

*The Life of a Jezebel: Sexual Exploitation of Enslaved Women in the Antebellum South*



by

Deanna Knox

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<sup>1</sup> “Remembering New Orleans’ Overlooked Ties to Slavery,” *National Public Radio*, last modified July 18, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/07/18/423803204/remembering-new-orleans-overlooked-ties-to-slavery>.

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### *Introduction*

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Sitting across from her new owner as they sailed away towards New Orleans, Louisa Picquet thought she had escaped the possibility of sexual harm due to her recent sale. However, she quickly realized that she “jumped out of the pot and into the frying pan.”<sup>2</sup> As the fourteen year old girl listened to the almost fifty year old man explain why he purchased her, the harsh realities of her circumstances set in.<sup>3</sup> Louisa Picquet’s new and involuntary life as a concubine was not an unusual case. Enslaved women in the Antebellum south were highly fetishized as a result of the perverse hyper-sexualization of the black female body.

In her memoir published in 1861, Harriet Jacobs despaired when she gave birth to a daughter because, “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own.”<sup>4</sup> Enslaved women endured the daily struggles of slavery just like men, but they had the added weight of sexual abuse. In most situations, enslaved women were unable to fully resist the sexual advances of their masters. Rape became commonplace, in part because legal statutes that protected enslaved people from sexual assault did not exist. The ineffectiveness of the law for enslaved black women supported the pernicious falsehood that black women were in a constant state of desire, therefore they could not be raped. This hyper-sexualized image undoubtedly caused an even more negative view of black women in the eyes of white masters and mistresses. The fetishization of black women contributed to the violence inflicted upon

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<sup>2</sup> Hiram Mattison, *Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon: Or Inside Views Of Southern Domestic Life* (New York: The Author, 1861), 16-20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 20

<sup>4</sup> Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1861), 66.

them, both physical and emotional. Enslaved women faced violence from all fronts; from slave traders, slave masters, and slave mistresses.

Historian Deborah Gray White was the first historian to publish a book focusing specifically on the experience of enslaved women. White published *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* in 1985. Her seminal work in the field of gender and slavery discussed multiple themes, ranging from the stereotypes of Jezebel and Mammy, to the life cycle of a female slave. White began the conversation that proposed enslaved men and women had incredibly different experiences. Women had a unique situation in slavery in which they were subject to violent floggings and punishments same as men, but the hyper-sexualization of the black female body and the abuse of power meant that they were also likely to experience sexual violence. White opens her book by discussing two popular stereotypes of enslaved women, Jezebel and Mammy. Typically an older woman with darker skin and a plump figure, Mammy loved her slave owners and nurtured their white children as her own. In direct contrast to the Mammy figure was the idea of Jezebel. Jezebel was a godless, sexually voracious woman who wanted nothing more than to indulge her carnal desires. This caricature gave white men one more reason to think that raping enslaved women was acceptable. If enslaved women constantly wanted sex, they would never say no.

It was because of this hyper-sexualization of enslaved women that concubinage engulfed the slave south. White men latched onto this false image of black women to feed their predatory impulses. A guilty conscience could be partially ignored if these men could view the sex as just an act rather than violent rape. But violence was inescapable in American slavery. Literary scholar Saidiya Hartman focused on the atrocities that characterized American slavery in her book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*

published in 1997. Hartman argues that violent subjugation was as much of a defining characteristic of slavery as was the concept of turning a person into property. Hartman dedicates one chapter to uncovering the horrific violence enslaved women faced if they were unlucky enough to catch the eye of their master. She begins by analyzing legal cases to explain from a legal perspective how, and why, white men and women so widely accepted the raping of black women. She then pivots to analyzing cases of brutal rape and their legal significance, with the infamous case of Celia, a slave, being one of them. She also considers how slavery was tied to the economy, and the commodification of enslaved people on the auction block. Slavery fueled the American economy, and it required slave traders and slaveholders to put enslaved people through a process of commodification, part of which took place in the slave markets.

On a larger scale, the economic aspect of fetishization added to the complex situations enslaved were in. Walter Johnson speaks on the culture of slave markets in his book *Soul by Soul: Life Inside The Antebellum Slave Markets*. Published in 1999, Johnson's work follows slave auctions and studies slave pens, all to emphasize the individuality of the marketplace. The title itself is there to stress that each human being experienced something different during an auction. Johnson briefly touches on the subject of sex slaves, but does not go into much detail. His work is more of a broad analysis of slave markets, rather than a specific study of how enslaved women impacted the economy. These women were not sold simply as enslaved laborers, in certain markets they were sold as "fancy maids," or sex slaves. The added burden of being a financial transaction helped slaveholders continue to commodify bondpeople. Despite these obstacles, some enslaved women managed to manipulate their circumstances in order to create the best situation possible for their children.

Scholars soon began to explore the complexities of these fraught relationships. Published in 2008, Annette Gordon-Reed's book *The Hemingses of Monticello* examines the complex relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. Much is unknown about their relationship, but Gordon-Reed explores the power dynamic between the two. Despite the inherent power imbalance of slavery, Sally Hemings was still able to utilize her role as concubine to negotiate the best circumstances possible for her and her children.<sup>5</sup> Most enslaved women did not have the resources available to them that Sally Hemings had. Though some women were able to exploit their master's fetishes, the system of concubinage remained a brutal system for most.

Brenda Stevenson makes that clear in her article "What's Love Got to do With It? Concubinage and Enslaved Women and Girls in the Antebellum South." Published in 2013 by *The Journal of African American History*, the article focuses on concubinage as a cruel system. Stevenson details the viciousness of sexual violence, with a particular focus on the deeply perverse nature of concubinage. She relays one disturbing case of a master impregnating a woman he enslaved, and then years later raping the same child he helped to conceive. Stevenson exposes the full immorality of the system of concubinage; nothing could stop a slave owner from submitting to his perverted desires, not even his own DNA.

In spite of its rich evolution, the historiography of the sexual exploitation of enslaved women does not fully explore what daily life was like for enslaved women under such sexual bondage. Additionally, it does not delve into the wide spectrum of responses bondswomen developed in response to sexual assault. My thesis explicitly addresses that question. Processing how slave mistresses, enslaved communities, and concubines themselves thought about this

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<sup>5</sup> Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 372-391

system of rape adds to the extant set of explanations of why it was acceptable in the antebellum south to rape black women as if they were solely commodities and not women. I will argue that the hyper-sexualization and complicity of the law situated enslaved concubines in a unique position in society. Black women forced to engage in sexual relations with their masters found themselves in dangerous positions with white men and women due to their degradation. But, some women were able to find a sort of power in their role and used it to their benefit. Fetishization of enslaved black women led to assaults on women that went deeper than just physical. Women struggled spiritually and emotionally to reconcile with the system of concubinage they had been forced into.

To address this issue I will draw upon a wide variety of sources, from narratives to financial records from slave traders. Letters and documents from infamous slave trading company Franklin & Armfield expose how the fetishization of black women worked in the company's favor. They profited from sexualizing women on the auction block.<sup>6</sup> This company made a fortune from the sexual commodification of black female bodies, and their promotion of sexed-up black women added to the sexual violence against concubines.

Slave narratives have historically been used to convince someone, typically northerners, of the horrors of slavery. This was the case for Harriet Jacobs' and Solomon Northup's narratives. Because full length narratives from enslaved women are not plentiful, I found myself having to learn about the lives of enslaved women through the perspective of enslaved men in their narratives. Regardless, I work with a number of voices, and each woman reacted differently to sexual assault. In order to explore those attacks against enslaved concubines themselves, I will draw upon various narratives by formerly enslaved concubines. Louisa Picquet's narrative

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



underscores the toll that concubinage took on her faith. She struggled with feelings of sin for living with a man she was not married to, despite being forced to be in that position.<sup>7</sup> Harriet Jacobs narrative shows the difficulty she had reconciling with the violation they endured. Jacobs also specifically discusses how her situation affected relationships with her family. Her narratives displayed how the actions of slave masters affected concubines in more than just a physical way. In addition to facing violent actions from masters, enslaved concubines often faced jealousy from their slave mistress, the wife of the slave master.

Enslaved concubines sometimes unfairly bore the brunt of their white slave mistress's anger and jealousy. The story of Patsey from Solomon Northup's *12 Years A Slave* is one tragic tale of how the concubine became the recipient of physical and verbal abuse from her rapist's wife. Patsey's slave mistress tortured her because she hated the fact that her husband kept a black woman as his personal mistress.<sup>8</sup> Thavolia Glymph expands upon this topic with her 2003 scholarly book *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*. Glymph argues that violence committed by slave mistresses was routine. Violence inflicted on enslaved women by slave mistresses could have been prompted by any number of minor infractions. Or, it could be because the slave mistress's husband was sleeping with an enslaved woman. It was not uncommon for plantation women to blame infidelity on enslaved women's perceived promiscuity. Glymph really interrogates the place of women in the plantation household and the power dynamics at play between white men and white women, and also white women and black women. By being presented as over-sexed, white women blamed black women for supposedly seducing their husbands away. White slave mistresses punished the enslaved

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<sup>7</sup> Hiram Mattison, *Louisa Picquet*, 22-24

<sup>8</sup> Solomon Northup, *12 Years A Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, A Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in 1853, From a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River in Louisiana* (London: Derby and Miller, 1853), 198-200.

women because they were not seen as victims; concubines were seen as flirtatious devils undeserving of empathy or help. Because of this distorted view of black women, white men took unabashed advantage of the women they enslaved.

Enslaved women forced into the system of concubinage experienced slavery differently than other enslaved people. In addition to daily chores, enslaved concubines had the added weight of complying to the sexual desire of their master. This continual rape put enslaved women in a difficult situation, in which they were chosen as “favorites” of their owner. Whether these women chose to accept this status or not, the status came with violence from jealous wives and vicious masters, as well as confusion within oneself. The system of concubinage employed by slave-owners undermined the personhood of enslaved women by taking away their right to choose, which forced bondswomen to cultivate a myriad of different responses to the sexual violence inflicted upon them.

*Chapter One**The Origins of Jezebel*

Historians have underestimated the intensity and traumatic nature of concubinage in the Antebellum South. By glossing over the impact of sexual violence, a damaging idea surrounding black women and assault has developed. The common conception now is that “everyone raped black women in those days.”<sup>9</sup> This casual dismissal of sexual violence is incredibly harmful not only to the understanding of black women’s experience during American slavery, but it also negatively impacts how society currently views sexual violence towards black women. For years in the Antebellum South, the excuse for sexual violence was that these black women were naturally salacious creatures. In fact, white defenders of concubinage and sexual violence accused the entire black community of lacking sexual morality.<sup>10</sup> But why was there this assumption that black people were such sexual creatures?

Slavery did not begin with the Americas. Various forms of slavery can be traced back to Greek and Roman civilizations. What was new and unusual was the form of chattel slavery that developed in the Atlantic world. Harsh and cruel order was implemented to ensure that productivity would reign supreme. The gendered difference between slavery in the Americas versus slavery in Africa became apparent as American slavery evolved. In various forms of slavery in Africa, it was generally possible to become free through several methods. For women, childbearing was a prominent one. Women made up the majority of slaves in different African nations, so different forms of emancipation developed due to the prominence of women in

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<sup>9</sup> Alexis Gravelly, Andy Campbell, Anna Higgins, Daniel Hoerauf, and Mike Reingold, “After White Supremacists Marched Through Grounds, U.Va. Grapples With Change,” *The Cavalier Daily*, last modified September 26, 2017: <http://www.cavalierdaily.com/article/2017/09/after-white-supremacists-marched-through-grounds-u-v-a-grapples-with-change>

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 38.

African slave culture.<sup>11</sup> The assimilation of female slaves into a culture through concubinage or marriage was a common path to emancipation. In fact, if an enslaved woman had a child by her master, that granted her automatic emancipation, provided that the master accepted paternity.<sup>12</sup> This was the complete opposite of American slavery. Enslaved women were often forced into concubinage, and masters having children by enslaved women was no rarity. But, women were not granted automatic emancipation, and the children of these unions were most certainly not guaranteed freedom. In fact, as early as 1662 in Virginia, colonial governments put into law that the status of the child would follow the status of the mother.<sup>13</sup> Meaning that if the mother was enslaved, regardless of the status of the father, that child would be a slave for life just like the mother. This law about enslaved reproduction typifies the changes that colonists put into place to ensure that the women they enslaved would be oppressed in every single way possible.

These misconceptions about black women can be found prior to widespread European contact and trade with people in West Africa. In 1526, a Spanish Moor Leo Africanus wrote about a “land of Negroes” and claimed “there is no Nation under Heaven more prone to Venery.” Leo Africanus also targeted black women of these various African nations and declared “They have great swarmes of Harlots among them; whereupon a man may easily conjecture their manner of living.”<sup>14</sup> Not only did Africanus insult African women by calling a great majority of them harlots, he assumed this based solely on their manner of living. But, what about their manner of living made Africanus decide that the majority of African women were so-called

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<sup>11</sup> Claire Robertson, “Africa Into the Americas?,” in *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “Slavery and the Law in Virginia,” *The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*: <http://www.history.org/history/teaching/slavelaw.cfm>

<sup>14</sup> Jordan Winthrop, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 33-34.

harlots? What Africanus wrote was not a factual depiction, but a severe misunderstanding of African cultures. The warm climate of West Africa influenced how African people dressed and lived, which varied greatly from the ways Europeans dressed and lived. According to most Englishmen, “Many Negroes were (or perhaps merely appeared to trousered Englishmen) utterly ‘naked.’” In addition to the different dress, marriage customs among West Africans did not line up with the traditional Christian Englishman’s idea of marriage.<sup>15</sup> All of these factors caused Europeans, in this particular case Englishmen, to view African people as a sort of primitive and provocative society. English men used their own customs and traditions as a standard that the rest of the world should aspire to reach, so to see West African people exhibiting a completely different culture shocked them. And that shock transitioned into judgment of African people as debauched.

Initial African encounters described by Europeans tended to portray African people as immoral in various facets in life, and those perceptions followed black women across the Atlantic and to the New World. European travelers gazed upon African women and African people as a whole with a sense of wonder, which unavoidably associated that wonder with differences. White men marveled upon African people because they had never seen people like that before. Richard Ligon described the first black woman he saw as beautiful, which must have been surprising to other Europeans because beauty was not the immediate association with black women. But in the same narrative, Ligon mentions a woman with long breasts that could be mistaken for legs if she were bent at the hip. This cognitive dissonance in describing and understanding African women became a bigger storyline in many traveler’s narrative. This concept even traced its way through the middle passage into the Atlantic world, persevering into

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 39-40.

the Antebellum south as well. The dichotomy of the beautiful women next to the monstrous beast was necessary for European travelers, and later American colonists. They needed to find a way to separate black womanhood from white female gentility, otherwise their system of enslaved female labor, both reproductive and physical, could not stand. White men needed both the beautiful woman, and the laboring beast with long breasts.

Long breasts began to be associated with savagery and lack of civility. Since medieval times, wild women would walk around with low-hanging breasts and use trickery to seduce men in order to appease their lustful spirit. European men took this superstition with them on their voyages, and applied it to African women. Various travelers narratives associate low-hanging breasts, or the ability to suckle over one's shoulder, with an over-developed sex drive. The perceived lustful nature of African women, and African people as a whole, was then tied to a lack of civility. Europeans were quite talented in finding ways to separate themselves from black people, even as early as the 16th century, despite beliefs in biological racial differences not coming around until the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The openness of African cultures in terms of marriage, and clothing, and mixing of genders in various spaces was very different from European culture, and that Europeans used those differences as a reason to consider African people as unusual. They were different, and therefore they were uncivilized.

The anthropological studies in Guinea conducted by William Smith and Willem Bosmen gave credence into why this mythical image of Jezebel was perpetuated throughout American slavery. Bosmen understood the women of Guinea to be “of a Nature so much hotter than the Men,”<sup>16</sup> while Smith described them as “hot constitution’d Ladies.”<sup>17</sup> This supposed

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<sup>16</sup> Willem Bosmen, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea: Divided Into the Gold the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts* (London: J. Knapton, 1705), 206.

understanding of black women as constantly “hot” perpetuated this idea that African women were insatiable. This led to white men using the Jezebel myth for their own perverse purposes. Newspaper ads appeared in Charleston described African women as “especially passionate” and encouraged single men to purchase an African woman from Guinea because they were able to serve “by Night as well as by Day.”<sup>18</sup> These ads as well as poems noting the “sooty dames, well vers’d in Venus’ school”<sup>19</sup> all worked to bolster the sexualized image forced upon black women that would later be used to commoditize their sexuality. The prominent assumption that black women were constantly aroused did indeed follow enslaved women to America, and particularly to the South.

Perceptions of black women differed in the colonial north slightly due to the different needs of the northern economy versus the southern economy. Wendy Warren explains that owning large amounts of slaves in the colonial north was not practical. In fact, women in their reproductive years came just behind adult men in profitability.<sup>20</sup> This reveals that in the colonial period in New England, natural increase was not something they looked for, whereas in the south, particularly after 1808, an enslaved woman’s reproductive ability was highly treasured. Enslaved women's bodies were treated differently under the colonial system. Warren includes multiple examples to explain that the fornication out of wedlock was strongly discouraged, and the courts did not look the other way in any case, even if the woman was black. Warren details that James Thomas was fined in 1653 for fornicating with a “negar servant” named Katherine.

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<sup>17</sup> William Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea: Describing The Customs, Manners, Soil, Climate, Habits, Buildings, Education, Manual Arts, Agriculture, Trade, Employments, Languages, Ranks of Distinction, Habitations, Diversions, Marriages, and Whatever Else Is Memorable Among the Inhabitants* (London: J. Nourse, 1745), 146.

<sup>18</sup> Jordan Winthrop, *White Over Black*, 146-150.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 15. (Winthrop)

<sup>20</sup> Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Incorporated, 2016), 126.

Thomas was required to pay weekly for the maintenance of the child. Katherine was punished with the whip.<sup>21</sup> The punishment Katherine and James received could certainly have served as a deterrent for other enslaved women to avoid having children for fear of being whipped. Again, this differs greatly from the antebellum south where by the nineteenth century, some enslavers forced breeding practices amongst the people they enslaved in order to increase their stock.<sup>22</sup> Colonial New Englanders had no need for large amounts of slaves; they did not have the extensive amounts of arable land like the south did. Because of that, New Englanders did not value enslaved women's reproductive abilities like antebellum southerners did.

Enslaved women lived under horrible circumstances that will be detailed in the following chapters. But not only was there imminent danger of some sort of violence almost all the time, enslaved women were poorly clothed and poorly fed. The abject dress of most enslaved women added to the image of Jezebel, because it was one factor that kept black women from measuring up to the Southern ideal of what a woman should be. Deborah Gray White explains in her novel, “Southerners were extremely squeamish about the “place” of women in antebellum society. Layers of clothing adorned the “respectable” white woman, and she never exposed even her legs or arms to public view.”<sup>23</sup> The Southern white lady was a lady of grace and class. She kept herself modestly covered at all costs, which added a certain classy aspect to her demeanor. Now, this image juxtaposed with Frederick Olmsted’s described of enslaved women in the South in his 1861 book *The Cotton Kingdom* further explains why black women were seen as immoral. Olmsted observed that enslaved women wore dresses that were burned and torn, meaning that they were not covering as much of the woman’s body as white women’s dresses did. He also

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<sup>21</sup> Wendy Warren, *New England Bound*, 163

<sup>22</sup> Daina Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 79.

<sup>23</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 31-32.



explains that these enslaved women tied their dresses up above their hips and cinched it tightly, as to show their legs which were covered in baggy material.<sup>24</sup> Olmsted described this in a tone that was clearly disgusted with the shamelessness of these women. He seemed truly shocked that a woman would wear tattered clothes, and even more shocked that she would tie her skirt up above her waist. Well, what Olmsted saw to be shamelessness was actually necessary for working. These women worked in muddy conditions, and had to work at the same pace as male slaves. In order to be more nimble, enslaved women had to tie up their cumbersome garments. Once again, black women were portrayed as sexual creatures simply because of a misunderstanding. The difference in cultural cues and necessity of dress led Englishmen to push this false idea of Jezebel, even interpreting the personalities of enslaved women as hyper-sexual to fit into their scope of black womanhood.

White men often claimed that black women acted in a sexual manner regardless of action taken by white men. Olmsted in *Cotton Kingdom* described the enslaved women he saw working as “clumsy, awkward, gross, elephantine in all their movements; pouting, grinning, and leering at us; sly, sensual, and shameless, in all their expressions and demeanour.”<sup>25</sup> While it is possible that Olmsted accurately described the mannerisms of these particular enslaved women, it is unlikely. There are much more plausible why the enslaved women he was observing would have stared at him than his explanation. Olmsted was riding through a plantation staring at these women and taking notes. Just as his curiosity led him to watch, the enslaved women probably felt curious about the man watching them. In terms of the “clumsy” and “awkward” accusations,

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<sup>24</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *Journeys and Explorations in The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery In The American Slave States, Based Upon Three Former Volumes of Journeys and Investigations By The Same Author* (London: Sampson Low, Son & Company, 1862), 208.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Olmsted must have forgotten that enslaved women worked every day from sun up to sun down with minimal breaks, so exhaustion was common and likely. They also wore bulky dresses while doing difficult tasks that required plenty of movement. It is unclear if Olmsted expected these women to be graceful slaves, or if he was once again comparing black enslaved women to white women. White ladies appeared graceful because they did not have to perform any hard labor, so seeing a black woman toiling in a field must have seemed “gross.” Since white ladies would never be seen in that sort of position, by performing these acts black women were immediately cast as complete opposites of a lady, and the opposite of a lady is a harlot.

Deborah Gray White wrote that “one of the most prevalent images of black women in antebellum America was a person governed almost entirely by her libido.”<sup>26</sup> White men heavily exaggerated the sexual personality of black women by describing them as White said, women governed by libido. Poet Alexander Wilson went so far as to write that “the negro wenches are all sprightliness and gayety; and if report be not a defamer – which render the men callous to all the finer sensations of love, and female excellence.”<sup>27</sup> The very wording of this quote is incredibly damaging. Wilson outright claims that black women cannot achieve female excellence because of their flirty nature. Not only are they automatically excluded from female excellence, but Wilson thinks that men who encounter black women sexually cannot possibly ever experience a more delicate and true love. He implicitly says that only white women could provide a full and feminine loving experience. Even people who opposed slavery still perpetuated this awful Jezebel myth. Abolitionist James Redpath published a book in 1859 containing his observations of slavery in the south, as well as conversations he had with enslaved

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<sup>26</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 28-29.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Wilson, *The Poems and Literary Prose of Alexander Wilson, The American Ornithologist* (Paisley: A. Gardner, 1876), 168.

people. He spoke on mulatto women in particular and wrote “I know that mulatto women almost always refuse to cohabit with the blacks...but are gratified by the criminal advances of Saxons, whose intimacy, they hope may make them the mothers of children almost white.”<sup>28</sup> Even in attempting to portray slavery as an evil institution, Redpath still puts the blame of sexual violence on black women instead of on the men who violate their bodies. He is supporting this idea that mixed race enslaved women were not just sexual beings, but actively attempted to secure a white partner in order to have practically white children. While some enslaved women did accept white partners in order to receive some sort of benefit for their children, Redpath does not make that clear in his argument. His only understanding is that black women, and mulatto women in particular, strove for a higher social class for them and their children, which could only be achieved by obtaining a white lover. Blaming black women is in part due to the hyper-sexualized ideas dating back to 1526 with Leo Africanus. However, a major aspect of sexualizing black women was for white men to place the responsibility on the women instead of accepting it themselves.

Observations of black women were skewed due to cultural misunderstandings, but also because white men interpreted certain things in ways that were in their favor. Jordan Winthrop explains this in *White Over Black* saying that the male-dominated cultures of England and colonial America played a key role in the derivation of sexually-oriented beliefs about black people in America.<sup>29</sup> White men clearly knew they were violating a woman’s body by sexualizing her, which is why white men worked to separate the idea of being a lady from the reality of being an enslaved black woman. By comparing their dress and mannerisms to white

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<sup>28</sup> James Redpath, *The Roving Editor: Or, Talks With Slaves in the Southern States* (New York: A.B. Burdick, 1859), 141.

<sup>29</sup> Jordan Winthrop, *White Over Black*, 150.

women, Southern men could accept sexual violence against black women because they did not meet the standards to be considered ladies. The consistent description of black women as “passionate” or “hot” actually worked to justify the actions taken by white men to satisfy their own passions.<sup>30</sup> Slave owners embraced these untrue caricatures of enslaved women because it removed the question of culpability. A “passionate” black woman could easily lure an unsuspecting white man into her bed to fulfill her godless desires. Even state politicians promoted the Jezebel image. When Northerners began questioning the morality of the South in regards to slavery and all of its inherent evils, southern spokesmen blamed black women. They declared that the entire black community lacked morality, and that black women had to search outside of their race in an attempt to satisfy their unending sexual desires. White men essentially argued that black women came to white men for sex, which led to the conclusion that slave owners never had to use power or violence to engage in sexual relations with black women because their morals were so relaxed it was not necessary.<sup>31</sup> This mentality completely removed all responsibility from the white men who inflicted sexual violence upon an unimaginable number of enslaved women. These tactics were not accidental. Accepting the premise that black women were naturally sexual served white men well, so why would any of them attempt to correct the presumption? It also worked to clearly separate black women from white women, which later added to the conflict between white women and enslaved concubines. It was because of this hyper-sexualization of black women that concubinage engulfed the slave south. White men latched onto this false image of black women to feed their predatory impulses. A guilty conscience could be partially ignored if these men could view their sexual violence as indulging with a sexual creature, rather than violently assaulting a woman.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>31</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 38.

This idea of sexual promiscuity followed African men and women throughout the commodification process. Slave trading vessels were a particular type of hell for African women. Many slave ship captains and traders wanted to keep the men and women separated in order to force as much isolation from normal routine as possible. Also because they wanted to break down the society of African people so that they would be completely broken and hopeless by the time they reached the auction block. This concept of social death that Orlando Patterson talks about is heavily reflected in that idea of separating men and women.<sup>32</sup> Another reason why captains would separate the genders was because they wanted to “protect” the women from the men, but only the black men of course.<sup>33</sup> In their minds, the black men aboard the ship were savages and uncivilized, and yet it was truly the white men that enslaved African women needed protection from aboard slave trading vessels. Women were seen as less of a threat, so sometimes women would be allowed to be on deck without manacles for the majority of the trip. While in theory this sounds like a good deal, it put these women in much closer proximity to white sailors and traders. White men aboard these ships felt entitled to the bodies of the African women they were in the process of enslaving. Partially because the sailors viewed African women as property, but also because of the stigma attached to black women. Historian Sowande Mustakeem argues that, “black females, viewed through a prism of promiscuity on both sides of the Atlantic, were held within a permanent cycle of sexual expectations”<sup>34</sup> The validity of his argument resides in the fact that black women were constantly reminded of their sexuality every step of the commodification process. They were seen as whores. Sexual in nature and unwilling

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<sup>32</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1-14.

<sup>33</sup> Sowande Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 83.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

to change, black women were promiscuous according to caricatures forced on them by white society. For these reasons, white men aboard slave trading vessels felt no apprehension at using black women's bodies in whatever way they chose. Sailors assaulted black women aboard slave trading vessels simply because they could. They held the power, and even when it was not acceptable to rape a slave on the ship, it was not really punished, only frowned upon. Mustakeem shares a story where a sailor forced himself on an enslaved woman who was "big with child" and he took her "brute like."<sup>35</sup> While the sailor was put in chains later, it seems that his punishment was rather more of a formality than an emphasis on the immorality of rape. This story adds another layer of horror in understanding the sexual assault enslaved women endured. He raped a pregnant woman, and chose her specifically. Perhaps it was to ensure that he would not impregnate an enslaved woman, or perhaps because he wanted to exert his power fully, so he chose a woman that would be not just a woman, but soon to be a mother. Whether these sailors and traders knew it or not, they were implementing the concept of commodification in the minds of these women who were unfortunate enough to be picked as a sailor's sex toy. By taking advantage of these women any day, at any time, in any way they chose, these men essentially told the African women that their bodies no longer belonged to them. They used the women as property. The women were expendable and could be replaced. There was very little care given to ensure the well being of these women. Some ended up with physical injuries, and some ended up with emotional and psychological injuries. There was no concern for ensuring that the enslaved woman was safe, because nobody cared. That lack of care for their humanity is another reason why sexual assault aboard slave ships was one of the first instances where it became very clear to enslaved women that in this new and horrible land they were being shipped to, their bodies were

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 86.

not their own. Because even resistance was met with physical punishment.<sup>36</sup> Mustakeem goes even further and claims that the things that happened aboard slave ships set the stage for what was to happen to women in the next steps of their journey:

“Knowing the prevalence of forced coupling, breeding, and sadomasochistic practices throughout the Atlantic plantation complex across centuries, rape in the Middle Passage established the formative precursor of sexual expectations that sailors not only set into motion but brokers, auctioneers, and slaveholders further manipulated through market sales.”<sup>37</sup>

The assault of women did not end with the sailors aboard slave trading vessels. It followed enslaved women as they left the ship and entered the slave markets.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 90.

Chapter 2

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*“There Is a High Demand for Fancy Maids”: Profits in Fetishization*

“Gentlemen!” the auctioneer called, “how much for her?” The “her” in question was a seventeen-year old young woman. Looking around from her perch on the auction block, she must have been anxious at what her fate would turn out to be. But, she did not have to wonder for very long, because the auctioneer began to highlight more specific details about her abilities. Hearty. Good health. Only seventeen. These three things all emphasize the young girl’s health and ability to labor in some way or another. It is only when the auctioneer said “she will be a fortune for any one who buys her that wants to raise niggers,” that her true function was revealed.<sup>38</sup> Her appeal was her sexuality and reproductive capability. The auctioneer sexually commodified her in order to ensure that she sell for at least \$1500.

The commodification of enslaved women’s bodies was not a new concept, but the way slaveholders valued enslaved women’s bodies began to change once the trans-Atlantic slave trade was outlawed in the United States in 1808. With the importation of slaves illegal, slaveholders were no longer just one slave woman. They were buying the slave woman and all of her future children. Enslaved women were often put through an embarrassing spectacle by traders and buyers alike when on the auction block. Buyers wanted to ensure that their purchases were in good reproductive health. According to a visitor at a slave auction in Richmond, enslaved women were forced to suffer through “the most indecent examination and questioning.”<sup>39</sup> Women had strange men grabbing at their legs, their arms, their breasts, and even their genitals. Potential buyers could even examine a young woman’s nursing ability by pulling

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<sup>38</sup> Peter Randolph, *Sketches of Slave Life, or, Illustrations of the Peculiar Institution* (Boston: published for the author, 1855), 8.

<sup>39</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 148-149.



on her breasts.<sup>40</sup> Slaveholders truly thought they could figure out a woman's reproductive capability through these invasive examinations. Their ignorance does not forgive the invasive measures they took with these women, who were forced to be poked and prodded like cattle. Women in the process of being sold were likely alone, with family members either being at a different plantation or being sold in the same market, so protection from family members during sale was unlikely. This proved to be especially harmful for young enslaved girls, as they were routinely raped by white men, and sexually vulnerable to slave traders and new owners, as was the experience of Louisa Picquet who was sold away from her family and repeatedly raped by her owner.<sup>41</sup> The white men who ran and attended these auctions had zero respect for enslaved women's privacy and physical form. Exposing body parts and touching became part of the auctioning process, and enslaved women were expected to stand there and take it. Some women refused to allow their bodies to be invaded in such a manner. One woman, when strange man began examining her breasts, looked at these men with such fire in her eyes that had she been armed, she very likely would have struck them. Another woman who was tired of the degradation lifted up her skirts while the traders were checking her teeth, and as quoted by Deyle she told the traders, "look an' see if dey could fin' any teef down dere."<sup>42</sup> Both of these women refused to accept the humiliation of sale without responding with a little fire. Because "very often on the auction block women's bodies were exposed and handled to determine their capacity for childbearing," it became just business for these men to pat down and invade the physical space of enslaved women.<sup>43</sup> But these two women serve as examples of resisting the invasion of

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<sup>40</sup> Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 263-264.

<sup>41</sup> Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 251-252; Hiram Mattison, *Louisa Picquet*, 17-19

<sup>42</sup> Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 264.

<sup>43</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 32.

privacy, even if it be the ever so slight murderous glance. Typically potential buyers examined the bodies of enslaved women to determine their efficiency at breeding, but some women were examined and sold for their potential for sexual entertainment rather than their reproductive purposes.

The abhorrent nature of the antebellum slave markets was not a secret, it was widely acknowledged. Slave owners knew that the happenings in the slave markets clearly went against the idea that slavery bettered black people instead of harming them. In order to maintain this distance between slaveholders and slave traders, “ordinary” slave holders promoted this rhetoric that slave traders were a different sort of white people. Walter Johnson writes about antebellum author and slaveholder Daniel Hundley who wrote accounts of how he saw slave traders and what their place in society was. These accounts were later included in his pro-slavery narrative *Social Relations in Our Southern States* published in 1860. Traders were uncouth. They were poorly dressed. They spoke in a crass manner. In summary, they were not in the same class as slave holders. Hundley confidently informed his readers that the standard slave trader, “is outwardly a coarse, ill-bred person, provincial in speech and manners, with a cross-looking phiz, a whiskey tinctured nose, cold hard-looking eyes, a dirty tobacco-stained mouth, and shabby dress.”<sup>44</sup> This is not the picture of the ideal southern gentlemen. This is the description of an outcast. An outsider so foreign that he would be the lowest of the social hierarchy were it not for the existence of the enslaved population. According to Hundley, it was not only the outward appearance that separated the traders from the owners, but it was the very nature of what the two occupations were. Traders violently sold wives from husbands. They intentionally sold children away from mothers. For this reason, Hundley posits that the slave trader “is not troubled

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<sup>44</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 24-25.

evidently with conscience...he is yet one of the jolliest dogs alive.”<sup>45</sup> Slave traders were the most cruel people out there, because of that very separation that they caused. But, someone had to sell bondspeople to slave traders since Congress closed the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1808. So from 1808 until the outbreak of the civil war, who was actually taking enslaved people from their roots and giving them to traders? Slave holders. If slave holders were the first step in separating bondspeople from ones they loved and homes they knew, what made them any different from slave traders? In reality, nothing. But in the arrogant minds of slaveholders, they only sold enslaved persons off of their plantation for valid reasons. That “reason” could be something as simple as an enslaved man refusing to complete a task. But, it was better to sell a person as a punishment rather than sell a person for a profession. That is where slave holders found themselves to be different from slave traders. Clearly that is a thin thread to hang their differences on, but slave holders needed slavery to be separate from the marketplace.<sup>46</sup> Slave holders had to find a way to separate themselves from the atrocities of the slave markets. They needed to keep the institution of slavery as clean as possible. And in order to do that, they created an image of slave traders that was impossible to respect. But plenty of slave traders defied this false image and further proved that slave traders and slave holders were not so different after all. Isaac Franklin of the notorious slave trading company Franklin and Armfield is one example of a slave trader who rejected the idea of traders being social outcasts. He acted as a plantation owner would; “he invested his vast wealth in land and slaves, and like many other traders who were attached to the soil, he moved in a social circle which befitted his wealth.”<sup>47</sup> Despite growing up on the frontier and receiving a less than stellar education, Isaac Franklin

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<sup>45</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 24.

<sup>46</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 25.

<sup>47</sup> Wendell Holmes Stephenson, *Isaac Franklin, Slave Trader and Planter of the Old South* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1938), 4.

worked his way from trader to planter, and by the time he died he owned over 600 slaves spread out across 10,000 acres in multiple states.<sup>48</sup> His ascent to the status of planter naturally increased his social capital, but he was far from a social pariah while he was a trader. His immense wealth earned him respect from southern society, proving that money was the best way to guarantee social status.

While some slaveholders made enslaved women their concubines after bringing them on to serve in an official capacity, some slaveholders bought women specifically for sex. Despite the belief discussed in 1782 by Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that black women were less desirable than white women, concubinage was still a common system. Jefferson denigrates black women throughout *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and claims that white women were the “superior beauty.”<sup>49</sup> In *Notes*, Jefferson attempts to deny the beauty of black women. And yet even he, the person behind the belief that black women have nothing to offer next to white women, had multiple children by a woman he enslaved. The unfounded arguments Jefferson tries to put forth in *Notes* were clearly not even believed by him. He wrote in 1782 what would make slave-holders happy; that black women were undesirable animals, and that white women were God’s special treat. Believing that black women were not women of the same sort as white women played into slaveholders’ system of “other-ing” black women in order to rationalize fetishizing enslaved women. Within the few years after this was published, Jefferson began raping the teenaged enslaved person Sally Hemings after she had brought Jefferson’s daughter to him in Paris.<sup>50</sup> This belief in the physical inferiority of black women did not stop white slave-owners from purchasing women for sexual purposes. There was even a

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 11-15.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1782), 148.

<sup>50</sup> Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello*, 24.

specific sex trade, known as the fancy trade. Historian Edward Baptist touches on this subject discussing the sexual nature of the slave trade while focusing on the infamous slave trading company Franklin and Armfield. At one point, Baptist writes that in their records, Franklin was noted to have reported back to the Richmond office that there was a great demand for “fancy maids.”<sup>51</sup> There was a specific market for attractive, young, black women because of the fetish that white slaveholders had created out of the black female body. The letter from Franklin to Ballard about the demand for fancy maids was just the tip of the iceberg for the sexually charged sort of language and actions these men took. In another letter written to Ballard from Franklin on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1833, Franklin jokes about a certain young woman from Charlottesville. He asks Ballard if he plans on sending the girl along, or if he intended on keeping her with him in Richmond. Franklin asks in jest if he should go ahead and charge Ballard \$1100, the price they would have sold her for as a fancy.<sup>52</sup> Nothing was mentioned about this young woman except for the fact that she was a “fancy girl.” Her age was not told, her skin color was not described, not even her name was given. Franklin and Ballard looked at this woman, and other enslaved women like her, and viewed them as sexual beings, as property. Franklin talks about this woman like she is a sex toy, and based on how these men conversed, it is likely that that is how she was viewed by Ballard as well. The exchange suggests that Ballard was supposed to send this girl along to Franklin to be sold, but instead decided to keep her for a time. She was likely very young and very beautiful if she was to be sold as a fancy like Franklin mentioned. Even though Ballard was technically impacting their joint financial ventures by not sending the young girl to Franklin to be sold, Franklin was very casual about it. In fact, the lighthearted nature of his comments to

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<sup>51</sup>Edward Baptist, ““Cuffy,” “Fancy Maids,” and “One-Eyed Men”: Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States,” *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (2001): 1633.

<sup>52</sup> Rice C. Ballard Collection, UNC Chapel Hill, folder #12.

Ballard suggests that this was not incredibly uncommon for one of the partners to eye a girl they liked and hold on to her for an extended period of time before she was sold. They just used these women until they were done, and then passed them down the river to be sold in various slave markets, most likely in Louisiana to fetch a high price.

Sex slaves typically sold for obscene amounts of money ranging from \$1200 to \$2000 and higher, and New Orleans was the location that most prominently figured in the so-called “Fancy Trade.”<sup>53</sup> The financial records amongst Ballard’s personal letters do not give much away in regards to the sale of fancy maids. While we know for certain that Ballard dealt in the fancy trade, his records simply do not show that very clearly. There are certainly some places where a “yellow” girl was sold for a couple hundred dollars more than a “negro” girl, but nothing spectacular was really shown through his records. But this fits with how fancy maids were acknowledged, or not acknowledged by their enslavers. Fancy maids were not publicly announced when they were purchased. Walter Johnson discusses this phenomenon and argues that buying a fancy girl was a sign of wealth, power, and status. Men who purchased sex slaves “showed that they had the power to purchase what was forbidden and the audacity to show it off.”<sup>54</sup> While everyone knew that this trade existed and that white men consistently raped black women, it was not a polite thing to talk about it. Despite it being a sign of wealth, owning a sex slave was not socially approved dinner conversation. This prudence is reflected in how fancy girls were registered. Slaveholders typically defined these women as cooks or domestics, not as fancies or mistresses. But, not registering fancy girls was more common than registering them under a false position.<sup>55</sup> Even more taboo than openly declaring the purchase of a concubine was

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<sup>53</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 114.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 114-115.

discussing it. Even between parties that knew the truth, it was considered gossip; “it reflected as badly upon the knower as the known. Mary Chestnut Boykin said that sex between master and slave was “the thing we can’t name.”<sup>56</sup> It was always well known that masters slept with the women they enslaved. Sometimes the truth came out via rumors, or because the enslaved woman told the tale herself, or more often than not the handful of near-white slave children running around a plantation gave away the truth. This concept of purchasing fancies was such an interesting one because you truly were not supposed to brag about it. And yet, it was such a symbol of power to purchase a fancy. It was this unspoken truth that only the wealthiest and most powerful could even think to buy a fancy girl. That level of wealth was something that planters often aspired to, so in a way the ability to purchase a fancy girl was a marker of success. Despite being a marker of success, purchasing a sex slave was taboo. The ownership of a fancy girl as a sign of wealth was one reason why slave traders like Franklin and Ballard sometimes felt compelled to keep an enslaved woman as their concubine. As their company grew, these men actually became incredibly wealthy and Ballard himself did transition into being a planter, as did Franklin. But prior to that, they were traders. Slave traders are often perceived as lower class, less couth, and more vulgar than plantation owners. This stigma could have encouraged the desire for fancy maids amongst slave traders because it meant that they could have the same thing that plantation owners had. While not all slave traders decided to secure a concubine, Ballard did. However, he may have ended up with more than he bargained for because his relationship with an enslaved woman named Avenia White did not end up in a sale. It ended up with him financially taking care of her and their children while they lived in freedom.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

It was 1840, and Avenia sat stoic in her room at a boarding house in Cincinnati. She had just written to Ballard explaining her predicament. She, along with another woman Susan and the four children that the two women had between them, was struggling financially. Ballard had freed Avenia and her children, but he had failed to provide her with enough resources to take care of herself and their children in a completely foreign land.<sup>57</sup> Ballard took a risk and took in Avenia as his concubine for however many years. But what he did not count on was some sort of emotional attachment, and even a sense of responsibility that he would develop for her. He could not have predicted that he would be swayed into freeing Avenia along with her children. Avenia's positioning as this specific sort of slave allowed her to petition the slave trader for various necessities, such as more money for herself and the children. Not all women who were purchased as fancies got to experience such a luxury. One young woman named Antoinette so detested the purpose of her purchase and the uncouth trader who bought her, that she threw herself out of a window and fell to her death.<sup>58</sup> The end result for the young Antoinette was obviously not as ideal as what Avenia was able to secure. But, the willingness of Ballard to send Avenia money and fund her and her children portrays a different character than the personality that comes through in his letters with Franklin. In correspondence with his partners Ballard discusses whorehouses, a lover's purse, and a one-eyed man.<sup>59</sup> This crude language as a way to describe women and their bodies does not match up with the man who paid to ensure that his bastard child could continue his education. The only difference is that Ballard let his business sneak into his personal. With the discussion of fancy maids in general, Ballard had no connection

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<sup>57</sup> Sharony Green, "Beyond Bedrooms and Brothels," *Black Women, Gender, + Families* 5, no. 1 (2011): 17.

<sup>58</sup> William and Ellen Craft, *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom, or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft From Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1860), 21.

<sup>59</sup> Ed Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men,'" *The American Historical Review*, 1619.



to them. It was strictly business. But with Avenia, he clearly felt that he owed her a stable life. Not all women were as lucky as Avenia. Her response to being commodified in the market seems to have been almost a business transaction. She most likely accepted her station as concubine and cooperated with Ballard, which eventually earned her freedom. While some women reacted to concubinage similarly, other women chose to respond completely differently.

### Chapter 3

#### *“Us Colored Women Had to Go Through A Plenty”: The Battle at Home*

##### **Rape as a Routine**

Tall and graceful, the twenty-three year old Patsey was admired by the other enslaved people on Epps' farm. Solomon Northup described her as an elegant and joyful woman whose potential was stripped from her by the evils of slavery. Daughter of a woman from Guinea, she exuded loftiness with her straight posture and bright eyes. Northup swore she would have been a chief amongst her people due to her immense strength and never-ending grace. In addition to the impressive and memorable stature of Patsey, she was also a prime field hand. Patsey could pick cotton quick as lightning. She followed orders directly, and remained obedient with a pleasant temper. Patsey was the ideal slave according to Northup, but something about her appearance was off. Despite her deferential demeanor and dedicated work ethic, Patsey had been the victim of the lash multiple times. Her punishment came not due to laziness or misbehavior, but from being “the slave of a licentious master.”<sup>60</sup> Layers upon layers of whipping scars on Patsey's back tell the story of what it was like to be the object of lust.

Solomon Northup's dramatic life story is immortalized in his narrative *12 Years A Slave*. While a horrifying and tragic story in its own right, he is not the focus of this particular examination. Instead, I focus on Patsey, who is a supporting character in Northup's narrative. Even though we see Patsey's life through the eyes of Northup, he still provides enough information that her daily life under Master Epps can be extrapolated and understood. Patsey belonged to Master Epps in more ways than one. She picked cotton all day in the fields, and at night she was subject to the base desires of her owner.

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<sup>60</sup> Solomon Northup, *12 years a slave*, 189.

A chronic drunk, Epps often lashed out in fits of violence, including sexual violence. Northup tells of at least one situation in which a clearly drunk Epps motioned for Patsey to leave the field and come to him. The young girl began to weep, as she clearly knew what he wanted with her.<sup>61</sup> She could not escape him. Not only did Patsey operate under the constant beck and call of Master Epps, she also arose the ire of his wife Mistress Epps. Black women often faced violence from two sides; from the slave master as well as from the slave mistress. Part of that violence came from that simply being inherent in the nature of slavery, but other times slave mistresses struck out against enslaved women who slave masters abused. White women's violence is acknowledged by scholars, but it is "rarely analyzed as a central facet of their existence."<sup>62</sup> In a compilation of narratives from former slaves in Richmond, one person reveals that whenever their slave mistress became angry, she would whip the slaves with a cow hide "till the blood ran down."<sup>63</sup> This example shows that slave mistresses were quite capable of violence, and not just a slap to the wrist. The type of violence that is usually attributed to overseers more so than slaveholders themselves. The concept of violence as part of everyday life for white women was not considered by slaveholders either, because that would have been in complete contrast to the genteel image that had been so carefully cultivated and preserved by white men. If white women's violence against enslaved black women was understood to be a regular occurrence by white society, it could have potentially damaged white women's reputation as demure southern ladies. Mistress Epps had a reputation to maintain as the wife of a slaveholding, landowning man, but at the same time she felt that she had to resort to violence in

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 227-228.

<sup>62</sup> Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 25.

<sup>63</sup> *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Telfair-Young with combined interviews of others*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn044/>, 299.

order to preserve her status as mistress in her own home. Mistress Epps' violent outbursts stemmed from jealousy of Patsey. She was not a characteristically horrible woman. In fact, Northup said that she was kind to all of the enslaved people on her husband's plantation, except Patsey. She was jealous because of her husband's illicit relations with the enslaved girl. Mistress Epps did not seem to recognize that Patsey did not choose to be Epps's sexual plaything. It is likely that she subscribed to the ludicrous theory that black women were simply promiscuous. The mistress probably thought that Patsey seduced her husband away. Southern white women often found slave women to be at fault when it came to a slave master's indiscretions. Mary Chestnut Boykin was one southern women who felt no pity for enslaved women. She even referred to enslaved women who were forced into sexual situations as being part of a "harem." She then continued to juxtapose that image of shameless whores with the "purity and innocence" of white women.<sup>64</sup> Plantation mistresses were more concerned with how the rape of black women impacted white women. Mistress Epps became so upset over her husband's infidelity because it reflected poorly on her; she may have felt extreme embarrassment that her husband for some reason felt the need to turn to a black woman. Because of this jealousy and insecurity, Mistress Epps punished Patsey every chance she got. While Mistress Epps wielded power over Patsey, she did not hold enough power to force Patsey's sale. Master Epps did love his wife, but he loved money more. For this reason, Mistress Epps could not even stand the sight of Patsey, "and nothing less than trampling out the life of the helpless bondwoman would satisfy her."<sup>65</sup> She did everything in her power to strip Patsey of all life. She would hurl a broken bottle or a piece of wood at Patsey when she saw her walking around. She emitted so much hate and

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<sup>64</sup>Mary Chestnut Boykin, *A Diary From Dixie* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1905), 114-116.

<sup>65</sup> Northup, 12 years a slave, 198-199.

jealousy from her heart that Patsey constantly felt in danger. When Mistress Epps became so fiery red with anger, Master Epps would calm her and reassure her of his love by flogging the girl.<sup>66</sup> Patsey lived in constant fear. She never knew if she would be safe from a violent whipping. She never knew if a piece of glass would come flying at her head with dangerous speed. She had no reason to believe that violence and fear and revenge would ever end. Every day was a nightmare, but there was one day where she experienced a beating so brutal that it darkened her countenance for the rest of her life.

It was a sunny, Sabbath day and Northup along with other bondspeople sat by the bayou bank. In his usual nature, Epps came calling for Patsey, but she was nowhere to be found. As Epps continued to search for her, his anger and fear of her leaving him continued to grow. Meanwhile, just one farm away, Patsey began her return to Epps's plantation. She had used her time off on the Sabbath to visit her friend, Harriet Shaw. Understanding of Patsey's plight, Harriet pitied the girl and attempted to help her as much as possible. Harriet was a black woman married to the white Master Shaw, so Harriet was the mistress of that plantation. That particular Sabbath, Patsey had gone to Harriet to get a piece of soap, because Mistress Epps refused to grant her that small luxury out of her hatred for the bondswoman. Patsey slowly made her way back to Epps, most assuredly dreading being in the presence of her torturer. When Epps saw her coming from the direction of Shaw's plantation, he became enraged. He accused Patsey of going to see Master Shaw rather than Mistress Shaw. Even though Patsey explained that she only went for soap, he refused to believe her and chose to instead inflict the most horrific and soul-breaking whipping Patsey had ever received. Northup remembers it so clearly because he had to assist in delivering the punishment. It is impossible to imagine the humiliation and fear that Patsey felt in

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<sup>66</sup> Northup, 12 years a slave, 189-200.

clothes. She stood naked in front of everyone as Epps pointed out four positions in the ground for stakes to be driven into. Patsey's ankles and wrists were each tied to one of the four stakes, leaving her completely nude and stretched out in a starfish-like position. As she lay crying and begging for mercy, Epps forced Northup to begin. The air crackled with the sound of the whip as Northup struck Patsey one, two, three, up to thirty times. Her skin screamed with each blow. Ten to fifteen more lashes, and Northup refused to deliver anymore. He refused to beat the helpless Patsey any further, so Epps took his turn. He struck her more viciously than Northup had. He taunted her with each crack of the whip, asking if she would ever dare to return to Shaw's. Her writhing body matched the horrendous shrieks that escaped her mouth as Epps whipped her with more and more force. As he literally flayed the flesh from her bones, her struggles and groans began to abate and her head gradually lowered to the ground. She had fainted from the torment of it all. Finally, Epps stopped. The other enslaved people carried Patsey back to her bed and cleansed her wounds. They dressed her again, but her clothes immediately became stiff with blood. Even as Patsey's physical wounds began to heal, she never fully recovered emotionally from the barbarous treatment she received. She no longer walked with a bounce in her step, all vigor and youth stripped from her. Her disposition completely transitioned into that of a despondent and miserable woman. She was even known to have nightmares, "and often times would start up in her sleep, and with raised hands, plead for mercy."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Solomon Northup, *12 Years A Slave*, 254-260.





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<sup>68</sup> <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/ill4.html>

Master Epps was not just furious at Patsey for going to another plantation. The excessive reaction shows that Epps felt rejection. He felt anger at the perceived slight because in his mind, he owned Patsey's every thought and every action. His anger was only compounded by his jealousy, which is an entirely different beast all on its own. Epps imagined that Patsey was seeing another man, which pushed him over the edge. Regardless of the fact that she was not in a relationship with him, and did not want to be in a relationship with him, he could not fathom the concept that she would be with another man. Even if she had gone to see Master Shaw instead of Mistress Shaw, she would have been within her right as a human being to choose who she wished to be with romantically. But, Epps did not see her as a woman with the right to choose. He saw her as property. He felt entitled to her body, and legally, he was. Enslaved women were not granted the legal right to choose who they wanted to be with, and even when bondspeople could choose their partner, there was no guarantee that their partner would not be sold from them.<sup>69</sup> But even if their body could be exploited, a slave master could not force an enslaved woman to care for them emotionally, which is partially why Epps felt insecure. He knew that she did not feel attached to him, but the thought of her giving a part of herself emotionally to another man was unacceptable to him. His jealousy and pent-up sexual frustration took control and he could not even allow himself to think logically when Patsey explained why she was with Harriet. The entire situation can be traced back to Master Epps. His wife refused Patsey soap because of jealousy, and she was only jealous because her husband insisted on using Patsey to indulge his lust. Even for a problem that she did not cause, Patsey was punished, and violently so. She only wanted a piece of soap.

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<sup>69</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman*, 102-103.



A sense of entitlement plagued southern slaveholders to the point where virtually no enslaved woman was ever truly safe from the possibility of sexual assault. Some women were even purchased solely to act as sex slaves, Louisa Picquet being one of them. Referred to as an octoroon, Louisa Picquet was the child of her owner Mr. Randolph and a woman he enslaved who was  $\frac{1}{4}$  black and  $\frac{3}{4}$  white. As a result, Louisa had incredibly light skin, and her complexion plagued her from birth. As the product of a master/slave relationship, Mr. Randolph's wife Mistress Randolph felt some jealousy towards Louisa as a child. She was a constant reminder of her husband's infidelity. So, she had her sold.<sup>70</sup> A man by the name of Mr. Cook purchased Louisa and rented her out occasionally. Mr. Cook moved her to Mobile with him where he boarded with a family by the name of Bachelor. Louisa was only 14 years old when the lecherous requests began. Under the ruse of illness, Mr. Cook began to summon Louisa to his room at night. He would request that she bring various items to ease his sickness. As young as she was, she knew enough to be frightened by his requests that she enter his room in the evening. Louisa did find aid in Mrs. Bachelor, who took care of the boarders. Louisa shared her fears with Mrs. Bachelor, and she blocked Mr. Cook's immoral requests by either completing them herself or sending an enslaved boy to carry out whatever task Mr. Cook had requested. Eventually, there came the day where Mr. Cook caught on to Louisa, and he forbade her from consulting with Mrs. Bachelor next time he sent for her, otherwise she would be whipped. Of course Louisa told him she would not speak to Mrs. Bachelor and would go to his room that night, but she had already decided she would take the beating instead. As promised, the next morning Mr. Cook whipped Louisa so that she would not "forget" to follow his orders.<sup>71</sup> Louisa was not able to reject, ergo she could not give consent either. Enslaved women often faced this terrible dilemma where they

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<sup>70</sup> Hiram Mattison, *Louisa Picquet*, 6.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

could not say no to sexual advances without the threat of bodily harm. Their bodies were not their own; as property, enslaved women could not consent or reject sexual advances. It made no difference, because slaveholders had property rights over enslaved women's bodies. The next time he sent for Louisa, she again pretended to forget and decided to face the lash instead. However Mr. Cook's patience was running out, and it was plain that he was becoming more angry with Louisa due to the nature of this specific beating. The first time he whipped her, she was dressed in a thin dress. But this time, he made her remove all of her clothes and rained blows upon the most delicate places of her body. She did not go into detail regarding the exact location she left lash marks on her, but he forced her to be naked for a reason, so it is reasonable to assume that he struck her back, thighs, buttocks, and potentially in between her legs. He struck her with a cowhide whip until he cut through her skin.<sup>72</sup> Even though Mr. Cook pretended he beat Louisa for disobeying his orders, he beat her because he was furious that she had rejected his sexual advances yet again. Despite the fact that she refused him the use of her body sexually, he still expressed his sexual desire through this beating because rape is about power dynamics, especially within the master/slave dynamic. Mr. Cook was furious because a fourteen year old girl he purchased was not giving up any power over her body, which to him seemed outrageous. Forcing Louisa to bare her naked body in front of him while whipping her allowed him to exert that power over the young girl that he had been wanting to do through rape. After this horrid experience, Louisa decided that she would give in and go to Mr. Cook's room next time he sent for her. But, she never had to see him again because Mr. Cook's debts caught up with him and he had to sell off all of his property, including Louisa.<sup>73</sup> The thought of escaping Mr. Cook's

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 15-16.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 16-17.

lecherous ways excited Louisa, but unfortunately the young girl ended up in an even worse situation.

Standing in a room with other enslaved women, bidders began to remove Louisa's clothes to "examine her." A man stopped the bidders and stated that she was a "virtuous girl" and to take her out to be auctioned at the market.<sup>74</sup> While Louisa's invasive examination was ended prematurely, other enslaved women in the process of being sold were not so fortunate. Daina Berry explains that "young men and women were fondled, poked, prodded, and made to walk, run, and jump; every cavity was explored, from their mouths to their private parts."<sup>75</sup> Bidding for Louisa began upward of six hundred dollars. As bidding went on, the auctioneer continued to speak towards Louisa's various qualities that would ensure a good sale. The auctioneer described her as a "good-lookin girl." Seven hundred dollars. Her hair was of "good quality." Eight hundred and fifty dollars. Though it was short at the moment, "it will grew out again." One thousand dollars. After all was said and done, Louisa was sold to Mr. Williams for fifteen hundred dollars.<sup>76</sup> That would be about \$45,000 in today's money with inflation rates.<sup>77</sup> The high price that Mr. Williams paid is just one example of slaveholders who would go to very expensive lengths to fulfill their illicit desires. Mr. Williams was a fifty year old man. He was separated from his wife and he lived in New Orleans with his three children, all boys. They began the journey from Alabama to New Orleans by boat, and it was on that journey that Mr. Williams explained to Louisa why she purchased her. Only fifteen years old, Louisa had just been sold away from her mother and her baby brother. The other enslaved people formerly owned by Mr. Cook had been sold away as well, so she had just lost all of the people she knew and was

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 17-18.

<sup>75</sup> Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 84.

<sup>76</sup> Mattison, *Louisa Picquet*, 18-19.

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.in2013dollars.com/1850-dollars-in-2018?amount=1500>

comfortable with. She had dodged sexual advances from Mr. Cook for weeks, maybe even months. Louisa went through the trauma of being sold away from her mother and enduring the spectacle of an auction, and then was hit with the fact that she had just been purchased as a sex slave. Her situation went from bad to worse, because Mr. Williams did not give her the chance to think that her responsibilities under his ownership would be anything other than purely sexual. He explicitly told her that he planned to live out the rest of his days with her, and if she refused to cooperate, he would beat her almost to death.<sup>78</sup> After Louisa's experience with Mr. Cook's whipping, she decided that there was no point in attempting to resist Mr. Williams. She was all alone, traveling to a new place where she knew nobody, and she was scared. She decided that staying alive and avoiding beatings was the best option for her. She lived as his housekeeper and concubine, and had four enslaved children by him.<sup>79</sup> With the evidence of her four children, and the intentions with which Mr. Cook bought her, it is safe to say that Louisa's life was regulated by chores and rape. During the day she probably helped out in Mr. Cook's house, and in the evenings he would rape her. Louisa's experience mirrors Patsey's in the sense that she was a slave to Mr. Cook's lust, just as Patsey was to Master Epps's lust. But, the absence of a mistress in Louisa's case eliminated one aspect of a violent life; she did not have to worry about jealous mistresses. Louisa understood that she either relented and did not resist Mr. Cook, or he would kill her. She chose to stay alive, but her status as concubine deeply troubled her mind and spirit. she often struggled with guilt over "living in sin," and she prayed often to God to save her from her circumstances.<sup>80</sup> Louisa's response to Mr. Cook's advances is just one example of a wide range of responses that enslaved women developed in response to their attacks.

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<sup>78</sup> Mattison, *Louisa Picquet*, 19-20.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 23-24.

## **Responses to Assault**

What could these enslaved women do to protect themselves when the law was against them? *George v. State* ruled that rape could not exist within the black race.<sup>81</sup> *State v. Mann* ruled that the power of the master must be absolute in order to render the submission of the slave perfect, which implicitly included rape and sexual assault.<sup>82</sup> Enslaved women had to find ways to protect and preserve themselves as best as they possibly could, because nobody else was going to protect them. While some bondswomen chose subtle responses, it was not uncommon for a bondswoman to take a more hands on and aggressive approach.

Melton McLaurin writes the story of Celia in his book *Celia, A Slave*, published in 1991. Not much is known about Celia's life prior to Robert Newsom's purchase of the girl. But there is information on the man who owned her. Robert Newsom was about 50 to 60 years old at the time of her purchase. He was a widowed farmer with four children, two sons and two daughters. He lived in Calloway County, Missouri, where he had arrived with his family in 1822. Newsom's wife died in 1849, and he purchased Celia one year later. Celia was fourteen years old. She only knew that a middle-aged man bought her to provide a service in his home, but she did not know what that service would be. She quickly found out. On the journey back to Newsom's farm in Calloway County, he raped Celia.<sup>83</sup> This act clearly defined the roles of the relationship that Newsom had in mind. He did not purchase Celia to perform housework, though it is thought that she did that as well. He purchased her to be his sex slave. Newsom made it clear to Celia right then and there that her body belonged to him, and he would do with it whatever he pleased. And as a fourteen year old girl, what was she to do? She was in the middle of a journey

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<sup>81</sup> *George v. State of Mississippi*, Supreme Court of Mississippi, 183 Miss. 327 (Miss. 1938), Oct. 30, 1938.

<sup>82</sup> *State of North Carolina v. John Mann*, December 1829.

<sup>83</sup> Melton McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 1-25.

back to this man's home. She was alone with him, with no protection. We don't know if she had any family, and if she did it is unclear where they were located. She could have fought back, but to what end? At that moment, Celia resigned herself to the fate that so many other enslaved women faced as well.

Celia lived with Newsom from 1850 to 1855. Her cabin was just a short distance from the main house so that Newsom could have easy access, and it was a clear distance from the other slave dwellings. In that time period, she bore two children by him.<sup>84</sup> Not much about her daily chores are discussed, but it is clear that she did not work in the field with the other people Newsom enslaved. She may have cleaned the house and worked as a cook/housekeeper, but the existence of her two children is proof enough that her main job was to be Newsom's concubine. Two children in the span of five years may not seem that many and could hint at sporadic assault rather than continual rape. However, it is not very likely that her assaults were sporadic. Obviously, not every assault would result in a pregnancy, and miscarriages were not such a rarity that it is implausible for Celia to have suffered a miscarriage in that time. But again, the main evidence that suggests that she was a constant victim to assault was the situation of their first meeting where Newsom's first instinct was to rape in order to set the tone for what their relationship would be. Additionally there are no records of Celia's children being sold, but they did not make sense for Newsom's type of operation. He ran a farm, and two young children, one of which a boy, would have made him more money on the auction block than they would have as slaves for him. But, selling off Celia's children would have done nothing but further torment the young girl, and up until this point Newsom had no reason to punish her, in fact he had every reason to continue letting her find whatever happiness she could.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 28.

While Celia was living under Newsom's control, she began a romantic relationship with another enslaved person on Newsom's farm named George. Not much information is given about George. Their relationship is not detailed too well by McLaurin, but we learn that in the year 1855, Celia was once again pregnant. While it clearly could have been Newsom's child, there was speculation that the baby could have been George's instead. Whether this was the final straw for George or not is unclear, but he gave Celia an ultimatum. He told her to "quit the old man" if she wanted him to remain with her.<sup>85</sup> McLaurin does not fill this section with many sources. In fact, his source material across the board is rather slim. But, we know that George exists and according to trial records we know that he and Celia had some sort of relationship. While it is reasonable that George would become upset and jealous over his master paying visits to Celia's cabin, the request he made was unreasonable. He was an enslaved man, so he knew the unsteady temperament of white men just as well as Celia knew it. And yet he still made the unreasonable request that she end the relationship, as if she entered it willingly. Regardless of the logic and legitimacy of George's request, we have to imagine that Celia was tired of being violated anyways. She had been assaulted by a man 40 years her senior for five consecutive years. The emotional toll that must have taken is unimaginable, but perhaps she had been so resigned to her abuse for the entirety of her time with Newsom that she had never made any moves to resist, at least none that were documented. It is possible that George's request, although illogical, gave her a reason to fight back against the regimen she had been unwillingly accustomed to.

In the days following George's request, Celia made up her mind to never be assaulted again. She approached Newsom during the day on June 23 of 1855 and warned him to never

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 30

approach her cabin again, or she would hurt him.<sup>86</sup> He chose not to adhere to her warning. He did not seem threatened at all, which suggests that Celia had never posed a serious threat to his well-being before. She had probably never even been a cause for concern, otherwise Newsom may have heeded her warning a little closer, which would have been wise for him. Later that same evening, Newsom approached the cabin where Celia slept with her two young children. He entered and woke her up for the express purpose of assaulting her sexually as he had done for the past five years, but this time was different. As he moved closer and closer towards her, Celia backed away from him and reached for something in the corner near her children. She must have suspected that he would not listen to her warning, because earlier that day she had hidden a large stick in her cabin. As he came nearer to her, she grabbed the stick and hit Newsom over the head with it. He stumbled backwards and reached his arms out as if to grab her, but she avoided his grasp and hit him on the head again. The second blow turned out to be deadly. As their two children slept in the corner, their mother stood over the dead body of her rapist and the father of her children. She reacted quickly. Building a large fire, she burned what she could of his body, crushed the smaller bones and hid the big ones. The very next morning, she had Coffee Wainstain, Newsom's grandson, clean out the ashes of her fire with the promise of some candy.<sup>87</sup> This final act of having Newsom's own grandson discard of his ashes is one final slap in the face to Newsom. Her decision to enlist Coffee's assistance shows how much disdain she truly had for Newsom. There can be no argument that theirs was anything but a pseudo-husband and wife situation; it was pure power that ruled their interactions. He had more, and she had less. She clearly felt no guilt over what she had done, because in her mind all she had done was put an end

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 33-37.

<sup>87</sup> Kathleen Hall, "State of Missouri vs. Celia, A Slave: Trial Record, Selected Links & Bibliography," 15-19: <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/celialinks.html>



to her perpetual assault. And in her defense, she had employed other methods before she came to violence. She attempted to win the sympathy of Newsom's family members, and when that failed she tried to warn him verbally. When none of that worked out, she had no choice but to defend herself by whatever means necessary.

The actions of this story are fascinating in themselves, but the trial that ensued just proved that enslaved women had no friend in the law and were truly forced to take their fate in their own hands. Celia was tracked down and accused of Newsom's murder, and she easily confessed. While she did not initially tell the whole truth, she admitted that she was the one who killed him.<sup>88</sup> As the murder trial was brought to court, Celia's status shifted from property to human based on what the problem was. Celia was a slave. In order to be a slave, that person must be considered property rather than a person, in the same way that cattle is considered property. Because of that, enslaved people had about as many rights under the law as cattle, which is crass but true. Going off of that thought process, Celia could not be charged with murder, because property cannot kill. If a horse threw its rider and the rider died from the fall, would the horse be brought to court to stand trial for manslaughter or murder? Of course not. According to that logic, Celia should not have been able to be on trial. But, when it came to the question of rape and sexual assault and self defense, she was relegated back to the status of property. As an enslaved woman, she did not own her own body. Therefore, she could not be raped or resist rape because it was not within her legal right to do so. This mischaracterization of property rights stopped Celia from being protected from rape, as a white woman would be. It was illegal to force a woman into a sexual encounter, but of course that rule only applied to white women.<sup>89</sup> This

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<sup>88</sup> Melton McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 45.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 304-305. .

constant shift between property and human was not an accident. The legal system in the south was manipulated at the behest of slave owners in order to best protect their interests. Celia's violent response was only one example. Another example of resistance turned fatal comes from a woman also named Celia, Celia Bryan. Her story mirrors the story of the other Celia fairly closely, except for one small detail. Celia Bryan killed her father, who happened to also be her rapist.

Brenda Stevenson says that “incest, of course, was the most extreme and perverse example of how physical intimacy lent itself to serial concubinage and sexual predation.”<sup>90</sup> It is hard to disagree with this statement when it is juxtaposed with the story of Celia Bryant. Celia Bryant moved to Florida from Georgia in 1830 when she was twelve years old. She moved with her family, which included her three sisters, her enslaved mother Susan, and her master/father Mr. Bryan. Mr. Bryan had been living with Susan as his “common law wife for at least twelve years, since that is how old their eldest child was.”<sup>91</sup> Referring to Susan as a common law wife seems like a stretch. While yes, she had been living with Mr. Bryan for more than ten years, she was still a slave. Therefore, any rights that would be granted to a white common-law spouse would not be granted to the enslaved Susan, should something happen to Mr. Bryan. Susan was more of a concubine than a wife. What the exact nature of their relationship was is of course impossible to tell because neither left letters or a narrative to tell their story, so any conclusions about the nature of their emotional relationship would be conjecture. But, we do know that Jacob Bryan freed all the slaves that comprised his family on November 25, 1842. So perhaps he felt

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<sup>90</sup> Brenda Stevenson, “What’s Love Got to do With It? Concubinage and Enslaved Women and Girls in the Antebellum South,” *The Journal of African American History* 98, no. 1 (2013): 109.

<sup>91</sup> H. Franklin Robbins, Jr. and Steven G. Mason, “Florida’s Forgotten Execution: The Strange Case of Celia,” *Florida Supreme Court Historical Society* (2014): 2

some emotional connection or duty to Susan and their children. Or perhaps he became embarrassed to own his own children when he truly could not deny that they were his offspring.

Mr. Bryan was Celia's father. He also happened to be the father of her children. Celia had her first child in 1835 when she was seventeen years old. By December of 1847, she had four children.<sup>92</sup> The father of Celia's children was her own father, Jacob Bryan. His own daughter had multiple children who could have called him father or grandfather. The sick and twisted nature of all of this leaves no sympathy for Bryan. He had to know that what he was doing was wrong, and it is clear that Celia felt no love for her father and rapist.

In 1847, Celia killed Jacob Bryan. What her motivation was is unclear, but it is very clear that she split his skull with a knife. A local newspaper reported the event on December 10, 1847, and noted that Bryant was murdered by a "female negro slave of his."<sup>93</sup> The consequences of Celia's actions were clear. An 1840 statute declared that if any person of color, whether free or enslaved, was guilty of killing a white person, they would be punished with death.<sup>94</sup> This 1840 statute tells a lot of the law and how black people were treated, both enslaved and free. Even though free from slavery, free black people were incredibly oppressed legally and in society. There is so little information on this case, and similar to the story of Celia in Missouri, Celia Bryan did not leave any writing to provide insight into what she thought about her life. The women who were able to write narratives about their lives provided much wanted information about what their lives were like, but not all details were always discussed.

Harriet Jacobs narrative is one of the few full slave narratives written by women. She traces her life from girlhood and slavery all the way to womanhood and freedom. As most slave

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 3.

narratives were, Jacobs wrote “*Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl*” for a northern audience, particularly Northern white women. Even the title of her book reveals the emphasis she wishes to place on her story. She wants to remind her readers consistently that she was only a girl when the traumatizing situations that she disclosed happened to her.

Harriet Jacobs was born in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1813.<sup>95</sup> But according to her, she did not realize she was a slave until 1819 when she was six years old. She describes her childhood as a fairly happy one. Her father was allowed to work as a carpenter when he was not working for his mistress, provided he would pay her \$200 a year. His goal was to purchase his family’s freedom, but unfortunately that dream never came to fruition. Her parents so sheltered her from the horrors of slavery that she never dreamed she was only property. Both of her parents were mulattoes, which made her a mulatto as well, suggesting that her skin was very light. In addition to her parents, she had a younger brother that she loved and a grandmother who turned out to be one of the most important people in her life.<sup>96</sup> According to this description, Jacobs lived a relatively calm and normal childhood. She had parents who loved her, they all lived together in their own cabin, and she saw her father working and bringing in money. Everything about her early years seemed normal, except for the fact that it could all be stripped away at any point and there would be nothing she could do about it.

When she was six years old, Harriet realized for the first time that her life was not her own. Her mother died. After her mother passed, Harriet went to live with her mistress who had been as kind as a slave owner could be to her mother. The slave mistress treated Harriet similarly. She tells of no stories where she was beaten or punished by her mistress; instead

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<sup>95</sup> Professor Justene Hill, Lecture, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, April 2, 2018, “The Experiences of Harriet Jacobs.”

<sup>96</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents*, 8-9.

Harriet tells us that this mistress taught Harriet to read and write, and allowed her to run outside and play like any other child would. For the few years that Harriet was with her, she was content.<sup>97</sup> But, once again, Harriet was reminded that she was not a free person or a member of her mistress's family. She was a slave. When she was twelve years old, Harriet's mistress took ill and died. Harriet hoped that her former mistress would keep her promises that Harriet and her brother would never want for anything. She hoped that her mistress had given her and her brother their freedom in her will. But this was not the case, because a promise to a slave was no promise at all. Harriet was willed to her mistress's five year old daughter. Despite the love that Harriet and her family had for their mistress and the loyalty they gave her, all of Harriet's family members were sold off. She thought her mistress had cared for her like family, but she realized instead that "these God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend."<sup>98</sup> Harriet did everything right. She served her mistress faithfully. She never attempted to run. She even loved her and even looked to her as a maternal figure. But it did not matter. No matter what enslaved people did, at the end of the day they were property and nothing more.

Harriet entered the house of her new owners, Dr. and Mrs. Norcom, when she was twelve years old. She begins discussing her experience with the Norcom's by relaying two stories that would have more to do with her life than she could have possibly realized at the time. In the first few weeks of being at the Norcom's, Harriet remembers hearing a commotion outside. She looked to find a man from one of Norcom's other plantations being dragged to Norcom's house, where he was sent to the smoke house. Shortly thereafter, all Harriet heard was the crack of the whip and the screams of the tortured. Norcom had this enslaved man beaten so savagely that his

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 10-11.

screams never left Harriet's memory. There were various rumors that went around explaining why this man was whipped. One rumor in particular lines up with what was exposed later by the enslaved man's wife. Apparently, the man was arguing with his wife in the field, and Norcom's overseer overheard the man accuse his wife of having relations with Norcom, and that Norcom was the father of their new baby. Both the enslaved man and woman were said to be of a darker complexion, while their newborn baby was quite white. Norcom could not bear to have these stories shared across his plantations and from slave to slave. So he sold both the husband and the wife. As the enslaved woman was being given to the slave trader, she reportedly said to Norcom "you *promised* to treat me well," to which he responded "you have let your tongue run too far; damn you!"<sup>99</sup> Her final words to Norcom, combined with his attempts to seduce Harriet later, suggest that he gave empty promise upon empty promise to this woman. He probably told her that if she just gave in, he would treat her, and subsequently her children, well. It is likely that Norcom also consistently reminded this woman that he in fact owned her, so he could legally do with her whatever he pleased. Based on what this woman said to Norcom, it sounds like she gave in to his demands. To her, she probably viewed the situation in two ways. Either she could accept his advances and potentially better her life and maybe even her husband's, or she could reject him and face a violent response. Regardless of what her reasoning was, it is clear that Norcom was the father of her child and that he refused to have that knowledge widely circulated. His response to her is so incredibly cold and callous that it is hard to process. He clearly told this woman that he would treat her well, but the second that the truth emerged, she was punished. This woman suffered because "she had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 15.

the father of her child.”<sup>100</sup> This false sense of security was not an uncommon tactic that white men used to secure the sexual favor of enslaved women. One slaveholder by the name of Dr. Gale was known to have multiple children by the women he enslaved, and the threat of being sold to Mississippi was so prevalent that some women did not resist as to ensure that they would not be sold. While the women Dr. Gale had children by fared better than most, the children of these unions were treated just as harshly as the other enslaved people on his plantations.<sup>101</sup> Unfortunately for the women Dr. Gale impregnated, their security was not extended to their children which would have been a natural thought. So even if they were treated well, they were subject to the sight of their children being whipped for any disobedience. Dr. Gale used that sense of security to more easily procure concubines amongst his property, just as Norcom did to get a less-resistant partner. Harriet saw women like Norcom’s concubine suffer all throughout her life, and very early on she learned about Norcom’s predatory habits.

At the age of fourteen, Harriet’s troubles as a slave began to transition into problems quite specific to enslaved women. I own you. Your body was made for my use. Your will must surrender to mine.<sup>102</sup> These are some of the disgusting utterances Harriet began to hear on a daily basis from Dr. Flint. He entreated the young girl to submit to him. He attempted to convince her of those same beliefs he held: that she did not belong to herself. That she had no say in what was done to her. It would be easy enough for Norcom to force his body upon her, but he wanted to convince her. He wanted to manipulate her mind to prove that he could force her mind just as easily as he could force her body. After years of dealing with Norcom’s sexual harassment and abuse, Jacobs decided she had enough. She escaped and hid at her grandmother’s in a crawl

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid 15.

<sup>101</sup> *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves* (Washington D.C.: Microcard Editions, 1968), 1-3.

<sup>102</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents*, 26-27.

space.<sup>103</sup> She refused to allow Norcom any further satisfaction from persecuting her mind and attempting to persecute her body. She finally broke, and reacted by fleeing.

Another subset of enslaved women reacted entirely differently than women like Celia Bryant or Harriet Jacobs. These women chose to manipulate their circumstances to the best of their abilities in hopes of creating the best possible future for themselves and their children. Sally Hemings is probably one of the most well known figures who was able to influence her circumstances to best benefit her family. There is much intrigue surrounding Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Nobody knows exactly what happened between the two while Jefferson owned Hemings. The biggest question tends to be, what was their relationship like? Was it violent rape like the case of Patsey and so many other enslaved women? Was it an equal and consensual relationship? Or was it more of a business transaction? The idea that their relationship was equal and consensual can be eliminated, because “enslaved women practically and legally could not refuse consent.”<sup>104</sup> But, according to Thomas Morris, rape had been defined as “carnal knowledge of a woman forcibly and against her will” as early as the seventeenth-century in England. Additionally, from the late eighteenth-century to the early nineteenth-century, Virginia, North Carolina, and Missouri all allowed for the castration of convicted rapists.<sup>105</sup> Clearly the rape of women was taken seriously, except slave narratives quite openly discuss the sexual assault of enslaved women without any repercussions for the rapists. Black women were excluded from this category of “woman” in laws regarding rape. Because race and gender both played so heavily into the law and court cases, women bringing charges could likely find their race being brought into question. Morris gives this fact credence with the

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 81-87.

<sup>104</sup> Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello*, 106.

<sup>105</sup> Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*, 304-305.



example of *Grandison (a slave) v. State* (1841). In this trial, the Tennessee court ruled that Grandison's whiteness had to be proved during the trial.<sup>106</sup> The enslaved woman's story of assault had to be considered alongside what her ethnicity was, because if she was determined to be a black woman, her case would likely be thrown out of court on the grounds that she was considered property and property cannot say no or yes. All of this is simply to emphasize the fact that the inability to legally consent to sexual interactions must be considered when studying sexual "relationships" between slaveholders and the women they enslaved. Legally, Sally Hemings could not have been anything other than a concubine, because in the nineteenth century a concubine was defined as "a woman who lived with a man without being married to him."<sup>107</sup> Hemings could not have been Jefferson's wife because a interracial marriage was not legal, and she could not have been a common law wife either because that would suggest that she was recognized by the law. Hemings' status was, and could only have been, concubine of Thomas Jefferson.

On June 26 of 1787 at the age of fourteen, Sally Hemings arrived in London.<sup>108</sup> While there is plentiful documentation about what Sally's brother James was doing while in Paris with Jefferson, there is less about Sally Hemings and her daily routines. Gordon-Reed argues that the "veiled nature of her existence" was one of the key themes of her life. Especially within Jefferson's white family, which would have felt reluctance to speak outright on the subject.<sup>109</sup> Sally's absence and Jefferson's silence on her exact roles and responsibilities actually speaks to her position in the Jefferson household. The unnecessary vagueness implies that there were times where Sally was in places that would have compromised Jefferson's reputation. Not speaking

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 305.

<sup>107</sup> Annette Gordon-Reed, *Hemingses of Monticello*, 107

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 247.

about Sally in a way prevented Jefferson from revealing anything about the true nature of her role in his life. His family's choice to remain vague on the matter as well is likely for the same reasons. They could have easily denied outright that Jefferson fathered Sally Hemings children, which some did, but others chose to be more vague. Gordon-Reed includes the story of one of Jefferson's granddaughter's, Ellen Coolidge, who in 1850 wrote a letter to her husband stating that no female domestic ever entered Jefferson's chambers while he was there, and if she were to enter while he was there, people would have seen her.<sup>110</sup> While Ellen Coolidge does not say her name, she is referring to Sally Hemings and is hoping to quell what were then only rumors about her grandfather having children by a woman he enslaved. Keeping Sally Hemings out of the records suggests just how important she really was in Jefferson's life, and his relatives knew that, but wanted to keep his transgressions quiet for the sake of the family name. Jefferson's silence on Sally Hemings is similar to how slaveholders in the antebellum South often registered their "fancies" as anything other than concubine in public record.<sup>111</sup> This speaks again to the odd nature of concubinage. It was not a secret, family and neighbors knew when a slaveholder was sleeping with a woman he enslaved. However, it was still stricken from public record. Why? These men had to know that they were doing something wrong, and that history would not look upon them kindly for their actions.

In 1788, Thomas Jefferson put in word that he wanted to return to Virginia. Sally was fifteen or sixteen years old and Jefferson in his 40s when they actually left. Again, not much is known about what transpired in that year Sally was there, except for the fact that she became Jefferson's concubine during that time. That evidence comes from the child Sally bore in 1790

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 247.

<sup>111</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 114.

only months after returning from France.<sup>112</sup> Given the fact that the young girl was sent to live alone with a middle-aged widower, their eventual “relationship” is unsurprising. What is surprising are the terms Sally Hemings was able to get Thomas Jefferson to agree to. In France, Sally was a free woman, and she had skills as a seamstress that she could have employed for work. But, she was also a pregnant sixteen year old young woman who was legally owned by someone else. In an interview conducted in 1873, their son Madison Hemings said:

“...when he was called back home she was **enceinte** by him. He desired to bring my mother back to Virginia with him but she demurred. She was just beginning to understand the French language well, and in France she was free, while if she returned to Virginia she would be re-enslaved. So she refused to return with him. To induce her to do so he promised her extraordinary privileges, and made a solemn pledge that her children should be freed at the age of twenty-one years. In consequence of his promise, on which she implicitly relied, she returned with him to Virginia.”<sup>113</sup>

Madison Hemings essentially explains the business deal that his mother secured. If Sally Hemings returned with Jefferson, and continued a sexual relationship with him as it is implied, she would not be treated as a slave and her children would be freed once they reached adulthood. Though Jefferson offered her these terms, he really did not have to. He owned her. He could have punished her for even saying that she would not go back. But that was not in Jefferson’s nature. Jefferson would not have left Paris without Sally Hemings. Not only had she become a fixture in his life, she now carried evidence of his indiscretions. But again he was not the type of person to force Sally onto a ship if she was adamantly opposed. Instead, he offers her a few

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<sup>112</sup> Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello*, 264.

<sup>113</sup> “Memoirs of Madison Hemings,” *Public Broadcasting Service*, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/cron/1873march.html>

promises, which she accepts. She had no idea if he would keep his promise, but it is likely that she felt that there was no reason why he would not keep his word. And he did. Upon his death, Jefferson only freed five enslaved people in his will, Sally Hemings and all of her children.<sup>114</sup> Freeing his own children is nothing to applaud. While there is no question that Sally and her children gained a more secure future than the enslaved people who were sold after Jefferson's death, it is still horrific to think about what she had to do to secure it.

Other enslaved women found themselves in similar circumstances as Sally Hemings, but the same result was not always reached. William Wells Brown tells the tragic tale of an enslaved woman named Cynthia in his own narrative. Wells Brown encountered Cynthia while he was enslaved by a slave trader named Mr. Walker. With skin practically white but enough African ancestry in her blood to retain some of those features that made her an “exotic,” Cynthia was a beautiful woman. She was only one quarter black, so we must assume that she was incredibly white in complexion and in physical traits. Mr. Walker purchased Cynthia for the New Orleans Market. Being one of the most prominent spots for the fancy trade, it is likely that Mr. Walker intended to sell Cynthia as a “fancy”, which is code for sex slave. But, he became so enamored with Cynthia's beauty that the thought of selling her was no longer the most prominent thought in his head. Walker's lust overpowered his greed.<sup>115</sup> The sexual assault of women under the control of slave traders was not uncommon. This in between period where enslaved women were owned by the traders until they were sold off in market did not provide a temporary pause to the threat of sexual danger. In fact, “southern slave traders were notorious for raping the young

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<sup>114</sup> Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello*, 657.

<sup>115</sup> Brown, William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William Wells Brown, A Fugitive Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1848), 28.

enslaved women under their control.”<sup>116</sup> Even the way traders spoke about enslaved women showed the lack of respect they had for their bodies, and the sexual nature of the trade. A letter from James Franklin to Rice Ballard on May 24<sup>th</sup> of 1832 discusses general business, but then there is mention of a slave girl’s “lover’s purse” and how it interacted with his “one-eyed man.”<sup>117</sup> This coarse language exhibits how slave traders looked at enslaved women as just bodies. There was not truly recognition of their humanity and womanhood, instead traders like Franklin made crass comparisons about genitalia and his sexual conquests. Mr. Walker was similar to Franklin. He was overcome with lust and wanted Cynthia sexually almost on sight. The first night aboard the ship, Walker had Cynthia placed in his state-room. The young woman was frightened; placed in a room away from the other enslaved people, with a white man who had just purchased her, his intentions could hardly be misconstrued. As Walker continued to proposition her, Cynthia staunchly refused. Walker stopped asking and began threatening instead. He told Cynthia that if she accepted his advances, he would not sell her. Instead, he would take her to his home in St. Louis where she would live as his housekeeper. But, if she did not willingly accept his offer, he would sell her as a field hand to the worst plantation in the south he could find.<sup>118</sup> Cynthia’s options could hardly even be called options. She could either acquiesce to his request and be sexually assaulted at Walker’s whim, or she could refuse and be sold into back-breaking labor where she would be exposed to unimaginable violence. She chose to be Walker’s concubine, and according to Wells Brown, “Walker performed his part of the contract at that time.”<sup>119</sup> Unfortunately, Walker’s word to Cynthia that she would be taken care of on his farm was not kept. After Cynthia had two children by Mr. Walker, he sold her to a

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<sup>116</sup> Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 126-127.

<sup>117</sup> Rice Ballard Collection, Series 1.1, letters, folder 5.

<sup>118</sup> William Wells Brown, *William Wells Brown Narrative*, 45-46.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

slave trader because he got married to a credible white woman, and could no longer keep a concubine.<sup>120</sup> Cynthia's story is representative of the lack of accountability slave owners had to the people they enslaved. Even if Walker had made a legal contract stating that Cynthia would remain under his roof well taken care of for the rest of her life, he could have disregarded it at any time. Slaves had zero standing under the law.

The various responses that enslaved women created were highly individualized. While trusting her enslaver worked for Sally Hemings, it did not work for Cynthia. Harriet Jacobs was able to escape and free herself, but there were plenty of enslaved women who could not fathom escape. Each woman had to respond in the way that she felt was the smartest. So many factors impact enslaved life that the idea that there would be one response that worked for every single woman is unreasonable. Instead, each woman looked at their own life and evaluated for themselves what their options were. Some stayed, some left. Some fought, some relented. Whatever course was chosen, each woman had to live with whatever consequences came with her actions.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 45-46.

## *Epilogue*

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With a history that is characterized by the lack of respect for their bodies and the fetishization of their sexuality, how does that impact black women today? According to the Center for Disease Control's 2010 summary report on National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 41% of Black women reported sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime.<sup>121</sup> This number comes as no surprise, because the legacy of assault has transcended the generations. The residual effects of the hyper-sexualization of enslaved women can be seen today in how black female bodies are viewed by society, as well as by the treatment of sexual assault of black women, with the #MeToo movement being one example.

From being examined indecently on the auction block to being exposed by the police in a restaurant, there continues to be a lack of respect for black women's bodies and their femininity. On April 22<sup>nd</sup> of 2018, a story emerged of two white police officers who had tackled Chikesia Clemons, a black woman, to the ground, exposing her breasts in the process. Her "crime" was arguing with the server over plastic cutlery, and Clemons states that she was waiting for the manager's information in order to file a complaint when the police arrived. It is unclear what transpired that caused the police officers to tackle her to the ground, but the video clearly shows that Ms. Clemons was not resisting, even when being pushed to the ground. The fall disturbed her shirt, and Ms. Clemons ended up lying on the ground with her breasts exposed, still not resisting. The video of the incident clearly shows one of the officers tugging on Ms. Clemons shirt, but not to cover her back up. It appears as if he is attempting to drag Ms. Clemons by her shirt, which would have been unnecessary because the officer's partner already had Ms. Clemons

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<sup>121</sup> "National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey," *Center for Disease Control*, 2010, [https://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS\\_Report2010-a.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS_Report2010-a.pdf).

on the ground in a secure hold.<sup>122</sup> Why the first officer decided to tug on Ms. Clemons clothes is unknown, but I would not argue that it was overtly sexual. Instead, I see it as a continued lack of respect for black women's bodies. Whether it be Rosa's experience on the auction block where the auctioneer touched her and displayed all of her features from her teeth to her "beating bosom," or the exposure of Chikesia Clemons by police officers, this lack of respect cannot be ignored.<sup>123</sup> As previously discussed, enslaved women were not put on the same level as cultured white women. And while I cannot prove this, I suspect that if the same scenario that occurred with Ms. Clemons occurred with a white woman and black police officers, the public outrage would be much greater. But still in 2018, black women's femininity is challenged despite the fact that a woman is a woman. A former enslaved woman from Richmond Virginia said it best when she recounted the story of a beating she received for no reason. She responded to the unjust punishment with truth and defiance; "I told them they needn't think they had done somethin' by strippin' me in front of all them folk 'cause they had also stripped their mamas and sisters. God had made us all, and he made us just alike."<sup>124</sup>

The lack of respect for black women's bodies goes beyond just denying them their femininity. It stretches to the sexualization of their bodies, starting from a very young age. The concept of rape in antebellum law is incredibly convoluted and difficult, especially when it pertained to black women. Some states began to put age specific laws into place in order to be

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<sup>122</sup> Alex Horton and Rachel Siegel, "A woman was tackled by officers at an Alabama Waffle House. Police are defending the arrest," *The Washington Post*, April 24, 2018: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/04/23/police-wrestled-a-black-woman-to-the-ground-exposing-her-breasts-in-restaurant-video-shows/?utm\\_term=.9f15a199100f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/04/23/police-wrestled-a-black-woman-to-the-ground-exposing-her-breasts-in-restaurant-video-shows/?utm_term=.9f15a199100f)

<sup>123</sup> Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 85.

<sup>124</sup> *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Telfair-Young with combined interviews of others*. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn044/>, 294.



more clear on what was automatically rape. Mississippi legislators declared in 1822 that sexual assault of a female under the age of twelve was without a doubt rape.<sup>125</sup> This statute did not necessarily include enslaved women, but it did not exclude them either. This statute was tested when in 1859, an enslaved man by the name of George was charged with the rape of a ten-year old enslaved girl. George was convicted, but because he and the girl were both slaves, the matter became not her age or the crime against her, but her status and whether a slave can rape a slave at all.<sup>126</sup> The fact that this little girl was the victim of a violent crime was not the concern, the question was focused on whether or not rape can exist between black people. Unfortunately, sexual abuse of young children is not a rarity. The Center for Disease Control's 2010 summary report on National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey showed that 29.9% of women experienced their first completed rape between the ages of eleven and seventeen, while 12.3% of women experienced it at or before the age of 10.<sup>127</sup> As reported by the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, the United States Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics showed that from 2005-2010, African American girls and women twelve years old and older experienced higher rates of rape and sexual assault than white, Asian, and Latina girls and women.<sup>128</sup> These numbers for African American women reflect the misconception that black women are easy and promiscuous, which unfortunately still plagues our society. We know that black people were considered to be excessively sexual people, dating back to the sixteenth-century with European travelers narratives. A study released in June of 2017 demonstrated that these beliefs are still supported by today's society. Georgetown Law's Center on Poverty and

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<sup>125</sup> Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*, 307.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 306.

<sup>127</sup> "National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey," *Center for Disease Control*, 2010.

<sup>128</sup> "African-American Women and Sexual Assault," *Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault*: <https://mcasa.org/assets/files/African-American-Women-and-Sexual-Assault1.pdf>

Inequality found that adults view black girls as less innocent than their white peers, particularly from the ages five to fourteen. This is not just in sexual ways, in every aspect. The study refers to this phenomenon as the “adultification” of young black girls, which is the process of adults perceiving black girls to be more adult-like than their white peers. One key aspect of adultification lies in attaching hyper-sexualized stereotypes to young black girls, which allows society to view sex as the natural role of black women and girls.<sup>129</sup> Jennifer Morgan discussed this idea that black women were meant for sex and reproductive labor when she discussed women with low-hanging breasts and how white men attributed that to extreme sexuality.<sup>130</sup> This study also found that adults believed black girls to be more knowledgeable about sex than white girls, specifically between the ages of five to fourteen.<sup>131</sup> These perceptions are damaging in regards to sexual assault because people who view black girls as more knowledgeable about sex are quite likely to also think that these same black girls are either engaging in sexual activity, or ready for sexual activity. Jonita Davis of the Washington Post discusses this occurrence in her article about the Georgetown study. Davis remembers the times people commented on how “curvy” her daughter Chloe was, who at the time was only a toddler. Davis responded by putting her young daughter in shorts and one-piece bathing suits when at the beach, while Chloe’s white cousin sat peacefully in a two-piece without anyone commenting on her curves.<sup>132</sup> This story

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<sup>129</sup> Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia Blake, and Thalia Gonzalez, “Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood,” *Georgetown Law Center on poverty and Inequality*: <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/poverty-inequality/upload/girlhood-interrupted.pdf>, 1-5.

<sup>130</sup> Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 14.

<sup>131</sup> Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia Blake, Thalia Gonzalez, “Girlhood Interrupted,” 8.

<sup>132</sup> Jonita Davis, “A study found adults see black girls as ‘less innocent,’ shocking everyone but black moms,” *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2017: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2017/07/13/a-study-found-adults-see-black-girls-as-less-innocent-shocking-everyone-but-black-moms/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.49a62b0a6082](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2017/07/13/a-study-found-adults-see-black-girls-as-less-innocent-shocking-everyone-but-black-moms/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.49a62b0a6082)

exemplifies the advanced way people view black female bodies. People felt so comfortable discussing a toddler's "curves" because black girls are sexualized by society at a young age. Black girls are already mature in the eyes of adults according to the Georgetown study, and that includes sexually.

Women like Tarana Burke, the founder of the #MeToo movement are constantly reminding advocates that sexual violence impacts everybody from every corner of the world. Because of that, "we can't afford a racialized, gendered or classist response."<sup>133</sup> Historically, sexual assault has received a racialized, gendered, and classist response. Enslaved women could not rely on white women to help protect them from sexual assault. That is not to say that slave mistresses encouraged or even accepted sexual abuse of enslaved women, but "plantation mistresses did not have to be abolitionist-minded to deplore the seduction and rape of slave women by white men. They did not have to be feminists to resent the heavy costs in civic, financial, and social dependence that they bore. They would have had to be both, however, to alter the circumstances that made these abuses possible."<sup>134</sup> This is simply to say that plantation mistresses did not like it when their husbands abused enslaved women, partially because of the embarrassment it caused white women. But, the majority were not going to do anything to stop it. The majority were not willing to help enslaved women fight assault, and Celia proved that when she asked Newsom's daughters for help and they ignored her.<sup>135</sup> Their refusal to help a woman escape sexual abuse led to the murder of their own father, and the hanging of Celia.

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<sup>133</sup> Tarana Burke, "#MeToo was started for black and brown women and girls. They're still being ignored," *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2017:

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/11/09/the-waitress-who-works-in-the-diner-needs-to-know-that-the-issue-of-sexual-harassment-is-about-her-too/?utm\\_term=.495b1ec41aca](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/11/09/the-waitress-who-works-in-the-diner-needs-to-know-that-the-issue-of-sexual-harassment-is-about-her-too/?utm_term=.495b1ec41aca)

<sup>134</sup> Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 54.

<sup>135</sup> Melton McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 31-32.

Today we see white women interacting with black women to make strides against sexual assault. While there is quite clearly more cohesiveness between black and white women today than in the 1800s, there is still work to be done. This #MeToo movement was founded for black and brown women and girls, but they are still being left behind and ignored. Tarana Burke explains that marginalized voices tend to be pushed to the side when big movements like this come along. Women of color, low income women, queer women, and disabled women tend to be forgotten, lucky just to get a footnote.<sup>136</sup> Even the coverage of black victims receives less attention. Jerhonda Pace spoke out about being a victim of R. Kelly and his sexual cult, but the only outlets that covered her story were Billboard, Vox, and a few other outlets that are not exactly respected for their hard-hitting journalism.<sup>137</sup> Whereas all of the big media outlets covered the Weinstein scandal and the predominantly white victims. The Huffington Post, the New York Times, CNN, BBC, all of these outlets covered Weinstein. Part of this has to do with the status of the victims as well as the fact that they are white, but it all serves to prove that black women face a battle to have their voices heard in regards to sexual assault. Though it is an uphill battle, women like Tarana Burke and other advocates for women of color are creating a dialogue that forces black and brown women to be at the forefront, because they were ignored for far too long.

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<sup>136</sup> Tarana Burke, #MeToo was founded for black and brown girls and women,” *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2017.

<sup>137</sup> Constance Grady, “One of R. Kelly’s alleged victims just broke her nondisclosure agreement to speak out,” *Vox*, August 22, 2017: <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/22/16184542/r-kelly-abuse-victim-nondisclosure-agreement-jerhonda-pace>

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