

## The Power Within: The Inches Gained by Black Women in the Hopeless Battle of Southern American Slavery

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*“The Power Within: The Inches Gained by Black Women in the Hopeless Battle of Southern American Slavery” analyzes how black women under the oppressive lash of slavery achieved a level of power and exercised it more than has been traditionally recognized. However, despite their efforts whites largely undermined or restricted it. Moreover, abuse aimed at slaves encompassed physical, psychological, and emotional abuse, and in regards to black women, it centered on their sexuality. Enslaved black women combine two marginalized populations, and, as such, they have suffered doubly from historical narratives dominated and directed by white males. Little is known about these women and their unique history, but as no human can completely subjugate another, they must have exerted their wills in some form or fashion, as an examination of their situation proves.*

Race-based slavery, a dark blight in the history of the United States, received little scholarship decades following the Civil War. Many of the people who wielded political power and the scholars who wielded academic authority held racist views, which caused a distortion of slavery’s reality, a distortion which received support by historians who described slavery as a kindness to African Americans. For example, Ulrich Phillips painted a picture of benevolent paternalism in romanticized “Old South” in his 1918 work, and it remained the dominant narrative for decades.<sup>1</sup> Not only did these authorities ignore the history of African Americans, but the contributions of women also largely went ignored as well, and only in the twentieth century with the women’s suffrage movement did women begin to be heard. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the Afro-American experiences in slavery received serious consideration, and still then males dominated the study. The first pioneers of studying black women, Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, inspired other breakthrough works published in the 1980s with their 1978 book *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*.<sup>2</sup> But a balanced analysis of history cannot simply ignore that blacks and women constitute a large part of the population, and commonsense dictates that they have stories that need to be shared.

Two marginalized populations combined, enslaved black women suffered doubly from these holes in history. Whites harmed black female slaves physically, psychologically, and emotionally, and they employed cultural notions and legal precedents to oppress black women. Little is known about these women and their unique history, but as no human can completely subjugate another, they must have exerted their wills in some form or fashion, as examining their situation proves. The brunt of abuse revolved around their sexuality and the threat it posed to

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Régime*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Higginbotham and Sarah Watts, “The New Scholarship on Afro-American Women,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 1 & 2 (Spring-Summer 1988): 14-15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40003796> (accessed February 1, 2017).

established Southern ideology based in slavery. Despite Southern whites largely undermining or restricting African American women's wills, they achieved a level of power and exercised it more than has been traditionally recognized under the lash of slavery.

During the development of slavery, whites developed a mythology concerning the black woman and her sexuality that allowed them to shift moral blame away from themselves. The Jezebel stereotype became the manifestation of this myth, of the promiscuous and depraved African whore. The belief took root in the Western world, not just specifically American southerners, and the conditions that affected African women<sup>3</sup> grew it. For example, the climate in the West African countries and those along the coastline is arid and hot because cold water currents cause clouds to deposit rain out in the ocean.<sup>4</sup> This type of climate made clothing a moot point; Elmo Steele's great-grandfather, brought over in the Atlantic trade, told Elmo that "in Africa dey didn't wear no clothes at all."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Africans generally did not have abundance of the resources or industry needed for mass clothing production, and if they did, it did not receive a high priority.<sup>6</sup> But even though most West African cultures did not sexualize women's bodies, Europeans did, and so Westerners assumed wanton desire controlled African women, which explained their nudity.

In addition to this myth, other conditions for the perpetuation of the Jezebel belief developed during the 1600s as enslavers brought African women into bondage. Because reproduction yielded a profit for owners, slave holders discussed the women's abilities in regards to sexual activities. During sales, the auctioneer or buyers would force a black woman to strip, to be still while a stranger ran his hands over her body to feel her breasts, hips and legs. She would sometimes be taken to a private room where the bidder could examine her more intimately and question her.<sup>7</sup> With only profit as the goal, white men had no respect for the women's bodies, leading to no respect for her femininity and individuality, thus perpetuating the ongoing myth.

This belief became as familiar as the concept of the Whore of Babylon, spreading so wide that even the abolitionist and journalist James Redpath believed that "mulatto women were 'gratified by the criminal advances of Saxons.'"<sup>8</sup> Historian Edward Baptist explains how white men excused these abusive actions toward black women by embracing this belief that African females biologically were more sexual and less moral than white women. So then the legal freedom

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<sup>3</sup> Although Africa is not monolithic, references to Africa and its ethnic peoples will be synonymous with the area along the Atlantic coastline because it underwent the highest traffic for the slave trade. While Europeans did not limit themselves to local enemies and captured Africans who lived more inland to sell, they did not document the various places their slaves came from. As a result, whites typically referred to all cultures and ethnicities of their slaves as simply African.

<sup>4</sup> Harm J. de Blij, *Geography: Realms, Regions, and Concepts*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Wiley, 2012), 28.

<sup>5</sup> James Mellion, ed., *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember*, (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 280.

<sup>6</sup> William A. Haviland, *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge*, 14<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Cengage Learning, 2013), 95-98.

<sup>7</sup> Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 99.

<sup>8</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 30.

to rape and harass formed an association between financial aggression and sexual desire.<sup>9</sup> According to historian Patrick Mingos who analyzed Works Progress Administration interviews with former slaves, the belief that black women desired their southern white owners “promoted [the owners’] self-esteem” because the men believed they had a “certain social responsibility to quell the libidinous urges of their charges.”<sup>10</sup> White owners had complete control over what they did to their property, and the power to enforce or create a stereotype justified those actions.

Despite the lopsided power arrangement, black women occasionally could work sexual attention in their favor by becoming a master’s sexual favorite or seducing him into giving her more authority. The autobiographical account *12 Years a Slave* provides examples that former slave Solomon Northup witnessed. For example, the plantation of Edwin Epps, Northup’s owner, bordered the property of Mr. Shaw, who fell in love with his slave mistress and, after freeing her, married her and gave her authority on his plantation. Northup also describes Eliza, a slave in Maryland, whose master favored her greatly and gave her clothes and comfortable living quarters. After she bore him a daughter, he resolved to bring this daughter up with his other children, and once he died, she and the children she bore him were to be freed.<sup>11</sup> Both of these black women used similar means to achieve a power that rivaled white women.

But black women rarely truly benefitted from the sexual attention because it became a complete domination of their will by an outside party, breaking the woman emotionally and physically. Demonstrating this impact, Patsey, a slave belonging to Edwin Epps, asked Solomon Northup to kill her because she could no longer take Epps’s abuse: he raped her, sold her children, and beat her until she nearly died.<sup>12</sup> Instead of reaping benefits and favors from her owner, she sank into a morbid depression. Similarly, former slave Louise Everett recalled when her master invited his friends to an orgy at the expense of the female slaves and forced their husbands to watch them be raped.<sup>13</sup> Not only did this serve as a sexually satisfying game for the owners, it reminded the slaves who controlled them. To escape this type of abuse, former slave Harriet Jacobs lived for seven years in a small attic hiding from her abusive master.<sup>14</sup> As these accounts illustrate, a slave woman’s life did not tend to perk up from being preferred by the master, not even after bearing his children. James Brown, a slave, recounted how one slave had four children with her white master, but the master and his employees treated her in the same way as the other slaves.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, bastard children created a crisis for white proprietors because they represented in a very tangible way the infidelity and disrespect within a marriage as well as the power associated with the owning class. Because of this tension children were not freed simply because they had a

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<sup>9</sup> Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 235.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Mingos, *Far More Terrible for Women: Personal Accounts of Women in Slavery* (Winston-Salem: John F Blair Publisher, 2006), 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> Greda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 10.

<sup>12</sup> Steve McQueen, *12 Years a Slave*, Regency Enterprises, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Mingos, *Far More Terrible for Women*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Thayer and Eldridge, 1861), edited by Jean Fagan Yellin, 128.

<sup>15</sup> Mellion, *Bullwhip Days*, 296.

white father. A Virginian law established in 1662 declared that the mother's race decided the child's, and if a slave woman had offspring, they would be slaves as well.<sup>16</sup> This allowed an increase in profits and freed white masters of the inconvenience mulatto children caused. This standard also provided the white Europeans with another reason that blacks differed from them; Europeans inherited status from the father and by inverting their patriarchal model, they carried over the matrilineal society of West African tribes and created more cultural differences.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, while owners recognized the greater stability and less dissent that resulted from keeping children with their biological mother, they believed that African Americans, and therefore their mixed-race offspring, were inferior, and they would not unite them with their white family, regardless of the additional stability that might have provided.<sup>18</sup> To do so would be to openly equalize pure Anglo blood with any amount of black blood, a blasphemous statement to southern ideals. In the late 1600s, slave codes were updated to render intermarriage illegal, displaying the influence of racial purity.<sup>19</sup> Journalist Edward Ball recounts the story of a son borne to Ball's ancestor Red Cap and his "Molattoe Wench Dolly" shipped to another plantation because to free him would have exposed Red Cap's sexual preference for his slave.<sup>20</sup> As this demonstrates, an elite planter could not reveal or boast about falling for the wiles of black women, as blacks were considered inferior to white women.

Despite this attitude, these relationships continued, and occasionally white owners would free their children; however, whether love or a sense of obligation motivated the owners remains a mystery. For example, Thomas Jefferson, U.S. President and Virginia planter, emancipated two of his sons by his slave Sally Hemmings, but he never freed Sally herself. Henry Grimke, a Southern lawyer, left provisions in his will for his son to treat his slave mistress Nancy and the children she had borne him as family.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a South Carolinian enslaver freed former slave and author Harriet Jacobs's grandmother, because she resulted from his relations with a slave woman.<sup>22</sup> But the planter class as a whole saw these children as they saw any slave children- an asset. Perhaps the legal and cultural settings were too deeply ingrained for white males to imagine their illegitimate children in any other way, or perhaps they feared the social backlash and the harm it would do to their legacy. Surely some white slaveholders genuinely cared for the slave women they had sexual relations with, but with limits on knowing motivations and feelings, conclusions must be drawn from the fact children were a profitable increase.

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<sup>16</sup> The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, "Slavery and the Law in Virginia," *Colonial Williamsburg: That the Future May Learn from the Past*, <http://www.history.org/history/teaching/slavelaw.cfm> (accessed January 30, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Haviland, *Cultural Anthropology*. The countries which predominantly traded slaves to Europeans were located in West Africa. These countries include Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. The nations and tribes within the "Bulge of Africa" as it is called tended to trace kinship through the mother.

<sup>18</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 105.

<sup>19</sup> Colonial Williamsburg, "Slavery and the Law in Virginia"

<sup>20</sup> Edward Ball, *Slaves in the Family* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 186.

<sup>21</sup> Lerner, *Black Women*, 52.

<sup>22</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 4.

White mistresses took a different view of their husbands' slave children. The wives of the unfaithful owners, of whom there were many, despised the black mistresses and the children they bore.<sup>23</sup> Mistress Epps, wife of Edwin Epps, tormented Patsey because of her husband's ongoing obsession with her, denying her soap and throwing dishes at her, which added to Patsey's daily hell. Northup describes Patsey as "broken" after "her mistress and her master's children watched with obvious satisfaction [as] she almost died" from the whipping. Eliza's Virginian owner Elisha Berry had a daughter and wife who, angry over his decision to choose a slave and her children over his white family, sold Eliza and her bastard daughter to traders, symbolizing the jealousy white women had toward black females.<sup>24</sup> Nora Zeale Hurston's book also illustrates this reality; the main character's grandmother, the enslaved mistress of her owner, ran away because the owner's wife beat and threatened to kill her.<sup>25</sup> Although the novel is fictional, Hurston used the common tale she heard from black communities during research as inspiration. Catharine Hammond, wife of a South Carolina planter and politician, gave her husband an ultimatum: sell the two women he had relations with and their children, or she would leave him, illustrating the lengths white women could go.<sup>26</sup>

However, not all Southern white women hated enslaved black women, as Sarah and Angelina Grimke illustrate. Daughters of a wealthy South Carolina planter, they rejected the institution of slavery, and they spoke publicly on the horrors they witnessed on plantations. Angelina wrote a treatise urging white women not to despise blacks but pity them, especially the women and children, because they should feel sympathetic.<sup>27</sup> One such compassionate woman, Frances Kemble, attempted to alleviate the trials of the slaves on her husband's plantation, particularly those suffered by black women during and after pregnancy.<sup>28</sup> Mary Peters's mother conceived her after the three boys of her master raped her, but when her mistress found out she punished the boys with whippings.<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, the majority of white mistresses hated their husbands' sex slaves and the children that resulted. The reason for this rivalry could be that white women felt more powerful standing above rather than besides black women because it allowed them not to be at the bottom of the social order, much like poor Southern whites fought for slavery because it kept them from being the lowest class. Perhaps jealousy over the perception that black women were viewed similarly to black men instilled this hatred. But it mostly stemmed from embarrassment. Mary

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<sup>23</sup> The white women referenced in these circumstances are all members of the planter class; poor whites normally did not own slaves as they could not afford it.

<sup>24</sup> Lerner, *Black Women*, 51, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Nora Zeale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: J.B. Lippincott & Company, 1937), 15.

<sup>26</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 87.

<sup>27</sup> Stephanie MacPhearson, *Sisters Against Slavery: Story about Sarah and Angelina Grimke* (New York: Lerner Classroom, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Lerner, *Black Women*, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Mellion, *Bullwhip Days*, 297.

Boykin Chesnut recognizes this fact in her diary, writing “any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody’s home but her own.”<sup>30</sup>

Enslaved black women could neither defend themselves against the white master or mistress, nor could they protect their children. Even if black women could potentially benefit from sexual attention, white owners definitely benefitted pleasurably from the legal reign they had over their female property, and white mistresses made the women’s lives seem more like hell. But the benefit of sexual pleasure remained only a part of masters’ overwhelming power.

Most of the power concerning life choices which resides today within a modern woman lay with the owners of slaves. Black or white, a woman’s opinion over who to marry did not hold much sway; society dictated her father had the duty, along with other males in the household, to find a suitable match. Yet during the antebellum period, white women’s opinions on marriage were given the most consideration since the days of skewed gender ratio in the early settlement of Virginia. Victorian feminism caused this result with its effect on the English-speaking world, albeit granted that it witnessed a much stronger hold in Great Britain.<sup>31</sup> Conversely, slave women only were able to choose a partner if it was an extension of their masters’ wills. James Green explained that his master, desiring profit, would “breed de niggers as quick as he can...he chooses de wife for every man on de place. No one has no say.”<sup>32</sup> Usually, however, white owners did not care who enslaved women chose as a husband as long as they were procreating. Julia Brown, a former Georgia slave, recalled that the masters “didn’t care about the slaves matin’, but they wanted their niggers to marry only amongst them at their place,” demonstrating this apathy.<sup>33</sup>

Because whites denied that slaves actually had legitimate marriages, owners did not frown upon premarital sex, allowing black women to test out several different men before settling on one. Many owners did slyly encourage commitment to a single man because they wanted children consistently; if a woman jumped from partner to partner, it could potentially affect how often she gives birth. Moreover, the masters only asked for “a little one or two for the next year” in exchange for permission to marry.<sup>34</sup> Herbert Gutman statistically illustrates<sup>34</sup> that long-term slave marriages existed, regardless of practical or romantic intent: out of the available fourteen percent of the North Carolina slave records, twenty-five percent of slaves lived with spouses for ten to twelve years and about twenty percent lived together for at least twenty years.<sup>35</sup>

While their marriage choices were not typically respected, black women brandished more power than their white counterparts in the realm of divorce. Owners and overseers allowed women

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<sup>30</sup> Lerner, *Black Women*, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Susan Hamilton, “Making History with Frances Power Cobbe: Victorian Feminism, Domestic Violence, and the Language of Imperialism,” *Victorian Studies* 43, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 437-460, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3829700> (accessed February 1, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Mellion, *Bullwhip Days*, 296.

<sup>33</sup> Minges, *Far More Terrible for Women*, 67.

<sup>34</sup> White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 97-99.

<sup>35</sup> White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 149. White used Gutman’s statistics because he did an extensive study on slave relations, and according to Higginbotham and Watts’s article, Gutman broke ground with a realistic portrayal of black slave families (*New Scholarship*, 12,14).

to separate for valid reasons, such as an abusive husband, an irony lost on the whites as they physically and emotionally abused slaves. Because they, as slaves, were not dependent upon the men for economic or social status, black women could simply leave their husbands. However, the women only had this small freedom if they were past childbearing age or if the plantation had a surplus of eligible men.<sup>36</sup>

Some masters though did not appreciate disruption to plantation life divorce caused and would order the couple to remain together; James Henry Hammond's diary reports the flogging of "Joe Goodwyn" with subsequent orders for him "to go back to his wife," before discussing another similar case, recording "ditto [with] Gabriel & Molly & ordered them to come together again" exemplifying the restraints on the act of divorce.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, masters, if they decided to care who married whom, could and would force matrimony and copulation. Molly, a slave on St. Simon's Island, unwillingly married Toby, a fellow slave, because her owner coerced her into it.<sup>38</sup> Big Jim, Louise Everett's master, would force his slaves to "consummate this relationship in his presence. He used this same procedure if he thought a certain couple did not produce children fast enough."<sup>39</sup> Louise's account exhibits the demands expected of the female slaves and the main reasons slave marriages and divorces interested masters- children and a smooth running plantation.

As women like Louise discovered, masters expected a natural increase regularly, so children resulted as a staple on a plantation. The high number of infant deaths on James Henry Hammond's plantation worried him because he could not afford to lose profit, not because of the life lost.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, if a slave woman obtained an abortion, or if the owners viewed a miscarriage with suspicion, the woman would be punished for destroying her owner's property. John Morgan, a Tennessee doctor in the antebellum period, ascertained that black women used natural abortifacients such as herbs and plant roots. Although rarely finding proof of this action, clearly several black men and women did not want to procreate, as they did not want to bring an innocent life into slavery or have the burden of caring for a child.<sup>41</sup> However, slave women generally did not have a choice in child bearing, and American culture as a whole generally regaled children as blessings.

Despite this focus on creating families, or at least procreation, owners maintained and enforced that slave marriages were not legal or binding. Thus, owners did not have to respect the blacks' bonds between each other, and they sold and broke apart families at will, forcing black women to redefine their classifications of a familial unit. Harriet Jacobs learned the hard way that masters had the final decision in family matters; her twelve-year-old uncle Joseph, who seemed "more like [a] brother" was sold away, and she discovered "no matter how strong the family, slavery could tear it apart."<sup>42</sup> The owner's interest to sell the boy caused the separation, not because

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<sup>36</sup> White, *Aren't I a Woman*, 157.

<sup>37</sup> Faust, *James Henry Hammond*, 85.

<sup>38</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 150.

<sup>39</sup> Minges, *Far More Terrible for Women*, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Faust, *James Henry Hammond*, 76.

<sup>41</sup> White, *Aren't I a Woman*, 85.

<sup>42</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 6.

he wanted to punish. Northup's companion Eliza lost her son and her daughter, as the trader found maximum profit in separate transactions. Because of the frequency of losing family members to the internal slave trade, slave families became much more complex and expansive than an average white family; survival depended upon an united front and strength had to be found in numbers because only together could slaves fight back against oppression. Former slave Jane Pyatt captures this: "the real character of a slave was brought out by respect that they had for one another."<sup>43</sup> Enslaved women demonstrated this cohesive movement by helping each other, particularly in the area of motherhood.

Female slaves would act as midwives, nurses, babysitters and other maternal authorities to the children. Julia Brown explained how the "granny" would relieve labor pains by placing a "rusty piece of tin or ax under the mattress," demonstrating the hierarchal authority as well as the primitive conditions of slave obstetrics, which only differed in white obstetrics by the amount of care and attention given.<sup>44</sup> On Big Jim's plantation, slave women spent their days working in the fields with no time left over for their children. According to Dicey Thomas, a WPA interviewee, a nursing woman would have to wake up earlier and shorten her lunch break, and not be with her children until past dark, by which time they would normally be asleep.<sup>45</sup> Louise Everett testified that an elderly slave woman cared for the kids during the daylight hours.<sup>46</sup>

But while these communal ties gave slaves a sense of family, whites used them as a powerful tool in limiting female slaves from running away; most women would not leave their children behind, so children formed an effective leash that held the women captive to a higher degree than men. Harriet Jacobs's grandmother warned her to "stand by your own children and suffer with them till death," representing the perspective the women themselves had on escape.<sup>47</sup> Advertisements in colonial South Carolina indicated that seventy-seven percent of runaways were men, a pattern that continued into the Deep South, as only 31.7 percent of fugitive slaves were women in 1850 New Orleans.<sup>48</sup> The control by whites dictated that female slaves would marry, reproduce, and work, trapping them in this cycle of communal bonds and limited power.

Black women faced another additional struggle in slavery, to be merely recognized as female. Because black women performed female-orientated tasks, they should have been seen as female entities, but whites denied their womanhood because they also performed traditional male orientated tasks. The dual roles black women played contributed to this contradiction: that of the mother and father, the nurse and field laborer, the Jezebel and Mammy. As discussed previously, masters tried to keep a mother with her children because it created more stability, and because a father could unwillingly be absent, women had the duty to educate their children in slavery and its workings. Within the slave communities, women represented the primary influence on the new

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<sup>43</sup> Brenda E. Stevenson, "The Question of the Slave Female Community and Culture in the American South: Methodological and Ideological Approaches," *The Journal for African American* 92 (2007), 79.

<sup>44</sup> Rural and poor white women found themselves in similar conditions regarding obstetrics.

<sup>45</sup> Mellion, *Bullwhip Days*, 35, 38.

<sup>46</sup> Minges, *Far More Terrible for Women*, 67 and 17.

<sup>47</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 91.

<sup>48</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 70.

generation and thus had more of an equal role in their social sphere than white women did in theirs. Historian Brenda Stevenson, a contributor to *The Journal of African American History*, writes that “enslaved mothers were responsible for shaping the social dynamics of slave life.”<sup>49</sup>

Black female slaves not only had to bear and raise the children as the fulfillment of a woman’s traditional role; they also were expected to work in the fields or in other jobs around the plantation, generally considered male work. In fact, women actually tended to pick the most cotton, averaging more pounds than men daily; one planter records that “the females are the better pickers and have saved much of the larger portion of the crop.” Baptist’s research illustrated the consistent higher numbers females had over males in daily yields.<sup>50</sup> Patsey, Northup’s friend and Edwin Epps’s prized slave, picked more than 300 pounds of cotton daily.<sup>51</sup> Edward Ball found within his family’s records that this labor had physical consequences, as conceptions reached a low point during the most demanding work time- the harvesting season, proving that women were expected to work as much as men in those months of May, June, and July.<sup>52</sup> Black women relied on coordination to pick cotton rather than strength.<sup>53</sup> Because those were the skills most useful in cotton picking, they increased the owners’ profits on a cotton plantation not only by bearing children but with their ability to harvest. But the innate skill which made them useful and therefore necessary to their owners also made them less feminine, at least in the eyes of whites.

Because of the Anglo patriarchal society, upper class white women appeared too fragile and delicate to work in manual labor. But black women were not given this same consideration. Rather, Anglo men cemented differences between black and white women as early as 1642. A law in the colony of Virginia declared black women could be taxed like men. This made black women more profitable as laborers than white women.<sup>54</sup> Even before the colonies indoctrinated slavery into daily life, this legal precedence placed race as the difference between women.

Public opinion also held that black women deserved less respect and protection. Oloudah Equiano, a former slave autobiographer from the eighteenth century, recorded a conversation he had with a fellow slave: an owner would rape all his female slaves and force his own brood to work in the fields, proceeding to rape his own children once they came of child-bearing age, demonstrating the perspective of whites toward black women, that they were not really women at all, but more akin to cattle. And yet on the other hand, Equiano observed a black male who had consensual sex with a white prostitute and his subsequent punishment: white men tied him to a stake and cut off bits of his fingers and ears, sending the message that no matter how immoral the

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<sup>49</sup> Brenda Stevenson, “Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca down’: Enslaved Women, Religion, and Social Power in the Antebellum South,” *The Journal of African American History* 90 (2004), 346.

<sup>50</sup> Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 134.

<sup>51</sup> McQueen, *12 Years a Slave*.

<sup>52</sup> Ball, *Slaves in the Family*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 130, 134. This is not to say men did not or could not develop similar skills. However, the shift from reaping to picking dictated this shift in skills, and black men preferred shows of strength to display masculinity, on the few occasions they could.

<sup>54</sup> Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “Slavery and the Law in Virginia”

white woman is, she is always superior to blacks.<sup>55</sup> Even on the spiritual side, black women were not given the same value as their male counterparts. James Henry Hammond sold his plantation's slave preacher and terminated the black church,<sup>56</sup> but Rebecca, a female slave who prayed fervently in public, did not threaten her master because he assumed her gender would limit her role.<sup>57</sup>

On top of the legal justification whites created to view black women as less than human, they also developed a social mythology to illustrate the lack of an African American femininity. Like Jezebel, basic facts support the Mammy myth, such as black female slaves did tend to work in the house more than males and provide care for the wealthier masters' children.<sup>58</sup> Betty Quesnesberry recalls her mammy fondly, demonstrating the close bond between a slave woman and the children they cared for.<sup>59</sup> But most black women did not run the owner's home, as that job fell to the white wife. According to Deborah Gray White, Mammy was an idealized figure, the perfect slave.<sup>60</sup>

Whites combated the overly sexualized stereotype of a Jezebel with the maternal asexual Mammy. Plantation owners faced criticism for allowing such a morally deprived creature as the black woman near their families, but Mammy's lack of femininity caused her not to be a threat to white families.<sup>61</sup> The Mammy allowed elite whites to defend themselves and prove the well-being of their families. Ultimately then, female slaves were not allowed to be considered women because that would undermine manliness and chivalry, twin pillars of white southern society. Black women had to be denied their femininity in the public realm as a necessity for the peculiar institution to function, but their natural womanhood allowed slave owners to thrive, a paradox that white elitist logic created.

Black women, despite being caught in the circular trap of slavery, did not let themselves give up their distinct cultures. They formed familial ties, exercised parental control, and worked toward freedom, creating a degree of autonomy within their lives. They helped to establish a strong community, establishing what historian Michael Gomez describes as the truest definition of community: "a community of individuals and families who share a common and identifiable network of socio-cultural communications."<sup>62</sup> However, white masters controlled almost all aspects of a slave's life, and black women especially so. Because black women had to overcome not only being a slave in a free society and black in a white society, but also female in a male society, their masters possessed more power over them than of male slaves, producing the mindset of female slaves lacking any sort of voice.

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<sup>55</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, (United Kingdom: Dover Publications Inc, 1789), 79, 74.

<sup>56</sup> Faust, *James Henry Hammond*, 91.

<sup>57</sup> Stevenson, "Marsa Never Sot Aunt Rebecca," 346.

<sup>58</sup> Lerner, *Black Women*, xxii.

<sup>59</sup> Minges, *Far More Terrible for Women*, 37.

<sup>60</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 61.

<sup>61</sup> Femininity as used here means the characteristics belonging to a woman, namely sexual.

<sup>62</sup> Stevenson, *The Question of Slave Female Community and Culture*, 80.

But this perspective is incorrect. Lerner describes black women as “the most powerless group in our entire society,” but she also describes the “strength, racial pride and sense of community among black women” as a common theme in the slave narrative.<sup>63</sup> Although African American women struggled during slavery and even after emancipation because of their environment, they were able to survive, and survival translated into resistance.<sup>64</sup> People who read and study the struggle of enslaved black women should acknowledge their accomplishments in the correct historical context that they were first and foremost property in the eyes of American law, and as such, the gains they made were minuscule. As Harriet Jacobs summed up in her autobiography, “slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, xxiii, xxv.

<sup>64</sup> Lerner includes multiple accounts detailing the struggles black women faced in the decades following the Civil War, including the fight for education, voting rights, equal pay, and the consequences of Jim Crow. This paper focuses on black women before emancipation, but see Lerner’s compilation for more information regarding that time period.

<sup>65</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 77.