LABOR OF LOVE, LABOR OF SORROW

Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present

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"My Mother Was Much of a Woman": Slavery

Although largely ignored by historians over the years, Nanny's lament captures the essence of the antebellum South's dual caste system based on race and sex. A compact, volatile, and somewhat isolated society, the slaveholder's estate represented, in microcosm, a larger drama in which physical force combined with the coercion embedded in the region's political economy to sustain the power of whites over blacks and men over women. Here, then, without pretense or apology were
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racial and patriarchal ideologies wedded to the pursuit of profit. As blacks, slave women were exploited for their skills and physical strength in the production of staple crops; as women, they performed a reproductive function vital to individual slaveholders’ financial interests and to the inherently expansive system of slavery in general. Yet slave women’s unfulfilled dreams for their children helped to inspire resistance against “the ruling race” and its attempts to subordinate the integrity of black family life to its own economic and political interests.3

The peculiar configuration of enforced labor and sexual relations under slavery converged most dramatically where the two forms of social domination overlapped—that is, in the experiences of slave women—and reflected traditional white notions of womanhood combined with profit-making considerations that were in some sense unique to the plantation economy. In the context of the sexual division of labor in early rural America, the work of black men and white women conformed to certain patterns not limited to the slaveholding South. For example, despite the rhetorical glorification of the slaveholder’s wife as the embodiment of various otherworldly virtues, she remained responsible for conventional womanly duties in the mundane realm of household management.4 Likewise, slave men performed duties similar to those of New England and southern yeomen farmers. They planted, weeded, and harvested crops, and during the winter months they burned brush, cleared pasture, mended fences, and repaired equipment. A few received special training and labored as skilled artisans or mechanics. Clearly, the size, spatial arrangement, commercial orientation, and free use of physical punishment set the southern plantation apart from northern and midwestern family farms. Still, the definition of men’s work did not differ substantially within any of these settings.5

However, the master took a more crudely opportunistic approach toward the labor of slave women, revealing the interaction (and at times conflict) between notions of women qua “equal” black workers and women qua unequal reproducers; hence a slaveowner just as “naturally” put his bondswomen to work chopping cotton as washing, ironing, or cooking. Furthermore, in seeking to maximize the productivity of his entire labor force while reserving certain tasks for women exclusively, the master demonstrated how patriarchal and capitalist assumptions concerning women’s work could reinforce each other.6

However, slave women also worked on behalf of their own families, and herein lies a central irony in the history of their labor. Under slavery, blacks’ attempts to sustain their family life amounted to a political act of protest against the callousness of owners, mistresses, and overseers. In

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defiance of the slaveholders’ tendencies to ignore gender differences in making assignments in the fields, the slaves whenever possible adhered to a strict division of labor within their own households and communities. Consequently, the family played a key role in their struggle to combat oppression, for black women’s attention to the duties of motherhood deprived whites of full control over them as field laborers, domestic servants, and “brood-sows.” Indeed, the persistence with which slaves sought to define on their own terms “what a woman ought to be and to do” would ultimately have a profound impact on Afro-American history long after the formal institution of bondage had ceased to exist.

Working for Whites: Female Slave Labor as a Problem of Plantation Management

Interviewed by a Federal Writers Project (FWP) worker in 1937, Hannah Davidson spoke reluctantly of her experiences as a slave in Kentucky: “The things that my sister May and I suffered were so terrible. . . . It is best not to have such things in our memory.” During the course of the interview she stressed that unremitting toil had been the hallmark of her life under bondage. “Work, work, work,” she said; it had consumed all her days (from dawn until midnight) and all her years (she was only eight when she began minding her master’s children and helping the older women with their spinning). “I been so exhausted working. I was like an inchworm crawling along a roof. I worked till I thought another lick would kill me.” On Sundays, “the only time they [the slaves] had to themselves,” she recalled, women washed clothes and some of the men tended their small tobacco patches. As a child she loved to play in the haystack, but that was possible only on “Sunday evening, after work.”

American slavery was an economic and political system by which a group of whites extracted as much labor as possible from blacks (defined as the offspring of black or mulatto mothers) through the use or threat of force. A slaveowner thus replaced any traditional division of labor that might have existed among blacks before enslavement with a work structure of his own choosing. All slaves were barred by law from owning property or acquiring literacy skills, and although the system played favorites with a few, black males and females were equal in the
sense that neither sex wielded economic power over the other. Hence property relations—"the basic determinant of the sexual division of labor and of the sexual order" within most societies—did not affect male-female interaction among the slaves themselves. To a considerable extent, the types of jobs slaves did, and the amount and regularity of labor they were forced to devote to such jobs, were all dictated by the master.

For these reasons, the definition of slave women's work is problematical. If work is any activity that leads either directly or indirectly to the production of marketable goods, then slave women did nothing but work. Even their efforts to care for themselves and their families helped to maintain the owner's work force and to enhance its overall productivity. Tasks performed within the family context—childcare, cooking, and washing clothes, for example—were distinct from labor carried out under the lash in the field or under the mistress's watchful eye in the Big House. Still, these forms of nurture contributed to the health and welfare of the slave population, thereby increasing the actual value of the master's property (that is, slaves as both strong workers and "marketable commodities"). White men warned prospective mothers that they wanted neither "runts" nor girls born on their plantations, and slave women understood that their owner's economic self-interest affected even the most intimate family ties. Of the pregnant bondswomen on her husband's large Butlers Island (Georgia) rice plantation, Fanny Kemble observed, "They have all of them a most distinct and perfect knowledge of their value to their owners as property," and she recoiled at their obsequious profession obviously intended to delight her: "Missus, tho' we no able to work, we make little niggers for Massa." One North Carolina slave woman, the mother of fifteen children, used to carry her youngest with her to the field each day, and "When it get hungry she just slip it around in front and feed it and go right on picking or hoeing . . . " symbolizing in one deft motion the equal significance of her productive and reproductive functions to her owner.

The rhythm of the planting-weeding-harvesting cycle shaped the lives of almost all American slaves, 95 percent of whom lived in rural areas. This cycle dictated a common work routine (gang labor) for slaves who cultivated the king of all agricultural products, cotton, in the broad swath of Black Belt that dominated the whole region. Patterns of labor organization varied somewhat in the other staple crop economies—tobacco in the Upper South, rice along the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, and sugar in Louisiana. (For example, the task system characteristic of low-country rice cultivation granted slave women and men an exceptional degree of control over the completion of their daily assignments.) Of almost four million slaves, about half labored on farms with holdings of twenty slaves or more; one-quarter endured bondage with at least fifty other people on the same plantation. In its most basic form, a life of slavery meant working the soil with other blacks at a pace calculated to reap the largest harvest for a white master.11

In his efforts to wrench as much field labor as possible from female slaves without injuring their capacity to bear children, the master made "a noble admission of female equality," observed Kemble, an abolitionist sympathizer, with bitter irony. Slaveholders had little use for sentimental platitudes about the delicacy of the female constitution when it came to grading their "hands" according to physical strength and endurance. Judged on the basis of a standard set by a healthy adult man, most women probably ranked as three-quarter hands; yet there were enough women like Susan Mabry of Virginia, who could pick 400 or 500 pounds of cotton a day (150 to 200 pounds was considered respectable for an average worker) to remove from a master's mind all doubts about the ability of a strong, healthy woman field worker. As a result, he conveniently discarded his time-honored Anglo-Saxon notions about the types of work best suited for women, thereby producing many a "very dreary scene" like the one described by northern journalist Frederick Law Olmsted: During winter preparation of rice fields on a Sea Island plantation, he saw a group of black women, "armed with axes, shovels and hoes . . . all slopping about in the black, unctuous mire at the bottom of the ditches." In essence, the quest for an "efficient" agricultural work force led slaveowners to downplay gender differences in assigning adults to field labor.12

Dressed in coarse osnaburg gowns; their skirts "reefed up with a cord drawn tightly around the body, a little above the hips" (the traditional "second belt"); long sleeves pushed above the elbows and kerchiefs on their heads, female field hands were a common sight throughout the antebellum South. Together with their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons, black women spent up to fourteen hours a day toiling out of doors, often under a blazing sun. In the Cotton Belt they plowed fields; dropped seed; and hoed, picked, ginned, sorted, and matted cotton. On farms in Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee, women hoed tobacco; laid worm fences; and threshed, raked, and bound wheat. For those on the Sea Islands and in coastal areas, rice culture included raking and burning the stubble from the previous year's crop; ditching; sowing seed; plowing, listing, and hoeing fields; and harvesting, stacking, and threshing the rice. In the bayou region of Louisiana, women planted sugar cane cuttings, plowed, and helped to harvest and gin the cane. During the
winter, they performed a myriad of tasks necessary on nineteenth-century farms: repairing roads, pitching hay, burning brush, and setting up post and rail fences. Like Sara Colquitt of Alabama, most adult females “worked in the fields every day from ‘fore daylight to almost plumb dark.” During the busy harvest season, everyone was forced to labor up to sixteen hours at a time—after sunset by the light of candles or burning pine knots. Miscellaneous chores regularly occupied men and women around outbuildings and indoors on rainy days. Slaves of both sexes watered the horses, fed the chickens, and slopped the hogs. Together they ginned cotton, ground hominy, shelled corn and peas, and milled flour.13

Work assignments for men and women differed according to the size of a plantation and its degree of specialization. For example, on one Virginia wheat farm, the men scythed and cradled the grain, women raked and bound it into sheaves, which children then gathered and stacked. Thomas Couper, a wealthy Sea Island planter, divided his slaves according to sex and employed men exclusively in ditching and women in motting and sorting cotton. Within the two gender groups, he further classified hands according to individual strength so that during the sugar cane harvest three “gangs” of women stripped blades (medium-level task), cut them (hardest), and bound and carried them (easiest). However, since cotton served as the basis of the southern agricultural system, general patterns of female work usually overshadowed local and regional differences in labor-force management. Stated simply, most women spent a good deal of their lives plowing, hoeing, and picking cotton. In the fields the notion of a distinctive “women’s work” vanished as slaveholders realized that “women can do plowing very well & full well with the hoes and [are] equal to men at picking.”14

To harness a double team of mules or oxen and steer a heavy wooden plow was no mean feat for a strong man, and yet a “substantial minority” of slave women mastered these rigorous activities. White men and women from the North and South marveled at the skill and strength of female plow hands. Emily Burke of eastern Georgia saw men and women “promiscuously run their ploughs side by side, and day after day . . . and as far as I was able to learn, the part the women sustained in this masculine employment, was quite as efficient as that of the more athletic sex.” In his travels through Mississippi, Frederick Law Olmsted watched as women “twisted their plows around on the head-land, jerking their reins, and yelling to their mules, with apparent ease, energy, and rapidity.” He failed to see “any indication that their sex unfitted them for the occupation.”15

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On another estate in the Mississippi Valley, Olmsted observed forty of the “largest and strongest” women he had ever seen; they “carried themselves loftily, each having a hoe over the shoulder, and walking with a free, powerful swing, like chasseurs on the march.” In preparing fields for planting and in keeping grass from strangling the crop, women as well as men blistered their hands with the clumsy hoe characteristic of southern agriculture. “Hammered out of pig iron, broad like a shovel,” these “slave-time hoes” withstood most forms of abuse (destruction of farm implements constituted an integral part of resistance to forced labor). Recalled one former slave of the tool that also served as pick, spade, and gravedigger: “Dey make ‘em heavy so dey fall hard, but de bigges’ trouble was liftin’ dem up.” Hoeing was backbreaking labor, but the versatility of the tool and its importance to cotton cultivation meant that the majority of female hands used it a good part of the year.16

The cotton-picking season usually began in late July or early August and continued without interruption until the end of December. Thus for up to five months annually, every available man, woman, and child was engaged in a type of work that was strenuous and “tedious from its sameness.” Each woman carried a bag fastened by a strap around her neck and deposited the cotton in it as she made her way down the row, at the end of which she emptied the bag’s contents into a basket. Picking cotton required endurance and agility as much as physical strength, and women frequently won regional and interfarm competitions conducted during the year. Pregnant and nursing women usually ranked as half hands and were required to pick an amount less than the “average” 150 or so pounds per day.17

Slaveholders often reserved the tasks that demanded sheer muscle power for men exclusively. These included clearing the land of trees, rolling logs, and chopping and hauling wood. However, plantation exigencies sometimes mandated women’s labor in this area too; in general, the smaller the farm, the more arduous and varied was women’s field work. Lizzie Atkins, who lived on a twenty-five-acre Texas plantation with only three other slaves, remembered working “until slam dark”; she helped to clear land, cut wood, and tend the livestock in addition to her other duties of hoeing corn, spinning thread, sewing clothes, cooking, washing dishes, and grinding corn. One Texas farmer, who had his female slaves haul logs and plow with oxen, even made them wear breeches, thus minimizing outward differences between the sexes. Still, FWP interviews with former slaves indicate that blacks considered certain jobs uncharacteristic of bondswomen. Recalled Louise Terrell of her days on a farm near Jackson, Mississippi: “The women had to split rails all
day long, just like the men.” Nancy Boudry of Georgia said she used to “split wood jus’ like a man.” Elderly women reminisced about their mothers and grandmothers with a mixture of pride and wonder. Mary Frances Webb declared of her slave grandmother, “In the winter she sawed and cut cord wood just like a man. She said it didn’t hurt her as she was strong as an ox.” Janie Scott’s description of her mother implied the extent of the older woman’s emotional as well as physical strength: She was “strong and could roll and cut logs like a man, and was much of a woman.”

Very few women served as skilled artisans or mechanics; on large estates men invariably filled the positions of carpenter, cooper, wheelwright, tanner, blacksmith, and shoemaker. At first it seems ironic that masters would utilize women fully as field laborers, but reserve most of the skilled occupations that required manual dexterity for men. Here the high cost of specialized and extensive training proved crucial in determining the division of labor. Although women were capable of learning these skills, their work lives were frequently interrupted by childbearing and nursing; a female blacksmith might not be able to provide the regular service required on a plantation. Too, masters frequently “hired out” mechanics and artisans to work for other employers during the winter, and women’s domestic responsibilities were deemed too important to permit protracted absences from their quarters. However, many young girls learned to spin thread and weave cloth because these tasks could occupy them immediately before and after childbirth.

The drive for cotton profits induced slaveowners to squeeze every bit of strength from black women as a group. According to some estimates, in the 1850s at least 90 percent of all female slaves over sixteen years of age labored more than 261 days per year, eleven to thirteen hours each day. Few overseers or masters had any patience with women whose movements in the field were persistently “clumsy, awkward, gross, and elephantine” for whatever reasons—malnutrition, exhaustion, recalcitrance. As Hannah Davidson said: “If you had something to do, you did it or got whipped.” The enforced pace of work more nearly resembled that of a factory than a farm; Kemble referred to female field hands as “human hoeing machines.” The bitter memories of former slaves merely suggest the extent to which the physical strength of women was exploited. Eliza Scantling of South Carolina, only sixteen years old at the end of the Civil War, plowed with a mule during the coldest months of the year: “Sometimes me hands get so cool I jes’ cry.” Matilda Perry of Virginia “use to wuk fum sun to sun in dat ole terbaccy field. Wuk till my back felt lak it ready to pop in two.”

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Although pregnant and nursing women suffered from temporary lapses in productivity, most slaveholders apparently agreed with the (in Olmsted’s words) “well-known, intelligent and benevolent” Mississippi planter who declared that “Labor is conducive to health; a healthy woman will rear most children.” (They obviously did not have the benefit of modern medical knowledge that links the overwork of pregnant mothers not only with a consequent decline in their reproductive capacity but also with Sudden Infant Death Syndrome affecting primarily children under six months of age.) Still, slaveowners faced a real dilemma when it came to making use of the physical strength of women as field workers and at the same time protecting their investment in women as childbearers. These two objectives—one focused on immediate profit returns and the other on long-term economic considerations—at times clashed, as women who spent long hours picking cotton, toiling in the fields with heavy iron hoes, and walking several miles a day sustained damage to their reproductive systems immediately before and after giving birth. At the regional level, a decline in slave fertility and increase in miscarriage rates during the cotton boom years of 1830 to 1860 reveals the heightened demands made upon women, both in terms of increased workloads in the fields and family breakups associated with the massive, forced migration of slaves from the Upper to the Lower South.

On individual plantations, for financial reasons, slaveholders might have “regarded pregnancy as almost holy,” in the words of one medical historian. But they frequently suspected bondswomen, whether pregnant or not, of shamming illness and fatigue—“play[ing] the lady at your expense,” as one Virginia planter put it. These fears help to account for the reckless brutality with which owners forced women to work in the fields during and after their “confinements”—a period of time that might last as long as four or six weeks, or might be considerably shortened by masters who had women deliver their children between the cotton rows. Indeed, in the severity of punishment meted out to slaves, little distinction was made between the sexes. Black women attained parity with black men in terms of their productive abilities in the cotton fields; as a result they often received a proportionate share of the whippings. In response to an interviewer’s inquiry, a former Virginia slave declared, “Beat women! Why sure he [master] beat women. Beat women jes lak men. Beat women naked an’ wash ’em down in brine.”

Moreover, it is significant that overseers ordered and supervised much of the punishment in the field, for their disciplinary techniques were calculated to “get as much work out of the slaves as they can possibly perform.” Agricultural journalists, travelers in the South, and planters
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themselves loudly condemned overseers—usually illiterate men of the landless class—for their excessive use of violence. Yet despite the inevitable depletion of their work force from illness and high mortality rates, slaveholders continued to search for overseers who could make the biggest crop. Consequently, many slave women were driven and beaten mercilessly, and some achieved respite only in return for sexual submission. To a white man, a black woman was not only a worker who needed prodding, but also a female capable of fulfilling his sexual or aggressive desires. For this reason, a fine line existed between work-related punishment and rape, and an overseer’s lust might yield to sadistic rage. For example, the mother of Minnie Fulkes was suspended from a barn rafter and beaten with a horsewhip “nekkid ’til the blood run down her back to her heels” for fending off the advances of an overseer on a Virginia plantation.

The whipping of pregnant and nursing mothers—“so that blood and milk flew mingled from their breasts”—revealed the myriad impulses that conjoined to make women especially susceptible to physical abuse. The pregnant woman represented the sexuality of the slave community in general, and that of her husband and herself in particular; she thus symbolized a life in the quarters carried on apart from white interference. One particular method of whipping pregnant slaves was used throughout the South: “they were made to lie face down in a specially dug depression in the ground,” a practice that provided simultaneously for the protection of the fetus and the abuse of its mother. Slave women’s roles as workers and as childbearers came together in these trenches, these graves for the living, in southern cottonfields. The uniformity of procedure suggests that the terrorizing of pregnant women was not uncommon.

Impatient with slow workers and determined to discipline women whom they suspected of feigning illness, masters and overseers at times indulged in rampages of violence that led to the victim’s death. Former Mississippi slave Clara Young told of her seventeen-year-old cousin “in de fambly way fer de fust time” who “couldn’ work as hard as de rest.” The driver whipped her until she bled; she died the next morning. He had told the other slaves, “if dey said anything ’bout it to de marster, he’d beat them to death, too, so ever’body kep’ quiet an’ de marster neber knowed.” Thus cruelty derived not only from the pathological impulses of a few individuals, but also from a basic premise of the slave system itself: the use of violence to achieve a productive labor force.

Upon first consideration, the frequency with which small boys and girls, pregnant women, mothers of as many as ten children, and grandmothers were beaten bloody seems to indicate that an inexplicable sadism pervaded the Old South. In fact, whites often displaced their anger at particularly unruly blacks onto the most vulnerable members of the slave community. Frederick Douglass, a former slave, argued that “the doctrine that submission to violence is the best cure for violence did not hold good as between slaves and overseers. He was whipped oftener who was whipped easiest.” Like the mistress who was “afraid of the grown Negros” and beat the children “all the time” instead, many whites feared the strong men and women who could defend themselves—or retaliate. Primary sources contain innumerable examples of slaves who overpowered a tormenter and beat him senseless or killed him with his own whip. Referring to a powerful slave who “wouldin’ low nobody ter whip in,” one plantation owner told his overseer, “let ’im ‘long[,] he’s too strong ter be whup’d.” The overseer’s hatred of this slave was bound to find some other form of release; by abusing a weaker person, he could unleash his aggression and indirectly punish the menacing relative or friend of his victim.

At times, a woman would rebel in a manner commensurate with the work demands imposed upon her. “She’d git stubborn like a mule and quit.” Or she took her hoe and knocked the overseer “plum down” and “chopped him right across his head.” When masters and drivers “got rough on her, she got rough on them, and ran away in the woods.” She cursed the man who insisted he “owned” her so that he beat her “till she fell” and left her broken body to serve as a warning to others: “Dat’s what you git effen you sass me.” Nevertheless, a systematic survey of the FWP slave narrative collection reveals that women were more likely than men to engage in “verbal confrontations and striking the master but not running away,” probably because of their family responsibilities. A case study of a Georgia plantation indicates that, when women did run away, they usually accompanied or followed spouses already in hiding.

Family members who perceived their mothers or sisters as particularly susceptible to abuse in the fields conspired to lessen their workload. Frank Bell and his four brothers, slaves on a Virginia wheat farm, followed his parents down the long rows of grain during the harvest season. “In dat way one could help de other when dey got behind. All of us would pitch in and help Momma who warn’t very strong.” The overseer discouraged families from working together because he believed “dey ain’t gonna work as fast as when dey all mixed up,” but the black driver, Bell’s uncle, “always looked out for his kinfolk, especially my mother.” James Tallafarre told of his father, who counted the corn rows marked out for Aunt Rebecca, a short-talking woman that ole Marsa
didn’t like” and alerted her to the fact that her assignment was almost double that given to the other women. Rebecca indignantly confronted the master, who relented by reducing her task, but not before he threatened to sell James's father for his meddling. On another plantation, the hands surreptitiously added handfuls of cotton to the basket of a young woman who “was small and just couldn’t get her proper amount.”

No slave woman exercised authority over slave men as part of their work routine, but it is uncertain whether this practice reflected the sensibilities of the slaveowners or of the slaves themselves. Women were assigned to teach children simple tasks in the house and field and to supervise other women in various facets of household industry. A master might “let [a woman] off fo’ de buryings ‘cause she know how to manage de other niggahs and keep dem quiet at de funerals,” but he would not install her as a driver over people in the field. Many strong-willed women demonstrated that they commanded respect among males as well as females, but more often than not masters perceived this as a negative quality to be suppressed. One Louisiana slaveholder complained bitterly about a particularly “rascally set of old negroes”—”the better you treat them the worse they are.” He had no difficulty pinpointing the cause of the trouble, for “Big Lucy, the leader, corrupts every young negro in her power.” On other plantations women were held responsible for instigating all sorts of undesirable behavior among their husbands and brothers and sisters. On Charles Colcock Jones’s Georgia plantation, the slave Cash gave up going to prayer meeting and started swearing as soon as he married Phoebe, well-known for her truculence. Apparently few masters attempted to co-opt high-spirited women by offering them positions of formal power over black men.

Work in the soil thus represented the chief lot of all slaves, female and male. In the Big House, a division of labor based on both sex and age became more apparent. Although women predominated as household workers, few devoted their energies full time to this kind of labor; the size of the plantation determined the degree to which the tasks of cleaning, laundering, caring for the master’s children, cooking, and ironing were specialized. According to Eugene Genovese, as few as 5 percent of all antebellum adult slaves served in the elite corps of house servants trained for specific duties. Of course during the harvest season all slaves, including those in the house, went to the fields to make obeisance to King Cotton. Thus the lines between domestic service and field work blurred during the day and during the lives of slave women. Many continued to live in the slave quarters but rose early in the morning to perform various chores for the mistress—“up wid de fust light to draw water and help as house girl”—before heading for the field. James Claiborne’s mother “wuked in de fiel’ some, an’ aroun’ de house sometimes....” Young girls tended babies and waited on tables until they were sent outside—”mos’ soon’s” they could work—and returned to the house years later, too frail to hoe weeds but still able to cook and sew. The circle of women’s domestic work went unbroken from day to day and from generation to generation.

Just as southern white men scorned manual labor as the proper sphere of slaves, so their wives strove, often unsuccessfully, to lead a life of leisure within their own homes. Those duties necessary to maintain the health, comfort, and daily welfare of white slaveholders were considered less women’s work than black women’s and black children’s work. Slave mistresses supervised the whole operation, but the sheer magnitude of labor involved in keeping all slaves and whites fed and clothed meant that black women had to supply the elbow grease. For most slaves, housework involved hard, steady, often strenuous labor as they juggled the demands made by the mistress and other members of the master’s family. Mingo White of Alabama never forgot that his slave mother had shouldered a workload “too heavy for any one person.” She served as personal maid to the master’s daughter, cooked for all the hands on the plantation, carded cotton, spun a daily quota of thread, wove and dyed cloth. Every Wednesday she carried the white family’s laundry three-quarters of a mile to a creek, where she beat each garment with a wooden paddle. Ironing consumed the rest of her day. Like the lowliest field hand, she felt the lash if any tasks went undone.

Though mistresses found that their husbands commandeered most bondswomen for field work during the better part of the day, they discovered in black children an acceptable alternative source of labor. Girls were favored for domestic service, but a child’s sex played only a secondary role in determining household assignments. On smaller holdings especially, the demands of housework, like cotton cultivation, admitted no finely honed division of labor. Indeed, until puberty, boys and girls shared a great deal in terms of dress and work. All children wore a “split-tail shirt,” a knee-length smock slit up the sides: “Boys and gals all dress jes’ alike.... They call it a shirt iffen a boy wear it and call it a dress iffen the gal wear it.” At the age of six or so, many received assignments around the barnyard or in the Big House from one or more members of the master’s family. Mr. and Mrs. Alex Smith, who grew up together, remembered performing different tasks. As a girl, she helped to spin thread and pick seed from cotton and cockle burrs from wool. He had chopped wood, carried water, hoed weeds, tended the cows, and
picked bugs from tobacco plants. However, slave narratives contain descriptions of both boys and girls elsewhere doing each of these things.32

Between the ages of six and twelve, black girls and boys followed the mistress’s directions in filling woodboxes with kindling, lighting fires in chilly bedrooms in the morning and evening, making beds, washing and ironing clothes, parching coffee, polishing shoes, and stoking fires while the white family slept at night. They fetched water and milk from the springhouse and meat from the smokehouse. Three times a day they set the table, helped to prepare and serve meals, “minded flies” with peacock-feather brushes, passed the salt and pepper on command, and washed the dishes. They swept, polished, and dusted, served drinks and fanned overheated visitors. Mistresses entrusted to the care of those who were little more than babies themselves the bathing, diapering, dressing, grooming, and entertaining of white infants. (One slave girl, introduced to her new “young mistress,” looked at the child in her mistress’s arms and replied in disbelief, “No, I don’t see no young mistress, that’s a baby.”) In the barnyard black children gathered eggs, plucked chickens, drove cows to and from the stable, and “tended the gaps” (opened and closed gates). It was no wonder that Mary Ella Grandberry, a slave child grown old, “disremembered ever playin’ lack chilluns do today.”33

In only a few tasks did a sexual division of labor exist among children. In the fields both boys and girls acted as human scarecrows, toed water to the hands, and hauled shocks of corn together. Masters always chose boys to accompany them on hunting trips and to serve as their personal valets. Little girls learned how to sew, milk cows and churn butter, and attend to the personal needs of their mistresses. As tiny ladies-in-waiting they did the bidding of fastidious white women and of girls not much older than themselves. Cicely Cawthon, age six when the Civil War began, called herself the mistress’s “little keeper”; “I stayed around, and waited on her, handed her water, fanned her, kept the flies off her, pulled up her pillow, and done anything she’d tell me to do.” Martha Showvvely recounted a nightly ritual with her Virginia mistress. After she finished her regular work around the house, the young girl would go to the woman’s bedroom, bow to her, wait for acknowledgment, and then scourry around as ordered, lowering the shades, filling the water pitcher, arranging towels on the washstand, or “anything else” that struck the woman’s fancy. Mary Woodward, only eleven in 1865, was taught to comb her mistress’s hair, lace her corset, and arrange her hoop skirts. At the end of the toilet Mary was supposed to say “You is served, mistress!” Recalled the former slave, “Her lak them little words at de last.”34

The privileged status of slave mistresses rested squarely on the backs of their female slaves. Nevertheless, the system of bondage ultimately involved the subordination of all women, both black and white, to masters—husbands whose behavior ranged from benevolent to tyrannical, but always within a patriarchal context. In Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s words, when it came to patriarchs, southern white men were the “genuine article.” Mary Boykin Chesnut believed that slave mistresses were “abolitionists in their hearts and hot ones too.” But if women’s resentment toward slavery found only indirect, or private, expression, the causes for that resentment are readily apparent. The slaveholders’ insatiable quest for more and better cotton lands mocked their wives’ desire for a more settled, orderly—existence. On a more immediate level, slavery rubbed raw the wounds of white women’s grievances in two specific ways—first, it added greatly to their household responsibilities, and second, it often injected irreconcilable conflicts into the husband—wife relationship.35

As they went about their daily chores, mistresses repeatedly complained about the burdens imposed on them; they were, they felt, “slaves of slaves.” To instruct youthful servants in the mysteries of table-setting, fire-stoking, and childcare; to cajole and threaten sullen maids who persisted in sewing too slowly or carelessly; to keep track of those women assigned to duties in the yard, garden, or chicken house taxed the patience of even generous—hearted white housewives. Impudence and recalcitrance among black women were recurring problems, but even more significantly, slaves could make a mistress’s life miserable by literally doing nothing. A white woman might banish a particularly stubborn cook to the fields (indeed, some slave women calculated upon that response in order to be near their families), only to find herself faced with an even more contentious replacement. Obviously, in these cases lines of dependency blurred; a mistress might have served in a managerial capacity, but she relied on slaves to perform a tremendous amount of work that she was unwilling or unable to do herself.36

In their role as labor managers, mistresses lashed out at slave women not only to punish them, but also to vent their anger on victims even more wronged than themselves. We may speculate that, in the female slave, the white woman saw the source of her own misery, but she also saw herself—a woman without rights or recourse, subject to the whims of an egotistical man. These tensions frequently spilled over into acts of violence. Severe chastisement did not necessarily guarantee the repentance of the offender. However, patterns of mistress-initiated violence toward black women suggest that such acts were just as often spontaneous outbursts of rage as they were deliberate measures to reform behavior. When punishing slave women for minor offenses, mistresses were likely
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to attack with any weapon available—knitting needles, tongs, a fork, butcher knife, ironing board, or pan of boiling water. In the heat of the moment, white women devised barbaric forms of punishment that resulted in the mutilation or permanent scarring of their female servants.37

Predictably, jealousy over their spouse’s real or suspected infidelity led many white wives to openly express their anger and shame. Husbands who flaunted their activities in the slave quarters essentially dared their wives to attack a specific woman or her offspring. Some promiscuous husbands made no attempts at gentlemanly discretion (or “transcendent silence”) within their own households, but rather actively sought to antagonize their wives. For example, Sarah Wilson, the daughter of a slave and her white master, remembered that as a child she was “picked on” by the mistress. The white woman chafed under her husband’s taunts; he would order her to “let [Sarah] alone, she got big, big blood in her,” and then laugh.38

Divorce petitions provide one of the few sources that reveal white wives’ outrage in response to their husbands’ provocative behavior. For example, a witness in a Virginia divorce case in 1848 offered the following testimony: A master one morning told his favorite slave to sit down at the breakfast table “to which Mrs. N [his wife] objected, saying . . . that she (Mrs. N) would have her severely punished.” The husband then replied “that in that event he would visit her (Mrs. N) with a like punishment. Mrs. N then burst into tears and asked if it was not too much for her to stand.” Like at least some other masters, Mr. N freely admitted that his initial attraction to his future wife stemmed from her “large Estate of land and negroes.” (Thus a favorable marriage became one more consideration for the ambitious slaveholder.) However, this particular husband went out of his way to demonstrate his “strong dislike and aversion to the company” of his bride by sleeping with the slave woman “on a pallet in his wife’s room” and by frequently embracing her in the presence of his wife. Mrs. N’s first response was to lay “her hands in an angry manner on the said servant.” Her husband, besides threatening his wife with bodily harm, “told her if she did not like his course, to leave his house and take herself to some place she liked better.” Although the outcome of this case is not known, the patriarchalism of the southern legal system dictated that the odds would be against the humiliated Mrs. N. In any case, the considerable dowry she brought to the marriage would remain in the hands of her spouse.39

Scattered evidence from other sources also indicates that slaveholders at times physically abused their wives. While this was hardly normative behavior, it appears to have been a natural by-product of a violent culture. Men who drank freely and whipped their slaves could hardly have been expected to respect even the frail flower of white womanhood at all times.40 But again, the denigration of white women, whether manifested through physical force or in a more subtle, though no less painful way, was part and parcel of slavery. By directing their anger toward slave women, white wives achieved a fleeting moment of catharsis. Rarely in American history is there a more striking example of the way in which the patriarchal imperative could turn woman against woman, white against black.

In sum, interviews with former slaves suggest that the advantages of domestic service over field work for women have been exaggerated in accounts written by whites. Fetching wood and water, preparing three full meals a day over a smoky fireplace, or pressing damp clothes with a hot iron raved cotton picking as back-breaking labor. Always “on call,” women servants often had to snatch a bite to eat whenever they could, remain standing in the presence of whites, and sleep on the floor at the foot of a mistres’s bed (increasing the chances that they would sooner or later be bribed, seduced, or forced into sexual relations with the master). Peeling potatoes with a sharp knife, building a fire, or carrying a heavy load of laundry down a steep flight of stairs required skills and dexterity not always possessed by little boys and girls, and injuries were common. Chastisement for minor infractions came with swift severity; cooks who burned the bread and children who stole cookies or fell asleep while singing to the baby suffered all kinds of abuse, from jabs with pins to beatings that left them disfigured for life. The master’s house offered no shelter from the most brutal manifestations of slavery.41

For any one or all of these reasons, black women might prefer field work to housework. During his visit to a rice plantation in 1853, Olmsted noted that hands “accustomed to the comparatively unconstrained life of the negro-settlement detest the close control and careful movements required of the house servants.” Marriage could be both a means and an incentive to escape a willful mistress. Jessie Sparrow’s mother wed at age thirteen in order “to ge’ outer de big house. Dat how come she to marry so soon...” Claude Wilson recalled many years later that “his mother was very rebellious toward her duties and constantly harassed the ‘Missus’ about letting her work in the fields with her husband until finally she was permitted to make the change from the house to the fields to be near her man.” Other women, denied an alternative, explored the range of their own emotional resources in attempting to resist petty tyranny; their defiance rubbed raw the nerves of mistresses already

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harried and highstrung. A few servants simply withdrew into a shell of “melancholy and timidity.”

The dual status of a bondswoman—a slave and a female—afforded her master a certain degree of flexibility in formulating her work assignments. When he needed a field hand, her status as an able-bodied slave took precedence over gender considerations, and she was forced to toil alongside her menfolk. At the same time, the master’s belief that most forms of domestic service required the attentions of a female reinforced the traditional role of woman as household worker. The authority of the master in enforcing a sexual division of labor was absolute, but at times individual women could influence his decisions to some extent. In certain cases, a woman’s preference for either field work or domestic service worked to her advantage. For example, the rebelliousness of Claude Wilson’s mother prompted her removal from the Big House to the field, a change she desired. Similarly, masters might promise a woman an opportunity to do a kind of work she preferred as a reward for her cooperation and diligence. On the other hand, a slave’s misbehavior might cause her to lose a position she had come to value; more than one prizéd cook or maid was exiled to the fields for “sassing” the mistress or stealing. A system of rewards and punishments thus depended on the preferences of individual slaves, and a servant determined to make life miserable for the family in the Big House might get her way in any case.

The allocation of slave women’s labor by white men and women was based on three different considerations—the whites’ desire to increase staple-crop production, enlarge their work force, and provide for the daily sustenance of their own households. As if it were not difficult enough to balance these three competing objectives, the master often found that he and his overseer and wife were operating at cross purposes when it came to exploiting the labor of black women. Profit-making was a “rational” basis upon which to set female slaves to work in the fields, but long-term interests related to women’s childbearing capacity at times yielded to the demands of the harvest at hand. Owners and overseers alike might easily cross the boundary between chastising black women for work-related offenses and terrorizing them as a means of asserting control over the entire slave labor force. Moreover, the sexual exploitation of a black woman could produce concentric rings of bitterness that engulfed the white mistress, resulting in further (though economically “irrational”) abuse of the victim herself. The slave master, armed with both a whip and legal authority over all plantation residents, was able to shield himself from the wellspring of hate that sprang from these peculiarly southern forms of inequality. Yet the slave community too had a claim on the energies of black women, and its own sexual division of labor helped to subvert the authority of the slaveowner in ways that he only dimly understood.

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Working for Each Other: The Sexual Division of Labor in the Slave Quarters

In the field and the Big House, black women worked under the close supervision of white men and women at a forced pace. The slaves derived few, if any, tangible benefits from their labor to increase staple-crop profits and to render the white family comfortable (at least in physical terms). However, their efforts on behalf of their own health and welfare often took place apart from whites, with a rhythm more in tune with community and family life. For slave women, these responsibilities, though physically arduous, offered a degree of personal fulfillment. As Martha Colquitt remarked of her slave grandmother and mother who stayed up late to knit and sew clothes “for us chillun”: “Dey done it ‘cause dey wanted to. Dey wuz workin’ for deyselves den.” Slave women deprived of the ability to cook for their own kinfolk or discipline their own children felt a keen sense of loss; family responsibilities revealed the limited extent to which black women (and men) could control their own lives. Furthermore, a strict sexual division of labor in the quarters openly challenged the master’s gender-blind approach to slave women’s field work.

A number of activities were carried out either communally or centrally for the whole plantation by older women. On smaller farms, for example, a cook and her assistants might prepare one or all of the meals for the other slaves each day except Sunday. Likewise, an elderly woman, with the help of children too young to work in the fields, often was assigned charge of a nursery in the quarters, where mothers left their babies during the day. To keep any number of little ones happy and out of trouble for up to twelve to fourteen hours at a time taxed the patience of the most kindly souls. Slave children grew up with a mixed affection and fear for the grandmothers who had dished out the licks along with the cornbread and clabber. Other “gannies” usurped the position of the white physician (he rarely appeared in any case); they “brewed medicines
for every ailment,” gave cloves and whiskey to ease the pain of childbirth, and prescribed potions for the lovesick. Even a child forced to partake of “Stinkin’ Jacob tea” or a concoction of “turpentine an’ castor oil an’ Jerusalem oak” (for worms) could assert years later that “Gran’mammy was a great doctor,” surely a testimony to her respected position within the slave community if not to the delectability of her remedies.45

On many plantations it was the custom to release adult women from field work early on Saturday so that they could do the week’s washing. Whether laundering was done in old wooden tubs, iron pots, or a nearby creek with batten sticks, wooden paddles, or washboards, it was a time-consuming and difficult chore. Yet this ancient form of women’s work provided opportunities for socializing “whilst de ‘omans leaned over de tubs washin’ and a-singin’ dem old songs.” Mary Frances Webb remembered wash day—“a regular picnic”—with some fondness; it was a time for women “to spend the day together,” out of the sight and earshot of whites.46

Much of the work black women did for the slave community resembled the colonial system of household industry. Well into the nineteenth century throughout the South, slave women continued to spin thread, weave and dye cloth, sew clothes, make soap and candles, prepare and preserve foods, churn butter, and grow food for the family table. Slave women mastered all these tasks with the aid of primitive equipment and skills passed on from grandmothers. Many years later, blacks of both sexes exclaimed over their slave mothers’ ability to prepare clothes dye from various combinations of tree bark and leaves, soil and berries; make soap out of ashes and animal skins; and fashion bottle lamps from string and tallow. Because of their lack of time and materials, black women only rarely found these activities an outlet for creative expression, but they did take pride in their resourcefulness, and they produced articles of value to the community as a whole.47

Black women’s work in home textile production illustrates the ironies of community labor under slavery, for the threads of cotton and wool bound them together in both bondage and sisterhood. Masters (or mistresses) imposed rigid spinning and weaving quotas on women who worked in the fields all day. For example, many were forced to spin one “cut” (about three hundred yards) of thread nightly, or to five cuts during rainy days or in the winter. Women of all ages worked together, and children of both sexes helped to tease and card wool, pick up the loom shuttles, and knit. In the flickering candlelight, the whir of the spinning wheel and the cickety-clack of the loom played a seductive

“Keep yo’ eye on de sun,
See how she run,
Don’t let her catch you with your work undone,
I’m a trouble, I’m a trouble,
Trouble don’ las’ always.

With her song of urgency and promise she coaxed her sisters to finish their work so they could return home by sundown: “Dat made de women all speed up so dey could finish fo’ dark catch ‘em, ’cause it mighty hard handlin’ dat cotton thread by fire-light.”49

Slave women’s work for other community members challenged the master’s authority in direct ways. As the persons in charge of food preparation for both whites and their own families, women at times clandestinely fed runaways in an effort to keep them out of harm’s way for as long as possible. One elderly black man recalled that it was not uncommon on his master’s plantation for slaves to go and hide after they were punished, and added, “I’ve known my mother to help them the best she could; they would stay in the woods and come in at night, and mother would give them something to eat.” While the act of cooking might not differ in a technical sense when performed for blacks as opposed to whites, it certainly assumed heightened emotional significance for the black women involved; and, when carried out in such subversive ways, political significance for social relations on the plantation.50

In the quarters, the communal spirit was but an enlarged manifestation of kin relationships. Indeed, family, kin, and community blended into one another, for blood ties were often supplemented by “fictive kin” when the slaves defined patterns of mutual obligations among themselves. Moreover, depending upon the size and age of the plantation, slave fertility and mortality rates, and the incidence of “abroad” marriages (characterized by spouses who belonged to different masters), kinship might encompass a significant percentage of the slaves at any one time.
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For example, during the twenty-year period before the Civil War, the bondsmen and bondswomen on the Good Hope, South Carolina, plantation were related to three out of ten of their fellows. When calculated on the basis of household linkages, the average individual could find that fully 75 percent of all residences in the quarters “house[d] kin, or the kin of those kin.” These linkages were often more numerous for women than for men, simply because “abroad” marriages, combined with masters’ buying and selling practices, reinforced the matriarchy of family structure (that is, children more often remained with their mother than with their father). In any case, a woman’s sense of responsibility for her own blood relations often found expression through her service to the slave community.51

However, the significance of the nuclear family in relation to the sexual division of labor under slavery cannot be overstated; out of the father-mother, husband-wife nexus sprang the slaves’ beliefs about what men and women should be and do. Ultimately, the practical application of those beliefs, “provided a weapon for joint resistance to dehumanization,” according to Eugene Genovese. The two-parent, nuclear family was the typical form of slave cohabitation regardless of the location, size, or economy of a plantation, the nature of its ownership, or the age of its slave community. Because of the omnipresent threat of forced separation by sale, gift, or bequest, the family was not “stable.” Yet, as Herbert Gutman found, in the absence of such separations, unions between husbands and wives and parents and children often endured for many years. Households tended to be large; families with eight living children were not uncommon.52

Within the quarters, the process of child socialization reflected both the demands made upon the slaves by whites and the values of an emerging Afro-American culture. For most young slave women, sexual maturity marked a crucial turning point, a time when their life experiences diverged quite explicitly from those of their brothers. Until that point, boys and girls shared a great deal in terms of dress, play, and work. In early adolescence (ages ten to fourteen), a child would normally join the regular work force as a half hand. At that time (or perhaps before), he or she received adult clothing. This rite of passage apparently made more of an impression on boys than girls, probably because pants offered more of a contrast to the infant’s smock than did a dress. Willis Cofer attested to the significance of the change: “Boys jes’ wore shirts what looked lak dresses ’til dey wuz 12 years old and big enough to wuk in de field . . . and all de boys wuz mighty proud when dey got big enough to wear pants and go to wuk in de fields wid grown folks. When a

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boy got to be man enough to wear pants, he drawed rations and quit eatin’ out of de trough [in the nursery].”53

Whether or not slave girls received any advance warning from female relatives about menarche and its consequences is unknown. Despite the crowding of large families into small cabins, at least some parents managed to maintain a degree of privacy in their own relations and keep a daughter innocent until she acquired firsthand experience. Gutman suggests that a “sizable minority” of girls became sexually active soon after they began to menstruate, though other scholars have argued that the average age of a slave woman at the time of the birth of her first child was twenty or twenty-one, four years after menarche and probably two years after the onset of fertility. The quality of that first sexual experience of course depended upon a number of personal factors, but all of these were overshadowed by the fact that slave women were always vulnerable to rape by white men.54

For young black people of both sexes, courtship was both a diversion and a delight. The ritual itself appears to have been intensely romantic, with compatibility and physical attraction the primary considerations. A person’s status (house or field slave) played a role in mate selection only insofar as it affected contact between the two groups. There is no evidence that parents arranged these liaisons for their children, although in at least some cases the girl’s parents expected to be consulted before any wedding plans were made.55

Slave men formally initiated the courting process. When a young man saw “a likely looking gal,” he found the opportunity to woo her on the way to and from work, in the field behind the overseer’s back (George Taylor was “too crazy ‘bout de girls” to keep his mind on cotton chopping), or at Saturday night dances in the quarters. Chivalry covered a broad spectrum of behavior, from refraining from chewing tobacco in the presence of a sweetheart to protecting her from the lash. At times it was difficult for the two to slip away by themselves, and flirting was carried on by pairs in a group setting. Della Harris remembered a teasing song sung by the young men on the Virginia plantation where she lived. They began with “Hi, Ho, Johnson gal . . . Johnson gal is de gal fo’ me” even though there was no such person; “De boys jus’ start dat way to git all de gals to perkin’ up.” Then each youth proceeded to call the name of a favorite, and if any girl was left out she was bound to feel “mighty po’ly ‘bout it, too.” Rivalry among suitors—“setting up to a gal and [finding] there was another fellow setting up to her too”—prompted some to obtain magic potions from conjurers and herb doctors. And girls would encourage attention in all the familiar ways. “Gals always tried
to fix up fo’ partyin’, even ef dey ain’t got nothin’ but a piece of ribbon to tie in dey hair.” They played coy and “hard to get.”

When this process proceeded naturally and freely, the couple might eventually have a child, or if the girl had already had her first baby (perhaps by a different man), they might marry and settle into a long-lasting monogamous union. (Husbands and wives expected each other to be faithful, and the slave community frowned on adultery.) But on individual plantations, demographic conditions and cultural traditions could interfere with this romantic ideal. An unbalanced sex ratio, in addition to the slaves’ exogamous customs, often limited the number of available partners. Moreover, many, like the two Mississippi slaves married in the field between the handles of a plow, were reminded in no uncertain terms that their master considered them primarily as workers, not as lovers or husband and wife. An owner might prohibit a marriage for any reason, and he might forbid a male slave to seek a wife elsewhere, since the children of their marriage would belong not to him but to the wife’s owner. Andy Marion insisted that black men “had a hell of a time gittin’ a wife durin’ slavery. If you didn’t see one on de place to suit you and chances was you didn’t suit them, why what could you do?” He listed the options and stressed that the preferences of a number of parties had to be taken into consideration: “Couldn’t spring up, grab a mule and ride to de next plantation without a written pass. S’pose you git your master’s consent to go? Look here, de gal’s master got to consent, de gal got to consent, de gal’s daddy got to consent, de gal’s mammy got to consent. It was a hell of a way!”

Whites often intervened in more direct ways to upset the sexual order that black men and women created for themselves, thereby obliterating otherwise viable courtship and marriage practices. The issue of slave “breeding” has evoked considerable controversy among historians. The suggestion that masters failed to engage in systematic or widespread breeding (as evidenced by the relatively late age at which slave women bore their first child, for example) does not negate the obvious conclusions to be drawn from the slave narratives—that white men and women at times seized the opportunity to manipulate slave marital choices, for economic reasons on the one hand, out of seemingly sheer highhandedness on the other.

At times, mistresses and their daughters took an unsolicited interest in a slave woman’s love life. “Don’t you ever let me see you with that ape again,” one South Carolina mistress would say to young girls with contempt. “If you can’t pick a mate better than that I’ll do the picking for you.” Masters frequently practiced a form of eugenics by withholding their permission for certain marriages and arranging others. Some slaves bitterly rejected the proposed spouse. Rose Williams, forced to live with a man named Rufus because the master wanted them “to bring forth portly chillen,” warned the slave to stay away from her “fore I busts yus brains out and stomp on dem.” Threatened with a whipping, she finally relented, but never married. Many years later Rose Williams explained, “After what I does for de massa, I’s nevah wants no truck with any man. De Lawd forgive dis cullud woman, but he have to ‘scuse me and look for some others for to ‘plenish de earth.’” Some masters followed a policy of separating quarreling spouses and then “bestow[ing] them in ‘marriage’ on other parties, whether they chose it or not. . . .” These slaves often distinguished between their current mate and “real” husband or wife who had been taken from them.

The economic significance of the American slave population’s natural increase over the years obscures the centrality of children to the slave woman’s physical, emotional, and social existence. Each new birth represented a financial gain for the slaveholder, but it was welcomed in the quarters as a “social and familial” fact. Some young girls had their first child out of wedlock, an event that was socially acceptable to the slave community. It also proved functional to a girl’s family since masters were less likely to sell a woman who early demonstrated her fecundity; young people in their late teens and early twenties were prime candidates for sale if an owner needed the cash. A long-lasting marriage (though not necessarily to the first child’s father) often followed within a couple of years. After that, more children came with sustained regularity. Early in the nineteenth century, in areas of the Upper South, fertility levels among slave women neared human capacity. A woman whose fertile years spanned the ages of eighteen to forty-five, for example, might conceive thirteen children and spend ten years of her life pregnant and almost the whole period nursing one child after another.

Children were a source of a mother’s suffering as well as her joy. Extraordinary rates of slave infant mortality (twice that of whites in 1850) meant that many women regularly suffered the loss of a baby before or after its birth. If slaveholders faced a dilemma when they tried to maximize women’s productive and reproductive abilities simultaneously, mothers suffered the emotional and physical consequences. New mothers had to walk long distances from field to nursery to feed their infants, and their overheated milk provided inadequate and unhealthy nourishment. For these and other reasons, fewer than two out of three black children survived to the age of ten in the years between 1850 and 1860; the life expectancy at birth for males and females was only 32.6 and
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33.6 years respectively. (Mortality rates were especially high on large plantations and those that specialized in rice cultivation.) Excessive childbearing, malnutrition, and heavy manual labor left many women week and susceptible to illness. A slave mother’s love protected her children only up to a point: "Many a day my ole mama has stood by an’ watched massa beat her chillun ‘til dey bled an’ she couldn’ open her mouf." The reality or threat of separation from their families (a fact of slave life that became even more frequent during the late antebellum period) caused some women to descend into madness, the cries of "Take me wid you, mammy" echoing in their ears, while others donned a mask of stoicism to conceal their inner pain.61

As Angela Davis has pointed out, female slaves, like women in all cultures, had a social "destiny" that was intimately related to their biological capacity to bear children and centered within their own families.62 They assumed primary responsibility for childcare and for operations involved in daily household maintenance—cooking, cleaning, tending fires, sewing and patching clothes. Wives and mothers completed these tasks either very early in the morning, before the start of the "regular" work day on the plantation, or at night, after other family members had gone to sleep.

Fathers shared the obligations of family life with their wives. In denying slaves the right to own property, make a living for themselves, participate in public life, or protect their children, the institution of bondage deprived black men of access to the patriarchy in the larger economic and political sense. But at home, men and women worked together to support the father’s role as provider and protector. In the evenings and on Sundays, men collected firewood; made shoes; wove baskets; constructed beds, tables, chairs, and animal traps; and carved butter paddles and ax handles. Other family members appreciated a father’s skills; recalled Molly Ammonds, "My pappy made all de furniture dat went in our house an’ it were might’ good furniture too,” and Pauline Johnson echoed, "De furn’chure was ho-mek, but my daddy mek it good an’ stout." Husbands provided necessary supplements to the family diet by hunting and trapping quails, possums, turkeys, rabbits, squirrels, and raccoons, and by fishing. They often assumed responsibility for cultivating the tiny household garden plots allotted to families by the master. Some craftsmen, like Bill Austin’s father, received goods or small sums of money in return for their work on nearby estates; Jack Austin, "regarded as a fairly good carpenter, mason, and bricklayer," was paid in "hams, bits of cornmeal, cloth for dresses for his wife and children, and other small gifts; these he either used for his small family or bartered with other slaves."63

These familial duties also applied to men who lived apart from their wives and children, even though they were usually allowed to visit only on Saturday night and Sunday. Lucinda Miller’s family “never had any sugar, and only got coffee when her father would bring it to her mother” during his visits. The father of Hannah Chapman was sold to a nearby planter when she was very small. Because “he missed us and us longed for him,” she said many years later, he tried to visit his family under the cover of darkness whenever possible. She noted, “Us would gather ‘round him an’ crawl up in his lap, tickled slap to death, but he give us dese pleasures at a painful risk.” If the master should happen to discover him, “us would track him de nex’ day by de blood stains,” she remembered.64

Hannah McFarland of South Carolina recounted the time when the local slave patrol attempted to whip her mother, “but my papa sho’ stopped dat,” she said proudly. Whether or not he was made to suffer for his courage is unknown; however, the primary literature of slavery is replete with accounts of slave husbands who intervened, at the risk of their own lives, to save wives and children from violence at the hands of whites. But in a more general sense, the sexual violation of black women by white men rivaled the separation of families as the foremost provocation injected into black family life by slaveholders in general. It is impossible to document with any precision the frequency of these encounters; the 10 percent of the slave population classified as “mulatto” in 1860 of course provides a very conservative estimate of the incidence of interracial rape or concubinage on southern plantations. The pervasive resentment on the part of black women, as well as men, who knew that such assaults were always a possibility cannot be quantified in any meaningful way. A women’s acquiescence in the sexual advances of an overseer or owner might offer a modicum of protection for herself or her family—especially when a master vowed to “put her in his pocket” (that is, sell her) or whip her if she protested. Nevertheless, black women often struggled to resist, and their fathers, sons, and husbands often struggled to protect them.65

Regardless of the circumstances under which their womenfolk were sexually abused, black men reacted with deep humiliation and outrage, a reaction that at least some slaveholders intended to provoke. One Louisiana white man would enter a slave cabin and tell the husband “to go outside and wait ‘til he do what he want to do.” The black man “had
to do it and he couldn’t do nothing ‘bout it.” (This master “had chillen by his own chillen.”) Other husbands ran away rather than witness such horrors. Recalled one elderly former slave, “What we saw, couldn’t do nothing ‘bout it. My blood is bilin’ now at the thoughts of dem times.” It would be naïve to assume that the rape of a black wife by a white man did not adversely affect the woman’s relationship with her husband; her innocence in initiating or sustaining a sexual encounter might not have shielded her from her husband’s wrath. The fact that in some slave quarters mulatto children were scorned as the master’s offspring indicates that the community in general hardly regarded this form of abuse with equanimity; hence the desperation of the young slave wife described by an FWP interviewee who feared that her husband would eventually learn of her ordeal with the master.66

The black man’s role as protector of his family would find explicit expression in postemancipation patterns of work and family life. Until that time, the more freedom the slaves had in determining their own activities, the more clearly emerged a distinct division of labor between the sexes. During community festivities like log rollings, rail splittings, wood choppings, and corn shuckings, men performed the prescribed labor while women cooked the meals. At times, male participants willingly “worked all night,” for, in the words of one, “we had the Heavenly Banners (women and whiskey) by us.” A limited amount of primary evidence indicates that men actively scorned women’s work, especially cooking, house cleaning, sewing, washing clothes, and intimate forms of childcare (like bathing children and picking lice out of their hair). Some slaveholders devised forms of public humiliation that capitalized on men’s attempts to avoid these tasks. One Louisiana cotton planter punished slave men by forcing them to wash clothes; he also made chronic offenders wear women’s dresses. In This Species of Property, Leslie Owens remarks of men so treated, “So great was their shame before their fellows that many ran off and suffered the lash on their backs rather than submit to the discipline. Men clearly viewed certain chores as women’s tasks, and female slaves largely respected the distinction.”67

The values and customs of the slave community played a predominant role in structuring work patterns among men and women within the quarters in general and the family in particular. Yet slaveholders affected the division of labor in the quarters in several ways; for example, they took women and girls out of the fields early on Saturdays to wash the clothes, and they enforced certain task assignments related to the production of household goods. An understanding of the social significance of the sexual division of labor requires at least a brief mention of West African cultural preferences and the ways in which the American system of slavery disrupted or sustained traditional African patterns of women’s work. Here it is important to keep in mind two points: First, cotton did not emerge as the South’s primary staple crop until the late eighteenth century (the first slaves on the North American continent toiled in tobacco, rice, indigo, and corn fields); and second, regardless of the system of task assignments imposed upon antebellum blacks, the grueling pace of forced labor represented a cruel break from the past for people who had followed age-old customs related to subsistence agriculture.68

Though dimmed by time and necessity, the outlines of African work patterns endured among the slaves. As members of traditional agricultural societies, African women played a major role in the production of the family’s food as well as in providing basic household services. The sexual division of labor was more often determined by a woman’s childcare and domestic responsibilities than by any presumed physical weakness. In some tribes she might engage in heavy, monotonous field work as long as she could make provisions for nursing her baby; that often meant keeping an infant with her in the field. She cultivated a kitchen garden that yielded a variety of vegetables consumed by the family or sold at market, and she usually milked the cows and churned butter.69

West Africans brought with them competencies and knowledge that slaveowners readily exploited. Certain tribes were familiar with rice, cotton, and indigo cultivation. Many black women had had experience spinning thread, weaving cloth, and sewing clothes. Moreover, slaves often used techniques and tools handed down from their ancestors—in the method of planting, hoeing, and pounding rice, for example. Whites frequently commented on the ability of slave women to balance heavy and unwieldy loads on their heads, an African custom.70

The primary difficulty in generalizing about African women’s part in agriculture stems from the fact that members of West African tribes captured for the North American slave trade came from different hoe-culture economies. Within the geographically limited Niger Delta region, for example, men and women of the Ibo tribe worked together in planting, weeding, and harvesting, while female members of another prominent group, the Yoruba, helped only with the harvest. Throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa (and particularly on the west coast), women had primary responsibility for tilling (though not clearing) the soil and cultivating the crops; perhaps this tradition, combined with work patterns established by white masters in this country, reinforced the blacks’ beliefs
that cutting trees and rolling logs was "men's work." In any case, it is clear that African women often did field work. But since the sexual division of labor varied according to tribe, it is impossible to state with any precision the effect of the African heritage on the slaves' perceptions of women's agriculture work.\(^7\)

The West African tradition of respect for one's elders found new meaning among American slaves; for most women, old age brought increased influence within the slave community even as their economic value to the master declined. Owners, fearful lest women escape from "earning their salt" once they became too infirm to go to the field, set them to work at other tasks—knitting, cooking, spinning, weaving, dairying, washing, ironing, caring for the children. (Elderly men served as gardeners, wagoners, carters, and stock tenders.) But the imperatives of the southern economic system sometimes compelled slaveowners to extract from these women what field labor they could. In other cases they reduced the material provisions of the elderly—housing and allowances of food and clothing—in proportion to their decreased productivity.\(^7\)

The overwhelming youth of the general slave population between 1830 and 1860 (more than half of all slaves were under twenty years of age) meant that most plantations had only a few old persons—the 10 percent over fifty years of age considered elderly. These slaves served as a repository of history and folklore for the others. Harriet Ware, a northern teacher assigned to the South Carolina Sea Islands, reported in 1862, "Learning with these people I found a knowledge of medicine, and a person is valued accordingly." Many older women practiced the healing arts in their combined role of midwife, root doctor, healer, and conjurer. They guarded ancient secrets about herbs and other forms of plant life. In their interpretation of dreams and strange occurrences, they brought the real world closer to the supernatural realm and offered spiritual guidance to the ill, the troubled, and the lovelorn.\(^7\)

For slaves in the late antebellum period, these revered (and sometimes feared) women served as a tangible link with the African past. Interviewed by a Federal Writers Project worker in 1937, a Mississippi-born former slave, James Brittan, recalled his own "grandma Aunt Mary" who had lived for 110 years. A "Molly Gasca [Madagascar?] negro," she was plagued by a jealous mistress because of her striking physical appearance; "Her hair it was fine as silk and hung down below her waist." Ned Chaney's African-born Granny Silla (she was the oldest person anyone knew, he thought) commanded respect among the other slaves by virtue of her advanced age and her remarkable healing powers: "Ever'body set a heap of sto' by her. I reckon, because she done 'cumulated so much knowledge an' because her head were so white." When Granny Silla died, her "little bags" of mysterious substances were buried with her because no one else knew how to use them. Yet Chaney's description of his own mother, a midwife and herb doctor, indicates that she too eventually assumed a position of authority within the community.\(^7\)

As a little girl in Georgia, Mary Colbert adored her grandmother, a strong field hand, "smart as a whip." "I used to tell my mother that I wished I was named Hannah for her, and so Mother called me Mary Hannah," she recalled. Amanda Harris, interviewed in Virginia when she was ninety years old, looked back to the decade before the war when her grandmother was still alive: "Used to see her puffin' on dat ole pipe o' her'n, an' one day I ast her what fun she got out it. Tain't no fun, chile,' she tole me. 'But it's a powful lot o' easment. Smoke away trouble, darter. Blow ole trouble an' worry 'way in smoke." Amanda started smoking a pipe shortly after her grandmother died, and in 1937 she declared, "Now dat I'm as ole as she was I know what she mean." In the quiet dignity of their own lives, these grandmothers preserved the past for future generations of Afro-American women.\(^7\)

The honored place held by elderly women in the quarters serves as a useful example of the ways in which the slaves constructed their own social hierarchy (based on individuals' skills and values to the community), in opposition to the master's exclusive concern for the productive capacity of his "hands." Moreover, older female slaves in particular often rivaled the preacher—widely acknowledged as the preeminent leader among slaves—in terms of the respect they commanded for their knowledge of medicine (especially midwifery). In his examination of "Status and Social Structure in the Slave Community," John Blassingame notes that "slaves reserved the top rungs of the social ladder for those blacks who performed services for other slaves rather than for whites." Although he specifically mentions male craftsmen, it is clear that laundresses, seamstresses, cooks, child rearers—as well as female conjurers, fortune-tellers, and herbalists—played important leadership roles often expressed through informal, everyday means.\(^7\)

Within well-defined limits, the slaves created—or preserved—an explicit sexual division of labor based on their own preferences. Husbands and wives and fathers and mothers had reciprocal obligations toward one another. Together they worked to preserve the integrity of the family. Having laid to rest once and for all the myth of the slave matriarchy, some historians suggest that relations between the sexes approximated "a healthy sexual equality."\(^7\) Without private property, slave men lacked the means to achieve economic superiority over their wives, one of the
major sources of inequality in the ("free") sexual order. But if male and female slaves shared duties related to household maintenance and community survival, they were nonetheless reduced to a state of powerlessness that rendered virtually meaningless the concept of equality as it applies to marital relations, especially since black women were so vulnerable to attacks by white men.

Moreover, task allocation among the slaves themselves revealed a tension between two different attitudes toward "women's work." The first involved a profound respect for the labor that women did and their ability to meet the demands imposed upon them by so many different people of both races. For example, in an 1840 speech before a northern audience, John Curry, a former slave who grew up in North Carolina, recalled that "My mother's labor was very hard." He then went on to outline her daily responsibilities in the cow pen (she milked fourteen cows) in addition to caring for the children of mothers who worked in the fields. She also cooked for the slaves on the plantation, and did all the ironing and washing for the master's household as well as for her own husband and seven children (including three orphans she had adopted). At night, she "would find one boy with his knee out, a patch wanting here, and a stitch there, and she would sit down by her lightwood fire, and sew and sleep alternately. . . ." Echoes of this type of appreciation for slave women's work are found throughout the narratives and interviews, work recounted in loving detail by both sons and daughters.76

On the other hand, though men might regard women's domestic labor as intrinsically valuable, this type of activity was nevertheless labeled "women's work" on the assumption that it was the special province of females. In this sense, black women and men performed complementary functions whenever possible within their own "sphere" of socially defined responsibilities. Yet a husband was not "equally" willing to wash clothes compared to a mother's "willingness" to gather firewood in the absence of her spouse. In addition, the formal task of spiritual leader remained a man's job; although women exercised power through a variety of channels, they could not aspire to the title or recognition that accompanied the preacher's role. This twin impulse to honor the hard-working wife and mother on the one hand and relegate "grannies" to positions of informal influence exclusively would help to shape the internal structure of the freed community after the Civil War.

The sexual division of labor under slavery actually assumed two forms—one system of work forced upon slaves by masters who valued women only as work-oxen and brood-sows, and the other initiated by

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the slaves themselves in the quarters. Only the profit motive accorded a measure of consistency to the slaveholder's decisions concerning female work assignments; he sought to exploit his "hands" efficiently, and either invoked or repudiated traditional notions of women's work to suit his own purposes. In this respect, his decision-making process mirrored the shifting priorities of the larger society, wherein different groups of women were alternately defined primarily as producers or as reproducers according to the fluctuating labor demands of the capitalist economy.

Because slaveholders valued the reproduction of the plantation work force just as highly as increases in their annual crop (in fact, the two objectives were inseparable), it would be difficult to argue that racial prejudice superseded sexual prejudice as an ordering principle for this peculiar society. Rather than attempt to determine which was more oppressive, we would do well to remember that the two systems shared a dense, common tangle of roots, and that together they yielded bitter fruit in the antebellum South. Black women bore witness to that bitterness in ways different from those of black men on the one hand and white women on the other.

In their devotion to family ties—a devotion that encompassed kin and ultimately the whole slave community—black women and men affirmed the value of group survival over the slaveholders' base financial and political considerations. Slave family life, as the cornerstone of Afro-American culture, combined an African heritage with American exigencies, and within the network of kin relations black women and men sought to express their respect for each other even as they resisted the intrusiveness of whites. Thus when it emerged from bondage, the black family had a highly developed sense of itself as an institution protective of the community at large.

The work of black women helped to preserve that community. Janie Scott's admiration for her mother, who was "much of a woman," would help to sustain her through the conflagration of civil war, for freedom demanded of black women the same kind of strength and resourcefulness they and their mothers had demonstrated under slavery. As workers, many freed women would still have to pick cotton and wash dishes for whites. But as family members, they would help to define the priorities of a freed people—or rather, affirm the priorities they had developed under slavery—and thereby participate in the transformation of southern society and economy during the postbellum years.