the abuse of their children. Slave children could do nothing but watch in horror when their parents were being whipped. Owners must have known that these punishments hit the slaves in their most vulnerable spot, the family.[129]

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[124] Wilma King, Stolen Childhood, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1.
[125] Ibid., 1.
[126] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 150.
[127] King, Stolen Childhood, 2.
[128] Ibid., 92.
[129] King, Stolen Childhood, 94.

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Owners frequently used extremely cruel forms of punishment to control slave children both in the house and in the field. Henrietta King, a former slave, remembers the horrible punishment she received from her mistress for taking a piece of candy left out on a dresser for a week. The abuse was so severe that it left her scarred for life. She recalls,

> Well she got her rawhide down from de nail by de fire place, an' she grabbed me by de arm an' she try to turn me 'cross her knees whilst she set in de rocker so's she could hol' me. I twisted an' turned till finally she called her daughter. De gal come an' took dat strap like her mother tole her and commence to lay it heal hard whilst Missus holt me. I twisted 'way so dere warn't no chance o' her gittin' in so solid lick. Den de ole Missus lif' me up by de legs, an' she stuck my haid under de bottom of her rocker , an' she rock forward so's to hol' my head an' whup me some mo'. I guess dey must of whupped me near a hour wid dat rocker leg a-pressin' down on my haid. …Seems like dat rocker pressin' on my young bones had crushed 'em all into soft pulp.[130]

Nancy Williams, a former slave from Norfolk, Virginia tells the story of being punished in the fields by her overseer for not getting all of the tobacco bugs off the plants. She says,

> Guess I was a girl 'bout five or six when I was put wid de other chillun pickin' de bugs off de terbaccy leaves. Gal named Crissy was wukin' on nex' row, an' kep' whisperin' to me to pick em all off. Didn' pay no 'tention to her, any dat fell off I jus' let lay dere. Purty soon old Master come long. Dough, an' see dat I done been missin' some of dem terbaccy worms. Picked up a hand full of worms, he did, an' suffed 'em inter my mouth; Lordy knows how many of dem shiny things I done swallered, but I sho' picked em off careful arter dat.[131]

The harsh punishments inflicted upon slave children were not restricted to the owners or overseers. Slave parents in an attempt to assert their authority often severely chastised their children. Parents may have been trying to prevent any future abuse by owners later on if the children misbehaved. Nancy Williams also remembers a time as a child when she stole something. She recounts:

> Den he march me ret to de meat house and put me in a guana bag, an' push all de hams back an' hung me up to de wall. Den he sweep up some baccy on de flo' an' tookin' [took and] light it an' smoke me til Ise drunk. Den he dump me on de flo' an' whup me somepin awful.[132]

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[130] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 191.
[131] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 322.
[132] Ibid., 317.

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Nancy's father was probably trying to prevent Nancy from stealing ever again, so he inflicted this harsh punishment upon her so that the master would not. Because slaves resided in a violent community, it is not surprising that they would use similar violence in an attempt to protect and raise their children.

Slave Childcare

Slave women also had very little control over the daily care of their children. Women who worked in the field would have little contact with their children, particularly infants, during the course of a day. Children were often left with an older slave, who was no longer able to work in the fields or in the house. Nannie Williams speaks of the type of childcare that was afforded on her plantation. She recalls:

> I was Ant Hannah's helper, and each mornin mama would drop me past Ant Hannah's house. Guess dey was 'bout fo'teen chillun she had to look arter, all of 'em black babies. Deed, chile, you ain't gonna believe did, but it's de gospel truf. Ant Hannah had a trough in her back yard-ju' like you put in a pig pen. Well, Any Hannah would just po' dat trough full of milk an' drag dem chillun up to it. Chillun slop up dat milk jus' like pigs.[133]

Slave women had little control over where they were forced to leave their small children.

One woman in North Carolina strapped her infant onto her back while she worked in the fields and "when it got hungry she just slip it around in front and feed it and go right on picking or hoeing."[134] On one plantation, slave women created cradles on the ground near the fields where they worked everyday. Ida Hutchinson reports the sad fate of those babies. She says:

> When [the mothers] were at the other end of the row, all at once a cloud no bigger than a small spot came up and it grew fast, and it thundered and lightened as if the world were coming to an end, and the rain just came down in great sheets. And when it got so they could go to the other end of the field, that trough was filled with water and every baby in it was floating round in the water, drowned. [The master] never got nary a lick of labor and nary a red penny for any of them babies."[135]

A slave mother was frequently torn between trying to satisfy the requirements of her master and the needs of her child. The contact mothers had with their children during

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[133] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 323.
[134] Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 36; Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, 35.
[135] Ibid., 37; Ibid., 14.

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the day was "limited by the rule of the patriarch who did not consider their maternal needs and feelings, his primary motive being profit."[136] Breastfeeding was a serious challenge faced by slave mothers. Deborah Gray White contends, "Postpartum is usually accompanied by fatigue, especially for nursing mothers, and slave women almost always breast-fed their youngsters."[137] Women were often assigned to easier tasks such as spinning in the first couple of weeks but this did not lighten their load. Women were still whipped if they failed to meet their assigned amount of weaving.[138] Women who worked in the fields would sometimes be allotted a time when they could go and feed their infants, usually thirty minutes. This was not always provided and the amount of time offered was not always long enough to satisfy the child. Therefore, slave children were often denied the essential food they required to live. This even further distressed the slave woman because in meeting the masters needs she was often failing to meet the needs of her child. Deborah Gray Whites asserts, "the combined responsibilities of nurturance and work were a source of constant anxiety as slave mothers tried to do their duty to both their children and their masters."[139]

Separation from Children

An additional burden that slave parents had to endure was separation from their children. Mothers and fathers or their children might be sold away and never see each other again. Slave owners would separate families with little or no concern for a child's age. Stephan Williams, a former slave, said, "a trader, them days, didn't think no more of selling a baby or little child away from its mother than taking a little calf away from a cow." [140]The slave trade promoted the buying and selling of young children. In fact, "the growing demands of the domestic slave trade (in Virginia) meant a gradual reduction of the ages of slaves in the market."[141] Mothers could also be sold away from their newborn infants. Mrs. Liza McCoy remembers, "Aunt Charlotte in Mathews County was sold to Georgia away from her baby and de chile won't no more 3 months"[142] Mrs.

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[136] Jennings, "Us Coloured Women Had To Go Through A Plenty," 58.
[137] White, Ar'n't I A Woman 112.
[138] Ibid., 113.
[139] White, Ar'n't I A Woman, 113.
[140] Mellon, Bullwhip Days, 290.
[141] Brenda Stevenson, Life in Black and White, 183.
[142] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 199.

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Virginia Shepherd recalls another incident when a slave woman was torn from her child. She says:

> Once there was a instance in Norfolk of a slave having to be sold to settle the estate. The old master and mistress had died and each on of the young folks wanted his share. No I don't remember the names, this slave woman, and her infant were brought to Norfolk and out in the slave pen. On auction day they were put on the block and sold to one of those greedy Richmond nigger traders. She begged him to buy her baby, but he refused. So the poor woman just had fits right there. She couldn't stand the thought of being wrenched from her baby. But she was taken to Richmond just the same and sold down South.[143]

Slave women and their families lived in constant fear that their children would be sold far away from them. Owners frequently used this as a means to punish their slaves or get them to cooperate.

Some women were faced with separation from all of their children. Other slave women never recovered from the forced separation from their children. Mrs. Matilda Carter tells the story of her mother's separation from her sister. She says, "Marser got angry 'bout dis an' sell po' lil sis down South. Mother never did git over dis ack of sellin' her baby to dem slave drivers in New Orleans."[144] White owners often separated slave mothers from their babies like they were cattle rather than people. Samual Walter Chilton remembers:

> Oh, yes, I done seen em' sale niggers sell 'em like cattle. Make you stan' up on a block . Yes, Zamine you like you was a hoss. Sometimes take an' sell you in groups, den other times you would see gangs of slaves chained together un, un, setch cryin' an' screamin' you ain't nebber heard like dem pitiful cries of dem po' slaves. Dat was a sad partin' time. Little babies was taken deir mothers breast while nursin' sometime dat little mouth would be holin' tight but dey snatched him away. What did dem ole mean marster keer. No, dey jes ain't had no pity an er-er feelin' in dey hearts[145]

Mothers who were separated from their children would have no idea whether or not the community of slaves would properly care for their children. They would never see their children grow or know whether or not they survived long enough to reach adulthood. Most importantly, they didn't know if they would ever see their children again.

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[143] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 257.
[144] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 68.
[145] Ibid., 71.

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Parents also had little control over the hiring out of their children by owners to supplement their income.[146] In Elizabeth City County, Virginia in the early nineteenth century, "one out of every eight slave children was hired out and working away from his or her parents."[147] Letters found in the Austin-Twyman collection reveal that a hired out child might not return at the end of the contract of work. In 1832 in Virginia, Lewis Miller hired out a slave girl that his children inherited. Miller shortly retrieved the girl and sold her to a trader without warning. The child's mother sent a bundle of things to the child through I..L. Twyman. When Twyman discovered that the girl was sold, he was outraged not because she was sold, but because he felt Miller had wronged the rights of his children, who rightly inherited her. Twyman claimed he did not want to "stand still and see orphan children wronged out of their rights" and urged Austin to solve the problem. This letter does not reflect that he felt the separation of the slave mother and her daughter to be wrong. Rather, it focuses on the rights of the white children who own the young girl.[148]

Separation from their children was a major reason that slave women decided to practice forms of gynecological resistance. The fear that their children would be sold away to an unknown fate and the emotional trauma that resulted from these separations inspired women to resist using birth control, abortion and infanticide.

By examining the experience of motherhood for slave women, it becomes evident that these women had a variety of motivations for not wanting to have children or to commit infanticide. They had little control over their bodies, nor the bodies of their children. During pregnancy, they were forced to continue to work at the same pace until immediately before they gave birth. Pregnant slave women were not immune to physical abuse and punishments. Childbirth also presented an ominous prospect. Medicine was not very advanced and women relied on the local midwife or the white mistress to deliver their children. Some slave women in Virginia in the early nineteenth century feared that any complications as a result of the birth might result in the experimental surgery from Dr. Marion J. Simms.

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[146] King, Stolen Childhood, 106.
[147] King, Stolen Childhood,106.
[148] Twyman to Thomas Austin, April 21, 1832, EGS.

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Once slave women gave birth to their children they were helpless as mothers. They had little control over the discipline of their children. They could do little to protect their children from harsh abuse and punishments from the slave owners. They could only watch as their children were beaten. Slave mothers also had little control over the fate of their children. The master could arbitrarily sell either mother or child away at any time. Slave narratives are full of heart wrenching accounts of the separation of mothers from their children. All of these factors illustrate that motherhood in slavery was a very different experience than white motherhood. Enslaved women faced frustration, pain and tremendous obstacles in an attempt to care for their children.

By looking at motherhood and pregnancy within slavery, it becomes apparent that slave women chose means of resistance that protected themselves and their children. Birth control, abortions, and infanticide served as means to regain ownership of their identities as women and as mothers. These options were kept alive through the community of slave women and the stories that they told of women who made such decisions. These stories are important to examine because they reflect the slave women's commitment to regain control over their bodies and their identities as mothers.

Chapter 3 - Gynecological Resistance

"Inside, the two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks…" [149]

Margaret Garner Case

The Margaret Garner case is probably the most well known account of gynecological resistance. In the winter of 1856, Margaret Garner and sixteen other slaves ran away from their plantations in Kentucky, crossed the Ohio River and arrived in Cincinnati. Soon slave catchers tracked them down. Upon the threat of being returned to slavery, Garner slit her baby daughter's throat with a knife and tried to kill her two sons by hitting their heads with a shovel. She was arrested before she was successful in killing her two sons.[150]

Reporter P.S. Bassett visited Margaret Garner in her Cincinnati jail cell and did not know what to expect. He undoubtedly depicted her in his mind as a wildly insane woman who would never be able to rationally account for her actions. What Basset found was just the opposite, an attractive calm woman. When he asked if she was insane when she murdered her daughter, she replied, "No, I was as cool as I am now; and would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings, than have them taken back into slavery, and be murdered by piece-meal." She showed no sign of remorse or regret. When she spoke of her baby girl, Bassett observed she possessed all the tenderness of a loving mother.[151]

Some historians are quick to dismiss the importance of the story because they claim that it represents one extreme case and is not representational of the experiences of the average slave women. Darlene Clark Hine argues that,

> Instances of sexual abstinence, abortion, and of infanticide are important for the same reasons that historians study the three major slave rebellions of the nineteenth century. As with the rebellions, the important point with respect to

[149] Toni Morrison, Beloved, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998), 175.
[150] Gerda Lerner, Black Women in White America, 62; Harris Middleton, The Black Book, (New York: Random House, 1974), 12; Julius Yanuck, "The Garner Fugitive Slave Case," The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, (June 1953), 52.
[151] Harris Middleton, The Black Book, (New York: Random House, 1974), 12.

> these modes of female resistance is not the infrequency with which they occurred, if indeed they were infrequent, but the fact that these methods were used at all. Through a closer examination of the responses of black women to slavery, we can gain further insight into the interaction of males and females of both races on southern plantations.[152]

The story of Margaret Garner and any other examples of gynecological resistance, therefore, are valuable to examine because they reflect the unique horrors that enslaved women faced as females and as mothers. These stories also illustrate the extent that these women went to retain some personal autonomy over their bodies and their motherhood.

Garner not only serves as the best-documented example of infanticide, but also reveals part of the unique experiences of enslaved women. Garner's decision to kill her three-year-old daughter and attempts to kill her sons were influenced by her own experiences as a slave woman. Like other slave women she lived in a world of rape and physical abuse. She lived in a world where she had no control over the fate of her children. Garner's story also suggests that a community of women's resistance existed.[153] When Garner moved to kill her youngest boys, she did not ask the men in her party to assist in killing them. Instead, she looked to her mother-in-law and cried, "Mother help me to kill the children."[154] Finally, it is probable that Garner's actions filtered back to the community and became a part of the oral history of the slave community.[155]

Garner's actions also challenge the notions of black womanhood and motherhood in the nineteenth century. As Catherine McKinley writes,

> Examining this collision in the contexts of motherhood, bondage, violence and sexuality allows us to approach another aspect of the multifaceted experience of African-American women, because it allows us to approach the captive subject from outside the mythic, monolithic, and idealized notions of who Black women are. For does not the woman who with one hand holds her child at her breast but

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[152] Darlene Hine Clark, Hine Sight: Black Women and Re-Construction of American History, 36.
[153] Scholars such as Darlene Clark, Brenda Stevenson and Deborah Gray White argue that a community of female slave resistance existed.
[154] Yanuck, 52.
[155] As Brenda Stevenson argues, many slave narratives the tradition of oral history and sharing experiences were passed onto other slave women. Brenda Stevenson, "Gender Convention, Ideals and Identity Among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women,"197.

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with the other kills her child defy simple notions of Black womanhood.[156]

Margaret Garner's case suggests that slave women committed these acts with a "clear understanding of the living death that awaited their children under slavery."[157] Their actions as mothers developed in response to and as a result of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and a helplessness to protect their children in the violent world of the slave community. Assessing this behavior as acts of resistance also mandates an examination of the conditions which shaped their lives.[158] Rape by their masters or forced sexual relations with men they neither loved nor were attracted to motivated slave women to take control of their bodies.

Gynecological Resistance

As mentioned earlier, slave mothers passed on knowledge of female forms of resistance to their daughters, including resisting sexual advances and feigning illness. This crucial oral knowledge was not limited to these topics alone. These women also conveyed through oral traditions practices of gynecological resistance, which included abstinence, abortion and infanticide. From the existing accounts of ex-slaves and African cultural practices including infanticide and abortion, it is evident that some slave women practiced sexual abstinence when possible, induced abortions and engaged in acts of infanticide. By procuring abortions and engaging in acts of infanticide, slave women provided incentive for other women to oppose the very system which they took an active part in reproducing. These actions necessitated a community of cooperation and confidentiality. It is only by studying these acts of resistance that we can truly understand the forces against which these women were arrayed. These decisions to perform acts of gynecological resistance were prompted and informed by African traditions and by the culture of dissemblance.[159] Bush argues that sterility in parts of

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[156] Catherine McKinley, "Infanticide and Slave Women," Black Women in America, edited by Darlene Clark Hine et al., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 609.
[157] Hine, Hine Sight: Black Women and Re-Construction of American History, 295.
[158] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Unspeakable Things Unspoken: Ghosts and Memories in the Narratives of African-American Women. (Mona: The University of the West Indies Press, 1992), 16.
[159] Barbara Bush, "Hard Labor – Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies" More Than Chattel, David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine eds, (Bloomington: The University of Indiana Press, 1996), 204.

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West Africa was a stigma and childbearing was honored, thus slave women protested their slave status and the erosion of their African cultural heritage by inducing abortions and committing acts of infanticide. The only way to take control of their lives was to make sense of their sexuality.[160]

For slaves whose mothers were not present, other women in the community functioned as their "fictive" mothers and assisted in their upbringing. At the onset of adolescence, slave girls began working within the all female world of the "trash gang." This female group raked stubble, pulled weeds, or did light hoeing. It was here that slave girls heard of the experiences of slave women who resisted physical and sexual abuse and even learned about sexuality.[161] Young slave girls listened to stories of other slave women's experiences which served as their initial glimpse of the life ahead of them and more importantly how they could defend themselves against it. It is within these tight knit groups of women that stories about resisting sexual advances, feigning illness, as well as, information regarding forms of gynecological resistance, might have been transferred.

Birth Control

Slave women were also aware of ways in which to control their fertility. This knowledge was passed down from mother to daughter or through the trash gangs. Methods of birth control were retained from their African heritage through oral tradition, as well as through the midwife. These methods included extended lactation, abortion, use of various roots, when possible, abstinence from sexual encounters. Barbara Bush asserted that slave women in the Caribbean practiced forms of birth control particularly through breastfeeding. Slave women deliberately breastfed their children for extended periods of time in order to spread childbirth over multiple years.[162] Whether slave women in the United States were able to practice similar forms of lactation is unsure, but there is evidence that some women were able to regulate their fertility in some manner. For example, one Virginia slave reports that she had a child every Christmas, "but when I had

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[160] Bush, "Hard Labor – Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies" 206.
[161] White, Ar'n't I a Woman, 94.
[162] Barbara Bush, "The Family Tree is Not Cut, Women and Cultural Resistance in Slave Family Life in the British Caribbean," In Resistance ed. by Gary Okihiro. (Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 120.

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six, I put a stop to it, and only had one every other year."[163] It is difficult for the historian to ascertain the various methods women might have used because these would have been kept secret from white owners, therefore, there is very little record of them.

Abstinence was a method female slaves used to avoid unwanted pregnancies.[164] Mothers encouraged their daughters to avoid sexual contact for as long as they could. They might have wanted to protect them from the harsh realities of a woman's existence for as long as possible. Minnie Folks remembers:

> Now jes lemme tell you how I did. I was married when I was wuz 14 years old. So help me God, I didn't know what marriage meant. I had an idea when you loved de man, you an' he could be married an' his wife had to cook, clean up, wash, an' iron fer him was all. I slept in bed – he on his side an' I on mine fer three months an' dis ain't no lie. Miss Sue, he never got close to me 'cause muma had sed 'Don't le nobody nother yo' principle,' cause dat wuz all yo' had. I 'bey my mumma, an' tol' him so, and I said to go an' ask mumma an' ef she sed he could get close to me hit waz alright. An' he an' I went together to see and ask mumma. Den mumma said, 'Come here chillun,' and she began tellin' me to please my husband, an' 'twas my duty as a wife, dat he had married a pu'fect lady.[165]

This story reflects the importance mothers placed on avoiding sexual activity until it was appropriate. Minnie also valued the instructions of her mother a great deal, thus revealing her revered position. She placed so much emphasis on her mother's advice that she made her husband go and ask her mother before she would sleep with him. As a result, her mother was able to introduce sex into her daughter's life when she felt it was appropriate.

Not all slave women had the opportunity to delay their daughter's exposure to the sexual world in the plantation community. Some mistresses took it upon themselves to educate their young female slaves. Clara Allen recalls:

> My mistis' and old Mrs. Scott was friends and she used to say ' Let your folks come down and visit my folks (Clara means the colored children). Your Bettie is older than any of my folks an' I want her to talk to them.' That meant she want Bettie to tell is all we ought to know, 'cause we girls is getting' near grown up. Things 'bout – well, you knows (meaning sexual enlightenment.)'[166]

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[163] Stevenson, Life in Black and White, 245.
[164] Hine, Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History, 29.
[165] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 93-94.
[166] Ibid., 5.

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Slave mothers would also have little control over their daughter's exposure to sexuality if the white master, or his sons, decided to introduce it to her themselves. Slave owners would want their slaves to be knowledgeable about sex as soon as possible so that they would begin to have children as soon as the females were physically able.

Abortion

Abortion was a means that enslaved women used to prevent unwanted children.[167] There are limited accounts discussing abortions in historical records. This is due, in part, to the close knit female community that would have kept these actions secret from their white owners. Abortion became a method used by slave women to end the cycle of production and reproduction that was such an integral part of the slave society. By performing such acts they regained control of their bodies, thus regaining control over a portion of their identities. The knowledge they used to perform abortions originated from a variety of sources, but primarily from their African heritage. This knowledge was carried over on slave ships and was transformed in slave societies and used as a means of reproductive resistance.

Slaves often resisted unwanted pregnancies by using abortions because slavery challenged their cultural practices. Abortifacient knowledge constituted one of the only means available to women to control their reproduction.[168] In African cultures they were social tools used to restore order after taboos had been violated. Barbara Bush cites, "An almost universal reason for abortion in traditional African societies is unsanctioned pregnancy during lactation periods (or) it is often common to abort girls regarded as too young for pregnancy."[169] The perverse breeding style of plantation owners mixed close family lines, which might have also motivated abortions. Among the slaves of Surinam, for example, incest was one of the worst crimes.[170] Richard Carruthers remembers, "Sometime', nigger folks git so mixed up about who kin to who, they marry their own sister or brother."[171] Wesley Burrell said, "One boy was traded off from his mother when

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[167] Hine, Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History, 30.
[168] Bush, "Hard Labor – Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," 206.
[169] Barbara Bush, "Hard Labor – Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," 204.
[170] Bush, "Hard Labor – Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," 130.
[171] Mellon, Bullwhip Days, 296.

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he was young, an' after he was grown, he was sold back to de same marster an' married to his own mother."[172]

Maria Cutrafelli argues that the structures of African society may have driven colonial slave women to induce abortions.[173] Cutrafelli writes:

> An almost universal reason for abortion in traditional African societies is unsanctioned pregnancy during the lactation period, it is also common to abort girls regarded as too young for pregnancy. Abortion allows women the only real choice in societies where female reproduction is subject to strict patriarchal control. This operated perhaps on two levels: the psychological, where the impact of slavery weakened the desire to have children and the practical where the transmission of cultural knowledge about contraception and abortion came into play. Plantation life offered little incentive for childbearing.[174]

Barbara Bush also argues that African societies commonly practiced forms of birth control and abortion techniques, as well as infanticide. She argues that this knowledge was transferred to the slave societies. She writes, "This operated on two levels: the psychological, where the impact of slavery weakened the desire to have children; and the practical where the transmission of cultural knowledge about contraception came into play."[175] According to Bush, Caribbean women, like their African ancestors, would attempt to nurse their children longer as a form of early birth control. Also, while many abortions could have occurred naturally due to women's harsh lifestyle, she claims that slave women, especially Obeah women, carried over this knowledge and applied it. Abortifacients used by women could include "infusions from herbs, leaves of special shrubs, plant roots and bark from certain trees. Common plants used include manioc, yam, papaya, mango, lime, and frangipani. Mechanical means were less popular and 'included', for instance, the insertion of sharp sticks into the vaginal canal."[176] These techniques were passed from mother to daughter. Bush concludes that the psychological impact that slavery had on women, in addition to the practical knowledge from Africa, leads her to believe that abortion and infanticide occurred in

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[172] Ibid., 297.
[173] Maria Cutrafelli, Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression, (London: Zed Press, 1993), 138.
[174] Cutrafelli, Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression 139.
[175] Bush, "Hard Labor – Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," 204
[176] Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 140.

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slave societies.[177] The African practices of abortion are important to look at because they serve as the basis of knowledge for many medicine women who transferred this knowledge with them when they were slaves. These forms take on a different meaning, though, when slave women use them as a means of resistance to the control owners had over their reproduction.

Though many slaveholders and doctors suspected that slave women sabotaged the breeding process, they could not prove it.[178] Public discussion about abortion was prevalent in the nineteenth century. By the late 1860's, physicians commented on the practices of abortions. In a paper before the Tennessee Medical Board in 1860, Dr. John T. Morgan listed, "tansy, rue, roots and seed of the cotton plant, pennyroyal, cedar berries and camphor" as items that combined with an unhealthy work regime could result in spontaneous miscarriages.[179] He found one slave who, "stuffed a roll of rags about two or three inches long and hard as a stick, into her vagina." Doctor Morgan was "certain that black females declined the use of mechanical implements to effect miscarriages" but he was convinced they used abortifacient. He also claimed that midwives conspired with the mother to cover up their actions. Dr. E.N. Pendleton, in his essay "One the Susceptibility of the Caucasian and Africa Races to Different Classes of Disease," cited the entire families of women who failed to have any children. He writes,

The cause was either slave labor (exposure, violent exercise) or as the planters believe, that the black possessed of a secret by which they destroy the fetus at an early stage of gestation. All county practitioners are aware of the frequent complaints of planters' about the unnatural tendency in the African female population to destroy her offspring.[180]

The Reverend Henry Beam wrote in 1826:

> The procuration of abortion is very prevalent…there being herbs and powders known to slaves, as given by obeah men and women…these observations respecting abortion have been collected entirely from Negroes, as the white medical men know little, except from surmise.[181]

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[177] Ibid, 141.
[178] White, Ar'n't I a Woman, 84.
[179] Ella Forbes, "African Resistance to Enslavement," Journal of Black Studies, (September, 1992), 40.
[180] Ibid, 80-81.
[181] Barbara Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 139.

Paula Giddings writes about another physician, who wrote in a Nashville, Tennessee medical journal, told of "a planter who kept between four and six slave women …but in the twenty-five years only two children had been born on the plantation. When the slave owner purchased new slaves, every pregnancy miscarried by the fourth month. Finally it was discovered that the women were taking 'medicine' supplied by an old slave woman to induce abortions."[182]

Slave mothers and midwives transmitted gynecological information to their daughters and other young women on the plantation.[183] Many slave women knew of abortifacients or potions, which would help them miscarry.[184] Midwives guarded the secrets of this root work and passed it on to future generations.[185] In 1857, one South Carolina woman was sold as barren. In 1869 it was documented that the same woman had three children after Emancipation.[186]

Former slave women such as Anna Lee, Lu Lee, and Mary Gaffney all refused to have children. Anna Lee remembers women chewed cotton roots to keep from having children. Legislation outlawing self induced abortions Lee remembers, "did not help much. If slavery had lasted much longer there would not have been any slaves except the old ones they had here, cause when slavery was ended they was not being any new slaves born, we had done quit breeding."[187]

Lu Lee a former slave from Louisiana knew of several women who used calomel, turpentine and indigo raised in the garden to help induce miscarriages. She remembers, "In them days the turpentine was strong and ten or twelve drops would miscarry you…"[188] On the Ferry Hill plantation in 1838, Daph, a slave woman, miscarried twins and the overseer thought she had an abortion.[189]

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[182] Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter, 46.
[183] Bush, "Hard Labor – Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," 125.
[184] Linda Gordon, Woman's Body, Woman's Right, (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 36. Gordon writes that these potions did not directly attack the fetus. "Rather, they so irritate or poison the digestive system that they cause rejection of the fetus as a side effect."
[185] Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, 41 and White, Ar'n't I a Woman, 116.
[186] Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and in Freedom 1750-1925, 81 and White, Ar'n't I a Woman, 85.
[187] Rawick, The American Slave: Texas Narratives Vol. 6, (Connecticut: Westport Press, 1977), 2284.
[188] Ibid., 2299.
[189] Fletcher M. Greene, ed. *Ferry Hill Plantation Journal ,*in The James Spruny Studies in History and Political Science (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 338, quoted in Deborah Gray White, Ar'n't I A Woman, (New York: W.W Norton and Co, 1999),84.

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Mary Gaffney was forced to live with a man she did not love and was determined not to have children with him. She remembers:

> I would not let that Negro touch me and he told Maser and Maser gave me a real good whipping, so that night I let that Negro have his way. Maser was going to raise him a lot more slaves but I still cheated Maser, I never did have any slaves to grow and Maser, he wondered what was the matter. I tell you son, I kept cotton roots and chewed them all the time but I was careful not to let the Maser know and catch me, so I never did have any children while I was a slave.[190]

Infanticide

Infanticide was another form of gynecological resistance that enslaved women used in order to retain control over their reproduction.[191] The frequency of which slave women chose to commit acts of infanticide is not clear. Incidents of infanticide appear as early as the Middle Passage, when women threw their babies overboard to protect them from the suffering and unknown horrors that lay ahead. Cases of infanticide are a valuable part of the plantation south to investigate because regardless of the actual numbers of women that were actually committing infanticide, white owners feared that women were committing these acts. The fear of white owners illustrates that acts, as well as stories of infanticide, served as an effective means of resistance because white owners viewed it as a direct threat to their authority and power over slave women. Just as owners feared that their slaves would revolt, as in the case of Nat Turner's revolt in Virginia, they also feared that their slave women would resist by killing future profits in the form of newborn children.

Slave women were successful in inducing abortions and committing acts of infanticide on newly born children due largely to the fact that nineteenth century doctors rarely performed autopsies and infant deaths could be disguised as illness.[192] B.E. Rogers remembers that during slavery, " a number of deformed Negro babies" were killed shortly after they were born.[193]

Midwives were crucial in infanticide conspiracies. They validated whether or not the child was stillborn. The secrets kept by a midwife named Mollie proved that many midwives participated in activities such as destroying fetuses. The secret actions she

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[190] Rawick, The American Slave: Texas Narratives, 1446.
[191] Hine, Hine Sight: Black Women and Re-Construction of American History, 31.
[192] Stevenson, Life in Black and White, 228; King, Stolen Childhood, 11.

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performed in her role as a midwife caused her great guilt when she converted to Christianity after she was free. She remembers, "I was carried to the gates of hell and the devil pulled out a book showing me the things which I had committed and that they were all true. My life as a midwife was shown to me and I have certainly felt sorry for all the things I did."[194] Even though Mollie later felt guilt about her actions, she must have felt strongly about her decisions to help the slave women because she aided with so many abortions and infanticides.

A Missouri slave, Jane, in 1831 was charged and convicted in the killing of her baby girl, Angeline. According to Dorothy Roberts, Jane was charged with "knowingly, willfully, feloniously and of her malice aforthought" preparing a "certain deadly poison" and giving it to Angeline to drink on December 8 and 9. The indictment further alleged that on December 11, so "that she might more kill and murder said Angeline, she wrapped the baby in bedclothes and then choked and smothered her."[195]

Eugene Genovese documents a case of a slave woman in Virginia condemned to death. The white citizens petitioned in 1822 to spare her because "the child's father was a respectable, married white man, and the woman insisted she would not have killed a child of her own color."[196] Deborah Gray White records the case of a woman in Alabama who "killed her child because the mistress continually abused it. In confessing her guilt, she claimed that her master was the father of the child, and that her mistress knew it and treated it so cruelly that she had to kill it to save it from further suffering.[197] In 1830 a slave woman from North Carolina was convicted of killing her own child.[198] In 1834, Elizabeth, one of James Polk's slaves, was accused of purposefully smothering her newborn.[199]

Enslaved women reinscribed African cultural practices in regards to abortion, but they also reconfigured conditions, which justified infanticide. Infanticide occurred in West African societies when children were born with abnormalities.[200] As the

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[193] Rawick, The American Slave North/South Carolina Series, 1 Vol. 11, 54.
[194] White, Ar'n't I a Woman 126.
[195] *Jane (a slave) v. The State,* 3 Mo. 45 (1831), quoted in Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 48.
[196] Genovese, Roll, Jordon Roll: The World the Slaves Made, 497.
[197] White, Ar'n't I a Woman , 88.
[198] Catterall, ed., Judicial Cases, 2:59.; White, Aren't I a Woman, 88.
[199] Catterall, ed., Judicial Cases, 5:139.; White, Aren't I a Woman, 88.
[200] Bush, "Hard Labor – Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," 147.

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circumstances of slavery were not "normal," slave women transformed notions of normality and leveled them against the plantation system. Todd Savitt's research on medical practices in Virginia found multiple reasons for infanticide which included discovery of an illegitimate child, or of the pregnancy of an unmarried daughter. In those cases, he found that one mother struck her child's head with a blow, "sufficient to drive in the skull, and another murdered by 'strangling and suffocating' the infant."

Infanticide might have been used as a direct means to gain power when in opposition to the master. For example, Fannie, a disobedient slave, was going to be punished for physically assaulting the mistress. The master not only planned on selling Fannie but also keeping her newborn child on the plantation. In response to the possible separation, one of Fannie's daughters reported:

> At this, Ma took the baby by its feet, a foot in each hand, and with the Baby's head swinging downward, she vowed to smash its brains out before she'd leave it. Tears were streaming down her face,. It was seldom that Ma cried and everyone knew that she meant every word. Ma took her baby with her…[201]

This example illustrates that infanticide could have been used to publicly usurp the power of the master.

Knowing that infant deaths could be disguised as illness provided an opportunity for a community resistance between mothers, daughters and midwives. Deborah Gray White asserts that female cooperation in the realm of medical care and the separate social spheres of male and female slaves helped foster bonding that led to collaboration in the area of resistance.[202] They were able to commit these acts of gynecological resistance in this tight knit community without the master discovering. In this sanctuary, they responded to the actions of the slaveholders whose, "unmitigated drive for profit was the source of their misery."[203]

Sometimes the community of slaves endured punishment to protect women. Brenda Stevenson documented "one slave owner who beat his slaves in order to discover the nature of a slave girl who had put her child aside. The owner was unsuccessful at his task as the female slaves kept their sister's secret."[204] On Charles Kolloch Jones'

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[201] Quoted in Gerda Lerner ed., Black Women in White America (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 38.
[202] White, Ar'n't I a Woman 125.
[203] Angela Davis, Women, Race and Class, 204.
[204] Stevenson, Life in Black and White, 245.

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Georgian plantation Lucy denied she was pregnant. It was not until 12 days after the birth that the decomposing body of an infant was found.[205]

Women were not necessarily the only slaves to participate in infanticide. Given the medical conditions, the conditions of bondage, and the pain that both parents and children faced enslaved men and women were distressed about being brought into the world.[206] Ex-slave accounts imply a conscious policy on the part of slaves towards parenthood which planters had no power to control or influence.[207] Raymond and Alice Bauer reveal that parents committed suicide together. They write, "In Covington, a father and mother, shut up in a slave baracoon and doomed to the southern market, 'when there was no eye to pity them an no arm to save,' did by mutual agreement send the souls of their children to heaven rather than have them descend into the hell of slavery."[208] Afterwards, the couple killed themselves.[209]

Mary Gaffney remembers the story of one man's desperate attempt to control his life as well as the lives of his wife and unborn child. "He lived with her almost a year, then she was going to have a baby and he did not want her to, so then one night he just choked her to death and eventually killed himself."[210]

For slave women, the decision to take their children's lives was informed by what they heard from other women and the threat of not being able to protect them. Former slave, Lou Smith, remembers a story her mother told her about a slave who was determined to keep the master from selling her fourth child:

> 'I'm not going to let old Master sell this baby; he just ain't going to do it.' She got up and give it something out of a bottle and pretty soon it was dead. Course nobody tell on her or he'd beat her nearly to death.[211]

Additionally, Lewis Hayden remembered an exchange he had with his mother soon after she had run away. He recounted, "She caught my arms and seemed going to break them

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[205] White, Ar'n't I a Woman 125.
[206] King, Stolen Childhood, 8.
[207] Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 124.
[208] Raymond Bauer and Alice Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery," quoted in Darlene Clark Hine, Hine Sight, (New York" Carlson Publishing, 1994), 32.
[209] Hine and Wittenstein, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," 294.
[210] Rawick, The American Slave Vol. 5, 1446.
[211] Sterling, We Are Your Sisters, 157.

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and then said, 'I'll fix you so they'll never get you!'"[212] It is uncertain if his mother planned to do him harm as the slave catchers soon found her.

By controlling the output of their bodies, slave women did not permanently alter the institution of slavery, but they did ensure that their children would not have to endure the same fate as themselves. One slave named Sylvia told her mistress that she had been the mother of thirteen children, every one of whom she had destroyed with her own hands.[213] One Alabama woman killed her child after continual abuse by the mistress.[214] The extent to which slave women went to regain control over their children reflects the horrors that they were trying to protect them from. If slaves felt death was better than the life, that reflects how terrible the life of a slave could be.

Mr. Beverly Jones recalls,

> Ole Aunt Crissy was another slave what was [a] caution. She was, ole she was, an' she had seven chillun. There was Polly, an' Easter, an' Lucy, an' Milly, an' Henry, an' Hendley, an' John. Aunt Crissy was a smart talkin' woman, an' when Master sold Lucy an' Polly, she went to him an' tole him he was a mean dirty slave-trader. Ole Master got sore, but he ain' never said nothin' to Aunt Crissy. Then Hendley what was next to the youngest of her seven chillun got sick an' died. Aunt Crissy ain' sorrered much. She went straight up to ole Master an' shouted in his face 'Praise gawd, praise gawd, my little chile is gone to Jesus. That's one chile of mine you never gonna sell.[215]

Implications and Consequences of Infanticide

While the frequency of infanticide is difficult to gauge, these actions are the biggest indicators of the anger and hostility of a mother against slavery and against the pain her children, particularly daughters, would have to endure. Acts of infanticide were the most reflective of the horrors of slavery. By killing their children enslaved women wanted to protect them from the suffering that slavery caused. This speaks greatly to how harsh the suffering was for these women because they were willing to sacrifice their children out of love for them. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese describes the hard reality of he mother who committed infanticide faced because it represents a type of resistance

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[212] Ibid., 58.
[213] Hine and Wittenstein, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," 297.
[214] White, Ar'n't I a Woman 130.
[215] Perdue, Weevils in the Wheat, 183.

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motivated by love which, "nonetheless results in the extinction of a baby they had suckled and loved."[216]

The antebellum South did not condone sabotaged pregnancies or infanticide. As Fox-Genovese writes, "murders, poisonings, infanticide and arson could bring them to the courts, which recognized such acts as attacks against the system and accordingly recognized the slave women's legal standing as a criminal."[217] In Loudoun County Virginia, the *Democratic Mirror* reported on November 11, 1858 that a slave named Marietta was found guilty of infanticide and sent to the lower South.[218] The legal ramifications and psychological devastation, however, outweighed the thought of watching daughters being raped and abused. Therefore, slave women sometimes took their young children's lives rather than have them suffer the cruelties of sexual exploitation.[219]

Despite fear of punishment, slave women still performed acts of birth control, abortion and infanticide. These actions were ways slave mothers "gained power over the planter and control over at least a part of her life."[220] Slave women were calculating in rejecting their roles as breeders and this signified their refusal "to accept their designated responsibilities within the slave system."[221] While they were often powerless to prevent their status as property and were raped at will, at least they could prevent their daughters from having the same fate.

Secure in their role as protective mothers, the intense love for their children' spirit and soul prompted them to terminate their pregnancies and commit acts of infanticide. Through these acts they tested the boundaries of the institution of slavery and negated their role in the maintenance of the slave pool.[222] The threat of being separated from their children, seeing them abused and possibly raped contributed to many mothers taking their children's lives.

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[216] Fox-Genovese, Unspeakable Things Unspoken: Ghosts and Memories in the Narratives of African-American Women, 17.
[217] Ibid,, 17.
[218] Stevenson, Life in Black and White, 245.
[219] Darlene Clark Hine and Kate Wittenstein, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," 294.
[220] Hine and Wittenstein, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," 295.
[221] Hine and Wittenstein, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," 296.
[222] Ibid., 296.

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Slave mothers functioned within a community where their actions shaped the lives of other individuals, most importantly their daughters. In sharing their own stories and the experiences of other slave women and in drawing on their African heritage, slave women instructed their daughters in three crucial levels: how to prevent pregnancy, how to resist rape, how to induce abortions, and how to commit infanticide. This knowledge was kept secret and passed on within the tight knit community of female slaves. These acts represented the "ultimate statement" against slavery but also constituted higher forms of love.[223] While not all women induced abortions or practiced infanticide, they all kept the secrets of the women who did and therefore were participants in some from of group resistance. Through these actions, these women hindered the economic profits of their masters and regained an element of control over their bodies and their motherhood. They were also confident in the fact that their children would never again be harmed by separation, the master's whip, the mistress' scolding and, most importantly, rape by familiar and unfamiliar men.

Slave women derived their actions from an African past and an American reality. Cultural practices of abortion and infanticide in abnormal situations in Africa were transformed in America and became a way of challenging the system of slavery. In Africa abortion and infanticide was used for cultural reasons. These practices were transformed and used in the United States as a means to protect children and for enslaved women to maintain a degree of control over their reproduction. As a result of the horrors that these women faced within the institution of slavery, slave women took the lives of their children, regardless of the pain to themselves, to insure that their children would not have a life in bondage. Their acts sent the message to the slave holding society that, "You cannot do that to me, whatever the price I must pay to prevent you."[224]

In fashioning their own definition of motherhood, womanhood, and sisterhood, slave women did not overthrow the institution of slavery. They did not improve their circumstances or reduce the amount of suffering they endured. These acts of resistance were a means of maintaining a certain amount of autonomy. Enslaved women had so little control over their bodies, acts of gynecological resistance reasserted control over

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[223] Ibid., 295.
[224] Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 330.

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their bodies and their roles as mother, even for just a few moments. These actions were also a direct reflection of the horrors that these women faced in their lives. Enslaved women viewed death as a better alternative than life for their children in the oppressive world of the plantation south. Margaret Garner's story and the stories of other women who killed their children prompt historians to ask more in depth questions regarding the conditions of the slave mother's lives, their physical and mental condition, thoughts for the future of their children and most importantly, how their sexual experiences might have shaped their decisions.

Conclusion

Based on evidence found in the WPA slave narratives, as well as plantation and legal records, it is evident that slave women participated in various forms of gynecological resistance. These acts of reproductive resistance have not received as much attention by historians as the slave revolts that took place in the United States. Slave women were not actively overthrowing the institution of slavery, but their actions helped them to resist their white owner's control over their bodies and their reproductive lives. Acts of gynecological resistance were not only individual acts, but they incorporated the entire slave community. By either aiding the woman committing an act of gynecological resistance or by keeping her secret, the slave community participated actively in this type of resistance. Stories of gynecological resistance were also passed on from one generation of slaves to the next, serving as a source of education and inspiration for other slaves who chose to resist.

By studying gynecological resistance it is impossible not to examine the motivations behind these acts of resistance. White owners' attempts to control enslaved women's bodies provoked women to resist total dominance by taking control of their reproductive lives. Rape, incest, beatings, separation from children, and a lack of control over the fate of their children motivated slave women to use birth control, abortion, and infanticide as a means to resist. In order to understand gynecological resistance, it is important to examine the world in which these actions attempted to combat. When women killed their children, they were able to ensure that their children, especially their daughters, would not suffer the same fate as they did.

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Slave owners tried to control reproduction for reasons other than financial. While they wanted slave women to have children to add to their wealth, white owners knew that by controlling a woman's reproductive life he had dominance over her whole body, productive and reproductive. By raping a woman, selling her children, beating her, a slave owner tried to completely conquer her spirit. Dororthy Roberts writes, "Dominance of reproduction was the most effective means of subjugating enslaved women, of denying them the power to govern their own bodies and to determine the course of their own destiny."[225] By performing acts of gynecological resistance slave women said "no" to this complete domination.

[225] Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 55.

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Caroline Elizabeth Neely was born in San Diego, California on December 30, 1974 to Alfred and Mary Francis Melanson. She grew up in Fairfax, Virginia, twenty minutes outside of Washington D.C. Caroline graduated from Paul VI High school in 1993. She graduated from the College of William and Mary in 1997, where she got a B.A. in History and Art History. While getting her Masters at Virginia Tech, she focused on issues of race, class, and gender, specifically the experiences of African-American women in slavery. Upon completion of this Master's degree in May 2000, Caroline will be moving to Northern Virginia where she will be employed as an analyst at Anser.