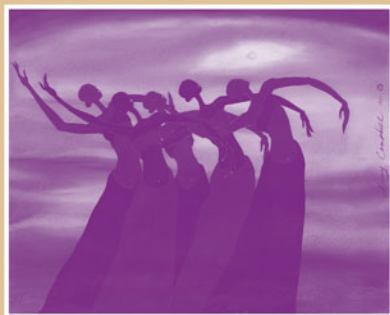


Black Religion / Womanist Thought / Social Justice



Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America

Renee K. Harrison



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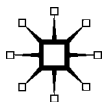
The Tragic Vision of African American Religion

By Matthew V. Johnson

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Renee K. Harrison

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Printed in the United States of America.

To mom and dad, and to the ancestors,
I pray that I have represented you well

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Bodies harvested, harvested bodies.

We remember because they were here... and survived.

—Renee K. Harrison, from “*harvested coolness*”

Preface

Ancestral Scratchings

What that song? I ast...She hum a little more. Something come to me, she say... Something you help scratch out my head.¹

—*Shug Avery & Celie, The Color Purple*

I came into this world with everything I needed because I did not come alone. God, the earth, wind, trees, waters, ancestral spirits, and those living and yet to be born were all here. These life-forces were, as Shug Avery expressed, all around me, inside me, and inside everybody else. Conceptually, as a child, I could not tell you who or where all these life-forces were, but I could feel their presence. They felt, as Sojourner Truth described, like a nation within me. I talked among them in various tongues and the warmth and guidance they provided was enough clarity for me.

People said my paternal grandmother, a former nurse in New Orleans, born with a veil or caul, often communed with these life forces.² I remember, in the final days of her 102-year life span sitting by her bedside one day watching her talk—talk, that is, to them. Her talking was not an act of listening alone, but rather an act of animated seeing—an experience. She seemed at peace with their presence while those around her thought Mommie was losing her mind. I was clear as I watched words pour from her arthritis-ridden body that she knew it was time—to join them. They were waiting for her, as they wait for me and as they wait for us all, to welcome another creation of the Divine into and out of the human joining.

For me, this was a beautiful thing, knowing and feeling that these life-forces affirmed and welcomed her life and mine. They did not chastise or reduce our blackness; they did not see our entrance into the world as a consequence of a curse or sin, but a consequence of

beauty and destiny. We were, as singer song writer Jill Scott says, *beautifully human*. And *life is*, as hip hop artist Talib Kweli says, *a beautiful struggle*.³

My mother struggled to bring me here. She was a tired 4 feet-11-inch brown-framed black woman with four children and faced with an unexpected fifth child on the way. Overwhelmed and uncertain about the future, her anxieties resulted in my traumatic early arrival. I came abruptly out of her womb, rather than naturally through it. I almost did not make it. It was in her moment of losing me that my mother wanted and fought for me. She remembered what she calls “a presence,” life-forces in the room entering her tense body calming her like cool water, telling her that “I would live.” These life-forces were there to help her. Of this she was sure. They came to reassure her and welcome me. I did not break through her water but was quickly lifted out arriving into the world one-and-a-half month early, weighing and looking like a 3 pound 5 ounce rock that a father could hold in the palm of his hand. My daddy always told me that, when I was born, I was small enough to fit in his hand, but I didn’t. I was neither placed in his hand nor in my mama’s arms. I was placed in an incubator to protect me from an abrasive outside world. So there I lay for nearly six weeks in this small, clear container; boxed in without a mother’s touch, fighting for what was already mine—life and freedom.

I grew with persistent feeling of the life-forces that my mother described. I grew communing with them and feeling guided by their wisdom. As a child and throughout my life, my father and mother always reminded me, especially on the hottest days of my life that these life-forces which moved like the coolness of the wind, flowed through me, through black peoples, through creation. No human being could stop their flow. I believed them. As I grew, I came to understand that no human being needed to be boxed in or to box themselves in. Human beings and all creation needed to be free to live fully. I thus live my life refusing to let anyone or any ideology deny me *any form* of healthy life-affirming communion or box me in *again*. All human beings, no matter who they are or how they arrive in this world, are welcomed and necessary because they are here. We come as embodied expressions of the Divine, and we are, therefore, *powerful beyond measure*.

The presence of those life-forces who whispered to my mother as I entered, communed with me as I grew, and talked with my paternal grandmother as she exited, assured me of this. It is from this womanist space that I come to this project entitled, *Enslaved Women and*

the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America. I come in honor of those life-forces who helped a tired black mother give birth, from her dogged strength, to a little black girl. I come knowing that those same life-forces lifted me out of the water from her womb as I struggled to enter into creation. I enter this work honoring those life-forces that my grandmother and my forbearers depended on and loved so well.

Looking back, I can see the ways in which this project emerged from my life's journey; it has been a part of my life's yearnings, personal experiences, and professional choices. During the research and writing stage, it became clear to me that all paths taken thus far have led to now. I realized as I moved from chapter to chapter that I was moving in the current of a deep life-force, an ancestral reservoir. I was immersing into a river that, Vincent Harding describes, persistently fills women and men with "the force of its vision, its indomitable hope. And at its best...moves consistently toward the ocean of humankind's most courageous hopes for freedom and integrity, forever seeking what black people in South Carolina said they sought in 1865: 'the right to develop our whole *being*.'"⁴

Although I am aware that there are many more paths ahead and I will continue to grow and change as a black woman, artist, poet, and scholar, I know that the ancestors summoned me to this work. They gave me this song; and, as Alice Walker's Shug Avery describes in the opening epigraph of this preface, they "helped scratch out my head." While writing, I was and continue to be humbled by their presence. I continue to be intrigued by their journey in America; it is their journey that makes me hunger for knowledge. It is from this space that I offer you, the reader, one small window into the life of *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America*. I write, as Vincent Harding has said, not from the space of "scholarly objectivity—the measure of all things" but rather from the space that honors "the children of the river" so that I might be "faithful to the truth of their experience as I see it, read it, and feel it."⁵ I pray that I have represented their vibrations well. *Áshe*.

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Finally, to love who forever changed me and called forth my gentle [*Afe na mahu senea odo esi etre fa, enam me ne woso nti*]; and, to all the women who involuntarily labored and died on North American soil never knowing the full beauty of their art.

Introduction

Ancestral Vibrations

*There is a loneliness that can be rocked... Then there is a loneliness that roams.
No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own.¹*

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

On May 8, 2008, archaeologists from the University of Maryland excavated a 17th-century clay bundle from a modern-day city street in Annapolis, Maryland. The clay bundle was buried four feet beneath the earth's surface just miles away from two National Historic Landmarks—Maryland's state capital and the waterfront. Archaeologists concluded that the “strictly African” bundle was originally placed around 1680–1720 in a gutter on Fleet Street, a canal once used to channel rainwater into the city's harbor. This bundle was no ordinary bundle. To date, this bundle is the oldest remains of indigenous African religious practices and beliefs that migrated and sustained itself in New World America.²

This excavated bundle is evidence that under the threat of New World terrorism, enslaved women, men, and children were relying on their own religio-cultural traditions and philosophic worldviews to combat anarchy. They were looking to their religious practitioners and the spirit world to help them negotiate the new realities of their lives. Such is also evident in the bundle's contents; it contained an estimated 300 pieces of metal—lead shot, iron nails, and copper pins—and a stone axe with its blade sticking out pointing toward the sky. Stone axes were important instruments in combating evil and often associated, in Yoruba and Mende traditions, with the African deities Shango, the god of thunder and lightning, and Eshu Elegba, the god of the crossroads.

During the 17th century, the bundle was strategically placed presumably by the enslaved in a canal, at the crossroads where two bodies

of water formed (College Creek and the city's harbor). Former enslaved Africans believed that water carried spirits; spirits that would rise and assist them in times of grave distress and communal and individual crisis. The bundle, its contents, and their strategic placements collectively were known to possess extraordinary powers when used by religious practitioners. These instruments were used in religious rituals to invoke the spirit realm for guidance, protection, and healing, and later, strategically placed to continue the effects.

The 17th-century clay bundle excavated by the University of Maryland is evidence that former enslaved women, men, and children turned to practices from their African past as they involuntarily tilled American soil. Yet what is important here is not merely what the bundle meant for dislocated 17th-century Africans in America, but what the excavated bundle seeks to convey to us now, in the new millennium. I see the bundle, its contents, and placement as both an agitator and igniter.

I come to this work both agitated and ignited by the spirit of history. The bundle and other similar artifacts dispel the myth of non-African retentions or non-subversive and creative methods of resistance and healing by Africans in the New World. The bundle and other troves of artifacts uncovered and yet to be unearthed, vibrate from the earth. They are forms of loneliness, as the opening epigraph suggest, that can no longer be rocked but rather roam our consciousness, challenging the human community to return and mine and listen deeper to the stories that shaped America's past and continue to have impact on America's present. They challenge us to return and mine in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience in early American history.

I seek in this work to unearth one aspect of that human experience—both the violence and beauty in African peoples' involuntary migration and tenacity for freedom in America. In doing so, I begin with some basics: the purpose of this project; how this book on violence and resistance came to be and why it is important; its objectives, methods, and scope; and an outline of chapters.

The overall purpose of this project is to join and add further insight to those scholars and activists whose labors have already broken the silence regarding violence against enslaved African women in the Diaspora, then to identify some of the creative and subversive strategies that North American enslaved women used to resist and recover from violence. These women were deeply shaped by their West African heritage; thus, they had unique ways of engaging with the world. By drawing upon the epistemologies of enslaved African women, I hope, at the end of the book

and in my companion volume, *“I’m Beautiful and I’m Here”: A Woman’s Guide to Healing and Self-Affirmation* to offer creative life-affirming strategies of resistance and well-being for modern-day women.

How This Book Came to Be and Why It Is Important

My interest in violence and strategies of resistance during the antebellum period emerged in my teens when I read slave narratives, such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl named Clotee*. I was intrigued by Douglass’ and Clotee’s worlds. The deep connectedness I felt to the rich textures of the enslaved peoples’ lives mediated by Douglass and Clotee had a profound impact on me. During this time, the presence of some of those unknown and unnamed life-forces began to take further shape for me. As a child of the 1960s raised in South Central Los Angeles, my affinity to Douglass and Clotee’s worlds connected me with an unbroken thread of interest to the struggles and survival of black peoples in America. The degradation of blackness in America often moved me to quiet sobering reflection, provoking questions around human decency, cruelty, and compassion.

Such reflection and questioning remained with me into adulthood. They emerged during moments when I met victim-survivors of violence while serving as a Los Angeles Police Officer. I spent eleven-and-a-half years watching and assisting mainly women and girls try to regain some sense of selfhood following a traumatic experience of physical or sexual assault. In some cases, I was one of the first emergency responders with whom these persons had contact. In those moments, they did not see themselves as victim-survivors; they felt violated, worthless, and hollow. They were numb. Most were stunned because someone they had trusted lured them in, violated them, and left them to pick up the stolen, broken pieces of their lives. Such deception often left them feeling duped and shamed, and within 20–45 minutes of their attack, they were faced with reliving those feelings while retelling their trauma to a stranger in uniform, like me. I was trained to take theft reports of a woman’s body, to record the spoken wounds of her soul. Using her memory to collect evidence, I had also grown accustomed to hearing what she was not saying—her silence, movements, and eyes spoke volumes. I was trained to listen although knowing that in most cases based on America’s justice system her assailant, if convicted, would serve a light sentence.

This book also emerges from my community work in various forums as a scholar and activist. Two events come to mind. During a session at a summer youth camp sponsored by The Interdenominational

Theological Center, black youth engaged in deep discussions on linguistic violence against black women. Heavy discussion ensued around rap lyrics and rap videos. The youth questioned adult's adverse feelings toward black youth's vernacular and behaviors. During our discussion of the word "*motherfucker*"—a popular word among young people—I asked why this term was dehumanizing for black women, men, children, and families. I explained how the word was often used when referencing acts of breeding during slavery. Slaveholders often forced black men of large stature to breed with several women, and sons were sometimes forced to breed with their mothers. Following this discussion, I read from slave narratives to illustrate my point of forced breeding between mothers and sons. For example, a former enslaved man noted that: "One boy was traded off from his mother when he was young, an' after he was grown, he was sold back to de same marster an' married to his own mother."³ I read from a woman's narrative in which she described in graphic detail how she was forced to breed nine children:

Most slave owners did not care who fathered the children, as long as they kept on coming. They employed studs or forced couples to mate "just like cattle" ... On the Blackshear place, slave owners took all the fine looking boys and girls that was thirteen years old or older and put them in a big barn. They used to strip them naked and put them in a big barn every Sunday and leave them there until Monday morning. Out of that came sixty babies.⁴

Following the readings, the youth and I discussed how the term *motherfucker* reinforces and invokes in the black psyche and black community dehumanizing images of breeding; it consciously or unconsciously degrades black life, especially black women and mothers. The youth and I then examined how violence is carried through our words, actions, and ignorance. Lack of information and barriers in generational dialogue among black youth and adults play a role in black peoples' internalization and perpetuation of systemic oppression and violence.

Following this dialogue, the youth identified how some of their particular behaviors and idioms such as *motherfucker* reinforce psychological, emotional, and spiritual violence within their own black communities. The youth made connections between violence in the lives of enslaved women and modern-day black women. They came to see how acts of violence, whether physical, sexual, or verbal, have long-term emotional and spiritual consequences. They began discussing innovative justice-oriented remedies to combat communal, institutional, and systemic violence.

The second incident from which this project emerges involved three guest lectureships that I gave from 2003 to 2004 at Emory University. During a discussion on violence against women during slavery and the use of the biblical texts to justify such actions, I asked graduate students to think of one word that described their own lives or feelings in relation to this project. Both female and male students from diverse ethnic and religio-cultural backgrounds made comments such as: “culpable, ignorant, privileged, curious, disenchanting, disconnected, uninformed, guilty, shame, painful, thirsty, open, unaware, running, hopeful, mystified, horrified, liberated, and empowered.” Many articulated how the project awakened issues in them that were long forgotten or suppressed.

All of the above life experiences along with my research and writing helped me to identify “awareness and transformation” as central themes to this project. I hope to evoke these themes in several distinct ways. First, I hope that, by graphically depicting the complexities of violence against black women, readers will be educated and sensitized and become committed to political and social movements that combat violence and dehumanization. Second, I hope that awareness will also inspire victim-survivors to speak and encourage religious leaders, educators, and practitioners to listen in order to respond more effectively. Third, by drawing on enslaved women’s life stories, I offer nine strategies of resistance beyond violence, in hope that these practices will be useful to practitioners and scholars as well as women faced with violence.

This book is equally important in that it contributes to the field of religion by naming and bridging three critical gaps that exist in current religious literature: violence against black women; black religious life in North America; and indigenous ritual practices of resistance in the lives of black women from slavery to present. Extensive academic articles and academic texts outside the field of religion have been written about intimate violence against black women from slavery to the present. In the field of religion, black feminist ethicist Traci C. West’s work, *Wounds of the Spirit*, remains the current leading publication that not only focuses solely on intimate violence as expressed by black women from slavery to present but also provides strategies of resistance. Other black feminists and womanist scholars of religion offer important connections between tridimensional oppression (race, class, gender) and intimate violence against black women.⁵ Even with these works, however, the definition of violence remains undifferentiated and renders some forms of violence and oppression invisible. This book expands violence analysis against black women

during slavery by examining five categories of violence in one publication: *domestic violence*; *sexual violence*; *sisterhood violence* [violence against black women by white women]; *sistah-hood violence* [violent acts between black women]; and *self violence* [internalized religio-cultural oppression/anti-Africanness].

Another gap is evident in analysis concerning black religious life in North America. North American black religious and womanist scholarship has situated itself almost primarily in Christianity.⁶ Some scholars make this case by arguing that the first wave of African arrivals in the New World retained their indigenous African religious beliefs; however, these beliefs and traditions were lost over a course of time.⁷ Other scholars' arguments identify the black religious experience as an amalgamation of Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions that led to the formation of a new reinterpreted and syncretized religious identity of Africans in America. Yet a noted flaw in this argument is that Christian apologists, although making a case for syncretism, often omit the rich textures of African-derived traditions and Islam in their analyses.⁸

Black religious and womanist scholars' failure to make connections with the rich textures of Islam or West and West Central African worldviews contributes to the suppressing of various black religious expressions in North America. It also results in them overlooking the fact that some Africans in America rejected Christianity outright. More fluid analysis within and beyond the boundaries of syncretism and reinterpretation of the slaveholder's religion needs to be continuously explored. Equally important is the need for more extensive engagement of interdisciplinary methods and interfaith discourse when writing about the black religious experience in North America.⁹ For this reason I seek in this work to join other scholars in unearthing other viable possibilities and truths. I also deliberately engage interdisciplinary methodologies and interfaith discourse to examine the fluid and complex dynamics of enslaved women's lives. Such is important when mining for strategies of resistance that were employed by enslaved women to combat violence and oppression.

Finally, North American black feminist and womanist scholars in the field of religion have not yet provided a nuanced perspective of black women's ritualized practices of resistance, self-affirmation, and freedom. Traci C. West makes this point clear when she challenges us to construct "liturgical theology" (what I term as rituals of resistance and well-being) relevant for women faced with the realities of heteropatriarchy, violence, and multidimensional oppression.¹⁰ Barbara Holmes' work, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices in the Black Church*, offers us a

starting point in her examination of contemplative spiritual practices in the lives of Africans in America from slavery to present. I suggest that a more nuanced perspective of liturgical theology that includes religious and cultural practices within the African/African American tradition and also within and outside the Christian tradition that promotes affirmation of life is needed; such perspective is particularly germane to my work on indigenous ritual practices of resistance and healing.

Objective, Method, and Scope of Book

My twofold objective is: to identify the spectrum of violence and oppression experienced by enslaved women and to examine the multiplicity of indigenous practices employed by these women to resist violence, seek freedom, and recreate themselves.

I give particular attention to the ways in which African women and girls were lured into slavery. Although religious scholars have given considerable attention to the forced capture of African peoples, little is said about the role of seduction. In this work, I focus on “seduction” as a precursor to violence in the enslavement of African women and girls. The emphasis on seduction, trickery, and tricksters emerges from the voices of African peoples, in dialogue with my phenomenological reading of the slave narratives and the realities of seduction and violence in the lives of modern-day women. My emphasis on trickery, seduction, and violence also informs the ways in which I examine religio-cultural oppression (anti-Africanness), the Euro-American Christian missionary enterprise, and slave conversions in the New World.

My particular engagement with slave narratives does not negate other ways of interpreting North American slave narratives. I simply seek to represent one perspective of African voices and invite those voices to shed light on the current situation. What guides my reading of the narratives are the narratives themselves and the state of crisis in which black peoples in North America find themselves. This crisis is grounded in identity, self-acceptance and deception, communal violence, societal injustices, and religious absolutism. Such phenomenological reading is critical until the crisis is over.

My phenomenological approach to the study of aesthetic forms, black culture, and black religion in this book is influenced by Zora Neale Hurston and Charles Long.¹¹ Drawing from Hurston and Long, I have outlined a four part-method which includes the following categories: thick description; bracketing or suspending; interpretation; and construction (practices).

I have collected data from many sources. My intent is to examine and provide “thick description” of black women’s experiences in North

America in order to uncover the dense complex dimensions of those experiences.¹² I present a myriad of narratives of enslaved women in a variety of violent contexts and then narratives that reveal diverse strategies of resistance. My intent is to provide enslaved women's own interpretations of what happened to them in order to allow their stories to speak collectively. Bracketing or suspending is a form of analysis used also by Hurston and Long to assert the primacy of black peoples' voices. By bracketing and suspending, I seek to understand enslaved and free African women's purview (the world in which they lived and the world they constructed). I seek to understand what they mean and what themes arise from their narratives. Knowing that I could never fully suspend my presuppositions, I nonetheless seek in the process of bracketing and suspending to invite the integrity of their voices and experiences and thereby to discover the opaqueness and ambiguity of their lives. Their lives were neither linear nor one-dimensional, but ambiguous and contradictory at times. In this opaqueness, ambiguity, and contradiction, most women were forging ahead searching ways to renegotiate their lives, which were permeated with violence and oppression.

I also see my task as interpreting what enslaved women reveal about their experiences in North America. In light of my description and analysis of violence and strategies of resistance, I see my task as interpreting the varying stories, aesthetic forms, and recurring themes in order to offer theoretical constructs and constructive practices. The analysis that enslaved women provide us with suggests that they were seeking to understand their embodied existence in the midst of the antebellum maelstrom. Both Hurston and Long would agree that enslaved and free African women drew from aesthetic forms to help them interpret and make meaning of the dense realities of their lives. Given my thematic findings, I construct nine strategies or practices of resistance in this work. I identify these various strategies as strategies rooted in aesthetic imagination. These strategies are constructed from the enslaved women themselves, in dialogue with the creative and subversive traditions and principles within their African past.

Although this work largely draws from methodological approaches set forth by Hurston and Long, it is also informed by the methods and theories of U.S. third world feminist and womanist scholars. Such interdisciplinary work helps me analyze and interpret African aesthetics, spirituality, and strategies of resistance as seen in enslaved and free African women's lives. Most intriguing, however, is that U.S. third world feminist and womanist scholars offer me a certain kind of freedom to examine these rich aesthetic and spiritual textures of enslaved

women's lives, and to construct rituals or proposals for practice. I draw from U.S. third world feminists' and womanists' theories, sources, and strategies of resistance because they are fresh and practical counter-hegemonic tools and resources. They are also: pragmatic and not abstract; fluid and not static; theoretical and creative; interdisciplinary and life-affirming; and radical and unapologetic.¹³ Many of these scholars and activists have not limited their theoretical assumptions and applications to Western society's hegemonic definitions of truth, but rather have been critical of those theoretical methods. These scholars and activists also rely on sources and epistemologies within their own traditions and experiences. Most draw from the rich reservoir of enslaved and working-class women's ways of knowing as primary sources to inform their theorizing. These scholars' and activists' theorizing helps me to conceptualize how enslaved and free African women found ingenious indigenous ways to move from chaos to creativity and thereby combat violence, subvert enslavement, and break free.

Although the topic of this book is broad and inclusive, the scope is limited, focusing on particular experiences of violence against enslaved black women from the mid-seventeenth to late nineteenth centuries. To this end, I reviewed a combination of over one thousand slave narrative accounts; slave holders' journals; missionary records; abolitionist, proslavery, and court documents; and newspaper articles, advertisements, and pamphlets.¹⁴ I do not suggest that all African women during the antebellum period were victims of violence or that all whites were perpetrators of violence. What is common among the particular acts of violence against black women, however, is exploitation and racism. During the antebellum period, when one black woman was raped or beaten, her experience became an invitation to dehumanization and death for all black peoples throughout the American Union.

This book focuses primarily on violence experienced by enslaved African women, with minimal references to enslaved girls, free African women, and the enslaved community in general. It seeks to expand analysis of violence in the lives of enslaved women by examining various forms of violence. It is important to note, however, that enslaved and free African men and boys were also susceptible to antebellum racism and intimate violence.

Moreover, limited analysis of violence against enslaved African women at the hands of black men is mentioned in this project. This is because the antebellum documents examined for this project identified primarily white slaveholding men and women as perpetrators of violence. Enslaved African men, under the directive of white male

slaveholders, engaged in violent acts against enslaved African women as breeders and slave drivers.

Finally, of important note is the use of terms. In this work, the terms “black,” “Negro” and “African” are used interchangeably.

Outline of Chapters

This project is divided into three parts and eight chapters: Part 1: Precolonial West Africa: Context and Perceptions; Part 2: Historical Grotesque Realities; and Part 3: Yearning for the Beautiful.

Part 1: Precolonial West Africa: Context and Perceptions

Chapter One: “Dey Fooled Dem to Come”: Seduction and Trickery in the African Slave Trade

This chapter focuses on European arrival in West and West Central Africa, the European’s greed and quest for power, and African peoples’ participation in the trade. Attention is given to the various methods used by the European to procure slave labor. The European’s propensity to employ seductive methods resulted in African peoples describing him as the *Trickster*.

The central focus of this chapter is the sugarplum narrative wherein a little girl is seduced into enslavement. This narrative identifies how seduction is often the precursor to violence against women. Although the sugarplum narrative serves as the metaphor of seduction for this project, the narrative is not an isolated incident. Historians Michael A. Gomez and Anne C. Bailey have catalogued a number of seduction capture accounts. Moreover, in my review of slave narratives for this project, I uncovered numerous seduction capture accounts.¹⁵ Given this, it is safe to say that seduction played a pivotal role in the capture of Africans for enslavement.

Chapter Two: “Before the Arrival of the Good Ship Jesus”: African Women in Precolonial West Africa

This chapter offers readers a perspective on the lives of precolonial West and West Central African women prior to European arrival and subsequent slave trade. Particular attention is given to colonial historiography’s claim that African peoples were without history or religions prior to European influence. This chapter argues otherwise by offering readers a window into precolonial West African peoples’ lives, especially African women.

Part 2: Historical Grotesque Realities

Chapter Three: “Trouble Done Bore Me Down!”: Intimate Violence against Enslaved Women

This chapter sets the context of enslaved women’s subjugation and experiences of violence. I argue that during the mid-seventeenth to late nineteenth centuries, North America was the site of lawful domestic terrorism against black peoples and especially against enslaved women and girls.¹⁶ The European, motivated by greed or supposed divine commission, engaged in unimaginable terrorist acts for New World advancement, marking this time period as a pivotal violent moment in North American history. This chapter focuses specifically on domestic violence against enslaved women by white men.

Chapter Four: “Dat Man Grabbed Me an’ Strip Me Naked”: Enslaved Women and Sexual Violence

This chapter examines sexual violence experienced by enslaved women. Particular attention is given to vaginal incarceration and sexual reproduction. Both vaginal incarceration and sexual reproduction were methods used to imprison, populate, and regulate black existence. Black women were objectified as vaginas and their bodies were invaded for pleasure and play and to enforce and increase the labor force.

Chapter Five: “In the Company of My Sisters”: Violence among Women in the American Colonies

This chapter continues the exploration of violence in the lives of enslaved women by focusing specifically on *sisterhood violence*—violence against enslaved women at the hands of white women—and *sistah-hood violence*—violence between enslaved women. I identify four kinds of sistah-hood violence: (1) Jealousy, resentment, and Unhealthy competition; (2) gossip; (3) mistrust and betrayal; and (4) emotional abandonment and learned silence. I contend that although enslaved women’s sense of self was intimately connected to the master and mistress, and their agency was limited or confined to the institution of slavery, some enslaved women made choices that benefited themselves and harmed other black women.

Chapter Six: “Fix Me Jesus”: Enslaved Women and Self-Violence

This chapter explores a fourth dimension (religio-cultural) of black women’s tridimensional oppression (race, class, and gender). I identify *self-violence* as a form of internalized religio-cultural oppression and argue that as a result of African peoples’ violent disruption from Africa and the

anti-African puritan mood of the Euro-American missionary movement and the American Union, some Africans in America internalized the anti-African ideologies of their oppressors and thus compromised their souls and violated their own personhood. I identify those slave narratives in which enslaved African women negated their Africanness—indigenous religions, cultural traditions, legacies, and worldviews.

Part 3: Yearning for the Beautiful

Chapter Seven: “However far the stream flows it never forgets its source”: Five Strategies of Subversion and Freedom

This chapter draws on precolonial West and West Central African religious practices, cultural traditions, and philosophic worldviews, as initially presented in chapter two. It identifies five strategies or practices of resistance that were employed by enslaved and free women in North America. By linking practices in chapter two to practices in chapters seven and eight, this chapter and the following argue for African retentions in the New World. Both chapters also make a case for the richness of indigenous African practices and aesthetic forms to help combat violence.

Chapter Eight: “The Current Continues”: Four More Strategies of Subversion and Freedom

This chapter serves as a continuation of chapter seven. It identifies four more strategies or practices of resistance that were employed by enslaved and free African women in North America. The nine collective strategies are then explicated as strategies for the empowerment of modern-day women faced with violence and oppression.

A Final Note to the Reader

As you turn this page, I strongly urge you to read chapters three, four, five, and six with self-care and reflection. Though difficult in parts, I concur with literary writer Ahmadou Kourouma’s words that, “Truth must be told, however harsh it may be, it may redden your eyes, but it won’t blind you.”¹⁷ Enjoy the read, and thank you for embarking on this journey. It is my hope that this work in all of its hopes and shortcomings will join and generate critical and fruitful conversations vibrating within the human community.

Precolonial West Africa: Context and Perspectives

...Dey stole her...

—enslaved woman

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“Dey Fooled Dem to Come”: Seduction and Trickery in the African Slave Trade

I was playing by the sea-coast, when a white man offered me sugar-plums, and told me to go with him. I went with him, first into a boat, and then to a ship. Every thing seemed strange to me, and I asked him to let me go back, but he would not hear me; and when I went to look for the place where he found me, I could see nothing of land, and I began to cry. There I was for a long time, with a great many more of my own colour; 'till the ship came to...¹

—*The Sugarplum Narrative as told by an enslaved woman*

SUGARPLUMS are SEDUCTIVE.² The mere taking of candy from a stranger changed an African woman’s life forever. It lured her into a new world—a *new normal*—beyond her wildest imagination. Once she boarded the slave ship the promise of sugarplums no longer represented a friendly gesture but shock and fear. Sugarplums came to embody whips and guns, slave dungeons and slave ships, crying girls and shivering women. Sugarplums meant white men coming... white men peering... white men taking... SUGARPLUMS became VIOLENCE.

The seductive power of sugarplums and other enticements led to the enslavement of African peoples. Such were the barbaric realities of seduction, which also led to sexual and nonsexual violence and exploitation of African peoples throughout the world. Much has been written by scholars about the forced capture and transplantation of human cargo across the Atlantic to the New World of North America. This chapter identifies the role that seduction and trickery played in the enslavement of African peoples, especially women and

girls. Why is this important? Because the sugarplum narrative and other seduction-plot narratives provide us with a snapshot of African women's and girls' experiences and soul-struggles over their abduction from the hinterlands and coastal areas of West and West Central Africa.

Yet with seduction there is always the seducer, the seduction plot, and the one who is seduced. Certainly we will learn here of the women's experiences; however, the story is incomplete without also paying attention to the European and the deceptive methods used to procure slaves for European gain. Identifying and analyzing seduction as a form of deception and violence provides insight into the slave trade itself and wisdom for those victimized. Historian Michael A. Gomez argues that the seducing or tricking of African peoples was the "most important aspect of the trade to understand and the most consequential lesson to learn about dealing with white folk."³ Seduction-plot accounts such as the sugarplum narrative, the red cloth tales, the Incident at Atorkor, and other similar accounts were so important that they remained with the African and African-American oral and documented communities for generations to come.⁴ Gomez argues that the red cloth tales reveal the deceptive tactics used by Europeans to entice African peoples into slavery by trading much sought after red cloths and other textiles. Once on board the ship where the trading was to occur, Europeans overwhelmed the Africans with guns.

The Incident at Atorkor is similar to the red cloth narratives. According to historian Anne C. Bailey, the Incident originated among the Ewe people of the Volta region (present-day Ghana) and connects capture accounts on the African continent to deceptive accounts throughout the Diaspora.⁵ The Incident involved the kidnapping of famous African drummers related to Chief Ndorkutsu, the local chief who traded both African peoples and goods with Europeans. The drummers were playing their drums along the shoreline when European traders offered liquor to them and others who gathered. Everyone was invited to a party on board the Europeans' ship. Once on board, the Africans were seized. The Incident caused great alarm among tribal leaders. Since the chief had established trade relations with Europeans, the surprise taking of his grandson and grandfather meant that anyone was vulnerable to seduction and violence.

Bailey argues that such seduction-plot narratives, told through imagery and metaphor represent "*an independent mode of historical representation*: a unique understanding and conception of

history and the process of history making consistent with important aspects” of West and West Central African oral tradition and culture.⁶ Such narratives show that African peoples appropriated their own understanding of “history-making” by creating and retelling their life stories from their perspective. African peoples had world-views and versions of the European-African slave trade, which confirmed, denied, or provided an alternative perspective on the trade, and practice of slavery in North America. This counter-hegemonic approach to history and history-making suggests that a collective African epistemology was operating among those victimized. This counter-hegemonic strategy validated African peoples’ experiences of slavery and offered wisdom to future generations of oppressed daughters and sons.

Given this, equally important is the wisdom that seduction-plot narratives seek to reveal. West and West Central African oral tradition is embedded with teachings of grave spiritual, moral, or political meanings. Such teachings not only seek to provide a historical memory of what actually happened from the perspective of the oppressed, but also encourage readers or listeners to learn from and teach future generations the life’s lessons embedded in these events. As cautionary tales, seduction-plot narratives warned African peoples of their vulnerability to the slave trader’s deceptive tactics. If caught unaware, they were all in danger of being enslaved, exploited, and violated sexually and otherwise. The sugarplum narrative and other similar accounts epitomized seduction-plot narratives in which the perpetrator—the white man—was described as the “ultimate trickster” figure who lured his prey into enslavement.⁷

The European slave trader emerged as trickster in the same manner that trickster figures appear in West African folklore. He entered Africa and made “an offer of false friendship” to African peoples in order to gain their trust. He then entered into a contractual trade agreement with African peoples and later violated the friendship and contract using trickery by offering sugarplums, red cloths, and other enticements. Yet, the trickster, in many cases, did not act alone; his trickery was consummated by the assistance of other Africans. Caught off guard, Africans were captured against their will. The trickster’s craft was consummated once the trickster achieved his intended aim or reward and escaped punishment.⁸ This understanding suggests that the slave trader did not operate in good faith but rather employed premeditated deception and malice as a strategy of violation and dominance. He came, lured, and stole.

The sugarplum narrative reminds us that the African girl was “playing by the sea coast,” experiencing a sense of autonomy, security, and freedom before the white man came. Accepting candy, fruit, and gifts from a stranger that she saw only occasionally was apparently something she perceived as hospitable rather than potentially harmful. It was hospitality that was feigned and malicious that was unfamiliar to her. As soon as she trusted him, accepted the sugarplums, and boarded his ship her life was drastically altered. Although she pleaded to go home, he ignored her, transforming her world of play, security, and freedom into one of suffering, bondage, and suppressed agency. Once aware of his intentions, she decided to act on her own behalf—however, it was too late. Her homeland slipped out of reach over the horizon.

So narratives of sugarplums and red cloths that are passed along warn future generations about the cost of blindness and material enticements and the price of not naming and owning what one sees. African peoples’ ignorance became the seducer’s bliss. Latent within these cautionary-deception accounts is the wisdom of subversion; to see, name, and heed these warnings, in African epistemology, is to know, and to know is to critically act. Such an epistemology of caution provides another point of departure to investigate the European’s premeditated systematic methods of seduction and trickery in procuring African peoples for slave labor and New World advancement.⁹ Although every act of seduction has an intended aim in mind, all seduction does not lead to attack. The seduction plan of the trickster, however, led ultimately to attack and enslavement.

The Trickster’s Plan

What began as a mutual trade for skins and oil, gold, ivory, pepper, and other natural resources over time became dominated by a trade for human beings for the purpose of slave labor in Europe, the West Indies, and the Americas. By the sixteenth century, European countries developed an organized system of slave trading. The “Triangle Trade,” between Europe, Africa, and the Americas evolved into a booming business for the European. Many Europeans benefited from the trade, from “towns and shipbuilders and merchants and businesses in Europe, to planters and miners in America, to textile manufactures everywhere.”¹⁰

With the influx of trade and the push for capital gain, questions arose over who would dominate the trade in various West African regions. Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Denmark,

Brandenburg, and England all wanted their hand at the money-making wheel. Given this rivalry and competition, each country understood the need to devise plans to procure slave labor. Components of these plans included: a plan of engagement; a plan for securing a position of location and advantage; and a plan of attack and enslavement.

A plan of engagement was crucial, a plan that included methods of capturing African peoples. European traders sought to perfect trade operations, by securing a position and location of advantage first over their European and Scandinavian rivals and subsequently over African peoples. Position meant garnering financial, military, political, and religious support from their respective countries. Location meant establishing forts, slave castles, and places of commerce on the African continent to leverage and protect European interests. Once a plan of engagement and a position and location were secured on the African and European continents, Europeans could carry out their plan of attack using violent means to secure slave labor and land for the purpose of European advancement and world dominance. Violence in all shapes and forms was the critical component of their plan of attack in order to maintain control. The reign of terror over African peoples began with seduction and betrayal, which contributed to their journey to the slave dungeons and subsequent Middle Passage. Upon arriving on North American soil, African peoples seduced by sugar-plums, red cloths, liquor, and other enticements experienced a kind of domestic terrorism previously unknown to any world slavocracy.

Though African peoples were involved in the trade that turned into terror, Gomez argues they were unaware of the European's hidden agenda. An agenda that "he never fully revealed, having presented himself as a friend, as an associate in commerce... The European was not at all what he presented himself to be."¹¹ Once the European set his plan in motion, there were African peoples who believed him to be a trickster who arrived with a plan and "stole" African peoples for his gain. His plan of engagement, his plan for securing a position and place of advantage over his prey, and his plan of attack of a reign of terror were the three tactics that drove his seduction-plot success.

Plan of Engagement

At different intervals during the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries, European ships descended on the Gold Coast, Bight of Biafra, Senegambia, Sierra Leone, Bight of Benin, West Central Africa, and Mozambique-Madagascar.¹² Numerous ships anchored along the coast awaiting African slaves. James Pope-Hennessy describes the scene for

us: “At, Bonny [*Bight of Biafra*], for example, the slave ships—often as many as fifteen in number, chiefly British and French—would lie a mile below the town, in seven or eight fathom of river water... At other times the slave ships would lie off the glittering coast of Benin or Biafra for months together, waiting for their full complement of Negroes or, as it was generally called, ‘waiting to be slaved.’”¹³

Although some Europeans waited in ships for their new crop of slaves, others went ashore, ostensibly to trade. In the early stages of trade, it appeared that Europeans knew what they wanted. They just had no plan of engagement. At one point, it looked like an all-out-economic frenzy as captains and seamen appeared almost overwhelmed by the prospects. Captain Antam Goncalvez, for example, returned to Portugal with ten Africans as a gift to Prince Henry. Goncalvez was excited about what he *discovered* on his expedition and looked upon the Africans with *fear* and *awe*. Another noted captain, excited about the possibilities, arrived on the African shoreline telling his men “all of you run as fast as you can... if we can’t take the young men prisoner, let’s go for the old men, the women and the small children. Be sure that anyone who tries to defend himself is killed without mercy.”¹⁴

For the most part, Europeans understood that a successful plan of attack meant devising a comprehensive plan of engagement. Their plan of engagement was essential not only for initial contact with Africans but also for the eventual distribution of enslaved African peoples throughout the Diaspora. The taking of African peoples was not an arbitrary act. In most cases, traders selected African peoples from regions based upon their skill level and how these skills could be best utilized on North America slave owning properties. Strategically placing particular African ethnic groups not only helped to ensure planters’ productivity, but also planters’ safety. Planters also preferred some West African ethnic groups over others depending on their propensity to abscond or revolt.

The European’s plan of engagement to capture and enslave African peoples included: strategic trade negotiations between themselves and Africans; widespread kidnappings; small-scale raids; obtaining Africans as war booty, criminals, and outcasts; befriending African kings to build slave forts along the coast; and enticing African peoples with liquor, tobacco, Bibles, textiles, and food. Enticement—seduction or trickery—was central to the slave trade.

Their acts of enticement were not whimsical but premeditated. Europeans tricked African peoples in order to enslave them. The tricking-seduction process included, first and foremost, preying on

someone that the European perceived to be weaker, naïve, uninformed, or inferior—in this case African women and girls. They perpetuated this classification of African women and girls as weaker by referring to them as primitive, uninformed, gullible, and promiscuous—presumably in contrast to the refined and genteel Victorian lady.

Europeans also took advantage of African women's innate generosity and hospitality, which made them gullible and open to strangers. As one slaver noted, it was African women's "courtesy to strangers" that "made them an easy prey...for the slave-traders, and subsequently for the Colonial Powers."¹⁵ Europeans enticed African peoples in order to lower their guard and overpower them—such as by seducing a girl with sugarplums and then victimizing her. However, enticement with sugarplums, red cloths, and liquor were not the only means of engagement. One former enslaved woman recalls the various "gew-gaws" used to lure her grandmother and fifteen to twenty-five other Africans. She says:

My grandmother was captures in Africa. Traders come dere in a big boat and dey had all sorts of purty gew-gaws—red handkerchiefs, dress goods, beads, bells, and trinkets in bright colors. Dey would pull up at de shore and entice de colored folks onto de boat to see de purty things. Befo' de darkies realized it dey would out from the shore. Dat's de way she was captured.¹⁶

In another staged attraction, a former enslaved man recalls the story of his grandparents:

I hear dem tell dat my grandparents come from Africa. Dey fooled dem to come or I calls it foolin dem. De peoples go to Africa en when de go to dock, dey blow whistle en de peoples come from all over de country to see what it was. Dey fool dem on de vessel en give dem something to eat. Shut dem up en don' let dem get out. Some of dem jump over board en try to get home, but dey couldn' swim en go down. Lot of dem still lost down dere in de sea or I reckon dey still down dere cause dey ain' got back yet.¹⁷

In these narratives, the European appears as the trickster who "tricked" African peoples onto slave boats or ships. French historian Rene Girard describes the trickster character as an incarnation of sacred violence who involves him or herself in some kind of collective (communal) violence to achieve an end.¹⁸ The trickster can either serve as a villain who engages in maleficent violence (harmful, destructive)

or a cultural hero who engages beneficent violence (regenerative, retributive) by using talismans, charms, rituals, potions, and so forth to mediate with deities for protection from enemies, and healing and restoration of communities. In West African folklore, the trickster is seen as cultural hero or a villain. In Akan tradition for example, the trickster *Anansi* is described as

endlessly preoccupied with outwitting the creatures of the field and forest, men, and even deities. He is an adversary in endless contest with his community. Sometimes seen sympathetically, even wise, he is more generally characterized as cunning, predatory, greedy, and gluttonous, and without scruples...he is responsible for all men having hoes, for the fact that men have debts, for the fact that greed is found everywhere, for the origin of the human tongue.¹⁹

Similar to *Anansi*, the trickster *Ijapa* in Yoruba tradition is described as

shrewd (sometimes even wise), conniving, greedy, indolent, unreliable, ambitious, exhibitionistic, unpredictable, aggressive, generally preposterous, and sometimes stupid. Though he has a bad character, his tricks, if ingenious enough, can excite admiration. Though he may be the victor in a contest of wits, his success does not teach that bad behavior is justifiable. He exists as a projection of evil forces and bad behavior against which mankind must contend, sometimes winning, sometimes losing.²⁰

As the slave trade progressed and more and more African peoples were tricked into enslavement, West African peoples identified the white man as someone who could not be trusted and from whose lust for advancement no one was immune. Even strong, industrious, and intelligent African women were vulnerable to seduction and violence.

Although the trading of African peoples would not have happened without the aid of Africans, it was the European who possessed the hunger and *modus operandi*. As Anne Bailey, Michael Gomez, and other scholars have argued, the European had the material (ships, ports, firearms, etc.), the financial means, and the deceptive tactics to procure African peoples for slave labor in Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas. The European also had the support of the royal court, businessmen, and the Pope. Two Papal bills were enacted sanctioning slavery and giving him exclusive rights in Africa. The European-African slave trade increased European wealth and thereby, European

positioning in the world. His position of power and access transformed him on the coast from a merchant trader and ultimately into a cunning trickster.

Securing a Position and Place of Advantage

Devising a plan of engagement also meant securing a position and place of advantage over his prey and competitors. Such plan was necessary to carry out his plan of attack. The occupation and colonization of West and West Central Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas was a systematized plan on the part of the European to gain world prominence. Once Europeans had strategically positioned themselves there they could overthrow civilizations, peoples, and lands.

As Bailey notes, given the high demand for slaves, Europeans devised a more sophisticated and systematic means of organizing and setting up the trade in England and the Americas. The Royal African Company was established to fuel and invest European capital. Europeans also procured agents (investors), ship captains, surgeons, and crew members. The British were instrumental in perfecting the slave ship design and slaving instruments and methods and in gaining political and financial support.²¹

To secure their position on the coast, Europeans formed alliances with African royalty, chiefs, and middlemen, alliances that Bailey argues Europeans established literally through “buying obedience” from chiefs and villages to reduce village raids and kidnappings by outside ethnic groups or competing European countries. This method gave “traders the right to pursue their efforts without interference.”²²

Slave castles were also erected. Europeans seduced kings with gifts, who granted them permission before they overtook the lands to build forts along the coast. In the initial building stages African kings, chiefs, and middlemen were invited to the castles and given swatches of cloth, cotton, silk handkerchiefs, brandy, and beer. Once operations commenced, they were granted limited access. These castles and forts were designed: to protect traders from opposing European or African forces and from the natural elements of heat, rain, wind, and so forth; to secure newly purchased slaves in slave pens or prisons until transplanted to Europe or the Americas; to perform surgical examinations, inspections, and branding of slaves; to segregate male slaves from female slaves; and to prevent slaves from running away or leaping overboard. The Portuguese were the first to control the

coastal trade and build slave castles and trading depots. Elmina on the Gold Coast was the first major slave fort built to maintain control over coastal trade, and subsequently over African peoples and their lands.

Once Europeans engaged and secured their positions and locations on the coast and throughout the Diaspora, they attacked. The trickster understood that in order to maintain power and control over African peoples and their lands his attack must inflict long-term mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual damage. Once seduced into slavery, the measure of violence inflicted upon African peoples marked the beginning of the Europeans' reign of terror. The arsenal of violence used to exert power and control shifted the seductive frenzy of the trade into a callous and calculating one. Precolonial West and West Central African women unexpectedly found themselves in the belly of the trickster.

THE ATTACK: The Reign of Terror

Europeans understood that for their strategy of engagement, seduction was essential because it lowered African peoples' defenses making it easier for Europeans to gain power and control over them. Once trapped, the European used fear, force, and intimidation to keep African peoples in a perpetual state of victimization. Once the European had devised a plan of engagement and secured a position and place of advantage, he attacked in order to maintain power and control. Violence became a means of control and asserting authority.

The sugarplum narrative tells us that the reign of terror for the little girl playing by the sea began at the moment of her capture. Other similar accounts reveal that terrorism of African women, men, and children continued in slave dungeons and aboard slave ships with Europeans using psychological and physical means to sever African peoples' spirits, enslave their minds, and generally control them. Inside the dungeons, the women, men, and children were stripped naked and inspected like cattle. The ship's surgeon subjected them to humiliating medical inspections to judge their age, strength, state of their teeth and genitals, and to check whether they were suffering from venereal or other diseases.²³ Healthy African peoples were separated from unhealthy persons. "Slaves were 'thrown out' for being more than thirty-five years of age, for being maimed in arms, legs, hands, or feet, for having lost teeth, for having grey hair or cataract[s]."²⁴

African women, men, and children were branded with “burning irons” that had the names or insignia of various European families or companies embossed on them. Branding was considered essential to avoid confusion of ownership between Dutch, English, Danish, French, and Portuguese slaves, and to prevent traders from “craftily substituting bad slaves for good ones.”²⁵ Prominent slave trader Willem Bosman, after receiving complaints about the deep burns slaves received under his care, wrote, “we will take all possible care that they are not burned too hard, especially the women, who are more tender than the men.”²⁶ After branding, the enslaved were taken to slave pens within the dungeons and given bread and water.

Once the dungeons accumulated a sufficient number, the enslaved were transported to ships anchored along the coast. They were taken to the hold of the ship and shackled and stacked close together. Aboard slave vessels, many were stripped of their names and given Biblical names, their owner’s names, or some demeaning non-names. Women and girls were often left unchained and separated from the men. They walked freely on the top deck—allowing white seamen and slavers free sexual access to them. Indeed the rape and exploitation of African women by European men began aboard slave ships, long before women reached North American shores. Such practices were commonplace aboard many slave vessels. Slave trader John Newton in his journal describes the treatment of women and girls aboard his ship:

When women and girls are taken on board a ship, naked, trembling, terrified, perhaps almost exhausted with cold, fatigue, and hunger, they are often exposed with the wanton rudeness of white savages. The poor creatures cannot understand the language they hear, but the looks and manner of the speakers are sufficiently intelligible. In imagination, the prey is divided, upon the spot, and only reserved till opportunity offers.²⁷

Once at sea, countless Africans jumped overboard or revolted. Those caught were subjected to all types of terror. In his report, one ship doctor describes the 1721 mutiny aboard the English slave ship *Robert*: “The Reader may be curious to know their mutinous punishment . . . Captain Harding . . . sentenced [slaves] to cruel Deaths; making them first eat the Heart and Liver of one of the killed [whites] . . . The woman he hoisted up by the Thumbs, whipp’d and slashed her with Knives, before the other Slaves till she died.”²⁸

At sea, Europeans feared losing power and control primarily because Africans outnumbered them and so inflicted ruthless pain upon a few to terrorize the rest. In his journal of the 1693–1694 voyage of the *Hannibal*, ship's captain Thomas Phillips writes: "When [my] officers urged [me] to follow the example of many slaving captains and 'cut off the legs and arms of the most willful' of the slaves 'to terrify the rest' [I] refused to entertain the least thought of it, much less put in practice such barbarity and cruelty to poor creatures."²⁹

Enslaved Africans soon understood that once the ship headed into the unknown, home was lost in the horizon. The smell of sugarplums, the delight of red cloths, and the sounds of drums were now replaced with the stench of feces, the sight of blood, and the howls of anguish. Thomas Trotter, a ship's surgeon testifying before the Select Committee of the House of Commons between 1789 and 1791, describes the scene:

The slaves in the night were often heard making a howling melancholy kind of noise, sometimes expressive of extreme anguish. I repeatedly ordered the woman, who had been my interpreter in the latter part of the voyage, to enquire into the particular causes of this very melancholy sort of noise. The answer came back that it was because the slaves had been dreaming that they were back in their own country again, amongst their families and friends; when they woke up to find themselves in the reality on a slave ship they began to bay and shriek.³⁰

European journals describe the sounds of women's anguish as being unbearable and beyond recognition. Their sounds were evidence that the plan of attack and subsequent reign of terror were "successful." In fact, the plan was so successful that by the nineteenth century England had become the dominant force, not only in the trade of human beings, but also in colonizing Africa and gaining power and control in the New World of North America.

Between the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, the "Scramble for Africa" ensued and subsequently the Treaty of Berlin was signed granting European nations—Britain, France, and Germany—occupation of the African continent. The British gained power and control of the Gold Coast, Igboland, and other regions throughout West and West Central Africa. African societies were experiencing a new world reality beyond its wildest imagination. Various African regions and its people were now under British and French colonial rule. Africa's children were now enslaved and headed to or already

laboring on plantations throughout Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas. Africa's children were gone, and so were cultural artifacts and traditions such as the Asante Golden Stool, the Igbo Staff, the Yoruba Divination Board, and Nigeria's Benin Bronzes. Africa was left ransacked by Europe. By 1900, almost 90 percent of Africa was under British, French, German, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian control.

Historians David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein note that between 1514 and 1866, an estimated 35,000 documented trans-Atlantic slave ship voyages made their way to Africa and exported and enslaved an estimated 11.9 million African peoples.³¹ An estimated 9.6–10.8 million (excluding those who jumped overboard) were imported into the Americas, and an estimated 490,930–481,000 (approximately half a million) were transplanted to North American plantations.³² Eltis notes that “by 1700 to 1760, Britain, France, and the Netherlands were carrying nearly twice as many people across the Atlantic as were the Iberians, with the British alone carrying nearly half of everyone shipped.”³³ When the trade was abolished in the mid-nineteenth century, an unknown number of European ships were still making their way across the Atlantic to the American colonies.

The passion for power and control spun the seduction plot, which led to violence. Sugarplums and other methods resulted in the violent enslavement and oppression of African peoples. By the end of the European-African slave trade, it was evident that the trade was both an economic enterprise and violent trafficking. As Pope-Hennessey notes:

Even taking human nature at its lowest, a trade in which so many Europeans and Africans indulged for centuries cannot have been run exclusively by money-maniacs and pocket sadists. As an industry the Atlantic slave trade encouraged greed, brutality, hypocrisy and fear. As a profession it was probably more degrading than any other. Its methods were even cruder than its motives.³⁴

Ironically, it was aboard ships named the *Black Joke*, *Gift of God*, *Jesus of Lubeck*, *Liberty*, *Integrity*, *Destiny*, *The African*, *New England*, *Pretty Peggy*, *Elizabeth*, *Molly*, and so forth that the trickster held his prey, West and West Central African women and girls with a vibrant past and an unknown future.

They were not chattel. They were daughters, mothers, and wives. These women were warriors, market women, artisans, agriculturalists,

priestesses, griots, and shamans. Some were peasants, indentured servants, slaves, secret society women, and policy makers. They were the rich panoply of society, and among them was a little girl seduced by sugarplums.

The sugarplum narrative and other seduction-plot narratives remind us that there is perhaps something puzzling about seduction-driven violence. Its material enticement and momentary sweetness lures you into a false sense of pleasure before it reaches in for the kill. Once enslaved women were sealed in slave dungeons and slave ships, like exquisite butterflies trapped in a tightly sealed jar, where could they fly? North American plantations would prove to be an evil honey of epic proportions. What a price to pay for a new life—a *new normal*—they did not choose.

We turn our attention in the next chapter to better understand the lives of these women and girls prior to the arrival of the trickster, his sugarplums, and other enticements. We turn our attention to a snapshot of their lives before they boarded the Good Ship *Jesus* and other slave vessels. And we find that there was more to their lives than suffering and enslavement.

“Before the Arrival of the Good Ship *Jesus*”: African Women in Precolonial West Africa

In all the books that you have studied, you never have studied Negro history, have you? You studied about the Indians and the white folks, but what did they tell you about the Negro?

—enslaved man

The moment the large merchant ships from Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, France, and England came within reach of the African shoreline and the European descended, the terror of the new normal began. And it began right away. Colonial historiography recounts that when the European emerged from the water, African peoples “who had never seen a white man supposed them to be a species of sea-monsters.”¹ It was rumored that these sea-monsters “came from over the horizon, where no land was, in large ships” to eat them.²

The arrival of the European during the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries did change precolonial West and West Central African peoples’ destiny forever. What it meant to be a *woman* and *human* would take on a new meaning—a recreated reality over and against the reality they had come to know. Precolonial African women would be redefined and treated in ways unimagined. Yet, who were these women seduced into slavery by sugarplums?

“Some were without a doubt” the African foremothers of “our mothers and grandmothers” suggests Alice Walker, “exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era . . . that did not acknowledge them, except as the *mule of the world*.”³ Yet, they were not mules of the world but women and girls who dreamed,

worked, created, and played by the seacoast. What were the traditional African worldviews and the role of women in different indigenous societies prior to European arrival? Not a monolithic group, these were peoples from various West African regions and ethnic groups representing distinct cultures, epistemologies and religious beliefs, and transplanted to American soil as such.

Colonial historiography would certainly have us believe African women's stories began at the point of their seduction and violent entrapment. It asserted that their subjectivity was limited to being gullible gals, mules of the world, and beasts of burden who emerged out of a "blank darkness" apparently with no past or history.⁴ Such accounts report that their civilizations began the day the European arrived. How did such a reporting of history happen, and why did it endure and obscure so long? It was the Berlin West African Conference in 1884–1885 that identified Africa to European powers as "the peoples without history," and European scholars from "Hegel down ... [who] asserted that Africa constituted a blank darkness, and 'darkness was no suitable subject history.'"⁵ It was they and not Africans themselves who asserted that the "only history" was the "history of Europeans in Africa."⁶ Historian E.S. Atieno Odhiambo argues that, "Colonial historiography produced its own knowledge of Africa, based on the premise of European superiority and the civilizing nature of its mission."⁷ Africans were seen as being "static and primitive, the passive recipients of European progress. Africa's self-evident artistic achievements, its historic monuments, its political kingdoms, and its complex religious institutions were attributed to foreigners."⁸

Europeans argued that, without Europe's involvement, there would be no legitimate oral or documented historical account of African peoples' civilizations and legacies. The sugarplum narrative and other related accounts suggest otherwise. These counter-hegemonic accounts remind us of ways in which women were present and participating in African societies prior to their victimization and enslavement, that they were not dependent upon colonial historiography to tell their stories. Indeed, among the precolonial written sources were: Muslim sources from the eighth to fifteenth centuries CE, comprised of direct accounts of local societies; a corpus of African Islamic scholarship after the sixteenth century, which incorporated local oral traditions; and Swahili Islamic scholarship from the eighteenth century, which included city-state records, such as the *Pate Chronicle* and *Kano Chronicle*.⁹ Furthermore, West African Arabic literature reveals that African peoples were diverse civilizations with diverse ethnic groups. Many of these Arabic sources predate the colonial period by hundreds

of years. Gomez argues that “these and other ethnic identities were formed and facilitated by some combination of centralized states, extensive commercial networks, religion, language, and culture long before exportation via the transatlantic slave trade.”¹⁰

In addition, West African societies created writing systems to record their own worldviews. The Mende peoples of Sierra Leone, for example, invented their own ideographic and syllabic writing systems. Many of their scribes were “literate in Arabic or western alphabetic scripts for six or seven generations and held advanced degrees.”¹¹ Historian Robert Farris Thompson also notes that the Ejagham peoples of the Cross River in southeastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon had their own writing system prior to European invasion.¹²

More familiarly, African peoples were of course recording and preserving their worldviews through oral tradition. Typically, designated persons within each community were chosen to preserve oral tradition—the primary means of transmitting worldviews from generation to generation. Myths, folktales, and proverbs played an important role in transmitting communal values, lifestyles, and philosophies and providing insight into how precolonial African societies functioned and viewed themselves.

Along with written and oral sources, African societies relied heavily on African material art such as masks, pottery, and drawings as cultural-historical expressions of the African past and as ways to preserve their ideas, philosophies, and cultural traditions. In addition to these sources, African descendents—contemporary African scholars—have responded to colonialism by using the master’s tools to dismantle colonial historiography, writing down histories that provide us a counter-European perspective of African ways of life.

Such African sources give tremendous insight into the rich and varied precolonial worldviews of West African women and offer a corrective to the colonial historiographer’s often barbaric, false, or simply misleading misrepresentation. Their stories tell us that these women were indeed more than their violent entrapment and subsequent victimization: they were artisans and market women, policy makers, priestesses, medicine women, and mothers—everyday industrious women experiencing the day-to-day harsh and vibrant realities of life within their own cultural contexts. They were women who dreamed and struggled and loved and lost. Their lives were deep and multivalent, diverse and complex, beautiful and grotesque. Their worldviews and legacies cannot be romanticized, minimized, or deprived of their life-affirming qualities. Telling their lives from such a life-affirming

perspective helps us to recognize what their lives and legacies continue to teach us today about resistance, freedom, and well-being.

For the most part, their lives began on the shores and hinterlands of West and West Central Africa. They came from villages, townships, and/or urban centers within the regions represented on the map below.¹³



Map Historians have noted that African women, men, and children were taken primarily from these regions: (1) Senegambia (Coastal areas along the Senegal River to Casamance and the Upper and Middle Niger Valleys); (2) Sierra Leone (Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Ivory Coast); (3) Gold Coast; (4) Bight of Benin (Togo, Benin, and Southwestern Nigeria); (5) Bight of Biafra (Southeastern Nigeria, Cameroon, and Garbon); and (6) West Central Africa (Congo and Angola). They were also taken in small numbers from Mozambique Madagascar which includes Southeastern Africa, Tanzania and the Island of Madagascar.

Source: Map illustration by C. David Van Lear

They represented a diverse population of African ethnic groups and languages. The largest and most distinct groups from the seven regions were also among the principal groups later transplanted to North American slave-owning properties. To list their names is to give them particularity and affirm their cultural heritages, their homelands and peoples, among them: the Akan, Ashante, Igbo, Ibibio, Senegambians (including the Bambara, Mandingo, Malinke, Wolof, Sereer, Fulbe, Soninke), Sierra Leoneans (including the Temme, Mende, Kissi, Gola, Baga, Limba, and Fulbe-Jallonke), Fon, Gun, Ewe, Yoruba, Bakongo, and other Congolese-Angolan speaking peoples.

This chapter argues that these women were “no blank slates” but rather active participants in precolonial societies. They moved in West and West Central African societies and on North American slave-owning properties like rivulets, merging at different points into an uncontainable and unstoppable river. They were diverse women who found connectedness in distinct yet oftentimes similar family systems and ethnic ties; social and political systems; military systems and activism; economic systems; indigenous religious systems; and cultural ties and artistic expressions. Prior to their enslavement, these women played key roles in their African societies; that they did so, stood them in good stead when they were transplanted for it aided African-born and African American–born enslaved African women in combating the daily threat of violence and oppression. In times of crisis, these women often relied on their West and West Central African indigenous traditions and practices to help them heal, protect themselves, and to break free. A survey of some of their and their foremothers’ regions of birth suggests that their stories did not begin with the arrival of the European; they were more than their victimization.

Women’s Family Systems and Ethnic Ties

Before European disruption and African betrayal, these women were mothers and daughters of family systems that held strong ethnic ties. Many ethnic groups were not strangers; they were autonomous yet shared many commonalities. Linguistic and cultural connections allowed ethnic groups, clans, and lineages to intermingle. The Bambara, for example, the largest and most dominant Mende group in the Mali region of Senegambia, whose name means *those who refused to be ruled*, “shared a number of political, social, and cultural elements with neighboring populations to whom they were linked in specific ways.”¹⁴

Even diverse groups within a given region shared a common heritage. Historian Boubacar Barry notes that these regions and states shared commonalities “forged by several centuries of life together.”¹⁵ The Akan for example, another principal group transplanted to North America were linguistically, culturally, and politically connected. The thirteenth century gave rise to the early Akan centralized states. Centralized states and independent kingdoms within the Akan nation consisted of the Fante, Bron, Akyem, Gonja, Dagomba, Denkyira, and Asante, among others. At the close of the seventeenth century, the Asante kingdom emerged in the central forest region of the Gold Coast. The Asante, whose name means “*the because-of-war-people’ or Asantefo,*” were known as a distinct, powerful, close knit political economy and people.¹⁶ The Asante consisted of several small states that united under the King of Kumase in order to achieve political freedom from the Denkyira.

In addition to the Akan, Igbos also held strong ethnic ties. Precolonial Igboland was located in the Bight of Biafra. It covered most of southeastern Nigeria and was surrounded on all sides by other ethnic groups (e.g., the Ibibio, Igala, Efik, Ijo, Ogoni, Bini, and Warri). The Niger and Cross rivers, which divided this region, did not serve as a barrier between these precolonial ethnicities. Rather, the divide functioned as a bridge, in which peoples of distinct and diverse ethnicities shared sociocultural and political affinities. Gomez explains that, “although the Igbo of the eighteenth century were first and foremost loyal to their respective villages and village groups, many were very much aware of their shared qualities.”¹⁷ This sense of connectedness becomes important when we turn our attention to how alliances among North American enslaved women played a role in helping them work together in subverting plantation norms. Ethnic commonalties within their distinct cultures allowed them to forge ahead within the confines of their victimization—they were bonded together by a new narrative of suffering, bondage, and dehumanization of their blackness.

West and West Central African ethnic groups were also bonded by a strong sense of family and community. Extended families worked and lived together for the benefit of the whole fostering a strong sense of interdependence and belonging. A person was considered “wealthy” and gained status in the community by his or her family and lineage. Family systems were diverse and complex and whether matrilineal or patrilineal lineage cemented family and community ties and identity in both systems, the mother had a prominent role.

In matrilineal systems, lineages were traced through the bloodline or (*mogya*) of the mother. Among the matrilineal Akan, for example, “a first-born daughter is an auspicious beginning—a blessing to her mother, a little mother to subsequent siblings, a catalyst for the continued unity of that line, and an advocate for her clan before the rest of the kin group.”¹⁸ She is raised to “fulfill these roles and to be a channel for the return of this life to the ancestors.”¹⁹

By contrast, in other societies such as the Igbo, family systems followed a complex patrilineal descent system, and in some cases, as Gomez adds, a “double unilineal descent or double system.”²⁰ African feminist scholar Nkiru Nzegwu argues that in some precolonial societies such as the Igbo, although lineages were traced through the bloodline of the biological father, patrilineal systems did not “identify the locus of power in families because there were different conceptions of father and different patterns of power distribution in families.”²¹ Patrilineal did not translate into patriarchy, nor did patrilineal negate or suppress the substantial role of women and motherhood in Igbo culture. African sociologist Ifi Amadiume sheds further light on precolonial Igbo family systems by suggesting that “in Igbo, the status for the role of head of family is genderless,” noting further that “this means that **man** or **woman** can be *di*, husband, or *dibun*o, family head.”²²

Whether having matrilineal or patrilineal family systems, West African peoples regarded mothers as the soul life of the family and lineage. Motherhood (procreation and nurturing creation) was the most important component governing family systems and ethnic ties. African theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye adds that “the primacy of life for the African woman is emphasized by the ‘right’ use of power...Nurturing the next generation is a communal duty and all the women of the community become one’s mother.”²³ Amadiume suggests that, in Igbo folktales “The loss of a mother caused greater suffering than the loss of a father.”²⁴ Although childbearing and child-raising were central, West African women were not limited to or by these roles and also maintained industrious roles outside the home.

The prominence of women and especially mothers was equally valued on slave owning properties. Although slave masters and mistresses exploited and demeaned the role of women, classifying house servants as “Black Mammies;” they also ironically held Mammy in high esteem. Though belittled by their masters, the slave community identified some of these women as “Big Momma,” well-respected women who not only cared for master’s children, but also other slave

children as well as her own. The role of the mother was crucial to the survival and well-being of the traditional African-based communities and the slave community, so much so that many African peoples believed that “without women a lineage is finished.”²⁵

Amadiume further notes that in West African societies there was also a widespread practice of woman-to-woman marriage.²⁶ According to Amadiume, the Igbo communities did not consider these woman-to-woman marriages as lesbian unions, but rather, as opportunities to acquire wealth, political power, and in some cases, land. Women-to-women marriages also oftentimes enhanced women’s roles in Igboland. Amadiume argues that, “a flexible gender system meant that male roles were open to certain categories of women through such practices as *nhanye*, ‘male daughters’, and *igba ohu*, ‘female husbands.’ These institutions placed women in a more favorable position for the acquisition of wealth and formal political power and authority.”²⁷

Gomez, Nzegwu, and Amadiume all argue that even within the context of sexist ideologies that existed in precolonial West Africa, women, for the most part, experienced relative freedom and status in many societies. This becomes important in chapters seven and eight when we explore the ways in which women formed bonds of sisterhood or expressed love through same-sex unions within the context of a racist and sexually restricting white world.

Gomez, Oduyoye, Nzegwu, and Amadiume all agree that families, ethnic ties, village life, and community building were vital to the sustenance of West African culture and identity. The mother was central to the family and community’s well-being. Separation or estrangement from her or one’s immediate and extended family system was equivalent to being severed from one’s “roots...and the entire group of those who makes [one] aware of her/his existence.”²⁸

Women in Social Systems

Before these women were deemed chattel property, they were nobles, market women, and servants. The social stratifications to which West African women belonged defined and located them in the world. These class systems consisted of “numerous substrata, not necessarily arranged hierarchically” but representing “different spheres of power.”²⁹ All of the strata were considered economically and socially essential to the whole. Delineation was marked by banning groups within the strata from sexual intermingling. These social

stratifications were altered on slave-owning properties creating division between Africans based on position in the Big House and fields and based on color caste.

Each traditional African ethnic group had a unique social system. Senegambians, Akan, and Igbo, for example, maintained distinct, yet similar systems. Senegambian societies “tended to be stratified into tripartite arrangements consisting of free population, caste groups, and slaves.”³⁰ Within the Senegambian societies, the Wolof social distinctions consisted of the *baadoolo*, (free), *neeno* (caste), and *jam* (slave). The Malinke categorized them as *foro*, *namaxala*, and *joon*; the Fulbe named them *riimbe*, *neenbe*, and *maacube*; and the Bambara called them *horon*, *namaxala*, and *jon*.³¹ The free population included the elites, cultivators, and herdsman. The caste population included endogamous occupational groups such as blacksmiths, woodworkers, and potters.³²

The Akan employed a similar tripartite arrangement. However, as Wilks points out, “upward mobility” among the Akan “was an institutionalized process.”³³ Wealthy Asantes, for example, were known as the *sikafo*—the monied people. The Akans’ philosophy of wealth and advancement was not a judgment against the underprivileged classes but an indictment upon “those who had access to the rewards of business and office and failed to achieve prosperity.”³⁴ Wilks notes that “the opposition between wealth and poverty was not a commentary upon social inequality, but rather upon success and failure.”³⁵

The Igbo’s dipartite stratification differed slightly from the Senegambian and Akan’s tripartite arrangement and consisted of the freeborn, peasantry (*diala*) and nobility (*amadi*); the non-free (semi-slaves, those given to creditors to secure loans, and full slaves [*ohu or oru*] strangers obtained for domestic work); and, the ostracized (*osu or ume*) the outcast and “dread” of Igbo society.³⁶

In summary, precolonial West African societies were not racially stratified. West African peoples did not have a westernized concept of “race” based on biological inferiority or melanin concentration. For the most part, distinctions between persons within the tripartite and dipartite arrangements were based on ethnic ties, skills and labor, and lineage. Some myths, folktales, and proverbs described women in these social systems as inferior to men, while others reveal that women possessed equal status to men. All groups within the strata, with the exception of the *osu* of Igboland were viewed as economically and socially essential to the whole. On many slave owning properties, social stratifications based on position and color caste helped

fuel tensions among slaves. Some slaves, however, transcended color caste lines and joined forces to abscond and revolt.

Women in Political Systems

Before enslaved African women were wenches who “emerged out of a blank darkness,” they held a great variety of positions and roles in the political sphere. They were connected to expansive political monarchies, thriving states, and close knit villages. Both precolonial Akan and Senegambia were known for their vast political kingdoms. The Akan were hailed for both the rise and fall of the Asante kingdom. The Senegambians were known for their connection to the Malian empire and later Massassi dynasty of Segu. Moreover, rural life and statecraft were central to the Akan and Senegambians’ way of life. Both had large and distinct centralized governments.

The Akan’s political configuration was comprised of several nations (*amna*) similar to the city states of medieval Europe. Oduyoye notes that this configuration consisted of autonomous political matrilineages spread throughout southern Ghana. Each political unit consisted of a capital (*ahenkuro*), and a male ruler (*Ohene*) or female ruler (*Ohemaa*, or the plural, *Ahemaa*) whose ethnic title was ascribed to the subgroup. Each town reflected this pattern with its own *Ohene* and *Ohemaa* and the villages also had male and female heads.³⁷ African scholar Arhin Brempong further adds that “an *ôhemaa* [female ruler] of a state also had her own *ntam* (oath), a formula for starting the judicial process, and her own court, as well as her own *ôkyeame* (spokesman) who in the Akan courts acted as prosecutor and judge.”³⁸

The Senegambians, somewhat like the Akan, were rural people who had access to surrounding and emerging cosmopolitan centers and urban life. The Igbo and Sierra Leoneans, on the other hand, were rural people with only a few small neighboring townships. Their largest governance consisted of a small scale polity—a collection of villages surrounded by farms and hunting lands. The village was the most important unit of organization in Igboland and Sierra Leone. The Igbo maintained a decentralized and democratic way of life. There were no single rulers or kings that governed the village and power was not inherited. Historian Joseph-Therese Agbasiere notes that women primarily served an advisory role in communal affairs, yet within that role she was certainly, “expected to speak her mind.”³⁹ Upward mobility was encouraged. Honor was imparted through personal

and communal merit and achievement. In Igboland, decisions were made by villagers with almost everyone involved. Established governing councils and bodies met to discuss and resolve concerns among villagers.

Although enslaved African women in North America were treated and told by their masters that they were less than human, the prominent role of women in these traditional African political systems suggest that African-born and African American-born enslaved women had a wellspring of memories of power, status, subjectivity, and worth to draw from when faced with crisis. In each of the above political systems, women's political roles were substantial and fluid. Sociologist Kamene Okonjo describes precolonial West African political systems as dual-sex. Both women and men managed their own affairs and women's interests were represented at all levels. Women were policy makers who held various political positions and controlled many of the marketplaces.

In some West and West Central African societies, women's collective political strength was best demonstrated in social groups such as women's organizations, women's councils, and secret societies. Women achieved self-governance through their social institutions.⁴⁰ Members of these social institutions also possessed degrees of political power. Akan, Igbo, Mende, and Temme women sat on men's councils and participated in decision making. The council of women included those who specialized in fields normally associated with men, such as traditional healers (*igwo ogwu*) and diviners (*igba afa*).⁴¹ Such women were "regarded as the equals of their male colleagues and they were accorded much honour and respect."⁴²

African women's self-created and self-governed secret societies played a key role in self and communal progression. Igbo, Akan, Yoruba, Bambara, and Sierra Leonean (Mende, Temme) women all maintained secret societies. Some women societies were the preserves of the elite, while others were accessible to women on various levels of the social strata. Oftentimes, these women convened only within the villages, while most expanded to local chapters (lodges) in which members could transfer affiliation to neighboring villages and towns.

The secret societies were semi-clandestine in nature—accessible to its members yet not necessarily identifiable or understood by outsiders. They were autonomous bodies that functioned as the equivalent of social, cultural, and governmental agencies.⁴³ The Sande Society, for example, a noted society among the Mende of Sierra Leone was among the many societies that functioned as political, social, and

cultural organizations within the community; socially, they provided resources for families in times of crisis, and culturally, they provided formal training to males and females. It can be argued here that the notion of the “Invisible Institution,” derived from these traditional secret societies. The “Invisible Institution” was a self-governing clandestine space in which enslaved African women and men gathered in the woods away from the watchful eye of their master to plot rebellions, strategize methods of absconding, and to worship.

Traditional African secret societies also provided a spiritual purpose. As Sylvia Boone asserts, the Sande secret society promoted a religious ideology that focused on love, justice, and harmony.⁴⁴ The Sando or Sando-Mother (leader of the Sande Society) was a powerful person, an intermediary between the physical and spiritual world. She was responsible for mediating and maintaining harmonious relations with the spirit realm, “calling upon powers of divination to interpret and mediate between human beings and the spirits of the bush, rivers, ancestors, and deities.”⁴⁵ This model of the Sando-Mother as mediator was also prominent in other traditional African societies and later on various slave-owning properties. Enslaved women functioned as preachers, priestess, Big Mommas, and shamans mediating between the spirit world and the slave community.

Traditional African secret societies often convened in the woods or in a designated place in the village, township, or city. Those initiated were “taught to keep a secret, having previously been considered untrustworthy and therefore excluded from deliberations of any substance ... Initiates were scarified during the process and underwent a symbolic death to their prior lives and a rebirth to new ones within society. At the end of the ritual, the initiates, both males and females, were given new names.”⁴⁶ To celebrate their passage from the old life to the new life (rebirth, conversion, regeneration) these secret societies engaged in festive activities such as ceremonies, rituals, dances, masquerades and other live performances.⁴⁷ The central aim of these societies, regardless of members’ ranking and placement, was the cultivation, survival, and advancement of the people.

Women in Military Systems

Before they were prized booty, these women were revolutionaries and activists who fought alongside men to protect their land, humanity, and freedom. West and West Central African regions had large military regimes or small scale resistance forces. Akan (Asante), Igbo, and

Senegambians (Bambara) were known for their military competency. Gomez notes that the Asante, for example, was “one of the most militarily powerful and structurally articulate polities in all of West and West Central Africa, rivaling the savannah states in complexity if not territorial expanse. The unity of the empire was symbolized in the institution of the *Sika Dwa*, the Golden Stool, before which all other previously existing stools symbolizing political autonomy were destroyed.”⁴⁸

Furthermore, the Bambara had a strong reputation as accomplished warrior-cultivators. In times of battle, women and men fought against other ethnic groups over territorial rights in order to protect their families, economies, and lands and to protect themselves from organized slave raids and kidnappings. In wartime, military regimes were used to protect civilizations from external territorial invasion by European countries.

Igbo, Akan, Wolof, Bambara, and Sierra Leonean women were highly skilled warriors. Igbo women had a reputation for being the most militant of women. Traditional women served not only as warriors, but also as generals, leaders, and activists who carried out responsibilities crucial to military campaigns. Although women were warriors and political leaders, they rarely fought on the front lines. One exception was the Asante queen and war-leader Nana Yaa Asantewaa. Brempong asserts that Asantewaa’s role in the *Yaa Asantewaa War* (Asante 1900 resistance war) “exceeded the normal political and military roles of Asante women.”⁴⁹ She did not just dare the men to fight, she led them into battle against the British to protect her people and land. The men recognized her as a leader and elected her as the first female war-leader or *sahene*.⁵⁰ There were countless Yaa Asantewaa’s during American slavery, abolitionists who led bands of runaway slaves to freedom.

In many traditional societies religion and military power were closely connected. In wartime, women were known to perform religious dances and songs to energize the community and to subvert the enemy. Women’s primary military role was to “engage in what was known as *mmomomme twe*, perform pantomime dances and sing dirges.”⁵¹ Such songs are reminiscent of Negro Spirituals and work songs in which enslaved African women and men filtered coded messages through song in an effort to plan rebellions and escapes, and to subvert the enemy. The song, dance, and drum were key rhythmic vehicles used as strategies of war. In addition, traditional African societies like their enslaved descendents sought the advice of conjurers

and the protection of deities for support, courage, and victory. In both worlds—precolonial and colonial—consulting conjurers and practitioners and the spirit world was a common strategy in plotting rebellions.

Women in Economic Systems

Before African women came to be known as *mules of the world*, they were contributors to West and West Central Africa's economic growth through various industries. As industrious market women, artisans, and agriculturalists, their entrepreneurial skills, creativity, and labor preserved and advanced precolonial societies and later the New World.

Market Women

Precolonial West and West Central African regions had skilled and vocational laborers such as cultivators, agriculturalists, exporters, merchants, crafters, and entrepreneurs including industrious market women who served as producers, buyers, sellers, and traders. These women made pottery, wove and dyed their own cloth, and marketed these items. They were well-versed in food processing, particularly of oil and flours and in soap-making. These women were associated with regions that were major producers in the world bullion market. Wilks informs us that the Akan economy, for example, was a major producer of gold, brass, copper, cloths, salt, cloves, pepper, saffron, fine silk threads, and sugar.⁵² Gomez further notes that the Akan gold trade was important since the Akan goldfields were opened to Juula merchants as far back as the fifteenth century.⁵³ Precolonial Igboland was also a major contributor with its expertise in trade and production and manufacture of iron. Some of the earliest examples of iron-based sculpture in West Africa came from the culture of Nok (500 BCE to 200 CE). Due to its proximity, Senegambia was the first to establish commerce with Europe, followed by Madagascar with its production of rice.⁵⁴ Sierra Leone, though a key player in producing goods and natural minerals, had limited access to long-distance commerce mainly due to the absence of urban areas.⁵⁵

Although West African women controlled the local exchange of goods in the market, men usually conducted the long-distance trade.⁵⁶ The women controlled the market through queen mothers—leaders of designated sections in the market, elected by women traders. Market

women saw their role as having economic and political leverage. It allowed them to sustain themselves and their children financially and maintain a level of independence for, as Gomez notes, many market women had the right to keep any money that they earned by their own efforts, including their market activity.⁵⁷

The role of market women predates the eighteenth century. Oduyoye describes these traditional entrepreneurs as self-identified women who belonged to an all-female organization (or at least, a female-directed one) with political potential. Local markets became an oppositional space of power for market women, giving them the necessary leverage to combat sexism and oppression. Most market women encouraged their daughters by teaching them a sense of autonomy, industry, and communal responsibility.

Artisans

Precolonial West African women and men were not only versed in commerce, but also were gifted artisans of many different types. Gomez notes that the Akan in particular were skilled craft persons, who specialized in weaving stools and carving drums. Although most of these items were crafted by men, menopausal women participated in weaving. Men also cleared the forest and built roads for commerce and travel. The Asante men, for example, built the “great road” system—eight roads over which both trade and political authority crossed.⁵⁸ In some societies, men were ritual specialists who worked iron and sculpted wood for farmers and their wives were potters.⁵⁹

In some cultures, artisans were highly respected persons who worked within the community producing art and outside the community as laborers. Artists were often set apart from the community to consult with a guardian spirit to produce works used in ethnic and religious ceremonies. West and West Central African women contributed to the world bullion market by producing crafts that were used at home and sold in the marketplace. Weaving and other artistry were controlled primarily by women.⁶⁰ Girls and women learned skills through an apprenticeship with their mothers or other skilled women.⁶¹

Agriculturalists

Akan, Igbo, Senegambia, Sierra Leone, Bight of Benin, and West Central Africa were primarily agriculturally based economies for especially with the rise of commerce, economies changed from hunting and farming to agriculture. The Akan in particular transformed

from a foraging economy to a food crop production economy during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. This transformation was a response to the demands of the world bullion markets and involved large scale clearances of the forest.⁶²

Women in most regions were the principal producers of crops including palm fruit, yams or cassava, cocoyams, sweet potatoes, maize, beans, ground nuts, guinea corn, kola nut, millet, indigo, plantains, okra, cotton, rice, and the like. Women were responsible for cultivating the land and processing and preserving the crop. The gender ideology governing economic production was, as Amadiume says, that of female industriousness, which was rewarded with both prestigious and political titles. In the case of Igbo society, “a flexible gender system encouraged the institutions of ‘female husband’ and ‘male daughter.’ This meant that certain women could occupy roles and positions usually monopolized by men, and thereby exercise considerable power and authority over both men and women.”⁶³ However, this exercising of power had its limitations.

In some regions the cultivation of yams, fruit, palm trees, and clearing forests was off limits to women. Men controlled the cultivation, marketing, and consumption of the most highly prized crop, yams.⁶⁴ Women were known to use the elements of earth to produce viable products for everyday living. Women’s industriousness was best demonstrated in their use of the palm tree—one of the most valuable resources for West African women for every part served an important economic function. The sap of the tree, palm-wine, and palm-fronds were used for feeding the goats. They made brooms from side branches, and trunks were used for building materials to support climbing plants, especially yams, or to make cooking fires. Palm oil was a major source of cash and the shells of the fruit from the tree were used for fuel. The fiber or chaff extracted during oil processing was used by women to make medicinal soap and they used extracts from the tree to make light or torches. Finally, they made rope from the skin or bark of the tree for weaving baskets, floor mats, and sleeping plaits.⁶⁵ Such industriousness became useful to them on slave-owning properties as they acclimated quickly to “making something out of nothing,” using the throwaways or elements around them to survive.

Women in Indigenous Religious Systems

Before African women were deemed to be uncivilized heathens, they were adherents and practitioners of fluid traditional African religious

systems. Others were Muslims, and a few were Christians. West African peoples had a unique way of being religious and looking at the world religiously; to them everything was connected. The spirit world and nature, the land and ancestral veneration, religious ceremonies, practices, and objects, and reincarnation were common and important elements in their respective religious systems. These elements were carried over into the New World.

Spirit World and Nature

Akan, Igbo, Bambara, Temme, Mende, Fon-Ewe-Yoruba, West Central African, and Mozambique-Madagascar women shared a reverence for nature and worshipped a Supreme Being, Creator or High God.⁶⁶ In most of these regions, and across the African continent, the Supreme Being was androgynous. As Oduyoye notes, the variety of ways in which African peoples refer to God does not pose fundamental problems. “The language for talking about God uses no gender-specific pronouns. God’s ‘maleness’ is further masked by appellations of God that suggest androgyny...It could be said, given the way we Africans understand gender, that in African Traditional Religion the Godhead is androgynous.”⁶⁷ The Fon-Ewe high god, *Mawu-Lisa* and the Yoruba deity *Olorun*, for example, is a “composite of male and female characteristics that together represent the notion of perfect balance.”⁶⁸ This is also true of the Igbo high god *Chineke (Chukwu)*, who represents male and female elements (chi and eke). The union of Chi and Eke (Chi-n-eke) makes “two complementary halves of a whole,” symbolizing “harmony and completion.”⁶⁹ He further adds that the Senufo (Sierra Leone) society believed in a sexually bipartite deity called *Kolotyolo*, when referred to as Creator, and *Katyeleleo* when protecting and nurturing.⁷⁰ This was another indicator of sexual balance in religious ideologies.

Whether androgynous or non-androgynous, all traditional societies believed in a Supreme Being, Creator or High God and a pantheon of lesser-specific divinities. They did not worship these divinities as the Creator because these deities acted on behalf of the Creator. They had a specific function and West African peoples had their own systematized and practical ways of communicating with them. Intimacy with the high god and lesser divinities, nature, cosmos, and human beings was a part of the West African societies’ natural order and practical way of life.

Each West African society had myths about creation but did not hold these stories as literal interpretations. Though they did not have

a universal agreement on how creation of the universe took place, they collectively agreed “that the universe could not simply have come into existence on its own” or by human initiative.⁷¹

Many traditional African religions shared commonalities. African peoples’ religious beliefs complemented one another, making these belief systems adaptable. Indigenous African peoples’ connectedness to a Supreme Being, lesser-specific divinities, and to each other helps us to understand why some enslaved Africans were able to appropriate Christianity as a belief system. When the Christian religious values of the master were antithetical to this understanding, many enslaved Africans rejected Christianity outright or integrated tenets that were beneficial to their well-being. The acceptance or rejection of Christianity, and the preservation of their own religious belief systems become important when we turn our attention religious autonomy and valuation and, to the ways in which enslaved women and men worshipped together given the diversity of their religious expressions.

The Land and Ancestral Veneration

The land and the ancestors were inseparable; neither was worshipped, however, both were considered sacred and essential to community life. African women believed that the ancestors lived in the land of spirits, and so “each village maintained at least one ancestral shrine; the ancestors maintained contact with the living through the latter’s sacrifices and prayers”⁷² Although dead, the ancestors were considered alive and active spiritually and functioned as mediators between God and humanity. They were not, however, on the same plane as lesser deities—gods and goddesses.

All groups “venerated ancestors and understood the connection between the living, the dead, and the land.”⁷³ They understood the ancestors as “‘the returners,’ and by returning they incarnated the past among the living.”⁷⁴ Gomez notes that ancestral shrines and veneration of the ancestors in community “reinforced the perspective that the welfare of the community transcended that of the individual, so that while individual achievements were encouraged, the notion that something is *for me* is meaningless unless it is linked with the total idea that is *for us*.”⁷⁵

Religious Ceremonies, Practices, and Objects

Religious ceremonies, practices, and objects were essential to indigenous African religions because they showed how “people expressed

their beliefs in practical terms.”⁷⁶ Ceremonies were “normally joyful occasions in which people sang, danced, ate, and celebrated a particular occasion or event.”⁷⁷ Ring ceremonies were common practices in West African traditions. These ceremonies, in which African peoples engaged in movement within a ring to invoke the presence of both ancestors and deities, allowed human beings to enter into a shared experience with them.⁷⁸ Rituals involving water—lakes, rivers—were also common. Certain groves and forests were set apart for religious activities like rituals, ceremonies, prayers, and sacrifices for many Africans believed that spirits inhabited rivers, lakes, and waterfalls. Water symbolized bodily purification and cleansing, and also mystical impurities contacted through broken taboos.

Religious practices and objects also possessed religious and communal value. John Mbiti notes that African peoples’ sense that religion permeates all of life makes them “feel that many objects and places have a religious significance.”⁷⁹ Some objects are made by designated practitioners and others are made by ordinary people. Some are regarded as sacred, and others are used for practical or medicinal purposes.⁸⁰ The use of objects or mystical charms becomes important when we turn our attention to how enslaved women in America used roots, conjuring, talismans, and so forth to protect and heal themselves from domestic and sexual violence. Enslaved women’s forebears, West and West Central African peoples were known to use charms, amulets, or talismans. The Bambara, Mende, Igbo, Yoruba, Akan, Congolese, and Sierra Leoneans, for example, used these animated objects as powerful devices for empowerment, healing, protection, good luck, and warding off evil. They were, as Gomez notes, “critical to negotiations” and were often consulted before a person took action.⁸¹ Charms, amulets, or talismans were tied around a person’s neck, arms, legs, or waist. Enslaved women, like their forebears, kept these devices in purses, pockets, and bags. They were placed on house roofs or at entry gates of homes as well as hidden and dug into the ground around houses or in fields and concealed from those who intended to bring harm.⁸²

Reincarnation

African women believed that death was a gateway to a realm similar to that of the physical world. However, in most traditions the deceased (departed soul) returned. The departed soul was reincarnated (i.e. the passage of the soul from one body to another).⁸³ This belief in reincarnation was a part of the Akan, Igbo, Bambara, Sierra Leonean, and

Yoruba religious worldviews. All believed that, when the departed soul returned to the land of the living, part of it remained with the ancestors to assist them in helping the living negotiate the realities of their lives. They believed that those ancestors who remained among the living would help them negotiate these realities not only through indigenous religious practices, but also through artistic mediums. Culture and art, like the ancestors and religious practices, were transmutable and transportable. As the Igbo say, “Time past and time future. What might have been and what has been, point to one end, which is always present.”⁸⁴ Religion, culture, and art in the African and later African-American context transcended time and space.

Women’s Cultural Ties and Artistic Expressions

Similar patterns of cultural and artistic affinities, particularly oral tradition, linked various West African cultures together from generation to generation. Myths, folktales, and proverbs played an important role in transmitting communal values and often portrayed African goddesses and women as active agents in West African societies. One southern Nigerian myth, for example, describes the creator of humanity as a woman named the Great Mother, called Woyengi or Tamarau, who created humanity in this fashion:

in the beginning, [she] seated herself on a stool and with her feet firmly planted on the Creation Stone and a table before her, she began to mold human beings out of the earth. As each person was completed, each was embraced by her and each became a living being as the Great Mother breathed into each.

Then Woyengi posed the question, “Which do you want to be, male or female?” So, what each person chose is what he or she became. Each was given a destiny. Where you desired to be born is where you were sent, and how you desired to die is how you died. Only by very special religious ritual could any of this be changed.⁸⁵

This and other myths suggest that women and men were born with a soul and a destiny. Additionally, both goddesses and women maintained fluid roles in the creation of the world and the sustainability of traditional societies. This positioning of women also suggests that they were autonomous, revered, and wise beings in West African societies. Perhaps this is why some North American enslaved women were known to possess a demeanor of inner resolve (*itutu*—coolness)

in times of crisis because they understood that neither they nor their African foremothers were created to be enslaved and victimized.

Although these same myths and so forth describe the complexities of indigenous women's roles as ones weighted down by inferiority and bondage, African-born and African American-born women often fought against these sexist realities to reclaim their selfhood. Many did so through artistic expression. Precolonial African societies relied heavily on material art such as masks, wood carvings, and metal artifacts as cultural-historical expressions of the African past and the valuation of women. Material art was essential to the preservation and valuation of precolonial West African societies. Many of these objects have survived, including metal artifacts recovered by archaeologists from ancient Igbo-Ukwu and Ife societies in Nigeria. Furthermore, three sites containing hundreds of ritual vessels and copper alloy castings of bronze have been excavated. The recovery of these artifacts from the ninth and tenth century Igbo-Ukwu (present-day Igboland) suggests that Igbo society achieved a level of technological competence evident in their renowned metal artifacts. As early as the ninth century, the people of Igbo-Ukwu, for example, were the world's leading smiths of copper and the creators of the famous Benin Bronzes. These bronze works of art were among those artifacts stolen from Africa during the precolonial period and currently on display in European museums. The Yoruba divination board, collected around 1650, was also one of the oldest wood artifacts that continues to tell the story of Africa's rich indigenous religious traditions.⁸⁶ The board is currently housed at the Ulmer museum in Germany.

In addition to material art, other artistic media such as dance, drumming, and singing were cultural and spiritual expressions of West African peoples. Women were active in the creation and performance of dance and singing at ceremonies, and festivals. In Igbo societies, on behalf of the community women satirized in song, dance, and mime "an incompetent or tyrannical leader, as a means of sanctioning and enforcing discipline and restoring order."⁸⁷ Dance, drumming, singing, and other artistic media functioned as celebratory practices, subversionary tactics, and spiritual mediums. These artistic expressions were an effective catalyst in bonding communities together, communicating with the spirit world, and cautioning community members of imposing external threat. Culture and art were identifying connectors that expressed the beliefs, traditions, and philosophies of these African-born and African American-born enslaved peoples across ethnic lines. Culture and art were to become life saving

mediums and expressions for the enslaved in order to withstand the horrors of American slavery.

Conclusion

Precolonial West African peoples' social, political, military, economic, and religious systems, and cultural and artistic ties were rich, diverse, and similar. Women played an active role in all these systems. It would be reasonable to believe that fragments of these worldviews and indigenous practices were transmitted by enslaved African women and men to North America. Yet, the African systems and ways of life prior to the coming of the European cannot be romanticized and oversimplified. What can be asserted here, however, is that West and West Central African peoples are diverse ethnic peoples with fluid worldviews and systems—civilizations with a vibrant past. The vitality and resilience of this past are evident in the lives of West and West Central African women before the arrival of the Good Ship *Jesus* and other European vessels on African shores. Fragments of this vitality and resilience can be gleaned from the resistance strategies employed by their descendents.

Colonial historiography's version of the African past denied the life-affirming qualities of precolonial West and West Central Africa and ignored or misrepresented the violent invasion of colonialism. It muted the sounds of African women running and the echoes of little girls' cries seduced into slavery by sugarplums. Ifi Amdaiume writes that, "colonial invasion was a milestone" in the history of African peoples.⁸⁸ With the coming of the European, the stones of negation were set and the diverse legacies of West and West Central African peoples, especially its women became a collective demoralizing one of violence, dehumanization, and oppression. The little girl playing by the seacoast became one among many casualties of deception, intimate violence, and greed. She was one among many African women and girls robbed of her soul life by the trickster. In the next four chapters we turn our attention to see just how robbed she was after she turned to catch a glimpse of the fading African shoreline.

Historical Grotesque Realities

The scream of outrage would wake up saints in the backrooms of Heaven.¹

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

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“Trouble Done Bore Me Down”: Intimate Violence against Enslaved Women

I prayed to die; but the prayer was not answered.

—enslaved woman

She arrived in America just as she left Africa: resilient, industrious, seduced, and enslaved. “Her body,” as Simone de Beauvoir notes, “became a resistance to be broken through.”² The trickster violently used his fist, foot, and penis as bodily weapons to break her down and break her in. This breaking-in process, he maintained, “became necessary to accustom her to the routines of plantation slavery” and exploit her body for labor and reproduction.³ Indeed, writes historian Benjamin Quarles, “when . . . fully seasoned—having learned [her] work assignment, become accustomed to the food and climate, learned to understand a new language, and shaken off any tendency to suicide—[she] was worth twice as much as when [she] first landed.”⁴

Under his control her body became a lucrative tool for his personal, political, and economic gain. The southern colonies and subsequent North American expansion were improbable without her exploitation. His opportunity to seize the American dream depended upon the sweat of her brow, the bend of her back, and the incarceration of her vagina. *Her back*, as feminist of color and womanist scholars have argued, became *his bridge* into his New Frontier.⁵

Her seductive and forceful capture and Middle Passage voyage represented, as Gomez notes, “a death and birth canal, baptismal waters of a different kind.”⁶ Her body, soul, mind, and spirit underwent an

abrupt death to an old life and awakened to a brutal one. The sadistic disruption of her West African way of life marked the beginning of a new normal—a violent recreation of graphic paradoxical proportions. This paradox would soon pose a fundamental schism by negating who she knew herself to be and affirming *only* what Europe said she must become.

She left West and West Central Africa and arrived on North American soil, representing an amalgamation of ethnic West and West Central African women born free. Once she was subjugated to colonial ideology, her identity collapsed into an essentialized description—that of an enslaved African woman. She appeared to her captors as a barren slate with no indigenous past; no ethnic density, origin, or character. He saw her as savage—uncivilized, exotic, and chattel. She stood on North American auction blocks and labored on plantations as his seducible commodity, his breeder, his concubine, and his field hand. Religious scholar Alton B. Pollard III argues that she and all enslaved African peoples were redefined economically as property and cargo; socially as beasts of burden, semi-animals, childlike, and unintelligent; and politically as noncitizens and three-fifths human.

Her journey from her West and West Central African villages and townships to his North American colonies solidified that dying to her old way of life was inevitable because, on North American soil, to be black, enslaved, and female was a perpetually violent and dehumanizing existence. She was inferior to everything around her. Her inferior status was not only evident in her race, class, and gender, but also in the eyes of her enslavers she was a “gal” of inferior religion, sexuality, and culture.

Thrust into the bowels of New World terrorism, her inferior status caused her at times to abort her old life-affirming notions of self and spirituality, and to adopt debilitating ones. She was now subjugated to the European’s wants, desires, and ways of life. His puritan mindset, proslavery rhetoric, anti-African ideology, biblical text, and colonial laws served to deaden her precolonial sense of selfhood and seal her subjugation. In his New World, his Garden of Eden, her eyes were opened. In this unfamiliar demoralizing place, she realized that a sugarplum from the hand of a white man was more than a bitter experience: it was a poisonous one. His deceptive self-serving gesture threatened her soul life and the souls of the black folk around her. In time, the sight and stench of black bodies hanging from southern poplar trees would become undeniable evidence of what hap-

pens to flourishing fruit once plucked by the hands of the trickster. Something beautiful touched by him inevitably reappears strange and oppositional. Something free inevitably finds itself subjugated or colonized.

In North American history, black women's bodies and souls have carried the historical legacy and burden of domestic torture and exploitation. The next four chapters identify North America as the site of lawful domestic terrorism against black peoples and especially enslaved women and girls.⁷ During the mid-seventeenth to late nineteenth centuries, the European engaged in unimaginable terroristic acts, marking this time period as a pivotal violent moment in North American history. The European-African slave trade and the slave plantation work force created a distinct culture of violence in the modern world.

Religious studies scholars have already given considerable attention to violence during slavery, which has benefited public and academic discourse; yet religious scholars are not yet describing the full variety of violence evident in enslaved women's literature. Five categories of violence—domestic, sexual, sisterhood, sistah-hood, and self—offer a framework for examining unimaginable terroristic acts committed against or internalized by enslaved women. Domestic violence I discuss in this chapter, sexual violence in the next, sisterhood and sistah-hood violence in chapter five, and self violence in chapter six. Domestic violence and sexual violence include intimate violence against enslaved women by white men.⁸ Sisterhood violence is that violence which enslaved women experienced at the hands of white women and sistah-hood violence encompasses violence between enslaved women. In some instances, particularly self violence, brutal acts inflicted upon African peoples, especially women resulted in the internalization of violence and terror. Self violence includes African women's internalization of the oppressors' precepts about their womanhood, Africanness, and indigenous religious traditions.

The FBI defines domestic terrorism as the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in the furtherance of certain political, social, or economic objectives and interests.⁹ Terrorists employ a wide range of weaponry and terroristic methods to carry out their aims. The effects of domestic terrorism vary from deprivation of basic human needs and services, injuries to property, and loss of limb, body parts, or life.

Enslaved women's narratives and other similar accounts set the context for taking a revisionist approach for identifying North America as the site of domestic terrorism during the antebellum period. I also draw from slaveholders' journals, newspapers, legal documents, and the Bible to reveal violence in many forms. The European used his bodily force and a bizarre variety of implements like whips and iron collars to intimidate, coerce, and control enslaved African women. White women, and enslaved men and children were used as weapons to divide and conquer African women in America. All of these weapons induced terror and were symbols of his sovereignty. He employed them at his will to reduce her soul to emptiness and her self-perception to chattel.

Various terroristic methods were also employed against enslaved women to further European advancement in the New World. Terroristic methods included kidnapping and torture, and economic, cultural, and sexual violence all kept enslaved women, men, and children in a perpetual state of brokenness. Such resulted in dehumanization and humiliation as well as loss of limb and life.

The domestic violence described in this chapter is not indicative of the way of life on all North American plantations and farms. This chapter does not make general assertions about *all* enslaved women's experiences of violence. Nor does it suggest that *all* whites during the antebellum period were perpetrators of brutal assaults against black women. This chapter represents a spectrum of terror and offers a snapshot of antebellum terrorism through domestic violence. These acts of violence were committed for the sole purpose of exploiting black women, enforcing their subjugation, and promoting their inferiority and inhumanity. Both domestic and sexual violence are identified as two particular forms of domestic terrorism essential to the "breaking through" of black women's bodies to "break down" their resistance for the furtherance of European New World formation agenda.

* * *

Enslaved Women and Domestic Violence

Dey wuked me lak a dog an' beat me somepin turrible

—enslaved woman

William Wells Brown, a former enslaved man and literary writer identified American slavery as a "national institution," whereas

violence against enslaved women, men, and children's personhood was a national pastime, a part of the very fabric and culture of the American Union.¹⁰ From the mid-seventeenth to late nineteenth centuries, North America was the site of domestic terrorism, in which the European used various forms of violence to intimidate, coerce, and enslave Africans for his personal, political, economic, and social gain. Indeed, it was "the nation" itself, Brown wrote in 1848, that

licenses men to traffic in the bodies and souls of [*women and*] men; it supplies them with public buildings at the capital of the country to keep their victims in. For a paltry sum it gives the auctioneer a license to sell American men, women, and children, upon the auction stand. The American slave trader, with the constitution in his hat and his license in his pocket, marches his gang of chained men and women under the very eaves of the nation's capitol... With all their democracy, there is not a foot of land over which the "stars and stripes" fly, upon which the American slave can stand and claim protection... Slaveholders hide themselves behind the church. The religion of the south is referred to every day, to prove that slaveholders are good, pious men. But with all their pretensions, and all the aid which they get from the northern church, the [*Negro and the rest of the world know otherwise*]... the people of the free states cannot expect to live in union with slaveholders, without becoming contaminated with slavery. They are looked upon as one people; they *are* one people; the people in the free and slave states form the "American Union" ... Wherever the United States constitution has jurisdiction, and the American flag is seen flying, they point out the slave as a chattel, a thing, a piece of property.¹¹

Brown's account not only portrayed American slavery as a national pastime of white rule, but also described the European as a duplicitous character who presented himself to the world as an inquisitive explorer and pious man. What the European claimed to have "traded" for or "found" on his voyages to Africa and the New World, however, he essentially sought to own—people, artifacts, gems, and lands. The seduction-plot narratives simply say: He saw. He tricked. He took. He claimed. Then, he called it a "discovery"; a "mission" and "mandate" from God.

With Bible and constitution in hand, and his slave's hand on the plow, he set out to build his Garden of Eden—on lands already "discovered" and occupied by Native American peoples. Brown noted that both the North and South profited from the violent trafficking in human beings, and therefore contributed to the historical legacy of human suffering and degradation in North America. At the center

of his violent trafficking was his *chattel, piece of property*—enslaved African women. The use of her body as a tool for labor, reproduction, and sexual gratification allowed him to maintain his status and power in the nation, church, auction blocks, seaports, Big House, slave quarters, and fields. These spaces were the primary sites of her suffering. On North American slave owning properties, she labored against her will and lived as a symbol of a New World expansion, in which white gain was acquired by fraudulent activity and exploitation.

As the European transformed her from an African matriarch to a plantation mule, he transformed himself.¹² The idea of a New World also meant the creation of a new identity. Europeans, like African peoples, were not a monolithic group. By the late seventeenth century, when enslaved Africans outnumbered them, the European redefined himself socially, politically, and economically as white separating himself from non-European Christian and non-Christian ethnic groups. The European argued that whiteness possessed an inherent political, economic, and social value that deemed Europeans superior to all other ethnic groups. White supremacy granted him rights and privileges to peoples, lands, and New World formation. The plantation—ranging from small farms to moderate and elaborate estates—was his domain; his point of departure for living out his ideas. It became the locus of domestic terrorism in America; the place where he violently domesticated her.

Scholars such as historians Dorothy Sterling and Deborah Gray White argue that most plantations functioned as a patriarchal family system, in which the land, produce, livestock, and/or slaves were under the slaveholder or planter's jurisdiction. Other scholars, such as historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, maintain that this system was not necessarily patriarchal, but rather paternal, in that the slaveholder or planter served a fatherly role as head of the household. Whether patriarchal or paternal, the plantation household was a hierarchically arranged social system, in which enslaved Africans ranked at the bottom. Nearly all slave owning properties operated in this fashion. On rare occasions, the mistress or misses (wife or daughter) functioned as slaveholder and managed affairs upon her husband or father's absence, illness, or death. Under the master or mistress' care, enslaved Africans were subjected to various forms of domestic terrorism. Among them was the willful neglect of their basic human needs (food, medical care, and clothing/shoes). Intentional withholding and deprivation of these basic needs to control slaves and enforce labor for New World advancement was a glaring mark of domestic terrorism.

*Neglect of Basic Human Needs: Food,
Medical Care, and Clothing/Shoes*

Days of famine and toil as one enslaved woman described were “a constant misery to us...I never had no white folks that was good to me. We all worked jest like dogs, and had about half enough to eat, and got whapped for everything.”¹³ Controlling access to food and providing limited portions was a means of maintaining social control and slaves’ dependency on their masters. Frederick Douglass noted that he never remembered during slavery “enjoying sufficiency.” He wrote: “Master Thomas was a mean man...not to give a slave enough to eat, was regarded as the most aggravated development of meanness even among slaveholders. The rule is, no matter how coarse the food, only let there be enough of it...Master Thomas gave us enough of neither coarse nor fine food.”¹⁴

On most plantations, food was dispersed once a week in limited bulk to slave families. Slaves’ diet consisted primarily of starch-based foods. Meat, if allotted, was distributed at different intervals. Slaves were often allowed to keep a small garden near their quarters to grow fresh vegetables. During work hours, fieldworkers received food in various inhuman ways. Food was poured in troughs, in which enslaved Africans submerged their faces and ingested food like pigs. One former enslaved woman recalled, “I had to feed the little Negro children. I remember quite well how those poor little children use to have to eat. They were fed in boxes and troughs, under the house. They were fed corn meal mush and beans. When this was poured into their box they would gather around it the same as we see pigs, horse, and cattle gather around troughs today.”¹⁵ Another expressed: “It was work hard, git beatin’s and half fed. They brung the vittles and water to the fields on a slide pulled by an old mule. Plenty times they was only half barrel water—and it stale and hot—for all us on the hottes days. Mostly we ate pickled pork and corn bread and peas and beans and taters. They never was as much as we needed.”¹⁶

Food was also poured into reused worn crusty bowls or in the palms of hands. Slaves seldom sat and ate a warm hearty meal with human dignity. Booker T. Washington recounts:

My mother was the plantation cook...[Yet,] I cannot remember a single instance during my childhood...when our entire family sat down to the table together, and God’s blessing was asked, and the family ate a meal in a civilized manner. On the plantation in Virginia, and even later, meals were gotten by the children very much as dumb animals

get theirs. It was a piece of bread here and a scrap of meat there. It was a cup of milk at one time and some potatoes at another. Sometimes a portion of our family would eat out of the skillet or pot, while some one else would eat from a tin plate held on the knees, and often using nothing but the hands with which to hold the food.¹⁷

Limited access and resources resulted in stealing. Stealing food was a matter of survival. Although laws were enacted making it illegal for slaves to steal, and biblical scriptures were preached admonishing them, countless slaves stole to combat starvation. Many, including pregnant women, lamented that “we were so hungry we were bound to steal or perish.”¹⁸ Punishment for stealing due to hunger resulted in flogging and severing of fingers, hands, or other limbs.

Malnutrition and poor food quality coupled with long days of toil caused illnesses and long-term health problems. A European businessman traveling throughout the South observed how slaves’ “means of subsistence, which consists generally of seven quarts of meal or eight quarts of small rice for one week” coupled with the “driver and overseer pushing them to the utmost of their strength by threatening and whipping” resulted in “sickness from fatigue.”¹⁹ The businessman stated that “[I] go their huts [...] and see them groaning under a burning fever or pleurisy, lying on some straw, their feet to the fire with barely a blanket to cover them; or on some boards nailed together in form of a bedstead.”²⁰

Medical treatment by English doctors was administered only in severe cases where the medical condition affected work performance. Historian William Dusingberre notes that “there was constant tension between the master’s desire to get the plantation work done and their wish to keep most of the slaves alive.”²¹ One former enslaved man recalled, “Befo’ the war we never had no good times. They took good care of us, though. As pa’taculah with slave as with the stock—that was their money, you know. And if we claimed bein’ sick, they’d give us a dose of castah oil and tu’pentine. That was the principal medicine cullud folks had to take, and sometimes salts... And if we was real sick, they had the Doctah fo’ us.”²²

Slavers and overseers also treated lacerations from flogging with brine. One former enslaved man described how slavers and overseers treated lacerations on his plantation: “My master would put slaves in a calabosse at night to be whipped de next morning. He always limited de lashes to five hundred. After whipping dem, he would rub pepper and salt on deir backs, where whipped.”²³ Enslaved women

also provided care for most non-life-threatening illnesses. Many slaves died from injuries from floggings or illnesses like pneumonia and malaria.

The slave community not only lamented about the poor quality and sufficiency of food, but also clothing and shoes. Clothing and shoes were a rarity and another indicator of willful neglect. If allotted, clothing and shoes were distributed at designated times. Most slaves never owned a pair of shoes or wore them. Shoes were either too tattered and worn or too small or big. One former enslaved woman stated, "Our clothes were bad, and beds sorry. We went barefooted in a way. What I mean by that is, that we had shoes part of the time. We got one pair o' shoes a year. When dey wore out we went barefooted. Sometimes we tied them up with strings, and they were so ragged de tracks looked like bird tracks, where we walked in the road... My brother wore his shoes out, and had none all thu winter. His feet cracked open and bled so bad you could track him by the blood."²⁴ Another remarked, "we went bar'foots in summer, but bless your sweet life us had good shoes in the winter."²⁵

Neglect of Basic Human Needs: Housing and Shelter

The most distinguishable evidence of deprivation among slaves was housing. Southern slave quarters graphically conveyed the disparities of being black, enslaved, and poor in the world. Although poor whites possessed paltry living conditions, they lived as free human citizens of New World expansion.

Historian John Michael Vlach notes that "a plantation was not always understood to be a large agricultural estate... For most of the seventeenth century, a southern planter was a poor farmer who held claim to about a hundred acres and owned no slaves. His home was made of wood, roof shingles and unpainted."²⁶ As one former enslaved woman recalled, her slave owner's house was "a li'l old frame building like a ordinary house."

By the end of the seventeenth century, wealthy slavers had acquired a vast amount of land. Housing became a statement of acquired wealth, social standing, and political prowess. One former enslaved woman described her slave owner's house as "a pretty place, a settin' up on a high hill" where "de squirrels was so tame dar dey jus' played all round de yard... I never knowed how many acres dere was on de plantation us lived on... He had land scattered evvywhar."²⁷ Wealthy slaveholding whites resided on or owned homes ranging from modest

farms to elaborate plantation estates (mansions). Slaveholders, along with enslaved Africans, identified their housing as “the Big House” or “the White House.” One former enslaved woman described the Big House as a “grand fine place. Why, it must have been as big as de Mill Stone Baptist Church. It was all painted white with green blinds and had a big old high porch dat went nigh all ’round de house.” The Big House or White House was considered the seat of wealth and power. Vlach notes that whites with political, social, and economic access made themselves and their lands into a “territorial aristocracy,” wherein North American colony estates were “transformed into the aristocratic estates of England.”²⁸

Unlike the Big House, most enslaved Africans’ quarters were cramped log cabins clustered in single file rows, which they described as ranging from adequate shoddy fixer-uppers “built of pine boarding” and “beds made of puncheons [rough poles] . . . with ticking mattresses filled with corn shucks” to deplorable shacks—“worst as stalls used for cattle.” One former enslaved woman remarked, “they wasn’t fitten for nobody to live in. We just had to put up with them.” Another stated, “down in the quarters every black family had a one- or two-room log cabin. We didn’t have no floors in them cabins.” Another remarked, “dere am twelve cabins all made from logs, and a table and some benches, and bunks for sleepin’, and a fireplace for cookin’ and de heat. Dere am no floor, jus’ de ground.”²⁹ One former enslaved man described the realities of his living conditions. He stated, “My brothers and sisters had to sleep on the floor in the cabin huddled together in cold weather so we wouldn’t freeze to death. Our life was a misery.”³⁰ A European businessman traveling throughout the South recorded his observations of the slave quarters: “Follow them next to their huts; some with and some without floors—Go at night, view their means of lodging, see them lying on benches dozing away the night—others, of younger age, with a blanket wrapped about them; and one or two lying in the ashes. These things *I have often see with my own eyes.*”³¹

From Neglect of Basic Human Needs to Exploitation of Women for Labor

Denial of basic human needs—food, medical care, clothing, and shelter made enslaved women, men, and children vulnerable to New World exploitation. Enslaved women for example, prostituted their bodies to feed, clothe, and provide shelter for their children. Although

their waking days and sleepless nights were filled with starvation, poor health care, insufficient clothing, and inadequate shelter, they were *all* expected to work from sunup to sundown for the furtherance of European New World capitalism. As one former enslaved man expressed, “Bells and horns! Bells for dis and horns for dat! All we knowed was go and come by de bells and horns!”³² The plantation evolved around slave labor and exploitation, and enslaved women lived at the core of this oppositional space.

Womanist ethicist Joan M. Martin notes that “women were exploited for their labor in fields, their labor in the slave owner’s house for his/her family, and in the slave quarter, ironically performing tasks that sustained the slave master’s workforce.”³³ House slaves were expected to attend to housekeeping to cook meals, slaughter meat, nurse and raise children, assist the misses/mistress, and so on. Field slaves cultivated crops and tended to animals. Of the millions of enslaved Africans who worked on primarily southern agriculturally based plantations and farms, half picked cotton and the rest cultivated tobacco, rice, and sugar cane.³⁴

Enslaved women’s legacy of toil and exploitation served as a precursor for the standard of living their daughters and other enslaved girls inherited during slavery. One former enslaved man remembered his mothers’ everyday existence of weariness, self-sacrifice, and toil. His mother, a house servant, worked until she died. The son described his mother’s days:

My mother’s labor was very hard. She would go to the house in the morning, take her pail upon her head, and go away to the cow-pen, and milk fourteen cows. She then put on the bread for the family breakfast... [*then, care for*] ten to fifteen children, whose mothers worked in the field. After clearing away the family breakfast, she got breakfast for the slaves... In the meantime, she had beds to make, rooms to sweep, etc. Then she cooked the family dinner... At night she had the cows to milk again.³⁵

She would not get through [*working in master’s house*] to go to her log cabin until nine or ten o’clock at night. She would then be so tired, that she could scarcely stand; but she would find one boy with his knee out, and another with his elbow out, a patch wanting here, and a stitch there, and she would sit down by her lightwood fire, and sew and sleep alternately, often till the light began to streak in the east, and then lying down, she would catch a nap, and hasten to the toil of the day. Among the slave children, were three little orphans, whose mothers, at their death, committed them to the care of my mother... She took them

and treated them as her own... This was her work day by day. Then, in the course of the week, she had [*to care for*] her husband, her seven children, and herself.³⁶

His mother's "work 'til you drop" legacy was indicative of many enslaved women who lived without a day to think and respond to their own thoughts and feelings, and women died without a day to celebrate or care for themselves. As one former enslaved woman remarked, "I sho' has had a hard life. Jes wok, an' wok. I nebbah know nothin' but work. No'm, I nebbah knowed whut it wah t' rest. I jes owk all de time."³⁷ Enslaved women spent their days and nights caring for the slaveholder's family, their own family, and other slaves at the expense of their own self-care. Women lived a harsh life filled with invisibility and uncertainty. Their bodies were continuously pushed not only from sunup to sundown, but also from sundown *to death*. Those who worked in the fields received the same workload as men and were expected to work and produce with the same vigor. One former enslaved woman remarked that "women worked in de field same as de men. Some of dem plowed jes' like de men and boys. Couldn't tell 'em apart in de field, as dey wore pantalets or breeches. Dey tied strips round de bottom of de legs, so de loose dirt wouldn't git in deir shoes."³⁸

Enslaved women were expected to perform their "duties" at work and home regardless of sickness, pregnancy, menstrual cycle or cramps, depression, and so forth. Women who failed to labor relentlessly or perform according to the slave owner's or overseer's standards faced other forms of domestic violence ranging from intimidation and coercion to flogging and beheading. Willful neglect of their basic human needs was only a precursor to their ensuing reign of terror. Slavers and overseers not only saw a need to control them by withholding food, medical care, shoes, clothing, and shelter, but also used verbal, physical, and psychological violence to control and enforce performance. One former enslaved man exclaimed, "the way we was treated was awful. Marster would beat, knock, kick, kill. He done ever'thing he could 'cept eat us."³⁹

The Enforcement of Labor: Tools of Torture

Various tools of torture were used to enforce labor and maintain social control of enslaved African women, men, and children. Historian Ira Berlin notes that "Some owners exercised their dominion with such subtlety as to be nearly invisible; others were omnipresent, intrusive,

and heavy-handed. Rather than wield the lash and the paddle themselves, many large slave-holders delegated that chore to white overseers or black drivers. Standing above the fray, such planters like to assume the role of patriarch and rule by precept and incentive rather than force. Others seemed to enjoy...domination.”⁴⁰ One European businessman described how slave owners used bodily weapons and other weaponry as means of governance. He noted that:

whipping, kicking, beating, starving, branding, cat-hauling, loading with irons, imprisoning, or by some other cruel mode of torturing. They often boast of having invented some new mode of torture, by which they have “tamed the rascals.” What is called a moderate flogging...is horribly cruel. Should we whip our horses for any offence as they whip their slaves for small offences, we should expose ourselves to the penalty of the law...Thirty-nine lashes on the bare back, which tear the skin at almost every stroke, is...a very *moderate punishment!* Many masters whip until they are tired—until the back is a gore of blood—then rest upon it; after a short cessation, get up and go at it again...Sometimes, after being whipped, some have been shut up in a dark place and deprived of food, in order to increase their torments; and I have heard of some who have in such circumstance, died of their wounds and starvation.

Beatings and flogging sparked a wave of terror throughout the slave community. Enslaved women were beaten with a fist, foot, and whip until “dere clothes would stick in dere flesh an’ nearly kill dem.”⁴¹ Accounts such as this were not uncommon. Body restraints such as iron collars and barrels were also commonly used to intimidate or prevent slaves from absconding. Though women did resist domestic violence by running away, those caught were beaten severely, domesticated with an iron collar, and placed on display. As one European merchant stated, “I once saw a colored woman, of intelligent and dignified appearance, who appeared to be attending to the business of the house, with an iron collar around her neck, with horns or prongs extending out on either side, and up, until they met at something like a foot above her head, at which point there was a bell attached. This yoke, as they called it, I understood was to prevent her from running away, or to punish her for having done so.”⁴² One former enslaved woman described how barrels were used as weapons to torture them, “My master had a barrel, with nails drove in it, that he would put you in when he couldn’t think of nothin’ else mean enough to do. He would put you in this barrel and roll it down a hill. When you got out

you would be in a bad fix, but he didn't care. Sometimes he rolled the barrel in the river and drowned his slaves."⁴³

Enslaved men were also used as weapons against enslaved women. These men either perpetrated or witnessed abusive acts against enslaved women. A former enslaved man named Solomon recalled feeling overwhelmed while forced to flog a woman. His only option, however, was to "whip or be whipped." He recorded his anxieties:

Then turning to me, he [*slave owner*] ordered four stakes to be driven into the ground, pointing with the toe of his boot to the places where he wanted them. When the stakes were driven down, he ordered her [*Patsey*] to be stripped of every article of dress. Ropes were then brought, and the naked girl was laid upon her face, her wrists and feet each tied firmly to a stake...he took down a heavy whip, and placing it in my hands, commanded me to lash her. Unpleasant as it was, I was compelled to obey him. Nowhere that day, on the face of the whole earth, I venture to say, was there such a demoniac exhibition witnessed as then ensued. Mistress Epps stood on the piazza among her children, gazing on the scene with an air of heartless satisfaction. The slaves were huddled together at a little distance, their countenances indicating the sorrow of their hearts. Poor Patsey prayed piteously for mercy, but her prayers were vain. Epps ground his teeth, and stamped upon the ground, screaming at me, like a mad fiend, to strike *harder*. "Strike harder, or *your* turn will come next, you scoundrel," he yelled...When I struck her as many as thirty times, I stopped, and turned round towards Epps, hoping he was satisfied; but with bitter oaths and threats, he ordered me to continue.⁴⁴

Another former enslaved man described how he felt helpless as he stood by unable to protect his wife from physical abuse:

One day while I was in this prison, Garrison got mad with my wife, and took her off in one of the rooms, with his paddle in hand, swearing that he would paddle her; and I could afford her no protection at all, while the strong arm of the law, public opinion and custom, were all against me. I have often heard Garrison say, that he had rather paddle a female, than eat when he was hungry—that it was music for him to hear them scream, and to see their blood run.⁴⁵

The most profound evidence of intimidation and control was the public beatings of slaves, especially enslaved pregnant women. Public beatings were useful in instilling fear and igniting terror throughout the slave community. One enslaved woman remarked, "Slavery was

the worst days was ever seed in the world... I got the scars on my old body to show to this day. I seed worse than what happened to me. I seed them put the men and women in the stock with they hands screwed down through holes in the board and they feets tied together and they naked behinds to the world. Solomon [*the overseer*] beat them with a big whip and massa look on. The [slaves] better not stop in the fields when they hear them yellin'... We was scart of Solomon and his whip."⁴⁶

Shock and fear tactics were necessary methods for enforcing labor and paralyzing the slave community to ensure the slavers' footing and security in the New World. The more slaves lived in fear and uncertainty the stronger the slaver and overseer's grip on their bodies, minds, and souls. Public beatings rendered the slave community helpless; men were helpless in protecting women, and a mother was helpless in protecting her unborn child. One European slave trader remarked: "If Negroes could testify, they would tell you of instances of women being whipped until they have miscarried at the whipping-post."⁴⁷ Another noted: "Tune [*slave owner*] became displeased with one of the women who was pregnant, he made her lay down over a log, with her face toward the ground, and beat her so unmercifully, that she was soon after delivered of a *dead child*."⁴⁸

The severing of babies from their mothers' wombs was just as traumatic for the slave community as separating babies from their mothers' arms. As one former enslaved woman remarked, "babies was snatched from dere mother's brea' an' sold to speculators."⁴⁹ Recounted one former enslaved woman, "I seen chillun sold off and de mammy not sold, and sometimes de mammy sold and a little baby kept on de place and give to another woman to raise. Dem white folks didn't care nothing about how de slaves grieved when dey tore up a family."⁵⁰ In the following account, one former enslaved woman recalled her dramatic separation:

One morning, our family is all kinda huddled up together in a corner of the yard away from the rest, and 'long comes Major Long, carrying his bullwhip in his hand, with another man. He makes Mary stand up and say to the man with him. "Here's jes' the girl you want for a nurse girl." Mama begs Major Long not to separate us folks, and hugged Mary Jane and me to her. The major and the man wit him talks a while, and then the major come over to where we are and pulled Mary away from Mama, and he and the man took her off... we never saw her again... I reckon there musta been a hundred colored folks in that trader yard, and the dirt and smell was terrible... husbands, sold away

from wives, and children taken away from mothers. A trader, in them days, didn't think no more of selling a baby or little child away from its mother than taking a little calf away from a cow.⁵¹

The culture of violence that slavery created reduced black life in the New World to nothingness; blacks were a commodity separated and sold at will. Such is evident in the following slave sale advertisement in the New Orleans Bee newspaper: "NEGROES FOR SALE—A negro woman, twenty-four years of age, and her two children, one eight and the other three years old. Said negroes will be sold SEPARATELY or together, as desired. The woman is a good seamstress. She will be sold low for cash, or EXCHANGED FOR GROCERIES."⁵²

Domestic violence sanctioned by law under the auspices of American Christian principles provided owners or overseers the leverage to regulate slaves' bodies, souls, and minds for their own personal, political, social, or economic interests. James Baldwin asserted that "if one person is permitted to treat any group of people with special disfavor because of their race or the color of their skin, there is no limit to what one will force them to endure, and, since the entire race has been mysteriously indicted, no reason not to attempt to destroy it root and branch."⁵³ In the remaining narratives, we come to grips with the dense and senseless realities of the successful attempts of destroying black life, root, and branch. Women were not only severed from their loved ones, but also from themselves. The severance of their limbs happened as a result of minor offenses that occurred in the fields and Big House. Such offenses were not an aberration. They clearly defined blacks place in the antebellum world. One slave trader explained that, "to threaten [slaves] with death, with breaking in their teeth or jaws, or *cracking their heads, is common talk.*"⁵⁴ Another wrote that "Many, many more are knocked down; some have their eyes beaten out; some have an arm or a leg broken or chopped off; and many, for a very small, or for no crime at all, have been beaten to death, merely to gratify the fury of an enraged master or overseer."⁵⁵

Laws sanctioned the right for slavers to sever limbs and behead slaves. According to one Maryland law, "any slave convicted of petty treason, murder, or willful burning of dwelling houses, may be sentenced to have the right hand cut off, to be hanged in the usual manner, the head severed from the body, the body divided into four quarters, and the head and quarters set up in the most public place in the country where such fact was committed!!!"⁵⁶ Most states in the American Union instituted tenets of the same law.

Beheading was a terroristic act used to dishonor the victim and instill humiliation on her family, community, and legacy. Such public terroristic act sent a clear message during the antebellum period of black annihilation at any given moment. One former enslaved woman who toiled away her life in the Big House died alone. She was not convicted of “petty treason, murder, or willful burning of dwelling houses.” Nor was she punished for planning or leading a revolt against slave owners and the American slavocracy. Her unexpected torture occurred for one reason and one reason alone: *spilling gravy*. Unlike many resilient women who were able to resist and break free from the chokehold of slavery, she did not live to tell her story. However, an enslaved man did:

One day master was dining with a gentleman...A young colored woman...waited on the table. She happened to spill a little gravy on the gown of her mistress. The gentleman took his carving knife, dragged her out to wood pile, and cut her head off; den wash his hands, come in and finish his dinner like nothing had happened!⁵⁷

Crimes such as these were not limited to the antebellum period. Such mayhem waved its defiant head for centuries to follow. Nearly a century later, Mary Turner, a free black woman, eight months pregnant, vowed to have her husband’s senseless lynching avenged in the courts. Historian Leon Litwack noted that for making such accusations a mob of white men and women decided to “teach her a lesson.” They tied her ankles together, hung her upside down from a tree, and burned her body. While burning, someone from the crowd took out a carving knife and cut open her stomach. Her baby fell from her womb and cried. Upon hearing the baby cry, a man from the crowd raised his heel and crushed the baby’s head. The angry mob then withdrew their guns and fired hundreds of bullets into her burning body.⁵⁸

The Associated Press wrote that Mary Turner had made “unwise” comments about the execution and beheading of her husband. Unchecked power entitled her attackers to commit mayhem simply because they could. Mary Turner and her child were buried near the execution site. No headstones of honor erected or words about their legacy or dreams were spoken. Their graves were marked by a white man’s empty whiskey bottle and partially smoked cigar. A few years later, in Harlem, New York during the Silent Protest March of 1917 against execution style murders, banners blew. Among them, one questioned: “Mother, Do Lynchers Go to Heaven?” while another pleaded: “Give Us a Chance to Live.”

Many enslaved and free women lived to tell their stories; others did not. What we glean from their stories is a snapshot of the historical legacy of domestic terrorism in the modern world. The culture of violence that the antebellum world created is sobering at best. It reminds us of the fragility of human life and yet, in the midst of this fragility the capacity of human beings to emerge defiantly from violence to live.

In this chapter, we have seen that domestic violence crimes committed against enslaved women ranged from deprivation of basic human to physical abuse to loss of limb, body parts, and life. These terroristic acts varied from plantation to plantation. The reign of terror against black women spread from thirteen colonies to emerging cities and regions throughout the United States of America. Such acts of terrorism were not limited to domestic violence. Sexual violence was also a means of torture and control.

“Dat Man Grabbed Me an’ Strip Me Naked”: Enslaved Women and Sexual Violence

“Granny,” I said, “did your master harm you in another way?”...she leaned over and answered... “see dat girl... dat’s my chile by him [master]... I didn’t want him, but I couldn’t do nothin’.”

—enslaved woman

Enslaved women thrust into the bowels of domestic suffering were also faced with the stench of sexual assault. In her autobiography, former enslaved woman Harriet A. Jacobs (a.k.a. Linda Brent) identified the thin line between domestic and sexual violence. She, along with other enslaved women spent their lives negotiating the atrocities of American slavery—a slavocracy latent with vile acts of brutal physical assaults and sexual tyranny. Jacobs wrote that “the degradation, the wrongs, the vices that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe. They are greater than you would willingly believe... Only by experience,” Jacobs continued, “can anyone realize how deep, and dark and foul is that pit of abominations.”¹

Jacobs’ foul pit was the Flint Plantation in North Carolina. There, she experienced the unwanted thrust of her master’s vices. There, under the deep lusting eye of Dr. Flint she found herself in an unavoidable web of domestic and sexual violence. “My master,” she wrote:

began to whisper foul words in my ear...He was a crafty man, and resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes...He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could

think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master . . . where could I turn for protection?²²

Jacobs' outcry was indicative of other enslaved women whose suppressed or muted voices, if spoken and heard, would speak volumes. As many were flogged several more were also sexually assaulted. Underneath the scorching antebellum sun, enslaved women labored in the same fields in which they were sexually violated. These fields contained dried up remains of vaginal blood and wasted semen as a result of sexual violence. In the Big House, women were raped in the same spaces in which they cooked and cleaned. When night fell, countless survived the evils of the fields and Big House only to find themselves forced to breed with enslaved men in the slave quarters or barns. Where could they run? Who could they tell? Such invasion of their bodies was synonymous with dying.

Sexual violence as an act of domestic terrorism is examined in this chapter. Enslaved women were subjected to invasive abuse resulting in vaginal incarceration. Vaginal incarceration was a necessary strategy employed to imprison, populate, reduce, and regulate black existence. Black women were objectified as vagina and their bodies were invaded for pleasure and play and to enforce and increase the labor force. The penis became a tool and weapon for white male sexual gratification and socioeconomic advancement. Such device allowed owners and overseers to maintain power and control over enslaved women's bodies, and the slave community at-large.

Vaginal Incarceration: The Objectification of Enslaved Women as Vagina

The plantation became a location of social annihilation, sexual tyranny, and sexual imprisonment in that white men treated enslaved African women as "the enemy" and operated as though they were at war with their bodies. Jacobs experienced this warlike-torture and imprisonment when she lamented,

I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny . . . No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as his mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from

insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men.³

The white man's use of the penis or phallus as, according to Simone de Beauvoir, *a tool of domination* or as, according to Sigmund Freud, *a weapon of preemptive aggression and sexual proclivity* for his own personal and socioeconomic interests was domestic terrorism. Vaginal incarceration was first and foremost constituted by the objectification of the enslaved woman as vagina. Such objectification became another means by which owners and overseers sought to break through enslaved women's resistance in order to break them down and reduce them to an animal-like status.

Once the black woman was reduced to a vagina, in the eyes of her master she was an object—a reproduction tool or fantasy fulfillment for sexual appeasement and breeding. She ceased being human—an intelligent self-governing woman of respectability, dreams, and legacies and became a sexualized commodity; an exotic other held in captivity. No longer valued for who she was, but rather by what she produced, and yet, in most cases, the offspring and harvest she produced became more valuable than her.

The reducing and signifying of enslaved women as vagina “thingified” them, making them useful for pleasure, play, labor, and reproduction. Such reduction and signification transformed them from freeborn women to chattel property, concubines, and mules. It transformed them from matriarchs to plantation mammies, and industrious market women and mothers to prostitutes and breeders. It redefined and labeled them as highly sexed Jezebels, and tragic mulatto servants and Mammies. How slavers viewed enslaved women was central to how they acted upon them.

The perception and “thingifying” of African women as vagina happened the moment Europeans arrived on the African continent. Upon arriving, Europeans saw Africa and its peoples as a tropical zone. Their puritan mindset had difficulty apprehending African cultural traditions, religious rituals, and more importantly, African women's agency. African women were unlike European women whom European men had socialized into Victorian types—cultivated women with reserved emotion and masked sexuality. From the European perspective, Victorian women were virtuous, discreet, and circumspect whereas African women were uncivilized, exotic, and base. Victorian women's bodies were pure unadorned temples not meant for pleasurable sex but childbearing. The notion of bejeweled and half-clothed

African women expressing some sense of sensuality resulted in Europeans labeling them as primitive and irreligious, promiscuous, and untamed. Slave trader Willem Bosman, for example, during his travels to Africa to purchase slaves, described in his journals African women as “fiery” and “warm” and “so much hotter than the men.”⁴

Such stereotypes and perceptions became even more prevalent once African women were transplanted to New World America. Former slave owner President Thomas Jefferson later claimed that even apes when mating preferred “the black woman over those of his own species.”⁵ Europeans concluded that African women were uncivilized women “governed almost entirely by their libidos,” and therefore unworthy of the dignity and respect preserved for European women.⁶ One former enslaved woman confirmed such sentiments when she recalled that “whenever white folks had a baby born, den all de old [slave] folks had to come th’ough the room, and the master would be over ‘hind the bed, and he’d say, ‘Here’s a new little mistress or master you got to work for.’ You had to say, ‘Yessuh, Master,’ and bow real low, or the overseer would crack you. ‘Them was slavery days, dog days.’”⁷ Harriet Jacobs also identifies her master’s perception and role of “negro” women coupled with his own sense of entitlement. Jacobs wrote:

Sometimes my persecutor would ask me whether I would like to be sold. I told him I would rather be sold to anybody than to lead such a life as I did. On such occasions he would assume the air of a very injured individual, and reproach me for my ingratitude. “Did I not take you into the house, and make you the companion of my own children... Have I ever treated you like a negro? I have never allowed you to be punished, not even to please your mistress... And this is the recompense I get, you ungrateful girl!”⁸

Ironically, European slavers were both repelled and intrigued by African women’s presence. They saw the enslavement and taming of African women as their salvific duty. Yet, slavers’ desire to incarcerate to tame, was equally matched by their urge to unleash their inhibitions. They sought to harness African women’s primordial energy for their own inhuman desires. As Alexander Falconbridge, a slave ship’s surgeon described, “On board some ships, the common sailors are allowed to have intercourse with African women... The officers are permitted to indulge their passions with them at pleasure, and sometimes are guilty of such brutal excesses as disgrace human nature.”⁹ Thomas Jefferson, in his slaveholders’ journal, *Notes on Virginia*

wrote, “the whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions.”¹⁰

The paradox of slavers’ repulsion toward and desire for African women was most evident in their exploitation of the female house servant. They demeaned her yet wanted her. Jacobs along with other house servants experienced the brunt of this paradox on a daily basis. Jacob wrote:

Everywhere the years bring to all enough sin and sorrow...Even the little child...before she is twelve years...will learn to tremble when she hears her master’s footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave...My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him. If I went out for a breath of fresh air, after a day of unwearied toil, his footsteps dogged me.¹¹

In another instance, an enslaved woman recounted how an enslaved woman named Diana worked tirelessly at resisting her master’s vices. She noted that:

Diana was the house maid for the Gaskins and lived right in the house with the family. This girl was old master Gaskins’ Diana. He had his wife and children, but he just wanted his Diana in every sense of the word. He was really master of all he surveyed. He made demands on Diana just the same as if she had been his wife. Of course she fought him, but he wanted her and he had her. He use to send Diana to the barn to shell corn. Soon he would follow. He tried to cage her in the barn so she couldn’t get out. Once when Diana was successful in fighting him off, he bundled her up, put her in a cart, and took her to Norfolk and put her on the auction block.¹²

The pinnacle of this paradox, however, is most noted in slavers’ attitude and treatment of their house servant commonly known as “Mammy.” On one hand slavers created the Mammy image to portray “slavery as a humane institution.”¹³ They offered Mammy to the world as a tamed contented house servant saved from the wilds of Africa and unsoiled by the grotesque dimensions of American slavery. Mammy was a matriarchal figure of inordinate strength who professed an undying devotion to the white family—she maintained and ran the household, nurtured the children, and served as the “right

hand” of the plantation mistress.¹⁴ Black feminist Michelle Wallace notes Mammy was characterized as a “superwoman—the personification of the ideal slave and ideal woman.”¹⁵

Yet, on the other hand, slavers’ public portrayal of Mammy did not coincide with their private degradation of her. Mammy was humiliated. She was overworked and disrespected by the family, and often raped by the master or his sons in the house where she labored. One former enslaved woman recalled her mother’s brutal rape, which exemplified whites’ complex perceptions of African women. The boys whom “Mammy” cared for and raised into manhood gang raped her:

My mother’s mistress had three boys—one twenty-one, one nineteen, and one seventeen. One day, Old Mistress had gone away to spend the day. Mother always worked in the house... while she was alone, the boys came in and threw her down on the floor and tied her down so she couldn’t struggle, and one after the other used her as long as they wanted, for the whole afternoon. Mother was sick when her mistress came home. When Old Mistress wanted to know what was the matter with her, she told her what the boys had done. She whipped them, and that’s the way I came to be here.¹⁶

Such generational cycle of abuse existed within the plantation household because the children of slave owners witnessed such behaviors, and then, found themselves enactors of similar behavioral patterns. Thomas Jefferson wrote:

Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. If a parent had no other motive, either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passion towards his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally it is not sufficient. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, put on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst passions, and, thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny.¹⁷

Slavery for many black women was sexual imprisonment—an earthly hell wherein overseers, slavers, and their sons gave “loose to their worst passions,” and God and heaven appeared at times, out of sight, unresponsive, and incomprehensible. Many women felt their only options were to submit or die. As one former enslaved woman remarked, slavery “breaks down” women’s “spirits dreadfully, and makes ‘em wish they was dead.” The weight and cycle of sexual abuse caused many women to not only “wish they was dead” but they also “prayed to die.” As Jacobs cried out, “I prayed to die, but the prayer

was not answered.”¹⁸ In these moments of distress and at these sites of deprivation many women also felt caged and unworthy with no relief in sight. Jacobs continues,

I shed bitter tears that I was no longer worthy of being respected by the good and pure. Alas! Slavery still held me in its poisonous grasp. There was no chance for me to be respectable. There was no prospect of being able to lead a better life. Sometimes when my master found that I still refused to accept what he called his kind offers, he would threaten to sell my child. “Perhaps that will humble you,” said he. Humble me! Was I not already in the dust?¹⁹

The objectification of enslaved African women as vagina and their subsequent rape reduced them to an object of their masters’ desires and robbed them of their dignity. It left a lasting psychological imprint on the hearts and minds of men, women, and children throughout the American Union that the black woman was a “thing”—a “piece of meat” to purchase, sell, or indulge at the master’s will.

Rape

Once objectified, rape was another means to sustain the incarceration of black women’s vaginas. The penis was used as a tool and weapon of domination and preemptive strike not only to break, tame, and reduce enslaved African women for white male pleasure, but also to render them fearful, submissive, and powerless to enforce labor. Such terroristic tactics were employed to provide slavers and overseers the leverage they sought to conquer and control enslaved women. Black feminist scholar Angela Davis argues:

The act of copulation reduced by the white man to an animal-like act would be symbolic of the effort to conquer the resistance the black woman could unloose. In confronting the black woman as adversary in a sexual contest, the master would be subjecting her to the most elemental form of terrorism distinctively suited for the female: rape. Given the already terroristic texture of plantation life, it would be as potential victim of rape that the slave woman would be most unguarded... The integration of rape into the sparsely furnished legitimate social life of the slaves harks back to the feudal “right of the first night,” the *jus primae noctis*. The feudal lord manifested and reinforced his domination over the serfs by asserting his authority to have sexual intercourse with all the females.²⁰

By raping enslaved women and girls, slavers’ and overseers’ sought to assert their authority over the plantation work force. Such warfare

tactics were employed in conjunction with flogging. One enslaved man explained that, “women who refuse to submit themselves to the brutal desires of their owners, are repeatedly whipt to subdue their virtuous repugnance, and in most instances this hellish practice is but too successful—when it fails, the women are frequently sold off to the south.”²¹ Slavers believed, as articulated in an 1829 North Carolina Supreme Court decision that “the power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect.”²² Sexual assaults at a young age heightened the probability of inducing long-term fear and compliance. One former enslaved man expressed, “I had a pretty sister... When she was sixteen years old, her master sent for her... she cried, and didn’t want to go. She told mother her troubles, and she tried to encourage her to be decent, and hold her head above such things, if she could.”²³ White notes that an enslaved mother’s “uneasiness during her daughter’s adolescence grew out of her desire to protect her daughter... In the long run, however, a mother could do little but hope that her daughter would make it through adolescence and young womanhood unscathed by sexual abuse.”²⁴ Yet at one point or another, most enslaved girls did become a target of rape.

Feelings of fear and submission were often accompanied by feelings of powerlessness. Enslaved women had no protection under the law, and no social standing in society. Women were the property of their masters, and therefore as Jacobs noted earlier, “subject to his will in all things.” The act of rape was also an instrumental tactic for rendering enslaved mothers powerless and also fathers, husbands, and sons. Davis pointedly argues, “In launching sexual war on the woman, the master would not only assert his sovereignty” over her but also the black man.²⁵ “Clearly the master hoped that once the black man was struck by his manifest inability to rescue his women from the sexual assaults of the master, he would begin to experience deep-seated doubts about his ability to resist at all.”²⁶ Such inability to resist would aid in paralyzing both the woman and man, and thereby, the slave community at-large.

The raping of enslaved girls was also effective in sending messages of compliance and heightening moods of powerlessness within the slave community. Feminist philosopher Claudia Card argues that in martial rape, for example, one target is oftentimes “a throwaway or sacrificial victim who is used to send a message to others. The role of women who are raped and then murdered is like that of people who are murdered in a bombing. They are used to send a message to the second targets, whose compliance with various demands and expectations is sought by the terrorist.”²⁷ One former enslaved man

recalled the rape of several girls, which incited terror among the girls and sent shock waves of compliance throughout the slave community: "There was a widower . . . who took one of his women slaves into the house. She told her master one day that seven of the young girls had poked fun at her for the way she was living. This raised his ambition. 'I'll teach 'em to make fun!' said he. So he sent the woman away, and ordered the young girls to come to him, one by one.²⁸ The girls were terrified and defenseless; they, like Harriet Jacobs and many other women and girls, had no recourse. Jacobs said when she heard her master's footfall, she trembled. Jacobs wrote:

It was a lovely spring morning, and when I marked the sunlight dancing here and there, its beauty seemed to mock my sadness. For my master, whose restless, craving, vicious nature roved about day and night, seeking whom to devour, had just left me, with stinging, scorching words; words that scathed ear and brain with fire. O, how I despised him! I thought how glad I should be, if some day when he walked the earth, it would open and swallow him up, and disencumber the world of a plague. When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong. So deeply was I absorbed in painful reflections.²⁹

The sound of Jacob's master's *footsteps dogging her at every turn* felt like an invading force impeding on her well-being, self-respect, and dignity. Such were the sentiments of many enslaved women, men, and children during the antebellum period. Although American slavocracy and the plantation complex did not operate under martial law nor did Europeans see themselves as a militia committing martial rape, Europeans appeared in Africa and North America like a militia on a mission. Overcome by competition and greed, they later appeared on the African continent as an occupying force, invading and raping enslaved women's bodies in the same manner that they invaded and raped the lands. As argued in chapter one, they transitioned from friendly trade to overthrowing existing orders (both the West and West Central African and Native American ways of life). They deemed these social orders primitive and untamed, and then, commenced in instituting a system of governance that favored their interests. Yet, they did not operate alone; African middlemen and women participated in the capturing and incarceration of their own people. In New World America, slavers, overseers, and their sons objectified and signified African women as vagina and held them captive to this

ideology by raping and exploiting them for pleasure, play, and for the purpose of enforcing labor. Although the incarceration of enslaved women's vaginas proved profitable for slavers' own self-serving interests, further detriment to black life came once slavers realized they could become even more profitable by breeding more slaves.

Sexual Reproduction: Breeding

The demoralizing breeding process between enslaved women and black and white men intensified the grotesque nature of vaginal incarceration and sexual violence in North America. Breeding was a dehumanizing act that objectified and reduced black women to an animal-like status and also black men. As one former enslaved woman exclaimed, "we weren't nothing but cattle."³⁰ Another remarked:

Most slave owners did not care who fathered the children, as long as they kept on coming. They employed studs or forced couples to mate "just like cattle" ... On the Blackshear place, slave owners took all the fine looking boys and girls that was thirteen years old or older and put them in a big barn. They used to strip them naked and put them in a big barn every Sunday and leave them there until Monday morning. Out of that came sixty babies.³¹

On the auction block, enslaved women's bodies were publicly exposed and humiliated for sale. As one trader exclaimed while auctioning a half naked woman before a crowd of prospective buyers, "There's a breast for you; good for a round dozen [*babies*] before she's done child-bearing."³² Oftentimes slave buyers kneaded a woman's stomach before a crowd of spectators to determine how many children she could have.³³ Many were treated indecently during sale and some had "experimental gynecological operations and cesarean sections performed on them without the benefit of anesthesia."³⁴ One enslaved woman recounts how enslaved girls and women were stripped on the auction block during inspection for prospective slave owners and traders:

Us didn't have no clothes for goin' round. I never had a undershirt until just before my first child was borned. I never had nothin' but a shimmy and a slip for a dress, and it was made outen de cheapest cloth dat could be bought, unbleached cloth, coarse, but made to last... we was all chained and dey strips all our clothes off and de folks what gwine buys us comes round and feels us all over. And if any de slaves don't want to take dere clothes off, de man gets a long, black whip and cuts dem up hard. When Marse Jones seed me on de block, he say "Dat's a whale of a woman."³⁵

Breeding was a monopoly. One former enslaved woman noted that “The masters were very careful about a good breedin’ woman. If she had five or six children she was rarely sold”³⁶ One white businessman recalled activities that took place on a plantation containing about one hundred women:

One day the owner ordered the women into the barn, he then went in among them, whip in hand, and told them he meant to flog them all to death; they began immediately to cry out “What have I done Massa?” ... He replied; “D—n you, I will let you know what you have done, you don’t breed, I haven’t had a young one from one of you for several months.” They told him they could not breed while they had to work in the rice ditches. (...they frequently had to work from daylight in the morning til it was so dark they could see no longer). After swearing and threatening for some time, he told them to tell the overseer’s wife, when they got in that way [*pregnant*], and he would put them upon the land to work.³⁷

An enslaved man also recalled, “Massa, he bring some more women to see me. He wouldn’t let me have jus’ one woman. I have ’bout fifteen and I don’t know how many children. Some over a hunerd, I’s sho’.”³⁸ White notes that proslavery newspapers and flyers printed detailed accounts of enslaved women’s capacity for breeding. The “merits of a particular ‘breeder’ were often the topic of parlor or dinner table conversations.”³⁹ Slavers also evaluated the “merits” of black males as breeders. One former enslaved man remembers:

Gainan Macabee, who owned a large farm across the river, had a great number of lively-looking girl slaves...all the young men in the neighborhood would...get over there if possible. Gainan, he watched his girls closely—used to sit on a chair between his two houses where he could see everything—and if a skinny, reedy sort of nigger made his appearance...Gainan would call him over and say, “Whose nigger are you?” The boy would tell him. Gainan would look him over and say, “...I don’t want you comin’ over to see my gals. You ain’t of good stock” ... But when he saw a well-built, tall, husky man...Gainan would call him and say, “Whose nigger are you?” And when he was told, he’d say, “...You can come over and see my gals anytime you want. You’re of good stock.”⁴⁰

Breeding was critical to the slave economy, and therefore women who resisted breeding were punished. As one former enslaved woman stated, “dar was an overseer who use to tie mother up in de barn wid a rope aroun’ her arms up over her head, while she stood on a block. Soon as dey got her tied, dis block was moved an’ her feet dangled...Dis ole man, now, would start beatin’ her...I asked mother,

‘what she done fer ’em to beat and do her so?’ She said. ‘Nothing [but] ’fuse to be wife to [breed with] dis man.’⁴¹ One white businessman noted that on another plantation an enslaved woman “gave birth to a child which lived but two or three weeks. After its death the planter . . . asked her how she came to let the child die . . . She told him, with all the feeling of a mother, the circumstances of its death. But her story availed her nothing . . . She was severely whipped.”⁴²

Women who resisted breeding or absconded were also severely beaten in public to incite fear. One former enslaved woman stated, “Aunt Cheyney was jus’ out of bed with a sucklin’ baby one time, and she runs away. Some say that was ’nother baby of Massa’s breedin’. She don’t come to the house to nurse her baby, so they . . . gits the hounds and takes her trail. They gits near her and she grabs a limb and tried to heist herself in a tree, but them dogs grab her and pull her down . . . the dogs tore her naked”⁴³ Those beaten beyond the capacity of childbearing were often sold and labeled “ruined for breeding.” As one former enslaved woman expressed after she was beaten severely, “my Massa looks me over good and says I’ll git well, but I’m ruin’ for breedin’ chillum.”⁴⁴

Breeding not only reduced enslaved women and men to an animal-like status but also produced unhealthy bonds between them during the antebellum period. Both enslaved women and men were caught in an inescapable bond of involuntary human reproduction.

Sexual Reproduction: Bonding

Breeding of enslaved women with enslaved men for the purpose of increasing the labor force was a social norm in antebellum America. Although sexual reproduction hinged primarily on breeding for economic advancement, another dimension emerged during the sexual reproduction process—bonding. By forced breeding, enslaved women and men became bonded to each other against their will in unhealthy ways. In this grotesque entrapment—the forced breeding and bonding of enslaved women and men—the slave community found itself entangled in a web of sexual oppression and inbreeding. Enslaved women and men were knowingly and unknowingly forced to breed with their own kin. Additionally, the male child from these unions oftentimes later married or was forced to breed with their mothers. One former enslaved man described these unhealthy bonds:

She [enslaved woman] was forced to leave her infant son who was just beginning to walk. Nineteen years later; all ties between the two having been broken her child was sold to the same plantation. Working

near each other in the field, the two strangers... were married. Some time thereafter, the mother noticed a peculiar scar on her husband's head and asked him how he got it. He told her that as a child he fell out of his mother's arms into a fire and got badly burned. "Why," screamed the poor woman, "you are my own son!"⁴⁵

An enslaved woman expressed the same sentiments: "One boy was traded off from his mother when he was young, an' after he was grown, he was sold back to de same marster an' married to his own mother."⁴⁶ Another stated: "My father told me dere wuz once a mastah who sold a woman and her son. Many years after dis, de woman married. One day when she wuz washing her husband's back she seen a scar on his back. De woman 'membered de scar. Et wuz de scar her mastah had put on her son. 'Course dey didn't stay married, bud de woman wouldn't ever let her son leave her."⁴⁷

In the sexual war between white men and the slave community, slavers did not view inbreeding as molestation or incest because enslaved women and men were considered less than human. Enslaved women were not only signified as vagina but also "bitches" and "hoes," and enslaved men as "bucks" and "motherfuckers." For enslaved women and men thrust against their will into a sexual war that produced unimaginable bonds, the question became: how does one unbind oneself from a grotesquery one did not create but is forced to live with for generations to come? How do a people—treated as livestock—deal with and unpack the language "niggers, bitches, ho's, and motherfuckers" that reinforces their oppression?

Yet the white man too became entangled in the forced sexual reproductive web for although he functioned primarily as *breeder* of enslaved women and men, he also became *the bred* when he forced himself upon African women and fathered their children. Psychiatrist Gail Elizabeth Wyatt points out that, "breeding was not just a matter of slaves impregnating slaves... after 1808, when legislation against importing slaves created increased demand. Masters who specialized in trading slaves became slave breeders"⁴⁸ Slavers used their penises as tools and weapons to breed with enslaved women. Slave children born from these unions were exploited, raped, and bred by their fathers or another male, and oftentimes, sold to the highest bidder. As one former enslaved man remarked "50 to 60 slave women were kept solely for whites to impregnate them. From these women, 20–25 children were born and sold away when they were ready for market."⁴⁹ Another white businessman noted, "To show the disgusting pollutions of slavery, and how it covers with moral filth... A planter offered a white man of my

acquaintance twenty dollars for every one of his female slaves, whom he would get in the family way. This offer was no doubt made for the purpose of improving the stock, on the same principle that farmers endeavor to improve their cattle by crossing the breed.”⁵⁰

Enslaved women and men reduced to an animal-like status and forced to breed were faced with a human dilemma for generations to come. Given that countless slave children were products of molestation and incest and birthed into a world that did not acknowledge such, what consequential impact would befall their daughters and sons for generations to come? More sinisterly, how would both slave and master who functioned as co-creators in the making of livestock—human life—determine in generations to come who belonged to whom? For, if enslaved mothers bred and bonded with sons, presumably so did enslaved fathers with daughters, and likewise owners with their slave women, and young slave owners’ sons with their servant “gal” playmates and “Mammies.” As one enslaved woman remarked, “sometime [us] folks git so mixed up about who kin to who, they marry their own sister or brother.”⁵¹

Conclusion

This chapter has given much attention to the dynamics of sexual violence in the lives of enslaved women. European slavers imprisoned their bodies in the same manner that they colonized the lands—with what Jacobs describes as “an air” of entitlement, superiority, and dominance. Through vaginal incarceration, slavers reduced black women’s humanity to vagina rendering them sexualized commodities and chattel property viable only for pleasure, play, labor, and reproduction. The bent of black women’s backs from rape and breeding became the bridge by which slaveholding families and merchants entered into the new frontier. And yet, with all this mayhem in antebellum America one must wonder where was the missus? What was she doing or thinking, while her father, husband, son, and plantation preacher was seducing women into slavery with sugarplums, and later, forcing little girls onto kitchen floors and cotton fields for sexual pleasure or labor production? Such were the realities of a slavery latent with domestic terrorism. Did the missus join with the master in administering and cultivating the sugarplum poison or was she the antidote?

“In the Company of My Sisters”: Violence among Women in the American Colonies

No one can humiliate you like one of your own.

—*Judy Grahn*

The sugarplum journey from West and West Central Africa to North American slave-owning properties was a brutally tumultuous and demoralizing one for enslaved African women born free. Their violent inhuman capture and New World exploitation marked the eruption of lawful domestic terrorism in North America during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. The previous chapters have shown how slavers engaged in unimaginable terroristic acts against enslaved women’s bodies and souls in order to further their aim of New World expansion. In this chapter we turn our attention to acts of violence between white women and enslaved African women. Just as “the voices from the past are needed to accompany contemporary women on their journey of recovery” from violence by men, women’s experiences of violence at the hands of other women are also critical. Countless enslaved women’s narratives name violence among women as a pressing reality during the antebellum period.

These narratives suggest that, as feminist Phyllis Chesler puts it, all women are not “kind, caring, maternal, valiant and ever-noble under siege—and that all men are their oppressors...like men, women are really human beings...capable of both cruelty and compassion, envy and generosity, competition and cooperation.”¹ A nuanced perspective of violence experienced by women also helps in the “attempt to initiate the comprehensive social change

necessary” for combating violence experienced and perpetrated by women.² This chapter identifies sisterhood violence as those violent acts experienced by enslaved African women at the hands of white women and *sistah-hood* violence as violence between black women.

* * *

Enslaved Women and Sisterhood Violence

Misses would beat and stomp away, with all the venom of a demon

—enslaved woman

Henrietta King, an eighty-six-year-old former enslaved woman sat with reporters and recounted a day in the life of a slave girl. Her brutal “disfiguring” experience happened before her tenth birthday. King’s story is told in its entirety to capture the nuances of her experience. King stated:

She [her Mistress] put a piece of candy on her washstan’ one day. I was ’bout eight or nine years ole, an’ it was my task to empty de slop ev’y morin’. I seed dat candy layin’ dere, an’ I was hungry...had jes’ little pieces of scrapback each mornin’ throwed at me from de kitchen. I seed dat peppermint...an’ I ain’t dared go near it ’cause I knew ole Missus jus’ waiting’ for me to take it. Den one morin’ I so hungry dat I cain’t resist. I went straight in dere an’ grab dat stick of candy an’ stuffed it in my mouf an’ chew it down quick...

Nex’ mornin’ ole Mussus say, “Henrietta, you take dat piece o’ candy out my room?”

“No mam, ain’t seed no candy...”

“You lyin’ and I’m gonna whup you. Come here.”

“Please, Missus, please don’t whup me. I ain’t seed no candy. I ain’t took it.”

Well, she got her rawhide down...an’ she grabbed me by de arm an’ she try to turn me ’cross her knees whilst she set in de rocker so’s she could hol’ me. I twisted an’ turned till finally she called her daughter. De gal come an’ took dat strap like her mother tole her and commence to lay it on real hard whilst Missus holt me. I twisted ‘way...Den ole Missus lif’ me up by de legs, an’ she stuck my head under de bottom of her rocker, an’ she rock forward so’s to hol’ my head an’ whup me some mo’. I guess dey must of whupped me near a hour wid dat rocker leg a-pressin’ down on my head.

Nex' thing I knew de ole Doctor was dere, an' I was lyin' on my pallet in de hall, an' he was a-pusin an' diggin' at my face...I couldn' open my mouf and' I feel it an dey warn't no bone in de lef' side at all...I couldn't chaw nothin'—only drink milk...He [*doctor*] git it arterwhile so's it open an' I could move my lips, but it kep' movin' over to de right, an' he couldn't stop dat. Arter a while it was over jes' whar it is now...Don't even 'member what it is to chaw. Been eatin' liquid, stews, an' soup ever since dat day, an' dat was eighty-six year ago.³

King's story suggests that slaveholding women were neither naïve nor passive participants of New World expansion. King's story suggests that some slaveholding women and their daughters were terrorists, too. Counter to what this and other narratives suggest, however, is another perspective offered by historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. In her book *Within the Plantation Household: Black & White Women in the Old South*, Fox-Genovese explores the relationship between slaveholding white women (female owners and wives of the master) and their enslaved African house servants and argues that mistresses had a loving and affectionate bond with their house servants. Fox-Genovese asserts that:

Mistresses frequently expressed genuine personal concern and grief over the illness or death of their slaves...Death confronted mistresses with the humanity of their slaves and with the ties...that bound them to those whom they held in bondage...for the moment we are not concerned with the perceptions of slave women, who surely had their own stories to tell, but rather...the perceptions of the mistresses. For one single such sense of intimacy, affection, and love for a slave would be enough to confirm the mistress, psychologically and ideologically, in her own vision of herself as bound by ties of human fellowship to those whom she not only governed but owned....Mistresses lived intimately with their female house slaves, especially their own and their children's nurses, and in an extended personal circle.⁴

Fox-Genovese notes that those who oppose these bonds of intimacy between mistresses and enslaved women and identify them as “atypical reactions or atypical relations...miss the point” of the true feelings of the mistresses. Drawing from antebellum white women's diaries, Fox-Genovese provides examples of these bonds. Among her examples is an account taken from Anna Matilda Page King's diary. Page King recalled how she “devotedly nursed” her “favorite young slave, Annie” who later died.⁵ In a letter to her traveling husband, Page King wrote “grieving—grieving for the death of a favorite servant

girl—forgetful that we must all die—that not only must I die—but—I may have this misery of seeing those I love better than life—whose lives are dearer to me than my own soul—taken, & I left to mourn their loss.”⁶

But who and what was Page King grieving over or about? Was she grieving the loss of Annie, the person or her “favorite servant girl?” Was she grieving the loss of an intimate sisterhood bond between two women or the loss of her favorite help? Did Annie die as a result of violence or enslavement—the breakdown of her body from years of labor? Where is Annie’s voice in the story?

Page King wrote to her husband, “grieving . . . forgetful that we must all die.” What were the dynamics of Page King’s everyday existence that afforded her the leisure to become forgetful of death? Did a life of access, luxury, or privilege provide her the sustenance of something to live for and the lack thereof cause Annie her servant girl to die? Did a life of suffering and loss cause Annie to live each day at the edge of death? Although Page King, the mistress was “left to mourn” her loss, was Annie her servant girl awaiting death—an afterlife free of exploitation, dehumanization, and toil? Or was Annie sad to leave her enslavement and her mistress? Who was Page King really concerned about? One could conclude that the four “I” statements and the three personal pronouns (we, my, me) in Page King’s account signified that her loss was more about her than her “favorite servant girl.” In addition to Page King, Fox-Genovese provides other examples of mourning mistresses. Eliza Clitherall, for example was in grave distress over the loss of her own “faithful old Hagar” and “the death of her daughter’s slave, Theodore.” Clitherall laments, “My poor child loses by him his wages of \$350 per anum.”⁷

If Fox-Genovese’s analyses of white women’s compassion toward their house servants are correct, then, what are we to make of the terroristic acts committed by slaveholding women against enslaved women—acts that jeopardized enslaved women’s welfare, caused them illnesses or injuries, and oftentimes led to their death? What are we to do with Henrietta King’s story and those countless other enslaved women’s testimonies that describe the mistress-to-house servant relationships as contentious at best? Although Fox-Genovese provides excerpts from slaveholding women’s diaries, the voices of house servants who encountered these mistresses are missing. Enslaved women’s narratives are needed to affirm or deny the integrity of such expressions of “genuine personal concern and bonds of human fellowship.” Without these enslaved women’s voices, the

feelings, expressions, and bonds of the mistresses are merely romanticized notions.

Cultural critic and black feminist bell hooks in questioning why women of color have not written an “unrelenting critique” of Fox-Genovese’s work also questions the merits of “members of a privileged group interpreting the reality of members of a less powerful, exploited, and oppressed group.”⁸ Fox-Genovese writes about slave women and slaveholding women from the perspective of slaveholding white women and her own social location. Space must also be created for the less powerful, exploited, and oppressed group to tell its own version of the story about the relationship between slaveholding white women and enslaved African house servants.

In their own voices, former enslaved house servants such as Henrietta King paint a portrait of their mistresses as neither loving nor benevolent. The mistress’ touch was neither gentle nor soothing. As one former enslaved woman put it, women were known to “lash the slaves with the might of a man.”⁹ Recipients of mistress’ wrath likened her “lashes” to strikes against their humanity, dignity, and well-being. One enslaved woman described the cycle of beatings her mistress inflicted upon her and other house servants. “Mistress did her best to kill me, but I lived through it,” she stated. “She used to sit over her toddy, trying to invent some new way to punish [slaves] . . . She used to pull the hair out of my head, and tell the children to pull it . . . One day, . . . she gave me a blow over the head with a dusting brush, and I fell senseless on the floor . . . They brought me to; and after I got a little over it, she whipped me for pretending to be dead.”¹⁰

Another former enslaved woman recalled how her mistress often degraded house servants. “Ole Missis Gullendin,” she stated, “she’d take a needle and stick it through one of their nigger women’s lower lip and pin it to the bosom of her dress, and the woman would go roun’ all day with her head drew down thataway, and slobberin’. Ole Missis Gullendin done her that-away lots of times. There was knots on her lip where the needle had been stuck in it.”¹¹ Another former enslaved man recalled the severe lashing a ten-year-old house servant received from her mistress for breaking a comb:

there was a comb found broken in a cupboard, which was worth about twenty-five or thirty-seven and a half cents. She [*the mistress*] suspected a little girl, 9 or 10 years old, who served in the house, of having broken it. She took her in the morning, before sunrise, into a room, and calling me to wait upon her, had all the doors shut. She tied her hands, and then

took her frock up over her head, and gathered it up in her left, hand, and with her right commenced beating her naked body with bunches of willow twigs. She would beat her until her arm was tired, and then thrash her on the floor, and stamp on her with her foot, and kick her, and choke her to stop her screams... The poor child never recovered.¹²

Enslaved women expressed feelings antithetical to those of “affectionate personal bonds” between mistresses and their female slaves as described by Fox-Genovese. Enslaved women often described their mistresses as she-devils, hell-pigeons, demons, or cruel, venomous, unyielding, and mean. In the opening narrative for example, Henrietta King found herself disfigured for seventy six years as a result of her mistress’ callousness. Public embarrassment due to her disfigurement led her to refer to her mistress as a “she-debbil.” King remarked, “I been like dis so long now dat I don’ never think on it, ’ceptin’ when I see someone starin’ hard an’ wonderin’ what debbil got in an’ made me born dis way. An’ it was a debbil dat done it—a she-debbil, burnin’ and twistin’ in hell.”¹³ King’s mistress did not grieve for her internal imprisonment or her public shame. She expressed her concern by crushing her face and “giving her away” at age thirteen.

The words that another former enslaved woman used to describe her mistress was antonymous to compassionate. She wrote, “When mother was in pregnant stage, if she happen to burn de bread or biscuits, Missus would order her to the branary... After she had stripped her stark naked she would beat mother wid a strap... She beat all de slaves cruelly, dat ‘hell pigeon’ did.”¹⁴ Another former enslaved woman recalled the meanness of her mother’s mistress. She noted that, “[My young misses’] mother wuz a mean ol’ thin’. She’d beat yer with a broom or a leather strap or anythin’ she’d git her hands on.”¹⁵ Another former enslaved woman remembered how her mistress, Missus Hodges “studied ‘bout meanness.”¹⁶ She stated that “she was mean to anybody she could lay her hands to... She beat me and used to tie my hands and make me lay flat on the floor, and she put snuff in my eyes... I knows that’s why I went blind.”¹⁷

The cruelty of some masters and mistresses caused enslaved women to run away from their mistresses, rather than toward them for protection and comfort. Those who absconded were often punished severely and publicly ostracized. Such is exemplified in the following narratives:

There was a woman slave who persisted in running away. Whippings did not frighten her, and so her mistress had her belled. An iron hoop was welded across her waist, another about her neck, and attached to these

a long rod went up her back to which, up over her head and beyond her reach, a bell was hung. It rang as she moved, and when she lay down at night the least motion started the clapper. She wore it until she was free.¹⁸

A white businessman whose father and brothers were slaveholders recounted the punishment and ostracizing a young girl from a neighboring plantation received, which ultimately led to her death:

A young woman, who was generally very badly treated, after receiving a more severe whipping than usual, ran away. In a few days she came back . . . Towards night, she told her master that she was sick, and wished to go to the house. She went, and as soon as she reached it, laid down on the floor exhausted. The mistress asked her what the matter was? . . . She asked again; but received no answer. I'll see, said she, if I can't make you speak . . . took hold of her throat. This had the desired effect. The poor girl faintly whispered, "Oh misse, don't—I am most gone;" and expired.¹⁹

Fox-Genovese attributes some behaviors exhibited by the misses to mood swings. She asserts that "incompatible personalities, like the normal mood swings on both sides, accounted for many instances of bad chemistry between mistress and slaves, including the bad chemistry that plagued relations between those who normally got on well and even demonstrated unfeigned affection for each other."²⁰ Yet, the preceding narratives say little of mood swings.

Moreover, mistresses oftentimes felt enraged by their husbands' infidelity and projected these feelings of rage onto their "favorite servant girls." Mistresses felt superior and yet, also threatened by enslaved women who involuntarily "lived more intimately with their" husbands, than with them. Slavers justified their lewd behaviors by arguing that their wives were virtuous women accustomed to the standards of civilized societies and therefore, preserved. Many held the same position as slave trader William Drayton who maintained that "one of the first fruits of slavery was to rescue" white women and "afford them leisure time to improve themselves."²¹

Yet, while slavers were preserving their European counterparts they were also oppressing them by stifling their sexuality and betraying them. The white woman's vagina and her personhood were constrained to and by a virtuous image although simultaneously disrespected by a husband who desired and bore children by black female house servants. Her husband then allowed her "slave girl" concubine and their children to live and serve in the same home as his wife.

Such realities created tensions between master, mistress, and female house servants within the plantation household. House servants were subjected to both the sexual defiance of their masters and the jealous passive-aggressive tirades of their mistresses. Though mistresses often turned a blind eye to their husbands' and their own actions, they left one eye open on their "favorite servant girl." This open eye was often filled with jealousy and contempt, which resulted in violence. Jealousy and contempt understandably hindered "bonds of human fellowship." As one former enslaved man put it, "Sometimes white mistresses will surmise that there is an intimacy between a slave woman and the master, and perhaps she will make a great fuss and have her whipped, and perhaps there will be no peace until she is sold. I have seen slaveholders with little bits of children on a horse, whom they were taking from home to sell."²²

One can argue that there were intimate bonds between some mistresses and slave women. What the aforementioned narratives point to, however, is a version of the story, omitted by Fox-Genovese. These narratives and others speak of the disparities between the two accounts—affectionate bonds and contentious bonds. Hearing stories from enslaved women's perspectives provides an alternate lens for further exploration of the relationship between white women and enslaved African women during the antebellum period. Such stories suggest that the missus was just as culpable as her husband in committing heinous acts against enslaved women.

Although Fox-Genovese and other scholars have noted that white and black women were welded together in an inescapable web of gender oppression dominated by white male rule and imperialism, this welding does not suggest that these women formed bonds of intimacy because of it. Though welded together through gender they were separated by race, class, and religio-cultural identities. The horrors of slavery reinforced black women's position in the antebellum world and did little to alter their overall status. Even Fox-Genovese analysis cannot escape this reality. As Fox-Genovese notes, the house servant "worked tirelessly in the kitchen and smokehouses, produced three meals a day, waited on tables, washed and ironed, lifted barrels, swept floors, dusted furniture, hoed and weeded gardens, collected eggs from the poultry, suckled, washed, and minded infants, spun wove and sewed household linens" and "did whatever their mistresses needed or wanted done,"²³ the slaveholding daughter's day was filled with "reading, visiting, and shopping, dressing and fixing her hair for the evening, gathering flowers to dress flower pots, arranging her room, gathering

roses and putting the leaves up to dry and mending her kid gloves or occasionally passing a whole day in doing nothing at all.”²⁴

The disparities between mistresses and house servants’ lived experiences suggest that mutual bonds of human flourishing were an aberration. In order for authentic bonds of human fellowship to have existed mistresses would have had to divest themselves of white privilege and stand against the norms of a patriarchal and violent American slavocracy that deemed blackness as inhuman and inferior. Although mistresses had to deal with gender oppression and patriarchy, their race, class, gender, and religio-cultural privileges allowed them at times, to ignore these realities.

Intimate violence against enslaved women at the hands of their mistresses suggest that bonds of sisterhood were hindered by the culture of violence that slavery produced. Although history has shown that some women stood against American slavocracy, countless others did not. Henrietta King’s mistress was so enraged by King’s presence that she disfigured King’s face, leaving both women with a lifetime of wounds. King, heartbroken by the violence she experienced at the hands of another woman, told reporters what to do if they wanted to know what slavery days were like, “Here,” she said. “put yo’ han’ on my face—right here on dis lef cheek—dat’s what slave days was like.”²⁵ “Don’t just stare at the horror and quickly turn away,” King was saying, “But touch me and feel the impact of American slavery. Touch me and you will know.” The realities of violence against enslaved black women suggest that men did not stand alone in the reign of antebellum terror. And yet, with all this mayhem, one must wonder were bonds of solidarity flowing among black women or were they themselves embittered by their sugarplum poison?

* * *

Enslaved Women and Sistah-hood Violence

That woman was simply mean.

—enslaved woman

African women’s embittering experiences in North America caused them, at times, to regurgitate and spatter fragments of their sugarplum poison onto other black women. Internalized violence, oppression, and imbalanced power dynamics caused some black women to

lash out and embrace, console and exclude, mask and share, build bonds and tear down. Audre Lorde wrote that, black women were “born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female. We are strong and enduring. We are also deeply scarred.”²⁶ The culture of violence that slavery created made it almost inevitable that violence would emerge between black women.

This section explores deeper adverse affections expressed by enslaved women “born into a society entrenched with loathing and contempt” and also, “deeply scarred.” Racism, classism, sexism, and caste-ism dictated and controlled the release of their affections fueling feelings of jealousy, resentment, unhealthy competition, mistrust, and betrayal. Some women gossiped; they spoke unkindly and committed cruel acts. Others appeared numb and unsympathetic toward their daughters and other women because they, themselves, felt a sense of disgrace from whites’ public and legalized humiliation of their bodies and souls. They learned to see and treat themselves and other women from this space and experience of worthlessness. Yet, as the opening epigraph suggests, some women’s adverse reactions were not merely the result of external factors but also an innate toxicity that bled out onto everyone they encountered. Some women were *simply* mean.

Sistah-hood violence focuses on negative behaviors among enslaved women. The behavioral patterns analyzed in this section are a snapshot of adverse feelings and actions that black women expressed toward other black women and such feelings and actions continue to impact relationships between black women today. These life-threatening emotions and acts represent common emotions and actions within the human community. The harsh realities of black women’s experiences during the antebellum period brought forth these responses in some. The underlying question to consider when examining violence between black women is: Can subjugated peoples escape the ideological power structures that those in power created to control them?

* * *

Jealousy, Resentment, and Unhealthy Competition

I hopes and prays dat dere’ll be no sich thing as a color line, in Hebben.

—enslaved man

The pressing reality of class and caste on many slave owning properties fueled misconceptions and division between black women. The

“brown paper bag test” and elevated positioning of one enslaved woman over another struck chords of disharmony and tension within the slave community. At any given moment, skin tones and one’s placement in the white world had an adverse affect on the individual.

Chapter two identified varying degrees of social stratifications within precolonial West Africa. Although precolonial West and West Central African ethnic groups had similar social systems based on class and ethnic ties, each had its own unique and autonomous system. Once West and West Central African peoples arrived on North American slave owning properties their ethnic groups and social stratifications collapsed overtime into a race based hierarchal system determined and controlled by inordinate violence.

One former enslaved woman provides an example of the complexities of this early stratification among “whites” and “slaves” in the New World:

Dere was just two classes to de white folks—buckra slave owners and poor white folks dat didn’t own slaves. Dere was more classes ‘mongst de slaves. De fust class was de house servants. Dese was de butler, de maids, de nurses, chambermaids, and de cooks. De nex’ class was de carriage drivers and de gardeners, de carpenters, de barber, and de stable men. Then come de nex’ class: de wheelwright, wagoners, blacksmiths, and slave foremen. De nex’ class I ‘members was de cow men and de niggers dat have care of de dogs. All dese have good houses and never have to work hard or git a beatin’. Then come de cradlers of de wheat, de threshers, and de millers of de corn and de wheat, and de feeders of de cotton gin. De lowest class was de common field niggers.²⁷

Scholars such as historian George P. Rawick have argued that even within social stratifications like the preceding one, enslaved Africans also developed their “own class systems based upon the division of labor on the plantation.”²⁸ Gomez agrees with Rawick, yet argues that these systems were influenced heavily by Euro-American culture. For the most part, Europeans dispersed African peoples for labor throughout the American colonies based on these factors: continent of birth and skill level, and ethnicity or color gradation.²⁹

During trade negotiations, slave traders often identified specific ethnic groups from particular regions in West Africa who were more qualified for agricultural labor and others who were better suited as craft persons. Gomez suggests that the Akan and Igbo, for example, were universally known as industrious and were well represented in

areas such as Virginia and Maryland where such skills were needed. West Central Africans were skilled laborers and heavily recruited for labor in South Carolina and Georgia. The Senegambians were widely known as cultivators, and also recruited along with Africans from the Bight of Benin for unskilled and skilled labor in Louisiana, while the expertise of the Fon-Ewe-Yoruba and Bambara contingency impacted the Mississippi region.³⁰ The preceding grouping reflects those ethnic groups in which a high percentage emerged in a particular North American region; it does not suggest that only these particular ethnic groups were imported to these particular regions.³¹

Although a large percentage were “imported to work as cultivators on farms and plantations,” Africans’ skills were also essential to laying “[t]he nation’s rural and urban foundations by working as coopers, cartwrights, boat and shipbuilders, stevedores, cart drivers, construction and drainage workers, sugar and indigo processors, butchers, and so on.”³² From the onset, field laborers consisted of Africans. As time progressed, field laborers were comprised of darker hued rural folk and skilled laborers lighter skinned African American-born slaves. Slavers also began to prefer African American-born slaves over African-born because they were less combative and more acclimated to New World values.

Although a person’s continent of birth and skill level remained a factor in labor differentiation, ethnicity or color gradation also impacted labor assignments. Eventually, miscegenation (race mixing) among the races (Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans) set the standards of occupational hierarchy. Gomez argues that “groups more closely approximating the European phenotype were believed to have greater propensities for certain tasks.”³³ On some slave owning properties these individuals were given assignments which placed them in positions of authority or privilege over other slaves; these assignments also increased their interaction with whites oftentimes isolating them from the slave community. Mulattoes and house servants, for example, were granted privileges that were not granted to darker hued Africans and field workers and, most often house servants did not live in the slave quarters. Moreover, some field workers were granted privileges to which other field workers were not privy and field laborers, placed in positions of authority over other field slaves were known to disassociate themselves from field hands.

Both classism and caste-ism contributed to power struggles, unhealthy competition, and feelings of jealousy and resentment between enslaved women. Although all women belonged to the “lower

class” of slaves, the privileging of one group over another by slavers based on continent of birth, skill level, and ethnicity or color gradation fueled conflict and division. Isolated from one another, enslaved women oftentimes formed opinions about each other from what they heard. Yet there were also cases of enslaved women forming opinions based on adverse experiences with other black women. As one former enslaved woman put it plainly, “Now, ’bout’er good ’oman an’ a bad’un. You kin niver tel ’bout ‘em ‘tel ‘ya had dealin’s wid’um. Ever’ting dat looks lak gold ain’t gold.”³⁴

Women expressed their frustrations in various ways. Some women, for example, when placed in a position of authority, modeled and exerted power over other women in the same oppressive manner that was exerted over them. As one former enslaved woman asserted, “Blacks ain’t got no sense. Put ’em in authority and they gits so uppity. My brother left me here with a colored woman named Rachael Ross. And oh Lawd, she was hard on me. Never had to do in slavery times what I had to do then... But the devil got her... when death struck her.”³⁵ One former enslaved man described the resentment slaves felt toward one another when one was placed in a position of authority. He remarked, “They do not like to see one get above the other and just as soon as one is placed in authority over the others, he [she] finds it hard work to have their orders obeyed. They will leave nothing undone to get the person back to the same level with themselves, and will work mean, hard and deceitfully to accomplish that purpose.”³⁶

Some women lashed out because they felt powerless in confronting slavers and retaliated by verbally degrading other women. As one former enslaved woman asserted in referring to a mulatto house servant, “All dese ole slaves try to be so uppity by jes bein raised in de house and cause dey was what dey think Quality. Some of dese slave gals was raised in de house but most of dem was made to work ebery whar on de plantation. My Massa has his slave gal... and de misses try to teach de nigger gal... But shucks niggers aint got no sense nuf ter do fancy things.”³⁷

One woman suggested that jealous and resentful blacks suffered from a “crabs in a barrow” mentality. “Us Negroes,” she remarked. “won’t let one another get nowhere. We are too much like crabs... one can’t get away from the rest; do, they’ll pull [her] him right back.”³⁸ Others argued that those favored by whites often “looked down on their own.” “When a slave got a chance to live in de ‘Big House’ wid de white fo’ks,” one woman stated. “he thought he wuz somebody.”³⁹ Another woman described the jealousy and

resentment other women had toward her for being favored by the master's family:

My position was second nurse for the doctor's family or one of the inner servants of the family, not one of the field hands. In my position my clothes were made better, and better quality than the others, all made and arranged to suit the mistress' taste. I got a few things of feminine daintiness that was discarded by the mistress... During my life as a slave I was whipped only once, and that was for a lie that was told on me by the first nurse who was jealous of my looks.⁴⁰

Some women expressed feelings of frustration, jealousy, and resentment, while others exhibited attitudes of superiority and disassociation with the "common folk." Both whites and house servants referred to the "common folk" among them as those unskilled and unprivileged black laborers. Historian Dorothy Sterling notes that both whites and the enslaved viewed the "common field hand" as the most inferior of all enslaved blacks, and women field workers were even more than men. Common field hands were frequently ridiculed by both whites and blacks. Field laborers and house servants came to think of those who worked in the Big House or the city as favored; to live or work in either space meant that one "had arrived." Moreover, mulatto house servants oftentimes were socially tolerated by whites more than any other group.⁴¹

The distinction between common field hands and house servants carried the same meaning for slaves as rural laborers vs. urban laborers, and Northern Negroes vs. Southern Negroes. One former enslaved man was clear about this distinction in his response to an interviewer. When asked with whom he chose to interact the most, Negroes who worked in the country or those who worked in the city, he responded: "[I] mingled most... with city people... The City people look upon themselves as a little better. They are more intelligent than the country people."⁴² It was widely assumed among whites and blacks that those who labored in the city or lived in the North were more cultivated.

Sentiments such as the aforementioned were widespread throughout the American Union and shared by both whites and blacks. By deeming African American-born women superior to African-born women, skilled laborers superior to unskilled, house servants superior to field hands, mulatto women superior to darker hue women, northern or city Negroes superior to southern or rural Negroes, whites were setting clear distinctions of social acceptability. In doing so, they

were also providing the necessary fuel for conflict and disunity. Black women's inferior status often placed them at war with one another as they fought to win the master's and missus' affections. This fight was not only based on power and position but also acceptance. Moreover, by grouping slaves according to place of origin, skill level, ethnicity, and skin tone, slaveholders also created a system that defined standards of beauty and occupational hierarchies for Africans in America. This standard and hierarchy set in motion by slavers was sustained by Africans in America who adopted standards of beauty and occupational hierarchies as criteria for evaluating blackness. In her description of a mulatto woman to other black women, one former enslaved woman undoubtedly elevates this standard and hierarchy. She remarked:

Do you know the Wainwrights in Hampton? Well, they had an aunt who lived in Nansemond County named Diana Gaskins. Her old master was named Gaskins too. Diana was a black beauty if there ever was one. She had this thin silk skin, a sharp nose, thin lips, a perfect set of white teeth and beautiful long cole-black hair. Diana was dignity personified, the prettiest black woman I ever saw.⁴³

In another description, an enslaved woman's features are elevated at the time of her sale:

She was a beauty—a picture—a doll—one of the regular bloods—none of your thick-lipped, bullet-headed, cotton picking niggers—if she was she might be d—d.⁴⁴

These comments suggest that beauty and acceptability as a black person in society meant adapting to white standards. As a result of internalizing ideologies such as these, numerous dark skinned enslaved girls and little black girls in subsequent generations moved throughout the world living in shame of their blackness. They quickly realized as victims of whites' racialized standards of beauty that the lighter the skin, the straighter the hair, the sharper the nose, the thinner the lips, and the smaller the body frame the more socially esteemed they would be. The closer they were to European features the less invisible and ostracized they would be by both whites and blacks.

Standards of beauty were ingrained in the minds of African women, men, and children by associating their skin tones with negative or positive terminology and images; the darker the African woman the more negative the signifier. Language helped to shape and sustain opinions, attitudes, and behaviors.⁴⁵ Social scientists Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson,

and Ronald Hall have noted in their work, *The Color Complex* that during slavery and to the present-day “language symbolism” has been an “important source of bias against those” of darker hue and a source of admiration of those of lighter skin tones.⁴⁶ Mulatto women and girls, for example were described as beautiful, light, and pretty. They were referred to as “light skinned,” “black beauty,” “high brown gal,” “pretty mulatto gal,” “redbone,” “high-yellow,” “light-bright-damn near white,” “real bright with long black straight hair, and so forth.”

Dark skinned slaves, on the other hand, were referred to as “darkies,” “jet black niggers,” “lamp black niggers,” “Sambo,” “jigga-boos,” “pick-a-ninnies,” “wannabees,” “tar-babies,” and so forth. One former enslaved woman described the mood of the Union toward dark skinned Africans and the mood of dark skinned Africans toward themselves. He stated, “De ‘Lamp Black Nigger’ is de mos’ pendable cau’ se he is ‘honest got.’ But, some white fo’ks say, dat when a ‘Nigger’ is so black he jes’ natu’ly mean... Sometimes ‘Jet Black Niggers’ is ‘shamed ob dey’ self, specially when dey gits wid white fo’ks an’ yaller ‘Niggers’”⁴⁷

As a result of feeling “shamed ob dey’ self,” some dark skinned women became jealous and resentful of mulattoes, light skinned women, and Creoles. Slave communities oftentimes both admired and envied mulattoes, and resented their own African features. As one former enslaved man noted, “De ladies [mulattoes] was beautiful wid big black eyes an’ sof’ white han’s, but dey was high strung, too... I’s part Injun. I ain’t got no Nigger nose an’ my hair is so long I has to keep it wrapped. I’s often heard my mammy was reddish lookin’ wid long, straight, black hair. My pappy... hair was kinky.”⁴⁸

The world of mulatto, light skinned, or Creole identity was not an easy one to negotiate for many women. Mulattoes were aware that they were not “white children.” Yet, as one mulatto girl exclaimed, they were more keenly aware that they were not “niggers.” One former enslaved woman recalled how two mulatto girls were scolded by a group of white children for playing in their dollhouse. The white children told them to get out; the dollhouse was for “white chillum” only. The mulatto girls confronted them, yelling back, “we ain’t no niggers, ’cause we got the same daddy you has, and he comes to see us near every day and fetches us clothes and things from town.” The mulatto girls went on to say, “He is our daddy and we call him ‘Daddy’ when he comes to our house to see our mama.”⁴⁹

Mulattoes’ place in the world was often a destabilizing one, which proved to be both advantageous and disadvantageous. Living on

the margins of both worlds, they experienced rejection, tolerance, and resentment from both whites and blacks. Remarkd one former enslaved man, “You have no idea de worry and de pain a mulatto have to carry... Forced to ‘sociate wid one side, proud to be related to de other side. Neither side lak de color of your skin... I hopes and prays dat dere’ll be no sich thing as a color line, in Hebben.”⁵⁰

In some cases, mulattoes, light skinned women, or Creole women felt misrepresented and misunderstood by other enslaved blacks; they were often treated as though their skin tones nullified their blackness. They expressed feelings of alienation from other women because of their house servant status and skin tones. They often overheard comments made by other black women such as “yaller women thinks they better” or “de yaller women was highfautin’.”⁵¹ One former enslaved woman remarked, “Yaller ‘Niggers’ thinks dey’self better dan’er black ‘Niggers.’ I tell’em, ‘You may be yaller but’cha gotta take’er “Nigger” stoops jes’ lack me.’ Dere’s yaller ‘Niggers’ right here whut thinks dey is bedder dan any blacks.”⁵²

Following emancipation, black parents often upheld the superiority of the color line by pressuring their children not to “lighten” or “darken” the blood line.⁵³ As one former enslaved woman remarked, “Sally J._____ wuz’er yaller ‘Nigger’...her mamma had’er back in slavery time, on de plan’ation by a white ove’seer. She had seb’en chillum, all ob’em by a white man ’cept one. She put one’er her daughters in school at Tuskegee an’ let’er stay dere a w’ile, den she come an’ tuk’er out an’ ca’ied her back down on de plan’ation an’ ‘sold her’ to a white man. Sally said she didn’t want none ob her chillum to marry’er black ‘Nigger’.”⁵⁴

Testimonies like the preceding are not isolated incidents. They are the expressed sentiments of many enslaved women during the antebellum period and also of modern-day black peoples. Issues of class and caste within the African American community from generation to generation gave way to common idioms, passed down by our foremothers. External and internal values of class and caste were the reasons why, mama used to say, “don’t play in the sun” “marry light” “straighten that kinky hair” or “child don’t be common, act like somebody!”

Both classism and caste-ism played an adverse role in how enslaved women perceived themselves and each other. Both *isms* affected black women’s self-esteem and self-understanding causing them to act out their frustrations or feelings of insecurity on other black women. Occupational hierarchies based on continent of birth, skill level, and

ethnicity or color gradation as well as imposed standards of beauty ignited conflict and division, and fueled feelings of jealousy, resentment, and unhealthy competition among women. Such adverse affections impaired enslaved women's vision, which in turn impeded them from seeing and embracing the uniqueness of their differences, and using this uniqueness as a collective power and strategy to resist and subvert ideologies or hierarchies of class, caste, and gender. Their vision was impaired, no doubt, by the antebellum world in which they lived. This impairment did not, however, halt their overall collective pursuit of freedom. It weakened bonds of womanist harmony, of womanist affirmation, diversity, and beauty; it caused intolerance among women.

Gossip

Some folks was better dead anyhow.

—enslaved woman

I [remember] two little slaves whose missy teach dem to read. Emily, she look like a white gal. She was treated jes like she white. Her daddy was a white man... When de missy go to buy clothes for de chillum she allus take Emily along... de missy she was good to her. She never stay in de quarters, she stay in de house with de white fokes. But Emily have de saddest look on her yaller face cause de other niggahs whisper 'bout her pappy.⁵⁵

From the preceding slave narrative, it would appear that Emily had the better parts of the white world. Her “missy was good to her”: she taught her how to read and took her shopping. Emily never slept in “de quarters, she stayed in de house with de white fokes” where “she was treated jes like she white.” Appearances, however, are not always what they seem and whispered words hurt. Psychotherapist and literature professor Laura Tracy notes that, “When women tell stories about other women... whom they envy, with whom they cannot identify with, they seek to destroy. As all women know, gossip can be destructive and terrible. Because we have been forced to separate our aggressive and our erotic drives in relation to men, we locate our aggression in our relations with other women.”⁵⁶

Enslaved women often projected their hostility toward the institution of slavery and whites onto other socially, politically, and economically powerless women. They criticized, judged, and spoke ill

of one another causing hurt and harm. In this sense, gossip—spiritual and social “death by language” or “indirect verbal aggression”—reinforced sexist norms.⁵⁷ That is, it empowered one group or individual and disempowered, denigrated, and excluded another. Feminist psychologist Phyllis Chesler argues that, “to the extent that women are oppressed, we have also internalized the prevailing misogynist ideology which we uphold both in order to survive and in order to improve our own individual positions vis-à-vis all other women.”⁵⁸ Gossip allowed some enslaved women, excluded by the dominant culture, to create their own social networks, which then created cliques while excluding whites and other enslaved women. Marginality and inferior status within the dominant culture reinforced feelings of powerlessness, and ignited feelings of insecurity and envy. Women gossiped as a means of security, survival, group inclusion, and self-promotion. Some women gossiped out of sheer spitefulness and jealousy. Chesler notes that gossip “solidifies group identity” “class solidarity,” and group loyalty in that it “serves as a warning that one may become the focus of gossip if one behaves anti-normatively.”⁵⁹

Emily became the focus of gossip because she was favored over other enslaved women. Those who gossiped about her sought to diminish her by shunning her through whispering. Such behavior functioned to signify to Emily and affirm for the gossipers that Emily, whether she was liked by missy or lived in the house, was no different than them. She was a black female slave, and therefore, in the white world in which they all lived, she was as they were insignificant and powerless. As the former enslaved woman in the preceding slave narrative went on to say, “[Emily] daddy was a white man . . . She belong to one of de Johnson mens . . . Her pappy pay no more attention to her den to de res’ of de niggahs. Many de pore niggah women hab chillum for de massa . . . Dey [the master] jes tell de niggahs what to do and dey knows better den to fuss.”⁶⁰

Internalized oppression, insecurity, and envy caused the gossipers to see Emily as a “favored” black woman and not a “hurting” black woman. Such adverse reality and emotions obscured their vision from identifying with the similarities in their oppression and pain. It hindered them from seeing that those whom they excluded were neither, as Audre Lorde has said, “the root cause nor source of their anger,” but rather, the source of their collective power to heal, recover, and fight back.⁶¹ By focusing on tearing one another down rather than the systemic strongholds that were the root of their oppression, the women were, in a sense, feeding life into the

oppressive patriarchal systems or persons which sought to divide and conquer women.

Indirect forms of verbal aggression such as gossip or uninformed and harmful criticism placed a wedge between enslaved women. This wedge oftentimes prompted feelings of anger, betrayal, and disappointment in women. The fact that a woman could be verbally cruel to another woman was damaging and disenchanting because unrealistic expectations of women left little room for women's humanness or errors in judgment. Some enslaved women, at times, were more forgiving of oppressive and violent men than their gossiping female counterparts. Chesler notes that, "women often have higher and different expectations for other women than we do for men. We tend not to forgive women when they fail us. We tend to have more compassion for male failure or imperfection."⁶² We tend to "demonize" the woman and "excuse" and not hold accountable the man.

On occasion, gossip among enslaved women led to disillusionment and arguments, and finally, to physical aggression sometimes in the form of harmful conjuring. The following narrative describes how gossip among enslaved women gained momentum energizing feelings of paranoia, distrust, alienation, anger, and retaliation. The sister of one of the women involved recalled the incident, which in her retelling brought her much hurt and discomfort. She stated:

a woman named Lucinda hurt my sister. She was always a "Big me," and her chillum was better than anybody elses. Well her oldest child got pregnant and that worried Lucinda nearly to death. She thought everybody she seed was talkin' bout her child. One day she passed my sister and another 'oman [Mamie] standin' on the street laughin' and talkin'. Lucinda was so worried 'bout her daughter she thought they was laughin' at her. She got so mad she cussed 'em out right there and told 'em their "turn was in the mill." My sister called the other 'oman in the house and shut the door... That made it wuse.

'Bout three weeks later my sister started complainin'. Us had two or three doctors with her, but none of 'em done her any good... Lucinda's great uncle... the greatest root worker in South Carolina... got her... She [my sister] stayed sick a long time and Mamie stayed by her bed 'til she died... Don't think Lucinda didn't have pore Mamie conjured too. Mamie took sick just one month after my sister died... She suffered and suffered before she died... When Mamie died Lucinda... said "some folks was better off dead anyhow."

But Lucinda got her pay for all of it... She stayed sick as long as my sister and Mamie put together. She got so bad off 'til nobody couldn't even go in her house. Everybody said she was reapin' what she

sowed...Nobody didn't feel sorry for her 'cause they knowed she had done too much devilment...Just 'fore she died, Lucinda was so sick and everybody was talkin' 'bout it.⁶³

The cycle of gossip within the community continued even after the two women and Lucinda died. Gossip fueled lies and lies fueled defamation of character even after death. The cycle of gossip within the slave community severed relationships among enslaved women. It impeded sistah-to-sistah flourishing, and hence, the flourishing of respect and gentleness of word between women. Gossip or any form of verbal assault wounded enslaved women's souls and impeded the possibility of love. Yet, as feminist scholar and cultural critic bell hooks argues, "given the politics of black life in this white supremacist society it makes sense that internalized racism and self-hate stand in the way of love," respect and gentleness of word. "Black folks have been deeply and profoundly 'hurt', as we used to say down home, 'hurt to our hearts,' and the deep psychological pain we have endured and still endure affects our capacity to feel and therefore our capacity to love."⁶⁴ It impedes our capacity to speak affirmatively of ourselves and one another.

Emily's and Lucinda's stories are not isolated incidents. Gossip, whispered words that hurt, and other forms of indirect and direct verbal aggression have been a part of black communities from slavery to the present. Such is the primary reason why mama used to say, "if you don't have nothing nice to say don't say nothin' at all," or "God don't like ugly and not too crazy about pretty when it's wrong." These idioms were passed down from generation to generation because of the realities of gossip within black communities and the larger society. Mama was clear about the effects of gossip. Ugly words and ugly ways harmed the lives of enslaved women and continue to harm the souls of black women today. Gossip weakens bonds of womanist gentleness, of womanist flourishing, respect, and love; it causes women to withhold their goodness.

Mistrust and Betrayal

De missy...have de spies 'mong de cullud folks.

—enslaved woman

Some enslaved women mistrusted other women. Others sided with the master and aided them in sabotaging their own peoples' pursuit

of well-being and freedom. As one former enslaved woman stated, “Jenny was one of those base characters that would have jumped to betray a suffering fellow being for the sake of thirty pieces of silver.”⁶⁵ Enslaved women distrusted and betrayed fellow slaves for various reasons.

During slavery, friendships among women were common. Many of these friendships were formed because women depended on each other for the welfare of their children and men, as well as to find comfort or seek retaliation against the misses and master. Friendships among women were sometimes severed over a disagreement, which resulted in feelings of mistrust and betrayal. Those who suffered the most were not only the women, but also their children. In the following narrative, two women’s lives were unnecessarily shattered over a disagreement. Hurt feelings and spitefulness caused one woman to betray another leaving an innocent child without a mother. A former enslaved woman recalled the incident:

About 1850 a colored woman hired her time of her master, a man named Laycock, who owned a large farm some distance down the river, and was noted for cruelty to his slaves. . . . While here she gave birth to a child, a bright mulatto boy. As the mother was in bondage, the child was born a slave; but she determined that it should never feel the heavy hand of a master. A free negro woman was a servant at the same house, and the mother persuaded her to claim the child. All went well for a year, when the two servants fell out, as servants sometimes will, the foster-mother betrayed her trust and the child was seized.⁶⁶

Enslaved women, whose trust had been compromised by friendships with women, became embittered by their experiences. They oftentimes put up walls believing that women could not be trusted. This created a vicious trap in that no one could either live up to the wronged woman’s expectations or guarantee not to hurt her. In fear, some women distanced themselves from women; they refused to accept that someone could actually care for them or have their best interest at heart. Instead, they participated in friendships as cautious observers anticipating someone’s betrayal or disappointment. Some enslaved women not only lived in fear of the master but also lived in fear in their day-to-day relationships with other women.

Some women betrayed because they feared for their lives, while others betrayed because they longed to feel socially accepted. They needed to feel validated by the dominant culture, by master and others in position of authority, so they betrayed other slaves especially in

relation to slave rebellions. When slave communities gathered secretly in the woods to plan insurrections or abscond, many risked their lives knowing that “dar was a slave amongst us” protecting the master’s interests. Nat Turner’s revolt and other known insurrections were sabotaged by other slaves. Who could the slave community trust? As one former enslaved woman expressed, “you can’t ’pend on nothing colored folks tell you... they learned to be so deceiving.”⁶⁷

For the most part, the slave community’s quest for freedom outweighed their suspicions. They secretly met and planned even though they knew “de missy had de spies ’mong de cullud folks.”⁶⁸ One former enslaved woman recalled the night her mother and other slaves were betrayed by a slave named Frances. She remarked,

Marse Carter had a house gal by de name uf Frances... when night wud come, he made her slip out ’mongst de slaves an’ see what dy was doin’ an’ talkin’ bout... one night Joe an’ my mammy an’ some more slaves wus down on deir knees prayin’ fur de good Lord to sot dem free, an’ Frances wux slippin’ round de corner uf de house an’ heard what dy was sayin’. An’ she goes back to de house an’ tells de old mares, an’ he sont de overseer down dar an’ brung ebery one uf dem to de staks, an’ tied dem, an’ whupped dem so hard dat blood come some uf dem’s backs.⁶⁹

Another former enslaved woman stated,

Fannie Miller run away. Dey couldn’t find her fer a long time. Dey told my marster to git her. One Sunday my ma got ready dress me fer Sunday school. She bathes me and when she looked in de drawer she couldn’t find my clothes... I couldn’t go to Sunday school. Maude, de woman what lived next to us, went to church. She saw Fannie dar... She told Marse about it and he sont out and had Fannie caught... Dey put her in jail. And den her marster come and whupped her... She never tried to run off again.⁷⁰

Another remarked,

Now ’member I ain’t never tellin’ all I seen. Dar was a slave amongst us who ’cided to run away an’ a ’oman slave heard him doin’ his plan. She ups an’ tells her mistess, an’ mistess sends dis man to de spring to fetch water. Down dat spring dar was dem overseers. De man stayed so long fo’ he brought de water up to de house [that] another slave went to look for him an’ do you know dat man was found all cut up in de water bucket.⁷¹

Mistrust and betrayal wounded the soul of the slave community; it threatened the lifeline of the community and sabotaged pursuits of freedom and well-being. The preceding former enslaved women's narratives are not isolated incidents. They are the expressed sentiments of many enslaved women during the antebellum period and also of modern-day black women. Incidents involving mistrust and betrayal within and outside the African American community from generation to generation were the primary reasons mama would always warn her children to "watch your back!" or mama used to say "a hit dog will holla." Mama was clear about the impact of losing trust in one's own. Mistrust and betrayal among women weakens bonds of womanist solidarity, of womanist loyalty, friendship and trust; it causes women to fear connectedness.

Emotional Abandonment and Learned Silence

Manage your own secrets.

—enslaved woman

The degradation and strain of enslavement caused some enslaved women to become emotionally detached. They became numb to trauma. They became numb to the possibility of freedom and seeing their family or loved ones, again. They especially became numb to bonding with other women and in protecting their daughters from the wilds of hungry men. And as with most women who become numb, they struggled to hold onto a small ounce of hope. Instead, they gave up and lived in shame and silence. For some women such surrendering and living was not an act of survival, but rather, an act of slow death. They leaned on God and chose not to fight—for themselves, for their daughters, or for other women. They advised their daughters to do the same. One grandmother advised her granddaughter and son to stop fighting, and instead trust in God to fight their battles. The granddaughter recalling the exchange remarked, "She told [us] she had not always been so; once, she was like him [her son]; but when sore troubles came upon her, and she had no arm to lean upon, she learned to call on God, and he lightened her burdens. She besought [us] to do likewise."⁷²

In this sense, compliance was not a healthy coping strategy of resistance but rather evidence of numbness, fatigue, and shame. Some women ceased from fighting back and gave their silent cares only to God, and to their daughters and granddaughters they remained

unveiling; to their daughters and granddaughters they appeared detached and compliant. The granddaughter from the preceding narrative excerpt experienced this the day she attempted to tell her grandmother that she had been raped by the master. Before she could break her silence, the misses broke hers. The former enslaved granddaughter recalling the incident wrote:

I went to my grandmother. My lips moved to make confession, but the words stuck in my throat...I think she saw something unusual was the matter with me. The mother of slaves is very watchful. She knows there is no security for her children. After they have entered their teens she lives in daily expectation of troubles...Presently, in came my mistress, like a mad woman, and accused me concerning her husband. My grandmother...believed what she said. She [grandmother] exclaimed, "...has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother." She tore from my fingers my mother's wedding ring and her silver thimble. "Go away!" she exclaimed, "and never come to my house again." Her reproaches fell so hot and heavy, that they left me no chance to answer. Bitter tears, such as the eyes never shed but once, were my only answer...How I longed to throw myself at her feet, and tell her all the truth! But she had ordered me to go...⁷³

The grandmother believed the missus and "ordered" her granddaughter to leave. In a world where a black enslaved woman had no voice or protection and only her dignity and character; perhaps it was easier to believe the missus and shame the daughter. Perhaps, it was less life-threatening to become numb to her granddaughter's pain to prevent exposing her own. In an antebellum world of illicit men, it was conceivable that the grandmother, too, had a similar story of rape suppressed from childhood. How can a woman come to terms with what has happened to her daughter or granddaughter when she has not come to terms with what has happened to herself? Or perhaps, as Sterling suggests, "it was a reticence developed to protect their own privacy" and secrets in a "too-public" antebellum world. "Perhaps they hoped by all reason that ignorance would buy a few extra months of childhood for their daughters."⁷⁴

The granddaughter went away in shame, believing she had done something wrong; something she said or did caused her violation. She returned to her grandmother seeking acceptance and forgiveness:

Where could I go?...I could bear my shame if I could only be reconciled to my grandmother...I longed to open my heart to her. I thought

if she could know the real state of the case, and all I had been bearing for years, she would perhaps judge me less harshly. My friend advised me to send for her. Days of agonizing in suspense passed before she came...I knelt before her, and told her things that had poisoned my life...She listened in silence. I told her I would bear anything and do anything, if...I had hopes of obtaining her forgiveness...I begged of her to pity me, for my dead mother's sake. And she did pity me. She did not say, "I forgive you" but she looked at me lovingly with her eyes full of tears. She laid her old hand gently on my head, and murmured "Poor child! Poor child!"⁷⁵

In silent pity with "loving...eyes full of tears," the grandmother touched her granddaughter's pain, but chose not to name it. No broken silence. No words of belief or similar stories from her own life's journey to soothe her aching child. No consoling or encouraging words; just murmurings of "Poor child!" No words of wisdom passed down from mother to daughter to guide little girls when men are cruel. Instead, advisement to do what she had done—"learned to call on God, and he lightened her burdens." Good advice, but what about the men and what about the systemic realities that were the sources of her granddaughter's discomfort? How do women in crisis fight back, and how does a community that sees a woman in crisis hold perpetrators and legal system accountable? Perhaps her grandmother's words were limited by feelings of powerlessness. Perhaps she felt saddened by her inability to shield her granddaughter from what she knew would inevitably happen.

The granddaughter learned to feel for herself what her grandmother felt: ashamed and dirty. She was now stained. The grandmother passed her shame and silence on to her granddaughter who in turn was at risk of passing the same onto her child. The granddaughter remarked, "My babe was the ever-present witness of my shame...I was no longer worthy of being respected by the good and pure...There was no chance for me to be respectable. Sometimes when my master found that I still refused to accept what he called his kind offers, he would threaten to sell my child. 'Perhaps that will humble you,' said he."⁷⁶

And so, to prevent her child from being sold she gave in to the wiles of her master. She did as her grandmother advised: she complied and leaned on God. She leaned on God in shame, feeling at times, like most women, too ashamed and too numb to fight back to reclaim her selfhood. Her grandmother, knowing her plight, remained silent and the two lived in numbness and silence together, while the master

sought various means to maintain power over them both. As the granddaughter later asserted, "I longed for someone to confide in. I would have given the world to have laid my head on my grandmother's faithful bosom, and told her all my troubles. But [master] swore he would kill me, if I was not as silent as the grave. Then, although my grandmother was all in all to me, I feared her as well as loved her . . . I was very young, and felt shamed about telling her such impure things, especially as I knew her to be very strict on such subjects."⁷⁷

Where do abused women go when their mothers feel powerless, numb, and are silent? How do they learn to reach inside themselves when they have learned to live and cope in denial? How do they learn to move from silence to voice, from blame to healing, from shame to self-recovery, and from paralysis to resistance? Rape caused some enslaved women and their daughters in subsequent generations to lose a part of themselves. Yet, more importantly, emotional detachment and silence between mothers and daughters caused some women to lose something greater: their sense of self and an intimate connection with themselves, the earth, and one another. Their numbness in communion with other numb women numbed the slave community. Some black women, instead of fighting back and breaking the silence, turned inside themselves; they shut in and shut down leaving their daughters with little or no answers to life's dilemmas. As one former enslaved girl expressed, "They didn't tell you a thing."⁷⁸

Iyanla Vanzant argued that, "As women, so many of us are deprived of a healthy respect of and connection to our sexuality. For some, it is shrouded in so much shame by so many [lived experiences] and convoluted messages that we actually become detached from our sexual identities."⁷⁹ Vanzant's words suggest that as women we must find a way to bring our daughters and mothers home to themselves. We must restore them to the human community and hold accountable both their perpetrators and those persons in our communities who shame them with "convoluted messages" about their personhood. As black women, we must find a way to break the cycle of inherited emotional detachment and learned silence in our lives, in our families, and in our communities; to do otherwise is *sistah-hood* violence.

This granddaughter's testimony is not an isolated incident. Testimonies like hers were common among enslaved women and are so among present-day black women. Their feelings of shame gave way to common idioms such as, *mama* used to say "what goes on in this house, stays in this house" and "be careful not to air our dirty laundry." Emotional detachment and learned silence among grandmothers

and granddaughters, and mothers and daughters weakens bonds of womanist wholeness, of womanist sexuality, intimacy, and healing; it causes women to suppress their truths.

* * *

Former enslaved woman Harriet Jacobs once said, “a woman can whisper her cruel wrongs in the ear of a dear friend much easier than she can record them for the world to read.”⁸⁰ Jacobs’ words, however, were not the expressed sentiments of *all* women during the antebellum period. Sisterhood and sistah-hood violence reveals that some women did not present themselves as a healing balm or antidote for what ailed black women during the reign of terror in antebellum America. Furthermore, many behaviors or idioms passed down were helpful, while others were harmful. They led mama’s daughters in subsequent generations down paths and into areas that are still unresolved for many black women. Violence against black women at the hands of white women as well as violence between black women adversely impacted the lives of women, both slave and free, and white and black. In the next chapter we explore one final path and area of violence that impacted the lives of enslaved women—self violence. Some women ingested the sugarplum poison believing it to be the antidote and, as a result of this internalization, they harmed themselves.

“Fix Me Jesus”: Enslaved Women and Self-Violence

I was a sinner and I didn't even know it...when I touched that mainland I fell into the arms of the Lord.

—Viola Peazant in Julie Dash's, *Daughters of the Dust*

What was an enslaved African woman to do with digested sugarplum poison and no immediate antidote? She internalized the mayhem. At times, it caused her to abandon her Africanness and adopt the trickster's anti-African ideologies and Euro-American Christian dogma. She became a victim of anti-African circumstance. This chapter examines self-violence in the lives of enslaved women. Self-violence includes enslaved and free African peoples' internalization of their oppressors' preconceptions about their Africanness—preconceptions about such matters as their very humanity, place of origin, ethnicity, cultural traditions, philosophies, and traditional religions. Africanness refers to African peoples' personhood and precolonial ways of life as well as those worldviews and practices they carried over from Africa to the Americas.

This examination of internalized religio-cultural oppression I draw from womanist scholar Dianne Stewart's religio-cultural analysis. Beyond womanists' attention to race, class, and gender oppression, Stewart also gives considerable attention to Afrophobia (anti-Africanness) as a particular manifestation of religio-cultural oppression.¹ Drawing from Stewart's womanist work, I identify anti-Africanness as the harboring of, and expressed discomfort with, most or all things African by both white and black peoples in North

America. Anti-Africanness is cultural annihilation, self and spiritual debasement, and fear of most or all things African, particularly indigenous religions, identities (ethnicities), and ways of life.

I therefore identify those slave narratives in which enslaved Africans, namely women, negated their Africanness, and argue that this negation resulted in anti-African thinking, attitudes, and behaviors. These were most pronounced in enslaved Africans: (1) expressed understanding of salvation and benevolence; (2) attitudes about education (“book larnin”); and (3) slave conversion experiences. As a result of their violent disruption from Africa, the white missionary movement, and the puritan anti-African mood of white America, some Africans in America internalized anti-African ideologies and thus violated their own personhood.

What is important to note here is that not all enslaved and free black Christians internalized and interpreted their faith in detrimental ways. Some enslaved and free black Christians found life-affirming tenets of the faith that provided them spiritual sustenance and renewal, and empowered them to galvanize to subvert plantation norms and work toward freedom. Uplifted here, in this final discussion of violence in the lives of enslaved women, are those internalized harmful aspects of the faith that disempowered black peoples and perpetuated their oppression. Some enslaved and free women’s ideologies about salvation were simply misguided. We will also witness the effects of the “mis-education of the Negro” and, come to grips with the debilitating consequences of self-debasing Christian conversion experiences.

Here, I explore how such violence became essential weapons for Europeans to further deaden culturally and spiritually enslaved Africans’ precolonial sensibilities and hinder bonds of solidarity and flourishing among African peoples in order to sustain their subjugation. Throughout this chapter, I draw from enslaved women’s narratives, slaveholders’ journals, missionary documents, newspaper accounts, slave codes, constitutional law, court records, and the Bible. Concrete acts of self-violence are evident in these sources and connect to contemporary black peoples’, especially black Christian women’s experiences and expressions of internalized religio-cultural oppression.

Why is such an exploration important? First, it offers readers more insight into the lives of black women in America from slavery to the present. Second, examining internalized religio-cultural oppression as a form of violence in turn calls for more comprehensive strategies

for responding to and combating violence. Third, such an exploration helps evaluate the impact of religious oppression on the psyche and well-being of black Christian women.

Before we begin our exploration of anti-African thinking, attitudes, and behaviors in the lives of Africans in America, we turn our attention to anti-Africanness in the mind of the master and the missionary. Such exploration is necessary to better understand the complex realities of religio-cultural oppression in the lives of enslaved women. Freeborn enslaved African peoples and those born enslaved on North American soil were subjected to all forms of domestic, sexual, and sisterhood violence at the hands of white peoples as we have seen amply. Yet, it was slavers and white missionaries, and some converted Africans who asked God to “fix” not white peoples, but Africans. The idea that something was inherently wrong with “the African” was prevalent in the mind of the master and the missionary, and some black women and men believed them. The master and missionary spoke, taught, and preached it, and black peoples believed it and acted it out. Knowingly or unknowingly, Africans in America thus became entangled in a seemingly inescapable web of anti-Africanness or Afrophobia.

Anti-Africanness in the Mind of the Master

In 1832, slave owner Henty Berry stood before the Virginia House of Delegates—an all white male Christian body—and spoke these words from the floor of the house:

We have, as far as possible, closed every avenue by which light may enter their [the slaves'] minds. If we could extinguish the capacity to see the light, our work would be complete; they would then be on a level with the beasts of the field and we should be safe.²

It was clear to Berry and other whites, during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, that “the capacity to see the light” could not be extinguished by physical enslavement and intimate violence alone. The trickster needed other means. One means was to enslave African peoples’ minds; to use their Africanness—their very personhood—against them in order to suppress and debase their spirits, and deaden their precolonial sense of personhood and ties to the African past.

Whites understood that in order to debase and deaden they had to institute laws that restricted the human rights of Africans in America

by: identifying them as property, three-fifths human, and so forth; claiming legal rights to their bodies and annual taxation of their bodies as toils of labor; and prohibiting any form of autonomy. They repeatedly reinforced these legislated restrictions with various forms of violence in order to sustain this debasement. As noted in previous chapters, African women were deprived of basic human needs, worked like mules, bred like cattle, objectified as vagina, and raped and beaten at will. These violent experiences were reinforced with negative images of blackness. Slavers and overseers, for example, impressed upon black women's minds that they were wenches, witches, and whores. Missionaries further identified them as heathens without God whose souls were inherently cursed and wretched. Legislated oppression, violent experiences, and negative images of Africanness served to strengthen the notion that the personhood of Africans in America possessed no inherent value. Such an enslaved mind, it was assumed, would accept whites' perceptions and definition of them. Africans in America would no longer look to themselves, each other, or their own African past for valuation.

The belief that Africa, its ways of life and peoples were savage was disseminated by Europeans long before the slave trade. Dianne Stewart argues in the Jamaican context:

By the time Europeans began to encounter Africans in Jamaica, there was in European culture a long-standing tradition of myths, tales, and recorded accounts depicting Africans as savage, intellectually inferior, physically grotesque, sexually promiscuous, and morally depraved... Anti-African ideas emerged from the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, early Jewish and Christian literatures, and the European medieval period, all of which predate the inauguration of the transatlantic slave trade.³

On North American soil, the belief was more than an ideology upheld by some overzealous slave owners; it was the "unifying ideology" of the American Union—both in the North and South enslaved and free Africans in America experienced the effects of this anti-African fervor. Anti-Africanness was expressed and defended on the floor of the House of Delegates, argued in courtrooms, legislated at the nation's and state's capitols, exegeted from biblical texts, sermonized from Christian pulpits, cried out in Catholic confessionals, proselytized at evangelical camp meetings, persuaded to planters by missionaries, taught during religious instruction, advocated at proslavery gatherings, photographed at lynching sites, flaunted on auction blocks,

discussed around dinner tables, and debated in parlor rooms in the Big House.

The vilest expression of this unifying ideology, however, was evident on the scarred backs and wounded souls of former slaves. It was from enslaved Africans' wounds and their violent testimonies that we come to grips with what anti-Africanness may have felt, sounded, and looked like for black peoples in North America.

Many of the world's inhabitants believed that the African was a heathen in need of the European and his missionary enterprise. This line of thinking pervaded European imagination. To save African peoples from their heathenism, the European reasoned that it was his divine mission to liberate them. As religious scholar Sylvester A. Johnson asserts, "In the wake of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the holocaust of slavery, the public meaning of 'Negro' and 'Africa' were finely wedded to 'backward,' 'uncivilized,' and 'heathen.' It was generally assumed throughout Christendom, by the nineteenth century that Africa stood in need of redemption."⁴ One reporter writing for the *Western Luminary* newspaper, a widely distributed and well-respected religious publication in Lexington, Kentucky, proclaimed as much. He wrote:

I proclaim it abroad to the Christian world that heathenism is as real in the slave States... and that our Negroes are as justly objects of attention to the American and other boards of foreign missions, as the Indians of the western wilds. What is it that constitutes heathenism? Is it to be destitute of a knowledge of God—of his holy word—never to have heard scarcely a sentence of it read through life—to know little or nothing of the history, character, instruction and mission of Jesus Christ—to be almost totally devoid of moral knowledge and feeling, of sentiments of probity, truth, and chastity? If this constitutes heathenism, then there are thousands, millions of heathens, in our beloved land.⁵

The antebellum world not only identified the African as heathen, but also cursed. Slavers and American proslavery advocates drew from the ancient worldview and the biblical Hamite story (Genesis 9: 18–28) to buttress their claim that black peoples were descendents of Ham, and therefore, cursed. Johnson argues that "Ham [son of Noah] was the ultimate representative of the heathen... Noah cursed the posterity of Ham and specifically indicated that they [Ham's descendants] will be slaves to other peoples."⁶ Slavers "made frequent recourse to this story in order to justify the institution" of slavery, the superiority of whiteness, and the inferiority of African peoples.⁷

In his liberation efforts, the European envisioned himself as the world's humanitarian, the leader of an emerging New World democracy, the rescuer of African peoples from their heathenism, cursed state, and primitive ways. Intervention called for the enslaving and civilizing of African peoples as well as the colonizing of their lands, precious minerals, and artifacts. There were Europeans who firmly believed that uncivilized backward peoples needed to be owned because they were ill equipped to think or care for themselves. As one former enslaved man recalled,

[master] sometimes talked to me an hour at a time, to convince me that I was better off than I should be if I was free. He said slaves were better off than their masters, much better off than the free colored people, and vastly better off than they would have been if left in the wilds of Africa; because there they fought, killed, and ate each other... He told me that the reason why they murdered and devoured one another in Africa was because there were no white people there to make them behave themselves.⁸

When one former enslaved woman remarked, "I told...[master] that I wanted to get an opportunity to work for my own benefit," he responded, "If you had your freedom, you would not be so well off as you are now... I have all the trouble of planning and thinking for myself and all the rest of you." She replied, "I told him I greatly wished to relieve him from the task of thinking for me. I should much prefer to think for myself." Her master smiled, and told her that she "was a fool."⁹

At the heart of the trickster's anti-African agenda was the white missionary enterprise. Some white missionaries were entrenched deeply in the slaveholding business as both slave sympathizers promoting the Gospel and slavers promoting the American Union. Their mission: the saving of the African's sin sick soul.

Anti-Africanness in the Mind of the Missionary

In the early eighteenth century, the Anglican Bishop of London sent Rev. Dr. Thomas Bray to the American Colonies to report on the state of the Church of England there. Bray sent word to the Bishop that the "Anglican Church in America had 'little spiritual vitality' and was 'in a poor organisational condition.'"¹⁰ On June 16, 1701 King William III issued a charter establishing the Society for the Propagation of the

Gospel (SPG), an organization which commissioned priests, church laypersons, and schoolteachers who each functioned as missionaries to help provide the Church's ministry to the colonists as well as the "evangelisation of slaves [African peoples] and Native Americans."¹¹ By 1750, over 300 European missionaries were dispersed throughout the American colonies, and eventually, within that same period, the charter commissioned missionaries to Australia, New Zealand, and West Africa.¹²

By the early nineteenth century, Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian missionaries were also engaged in the enterprise. In 1834, members of the Presbyterian Church wrote, for example, in the *Report of a Committee of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia*, "Let us establish missionaries among our Negroes, who in view of religious knowledge, are as debasingly ignorant as any one on the coast of Africa; for I hazard the assertion, that throughout the bounds of our synod, there are at least one hundred thousand slaves speaking the same language as ourselves, who never heard of the plan of salvation by a Redeemer."¹³

Upon their initial encounter with the Africans, the missionaries believed that African peoples were heathens in need of conversion; missionaries, however, became further convinced after witnessing what they considered to be heathen practices. They concluded that slaves' traditional African religious practices were evil black magic, demonic, and grotesquely pagan, and practitioners of these religions were sorcerers, wizards, witches, and devils. Only the Christian God could save African peoples' souls and free them of their paganism. Missionaries demanded "total allegiance from enslaved Africans to Euro-religion, Euro-culture, and Euro-authority through religious conversion and social control."¹⁴

Missionaries prided themselves and their enterprise as being central to bringing African peoples out of darkness. The SPG defined its responsibilities as including "performance of divine service, catechism, baptism, instruction for the 'heathen and infidels', and encouragement of educational establishments."¹⁵ Missionaries firmly believed that religious instruction and slave conversions were necessary practices for saving African peoples' souls. Through these means the unintelligent and uncivilized African would come to know God.

Some slavers agreed and welcomed religious instruction and slave conversions. They viewed religious instruction, especially biblical teachings as "safe" because certain passages buttressed their position in sanctioning the oppression of African peoples, especially women.

Such teachings and practices were also harmless and ineffective in bolstering slave resistance and rebellion. On the other end of the spectrum, however, some slavers wanted no part of the missionary enterprise. Historian Marcus W. Jernegan wrote in 1916, “With comparatively few exceptions the conversion of negro slaves was not seriously undertaken by their masters. On the contrary, many of them strenuously and persistently opposed the Church of England and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, the agencies most active in promoting conversion.”¹⁶

Many slavers resisted religious instruction and conversion because they were mainly concerned with slave labor not slave salvation. Additionally, some feared that baptism would alter the terms of Africans’ enslavement and free them.¹⁷ Slavers also feared that upon “interpreting the teachings of Jesus Christ as being in favour of equality,” slaves would think critically about their predicament and revolt.¹⁸ Others maintained that instruction and conversion were unnecessary because African peoples had no souls. Moreover, many maintained that due to linguistic, cultural, and racial differences, Africans in America were intellectually inferior to whites, and incapable of learning. During the eighteenth century, the Virginia House reported that “the gross bestiality and rudeness of their manners, the variety and strangeness of their languages, and the weakness and shallowness of their minds, render it in a manner impossible to make any progress in their conversion.”¹⁹ Slave codes recognized Africans as having no or limited intellectual capacity because slavers identified Africans as chattel not human beings. In 1853, William Goodell wrote:

As a general statement... “the legal relation” of slave ownership, in America, as defined by the code... is a relation that cannot and does not consist with the recognition (either in theory or practice) of the intellectual and religious RIGHTS of the slave. The slave “is a chattel” ...chattels have no literary or religious rights... He is a chattel “to all intents, constructions, and purposes whatsoever.” He is “in the power of a master, to whom he belongs”—“entirely subject to the will of his master”—“not ranked among sentient beings, but among things.” It would be an absurdity for such a [slave] code to recognize the slave as possessing religious rights. It is free from any such absurdity.²⁰

Missionaries set forth several arguments persuading slavers who opposed religious education and conversion of their slaves. There was a sense of urgency on the part of some missionaries because

without conversion, African peoples would remain cursed and die in their inherent sinfulness. One white minister for example, preached in 1831 before two associations of slaveholders: “Generally speaking, (the slaves) appear to us to be without God and without hope in the world, a nation of heathens in our very midst... The cry of our perishing servants comes up to us... from the midst of their ignorance and superstition, and adultery, and lewdness.”²¹ Moreover, in 1834 members of the Presbyterian Church wrote, in the *Report of a Committee of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia*: “Before we attempt to set forth the duty [of evangelizing] it will be proper to show, that the negroes are destitute of the privileges of the gospel, and ever will be, under the present state of things. From long continued and close observation, we believe that their moral and religious condition is such, as that they may justly be considered the heathen of this Christian country.”²²

Missionaries alleviated slavers’ fears by arguing that religious instruction and conversion would neither empower slaves nor change the conditions of their enslavement. Although a converted slave would be assured a place in heaven, her or his earthy state would remain unchanged. Albert Raboteau notes that “by 1706 at least six colonial legislatures had passed acts denying that baptism altered the condition of a slave ‘as to his bondage or freedom.’”²³ Missionaries also argued that instruction and conversion would help civilize slaves, render them docile, and acclimatize them to plantation life and values. By teaching the virtues of obedience, humility, forgiveness, and Christian love, a converted slave would be a contented slave. Stewart argues that, “with this type of Christian consciousness, Africans could think less about their concrete social predicament and give more attention to the suffering of the crucified Christ who paid the ultimate price for their personal sins and made salvation possible for them.”²⁴

During religious instruction, Sunday worship, and evangelical camp meetings, missionaries and slavers reinforced their ideologies. Through prayers, hymns, sermons, and catechisms, they repeatedly debased African peoples’ cultural and religious worldviews while proselytizing messages of obedience and humility. Conversion to Christianity necessitated black peoples’ renouncement of their African past—its practices, worldviews, and traditions.

In his autobiography *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit, or, Fifteen Years in Slavery*, former slave Rev. William H. Robinson captures the mindset of many missionaries and slavers. The following excerpts are

taken from a slaveholder's Sunday worship service that Robinson and other slaves heard on the Cowen plantation in Wilmington, North Carolina. Such anti-African fervor and Euro-American Christian piety often emitted in their prayers as expressed in this "slaveholder's prayer":

Supremely great, and worthy of all adoration art Thou, O Lord, our heavenly Father. The cattle upon a thousand hills, and the negroes in a thousand fields are Thine. We thank Thee, Lord, for the manifold blessings with which Thou art supplying us... Now, Lord, we have not much time to pray, for Thou see'st how those devilish slaves are squandering away their time. Lord, revive Thy work in our midst. Grant us all a large increase of slaves for the traders this fall that we may obtain the means, through Thy well directed providence, to rear Thee a magnificent temple... O! Lord God, when we go into the fields among those ignorant, hard headed creatures, (over whom Thou hast made us to rule), may Thy glory so shine in our countenances that one of us shall subdue a thousand, and bind ten thousand upon the racks from the ungovernable malice of enraged negroes. Deliver us from the influence of a guilty conscience; deliver us from the abolition creeds, and from the slanderous tongues of enthusiastic politicians. Deliver us from insurrections and perplexity of minds, good Lord, deliver us. Give us and our dogs our daily bread, and our negroes their full pecks of parched corn or cotton seeds per week. Strengthen the horse and his rider, and make the limbs of the fugitive weak. Confound the cunning schemes of anti-slavery men... Bless the star spangled banner, which floats over the land of the free and the home of the brave... Hear us, good Lord, and according to Thy manifold mercies, bless and sanctify us. Give us more than we are able to ask for at this time, and in the end save all the white people who have supported Thy holy institution and performed Thy will, through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, Amen.²⁵

The same kind of fervor was also fed by the "slaveholder's hymn," sung in worship:

A charge to keep I have,
 A negro to maintain.
 Help me, O Lord, whilst here I live,
 To keep him bound in chain...

No negroes have I lost—
 Not one has run away.

I have been faithful to my trust
Through this, another day...²⁶

This zeal was also preached from plantation pulpits and other spaces on slave owning properties. Robinson notes that the following sermon, for example, was “preached more generally on the Sabbath, previous to the usual holidays by the Rt. Rev. Bishop Policy”:

Well, darkies, I am happy to see so many shining eyes, and greasy faces today. It speaks two great truths; first, that you are all awake to your own welfare; and secondly, that your masters treated you well and gave you meat. You have come out today to hear the word of God. I hope you will pay strict attention to what is said... O that you might praise the Lord for His goodness and for His wonderful works toward you black people... God’s wisdom is displayed in the institution of slavery, in its great plan of perpetuating the negro race. “The white men, the masterpiece of God’s creation” when tracing nature through various windings, while the good Samaritans were seeking upon the face of God’s earth for objects of pity and compassion, somehow, very mysteriously, were wafted by the kind breezes of heaven to the burning shores of Africa. There they found the sooty tribes of that hot climate very much degraded. At first they scarcely knew what to call them; they so much resembled the orangutan as to cause a great controversy among God’s people.

Now you can see what God has done for you in instituting this system of slavery. You were found an ignorant set, no top on your heads—and it is doubtful whether you had any soul. But through the economy of God’s grace you have been transplanted upon American soil, and through much toil on the part of the white man, you are becoming quite intelligent. The white man, through amalgamation, has not only imparted to you his straight hair, high nose, blue eyes, thin lips and perfect form, but it is to be hoped that you have a soul much resembling his, which will, by his care and attention, and your obedience to his precepts, stand a great chance to be admitted upon the ground floor of God’s glorious temple in heaven—this is better than a thousand lives in Africa, and who would despise his chains, which are but for a moment, and then passeth away—for the blessings which flow out of the system of slavery. The [biblical] text declares that you shall be slaves your natural lives, which may signify that it is your nature to be slaves. That is, that you are created to be servants of the white man, and all the children to be born of you are to be slaves.

Again God’s wisdom is displayed in making you with strong constitutions. See what large, robust, fat, greasy looking fellows you all are... Look at those great, broad-sided, good, healthy looking wenches sitting before me. What arms they have. Any of them

can work from daylight until dark in the field, when the sun is so hot... Thus, you can plainly see that God has not made the white man to work. He is only to think, plead law, make laws, preach, pray, and carry the gospel to the heathen, and superintend God's works, while the blacks were made to do the hard and dirty work. For this they had constitutions peculiarly adapted. But again; God's wisdom is further displayed in the economy of slavery by creating you void of natural affections, as regards family sociability, and maternal and parental love for your husbands, wives and children. Therefore, our conscience is void of offense toward God or you negroes, when we separate the husbands from their wives and children, for it is for the purpose of rearing up fine temples for the glory of God and his Kingdom.²⁷

Finally, the following catechism taken from Rev. Charles Colcock Jones' collection speaks volumes of the Euro-Christian supremacy of the American Union and the inferiority of African peoples.²⁸ Both Stewart and Johnson note that the biblical curse of Ham and his African progeny were central to missionary catechisms.²⁹ Moreover, the Q & A format of the catechisms also reinforced whites' understanding of slaves' intelligence. Catechisms and the Apostles' Creed only needed to be memorized and accepted; rote memory learning modalities involved very limited independent thinking.³⁰ The following catechism, written in 1837, was taught to slaves throughout the North and South. Read what slaves learned and memorized under the guise of Christendom:

- Q: Who is duty bound to give Servants comfortable clothing, wholesome and abundant food?
 A: The master.
 Q: Who is duty bound to instruct Servants in a knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, and to give them every opportunity and encouragement to seek their soul's salvation?
 A: The master
 Q: Who is the Master of us all in Heaven?
 A: God.
 Q: Does God show favour to the Master more than to the Servant, and just because he is a Master?
 A: No.
 Q: What are the Servants to count their Masters worthy of?
 A: All honour.
 Q: How are they to try to please their Master?
 A: Please them well in all things, not answering again.

Q: Is it right for a Servant when commanded to do anything to be sul-
len and slow, and answering his Master again?

A: No.

Q: But suppose the Master is hard to please, and threatens and pun-
ishes more than he ought, what is the Servant to do?

A: Do his best to please him.

Ethicist Riggins R. Earl, Jr., points out that the above liturgy cannot be seen as an aberration primarily because there are sources which demonstrate that white preachers in the South produced and published liturgies and sermons for slaveholders and their slaves. Portions of liturgies were often sold at church conventions to slave owners, who in turn distributed them to white plantation preachers and slavers. The sermons of Charles Colcock Jones, a prominent plantation owner and Presbyterian minister in Savannah, Georgia are among such notable sources. It can be debated whether or not the preceding prayers, hymns, and sermons incorporated in Robinson's narrative is propaganda. One cannot ignore, however, the similarities between the sentiments expressed in the liturgy and the anti-African ideologies within slaveholders' diaries, missionary documents, and colonial legislation and historiography.

The European's anti-African temperament was woven into the fabric of Euro-American Christian culture and values. This temperament was expressed by Henty Berry and his slaveholding peers as well as white missionaries. The slaveholder's liturgy was indicative of the anti-African mindset of the American Union and remains the lingering beliefs and expressions of people throughout the modern world. Some antebellum slavers and missionaries spoke and taught these beliefs and some Africans in America internalized them as truisms.

Anti-Africanness in the Mind of the African

Eventually, the belief that something was inherently wrong with the African was internalized in the hearts and minds of some African peoples; peoples who, before the white man came and inflicted almost 400 years of terror, knew themselves to be descendents of rich indigenous world-views and civilizations. Anti-Africanness took root and sustained itself in the souls of peoples who, prior to the arrival of the Good Ship *Jesus* on African soil, did not see or define themselves as sinful and wretched "peoples without a history or religion." With an enslaved mind yielded to the anti-African precepts of the master, it appeared that "the light" that whites in the American Union sought to extinguish was out.

The Enslaved, Self-Violence, and Misguided Salvation

There were Africans in America who, having accepted others' negative perceptions of them and having internalized themselves to be without God, value, or origin, renounced their selfhood. The process of accepting and renouncing though was not a simple one. One cannot ignore the layers of racism, classism, sexism, and religio-cultural oppressions and violence which Africans in America faced on a daily basis. Yet one also cannot ignore that there were some blacks who appeared grateful to the white man and his missionary enterprise for delivering them and their forebears from Africa. "Slavery," they testified, "was a Godsend." They shared the same sentiments as expressed in the following excerpt by a former enslaved man, "Slavery in this country, taking everything into consideration, was a Godsend for the slaves. The twenty million Negroes are descended from four million sent over from Africa. If it had not been for the slave traffic, we would still be living in Africa. I would be a heathen and my children would be heathens. Out of bad comes good."³¹ They saw Africa as the land of the "pagan-heathen" and America was the land of the civilized. One former enslaved woman expressed, "If we hadn't been brung over an' made slaves, us an' us chillum dat is being educated an' civilized would be naked savages back in Africa, now."³² A former enslaved preacher Rev. W. B. Allen further asserted, "If it wasn't for the influence of the white race in the South, the Negro race would revert to savagery within a year."³³ Another former enslaved woman remarked, "Most of the time there was more'n three hundred slaves on the plantation. The oldest came right from Africa. My grandmother was one of them. A savage in Africa—a slave in America. Over there all the natives dressed naked and lived on fruits and nuts."³⁴ One former enslaved man stated, "We were savages when we came over here. Everything we got and everything we know, good and bad, we got from white folks."³⁵

Many enslaved and free blacks in the antebellum world saw the white man as a savior figure. As one former enslaved woman expressed, "He was a good man and he made a sho'-nuf good marster . . . None of Marse . . . slaves never run away . . . 'cause he was so good to 'em dey never wanted to leave him . . . I 'members jus' as good as if it was yesterday . . . when [Mammy] told us de fust news of our freedom. 'You all is free now,' she said. 'You don't none of you belong to Mister Lordnorth nor Mister Alec no more . . . Me, I warn't even

studyin' nothin' 'bout leavin' Marse... Yes, m'am, I sho' would rather have slavery days back if I could have my same good marsters."³⁶ Others concurred with one former enslaved woman, "Negroes ain't got no business being set free, Negroes still oughter be slaves. When my Missis called us gether and told us we was free. I was as happy as a skinned frog but you seed I didn't have any sense. All Negroes are fools. [Missis] says...you can all stay here en work...if youse git hungry and haint got no money to buy vittals just ask de white folks for it and day will give it to youse."³⁷

Blacks who believed that their liberation from Africa was the actions of a benevolent white man also tended to accept slavery as God's will. One former enslaved woman stated it plainly; when asked if she thought African peoples would be better off if they had never left Africa she responded:

No Ma'am, dem heathen didn't have no religion...The Lord made three nations, the white, the red and the black, and put dem in different places in de earth...Dose black ignoramuses in Africa forgot God, and didn't have no religion and God blessed and prospered the white people dat did remember him and sent dem to teach de black people even if dey have to grab dem and bring dem into bondage till dey learned some sense. The Indians forgot God and dey had to be taught better so dey land was taken away from dem. God sure bless and prosper de white people and He put de red and de black people under dem so dey could tech dem and bring dem into sense wid God. Dey had to get dere brains right, and honor God, and learn unrightness wid God cause He make you, and His son redeem you and save you wid His precious blood... You got to believe on Him if it tek bondage to bring you to your knees.³⁸

Some blacks believing that enslavement was God's plan for the Negro also believed that to walk or act counter to this ideology was an act of disobedience, rebelliousness, and haughtiness. Suffering made one humble, stronger, and more faithful and worthy. As Harriet Jacobs described, "Most earnestly did [my grandmother] strive to make us feel that it was the will of God; that HE had seen fit to place us under such circumstances; and though it seemed hard, we ought to pray for contentment."³⁹ "Put your trust in God. Be humble, my child," her grandmother advised, "and your master will forgive you."⁴⁰

Both formally and informally trained blacks embraced reconciling themselves to a life of slavery as an act of Christian duty and

humility. Renowned eighteenth-century poet and former slave Jupiter Hammon wrote:

Respecting obedience to masters. Now whether it is right, and lawful, in the sight of God, for them to make slaves of us or not, I am certain that while we are slaves, it is our duty to obey our masters, in all their lawful commands, and mind them unless we are bid to do that which we know to be—sin, or forbidden in God’s word. The apostle Paul says, “Servants be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling with singleness in your heart as unto Christ: Not with eye service, not as men pleasers, but as servants of Christ doing the will of God from the heart...” Here is a plain command of God of us to obey our masters. It may seem hard for us, if we think our masters wrong in holding us slaves, to obey in all things, but who of us dare to dispute with God! He has commanded us to obey, and we ought to do it cheerfully, and freely.⁴¹

Hammon and other blacks’ notions of obedience to master and deliverance from Africa as God’s providential will were misguided, affecting their self-worth in adverse ways. First, it caused them to view obedience and suffering as an act of faithfulness at the cost of their own well-being, and furthermore, to see obedience and suffering in this manner as God’s plan for their lives. Obedience and suffering were the price they had to pay to demonstrate their faithfulness to God and gratefulness to master. If they worked hard on earth for God and master, they would be duly rewarded in heaven. Such positions oftentimes adversely impacted slaves because it produced docility and obedience to slavers who dehumanized them at every turn. It also caused them to internalize a self-inflicting work ethic of “toil without self-care” for the promise of eternal rest in heaven. Second, it created an identity paradox, causing them to view their personhood as a rapprochement, and by doing so, internalize and speak of themselves as damaged and unworthy human beings in need of the white man and his religion and his God to deliver them from themselves and the “wilds of Africa.” They internalized their blackness as inherently sinful and their enslavement was another debt they were expected to pay for being black and cursed. The paradox that most enslaved and free Africans faced in the New World was that the Christianity they were taught convinced them that they were tainted and could only be cleansed by Christian conversion. Hence, Euro-American Christianity was both the means by which African peoples came to see and accept themselves as tragically African and sinfully human, and yet also the only means by which they

could be cleansed and saved. In short, Christianity dirtied them and cleansed them. Christian conversion meant the embodied acceptance and rejection of their tragically African and sinfully human selves. This created a paradox, in that they were forced to accept and reject who or what they never really were—tragically African and sinfully human.

Christianity, in this sense, meant that their personhood (humanity, Africanness, blackness, bodies, flesh) possessed no value even after it was “washed and cleaned by the blood of Jesus.” As legalized and biblically legitimized slaves in the New World their existence, their bodies were meant for labor and enslavement; negation, neglect, and sacrifice of their bodies was the ultimate act of obedience and faithfulness to both their earthly (slavers) and heavenly (God, Jesus) master. Only their souls were worth saving for the afterlife. Ethicist Riggins R. Earl Jr. calls this the paradox in “the making of the black Christian self-worth consciousness.”⁴² This line of thinking became a paradox for Africans in America because it meant they internalized “Jesus as Lord of their bondage for salvation” and not “Lord of their empowerment or liberation from bondage.”⁴³ In this sense, the life of Jesus served a spiritual/salvific purpose for the life to come and not a political purpose to circumvent any form of oppression in the present-day realities in which they lived. Missionaries and slavers impressed this view upon Africans so that some Africans believing themselves to be tragically African and sinfully human thirsted for missionaries’ teachings to cleanse and replenish them. As one former enslaved woman put it, “There are thousands, who, like good Uncle Fred, are thirsting for the water of life... I am glad that missionaries go out to the dark corners of the earth; but I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home [America].”⁴⁴

Over time, anti-African victimization in the New World caused many to fear and deem ungodly their own indigenous ritualized expressions, religions, and cultural traditions. One former enslaved man stated, “We didn’t have no voodoo... and we didn’t put no stock in conjure.”⁴⁵ Another asserted, “I learned a long time ago dat dey was nothing to charms... De Bible teaches me better ‘n dat.”⁴⁶ One former enslaved man remarked, “I am a great Christian... I don’t believe in conjurers... he [God]... said, ‘There ain’t no such thing as conjurers.’”⁴⁷ Another recalled how his Aunt cautioned other slaves from using Islamic beads and other non Christian symbols: “Aunt Jane was the cause of so many on our plantation getting religion... She said them beads and crosses we saw every body have was nothing. She

said people must give their hearts to God, to love him and keep his commandments; and we believed what she said. I never wanted them beads I saw others have.”⁴⁸

It was during religious instruction and Sunday worship that many blacks began internalizing that slavery and the white man were necessary means for civilizing them. They needed him, his missionary movement, and his Christian faith to deliver them from themselves because they were cursed, dirty, and inferior; and their primitive practices and traditions were an abomination. As Stewart stated, redemption was only possible through their “total allegiance to Euro-religion, Euro-culture, and Euro-authority.” Religious instruction or Christian education became one of the means by which slavers, plantation preachers, and missionaries reinforced this redemption ideology. The mind was not only enslaved by the internalization of misguided notions of benevolence and salvation, but also by the “mis-education of the Negro.”

The Enslaved, Self-Violence, and Religious Instruction

Whites understood that education was freedom. An enslaved mind was controllable. An informed free thinking mind, however, was a powerful mind, providing one the means, access, and opportunity to live out the American ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Such afforded many slavers and their families the privileges and advances over oppressed peoples of color and poor whites. As one former enslaved man, reporting before the 1863 American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, put it plainly, “[Negroes] have no chance for advancement...they are barred out from everything that will give them a living. I see my [white] neighbor prospering, bringing up his children & educating them...But you don’t see a colored child that dares put his head into a school...As a general thing, the colored people are not invited into society.”⁴⁹

Denying access or limiting enslaved blacks’ education to only religious instruction (Christian education) under the authority of whites and by white standards helped to regulate black existence in America. Slavers believed that once blacks internalized that they were unable to think critically for themselves, they would become dependent on the master to lead them. The enslaved mind would be as the master intended: powerless to itself, and therefore, a powerful tool for the master. As historian Carter G. Woodson has argued,

Once the Negro’s mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor, the problem of holding the Negro down, is easily solved.

When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his "proper place" and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one.⁵⁰

Enslaved blacks who believed that they were too ignorant to learn without the aid of their masters felt powerless to act on their own behalf. Said one former enslaved woman, "White people, they did not try to help me learn to read and write; said they did not have time to fool with us, as we were too thick-headed to ever learn anything."⁵¹ Likewise a former enslaved man opined, "If you take all the white men away we [Negroes] are nothing...Some of them are lazy and they do not understand how to take care of themselves against the white man...No matter how smart or intelligent a colored man may be, one white man will have more influence over them than six colored men."⁵²

Denying or limiting African people access to information and education outside of religious instruction also served to disempower them in order to render them submissive and obedient. As one former enslaved woman stated, "They had a white man that would come over every fourth Sunday and preach to us. He would say, 'Be honest, don't steal, and obey your marster and mistress.' That was all the preaching we [got]... They had benches and planks 'round for you to sit in, and a little table and a chair in the center for the preacher. When I'd come back from church they would ask how I liked it, and I would have to say I liked it fine... When the war was coming up I would hear the white folks reading the papers about it, and I would run in the kitchen and tell Aunt Harriet. She would say, "Don't let the white folks hear you talk; they'll kill you."⁵³ Denying or limiting access to education not only served to curtail self-awareness but also slave rebellions. One former enslaved woman remarked, "Us poor slaves never allowed us to learn anything. All the readin' they ever hear was when they was carried through the big Bible. The massa say that keep the slaves in they places...white folks feared for slaves to get any religion and education."⁵⁴ Slavers feared uprising because such revolts placed their livelihood and safety at risk. Legislating education allowed whites to maintain better control and lessen the likelihood of self-actualization and slave revolts.

Enslaved Africans who educated themselves were penalized severely. They were verbally denigrated, physically or sexually assaulted, and

publicly humiliated. On numerous occasions, they were dismembered for learning to read. One former enslaved man stated, “I spent a good deal of time trying to improve myself; secretly, of course. One day, my mistress happened to come into my room, when my materials were about; and she told her father (old Capt. Davis) that I was learning to write. He replied that if I belonged to him, he would cut my right hand off.”⁵⁵ Another former enslaved woman recalled the public punishment she and other slaves experienced:

One day Old Mistus saw us with a book and she come outside with stick candy held out in her hand, and she say, “I give you all of this you want if you tell me where you got the book and learned the letters.” I spoke up smart as you please and told her... she took us in the house and she held our heads between her legs and she whipped our back ends with a big wooden paddle. Then she stuck us up the chimney where it was dark and kept us there forty minutes. We was scared fit to die. When she took us out, we didn’t have as much sense as a wild hog.⁵⁶

Fear of punishment and low self-esteem also contributed to slaves’ attitudes about formal education outside of religious instruction. Some internalized that they were “unintelligent” or “unteachable” and the only worthwhile “book learning” was Bible learning; education outside the purview of the Bible was of no use to the slave. One former enslaved man asserted: “People [Africans] look to education to save them. That’s a lot of damn rot. Education don’t modify fools, it increases fools...I never went to school. I learned to talk pretty good by associating with my masters in their big house.”⁵⁷ Like him, there were slaves who also believed that formal education was sin and foolishness because a “true Christian” was “of the world but not in the world,” and therefore, one’s focus should remain heaven bound. As one former enslaved woman remarked, “Book learning, while good, is worldly and got nothing to do with being borned of God.”⁵⁸ Another former enslaved man noted, “some of the slaves might have had somewhat of an education had they wanted it, but not knowing that they ever would be free failed to take advantage of the opportunity. As slaves, they did not need an education. Slaves in those days did not know the words in a book, but they did know how to serve the Lord.”⁵⁹ Some enslaved African preachers also believed that education outside the Bible was nonessential. One former enslaved preacher remarked, “I preached with no trouble...I don’t prepare any sermon...I just read the word [the Bible] and pray. God will do the rest.”⁶⁰ Many converted enslaved and free African laypersons and

preachers upheld the Bible as the infallible word of God; the blueprint to a sinless life and the reward of heaven.

During slavery and post-emancipation, there were Africans in America who, upon internalizing the precepts of missionaries and slavers, proselytized the same anti-African Euro-American Christian dogma that they learned. The language and mood of some of their prayers, hymns, and sermons suggest that some blacks saw themselves as the master saw them. Popular enslaved and free Africans' prayers transmitted from generation to generation included deep felt pleas of repentance and forgiveness for their sins and deliverance from their accursed state. Zora Neale Hurston argues that these prayers normally included an introduction consisting of one or two verses of some well-known hymn, followed by a pause and then an elaboration of all or parts of the Lord's Prayer. Following the prayer comes "the setting" which draws attention to the "physical situation" of the prayer leader and those gathered.⁶¹ Most often the setting included such pleas of repentance, forgiveness, and deliverance. Renowned author and poet James Weldon Johnson remembered as a boy listening to such prayers. Elements of repentance, sin, forgiveness, and deliverance were recorded in Johnson's work *God's Trombones*:

O Lord, we come this morning
 Knee-bowed and body-bent...
 Lord, have mercy on proud and dying sinners—
 Sinners hanging over the mouth of hell...
 And ride-by this morning...
 Ride by the dingy gates of hell,
 And stop poor sinners in their headlong plunge.
 And now, O Lord, this man [the preacher] of God,
 ...keep him out of the gunshot of the devil
 Wash him with hyssop inside and out,
 Hang him up and drain him dry of sin.⁶²

Prayers such as this exemplify how Africans in America saw themselves as sinners in constant need of being cleansed and saved by grace as they daily plead their case before God.

In addition to prayers, enslaved and free Africans also sang hymns identifying themselves as wretched and unworthy. The hymn *Amazing Grace*, for example, was a song written by a repentant white slave owner, John Newton. Newton, upon realizing the detrimental effects of slavery in the American Union, repented for his involvement in white profit from slave labor. This popular hymn

has been sung in black churches throughout America from slavery to present:

Amazing Grace
 How sweet the sound
 That saved a wretch like me!
 I once was lost but now I'm found
 Was blind but now I see

African peoples, seeing themselves as whites saw them, embraced this song and sang it with passionate repentance and gratefulness; they too believed they were wretched. By internalizing that they were wretched beings, Africans in America created a triple dilemma for themselves. They internalized that they were inherently wretched because they were black, sinful, and deemed less than human. Religious instruction and conversion did not transform socially their blackened condition in America, heal their feelings of wretched worthlessness or make them equal as human beings with whites. Both served to validate and reinforce these realities.

Religious instruction and conversion coupled with their inhuman experiences in America inevitably placed them at the table in a perpetual state of beggary; beggars seeking access, salvation, and humanization by both whites and God. Such condition was injurious to their personhood and spiritual well-being. As converted wretched beggars, Africans in America found themselves in a religio-cultural dilemma; a dilemma in which a faith tradition professed to save their wayward pagan souls but denied the beauty and wholeness of their humanity. No matter how often they “got ligion” and their souls were cleansed and made anew, they continued to see and speak of themselves as sinful, damaged, and immoral. The questions here become: If the black body is considered wretched how did and does Christianity beautify it? How does one who is deemed inherently unclean come to see and accept oneself as created in the image of God?

In addition to the hymns of the church, sermons also created a dilemma for black consciousness. For the most part, black preachers were prohibited from preaching without the presence of whites because they were known to encode their sermons with messages for manumission. Some enslaved and free preachers, however, preached the same fear inciting self-debasing sermons that they heard or learned from white missionaries. These black preachers’ fire and brimstone sermons often identified blacks as sinners and called them to repent or

face damnation. Uncle John Woods, for example, a former slave on the Frierson plantation in Sumter County was a well-known preacher who often warned blacks to repent or be condemned.⁶³ Rev. I. E. Lowery, his young enslaved apprentice, recorded Woods' sermon:

Brothers and Sisters: These words...were spoken by our Lord, Jesus Christ...take warning. St. Matthew...was a good servant and obeyed Christ, his Master...So Christ wants you and me to obey Him in all things. He says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"...if we don't obey Him he will punish us, for He says in another place: "He that knows his Master's will and does it not shall be beaten with many stripes." Many of us know, in a two-fold sense, what this means. But all who are not Christians will learn to their sorrow one of these days what it means in a spiritual sense. Christ is our Master, we are His servants, and if we don't obey Him and repent, He will certainly apply the lash, and apply it severely, too.

My friends, there is going to be a judgment. God has appointed a day when He is going to judge the world...And if you don't repent the men of Nineveh will come forth as witnesses against you. They shall condemn you...May the Lord help you all to get ready for that awful day, for it will surely come!⁶⁴

It has been argued by scholars that enslaved and free Africans oftentimes used the language world of whites as a political tool for manumission and to subvert the slavocracy and Euro-American Christian culture. Although true, this language-world also simultaneously functioned, at times, to subvert African peoples. That is, the injurious language in some of our forebears' prayers, songs, and sermons carried with it anti-African Euro-American Christian baggage that was psychologically damaging to their humanity and well-being. The continuous engagement of these particular kinds of self-debasing genres—prayers, songs, and sermons—rather than, affirm and inspire black peoples toward self and communal healing, wholeness, and freedom, consciously or subconsciously, perpetuates religio-cultural oppression. The language in these genres when naively embraced and seldom critiqued within communities of faith has the potential to be injurious. Any form of human wretchedness or inherent sinfulness that is believed, expressed, or experienced, is problematic for any person living under the constant threat of racist, sexist, classist, and religio-cultural annihilation. As Stewart asserts,

It is theologically misleading to conceive of blacks as born with original sin and as candidates for reconciliation with God through the

redemption offered by Jesus Christ. What is primordial about black people is suffering, not sin. Blacks are born with a Primordial Suffering caused by the Original Violation of avarice egregiously expressed in the institution of slavery and ubiquitous forms of racist aggression against people of African descent by people of European descent.⁶⁵

Then how did and do black Christians find within the Christian vocabulary a language that affirms them and the beauty of their black bodies? How do they do so when the Christian tradition they embraced was birthed out of and adheres to a human condition of wretchedness, self-denial, original sin, and redemptive suffering (i.e., wretchedness that is imposed by outside forces)?

During the antebellum period, religious instruction was one of the primary means used to impress upon the hearts, souls, and minds of black peoples that they were inherently wretched, cursed, and in need of Christian salvation. As a result of external and internalized anti-African Euro-American Christian dogma, enslaved and free Africans, began seeing and speaking of themselves as whites saw and spoke of them: as heathens in need of Christian conversion. They found themselves at the human communal table begging for God to “save” them or, as some enslaved Africans expressed, for “God to strike them dead” in order to transform their tainted dark souls. Their self-debasing language and views of themselves caused them to engage in self-debasing conversion experiences.⁶⁶

The Enslaved, Self-Violence, and Slave Conversions

It was the African’s pagan soul as characterized by whites and internalized by African peoples that was in need of purification through Christian conversion. Conversion came to represent various purposes for African peoples in the New World. Earl argues that for some enslaved Africans conversion represented a change in consciousness whereby “slaves believed that God transformed them into new beings with a radically different mission in the world—a mission that required them to live counter to plantation values.”⁶⁷ Those transformed began to process their personhood apart from their oppressor. Conversion empowered them to pursue their right to freedom, equality, and full humanity.

Yet, on the other end of the spectrum, conversion represented, for some enslaved and free Africans, what white missionaries intended—the death of the pagan soul: redemption from their African past with a promise of a new life in Christ. This type of conversion was

self-debasing because it failed to value the totality of African peoples' humanity. It also served to control them socially, mentally, and spiritually. It can be argued that this type of conversion experience did not empower African peoples but rather locked them mentally into a perpetual cycle of self-loathing, self-denial, obedience, and redemptive suffering. Moreover, following this type of conversion experience, African peoples' "mission" did not require them to "live counter to plantation [or white American] values," but rather acquiesce to plantation values—values that rejected their humanity, substantiated their enslavement, and repudiated their indigenous African worldviews and traditions.

Many who underwent slave conversions publicly and privately made declarations of sinfulness and self-denial. As one former enslaved woman confessed, "when it pleased the Lord to open my eyes... I thought I would assist the poor if I had the means some people had, but I have no more than I want myself; how can I help the poor? Then it occurred to me that Christ lived a self-denying life, and I began to think how I might deny myself, take up the cross and follow him."⁶⁸ Upon being convinced that he was a sinner, another slave confessed: "In the year 1828, I saw some Christians, who talked with me concerning my soul, and the sinfulness of my nature. They told me I must repent, and live to do good. This led me to the cross of Christ—and then, oh, how I longed to be able to read the Bible!"⁶⁹

Self-debasing conversion experiences were also latent with violent imagery. Conversion experiences were often likened to brutal deaths, brutal baths, and brutal repairs.⁷⁰ One former enslaved woman's violent imagery made striking contrasts between *darkness* and *whiteness*. She associated *darkness* with danger, fear, hell, the devil, and the profane; and *whiteness* with beauty, freedom, the serene, and the sacred. She stated:

When God struck me dead with his power... I fell out on the floor flat on my back. I could neither speak nor move, for my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, my jaws were locked and my limbs were stiff. In my vision I saw hell and the devil... I was crawling... it looked like I would fall into a dark, roaring pit. I looked away to the east and saw Jesus. He called to me and said, "Arise and follow me." He was standing in... the prettiest, whitest snow... I saw God sitting in a big armchair. Everything seemed to be made of white stones and pearls. God didn't seem to pay me any attention He just sat there looking into space... A voice spoke to me and said, "Whosoever my son sets free is free indeed. I give you a through ticket from hell to heaven."⁷¹

In another narrative, a former enslaved man argued that “a sinner is dead” and in order to live, God had to, “open your blinded eyes, cut loose your stammering tongue, unstop your deaf ears, and deliver your soul from death and hell... You got to be dug up, rooted and grounded, and buried in him [in order to live].”⁷² One former enslaved woman argued, “we are conceived in iniquity and born in sin... God chastises his children for their disobedience... Those who have not been killed dead and made alive again in Christ Jesus, who have not been dug up and rooted and grounded and buried in the Lord, they will have their portion in outer darkness.”⁷³ Another’s experience was marked by language of death and cleansing in whiteness: “I was made to know that I had to die... A voice said, ‘Though your sins be as scarlet, I will wash you as white as snow.’”⁷⁴

The idea that Christian conversion would transform blacks’ tainted souls was also embraced by formally educated free blacks in both the North and South. Phillis Wheatley and Jarena Lee, two powerful black women during the antebellum period, are prime examples. Both made tremendous and sustaining contributions to American society, yet both were victims of and became stifled by religio-cultural oppression. Their self-debasing conversion experiences—embodied pronouncements of self-negation and worthlessness—made manifest the realities of their anti-African Euro-American Christian circumstance. Such circumstance devalued and suppressed the fullness of their womanhood, beauty, intellect, and talents.

Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved Senegalese freeborn woman who later became a renowned poet, believed herself and her African past to be pagan and therefore in need of “refinement.” Her writings identified African peoples as sinners in need of Euro-American Christianity and culture. Phillis was gradually converted to this truth from the time of her capture in Africa to her subsequent life of enslavement on the Wheatley plantation, a prominent Boston slaveholding family. Mrs. Wheatley was “desirous of finding a young slave girl with apparent docile qualities” to “train her.”⁷⁵ She taught Phillis “how to speak [and read] the English language.”⁷⁶ By age twelve, Phillis was well-versed in Greek and Latin classics and the Bible. Cultivated and paraded by the Wheatleys, Phillis gained prominence throughout the American Union and Europe. She became “so articulate,” that the Wheatleys and other whites prided themselves on having created her. In the preface of Phillis’ first publication, eighteen European men published a two-paragraph statement authenticating Phillis’ intelligence.⁷⁷ They wrote: “We whose Names are under-written, do assure

to the World that the POEMS...were written by PHILLIS...a young Negro girl, who was but a few Years since brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa...She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.”⁷⁸

Although Phillis Wheatley was a renowned African female poet and deserves recognition, the depths of her greatness we will never know. She was a victim of white anti-African cultivation and many of her words were *not* her own. Perhaps this is why, “there is little, if any, anger or subversion” in Phillis’ poetry.⁷⁹ One notable exception was a poem written to the Earl of Dartmouth in which Phillis described her brutal kidnapping from Africa.⁸⁰ Some blacks trained and educated by whites oftentimes became entangled in an inescapable web. That is they became products of the same anti-African, racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist, and white male dominated system in which they lived and to which they were subjected.⁸¹ They embraced whites’ standards of knowledge and anti-African ideologies, and used these very same standards and ideologies to valuate and draw conclusions about their own people. I argue here that this was the case of Phillis Wheatley.

Phillis became entangled in an inescapable paradox; she was declared an “uncultivated Barbarian” by whites and later educated, freed, and paraded by them. Given this, it seems inevitable that Phillis’ conversion experience caused her to believe that African peoples needed to be washed clean of paganism and this washing was a *gift* of God and a benevolent act on the part of Europeans. Phillis saw her soul as “benighted” and cursed and Christian conversion as the ritual by which deliverance from paganism/heathenism and membership into the family of God was obtainable.⁸²

In her poem, “On Being Brought From Africa,” Phillis argued that although African peoples were cursed for being “Negroes, black as Cain,” their conversion bestowed upon them the right to be “refin’d” and become a part of the human family of God. The price of admittance onto the angelic train, however, was the negation of their Africanness. And as Earl, Stewart, Johnson, and other scholars have argued, Christian conversion granted them membership into the elect family of God. It did not, however, make them equal to whites. Given this paradox, how did Phillis and other African converts, although admitted into the family of God, contend with the institutional racialized realities of their blackness/Africanness during the antebellum period? Even if they “Africanized” their worship services in some clandestine or segregated form, they still had to contend with the multivalent layers of their victimization and oppression. What Christian

practices or strategies beyond worship provided them the means or resources to combat institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, and religio-cultural oppression? No matter how converted or educated by white society Phillis Wheatley was, she still had to contend with the realities of her African female second-class self in a white Christian slaveholding world.

In addition to Phillis, Jarena Lee's conversion experience further identifies the complexities of self-debasing Christian conversion experiences. Woven in Lee's conversion testimony were the anti-African teachings of white missionaries. As argued earlier, missionaries drew from the Bible to base their claims that African peoples were cursed. They also argued that the New Testament "enjoined obedience upon the slave as an obligation due to a present rightful authority" and "according to scripture slavery was not immoral."⁸³ Their teachings that Africans' lives had no meaning before Christian conversion were also substantiated by the biblical text.

Entrenched in a Euro-American Christian worldview which derived its legitimacy from the biblical text, Lee became entangled in a seemingly inescapable paradox. Although Lee emerged as a powerful prominent female preacher who readily embraced the agape love ethic she was burdened by feelings of guilt and self-loathing. I argue that she lived in a perpetual state of theological shame—a state in which we come to sin consciousness upon conversion to the Christian faith. Anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston maintained that sin consciousness which causes feelings of shame and guilt was indicative of most Africans' conversion testimonies during the early twentieth century. In her observations of parishioners within the Sanctified Church, Hurston wrote:

In conversion the sinner is first made conscious of his guilt. This is followed by a period called "lyin' under conviction" . . . After which Jesus converts the supplicant, and the supplicant refuses to believe without proof, and only gives in under the threat of eternal damnation. He/she flees from this to open acknowledgement of God and salvation. First from the outside comes the accusation of sin. Then from within the man or woman comes the consciousness of guilt, and the sufferer seeks relief from Heaven . . . We have a mixture of external and internal struggles.⁸⁴

Lee, a woman called by God, could not escape this paradox of theological shame. Lee came to sin consciousness after feeling guilty for lying to her employer. At a young age, she was separated from her

parents and sent to serve as a maid in the Sharp household, sixty miles away. Mrs. Sharp summoned her to complete a task. Lee, in turn, lied indicating that she had done so. As a result, an awful feeling overcame her, followed by the beginning stages of her conversion experience. She described her journey to conversion like this:

At this awful point, in my early history, the spirit of God moved in power through my conscience, and told me I was a wretched sinner. On this account so great was the impression, and so strong were the feelings of guilt... At the reading of the Psalms, a ray of renewed conviction darted into my soul. These were the words, composing the first verse of the Psalms for the service: Lord, I am vile, conceived in sin, / Born unholy and unclean. / Sprung from man, whose guilty fall / Corrupts the race, and taints us all. This description of my condition struck me to the heart, and made me feel in some measure, the weight of my sins, and sinful nature. But not knowing how to run immediately to the Lord for help, I was driven of Satan, in the course of a few days, and tempted to destroy myself.⁸⁵

Lee did not “destroy” herself; instead, she said, “the unseen arm of God saved” her “from self murder.”⁸⁶ Lee escaped death. Her mind, however, “was not at rest—so great was the labour of my spirit and the fearful oppression of a judgment to come,” that she became “extremely ill.”⁸⁷ Upon recovering, Lee accompanied the Sharp family’s head cook to a religious meeting. There she heard a sermon preached by Bishop Richard Allen and was “gloriously converted to God,” and joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church.⁸⁸ Five years later, Lee remarked that she “distinctly heard, and most certainly understood”⁸⁹ God calling her to “Go preach the Gospel!”⁹⁰ Her call, however, was rejected by the black male African Methodist cleric body that grounded their claims in the Bible.

Lee came to sin consciousness through feelings of guilt for lying followed by a belief that she was a wretched sinner. Under these conditions, the fullness of her personhood was suppressed and further suppressed by a black male clergy and the Bible when both negated her call to ministry because of her status as a woman. Lee relentlessly fought for her divine right to preach, and won; some pulpits became open to her, others closed. As she preached to free and bring African peoples to *salvation*, her personhood continued to be repressed and suppressed by herself and others. Although proclaiming the Gospel message, she continued to be plagued with feelings of wretchedness, worthlessness, self-doubt, nonacceptance, gender oppression, and

guilt brought on by black male clergy sexism and internalized Euro-American Christian anti-African degradation.

Mental health practitioner Ayanna Abi Kyles argues stories of influential black women like Phillis Wheatley and Jarena Lee “account for how black women can work for liberation in a broad sense and not for self-liberation.”⁹¹ The questions here become: what will come of black women who sacrifice themselves, who work hard for the world and the Christian cross and not themselves? How can a black woman who has been broken, disenfranchised, and exploited by the world and subconsciously broken by a faith tradition and its ordained clergy who proselytizes messages of wretched worthlessness, sexism, and exclusion ever come to see herself as valuable? How does she protect and nurture herself from intrusive persons or experiences without feeling disobedient and abandoned by God? How does she come to see or know herself as powerful beyond measure when she believes herself to be inherently damaged and without merit? How does a mind which internalizes itself as wretched reconcile itself beyond shame especially when it feeds off language of shame and damnation? Kyles further argues that

For most African women who harbor feelings of shame and guilt, divine forgiveness ceases to be a source drawn from within. Divine forgiveness becomes an external source by which black women participate in various rituals seeking a male authority figure (Jesus) to cleanse, repair, or heal them. We kneel at communal tables and altars with a sense of self-loathing, pleading our cases before THE ONE (Jesus) we are told took on our guilt and shame, and we leave feeling indebted to him and not ourselves. In this sense, Christian rituals and Jesus reinforce our shame and guilt because each reminds us that we are sinful and undeserving. Everything we do comes under scrutiny, causing us to bear unnecessary crosses and guilt. This becomes an inescapable web for even powerful black women whose allegiance to the Christian faith is birthed out of and energized by guilt, self-loathing and self-sacrifice.⁹²

Christian conversion became a public and private ritualized process by which Phillis Wheatley, Jarena Lee, and other converted blacks came to think of themselves as tragically African and sinfully human, unworthy beings in the sight of God. As shameful beggars at the communal table of spiritual bondage, blacks across the North and South pleaded their cases of forgiveness and sinfulness before the Christian God although living under the constant threat of an

American terrorism they did not choose. Their pronouncement that they were damaged was ipso facto evidence that they had become entangled by internalizing the Euro-American Christian language of their oppressor(s)' and then, unavoidably used that very same language against themselves. Once converted, the work of the white missionaries was complete; conversion became the pseudo bit in the mouth of converted Africans peoples. Although Christian conversion "radically transformed" and connected them to the human family of God, it also produced feelings of loathing and shame about their personhood and African past.⁹³

This chapter has shown that during the antebellum period and post-emancipation, Africans in America were also subjected to religio-cultural oppression at the hands of white missionaries and slavers who derived their legitimacy from the Bible. They reinforced this legitimacy during religious instruction followed by self-debasing conversion experiences. Some enslaved and free blacks in America internalized this oppression. They saw themselves as their oppressors saw them: heathens without purpose; savages without civilizations; pagans without religion; and chattel without souls.

There was a price to be paid for Christian conversion. Psychological and mental harm ensues for generations when individuals and communities do not develop a counter-hegemonic language and strategies to combat religio-cultural oppression. As a result of internalized religio-cultural oppression many Africans in America became victims of misguided salvation, mis-education, and self-debasing conversion experiences. For Phillis Wheatley, Jarena Lee, and a host of others the development of a self-affirming language and livelihood was difficult, given the nature of their demoralizing experiences in North America.

The debasement and renouncement of enslaved and free black peoples' humanity or Africanness for the reward of Christian salvation was a trick played upon black peoples during the antebellum period, and continues to be a misnomer. Any religious ideology or conversion experience that causes one to feel shame and wretched, and requires one to negate his or her personhood, is not only misguided, mis-educating, and self-debasing, but also an act of terrorism on the part of those who proselytize such. Its intent is the manipulation, control, and devaluation of one's humanity and soul-life for someone else's benefit.

Influenced by the Euro-American Christian precepts of white America, some enslaved and free blacks accepted what the slavers

and missionaries told them; some of their daughters and sons in subsequent generations continue to as well. Womanist theologian Delores Williams once wrote that “an unexamined faith, like an unexamined life, is not worth living. Unexamined faith leads a people to be unconscious instruments of their oppression and the oppression of others.”⁹⁴ This is, as I have argued, self-violence, internalized religio-cultural oppression (anti-Africanness) in the lives of blacks in America.

Black women’s journey in America during the antebellum period was tumultuous at best. Womanist ethicist Emilie M. Townes reminds us, however, that “evil and suffering should never be our last or only word about the nature of humanity and the way in which the divine works in our lives.”⁹⁵ I agree with Townes. The enslaved women’s testimonies and those voices in support of them presented in chapters three, four, five, and six remind us, however, that there must be *a word*; a reminder; a memory spoken and never forgotten and then, a call to action. Enslaved women who experienced the reign of domestic, sexual, sisterhood, sistah-hood, and self-violence in North America sought refuge from and rebellion against American tyranny. Some women seeking refuge found spaces where human value, dignity, freedom, resiliency, and gentleness resided. Upon hearing the call and rhythms of the river, they found the antidote to the sugar-plum poison in a familiar, yet unexpected place. And from that space, beyond seduction and violence they created strategies of resistance, healing, and freedom.

Yearning for the Beautiful

“Sethe,” he says, “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.” He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” His holding fingers are holding hers. “Me? Me?”

—Paul D. and Sethe, *Beloved*

when I finally looked inside I found it.

—Celie, *The Color Purple*

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“However Far the Stream Flows It Never Forgets Its Source”: Five Strategies of Subversion and Freedom

Mu kala kintwadi ya tubu l mu zinga.

A [woman] in touch with her origins is a [woman] who will never die.

—*Bakongo Proverb*

The women were their own antidotes, the healing agents of one another. Deep within these enslaved daughters of Akan, Igbo, Bambara, Temne, Mende, Fon-Ewe-Yoruba, and Congolese-Angolan women born-free was the cure to the trickster’s sugarplum poison. At the core of their being, beneath the layers of multidimensional oppression and violence was a river, an indigenous wellspring of womanist vitality. Domestic, sexual, sister-hood, sistah-hood, and self-violence may have damned these resilient, healing, protesting waters to a trickle; however, it was enough for the women to draw on to push through, press on, and transcend any obstacle in their path.

This wellspring was most evident in them when they gathered at night down by the riverside and away from the watchful eye of their masters. It was at night, when the antebellum world was asleep and the spirit world was stirred, that they could affirm and feel within them the power of their rivers. Such power was best reflected and energized in them when they sang, danced, ring shouted, drummed, conjured, root-worked, educated themselves, affirmed one another, and contemplated and strategized their way to freedom. Through these mediums they reclaimed and reconnected with the spirit world of

their African past. They communed with this world, and pulled from themselves and others resources and strategies to resist and transcend the violence and oppression. Many women joined forces, emerging at times into rivulets and currents to be reckoned with. They became a river, transforming and resilient, signifying to the world that the river of the human spirit could neither be contained nor forever damned by human oppressors or violence.¹ A restless contained and violated river eventually unleashes itself in subversive, protesting, and rhythmic ways.

Yet it is important to note here that many women could not conjure up the power of their indigenous waters. They died or committed suicide on American soil never knowing the resiliency of their waters. Acts of violence had stifled their well-being and movement in the world, and thus impeded the fullest expression of their human potential and beauty. These women never came to see themselves as vital life forces. Dammed and exploited, their wellsprings were impeded by the seduction, enslavement, and raping of their minds, souls, and bodies.

In this chapter we explore five strategies, and in the next chapter four additional strategies of resistance employed by enslaved women during the reign of American terrorism. We see that they drew from the spirit world and from traditions, practices, and philosophic worldviews within their African past. They devised creative and subversive strategies to resist victimization, affirm agency and identity, and break free. In turn, these strategies suggest forms of resistance and recreation for women facing violence and oppression today.

Of course not everything African was life affirming. Just as African peoples, traditions, and practices possessed the power to transmit human value, they also possessed the capacity to devalue or harm. Here, we examine the transformative power of enslaved African women and how some life-affirming African practices reenergized them to fight for themselves when life seemed hopeless, practices that helped them retain, reclaim, and celebrate their Africanness and subvert American slavocracy. Such creativity and subversion call forth aesthetic imagination, or more specifically an African aesthetic orientation and spiritual practice employed by enslaved women under terrorist attack. I identify aesthetic imagination as the way in which enslaved and free African women in America drew on their artistry, intellect, mother wit, dreams, and intuition to create beauty and find strength to endure or eradicate the grotesque. Aesthetic imagination includes those indigenous creative and subversive means and mediums these women used to move

from chaos to creativity and thereby, to combat violence, subvert enslavement, and pursue freedom.

Their use of aesthetic imagination is represented in the nine strategies outlined in this chapter and the subsequent chapter. These counter-hegemonic tactics helped them to confront their victimization. The strategies included in this chapter are:

1. reclaiming human value and dignity by drawing from the principles of *itutu* (coolness) and *áshe* (the power-to-make-things-happen);
2. fighting back and engaging in large-scale slave revolts;
3. accessing critically imaginative ways to abscond;
4. consulting tricknology experts (religious practitioners);
5. harnessing wellness by making herbs, poisons, and charms for healing and protection.

The remaining strategies will be discussed in the next chapter:

6. encoding subversive strategies of resistance in rhythmic melodies;
7. praying and retaining traditional African and Islamic religious beliefs;
8. garnering the master's literacy tools to empower themselves and others; and,
9. expressing intimacy, love, and tenderness on their own terms.

These particular strategies serve as counter-hegemonic practices against multilayered violence and anti-Africanness (Afrophobia) ideologies. Enslaved women, by knowingly or unknowingly drawing on their African past to inform their present condition, redeemed indigenous African practices or worldviews. By teaching and passing down these practices and worldviews to their daughters and sons, they upheld the value of Africanisms in the New World. These strategies of resistance also empowered enslaved women to reclaim their agency, break free, and “fight back” in creative and subversive ways. Taken together, these strategies are a testimony to black women's willfulness and resiliency. Finally, these strategies can serve as a template for contemporary women's responses to their experiences of violence and oppression.

Workable practices and strategies of the past can affirm for contemporary women and girls that they are more than their victimization. Their legacies, just like their foremothers' legacies of thriving beyond surviving did not begin on North American soil but rather in Africa. They, like their foremothers, have within them the resources to resist, recover from, and transcend violence.

Aesthetic Imagination as an African Aesthetic Orientation and Practice

Put on your beads, pocket your jujubag, and cross yourself several times. Do what you do. Do what you must...remember what Grandma told you!...Eshu[-Elegba], will meet you at the Threshold. He stands there in the crossroads between power and fear...Gather up your courage, child.

—Mojo, *Luisah Teish*

Enslaved women began to subvert the trick and liberate themselves by recognizing that the power to say “no more” and to break free was inside them. They were not unscripted before the white man came and named them; they were women with a history, past, and legacies, a history that historian Michael Gomez reminds us allowed them to see themselves as coming from different regions and ethnic groups representing distinct cultures, languages, dialects, epistemologies, socioeconomic strata, political systems, and religious traditions. The legacies from which they emerged signified that they and their future descendants possessed the wisdom and resources to creatively resist and subvert.

Once African women realized that their transplantation as cargo to North America, as historian of religions Charles Long argues, was their second creation story and not their first, they began to rediscover their own autonomy, beauty, and truth. Many began shaping and articulating a counter narrative. In this counter narrative, we see strategies of creative resistance and a subversive reorientation toward an understanding and pursuit of human worth and freedom. Enslaved African women and men cleared brush arbors and transformed those spaces on the margins into radical and open spaces for counter-hegemonic discourse, creative strategizing, rhythmic protest, communal lament, spiritual renewal, and resistance. In these spaces, they oriented themselves aesthetically toward a common cause of freedom.

The brush arbor and other spaces used for counter-hegemonic discourse and resistance became sociopolitical aesthetic spaces where diverse African ethnic groups reoriented themselves in imaginary ways for a common cause. Their strategies of resistance not only emerged from shared oppression, but also shared aesthetic imagination. Precolonial West and West Central African peoples were knowers of beauty, creativity, and sensuality. African peoples, as Zora Neale Hurston has asserted, had a way of “decorating a decoration.”² That is, they possessed the ability to add “layer upon intricate layer of meaning and

beauty to objects of nature and artifacts of everyday use.”³ They were peoples who assessed the worlds around them aesthetically—“from the taste and color of a yam to the qualities of a dye, to the dress and deportment of a woman or a man.”⁴ Art historian Robert Farris Thompson argues that they were “*amewa*—embodiers and knowers-of-beauty; a connoisseur of the senses; one who is and looks for the manifestation of pure artistry in their religion, art, culture, and ways of life.”⁵

This aesthetic orientation was evident at the time of their capture on West African soil whereas many women and girls, before being seduced or forcibly taken, were swaying their bodies in religious dance ceremonies, weaving and dying cloths, venerating ancestors, trading handcrafted goods in the marketplace, and so forth. This aesthetic orientation was in their enslaved daughters and sons in North America. Enslaved women and men tapped into their aesthetic imagination and power by creating quilts and singing songs with subversive encoded messages, thus creatively undermining structures of oppression. The same can be said when they cooked elaborate meals for master’s family and made meals from master’s scrapings to feed their own starving children. Moreover, they made remedies from natural elements to heal the slave community and potions from natural elements to poison brutal slave owners.

Their precolonial West and West Central African worldviews provided them ample philosophic and aesthetic “means for comprehending, and ultimately transcending, the powers that periodically threatened to dissolve them.”⁶ Aesthetic imagination—creativity and subversion—was rooted in their precolonial worldviews, and became therefore, central to their mode of resistance. U.S. Third World feminist Gloria Anzaldúa argues such modes of resistance are creative and subversive because they are a,

sneak attack while the giant sleeps and a sleight of hands when the giant is awake, moving so quick they can do their deed before the giant swats them. Our [women of color] survival depends on being creative. Even when our bodies have been battered by life, these artistic “languages,” spoken from the body, by the body, are still laden with aspirations, are still coded in hope and... a bloodied truce. By sending our voices, visuals and visions outward into the world, we alter the walls and make them a framework for new windows and doors. We transform the... aperture that we are forced to speak from.⁷

Many enslaved women were neither passive participants of their oppression nor victimized women who waited passively for God to

deliver them. They often acted on their own behalf. Womanist theologian Delores Williams has noted that, “Almost from the day when they first arrived as slaves in America in 1619, African-American women have rebelled against their plight. They have used a variety of resistance strategies, some subtle and silent, others more dramatic . . . They transformed the wilderness into spaces where creative imagination could flourish and subversive action began.”⁸

Aesthetic orientation and imagination was necessary to African women’s survival in a white slaveholding world. As bell hooks has argued, aesthetic orientation and imagination was a call to survival and revolutionary action, a way of radicalizing oppositional spaces and reorienting oneself in the world. Aesthetic orientation and imagination became for enslaved and free African women, a spiritual practice to reclaim their legacies, self-worth, and freedom and while doing so, to undermine the institution of slavery and its violence.

This chapter and the following chapter show through the examination of nine strategies of resistance that there were enslaved and free African women who not only pulled from their internal reservoir to resist and break free, but also creatively subverted the trick while doing so. These strategies provided them a wellspring of antidotes to respond to antebellum mayhem. These strategies rooted in aesthetic imagination provided them ample means to draw from their inherent beauty, dignity, spirituality, and strength, and summon the spirit world on their behalf to fight back.

* * *

STRATEGY #1: There is a time in every woman’s life when she needs to step back, cool down, and assess her value.

Human Value: Enslaved Women and the Beauty of Intuitive Coolness and the Power of Áshe

It is the calm and silent water that drowns a man.

—Ashanti Proverb

To others’ response that some people were slaves and others masters because “‘*God, up in the sky,*’ made everybody; and he made *whites*

to be masters and *blacks* to be slaves,” Frederick Douglass responded that such ideology did not “satisfy him.” “It was not good,” Douglass reasoned, “to let old master cut the flesh off Esther, and make her cry so. Besides, how did people know that God made black people to be slaves? Did they go up in the sky and learn it? Or, did He come down and tell them so?” Douglass concluded, like many enslaved African women and men, that “*Color* was a very unsatisfactory basis for slavery.” He argued that “There were slaves here, direct from Guinea; and there were many who could say that their fathers and mothers were stolen from Africa—forced from their homes, and compelled to serve as slaves. This, to me, was knowledge [enough that] it was not *color*, but *crime*, not *God*, but *man* that afforded the true explanation of the existence of slavery [and] what man can make, man can unmake.”⁹

Such knowledge “filled” Douglass with a “burning hatred for slavery” and also a burning desire to be free. The idea of freedom, for many enslaved women and men, was not merely a bottomless yearning but a “cheering assurance—an inborn dream of their human nature—a constant menace to slavery—and one which all the powers of slavery were unable to silence or extinguish.”¹⁰ For Douglass and many others, human beings were born free; a freedom, as one former enslaved woman put it, that was “bestowed upon them by God Almighty.” African peoples’ purpose, therefore, was not New World enslavement as told to them by the European. They were not created to be slaves or to suffer. Neither was the white missionary movement nor their seductive or violent rupture from Africa necessary to civilize them and introduce them to God.

The above sentiments shared by many enslaved women and men correlated with their forebears’ philosophic worldviews of human purpose, value, and freedom. In precolonial West and West Central tradition people believed that every soul had a destiny, and therefore, every soul was valuable. *Every person mattered*. At birth, each soul was assigned a guardian spirit(s) to guide her or him toward her or his destiny.¹¹ The Yoruba, Akan, Ewe, and Igbo peoples believed, as did other precolonial West and West Central African groups, that a person’s destiny—the self-chosen or assigned pattern of a person’s life—was chosen before they arrived on the earth.¹² With such a worldview in mind, it is therefore inconceivable that countless indigenous African peoples knelt before their High God and chose or were assigned American slavery and dehumanization as their destiny. It is inconceivable that they chose a life of demoralizing suffering and survival.

The Yoruba, for example, believed that healthy struggle—“good things in life happening only through unceasing effort”—was a part of fulfilling one’s destiny.¹³ Healthy struggle was not dehumanizing or debilitating. Healthy struggle honored the balance between hard work and self-care; it was the pathway to character building and self-fulfillment. One had to work hard toward the fulfillment of destiny, and once fulfilled, the person would appreciate living and have a good life. As people struggled toward destiny, they struggled with quiet dignity or cool character because their assurance was in the fact that God and the spirit world were with them guiding them toward a healthy and full life as they progressed on earth. More importantly, human beings themselves possessed the power to make things happen on their own behalf. Diviners (priests) were available to divine or offer sacrifices to direct and help one progress on the path toward destiny and good living. Diviners divined to illumine or clear obstacles and forces working against fulfillment of destiny.

African peoples’ destinies and value were intrinsically linked to God and the world around them. They were deeply religious peoples who had intimate ties to the earth and spirit world, and viewed all creation as creations of God. Given this, it is inconceivable that prior to Euro-American Christian influence they viewed themselves as wretched and valueless. Most societies believed that God was Spirit. God was inside everything and transcended everything. In New World America, destiny and God therefore did not need to be found, nor value bestowed through missionary proselytizing; they each needed only to be tapped into, and reclaimed and remembered.

Some enslaved women began the process by first stepping away from the social madness and entering nature for communion and contemplation. As some enslaved Africans often stated, “we would sneak off into the woods and have prayer meeting.” This act alone—stepping away and entering nature—connected them to themselves, their bodies, their voices, feet, hands, hearts, souls, and minds. It connected them to the earth, and each other, and their precolonial African past—a past though varied across ethnic groups and traditions, had strong ties to nature and its rhythms. This act signified their need for connectedness to something human and spirit, real and organic, open and free; a space where they could momentarily clear their heads and cool their faces (*tu l’oju*). Such connected cooling moved them from a reactionary position to a proactive one with a sense of internal certainty and wisdom that they were not alone, and they were connected to something much larger than their circumstance. As one former

enslaved African remarked, when we stepped into the woods to pray “somethin’ inside jes told us about God and that there was a better place hereafter.”¹⁴ Many believed that if justice was not achieved by divine intervention and human action in their lifetime, it was sure to come. As the Congolese say, “No matter how long the night, the day is sure to come.” Or as former enslaved Africans often said, “trouble don’t last always.”

Coolness (*itutu*) summoned forth in contemplative remote spaces, such as wooded areas, brush arbors, gardens (i.e., “li’l patch”), rivers, and caves, helped them regain their composure and move toward reclaiming their dignity and space in the world. It was in these aesthetic spaces, while communing with nature and invoking the spirit world, that many enslaved women gained perspective and realized they were not intended to be slaves nor victims of violence. They “refused to believe or accept the devastating and devaluating assumptions about their human worth”; assumptions that “would deny their right to exercise any control over their bodies or their fate.”¹⁵ They were connected to all of life. Their value and destiny was tied to all that was around and within them—God, nature, the spirit world, the earth, and each other. Their lives had meaning. As one former enslaved African asserted, “God Almighty never meant for human beings to be like animals. Us [folks] has a soul an’ a heart an’ a mine.”¹⁶

With coolness came courage and beauty of character; an inner resolve and quiet dignity. Coolness of character was a principle that enslaved women understood. Their forebears, especially the Yoruba, Igbo, Ewe, and Akan believed that coolness or quiet dignity was a vital character response to opposition. Good character was expressed in one’s attitude and gestures in times of conflict. “It is the calm and silent water,” the Ashanti and Akan say, “that drowns a man.”¹⁷ “His [her] mouth is cool” (*enu e tutu*), was one way the Yoruba would say, “He [she] fell silent.”¹⁸ “She is cool inside” (*emefa*), was another way the Ewe referred to women who exhibited courage and coolness under strife.

Frederick Douglass recalled such demeanor during the public whipping of an enslaved woman named Nelly. What Douglass remembered was not only the meanness of the master but also the resolve of the woman. “She was a vigorous and spirited woman,” Douglass stated, “and one of the most likely, on the plantation, to be guilty of impudence.” An impudence Douglass described as an attitude—a “tone,” “countenance” “motion of the head” “gait” or silence. “In Nelly there

were all the necessary conditions for committing the offense.”¹⁹ Douglass wrote:

Mr. Sevier, the overseer, had hold of Nelly when I caught sight of them; he was endeavoring to drag her toward a tree, which endeavor Nelly was sternly resisting...There was no doubt that Nelly felt herself superior in some respects...she nobly resisted...The blood on his (and her) face attested to her skill as well as her courage...I watched with palpitating interest the course of the preliminary struggle...There were times when she seemed likely to get the better of [him], but he finally overpowered her and succeeded in getting his rope around her arms and in firmly tying her to the tree...Nelly was at the mercy of his merciless lash...When Nelly was untied, her back was covered with blood...She was whipped severely, but she was not subdued, for she continued to denounce the overseer...He had bruised her flesh but had left her invincible spirit undaunted.²⁰

One former enslaved man remembered his brother January’s countenance upon receiving a beating by the slave owner for visiting his girlfriend on a neighboring plantation. The master “tied him wid a rope to a pine tree, strip’ his shirt off and ... started layin’ on de lashes.” He recalled how his brother stood defiance with his head up and “neber said a word. De massa got madder and madder kaze he couldn’t make January holla. ‘What’s de matter wid you, nigger?’ he say. ‘Don’t it hurt?’ [But] January [stood], he neber said nothin’, and de massa keep a beatin’ till little streams of blood started flowin’ down January’s chest, but he neber holler. His lips wuz a quiverin’ and his body wuz a shakin’, but his mouf it neber open [while] De [other slaves] wuz all gathered about.”²¹

Negro Spirituals also address how enslaved women and men exhibited coolness during hangings and slave auctions by “never said a mumbling word.” Moreover, Nat Turner, following his rebellion possessed a quiet dignity and cool character during his interview and sentencing. He, too, said little. The slave community also regarded Jesus’ demeanor during his flogging and crucifixion as one of coolness. Instead of drawing on Jesus’ “seven last words” (Matt 27: 45–50; Mark 15: 33–37; Luke 23:46), enslaved Africans often referred to Jesus as having “never said a mumbling word.” Jesus was cool in the face of adversity. Yet, coolness and silence (quiet grace) was not a sign of fear or passivity. It was a resolve, an assurance that God was in control or an indication that the victimized was thinking and lying in wait to act. Coolness (*itutu*) allowed women faced with suffering, violence, and persecution to connect and center with the world around them; it

allowed them to think critically in order to act wisely. “Carving a calm face” was necessary for critical focus and deliberate action.²²

Coolness (*itutu*) of character allowed enslaved women to maintain their composure and “act as though it was impossible to fail.”²³ The harshness of slavery called forth their intuitive coolness—an inner resolve and outward persona of grace under pressure. Such a persona of coolness was an act of resistance. It awakened them to remember that no matter what obstacles or struggles lay ahead, they should remain cool because, as one former enslaved man put it, “Some day, some day, this yoke gwine be lifted offen our shoulders.”²⁴ Or as their Igbo forebears would say, “things will eventually improve despite the present difficulties” (*O te aka o di njo, emesie o ga-adi mma*). Coolness (*itutu*) allowed them to contain their strength in order to speak, protest, or act at the right moment.

Enslaved women were able to subvert normative plantation values with quiet dignity and unceasing persistence toward freedom and well-being. They were able to do this not only because they remained cool, but also because they held a strong inward conviction that they possessed *áshe* (the-power-to-make-things-happen). *Áshe*, as coolness, was a strategy of resistance or a spiritual principal and practice of self-valuation, which connected them, knowingly or unknowingly, to their African past. Where coolness was an inward assurance or conviction of value, *áshe* was an outward manifestation of its power. *Áshe* was understood as “God’s own enabling light rendered accessible to men and women.”²⁵ Robert Farris Thompson argues that, “God... according to Yoruba belief, bestowed upon us the power-to-make-things-happen, morally neutral power, power to give, and to take away, to kill and to give life, according to the purpose and the nature of its bearer.”²⁶

For enslaved African women, *áshe* was their assurance that they possessed the internal power to think critically and act on their own behalf with the support of the spirit world against forces of oppression. One former enslaved woman described a common view that human action and the power of God made a real difference in people’s lives:

We was scairt of Solomon and his whip...He didn’t like for us to pray... We never heard of no church... But some the old folks tell us we got to pray to Gawd... Once my maw and paw taken me and Katherine after night to slip to ’nother place to a prayin’-and-singin’... We prays for the end of trib’lation and the end of beatin’s and for shoes that fit our feet... When we’s comin’ back from that prayin’, I heard dogs and somebody on horseback... Maw listens and say, “Sho’ nuf, them

dogs am runnin' and Gawd help us!" Then she and Paw talk, and they take us to a fence corner and stands us up 'gainst the rails and say, "Don't move, and if anyone comes near, don't breathe loud." They went to the woods, so the hounds chase them and not git us... hounds come nearer, but we don't move. They goes after Paw and Maw, but they circles round to the cabins and gits in. Maw say it's the power of Gawd.²⁷

This woman believed that her family could transcend their victimization by human initiative and divine intervention. Many enslaved women shared this emphasis on human agency and the aid of the spirit world, nature, and others. As human agents, they possessed the power to make things happen, and the wisdom to develop strategies to reorient their destiny even in some of the most devastating circumstances. As Harriet Tubman, a woman imbued with *áshe*, asserted, "I will gain my freedom by fleeing the cruelties of slavery or die trying."²⁸

Coolness of character provided enslaved women the means to gain a clearer perspective and to hear the spirit world and their inner voice calling them to resistance and freedom. *Áshe* was their assurance of God's enabling light, confirming that they possessed the resiliency and power to turn things around. It cannot be said, however, that enslaved women drew directly from the principles of *itutu* and *áshe* to respond to their oppression. What can be said is that these principles, which derive from indigenous African philosophic worldviews, were resident in the slave community and continue to be resident in black culture today. Whether black folks speak directly or indirectly about *itutu* and *áshe*, both are a part of black culture; African Americans through the years have associated dignity and human value to a persona of coolness when faced with adversity. From slavery to the civil rights, they demonstrated and maintained a persona of coolness in an unjust American society because intuitively they believed God would intervene in human history on their behalf. They further believed that they had within them the power to act on their behalf.

Countless enslaved women did not sit idly by and accept their suffering and victimization as God's plan nor did they wait on God to act. They drew from their internal reservoir and protested against a system that sought to annihilate them, and they did so with coolness of character in light of the atrocities of American slavery. "It is the flood that takes her in," the Cameroonians say, "and the ebb that takes her out." They did not need to find God, value, or destiny any more than they needed to find coolness and power to resist and fight back; each was already inside them. They only needed to tap in and

reclaim and remember. And so, countless enslaved African women pulled from within, and with quiet dignity, they waded in cool waters, until it was time to slay the giant.

* * *

STRATEGY #2: There is a time in every woman's life when she needs to say, without hesitation, "No More!"

Revolutionary Action: Enslaved Women "Fighting Back" and Unapologetically Walking toward Canada

When they beat my Aunt Sallie she would fight back.

—enslaved woman

In 1836, two unnamed enslaved women resolved that they would no longer be subjected to the cruelties of domestic, sexual, and sisterhood violence. They fought back. They fled from their southern plantation and made their way north, to Boston. While in Boston, they were captured, imprisoned, and tried in the courts as fugitives. The court, favoring the Constitutional rights of white slave owners, rejected the women's pleas. The women were ordered to return to their southern plantation. Immediately thereafter, a group of free African women banded together and rescued the women from the courtroom.

Throughout the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, enslaved and free African women in America fought against systems of oppression by engaging in individual and collective acts of insurrection. As noted in chapter two, these women emerged from a legacy of warrior women who physically protected themselves, their children, and their villages. Even at their capture on the African coast and hinterlands, their enslaved forebears protested and fought back.

Individual Revolutions

For many enslaved women, fighting was a constructive pro-life strategy, a means of self-preservation. Enslaved women fought out of necessity to protect themselves and to preserve their dignity. Fighting helped them gain momentary control of their bodies and environment. Momentary control provided them a sense of power and fearlessness.

One former enslaved woman recalled how her mother's bold stand induced fear in her attacker. She stated:

My maw... she warn't fraid. [Marse] Wash Hodges tried to whop her with a cowhide, and she'd knock him down and bloody him up. Then he'g go down to some his neighbor kin and try to git them to come help him whop her. But they'd say, "I don't want to go up there and let Chloe Ann beat me up."²⁹

Enslaved women protected themselves from their masters, mistresses, overseers, and other whites that sought to harm them. As one former enslaved mother remarked, they physically fought off their attackers and advised their daughters to "fight, and if you can't fight, kick; if you can't kick then bite" or use whatever means. One former enslaved woman recalled how her mother protected herself against domestic violence:

[My mother's] boss went off deer hunting. While he was gone, the overseer tried to whip her. She knocked him down and tore his face up so that the doctor had to 'tend to him. When Pennington came back the overseer told him that he went down to the field to whip the hands and that he just thought he would hit Lucy a few licks, but she jumped on him and like to tore him up... There wasn't no use for no one man to try to do nothing with her. No overseer never downed her.³⁰

Another former enslaved woman named Sukie protected herself from sexual violence:

Sukie... never had nothin' to say much. She used to cook for Miss Sarah Ann, but old Marsa was always tryin' to make Sukie his gal. One day Sukie was in the kitchen makin' soap. Had three gra' big pots o' lye jus' comin' to a bile in de fireplace when ole Marsa come in for to git arter her 'bout somep'n. He lay into her but she ain't answer him a word. Den he tell Sukie to take off her dress. **She tole him no.** Den he grabbed her an' pull it down off'n her shoulders. Whe he done dat, he fo'got 'bout whuppin' her, I guess, 'cause he grab hold of her an; try to pull her down on de flo'. Den dat black gal got mad. She took an' punch ole Marsa an' made him break loose an' den she gave him a shove an' push his hindparts down in de hot pot o' soap. Soap was near to bilin', an' it burnt him near to death. He got up holdin his hindparts an' ran from de kitchen, not darin' to yell, 'cause he didn't want Miss Sarah Ann to know 'bout it.³¹

One former enslaved woman protected herself from physical assault at the hands of her mistress. Although "given a terrible beating" for

fighting back, she “didn’t care.” She believed that she had a right to be treated humanly. She stated:

One day my mistress Lydia called for me to come in the house, **but no, I wouldn’t go.** She walk out and says she is gwine make me go. So she takes and drags me in the house. Then I grabs that white woman and shook her until she begged for mercy. When the master comes in, I wuz given a terrible beating but I didn’t care for I give the mistress a good un too.³²

One former enslaved woman recalled how her mother vowed to fight back even unto death:

One day she [my mother] had worked and worked and worked until she just couldn’t go any faster. The overseer told her to work faster or he’d beat her. She said she simply stopped and told them, “go a-head, kill me if you want. I’m working as fast as I can and I just can’t do more.” They saw she was at the place where she didn’t care whether she died or not; so they left her alone.³³

Other women vowed to “kill their attackers dead before they let them beat them.” As one former enslaved woman noted:

[Mistress] set me to scrubbing up the bar-room. I felt a little grum, and didn’t do it to suit her; she scolded me about it, and I sassed her; she struck me with her hand. Thinks I, it’s a good time now to dress you out, and damned if I won’t do it. I set down my tools and squared for a fight. The first whack, I struck her a hell of a blow with my fist. I didn’t knock her entirely through the panels of the door, but her landing against the door made a terrible smash, and I hurt her so badly that all were frightened out of their wits and I didn’t know myself but I’d killed the old devil.³⁴

Individual enslaved women fought back by not only attacking their owners, but also attacking them by way of their property. In doing so, they were in essence, attacking their owners. They vandalized and set fires to barns, smoke houses, outhouses, fields, and so forth. Arson was a means of public protest against victimization and oppression. Historian Dorothy Sterling notes that countless individual enslaved women resorted to “poison or arson, putting jimsonweed seeds in the [master’s] coffee pot or torching the barn.”³⁵ In his book, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, historian Herbert Aptheker also notes that “individual attempts at assassination or property damage by gun,

knife, clue, axe, poison, or fire were so numerous that undertaking an enumeration of all would be a well-nigh impossible task.”³⁶ Due to the frequency of property damages and assassinations, by the mid-eighteenth century laws were enacted sentencing slaves found guilty of arson or poisoning whites to the death penalty.³⁷

One of the first reported cases of an enslaved woman executed for arson occurred in Roxbury, Massachusetts. In 1681, she was indicted and burned at the stake for burning down a building. In 1766, another enslaved woman was executed for burning her master’s Maryland estate. She set fire to his home, tobacco house, and outhouse.³⁸ The intent of arson was to cause grave economic hardships for slavers and their families.

Individual enslaved women were unsuccessful at times in physically protecting themselves from violence. Traci C. West argues, however, that constructive combative strategies “must be valued for the valiant acts of resistance they represent. That value rests upon the survival and some justice that the women accomplished.”³⁹ Enslaved women were successful because they asserted themselves; they took a stand, resisted, and fought back. Constructive combative acts of resistance signified an inner resolve in which enslaved women stood fearless in the face of adversity. As Harriet Tubman stated, “I prayed to God to make me strong and able to fight, and that’s what I’ve allers prayed for ever since.”⁴⁰ Tubman asserted that such prayers were “sincere and right,” and would “certainly be fully answered.”⁴¹ By fighting back, enslaved women were articulating to their master(s) that violence against their personhood and womanhood was unacceptable. Fighting helped them regain a sense of voice, courage and self-worth.

Collective Revolutions

In addition to individual acts of constructive combative resistance, enslaved women engaged in collective revolts against institutionalized violence and oppression. Aptheker notes that they were protesting against the institution of slavery: the “social system itself, the degradation, exploitation, oppression, and brutality which it created.”⁴² Slave revolts became a means of rebelling against system(s) that neither protected African peoples’ rights nor valued their humanity.

Antebellum state laws defined slave insurrections as the assemblage of three or more armed slaves with the intent to obtain their liberty by force.⁴³ Aptheker argues that insurrections of this nature were surmountable. His investigation therefore encompasses the assemblage of ten or more slaves who plotted or participated in revolts for the

sole purpose of procuring their freedom. These groups also sought to “overthrow the master class by force,” envisioning “a redistribution of property” in which the oppressed or exploited received just compensation.⁴⁴ Euro-American slave sympathizers and liberals also committed themselves personally and financially to the struggle. Aptheker estimates that an approximately 250 recorded uprisings of this nature occurred during the antebellum period. Enslaved and free women were actively involved in these uprisings. They worked alongside men like Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner to strategize revolts. They went underground with these men because they experienced firsthand acts of human degradation. They understood that their lives and their children’s welfare were at stake.

On August 21, 1831, enslaved women, two of them named Lucy and Charlotte, gathered with Nat Turner and revolted. They paralyzed white Virginia and the world for forty-eight hours as they went from plantation to plantation killing primarily white slave owners and their families with the same tools they were forced to use for slave labor. At the end of their forty-eight hour reign of resistance, approximately sixty white men and some women were dead. In response, thousands of armed forces converged on Virginia, killing approximately 200 enslaved women and men. Those insurgents captured were tried, sentenced, and put to death.

Recorded accounts of slave revolts in antebellum America did not emerge until the late seventeenth century.⁴⁵ The first major recorded slave conspiracy occurred in 1663 in Gloucester County, Virginia. Enslaved women and men and indentured white servants conspired to rebel, overthrow their masters, and secure their freedom.⁴⁶ The participants, however, were betrayed by Africans and white servants. Several slaves, including women, were beheaded and their heads were publicly displayed “from local chimney tops.”⁴⁷ In response to the 1663 revolt, fugitive enslaved women and men in 1672 raided nearby towns, soliciting others to join them. An Act was passed urging their capture, dead or alive.⁴⁸

At the early part of the eighteenth century, conspiracies and uprisings increased throughout the American colonies as African slave importation rates increased.⁴⁹ This increase continued well into the late nineteenth century. Aptheker describes the nineteenth century as “the most fateful [time] in the history of American Negro slave revolts.”⁵⁰ We know from court documents that black women were convicted, burned, or slain for participating in many of these slave insurrections.

Insurrections were not the crazed actions of madwomen and madmen. Some enslaved Africans saw revolts as a means of maintaining their dignity, protecting their welfare, and subverting systems of oppression. The rise and frequency of slave conspiracies and revolts reveal that slaves were resistant to their oppression. They were prepared to surrender their lives in defense of life and freedom for themselves and succeeding generations.

Table 7.1 lists key slave revolts in antebellum American history in which women were active participants. These women gathered with men sending shock waves throughout the North and South, threatening the security of whiteness and questioning the ideas of American democracy. By revolting, they were cleansing by fire the stench of American tyranny and collectively saying, “NO MORE!” to its grip upon their lives.

Table 7.1 Slave Conspiracies and Revolts in Which Enslaved Women Participated

<i>Date/ Location</i>	<i>Revolts/Insurrections</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
Major Early 18th Century		
Oct. 1708 Long Island, New York	Enslaved Africans revolted and killed seven whites.	Four enslaved Africans, including an Indian and a woman, were publicly executed; the men hanged and the woman burned.
1711 South Carolina	Group of armed fugitive slaves led by a slave named Sebastian plotted and raided a predominantly white community, ransacking houses and plantations.	Terror and fear spread throughout the colony. Sebastian and others were captured and executed. Others escaped. The Governor suggested that quantity and quality of food and clothing contributed to the raid. Improvement of basic human needs would deter future raiding among the enslaved.
April 7, 1712 New York	Slave Insurrection. Slaves from the Caramantee and Pappanations set fire to a building and attacked approaching whites; killed nine and wounded others.	27 slaves were condemned; 6 including a pregnant woman pardoned and 21 executed. Others escaped. A Catechism School was closed after authorities learned that participants were students.
1720 Charleston [Charles Town] South Carolina	Slave conspiracy revealed. Revolt planned when colony was in grave economic depression and whites in conflict with local Indians. Conspiracy alarmed whites who concluded that blacks were almost successful in creating a “new revolution.”	Those involved, including women, were taken as prisoners; some were hanged and others were burned or banished or sold from the colony. Others escaped. A year later, a South Carolina statute limited voting right to free white Christian men.

Continued

Table 7.1 Continued

<i>Date/ Location</i>	<i>Revolts/Insurrections</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
1722 Virginia	Slave conspiracy was uncovered. Slaves planned to revolt in two or three Virginia counties.	Leaders were sentenced and some members imprisoned. Others escaped. Stricter laws were enacted limiting movement of slaves and clergy, requiring slaves to carry passes. Secret meetings among slaves were prohibited.
April 1723 Boston, Massachusetts	Slaves accused of setting a dozen fires in one week.	Curfew laws were enacted. Also various laws prohibited slaves meeting on Sundays independent of master.
1729 New Orleans, Louisiana	Native American group inspires the Bambara, enslaved Africans from Senegal, to overtake whites and start their own colony.	Plot betrayed. In 1724, LA enacts the Black Codes drawing from codes and other punishments, penalties and restrictions enacted in other colonies.
1730 New Orleans, Louisiana	An enslaved woman received a violent blow from a French soldier for disobeying him. She stood up and immediately shouted, "The French should not long insult Negroes." Suspicious whites questioned her, but she refused to speak.	Spies were sent into the community. Widespread slave conspiracy uncovered. Expectant participants were tortured to extract information. Whites tricked one slave into confessing plans. Eight men were broken in half on a wheel. The woman who refused to speak was publicly hanged.
1730 Virginia	Slave conspiracy involving over 200 slaves. Arose after enslaved Africans heard that whites covered up an order by King George II to free Christian slaves.	Laws enacted. One Virginia law ordered white males to carry arms to church to protect themselves. Other laws prohibited slaves from testifying in court against whites, but not against nonwhites.
Spring 1738 Prince George County, Maryland	Several slaves broke out of jail and joined other slaves "to wage a small-scale guerrilla war." Slaves sought to "destroy Majesties within the Province," and overtake the whole county including the Capitol.	Approx. 200 slaves were implicated including their leader Clever Sensible. Slaves also sought to overthrow the town's government and establish their own. If overtaken, they had plans in place to settle in woods until they could further strategize governance and control. Some slaves were executed; others escaped.
Sept. 9, 1739 Stono, South Carolina	Slave revolt led by slave named Jemmy. Killed two warehouse guards and armed themselves. They marched to the beating of two drums and killed all whites in their path who interfered. Twenty-five or more whites killed and several buildings burned.	Large number of slaves were seized and discharged. More than 30 executed. Others escaped. Approximately 70 slaves involved. Infantry companies were called upon to protect South Carolina and Georgia.

Continued

Table 7.1 Continued

<i>Date/ Location</i>	<i>Revolts/Insurrections</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
Major Mid-Late 18th Century		
Sept. 3, 1741 Charleston [<i>Charles Town</i>] South Carolina	Slaves revolted by setting fires to several properties throughout Charles Town, devastating the colony.	A woman was condemned to die for arson and a man was burned. Others escaped. Laws enacted requiring better food and clothing to slaves and work hours not to exceed 14 hours a day in winter, and 15 hours in summer.
Dec. 4, 1771 Savannah, Georgia	Slaves revolted, ransacked and destroyed whites' properties and townships from Savannah to Ebenezer.	Militia sent to search out slaves' campgrounds. Extra patrols were sent throughout Savannah to protect whites during the holidays. Some slaves escaped.
June 1772 Savannah, Georgia	Fugitive slaves united near the Savannah river and planned another revolt in Savannah. They burned whites' properties and hijacked a boat.	A white man uncovered where slaves were hiding. Slaves shot at him. Patrols sent. Unreported whether or not slaves were captured. Others escaped.
Nov. 1774 / St. Andrew Parish, Georgia	Several enslaved women and men rebelled, killing four whites and wounding three others.	Slaves were captured and two burned alive. Number of those punished or escaped unrecorded.
1782–1784 / Spanish province of Louisiana	Several maroons (fugitive slaves) and enslaved Africans led by St. Malo revolted.	25 women and men were captured. Punishments included hanging, branding, and floggings. Others escaped.
1792 Eastern shore of Virginia	Slaves joined forces and conspired to revolt. Those from Norfolk, Portsmouth and other counties united. 600 were to cross the bay, at a certain time at night. Then, at a certain time, revolt and take possession. Approx. 900 slaves involved. They armed themselves with muskets, spears, clubs. Those slaves described as, "the favorite servant of his or her master" overtook their masters while other slaves rebelled throughout the counties.	Barrel of musket balls, about 330 spears, some guns, powder, and food in slaves possession were seized. It was reported that the spears were made by a Negro blacksmith on the Eastern seaport. Several slaves were captured and others escaped.
Nov. 1793 Albany, New York	Slaves revolted. Set several fires in Albany, causing damages totaling nearly a quarter of a million dollars.	Two women and a man involved were executed. Others escaped.

Continued

Table 7.1 Continued

<i>Date/ Location</i>	<i>Revolts/Insurrections</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
Spring 1795 Louisiana	Slaves conspired to kill their masters.	Plot uncovered. Some resisted capture and confrontation ensued. Some captured and executed; others escaped. Whites implicated were banished from the colony. A decree was later issued declaring that each slave would receive one barrel of corn every month <i>or</i> some waste (food remnants) for his <i>or</i> her own use or clothing in summer and a coat in winter and work all day (except Sundays) with 2 1/2 hours break for resting and eating. Slaves also required to work everyday during harvest and paid thirty cents for Sundays.
Dec. 1794 Augusta, Georgia	Fires sweep Augusta, Georgia	\$5,850 reward offered.
Nov. 1795 Charleston, [Charles Town] South Carolina	Fires sweep Charleston, South Carolina	Reward offered. Governor declared a day of fasting. Pardon to those who confess.
1796 Five American Colonies	Fires sweep Charleston, New York City, Newark and Elizabeth in New Jersey, Savannah, and Baltimore.	No recorded account of capture.
Major 19th Century		
Aug. 30, 1800 Richmond, Virginia	Slave revolt led by Gabriel Prosser and Jack Bowley. Gabriel's wife Nancy Prosser and brothers actively involved. One of the largest planned slave revolts. Approx. 1,000 slaves involved. Met secretly at key locations. Made weapons. Prosser expected to carry a flag with inscription "death or liberty"	Plot first postponed (bad weather), later betrayed. Fifteen slaves executed with Prosser. Others later hanged, imprisoned, and one committed suicide. Other accounts of capture unrecorded. Prosser stated at trial: "I have adventured my life in endeavoring to the liberty of my people, and am a willing sacrifice to their cause."
Jan. 9, 1811 New Orleans, Louisiana	Revolt led by free man Charles Deslandes. Slaves armed with knives, axes, clubs, guns, drums, and flags, marched to adjoining plantations to seize the city and free all slaves. One white man killed and plantations destroyed.	Some executed; others escaped.

Continued

Table 7.1 Continued

<i>Date/ Location</i>	<i>Revolts/Insurrections</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
March 1811 North Carolina	Slave revolt including fugitive slaves.	Two slave women captured; one male slave wounded and two killed. Others escaped.
Summer 1812 New Orleans, Louisiana	Slave conspiracy involving slaves, free Africans, and a few whites. Unknown number of slaves involved.	Plot betrayed. Whites implicated were imprisoned, and one hanged. Punishment of Africans unrecorded.
1816 Apalachicola Bay, Florida	About three hundred fugitive slaves (men, women and children) along with thirty Indians took over British fort in order to harbor runaway slaves.	Nearly 270 killed and approx. 40 survived. Slaves seized fort for 10 days until they were outmatched by U.S. troops.
May 30, 1822 Charleston [Charles Town] South Carolina	One of the largest strategically planned slave revolts. Involving approx. 5,000 slaves, free Africans, and whites led by Denmark Vesey. Vesey, African-born, purchased freedom. Other leaders: Peter Poyas and Mingo Harth.	Plot betrayed by house servant. 131 arrested; 49 condemned to die; 12 pardoned; 37 hanged. Vesey executed. He stated that, "Negroes were living such an abominable life, they ought to rise." Although he and others were living well, Vesey argued many more were suffering gravely from the wrongs and degradations of slavery.
April 1829 / Augusta & Savannah, Georgia	Fires sweep Augusta and arson attempts in Savannah.	Enslaved pregnant woman convicted, executed, and body publicly displayed. She died denying the crime. Another pregnant woman imprisoned, awaiting execution for the crime.
Aug. 10, 1829 Cincinnati, Ohio	Three day race riot. Africans loot and burn homes.	Africans escape to Upper Canada at the invitation of Canada's Governor.
Aug. 22–23, 1831 Southampton, Virginia	Revolt led by Nat Turner terrified the colonies. Two day revolt. Nearly 75 whites killed, including Nat's master and family. Several properties destroyed.	U.S. forces converged to restore order. Unknown number of slaves killed. Whites implicated. Turner tried, pleaded not guilty, and remained calm during the proceedings. Turner executed. Two women, Lucy and Charlotte and other slaves involved escaped.
Aug. 5, 1848 Fayette County, Kentucky	Slave revolt led by young white man named Patrick Doyle, and three Africans. Approx. 75 slaves armed themselves and headed to the Ohio River to freedom.	\$5,000 reward offered. Several slaves captured. Leaders: Three Africans hanged; Doyle sentenced 20 years. Other women and men involved escaped.
1856 Eight American colonies	Several slave conspiracies and revolts occur in Louisiana, Arkansas, Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee	One year later, Dred Scott decision passed. U.S. Supreme Court ruled against citizenship for Africans. Slaves could not sue for freedom in free states because slaves were deemed property.

Constructive combative resistance was not uncommon among enslaved and free African women in North America. This inner resolve to defend themselves, to preserve their lives and restore their dignity, came from a wellspring of warrior women—precolonial West and West Central African women who fought alongside or independent of men. As Queen Yaa Asantewa said, when resisting the British colonization of Ghana, “If you the men of Ashanti will not go forward, then we will. I shall call upon my fellow women. We will fight the white men. We will fight until the last of us falls in the battlefield.”⁵¹

Individual and collective groups of enslaved and free African women drew from this wellspring of warrior women. During the antebellum period, countless women risked their lives in order to reclaim their lives. A life of violence and abuse was unacceptable—so unacceptable that countless women ran as far as they could from the mayhem.

* * *

STRATEGY #3: There is a time in every woman’s life when she needs to run and not look back.

Self-Preservation and Escape: Enslaved Women Running from the Madness and Transforming Themselves

I met many runaway slaves... dey had good a strong notion to see what it was like to own your own body.

—enslaved man

Countless enslaved women not only fought their way to freedom, but also ran. One former enslaved man remarked, “plenty of slaves uster run away... dem woods was full o’ em.”⁵² Aptheker argues that, “flight was a major factor in the battle against bondage. Slaves fled wherever havens of liberation appeared.”⁵³ Enslaved and free women risked their lives to protect other women; they harbored one another in times of need. As one former enslaved woman remarked:

One night I was fast asleep an’ heard a rap-bump, bump-on my do’. I answered, “Who’s dat?” De answer was, “Hush, don’ say nothin’, but let me in!” Dat ’oman was out a breath, wisperin’, “Can I stay here all night?” I told her she could, so dar de ’oman done slept right dar ’hin’ me in my bed all night... I took an’ heard de horses an’ talk’ in de woods. Dog barkin’... I peeped out de window an’ saw dem white foks

go by an' ain' never dreamed of 'em lookin' fer de 'oman whar was over 'hind me. Next morning she stole out from dar, an' I, Baby, ain' never seen her no more. You see we never told on each other.⁵⁴

How enslaved women ran, however, was just as essential and intriguing as why and where they ran. They did not run haphazardly into the woods, but rather, their imaginations led them to creative and subversive strategies of escape. Gomez argues that enslaved women's fierceness of spirit can be traced to West Africa. As chapter two has shown, precolonial African women had a sense of body autonomy. They were known to take imaginative risks to protect themselves and their children. Enslaved Igbo women, for example, "featured large as runaways in America" because their "sense of independence" in precolonial Africa was represented in "multiple arenas"—home, marketplace, commerce, and government.⁵⁵

The ingenious ways in which countless enslaved women chose to abscond provides evidence of their internal fortitude to think critically under pressure. Under the daily threat of bodily harm, they imagined the possibility of freedom and transformed that possibility into a lived reality. In doing so, they outsmarted those who sought to subjugate and belittle them. Their imaginative spirits and preservation instincts were evident in harrowing acts of escape. Enslaved women impersonated white women, disguised themselves as white male slaveholders, posed as black male soldiers, faked physical and mental illnesses, served as spies, mailed themselves north as cargo, joined others on the Underground Railroad, boarded ships headed to Africa, and committed mercy killings in order to protect their children from slavery. They risked their lives in creative and subversive ways because they believed they had a right, as one former enslaved man stated, "**to own your own body.**"⁵⁶

In 1782, an enslaved woman named Sally transformed herself from slave to philanthropist. In addition to her regular involuntary labors on the Beaty plantation, Sally, an enslaved woman requested permission to "work for wages" in the nearby town. Her master granted her request on the condition that Sally would pay him a portion of her wages. For several years, Sally paid her master his share while secretly saving her extra earnings. Once she acquired a considerable sum, Sally purchased an enslaved girl also named Sally and, immediately thereafter, freed the child. Her master was outraged and claimed the enslaved girl as his property since she was purchased by his slave. It was outrageous for a "slave woman to think she could purchase a slave" and then, simultaneously grant freedom. Sally took her master to court and won her case. The court ruled that her extra earnings

were hers to “dispose of as she pleased.” The court also argued that the “generosity of the act ought not go unnoticed; a slave herself, and having the means of purchasing her own freedom Sally still preferred to remain in slavery, in order to give liberty to an enslaved Negro girl.” Young Sally was freed and walked away from the courtroom as a free Negro. The case “The Guardian of SALLY, a Negro, vs. BEATY” set precedence and became a famous trial in South Carolina.⁵⁷

In 1841, enslaved women aboard the slave vessel *Creole*, transformed themselves from slaves to warriors (mutineers) the day they overtook their captors and revolted. The slave ship was headed to slave ports in Hampton, Virginia, and New Orleans, Louisiana. They gained control of the vessel and steered its course toward Nassau, Bahamas. In Nassau, they pleaded their case before the British court. The court ruled in their favor, freed them, and granted them asylum.

In 1848, Ellen Craft transformed herself from slave to slaveholder. She and her husband, William Craft devised a plan to flea captivity in Macon, Georgia. They requested passes from their owners to travel to the adjoining town for Christmas. After leaving the plantation, Ellen, a mulatto house servant dressed as a man and disguised herself as white slaveholder. Her husband William, a dark skinned man posed as her servant and the two boarded a train. They agreed if asked, to tell inquirers that William was accompanying his master to Philadelphia for medical treatment. After traveling by train, the two traveled by ship to South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Washington D.C., and Maryland until they reached Philadelphia. They were met by Quaker abolitionists who helped them reach Boston. The two traveled over 1,000 miles disguised as a white male slaveholder and black male servant. In Boston, they continued risking their lives to help other fugitive slaves. An arrest warrant was issued and the two fled to England where they continued abolitionist efforts. William Craft once remarked, “it is true, our condition as slaves was not by any means the worst; but the thought that we couldn’t call the bones and sinews that God gave us our own...haunted us for years.”⁵⁸

In 1849, Harriet Tubman transformed herself from slave to conductor. After receiving numerous beatings, Tubman resolved that she would no longer subject her body to cruel and inhumane treatment. She escaped. She risked her life in order to save her life. She also risked for others. Tubman returned to the South nineteen times to help over 300 slaves escape. With a pistol on her hip, she moved along the Underground Railroad route offering a word of advice to slaves who wanted to turn back. “Live north,” she said, “Or die here.”⁵⁹ Historian W.B. Hesseltine estimates that “between 1830 and 1860

as many as 2,000 slaves a year passed into the land of the free along the route of the Underground Railroad.”⁶⁰ Tubman, along with other African women and men, and sympathetic whites helped turn the possibility of freedom into reality.

In 1857, Lear Green transformed herself from slave to cargo. With the aid of her fiancé William, a free black barber and his mother, Lear, an eighteen-year-old house servant, had “herself packed into a sailor’s chest and shipped as freight from Baltimore to Philadelphia.”⁶¹ William’s mother traveled aboard the Ericsson Steamer as a passenger while Lear endured the eighteen hour journey in a wooden box until she reached freedom.

During the late nineteenth century, Mary Elizabeth Bowser transformed herself from slave to spy. Mary Elizabeth, a house servant on the Van Lew plantation in Virginia was freed after her master’s death. She continued working, however, for his wife, Elizabeth Van Lew as a paid house servant. At the start of the Civil War, Elizabeth Van Lew, an abolitionist, asked Mary Elizabeth to serve as a spy against the Confederates. Elizabeth Van Lew and other white abolitionists, with the help of African servants, conspired to free Union prisoners and subvert proslavery war efforts. In order to gain access to Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Mary Elizabeth became his house servant. Because Africans were often deemed unintelligent, Jefferson did not perceive her as a threat and discussed war efforts with other men in her presence. Mary Elizabeth recorded the conversations. She also read important documents in Davis’ study while cleaning and dusting. She memorized war strategies and other pertinent information and forwarded it to Elizabeth Van Lew who in turn informed Union officials. Her efforts helped free Union prisoners.

In 1856, Margaret Garner transformed herself from slave to martyr. She, along with her husband Simeon Garner, their four children, and Simeon’s parents fled captivity in Kentucky and headed to Cincinnati, Ohio. In Cincinnati, bounty hunters (slaveholders and US marshals) tracked them to a relative’s home. In a desperate attempt to save her children from the brutal life she lived, Margaret slit the throat of her baby girl and struck her sons with a shovel. She was taken into custody and ordered by the court to return to her master. In a final act of escape, Margaret upon returning to her master jumped into the Ohio River taking one child with her. She was recaptured, separated from her family, and resold to a southern slaveholder. At the time of her initial capture Margaret was twenty-two years old and pregnant with her fifth child. Margaret was not the only woman who viewed suicide and

mercy killings as an act of resistance. Throughout the antebellum period, countless women sought to abscond or preserve their lives by committing suicide. They did not want to subject themselves or their children to the harsh realities of American cruelty. They sought to shorten their misery. If they could not own their own bodies, then they felt no one should.

During slavery and the post-emancipation period, Cathy Williams and other African women transformed themselves from slaves to soldiers. Blacks serving in the Civil War were known as “Buffalo Soldiers,” a name given to them by Indians because of their warrior ability and hair texture. Cathy, a slave in Missouri became a cook for the Army. In 1866, she disguised her gender and enlisted in the 38th Infantry, Company A, in St. Louis as a Buffalo Solider. She changed her name to William Cathay and served under Captain Charles Clarke, at Ft. Cummings, New Mexico. At the time, medical examinations were not required. Therefore, Cathy was able to disguise her gender for two years. Women, like Cathy, were known to disguise themselves as male soldiers and join armed forces in pursuit of a better life for themselves and other blacks in the American Union.

Enslaved women devised imaginative means to abscond, yet struggled with leaving loved ones behind. When they reached freedom, however, they spent their lives helping other enslaved African women and men follow the river’s current to freedom. Some women chose to fight as a way of facing their oppression, while others chose flight. Whatever their choice, they tended to seek the advice of tricknology experts, those counselors and custodians of well-being who would help them recover from the violence and deal with the trickster.

* * *

STRATEGY #4: There is a time in every woman’s life when she needs to simply say, “I need help.”

Tricknology Experts: Enslaved Women Consulting Experts to Handle the Trickster

Chile, lemme tell you that ‘oman knowed just what ter do fer you.

—enslaved woman

On many slave owning properties, “practitioners of the supernatural” (conjurers) were highly respected religious women and men with “extraordinary powers”⁶² They were “entrusted with the knowledge

and responsibility for maintaining spiritual traditions,” and the enslaved African women among them “made their mark in significant numbers.”⁶³ Although some Africans and whites deemed conjurers and their practices as evil, others believed that these practitioners were well-versed in animating the spirit world on their behalf. Historian of religions Yvonne Chireau asserts that conjure traditions gave enslaved and free Africans the “determination to engage in subversive activities,” to heal and protect themselves, and therefore, gain some measure of control over their lives.⁶⁴ The slave community looked to these practitioners for healing, self-defense, and protection.

In precolonial West and West Central Africa, various terms were appropriated to describe these women and men who “worked the spirits,” and were known to control weather, summon rain for harvest, create charms, receive and interpret communication from the spirit world, become invisible, and fly.⁶⁵ Once the practitioners and their traditions were transplanted to North America, they came to be known as conjurers/conjuring. Chireau also employs the term *practitioners of the supernatural*, and I will apply interchangeably the terms *tricknology experts* and *counselors and custodians of well-being*. By the nineteenth century, enslaved and free Africans appropriated other names. Chireau notes, for example, that:

“Hoodooos” and “root workers” were the most common vernacular expressions that depicted persons who were believed to be able to manipulate unseen forces or “work the spirits.” “Root doctors” was a prevalent euphemism that described persons who practiced healing only, whereas “Conjure doctors” could include those who possessed the power to do harm as well as heal. “Goopher-doctors,” “Two-Head doctors” or “Wise men” were region-specific titles for folk practitioners, as were “Longheads,” and “Double-sighters,” root workers who could be found in Florida, South Carolina, and Georgia. Throughout Louisiana and Mississippi, black Conjure specialists were variously called “Voodos,” “wagateurs” and “horses.” “Trick doctors” and “Witch-doctors” dealt with the spiritual sources of misfortune.⁶⁶

Conjurers had distinguishable physical characteristics that set them apart from others. Among these characteristics were unusual and discernable “birthmarks or abnormalities such as harelips, red eyes, or eyes of different colors.”⁶⁷ The conjurer tradition was passed down from generation to generation among family members or taught to young protégés who exhibited proficiency or talent. Others were “born with the gift” or experienced divine commission, a calling.⁶⁸ Most conjurers or tricknology experts recorded their conjuring formulas

and techniques or shared them with others. One former slave read to Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviewers “a strange recipe jotted down in almost illegible writing on the flyleaf of this...root doctuh’s” manual.⁶⁹ The formula was recorded as such:

Eggs—2
 carisin—1 pint
 turpentine—1 pint
 vinegar
 cy pepper
 table salt—1 box

After reading the formula, he remarked, “that’s a cunjuh mixin. I don’t know what it’s faw. It was in the book when Joe Fraser, a root doctuh gave it to me.”⁷⁰

Tricknology experts were both feared and revered by both blacks and whites. Their status, knowledge, and power, afforded them privileges uncommon to slaves. Some were able to secure for themselves “limited freedom of mobility” and “a certain amount of respect.”⁷¹ As former slave Williams Wells Brown describes in relation to a conjurer named Dinkie:

Nearly every large plantation, with any considerable number of negroes, had at least one, who laid claim to be a fortune-teller, and who was regarded with more than common respect by his fellow-slaves. Dinkie, a full-blooded African, large in frame, coarse featured, and claiming to be a descendant of a king in his native land, was the oracle on the “Poplar Farm”...No one in that section was considered so deeply immersed in voodooism, goopherism, and fortune-telling, as he. Although he had been many years in the Gaines family, no one could remember the time when Dinkie was called upon to perform manual labor. He was not sick, yet he never worked. No one interfered with him...Dinkie hunted, slept, was at the table at meal time, roamed through the woods, went to the city, and returned when he pleased, with no one to object, or to ask a question. Everybody treated him with respect. The whites, throughout the neighborhood, tipped their hats to the old one-eyed negro, while the policemen, or patrolers, permitted him to pass without a challenge. The negroes, everywhere, stood in mortal fear of “Uncle Dinkie”...I once asked a negro why they appeared to be afraid of Dinkie. He looked at me...and said, ...“Dinkie’s got de power, ser; he knows things seen and unseen, an’ dat’s what makes him his own massa.” It was literally true, this man was his own master. He wore a snake’s skin around his neck, carried a petrified frog in one pocket, and a dried lizard in the other.⁷²

There were African women and men, and also whites, who believed in the power of conjuring and did not reduce it to superstition. They saw conjurers as skilled practitioners who provided them pragmatic practices and solutions. These tricknology experts had the ability to subvert the trick and deal with the trickster. As theologian Will Coleman notes, conjurers “reversed the hand”—they discovered effective ways to prevent attacks or to cause harm to the originator of slaves’ misfortune or ill treatment.⁷³ The intended aim was to, “determine the source of the malevolence” in order to “counter the attack” and “prevent the series of catastrophes” from happening.⁷⁴ Both Africans and whites depended on conjurers’ artistry and wisdom to subvert acts against them. Chireau asserts that “Black Americans utilized conjuring traditions not only because they saw them as a valuable resource for resistance, but because they believed that the supernatural realm offered alternative possibilities for empowerment.”⁷⁵

Conjurers’ supernatural powers were effective to the “extent that they were believed,” and more importantly, “their powers seemed to work.”⁷⁶ As one former enslaved man stated, “If dey has faith in sich, it works. Otherwise, it won’t.”⁷⁷ Slaves often referred to the ineffectiveness of conjuring practices especially against whites. Yet, others alluded to the effectiveness of conjuring, as one former slave remarked, “[I] watched them and found that they are true.”⁷⁸ Many expressed how charms and amulets made from the elements of the earth protected them from floggings and other intimate acts of violence. For many within the slave community, the conjurer served as a counselor or advisor; his or her presence and practices provided many slaves a glimmer of retribution and hope amidst the cruelties of slavery.

Although conjurers’ practices and motives were often questioned, conjurers were also considered visionaries and healers in the slave community, and mediators between slaves and the spirit world. Coleman, Chireau, and Albert Raboteau note that even well-known skeptics, such as Frederick Douglass, consulted conjurers. After several unsuccessful attempts in confronting his brutal master, Douglass consulted a well-known tricknology expert named Sandy Jenkins. Thereafter, Douglass had no more brutal encounters with his master, Edward Covey. Coleman further notes that the secret to conjurers’ powers was not only their ability to animate the spirit world, but also their keen sense of human behavior and how they use their minds.

Both individuals and groups consulted conjurers for protection against brutal white masters. Table 7.2 identifies some of these tricknology experts (some prominent, others anonymous), and their practices during the antebellum period.

Table 7.2 Tricknology Experts: Various Regions in the American Union wherein Africans Sought Conjurers' Expertise

<i>Date/ Location</i>	<i>Tricknology Expert/ Religious Specialist</i>	<i>Description of Practice / Ritual Performed</i>	<i>Consulted by</i>	<i>Reason / Outcome</i>	<i>Source</i>
1712 New York	Unnamed Conjurer (also referred to as a witch doctor, sorcerer, religious specialist)	Conjurer sealed pact among group using blood and neutral mystical powder. The blood ritual involved the group taking an oath of secrecy as they sucked blood from each others' hands, creating a bond and commitment to one another and their cause. This oath, like many African rituals, was a form of spiritual invocation. The group formed a bond between themselves and the spirit world.	The Cormantee and Pappa Tribes from West Africa (new arrivals called salt water Africans)	Revolt: rioted against all whites in the town to procure their safety and freedom. <i>The outcome:</i> Enslaved Africans set fire to the house of Peter Van Tilburgh and shot at the whites who came to extinguish the blaze. Slaves were subdued; nine whites killed and thirty-nine rioters executed.	Gayraud Wilmore (<i>Black Religion</i> , 1998, pp. 70, 71) Yvonne Chireau (<i>Black Magic</i> , 2003, p. 61)
1731- New Orleans	Unnamed Priest/ Conjurer (native of Guinea—Mandinga speaking)	Conjurer created poison from the gull and heart of a crocodile. Poison was comprised of a secret formula known only to African priests.	Creole overseer, on behalf of enslaved African women and men	Overseer consulted conjurer's expertise to deal with a slave driver. <i>The outcome:</i> The scheme was exposed.	Yvonne Chireau (<i>Black Magic</i> , 2003, p. 72)
1795 Virginia	Unnamed woman Conjurer (well-known in the slave community; whites referred to her as a Negro Wench)	Conjurer created poison from unknown natural substances.	Two unnamed enslaved Africans	The two men consulted the woman conjurer's expertise for handling a brutal slave master.	Philip D. Morgan ("Slave Life," in <i>Colonial Chesapeake Society</i> , p. 454) Yvonne Chireau (<i>Black Magic</i> , 2003, p. 69 c- also p. 180 fn 24)

Continued

Table 7.2 Continued

<i>Date/ Location</i>	<i>Tricknology Expert/ Religious Specialist</i>	<i>Description of Practice/ Ritual Performed</i>	<i>Consulted by</i>	<i>Reason / Outcome</i>	<i>Source</i>
1822– South Carolina	Gullah Jack, Angolan Conjuror, a.k.a Paul Pritchard. Well-known in the slave community as “the little man who can’t be killed.” Mingo Harth, Mandingo Conjuror. Monday Gell , Igbo Conjuror. Each served as advisors in Vesey’s conspiracy. All were preachers.	All three advised Vesey. Jack drew on African practices and preached “the conjurer’s doctrine of invincibility.” Vesey described as the man with the charm who would lead them. Jack was feared by whites. In preparation for the revolt, he ordered Vesey’s group to eat a certain diet until the morning of the revolt.	Denmark Vesey	Vesey and other enslaved Africans strategized a comprehensive slave revolt against whites and to procure slaves’ freedom. <i>The outcome:</i> The plot was exposed by a fellow slave. Those involved were apprehended and executed. Over 40 were sent to Africa and the West Indies.	Gayraud Wilmore (<i>Black Religion</i> , 1998, pp. 81–87) Michael A. Gomez (<i>Exchanging Our Country Marks</i> , 1998, pp. 1–4) Sterling Stuckey (<i>Slave Culture</i> , 1987, pp. 47–53)
1831– South Hampton, Virginia	Nat Turner— possessed ability to handle neutral mystical powers. Turner’s birthmarks, according to African custom, were indicative of one who possessed unusual mental abilities associated with “witch-man,” a conjurer. Parents instilled in him that he was commissioned for a great mission.	Turner conducted mysterious experiments associated with paper, gunpowder, plants, and other elements. Turner was known to interact with the supernatural world and animating nature on his and slaves’ behalf in the commencement of revolts.	Himself (Nat Turner)	Turner and other enslaved Africans strategized a comprehensive slave revolt against whites to procure slaves’ freedom. Turner argued that he was under divine commission. <i>The outcome:</i> Insurrection succeeded. Inspired and ignited more slave revolts throughout the American Union. Revolt known as the Three Blue Days of 1831.	Nat Turner (<i>The Confessions</i>) Gayraud Wilmore (<i>Black Religion</i> , 1998, pp. 87–98) Yvonne Chireau (<i>Black Magic</i> , 2003, p. 63)

1833 Maryland	Sandy Jenkins, African Conjuror (referred to as “an old advisor”)	Conjurer advised Douglass on methods for protecting himself against his master. Made root pouch taken from natural elements found in the woods. Advised Douglass to carry this root pouch on his “right side” to protect himself from any white man. He told Douglass that he himself had carried a root for years and never received a blow.	Frederick Douglass	Took root to protect himself from his brutal master, Edward Covey. <i>The outcome:</i> Douglass stood up and fought back. He said “My spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place.” He noted that carrying the root and fighting back was his “turning point.” Covey never touched him again. He vowed to fight for his and other slaves’ freedom.	Frederick Douglass <i>(Frederick Douglass: The Narrative and Selected Writings, 1984, pp. 76–83)</i> Will Coleman <i>(Tribal Talk, 2000, p. 44)</i> Albert Raboteau <i>(Slave Religion, 1987, p. 281)</i>
1856 Texas	Unnamed Conjuror	Conjurer made “jacks”—charms, little bags filled with queer things.	Unnamed woman	Consulted conjurer for protection against a slave master who repeatedly beat her. <i>The outcome:</i> The woman stood up to her master and was beaten.	George P. Rawick <i>(American Slave, Supplemental Series, Part 3, p. 161)</i> Michael A. Gomez <i>(Exchanging Our Country Marks, 1998, p. 289)</i>
Date Unspecified- Indiana	Unnamed Conjuror (a.k.a. “old man” and friend/advisor)	Issac consulted conjurer on two occasions to assist him in dealing with his violent mistress. On the second visit, he advised Issac to put “yellow dust around her room and in her shoes.”	Issac Carpenter, a slave on the Carpenter plantation	Issac sought protection from his violent mistress. He also desired to be resold. <i>The outcome:</i> The beatings ceased and Carpenter was resold to another master.	WPA, Indiana Narratives Vol. V <i>Source:</i> Sarah Carpenter Colbert (daughter of Issac Carpenter)

Continued

Table 7.2 Continued

<i>Date/ Location</i>	<i>Tricknology Expert/ Religious Specialist</i>	<i>Description of Practice/ Ritual Performed</i>	<i>Consulted by</i>	<i>Reason / Outcome</i>	<i>Source</i>
Date Unspecified-South Carolina	Unnamed Conjurer called "Conjin Doc"	Conjurer put a "spell" on the master.	Enslaved Africans	Consulted conjurer to <i>trick</i> their master (Marse Glen) in order to give "slaves' minds relief." <i>The outcome:</i> Spell succeeded. "turned out dat in a few weeks de Marse come out from under de spell."	WPA, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. XIV Source: Unnamed/Folklore
Date Unspecified-Arkansas	Unnamed Conjurer	Conjure involved putting turpentine on slaves' feet or in their shoes and fresh dirt on feet to avoid paddyrollers and hounds. They were also told to "catch a yearlin calf by der tail en step in the droppin and runned long with him and hold on to its tail."	Enslaved Africans	Conjure to prevent hounds and paddyrollers from catching them without pass or for absconding. <i>The outcome:</i> Conjure often successful. "If de paddyrollers got de hounds wid 'em when u run, de onliest thing u can do is wuk conjure"	WPA, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. II, Part 3 Source: Henry Green
Date Unspecified-Arkansas	Uncle Marion Johnson Voodoo Man/Conjurer	Conjurer used voodoo instrument comprised of a small glass bottle about 2.5 inches long wrapped to the neck in pink washable tape and suspended it from a dirty 6 inch twine with slip knot at top. Conjurer divined by asking group questions. Instrument was used to answer questions.	White WPA interviewers (Uncle Marion in retelling his story of slavery days not only requests payment but "tricks" the interviewers while demonstrating conjuring methods used during slavery).	Advises interviewers that conjuring is good for those wishing to "ward off evil, conquer troubles and ovah come yo enemies." <i>The outcome:</i> Conjurer tricks interviewers who present themselves as voyeurs.	WPA, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. II, Part 4 Source: Marion Johnson

Date Unspecified- Maryland	Eliza Foote-Conjurer (Free African woman)	Conjurer created a small bag with a stone of a peculiar shape and placed several roots inside the bag.	Enslaved Africans	<p>Consulted conjurer for protection and to “have power over all with whom [the root] came in contact.” Bags made for curing ailments and protection to abscond.</p> <p><i>The outcome:</i> One man cured and slaves successfully absconded. However, conjurer was forced by whites to tell where they might have gone. Slaves were caught. Conjurer ordered to leave county or be sold into slavery.</p>	WPA, Maryland Narratives, Vol. VIII <i>Source:</i> Thomas Foote (son of medicine woman/ conjurer)
Date Unspecified- Missouri	Unnamed Conjurer	“hoodoos and castin’ spells en’ sech like.”	Enslaved Africans	<p>Consulted conjurer for her expertise in protecting themselves from “mean Masa’s when dey beat um up.”</p> <p><i>The outcome:</i> “Slaves believed that if they hadn’t consulted the conjurer the master would “beat um up worser or mebby killed em.”</p>	WPA, Missouri Narratives, Vol. X <i>Source:</i> Lucy Davis

The tables are not comprehensive listings, but rather provide a snapshot of conjurers, their practices, and the outcome/effects of their practices. Chireau argues that conjuring arbitrated slaves' day-to-day confrontations with slaveholder's domination, a domination that was enforced through violent means and racial oppression.⁷⁹ Individuals and groups also sought conjurer's expertise in preparation for small and large scale slave revolts. They relied on their wisdom and religious objects, and involved them in the strategic planning of slave insurrections. Both women and male conjurers played a key role in the successful outcome of various individual and small and large-scale slave rebellions.

The above tables show that tricknology experts were intentional about subverting the trick and dealing with the trickster. As counselors and custodians of well-being, however, some were equally intentional about empowering African peoples to become self-reliant in healing and protecting themselves.

* * *

STRATEGY #5: There is a time in every woman's life when she needs to heal and help herself.

Harnessing Wellness: Enslaved Women Activating the Earth's Elements

De peoples use herb medicines for dey cures in dem days dat dey get out de woods.

—enslaved woman

*Africa wuz a lan uh magic powuh since duh beginning uh history
duh descendants ub Africans hab duh same gif tuh do unatchul ting.*

—enslaved man

The elements or ingredients that tricknology experts used for healing and protection were also harnessed and used by enslaved women. Enslaved women made use of herbs and roots (medicinal plants) for healing and potions, charms, talisman, objects, water, rocks, and other forms of natural and cosmic energy for protection against a system that sought to harm them. Womanist theologian Dianne Stewart employs

the term “neutral mystical power” to describe the use of such energy and how the slave community drew from nature, cosmic energy, and spiritual energy for sustenance, healing, and protection.⁸⁰ With limited or no access to health care (treatment by white doctors) and to personal and communal safety, the slave community drew from traditions within their African past for sustenance. The African past afforded them a rich reservoir for accessing and making use of elements and energies around them for healing and protection. Such engagement or harnessing of natural elements and cosmic and spiritual energies was an act of resistance. Through these elements and energies, enslaved women reconstructed their reality by harnessing elemental and dynamic energy in physical objects and pouches such as charms, talismans, medicine bags, and so forth. In so doing, they established an interlocking connection with nature, themselves, and the spirit realm. They also formed bonds of *sistah-hood* through the sharing of these elements. In doing so, they transmitted humanity and healing to one another, and protected themselves from opposing human forces. Enslaved women were skilled in activating neutral mystical power because they were descendants of pretechnological mystical experts (i.e. herbalists, root workers, medicine women and men, priests, diviners, and shamans). These traditions were carried over into the New World.

Harnessing Wellness: Healing

Good health and healing was important to precolonial African societies as well as the slave community. Both relied on neutral mystical power to create remedies and cures for themselves and others.⁸¹ Medicine bags or prescribed remedies required particular ingredients to ensure their effectiveness. One former enslaved woman described how herbs and roots were mixed for healing:

Dere been some queer things white folks can't understand. Dere am folkses can see de spirits, but I can't. My mammy larned me a lots of doctorin', what she larnt from old folkses from Africy, and some de Indians larnt her. If you has rheumatism, jes' take white sassafras root and bile it and drink de tea. You makes lin'ment by boilin' mullein flowers and poke roots and alum and salt. Put red pepper in you shoes and keep de chills off, or string briars round de neck. Make red or black snakeroot tea to cure fever and malaria, but git de roots in de spring when de sap am high. When chillen teethin' put rattlesnake rattles round de neck, and alligator teeth am good, too. Show de new moon money and you'll have money all month. Throw her five

kisses and show her money and make five wishes and you'll git dem. Eat black-eyed peas on New Year and have luck all dat year... When anybody git cut I allus burns woolen rags and smokes de wound or burns a piece of fat pine and drops ter from it on scorched wool and bind it on de wound. For headache put a horseradish poltice on de head, or wear a nutmeg on a string round you neck... For a sprain, git a dirt dauber's nest and put de clay with vinegar and bind round de sprain. De dime on de string round my ankle keeps cramps out my leg, and tear from red coon-root good, too. All dese doctorin' things come clear from Africy, and dey allus worked for mammy and for me, too.⁸²

Good health did not translate into recovery from physical ailments alone. Good health meant the recovery of one's whole being in community. In a society that overtaxed their bodies, enslaved women turned to the earth, cosmos, and the spirit world for recovery and renewal. They subverted slave owners' misuse of their bodies, minds, and souls by mixing elements together to create remedies that sustained their well-being in North America. Table 7.3 below offers a snapshot of the ingenious ways enslaved women shared and made use of natural elements and cosmic and spiritual energies to empower themselves and heal one another.

Harnessing Wellness: Protection

Neutral mystical power not only carried healing agents but also provided protection for women under the constant threat of violence. Enslaved women used charms, amulets, talismans, and poisons to protect themselves from slave owners or others who sought to cause them harm. A vast majority of women and men either carried or displayed them. As one former enslaved woman stated, "Nearly all classes of superstitions find acceptance among the negroes."⁸³ These spiritually charged religious objects were worn around necks, pinned to clothing, or secured in pockets. One former enslaved man remarked that "the mojo ring or luck piece [was] worn by almost every man [and] the silver dime [was] tied around many a woman's ankle."⁸⁴ One former enslaved woman stated, "Many of us slaves feared de charm... more than de whippin' dat de Marster gave. Dey would keep their tiny bags of charms closely hidden under their clothes."⁸⁵

Enslaved Africans used various names to describe charms, amulets and talismans such as: mojos, hands, gris-gris, jacks, tobies, gopher bags, goofer dust, hoodoos, and wangas. These names derived from African origins and functioned in the same manner as they did and

Table 7.3 Harnessing Wellness: Healing (herbs, roots, and medicine bags)

<i>Location</i>	<i>Biographical Information on Practitioner Description of Practice/Ritual Performed</i>	<i>Reason/Outcome</i>	<i>Source</i>
Georgia	<p>“Aunt Darkas” was a well-known respected “conjure doctor” who lived to 128 years of age. Slaves remarked that “she was blind but she could go ter the woods and pick out any kind of root or herb she wanted. She said the Lord told her what roots to get. Before sun-up you see her in the woods with a short handled pick.” She listened to what ailed slaves and then, “she go out there and draw a bucket of water and set it on the floor.” She created a healing substance with the water and certain herbs taken from the woods. After placing the bucket on the floor “she waved her hand over it and say something. She called it healing the water.” She said the “Lord gave her power and vision.”</p>	<p>Slaves went to Aunt Darkas for ailments. Most were cured. She also provided the slave community with an on-hand supply of <i>healing water</i>. In the same slave community, other known medicine women and men provided the slave community with prescriptions and wisdom for other known ailments such as: “Ef you think you will have a stroke, go to running water and get four flint rocks; heat ‘em and lay on all of them, and... it will start your blood circulating and prevent the stroke. Another way to start your blood circulating; heat a brick and (lay) lie on it. To get rid of corns, bathe your feet in salt water and take a little salt and put it ‘tween toes.”</p>	<p>WPA, Georgia Narratives, Vol. IV Part 4 Source: Mrs. Emmaline Heard, former slave Rosa and Jasper Millegan, former slaves</p>
North Carolina	<p>Unnamed grandmother. Medicine woman and caregiver of slave children on Moore plantation. Her remedies included: making teas from dogwood bark, wild cherry bark, pennyroyal, or hoardhound for colds. She used rats’ veins mixed with a little sugar and boiled it to treat colic. She used snake root for stomach aches in tea form or cut the root. She treated fevers by wrapping slaves in cabbage leaves or ginseng leaves. For severe fever she took hoofs, “off de hog dat had been killed.” She “parch the hoofs in de ashes and den she beat em’ up to make a tea.”</p>	<p>Fannie Moore’s grandmother’s herbs and remedies were successful in curing most enslaved children of their ailments.</p>	<p>WPA, North Carolina Narratives, Vol. XI, Part 2 Source: Fannie Moore (granddaughter of medicine woman)</p>

Continued

Table 7.3 Continued

<i>Location</i>	<i>Biographical Information on Practitioner Description of Practice/Ritual Performed</i>	<i>Reason/Outcome</i>	<i>Source</i>
Oklahoma	Enslaved women made their own medicines using herbs and roots. To help teething babies, they took poke root, cut it in small pieces, stringed it, and put it around the babies neck. To cure chills and malaria they made tea out of dog fennel or corn shucks causing those sick to vomit. To cure consumption they made a tonic out of button snake root, black snake root, chips of anvil iron and whiskey.	Enslaved Africans, both women and men created remedies to treat enslaved Africans on the plantation.	WPA Oklahoma Narratives, XIII Source: Lou Smith
Texas	Julia Collins medicine woman and servant on the Coke plantation. Responsible for bringing lunch to the state Capitol where her master was Governor. She learned remedies “from old folkses from Africy, and some de Indians.” For rheumatism she made teas from white sassafras root. For chills she placed “red pepper in shoes or strung briars round de neck.” She “used red or black snakeroot for fever and malaria.” Roots were tightly bound “in de spring de sap am high.” For cuts, she burned woolen rags. “Smoked wound or burned a piece of pine dropping tar from it on wool and bound it on de wound.” For headaches, she “put horseradish poultice on de head” or told slaves to wear stringed nutmeg on a string around their neck. For sprains, she used a “dirt dauber’s nest and put de clay with vinegar” and bound it around the sprain. Teas made from red coon-root or a dime on a string placed around ankles cured ankle cramps.	Julia Collins, a well-respected medicine woman. She taught her daughter, Harriet, the remedies that she learned from the “old folkses from Africy and some de Indians.” “All dese doctorin’ things,” Harriet stated “come clear from Africy, and dey allus worked for mammy and for me, too.”	WPA Texas Narratives Vol. XVI, Part 1 Source: Harriet Collins (daughter of medicine woman)

South Carolina	Sylvia Cannon, wet nurse and medicine woman. She was purchased by Miss Earlie Hatchal and taken from her parents on the Gregg plantation to serve as Hatchell's wet nurse. She later became well-known for her remedies. She made herb medicine "dat good for anything" out of roots that she gathered from the woods. By mixing herbs together to make a medicine compound, Cannon treated blacks and whites for various ailments. Post-slavery, sick people from the jail were taken to her home for treatment. She told interviewers that she "couldn' tell you how I make it cause dat" would ruin her business.	Cannon's remedies were successful in curing people So successful that she noted that the "town people try to buy de remedy from me but Dr. McLeod tell me not to sell it. Dey offer me \$1,500.00 for it, but [I] never take it."	WPA, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. XIV, Part 1 Source: Sylvia Cannon
Alabama	Aunt "Tildy" Collins a house servant on the Harris plantation. She learned from her grandmother and mother who served on the Harris plantation. In her adult years, she worked as a midwife and medicine woman. Tildy was known as the "doctor man." Her "practice is closely interwoven with 'conj'in'." She prescribed treatments such as wearing matches in the hair or a little salt on the head for headache. For rheumatism, she advised " 'nint de j'int's wid kerosene oil an' put some mullein leaves on it. A good dose of turpentine is good for mos anything de matter wid you."	Aunt "Tildy" Collins successfully treated most of her patients during slavery and post-emancipation. "Tildy was described as "a talkative old soul."	WPA, Alabama Narratives, Vol. 1 Source: Aunt "Tildy" Collins
Maryland	Eliza Foote (noted on previous table) was also a noted medicine woman. She was sought after by both free and enslaved Africans for treatment. She worked with Dr. Ensor, a noted white homeopathic medical doctor. Mrs. Ensor taught Eliza to read and write. She assisted Dr. Ensor in mixing various herbs and roots to create medicines. Her "fame reached from Baltimore to Pennsylvania." She "prescribed for her people, compounding medicine out of the same leaves, herbs and roots that Dr. Ensor did." She was also a midwife and delivered babies of poor whites, and free and enslaved Africans.	Most free and enslaved Africans and poor whites were successfully treated by Eliza Foote. Foote prayed before treating her patients. She also was able to cure patients that Dr. Ensor "failed to cure." Some of her prescriptions included "a small bag in which a stone of a peculiar shape and several roots" were enclosed.	WPA, Maryland Narratives, Vol. III Source: Thomas Foote (son of medicine woman/ conjurer)

do in West Africa. Coleman, for example links religious objects (talismans—jacks, hands, hoodoos) used by enslaved Africans in North America to the Dahomey charm *Gbo*. Coleman notes that:

Gbo are designed to protect their owner from harm or danger of any sort. They are constructed from various materials (roots, herbs, stones, metals, and so on), then infused with some magical power, like vodun, in order to ward off evil influences and ensure good fortune. In short they function as talismans. This gave the wearer the psychological and emotional confidence she or he needed in order to face adversity both within the slave community and within the institution of slavery. It was a ready response to the interpersonal and institutional forces of oppression.⁸⁶

Charms, amulets, and talismans were comprised of various elements, including soil, plants, trees, grave dirt, rocks, water, metal, glass, bottles, pins, scorpions, and reptile, bird, or animal bones, skins, and hair. Chireau provides an inventory of other ingredients or materials:

A rabbit's feet or the highly sought after bone of a black cat endowed a practitioner with great power. Materials were selected both for their sympathetic associations and for aesthetic purposes; red pepper to produce heat or irritation; lodestone to draw desirable forces magnetically; bone fragments to signify the passage of powers from the otherworld; soil from gravesites to symbolize the presence of spirits in transitional places; acrid herbs to displace evil essences metaphorically. Some of the most powerful charms required exuviae from the body itself: hair, nails, skin, or waste matter such as urine or excrement.⁸⁷

In the North American context, Thompson, Coleman, and Chireau all identify gopher dust—gravel and earth gathered from the surfaces of cemetery graves and stone markers—as the universal essential element in charms. Gopher dust and other powder substances were either ingested as poison or sprinkled around doors, on lands, water, persons, and other designated areas to protect its owner from harm.⁸⁸ The substance made from these elements was carried in bags, transformed into powder, or carved into images. Each religious object possessed a spirit. That is, each religious object was “ritually consecrated” and spirits were invoked and infused within the object in order to be “evoked to do the conjurer’s bidding” and “to strengthen the spirits’

association” with the owner of the object.⁸⁹ This created a mutually enhancing connection between owner, object, and the spirit world. One enslaved woman describes the important use and effects of the root John de Conquerer: “Some of de roots dat dey used to bring ‘im luck an’ to trick folks wid wuz Rattle-Snake Marster, and John de Conquerer. John de Conquerer is supposed to conquer any kind of trouble you gits intuh. Some folks says dat you can tote it in your pocket an’ have good luck. I once knowed a woman who had some lodestone dat she uster work.”⁹⁰

High John the Conquerer, a root used for protection and good fortune, was the most famous charm among Africans in America. This Kongo-influenced charm, was made of “a gnarled and twisted root” and known for its “enormous reserves of power.”⁹¹ The name High John the Conquerer signified, in African American folklore, a mythic figure “attributed with acts of defiance and bravery.”⁹²

The making of charms was a sacred process. Practitioners chanted various incantations over the charm, as they filled and bound the charm with rope, string, yarn, or other fastening materials. The process of binding the charm was the means by which the practitioner “closed the door.”⁹³ That is to say, “the spirit was arrested in the charm as in a tiny habitation.”⁹⁴ In Ki-Kongo tradition, persons made *nkangue* charms that became carryovers in North America.⁹⁵ *Nkangue* meant “one who arrests” or to “tie”; its intent was to bind a potential lover’s affections toward the conjurer. The purpose of the Ki-Kongo derived charms such as the *Nkangue* and *minkisi* charms were to win the affections of a potential lover or for protection “against powers or authorities [and] to sway these powers in their direction.”⁹⁶ *Minkisi* charms were folded “symbolizing ‘tying’ the company or persons to your concern.”⁹⁷ The knots (*makolo*) binding the charm contained incantations, which constituted “a kind of African ritual mathematical system.”⁹⁸ The folds, knots, and insertions in these kinds of charms excited the spirit or recipient in the bearer’s favor.⁹⁹

Enslaved and free Africans also dressed trees with bottles and other objects to invoke spirits and protect themselves and their homes from thieves or opposing human forces. People of Kongo and Angolan-derived traditions believed that the spirits, which sought to cause harm, were lured and then trapped in the bottle, and therefore, unable to cause harm. Plates and bottles on trees also represented the honoring of ancestors’ gifts and talents. The placing of plates and bottles was a means to block “the disappearance of their talents.”

Even after death, their aesthetic gifts and talents were essential to the well-being of their respective communities. Thompson notes that, the lifting of plates or bottles on trees also meant “not the end” or “death will not end our fight.”¹⁰⁰ Rebirth has begun because “the talents of the dead that have been stopped by gleaming glass and elevation, from absorption in the void.”¹⁰¹

Neutral mystical power, harnessed in spiritually charged religious objects and powders, provided enslaved and free African women a sense of security. Table 7.4 below offers a snapshot of the ways in which these women sought to empower and protect themselves in a hostile antebellum world. The table focuses on techniques and elements used by enslaved women.

Table 7.4 Harnessing Wellness: Protection (charms and other spiritually charged religious objects)

<i>Location</i>	<i>Description of Practitioner(s), Practice, and/or Ritual Performed for Protection, Prevent Conjure, or Treat Poison</i>	<i>Source</i>
Mississippi	Enslaved Africans wore rabbit or coon’s heels on the Harper plantation for good luck. They placed horse shoes over the entry doors of their slave quarters.	WPA, Texas Narratives, Vol. XVI, Pt 2 Source: Austin Grant
Oklahoma	Unnamed conjurer woman brewed tea she made from herbs to “break evil spells.”	WPA, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. XIII Source: Della Fountain
Mississippi	Rosana Frazier, former slave on Frazier plantation, remembered unnamed Hoodoo man from Louisiana. Conjurer made charms for slaves to “wear round de neck or de ankle” for protection. His potions included “powder up de rattle offen de snake and tie it up in de little old rag bag” or “git dirt out de graveyard” to make [the person] “go crazy.” He also made “de straw man or de clay man and dey puts de pin in the leg and your leg git hurt or sore jus’ where dey puts de pin. Iffen dey puts de pin through de heart you gwinster die and ain’t nothin’ kin save you.” Also made “de love powder, out de love vine, what grow in the woods.”	WPA, Texas Narratives, Vol. XVI, Pt 2 Source: Rosana Frazier
Kentucky	Some enslaved Africans on the Smith plantation “wore rabbits feet for charms and skins of snakes for a belt as charms.”	WPA, Kentucky Narratives, Vol. VII Source: Bert Mayfield

Continued

Table 7.4 Continued

<i>Location</i>	<i>Description of Practitioner(s), Practice, and/or Ritual Performed for Protection, Prevent Conjure, or Treat Poison</i>	<i>Source</i>
Georgia	Mrs. Avery, a former enslaved woman listed several practices to protect oneself or obtain good fortune. She stated “you can change your luck by throwing a teaspoon of sulphur in the fire zackly 12 o'clock in the day.” Also, throw the bones of a black cat into a creek. “The bone that goes up stream is the lucky bone and should be kept. To keep from being conjured, sprinkle chamber-lye with salt and then throw it all around the door.” Also, throw salt and pepper over the shoulder or on the floor to prevent or reverse negative conjures. She also advised slaves to “wer a silver dime around your leg” to prevent or reverse negative conjures.	WPA, Georgia Narratives, Vol. IV, Pt 1 Source: Mrs. Avery
Oklahoma	“Old Bab Russ,” well known hoodoo man, made “hoodoo hands” (charms) for slaves and charged them “four bits” for each hand. Slaves used hands for protection or to gain the affections of another slave. He was described as an “African-born man who spoke in an unknown tongue.”	WPA, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. XIII Source: Henry F. Pyles
North Carolina	Former enslaved woman Louise Evans stated that “most of the old folks believed in spells and charms.” She remembered how conjurer “used to make charms, little bags filled with queer things. He called them ‘jacks’ an’ sold ‘em to the colored folkes an’ some white folks too.”	George Rawick, American Slave Suppl Series I, 11:19–20. Source: Louise Evans
Florida	Former enslaved woman Josephine Anderson advised that her husband would protect their daughter who was born with a veil from conjuring and hants by putting a grain of corn in a bottle and placing it in her bedroom at night. In the morning “he planted it and drive plenty sticks roun it. When it was growing good, he put leaf-mold roun de stalk, and watch it ever day, an tell us not to touch de stalk. It raise three big ears o’corn, and when dey was good in size he pick em off an cook em tell Teeny [daughter] to eat ever grain off all three cobs. She did it, an she had no more hants. She sees em, but dey doan bother her none.	WPA, Florida Narratives, Vol. III Source: Josephine Anderson
Texas	Former enslaved William Adams, well-known among the slave community for his “belief in the occult” recalled a story in which a conjurer/medicine man/shaman protected a man from a mule. The mule “cut his leg so bad dat he bleedin’ to death and dey couldn’t stop it.” Slaves turned to the “old cullud man” for help. “He comes and passes his hand over de cut. Befo’ long de bleedin’ stop and dat’s de power of de Lawd.” Also, “some folks don’t go without lode-stone or de salt and pepper mixture in de little sack tied round dey neck. Some wear de silver coin tied round dey neck to keep away de affect of evil power.”	WPA, Texas Narratives, Vol. XVI, Pt. 1 Source: William Adams

Continued

Table 7.4 Continued

Location	Description of Practitioner(s), Practice, and/or Ritual Performed for Protection, Prevent Conjure, or Treat Poison	Source
New York	Enslaved Africans conspired to kill their masters by poisoning the water supply. "As a result most New Yorkers, for quite some time bought spring water from vendors who carried it about the streets. This led to widespread paranoia and pandemonium in New York.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 29 Herbert Aptheker, <i>American Negro Slave Revolts</i> , p. 192
Virginia	Enslaved African named Dick made poison "by beating up leaves with snake heads and leaving the combination at the door of his master." Convicted of conspiring to poison his master.	Gayraud Wilmore, <i>Black Religion & Black Radicalism</i> , p. 80
South Carolina	Enslaved Africans seek revenge by poisoning their masters. The Charles Town Gazette Newspaper reports that Negroes "have again begun the hellish practice of poisoning."	Herbert Aptheker, <i>American Negro Slave Revolts</i> , p. 197
Alexandria Virginia	Slaves administered poison to several overseers during a rebellion. Unknown number of slaves involved. Overseers died. Slaves were captured, executed and heads placed on top of chimnies.	Herbert Aptheker, <i>American Negro Slave Revolts</i> , p. 198
South Carolina	Cesar, an enslaved African well versed in making poisons and antidotes. He "gained such notoriety for his curative knowledge of roots and herbs that his cure for poison was published in the Massachusetts Magazine. The South Carolina Assembly purchased his freedom and gave him an annuity of 100 pounds" for his cure.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 63
Georgia	Conjurer woman named Aunt Gracie was a well-known conjurer in Georgia who created poisons and used them against her enemies both whites and Africans.	George Rawick, <i>American Slave Suppl Series I</i> , 3: 267-268; Will Coleman <i>Tribal Talk</i> p. 87; Source: Anna Grant
Arkansas	Enslaved conjurer made "a little man out of mud" in the image of his owner and stuck pins in the doll in order to protect himself and other slaves from abuse. The charm worked; his master was injured. His master's health improved once the pins were removed.	Yvonne Chireau, <i>Black Magic</i> , p. 16 Source: Clara Walker
Georgia	Enslaved Africans "wore rabbits foots, little bags of asfiddy (asafetida), and garlic tabs 'round our necks to keep off mis'ries."	WPA Georgia Narratives, Vol. IX Pt. 4 Source: Addie Vinson
Florida	Enslaved Africans "wore bags of sulphur" to keep away disease and "bags of salt and charcoal" to keep away "evil spirits." Others "wore a silver coin in their shoes and some made holes in the coin, threaded a string through it, attached it to the ankle" to protect themselves.	WPA Florida Narratives, Vol. 3 Source: Willis Williams

Becoming proactive about their health (healing) and safety (protection) was vital to enslaved and free African peoples, especially women's well-being. Thus, women drew from the wellspring of their African past and created remedies and potions for healing and protection. Women responded to their oppression by drawing from natural elements and cosmic and spiritual energies around them to heal and protect themselves, each other, and their communities. They knew that, in order to sustain themselves in the New World, they had to take charge of their lives.

As we have amply seen, for some enslaved and free African women in America taking charge meant remaining calm under pressure, fighting back and absconding when necessary, consulting counselors and experts, and making use of herbs and charms for healing and protection. They also realized, however, that they needed to continue drawing from deep within their own reservoir to recover other strategies to overcome. We turn our attention in the next chapter to the four remaining strategies of resistance that were equally crucial in aiding enslaved and free African women transform their circumstance as they pressed forward negotiating the violent realities of their lives in antebellum America.

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“The Current Continues”: Four More Strategies of Subversion and Freedom

I opened myself to the river, to my indigenous purple flowing inside and welcomed her to carry me to the place of the trees.

—Renee K. Harrison

In the previous chapter, we identified five strategies that were critical in helping African women in America combat violence and oppression. Enslaved and free African women: (1) reclaimed their human value and dignity by drawing from the principles of *itutu* (coolness) and *áshe* (the power-to-make-things-happen); (2) fought back and engaged in large-scale slave revolts; (3) critically assessed their situation and absconded in imaginative ways; (4) consulted counselors (tricknology experts); and (5) made use of herbs, poisons, and charms for healing and protection. These strategies rooted in aesthetic imagination provided them ample means to draw from their inherent beauty, dignity, spirituality, and strength, and summon the spirit world on their behalf to help them fight back. In this chapter we examine four more strategies rooted in aesthetic imagination. These strategies are (6) encoding subversive strategies of resistance in rhythmic melodies; (7) praying and holding onto indigenous religious beliefs; (8) garnering the master’s literacy tools to empower

themselves and others; and (9) expressing intimacy, love, and tenderness on their own terms.

* * *

STRATEGY #6: There is a time in every woman's life when she needs to sing, dance, and drum the lyrics of her own freedom.

Rhythmic Protest: Enslaved Women and the Subversive Power of Her Drum, Song, and Dance

It was a habit for us to talk about "white horses" when we meant white folks, so if they heard us they wouldn't know we was talking about them.

—enslaved woman

The secret worship life of the slave community became known as the "Invisible Institution" or the clandestine brush arbor gatherings. Enslaved women used the Invisible Institution and also oppressive spaces under master's domain and watchful eyes as sociopolitical radical and open spaces of rhythmic protest and creative resistance. As one former enslaved woman stated, "When dark come, de men folks wud hang up a wash pot, bottom up'ards, in de little brush chu'ch house us hed, so's it'd catch de noise an' de oberser wudn' hear us."¹ Another stated, "We used to steal off to de woods...like de spirit moved us—sing and pray to our own liking and soul satisfaction... We had dem spirit-filled meetings at night on de bank of de river, and God met us dere. We was quiet 'nuf so de white folks didn't know we was dere."² In these spaces, they used the drum, song, and dance to summon the spirit realm on their behalf and to creatively subvert their way to freedom. Each medium was used to empower and uplift the slave community, providing them a sense of relief from the day-to-day realities of oppression and violence. In these spaces, they tapped into their inner rhythms and used the very same artistic expressions that master and some slaves saw as mindless entertainment, as subversive devices to invoke the spirit world and resist bondage and violence. Artistic expression—drumming, singing, and dancing—served a political and religio-cultural purpose; it was a means of resistance, subversion, invocation, inspiration, and retention.

Enslaved Africans from various West and West Central African ethnic groups shared commonalities in artistic or aesthetic expression. Art connected them across ethnic lines. As noted in chapter two,

precolonial West and West Central African ethnic groups transported to North America used some form of art to express their beliefs, traditions, and philosophies. Drumming, singing, chanting, miming, dance, and material or textile art (masks and quilts) were among the aesthetic media used in celebrations and religious rituals.³

Scholars have argued that artistic forms such as the drum, song (Negro Spirituals), and dance (ring shout) during American slavery were “carriers of African meanings” and rhythms.⁴ W.E.B. Dubois for example, argued that enslaved Africans’ creative expressions (e.g. Negro Spirituals) were distinct indigenous sounds (rhythmic melodies) that derived from African townships, villages, and forests.⁵ Anthropologist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston identified the rhythms and rituals (drum, song, and dance) performed in black sanctified churches as carryovers of traditional West African religious practices.⁶ Sociologist Donald Matthews further argues that, by examining the nuances of these various aesthetic forms, one is able to uncover the polyvalent rhythms and African retentions pregnant in enslaved Africans’ artistic expressions.⁷

Forced into a culture of death, which slavery signified, many enslaved women and men drew from the African polyrhythms of their past to express their inner strivings and to resist. Encoded in these rhythms, tones, sounds, and gestures were messages of self-determination, hope, spiritual renewal, and racial uplift in times of crisis. Drumming, music, and dance had a way of tapping in to black women’s inner wounds, consoling their broken hearts, and providing them hope and imagination to manifest a better tomorrow.

The Drum

The African talking drum was considered the most powerful musical instrument in precolonial West and West Central African religious rituals and culture.⁸ In most traditions, the drum symbolized and invoked various deities and the presence of the ancestors. In Yorubaland, for example, talking drums such as the Bata drum symbolized Shango (the god of thunder); the Ipses drum represented Ifa (god of oracle); and the Ibgin drum, Obtala (god of peace). The drum’s power not only lay in its ability to imitate the rhythms and tonal sounds of spoken language and connect African peoples to God and the spirit world, but also each other. The Ashanti, for example, were known for their use of drums to invoke deities and also communicate messages to humans across miles. The drum was also a significant medium for gathering communities in times of celebration and crisis. Such purposes and meanings migrated with enslaved Africans to New World America.

The slave community used drums to: invoke, honor, or summon support from the spirit world; mediate slaves' feelings; communicate with and build and strengthen communities; signal or rally slaves to revolt or abscond; celebrate harvest and festivals; and preserve African cultures. Anthropologist Maarit Laitinen described how some dislocated and disoriented enslaved Africans in America remembered their African past upon encountering Congo men and their drums, and later, hearing Congo drums (*tambo-bambo*) played by enslaved women.⁹ The drum provided them a sense of connectedness to Africa and thereby, a connectedness to lands, ethnicities, and origins. Enslaved Africans made drums from the natural elements around them. As one former slave described:

Dar wasn't no music instruments. Us take pieces a sheep's rib or cow's jaw or a piece of iron, with a old kettle, or a hollow gourd and some horsehairs to make de drum. Sometimes dey'd git a piece of tree trunk and hollow it out and stretch a goat's or sheep's skin over it for de drum. Dey'd be one to four foot high and a foot up to six foot 'cross. Dey'd take de buffalo horn and scrape it out to make de flute... Den dey'd take a barrel and stretch a ox's jode 'cross one end and a man sot stride de barrel and beat on dat hide with he hands, and he feet, and iffen he git to feelin' de music in he bones, he'd beat on dat barrel with he head. 'Nother man beat one wooden side with sticks.¹⁰

The enslaved seldom discussed the subversive nature and purpose of the drum among whites. As one former enslaved woman remarked, "de olden people was mighty careful of de words dey let slip dey lips."¹¹ During an interview with a former enslaved woman, a white WPA interviewer indicated that:

We were told that the beating of the drums had a special significance, but that was all we could learn on the subject; we were told that this was a secret, divulged only to members... She [interviewee] remembered hearing the drums beaten to tell the people in the nearby settlements of an approaching dance or festival. Her father had been one of those who beat the drum and thumped out a regular message on it, a message that could be heard from miles and was clearly understood by all those who had heard it.¹²

In the brush arbor meetings, women and men uttered sounds of sorrow, joy and hope as they swayed their bodies to the beat of the drum. The drummer, in turn, interpreted their gestures in the drumming. The drum thus communicated their primal utterances (chants, moans, cries, and sways) to the spirit realm, which invoked spirits

and created a call-and-response dialectic. In this call-and-response moment, women and men surrendered themselves to the rhythms and the spirits. As they did so, many experienced momentary ecstasy and a connection to the spirit world; dismal chants, moans, cries and sways were transformed at times into rhythmic tones and ecstatic moods of hope, joy, and freedom. Their bodies and souls were reawakened to the sacred; to the rhythmic life-forces within and around them. Momentary body autonomy allowed them to see their bodies as more than one-dimensional tools of labor and subjugation. The spirit's presence was their reminder that they were connected to something greater than their present circumstance; they possessed the means to subvert or transcend the threat of impending harm and death. The rhythm within each of them was transformed into a collective rhythm that transcended them. This collective rhythm connected them to deities, spirit(s), and one another. Upon hearing drums and connecting with the spirit world, many returned to oppressive spaces on slave-owning properties with a new sense of being and purpose in the world. The drum, its rhythms, and the spirit world unified them; each transcended language and ethnic barriers and helped them to forge a new collective identity rooted in struggle and a desire for freedom. Theologian Will Coleman notes that, the slave community "used the magical language of drums to encode the rhythmic impulse for liberation as often as possible. Sometimes, while under the sway of the electrifying beat, the mediators would also instigate revolts, promising the support of the gods."¹³

Given the preceding, the drum and drumming functioned as an act of conjuring; it invoked the spirit world and stirred women and men to gather to pray, sing, dance, revolt, and escape. What slavers once saw as a form of mindless entertainment, soon posed a threat on many slave-owning properties; they eventually banned "talking drums" and other "talking instruments" that fostered self-respect and pride and awakened the consciousness of black peoples. One former enslaved African man recalled laws that prohibited slaves from "using and keeping drums, horns or other loud instruments which called together or gave a sign or notice to one another."¹⁴

Theomusicologist Jon Spencer argues that the "de-drumming" of enslaved Africans by slave owners, however, did not "de-rhythmize" them. Angela M.S. Nelson, editor of *This Is How We Flow*, argues that slave owners failed to understand that rhythm, not the drum alone, was the essential African remnant that secured and maintained the spiritual and physical harmony of enslaved Africans.¹⁵ Scholars

have argued that rhythm not only involves flow and time; rhythm is also the life-force which, through our senses, grips the core of our being.¹⁶ Rhythm causes us to let go and open ourselves to new horizons and possibilities for our lives. According to Dona Richards, rhythm is an indigenous African principle, commonly known in many West African traditions as “the universal life force.”¹⁷ Most societies were guided by the principle of rhythm.¹⁸ Rhythm, therefore, posed the threat because rhythm connected the enslaved to their inner selves, each other, the spirit world, and their indigenous past. Although the drum was banned on many slave owning properties, the music and rhythm lived on.

The Song: Negro Spirituals

Enslaved African women and men learned the Christian language of their oppressor(s), reinterpreted and subverted that language, and creatively communicated that subversion in song. The Negro Spirituals also functioned as creative and subversive aesthetic texts of resistance that: invoked the spirit world; concealed enslaved Africans’ strategies of absconding through Christianized language; preserved indigenous African religio-cultural traditions in the New World; and encoded political messages of protest. The Spirituals, in this sense, also posed a threat when they functioned as songs of invocation, concealment, retention, and protest.

The Spirituals portrayed American slavery as the most profound evidence of New World suffering and evil. Charles Long argues that the Negro Spirituals was one aesthetic phenomenon that got at the depths or “nitty gitty dimensions” of blackness and black religion in North America. Long argues that the spiritual “I couldn’t hear nobody pray / Way down yonder all by myself / And I couldn’t hear nobody pray,” for example, conveyed the depths of black pain. It referenced an involuntary and inhuman hell, a form of spiritual exile where “nobody,” not even God was listening to the depths of enslaved women and men’s pains.

In the density of blackness, enslaved women and men lamented in song. They questioned their predicament and pleaded for God’s intervention. As one former enslaved man expressed, “singing” is what gives enslaved women and men “de mos’ joy an’ dey mos’ comfort...When dey needs all dese things, dey sing ’bout de joys in de nex’ world an’ de trouble in dis. Dey first jes’ sung de ’ligious songs. Den, dey commenced to sing ’bout de life here. An’ when dey sung of bofe, dey called dem de ‘spirituals’...[when we sing] we forgets

de sorrows an remembers de happy days.”¹⁹ Another remarked, “us would meet at log cabins ter worship . . . Dey would hum deep an’ low in long mournful tones, swayin’ to an’ fro. Udders would pray an’ sing soft . . . De song wuz old Negro spirituals sung in de deep, rich voice of our race. We sorter made ‘em up, as us went ‘long.”²⁰ One former enslaved woman stated, “they say us can carry de song better than white folks. Well, maybe us does love de Lord just a little bit better, and what’s in our mouth is in our hearts.”²¹

In the Spirituals, enslaved Africans invoked God’s presence similar to the way their African forebearers invoked deities and spirits in their songs.²² Given this, it is important to consider, who was the enslaved African community really invoking in the Negro Spirituals: a reinterpreted Christian God, their indigenous high god or their Islamic God, or did they see all as one and the same? As Rev. Jones indicated, the Mohammedan Africans accustomed to hearing the Gospel preached were “known to accommodate Christianity to Mohammedanism. ‘God,’ say they, ‘is Allah, and Jesus Christ is Mohammed—the religion is the same, but different countries have different names.’”²³

The slave community and brush arbor gatherings were dynamic and fluid. Therefore, it is impossible to conceive that enslaved Africans were a monolithic group of converted Christians. Scholars have noted the concealed and coded messages of freedom in the Spirituals. Yet, if slaves used concealed and coded messages for freedom, would they have not also used concealed and coded messages for religion? Given that indigenous religious practices were banned in some parts of the New World, could the Spirituals have also functioned as a veneer to retain African indigenous and Islamic religious traditions?

Some spirituals reveal how the slave community used biblical or Christianized language to conceal their strategies of resistance as well as to retain their African and Islamic religio-cultural traditions. The spiritual “Let Us Break Bread Together,” for example, represented more than a Christian communion ritual.

Let us break bread together on our knees
When I fall on my knees, with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

According to ethnomusicologist Richard Newman, this song not only functioned as a secret call for women and men to gather in the Invisible Institution, but also the stanza “with my face to the rising

sun” signified African Islamic retentions. Muslim slaves, such as Rosa Grant’s grandmother was known to “evry mawnin at sun-up . . . kneel on duh flo in uh ruhm and bow obuh an tech up head tuh duh flo tree time” and “prayuh,” then, end the “prayuh” with “ashanegad.”²⁴ Katie Brown also recalled how “wen duh sun come up, wen it straight obuh head an wen it set, das was duh time” the Muslim slaves pray. “day bow tuh duh sun and hab lill mat tuh kneel on.”²⁵ Moreover, in addition to prayer, Muslim scholars could argue that the song’s secret call also included the summoning of Muslim slaves to gather with others to revolt. Denmark Vesey’s conspiracy was a prime example of a unified gathering of Muslim, Christian, and traditional African enslaved women and men revolting for a common cause: freedom. In addition to the previous spiritual, the spiritual “The Old Ark’s Moving, and I’m Going Home” suggests that slaves were focused more on absconding or remembering and returning to Africa, than knowing or meeting Jesus: O, the old ark’s moving, moving, moving / The old ark’s moving / And I’m going home. / See that sister all dressed so fine? / She ain’t got Jesus on her mind / The old ark’s moving / And I’m going home.

Who does Jesus really represent in this song? Did slaves see Jesus as an orisha, ancestor, Savior, brother, friend, or a metaphor? Moreover, what does the slave community really have on its mind since separation from Africa? Family ties and kinships created for them a grave sense of displacement and disconnectedness. Countless narratives reference how enslaved women and men “flew back tuh Africa” because they often imagined and dreamed of returning home to Africa, not Jesus. For some, heaven represented a place where they would be reunited with the familiarity of home—loved ones and friends.

Encoded in the Spirituals were also messages of revolt and escape, making the Spirituals political songs of protest. Scholars have argued that the spiritual “Steal Away,” for example, was more than a song about Jesus and “the world to come.” The song served several functions. The words “steal away” signified a secret meeting call. As one former enslaved woman noted, “When de slave go round singin’ ‘Steal Away to Jesus,’ dat mean dere gwine be a ‘ligious meetin’ dat night. Dat de sig’fication of a meetin’. De masters ‘fore and after freedom didn’t like dem ‘ligious meetin’’, so us natcherly slips off at night, down in de bottoms or somewheres. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.”²⁶ Richard Newman further argues that enslaved Africans often used the name “Jesus” as a metaphor or signal to prepare for escape from bondage.²⁷ The phrase “Steal away to Jesus” for example, signified a

particular location or route for slaves seeking assistance on Harriet Tubman's Underground Railroad. In another case, the phrase "Steal away to Jesus" was a signal and summons for Nat Turner's followers to gather in preparation for rebellion against slavery.²⁸ All of this suggest that resident in the spirituals were polyvalent means that provided the slave community subversive means to counter oppression.

The Spirituals spoke to the depths of black suffering and also the well-spring of black hope. Enslaved women drew from this well-spring and found sustenance for the journey. Songs of protest and faith reminded them that "trouble really don't last always." These genres empowered them to press on and dance their way through the tide, to move with the current no matter how high the water rises.

Dance: The Ring Shout

Dance was also an art form of resistance and self-affirmation that allowed enslaved women to become animated and intimate with their bodies. Dance freed enslaved women; it allowed them self-expression and momentary release. Their "bodies became instruments through which every conceivable emotion or event was projected."²⁹ As they released their cares in the to-and-fro sway of their bodies they often experienced momentarily relief from pain and suffering. Dance was not an art-form of mindless entertainment. Dance often functions as a space for reawakening and re-centering; a space for gathering oneself and letting go. Dance provided enslaved women a sense of being in the antebellum world. It was a direct response to white's cultural resistance to blackness. White missionaries, for example, viewed African-derived dances as paganism gone wild. Dianne Stewart makes this point clear when she writes that:

One of the most offensive and "immoral" components of African religion and culture to the missionaries was the pervasiveness of dance. The missionaries detested the embodied spirituality and sensuality of enslaved Africans and required that they refrain from participating in any such gathering as a prerequisite for baptism and acceptance into the Christian community. Africans, in the company of the missionaries, were required to choose one or the other: African dance and spirituality or Christian instruction.³⁰

Many enslaved women ignored the missionaries and chose to dance, reaffirming their connectedness to the earth, while invoking the spirit world and claiming their bodies as their own. For many, dance was a mediation of the African past with the enslaved antebellum present;

it transcended them and became the human voice speaking, summoning, and uttering through the human body.

On many slave-owning properties, the ring shout, a ritualized group activity, was the most expressive African-derived dance. The form, structures, and style of ring shouts in African American tradition are carryovers of precolonial West and West Central African ring shouts. One former enslaved African described the ring shout ritual as: “De black folks gits off down in de bottom and shouts and sings and prays. Dey gits in de ring dance. It am jes’ a kind of shuffle, den it git faster and faster and dey gits warmed up and moans and shouts and claps and dances.”³¹ Theologian Will Coleman links such description to West African ring shouts:

In a typical West African religious ceremony, participants danced counter clockwise in a circle. As the spirits possessed them they would clap their hands, nod their head, and tap their feet to the rhythm of drums... Their bodies would move faster and faster... all these same phenomena may be found among the African Diaspora throughout the Americas. This is true even within a Protestant country like the United States.

Both in Africa and North America, ring shouts were a means of summoning spirits, honoring ancestors, worshipping deities, celebrating harvests (e.g. yam festivals), releasing the body of cares, and spirit possession. Ring shouts allowed women, to enter “an altered dimension” and connect with the spirit world in order to find peace and empowerment for responding to their oppression. Ring shouting served as a medium by which enslaved women could “enter into a shared experience,” to commune with the spirit for rejuvenation, protection, and guidance, and to reconnect with the African past.³² As one former enslaved woman described: “Duh slabes wuz out in duh fiel wukin. All ub a sudden dey git tuhgedduh an staht tuh moob roun in a ring. Roun dey go fastuhfastuh. Den one by one dey riz up an take wing an fly lak a bud. Duh obuhseeuh heah duh noise an he come out an he see duh slabs riz up in duh eah an fly back tuh Africa. He run an he ketch duh las one by duh foot jis as he wuz bout tuh fly off. I dohn know ef he wuz neah nuff tuh pull um back down an keep um frum going off.”³³

Ring shouting transformed oppositional spaces into momentary spaces of freedom, proving women a sense of autonomy, relief, and ownership of their bodies. Ring shouting connected them to the spirit world, their roots, and to one another. It allowed them to enter a shared alternate space, a space where they could shake the pain off

and become inspired to move toward a permanent life of freedom and well-being. Following ring shouting, many were so inspired that they returned to the fields and Big House with a determination to live. One could argue that they were connected to an inner rhythm whose every beat and tone was their reminder that they were neither created to suffer nor live in bondage. They were created to be free. As renowned dancer Pearl Primus wrote, dance drew them “nearer to the center of ‘All Being’ and farther and farther away from the harsh paved roads.” There was now inside them “an explosion, an infinitely silent flash of lightening truth” and “they knew their tongues could never tell what their inner selves felt.” They carried with them “inner spirit fire” which could not be verbalized. They somehow knew their subjugated bodies would “make many journeys over long smooth concrete roads, into high towering skyscrapers” and “their souls would forever remain with the people who truly dance with belief.” For, to “dance without belief” is to dance “without life.” Enslaved women drummed, sung, and danced their way through life’s dilemmas and the impending threat of death. These aesthetic forms connected them to something deep within and beyond themselves; each was their aesthetic reminders that they not only had a right to be free, but also a right to call on God in their own unique way.

* * *

STRATEGY #7: There is a time in every woman’s life when she needs to call on God in *her own way*.

Slave Religion: Enslaved Women, Religious Diversity, and Prayer

That religion I got in them way-back days is still with me.

—enslaved man

My mother had to put her head under the pot to pray for freedom.

—enslaved woman

Religion and prayer permeated enslaved women and their foremothers’ lives; it valued who and why they were. It gave them a sense of empowerment and hope. As one former enslaved woman stated, “My religion is my life. It is the most important thing that I know now or that I will ever know.”³⁴ Another stated, “I was ’ligious chile, in dem

days, and I'm 'ligious now, too, but colored folks jes' naturally had more 'ligion back dere, 'fore the War."³⁵ Given this, it is inconceivable that African-born enslaved women left their indigenous or non-Christian religions on the African coastline as they headed to America. It is conceivable that when the white man and his ships came that African women held onto their religions tighter than ever before. As Muslim scholar Sylviane A. Diouf argues: "African Muslims . . . made tremendous efforts to continue observing most important principles: the Five Pillars of Islam."³⁶ Gomez further argues that "the challenge of enslavement may have caused the African to cling even more desperately to [her] existing religion and call even more fervently upon forces familiar to [her]."³⁷ Historically, this is what black women have done—they cling to their faith and pray without ceasing in times of crisis.

Enslaved African women carried with them their traditional African and Islamic religious traditions and spiritual practices, as they were dispersed throughout the thirteen American colonies. They arrived on ship decks, auction blocks, and slave-owning properties in North America carrying with them their various religious beliefs, practices, ceremonies, and worldviews. Many of them held onto them as long as they could and died praying to their various deities and guardian spirits. African scholar John S. Mbiti argues that "Since African Religion belongs to the people, when Africans migrate in large numbers from one part of the continent to another, or from Africa to other continents, they take religion with them . . . Even if they are converted to another religion like Christianity or Islam, they do not completely abandon their traditional religion immediately: it remains with them for several generations and sometimes centuries."³⁸ Diouf further maintains that, Islam was also a "central force" in Muslim enslaved women and men's lives; they carried the tradition with them across the waters. Former enslaved African Ayuba Suleyman Diallo maintained that, it was "his faith in Allah, his Islamic faith and education" that "saved him, freeing him from bondage."³⁹

Enslaved Africans' brush arbor gatherings were more reflective of fluid and complex black religious traditions and expressions, which included tenets of Euro-American Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions. As one former enslaved man previously asserted, "our religion and superstition was all mixed up."⁴⁰ Old Lady Gray, a former enslaved Muslim woman, affirmed the above sentiment when she stated that: "Christ built the first church in Mecca and he grave was da."⁴¹ All of these varying traditions and expressions were vital in

helping women respond to the realities of their oppression. Since it is clear that enslaved African peoples were not all Christians, what can we make of their varying religious paths? What purpose did any of these paths serve for enslaved women under constant terrorist attack?

Although there were a variety of ways that enslaved women expressed themselves religiously, two are germane to our present discussion. First, it is safe to say, as scholars have argued, that some women held onto and retained tenets of their African-derived and Islamic religious systems and also adopted tenets of a reinterpreted version of the Euro-Christianity, creating an amalgamation of various traditions. These women, in essence, “developed modifications, innovations, and syncretisms thereof, designating no tradition superior over another.”⁴² Second, it is safe to say that others found no point of connection with Christianity and simply rejected the tradition outright. Both of these modes of faith were important strategies of resistance and spiritual sustenance.

Retaining and Adopting as a Strategy of Resistance, Freedom, and Well-Being

Enslaved women’s refusal to lay down their traditional African religions meant that they knew there was something valuable and practical in these traditions, beliefs, philosophies, rituals, and practices that would sustain and help them transcend the realities of their oppression. As one former enslaved man asserted: “That religion I got in them way-back days is still with me. And it ain’t this piecrust religion, such as the folks are getting these days. The old-time religion had some filling between the crusts.”⁴³ The effectiveness of traditional African religions was not in their ability to crush the violent day-to-day horrors of American slavery, but as Stewart has argued, “they inspired Africans to refuse dehumanization and oppression and to pursue freedom, control of destiny, and well-being as signs of the life to be experienced on earth.”⁴⁴

Moreover, women’s refusal to also lay down their Islamic tradition suggests that they equally saw something life-affirming in this tradition. As one former enslaved Muslim stated: “I had resolved to be faithful to the religion in which I had been carefully raised. I was attached to it by conviction: I was attached to it so much more that it was the only thing left to me from my family and my country.”⁴⁵

Tenets of both traditions—traditional African and Islamic—were practical and accessible. Furthermore, enslaved women’s openness to tenets of all three traditions—traditional African, Islam, and Christianity—demonstrated their willingness to value various faith

perspectives among women. This openness played a key role in unifying and sustaining them spiritually in the New World. Perhaps their common struggles and hope for freedom and relief were stronger than their religious differences. As one former enslaved Muslim woman stated: “I know I was borned in Morocco, in Africa, and was married and had three children befo’ I was stoled from my husband. I don’t know who it was stole me, but dey took me...drugs me with some coffee, and when I knows anything ’bout it, I’s in de bottom of the boat with a whole lot of other [Negroes].”

Irrespective of their various religious beliefs, they were all in the struggle together and therefore needed practical tools capable of transforming and transcending their reality—tools or practices that would strengthen their faith and help them combat oppression. As the previous strategies have shown, they found in these varying faith traditions something accessible, transmittable, and life-affirming so much so that it helped them to reclaim their worth, fight back, summon the spirit world, and heal and protect themselves.

In retaining and adopting tenets of different faith traditions, enslaved women were able to find connections with one another. Traditional African religions, Islam, and later Euro-Christianity held common beliefs which included but were not limited to: acknowledgement and honoring of God and lesser deities or prophets; communalism; ancestral veneration; visitation or spirit possession; reincarnation or resurrection; aesthetic expression (song, dance, drumming); sacrifice and offerings; and prayer (incantation, meditation, and invocation). These common tenets within their various faith traditions united the women rather than divided them.

Prayer, for example, was one integrated religious practice that transcended religious dogma and fostered bonds of solidarity among black women. Perhaps this was possible because when daughters were raped and pregnant mothers were beaten at the whipping post it did not matter what faith tradition the slave community professed. Perhaps what mattered was the prayer circle of women, who believed in the power of prayer to summon forth the spirit realm and see women through and bring their enemies to justice. One former enslaved woman recalled: “Dey hab big holes out in de fiel’d dey git down in an pray. Dey done dat way ’cause de white folks didn’ want ’em to pray. Dey uster pray for freedom.”⁴⁶ Both precolonial and antebellum African women believed in the power of prayer (incantation, meditation, and invocation). It was the practicality of prayer that made prayer efficacious for their well-being. Prayer was an interfaith religious practice that collectively

sustained and empowered them in times of crisis. Prayer galvanized them and helped create community; it connected them across ethnic lines, increased their faith, and strengthened bonds of sisterhood. It reconnected them to God, the spirit world, land, nature, and each other. It bonded them together in struggle, and later, in pursuit of human valuation and freedom.

Prayer was not a New World Euro-American Christian phenomenon; enslaved women emerged from a legacy of praying women. Mbiti notes that, praying is reported among practically all African peoples.⁴⁷ West and West Central African women, for example, often prayed for harvest and when harvest came, they offered prayers of thanksgiving by holding festivals and celebrations. They shared the reaped harvest with the community in honor of God's answered prayers. They also prayed seeking God for: material resources; recovery from drought or famine; safety from thunderstorms; blessings and prosperity; good health and healing; safe travels before taking a journey or preparing for war or revolt; and deliverance and protection from danger, enemies, and evil forces. They often prayed to the most powerful spirits, the river spirits who were known for defeating the enemy and bringing good fortune. Former enslaved women often remarked that, "Duh preachuh make a prayuh **tu duh ribbuh** an duh ribbuh" would respond on their behalf.⁴⁸ Notice the phrasing here "to the river" and not "at the river," a common expression in many slave narrative possibly signifying the river as a spirit or deity.

Prayer (*salat*) was also common among African Muslim women and their enslaved descendents in North America. On many slave owning properties enslaved African Muslims were known to "pray weah duh string uh beads at sun-up and face duh sun on duh knees an bow tuh it tree times, kneelin on a lill mat" or pray three to five times "ebry day at sunrise, at middle day, and den at sunset, alluz bow tuh duh sun," praying for blessings, good health, and safety.⁴⁹ Enslaved Christian women were also known to pray and call on God from sun-up to sundown. As one former enslaved woman noted, "My mother, all de time she'd be prayin' to de Lord... We'd see her wipin' her eyes wid de corner of her apron—first one eye, den de other. Den, back in de house, down on her knees, she'd be a-prayin'."⁵⁰

Enslaved women entered the sacred space of the Invisible Institution with modifications, innovations, and syncretisms of their various religious traditions, believing and trusting that the Creator would come and answer their prayers. As one former enslaved woman stated, "We had dem spirit-filled meetings at night on de bank of de river, and God

met us dere.”⁵¹ Another woman went on the say, “I’ve heard ’em pray for freedom...the old-time folks always felt they was to be free.”⁵² The power and solidarity of praying black women even made whites fearful. As one former enslaved woman stated: “de whites didn’t let women do much prayin’ in dem days.”⁵³ And another stated the reason being “’cause de poor souls was prayin’ to God to free ’em f’om dat awful bondage.”⁵⁴ “They knew,” another commented, that “they would be free. It must have been ’vealed unto ’em.”⁵⁵

Enslaved and free African women retained and adopted tenets of their traditional African religions, Islam, and Euro-Christianity beliefs and practices because these tenets served a practical value. These faith traditions regenerated their hope that the Creator and the spirit world would respond to their crisis. Women prayed for freedom despite the threat of violence because they believed that freedom would eventually come. Prayer, like other ritual practices, was efficacious because it sustained them and helped them to transcend religious dogma as well as the realities of their oppression. It galvanized the slave community and strengthened bonds of sisterhood.

Rejecting Christianity as a Strategy of Resistance, Freedom, and Well-Being

In addition to retaining and adopting tenets of religious beliefs and practices that had practical value, some enslaved women had little or no use for a religion that did not foster the transmitting of freedom and humanity to one another or sustain and transcend them and others beyond their circumstance. Enslaved women emerged from cultures whose religious worldviews were based on human valuation. Most of the principles in these traditions were life-affirming and transmittable. Some enslaved and free African women rejected Euro-Christianity because it had no practical value for their spiritual and physical well-being. There was no practical or spiritual value in obeying their masters, submitting to their oppression, being punished for stealing chickens when starving, and denying their flesh while acknowledging their human wretchedness. For many, the Euro-American Christian faith as presented by missionaries and slavers was not a liberating and human-affirming religion, and therefore embracing the tradition meant complying with oppression.

The fact that there were enslaved women who refused Christian conversion and religious instruction and sought to retain their traditional African and Islamic beliefs and practices is significant. It is noteworthy because it signifies that enslaved women were thinking

critically about their faith in relation to their freedom and well-being. As interrogators of the Euro-American Christian faith, they questioned the methods and motives of slave preachers and those men who promoted the faith in an attempt to control their bodies, souls, and minds. As one former enslaved man remarked, “since I’s got to readin’ an’ studying,’ I see some of de chu’ches is wrong.”⁵⁶ One former enslaved woman stated: “Our master took his slaves to meetin’ with him. There was always something about that I couldn’t understand. They treated the colored folks like animals and would not hesitate to sell and separate them, yet they seemed to think they had souls and tried to make Christians of them.”⁵⁷ One white missionary reported that among the Muslim population, “The educated Mohammedan negros...are less frequently converted to Christianity; and in cases where they have become nominal believers, they have been found to blend it, with the superstitions of their forefathers.”⁵⁸

Many women questioned and rejected what missionaries and white slave preachers taught them, especially if such teachings conflicted with their freedom and well-being. They also rejected the teachings of black preachers who had acquiesced to whites’ anti-African ideologies or Euro-American Christian ideologies of submission, humility, and obedience. They rejected black preachers who had internalized African practices as heathen and uncivilized, and who sought to control them by emphasizing moderate forms of worship. They stood against forms of church dogma and oppression that harmed their souls and denied them freedom of religious expression.

Two women in particular rejected the Euro-American Christian and anti-African ideologies of Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne, of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.). Payne, during his visits to brush arbor meetings throughout the American colonies, was outraged by blacks’ participation in ring shouts. Payne viewed ring shouting as “heathenish” practices, a “disgrace” to the “Black race” and the “Christian name.” As Payne articulated, “The A.M.E. Church must drive out this heathenish mode of worship or drive out all the intelligence, refinement, and practical Christians who may be in her bosom.”⁵⁹ Payne ordered the pastors and participants to stop dancing and in most cases the congregation complied. Two women at the Bethel Church in Baltimore, Maryland, however, galvanized the congregation and fought back. Ring shouting was their “primary means of contact with and respect for ancestral spirits and the source

of artistic expression” and spiritual renewal; many enslaved and free Africans believed there could be “no Christian conversion except through the ring.”⁶⁰ The two women rejected Payne’s demands and “rose from a front row and approached the pulpit with clubs, and attacked Payne and an assistant pastor.”⁶¹ Payne wrote, “The trouble grew out of my endeavor to modify the extravagances in worship,” including “their spiritual songs.”⁶²

Enslaved and free African women’s rejection of Euro-American Christianity, and their desire to retain their own traditions although adopting tenets of the Euro-American Christian faith, were strategies of resistance. Both were strategies of resistance, freedom, and well-being against a system and individuals that sought to suppress or annihilate them. Both helped women build bonds of sisterhood across religio-cultural lines and empowered them to remain faithful. These women were thinking critically about their faith in the midst of the antebellum maelstrom. The pathway to critical thinking also led them to begin carving out their own stories.

* * *

STRATEGY #8: There is a time in every woman’s life when she needs to tell her story, in her own words.

Garnering the Master’s Tools: Enslaved Women and the Power of Literacy

I have seen the negroes...going away...in secret places...with spelling books.

—enslaved woman

Ellen Betts never suffered violence at the hands of her master. *Not really*. She boasted that he “don’t allow no overseer to throw he gals down and pull up dere dress and whup on dere bottoms like...some of ’em do.”⁶³ Her master was “de greatest man what ever walk dis earth.”⁶⁴ Although she toiled away her life along with 500 other slaves on his Louisiana plantation she made just one request. Her request:

I wanted to git de papers for midwifin’ but, law. I don’t never have no time for larnin’ in slave time. If Marse cotch a paper in you hand he

sho' whop you... He allus say, "Book larnin' don't raise no good sugar cane." De only larnin he 'low was when dey larn de cullud chillen de Methodist catechism. De only writin' a nigger ever git, am when he git born or marry or die, den Marse put de name in de big book.⁶⁵

After the Civil War, Ellen Betts left her master's service carrying with her an old locked trunk with a key secured on a string around her neck; its contents unknown. Whether she ever learned to read or write is also unknown. What we do know, however, is she desired an education more than raising her master's sugar cane and children. She, like her master, saw the power and value in "book larnin." She understood the power and value of vocational education and "papers," and the advantages of writing one's own name in "de big book" of American history. She knew that there was more to know than what "de cullud chillen" learned in "Methodist catechism." Ellen Betts never suffered violence at the hands of her master. She suffered from illiteracy.

During the antebellum period, many enslaved and free African women valued education so much so that, they found innovative ways to teach themselves and to subvert plantation norms that forbade the education of slaves. Some enslaved house servants eavesdropped on their young mistresses' and masters' "book larnin" while other slaves held classes secretly in the woods under large trees or in large holes. As one former enslaved woman recalled:

On Sundays I have seen the negroes up in the country going away under large oaks, and in secret places, sitting in the woods with spelling books. The brightest and best men were killed in Nat's time. Such ones are always suspected.⁶⁶

Both women and men risked their lives to learn even though they knew that, "if you [slaves] picked up a piece of paper and looked lak you gonna read dey [whites] acted lak dey gonna beat you to death."⁶⁷ Those who did not have an opportunity to learn encouraged the younger generation to do so. Education was important because it attributed to them feeling like a free and equal person. They saw education as vital to sociopolitical and mental freedom; the key to "somebody-ness" for themselves and for generations to come. As one former enslaved woman pointed out:

I do all I can tryin' to help other folks. Dere is a little gal... I beg her to go to school an' tell her she ought to take all de chances and go back to

school, cause times ain't like dey use to be. I was a slave and couldn't go to school, but if I had de chance dese young folks have now a days I'd make good use of dem cause I always wanted an education so dat I could be somebody.⁶⁸

Enslaved and free African women in the North and South believed in the power of education to transform their lives and the lives of their people. An educated people would possess the power to tell their stories on their own terms and articulate a positive black identity while fighting for social, political, and economic equality. Both women and men sought to educate themselves for the sole purpose of educating and empowering others. Such empowerment would ensure that Africans in America would work toward systematic change of a society that sought to exclude and destroy them. Historian Heather Andrea Williams notes how, "Literate men who escaped slavery to enlist in the Union army...became teachers in regiments of black men, and once the war ended, these same men taught in local communities. They also advocated for political and economic equality, underscoring with each letter or petition precisely why literacy was such an urgent priority to an oppressed group living within a literate society."⁶⁹

Women also played a pivotal role in educating themselves and other enslaved and free black peoples. One former enslaved woman, Marie Bernard Couvent, a native of Guinea, West Africa, saved her meager earnings in hopes that others would receive the benefits of an education to which she was denied access. She made provisions in her will that a free school for orphans of color be established in New Orleans. *L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins*, commonly known as The Couvent School, opened in 1848, the oldest black Catholic school in North America.

At the close of the eighteenth century, free Africans and whites began establishing schools for the advancement of African peoples.⁷⁰ White philanthropists and Quakers questioned the legal right to withhold education from African peoples and were instrumental in financing schools and educating blacks. The rise of slave revolts both in the North and South, however, caused fearful whites to enact slave codes restricting or prohibiting the education of African peoples, namely in the South. From 1750–1865, however, enslaved and free African women responded by garnering the master's education and literacy tools to express themselves. They inserted themselves into the New

World leaving a textual imprint on American history. Their voices provide us a window into the enslaved and free African woman's world; a world in which they expressed through writings and public speeches the realities of race, class, gender, religio-cultural, and heterosexual oppressions.

Scholars have given considerable attention to written works by enslaved and free African men during the antebellum period with limited references to women. The table below provides textual evidence of published works and public speeches by enslaved and free African women with one reference to a non-published work. Although some of these writings were clearly influenced by the Euro-American Christian world in which the woman lived, the writings suggest that enslaved and free African women were knowledgeable of the sociopolitical, religio-cultural, and economic realities of black womanhood in the New World. These women used the pen and their education as tools of empowerment and resistance. They used education and the pen as a strategy for fighting back and created a counter hegemonic discourse in antebellum America. Their writings confronted American values and the devaluation of African women, placing their plight center stage. Literacy provided them the means to tell their story, and in so doing, their speeches and writings unveiled American trickery and terrorism to the world.

Table 8.1 catalogues published writings by women during a time when slave codes restricted or forbade the education of African peoples in North America. What is crucial to gain here is that these writings were authored by or written about both ordinary and well-known African women at a time when African women were considered, "too dumb to learn." The list suggests that many women believed, like Ellen Betts, that their purpose in life was not "raising sugar cane" or memorizing "Methodist catechisms." The table includes a list of published biographical and autobiographical accounts, public speeches, poetry, and other forms of literature. These women's writings and speeches appeared in books, anti-slavery pamphlets, journals, and newspapers. The table is not a comprehensive list of published writings by African women from 1746–1865 but offers a remarkable snapshot into the world of literate women who saw education as a powerful strategy of resistance. Women dared to speak and refused to accept the miseducation of the Negro as the acceptable standard of black life in America.

Table 8.1 Garnering the Master’s Literacy Tools: The Writings of Enslaved and Free African Women

<i>Year</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Author/ Biographer Contributor</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Source</i>
1746		Lucy Terry (Prince), <i>b. 1730–1821</i>	“Bar Fight,” a poem on the Deerfield Massacre. First known poem written by an African person in North America; published 1895. In 1796, Lucy was “the first woman to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme court against a white man and land rights and wins.”	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, pp. 31, 64
1767, 1773		Phillis Wheatley, <i>b. 1753–1784</i>	“A Poem by Phillis, a Negro Girl, on the Death of Reverend George Whitefield.” First published poem by an African in North America. Published 1770. In 1773, Wheatley authored <i>Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral</i> . First known book written by an African and second book published by a woman.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, pp. 37, 41
1831		Mary Prince	<i>The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself, with a Supplement by the Editor, to Which is Added the Narrative of Asa-Asa, a Captured African</i> . First published slave narrative by a African woman.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 95
1832, 1835	Boston, MA	Maria W. Stewart	Public speaking began. Stewart became the first African woman to engage in public political debates. In 1835, <i>Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart</i> published.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, pp. 98, 101
1833		Lydia Maria Childs	Four years after David Walker’s well-known appeal Lydia wrote her appeal, <i>Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans</i> .	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 99
1834	Philadelphia, PA	Jane Blake	<i>Memoirs of Margaret Jane Blake</i> published.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 101

Continued

Table 8.1 Continued

Year	Location	Author/ Biographer Contributor	Title	Source
1838	Boston, MA	Joanna, “an escaped slave known only as Joanna”	<i>Narrative of Joanna, an Emancipated Slave of Surinam (from Stedman’s Narrative of Five Years’ Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Suinam)</i> published.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 107
1838		Eleanor Eldridge	<i>The Memoirs of Eleanor Eldridge</i> —one of the first published narratives on the life of a free African woman in the early 19th century.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 107
1838		William Whipper and African women and men	<i>The National Reformer</i> , a periodical.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 107
1839	Columbus, OH	African women and men	<i>Palladium of Liberty</i> , a free African newspaper.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 109
1841		Ann Plato	<i>Essays, Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Poetry</i> published.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 113
1841	Philadelphia, PA	African women and men	<i>The Demosthenian Shield</i> , a newspaper.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 113
1842	New York	Joseph and Enoch, two fugitive slaves	<i>Narrative of the Barbarous Treatment of Two Unfortunate Natives of Concordia, Louisiana</i> , by Joseph and Enoch, Runaway Slaves, published.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 115
1843	New Orleans, LA	African women and men	Africans in New Orleans publish a monthly review in French. <i>L’Album Litteraire, Journal des Jeunes Gens, Amateurs de la Litterature</i> , included poetry, short stories, fables, and articles.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 115

Continued

Table 8.1 Continued

<i>Year</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Author/ Biographer Contributor</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Source</i>
1845, 1854		Frances Ellen Watkins Harper	<i>Forest Leaves</i> published (“no known copies of this work in existence”). In 1854, <i>Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects</i> published.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, pp. 119, 131
1847	Rochester, NY	African women and men Frederick Douglass, ed. William C. Nell, publisher	<i>North Star</i> , a newspaper.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 121
1850, 1851		Sojourner Truth Isabella Van Wagern) b. 1797–1883	Delivered Lecture, “Ain’t I A Woman” at the <i>Women’s Rights Conference in Ohio</i> (1851). In 1850, <i>Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by State of New York in 1828</i> published.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, pp. 114, 125
1852	Cleveland, OH	African women and men William Howard Day, ed.	<i>The Alienated American</i> , a newspaper.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 129
1852, 1853		Mary Ann Shadd, (d. 1893)	<i>A Plea for Emigration to Educate US Blacks About Emigrating to Canada</i> . In 1853, the first African woman editor and financier of a newspaper in North North America. Newspaper: <i>Provincial Freeman</i> .	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 131
1853		Nancy Prince	<i>A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince</i> , published.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 131
1853	OH	African women and men Peter H. Clark, ed.	<i>Herald of Freedom</i> , a newspaper.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 131

Continued

Table 8.1 Continued

Year	Location	Author/ Biographer Contributor	Title	Source
1855	San Francisco CA	African women and men Melvin Gibbs, ed.	<i>The Mirror of Times</i> , a newspaper.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 131
1858	Cincinnati, OH	Sally Williams	<i>Aunt Sally; or The Cross the Way to Freedom; Narrative of the Life of the Slave Girl and Purchase of the Mother of Reverend Isaac Williams of Detroit, Michigan</i> published.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 139
1859		Harriet E. Wilson	<i>Our Nig; or, Skethces form the Life of a Free Black</i> , pub- lished. First novel published in North America by an African in America.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 139
1859	Hartford, CT	Jane Brown	<i>Narrative of the Life of Jane Brown and Her Two Children; Related to the Reverend G.W. Offley</i> published.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 141
1860		William and Ellen Craft	<i>Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom, or the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery</i> , published.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 141
1861		Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs)	<i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself</i> , published.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 143
1861		African women and men Edward Jones, ed.	Published: <i>The Sierra Leone Weekly Times and West African</i> .	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 143
1863		Dinah, a slave girl	<i>The Story of Dinah, as Related to John Hawkins Simpson, After Her Escape from the Horrors of the Virgina Slave Trade, to London</i> .	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 143
1865	Augusta, GA	African women and men	<i>The Colored American</i> , the first black newspaper in the South.	<i>The Timetables of African American History</i> , Sharon Harley, p. 153

Education was a powerful strategy of resistance and a powerful vehicle of freedom. African women in America not only fought for their right to education when it was socially unacceptable but also fought to love. They decided that amongst a hostile unyielding world a black woman had a God-given right to own and love her body, soul, and mind on her own terms.

STRATEGY #9: There is a time in every woman's life when she needs to press beyond social constructions and fear to reach her soul.

Intimacy, Love, and Tenderness: Enslaved Women and the Beauty of Black Erotic Expression

...My Dearest I feel this moment as if I could throw my arm around your neck and lay until my soul was in heaven.

—Addie and Rebecca, Feb. 23, 1862

In olden days husbands loved...As I said, we [black folks] loved.

—enslaved woman

In an antebellum world of bruised bodies and hollow hearts enslaved and free African women and men found their way to healthy black loving. They found their way to intimacy, love, and tenderness as a strategy of resistance. As one former enslaved woman remarked, “We would just sit and talk with each other...I told him that I loved him so much I just loved to see him walk.”⁷¹ Another remarked, “Courtin’ dem day wuz like everything I reckon you all do now adays. You promise to ‘bey the man, but before you finish its cussing, honey. In olden days husbands loved...As I said, we loved... We went to church together and praised God; led prayer meetings and, yes sireee, would feel good.”⁷²

Although slaves were forced to breed and banned from legally marrying, some enslaved women and men still managed to respect and care for one another in life-affirming ways. They jumped brooms and committed themselves to one another through the most difficult circumstances. As one former enslaved man recalled: “When my daddy say he [want to marry my mammy] dey jis’ lay de broom down, ‘n’ dem what’s gwine ter git marry’ walks out ‘n’ steps ober dat broom bofe togedder, ‘n’ de ole massa, he say, ‘I now pronounce you man ‘n’

wife,' 'n' den dey was marry'. Dat was all dey was t' it—no ce'mony, no license, no nothin', jis' marryin'."⁷³ Another former enslaved woman remarked: "My paw was from the north, born free man and lived and died free to the end of his days... He saw my maw on the Kilpatrick place... He told Dr. Kilpatrick, my massa, he'd buy my maw and her three chillum with all the money he had, iffen he'd sell her. But Dr. Kilpatrick was never one to sell any but the old slaves... So my paw marries my maw and works in the fields, same as any other slave."⁷⁴ Men loving and honoring women, and women loving and honoring men in tender soul-satisfying ways were not isolated occurrences in antebellum America. Africans were loving, sensual, compassionate, and passionate people. Slave narratives make frequent references to how women and men longed for one another, competed or conjured for each other's affections, danced and frolicked together, prayed and supported one another, and sustained families. Woman-to-man loving withstood the harshness of slavery. Healthy bonding between women and men survived sexual violence and antebellum mayhem. Heterosexual couples found gentleness and companionship in a world that excluded and dehumanized them. Black women and men found their way to love within and beyond a world of human greed and black degradation.

Yet, what about the *other* love, the socially unacceptable love shared between two women during the antebellum period? In a world of multidimensional hardness and fear, many same-sex companions found their way to healthy black loving. Two such women were Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus. Their companionship was expressed through passionate letters filled with tenderness, respect, and homoerotic overtones written from 1859–1868 (before, during, and immediately, after the Civil War).⁷⁵ Addie's letters to Rebecca were among the Primus Family Collection housed at the Connecticut Historical Society in Hartford, Connecticut. Rebecca's replies still remain undiscovered. Without Rebecca's voice the reader is uncertain of her true feelings. From Addie's approximately 150 letters, however, edited by African American English professor Farah Jasmine Griffin in her work *Beloved Sisters, Loving Friends*, one can surmise that Rebecca reciprocated Addie's sentiments. Addie not only inferred such in her letters, but also the fact that Rebecca held onto the letters for sixty-two years and the letters remained a part of the Primus Family collection attest to this.⁷⁶ What resonates clearly from the Brown-Primus letters are the voices of two passionate critical thinking African women who had intimate ties to one another, God, the

Church, and the people around them during and after the antebellum period. Sociologist Karen V. Hansen, the first feminist to interpret the letters and whose work focuses on the letters' homoerotic tones, argues: "Addie and Rebecca's letters tell the story of a passionate relationship that endured nine years of intermittent separation, the ebb and flow of their romantic love, and male suitors attempting to woo each of them. Theirs was not a secretive liaison. It was highly visible and deeply enmeshed in the domestic networks of Hartford's African-American community."⁷⁷

Rebecca Primus (b. 1836) was the eldest child of two sisters and one brother. Her family resided in Hartford, Connecticut for several generations. Rebecca's paternal great-grandfather was a former African-born enslaved man "who won his freedom by fighting in the American army during the Revolutionary War."⁷⁸ The Primuses were a part of a small percentage of Hartford's black middle class who owned property and lived among whites. Griffin argues that, "though they lived in a predominantly white neighborhood, the Primuses were a part of a cohesive black community that centered around the activities of the city's black institutions."⁷⁹ Rebecca was formally educated in the Hartford area and went on to become a school teacher. She and her family were active members of the Talcott Street Congregational Church, one of two black Hartford churches. Her mother, Mehitable Primus and other Hartford blacks founded the church after rejecting segregation of local white churches.⁸⁰ Griffin, whose work focuses on Addie and Rebecca's day-to-day lives, notes: "The Primuses family home often served as a boardinghouse and employment agency for other African Americans, particularly young black women... Most important, it provided shelter and guidance for young black women migrants from the South."⁸¹ Prominent white Hartford citizens contacted the Primuses for domestic workers. Whether or not Addie Brown was among those women whom the Primuses recommended is unknown.

Addie Brown was born December 21, 1841. Little is known about Addie or her family. During her childhood, her father died and her mother later remarried. Addie spent the majority of her childhood in Philadelphia with an unnamed aunt. Her brother, Ally served in the Civil War. From her letters, it appears that by 1859, Addie was well-received and actively integrated into the Primus family as well as actively engaged in their social network. Addie, an inquisitive woman with no formal education, served in the Waterbury and Hartford areas, and later New York as a domestic worker.

Griffin notes that Addie's early letters reflect a woman who was "primarily concerned with her day-to-day existence."⁸² She was a high spirited woman who, like most black domestic workers, dealt with the day-to-day multidimensional (race, class, gender, and religious-cultural) realities of black womanhood in America. Given this, Addie often expressed to Rebecca her feelings of overexertion, depression, and sickness.⁸³ Her employers often demanded "much work with little pay." She often found herself resisting the sexual harassment of one employer, Mr. Games, a man unsuccessful at his attempts in seducing or forcing her.⁸⁴ At one point, their correspondence ceased because the two worked and lived in the same Hartford community. Letters were then replaced with notes left by either woman upon parting at night or morning.

Addie came to know Hartford through Rebecca's eyes. They both became enmeshed in Hartford life and were "avid readers of both the mainstream and the black press, as well as novels, sermons, biographies, and books on history and religion."⁸⁵ Unlike the Primuses, a prominent middle-class property-owning black family, Addie did not "appear in the federal census records or in city directories."⁸⁶ What we know of Addie was preserved by Rebecca. Without the Primus Family Papers, Addie Brown would "not exist." Like many poor or working-class black women of her time, she was not counted in the census data. Furthermore, the white male researcher who discovered the letters dismissed them as the immature musing of two lonely black women. Addie's and Rebecca's voices were not released in academia until Hansen and Griffin began their work.

How and when Addie's and Rebecca's paths crossed is unknown. Addie believed that God willed them together and created the space for the two to rediscover gentleness amongst a brutal antebellum world. Their love was not one of loneliness or convenience; they were bonded by mutual respect, faith, trust, and compatibility. Addie wrote to Rebecca, "as long as God is my witness, it [is a] pure and true friendship." In a letter dated Feb. 16, 1860 she expressed:

I did miss you last night I do not my Dear love know how long I have got to live. My Dearest Dearest Friend let it be long or short I must spend my days near with you if it tis the Lord will.⁸⁷

In a January 1860 correspondence, she assured Rebecca, "Do not cease praying for me for remember they is many obstacle in the way

if we do not meet each other here on earth again we will in heaven God bless you.”⁸⁸ A year later, she ended a May 24, 1861 letter with:

Rebecca I must bring this long letter to a close...if I [could] only exchange this pen and paper for a seat by my loving Rebecca it is possible and must be thus separation how long how long God knows and he only.⁸⁹

Addie and Rebecca longed for one another. The pain of separation seemed, at times, overwhelming for Addie. She often described Rebecca’s absence as an “excruciating pain all over me.”⁹⁰ She wrote “I am near breathing the same air...what would I not give at this moment to be with or near you my soul longs for it [...]”⁹¹ Other correspondences read:

* * *

Hartford, Oct. 28, 1862

My Darling Sister

It hard to have you leave me. I could not help shedding a tear after you had left. It is so lonesome here when night comes. I am just preparing to retire for the night...I hope it wont always be so good night my Sister. I hope it wont be long before I be able to lay in your arms.⁹²

* * *

New York, May 24, 1861

My Darling Rebecca

Your most Affec letter to me was like pieces of meat to a hungry wolfe I will not tell how often I pursue the contents of it this ever for the first time since I left that I gave vent to tears...if I had the energy of the dove how swiftly I would fly to the arms of my love.⁹³

Addie courageously expressed herself at a time when African women possessed limited rights to their bodies and their feelings and desires were ignored and devalued. A black woman’s purpose in the New World was labor and childbearing not self-discovery and self-fulfillment. Addie believed differently and held many convictions. She loved God, family, and community. She loved men and women.

Her deepest passions, however, was Rebecca Primus, five years her senior:

Waterbury, Aug. 30, 1859

My ever Dear Friend

O my Dear Friend how I did miss you last night I did not have any one to hug me and to kiss. Rebecca don't you think I am very foolish. I don't want anyone to kiss me now...no kisses is like yours... You are the first Girl that I ever love so it you are the last one...O Rebecca it seem I can see you now casting those loving eyes at me. If you was a man what would things come to...I must say I don't know that I every enjoyed myself any better than I did when I was at your parents house. I was treated so rich by all the Family.⁹⁴

* * *

Hartford, Jan. 7, 1866

My Dearly Adopted Sister

Rebecca you say that you lie awake in bed it is the same with myself I even wake up in the night and keep awake for an hour at a time my whole thought dwell upon you.⁹⁵

One can conclude that, for Addie and Rebecca, spirituality and sexuality were not in conflict. Both were inseparable sources of light. Both flowed out of Addie like a river. Perhaps, for Addie, loving Rebecca was a spiritual practice, a self-unveiling intimate experience of heaven and God. To walk in love with Rebecca was to walk love in with God. "My dearest," Addie wrote, "I feel this moment as if I could throw my arm around your neck and lay until my soul was in heaven." It could be interpreted that heaven, for Addie was on earth, lying in God, in love, in friendship and sisterhood with Rebecca. In her heaven, God and love were genderless, classless, spatial, non-judging, and welcoming; to know God and love in this manner was to reach and experience heaven. Perhaps Rebecca shared the same sentiments as expressed in Addie's reply to one of her letters: "Rebecca my Darling you cant imagine what pleasure I take in perusing those notes it send such a thrilling sensation through me particular were you say I do indeed love you with my whole heart. My Dear you say I am intirely ignorant of the depth of your love not quite my precious. Darling I am little wise of it. I cant help being so to see how much you do for me daily also the little token of love."

Though their relationship was supported by their communities, it was nonetheless confined to their respective communities. Yet, it appears that the two refused to be hindered by the fears, opinions, and limitations of others; they refused to let others dictate the parameters of love and intimacy between two people; to do so, would be to not reach heaven. In one correspondence, Rebecca's mother too defies the socially constructed parameters by defending their relationship to an intruding neighbor:

Hartford, Jan. 21, 1866

My Dearest and Loving Sister

Your Mother brought it [letter from Rebecca] I would not take it at first... She [insisted]... Mr. Jones came up and wanted to [see] if it was a gentleman letter I hesitate to peruse she said or no. She said I thought as much of you if you was a gentleman. She also said if either one of us was a gent we would marry. I was quite surprise at the remark Mr. Jones & I had quite a little argument. He says when I found some one to love I will throw you over my shoulder. I told [him] I have unshaken confidence in your love. I do sincerely believe him never. Your Mother also agreed with me.⁹⁶

Addie and Rebecca were genuinely concerned for each other's well being. They supported and nurtured each other's dreams. Addie wrote:

Hartford, Aug. 16, 1860

My Beloved Rebecca

I am very much please to hear that you are enjoying yourself & I also delighted that you are getting fat I hope you will not lose it all after you return home. You spoke of my health I am very well with the exception of my head... I was sun struck while I was at Mrs. Kellop.⁹⁷

* * *

New York, Sun., Jan. 10, 1862

My Dearly & Beloved Friend

I will imagine you with pupils around you and also giving them good instructions I guess by this time they all very fond of you... my Dear I felt very bad when I read your letter you spoking of writing me with a severe headach.⁹⁸

At one point in their nine year correspondence, Rebecca left Hartford and traveled to the South. She was among many northern black women who went South to teach former enslaved women and men. She helped form the Primus Institute, a school in Royal Oak, Maryland, where four generations of black peoples were educated. Both Addie and Rebecca had their share of male suitors. Addie appeared to enjoy flirting with men and as with most relationships, Addie and Rebecca's relationship was fraught with jealousy, insecurity, and conflict:

New York, Oct. 2, 1861

My Beloved Rebecca

...do you think that my feelings are change God knows there are not only will you think so only will you harbor such thoughts and feelings toward me only will you not forgive and forget what I said and done. when I was there last summer if ever I done anything in my life that I deeply repent it was what I done and said while I was with you...will you not forgive and forget. do do please I have done wrong...I'm not perfect why will you be so hard I have read your letter several times I have shed tears and bitter [...].⁹⁹

At times, Addie and Rebecca struggled to define their relationship. It appears that they saw friendship, sisterhood, kinship, and partnership as interconnected and interwoven in their love and respect for one another. Evidently what they struggled to define for themselves was a reflection of the larger society's struggle. Addie eventually married for economic and social reasons. Although she loved her husband, she sustained a deeper passion for Rebecca. The intensity of her love for Rebecca subsided and matured over time yet her passion remained. In a different world, free of social constructions, Rebecca would have been her "husband." Addie expressed her love and passion for Rebecca at a time when the world in which she lived suppressed and demeaned it. She wrote:

Hartford, Nov. 16, 1865

My True & only Dear Sister

What a pleasure it would be to me to address you My Husband...I will ans yur letter I must stop and purruse it again...you say you hope I will do well in your absence I will try to do so for your sake you say absence strengthens friendship and our love will not grow cold. mine will never. I will always love you and you only if you were to remain there how

pleasant it would be for me to come there too. I would like to very much or were ever else you are station.¹⁰⁰

* * *

New York, July 13, 1861

My Ever Dear & Darling Friend

...my Dearest I am sitting quite alone Thinking of the past and present and dreaming of the future wondering if the blank will be filled with the joys or sorrows of this checkered life.¹⁰¹

* * *

Hartford, Jan. 21, 1866

My Dearest and Loving Sister

Dearest friend & only Sister... I will never doubt your love for me again you say you put my picture under your pillow I wish I had the pleasure laying along side of you. I am delighted to think you are still please.¹⁰²

Addie and Rebecca's correspondences attest to black women's sense of selfhood during the antebellum period. Addie and Rebecca were two intelligent, sensual, and vulnerable women who lived courageously and with conviction. The letters highlight black women's capacity to live their truest self in a hostile world. By claiming their right to healthy black loving and tenderness in letters, Addie and Rebecca subverted normative American socialized ideas of black womanhood and hetero means of loving. Their letters suggest that there were black women who understood they had a right to love and feel. They had a God-given right to their bodies and to the gentleness of touch, to be loved and to love in return on their own terms. They had a right because as Addie expressed in a letter to Rebecca dated June 25, 1861, "I have come to conclusion that I'm human being." Griffin notes that: "Primus and Brown take black humanity for granted; thus their letters do not censor their opinions about the diversity and complexity of black life... Both women reveal their thoughts about books, politics, friendship, and family... they were victims of American racism and active agents in the struggle against it."¹⁰³

Both Hansen and Griffin agree that Addie and Rebecca were not "passive victims of oppression."¹⁰⁴ Perhaps, they understood, as womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant once said, "Black people do

not need the [kind of] love” in their lives that “functioned contrary to the establishment of Black personhood.”¹⁰⁵ It can be said that for Addie and Rebecca self-disclosure and love functioned as a strategy of resistance against a white Protestant heterosexist excluding world. This act of resistance was a natural non-rebellious one; the act of two women who merely sought to self-express and follow their souls’ longings.

The Brown-Primus letters reflect women who, without a doubt, knowingly or unknowingly, broke rigid sociopolitical boundaries of nineteenth century and present-day sexuality. The fluidity of their choices and their ways of loving make it impossible to label them or ignore the depths of their homoeroticism. Moreover, one cannot conclude that their story was an isolated one during the antebellum period. The Brown-Primus letters represent the first discovered historical primary source documents about intimate companionship of a homoerotic nature among two black women during the antebellum period. Their story is a gateway to many more stories yet to be discovered. It opens a passageway to the possibility of intimate relationships among same-sex women whose documented voices may have been hindered by illiteracy and access.

Addie Brown unashamedly opened herself wide and expressed to Rebecca Primus, on February 16, 1860, that “I never shall love any person as I do you” and their bond would remain “for ever until death parts us.”¹⁰⁶ Ten years later on January 11, 1870, Addie Brown Tines died at the age of twenty-eight carrying with her Rebecca Primus’ love. Rebecca did not marry until several years after Addie’s death. She carried with her the textual memories of their love for sixty-two years. These memories were among the Primus Family Collection housed at the Connecticut Historical Society. Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus’ love was perhaps among other unspoken woman-to-woman relationships during the antebellum period. The freedom that they found in loving one another was an act of resistance against a nation conditioned and paralyzed by violence, social constructions, white supremacy, and Euro-American Christian literalism. Addie and Rebecca’s story suggests that in a society that sought to destroy black life and black love, it took courage to be gentle and commit oneself to loving and respecting another human being. Addie Brown found a way to carve out a piece of her goodness in the midst of an unwelcoming New World. It took faith and tenacity to unclasp oneself in the presence of another and then, dance naked before that world, *regardless*.

Conclusion

The final two chapters of this book have offered nine strategies employed by enslaved and free African women faced with violence and oppression during the antebellum period. These strategies illumine the courageous, resilient, innovative, and spiritual women that enslaved and free African women were despite the impediments of slavery, violence, and multilayered oppressions. These chapters have shown the ways in which these women sought to maximize their potential by employing critical and creative subversive strategies of resistance. Before the Civil War, countless black women escaped to the North and to Canada in pursuit of freedom. Yet, in these regions, black women continued to experience the hardships of violence and oppression. The abolitionist movement gave them a public platform to speak and exercise human initiative for freedom. With the help of black and white abolitionists, fugitive slave women procured their freedom, and upon freedom, dedicated their lives to the freedom of others.

Enslaved and free African women, victims of violence and oppression, broke free, like an uncontainable river. They were the antidote to the white man's sugarplum poison because, within them and beyond them, was a river, an indigenous and endarkened wellspring flowing with womanist vitality. These women pulled from within and uncovered strategies of resistance and sustenance. They awakened to their internal waters and with coolness and precision fought back. It was their aesthetic imagination that emerged from their indigenous wellspring that provided them the subversive and creative resources to strategize their way to freedom and human wholeness. They subverted the trick played upon them by standing up and deciding that they had a right to live whole and free.

We see from their stories that as they moved and worked to free themselves from the mayhem they humanized the river. They moved us to see the river's soul. Their stories and journey put a face, feet, hands, and heart onto the struggle, protest, and hope for freedom from American enslavement. These women took us down by the riverside and showed us how whites exploited, violated, abused, and sold them at the river, transforming the river into a place of human sacrifice and pain. Yet, in that same rhythm, our foremothers' bodies danced, sang, shouted, and cooled themselves in the river, restoring the river to its natural state of beauty and freedom. In so doing, they tapped us into the spirit of our river, its transcendent power; reminding us that the river of the human spirit could never be damned nor

contained by human oppressors. All rivers eventually unleash themselves because they intuitively know that their existence was intended for beauty and freedom.

By resisting violence and oppression, enslaved and free African women in America showed us what the river was made of, and if left to follow its own destiny, without human interference, what the river can become. In a world where all odds were stacked against them, our foremothers broke free. Without them, we would not know the depths and resiliency of our own indigenous rivers. Without them, we would not know that we, too, possess the power to subvert the trick. Without their stories, we would not know that we possess the power to honor and value human life in all of its frailties and possibilities. *Áshe.*

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Notes

Preface

1. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), p. 57.
2. African women born with a veil or caul were known to be gifted with “second sight,” the ability to see and commune with the spirit realm.
3. Jill Scott, “Beautifully Human: Words and Sounds,” Vol. 2, Released 2004. Talib Kweli, “The Beautiful Struggle,” Released 2004.
4. Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1981), p. xix.
5. Harding, *There is a River*, p. xix.

Introduction

1. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1998), p. 274.
2. For more information on the clay bundle see: University of Maryland, UM Newsdesk, October 21, 2008, <http://www.newsdesk.umd.edu/sociss/release.cfm?ArticleID=1760>. See also: The New York Times, Weekender Science section, “Under Maryland Street, Ties to African Past,” October 21, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/21/science/21arch.html>
3. James Mellon, ed., *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember, an Oral History* (New York: Avon Books, 1988), p. 297.
4. Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), pp. 31–32.
5. West’s work is seminal for this project, especially as she provides theoretical underpinning for examining violence in the lives of enslaved women. In particular, she makes substantial connections between historical and contemporary acts of violence against black women and also provides ethical imperatives and strategies for responding to acts of violence. Works from womanist scholars are also relevant for our discussion. Renita Weems’ works provide readers correlations between violence in the lives of biblical women and modern-day black women. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan’s *Refiner’s Fire: A Religious Engagement with Violence* probes intersecting themes in religion, violence, the arts (media/film), and women, wherein Monica Coleman’s *The Dinah Project* serves as

a proactive resource for Christian congregations who come in contact with victim-survivors. Linda H. Hollies' work *Sister, Save Yourself!*, addresses ministry to victim-survivors of domestic violence. Joan M. Martin's work *More Than Chains and Toil: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women* examines the exploitative and complex dimensions of work in the lives of enslaved women and the work ethic that derives from such experience. Finally, Emilie M. Townes' work, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* and other seminal publications analyze the historical and cultural production of evil within a complex American society.

6. My use of the terms "black religious" and "womanist" refers to those scholars who identify themselves as primarily black theologians/ethicists and womanist, in particular and, scholars in the field of religion whose work focuses on the black religious experience, in general. Among the forerunners who position their work in Christianity are James Cone, Joseph Washington, Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, Riggins R. Earl, Jr., Katie Cannon, Cain Hope Felder, Delores Carpenter, Cheryl Sanders, Kelly Brown Douglass, Joan Terrell, Noel Erskine, James Deotis Roberts, Linda Thomas, Karen Baker-Fletcher, Garth Baker-Fletcher, Peter Paris, Robert Franklin, Rosetta Ross, Thee Smith, Renita Weems, Marcia Riggs, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, Nancy Lynn Westfield, Carol Duncan, Stacey Floyd Thomas, and so on. The illuminating discoveries of the previous scholars are duly noted. Yet, given the more recent scholarship it is necessary to renew the discussion regarding the fluidity of the black religious experience in North America from slavery to present.
7. E. Franklin Frazier's argument is germane to this discussion. He and other scholars argue that this loss was affected by the violent and coercive nature of slavery in North America, the white missionary movement, and the emergence of the Great Awakening revivals. These scholars argue that African religious retentions or practices were more identifiable in other regions, such as the Caribbean and South America where slaves from particular regions of Africa were less dispersed and more able to share and build upon their African traditions. See: E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Church in America* and C. Eric Lincoln's *The Black Church Since Frazier*.
8. I agree with Stewart here when speaking about the Jamaican religious experience she argues that religious scholars' hermeneutical lenses and analyses "privilege Christianity as the definitive religious identity" of Africans in America. As Christian apologists in the field of religion, their observations of black religious life focus primarily on black Christians and the Black Church. Consequently, the African in America is identified as Christian, Islam is ignored, and the indigenous African "syncretized" component of the story is mentioned, but largely reduced to ring shouting and rhythmic idioms. The question that emerges when reading these works is: besides ring shouting and rhythm, what other indigenous philosophic principles, world views, rituals, and religious practices were syncretized? For more insight see, Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. xiv-xvii.

9. Among the African American scholars who have made strides in this area are Albert Raboteau, Charles Long, Gayraud Wilmore, Josiah Young, Donald Matthews, Yvonne Chireau, Dianne Stewart, Tracey Hucks, Velma Love, Rachel Harding, Emilie Townes, Monica Coleman, Will Coleman, Anthony Pinn, Dwight Hopkins, Salim Faraji, Stephanie Mitchem, and others who give attention to indigenous traditions and also engage interdisciplinary methodologies and analysis beyond Christian presuppositions.
10. For further insight see: Traci C. West, "Visions of Womanhood: Beyond Idolizing Heteropatriarchy" in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review, Festschrift for Delores S. Williams*, Vol. 58, No. 3-4 (2004): 128-139.
11. Hurston saw her task as excavating, gathering, understanding, valuing, analyzing, and recording the rich textures of black peoples' lives—textures that, at times, were aesthetic phenomena unique to black culture. By peeling back the layers of black peoples' lives, Hurston was able to analyze the rich aesthetic forms in black culture (e.g. dance, ring shout, spirituals and neo-spirituals, spirit possession, drumming, conjuring, drama, preachments, conversion and visions, storytelling, folklore, etc.). From her observation of these embodied expressions, Hurston concluded that the "Negro is not a Christian really." The Negro and her ritual practices are embodied aesthetic forms, works of art seeking and orienting themselves toward sacred beauty and meaning. Charles Long relies on the tools of a phenomenologist to peel back the *opaque* layers of religious meaning and sees his task as ordering structures of meaning inherent in the religious expressions of black peoples in North America. He presupposes that phenomenology allows layers of meaning to emerge from the opacity (primal nature and depth) of black life and black religious expressions. By listening to the voices of Africans in America from slavery to the present, Long too, concludes that resident in black peoples' description of the "nitty gitty" dimensions of their lives is the various means by which they oriented themselves toward the Divine; these means were not limited to Christian tradition. Long argues that black scholars of religion entangled in the web of Euro and black Church Christendom must self-consciously draw from black culture and aesthetic forms, black experience and history, and other disciplines in the academy when theorizing about black religious life. Long argues that, since the starting point for black religious reflection is black culture, black experience, and history, this starting point ultimately means a return to Africa, not Europe or Euro-Christian presuppositions to inform black religious reflection. Long sees phenomenology as a critical and creative hermeneutic that is capable of addressing the fluid and complex dimensions of black life and black religious expression. Both Hurston's and Long's approaches provide me the tools necessary for interpreting the religious and aesthetic forms resident in the lives of enslaved Africans, especially in women's lives and in their ritual practices of resistance and well-being. For further analysis see: Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* and Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).
12. Zora Neale Hurston was known for applying the term "thick description" as well as her "spy glass approach" to her study of black culture. Hurston

maintained that the study of culture could not be done, as her mentor Franz Boaz has argued, using an “arm-chair” approach. The anthropologist must become a participant observer to understand the ways in which a given culture or peoples understand and interpret their surroundings, and the expressions and actions of members within their culture or group. Using thick description in narrative form, as offered by Hurston, I investigate and describe the complexities and depths of violence against enslaved women during the antebellum period. I conduct this investigation using primarily enslaved African women’s narratives, and some enslaved men and free African men and women’s accounts. I also draw from slave holders’ journals; missionary records; abolitionist, proslavery, and court documents; and newspaper articles, advertisements, and pamphlets. See: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935), *Tell My Horse* (1938), and her works for the WPA. See also womanist works: Katie Cannon’s work *Black Womanist Ethics* and Melanie L. Harris dissertation entitled *Alice Walker’s Ethics: An Analysis of Alice Walker’s Non-Fiction Work as a Resource for Womanist Ethics* (New York: Union Theological Seminary, Spring 2006). It is also important to note here the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Although Hurston’s work preceded Geertz, Geertz is known for his “development of thick description and symbolic or cultural anthropology. For Geertz, culture serves as a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms that serve to impose meaning on the world and make it understandable.” In understanding other cultures, the key question for Geertz was “the question of meaning and interpretation.” To this end Geertz “developed thick description, borrowing heavily from literary analysis, to examine the different layers of meaning and interpretation that lie behind social interaction.” For more insight see: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Hutchinson, 1975). See also: The University of Ballarat, <http://uob-community.ballarat.edu.au/~dwaldron/people.html>.

13. The primary black feminists and womanist works which inform my theorizing from this space are the writings of Alice Walker, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Gloria Anzaldua, Maria Lugones, Traci C. West, Delores Williams, Katie Cannon, Emilie Townes, Dianne Stewart, Yvonne Chireau, and so on. U.S. third world feminist and womanist scholars have been concerned with the inherent biases and racist nature of Western tradition and thought. In their theorizing, they have recognized and named the limitations of some of the dominant culture’s theoretical methods. They have appropriated interdisciplinary methods from history, social science, anthropology, literature, the arts, and other disciplines, and argued for the necessity of interdisciplinary methods and theories for understanding and improving oppressed people’s future and portraying accurately their past. The final chapters of this book are influenced by U.S. third world feminist and womanist scholars’ strategies of resistance rooted in aesthetic imagination. This project identifies aesthetic forms as creative and subversive practices of resistance that are capable of transforming reality in life-affirming ways.
14. Secondary sources include primarily the writings of continental Africans, U.S. third world feminist and womanist scholars and scholars of color

throughout the Diaspora. My use of such sources is a strategy of resistance against prevailing academic ways of knowing. I hope that the academic discourse continues to broaden by works offered from an array of scholars of color from various disciplines and ethnicities.

15. See: Anne C. Bailey, *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005). See also Michael A. Gomez' work *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).
16. Although it is duly noted that many of these and other sadistic acts continued into the 1960s, this study covers the antebellum period.
17. Ahmadou Kourouma, *The Suns of Independence* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1968).

I “Dey Fooled Dem to Come”: Seduction and Trickery in the African Slave Trade

1. Mrs. Brooks. Religious Tract Society, Missionary Records: West Indies (London: Religious Tract Society, 1834–1838), p. 109. Mrs. Brooks provided her testimony to “the wife of a missionary, Mrs. Coultart.” This narrative which illumines the nature of seduction of women into enslavement was given to me by Dr. Dianne Stewart and is also cited in her work *Three Eyes for the Journey*, p. 15. The sugarplum narrative stands as a metaphor of enslaved women’s experiences and represents a cacophony of their soul-struggles over their abduction off the west coast of Africa. The narrative is also a revisionist approach in that by appropriating historical imagination, I uncover the complexities of enslaved women’s abduction. As womanist scholar Renita Weems argues in her appropriation of historical imagination to connect biblical stories to the complex realities of modern-day black women’s lives, “the intent is to explore the uncharted territory of stories that could give us clues as to what” enslaved women “felt about their lives.” Though dimensions of the story are intensified to bring their collective voices and variations of other capture narratives to life, the basic tenets of the story are verifiable. For further explanation on Weems’ appropriation of historical imagination see: Renita J. Weems, *Just A Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible* (California: LuraMedia, 1988).
2. Sugarplums are small round or oval pieces of sugary candy. The name possibly derived from its resemblance to a small plum. Or it could have come from actual plums preserved in sugar, a relatively new idea in sixteenth-century England. Prior to this time sugar was so expensive that it was used very sparingly. Only well-off families were able to use it lavishly. For additional information see: <http://www.godecookery.com/friends/frec74.htm>
3. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 199.
4. Historian Anne C. Bailey notes that “ex-slaves...made strong accusations against their former master, particularly with regard to how their ancestors were captured.” Such accusations are recorded in Works Progress

Administration (WPA) writers' and continental Africans accounts about the seductive tactics used by Europeans to "trick" African peoples into slavery. For further explanation and analyses of the red cloth tales see: Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, pp. 199–214 and the Incident at Atorkor see: Bailey, *African Voices*, pp. 27–56. My analysis of seduction-plot accounts concur with Gomez and Bailey.

5. Bailey, *African Voices*, pp. 27–28.
6. *Ibid.*, 28.
7. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 200. Gomez makes this assertion—"ultimate trickster." However, there are many understandings of the trickster in West African folklore. Some are seen as an amusing, clever, cunning; sometimes, a well liked character, and oftentimes a scoundrel. On the other hand, many tricksters are portrayed as a creator god or go-between character for humans and the gods. In some traditions, the trickster is identified as one who represents ill harm. My appropriation of the trickster figure here derives from the Dahomey understanding of the trickster called *Yo* and the Dogon trickster *Ogo*. In the Dahomey version the trickster (*Yo*) acts as neither god nor human. *Yo* is consumed by greed which causes trouble for everyone. *Yo* appears everywhere creating havoc. Tradition believes that *Yo* is invincible, one cannot kill, eat, or get rid of him. *Yo* is the only *one* of his kind. Tradition advises that "*one* is enough." In the Dogon version, the trickster (*Ogo*) is a no-no trickster God. *Ogo* is the Pale Fox, known locally as the Jackal, a creature despised by many for his acts of trickery. For further insight see: <http://www.godchecker.com/pantheon/african-mythology> and <http://www.whitewicca.com>
8. For further analysis of the European as an "ultimate trickster" figure as described by Gomez see: Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, pp. 199–200.
9. My assessment of the European-African slave trade is supported by historian Anne C. Bailey's analysis of the Atlantic slave trade. In her work, Bailey outlines six distinct legs of the Atlantic slave trade used by Europeans to procure African peoples for labor. Bailey's analysis allowed me to look broader at the context of seduction from which this project posits its claims. For a more comprehensive treatment of these six legs of the trade see: Bailey, *African Voices*, pp. 115–151.
10. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, pp. 207–208. See also: Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 51–68. Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 18–23.
11. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 208.
12. For a more in-depth analysis see: Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*; Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*; Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*; and, David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

13. James Pope-Hennessy, *Sins of the Fathers: The Atlantic Slave Trade 1441–1807* (Edison, New Jersey: Castle Books, 2004), pp. 14, 16.
14. Pope-Hennessy, *Sins of the Fathers*, p. 40.
15. *Ibid.*, 26.
16. WPA Oklahoma Narratives, Della Fountain.
17. WPA South Carolina Narratives, Vol. XIV, Part II, Charlie Grant.
18. Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Patrick Gregory, trans. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 253–254.
19. Harold Courlander, *Treasury of African Folklore: The Oral Literature, Traditions, Myths, Legends, Epics, Tales, Recollections, Wisdom, Sayings, and Humor of Africa*, 3rd ed. (Emeryville, CA: Avalon, 2002), p. 135.
20. Courlander, *Treasury of African Folklore*, p. 221.
21. Financial, political, and moral support from European royalty, businessmen, and the Pope increased the British's potential of strategically positioning themselves in Europe, Africa, the West Indies, and the Americas.
22. Bailey, *African Voices*, p. 135.
23. Pope-Hennessy, *Sins of the Fathers*, p. 15.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
27. John Newton, *Journal of a Slave Trader, 1750–1754*. Quoted in Schneider, Dorothy and Schneider, Carl J. eds., *Slavery in America: From Colonial Times to the Civil War* (New York: Facts On File, 2000), p. 44.
28. Elizabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the Slave Trade to America*, 4 vols. (New York: Octagon Books, 1965), p. 226. Also quoted in Harding, *There is a River*, p. 13; fn 19, p. 341. Harding notes that “this cannibalism did not die out among white oppressors” prior to and during the antebellum period. “In many American lynchings, blacks experienced it well into the twentieth century in various tormented forms.” Also quoted in Schneider and Schneider, eds., *Slavery in America*, p. 44.
29. Thomas Phillips, *Thomas Phillips, Journal of the 1693–1694 Voyage of the Hannibal*. Quoted in Pope-Hennessy, *Sins of the Fathers*, p. 99.
30. Pope-Hennessy, *Sins of the Fathers*, p. 193.
31. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 18; See also David Richardson, “Slave Exports from West and West-Central Africa, 1700–1810: New Estimates of Volume and Distribution,” *Journal of African History*, 30 (1989): 3, 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969); David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson, and Herbert S. Klein, eds., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*, A Database on CD-ROM; and Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*.
32. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 18.
33. Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*, p. 12.
34. Pope-Hennessy, *Sins of the Fathers*, p. 6.

2 “Before the Arrival of the Good Ship Jesus”: African Women in Precolonial West Africa

1. Pope-Hennessy, *Sins of the Fathers*, p. 32.
2. Ibid.
3. Zora Neale Hurston appropriates this phrase in her work *Mules and Men*. See also: Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Florida: Harcourt Brace, 1983), pp. 231–233.
4. Atieno Odhiambo “Re-Introducing the ‘People without History’: African Historiographies.” (2000): 149–174. <http://www.oslo2000.uio.no/program/papers/s1/s1-odhiambo.pdf>.
5. Trevor-Roper, H. R., *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1966), p. 9. Quoted in Atieno Odhiambo “Re-Introducing the ‘People without History.’”
6. Atieno Odhiambo “Re-Introducing the ‘People without History.’”
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 7.
11. Sylvia Ardyn Boone, *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. xii.
12. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), pp. xvii, 244–268.
13. African women, men, and children were taken from seven regions of West and West Central Africa. Six of these regions included: (1) Gold Coast (Ghana); (2) Bight of Biafra; (3) Senegambia (Senegal-Gambia); (4) Sierra Leone (Windward Coast); (5) West Central Africa (Congo and Angola); and, (6) Bight of Benin. Africans were also taken from the southeastern region of Mozambique-Madagascar. However, Gomez and others argue this transplantation from Mozambique-Madagascar occurred only during the early part of the trade with a relatively small percentage transplanted to North America. See: Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 27.
14. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 38.
15. Boubacar Barry, *La Senegambie du XVe au XIXe siecle: Traite negrière, Islam et conquete* (Paris, 1988), p. 27. See also Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 47.
16. Ivor Wilks, *Forests of Gold: Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993), p. 111.
17. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 126.
18. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 80.
19. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 80.
20. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 126. Explanation of terms: *unilineal descent*- tracing kinship only through a single line of ancestors, male or female—that is, descent links are traced only through ancestors of one gender. Same as *parallel descent*- the pattern of descent in which males

trace their descent through the male line of their father and females through the female line of their mother. Unlike *bilineal descent*, every individual is a member of only one unilineage.

21. Nkiru Nzegwu, "The Epistemological Challenge of Motherhood to Patriliney," *JENdA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, Issue 5 (2004), <http://jendajournal.com/issue5/nzegwu.htm>
22. Ifi Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* (London: Zed Books 2001), p. 21. See also ft. 8, p. 25.
23. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 26.
24. Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society* (London: Zed Books 1998), p. 85.
25. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 7.
26. Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*, p. 21.
27. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, p. 123.
28. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann Education, 1997), p. 2.
29. For deeper analysis see: Michelle Gilbert, "Sources of Power in Akuropon-Akuapem: Ambiguity in Classification," in *Creativity of Power*, ed. W. Arens and Ivan Karp (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989). Quoted in Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, pp. 47, 48.
30. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 47.
31. For deeper analysis see Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, ft. 58, p. 308.
32. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 47.
33. Wilks, *Forests of Gold*, p. 140.
34. *Ibid.*, 139.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 112; Philomina E. Okeke-Ihejirika, *Negotiating Power and Privilege: Igbo Career Women in Contemporary Nigeria* (Athens: Ohio University Research in International Studies, 2004), pp. 12, 13. According to African scholar Philomina Okeke-Ihejirika, the *osu* status was traceable to: "certain cultural trespasses committed by either individuals or groups within their lineage in earlier times... Others were either sacrificed or handed over to an oracle, lost their citizenship and given the *osu* status upon them and their entire present and future lineage... Beyond the broad categories of *diala* and *osu*... individuals and families in Igboland gained access to elite groups through various channels, including membership (by descent or appointment) in the religious ranks or organizations, blood or marital ties to royalty, and as holders of traditional titles."
37. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 94.
38. Arhin Brempong, "The role of Nana Yaa Asantewaa in the 1900 Asante War of Resistance," *Le Griot*, Vol. VIII, 2000, Department of African Studies, K.N.U.S.T.—Kumasi—GHANA, p. 8.
39. Joseph-Therese Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 39.
40. Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa*, p. 100.
41. Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life*, p. 40.

42. Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life*, p. 40.
43. For a deeper analysis of "secret societies" among African women and men see: Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 95; Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, pp. 31–33; and, Boone, *Radiance from the Waters*.
44. Boone, *Radiance from the Waters*, p. 16.
45. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 96.
46. *Ibid.*, 97–98.
47. *Ibid.*, 98.
48. The Golden Stool or stools were sacred mediums which represented ancestral power. As Gomez notes, the stools "constituted the very ancestral presence among a unified community in a specific place." The "stool symbolized the unity of the ancestors and their descendents and the Chief [who] occupied the Stool." For further insight see: Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, pp. 109, 112; Wilks, *Forests of Gold*.
49. Brempong, "The role of Nana Yaa Asantewaa," p. 12.
50. *Ibid.*, 11.
51. *Ibid.*, 10.
52. Wilks, *Forests of Gold*, p. 22.
53. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 108.
54. *Ibid.*, 41, 45.
55. *Ibid.*, 92.
56. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 101.
57. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 127.
58. *Ibid.*, 109.
59. Roy Sieber and Roslyn Adele Walker, *African Art in the Cycle of Life* (Canada: Smithsonian Institution, 1987), p. 19.
60. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 93.
61. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 100.
62. Wilks, *Forests of Gold*, pp. 41, 42.
63. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, p. 40.
64. *Ibid.*, 37, 38.
65. *Ibid.*, 37.
66. Among their high gods were: (1) Gold Coast: *Onyame* [*Onyankopon* or *Odomankama*] (Akan); (2) Bight of Biafra region: *Chineke* or *Chukwu* (Igbo); *Obassi* (Ekoi and Ibibio); *Abassi* (Efik); *Cghene* (Isoko, Nigeria); (3) Senegambia region: *Bemba* or *Ngala* (Bambara); *Omumbo-Rombonga* (Serer, Gambia); (4) Sierra Leone: *Ngewo-wa* (Mende); (5) Bight of Benin: *Mawu-Lisa* (Fon-Ewe); *Nana Buluku* (Fon); *Nzame* (Fan-Congo); *Olodumare* or *Olorun* (Yoruba); *Unumbotte* (Basari, Togo); (6) West Central: *Kalunga* (Angola); *Massim-Biambe* (Mundang, Congo); *Bumba* (Boshongo, Congo); and, 7) Mozambique-Madagascar: *Ndriananahary* (Madagascar).
67. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, pp. 110–111.
68. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 57.
69. *Ibid.*, 129.
70. *Ibid.*, 96–97.
71. John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1975), p. 35.

72. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 129.
73. *Ibid.*, 113.
74. Elizabeth Isichel, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan Press, 1976), p. 41.
75. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 112. Both Wilks and Oduyoye note the importance of communalism and ancestral connectedness in Akan tradition. For more insight see: Wilks, *Forests of Gold*, and Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*.
76. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 11.
77. *Ibid.*, 11.
78. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 118.
79. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 144.
80. *Ibid.*
81. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, pp. 49, 50.
82. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 24.
83. E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (New York: Wazobia), p. 194.
84. Isichel, *A History*, p. 41.
85. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 23.
86. Sieber and Walker, *African Art*, p. 13.
87. Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life*, p. 39.
88. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, p. 21.

3 “Trouble Done Bore Me Down”: Intimate Violence against Enslaved Women

1. Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (New York: HarperPerennial ed., 1996), p. 262.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H.M. Parshley, ed. (New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 22.
3. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 34.
4. Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America*, p. 34.
5. Phrase taken from: Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 2nd ed. (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).
6. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 13.
7. Although it is duly noted that many of these and other sadistic acts continued into the 1960s, this study covers the antebellum period.
8. The definition of intimate violence that Traci West provides becomes helpful here. West argues that intimate violence exists in varied forms. West appropriation of the term ‘intimate violence’ coincides with my analysis of domestic, sexual, sisterhood, sistah-hood, and self-violence in the lives of enslaved women. For further analysis of West’s work see: Traci C. West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 13, 4–6.

9. The FBI notes that “there is no single, universally accepted definition of terrorism.” In the United States, terrorism is defined in the *Code of Federal Regulations* as “the unlawful use of force or violence, committed by a group(s) of two or more individuals, against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives” (28 C.F.R. Section 0.85). “Domestic terrorism refers to activities that involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any state; appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.” [18 U.S.C. § 2331(5)]. See: http://www.fbi.gov/publications/terror/terror2000_2001.htm. Although slavers did not identify themselves as terrorists or the American Union as the site of domestic terrorism the terroristic nature of their actions falls within the scope of *lawful* domestic terrorism. Legislated terroristic acts against people of color were commonplace in the American Union during the antebellum period.
10. William W. Brown, “Narrative of William W. Brown, An American Slave Written by Himself” in *The Civitas Anthology of African American Slave Narratives*, William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. (Washington D.C.: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1999), p. 259.
11. *Ibid.*, 259.
12. By the end of the seventeenth century racial stratification emerged in the colonies distinguishing non-Euro-American Christians or non-Christians from Euro-American Christians. This created a line of demarcation between Africans, Native Americans, and Euro-Americans. Negro was used to racially categorize Africans. Negro signified the anglicized Spanish word for black, and Europeans referred to themselves as white.
13. Annie Hawkins, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 242.
14. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. An American Slave: Written by Himself*, Houston A. Baker, Jr., ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), Chapter IX, pp. 95, 96.
15. Octavia George, *Unchained Memories: Readings From the Slave Narratives*, Home Box Office HBO (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2002), p. 45.
16. Mary Reynolds, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 18.
17. Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 3, 9.
18. Louisa Adams, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 46.
19. Narrative of Mr. Caulkins, in *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), pp. 16–17.
20. *Ibid.*, 16–17.
21. William Dusinger, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 72.
22. Richard Toler, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/wpa/toler1.html>
23. Robert Burns, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 241.
24. Louisa Adams, *Unchained Memories*, p. 72.

25. Georgia Baker, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 7.
26. John Michael Vlach, "The Plantation Landscape" in *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 2.
27. Baker, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 8.
28. By 1860, the South was comprised of 46, 274 plantations (12% of the slave-holding families). These 12% social elite acquired their wealth by slave labor. Although the majority of southern whites did not own large estates, most benefited in some way from European invasion and slave labor. For further insight see Vlach, "The Plantation Landscape" in *Back of the Big House*.
29. Rose Williams, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 129.
30. Jack Maddox, *Unchained Memories*, p. 75.
31. Narrative of Mr. Caulkins, in *American Slavery As It Is*, pp. 16–17.
32. Charley Williams, *Unchained Memories*, p. 50.
33. Joan M. Martin, *More Than Chains and Toil: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), p. 91.
34. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, eds. *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation* (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp. 71–74. See also: *Unchained Memories*, p. 36.
35. Narrative of James Curry, in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, John Blassingame, ed. (Louisiana: Louisiana State University, 1977), p. 133.
36. *Ibid.*, 133.
37. Sarah Gudger, *Unchained Memories*, p. 52.
38. Georgia Flemming, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 257.
39. Charlie Moses, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 180.
40. Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, eds., "The Faces of Power: Slaves and Owners," in *Remembering Slavery*, p. 4.
41. Jeff Stanfield, in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 280. See also: Mrs. Katie Blackwell Johnson narrative account, p. 161.
42. Mr. Robert McDowell, in *American Slavery As It Is*, p. 74.
43. James Mellon, ed., *Bullwhip Days*, p. 247.
44. Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, eds. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), pp. 196–198.
45. Henry Bibb, "Narratives of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave Written by Himself," in *The Civitas*, Andrews and Gates, Jr., eds., p. 349.
46. Mellon, ed., *Bullwhip Days*, p. 18. See also Mary Reynolds, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/wpa/reynold1.html>
47. Rev. Horace Moulton, in *American Slavery As It Is*, pp. 19, 20.
48. Rev. William T. Allen, in *American Slavery As It Is*, p. 46.
49. Delia Garlic, *Unchained Memories*, p. 34.

50. Katie Rowe, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 29.
51. Stephen Williams, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 290.
52. Schneider and Schneider, eds., *Slavery in America*, p. 61.
53. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), pp. 82, 83.
54. Rev. Horace Moulton, in *American Slavery As It Is*, pp. 20.
55. "General Testimony to the Cruelties Inflicted Upon Slaves," in *American Slavery As It Is*, p. 58.
56. Maryland State Law, Sec. 8. See: Andrews and Gates, Jr., eds., *The Civitas*, p. 277.
57. Narrative of James Curry, in *Slave Testimony*, pp. 125, 126.
58. James Allen, Hilton Als, Congressman John Lewis, and Leon F. Litwack, eds., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palms, 2000), p. 14.

4 "Dat Man Grabbed Me an' Strip Me Naked": Enslaved Women and Sexual Violence

1. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in *The Civitas Anthology of African American Slave Narratives*, William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. (Washington D.C.: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1999), pp. 490, 465.
2. *Ibid.*, 489–490.
3. *Ibid.*
4. William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (London: Frank Cass, 1967 [1705]), pp. 208–211. Quoted in Deborah Gray White, *Ain't I Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), p. 29.
5. Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *The Portable Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Viking, 1975), p. 187. Quoted in White, *Ain't I Woman?* p. 30.
6. White, *Ain't I Woman?* p. 29.
7. Harriet Robinson, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 149.
8. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, in *The Civitas*, p. 496.
9. Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (London: J. Philips, 1788).
10. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XVIII. Web text version as a part of The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, 1996. See: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/jevifram.htm>
11. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, in *The Civitas*, p. 490.
12. Mrs. Virginia Hayes Shepherd, in *Weevils in the Wheat.*, p. 257.
13. M.M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p. 19.
14. For more insight on the "Mammy" figure see: Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial Press, 1979); Riggins R. Earl, Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self & Community*

- in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 113, 114; and, White, *Ain't I Woman?* pp. 46 – 61.
15. Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, p. 107.
 16. Mary Peters, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 297.
 17. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XVIII. Web text version as a part of The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, 1996. See: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/jevifram.htm>
 18. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, in *The Civitas*, p. 516.
 19. *Ibid.*, 532–533.
 20. Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” in *The Black Scholar*, 3 (December 1971), p. 13.
 21. Madison Jefferson, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 221.
 22. George M. Stroud, *Stroud’s Slave Laws: A Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery in the Several States of the United States of America* (Baltimore: Imprint Editions, 2005), p. 33.
 23. Lewis Clark, “Leaves from a Slave’s Journal of Life,” in *Slave Testimony*, p. 156.
 24. White, *Ain't I Woman?* p. 96.
 25. Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role,” in *The Black Scholar*, p. 13.
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. Claudia Card, “Rape as a Weapon of War,” in *Hypatia* Vol. 11, No. 4 (Fall 1996).
 28. Lewis Clark, “Leaves from a Slave’s Journal of Life,” in *Slave Testimony*, p. 156.
 29. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, in *The Civitas*, pp. 480–481.
 30. George Rawick, ed., *The American Slave, a Composite Autobiography*, 19 vols. (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1972), 18: 92.
 31. Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, pp. 31–32.
 32. Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1931), p. 112. Quoted also in White, *Ain't I Woman?* p. 32.
 33. B.A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), p. 155. Quoted also in White, *Ain't I Woman?* p. 32.
 34. Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery, A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 137–138. Quoted also in White, *Ain't I Woman?* pp. 9–10.
 35. Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, pp. 19–20.
 36. Mrs. Katie Blackwell Johnson, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 161.
 37. Narrative of Mr. Caulkins, in *American Slavery As It Is*, p. 15.
 38. Elige Davison, in *Slavery in America*, Schneider and Schneider, eds., p. 71.
 39. Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, David Freeman Hawke, ed. (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 163. Quoted also in White, *Ain't I Woman?* p. 31.
 40. Rachel Cruze, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 208.
 41. Mrs. Minnie Folkes, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, pp. 92, 93.
 42. Narrative of Mr. Caulkins, in *American Slavery As It Is*, pp. 15–16.
 43. Mary Reynolds, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 21.
 44. *Ibid.*, 22.

45. Issac D. Williams' narrative cited in Dr. Gail Elizabeth Wyatt's work *Stolen Women: Reclaiming Our Sexuality, Taking Back Our Lives* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), p. 18.
46. Wesley Burrell, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 297.
47. Mrs. Georgia Gibbs, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 105.
48. Wyatt, *Stolen Women*, p. 13.
49. Ibid.
50. Narrative of Mr. Caulkins, in *American Slavery As It Is*, p. 16.
51. Richard Carruthers, in *Bullwhip Days*, pp. 296–297.

5 “In the Company of My Sisters”: Violence among Women in the American Colonies

1. Phyllis Chesler, *Women's Inhumanity to Women* (New York: Plume, 2003), p. iv.
2. West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, p. 13.
3. Henrietta King, in *Remembering Slavery*, Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, eds., pp. 19–21.
4. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and white women of the old south* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 129–131.
5. Ibid., 130.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), pp. 54, 55, 96, 97.
9. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, in *The Civitas*, p. 507.
10. Lewis Clark, “Leaves from a Slave's Journal of Life,” in *Slave Testimony*, p. 162.
11. Mrs. Thomas Johns, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 240.
12. Narrative of James Curry, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 131.
13. Henrietta King, in *Remembering Slavery*, Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, eds., p. 21.
14. Mrs. Liza Brown, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 63.
15. Elizabeth Sparks, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 274.
16. Lulu Wilson, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 324.
17. Ibid.
18. Alabama Former Slaves, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 543. See also: *Independent Newspaper*, LXVIII (May 26, 1910), pp. 1131–1136.
19. Mr. Calvin H. Tate, in *American Slavery As It Is*, p. 88.
20. Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, p. 135.
21. William Drayton, *The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of Northern Abolitionists* (Philadelphia: H. Manley, 1836), p. 104. Quoted in White, *Ain't I Woman?* p. 44.
22. J.W. Lindsay, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 401.
23. Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, p. 138.

24. *Ibid.*, 113, 114.
25. Henrietta King, in *Remembering Slavery*, Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, eds., p. 21.
26. Audre Lorde, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), p. 151.
27. Rosa Starke, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 136.
28. George Rawick, ed., *The American Slave, A Composite Autobiography*, 19 vols. (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1972), 1: 8. For further insight see: Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 221.
29. For further insight see: Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, pp. 221–222; Robert O'lowell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country 1740–1790* (New York: Cornell University: 1998), pp. 68–71; "The Faces of Power: Slaves and Owners," in *Remembering Slavery*, Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, eds., pp. xxxii–xxiv; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); and, James Stewart, "The Critical Role of African Americans in the Development of Pre-Civil War U.S. Economy" in *African Americans in the U.S. Economy*, Cecilia A. Conrad, John Whitehead, Patrick Mason, and James Stewart, eds. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005) pp. 20–31.
30. For more insight on these regions and others see: Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, pp. 220–221.
31. For a deeper analysis of importation patterns see: See also Richardson, "Slave Exports from West and West-Central Africa, 1700–1810" Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*; Eltis, Behrendt, Richardson, and Klein, eds., *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade*; and, Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*.
32. For further insight see: Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 220 "Slavery as Memory and History," in *Remembering Slavery*, Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, eds., pp. xxxii–xxiv.
33. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 221. See also Thomas Skidmore, "Whitening," in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. (Basic Civitas Books, 1999), p. 1991.
34. Sarah Fitzpatrick, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 648.
35. WPA, Arkansas Narrative, Vol. II, Part V, Bernice Bowden.
36. Robert Smalls, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 374.
37. WPA, Kentucky Narratives, Volume VII, Tale of Mary Wooldridge.
38. Louise Noble in *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folktales From the Gulf States*, Zora Neale Hurston, ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 13.
39. Sarah Fitzpatrick, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 648.
40. WPA, Maryland Narrative, Vol. VIII, Anne Young Henson.
41. Social scientists Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall have noted that, "Mulattoes in the Deep South were typically not the descendents of lower-class servants, but often the love progeny of the finest families. Early on, some plantation owners freed their mulatto sons and daughters, and helped them get a start in business or trade or in farming. Some even

- provided them with slaves of their own... As a result, mulattoes of the deep South attained the status of a separate Colored class... Those with light-enough skin and European features often passed as 'White.'" See: Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), p. 15.
42. Robert Smalls, in *Slave Testimony*, pp. 374.
 43. Mrs. Virginia Hayes Shepherd, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 257.
 44. Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, eds. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1968), p. 58.
 45. Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex*, p. 60.
 46. Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex*, pp. 59, 60.
 47. Sarah Fitzpatrick, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 649.
 48. WPA, Mississippi Narrative, Vol. IX, Charlie Davenport.
 49. Mary Reynolds, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 21.
 50. Charlie Robinson, in *Bullwhip Days*, pp. 297, 298.
 51. Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 28.
 52. Sarah Fitzpatrick, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 648.
 53. Russell, Wilson, and Hall, *The Color Complex*, p. 98.
 54. Sarah Fitzpatrick, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 649.
 55. WPA, North Carolina Narratives, Vol. XI, Part II, Lizzie Williams.
 56. Laura Tracy, *The Secret Between Us: Competition among Women* (New York: Little Brown 1991). See also: Chesler, *Women's Inhumanity*, p. 155.
 57. Roland Barthes defines gossip as "death by language." See: Chesler, *Women's Inhumanity*, p. 152.
 58. Chesler, *Women's Inhumanity*, p. 2.
 59. Chesler, *Women's Inhumanity*, p. 154.
 60. WPA, North Carolina Narratives, Vol. XI, Part II, Lizzie Williams.
 61. Lorde, "Eye to Eye" in *Sister Outsider*, p. 145.
 62. Chesler, *Women's Inhumanity*, p. x.
 63. WPA, Georgia Narratives, Vol. IV, Part 4.
 64. bell hooks, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self Esteem* (New York: Atria Books, 2003), p. 18. Also cited in bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (Boston: South End Press, 1993).
 65. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, in *The Civitas*, p. 600.
 66. A Minister's Story, in *Slave Testimony*, pp. 509–510.
 67. Edward Jones, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 196.
 68. Betty Powers, in *Bullwhip Days*, pp. 195–196.
 69. Judy Halfen, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 196.
 70. WPA, South Carolina Narratives Vol. XIV, Part 4.
 71. Mrs. Jennie Patterson, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 220.
 72. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, in *The Civitas*, p. 485.
 73. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, in *The Civitas*, pp. 515–516.
 74. Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 19.
 75. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, in *The Civitas*, p. 516.
 76. *Ibid.*, 533.

77. *Ibid.*, 491.
78. Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 19.
79. Iyanla Vanzant, Intro, *Best Black Women's Erotica*, Blanche Richardson, ed. (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2001), p. xiii.
80. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, in *The Civitas*, p. 641.

6 “Fix Me Jesus”: Enslaved Women and Self-Violence

1. For more insight on Stewart's analysis of Afrophobia, see: Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, pp. 43–44.
2. Edwin R. Embree, *Brown America: The Story of a New Race* (New York: Viking Press, 1931). Slave owner Henty Berry spoke these words from the floor of the Virginia House of Delegates in 1832.
3. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, p. 69.
4. Sylvester A. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), p. 24.
5. Rev. Orange Scott, *An Appeal to the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Boston: David H. Ela, Printer, 1839), p. 22.
6. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham*, p. 4.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Narrative of James Fisher, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 234.
9. *Ibid.*, 235, 236.
10. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society_for_the_Propagation_of_the_Gospel_in_Foreign_Parts
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Rev. Orange Scott, *An Appeal*, p. 22.
14. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, p. 89.
15. Records of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, Collection 155. <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/155.htm#606>
16. Marcus W. Jernegan, “Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies,” in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Apr. 1916), p. 504.
17. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 98.
18. The Slave Trade (Religion and Slavery) taken from: Spartacus Internet Encyclopedia. <http://www.blackapologetics.com/bamanswerforcedreligion.html>.
19. Edgard Legare Pennington, *Thomas Bray's Associate and Their Work among the Negroes* (Worcester, MA: The American Antiquarian Society, 1939), pp. 38–39. Also cited in Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 100.
20. William Goodell, *The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice: Its Distinctive Features Shown by Its Statutes, Judicial Decisions, and Illustrative Facts* (New York: American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1853), p. 253.

21. Rev. Orange Scott, *An Appeal*, p. 22
22. *Ibid.*
23. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 99.
24. Dianne Stewart, "Christian Doctrines of Humanity and the African Experience of Evil and Suffering: Toward a Black Theological Anthropology," in *Ties That Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino Theology in Dialogue*, Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamin Valentin, eds. (London: Continuum International, 2001), p. 172.
25. Rev. W. H. Robinson, *From Log Cabin to the Pulpit, or, Fifteen Years in Slavery*, 3rd ed. (Eau Claire, Wisconsin: James H. Tifft, 1913), pp. 81–83. Electronic Edition, see: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>.
26. *Ibid.*, 83–84.
27. *Ibid.*, 84–88.
28. The Rev. Charles Colcock Jones, *Catechism* (1837), 127–130.
29. See: Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, p. 86. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham*, Part 1.
30. Religious historian Albert Raboteau notes that several catechisms had been specially prepared for teaching slaves. Two of the most popular were *Caper's A Short Catechism for the Use of the Colored Members on Trial of the Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina* (1832) and Jones's *A Catechism for Colored Persons* (1834), though sometimes regular catechisms were employed. (Jones's Catechism proved so popular that it was eventually translated into Armenian and Chinese for use in the foreign mission field). For further explanation see: Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, pp. 161–163.
31. Martin Jackson, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 227.
32. Tony Cox, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 51.
33. WPA, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 1, Rev. W. B. Allen.
34. WPA, Kentucky Narratives, Volume VII, Tale of Mary Wooldridge.
35. WPA, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. II, Part VI, James Reeves. It is debatable whether or not anti-African comments such as the preceding ones in this section and the following masked slaves' true feelings. Undeniable, however, are the similarities between these sentiments of former slaves and beliefs and attitudes about Africa, often expressed by black peoples in North America. From slavery to the present, Africanness has been seen by some as sinful, uncivilized, backwards, and dirty. For some, Africa is more reflective of danger: tribal wars, female genital mutilation, untamed jungles, voodoo, evil black magic, and naked people running about with giant spears. Africa and their own inherent Africanness are seen as something separate from them—cultures which they share no relation. "Africans," they argue, "do not like black Americans and want nothing to do with us." They also remark, "Be careful when you travel to Africa you may get killed or catch a disease and die; watch out what you eat and don't drink the water" and those who speak of Africa in life-affirming ways are often cautioned "not to romanticize Africa." Blacks themselves participate in devaluing their own people. Such self-devaluation and fear of all things African was implanted within the psyche of Africans during slavery and continues to linger today.

36. Georgia Baker, in *Bullwhip Days*, pp. 8, 9, 11–13.
37. WPA, Kentucky Narrative, VII, Caldwell Co.
38. WPA, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 1, Rev. W. B. Allen.
39. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, in *The Civitas*, p. 480.
40. *Ibid.*, 85.
41. Jupiter Hammon, *An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York*, by *Jupiter Hammon, servant of John Lloyd, Jun, Esq; of the manor of Queen's Village* (Long Island, 1787) Electronic edition see: <http://etext.lib.Virginia.edu/readex/20400.html>. See also: Quincy T. Norwood, "Plantation Rhymes: Hip Hop as Writing against the Empire of Neo-Slavery," in *PROUD FLESH: A New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics & Consciousness*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (October 2002). Norwood's analysis coincides with my analysis. The words and mindset of some former enslaved women and men "have not always been conducive to resistance;" they have reinforced normative and oppressive pro-American slavery ideologies. It is also important to note here that religious scholars have identified enslaved Africans who, like Howard Thurman's grandmother, rejected oppressive biblical texts, namely the writings of Paul as well as the oppressive interpretations of the biblical texts by slavers, plantation ministers, and missionaries. Yet, often overlooked are those instances in which enslaved and free Africans, rather than reject oppressive biblical passages eventually settled into its tenets and embraced and internalized these passages as literal interpretations and guidelines for their lives.
42. Riggins R. Earl, Jr., "The Jesus Spirit-Possession Paradox in the Making of Black Church Consciousness," paper presented at the Charles B. Copher Lecture Series, April 24, 2006, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, GA.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, in *The Civitas*, p. 530.
45. WPA, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. XIII, Anthony Dawson.
46. WPA, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. XIII, 309.
47. Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Voices of Ex-Slaves* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1993), pp. 140–141.
48. Rev. G. W. Offley, *A Narrative of the Life and Labors of the Rev. G. W. Offley a Colored Man, Local Preacher and Missionary*, Electronic Edition, Academic Affairs Library, UNC-CH University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000, p. 13.
49. J.W. Lindsay, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 404.
50. Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), p. xiii.
51. Annie Lee, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 200.
52. Robert Smalls, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 378.
53. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead*, pp. 134–135.
54. Narrative of James Fisher, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 239.
55. Narrative of James Fisher, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 234.
56. John Crawford, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 309.
57. Martin Jackson, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 227.

58. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead*, p. 2
59. Rev. G. W. Offley, *A Narrative of the Life and Labors*, p. 15.
60. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead*, p. 23.
61. Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1981), pp. 83–84.
62. James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 13.
63. Rev. I.E. Lowery, an apprentice of Woods, recorded Woods' sermon. Lowery noted that "the service conducted in Mr. Frierson's yard at 11 o'clock on the preaching day at Shiloh was the centre of attraction in all that region of country." See: Rev. I.E. Lowery, *Life on the Old Plantation in Ante-Bellum Days, or A Story Based on Facts, With Brief Sketches of the Author by the Late Rev. J. Wofford White of the South Carolina Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church and An Appendix* (South Carolina: The State Co. Printers, 1911), p. 71. Electronic edition see: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/lowery/lowery.html>
64. Rev. I.E. Lowery, *Life on the Old Plantation*, pp. 73–81. Electronic edition see: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/lowery/lowery.html>
65. Stewart, "Christian Doctrines of Humanity" in *Ties That Bind*, p. 181.
66. I identify self-debasing conversion experiences as those bodily and verbal expressions in which Africans in America negated their own personhood (humanity, Africanness, bodies, flesh, souls) in order to be Christians. They believed that their souls could be washed clean of its heathenism and transformed anew by the blood of Jesus.
67. Riggins R. Earl, Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 46.
68. Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 104.
69. James Bradley, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 689.
70. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead*, p. 59. Such linguistic images associated with Christian conversions were not isolated depictions in North American slave narratives. These images saturated WPA narratives and other autobiographical accounts.
71. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead*, pp. 58–60.
72. *Ibid.*, 1, 2.
73. *Ibid.*, 13, 14.
74. *Ibid.*, 145–147.
75. S. Elizabeth Frazier, "Some Afro-American Women of Mark," in *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review*, 04/1892 Vol., 8 No. 4 . See also: www.ohiohistory.org.
76. Frazier, "Some Afro-American Women" in *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review*.
77. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, *The Norton Anthology African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. xxxii.
78. Gates, Jr. and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, p. xxxii.
79. <http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/DIASPORA/FREE.HTM>.
80. *Ibid.*

81. Carter G. Woodson makes this point clear in his analysis of internalized oppression in the lives of black peoples in America which resulted in “the mis-education of the Negro.” For more insight see: Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), pp. 17–25.
82. This is evident in Wheatley’s poem, “On Being Brought from Africa.” Phillis wrote: Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,/Taught my beknighted soul to understand/That there’s a God, that there’s a Savior too:/Once I redemption neither sought nor knew./Some view our sable race with scornful eye,/‘Their color is a diabolic dye./Remember Christians; Negroes, black as Cain,/May be refin’d, and join the angelic train.”
83. Rev. Orange Scott, *An Appeal*, p. 13.
84. Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, pp. 85, 86.
85. Jarena Lee, “A Female Preacher Among African Methodists,” in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, 2nd ed., Milton C. Sernett, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 165.
86. Lee, “A Female Preacher,” in *African American Religious History*, Sernett, ed., p. 165.
87. *Ibid.*, 166.
88. *Ibid.*
89. *Ibid.*, 172.
90. *Ibid.*
91. Dialogue with grassroots mental health practitioner, Ayanna Abi Kyles. May 2, 2006. Dialogue regarding her work with victim-survivors at the Genesis Women’s Shelter, Atlanta, Georgia.
92. *Ibid.*
93. Although whites often articulated a similar language of conversion as enslaved African peoples, during this time period, internalization of their experiences was vastly different. Enslaved Africans’ conversion affirmed what they had been told, experienced, and internalized about themselves—inferior, tragically African and sinfully human. Whites’ conversion affirmed what they believed and institutionalized about themselves—superior, pure, and entitled. Moreover, whites benefited from enslaved Africans’ self-debasing conversion experiences in two ways. First, it was to their advantage to acquire docile and submissive slaves who served out of a sense of Christian obedience and love. Furthermore, the white missionary movement was sustained by American slavocracy. As long as Africans were deemed heathen and enslaved the missionary enterprise would remain in business because both missionaries and slavers saw it as their divine mission to rescue African people.
94. Delores S. Williams, “Straight Talk, Plain Talk: Womanist Words about Salvation in a Social Context,” in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation and Transformation*, Emilie M. Townes, ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 99.
95. Emilie M. Townes, ed. *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspective on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), p. xi.

7 “However Far the Stream Flows It Never Forgets Its Source”: Five Strategies of Subversion and Freedom

1. Using the metaphor of a river, religious historian Vincent Harding argues that, to uncover what happened to the tragic soul-life of Africans in North America and to trace their rhythmic protest for freedom, one must follow the river’s current from Africa to the Americas. Harding saw it as his mission to follow the river’s current and set forth what he called the “Great Tradition of Black Protest” and other forms of reaction to white oppression. He sought to understand what black people, who committed their lives to the unfinished struggles of the river, were fighting, dying, and hoping for. And, yet, in the midst of their crossing over, also how they celebrated their African legacies, God, each other, and hence themselves. Harding passed this exploration of the river’s current to succeeding black scholars. For further insight see: Harding, *There Is a River*.
2. Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, p. 53.
3. Michael Dembrow, *Program Notes for Daughters of the Dusk*. Cascade Festival of African Films #15; Program Notes and Resources 2005. http://www.spot.pcc.edu/~mdembrow/cfaf15_notes.htm
4. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 5.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 16.
7. Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lutte Books, 1990), pp. xxiv–xxv.
8. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), pp. 136, 137.
9. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton, 1857), pp. 89–91. (Digitized Nov 23, 2005).
10. *Ibid.*, 91.
11. Mary Cuthrell-Curry notes that although a person chooses his or her destiny in heaven, this choice is forgotten when the person is born into this world. However, through divination, a diviner (priest) divines to determine the pattern of life the person chose in heaven so that the person can remedy his or her life pattern or oppose those who work against it. See Mary Cuthrell-Curry, “African-derived Religion in the African-American Community in the United States,” in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expressions*, Jacob K. Olupona, ed. (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co., 2001), p. 457.
12. In the case of Yoruba tradition, Mary Cuthrell-Curry notes that “Yoruba religious life is centered on the concept of destiny—the self chosen pattern of a person’s life. The Yoruba concept of ‘predestination’ contains a preponderant element of choice. According to the oral tradition, a person kneels in heaven before Olodumare (High God) to choose his or her lot in life. The Yoruba believe that the person is allowed to make any choice, and that,

within reason, Olodumare grants that choice. Destiny involves the individual's personality, his or her occupation, his or her luck, and the date of his or her death. Yet even this choice is not determinate, for the Yoruba conceive of destiny only as potentiality. The person, through his or her own efforts, must bring it into manifestation. Human beings or opposing spiritual forces may seek to work against a person achieving all that is destined for him or her... At birth, the person forgets the choice. Priests and babaloawos perform divination for the person to ascertain that pattern which the person chose in heaven, in order to remedy it through sacrifice or to ensure that those who work against it will not succeed. See: Cuthrell-Curry, "African-derived Religion" in *African Spirituality*, Olupona, ed., pp. 454–455.

13. Cuthrell-Curry, "African-derived Religion" in *African Spirituality*, Olupona, ed., p. 455.
14. WPA, North Carolina Narratives, Willaim L. Bost.
15. West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, p. 164.
16. Charlie Moses, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 182.
17. Ashanti proverb.
18. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 13.
19. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, p. 92.
20. *Ibid.*, 92–95.
21. WPA, Georgia Narratives, William Colbert.
22. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 12.
23. Ashanti proverb.
24. WPA Alabama and Texas Narratives, William Moore.
25. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 5.
26. *Ibid.*, 5–6.
27. Mary Reynolds, in *Bullwhip Days*, pp. 19, 20.
28. George F. Jackson, *Black Woman Makers of History: A Portrait* (Oakland, CA: GRT Book Printing, 1985), p. 12.
29. Lulu Wilson, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 324.
30. Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, pp. 56–57.
31. Mrs. Fannie Berry, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, pp. 48–49.
32. Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 57.
33. Mrs. Virginia Hayes Shepherd, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, pp. 258–259.
34. Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 57.
35. Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, p. 57.
36. Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 50th Anniversary ed. (New York: International, 1993), p. 143.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, 145.
39. West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, pp. 166–167.
40. Harriet Tubman, in *Slave Testimony*, p. 458.
41. *Ibid.*, 48.
42. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, p. 139.
43. See General Laws of the 7th Legislative of the State of Texas. An act passed February 12, 1858. Quoted in Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, p. 162.

44. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, pp. 162–163.
45. Aptheker notes that the 1526 slave rebellion is one exception to these recorded accounts. For further insight see, Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, p. 163.
46. *Ibid.*, 165.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Aptheker argues that uprisings centered in Virginia more than any other colony. He attributes this to the fact that “there were few Negroes in the prescribed limits until about 1680, Virginia itself having but three hundred in 1649, and only two thousand in 1670, about five per cent of the colony’s population. It was not until 1660 that the latter government actually declared them to be slaves. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, p. 163. See also: fn 6, 7.
49. *Ibid.*, 163–164.
50. *Ibid.*, 219.
51. In 1900, Yaa Asantewa, an Ashanti queen, led the resistance to British colonial rule in Ghana. The rebellion was known as ‘The War of the Golden Stool’. Asantewa succeeded in the short run, but the Ashanti were heavily outgunned.
52. Arthur Green, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 125.
53. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, p. 140.
54. Mrs. Jennie Patterson, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 220.
55. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 126.
56. Edward Lycurgas, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 302.
57. Elihu Hall Bay, ed., *Reports of Cases Argued and Determined in the Superior Courts of Law in the State of South Carolina, Since the Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: I. Riley, 1809), pp. 261–263.
58. William and Ellen Craft, *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery (1860)*, in *The Civitas*, p. 406.
59. George F. Jackson, *Black Woman Makers of History: A Portrait*.
60. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, p. 141.
61. Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters*, pp. 65–66.
62. Wonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 21. Chireau, *Black Magic*, p. 21.
63. Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of “Telling the Story,”* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000). Chireau, *Black Magic*, p. 22.
64. Chireau, *Black Magic*, p. 17.
65. *Ibid.*, 21.
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*, 23.
69. Savannah Unit Georgia Writers’ Project Work Projects Administration, *Drums and Shadow: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, Brown Thrasher Edition, 1986) p. 16.

70. Ibid.
71. Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, p. 42.
72. William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home: or, The South and Its People*: Electronic Edition, Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brown80/brown80.html>, p. 70–71.
73. Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, p. 88.
74. Ibid.
75. Chireau, *Black Magic*, p. 18.
76. Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, pp. 42–43.
77. WPA, Texas Narratives, Vol. XVI, Part 1, William Adams.
78. WPA, Georgia Narratives, Vol. IV, Part 4, Rhodus Walton.
79. Chireau, *Black Magic*, p. 16.
80. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, pp. 24–26, 36–46.
81. Olupona asserts that good health does not mean only “a healthy body or a healthy mind. Disease is not just a physical or mental condition but is a religious matter. Sickness implies that there is an imbalance between the metaphysical and the human world as the flow of numinous power/life force has been disturbed.” For further insight see: Olupona, ed., *African Traditional Religions*, p. 47.
82. WPA, Texas Narratives, Vol. XVI, Part 1, Harriet Collins.
83. WPA, Kentucky Narratives, Vol. VII.
84. Savannah Unit Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadow*, p. 7.
85. Marrinda Jane Singleton, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 268.
86. Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, p. 55.
87. Chireau, *Black Magic*, p. 48.
88. Thompson also ties tobyes, gopher bags, and goofer dust to West Central Africa. He argues that one of the most important words in black United States conjure-work, “goofer,” refers to grave dirt, often inserted in a charm. In Kongo territory, earth from a grave is considered at one with the spirit of the buried person. “Goofer dust” harks back to the Ki-Kongo verb *kufwa* (“to die”). Another important word in the lexicon of the charm makers is toby. A toby is a good-luck charm. In form and function it almost certainly derives from the tobe charms of Kongo. The original charm was “made up of a mixture of earth from a grave plus palm wine, and is believed to bring good luck.” See: Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 105.
89. Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, p. 42. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 278.
90. WPA Georgia Narratives Vol. IV, Part 4.
91. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 131.
92. Chireau, *Black Magic*, p. 17.
93. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 128.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid., 127–131.
96. Ibid., 129, 130.
97. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, p. 130. Taken from Fu-Kiau Bunseki interview, October 1978.
98. Ibid.
99. Ibid.

100. *Ibid.*, 144–145.

101. *Ibid.*

8 “The Current Continues”: Four More Strategies of Subversion and Freedom

1. Clara Young in *Bullwhip Days*, pp. 187–188.
2. Susan Rhodes in *Bullwhip Days*, pp. 194–195.
3. Both music and religious rituals were essential in the performance of African life cycles such as fertility, birth, puberty, marriage, famine, and death. Artists were often set apart from the community to consult with spirits to assist in the creation of art-work used in religious ceremonies. As a subversive tactic, art was used also in war or against forms of oppression. Women were known to create and perform dance rituals and songs in opposition to injustice.
4. Herkovits, Hurston, Dubois, Raboteau, Chireau, Coleman, Olupona, Hopkins, Stewart, Pollard, and scholars from *This Is How We Flow* are among those scholars who argue retentions. See also Donald H. Matthews, *Honoring the Ancestors: An African Cultural Interpretation of Black Religion and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 9.
5. For further insight see: W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, eds. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).
6. For further insight see: Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*.
7. Matthews, *Honoring the Ancestors*, pp. 9–10.
8. The talking drum is a member of the membranophone class of musical instruments. It is shaped like an hourglass with two heads of the same size and shape. The two heads are sewn together with leather thongs call “osan.” For further explanation, see Francis Awe’s article “Drum Clinic.” Awe is a Yoruba priest who was discovered as a “talking drummer” at the age of two months. <http://www.after-science.com/awe/clinic.html>. For explanation re: drum among the Akan peoples (Ghana, West Africa) see also <http://www.si.umich.edu/chico/instrument/pages/tlkdram-gnrl.html>.
9. Maarit Laitinen, *Marching to Zion: Creolisation in Spiritual Baptist Rituals and Cosmology*, Dissertation, Research Series in Anthropology, University of Helsinki (Helsinki University Printing House, 2002), pp. 5–6; see also fn 10, p. 20.
10. WPA, Texas Narratives, Vol. XVI, Part 4.
11. Lizzie Davis in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 196.
12. Savannah Unit Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadow*, p. 91.
13. Coleman, *Tribal Talk*, p. 40.
14. Lewis W. Paine, *Six Years in a Georgia Prison* (New York, 1851); reprint in RBAM. See also Eileen Southern, “Let My People Go,” in *The Music of Black Americans*, 3rd ed. (W.W. Norton, 1997), 172.
15. Angela M.S. Nelson, ed., *This is How We Flow: Rhythm in Black Culture* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).
16. Nelson, ed., *This Is How We Flow*.

17. Dona Marimba Richards, "The Implications of African American Spirituality," in *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity*, ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Kariamu Welsh-Asante (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), p. 220. Quoted in Nelson, ed., *This is How We Flow*, p. 3.
18. Performance theorist Kariamu Welsh-Asante notes black aesthetic and cultural forms are guided by the principles of rhythm. See: Nelson, ed., *This Is How We Flow*.
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20. Steve Weathersby in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 187.
21. Dinah Cunningham in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 187.
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23. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, p. 47.
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25. *Ibid.*
26. WPA, Texas Narratives, Vol. XVI, Part 4, Wash Wilson.
27. Richard Newman, *Go Down Moses: Celebrating the African-American Spiritual* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1998), p. 106.
28. Dwight N. Hopkins. "Slave Theology in the Invisible Institution," in *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives*, Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 21–23.
29. Pearl Primus, "African Dance" in *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry*, Kariamu Welsh Asante, ed. (Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, 1998), p. 6.
30. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, p. 86.
31. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave*, Vol 4; Part 2, p. 294. Quoted also in Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 266.
32. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, pp. 118, 267.
33. Georgia Writer's Project, *Drums and Shadows*, p. 154.
34. Mary, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 191.
35. Rachel Reed, in *Bullwhip Days*, pp. 191–192.
36. Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 49.
37. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, pp. 248–249.
38. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, pp. 14, 15.
39. Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, p. 50.
40. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave*, Mississippi Narratives, Vol. 6; Part 1, p. 271. Quoted in Chireau, *Black Magic*, p. 14.
41. Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, p. 56.
42. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, p. 254.
43. Prince Bee, in *Bullwhip Days*, pp. 189–190.
44. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, p. 68.
45. Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, p. 59.
46. Ellen Butler in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 190.
47. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, pp. 61–63.
48. Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows*, taken from a culmination of collected narratives on prayer.

49. Ibid.
50. Rebecca Grant in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 191.
51. Susan Rhodes, in *Bullwhip Days*, pp. 194–195.
52. Mellon, ed., *Bullwhip Days*, p. 190.
53. Ellen Butler, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 190.
54. Annie Williams, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 313.
55. Mrs. Minnie Folkes, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 93.
56. Jack White, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 197.
57. Malinda Discus, in *Bullwhip Days*, p. 190.
58. Joseph Sturge and Thomas Harvey, *The West Indies in 1837* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1968), pp. 287–288. Quoted in Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, p. 57.
59. Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), pp. 254–255. Quoted in Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, pp. 93–94.
60. Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, p. 93.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. WPA, Texas Narratives, Ellen Betts.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Charity Bowery, *Slave Testimony*, p. 267.
67. Mrs. Liza McCoy, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 201.
68. Peggy Burton, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 65.
69. Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), introduction.
70. In 1789, one of the first schools for blacks was established by free blacks for blacks with the help of white philanthropic and state appropriations. Until 1830, schools for blacks were established primarily in the North, nearly every year.
71. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead*, p. 139.
72. Mrs. Della Harris, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, p. 131.
73. Joe Rawls in *Bullwhip Days*, pp. 145–146.
74. Mary Reynolds, *Unchained Memories*, p. 61.
75. The Brown-Primus letters are among the Primus Family Collection housed at the Connecticut Historical Society in Hartford. The collection includes 120 letters from Brown to Primus, along with the 50 letters Primus wrote to her family between 1859 and 1869. Rebecca preserved Addie's letters, but her direct replies to Addie are missing and presumed lost. White feminist and sociologist Karen V. Hansen was the first feminist to research and interpret the letters. See: Karen V. Hansen, "'No Kisses Is Like Youres': An Erotic Friendship between African-American Women During the Mid-Nineteenth Century," in *Gender and History*, 7:2 (August 1995): 153–182; Karen V. Hansen, *A Very Social Time: Crafting Community in Antebellum New England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Moreover, Farah Jasmine Griffin is the first African American scholar to preserve the letters in an edited volume with commentaries. See Farah Jasmine Griffin, ed.,

Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854–1868 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

76. Hansen, “No Kisses Is Like Youres” in *Gender and History*, p. 154.
77. *Ibid.*, 153.
78. Griffin, ed., *Beloved Sisters*, pp. 10–12, 279–284.
79. *Ibid.*, 12.
80. Hansen, “No Kisses Is Like Youres” in *Gender and History*, p. 155.
81. Griffin, ed., *Beloved Sisters*, p. 18.
82. *Ibid.*, 19.
83. *Ibid.*
84. *Ibid.*
85. *Ibid.*, 13.
86. *Ibid.*, 27.
87. *Ibid.*, 22.
88. *Ibid.*, 23.
89. *Ibid.*, 35, 36.
90. *Ibid.*, 52.
91. *Ibid.*, 65.
92. *Ibid.*, 72, 73.
93. *Ibid.*, 35, 36.
94. *Ibid.*, 20, 21.
95. *Ibid.*, 103, 104.
96. *Ibid.*, 106–108.
97. *Ibid.*, 24.
98. *Ibid.*, 55–56.
99. *Ibid.*, 49, 50.
100. *Ibid.*, 87, 88.
101. *Ibid.*, 40.
102. *Ibid.*, 106–108.
103. *Ibid.*, 5.
104. Hansen, “No Kisses Is Like Youres,” in *Gender and History*, p. 154.
105. Jacquelyn Grant, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, With Special Reference to Christology,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume Two: 1980–1992*, Vol. II, James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 274.
106. Griffin, ed., *Beloved Sisters*, pp. 24, 25.

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