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“IF DE BABIES CRIED”: SLAVE MOTHERHOOD IN ANTEBELLUM MISSOURI

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

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“IF DE BABIES CRIED”: SLAVE MOTHERHOOD IN ANTEBELLUM MISSOURI

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“IF DE BABIES CRIED”: SLAVE MOTHERHOOD IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

An Abstract of the Thesis by
Lucy Phelps Hamilton

Slavery in Missouri was typically small-scale in nature and featured smallholdings possessing few slaves. Situated on the periphery of the South and the western border of the antebellum United States, Missouri, even after achieving statehood, remained a frontier. This small-scale frontier environment provides an opportunity for the close examination of slave motherhood.

Focusing on slave motherhood through the lens of small-scale slavery in Missouri, I am able to closely examine the day-to-day lives of these women and focus on their common experiences as mothers living in bondage. This in turn paints a broader picture of typical slave mother experiences in the South. The prevalence of smallholdings demands a closer examination of the women who lived, labored, and mothered on them. I argue that no study of the lives of slave women is complete without a close examination of motherhood as it defined and shaped the lives of and decisions made by slave women.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Historians have studied American slavery as far back as the late nineteenth century. U.B. Phillips, foremost among these early historians, set an erroneous precedent by focusing on white plantation owners, infantilizing slaves, and presenting the antebellum South as an idyllic culture in which slave and master lived happily side-by-side.¹ He reinforced, and validated, the growing Southern mythology of a romantic bygone era of rolling plantations, managed by paternalistic masters, and populated with happy slaves. Paternalism, advocated by Southern culture, preached a message of treating one's slaves as a kind and benevolent father treated his children. A paternalistic master provided adequate food, clothing, and shelter, strove to preserve slave families, disciplined judiciously, and used the whip sparingly. Paternalism was an idyllic paradigm in which masters firmly, but kindly, oversaw the day-to-day management of their plantations and in return earned the respect of their contented slaves.

Apologists argued that adherents to paternalism created a better life for slaves than they would otherwise experience as free men and women. The postulation was that no other alternative available to black men and women, not even freedom, offered the

¹ Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1918).

support experienced by those belonging to paternalistic masters. This theory not only justified the institution of slavery but also reinforced its inherent racist ideology. It perpetuated the perception of the black race as wholly dependent upon whites, relegating them to a childlike position within society. Thus, the paradigm of paternalism simultaneously justified slavery and furthered the dehumanization of slaves.

Phillips supported these assertions, and his scholarship presents infantilization, the theory that Africans, and later African-Americans, were inherently childlike because of their race. Slaves, therefore, possessed inherent qualities that rendered them incapable of caring for themselves, but jovial, and willing to assume the traits and personalities projected on them by their masters. In short, he reinforced the stereotype of Sambo, a docile, servile, and all around contented slave. Within Southern culture, the Sambo figure supported the racist ideology that black men possessed less personhood than whites did and required the care they received from owners. These men, wholly incapable of providing for themselves, much less a family, benefited from slavery as their masters assumed total care for them both materially and spiritually. Therefore, slavery improved the black man's life and imbued him with character and traits he otherwise lacked. In addition, Sambo presented himself as wholly content and happy under the care of his master, furthering the promise found in paternalism that a slave well cared for reacted with love and respect towards his white family. This stereotype furthered the South's defense of slavery by allowing Southerners to argue that their slaves resided in contentment and actually faced great difficulties if freed.

This racist mindset dominated slavery scholarship until the mid-twentieth century, when historians began focusing more attention on the slaves themselves. Famously,

Kenneth Stampp attacked this idealized slave culture in his book, *The Peculiar Institution*, in which he meticulously exposed injustices and abuses within slavery. He argued that slaves did not benefit from the institution; rather, they experienced hardships because of hunger, mistreatment, separation from loved ones, and many other trials. Stampp unequivocally silenced scholarship arguing in support of slavery and its supposed benefits. Furthermore, he eradicated any notions that slaves experienced contentment while in bondage. Unfortunately, though, his work did not eradicate the theory of slave infantilization. Stampp rejected notions of inherent racial differences; instead, he argued slaves experienced infantilization because of the effect of slavery. Stampp's slaves, utterly besieged by the trauma of bondage, lost their culture and assimilated to white expectations.²

Stanley Elkins expanded on the theory of infantilization as a natural consequence of slavery. He compared the antebellum South to Nazi Germany, arguing that slaves experienced the same total subjugation experienced by concentration camp inmates. Echoing Stampp, he claimed that Southerners created such a rigid regime that slaves experienced difficulty preserving their culture and individuality. Stampp, followed by Elkins, contributed to slave historiography by finally ending theories of content slaves and inherent differences between the races. Both though, made errors that guaranteed the continuance of slave historiography: they emphasized the injustices and excesses of the

² Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956).

antebellum South to such a degree that they stripped the slaves of their individualism and culture.³

These conclusions inspired other historians to more closely examine the lives of the slaves and weigh in on the debate concerning their individuality. Eugene Genovese entered this growing slave historiography in 1974 with his landmark tome, *Roll Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. Unlike many of his predecessors, Genovese scrutinized the slaves themselves and examined every facet of their lives from how they prepared food to courtship rituals. He effectively argued that slaves possessed their own individuality and culture despite enslavement.⁴ Thus, 20th century slave historiography evolved from the belief that Africans, and their American descendants, possessed inherent racial differences that resulted in infantilized men. This fell out of favor, replaced by the argument that these men, no different from any other racially, experienced infantilization because of the psychologically overpowering experience of bondage. This too fell out of favor as scholars analyzed the lives of the slaves, determining they possessed agency and their own unique culture. By the latter part of the century, slaves gained acknowledgment as a people who experienced an assault on their personhood, but never yielded. They resisted in many forms and created a vibrant culture unique to themselves.

As scholars refuted Stamp, and especially Elkins, they restored the manhood of slave men and stripped away theories that denigrated them as infantilized Sambos. Slave

³ Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

⁴ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976).

women, however, remained on the periphery of the debate, bearing a double burden in the historiography as both racism and sexism affected their stories. Their voices, both in their own time and in later scholarship, remained largely silent. Many of the previously published studies of American slavery focused almost exclusively on the male experience, leaving women as mere shadows of men who reproduced, labored, and died in near anonymity.

This changed in 1985, with the publication of Deborah Gray White's book, *Ar'n't I A Woman*, in which she exclusively focused on female slaves and their lives.⁵ The following year, Joan W. Scott penned her influential article, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in which she explored how gender theory had been hitherto utilized in scholarly works.⁶ She argued that gendered analysis was critical to the study of history. This increased attention to the experiences and contributions of women became increasingly visible and influential within slave historiography as the end of twentieth century witnessed a boom in the study of slave women. These and subsequent studies centered on women's involvement in slavery broadened the discussion of American slavery to include gendered analyses, which revealed that male and female slaves experienced bondage differently.

These works challenged the antebellum stereotypes of black women, namely Jezebel and Mammy. The Jezebel stereotype featured a licentious woman controlled only by her insatiable sexual desires. This stereotype developed from white observations

⁵ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999).

⁶ Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053-1075.

of working slave women and their reproductive capabilities. Women working outside, particularly at laborious tasks such as rice cultivation, often hiked their skirts up and secured them, leaving their legs freer and increasing their mobility. Whites misconstrued these types of behaviors as a lack of modesty on the part of the woman who desired to flaunt her sexuality. As for the reproduction, slave women did not have ready access to birth control and experienced great pressure to bear children. After the abolition of the international slave trade in 1808, the South's dependence upon natural reproduction increased. Slave women experienced pressure to bear children from a culture that gloried motherhood and from masters who personally benefitted from slave offspring. When constructing or perpetuating the Jezebel stereotype, whites neglected to consider how these women simply responded to the circumstances they, as free people in a slaveholding society, constructed.⁷

The Jezebel stereotype also served as a justification for white male sexual behavior, as it provided an excuse for white men who, it argued, fell haplessly into the snare of these licentious creatures. This stereotype provided a ready excuse for guiltless coercion of slave women, and even rape. Slave women who entered into consensual sexual relationships typically did so to try to improve their lives and the lives of their children. A relationship with a white man often offered better material care and a measure of protection from sale. In other instances, the white man engaged in coercive overtures towards the woman until she, fearing rape or repercussions if she refused, consented. And finally, rape was an expected experience for many slave women. Again, whites exonerated their own actions, refused to examine how their slave society created

⁷ White, 28-34.

situations in which slave women possessed little choice, and instead blamed the woman and her libido for miscegenation.⁸

Finally, white women also played a role in perpetuating the Jezebel stereotype. They experienced subjection to societal expectations focused on purity and motherhood. The Jezebel character created a foil whereby the sexualization and availability of slave women preserved the purity of white women. While the former example features both groups of women as hapless participants within these paradigms, white women also accepted the Jezebel stereotype, typically using it to excuse their husbands' philandering. A wife whose husband took a black concubine, or visited the slave quarters a little too often, found herself with little recourse. Regardless of whom she held responsible for the adultery, she found it easiest to focus her anger and betrayal on the slave woman. Turning the woman into a Jezebel character allowed the mistress to excuse her husband's unfaithfulness and place all the blame on the slave woman, as she surely initiated the act. Not all white wives wholly believed this, and many harbored anger and resentment towards their husbands' unfaithfulness. However, perpetuating the stereotype allowed them to save face within their communities.⁹

The Mammy character was a second common stereotype projected onto slave woman and developed as a foil to Jezebel. Many Southerners, regardless of how deeply they believed the Jezebel paradigm, still held concerns about that characterization. The practice of miscegenation made them uncomfortable, and they did not want to encourage this practice by painting all slave women as possessing out-of-control libidos. The

⁸ Ibid., 33-38.

⁹ Ibid., 39-42.

paradigm also created unwanted criticisms from Northerners who used this to accuse the South of living in moral depravity. To combat these issues, Southerners constructed the Mammy character, which possessed little to no sexuality and exemplified positive maternal traits.

According to this stereotype, white families enlisted the assistance of an older, maternal, slave woman in the raising of their children. The mammy dutifully fulfilled her role by lovingly raising her white charges as if they were her own children. In addition to this child-rearing duty, she also served her mistress invaluablely by aiding in the oversight of the household. Mammy ruled the home with a firm and loving hand, overseeing the house slaves while never neglecting her young charges. Within this paradigm, the white family ultimately venerated Mammy, raising her to a position of “family” within the home and speaking highly of her and her abilities. Her character served as a useful tool in the defense of slavery, as she exemplified paternalism at its best: a slave loved and cared for by her family whom she loved and cared for in return.

While this character became an oft-mentioned slave within the South and featured heavily in Southern culture, few white families actually owned a “Mammy.” Much like Jezebel, slaveholders and their sympathizers created her character to provide justifications for slavery, but in her case, she further reinforced paternalism and its edifying effect on slaves within the institution of slavery.¹⁰

By the early twenty-first century, historians fully recognized the gendered differences inherent in slavery and began to narrow this male/female dichotomy. They published studies solely examining a single aspect of a slave woman’s life. Stephanie

¹⁰ Ibid., 46-61.

M.H. Camp and Marie Jenkins Schwartz are included among these historians, with the former focused on resistance and the use of space by female slaves while the latter examined childbirth and the struggle of slave women to maintain control over their labor and delivery of their children.¹¹ This study contributes to the growing historiography by examining slave women within their roles as mothers.

A majority of American slave women experienced motherhood within their lives. They lived during an era in which there was no reliable birth control, and they reproduced within a culture that glorified motherhood. Early nineteenth century Americans venerated women's status as mothers and revered motherhood as the most important role in a woman's life.¹² Free white women experienced a great deal of societal and familial pressure to bear children in order to fulfill their natural and divinely ordained destinies. These societal expectations pressured slave women as well, but they experienced added pressure from their masters to procreate. The law, harkening back to the seventeenth century, declared that at birth a child followed the condition of its mother. Thus, every child born to a slave woman added to her master's property, resulting in owners wholly invested in ensuring their slave women reproduced.

Few historians have focused exclusively on the role of motherhood despite the fact most American slave women experienced this condition. No study of the lives of slave women is complete without a close examination of motherhood. The condition of

¹¹ Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹² Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

motherhood defined and shaped the lives of and decisions made by slave women. This study strives to illuminate the lives of slave women by examining their roles as mothers and explain how this role defined their lives and shaped their decisions.

While I study those women who attained the status of motherhood through the birth of biological children, it is important to note that some women experienced motherhood through the formation of fictive family. Fictive family is based on kinship relationships between otherwise unrelated people. The establishment of these familial relationships proved a powerful coping tool for slaves, especially those separated from blood relatives. The slaves took these relationships seriously and genuinely considered their fictive kin as blood family. This strategy allowed them to fill voids in one another's lives: an older woman doted on children as a grandmother, a man stepped in paternally on behalf of children separated from their father, and women assumed the role of mother or aunt for motherless children. While not biologically related, these women - the mothers, aunties, and grannies - loved "their" children and raised them as their own. Through the adoption of motherless children, these women attained the respect and status of mothers within their community.

Focusing on slave motherhood through the lens of small-scale slavery in Missouri, I am able to closely examine the day-to-day lives of these women and focus on their common experiences as mothers living in bondage. This in turn paints a broader picture of typical slave mother experiences in the South. Diane Mutti Burke studied slavery in frontier Missouri and pointed out the prevalence of smallholdings. Using census records from 1860, she observed that of all Southern slaveholders, 80 percent owned less than twenty slaves, 88 percent owned less than ten, and finally, approximately

50 percent owned just one.¹³ The prevalence of smallholdings demands a closer examination of the women who lived, labored, and mothered on them. The preponderance of scholarship focusing on large plantations cannot fully illuminate the lives of mothers living on smallholdings, as they experienced unique influences in their lives due to the nature of small-scale slavery.

Chapter 2 introduces slave motherhood by analyzing the early stages of that role including pregnancy, labor and delivery, and the care of infants. Chapter 3 continues the experience of motherhood: focusing on the care extended by mothers as they raised their children. Chapter 4 explores the role these children's fathers played to see the effect these men exerted, or did not exert, on the lives of the mothers. The labor mothers performed is the subject of Chapter 5 with special emphasis on how motherhood shaped masters' expectations of slave women and how they in turn influenced and shaped the labor they performed. Chapter 6 examines resistance to slavery through the lens of motherhood: how mothers resisted and why the condition of motherhood often resulted in vastly different choices when compared to men and childless women. Finally, the effect of separation is the topic of Chapter 7; slave women all too often experienced the loss of children due to sale or other factors rooted in bondage. Exploring these common themes throughout a slave woman's life will provide a richer perspective on how motherhood defined and shaped women living in bondage.

Finally, any historian who studies the American slave experience must carefully navigate their sources. Slave narratives provide the foundation of this study; as such, the women who were slaves tell their own stories. Criticisms concerning the use of slave

¹³ Diane Mutti Burke, *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

narratives, particularly those gathered by the WPA in the 1930s, include concerns that the age of the narrators coupled with the passage of time clouded too many memories. White researchers interviewed the former slaves, and this, too, could have induced the narrators to frame their experiences in a way that would not be offensive white readers. These are reasonable concerns that historians should not dismiss, but neither should they discard such a rich resource for the study of slavery. Narratives present the best opportunity to hear of slave experiences from the slaves themselves. What follows is a critical examination that allows for the inherent flaws of oral history without dismissing the wealth of useful information concerning slave life.

CHAPTER II

“HAD A BABY OUT IN DE FIELD”:

SLAVE PREGNANCY AND INFANT CARETAKING

The realization of a pregnancy began the journey of motherhood, and slave woman quickly experienced the added burden and responsibility brought by children. During pregnancy, they faced the challenges of morning sickness and fatigue coupled with an ever-expanding physique. The months wound down and soon mothers faced labor with all of its difficulties. Slave women often experienced complications while delivering their children as well as the risk of infant and maternal mortality. Delivery did not pose the only risk to their child’s life, and mothers knew this: many nineteenth century babies did not live to their first birthday. Finally, after all this, they experienced little reprieve as new mothers working to adapt their choices in order to meet the needs of an infant. Slave women faced an additional strain as they strove to accomplish this while balancing masters’ expectations.

Southern women, as well as their Northern and Western counterparts, generally experienced their pregnancies with mixed emotions: they perceived babies as a blessing to love and nurture, but also faced the physical burden of increased vulnerability to fatigue and sickness. Mothers also typically experienced fear, as many pregnancies ended in miscarriage or deliveries during which the child, mother, or both, died. Slave

women knew the risks that accompanied bearing children. Former slave woman Hannah Allen, interviewed in the 1930s, reported her age as 107. She never bore children, a factor she attributed to why she experienced such overall good health and longevity.¹

Black and white women shared the experience of simultaneous joy and fear upon the discovery of a pregnancy. Women throughout the region faced the problems unique to pregnancy while continuing their typical day-to-day work, which rarely diminished even as the pregnancy progressed. Southern women in good health maintained the normal rhythms of their lives, regardless of their race. A woman who typically maintained her home, attended church, and mothered existing children continued to do so while pregnant.² If daily life continued normally for white women, then it definitely did so for slave women.

Masters invested in preserving the health and life of an expectant slave mother and her child, as they recognized their own personal advancement if both mother and child survived. Many owners, especially those who aspired to fulfill their role as a paternalist master, made special accommodations for their pregnant slave women. These women often received extra food or assigned lighter work. For other masters, pregnancy did not garner privileges, and life continued on much the same for their slave women.

Regardless of their masters' opinions concerning pregnancy, few slave women were wholly exempt from their regular work while pregnant. Most experienced some

¹ "Hannaah Allen," Federal Writers' Project of the United States Works Progress Administration (WPA), *Missouri Narratives*, vol. 10 of *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, ed. B.A. Botkin (Washington, 1941), 9.

² McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 2002), 54.

sort of lightening of duties as they moved from fieldwork to house work or temporarily reassigned to sewing and weaving. The amount of time off granted a woman depended on her master; while some especially conscientious owners gave the entire month before and after delivery, most tended to reassign the woman to easier work in the eighth or ninth month of pregnancy and expected no labor in the month after delivery.³ Others maintained their pre-pregnancy work and experienced no reprieve until only weeks before delivery.⁴ Due to masters changing women's work, pregnancy increased a woman's likelihood of interacting with, and receiving support from, other women. Once reassigned to lighter labor, the woman often performed her new tasks in the company of others with similar assignments – typically older, pregnant, or nursing women.⁵ Few Missouri mothers experienced this camaraderie as most lived on smallholdings with few, if any, fellow slaves.

As for adjusting duties, as in other regions of the South, Missouri masters made the decision concerning the work expectations of their slave women. Thus, Missouri slave women experienced a range of expectations based upon their master's discretion. Hannah Allen recalled a slave woman who went into labor and “had a baby out in de field about eleven o'clock one morning.”⁶ Allen's master did not adjust the labor requirements of his pregnant slave women, or felt that labor demands on his holding

³ Genovese, 497.

⁴ Blassingame, 93.

⁵ White, 110.

⁶ “Hannah Allen,” WPA, 9.

required all to be working in the fields that day, and did not allow her rest or light work despite the advancement of her pregnancy.

Women, both slave and free, typically cared for one another during pregnancy and particularly with the onset of labor. Midwives, or older women, dominated the birthing rooms of white and black women and practiced a variety of techniques – some rooted in superstition, but most based on herbal knowledge or an understanding of how massage and position could reduce maternal and infant injury.⁷ The landscape of women's health changed dramatically in the nineteenth century due to the medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth. This resulted in the perception of pregnancy as a disease necessitating medical intervention. Doctors began studying gynecology and obstetrics while promoting a need for pregnant women to be in their care. Despite the increased focus on women's health, doctors still knew very little and did not contribute to a lowering of the maternal and infant mortality rate.⁸ Nevertheless, increasing numbers of Southern women experienced pregnancy and delivery under the care of a doctor.⁹

Several factors motivated doctors to advocate the necessity of their care for laboring women. Attending births increased their knowledge of the delivery process, helped to legitimize their role, and increased their clientele. Doctors desired to usurp the midwives traditional role as deliverer, but did not wish to banish them from the delivery room. Labor often took hours, sometimes days, and doctors possessed little desire to wait and watch with a laboring woman, especially one whose labor presented with no

⁷ Schwartz, 150-53.

⁸ McMillen, *Southern Women*, 55, 57-58.; Schwartz, 144-45.

⁹ Schwartz, 144-145.

complications. Midwives, then, proved adequate to tend to a woman's needs until time to birth the child, or to see her through the entire process if no complications arose. Doctors advocated though, that their care provided the best outcome and midwives should summon for them at first sign of trouble.¹⁰

Slaveowners often preferred midwives due to their lower cost and greater accessibility in rural areas; however, when labor stalled or complications arose they rarely hesitated to summon a doctor.¹¹ Hannah Allen's master eventually called for a doctor to tend the laboring slave woman in the field. Allen recalled after delivery the woman "was sick a long time," so circumstances probably compelled the master to call for the doctor.¹²

Slave women also preferred the services of a midwife, for a myriad of reasons. First, slave women knew doctors only came to their childbed when serious, and potentially life-threatening, circumstances arose, many of which doctors did not know how to treat with success. As members of their own community, midwives offered assistance to laboring mothers that doctors could not, or would not, offer. They advocated on behalf of the new mother and child to their master, gaining necessities like additional food or clothing, a lightened workload, and even the preservation of the woman's family. Midwives also understood the various perceptions of, and rituals surrounding, birth within slave culture and paid these careful respect. A white doctor, largely ignorant of the varying beliefs, carried little about the cultural expectations of the

¹⁰ Schwartz, 2, 144, 153, 182.

¹¹ Schwartz, 144; 157.

¹² "Hannah Allen," WPA, 9.; Schwartz, 121.

birthing mother. Slave women also felt personally cared about and validated by midwives who took the time to listen to and sooth their fears. In sharp contrast, doctors paid little heed to the anxieties of laboring mothers and rarely addressed them. Finally, midwives stayed by the woman's side through the duration of labor, assisting in a variety of ways such as performing housework and caring for older children. By contrast, when faced with a period of waiting doctors preferred to do so within the white family's home.¹³

A safely delivered child caused mothers to breathe a sigh of relief with the realization they each survived the birthing process. Her work, though, increased exponentially as she performed the majority of the caretaking needed by the infant, along with any older siblings. Slave mothers shouldered the responsibility of ensuring their children received basic care such as food and clothing while also providing emotional support and guidance as they grew. While accomplishing these tasks she remained conscious of her status as a slave and as such remained beholden to the expectations of her master.

Masters involved themselves in decisions affecting the child when it also affected the mother, particularly the quality of her work. Masters commonly exerted their authority in decisions pertaining to how often a mother nursed a child and where that child remained while she worked. Masters, and sometimes mistresses, exerted their power further and made determinations that appear inconsequential, such as dictating a slave child's name.

¹³ Schwartz, 150-72.

Typically, mothers chose their children's names, but not all. Some masters and mistresses named slave babies, leaving mothers forced to use a name not of their choosing. Filmore Taylor Hancock proclaimed, "My ol' missus Hancock named me herself...after two presidents," and in so doing denied his mother any say in the names bestowed upon her infant.¹⁴ Surely, this rankled and reinforced the powerlessness experienced by slaves. His mother likely chose a name that went unused in favor of this homage to white American presidents.

A slave woman named Elizabeth birthed a son and named him William. For years, he carried this name until his master took in a young nephew who by happenstance shared the name. Brown wrote that his master, finding it intolerable to have two Williams within the same household, devised a solution whereby "my mother was ordered to change mine to something else." Brown does not record his mother's reaction, but surely she experienced displeasure with this order. Changing William's name chipped at her child's identity, replaced the name she selected, and further reinforced that her child did not truly belong to her. As for Brown's feelings about the name change, he declared that, "This, at the time, I thought to be one of the most cruel acts that could be committed upon my rights; and I received several very severe whippings for telling people that my name was William, after orders were given to change it."¹⁵

Of all an infant's immediate needs postpartum, a mother offered the most important: that of nutrition. Adequate nutrition comprised an important aspect of infant

¹⁴ "Fil Hancock," WPA, 148.

¹⁵ William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*, in *Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Literary Classics: New York, 2000), 419.

care and most Southern infants, white and black, fed at the breast. Nineteenth century America accepted breastfeeding as the norm and research examining middle and upper class white women shows that over 85 percent of Southern mothers breastfed their babies.¹⁶ Women living in bondage possessed fewer resources than wealthy white women and likely breastfed their own infants at a similar or higher rate.

Slave mothers often received time off to recover from delivery and care for their newborn, a period during which they established the breastfeeding relationship. The amount of time off depended upon what their master deemed an adequate recovery time, typically a few weeks to a month. Once the postpartum period expired, a woman returned to her typical work, though some masters transitioned mothers by temporarily assigning them to the lighter tasks they performed immediately prior to delivery.¹⁷ Less rigorous work, in turn, supported a breastfeeding relationship; the baby accompanied mother as she spun, wove, or performed any other light task. This arrangement was not possible for the majority of slave women who immediately returned to their pre-pregnancy work, especially work in the fields. In order to accommodate the infant's need to eat while still benefiting from the labor of its mother, most masters established some form of a nursing schedule. This schedule granted a woman regular breaks from work to nurse her baby. Nursing schedules varied widely depending on the master and extant scholarship does not present a clear picture of how often masters released their slave

¹⁶ Sally G. McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 118.

¹⁷ White, 112-13

women from work in order to nurse.¹⁸ The most definitive theory posits that women received an average of three to four such breaks per day.¹⁹

Nursing schedules created contention between masters and mothers when the latter believed their allotted times off did not adequately provide for the needs of their babies. A slave woman named Elizabeth related to her grown son “how often she had been whipped for leaving her work to nurse” him.²⁰ Clearly, Elizabeth believed she did not receive adequate time to feed her baby. There is no record of how often Elizabeth was allowed to nurse her baby but, since a healthy baby was in the master’s best interest, one can suspect that he believed the allotted time adequate. That Elizabeth wanted to nurse more often to shirk her work is possible but, owing to the attendant risk of physical punishment, unlikely. Most likely, she genuinely believed that her son required more care than her master was willing to approve.

Women perceived breastfeeding as a natural accompaniment to motherhood and nourished their own children with little to no consideration of alternatives. Mothers who used those alternatives generally did so if unable to breastfeed because of diminished milk supply or illness. For these unfortunate mothers, bottle-feeding and wet nursing by another were the only options. Bottle-feeding, also called hand-feeding, was usually with a mixture of cow’s milk, water, and brown sugar or bread. There were serious risks to the infant: first, there was no standardized formula for infant food and the hodgepodge of mixtures concocted did not provide adequate nutrition. Secondly, the lack of

¹⁸Blassingame, 94; White, 113.

¹⁹ Genovese, 497.

²⁰ Brown, 385.

refrigeration made it difficult to preserve food. Thus, bottle fed infants experienced much higher risks of malnutrition and bacteria-borne diseases. Despite a lack of understanding of the etiology of these diseases, both the public and medical community recognized that bottle-fed babies fared worse than their breastfed counterparts.²¹ Mothers who turned to wet nurses looked for, or advertised their need, for a lactating woman within their area. While ads sometimes expressed a desire for a white wet nurse parents typically just desired a woman possessing a great enough milk supply to support a second child or one whose baby recently died. Southern women living on large plantations found it easier to procure a wet nurse from among their own slaves; however, mothers living on smallholdings or in rural areas found the task more difficult. That white women breastfed their own babies and only sought a wet nurse in extreme circumstances challenges the supposition that black women regularly suckled white babies.

In short, the image of the black mammy wet nursing white infants is largely mythical. According to this stereotype, white families enlisted the assistance of an older, maternal, slave woman in the raising of their children. The mammy dutifully fulfilled her role by lovingly raising her white charges as if they were her own children. While a small percentage of white families living within the upper echelons of Southern society possessed such a slave, most did not. Moreover, we have little record of the slaves' perspectives in any case. In the years immediately after the Civil War, Southerners mythologized their antebellum culture and the Mammy figure factored in heavily. Suddenly, all white children possessed a loving mammy who loved and cared for them,

²¹ McMillen, *Motherhood*, 114-15. McMillen bases her conclusions about breastfeeding and bottle feeding from multiple sources, including: Samuel J. Fomon, *Infant Nutrition*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1974); and Mrs. J. Bakewell, *The Mother's Practical Guide in the Physical, Intellectual, and Moral Training of Her Children*, 3rd ed. American ed. (New York, 1846).

oftentimes more so than their own mothers. Mammy fulfilled a maternal role for the child, which included nursing him, and performed all other child-rearing duties such as bathing and disciplining. A European visitor to the Carolinas wrote, "Each child has its *Momma*, whose gestures and accent it will necessarily copy, for children, we all know are imitative beings. It is not unusual to hear an elegant lady say, *Richard always grieves when Quasheehan is whipped, because she suckled him.*"²² These assertions undermine white mothers, most of whom raised their children in a loving and attentive manner and, as noted previously, breastfed their own infants.

The perpetuation of the Mammy character caused a gross misrepresentation of the number of white children who possessed a female slave exclusively charged with their care. While some female slaves did act as an exclusive caretaker for their master's children, these women constituted a small minority of slaves and were found only on the large plantations of wealthy Southerners. Within most Southern homes, white women performed the role of their children's primary caretaker, which included assuming the responsibility of breastfeeding.

White Missouri mothers faced greater difficulties in the procurement of a wet nurse than did their more Southern sisters. The smallholdings typical in Missouri made it unlikely a white woman possessed a lactating slave at any given time. Even if a Missouri woman conveniently owned a slave capable of nursing, it is doubtful she could afford to reassign the slave to the sole task of wet nursing. Small Missouri farms featured few slaves and required all to work to maintain the home and fields. Few white Missourians could afford the luxury of an exclusive wet nurse. As for elective wet nursing, this

²² Blassingame, 167.

proved impractical within Missouri's small-scale slave culture. An examination of the Missouri WPA slave narratives showed that not even one mentioned a slave nursing a white child.

Slave women assumed responsibility for the nourishment of their own children, but some circumstances arose in which they relinquished or shared this duty with another woman. In some instances, white mistresses stepped in and nursed slave babies. Sarah Graves reported that she nursed as an infant at her mother's and mistress's breast. Her mother worked in the fields and did not want to take her daughter with her, and so left her with their mistress. The mistress cared for and nursed Sarah, along with her own baby. This arrangement ended after Sarah experienced a threatening situation in her mother's absence when, "a partition around a bed on which I lay near, caught on fire."²³ Afterwards, Sarah's mother always took her to fields when she worked.

The birth of a baby brought change to a woman's life. She experienced the physical changes and discomfort of pregnancy, while still maintaining a steady schedule of work. Her work often changed, especially as the pregnancy advanced, but even when assigned lighter tasks she rarely experienced rest. An expectant mother with children continued caring for them, performing all the duties required to bringing up children: supervising, diapering, feeding, cleaning, and laundering. Pregnancy also brought fear, especially as the hour of childbirth approached. Delivering children posed serious, and often times life-threatening, risks to both mother and child. After a successful delivery, women faced the establishment of nursing their infant and negotiating with their master in determining the frequency of nursing once she resumed work. Finally, she faced the

²³ "Sarah Graves," WPA, 138

responsibility of trying to care for an infant while fulfilling her master's work expectations. From the beginning, children introduced change into a woman's life and added to her responsibilities.

CHAPTER III

“PORE MUTHUH, SHE SHORE DID HAVE A HARD TIME”:

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CHILDREN

Hattie Matthew’s grandmother told her, “Whenever a negro slabe had a baby she had ta work rite on,” acknowledging the truth known to all Southern mothers: work stopped for nothing, not even babies.¹ The children had but two choices: accompany their mothers or remain behind. Some masters allowed mothers to choose while others did not, but neither arrangement guaranteed the mothers a final say in their children’s welfare. Masters of women who took their children not only expected those women to focus on assigned work – sometimes as the expense of the child – and older children normally worked, too. The alternative, leaving the child behind, left a mother powerless to do anything but trust the infant’s caretaker.

A mother who took her children to the fields understood the master’s expectations. She managed best she could, either wearing the baby on her back or finding the safest spot to leave it unattended. Security in the knowledge of closeness mattered, but the shortage of caretakers particularly affected Missouri mothers, many of whom were the only female slaves living on their respective properties. No matter the precautions a mother took, danger always lurked, especially in the form of snakes or

¹ “Hattie Matthews,” WPA, 249

weather.² Despite these risks, mothers on smallholdings who chose to take their children to work probably knew that leaving children did not guarantee their safety. Infants left behind rarely possessed an exclusive caretaker with no other responsibilities; therefore, the child still experienced care by someone primarily busy with a work assignment. The few infants who did gain one-on-one attention from caretakers often benefited at the master's expense: performers of exclusive childcare tasks on smallholdings typically did so only because they were unable to perform more rigorous work. Choosing to take a child to the fields meant being closer when it cried, and while possibly unable to nurse whenever the baby cried, mothers were at least closer when granted a break. For some, a child in the field equaled greater maternal attentiveness; a benevolent master was more likely to accommodate the mother when faced with a crying child.

Those women whose infants went to the field employed various strategies to keep their babies safe while also keeping as close a watch as possible. Elizabeth kept her baby close by carrying him on her back while working in the field.³ When plowing, Clausa Bridges laid her baby daughter at one end of the field, plowed to the other side, then returned back up the field.⁴ While not ideal, as the baby remained alone for a period, Bridges' arrangement allowed her to regularly check on the baby. Hattie Matthews grew up hearing her grandmother talk about how a mother, "If she work'd in de fiel she ud take de baby long and lay hit down in de rail fence corn'r in de sun." Mothers did not intentionally expose their children to the sun; rather, few options for shade existed in land

² McMillen, *Southern Women*, 63.

³ Brown, 385.

⁴ "Annie Bridges," WPA, 44.

cleared for farming. She continued, telling Hattie, “If de babies cried de muthuh had ta get de masters permishun for she cud pick up their baby.”⁵ Regardless of what manner mothers attempted to keep their babies safe and close, master’s expectations remained the same: work came first. Many mothers attempted to balance work and childcare but were not always available, or allowed, to meet the needs of their children.

In some instances, unreasonable labor expectations for slave mothers resulted in the suffering of their children. In the Lewis household, where Ellen worked and brought her young son with her each day, daughter, Mattie reported in her narrative that Mrs. Lewis required Ellen to keep the baby “in a box” because, “If permitted to creep around the floor...it would take too much to attend to him.” Jackson blamed this method of child confinement for her brother’s inability to walk at the age of two explaining, “His limbs were perfectly paralyzed for want of exercise.” Ellen, undoubtedly horrified, believed no other childcare option available as she continued bringing the child. After the onset of illness, also attributed by the slave family to the extended physical confinement of their son and brother, he began “gradually failing.” Despite his worsened condition, Ellen’s mistress did not allow her adequate time to care for him and so “She watched over him for three months by night and attended to her domestic affairs by day.”⁶

One morning, Ellen arrived in the kitchen with her dying child in tow. She knew her mistress expected her presence regardless of how poor the child fared. Mrs. Lewis

⁵ “Hattie Matthews,” WPA, 249.

⁶ Mattie J. Jackson, *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson; Her Parentage – Experience of Eighteen Years in Slavery – Incidents During the War – Her Escape from Slavery. A True Story* (Lawrence: Sentinel Office, 1866), 9

soon arrived, and “then she put on a sad countenance for fear of being exposed.” After this, she permitted Ellen to leave with the child, who died one hour later.⁷ An undiagnosed disease such as polio or rickets possibly accounted for the boy’s ill health and subsequent death; however, his extended confinements only exacerbated any underlying malady. At any rate, Jackson’s family laid the blame for his ailments and unfortunate death squarely on their white owners. Ellen felt powerless to help her child due to the expectations of her mistress.

Mothers who worked apart from their children typically left them in the care of older siblings or elderly slave women. A woman in Ellen’s situation benefitted from such an arrangement as her child received better care than Ellen’s son. Surely Ellen must have considered making her older daughter, Rachel, the primary caregiver, but Mrs. Lewis probably did not want to waste Rachel’s labor on childcare. Many siblings performed this task instead, a risky arrangement given that siblings were not always much older than the baby, and preparation was not always thorough. Louis Hamilton’s mother left him under the supervision of her older daughter, with severe consequences. He stated, “my sister was sitting by de fireplace rocking me and she fell asleep and let me fall in de fireplace and I was burned on de hand. Four of my fingers was burned and have never come out straight.”⁸

Infants required some direct caretaking, whereas older children left behind by working mothers did not and were supervised from a distance. Dave Harper, a motherless slave youth, grew up on a farm with an elderly slave woman and explained,

⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁸ “Louis Hamilton,” WPA, 146.

“De old lady took care of de children while de mothers worked. De oldest one never went to de field. She just looked after de little ones.”⁹ Slave owners often related this arrangement when explaining the care provided to their youngest slaves, but in reality, children received little supervision.¹⁰ The majority of Missouri slaves interviewed by the WPA supported this latter assertion; most reported a great deal of adolescent autonomy. Steve Brown said, “When I’s little de mostest fun we had was going fishing – we spent most of our time down dar by de branch and I guess de big folks was glad to have us out of de way.”¹¹

Finally, some slave children accompanied their mothers and worked alongside them or played nearby. Katie Cherry took her young daughter Tishey with her when she carded, spun, and wove for her master. Tishey recalled that she played but was not to disrupt her mother’s work. “I ‘member one time, I wus little, I played ‘rat under de loom’. I would crawl up and grab mammy and say ‘e-e-e-k’, and pinch her. She say, ‘I’ll puts a stop to that ‘rat’ bother me when I got work to do!’ That didn’ stop me but she sho’ make me wish it had the nex’ time I do it.”¹²

Katie Cherry’s decisions concerning Tishey demonstrate the freedom given some mothers in deciding arrangements for their children. While assigned to spinning and weaving she kept her daughter close by and supervised her while she worked, but upon being reassigned to fieldwork, Tishey reported that her mother, “lef me, and my brother

⁹ “Dave Harper,” WPA, 164.

¹⁰ Genovese, 506, 508

¹¹ “Steve Brown,” WPA, 57.

¹² “Tishey Taylor,” WPA, 343.

and sister by our selvs' 'till she come.'"¹³ Tishey's age likely influenced her mother's assigned work: Cherry performed duties that allowed her to simultaneously supervise her child. In Tishey's memory of playing while her mother wove, she does not mention siblings nearby. Her game of "rat under the loom" is also indicative of a small child's play. Therefore, it is likely that as Tishey became older her mother did not need to be close by, and that one of her children acted as supervisor.

Slave mothers, though placed in a subordinate role due to their race and sex, still exercised authority over their children. Missouri slaves remembering their childhood reported far more chastisement at the hands of their mothers than their masters. They acknowledged the power whites exerted over their family, but also recognized their mothers as figures of authority as well. When seven-year-old James Abbot swore in ignorance, his sister turned to him saying, "I gonna tell Muthuh on you." She perceived their mother as the immediate figure of authority in their lives, and the one who would address James's inappropriate speech.¹⁴ This authoritative role assumed by slave parents constituted an important one as they strove to raise their children to responsible adulthood. For slaves, this role became all the more important as parents taught children how to conduct themselves as a subordinated people in a racist society.¹⁵ Katie Cherry's daughter, eager to attend a nearby party, asked her mother's permission to leave. When Katie asked, "Think you can come back in time?" and heard her daughter's response of,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "James Abbot," WPA, 1.

¹⁵ Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 67-68.

“Don’ know mammy,” she advised against it stating, “Better save your sef child.” Her daughter, heeding her words, retired to bed.¹⁶

Mothers exercised their authority over their children and punished infractions, typically with some form of corporeal punishment. Slaves remembered their mothers striking them, typically across the back or buttocks, with a razor strop, broom handle, and a homemade whip constructed from buckbrush.¹⁷ The liberal use of corporeal punishment dominated 19th century child rearing, so while its use appears harsh by later standards, slave mothers believed they acted in their child’s best interest when they punished them. The children themselves did not resent these ministrations and accepted these whippings as the natural consequence for disobedience. Fil Hancock declared, “Poor old mammy, she loved us and wanted us to do right. We never got a whipping ‘ceptin’ we needed it.”¹⁸

Masters condoned this maternal authority over slave children, as they did not forbid mothers from punishing their children. This acknowledgment of a mother’s authority only extended so far, with masters exercising overall control. Likely, masters did not interfere with this authority of mothers as it saved them the bother of dealing with childish infractions. Still, masters possessed the power to punish the children, or limit the authority of mothers, if they so chose.

A slave mother’s treatment depended largely on her master and his perspectives on the proper care of slaves, especially of mothers and their children. Many owners in

¹⁶ “Tishey Taylor,” WPA, 345.

¹⁷ “Fil Hancock,” WPA, 148; “Emma Knight,” WPA, 220; “Lewis Mundy,” WPA, 258.

¹⁸ “Fil Hancock,” WPA, 148.

the antebellum period embraced the philosophy of paternalism, which urged the same sort of kind and benevolent treatment that a father might give his own child. This ideology maintained the Southern tradition of white supremacy tempered by an expectation that whites were therefore responsible for the care of their lesser charges. Masters provided food and clothing, but generally only in the most basic of forms; therefore, many slave mothers supplemented the goods their families received. The presence of children added to a woman's responsibilities, as she invested more time and work caring for them outside of her regular duties. A mother worked all day on behalf of her master, which left her working to meet her children's needs in the evening, sometimes into the night. Allie Lane's son exclaimed, "Pore Muthuh, she shore did have a hard time." He continued, explaining, "Dey warn't never nuthin for her but work hard all de time she neveh came in fum de feel' till dark, den had to feed wid a lantern." This workload surely left Lane up late attending to the needs of her children.¹⁹

Masters determined the amount of clothing to be distributed and the frequency of distribution; there was no region-wide norm in the South. Most often, slaves received clothing semiannually, but for some, like Emma Knight's family, the distribution only came annually.²⁰ Regardless of frequency, mothers often supplemented inadequate clothing supplies on their own time and through their own efforts. When Emma Knight's feet cracked and bled in cold weather due to inadequate shoes, her mother fashioned moccasins from old pants.²¹ Sarah Graves' mother knitted mittens from wool her

¹⁹ "James Monroe Abbot," WPA, 3.

²⁰ Genovese, 505; "Emma Knight," WPA, 219.

²¹ "Emma Knight," WPA, 218-19.

daughter found caught on fences.²² Other masters provided supplies and expected the mothers themselves to manufacture the clothing. Gus Smith recalled he and his siblings “wore home-spun clothes, made of wool mostly. Mother carded, spun and wove all our clothes.”²³ Mothers worked creatively to fulfill their family’s needs and spent long hours of their evenings and weekends working to keep their children clothed.

Slave mothers also worked to supplement their family’s diet. Sarah Graves’ mother and stepfather maintained a garden to supplement their food and earn money. The family fashioned a rude corn grater: a piece of tin with punched out holes. She recalled that “Many times Mama would work in the field all day and in the evening she would grate enough corn for the family to use the next day.”²⁴

Mothers received little rest: they spent their days working for the masters and spent their evenings working to make their childrens’ lives more survivable. In addition to regular duties, the presence of children locked mothers into a never-ending cycle of food preparation, dishwashing, sewing, laundering, diapering, and child supervision.

²² “Sarah Graves,” WPA, 138.

²³ “Gus Smith,” WPA, 321.

²⁴ “Sarah Graves,” WPA, 138.

CHAPTER IV

“LIKE TO BROKE MY MAMMY UP”: THE ROLE OF FATHERS

Southern law did not recognize slave marriage, but slaves still chose to get married and respect their unions just as free blacks and whites respected theirs. Missouri slaves expressed the same desire for marriage as their counterparts in the Deep South, but because they lived in a small-scale slaveholding society, they faced greater barriers in finding a partner. Many Missouri households possessed only one slave, or only a few, creating difficulties in establishing a relationship. To circumnavigate these inherent constraints slaves sought spouses from within their wider communities. The dynamics and conditions of small-scale frontier slavery resulted in a higher incidence of abroad marriage, i.e., spouses owned by different masters and living apart. The Works Progress Administration narratives reflect the typicality of abroad marriages in Missouri, as many former slaves recalled the arrangement between their parents. James Goings stated, “Tom Goings was my Daddy: He lived on a near-by plantation.”¹ In similar spirit, Clara McNeely Harrell said, “Mah pappy’s name wuz John Mitchell and he belong to a neighbor.”² A study examining Missouri slaves reported, “a full 57 percent of Missouri

¹ “Tom Goings,” WPA, 120.

² “Clara McNeely Harrell,” WPA, 169.

slave marriages were between men and women who lived on different holdings, a significantly higher percentage than was found in other regions.”³

Many masters preferred that their slaves married someone within their own holding, as this bound the slave closer to the plantation and ensured profit in the form of any children born.⁴ John Blassingame, mid-twentieth century historian, observed rather crudely that, “Most slaveholders, feeling that the children their male slaves had by women belonging to other planters was so much seed spewed on the ground, insisted that they marry women on their own estates.” Additionally, by encouraging marriages formed at home a master faced less pressure from slave men seeking increased freedom and mobility in order to visit family.⁵

William Wells Brown’s master pressured him to marry in the belief that the marriage would inspire commitment to the household. Brown became the property of Captain Price following a runaway attempt, an action that motivated his sale and that no doubt inspired his new master and mistress to try to ensure his happiness and commitment to their home. After Brown joined the household, Mrs. Price “was very soon determined” to arrange his marriage to one of her female slaves. Brown, not interested in marriage, resisted. “Mrs. Price soon found out that her efforts at this match-making...would not prove successful. She also discovered (or thought she had) that I was rather partial to a girl named Eliza, who was owned by Dr. Mills. This induced her

³ Burke, 201

⁴ Genovese, 472-73.

⁵ Blassingame 86; Genovese 472-73.

at once to endeavor the purchase of Eliza, so great was her desire to get me a wife!”⁶ Mrs. Price got her wish and Eliza joined the household, but disappointment followed: there would be no marriage to arrange and fuss over. Brown, still intent upon his goal of running away to freedom, understood the consequences of marriage. He explained, “I gave but little encouragement to this proposition [the purchase of Eliza], as I was determined to make another trial to get my liberty, and I knew that if I should have a wife, I should not be willing to leave her behind; and if I should attempt to bring her with me, the chances would be difficult for success.” Mrs. Price likely thought herself quite clever and never considered Brown suspected her motivations as not wholly concerned with his nuptial happiness. He referred to her actions as “the trap laid...to make me satisfied with my new home, by getting me a wife” and admitted her actions created the opposite effect, “I determined never to marry any woman on earth until I should get my liberty.” Brown remained true to his convictions: he never married Eliza and soon after these events successfully fled his state of bondage. Later, as a free man, he married and fathered children.⁷

While some slave owners discouraged abroad marriages, others recognized benefits to themselves present in the arrangement and supported their slaves’ desires. Masters of women benefited financially and socially from children born into the marriage, without garnering any of the expenses of supporting the father. Meanwhile, the husbands’ owners gained advantage over men reliant upon their permission to visit wives

⁶ Brown, 411.

⁷ Brown, 412.

and children. Masters could threaten to withhold their permission, or outright forbid husbands from visiting, as punishment for infractions committed by these men.⁸

Slaves also recognized abroad marriage's advantages and disadvantages and possessed their own reasons for embracing or rejecting such arrangements. Some couples did not wish to enter an abroad marriage since they would not see one another daily. A lack of daily interaction meant a lack of daily support, leaving them alone while navigating their day-to-day lives as slaves. The inability of the men to partake in their family's daily lives meant abroad fathers played a much smaller role in the lives of their children. Tishey Taylor, born into an abroad marriage, barely remembered her father, "William Walturf, or somethin' like 'at," adding that she "never did know good 'cause he never stayed wif us in our cabin no how and we never knowed him much."⁹ The lack of a husband's presence within the slave home increased the burden on the wife. These women shouldered both their own familial duties and those typically performed by men, such as chopping wood. In addition, wives lacked the daily protection of their husbands against sexual abuse at the hands of white or slave men. While slave women always experienced a degree of vulnerability to sexual assault, regardless of their marital or living arrangements, those with consistently present husbands gained a measure of protection. Finally, living on two separate holdings meant a spouse sold often lost the opportunity to say a final goodbye to his or her family.

Despite these constraints, many Missouri slaves still chose to marry abroad, as this arrangement proved the only practical way to obtain a spouse. By opening

⁸ Genovese, 472-73.

⁹ "Tishey Taylor," WPA, 342.

themselves to the possibility of marrying beyond their owner's holding, slave men and women created a greater pool in which to choose a mate.¹⁰ This proved a significant factor for Missouri slaves and explained why so many lived within an abroad marriage. Because the smallholdings common throughout Missouri made choosing a mate within their own immediate household so difficult, most Missouri slaves accepted the alternative. Some slave men and women even preferred abroad marriage despite its disadvantages. For example, one's own violent master could not beat or abuse one's spouse.¹¹ When a slave committed an infraction determined worthy of corporeal punishment, owners typically disciplined the slave publicly. Masters ordered slaves on the holding to gather and observe the punishment meted out, thus resulting in spouses to stand helplessly by. Living on separate holdings at least spared the couple from this particular indignity and pain. Mary Bell's parents may have preferred their abroad marriage for this very reason: she recalled, "So often he [her father] came home all bloody from beatings." Bell's mother showed love and concern for her husband as she "would take those bloody clothes off of him, bathe de sore places and grease them good and wash and iron his clothes, so he could go back clean."¹²

Abroad marriages also decreased the amount of leverage a master exercised over a slave family. Owners attempted to exert control by threatening to separate a slave from his family, or sell members of the family. While a master could still sell the slave he owned, he exercised no power over the spouse or children on someone else's holding.

¹⁰ Genovese, 474.

¹¹ Genovese, 474.

¹² "Mary Bell," WPA, 27.

Living apart also helped slaves preserve their families if faced with sale. If a master planned to sell members of the family, the spouse living on a separate holding might convince his/her owner to purchase them. Dealing with two masters, then, sometimes gave threatened slave families more recourse.

Lastly, abroad husbands gained increased mobility, and thus, their freedom. Masters often cited this factor as a reason for not supporting a slaves' desire to marry off the holding.¹³ While slave couples in abroad marriages needed their masters' permission to visit, the husband usually did the traveling. The degree of mobility awarded to man depended on their master, but some traveled great distances to visit a wife and children. Slave couple Westly and Ellen began their marriage belonging to neighbors and even after Ellen's sale they remained geographically close. Two years later, Ellen's master moved twenty miles away and her daughter reported, "My father, thereafter, visited my mother once a week, walking the distance every Saturday evening and returning on Sunday evening."¹⁴ Whether living together or within an abroad marriage these slave women experienced some measure of support and assistance from their husbands.

Many slave mothers, regardless of marital status, found themselves raising children without the presence of the child's father. In many instances, fictive kin relationships emerged following the separation of the father from his children. A woman's brother, uncle, or male cousin often stepped in to fulfill a fatherly role for the children. Sometimes unrelated men fulfilled this role and assumed responsibilities towards the children to ensure they experienced fatherly direction and stability in their

¹³ Genovese, 473.

¹⁴ Jackson, 5.

lives.¹⁵ Peter Corn, child of an abroad marriage, stated, “My master had only my mother, my mother’s brother, and an old lady.”¹⁶ Due to the establishment of kin relationships, the man residing on Peter’s holding may not have been his biological uncle, but he fulfilled this role in the child’s life. Not all slave mothers and children experienced this though, especially when they lived in relative isolation on a master’s holding with no slave man nearby to assume this role. In these instances, mothers raised their children alone. The separation of these mothers from the fathers of their children typically resulted due to the sale of the man, the decision of a master to migrate, or the man’s decision to run away.

A slave mother named Catherine witnessed the destruction of her marriage, and family, through the sale of her husband, eldest daughter, and son. Her remaining daughter, Harriet, later recalled that “[o]ur home was not pleasant.”¹⁷ Eliza Madison’s parents found their abroad marriage broken upon the sale of her father.¹⁸ Finally, Emma Knight’s mother lost her husband because “...de master wanted money to buy something for de house.”¹⁹ While the historical record remains silent concerning her emotions, surely she felt deep pain due to the loss, and knowledge, that her marriage ended for a household object. Her husband, a man she loved and valued, wrenched away for a new item for the master’s household must have felt senseless, and as for the object, it simply served as a daily reminder of her and her family’s status as property.

¹⁵ Genovese, 493.

¹⁶ “Peter Corn,” WPA, 85

¹⁷ “Harriet Casey,” WPA, 73.

¹⁸ “Eliza Madison,” WPA, 241.

¹⁹ “Emma Knight,” WPA, 219.

Some men who knew their masters planned to sell them chose to runaway instead. A slave man named Billinger possessed secreted money earned from the manufacture and sale of baskets. Upon learning of his impending sale to slave traders, he took the saved money and ran away. His son George reported, "I ain't never seed my pappy since."²⁰ Westly Jackson habitually visited his abroad wife and their children, twenty miles away, every weekend. His daughter Mattie reported that when he learned of his sale "previous to his delivery to his new master he made his escape to a free State." Prior to fleeing Westly visited his wife and children one final time and Mattie recalled the "anguish" and "tears" of her parents that night. Of her parent's parting she wrote, "O, what a horrid scene, but he was not her's, for cruel hands had separated them." She noted that her "mother was then left with two children."²¹ Six years later, Ellen remarried and bore two more children. Four years into their marriage he also fled after learning of his impending sale. Jackson wryly noted, "Thus my poor mother was again left alone with two more children added to her misery and sorrow to toil on her weary pilgrimage."²² Other men simply took advantage of opportunities to flee, Clay (Carrie) Smith remembered, "Father ran away to Illinois during de war," and "we ain't never saw him again."²³

Many slave mothers on the frontier migrated to Missouri with their settler owners. Border States with slavery appealed to both slaveholders with few slaves and Southern nonslaveholders. These groups knew they could not compete economically or socially

²⁰ "George Bollinger," WPA, 42.

²¹ Jackson, 5.

²² Ibid., 8.

²³ "Clay (Carrie) Smith," WPA, 318.

with large, established planters. Southern planters owned the best and most fertile soil, established social standards, and dominated politics both locally and on the state level.²⁴ This left substandard, rocky or hilly land for those with less capital and little chance to become noteworthy in society or politics. The rising cost of slaves made it increasingly difficult for the middle class to add to their holdings and even more difficult for nonslaveholders to ascend into the slaveholding class. These factors combined made the frontier seem a land of boundless opportunity.

The act of migration affected white slaveholders and their slaves alike, as migrating across the country meant separation from friends and loved ones. Whites sought comfort in writing letters to loved ones. This strategy of maintaining distant relationships provided no comfort for their slaves, who knew they would never see family and friends left behind. As most migrating whites owned few slaves, their bondsmen and women often maintained close connections to slaves living on nearby holdings. Nearly every slave transported to the frontier from the Old South faced this separation from loved ones. Joe Medley's decision to move to Missouri ended the marriage of one of his slave women, mother to an infant son, who "never knowed nothin'" about his father.²⁵ Migration and opportunity for white owners often came at the expense of slaves, whose families and support networks dissolved in the process.

A master's decision to move sometimes churned up resentment and anger in slave mothers. Cynthia Logan harbored deep anger towards her master "... 'cause he brought

²⁴ Burke, 24-26

²⁵ "Steve Brown," WPA, 56.

her fum Arkansas and left her twins an dey poppy down dere.”²⁶ Likewise, at six months old Sarah Graves and her mother migrated with their owner to Missouri, resulting in the breakup of her family. We “...left papa in Kentucky,” she noted, “as he belonged to another man.” This mother’s anger about moving, coupled with a desire for her husband, caused her master to keep her ignorant of her husband’s location.”²⁷ Fear of her running away if she knew where to find her husband probably motivated the master. Running away to reunite with loved ones often motivated fugitive slaves and caused problems for owners of those who recently experienced separation.²⁸ Graves’s owner wanted to ensure she lost all hope of unification with her husband, as he desired her to remarry and produce more children.

Slave women regularly faced white pressure to marry and bear additional children. Every child born benefited the owner and increased the value of the woman. Grave’s mother did not share her owner’s desire for remarriage and, “...said she would never marry a man and have children.” Her master remained persistent, so she finally acquiesced and married a slave on her new holding named Trattle Barber. Despite her apparent submission to her master’s desires, she won the final word on the matter: “...she married...Trattle Barber, because she knew he had a disease and could not be a father.”²⁹

Owner insistence that slave women remarry after losing a husband meant that formerly fatherless children gained a stepfather. Their family surely experienced an

²⁶ “Rachel Goings,” WPA, 121.

²⁷ “Sarah Graves,” WPA, 135.

²⁸ Genovese, 650

²⁹ “Sarah Graves,” WPA, 135.

adjustment period following the marriage, but his presence provided additional help to the woman and a father figure for her children. Charlie Richardson's mother remarried after his father's death and Charlie elected to adopt his stepfather's surname.³⁰ Despite owner insistence that women remarry, these subsequent marriages still experienced the same vulnerabilities that caused the demise of former marriages. Emily Camster Green's mother lost two husbands. Her first, Emily's father, died after which she remarried a neighbor's slave. When the neighbor's daughter married, she took Emily's stepfather to Texas with her.³¹ Charlie Richardson's mother also lost her second husband, named Charlie, when her master sold him. Her son explained, "...we never seed him agin." He added, "Like to broke my Mammy up...she liked that Charlie and she feeled it mos'."³²

Marriage did not provide the only context in which slave mothers experienced relationships with the father of their children: some mothers never married. The white culture condemned sexual relations prior to marriage and single, sexually active women faced harsh criticism. Slave culture possessed its own sexual standards, influenced by slaves' African heritage and their adoption of Christianity. Slaves rejected the guilt white's associated with the act; rather, adopting a perception of sin as an act against the community, not God. This mindset made it difficult to condemn sex as a sin. Slave men and women did not engage in high levels of promiscuity, behaving in a manner that treated sex lightly. They maintained a respectful attitude that prioritized love as the appropriate foundation on which to establish a sexual relationship. Within this

³⁰ "Charlie Richardson," WPA, 290.

³¹ "Emily Camster Green," WPA, 149.

³² "Charlie Richardon," WPA, 294.

framework, sexual relations became a natural and acceptable pleasure.³³ Slave culture, though, advocated couples marry prior to the birth of children.³⁴

Still if a slave woman bore out-of-wedlock children, she did not experience the extreme condemnation from within her culture that unwed white mothers faced.³⁵ Oftentimes, slave mothers who urged their daughters to delay sexual activity were less concerned about purity than protecting them from pregnancy. A slave mother knew the added burden and responsibility a child brought and wished to spare her young daughters this responsibility for as long as possible.³⁶ Sarah Waggoner admitted to unwed motherhood, but disclosed no other details to the writer recording her narrative. She simply reported, “Yes’m, I had two chilun during de war, a boy Bob and a girl Mary and later a girl Minnie. Married? No’m, I never married. I never was married.”³⁷ Her reticence to speak further on the matter more than likely came from a desire to spare herself the judgment unwed mothers incurred.

Finally, slave mothers who bore children fathered by white men raised them by themselves. A slave woman simply known as Cynthia soon experienced after her sale to a man named Walker. A fellow slave, William Wells Brown, recounted her story in his narrative of life in slavery. Brown’s master hired him to Walker, a slave trader, as an assistant on his steamboat that transported slaves to markets in New Orleans. Brown recounted, “On the first night...he [Walker] directed me to put her [Cynthia] into a state-

³³ Genovese, 459-72.

³⁴ White, 105.

³⁵ Genovese, 465.

³⁶ White, 106.

³⁷ “Sarah Waggoner,” WPA, 363.

room he had provided for her, apart from the other slaves.” Suspecting what this meant, Brown secreted himself and witnessed Walker “...make...base offers...” which were “rejected” by Cynthia. Walker, adamant to secure Cynthia, made his offer appealing, promising “...he would take her back with him to St. Louis, and establish her as his housekeeper at his farm.” He threatened if she did not agree to his desires than “he would sell her as a field hand on the worst plantation on the river.”³⁸

Cynthia still rejected his offer and later expressed to Brown she did not want to agree to Walker’s proposition. Brown stated, “...I foresaw but too well what the result must be. Without entering into any farther particulars, suffice it to say that Walker performed his part of the contract.”³⁹ He took Cynthia as a mistress and housekeeper, ultimately fathering four children by her. Brown does not divulge particulars concerning whether she relented and agreed to the arrangement or was taken against her will back to Saint Louis. Oversight on Brown’s part does not adequately explain his lack of clarity concerning the matter. He wrote for a white, nineteenth century, audience whose sensibilities he did not want to offend by openly discussing matters of a sexual nature. In addition, Brown may well have tried to protect Cynthia from undue judgment if she in fact made the decision to accept Walker’s offer.

Cynthia faced a difficult choice: a life that offered basic needs and domestic work at the price of a sexual relationship, or one in the unknown of the Deep South likely spent toiling in a field. Based on the supposition that Cynthia made the decision, she did so with the belief the arrangement offered the most security. Brown understood the factors

³⁸ Brown, 392-93.

³⁹ Ibid.

leading her to accept but likely did not try to explain these matters to his audience. He would not want to risk them misperceiving the event and falsely painting Cynthia as a woman of questionable morals.

At any rate, Brown chose not to elaborate, leaving the record silent concerning whether Walker forced her into the relationship or Cynthia gambled and accepted, albeit with reticence. He ended Cynthia's story by relating her ultimate fate: Walker married and therefore sold his mistress along with her children.⁴⁰ Sale provided an easy avenue for white men desirous of swiftly ridding themselves of a black mistress, and hiding any evidence born from the relationship. As the possessors of all the power within a relationship, white men owed their mistresses nothing and could end the relationship at any time and by any means.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER V

“MAMA WORKED IN THE FIELD AND IN THE HOUSE TOO”:

SLAVE WOMEN’S LABOR WITHIN SMALL-SLAVEHOLDING HOUSEHOLDS

Labor defined a slave’s day: they spent most of their waking hours performing assigned work that benefited their master. The nature of this assigned work determined where and how they labored. Traditionally, discussions of slave labor fell into two categories: domestic and field, with slave men and women categorized as one or the other. Domestic slaves ensured the smooth operation of a master’s home and personal life, while field slaves ensured the profitability of his land and resources. Male house slaves fulfilled positions such as the butler or valet, while female house slaves performed a wide variety of domestic work. Field slaves, regardless of sex, labored outside maintaining crops, livestock, and the property. Introducing an examination of the intersection of gender and labor demonstrates that masters sometimes considered the former when assigning the latter.¹

Female house slaves worked at a variety of tasks categorized as woman’s work. Among other assigned duties, typical domestic slaves cooked, cleaned, laundered, sewed, wove, and assisted with childcare of white babies and children. This position proved advantageous for a woman as it spared her the backbreaking labor of fieldwork and

¹ McMillen, *Southern Women*, 100.

offered a measure of protection from elemental effects like heatstroke or dehydration. Domestic work brought its own set of difficulties though, as the constant interaction with, and scrutiny of, mistresses made it difficult. A slave woman laboring under these conditions easily felt as though she did not have a moment to herself. She also felt the burden of constant vigilance to guard her emotions, as expressing anger or frustration resulted in conflict with the mistress. The mistress's own emotions created vulnerability in her slaves who became easy targets. A slave woman working closely with a tired, ill, or bad tempered mistress bore the brunt of her emotions, commonly manifested in unreasonable expectations, unswerving dissatisfaction, or abuse. Women field hands shared a different experience, reporting for work each morning alongside their male peers, performing largely agricultural labor and other physically demanding tasks like caring for large livestock and building and mending fences. The punishing nature of this work was its distinguishing feature, but women in the fields experienced advantages as well: escape from constant interaction with owners and more socialization with other slaves mattered, too. The time in the field allowed visiting, singing, and offering mutual support to one another.²

This strict dichotomy does not accurately portray the typical labor experiences of women living in small-scale Missouri slavery, characterized by different conditions than those on plantations in the Deep South. There were fewer overseers, more hiring out, and a greater demand for female slaves. Additionally, the labor of these women did not neatly fall into one single category; most regularly transitioned between domestic and fieldwork. Not only could few Missouri owners afford overseers; they commonly

² Ibid., 104.

worked alongside their slaves because they could not afford to spare themselves from manual labor. And those few masters who *could* afford overseers faced a hiring problem rarely experienced in the Old South: shortage of applicants. The majority of white men in slaveholding frontier regions wanted to seek their fortunes on their own farms and eventually become slaveholders. Most perceived overseeing as an impediment to their own aspirations. In addition, because Southern culture emphasized personal autonomy, working for another man created a sense of dependency tantamount to slavery.³ These factors all worked together to create an environment in which few slaves experienced supervision from a white overseer. Instead, most Missouri slaves labored under their master's eye or that of a trusted slave placed in a position of authority.

Frontier masters also hired their slaves out more frequently than their Old South peers. Hiring out meant that a master leased his slave to another man for a specific amount of time. The slave remained the legal property of his or her master but labored under the direction of a temporary employer who, in turn, paid the owner for the slave's labor. A contract, signed by both men, determined how long the slave remained in the hirer's possession as well as who provided the slave with food, clothing, medical care, and other necessities. Contracts typically lasted one year with the hirer assuming all responsibility for the slave's care. The practice proved particularly advantageous for small-scale slaveholders and nonslaveholders alike, and was accordingly popular in Missouri. Hiring out allowed an owner to profit from an unneeded slave, while simultaneously reducing his expenses, as he assumed none of the responsibility for the slave once hired. Meanwhile, the hirer gained additional help without incurring the cost

³ Burke, 104.

of purchasing a slave, plus the savings from not having to provide any long-term support. Many farmers took advantage of the large numbers of slaves for hire and utilized them during busy times of the year. In this way, they gained the labor required at harvest and planting time without incurring losses by supporting unneeded slaves throughout the year. This practice also made slaves available for shorter contractual periods when the need arose. Isabelle Daniel remembered she “was hired out to the Methodist preacher’s family to take care of the children when his wife was ill.”⁴ Hiring out proved particularly advantageous for nonslaveholders, who through the process gained slaves and thereby, a measure of social standing. These benefits for whites often translated into losses for slaves, especially since the process of hiring out disrupted families.

Frontier demand for female slaves surpassed that of male slaves, as women fulfilled dual roles, performing housework and fieldwork. Maintaining a home on the frontier required a great deal of labor, and men desired to own at least one slave woman in order to alleviate some of the burden placed on their wives and daughters. Of particular importance, the presence of this slave woman spared the white women the rigors of fieldwork, but also allowed the latter to spend more time on child rearing, creating a home, and achieving higher societal standing.⁵

Of those Missouri slave women assigned domestic work, cooking and weaving were important tasks. Malissa Abernathy wove and sewed for her master, while George Bollinger recalled his mother as “a good cook ‘en she cud spin en weave.”⁶ Former

⁴ “Isabelle Daniel,” WPA, 203.

⁵ Burke, 105.

⁶ “Betty Abernathy,” WPA, 6.; “George Bollinger,” WPA, 40.

slaves interviewed by the Works Project Administration who mentioned the work performed by mothers overwhelmingly recalled labor focused on domestic duties within their master's home. These mothers did not gain the domestic positions due to the presence of their children; rather, because they provided the most valuable work by assisting mistresses with the care of the home.

A small number of those interviewed reported their mothers worked exclusively in the fields. Allie Lane's son described her as "big an' strong," and recalled that "She nevuh worked in de house none...She cud cut down a big tree on chop off a rail length an' use a wedge an' maul an' make rails as good as anybody."⁷ These women constituted a minority, most Missouri slave women did not exclusively work in the fields. A woman assigned to fieldwork only often meant a second slave woman lived on the holding, and she performed the domestic duties. Eliza Madison's mother "was jus' like a man and worked in de fiel' and made rails," in this case the master also owned Madison's aunt who primarily wove.⁸ Thus, a sole slave woman spent most of her days working in and around the home at a variety of domestic tasks. A holding with multiple slave women typically saw at least a few assigned to the fields.

The ability of slave women to perform both domestic and fieldwork defined their desirability, and many spent significant amounts of time in each environment.⁹ For all its gender constructs, Southern culture possessed no social sanctions against black women laboring at "men's" work. Frontier slave owners recognized the investment of a slave

⁷ "James Monroe Abbott," WPA, 3.

⁸ "Eliza Madison," WPA, 241.

⁹ McMillen, *Southern Women*, 102

woman due to the fluidity with which they could assign tasks. Katie Cherry's daughter remembered her mother, "cooked in the big house for 'Marse', and then som' time when her work was done in there she was took to the fields."¹⁰ Some slave women consistently experienced both types of work, with days divided evenly between the realms of home and field.¹¹ Sarah Graves recalled, "Mama worked in the fields and in the house too."¹² Interestingly, labor not dictated by societal constructs of gender only applied to women. There are no discussions or mentions of male slaves, in any region or holding, regularly assigned work commonly perceived as womanly. This social acceptance of waiving gender norms when assigning work to female slaves made them good investments for frontier families.

Slave children possessed their own paradigm of labor, again, one that waived gender roles in favor of maximizing their work. Masters rarely expected children, especially young ones, to labor in the fields, but children of both sexes typically performed labor in and around their master's home.¹³ Children's earliest assignments typically assisted the labor of their elders, such as hauling water, fetching kindling, and providing care to younger children, both slave and white.¹⁴ While most children in nineteenth-century America worked, both agriculturally and industrially, two distinctions separated their labor from that of slave children. First, a slave child's parents did not make the determination concerning the age labor commenced, nor the tasks performed.

¹⁰ "Tishey Taylor," WPA, 343.

¹¹ McMillen, *Southern Women*, 101

¹² "Sarah Graves," WPA, 138.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 102

¹⁴ King, 21

Second, the child's labor did not benefit his or her own family as assigned tasks ultimately contributed to the master and his holding.¹⁵

Slave children assisted the labor of adults by either directly participating in the task or performing small tasks that contributed towards its completion. Mothers assigned domestic duties sometimes labored alongside their children who assisted them. Malissa Abernathy spun and wove with her ten-year-old daughter Betty who recalled, "I learned to spin, I could fill broaches and spin as good as any of 'em."¹⁶ Clara McNeely Harrell's mother also produced textiles and taught her to spin. Clara aided her mother's work explaining that, "Ah's fill de quills and Ah I'd hep her thread de loom...She'd push de thread through tuh me an' den Ah'd ketch it and pull it through an han it back tuh her."¹⁷ Other children supported the work of their elders, Steve Brown hauled wood while Richard Bruner said, "I remember being a water-boy to de field hands before I were big enough to work in de fields."¹⁸

Slave children performed a wide variety of tasks intended to keep them both busy and productive. W.C. Parson Allen recalled, "I was kep' busy shooin' flies off de table with a pea-fowl brush, watching de chickens, and gettin' de maple sugar from de root of de trees."¹⁹ While Sarah Graves washed dishes and made carpet rugs from sewn together

¹⁵ Ibid., 22

¹⁶ "Betty Abernathy," WPA, 6.

¹⁷ "Clara McNeely Harrell," WPA, 169.

¹⁸ "Steve Brown," WPA, 56; "Richard Bruner," WPA, 59.

¹⁹ "W.C. Parson Allen," WPA, 18.

strips of fabric.²⁰ Emma Knight spent every evening knitting a finger-length of wool as required by her mistress.²¹

Owners commonly delegated childcare tasks to slave children, most of whom “nursed” a younger child at some point in their own childhood. Both boys and girls assumed this responsibility and many spent their days looking after multiple little ones while mothers worked. Many white mothers relied on slave children to assist with the care of their own youngsters. Hannah Allen’s days stayed busy attending to the care of her master’s six sons, while Tishey Taylor cared for her master’s youngest son even though she “warn’t much biggner him.”²²

Slave children living on holdings with no, or few other children, sometimes found themselves hired out to perform childcare duties. An unmarried Missouri woman named Kitty Diggs owned a farm and slave woman, a mother of six children. With six children to assist around the house and look after one another, Diggs decided hiring one out provided a greater profit and better met her own needs. She hired seven-year-old Mary for one year to a local minister to serve as a nurse for his children. In addition to her primary responsibility of caring for the children, she also summoned fieldworkers for dinner, gathered eggs, and performed other light household tasks. Mary reported that after the expiration of the contract her mistress immediately hired her out for an additional two years to a baker, again her primary responsibility being the care of his

²⁰ “Sarah Graves,” WPA, 138.

²¹ “Emma Knight,” WPA, 218.

²² “Hannah Allen,” WPA, 14; “Tishey Taylor,” WPA, 342.

children.²³ Hired out at the age of eight, William Black's new owner assigned him the task of escorting his children safely to and from school.²⁴

The labor performed by slave children, while generally light and rarely dominating their whole day, still contributed greatly to the operation of Missouri farms and households. By assigning light duties, such as caring for chickens, fetching kindling, and washing dishes, mistresses freed up a great deal of time. This saved time enabled slave women to devote more time to cooking and laundering. Slave children who cared for babies and younger children played an important role in ensuring the accomplishment of a mother's duties. Again, owners benefited from increased production on the part of slave women accomplished through the labor of children.

As childhood waned and adolescence waxed, slave children often experienced a shift in duties as they gradually assumed greater responsibilities. At around ten years of age slave children's labor increased, though some masters began the transition to greater labor as young as eight, with others delaying until the child neared twelve.²⁵ Richard Bruner graduated from distributing water in the fields to hoeing tobacco.²⁶ Rhody Holsell remembered her work increasing with age, "I would pull weeds in de cotton patch, and when I got a little older I was a-carding and spinning and dat wheel was a-singing."²⁷ By adolescence, though sometimes a little earlier, slave children experienced an almost total absorption into the world of their elders. By the age of twelve, most adolescents

²³ "Mary Bell," WPA, 25-6.

²⁴ "William Black," WPA, 38.

²⁵ King, 25; Genovese, 502-503

²⁶ "Richard Bruner," WPA, 59.

²⁷ "Rhody Holsell," WPA, 200.

shouldered a full workday with their assignments typically differentiated according to their sex. Girls worked in earnest within their mistresses' homes at tasks similar to the older women, or experienced their first fieldwork. Boys usually went to the fields.

Lewis Mundy described his transition: "When I was small I rode one of de oxen and harrowed de fields. When I was about ten or eleven I plowed with oxen."²⁸ Madison Frederick Ross felt pride when assigned to field duties like a man. "As a boy ah tended thuh cows an seck like, an' built the fires in the fireplace, later they let me plow an' ah thought ah sure hed a big job."²⁹

At roughly the same time, their clothing underwent a transformation as well, both of these events signaling their transition from childhood to adulthood.³⁰ Prior to adolescence, slave children wore long shirts with boys dressed identically to girls. George Bollinger explained, "Us chilluns never wore no pants – jes sumpin like a long shirt made o' homespun."³¹ Louis Hill described his childhood attire as "a straight slip like a nightgown an hit fastened round the neck. Tak dis off an we war naked."³² With the onset of puberty, masters provided girls with long skirts and boys with pants. This event, particularly for the boys, marked an important step towards adulthood. Some boys, embarrassed by their growing bodies now clad skimpily in an ever-shortening shirt, felt joyous and proud when presented with pants, even though this signaled the coming of

²⁸ "Lewis Mundy," WPA, 258.

²⁹ "Madison Frederick Ross," WPA, 299.

³⁰ Genovese, 505; White, 94

³¹ "George Bollinger," WPA, 40.

³² "Lewis Hill," WPA, 184.

more strenuous work.³³ Their new pants symbolized the approach of manhood. For girls, an increased workload, long skirts, and the onset of menstruation all signaled the close of childhood.³⁴ Motherhood, though, remained the greatest symbol of a girl's total absorption into the adult world.³⁵

³³ King, 26; Genovese 505

³⁴ King, xx

³⁵ White, 108

CHAPTER VI

“SHE USTA RUN OFF TO THE WOODS”: SLAVE WOMEN AND RESISTANCE

Happy, docile, and contented slaves did not inhabit Missouri, despite its reputation for possessing a “benevolent” system of slavery. To be sure, Missouri slavery differed from that of the Deep South, but this did not make the institution better or easier on the enslaved.¹ Slaves in Missouri experienced discontent with their status as chattel and engaged in resistance against their masters. Owners, especially those striving to fulfill their paternalistic duties, often felt betrayed by the defiance because they genuinely believed that they had attended to their slaves’ needs.² The closeness between masters and slaves due to small-scale slavery exacerbated the formers’ sense of betrayal, but also provided more opportunities for slaves to manipulate their masters.³

Some slave women refused whippings and fought back against perceived injustices. As Eliza Madison put it, “My mother was the type dat they had to treat good.”⁴ She provided no further explanation concerning the relationship between her mother and master. Multiple incentives existed for masters to treat slaves well, including

¹ Burke, 6.

² Genovese, 653.

³ Burke, 144-45.

⁴ “Eliza Madison,” WPA, 241.

increased work along with a decreased chance of the owner experiencing physical retaliation or a runaway slave. Her master possibly feared, or previously experienced one of these factors, and so determined it wise to treat her well.

Allie Lane proved herself this type of slave when she successfully refused to submit to corporeal punishment. Lane lived on a two-generation holding run by her master and his grown son, known as “Young Joe.” Her son related that one day as his mother worked hoeing corn Young Joe rode up and told her to swallow her tobacco. Lane ignored him, so he repeated his order. “Den she say, ‘You chewing tobaccy? Whyn’t yuh swaller dat?’ Angered, he struck her across the shoulders with a “double rope.” Lane retaliated and seized him by the throat, “an his face wuh all black as my own fore dey pulls her offen him.”⁵

The “Ole Mastuh” attempted to whip Lane but found himself unable to mete out the punishment. The account does not explain his inability to punish her, but soon after his health failed, he became bed ridden, and later died. Therefore, his health may have prevented the physical exertion of whipping Lane, or he feared for his own physical safety if he attempted. At any, he attempted to rectify the situation by summoning slave traders who he ordered to whip her. A trader approached Lane and instructed her to “put her han’s togedder so he tie em, she grab him by de collar an’ de seat o’ he’s pants an knock’s his haid agin a post like a battern’ ram.” After this, Lane’s master ended the confrontation by saying, ““Men yo’ better go on home. I don’ want my cullud folk to git hurt.””⁶

⁵ “James Monroe Abbot,” WPA, 2.

⁶ Ibid.

Lane's owner feared any injuries she may incur, and these fears outweighed his desire to punish her. Owners, especially ones with smallholdings, could not afford injured or maimed slaves. A hurt slave cost money: injuries required the response of a doctor, meant a decreased workload, or no work at all, and if serious the slave may never work again. A slave incapable of working became an expense with no value. He likely valued Lane as an important member of his workforce. Her son described her as "big 'an strong," and dey warn't nothin on de place dat she couldn't do. She cud cut down a big tree on chop off a rail length an' use a wedge an' maul an' make rails as good as anybody." Lane's physical strength and ability to perform rigorous manual labor coupled with the fact she was a woman capable of bearing children made her a very valuable slave. Her owner did not want to compromise her physical well-being, ability to work, or potential to bear more children.⁷

In addition to refusing to submit to a whipping, running away constituted another extreme form of slave resistance. While every slave may have considered fleeing bondage at one time or another, few acted due to the dangers and consequences inherent in the act. Fugitive slaves faced days, even weeks, of running with little or no provisions and shelter. They faced pursuit by owners and feared any white they may encounter: an unknown and unsupervised black man or woman raised suspicion making them vulnerable to detainment and a return to bondage. Finally, separation from loved ones proved a significant deterrent to running away.

Analysis of fugitive slaves through a gendered lens shows that women fled significantly less often than men. Eugene Genovese found that "[a]t least 80 percent

⁷ "James Monroe Abbot," WPA, 3.

were men between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five” he continues stating, “The age profile contains no surprise, but the sex profile does.”⁸ He argues that slaves who possessed some education or training, which generally meant they had an understanding of the geography off their master’s holding, comprised at least one-third of all fugitive slaves. Underrepresented in this number, women “occupied these ranks only as house servants.” He goes on to argue that, “In view of the physical strength and general assertiveness of the women, their stronger ties to children and family probably account for much of their unwillingness to defect.”⁹

Genovese’s discussion of the lower rates of female fugitives leaves questions unanswered. He does not explain why he believes female slaves lacked the physical tenacity to successfully runaway, especially in light of the fact that many of these women were working alongside their male counterparts performing much of the same labor. He also does not elaborate on the difficulties posed to women with children who considered fleeing. Deborah Gray White expands on the subject, making no mention of women’s physical aptitude, instead focusing on ties to family, especially their children. She argues that a woman’s childbearing responsibilities made running away between ages sixteen and thirty-five – the largest runaway cohort – difficult if not impossible. “A woman of this age,” she observes, “was either pregnant, nursing an infant, or had at least one small child to care for.”¹⁰ Like Genovese, White attributes lower rates of female slave flight to

⁸ Genovese, 648-49. Genovese cites statistical studies completed by Professor Paul Gaston for numbers from North Carolina and J.B. Sellers (*Slavery in Alabama*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1950) for numbers in Alabama.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ White, 70.

the love and dedication they felt towards their children, but her elaboration on the difficulties posed to mothers fleeing with children is a more exclusive contribution to the subject.

Problematically, White infers that slave women were less likely than slave men to consider running away, or even possess the desire to flee. “While all that men between sixteen and thirty-five could count on was hard work and severe punishment if they angered the master or overseer,” she reasons, “it was during these years that many slave women got their best care. Slave owners were less likely to insist on a full day’s heavy workload when the laborer involved was a pregnant woman.”¹¹ The present study contradicts this assertion, especially when one considers the added responsibilities and workload that the presence of children caused their mothers.

White describes women as receiving their “best care” during these years but neglects to mention that they were also exposed to a greater chance of death or sickness due to pregnancy and childbirth. Even available medical care often came too late or was not advanced enough to avert debility or death. While many masters did extend care in the form of a lightening of duties for pregnant or nursing women by lightening duties, few – by White’s own admission – actually allowed them to quit work.¹² There were also masters who either kept a woman’s normal workload or reduced it only minimally. As White herself states, “[n]ursing and childcare did not relieve a slave woman of the burdens of field work.”¹³

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 110.

¹³ Ibid., 113.

It should also be noted that women were not necessarily always pregnant or lactating in these years and so could expect to receive the same care and workload as men or older women. When one considers that even the maximum available care still put a woman at risk for disease or death, that labor in some form was expected, and that having children increased a woman's workload within her own home, it is doubtful that these women would not at least consider flight over the "best care" provided by their masters. Actually fleeing was a different matter and, as noted above, White agrees with other historians that running away was a largely gendered activity. According to Sally McMillen, for example, "it is easy to understand why few slave women ran away permanently...Slave mothers could not abandon their children to seek freedom. Nor could they carry young children with them."¹⁴

Slave mothers faced added difficulties when fleeing and few attempted the feat. Traveling with a child or children who could neither keep up nor keep quiet increased the risk of capture. A mother also faced difficulty feeding her children while fleeing, and packed provisions rarely lasted the entire trip. Ellen Jackson attempted to flee with her two daughters, the oldest of whom, Mattie, could not have been more than seven years old. In her narrative, Mattie remembered that they "slept in the woods at night," and that "...my mother had food to supply us but fasted herself." After two days running, Ellen managed to cross the border into Illinois with the girls. Unfortunately, an "advertisement had reached there before us," and the three found themselves captured, returned to Missouri, and resold into slavery.¹⁵

¹⁴ McMillen, *Southern Women*, 76.

¹⁵ Jackson, 7.

Exceptions did occur, as illustrated by the story of Malissa Abernathy, who successfully fled with her ten-year-old daughter Betty. The pair lived unhappily on the farm of John Abernathy in Perry County, Missouri. John, according to Malissa, fathered Betty who described him as “mean to his cullud folks.” Their unhappiness increased in 1862 when John hired out Malissa’s two elder sons with, they believed, no regard for their treatment by the hiree. The boys soon fled their new holding and “...they came an’ tole muthuh they was goin’ to run away ‘cause they’s treated so mean.” Malissa did not dissuade her sons; rather, she urged them to leave quickly. She feared that if captured they would be killed in her presence. Later that evening, upon discovering the boys fled, Abernathy arrived at the family’s cabin to question Malissa. When Malissa denied knowledge of the events, Abernathy hung her from the rafters of the cabin and beat her. Betty stated that “Aftuh this we was treated so mean that a neighbor helped us escape. We-all got in a big wagon, ‘bout ten or twelve of us, an’ druv us to the Cape, where they’s sojers who’d protect us.” Once in Cape Girardeau, Malissa and Betty found work and supported themselves.¹⁶

While most mothers did not runaway, especially with their children, Malissa experienced a set of circumstances more conducive to fleeing than did most slave mothers. First, Malissa did not face the journey alone; their neighbor, presumably a white man, offered protection. Secondly, the logistics of the trip did not pose a serious problem: the neighbor owned a wagon to ease travel and the journey was short. Lastly, she did not face separation from family, only Betty remained and she easily accompanied her mother on their flight. Thus, while running away posed a risk to Malissa, her

¹⁶ “Betty Abernathy,” WPA, 6.

circumstances spared her the slew of problems encountered by most mothers who considered fleeing.

Choosing to leave children behind improved a woman's odds of successfully absconding and, although this price proved too high for many mothers, some left their children behind in the care of family or friends. In 1822, a slave woman named Sophia fled, compelling her master to publish a runaway notice in the *St. Louis Enquirer*. In it, he complained that she "ha[d] left a husband and children, and taken up with a white man whose very countenance is sufficient to hang him."¹⁷ Easter Miller seized her opportunity to run for freedom, but chose to leave behind her son Wylie. Though her husband lived on a nearby farm, Wylie said that when the Union army passed through their region, his mother and a male slave chose to "...escape an' go off wid de sojers."¹⁸

Running away posed enough danger that far more women acted on their desire to flee by engaging in the act of truancy, or hiding out. Truant slaves did not stray far from their holdings and generally returned within a short time period, ranging from a few days or weeks. This form of resistance allowed the woman respite from daily labor but did not include many of the challenges inherent in running away. For women, truancy "reconciled their desire to flee and their need to stay."¹⁹ It allowed them a measure of independence but not at the cost of their children, either through separation or the risk of fleeing with them. Whereas White sees hiding out as a slave woman's attempt to reconcile flight and family, Stephanie Camp sees the same act as a self-assertive attempt to control

¹⁷ *St. Louis Enquirer*, July 1, 1822.

¹⁸ "Wylie Miller," WPA, 256.

¹⁹ White, 74.

the space she inhabits. Truancy, to Camp, equals resistance. In her book, *Closer To Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, Camp focused on space – the way whites used it as a means of control and the way slaves used it as a tool of resistance. When a slave fled her master’s property, even for a short time, she was defying him by defining her own space and refusing to move within the realm he controlled. Camp discusses a “rival geography,” which for the purposes of her study she defines as “[a]lternative ways of knowing and using plantation and southern space that conflicted with planters’ ideals and demands.”²⁰ She argues that truancy was an important aspect of the overall female slave experience. They were more likely to hide out than run away, and to assist those who were hiding out by providing food. Therefore, “[b]oth of these factors gave gender-specific meaning to woman’s acts of truancy and to their role in the creation of the rival geography.”²¹

Genovese addresses hiding out, but only within the context of running away. His overall discussion, then, contains a crucial gap. He does not analyze the gendered nature of hiding out or discuss its importance to women. He also argues that slaves who hid out were trying “to effect some specific end,” but as White and Camp so aptly demonstrate, that end did not necessarily lie in free territory and certainly resulted in punishment when the slave returned.²² The goal of such short term resistance as truancy might just as easily have been a temporary respite from life’s rigors. When angry, Cynthia Logan fled “to de woods till she git over it.” In one instance, she took her daughter, Rachel, with her

²⁰ Camp, 7.

²¹ Camp, 38.

²² Genovese, 597-98.

and hid out for nearly a month. Rachel reported “I wuz nigh dead. Dey kept me at de white folks house till I got strong again.”²³ Cynthy and Rachel’s experience demonstrates the difficulty mothers faced ensuring their children received adequate care. Hiding out together put the child at risk, but leaving them behind required someone to care for them. A mother faced difficulty leaving her child behind when she was the sole slave woman living on the holding, or her child still depended on her to nurse.

²³ “Rachel Goings,” WPA, 121.

CHAPTER VII

“KISS DE BABY GOODBYE”:

THE SEPARATION OF MOTHERS FROM THEIR CHILDREN

If the presence of children caused additional hardship for slave mothers, separation from them inflicted trauma outright. As in other slave states, Missouri law made slavery hereditary through the maternal line. Children of female slaves, therefore followed their mothers in perpetual bondage regardless of paternity. Missouri slaveholders and slave codes, like their counterparts elsewhere, showed little concern for slave mothers who wanted to remain with their children, and the slave mother generally suspected that at least one of their children might be sold.

This risk only increased as their children grew older. Slave children either supplemented a master's workforce or reaped a profit through sale. Masters, especially those striving to fulfill a paternalistic role, did not separate children from mothers until the former were at least ten to twelve years of age. But paternalism alone did not always explain a master's delay in separating mothers and children. Economics played a role too. Many owners regarded children under ten as poor contributors to the upkeep of a holding and did not expect them to bring good prices on the auction block. Yet there were exceptions: some sold children at any age if they saw a benefit to it.¹

¹ Genovese, 502.

Madison Ross recalled that his master “brought home a thirteen yeah ole boy,” to add to the farm’s workforce.² Delicia Patterson was also sold as an adolescent, at the age of fifteen. Resisting her purchase by “the meanest” slave owner in the county, she declared: “Old Judge Miller don’t you bid for me, ‘cause if you do, I would not live on your plantation, I will take a knife and cut my own throat from ear to ear before I would be owned by you.” Miller, either not seriously interested in purchasing her or taking heed from her warning, did not bid. Her strong words came at a price causing her to miss an opportunity for reunification with her father. Her father, present at the auction, pressured his owner to purchase Delicia. Unfortunately, “when father’s owner heard what I said to Judge Miller, he told my father he would not buy me, because I was sassy.”³ In the end, a man purchased Patterson to serve as a house slave and assistant for his wife. While these two adolescent slaves, at thirteen and fifteen, present a typical age for separation from mothers, many slave children experienced this when much younger.

At only two years old, Hannah Allen and her brother watched their mother and three other siblings sold away.⁴ Due to her young age, Hannah likely experienced a fictive kin relationship with a slave woman who assumed a maternal role in the wake of the separation. Six-year-old Dave Harper, his mother, and infant sibling all went up for sale, but not together. Auctioned off first, a Colonel Harper purchased Dave, then his mother with the baby followed as a separate sale. His mother, distraught at the separation, cried throughout her auction. Harper recalled, “She cried so hard ‘cause she

² “Madison Ross,” WPA, 299.

³ “Delicia Patterson,” WPA, 270-71.

⁴ “Hannah Allen,” WPA, 14.

wanted to live with me.” Fortunately, for Harper and his mother, a neighbor of Colonel Harper took pity on their plight and purchased her and the baby. In this way, she and Harper lived nearby one another enabling him, “to go to see her real often (WPA 163).”⁵

Many slave mothers and their children did not leave the auction block in the relatively good circumstances experienced by Harper and his mother. Often times separate sales, even at the same auction, meant complete separation with no hope of seeing one’s child again. Joe Higginson witnessed one such scene in Boonville, Missouri. He related a mother and baby went up for sale, but the purchaser did not want the baby, and so separated the two. He watched and, “de woman she ran back to kiss de baby goodbye, and de tradar picked up a whip and cracked it and shouts, ‘A bellerin cow will soon forget its calf!’ She was sold down de river and nevar saw de baby agin. Now dat was sad.”⁶

The callous attitude exhibited by the trader typified white reaction to such anguishing separations. Because separation of mothers and children did not align with the philosophy of paternalism, masters convinced themselves that slaves adjusted rapidly and easily after sold away from family. To further assuage their consciences, some owners even applied this ideology to mothers and their children⁷ But the behavior of slave mothers and children, both at the time of sale and far afterwards, does not support these flimsy rationalizations. Some slave women became so distraught at losing their families that they chose suicide over a life of separation. William Wells Brown, hired to

⁵ “Dave Harper,” WPA, 163.

⁶ “Joe Higginson,” WPA, 176.

⁷ Genovese, 455.

a slave trader who ferried Missouri slaves down the Mississippi River to markets in New Orleans, was one of several slave men set to the task of keeping watch over their human cargo. He recalled that even, “with all our care, we lost one woman who had been taken from her husband and children, and having no desire to live without them, in the agony of her soul jumped overboard, and drowned herself.”⁸

The above accounts clearly demonstrate the level of distress experienced by mothers and their children facing separation. The pain of separation did not always dissipate for slaves, Margaret Nickens reported, “My father come from Virginia and my mother from Kentucky when dey was little. Dey never seen dere parents no more. Dey watched for a long time among de colored people and asked who dey was when dey thought some body looked like dere parents, but never could find dem.” All of this happened despite their youth. “Dey was so small when dey left,” recalled Margaret, “dey didn’t even remember dere names.”⁹ Slave mothers and children felt, and continued to feel, the effects of separation from one another. For Ellaine Wright, the memory of the moment of separation from her mother remained strong ninety-three years later. Wright’s mother spoke to her before being taken away, and she remembered the words clearly: “‘Ellaine, honey mama’s gwan way off and ain’t never goin to see her baby agin.’ An I can see myself holdin onto my mama and both of us crying – and then, she was gone and I never seed her since.” The elderly woman expressed that even to that day “I hopes I goin to see my good mama some day, I do.”¹⁰

⁸ Brown, 389-90.

⁹ “Margaret Nickens,” WPA, 264.

¹⁰ “Ellaine Wright,” WPA, 378.

Some mothers endured the sale of several or even all of their children. Before Harriet Casey's birth, her mother had already lost her son and eldest daughter to sale, while Cynthia Logan never fully recovered from the sale that took her twins.¹¹

Slave mothers used a variety of strategies to resist separation from their children; the outward grief exhibited by Harper's mother and the last loving gestures exhibited by the mother on the wharf and Wright's mother are typical examples. But occasionally, slave mothers openly resisted such sales. Smoky Eulenberg remembered a neighbor's attempt to purchase him and his siblings, "I rec'lect one time missus sold my mother and four children but it wasn't no trade. De woman's name was Mrs. Sheppard and she was a bossy old woman. She come into my mother's cabin and grabbed her and told her she was going to take her home. Mother jes' pushed her out de door and said she wouldn't go – and she told missus she wouldn't go – so dey had to call it off – it was no trade."¹²

Most slave women did not fare as well as Eulenberg's mother, whose success likely hinged on her familiarity with her mistress and the potential buyer, Mrs. Sheppard. Eulenberg knew Mrs. Sheppard, probably a neighbor or acquaintance of his mistress, and described her as a "bossy" woman. His mother's boldness indicated she knew, or suspected, her mistress did not want to sell the family. Many slaves, especially those living in close quarters with whites on small-scale holdings, knew their owner's intentions concerning their fates. The other alternative, also based on the familiarity common on small-scale holdings, suggests his mother gambled on her mistress's inability to complete the sale when faced with resistance. At any rate, it appears that Eulenberg's

¹¹ "Harriet Casey," WPA, 71; "Rachel Goings," WPA, 121.

¹² "Smoky Eulenberg," WPA, 112.

mother relied on her knowledge of the mistress's intentions and disposition in order to thwart the sale.

Ellen Jackson's assertiveness also saved her children from sale. After a failed runaway attempt, Ellen and her three children found themselves confined to a "trader's pen" in Saint Louis. Her eldest daughter, Mattie, remembered how one evening a Captain Tirrell came to see the family and then "...returned, at the edge of the evening, with a covered wagon, and took my mother and brother and sister and left me." Ellen refused to leave Mattie and threatened to retaliate by crying out, thus causing a scene. Forced into the wagon after the two children, Ellen discovered a man in the bed positioned there to foil any escape attempts while the captain drove the wagon. Seizing an opportunity, she attacked him and then "leaping to the ground she made an alarm."¹³

While the men fled with the children in the wagon, her efforts did alert nearby Union policeman. Ellen informed the police of the kidnapping of her children and they accompanied her to Captain Tirrell's boat. They discovered the children on the boat and returned them to Ellen. Union troops occupied Saint Louis at this time, and Jackson reported they outlawed slave speculation and attempted to prevent the sale of slaves to regions outside the city.¹⁴ Armed with this knowledge, Ellen acted assertively to draw attention to the injustice of her situation and bring about the restoration of her children.

Sales were not the only profit producers; as noted previously, masters also hired their slaves out. This, too, separated mothers from their children. While hired out slaves did not face permanent separation as sold slaves did, hiring out could be for a long, or

¹³ Jackson, 14.

¹⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

occasionally indefinite term. Mothers expected that hired out children would eventually return, but the arrangement still exacted an emotional toll. The situation prevented seeing one another regularly or the child's gaining emotional support, and mothers found themselves helpless to assist and protect their children.

Malissa Abernathy's two hired out sons quickly found their new master's treatment intolerable. They visited their mother and told her of their decision to run away. Fearful for their safety, she did not discourage them but "begged" them to leave quickly, "'cause they'd find 'em 'shore, an' most likely kill 'em right before her eyes."¹⁵ Mary Bell's contracts caused long separations from her family. First hired out at the age of seven, she served a minister's family for a year, caring for his children. Then, hired out again for additional two years, she took care of a baker's children.¹⁶ Eight-year-old William Black's master hired him out to a person whose children needed an escort to and from school.¹⁷ After William Wells Brown's owner moved to the St. Louis area, he decided to hire Brown and his mother Elizabeth out. While away serving his new master, Brown's owner decided to sell Elizabeth and her other children. Brown recollected his "great unhappiness" upon hearing the news of the sale of his family."¹⁸

Many masters viewed the children of their slaves as their own offspring's inheritance. When a master's children grew up and moved away, they often received slaves who had been divided among them with no thought to the consequent breakup of

¹⁵ "Betty Abernathy," WPA, 6.

¹⁶ "Mary Bell," WPA, 25-26.

¹⁷ "William Black," WPA, 32.

¹⁸ Brown, 383.

black families.¹⁹ Clay Smith's mother lost three daughters due to marriages entered into by her master's daughters, each of whom received one of the slave girls.²⁰

Inheritance accounted for the separation Emma Knight expected, and that Emily Green and Margaret Nickens experienced. Even as a child, Emma Knight knew she was ultimately destined as a gift to her young mistress. She explained her master had fathered eight children and that, "Lizzie was de oldest girl and I was to belong to her when she was married."²¹ Freedom came for Knight and her mother before Lizzie married, but mother and daughter spent their time in bondage aware they faced separation. For Green and Nickens, freedom did not arrive in time to spare them the experience of separation from their mothers. "I fell to young Missie Janie," related Green, "an' wuz her maid an' when Missie Janie married Mista Bradley I went with 'em down to Cha'leston in Mississippi County."²² Nickens experienced an unexpected separation at the young age of eight. Her master's daughter, already married, arrived for a visit. She "had two children den so dey took me as a nurse for de children." She recalled the sadness she and her mother felt, but also their inability to express their emotions. "When we was fixing to leave, dere was lots of people standing 'round. My mother had to stand dere like I wasn't her's and all she could say was, 'Be a good girl, Margaret.'"²³ Ultimately, masters prioritized their own families giving them the foremost consideration. If splitting a slave family furthered a master's ability to provide or care for his own, then so be it.

¹⁹ Burke, 92.

²⁰ "Clay Smith," WPA, 318.

²¹ "Emma Knight," WPA, 218.

²² "Emily Green," WPA, 139.

²³ "Margaret Nickens," WPA, 263.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

Slave women overwhelmingly experienced the role of motherhood within their lives, along with the subsequent joys and trials that accompanied children. Motherhood defined and shaped a woman's life and her decisions and any study of slave women must therefore include a discussion of motherhood's influence on their lives. The presence of children affected every facet of a woman's life.

Mothers experienced added responsibilities and greater work due to their children. Infants required the effort of breastfeeding and demanded much of their mothers' attention. Slave women with infants and babies typically experienced a shift in responsibilities to accommodate their babies, either at the master's behest or through their own negotiations with an owner. And women experienced the added burden of motherhood regardless of the ages of their children. After tending to their assigned duties, mothers performed additional work on behalf of their families. They prepared food for their children, made them clothing, sometimes even shoes, and performed their own housekeeping tasks. The effort and time demanded by these housekeeping tasks. The effort and time demanded by housekeeping tasks such as washing dishes, laundering

and mending only increased with each child. Slave mothers devoted much of their lives to caring for their children.

The presence of children thus affected a woman's decisions and created a vulnerability to the heartache of separation. Mothers often resisted their bondage carefully, or not at all, in order to protect their children from repercussions elicited by their behavior. They rarely fled; to flee meant risking their children's health or permanent separation from them. Few mothers could bring themselves to pay the price of freedom, but while few willingly risked separation from their children, they all too often experienced this loss. Mothers and children regularly faced the pain of separation through sale, hiring out, or masters giving away slave children to family members. Equally to the point, those enslaved mothers fiercely loved their children, mourned their loss, and whenever possible, raised to adulthood. Some managed to preserve their families, but all sacrificed.

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Savitt, Todd L. *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981.

Savitt explores the intersection between white medical interests and the slaves who received these medical services. He emphasizes the observations the medical community made while treating slaves that they then manipulated into a defense of slavery based on physiologically differences between the two races.

Schwartz, Marie Jenkins. *Birth of a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Schwartz traces the evolution of the professionalization of gynecology and obstetrics as it transformed from a female dominated realm to a formalized profession practiced by white men. She explores the intersection of white doctors, owners, and slave women as they vied for control over the labor and delivery process.

Siebert, Wilbur H. *The Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1898.

Siebert wrote the first volume to thoroughly examine the Underground Railroad. It includes many firsthand accounts from both those fleeing and the many who aided them in their flight to freedom.

Stampp, Kenneth M. *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956.

Stampp meticulously exposes the injustices and abuses within slavery, arguing that slaves did not benefit from the institution; rather, they experienced hardships because of hunger, mistreatment, separation from loved ones, and many other trials.

Stowe, Steven M. *Doctoring the South: Southern Physicians and Everyday Medicine in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2003.

Stowe challenges the idea that doctors in the South and North practiced their profession in a largely similar manner. He argues that Southern factors such as slavery and climate lead to what he terms a “country orthodoxy” and doctors who practiced medicine differently than their Northern counterparts.

Trexler, Harrison Anthony. *Slavery in Missouri, 1804-1865*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1914.

Trexler presents a comprehensive study of slavery in Missouri encompassing topics ranging from slavery and the law to marriage.

White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999.

White explores how racism and sexism affected the lives of slave women creating a much different gendered experience for them when compared to other antebellum women. Slave women also had different societal expectations of them when compared to white women.

Journal Articles

Campbell, John. “Pregnancy and Infant Mortality among Southern Slaves.” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 14, no. 4 (Spring 1984): 793-812.

Campbell methodically studied the records of a Georgia planter to determine which factors impacted infant survival rates. He argues that less work, particularly in the first two trimesters of pregnancy, resulted in lower slave infant mortality rates.

Johnson, Michael P. “Smothered Slave Infants: Were Slave Mothers at Fault?” *Journal of Southern History* 47, no. 4 (November 1981): 493-520.

Johnson researched the high number of slave infants whose deaths were recorded as an accidental smothering by their mothers while asleep and argues that the infants succumbed to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

Savitt, Todd L. “Black Health on the Plantation: Owners, the Enslaved, and Physicians.” *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no. 5 (2005): 14-16.

Scott, Joan. “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” *American Historical Review* 91, no 5 (December 1986): 1053-1075.

Scott argued that gender should be a category of its own utilized by historians when examining the past. Gender, she believes, effects the lives of all men and women and how societies operate, by analyzing beliefs about gender a historian can learn many new things about the era in being studied.

Other

Fuller, Robert P., and Merrill J. Mattes. "The Early Life of George Washington Carver." Diamond, MO: George Washington Carver National Monument, November 26, 1957.

Peterson, Lori. *A Study of African-American Culture in Southwest Missouri in Relation to the George Washington Carver National Monument*. Lincoln, NE: National Park Service Midwest Archeological Center, 1995.

Toogood, Anna Coxe. *Historic Resource Study and Administrative History: George Washington Carver National Monument*. Denver, CO: National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, July 1973.