1 The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood

When the influential scholar Ulrich B. Phillips declared in 1918 that slavery in the Old South had impressed upon African savages and their native-born descendants the glorious stamp of civilization,[1] he set the stage for a long and passionate debate. As the decades passed and the debate raged on, one historian after another confidently professed to have deciphered the real meaning of the "peculiar institution." But amidst all this scholarly activity, the special situation of the *female* slave remained unpenetrated. The ceaseless arguments about her "sexual promiscuity" or her "matriarchal" proclivities obscured, much more than they illuminated, the condition of Black women during slavery. Herbert Aptheker remains one of the few historians who attempted to establish a more realistic basis for the understanding of the female slave.[2]

During the 1970s the slavery debate reemerged with renewed vigor. Eugene Genovese published *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*.[3] John Blassingame's *The Slave Community*[4] appeared, as did Fogel and Engerman's ill-conceived *Time on the Cross*[5] and Herbert Gutman's monumental *Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*.[6] Responding to this rejuvenated debate, Stanley Elkins decided it was time to publish an expanded edition of his 1959 study *Slavery*.[7] Conspicuously absent from this flurry of publications is a book expressly devoted to slave women Those of us who have anxiously awaited a serious study of the Black woman during slavery remain, so far, disappointed. It has been equally disappointing to discover that with the exception of the traditionally debatable questions of promiscuity versus marriage and forced versus voluntary sex with white men, scant attention has been focused on women by the authors of these new books.

The most enlightening of all these recent studies is Herbert Gutman's investigation of the Black family. In furnishing documentary evidence that the family's vitality proved stronger than the dehumanizing rigors of slavery, Gutman has dethroned the Black Matriarchy thesis popularized by Daniel Moynihan et al.[8] in 1965. Yet, since his observations about slave women are generally designed to confirm their wifely propensities, the implication is easily drawn that they differed from their white counterparts only to the extent that their domestic aspirations were thwarted by the exigencies of the slave system. According to Gutman, although institutionalized slave norms accorded women a great degree of premarital sexual freedom, they eventually settled into permanent marriages and built families based as much on their husband's input as on their own. Gutman's cogent and well-documented arguments against the matriarchy thesis are extremely valuable. But how much more powerful his book might have been had he concretely explored the multidimensional role of Black women within the family and within the slave community as a whole.

If and when a historian sets the record straight on the experiences of enslaved Black women, she (or he) will have performed an inestimable service. It is not for the sake of historical accuracy alone that such a study should be conducted, for lessons can be gleaned from the slave era which will shed light upon Black women's and all women's current battle for emancipation. As a layperson, I can only propose some tentative ideas which might possibly guide a reexamination of the history of Black women during slavery.

Proportionately, more Black women have always worked outside their homes than have their white sisters.[9] The enormous space that work occupies in Black women's lives today follows a pattern established during the very earliest days of slavery. As slaves, compulsory labor overshadowed every other aspect of women's existence. It would seem, therefore, that the starting point for any exploration of Black women's lives under slavery would be an appraisal of their role as workers.

The slave system defined Black people as chattel. Since women, no less than men, were viewed as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned. In the words of one scholar, "the slave woman was first a full-time worker for her owner, and only incidentally a wife, mother and homemaker."[10] Judged by the evolving nineteenth-century ideology of femininity, which emphasized women's roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically anomalies.

Though Black women enjoyed few of the dubious benefits of the ideology of womanhood, it is sometimes assumed that the typical female slave was a houseservant—either a cook, maid, or mammy for the children in the "big house." Uncle Tom and Sambo have always found faithful companions in Aunt Jemima and the Black Mammy—stereotypes which presume to capture the essence of the Black woman's role during slavery. As is so often the case, the reality is actually the diametrical opposite of the myth. Like the majority of slave men, slave women, for the most part, were field workers. While a significant proportion of border-state slaves may have been houseservants, slaves in the Deep South—the real home of the slaveocracy—were predominantly agricultural workers. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, seven out of eight slaves, men and women alike, were field workers[11]

Just as the boys were sent to the fields when they came of age, so too were the girls assigned to work the soil, pick the cotton, cut the cane, harvest the tobacco. An old woman interviewed during the 1930s described her childhood initiation to field work on an Alabama cotton plantation:

> We had old ragged huts made out of poles and some of the cracks chinked up with mud and moss and some of them wasn't. We didn't have no good beds, just scaffolds nailed up to the wall out of poles and the old ragged bedding throwed on them. That sure was hard sleeping, but even that felt good to our weary bones after them long hard days' work in the field. I 'tended to the children when I was a little gal and tried to clean house just like Old Miss tells me to. Then as soon as I was ten years old, Old Master, he say, "Git this here nigger to that cotton patch."[12]

Jenny Proctor's experience was typical. For most girls and women, as for most boys and men, it was hard labor in the fields from sunup to sundown. Where work was concerned, strength and productivity under the threat of the whip outweighed considerations of sex. In this sense, the oppression of women was identical to the oppression of men.

But women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment that could only be inflicted on women. Expediency governed the slaveholders' posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles.

When the abolition of the international slave trade began to threaten the expansion of the young cotton-growing industry, the slaveholding class was forced to rely on natural reproduction as the surest method of replenishing and increasing the domestic slave

population. Thus a premium was placed on the slave woman's reproductive capacity. During the decades preceding the Civil War, Black women came to be increasingly appraised for their fertility (or for the lack of it): she who was potentially the mother of ten, twelve, fourteen or more became a coveted treasure indeed. This did not mean, however, that as mothers, Black women enjoyed a more respected status than they enjoyed as workers. Ideological exaltation of motherhood—as popular as it was during the nineteenth century—did not extend to slaves. In fact, in the eyes of the slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force. They were "breeders"—animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers.

Since slave women were classified as "breeders" as opposed to "mothers," their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows. One year after the importation of Africans was halted, a South Carolina court ruled that female slaves had no legal claims whatever on their children. Consequently, according to this ruling, children could be sold away from their mothers at any age because "the young of slaves … stand on the same footing as other animals."[13]

As females, slave women were inherently vulnerable to all forms of sexual coercion. If the most violent punishments of men consisted in floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped. Rape, in fact, was an uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholder's economic mastery and the overseer's control over Black women as workers.

The special abuses inflicted on women thus facilitated the ruthless economic exploitation of their labor. The demands of this exploitation caused slaveowners to cast aside their orthodox sexist attitudes except for purposes of repression. If Black women were hardly "women" in the accepted sense, the slave system also discouraged male supremacy in Black men. Because husbands and wives, fathers and daughters were equally subjected to the slavemasters' absolute authority, the promotion of male supremacy among the slaves might have prompted a dangerous rupture in the chain of command. Moreover, since Black women as workers could not be treated as the "weaker sex" or the "housewife," Black men could not be candidates for the figure of "family head" and certainly not for "family provider." After all, men, women and children alike were all "providers" for the slaveholding class.

In the cotton, tobacco, corn and sugar-cane fields, women worked alongside their men. In the words of an ex-slave:

> The bell rings at four o'clock in the morning and they have half an hour to get ready. Men and women start together, and the women must work as steadily as the men and perform the same tasks as the men.[14]

Most slaveowners established systems of calculating their slaves' yield in terms of the average rates of productivity they demanded. Children, thus, were frequently rated as quarter hands. Women, it was generally assumed, were full hands—unless they had been expressly assigned to be "breeders" or "sucklers," in which case they sometimes ranked as less than full hands.[15]

Slaveowners naturally sought to ensure that their "breeders" would bear children as often as biologically possible. But they never went so far as to exempt pregnant women and mothers with infant children from work in the fields. While many mothers were forced to leave their infants lying on the ground near the area where they worked, some refused to

leave them unattended and tried to work at the normal pace with their babies on their backs. An ex-slave described such a case on the plantation where he lived:

> One young woman did not, like the others, leave her child at the end of the row, but had contrived a sort of rude knapsack, made of a piece of coarse linen cloth, in which she fastened her child, which was very young, upon her back; and in this way carried it all day, and performed her task at the hoe with the other people.[16]

On other plantations, the women left their infants in the care of small children or older slaves who were not able to perform hard labor in the fields. Unable to nurse their infants regularly, they endured the pain caused by their swollen breasts. In one of the most popular slave narratives of the period, Moses Grandy related the miserable predicament of slave mothers:

> On the estate I am speaking of, those women who had sucking children suffered much from their breasts becoming full of milk, the infants being left at home. They therefore could not keep up with the other hands: I have seen the overseer beat them with raw hide, so that the blood and milk flew mingled from their breasts.[17]

Pregnant women were not only compelled to do the normal agricultural work, they could also expect the floggings workers normally received if they failed to fulfill their day's quota or if they "impudently" protested their treatment.

> A woman who gives offense in the field, and is large in a family way, is compelled to lie down over a hole made to receive her corpulency, and is flogged with the whip or beat with a paddle, which has holes in it; at every stroke comes a blister. One of my sisters was so severely punished in this way, that labor was brought on, and the child was born in the field. This very overseer, Mr. Brooks, killed in this manner a girl named Mary. Her father and mother were in the field at that time.[18]

On those plantations and farms where pregnant women were dealt with more leniently, it was seldom on humanitarian grounds. It was simply that slaveholders appreciated the value of a slave child born alive in the same way that they appreciated the value of a newborn calf or colt.

When timid attempts at industrialization were made in the pre-Civil War South, slave labor complemented—and frequently competed with—free labor. Slaveowning industrialists used men, women and children alike, and when planters and farmers hired out their slaves, they found women and children in as great demand as men.[19]

> Slave women and children comprised large proportions of the work forces in most slave-employing textile, hemp and tobacco factories.... Slave women and children sometimes worked at "heavy" industries such as sugar refining and rice milling.... Other heavy industries such as transportation and lumbering used slave women and children to a considerable extent.[20]

Women were not too "feminine" to work in coal mines, in iron foundries or to be lumberjacks and ditchdiggers. When the Santee Canal was constructed in North Carolina,

slave women were a full fifty percent of the labor force.[21] Women also worked on the Louisiana levees, and many of the Southern railroads still in use today were constructed, in part, by female slave labor.[22]

The use of slave women as substitutes for beasts of burden to pull trams in the Southern mines[23] is reminiscent of the horrendous utilization of white female labor in England, as described in Karl Marx's *Capital:*

> In England women are still occasionally used instead of horses for hauling canal boats, because the labor required to produce horses and machines is an accurately known quantity, while that required to maintain the women of the surplus population is below all calculation.[24]

Like their British counterparts, the Southern industrialists made no secret of the reasons motivating them to employ women in their enterprises. Female slaves were a great deal more profitable than either free workers or male slaves. They "cost less to capitalize and to maintain than prime males."[25]

Required by the masters' demands to be as "masculine" in the performance of their work as their men, Black women must have been profoundly affected by their experiences during slavery. Some, no doubt, were broken and destroyed, yet the majority survived and, in the process, acquired qualities considered taboo by the nineteenth-century ideology of womanhood. A traveler during that period observed a slave crew in Mississippi returning home from the fields and described the group as including

> … forty of the largest and strongest women I ever saw together; they were all in a simple uniform dress of a bluish check stuff; their legs and feet were bare; they carried themselves loftily, each having a hoe over the shoulder, and walking with a free, powerful swing like chasseurs on the march.[26]

While it is hardly likely that these women were expressing pride in the work they performed under the ever-present threat of the whip, they must have been aware nonetheless of their enormous power—their ability to produce and create. For, as Marx put it, "labor is the living, shaping fire; it represents the impermanence of things, their temporality."[27] It is possible, of course, that this traveler's observations were tainted by racism of the paternalistic variety, but if not, then perhaps these women had learned to extract from the oppressive circumstances of their lives the strength they needed to resist the daily dehumanization of slavery. Their awareness of their endless capacity for hard work may have imparted to them a confidence in their ability to struggle for themselves, their families and their people.

When the tentative pre-Civil War forays into factory work gave way to an aggressive embrace of industrialization in the United States, it robbed many white women of the experience of performing productive labor. Their spinning wheels were rendered obsolete by the textile factories. Their candlemaking paraphernalia became museum pieces, like so many of the other tools which had previously assisted them to produce the articles required by their families for survival. As the ideology of femininity—a by-product of industrialization—was popularized and disseminated through the new ladies' magazines and romantic novels, white women came to be seen as inhabitants of a sphere totally severed from the realm of productive work. The cleavage between the home and the public

economy, brought on by industrial capitalism, established female inferiority more firmly than ever before. "Woman" became synonymous in the prevailing propaganda with "mother" and "housewife," and both "mother" and "housewife" bore the fatal mark of inferiority. But among Black female slaves, this vocabulary was nowhere to be found. The economic arrangements of slavery contradicted the hierarchical sexual roles incorporated in the new ideology. Male-female relations within the slave community could not, therefore, conform to the dominant ideological pattern.

Much has been made of the slaveholders' definition of the Black family as a matrilocal biological structure. Birth records on many plantations omitted the names of the fathers, listing only the children's mothers. And throughout the South, state legislatures adopted the principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*—the child follows the condition of the mother. These were the dictates of the slaveowners, who fathered not a few slave children themselves. But were they also the norms according to which the slaves ordered their domestic relationships among themselves? Most historical and sociological examinations of the Black family during slavery have simply assumed that the masters' refusal to acknowledge fatherhood among their slaves was directly translated into a matriarchal family arrangement of the slaves' own making.

The notorious 1965 government study on the "Negro Family"—popularly known as the "Moynihan Report"—directly linked the contemporary social and economic problems of the Black community to a putatively matriarchal family structure. "In essence," wrote Daniel Moynihan,

> the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.[28]

According to the report's thesis, the source of oppression was deeper than the racial discrimination that produced unemployment, shoddy housing, inadequate education and substandard medical care. The root of oppression was described as a "tangle of pathology" created by the absence of male authority among Black people! The controversial finale of the Moynihan Report was a call to introduce male authority (meaning male supremacy of course!) into the Black family and the community at large.

One of Moynihan's "liberal" supporters, the sociologist Lee Rainwater, took exception to the solutions recommended by the report.[29] Rainwater proposed instead jobs, higher wages and other economic reforms. He even went so far as to encourage continued civil rights protests and demonstrations. But, like most white sociologists—and some Black ones as well—he reiterated the thesis that slavery had effectively destroyed the Black family. As a result, Black people were allegedly left with "the mother-centered family with its emphasis on the primacy of the mother-child relation and only tenuous ties to a man."[30] Today, he said,

> Men often do not have real homes; they move about from one household where they have kinship or sexual ties to another. They live in flop houses and rooming houses; they spend their time in institutions. They are not household members in the only "homes" they have—the homes of their mothers and of their girlfriends.[31]

Neither Moynihan nor Rainwater had invented the theory of the Black family's internal deterioration under slavery. The pioneering work to support this thesis was done in the 1930s by the renowned Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. In his book *The Negro Family*,[32] published in 1939, Frazier dramatically described the horrendous impact of slavery on Black people, but he underestimated their ability to resist its insinuations into the social life they forged for themselves. He also misinterpreted the spirit of independence and self-reliance Black women necessarily developed, and thus deplored the fact that "neither economic necessity nor tradition had instilled (in the Black woman) the spirit of subordination to masculine authority."[33]

Motivated by the controversy unleashed by the appearance of the Moynihan Report, as well as by his doubts concerning the validity of Frazier's theory, Herbert Gutman initiated his research on the slave family. About ten years later—in 1976—he published his remarkable work *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*.[34] Gutman's investigations uncovered fascinating evidence of a thriving and developing family during slavery. It was not the infamous matriarchal family he discovered, but rather one involving wife, husband, children and frequently other relatives, as well as adoptive kin.

Dissociating himself from the questionable econometric conclusions reached by Fogel and Engerman, who claim that slavery left most families intact, Gutman confirms that countless slave families were forcibly disrupted. The separation, through indiscriminate sales of husbands, wives and children, was a terrifying hallmark of the North American variety of slavery. But, as he points out, the bonds of love and affection, the cultural norms governing family relations, and the overpowering desire to remain together survived the devastating onslaught of slavery.[35]

On the basis of letters and documents, such as birth records retrieved from plantations listing fathers as well as mothers, Gutman demonstrates not only that slaves adhered to strict norms regulating their familial arrangements, but that these norms differed from those governing the white family life around them. Marriage taboos, naming practices and sexual mores—which, incidentally, sanctioned premarital intercourse—set slaves apart from their masters.[36] As they tried desperately and daily to maintain their family lives, enjoying as much autonomy as they could seize, slave men and women manifested irrepressible talent in humanizing an environment designed to convert them into a herd of subhuman labor units.

> Everyday choices made by slave men and women—such as remaining with the same spouse for many years, naming or not naming the father of a child, taking as a wife a woman who had children by unnamed fathers, giving a newborn child the name of a father, an aunt or an uncle, or a grandparent, and dissolving an incompatible marriage—contradicted in behavior, not in rhetoric, the powerful ideology that viewed the slave as a perpetual "child" or a repressed "savage." … Their domestic arrangements and kin networks together with the enlarged communities that flowed from these primordial ties made it clear to their children that the slaves were not "non-men" and "non-women."[37]

It is unfortunate that Gutman did not attempt to determine the actual position of women within the slave family. In demonstrating the existence of a complex family life encompassing husbands and wives alike, Gutman eliminated one of the main pillars on which the matriarchy argument has stood. However, he did not substantially challenge the complementary claim that where there were two-parent families, the woman dominated the

man. Moreover, as Gutman's own research confirms, social life in the slave quarters was largely an extension of family life. Thus, women's role within the family must have defined, to a great extent, their social status within the slave community as a whole.

Most scholarly studies have interpreted slave family life as elevating the women and debasing the men, even when both mother and father were present. According to Stanley Elkins, for example, the mother's role

> … loomed far larger for the slave child than did that of the father. She controlled those few activities—household care, preparation of food and rearing of children—that were left to the slave family.[38]

The systematic designation of slave men as "boys" by the master was a reflection, according to Elkins, of their inability to execute their fatherly responsibilities. Kenneth Stampp pursues this line of reasoning even further than Elkins:

> … the typical slave family was matriarchal in form, for the mother's role was far more important than the father's. In so far as the family did have significance, it involved responsibilities which traditionally belonged to women, such as cleaning house, preparing food, making clothes, and raising children. The husband was at most his wife's assistant, her companion and her sex partner. He was often thought of as her possession (Mary's Tom), as was the cabin in which they lived.[39]

It is true that domestic life took on an exaggerated importance in the social lives of slaves, for it did indeed provide them with the only space where they could truly experience themselves as human beings. Black women, for this reason—and also because they were workers just like their men—were not debased by their domestic functions in the way that white women came to be. Unlike their white counterparts, they could never be treated as mere "housewives." But to go further and maintain that they consequently dominated their men is to fundamentally distort the reality of slave life.

In an essay I wrote in 1971[40]—using the few resources allowed me in my jail cell—I characterized the significance of the slave woman's domestic functions in the following way: "In the infinite anguish of ministering to the needs of the men and children around her …, she was performing the *only* labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor. There was no compensation for work in the fields; it served no useful purpose for the slaves. Domestic labor was the only meaningful labor for the slave community as a whole.…

"Precisely through performing the drudgery which has long been a central expression of the socially conditioned inferiority of women, the Black woman in chains could help to lay the foundation for some degree of autonomy, both for herself and her men. Even as she was suffering under her unique oppression as female, she was thrust into the center of the slave community. She was, therefore, essential to the *survival* of the community."

I have since realized that the special character of domestic labor during slavery, its centrality to men and women in bondage, involved work that was not exclusively female. Slave men executed important domestic responsibilities and were not, therefore—as Kenneth Stampp would have it—the mere helpmates of their women. For while women cooked and sewed, for example, men did the gardening and hunting. (Yams, corn and other vegetables, as well as wild animals such as rabbits and opossums, were always a delicious addition to the monotonous daily rations.) This sexual division of domestic labor does not

appear to have been hierarchical: men's tasks were certainly not superior to and were hardly inferior to the work performed by women. They were both equally necessary. Moreover, from all indications, the division of labor between the sexes was not always so rigorous, for men would sometimes work in the cabin and women might tend the garden and perhaps even join the hunt.[41]

The salient theme emerging from domestic life in the slave quarters is one of sexual equality. The labor that slaves performed for their own sake and not for the aggrandizement of their masters was carried out on terms of equality. Within the confines of their family and community life, therefore, Black people managed to accomplish a magnificent feat. They transformed that negative equality which emanated from the equal oppression they suffered as slaves into a positive quality: the egalitarianism characterizing their social relations.

Although Eugene Genovese's major argument in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* is, at best, problematic (i.e., that Black people accepted the paternalism associated with slavery), he does present an insightful, though abbreviated, picture of the slaves' home life.

> The story of the slave women as wives requires indirect examination. To deduce it from an assumption that the man was a guest in the house will not do. A review of the actual position of the men as husbands and fathers suggests that the position of the women was much more complex than usually credited. The women's attitude toward housework, especially cooking, and toward their own femininity by itself belies the conventional wisdom according to which the women unwittingly helped ruin their men by asserting themselves in the home, protecting their children, and assuming other normally masculine responsibilities.[42]

While there is a touch of male supremacy in his analysis, implying, as he does, that masculinity and femininity are immutable concepts, he clearly recognizes that

> What has usually been viewed as a debilitating female supremacy was in fact a closer approximation to a healthy sexual equality than was possible for whites and perhaps even for postbellum blacks.[43]

The most fascinating point Genovese raises here—although he does not develop it—is that women often defended their men from the slave system's attempts to demean them. Most women, perhaps a substantial majority, he says, understood that whenever their men were degraded, so too were they. Furthermore,

> [t]hey wanted their boys to grow up to be men and knew perfectly well that, to do so, they needed the example of a strong black man in front of them.[44]

Their boys needed strong male models to the very same extent that their girls needed strong female models.

If Black women bore the terrible burden of equality in oppression, if they enjoyed equality with their men in their domestic environment, then they also asserted their equality aggressively in challenging the inhuman institution of slavery. They resisted the sexual assaults of white men, defended their families and participated in work stoppages and revolts. As Herbert Aptheker points out in his pioneering work *American Negro Slave*

Revolts,[45] they poisoned their masters, committed other acts of sabotage and, like their men, joined maroon communities and frequently fled northward to freedom. From the numerous accounts of the violent repression overseers inflicted on women, it must be inferred that she who passively accepted her lot as a slave was the exception rather than the rule.

When Frederick Douglass reflected on his childhood introduction to the merciless violence of slavery,[46] he recalled the floggings and torture of many rebellious women. His cousin, for example, was horribly beaten as she unsuccessfully resisted an overseer's sexual attack.[47] A woman called Aunt Esther was viciously flogged for defying her master, who insisted that she break off relations with a man she loved.[48] One of Frederick Douglass' most vivid descriptions of the ruthless punishments reserved for slaves involved a young woman named Nellie, who was whipped for the offense of "impudence":

> There were times when she seemed likely to get the better of the brute, but he finally overpowered her and succeeded in getting her arms tied to the tree towards which he had been dragging her. The victim was now at the mercy of his merciless lash.... The cries of the now helpless woman, while undergoing the terrible infliction, were mingled with the hoarse curses of the overseer and the wild cries of her distracted children. When the poor woman was untied, her back was covered with blood. She was whipped, terribly whipped, but she was not subdued and continued to denounce the overseer and to pour upon him every vile epithet of which she could think.[49]

Douglass adds that he doubts whether this overseer ever attempted to whip Nellie again.

Like Harriet Tubman, numerous women fled slavery for the North. Many were successful, though many more were captured. One of the most dramatic escape attempts involved a young woman—possibly a teenager—named Ann Wood, who directed a wagonload of armed boys and girls as they ran for their freedom. After setting out on Christmas Eve, 1855, they engaged in a shoot-out with slavecatchers. Two of them were killed, but the rest, according to all indications, made their way to the North.[50] The abolitionist Sarah Grimke described the case of a woman whose resistance was not so successful as Ann Wood's. This woman's repeated efforts to escape from the domination of her South Carolina master earned her so many floggings that "a finger could not be laid between the cuts."[51] Because she seized every available opportunity to break free from the plantation, she was eventually held prisoner in a heavy iron collar—and in case she managed to break the collar, a front tooth was pulled as an identification mark. Although her owners, said Grimke, were known as a charitable and Christian family,

> ... this suffering slave, who was the seamstress of the family was continually in (their) presence, sitting in (the) chamber to sew, or engaging in ... other household work with her lacerated and bleeding back, her mutilated mouth and heavy iron collar without, so far as appeared, exciting any feelings of compassion.[52]

Women resisted and advocated challenges to slavery at every turn. Given the unceasing repression of women, "no wonder," said Herbert Aptheker, "the Negro woman so often urged haste in slave plottings."[53]

> Virginia, 1812: "she said they could not rise too soon for her as she had rather be in hell than

where she was." Mississippi, 1835: "she wished to God it was all over and done with; that she was tired of waiting on *white folks …"*

One may better understand now a Margaret Garner, fugitive slave, who, when trapped near Cincinnati, killed her own daughter and tried to kill herself. She rejoiced that the girl was dead —"now she would never know what a woman suffers as a slave."—and pleaded to be tried for murder. "I will go singing to the gallows rather than be returned to slavery."[54]

Maroon communities, composed of fugitive slaves and their descendants, could be found throughout the South as early as 1642 and as late as 1864. These communities were "havens for fugitives, served as bases for marauding expeditions against nearby plantations and at times supplied leadership to planned uprisings."[55] In 1816 a large and flourishing community was discovered: three hundred escaped slaves—men, women and children—had occupied a fort in Florida. When they refused to surrender themselves, the army launched a battle which lasted for ten days and claimed the lives of more than two hundred fifty of the inhabitants. The women fought back on equal terms with the men.[56] During the course of another confrontation in Mobile, Alabama, in 1827, men and women alike were unrelenting, fighting, according to local newspapers, "like Spartans."[57]

Resistance was often more subtle than revolts, escapes and sabotage. It involved, for example, the clandestine acquisition of reading and writing skills and the imparting of this knowledge to others. In Natchez, Louisiana, a slave woman ran a "midnight school," teaching her people between the hours of eleven and two until she had "graduated" hundreds.[58] Undoubtedly many of them wrote their own passes and headed in the direction of freedom. In Alex Haley's *Roots*[59]—his fictionalized narrative of his ancestors' lives—Kunta Kinte's wife, Belle, painfully taught herself to read and write. By secretly reading her master's newspapers, she stayed abreast of current political events and communicated this knowledge to her sister and brother slaves.

No discussion of the part played by women in resisting slavery would be complete without paying tribute to Harriet Tubman for the extraordinary feats she performed as the conductor for over three hundred people on the Underground Railroad.[60] Her early life unfolded in a manner typical of most slave women's lives. A field hand in Maryland, she learned through work that her potential as a woman was the same as any man's. Her father taught her to chop wood and split rails, and as they worked side by side, he gave her lessons which would later prove indispensable during the nineteen trips she made back and forth to the South. He taught her how to walk soundlessly through the woods and how to find food and medicine among the plants, roots and herbs. The fact that she never once suffered defeat is no doubt attributable to her father's instructions. Throughout the Civil War, Harriet Tubman continued her relentless opposition to slavery, and even today she still holds the distinction of being the only woman in the United States ever to have led troops into battle.

Whatever the standards used to judge her—Black or white, male or female—Harriet Tubman was indeed an exceptional individual. But from another vantage point, what she did was simply to express in her own way the spirit of strength and perseverance which so many other women of her race had acquired. This bears repeating: Black women were equal to their men in the oppression they suffered; they were their men's social equals within the slave community; and they resisted slavery with a passion equal to their men's. This was one of the greatest ironies of the slave system, for in subjecting women to the most ruthless exploitation conceivable, exploitation which knew no sex distinctions, the groundwork was

created not only for Black women to assert their equality through their social relations, but also to express it through their acts of resistance. This must have been a terrifying revelation for the slaveowners, for it seems that they were trying to break this chain of equality through the especially brutal repression they reserved for the women. Again, it is important to remember that the punishment inflicted on women exceeded in intensity the punishment suffered by their men, for women were not only whipped and mutilated, they were also *raped*.

It would be a mistake to regard the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men's sexual urges, otherwise stifled by the specter of white womanhood's chastity. That would be far too simplistic an explanation. Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men. These observations on the role of rape during the Vietnam War could also apply to slavery: "In Vietnam, the U.S. Military Command made rape 'socially acceptable'; in fact, it was unwritten, but clear, policy."[61] When GIs were encouraged to rape Vietnamese women and girls (and they were sometimes advised to "search" women "with their penises"[62]) a weapon of mass political terrorism was forged. Since the Vietnamese women were distinguished by their heroic contributions to their people's liberation struggle, the military retaliation specifically suited for them was rape. While women were hardly immune to the violence inflicted on men, they were especially singled out as victims of terrorism by a sexist military force governed by the principle that war was exclusively a man's affair. "I saw one case where a woman was shot by a sniper, one of our snipers," a GI said.

> When we got up to her she was asking for water. And the lieutenant said to kill her. So he ripped off her clothes, they stabbed her in both breasts, they spread her eagle and shoved an E tool (entrenching) up her vagina. And then they took that out and used a tree limb and then she was shot.[63]

In the same way that rape was an institutionalized ingredient of the aggression carried out against the Vietnamese people, designed to intimidate and terrorize the women, slaveowners encouraged the terroristic use of rape in order to put Black women in their place. If Black women had achieved a sense of their own strength and a strong urge to resist, then violent sexual assaults—so the slaveholders might have reasoned—would remind the women of their essential and inalterable femaleness. In the male supremacist vision of the period, this meant passivity, acquiescence and weakness.

Virtually all the slave narratives of the nineteenth century contain accounts of slave women's sexual victimization at the hands of masters and overseers.

> Henry Bibb's master forced one slave girl to be his son's concubine; M.F. Jamison's overseer raped a pretty slave girl, and Solomon Northrup's owner forced one slave, "Patsy," to be his sexual partner.[64]

Despite the testimony of slaves about the high incidence of rape and sexual coercion, the issue of sexual abuse has been all but glossed over in the traditional literature on slavery. It is sometimes even assumed that slave women welcomed and encouraged the sexual attentions of white men. What happened between them, therefore, was not sexual exploitation, but rather "miscegenation." In the section of *Roll, Jordan, Roll* devoted to

interracial sex, Genovese insists that the problem of rape pales in relation to the merciless taboos surrounding miscegenation. “Many white men,” the author says, “who began by taking a slave girl in an act of sexual exploitation ended by loving her and the children she bore.”[65] “The tragedy of miscegenation lay,” as a consequence,

> not in its collapse into lust and sexual exploitation, but in the terrible pressure to deny the delight, affection and love that often grew from tawdry beginnings.[66]

Genovese’s overall approach hinges on the issue of paternalism. Slaves, he argues, more or less accepted the paternalistic posture of their masters, and masters were compelled by their paternalism to acknowledge slaves’ claims to humanity. But since, in the eyes of the masters, the slaves’ humanity was childlike at best, it is not surprising that Genovese believes he has discovered a kernel of that humanity in miscegenation. He fails to understand that there could hardly be a basis for “delight, affection and love” as long as white men, by virtue of their economic position, had unlimited access to Black women’s bodies. It was as oppressors—or, in the case of non-slaveowners, as agents of domination—that white men approached Black women’s bodies. Genovese would do well to read Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*[67], a recent novel by a young Black woman which chronicles the attempts of several generations of women to “preserve the evidence” of the sexual crimes committed during slavery.

E. Franklin Frazier thought he had discovered in miscegenation Black people’s most important cultural achievement during slavery:

> The master in his mansion and his colored mistress in her special house nearby represented the final triumph of social ritual in the presence of the deepest feelings of human solidarity.[68]

At the same time, however, he could not entirely dismiss the numerous women who did not submit without a fight:

> That physical compulsion was necessary at times to secure submission on the part of black women … is supported by historical evidence and has been preserved in the tradition of Negro families.[69]

He cites the story of a woman whose great-grandmother always described with enthusiasm the battles which had earned her the considerable scars on her body. But there was one scar she persistently refused to explain, saying, whenever she was asked about it, “White men are as low as dogs, child, stay away from them.” After her death, the mystery was finally solved:

> She received that scar at the hands of her master’s youngest son, a boy of about eighteen years at the time she conceived their child, my grandmother Ellen.[70]

White women who joined the abolitionist movement were especially outraged by the sexual assaults on Black women. Activists in the female anti-slavery societies often related stories of brutal rapes of slave women as they appealed to white women to defend their

Black sisters. While these women made inestimable contributions to the anti-slavery campaign, they often failed to grasp the complexity of the slave woman's condition. Black women were women indeed, but their experiences during slavery—hard work with their men, equality within the family, resistance, floggings and rape—had encouraged them to develop certain personality traits which set them apart from most white women.

One of the most popular pieces of abolitionist literature was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book which rallied vast numbers of people—and more women than ever before—to the anti-slavery cause. Abraham Lincoln once casually referred to Stowe as the woman who started the Civil War. Yet the enormous influence her book enjoyed cannot compensate for its utter distortion of slave life. The central female figure is a travesty of the Black woman, a naïve transposition of the mother-figure, praised by the cultural propaganda of the period, from white society to the slave community. Eliza is white motherhood incarnate, but in blackface—or rather, because she is a "quadroon," in just-a-little-less-than-white-face.

It may have been Stowe's hope that the white women readers of her novel would discover themselves in Eliza. They could admire her superior Christian morality, her unfaltering maternal instincts, her gentleness and fragility—for these were the very qualities white women were being taught to cultivate in themselves. Just as Eliza's whiteness allows her to become the epitome of motherhood, her husband, George, whose ancestry is also predominantly white, comes closer than any other Black man in the book to being a "man" in the orthodox male supremacist sense. Unlike the domestic, acquiescent, childlike Uncle Tom, George is ambitious, intelligent, literate, and most important of all, he detests slavery with an unquenchable passion. When George decides, very early in the book, to flee to Canada, Eliza, the pure, sheltered houseservant, is terribly frightened by his overflowing hatred of slavery:

> Eliza trembled, and was silent. She had never seen her husband in this mood before; and her gentle system of ethics seemed to bend like a reed in the surges of such passions.[71]

Eliza is practically oblivious to the general injustices of slavery. Her feminine submissiveness has prompted her to surrender herself to her fate as a slave and to the will of her good, kind master and mistress. It is only when her maternal status is threatened that she finds the strength to stand up and fight. Like the mother who discovers she can lift an automobile if her child is trapped underneath, Eliza experiences a surge of maternal power when she learns that her son is going to be sold. Her "kind" master's financial troubles compel him to sell Uncle Tom and Eliza's son Harry—despite, of course, the compassionate and maternal pleas of his wife. Eliza grabs Harry and instinctively runs away, for "stronger than all was maternal love, wrought into a paroxysm of frenzy by the near approaches of a fearful danger."[72] Eliza's mother-courage is spellbinding. When, in the course of her flight, she reaches an impassable river of melting ice, the slavecatcher hot on her heels, she spirits Harry across

> … nerved with strength such as God only gives to the desperate.… (S)he vaulted sheer over the turbid current by the shore and on to the raft of ice beyond.… With wild cries and desperate energy she leaped to another and still another cake;—stumbling,—leaping,—slipping,—springing upwards again! Her shoes are gone,—her stockings cut from her feet,—while blood marked every step; but she saw nothing, felt nothing, till dimly, as in a dream, she saw the Ohio side, and a man helping her up the bank.[73]

The implausibility of Eliza's melodramatic feat matters little to Stowe—because God imparts superhuman abilities to gentle Christian mothers. The point, however, is that because she accepted wholesale nineteenth-century mother worship, Stowe miserably fails to capture the reality and the truth of Black women's resistance to slavery. Countless acts of heroism carried out by slave mothers have been documented. These women, unlike Eliza, were driven to defend their children by their passionate abhorrence of slavery. The source of their strength was not some mystical power attached to motherhood, but rather their concrete experiences as slaves. Some, like Margaret Garner, went so far as to kill their children rather than witness their growth to adulthood under the brutal circumstances of slavery. Eliza, on the other hand, is quite unconcerned about the overall inhumanity of the slave system. Had she not been threatened with the sale of her son, she would have probably lived happily ever after under the beneficent tutelage of her master and mistress.

The Elizas, if they indeed existed, were certainly oddities among the great majority of Black women. They did not, in any event, represent the accumulated experiences of all those women who toiled under the lash for their masters, worked for and protected their families, fought against slavery, and who were beaten and raped, but never subdued. It was those women who passed on to their nominally free female descendants a legacy of hard work, perseverance and self-reliance, a legacy of tenacity, resistance and insistence on sexual equality—in short, a legacy spelling out standards for a new womanhood.