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Re/membering the Sacred Womb:
The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in Georgia, 1750-1861

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Abstract

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By: Alexis S. Wells

The era of enslavement remains one of the most significant moments in history for examining the emergence of African-American cultural forms through the study of religion, yet few historical studies have explored enslaved people's sacred cultures during the antebellum and colonial periods, and no full-length historical study has interrogated the relationship between female embodiment and the sacred cultures of southern bondspeople. Using Georgia between 1750 and 1861 as a case study, this dissertation posits that women's distinctive experiences of enslavement configured female sacred cultures, and further, that these cultures were central to demarcations of the sacred among women, men, and children in enslaved communities. Through an examination of enslaved women's ethical and "common sense" knowledge systems, sociocultural rites, presence in the sacred imagination, and institutional participation, the study proposes a gendered approach to the study of enslaved religiosity, with implications for the future deployment of the "slave religion" category in scholarship on African-American religion.

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A Dissertation

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Introduction

The souls of black folk have a material locus. This locus is in their bodies. Their bodies form the locus for spiritual reflection because it was through the sale of their bodies that they became black and were relegated to the realm of pure materiality. The revelations that occurred during and after the terrors of the Middle Passage and slavery produced the somatic and oral syntax of the moans and shouts of the Spirituals, the Blues, work songs, jazz, and so on. These revelations were experienced through the bodies of black slaves—bodies that were beaten, castrated, raped, and rendered invisible developed a spirituality that would reverse the process of transfiguration that was reducing them to sheer matter. What African American slaves developed were covert practices of reverse transubstantiation whereby they were recreated and reconstituted as human beings.¹

The radical signification of African embodiment that accompanied enslavement engendered a new experience of consciousness. As a part of this new consciousness, Africans in the Americas were forced to confront the marriage of the African body to the slave designation. “Slave” was more than a labor designation in an emergent racialized global economy: it was the ontological modality through which many Africans and their descendants engaged their bodies and fashioned their spiritual strivings. Yet, evocations of the enslaved body in scholarship, evidenced by categories such as slave religion, frequently elide the diversity of enslaved people’s experiences. The “slave” designation assumed particular meanings when mapped upon female bodies. This dissertation explores the ontological, existential, and cosmological significance of enslaved female embodiment, and the ways women accessed an Africana sacred consciousness to

¹ James A. Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave: MacMillan, 2009), 117.

² Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African-American Religious Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 6.

³ Blassingame, John W., introduction to *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), lii-liii. Blassingame concedes that Black interviewers elicited the most uninhibited responses from enslaved people.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1999), 118, 207. James A. Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 67, 69-70. Noel argues that silence arises out of the ineffable terror of the encounter with Non-Being during the Middle Passage, yet it is from this encounter with Non-Being that Being emerges. Protestant discourse lacks the language to describe the

reconcile and reflect upon their “slave” status. Using Georgia between 1750 and 1861 as a case study, I propose the existence of female sacred cultures among enslaved women and the centrality of such cultures to the gender and religious identity formation of the entire enslaved community. By tracing the gendered iterations of the African sacred diaspora, the dissertation aims to redress the historiographical exclusion of female-generated religious experience from explorations of the Black sacred consciousness and to elucidate the religious diversity of bondspeople in the South.

Method

I primarily use historical methods to illuminate the sacred cultures of enslaved women. Therefore, published and archival documents contemporary to the period under examination constitute the bulk of the sources for the study. Despite the integral nature of enslaved women’s bodies to the maintenance of slave economies and their significance within enslaved communities, enslaved women are one of the least visible adult groups in the archives documenting U.S. cultures during the colonial and antebellum periods. Due, in part, to the politics surrounding speech during the antebellum and postbellum eras, as well as the circumscribed mobility that frequently prevented enslaved women from accessing the resources to record their stories, enslaved women’s first-person accounts of enslavement rarely appear in either colonial or antebellum records. Nevertheless, even in the absence of first-person utterances, their expressions permeate archival sources through second-hand, mediated accounts and other narrations. In my definition of “narrations,” I include a range of expressions—what religious historian Tracey E. Hucks

terms “multiple systems of narration” —which include “texts, autobiographical narratives, cultural expressions and the body, ritualization, and religious practice.”²

In order to explore the many narrations of enslaved women, I examine travel narratives, plantation mistress diaries, planter correspondence, runaway advertisements, missionary publications, anti- and proslavery apologia, formerly enslaved peoples’ narratives, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) narratives. In spite of the well-documented concerns surrounding the WPA interviews, the postbellum narratives and interviews represent one of the few bodies of sources that include first-person accounts of enslavement from women. For this reason, they figure prominently in the dissertation. Moreover, historian John Blassingame contends that Georgia WPA interviews offer the most honest, and therefore accurate, representation of enslavement, given that most of the interviewees had been enslaved, and 90% of the Georgia interviewers were well-trained, White women towards whom interviewees were more amenable.³

I include men’s first-person accounts of enslavement in Georgia with the recognition that men often recorded important information about women, particularly women in their kinship groups. Despite the fallibility of memory, I privilege enslaved peoples’ voices, particularly women’s voices, in my approach to the sources, due to the capacity for narrative to illuminate everyday meaning-making structures. Concerning this subject, Hucks’s perspective on first-person narrative is instructive:

For me, these probe metaquestions of how communities encode themselves in

² Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African-American Religious Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 6.

³ Blassingame, John W., introduction to *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), lii-liii. Blassingame concedes that Black interviewers elicited the most uninhibited responses from enslaved people.

history, narrativize meaning, and engage in active modes of self-representation and traditionalizing. Because “narrations of the self are always in flux and subject to revision with each new telling,” I am aware that they are neither synonymous with history nor a justification for strict methodological teleology but are nonetheless “life histories” whose value lies in the “ways in which people make sense of the events around them” and the ways their “lives are embroiled in larger social, cultural, economic, and political processes.”⁴

Speech is not the sole means of narration, however. Black religious consciousness possesses elements that elude apprehension via speech, an idea encompassed in historians of religion Charles H. Long’s definition, and James A. Noel’s explication, of the concept of opacity.⁵ In an effort to remain attentive to the opaque elements of enslaved peoples’ religious consciousness, I read the sources for the ways that “cultural expressions of the body,” in the form of silence and bodily performances communicated and constructed enslaved women’s definitions of the sacred. Even in the absence of information about women’s practices and/or perspectives, I examine the sources for evidence of the perception of women in the African-American religious imagination and, from this reading, attempt to glean the discursive environment that informed and dialogued with enslaved women’s consciousness. By asking different questions of previously explored sources and geographically limiting my sources to a

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1999), 118, 207. James A. Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 67, 69-70. Noel argues that silence arises out of the ineffable terror of the encounter with Non-Being during the Middle Passage, yet it is from this encounter with Non-Being that Being emerges. Protestant discourse lacks the language to describe the involuntary Black encounter with Non-Being, which he terms the “dark night of the soul” and “cloud of unknowing.” Noel credits Charles Long with the illumination of the problem of ineffability in methodological approaches to Black religion through Long’s construction of the “opaque” as a means of describing the ineffable of Black religious experience that predated speech.

particular region, I endeavor to contribute a more intense focus on the relationship between sacred consciousness and embodiment to the pre-existing body of scholarship on enslaved people's religious cultures.

Methodology

Although my methods are primarily historical, concerns indigenous to Black religious studies, particularly studies of Black religion in the U.S., inform the major points of departure for the study. Enslavement, the sacred, and female embodiment—conceptually expressed as dismemberment, re/membrance, and creative power, respectively—define the major parameters of study. Since women's reproductive and childrearing responsibilities were the primary distinguishing features of their experiences of enslavement, the womb serves as the central conceptual image of the dissertation. The consideration of the womb as a separate entity from the enslaved woman's body is an attempt to embed the existential dilemma of dismemberment in the conceptual infrastructure of the dissertation, and to acknowledge the re-membering/remembrance functions of enslaved women's religious cultures. The concept also alludes to the sacred power African descendants historically attributed to the womb, its emanations (menstrual blood, afterbirth, offspring), and its function as the central symbol of creative power in the sense world.

Enslavement/Dismemberment

I understand "enslavement" primarily as a legal status, which recognizes the diverse experiences of enslavement amongst women carrying the legal status, as well as

the corps of social norms emerging from the linkage of Blackness and enslavement. While I use the term throughout the dissertation to refer to persons that were legally enslaved, I acknowledge that slavery conditioned the existence of free Blacks in slave and free colonies by designating labor as the primary means through which their embodiment was defined.⁶ Nevertheless, I regard enslavement as possessing distinctive material meanings, due to the restrictions upon mobility, spatial confinement,⁷ and most significantly, significations of reproduction. Despite the alliance between Blackness and forms of labor in the colonies, enslavement registered a particular psychosomatic context, that, at times, intersected with the sociocultural context of free Blackness, but still induced a distinctive existential experience of Blackness.

Throughout the dissertation I use the language of “enslavement,” as opposed to “slave,” to evoke an awareness of enslavement as an externally imposed condition.⁸ However, in contrast to some others, I understand “slave” as an ontological designation that enslaved people grappled with in their sacred productions and consciousness. Although the enslaved countered the “slave” designation with life-affirming practices and cultivated alternative definitions of the enslaved Black Self, still the meanings of embodiment—the daily labor of the body, its naming and signification—cannot be divorced from notions of being. Questions of individual and collective existence

⁶ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African-Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4. Using New York City as the focal point of her study, Harris argues that racial ideologies were constructed to justify the relegation of Blacks to certain forms of labor and, consequently, racialized class. Concerning the free Blacks in the South, see Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

⁷ Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 210. Stampp contends that the right to own property and make contracts were the primary distinctions between free and enslaved Blacks.

⁸ Deborah Gray White, “Revisiting *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*” in *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, revised edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd., 1999), 8. Concerning the shift from the language of “slave” to “enslaved,” White argues that “enslaved” implicates White people as the sources of Black peoples’ enslavement, whereas “slave” “suggests a state of mind and being that is absolute and unmediated by an enslaver.”

undoubtedly emanated from enslaved Blacks' alienation from the sociopolitical and economic structures that defined personhood in the U.S. Furthermore, questions of existence inform individual and collective sacred consciousness, and vice versa; embodiment, being, and sacred consciousness are intertwined.⁹ For the enslaved, the meaning of Blackness as an ontological designation was conditioned primarily by the meanings of "slave." For this reason, I read the sacred consciousness, practices, and productions of enslaved people primarily through the experience of enslavement, and situate race as secondary. In doing so, I aim to illuminate the hermeneutical nuances in the sacred explications of enslaved and free Blacks that, at times, becomes obscured amidst the assumption of consistency among the existential strivings of Blacks in the U.S. during the colonial and antebellum periods.

Nevertheless, enslavement hosts a range of meanings, due to the differences in the work culture, planter culture, economy, and history of regions in the U.S., as well as between the origins, demography, and distribution of the region's inhabitants.¹⁰ I concentrate my study of enslaved women's religious cultures in Georgia during the period between 1750 and 1861. Since for most of the colonial period, "Georgia" consisted of 11 parishes and "Ceded Lands" along the Savannah River and Atlantic coast, the chronological focus of the project contours its geographical parameters.¹¹ The

⁹ Noel, *Black Religion*, x. Noel alludes to the relationship between the body, ontology, and religion in his explication of Charles Long's concept of materiality.

¹⁰ Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998). Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

¹¹ Marion R. Hemperley, "Map of Colonial Georgia, 1773-1777," 1979, Marion R. Hemperley Papers, University of Georgia, Archives, <http://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/parishmap.htm>. The "Ceded Lands" were added through the Creek-Cherokee Treaty executed on June 1, 1773. Jean Nicholas Bellin's 1757 map also displays a pattern of settlement along Georgia's waterways. Jean Nicholas Bellin, "Carte de la

Carolinas and Georgia imported more enslaved people than any other enslaving regions in the U.S., therefore Savannah functioned as an important geographical nexus of African and American identities throughout the colonies.

The geographical focus enables me to trace religious cultures in urban and rural settings, on small farms and large plantations, and amongst rice and cotton-producing enslaved cultures within the same state. Nevertheless, despite the regional specificity, consistent with the disciplinary objectives of African American religious history, I use Georgia to illuminate salient concepts in the sacred consciousness of enslaved people, more specifically women, which cuts across regional demarcations. Due to the strong ties between Georgia and South Carolina, where appropriate, I cross-reference phenomena that I observe in the region with similar phenomena in South Carolina and other regions of the U.S. to further highlight inter-colonial continuities.

Congruent with the function of the sacred to re-member and remember, I understand dismemberment as the central existential problem of enslavement. Dismemberment describes: (1) The uprooting of Africans from their homelands and relocation to foreign soil; (2) the resignification of African bodies as commodities in the development of the Trans- and Inter-Atlantic economies; (3) the estrangement of the body from the power to govern its labor and, in some cases, (re)productions; (4) enslaved peoples' existence under the constant specter of familial and communal disruption; and (5) the resignification of the womb as a capital asset.¹²

Caroline et Georgie," 1757, <http://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/gamaps/ga1757map2.htm>.

¹² "Definition of a Capital Asset," <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/capitalasset.asp#axzz290R0B7o6>. "A capital asset describes a type of asset that is not easily sold in the regular course of a business's operations for cash and is generally owned for its role in contributing to the business's ability to generate profit. Furthermore, it is expected that the benefits gained from the asset will extend beyond a time span of one year. On a business's balance sheet, capital assets are represented by the property, plant, and equipment figure." I use the term "capital asset" to describe the ways enslaved women's future

The Sacred/Re/membrance

The methodological orientation in female embodiment and women's experiences enables me to demarcate the sacred as the ways enslaved peoples used creative power—the symbolic iteration of the womb—to re-member, or recreate, self and community out of remembered, or recollected, elements of their ancestral cultures, in response to the dismemberment of enslavement. The resignification of the womb—that is, the reduction of female creative power to the economic utility of the womb in the North American context—also forced an existential need to re/member female creative power. Throughout the dissertation, I use the term “re/membrance” to denote re-creation, as well as recollection. Re/membrance, I propose, constitutes the central objective of enslaved women's religious cultures.

My contention that sacred cultures facilitate remembrance of the first creation to enable re-membrance in the context of enslavement situates memory as a significant field of analysis in the dissertation. As a nebulous category that is at once powerfully determinative of consciousness, yet highly resistant to questions of veracity, memory provides a conceptual frame through which to discuss the dialogical relationship between enslaved North American Africans and the diaspora. Given the vast cultural resources at the disposal of enslaved North American Africans, sacred symbols and language assumed multivalent meanings, reflective of the polycultural orientations of enslaved peoples in

reproductivity, specifically their future offspring, could be bequeathed as an asset, yet like a capital asset, did not possess the liquidity of a human body. For this reason, I situate the womb's resignification separately from the general commodification of African bodies, even though they are obviously interrelated. Furthermore, the listing of capital assets under the category of “property, plant, and equipment” connotes the dual status of the womb as property and machinery in the economy of slave societies.

the U.S.¹³ The sacred culture of enslaved people drew upon cultural repertoires that extended from the African continent to the African-European-Indigenous cultural milieu of the Americas. Thus, I do not aim to trace the lineage of practices, but rather to provide a context for discerning their meanings by placing U.S. enslaved Blacks' sacred performances in conversation with the religious rituals and cosmologies originating in the Windward Coast.

Composed of Mande-speakers, such as the Mende and Susu, as well as non-Mande speakers, like the Temne and Bullom, the Windward Coast, often grouped with Sierra Leone, reached its peak of enslaved exports between 1751 and 1810, with the highest number of yearly exports in the years between 1761 and 1780.¹⁴ In these two decades, 141,707 captives from Windward Coast and 78,847 from Sierra Leone boarded slave ships, and from 1755 to 1798, enslaved people from Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, and the Windward Coast composed the majority of enslaved people imported into

¹³ Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 10. In opposition to claims of syncretism amongst enslaved Africans and their descendants in the U.S., Gomez argues that the meeting between Africans and African-Americans, as well as African descendants and Europeans, generated polycultural lifestyles, in which several cultures were simultaneously maintained and performed.

¹⁴ Voyages Database.

<http://slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces?yearFrom=1501&yearTo=1866>, (Accessed Oct. 31, 2013). Although Sierra Leone and the Windward Coast are treated as distinctive regions in the database, scholars such as Michael A. Gomez and Marcus Rediker combine the two regions for the purpose of analysis. Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*, 40. In his assessment of the Upper Guinea Coast, which covers the regions called the Windward Coast and Sierra Leone to be discussed in this chapter, Walter Rodney contends that the absence of mention of chattel slavery in Portuguese documentation of the region suggests that internal chattel slavery might have been a post-contact development. Although enslaved people were being transported from the region by the 16th century, he surmises that this trade was the product of inter-tribal raids and/or contentious relations between commoners and the nobility, as opposed to a slave/free divide. Nevertheless, by the late 18th century a large number of coastal peoples were living in some degree of subservience, and some worked in the households and fields of their African captors. Walter Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 263-265. Although many scholars have dismissed Rodney's claims that the Trans-Atlantic slave trade precipitated West African forms of enslavement, his argument concerning the augmentation of certain forms of enslavement, such as plantation-based slavery, in the wake of the Trans-Atlantic trade remains significant. For Rodney's argument, see also Walter Rodney, "African Slavery and Other forms of Social Oppression on the Upper Guinea Coast in the Context of the Atlantic Slave Trade," *Journal of African History*, 7 (1966): 431-443.

Savannah, by a margin of 20% or more.¹⁵ Due to the presence of captives from the region in Georgia, and availability of scholarly resources on Mende and Temne culture, I use the religious and social histories of the region to contextualize the “African” elements of enslaved people’s religiosity.

At the same time, I acknowledge that the significance of certain practices emanated from their presumed cultural genealogies, generally an association with an ancestral homeland, and for this reason, I prioritize enslaved peoples’ ways of assigning meaning over the historicity of their claims.¹⁶ The “Africa” in African diaspora does not merely denote transplanted Africans’ shared homeland, but a common experience arising from their engagement with the American context and a tacit acknowledgement of a cultural distinctiveness arising from cultural origins that diverge from those of the American context.¹⁷ Yet, memory also posits that Africans did not forget their sacred cultural practices and sensibilities during transport, and that those practices and

¹⁵ Karen B. Bell, “Rice, Resistance, and Forced Transatlantic Communities: (Re)envisioning the African Diaspora in Low Country Georgia, 1750-1800,” *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (Spring 2010): 162-163. [pp. 157-182] Bell’s groupings revolve around her argument that persons from the areas designated the Rice and Grain Coasts were central to the development of rice cultures in Lowcountry Georgia, contrary to claims made by scholars such as David Eltis, which diminish the significance of groups from those regions. See also, James S. McMillin, “The Transatlantic Slave Trade Comes to Georgia, in *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, ed. Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2014), 18. According to McMillin, between 1766 and 1776, 26% of the captives imported into Savannah were from Sierra Leone and 10% were from the Windward Coast.

¹⁶ Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions*, 9. In agreement with Hucks, designating North American Africans’ practices in accordance with their distance from or proximity to a body of sacred performances and orientations deemed “African” often means “subtly limiting or undermining the legitimacy of the distinctive psychosocial and religio-cultural ways that African diasporic people have attempted to transform and resist their origins as chattel in the New World...” For this reason, I foreground their creative productions and the ways they assign meaning to these productions, including but not limited to the designation of practices as “African,” over an understanding of the ways their practices cohere or diverge from practices and orientations associated with geo-polities on the African continent.

¹⁷ Maureen Warner Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Culture* (Kingston: The University of West Indies Press, 2003), xxix. See also Margaret Washington Creel, *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 2. Concerning religion, Creel argues that traditional African religions, namely Bakongo and other Bantu systems, provided the basis for the divergence of the Gullahs’ Christianity from that of the White slaveholders.

sensibilities provided the structure for innovations and reconfigurations in their American sacred performances. Memory provided the tools for creativity. In this way, the use of memory as a conceptual category leaves space for the ways North American Africans re/membered sacred cultures and labeled them “African,” even as they distinguished themselves as African-Americans.¹⁸ Moreover, the concept of re/membrance grounds a central premise of the dissertation: namely that Africa, as a geo-cultural and symbolic space, remained the bedrock of African-descended peoples’ sacred consciousness and practices in the Americas long after the last African had involuntarily left its shores.¹⁹

Female Embodiment/Creative Power

As a category frequently represented by embodied females in this study, creative power attends to the physiological factors that have historically shaped perceptions of women in sacred cultures, and expresses the potential to create that accompanies understandings of forces beyond the sense world. Although women, particularly the womb, functions as the primary symbol of creative power in the sense world, creative power is, itself, gender neutral. The gender neutrality of the concept enables me to explore the ways images of female embodiment permeated and were deployed in the sacred consciousness and formations of enslaved people, even when embodied-females were not present. At the same time, the concept of creative power foregrounds the reproductive functions that rendered enslaved women’s experience of embodiment

¹⁸ Long, *Significations*, 188. In his essay, “Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States,” Long argues that “Africa as historical reality and religious image” functions as a central symbolic image and methodological principle in the religious expressions of Blacks in the United States.

¹⁹ For an elaboration on the significance of Africa as a symbol in U.S. Black religious consciousness, see Long, *Significations*, 190.

distinctive from enslaved men and free women—an idea which forms the very basis for my claim of a distinctive enslaved women’s sacred culture. Moreover, the alliance of creative power with understandings of the sacred allows me to extend its meaning into the material realm to include not only reproduction, but the creative productions of enslaved peoples. In this way, the imagining of alternative realities, development of survival strategies, and cultivation of community become iterations of sacred creative power in the sense world.

Given the frequent emphasis upon trauma and resistance in the consideration of the interior lives of enslaved peoples, the focus upon creativity—indeed the suggestion that enslaved people engaged in acts of individual and collective imagination and learned to reconcile themselves to their condition—and the focus on women establishes a methodological emphasis upon survival and quality of life in the examination of enslaved peoples’ sacred cultures.²⁰ In her explication of the survival/quality of life paradigm, womanist theologian Delores Williams argues that women’s reproductive labor, which includes the reproductive cycle and social norms surrounding childcare, generally constrained their capacity for self-liberation. Consistent with Williams’s formulation, I suggest that for many enslaved women, a desire to survive and improve their lives in enslavement, rather than to liberate themselves via resistance, constituted the context for their sacred cultures. Although survival may include resistance, in agreement with historian Walter Johnson, the foregrounding of resistance in studies of enslaved peoples’ interior lives creates a quagmire, in which every act of enslaved humanity—from the pre-

²⁰ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 6. In response to the liberation tradition of African-American biblical appropriation, Williams argues that the survival/quality of life tradition evidenced in the Hagar story represents the female-centered tradition, in which God does not “liberate” but rather provides a means for survival.

meditated to the mundane—equates to resistance, whether or not a challenge to the system is intended.²¹ The survival/quality of life paradigm coheres with Johnson’s proposition for a new methodological framing of questions regarding enslaved existence:

Posing the question as a question about the condition of enslaved humanity (rather than as a search for evidence of that humanity as indexed by the presence of acts of self-determination) seems to me to open up a new way of thinking about slavery. And to invoke the idea of the condition of enslaved humanity is, for me, to try to think, at once, about the bare life existence of slaves, the ways they suffered in and resisted slavery, and the ways they flourished in slavery, not in the sense of loving their slavery, but in the sense of loving themselves and one another. To speak of “enslaved humanity” in this context is to try to imagine a history of slavery which sees the lives of enslaved people as powerfully conditioned by, though not reducible to, their slavery. For enslaved people the most basic features of their lives—feeling hungry, cold, tired, needing to go to the bathroom—revealed the extent to which even the bare life sensations of their physical bodies were sedimented with their enslavement. So, too, with sadness and humor and love and fear. And yet those things were never reducible to simple features of slavery. They cannot simply be reformatted as resistance in a liberatory gesture which paradoxically reduces even the most intimate actions of human beings to (resistant) features of the system that enslaved them. The condition of enslaved humanity, it could perhaps be said, was a condition that was at once thoroughly determined and insistently transcendent.²²

²¹ Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37.1 (2003):115. Johnson argues that the conflation of agency, resistance, and humanity in the interrogation of enslaved peoples’ lives imposes a liberal notion of the self, with its emphasis upon choice, into a context defined by choicelessness. In doing so, historians elide the possibility of experiences of humanity that lie outside of demonstrations of liberal selfhood.

²² *Ibid.*, 115-116.

The prioritizing of survival and quality of life facilitates a shift away from an emphasis upon sociopolitical agendas as evidence of enslaved humanity to a consideration of the ways enslaved people assumed their humanity. Although enslaved people did intentionally craft responses to the language and knowledge about them, their sacred cultural productions are not reducible to the context of their enslavement. Indeed, I locate the transcendent element of enslaved existence in the sacred imagination and consciousness, which imbued acts of creativity with a significance that transcended the context in which they were performed. Consequently, neither sociopolitical agendas nor evocations of extraordinary power are necessary for an act to attain the sacred designation. Rather, the mundane, and the ways enslaved peoples' constantly recalibrated the scales of normality, are the subjects of analysis, thereby enabling the inclusion of utterances and performances that lie outside of the pane of institutional religious cultures, or Christianity, and concerted efforts towards political liberation.

Since institutional religious and political spaces were often male-led spaces, the survival/quality of life paradigm proposes the inclusion of spaces led, dictated, and defined by women in analyses of enslaved Black sacred cultures and suggests the presence of rival, intersecting, and complementary sites of sacred formation. Thus, the survival/quality of life paradigm mandates a spatial shift away from the *centralized* structures of the institution to the *centralizing* forms of diffuse sacred repositories as the focal point of Black sacred culture. Since survival required adaptability, resiliency, and resourcefulness, rather than aim to construct a linear narrative of sacred performances, I endeavor to illuminate the repertoires of sacred performance from which enslaved people, namely women, drew at different moments in their lives, across diverse spaces, and in

response to various occurrences. The emphasis upon centralizing forms, as opposed to centralized institutional structures, acknowledges that private spaces are equally as culturally productive as, yet in no way exclusive of, institutional systems. On the contrary, the focus on centralizing forms recognizes the ways that institutional systems can atomize in disruptive situations, yet remain salient features of the cultural landscape.²³ They remain present, albeit in less structured forms. For this reason, each chapter sketches a component in the bricolage of enslaved female sacred culture.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1: Georgia Genesis: Dismemberment, (Re)Creation, and the Temporalities of Enslaved Women's Lives

Chapter one explores the material and psychic conditions that shaped enslaved people's everyday experiences of dismemberment. Through an examination of the ontology of the slave, resignification of the womb, work, and violence, the chapter offers a review of the features of enslavement, critical to apprehending the religious psyche and deciphering the sacred productions of the enslaved. Moreover, in the chapter, I argue for a consideration of gender, as opposed to race, as the primary paradigm through which to understand the "genesis" of African-American religious consciousness.

Chapter 2: The Sacred Womb: Ethics and Common Sense in the Lives of Enslaved Women

²³ Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean*, xxix. In her study of the Central African legacies in the Caribbean, Warner Lewis counters Sidney Mintz and Richard Price's presumption that institutions function as the seat of culture with her analysis of songs, games, cooking, and other non-institutional forms as the primal elements of culture.

In this chapter, I explore the effects of sexual dismemberment upon the religious consciousness of enslaved women, as expressed through their ethical and “common sense” knowledge cultures. In many ways, the chapter functions as the pivot for the entire dissertation in its exploration of the relationship between enslaved women’s physiological power to create and the psychosomatic, sociocultural dismemberment of enslavement. Through an investigation of sexual exposure, sexual compromise, abortion, and infanticide, I propose the existence of gender-specific ethical and “common sense” knowledge cultures that originate from women’s unique social and physiological positions in enslaved society. The central premise of the chapter is that—as a result of the womb’s signification as a physiological, symbolic, and economic space—issues pertaining to reproduction functioned as significant points of existential concern and catalysts for theological reflection among enslaved women, men, and children.

Chapter 3: Re/membered Cycles: Women and the Creative Power of Ritual in Enslaved Life

In Chapter three, I attend to the role of enslaved women in the ritual life of enslaved communities by examining their function as facilitators of birth rituals. Through a cross-cultural comparison of enslaved practices with Mende birth protocols and female-exclusive socioreligious structures, the chapter explores the importance of seasonality to social and physiological concepts of femaleness, the cyclical nature of creative power, and the relationship between cycles and spirituality in many African

diasporic cultures.²⁴ The synergy between cycles associated with femaleness and cycles of creative power form the context for women's roles as ritual facilitators of significant moments in the lives of enslaved men, boys, girls, and women. Beginning with the role of women during birth, the chapter interrogates the birthing space as women's sacred space, and the midwife as an authoritative religious figure in enslaved communities. In addition to analyzing the ritual role of female elders at birth, the section also considers women's roles in the socioreligious initiation of children into the enslaved community.

Chapter 4: It Looked Like a Woman: Women and the African-American Sacred

Imagination

Chapter four uses lore surrounding the hag-witch and other trans-sense figures to illuminate the interplay between the appearance of female-embodiment in the Black sacred imagination and perceptions of women's power within the enslaved community. By using the term "trans-sense," I do not aim to dichotomize the sense and trans-sense worlds, but rather, to situate the entities as "of, beyond, and between" the worlds, simultaneously. Although they are apprehended through the senses, their power is not of the sense world. At the same time, the sense world, specifically the understandings of women of the sense world, shapes representations of feminine, trans-sense power. Read together, the sense and trans-sense worlds function as mutually-informing realms of gendered signification regarding African-descended, female embodiment.

²⁴ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 15. Stuckey argues that the circle functions as the central metaphor of African life and provides the basis for a shared value system amongst diasporic African peoples.

Chapter 5: Resignifying Sunday: Re/membering the Foundations of Enslaved Peoples’ Sacred Lives

The final chapter responds to the historiographical relegation of African-North Americans’ practices to non-diasporic methodological and discursive frameworks, and instead, places African-North American practices in conversation with the religious practices of the diaspora. Using the concept of re/membrance, I argue that enslaved people merely integrated the religions of their new contexts, namely Christianity, into the cosmological and ritual frameworks bequeathed to them by their West and West Central African foreparents. Thus, power, sound, sociality, and movement describe the central features of enslaved people’s religiosity—features transmitted and sustained primarily by enslaved women.

Conclusion

The embarkation of millions of enslaved men, women, and children upon ships designated for their transport to unknown lands occasioned the emergence of Africans in the Americas and permanently allied African peoples’ and their descendants’ sacred consciousness with the experience of enslavement. For this reason, the era of enslavement remains one of the most significant moments in history for deciphering the meanings of the “Black” in Black religion. Nevertheless, categories such as “slave religion” lack the precision to accurately describe the complex, diverse sacred cultures and experiences of persons carrying the “slave” designation. Enslavement was a gendered experience, and consequently, female embodiment engendered distinctive sacred cultural expressions in enslavement. As a consequence of the paucity of historical

data on enslaved people's religious experiences, enslaved Blacks, particularly women, frequently appear in theological and ethical studies of Black religious cultures as either participants in idealized, egalitarian religious cultures that predate the imposition of gendered hierarchies or as highly circumscribed victims of the sociocultural hegemony of White Christianity and gender norms. In actuality, the truth resides somewhere between the two poles. An examination of enslaved women's sacred cultures in Georgia during the era of enslavement disrupts the category of "slave religion" by introducing experiences and bodies that demand the construction of new categories and new narratives.

Chapter One

Georgia Genesis: Dismemberment, (Re)Creation, and the Temporalities of Enslaved Women's Lives

Introduction

In an early twentieth-century interview, Sapelo Island resident Julia Governor reconstructed the memory of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade through a narration of her grandmother's capture and subsequent transfer to the Americas:

Muh gran, she Hannah. Uncle Calina muh gran too; dey bote Ibos.

Yes'm, I membuh muh gran Hannah. She marry Calina an hab twenny-one chillum. Yes'm, she tell us how she brung yuh. "Hannah, she wid huh ahnt who wuz diggin peanuts in duh fiel, wid uh baby strop on uh back.

Out us duh brush two wite mens come an spit in huh ahnt eye. She blinded an wen she wipe uh eye, duh wite mens loose duh babyfrum huh backm an took Hannah too. Dey led um intuh duh woods, weah deah wuz udduh chillum dey done sketched an tie up in sacks. Duh baby an Hannah wuz tie up in sacks lak duh udduhs and Hannah nebudh saw huh ahnt agen and nebuh saw duh baby agen. Wen she wuz let out uh duh sack, she wuz on boat an nebuh saw Africa agen."²⁵

Confronted with the finality of never seeing her kin and homeland again, Governor's grandmother Hannah was forced to identify new cultural and existential anchors through which to recreate her identity, amidst the trauma and dismemberment of Trans-Atlantic enslavement. Those anchors, in turn, became the cornerstones of a culture

²⁵ Georgia Writers Project, Savannah Unit, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among Coastal Georgia Negroes* (Spartenburg, SC:) [1940], 163.

shared by her granddaughter and millions of other persons of African descent carrying the “slave” designation in the United States South. As evidenced by Governor’s recollection of her grandmother’s journey, narratives of capture and trans-Atlantic transport circulated between African-born bondspeople and their country-born counterparts, and subsequently, became an essential constituent of enslaved people’s collective memory.²⁶ The stories represented an attempt to reconcile the cognitive dissonance inaugurated by the movement from freedom to enslavement, and to explain the ominous, geographical distance between West and West Central Africa and Georgia. They were responses to the fundamental existential questions, “Who are we?” and “Why are we here?”—they were, in short, genesis narratives.

Yet, rather than describe the universal origins of humankind, narratives such as Hannah’s interpreted the origins of enslaved, African-descended humanity in the Americas—a humanity created anew from memories of their ancestral homelands and in response to the crisis of dismemberment precipitated by enslavement. In this study, dismemberment describes: (1) The uprooting of Africans from their homelands and relocation to foreign soil; (2) the resignification of African bodies as commodities in the development of the Trans- and Inter-Atlantic economies; (3) the estrangement of the body from the power to govern its labor and (re)productions; (4) enslaved peoples’ existence under the constant specter of familial and communal disruption; and (5) the resignification of the womb as a capital asset. As communicated in enslaved peoples’ genesis myths, the experience of dismemberment spanned multiple continents and encompassed various experiential temporalities, but functioned aggregately in collective memory. The agony and trauma of the auction block following Trans-Atlantic transport

²⁶ “Country-born” denotes persons born in the North American colonies.

in the 17th and 18th centuries paralleled and conversed with the traumas of the slave coffles in the 19th century. In this way, the experience of dismemberment was non-linear. The establishment of the second and third generations of enslaved peoples in Savannah businesses and Liberty County plantations did not mitigate the feeling of fragmentation, but rather, experiences of dismemberment ebbed and flowed through enslaved peoples' lives at different stages, and manifested in their language, posture, and, most significantly, religious consciousness.

Through its composite parts, dismemberment contextualizes the existential crises of enslavement and outlines the conditions under which enslaved people remembered, or recollected, and re-membered, or recreated, their individual and communal identities. These acts of re/membrance demarcated the sacred, or religious, for the enslaved. The sacred defined the collection of practices, theologies, philosophies, and performances generated through a combination of memory and creativity and calibrated to remember and re-member. It was a dis-membered people's retort to assaults upon their humanity, and assertion of the will to survive and improve their quality-of-life.²⁷ African captives, such as Hannah, and their descendants engaged in a constant process of creativity as they reconstructed their lives through re/membered West and West-Central African cosmologies and performances, and the resignified shards of their experiences in the U.S. South. In this way, the religious cultures that emerged amongst enslaved peoples in Georgia and the greater lower South were African diasporic productions; that is, they

²⁷ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 6. Using the biblical story of Hagar and historical accounts of enslaved Black women in the U.S. South, theologian Delores Williams argues that the religious cultures of enslaved Blacks emphasized survival and an improved quality-of-life, rather than liberation as argued by other theologians on the subject. I use the survival and quality-of-life concepts in congruence with the dissertation's overall methodological emphasis upon enslaved women and in agreement with Williams's argument.

were products of the cycle of dismemberment and recreation that accompanied the dislocation, dispersal, and enslavement of West and West-Central Africans and their descendants throughout the Western Hemisphere. As Africana religious formations, the sacred cultures of the bondspeople of the U.S. South were powerfully conditioned by the genesis stories that rendered their shared statuses as dislocated African “slaves” intelligible across diverse geographies.

At the same time, their religious consciousness and culture were rooted in the disparate material realities and brutal physicality of enslavement, more specifically, female enslavement in Georgia. In agreement with historian of religion James A. Noel, “religion is not separate from matter,” but rather humans imagine and actualize the sacred through material forms, and “religion determines how matter is conceived.”²⁸ Religion is corporeal. Consequently, the religious cultures of the enslaved cannot be segregated from the “matter” of enslavement—namely, the bodies of the women, men, and children that carried the “slave” designation. Rather, any study of enslaved people’s religious cultures must begin with the enslaved body and the material conditions under which it lived and labored.

This study takes enslaved female embodiment as the starting point for enslaved people’s religious consciousness, experiences, and cultures, and uses Georgia as a case study for religious formations in the colonial and antebellum U.S. Lower South. Accordingly, the enslaved female body, the gendered meanings assigned to enslaved female embodiment, and woman-gendered experiences of dismemberment form the interpretive context for the material conditions described below. Female enslavement

²⁸ James A. Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), ix-x.

was characterized on the microcosmic level by the sex- and gender-specific experiences of economy-driven childbearing, socially-prescribed childrearing, and circumscribed mobility, and on the macrocosmic level by more gender-amorphous legal strictures and labor policies. For this reason, the turn to specificity does not preclude the examination of enslaved males' religiosity. Far from merely a "woman question," rearing the offspring of coerced sexual encounters, enduring the appropriation of the womb for the economic advancement of the slaveholding class, and other socially and corporeally female experiences of dismemberment affected the ways women, men, and children defined the sacred, and re/membered their individual and collective selves.

Thus, the chapter explores the material conditions and experiential temporalities that occasioned the genesis of enslaved, African-descended people's religious cultures in Georgia, yet does so through a consideration of the enslaved, Black female religious subject. Contrary to the rigid epochs engendered by the linearity of chronologies, the conditions and temporalities outlined below describe experiential moments, born within specific chronological periods, yet not wedded to them. They are points of departure—the experiences that threaded through enslaved people's collective memories and, ultimately, shaped their sacred consciousness. "Slave" ontology, the resignification of the womb, work, and violence categorize the material and psychic conditions that structured the temporalities of enslaved people, generally, and enslaved women, specifically. Though each experience can be closely allied with a particular epoch in the historical development of slavery in the southern, British North American colonies, they function independently from the chronological period in which they originated. As expressed in Julia Governor's narration, geo-cultural displacement, Trans-Atlantic

transport, and sexual adaptation remained touchstones of enslaved peoples' re/membrances well beyond the chronological duration of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Likewise, reflections on the ontology of the "slave," the resignification of the womb, the gendered-structure of work, and violations of the enslaved body ebbed and flowed through enslaved people's meditations upon their past and present experiences of collective and individual dismemberment and, furthermore, shaped their religious responses. Understanding the enslaved female body as the locus for such experiences accesses the psychic content and symbolic anchors of enslaved peoples' sacred lives, while acknowledging, at the same time, the material nature of interiority. Enslaved Georgians' religious cultures originated with gendered and raced African bodies in the cultural, psychic, and material space between West and West-Central Africa and the lower U.S. South, and evolved in coastal barracoons, aboard slave ships, on auction blocks, and in fields and households as captives and their descendants re/membered their existences and forged new religious identities.

From African Captive to Negro Slave: The Ontological Meanings of the "Slave" in Gendered and Religious Perspective

On July 30, 1796, Captain Edward Boss and his crew set out from a port in Rhode Island, the slaveship building capital of Anglophone North America, in a ship intended for the purchase of enslaved peoples on the West African coast. Although ultimately bound for Savannah, Boss sailed first to an unknown port of the Windward Coast, where he likely exchanged rum for a percentage of his human cargo, and then, perhaps due to unfavorable trade conditions or an undesirable inventory of bodies, he continued to Cape

Mount to complete his purchases.²⁹ Although American captains generally designed their voyages for a quick departure from the coast to reduce the instance of disease and illness among the crew members and captives, the shifting landscape of powerful polities, rulers, and merchants in the region, encompassing present-day Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Guinea-Bissau, and Guinea, along with the desire to secure “likely” enslaved peoples, rendered Boss’s journey slightly longer than average³⁰. Nevertheless, on August 11, 1797, the *Agenoria* docked in Savannah.

Upon the disembarkation of the West African captives onto Georgia soil and the commencement of mercantile transactions for their bodies, female captives, along with their male and juvenile counterparts, began to apprehend the meanings of their “slave” statuses through the monetary valuation of their bodies. In a testament to the emergent gender norms surrounding the enslaved, African female body, the adult male and female captives both sold for \$300 per person during the first week of the sale.³¹ Juveniles sold for varying rates, according to age. While “boys” sold for \$200, “man boys” commanded

²⁹ Adam Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Kernels: A History of the Galinhas Country (West Africa), 1730-1890* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1983), 29-32. The French and North Americans were known especially for their use of alcohol, primarily rum, as payment for cargo, yet a variety of items characterized the trade, including luxury items such as silk handkerchiefs and beads. Firearms and gunpowder became increasingly common as the trade progressed, although luxury textiles and other goods remained the most popular.

³⁰ Phillip D. Curtin, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 128. Although Curtin argues that the Windward Coast during this period would have consisted of the area from Cape Mount to Assini, Adam Jones and Marion Johnson reject his claim that the area on either side of Sierra Leone was not included in this term until the 19th century. Rather, they assert that the “Windward Coast” encompassed Sierra Leone much earlier. Adam Jones and Marion Johnson, “Slaves from the Windward Coast,” *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1980): 27.

³¹ Records from Slave Ship *Agenoria* Arriving in Savannah, Georgia from Africa, 1797-1798. MS2114. Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens. Of the 125 enslaved people that boarded the ship, 110 survived the Atlantic crossing, a mere 72 were taxed upon import, and only 67 were sold. The figures of 125 embarked and 110 disembarked, as well as itinerary information is derived from the “Voyage 36661 *Angenoria/Agenoria*, 1797,” Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces> (accessed, October 28, 2013). The database estimates are based primarily on Lloyd’s Lists. On the other hand, the Savannah log records the importation of 72, and the sale of 67. The discrepancy could be due to the nature of the sale record, the retention of some by the owners, a stop or resale of some, or an error in the Lloyd’s list.

\$260. The potential for “girls” to be immediately useful in a variety of domestic roles likely contributed to their higher valuation at \$220-230 per person. As evidenced by the sale of the *Agenoria* captives, British colonists’ known preference for male captives—in accordance with gender-based, Western European concepts of labor—did not eventuate a devaluation of captive female labor. On the contrary, through such transactions, buyers and sellers of human flesh began to define the legal, social, monetary, and ontological meanings of the enslaved African in Georgia. In the end, the sale of the sixty-seven women, men, and children yielded \$13,601.³⁷ For their parts, the Savannah importer Robert Watts and ship captain Edward Boss were \$9,494.55 and \$1,461.30 richer, respectively.³² And, in the movement of African captives from the Windward Coast to the Savannah shores as a part of a transcontinental economy, the “Negro slave” was born.

Among the sixty-seven people sold, there were only nineteen “women” and six “girls.”³³ Yet, the low number of captive females relative to males belies the significance of female presences and gendered structures to the ontological meanings of the “slave” in Black religion. The resignification of captive West and West-Central African bodies as racialized human commodities in the Trans-Atlantic encounter with Western Europeans has long been a focal point in scholars’ analyses of Black being and its relationship to the production of Black religion in the United States. As historian of religion Charles H. Long explains, the European/African encounter inaugurated Africans’ “second creation” through Western categories, in which the being of the colonized was constructed via language “about” them, as opposed to knowledge “of” them.³⁴ From the moment of

³² Records from the Slave Ship *Agenoria*.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1999), 180.

encounter forward, the attempt to reconcile the first and second creations occupied the religious consciousness of oppressed African descendants:

The oppressed must deal with both the fictive truth of their status as expressed by the oppressors, that is, their second creation, and the discovery of their own autonomy and truth—their first creation. The locus for this structure is the mythic consciousness which dehistoricizes the relationship for the sake of creating a new form of humanity—a form of humanity that is no longer based on the master-slave dialectic. The utopian and eschatological dimensions of the religions of the oppressed stem from this modality.

The oppressive element in the religions of the oppressed is the negation of the image of the oppressor and the discovery of their first creation. It is thus the negation that is found in community and seeks its expression in more authentic forms of community, those forms of community which are based upon the first creation, the original authenticity of all persons which precedes the master-slave dichotomy.³⁵

Following Long's lead, James A. Noel contends that Western Europeans' racialization of African-descended bodies as Black as a part of the machinery of colonialism and slavery fashioned "a new mode of being human in the world" and, in turn, constituted the Black body as a "new mode of materiality."³⁶ This "imagination of matter" as raced was a religious project; religious symbols formed the psychic infrastructure for the new materiality, as enslaved people developed "covert practices of

³⁵ Ibid, 184.

³⁶ Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter*, x.

reverse transubstantiation whereby they were recreated and reconstituted as human beings.” In the transubstantiative process, they asserted a “new mode of modern consciousness” that emerged not in isolation from the body, but rather, as “a consciousness of the body—a suffering body—in its interaction with other bodies.”³⁷ Therefore, Black religion participated in the creation of Black racial identity.³⁸ Although Noel does not name the enslaved body as the primary subject of his analysis, the commodification of Black bodies in the Trans-Atlantic exchange grounds his claim that “the religious subject and the religious object make their phenomenological appearance simultaneously,” and the “imagination of matter on both sides of the subject-object epistemological framework” constitutes Black religion.³⁹ Like Long, Noel’s analysis of the material processes of enslavement and the ontological consequences of such processes offers incredibly rich insights into the religious consciousness of displaced Africans in the Americas, and indeed provides some of the methodological and conceptual infrastructure for the following discussion. Nevertheless, both scholars’ analysis of the psychosomatic conditions that occasioned the development of Western Hemispheric Black religion hinge upon racialization.

The high male-to-female ratio onboard the *Agenoria*, and many other ships that sailed to the Americas with human cargo, speaks to an oft-overlooked aspect of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in analyses of Black sacred consciousness: West and West-Central African captives apprehended the meanings of their enslavement through the paradigm of gender prior to their comprehension of race. The disproportionate emphasis upon the Black/White, colonized/colonizer identity structures in the contextualization of

³⁷ Ibid, 117.

³⁸ Ibid, x-xi.

³⁹ Ibid, x.

Black religion neglects the histories of slavery in West Africa, which affected women and men differently, and predated the Trans-Atlantic trade. For most captives, the first encounter with enslavement was not the consequence of an interracial confrontation, but rather, inter-ethnic and intra-familial conflicts, in which the socioeconomic and political interests of European and West African powers converged.⁴⁰ Western Europeans' sale and transport of African captives in accordance with gendered constructs merely expanded upon the captives' pre-existing understandings of the gendered dimensions of enslavement. Consequently, the gendered infrastructures of West African forms of enslavement formed one of the most significant interpretive frameworks for the captives' encounters with race-based enslavement.

Since the concept of enslavement was not foreign to many groups in West and West-Central Africa, the ontological significance of the "slave" designation for the progenitors of African-Americans in the United States must be understood within the expanded purview of their originating contexts. By the time they docked in Savannah, the Windward Coast women, men, and children aboard the *Agenoria* had already become enmeshed in a matrix of race and labor conversations, the consequences of which many captives apprehended through the material processes of enslavement and Trans-Atlantic transport.

The correspondence of the years of mass export from the Windward Coast with the Futa Jallon *jihad* points towards a state of religious and political instability, which is further evidenced by the late 18th-century rebellion of free persons, and protected and

⁴⁰ Adam Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Kernels*, 27. In contrast to the area explicitly identified as Sierra Leone, the Windward Coast trade was conducted almost exclusively by West African locals and the biracial descendants of West African women and Portuguese men. The Galinhas region that Jones explores is the point of overlap between the areas identified as Sierra Leone and the Windward (sometimes Grain or Ivory) Coast.

unprotected enslaved people against the Mande-speaking ruling classes on the coast.⁴¹

The rebellion bespoke the social exigencies of coastal West African enslavement and the increasingly interdependent relationship between the internal, West African and external Trans-Atlantic and –Saharan slave trades. Composed primarily of newcomers from the interior, “unprotected slaves” entered the caste of the kinless in their removal from their households, and consequently, possessed none of the immunity enjoyed by the protected domestic and plantation laborers, whose tenure of a year or more in a coastal household entitled them to a degree of immunity from sale.⁴² Even amongst the protected enslaved classes, devoid of the social protections of their kin groups, they were assigned an inferior status, which persisted in spite of improvements in the material conditions of their enslavement.⁴³ As the profit potential of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade increased, an expanding number of males entered the ranks of the unprotected slave caste to supply the trade with the Europeans on the coast, while female captives trickled into North American ships from their overflow in the West African and Trans-Saharan trades.⁴⁴

Whether bound for local or foreign slavery, the captives comprehended the gravity of their captivity, as a consequence of their entanglements in the complex political and cultural economies of the region. The ethnic diversity of the Windward

⁴¹ Bruce Mouser, “Rebellion, Marronage, and *Jihad*: Strategies of Resistance to Slavery on the Sierra Leone Coast, c. 1783-1796,” *The Journal of African History* 48 (2007): 34. Mouser uses Ismaili Rashid’s estimate that the enslaved population of Moria, the Muslim state on the coast, was between 70 and 80 percent in the 1770s. Michael Gomez links the *jihad* with the export of enslaved people from the region. Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*, 91.

⁴² Mouser, “Rebellion, Marronage, and *Jihad*,” 34.

⁴³ Claude Meillassoux, “Female Slavery,” in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, ed. Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 50. Mouser also alludes to a similar condition amongst the enslaved. Mouser, “Rebellion, Marronage, and *Jihad*,” 34.

⁴⁴ Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, “Women’s Importance in African Slave Systems,” in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, ed. Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 4. For estimates of the numbers of people sent into the various slave trades, see Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 22-23.

Coast inhabitants—which included the Mande-speaking Susu, Mende, and Fulbe-Jallonke, along with non-Mande speakers such as the Bullom, Temne, and Bagas—combined with the complex system of trade between the coast and the interior for salt, kola, meat, rice, and enslaved peoples to create one of the most economically and culturally diverse regions in West Africa.⁴⁵ Groups such as the Bullom and Temne shared a cultural similarity that rendered the dress, judicial processes, and languages of each intelligible to the other.⁴⁶ The Mande-speaking captives emerged from hierarchical political structures, in which spheres of power radiated outward from the emperor to governors, lieutenants, and chiefs, while most of the non-Mande *Agenor* captives originated from villages composed of multiple households, over which monarchs and chiefs ruled on a less grand scale.⁴⁷

The increasing demands for European goods in West Africa, coupled with the intense need for West African labor in European colonies, contributed to a precarious environment for non-elites. Rulers sanctioned kidnapping, authorized breaches in customary law, prosecuted petty crimes, and most significantly, manufactured “wars” to meet the demands of slave traders.⁴⁸ Some groups, like the Aro, staked their reputations and livelihoods on slave trading in the Bight of Biafra and explicitly integrated their activities into their religious cosmologies. Calling themselves *umuchukwu*, or “children

⁴⁵ Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 88-89. Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 6-7. Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 82, 84. Mouser, “Rebellion, Marronage, and Jihad,” 32.

⁴⁶ Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 33.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 25, 27, 29. Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*, 92-93.

⁴⁸ Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 254. Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin Group, 2007), 100-101. Rediker cites the slave trade as the cause of an enduring rift between commoners and elites.

of God,” the Aro connected their choice in victims to oracle pronouncements.⁴⁹ The North American traders were known especially for their practice of staging attacks, in league with a local trader or chief, to procure human cargo.⁵⁰ The number of people bound for foreign export, and retained locally by the increasingly powerful Muslim Mande and Fula elite, increased exponentially as merchants and rulers established local plantation regimes and sought to control prices through their supply of humans to the coast.⁵¹ Consequently, by the time of their capture, the adults on board the *Agenoria* had already witnessed the steady decline of the stabilizing structures of their societies and, most likely, many had developed mechanisms to defend themselves against the kidnapping excursions of external slave traders.⁵²

For women, the exacerbation of intra-African enslaving institutions by the Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Saharan slave trades heightened the tenuousness of their positions, even within their own societies. The vibrant trade between inland and coastal groups of the Windward Coast region ensured a healthy exchange of women in the commercial relations of the region for their productive and reproductive value. As the primary agricultural producers in most West African societies, women fetched a premium in the

⁴⁹ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 110. Although the Aro were in what would now be the southeastern region of Nigeria, similar integrations of commerce activities and religion most likely occurred in other regions. See also Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter*, 7.

⁵⁰ Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 255. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 91.

⁵¹ Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 264-265. Rodney argues that the Atlantic slave trade precipitated the rise or advent of slavery in the region, contrary to claims that Europeans initially exploited a pre-existing slave class.

⁵² Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, ed. Robert J. Allison (1789; reprint, Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2007), 57-58. In describing his capture, Equiano discusses the practice of one child serving as a watchman as the children played away from the adults. Equiano is functioning in this role, and sounds the alarm, whereupon the slave trader in view is secured by adults, but in the commotion, he is captured by an unseen trader. Although Equiano is not from the Sierra Leone/Windward Coast region, the similar time period and methods suggest that other villages likely organized against slave traders, given their knowledge of the practice of kidnapping.

internal slave market and were the main exports to the Trans-Saharan markets as well.⁵³

Although erroneously framed within the gender constructs of English society, resident slave trader Nicholas Owen's observations on the gender cultures of the Sierra Leone region highlights the agricultural and domestic activities that rendered women's labor indispensable. Noting women's roles in "makeing plantations and beating out the rice," Owens remarked that they underwent "the hardest of the labour."⁵⁴

Enslaved women also duplicated the labor of free women—that is, they generally performed "labor-intensive, low-status work," and in doing so, relieved their free counterparts from such labor.⁵⁵

The demand for women's labor, coupled with calculations that the internal West African slave market was more expansive than the Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Saharan trades in human property, suggests that females were the most familiar with the vulnerabilities and dependencies born of enslavement, regardless of whether they ever left African continental shores. Groups frequently used girls as pawns to pay fines, reward soldiers, or serve as spoils of war, which, coupled with the increased number of manufactured wars to supply the slave trades, amplified the vulnerability of low-status women during periods of sociopolitical instability.⁵⁶ With the movement of thousands of men from the interior to the coast came a steady stream of enslaved women, who, if not

⁵³ Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, "Women's Importance in African Slave Systems," 4-5.

⁵⁴ Nicholas Owen, *Journal of a Slave Dealer: A View of Some Remarkable Aecedents in the Life of Nics. Owen on the Coast of Africa and America from the Year 1746 to the Year 1757*, ed. Evenline Martin (London: George Routledge & Sons, LTD., 1930), 52.

⁵⁵ Robertson and Klein, "Women's Importance in African Slavery," 10-11. Robertson and Klein discuss extensively the use of enslaved women primarily by free-born women. As John Thornton points out, enslaved people were the only form of privately-owned, revenue-producing property recognized by law in many West African societies, since land was not owned as in Europe. Most wars were not fought for territorial expansion, but rather for the ability to increase wealth without infrastructural development (i.e. asset development through the acquisition of enslaved people). John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800, Second Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 77, 108.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 11.

sold off during travel to the coast, entered coastal society as laborers, slave wives, or sexual consorts.⁵⁷

Although scholars have frequently cited the potential for integration into the enslaving society as a reason for the more “benign” nature of West African enslavement, such arguments fail to consider the social and sexual dimensions of the predominantly female slave force’s so-called “integration.”⁵⁸ Evidence from the region points to the precarious status of slave wives, who could be sold or gifted to another in times of need. Carol P. MacCormack explains the meanings of the term *wono*, a term frequently translated as “slave,” amongst the Sherbro of Sierra Leone: “In the Sherbro language, *mano* means people who participate by birthright in their ancestral cognatic descent groups. *Wono* were those persons separated from their ancestral group by capture or by having been pawned; they were attached, without full rights of membership, to a master’s or mistress’s descent group.”⁵⁹ Concerning the status of *wono* as property, she distinguishes between two forms of property in the Sherbro culture: *kuu*, or corporate property shared by the household or descent group, and *lok*, “heritable property belonging to an individual which may be sold, given away, or passed on to an heir.” *Wono* were

⁵⁷ John Thornton, “Sexual Demography: The Impact of the Slave Trade on Family Structure,” in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, ed. Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 43-45. Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 265.

⁵⁸ For an example of the argument surrounding the more “benign” nature of West African enslavement, see G. Uko Nwokeji, “Slavery in Non-Islamic West Africa, 1420-1820,” in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery, Volume III, AD 1420- AD 1804*, ed. David Eltis, Keith Bradley, Stanley L. Engerman, Paul Cartledge (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 106. According to Nwokeji, “slaves” did not compose a distinctive class in West African cultures and, consequently, failed to form a unified social identity and consciousness. Moreover, Nwokeji contends that the “kinship ideology” enabled enslaved people to achieve social mobility through kinship structures.

⁵⁹ Carol P. MacCormack, “Slaves, Slave Owners, and Slave Dealers: Sherbro Coast and Hinterland,” in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, ed. Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 276.

lok.⁶⁰ The “wife” title conceals the laborious dimensions of her daily existence, which situated her in the lowest rungs of the familial hierarchy, as well as the coercive aspects of her sexual relationships with her owner-husband. Even in patrilineal societies where enslaved women’s children could be absorbed into the patriarch’s lineage, mothers remained vulnerable given the absence of their own kin ties.⁶¹

Therefore, the women and girls who eventually boarded the Savannah-bound ship already had some degree of knowledge of the meanings of their enslavement, given the matrix of productivity and reproductivity that located them within the social hierarchies of their homelands.⁶² Most women, particularly non-upper class women, would have been aware of their utility, and consequent vulnerability, in the increasingly mercenary and unstable environment. Nevertheless, an awareness of the possibility of enslavement and impending crisis could not eliminate the trauma of enslavement. As they marched from the interior to the coast, bound by vines or chains, with nursing children at the breast, enslaved women grew increasingly estranged from their lineal structures and cultures of origin.⁶³ Whether they were marched to another West African household, the barracoon of a European slave factory, or the dark hold of a Savannah-bound slave ship, captives’ seizure and subsequent removal from cultural ties constituted their first experience of dismemberment.

⁶⁰ Ibid. On the potential for slave wives to be gifted to others, see also Thornton, “Sexual Demography,” 44.

⁶¹ Meillassoux, “Female Slavery,” 57.

⁶² Meillassoux, “Female Slavery,” 50.

⁶³ Newly enslaved people were transported from the interior using vines, cords, or chains and tied by the neck in groups of two or four. Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 99-100. Jones estimates that inhabitants from the Windward Coast traveled no more than 186 miles in their journeys to the coast, which was a short distance relative to captives from other regions. Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Kernels*, 35. Upon reaching the coast, the captives were either transported immediately to the holds of ships or held in the dungeons of European slave factories. Gomez discusses the slave factories of Sierra Leone; see Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 90-91.

Though this initial rupture was not usually connected to an encounter with Europeans, in the encounter with Europeans, the female captive acquired additional layers of identity: she became African and, in turn, Negro. To be a slave was to occupy a degraded status in the West African context, but concurring with Long and Noel, the processes of Trans-Atlantic transport would take this degradation to new heights by imbuing the “slave” designation with expanded, racialized meanings.⁶⁴ In the invention of race, the White enslavers made the exchangeability of the enslaved the Africans’ most “socially relevant feature,” and continued to ally Africanness with a commodified status through the uni-directional movement of Africans to the Western hemisphere.⁶⁵

The ideologies of racial enslavement acquired material power in their emergence and expression using pre-existing lexicons and symbols of power, and without question, religion was a bastion of cultural and social power in West African and European cultures. Through the signification of captive bodies as religious, ethnic, and social outsiders, religious cosmologies enabled the normalization of human trafficking amidst Enlightenment discourses on “rights” and the decline of European feudalism.⁶⁶ In a papal

⁶⁴ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 10. Numerous scholars have pointed to the slave ship as the site for the crystallization of concepts of race, given the demarcations between the White crew members and the Black enslaved. Stephanie E. Smallwood also marks the slave ship as the site of an important ideological shift, since the disproportionate number of enslaved people relative to the number of Whites on board required Whites to construct some epistemological framework for understanding Africans as weaker. Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 34.

⁶⁵ Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 6, 35.

⁶⁶ In agreement with David Eltis, one of the fundamental questions of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade remains, why did Europeans revive slavery after its elimination and why were all slaves non-Europeans? The development of in-group recognition amongst Europeans and the endowment of Europeans with “rights” enabled the enslavement of non-Europeans to whom these rights did not accrue. David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2, 22, 72. Historian of religion Charles H. Long argues that the ideological structures that occasioned and supported the reconceptualization of humanity during the Enlightenment also enabled the advent of constructs, such as race, that justified forms of conquest. Long, *Significations*, 4. Building upon Long, James Noel argues that “racial identity represents a new mode of being in the world” and that the racialized people that emerge during the age of European colonialism and expansion “imagine their selves and the cosmos through religious symbols.” Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter*, x.

bull issued on January 8, 1455 regarding “Guinea”, Pope Nicholas V granted King Alfonso of Portugal license to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery.”⁶⁷ Nicholas not only sanctioned the reappropriation of West Africans’ lands, goods, and other assets to the colonizers, but declared Portuguese dominion over all of known West Africa as well. Four decades later, the Treaty of Tordesillas stretched the European vision of religious conquest beyond West Africa into the Western Hemisphere, as Pope Alexander VI divided the world between the Spanish and the Portuguese in a religio-political demonstration of Christians’ divine rights to unknown lands and the biblical imperative to “conquer and Christianize.” The figure of the “pagan” effectively mitigated moral angst surrounding the colonial project, as the Portuguese and the Spanish purported to engage and enslave inhabitants with the primary aim of bringing the non-Europeans into the Christian fold, and the secondary goal of economic profit.

Even though “paganism” provided the religious justification for Western Europeans’ initial incursions into West Africa and engagement in the human trade, the increasing dependence upon West African-sourced labor in Eastern hemispheric colonies such as the Canary Islands and Western hemispheric colonies such as Hispaniola—coupled with the conversion of enslaved Africans to Christianity in Portugal, Spain, and their colonies—forced Christian authorities to nuance their policies. As the contact with West Africans increased, the Spanish and the Portuguese realized the dangers of

⁶⁷ Nicholas V, Papal bull *Romanus Pontifex*, Jan. 8, 1455, in *Africa and the West: A Documentary History, Second Edition, Volume I: From the Slave Trade to Conquest, 1441-1905*, 2nd edition, ed. William H. Worger, Nancy L. Clark, Edward A. Alpers, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 16.

Christianization. Similar to the Anglo-North American planters' later remonstrances against Christianization, Iberian authorities discerned that proselytization not only taught captives the language of their captors, but also afforded them cultural knowledge of the colonizers, as well. Insurrections led by Christianized Africans ("ladinos"), in league with "pagans" and Muslims, such as the 1522 insurrection in Santo Domingo, established the dangers of bicultural competence among the enslaved and prompted the Spanish to bar the importation of enslaved people from the Iberian Peninsula and its established colonies. Spanish colonists in the Americas went even further to specify that those enslaved for transport to the Americas be *bozales*, or captives from Non-Muslim, Non-Christian areas of Africa.⁶⁸

The presence of Kongolese Christians and West African Muslims in the Anglophone colonies of North America suggests that British colonists were less stringent concerning the religious distinctions among their captives. However, like the Spanish and Portuguese Catholics before them, the predominantly Protestant British and American colonists understood their relationship to enslaved Africans in religious terms. The idea of Africans as the descendants of Ham, divinely appointed to serve Whites, reverberated in the religious rhetoric of slaveholders for the length of slavery in the U.S. and beyond.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ George Brandon, *Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 40-41. Brandon describes the religious aspects of the Spanish trade to the Americas in his section entitled "Cultures of Conquest."

⁶⁹ Colin Kidd, *The Forging of the Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 58-61. Kidd provides an extensive survey of religious discourses during the 17th and 18th centuries, which advanced an understanding of race through categories offered in the Hebrew Bible. Religion scholar Sylvester A. Johnson connects the curse of Ham myth to the American landscape and concepts of Blackness. Sylvester A. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4. The circulation of the concept in local Protestant institutions becomes apparent in correspondence between Mary Jones, the wife of famous 19th century Georgia missionary Charles Colcock

Upon embarkation of the slave ship, captives first encountered the gendered, racialized meanings of the “slave” for their New World captors, whose ruminations on African embodiment would define the parameters of their existence as enslaved people in the Americas. As they sailed in the darkness of ships, with the men shackled below deck, and the women unencumbered, but confined in separate quarters, surrounded by the noxious sounds and smells of menstruation, childbirth, death, and rodents, the now Black African captives were initiated into an alternate reality. Captive African females’ initiation into enslaved, Negro womanhood often featured psychologically and physically violent sexual assaults. On board the *African*, the rape of an already pregnant woman, known only as Number 83, by sailor William Cooney ““in view of the whole quarter deck”” constituted a vile violation of propriety and signaled, for the female captives who witnessed the heinous act and the male captives who likely heard it, the radical shift in the rights and boundaries that defined the parameters of their “slave” bodies.⁷⁰ The captives’ desire to negate their second creation as enslaved subjects engendered new modes of sacred activity—activity intent on a reconfiguration of consciousness through the resignification of enslaved embodiment.⁷¹

Modes of Female Embodiment: Enslaved Women and the Resignification of the Womb

Jones, and the Jones’s daughter Mary S. Mallard. In a letter to her mother, Mallard discusses a sermon during which the preacher referenced the curse of Ham to situate the Civil War as a religious war. “Mrs. Mary S. Mallard to Mrs. Mary Jones, Marietta, Nov. 16, 1863” in *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War*, Robert Manson Myers, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 1116. Therefore, although originating in earlier discourses, the idea of Blacks as descendants of Ham continued to be linked to their caste status in the U.S.

⁷⁰ This story was recorded by 18th century slave ship captain John Newton and is retold by Rediker. Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 179.

⁷¹ Long, *Significations*, 183. Noel, *Black Religion*, 117.

On April 12, 1764, the *Georgia Gazette* ran an advertisement for an unnamed, sixteen year-old female “runaway.” She was reportedly a native of “Guiney,” a region geographically linked to the Windward Coast and Sierra Leone, and therefore, an early predecessor to the women that would arrive on the *Agenoria* three decades later. Young and foreign-born, the woman spoke English “tolerable well,” and perhaps as a consequence of her linguistic capabilities, had developed relationships in the Savannah area. Such relationships were the suspected cause of her capacity for concealment during her escape attempts. She was recovered following her April attempt, but by May, had hazarded another escape from captivity. This time, however, she carried her two children with her, both of whom were described as “mulatto.”⁷²

The advertisement for the unnamed woman and her biracial children points to the ways enslaved women’s bodies became the conduits for the actualization of a new materiality, in which the multiple Western European and West and West-Central African ethnicities of the North American colonies coalesced to create a new iteration of African diasporic people. The tug and pull between European-imagined Africanness and the identity concepts cultivated by captive Africans themselves materialized in the form of “country-born” enslaved people, some of whom already bore the genes of their European enslavers. Other country-born Blacks represented fusions of Igbo and Kissi, Gola and Kongo, and other combinations of West and West-Central Africans that united in the wombs of enslaved women. Likewise, as planters relocated enslaved people from the more established Anglophone colonies of South Carolina, Jamaica, and Bermuda to Georgia in the early stages of economic development, the newly imported Georgia

⁷² *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from 1730s to 1790, Georgia*, comp. Lathan A. Windley (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 5-6.

captives entered into relationships with first- and second-generation captives from across the Western Hemispheric diaspora.⁷³ The products of these unions embodied the dismemberment of geo-cultural displacement and represented enslaved peoples' creation of new cultural identities connected to the North American, Anglophone South. Re-creation did not just occur in the ways Europeans imaged Black matter. Rather, the enslaved re-created themselves psychically, in the imbueing of their heritage with an expanded meaning, and materially, in the birthing of new, diasporic bodies.

Given the fledgling state of Georgia's immature slave system in 1764, one can speculate regarding the conditions under which the young woman fled her captivity. The woman's familiarity with persons in Savannah suggests that she was enslaved in the city, and her facility with English points to close contact with British colonists, most likely as a household domestic. Yet, the description of her children intimates the complexities of her positionality in the burgeoning Georgia economy. She was simultaneously commodity and consort—a role that likely was not unfamiliar to her, given the potential for enslaved women to become the wives of their owners in West African forms of enslavement and the role of women in the solidification of trade relationships between West Africans and Western Europeans.

⁷³ For evidence of relationships between West-Central African and country born enslaved people, see *Runaway Slave Advertisements*, 82. Evidence of enslaved people from the Anglophone diaspora abounds in the advertisements, and people from different parts of the diaspora frequently absconded together. Bermuda and Jamaica were the most commonly cited diasporic colonies of origins for people in Georgia. For examples, see *Runaway Slave Advertisements*, 12, 16, 34. The interconnectedness of the West Indies, Georgia, South Carolina, and West Africa was heightened by the movement of African-born enslaved people from South Carolina to Georgia. The land grant policies enabled heads of households to petition for one hundred acres of land for themselves and fifty acres for every other person in the household, including enslaved peoples. These policies afforded the more established South Carolinian and West Indian planters an advantage in the early Georgia plantation economy. The policies were designed to award larger tracts to persons with the means to convert frontier land into viable, profitable settlements quickly. This competitive advantage for persons who already owned a large number of enslaved people, coupled with their knowledge of plantation farming, positioned large South Carolinian and West Indian slaveholders to enter the Georgia economy at the top of the slaveholding class. Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia, 1730-1775*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 90-93, 98.

Women who'd had exposure to the sexual politics of enslavement, either through the general knowledge afforded by their existence in a world dominated by the domestic and global slave trade from the 16th-19th centuries or through their familiarity with trade communities dominated by the bi-racial offspring of West African women and Europeans, were often aware of their sexual vulnerability. The inclusion of sexual access as a component of enslavement was normative in the Windward Coast and many of the regions from which the thousands of West and West-Central African women that crossed the Atlantic originated. In many contexts, an enslaved woman's children entered into the lineal structures of the owner as his or her offspring, or at the very least, as a dependent within the webs of dependency that structured social and kinship bonds.⁷⁴ Given the understanding of marriage as a means of uniting lineages and solidifying social bonds, women's bodies also became a prime site for the facilitation of trade relationships between West Africans and Europeans. Slave trader Robert Hall, who was taken in a raid off the coast of the Cape Verde Islands was later incorporated into the social structure of his nation of captivity through marriage to one of the king's daughters.⁷⁵ Whether the woman possessed the social power to consent to or resist the union is unknown. However, as a consequence of such unions, many women within slave trading regions

⁷⁴ Robertson and Klein, "Women's Importance in African Slave Systems," 6. As Robertson and Klein point out, kin relationships were frequently underwritten by hierarchies of dependency. The head of household role was not sex-based, but rather tied to the social role of the benefactor. The phenomenon of female husbands speaks to the primacy of the role of the benefactor over that of biological paternity. An enslaved woman's offspring could enter into the lineal structures of the head of household, whether or not the child was the biological offspring of the head of household. For more on the relationship between gender, sex, and the household in West African societies, see Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987).

⁷⁵ Nicholas Owen, *Journal of a Slave Dealer: A View of Some Remarkable Aecedents in the Life of Nics. Owen on the Coast of Africa and America from the Year 1746 to the Year 1757*, Edited with intro by Eveline Martin. (London: George Routledge & Sons, LTD.), 44.

would have been aware of the relationship between economic/political relationships and sexual access to the regions' women.

The sexual role of women in the economies of slave trading regions prompted some West African women to use romantic and marital relationships as avenues for social ascendancy within the new social structures generated by the Trans-Atlantic trade. The Sherbro wife of a British trader on Plaintain Island conducted business in her husband's absence, and according to eighteenth-century British enslaver turned hymnist John Newton, convinced her husband to enslave Newton as a demonstration of her social power.⁷⁶ Marital and other sexual relationships with Europeans also presented the opportunity for the social, political, and economic advancement of the women's children. In many cases, the bi-racial offspring of these unions gained access to first-class educations, inherited the businesses of their fathers, and enjoyed immunity to enslavement, as a part of a socially and economically powerful upper class.

Thus, in the long history of trade between Western Europeans and West and West-Central Africans, women familiar with the coastal society and/or the trade with Europeans had witnessed the potential benefits of sexual relationships with powerful protectors long before they ever set foot on an America-bound slave ship. Once on board the ships, some women quickly ascertained their potential advantage as the only females amid all-male crews, and a few parlayed their advantage into influence and privileges. Historian Marcus Rediker narrates the story of a woman called "Sarah," who used her sexual prowess to secure a position of favor with the captain, and subsequently, to aid her

⁷⁶ MacCormack speculates that P.I., the name by which she is referred in Newton's writings, might have been Newton's corruption of the title, Yampai, which combines *Ya*, meaning "'mother or respected older woman,' with *m*' the possessive, with *Pai*, the proper name. MacCormack, "Slaves, Slave Owners, Slave Dealers," 284.

fellow captives in a doomed insurrection aboard the slave ship *Hudibras*.⁷⁷ Prior to her implication in the plot, the crewmen noted Sarah's lively provision of entertainment, in the form of singing and dancing, and her charismatic, gay manner—all of which she calibrated to insinuate herself into the social fabric of the ship.

Sarah, like the other women who sought the favor of European men on board the slave ships and in the first years of their enslavement, most likely understood these relationships within the sexual structures of African-European relations in the slave trading regions. They, perhaps, expected better material and social conditions for their children and for themselves on account of their sexual relationships and the production of progeny with European men. The unnamed woman of the runaway advertisement might have been one of this number, whose children were the product of intimate relationships forged on the slave ship or as a result of her close contact with Whites in her first years. On the other hand, she could have been one of an even larger number of women, who were forced into sexual relationships against their will and then raised the fruits of these violent liaisons.

Whether a “favorite” on the ship or coerced by a crewmember, upon arrival in Savannah and its larger, sister port of Charleston, female captives quickly discovered the limited social value of interracial intimacies in the Georgia slave economy. They, along with their children, were put up for sale with the other captives.⁷⁸ As evidenced by the sale of the *Agenoria* captives, there were women on board slave ships with children too small to be sold away from their mothers, likely due to the children being of nursing age. Although the ages of the *Agenoria* children were not recorded, it can be surmised—if not

⁷⁷ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 19.

⁷⁸ Records of the Slave Ship *Agenoria*.

from this ship, from the thousands of others that sailed—that women gave birth to children aboard the ship and in the holding cells where they were sometimes kept for medical examination prior to sale. The relatively quick voyage times for North American slave ships reduces the likelihood that women would have given birth to children conceived on board the ship prior to sale, but they certainly would have been aware of any resultant pregnancies from their sexual liaisons with crewmembers or coastal traders prior to disembarkation.

As they mounted auction blocks, the women, some of whom might have consented to sexual relationships on board the ship in hopes of a reprieve from their unknown fate, likely began to realize the fundamental and significant shift in the meanings of their embodiment that occurred upon their disembarkation. In the West African slavetrading context, interracial sexual relationships often solidified political and economic bonds, or at the very least, created pathways to social ascendancy for bi-racial progeny. However, within the signifying matrices of Anglophone North America, her womb and its reproductive capacities lost the power to solidify social bonds between Africans and Europeans. Moreover, contrary to the West African context of enslavement in which she was valued primarily for her agricultural productivity, and only secondarily as a reproductive laborer, in Georgia, her womb and its (re)productions were separate, exchangeable commodities in a market wholly dependent upon enslaved people's reproductivity.

The rapid expansion of the enslaved labor force in Georgia and other parts of the slaveholding U.S. can be traced entirely to the fecundity of imported and country-born enslaved women. Despite the low percentage of enslaved peoples imported into the U.S.

relative to the Caribbean and South America, the U.S. population grew exponentially in the years following mass importation, primarily due to the number of natural births.⁷⁹ As the importation of enslaved Africans ceased and slavery matured in the Lower South, the reproductive capacities of enslaved women became a matter of economic stability for the region. In the opening minutes of an address delivered to the Agricultural Society of St. John's Colleton, South Carolina slaveholder and future governor Whitemarsh Benjamin Seabrook remarked upon the duality of productivity and reproductivity that distinguished the U.S. slave context:

The value of our slave property is not justly appreciated. To their owners, our slaves yield two distinct interests; the one annual, or that which arises from their labour; the other, a contingent or prospective interest, the [I]ssue of the females. To the Southern States, and, I may properly add, to the human family, the inhabitants of Africa are absolutely essential.⁸⁰

Consistent with the gendered medical literature of the period, Seabrook laid the bulk of the responsibility for the reproduction of the enslaved population upon women.

⁷⁹ The growth of the enslaved population by natural increase was one of its distinguishing features amongst the enslaving regions in the Western Hemisphere. Historians of enslaved women's fertility have discovered that women on sugar plantations experienced lower levels of fertility, in comparison to women in non-sugar areas. The prominence of rice and cotton in the U.S., particularly the lower South, has been cited as one of the reasons for the population growth in the U.S., due to the less hazardous working conditions. Cheryll Ann Cody, "Cycles of Work and of Childbearing: Seasonality in Women's Lives on Low Country Plantations," in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 61. See also David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 134.

⁸⁰ Whitemarsh Benjamin Seabrook, "An Essay on the Management of Slaves and Especially on their Religious Instruction Read Before the Agricultural Society of St. John's Colleton" (Charleston: Order of the Society (Printed by A.E. Miller), 1834) 5.
http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/sas/retrieve.do?inPS=true&prodId=SAS&userGroupName=nypl&tabID=T001&searchId=&contentSet=ECCO&sort=&relatedDocId=frontmatter&bookId=SABCP00368000¤tPosition=0&workId=SABCP00368000&docId=CY3801533442&pageIndex=1&relevancePageBatch=CY101533442&docLevel=FASCIMILE&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&callistoContentSet=SABC&showLOI=&qrySerId

Slaveholders like Seabrook institutionalized this conviction in the price structures of the slave economy. According to one enslaved person's account, while women of average to low fertility and "runty" men sold for approximately \$600 per person, a "good 'breedin oman'" sold for upwards of \$1,200. Her value was subordinate only to the "well-trained" tradesmen, who sold for between \$2,000 and \$4,000, and the "fancy" women—women reared and sold to serve as sexual consorts for White men—who commanded the highest prices in slave economies.⁸¹

The valuation of enslaved women's bodies within a matrix of productivity and reproductivity upon the maturation of Georgia slavery introduced a new layer of dismemberment, in which the womb was resignified as a capital asset.⁸² Enslaved women's fecundity, specifically her future offspring, could be bequeathed to another as

⁸¹ George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: Georgia Narratives Pt. 1* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1976), 88, 205. According to Willis Cofer, a formerly enslaved man, "breeding" women potentially fetched prices of up to \$2,000. The same person discusses the potential for skilled tradesmen to fetch "fancy prices from \$3,000 to \$5,000 sometimes." In his discussion of "fancy" women and the domestic slave trade in the U.S., Edward E. Baptist traces the simultaneous normalization of sexual and commodity fetishism in the southern economy during the years of slavery's expansion, and contends that the value of a "fancy maid" was contingent upon supply and demand. According to Baptist, her value was "arbitrary when compared to the monetary value of her productive labor." Edward E. Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men: Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States,'" in *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 181-183. Historian Daina Ramey Berry corroborates Baptist's emphasis upon market forces in price determinations, but notes the influence of "age, rate, health, sex, and skill" in price determinations in Glynn County, Georgia. On four of the estates Berry examined, enslaved females garnered higher prices than their male counterparts until the age of thirty. Daina Ramey Berry, "'We'm Fus' Rate Bargain': Value, Labor, and Price in a Georgia Slave Community," in *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 61, 67. Jennifer L. Morgan locates such practices within Whites' imaginings of African and Native American women as reproductive machines, capable of excessive childbearing and physical labor. Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 36, 40.

⁸² "Definition of a Capital Asset," Investopedia, <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/capitalasset.asp#axzz290R0B7o6>. "A capital asset describes a type of asset that is not easily sold in the regular course of a business's operations for cash and is generally owned for its role in contributing to the business's ability to generate profit. Furthermore, it is expected that the benefits gained from the asset will extend beyond a time span of one year. On a business's balance sheet, capital assets are represented by the property, plant, and equipment figure." Regarding the centrality of reproduction to the maturing radicalized labor system, Morgan argues that Blackness was produced via enslavability and reproductive laws, therefore reproduction was central to slavery and the development of racial identities in the New World. Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 1.

an asset in wills, sales, and other legal and economic transactions, but like a capital asset, did not possess the liquidity of a human body. In this way, female fecundity is related to, but distinct from, the general commodification of African and African-American bodies. Enslaved women's wombs were simultaneously property and machinery—valued for evidence of their past fecundity and estimations of their future fertility. Thus, every infant death, every miscarriage, every disturbance of her reproductive system was inscribed upon her body and revisited within the monetary and sociocultural value systems of the slave economy.

As expected, the hierarchical valuation of their bodies based on its appearance and presumed (re)productivity infiltrated enslaved women's psyches and shaped some women's understandings of their existence. When outspoken Georgia mistress Fanny Kemble visited the Hammersmith settlement of one of her husband's coastal Georgia plantations, she found two elderly women who evaluated their contributions to her husband's estate in terms of their (re)productive labor. One woman repined her inability to work beyond a certain age, but quickly validated her worth, saying "tho' we no able to work, we make little niggers for massa," while the other, likewise, beseeched her mistress to recognize the woman's legacy of "many, many" offspring.⁸³ Despite the pain of comprehending such statements in the present, the context of enslavement renders the women's reasoning structures more intelligible. As evidenced by the accounts of formerly enslaved peoples, the term "breeding woman" was a part of the parlance of

⁸³ Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* (Savannah: The Beehive Press, Library of Georgia, 1992), [Based on New York: 1863 edition], 46.

enslavement, and the (re)productivity of enslaved peoples was frequently understood within the linguistic and ideological structures of breeding.⁸⁴

In the households of slaveholders that took eugenics-based approaches to their human property seriously, “breeding women” received incentives for their reproductive services. The most coveted incentive was rest from the incessant work schedules that characterized their existences. Although few women received more than two weeks, including their pre- and post-birth confinement, some were allowed up to five weeks for the birth of their children.⁸⁵ However, the special treatment, if any, accorded to women on account of their childbearing ended once the child was born. For the White slaveholder, the enslaved womb’s significations did not extend beyond its economic utility. Consequently, women were expected to continue their productive activities up to and immediately after their short confinement.

For those women whose narratives found a way into the records, issues surrounding childbearing were a constant source of physiological, psychological, and

⁸⁴ According to historian Gregory D. Smithers, enslaved people used “breeding” to refer to coerced reproductive practices and represented such practices as the “most dehumanizing aspect of the domestic slave trade” in their WPA narratives. Gregory D. Smithers, *Slave Breeding: Sex, Violence, and Memory in African American History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 110.

⁸⁵ For the special treatment accorded breeding women see George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: Georgia Narratives Pt. 4* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1976), 259. Also, Daina Ramey Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 86-87. According to Berry, large enslaved families in Wilkes County received a two-bedroom cabin, and in Glynn County, slaveholder William W. Hazzard offered a cow to families of six and a complete reprieve from labor for mothers of ten “living” children. For the length of confinement for the Butler plantations, see Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 136. The number of days allowed for the confinement period varied. Some, such as the women on the Butler Island plantations, were allowed up to four to five weeks at one time, which prompted them to complain to Kemble when the new overseer reduced their recovery to three to four weeks. The length of time was highly variable, since some women went back to work immediately after the birth of their children. In an analysis of pregnancy and work on a Georgia plantation during the antebellum period, John Campbell discovered an average of 24.6 days away from work over the course of the entire pregnancy, with an average of 8.4 days per trimester. Campbell also found that women whose infants survived past the first year received more days off each trimester and the number of days given was highest in the years between 1849 and 1861. John Campbell, “Work, Pregnancy, and Infant Mortality among Southern Slaves,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 14 (1984): 800-801.

existential angst. Upon an abusive overseer's reduction of the enslaved women's recovery period on the Butler plantations, an elderly woman called Old Sackey complained that the women received three weeks and then returned "out into the field again, through dew and dry, as if nothing had happened." Sackey echoed the complaints of many of the other women on the Butler plantation, yet wisely deployed the economic language of the slaveholding class to drive her point, saying: "that is why, missis, so many of the women have falling of the womb and weakness in the back; and if he had continued on the estate, he would have utterly destroyed all the breeding women."⁸⁶ Tales of enslaved women collapsing, becoming gravely ill, or dying, as a consequence of their premature reentry into the non-reproductive labor force point to the ways the resignification of the womb by White slaveholders forced women to wrestle with questions of their existence and mortality.

Women were not the only ones that grappled with questions that emanated from the resignification of the womb. Enslaved men were aware that incessant childbearing disproportionately affected enslaved women, and for this reason, womb concerns appeared in bondsmen's ruminations on enslavement as well. "Engineer Ned" of the Butler estate lamented his good health in contrast to his wife, who "had to work in the rice-fields, and was 'most broke in two' with labor, and exposure, and hard work while with child, and hard work just directly after childbearing." As a result of the matrix of reproductivity and productivity that accompanied the resignification of the womb, his wife "could hardly crawl," "was almost all the time in the hospital," and "could not live

⁸⁶ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 136.

long.”⁸⁷ He, like Old Sackey, urged his mistress to speak to the master about the plantation policies governing enslaved women’s bodies.

Clearly, men’s entrenchment in the sexual politics of the slave economy enabled them to offer man-gendered perspectives on the multivalent consequences of the womb’s resignification. Formerly enslaved John Cole provided commentary on “breeding” practices and intimated their effects on the relationships between enslaved men and women:

...Grow older, and get by the gates with a pass (you had to have a pass or the paddle-rollers would get you,) and you had you a woman. If the woman wasn’t willing, a good, hard-working hand could always get the master to make the girl marry him—whether of no, willy-nilly.

If a hand were noted for raising up strong black bucks, bucks that would never ‘let the monkey get them’ while in the high-noon hoeing, he would be sent out as a species of circuit-rider to the other plantations—to plantations where there was over-plus of ‘worthless young nigger gals.’ There he would be ‘married off’ again—time and again. This was thrifty and saved any actual purchase of new stock.”⁸⁸

Although it is difficult to gauge the commonness of the sexual dynamics represented in Cole’s statement, it is clear that the politics of breeding extended to enslaved men and, in some cases, afforded them privileges within the sexual networks of enslaved

⁸⁷ Ibid, 80-81.

⁸⁸ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part 1*, 88, 228. Rias Body explains a similar dynamic amongst eight of his twelve brothers who were “‘big buck Niggers.’” These men were accorded unusual privileges, such as an increased freedom of mobility, which allegedly produced numerous offspring across a wide area.

communities.⁸⁹ The coercive subtext of Cole’s rendering invites questions regarding enslaved women’s power to resist and/or choose her partner in contexts where mercenary concerns dictated the sexual relationships of the enslaved.

Yet, Cole’s account masks the emotional, psychological, and existential difficulties precipitated by sexual surveillance and incessant childbearing for enslaved men and women. George Womble intimated the extent of some slaveholders’ surveillance of enslaved people’s sexual relationships in his recollection that a small statured man “was never allowed to marry a large, robust woman” and neighboring slaveholders sometimes collaborated to facilitate sexual relationships between “large and healthy looking” male and female enslaved people.⁹⁰ In Womble’s account, the power to choose a sexual partner, which Cole represents as disproportionately in favor of privileged males, no longer resides with the enslaved people themselves, but rather rests with the slaveholders—a scenario much more representative of the norm.

Even on farms and plantations, and in households and businesses where breeding practices were not enforced, the resignification of the womb as a capital asset for the (re)production of human property drastically affected the parental relationships of enslaved peoples. Enslaved women and men wrestled with their roles in the reproduction of slavery, as they conceived and birthed children for reintegration into the very system that controlled their movement, speech, and relationships. The rearing of children for a specific purpose mirrored the “breeding” of offspring from pre-selected parents and

⁸⁹ Historian Daina Ramey Berry’s research on antebellum plantation enslavement in Georgia corroborates Cole’s depiction of breeding practices. Berry observed that enslaved women, whose children were likely the product of such practices, were particularly reluctant to discuss their children’s paternity. Enslaved males were particularly forthcoming on the subject, although Berry interestingly suggests that enslaved males’ forced participation in sexual acts for the reproduction of the enslaved workforce could be classified as rape. See Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*, 82-83.

⁹⁰ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part 4*, 190.

evolved into a feature of enslaved childhood. As an enslaved girl, Mahala Jewel was raised away from her parents and brother, in her mistress's household, because she was "gwine have to wait on" the mistress "when she [the mistress] got old."⁹¹ Mahala's preliminary divulgence that her mother worked in the fields intimated the extent of her estrangement from her family. Dependent upon the size of the farm or plantation, her mother's status as an agricultural worker dimmed the prospect of a relationship between mother and child. Mahala's mother supplied the womb, and most likely, the initial nourishment for her child, but was not permitted to integrate her daughter into the familial household; her parental rights and responsibilities extended only as far as her role as the reproductive machinery of the enslaving economy.

Moreover, the estrangement experienced by Mahala's parents was by no means exceptional. The practice of singling out select children to serve as the "pet" of the master or mistress exemplified the paradox of human property and forced enslaved parents to acknowledge and/or witness the rearing of their children by the people who held the deed to their bodies.⁹² In such cases, the extent of enslaved people's dismemberment during enslavement becomes painfully clear, as the productive aspect of their childbearing distanced them from the social act of parenting their own children.

This distance existed, even when the children were reared in the household with their parents. The long hours of an enslaved person's day, which generally began around 4 a.m. and ended around sundown or later depending upon the harvest cycle, required

⁹¹ George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: Georgia Narratives Pt. 2* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1976), 317.

⁹² Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 322. Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part 3*, 288. Enslaved children who carried the title of "pet" were frequently taken into the household of the master and/or mistress as a very small child and raised away from their biological parents. As adults, they recalled sleeping either in a pallet adjacent to the mistress's bed or in the trundle bed under the mistress' bed. One man, Melvin Smith, reports not returning to his parents until he was eight years old.

enslaved children to spend the bulk of their days in the care of either older siblings or elderly nurses. One such older sibling recalled that her mother used to attach a piece of “fat back” to the young girl’s dress to function as a pacifier for the young brother, for whom she was the caretaker while her mother was in the field.⁹³ In accordance with the prevailing norm of many plantations, nursing women were permitted to visit their children only twice during the long work day, while men and non-nursing women weren’t allowed any visitation privileges whatsoever. Thus, when asked by an interviewer about the types of games her children played during slavery, Nancy Boudry replied simply: “Maybe day did play ring games, I never had no time to see what games my chillun play, I work so hard.”⁹⁴

African Female/American Slave Woman: Work, Violence, and the Gendering of Captive Bodies

True to Nancy Boudry’s matter-of-fact characterization of enslaved mothers’ lives, “work” most accurately described the daily movements of African-descended bodies in the Western Hemisphere. The term encompassed a range of tasks that situated U.S. Africans and their descendants differently across the southern social and geographical spectrums, yet constructed experiential points of intersection in the linkage of Blackness to subordinate labor. The endowment of enslavement with expanded ontological significance through the invention of racial Blackness and resignification of the womb in the colonial encounter created a caste of laborers whose existences were bound to the economic interests of the racialized planter classes. Routine acts of physical,

⁹³ Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 287.

⁹⁴ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part 1*, 114.

psychological, and sexual violence, individual and cultural humiliation, and social disruption were carefully calibrated to inculcate the primary creed of American slavery: Black people were destined, indeed designed, to labor in the interest of the emergent White race.⁹⁵

This founding principle of the U.S. American, racialized labor hierarchy formed the ideological core of Africans' "second creation" in the West. The ontology of the slave, the product of the second creation, was engaged in a dialectical relationship with the enslaved's self-determined ontological truth, their "first creation," and within this relationship, the daily labors of the enslaved both reified the truths of the master class and offered a space for the enslaved's autonomous re-creation.⁹⁶ As the foundation, means, and end of White definitions of Blackness in Anglophone North America, work defines a central feature of enslaved peoples' existence, and for this reason, names one of the most important considerations in the exploration of their religious consciousness.

In their sacred cultures, the enslaved struggled to unhinge their interior lives from the psychological and physical excesses of their labor for others. Yet, the exertions of their material existences formed the context for their existential strivings and religious productions. To reiterate James Noel's keen assertion: "The souls of Black folk have a

⁹⁵ Although "Black" as a racial category denotes the erasure of ethnic and cultural distinctions between captives, there is some evidence that the literacy and religion of African Muslims accorded them positions of distinction in the hierarchy of enslavement and nuanced the meanings of Blackness with designations such as Moor and Arab. See Sylviane A. Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 97-102, 107-109.

⁹⁶ Long, *Significations*, 180-184. According to Long, the ideology of the master class describes a truth and fiction: "It is true as a structure with which one must deal in a day-by-day manner if one is to persevere, but it is fictive as far as any ontological significance is concerned." Yet he goes on to say that the statement "does not define a simple dichotomy, for the day-to-day existence is in fact the oppressed's labor—labor from which their autonomy arises; therefore their own autonomy takes on a fictive character." Thus, using the truth/fiction construct, Long describes the paradoxical relationship between the enslaved's internal truths and external condition.

material locus.”⁹⁷ However, notwithstanding the “Black” designation, the material loci of enslaved peoples were far from homogenous. Variations in the scope and definition of work often yielded distinctions between the enslaved and configured the daily dimensions of material existence differently across space, time, and most significantly, gender.

Labor imbued enslaved female embodiment with a gendered significance that resided precariously at the intersections of the sex-segregated norms of West and West-Central Africans’ originating context, and European notions of Blackness and femaleness. Contrary to Western European concepts of “women’s work,” the sex-segregated labor conventions of the Windward Coast and similar regions assigned the seemingly more labor-intensive tasks, such as hoe agriculture, to females. As discussed earlier, the higher valuation of females within the internal slave economies of West and West-Central Africa spoke to the import of their agricultural and domestic labor in their homelands. Much of the region engaged in wet and dry rice agriculture and grew other products, such as sweet potatoes, oranges, kola, palm oil, pumpkins, bananas, and sugar cane since before the 17th century.⁹⁸ Even prior to the Susu cultivation of vast tracts of land using enslaved labor in the late 18th century, the Djola, Nalu, and Baga of the region produced surplus amounts of rice employing methods of multiple crop rotation. Within these agricultural systems, the men cleared the forest, while the women engaged in tasks such as inland fishing, palm oil and salt production, house plastering, and rice cultivation.⁹⁹ The broad range of tasks performed by West and West Central African women in their towns, villages, and provinces was not lost upon Western Europeans. In response, Andre

⁹⁷ Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter*, 117.

⁹⁸ Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Kernels*, 167-168.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 166, 189-190. Rodney, *History of the Upper Guinea Coast*, 21-23.

Alvares d'Almada, an early Portuguese visitor to the Bissagos Islands off of the Upper Guinea coast, remarked incredulously that the women "do more work than men do in other places."¹⁰⁰

Certainly, the share of work done by females undoubtedly increased in the years of Trans-Atlantic slave trading, as the mass exodus of males from concentrated areas, coupled with the absorption of women and children into enslaving societies, yielded demographic imbalances that affected labor assignments. Yet, the expanded range of tasks performed by West and West Central African females did not preclude the differentiation of labor along gendered lines. Patterns of gendered labor socialization dictated that females learn to perform tasks, such as cooking and childrearing, as a part of the intergenerational transfer of knowledge within homosocial communities. Consequently, women performed the lion's share of the domestic labor in many societies, in addition to their agricultural responsibilities.

At the same time, though females and males engaged in different forms of labor, biological sex was not the primary determinant of an individual's social function and/or labor role within West and West-Central African cultures. Indeed, the meanings assigned to woman and man as gendered categories in Western European understandings must be reworked to comprehend the relationship between sex, labor, and social hierarchy in a number of West African societies. Regarding the correlation between sex and social role in precolonial Yoruba society, Nigerian sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi argues that the "perceived sexual dimorphism of the human body" neither constructed a sex-based social

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Thornton, "Sexual Demography," 44.

hierarchy nor dictated social roles.¹⁰¹ Rather, “social identity was relational” and governed chiefly by principles of seniority, in contrast to the “bio-logic” of the West.¹⁰²

The supplementation of free female labor with enslaved male labor in West and West Central African slavery, along with the range of duties enslaved and free women managed in African societies, affirm Oyewumi’s point: biological femaleness carried an expanded range of social meanings within West African cultures. Indeed, some scholars suggest that the preference for female slaves stemmed from an understanding of women as physically stronger, but more “docile” and culturally assimilable than their male counterparts.¹⁰³ However, to Oyewumi’s point, claims of docility interpret female labor assignments in a modality supplied by Western gender discourses and in doing so, obscure the ways social location, contributed to the ease or difficulty of women’s assimilation into a foreign community. A low ranking woman’s awareness of her vulnerability to familial and/or geographical dislocation likely rendered her more pliant or, at the very least, more accustomed to the labors of enslavement than men and high ranking women. Thus, it was the combination of low ranking status and gendered socialization, as opposed to a biologically-prescribed disposition, that better adapted some women to assume domestic and agricultural tasks in foreign spaces as slaves.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 12.

¹⁰² Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xiii, 31-32. Although I do not adopt Oyewumi’s language of “anafemale,” throughout this section I use the term “female” in corroboration with her point regarding the inaccuracy of gendered terms such as “woman” to describe the “relation between the human body and social roles, positions, and hierarchies.” (xii) Despite my absolute concurrence that the Western social category of woman as “powerless, disadvantaged, and controlled and defined by men” does not inhere in West and West Central African contexts, and rather represents the imposition of foreign social reasoning, I hesitate to claim that there was no relationship between soma and social roles in the Windward Coast region upon which I have chosen to focus my continental analysis. Therefore, I use the language of “women” in instances where I understand the soma-social relationship to exist, although I agree that there was a much more fluid understanding of this relationship.

¹⁰³ Meillassoux makes this claim based on evidence from Dahomey, where women were preferred as porters, due to the belief that they could carry heavier loads for farther distances. Meillassoux, “Female Slavery,” in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, eds. Clarie C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, 56.

Still, despite the imprecision of gender as theorized within Western discourses when applied to the relationship between sex, labor, and social role in West and West-Central Africa, sex-segregated labor undoubtedly helped construct social norms around the laboring bodies. Female bodies assumed social meanings as they became identified with certain tasks. Moreover, the association of females with various responsibilities in West African cultures heightened their economic and social value in the internal slave trade. Consistent with the socially dictated labor hierarchies of the region, much of the surplus domestic and agricultural work created by the slave trades was performed by the enslaved women and wives, to whom the majority of labor-intensive tasks were passed.¹⁰⁴ Males, particularly enslaved males, could certainly perform such tasks. But, men's execution of duties generally assigned to women signaled an inferior social status and, consequently, carried a degree of humiliation.¹⁰⁵ It is possible that the men's resentment stemmed less from their performance of "women's work," as defined by Western European understandings, and more from their engagement of *enslaved* women's work. Even so, labor arrangements generated social norms that replicated the effect of the gendered dimorphism of the West, despite the broader, more fluid range of attributes assigned to female bodies. The association of femaleness—free and enslaved—with certain forms of agricultural and domestic work imbued work with gendered meanings that expanded and contracted as the slave trades precipitated shifts in the demography and culture of affected regions.

¹⁰⁴ Thornton, "Sexual Demography," 44. Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Kernels*, 189. Jones points out that "female labour complemented the work of male slaves," which along with the difficulty of absorbing foreign males into the enslaving society, accounts for the preference for females in indigenous systems of slavery.

¹⁰⁵ Meillassoux, "Female Slavery," 55-56.

Thus, the intersection of African labor norms and European labor demands created a context ripe for sex-specific trajectories of enslavement in Western Africa and the Americas. As West and West Central African women arrived in the Western Hemisphere, they carried with them understandings of the relationship between sex, work, and social status that unquestionably influenced their perceptions of their new roles in the Americas. However, though woman, as a gendered social designation, encompassed a number of responsibilities and expectations in the captives' originating contexts, those responsibilities and expectations changed drastically as they became raced.

Despite the radically different architecture of gender between Africans and their European captors, the disproportionate representation of women in domestic tasks in their homelands offered some semblance of continuity between the cultures, since women assumed similar domestic tasks in the Americas. This point of intersection, did not, however, prevent Europeans from pathologizing West African labor practices. The hyper-visibility of female labor to the European eye eventuated the erasure of male labor, as evidenced by Nicholas Owen's account of gendered labor distinctions in the Sierra Leone region:

The women in Africa commonly undergoes the hardest of the labour, making plantations and beating out the rice (for thye have no mills as in other places) the same time the men are smoaking thier pipes, or danceing at home in thier houses, or drinking palm wine under some shade in the bushes. They keep thier women very much under and will never allow them to eate at one table with thier husbands; all the time he's eating shee

stand[s] by with water to serve him and so upon all occasions she waits
like a servant upon her husband at home and abroad.¹⁰⁶

European traveller accounts of West Africa were replete with remarks regarding the industriousness of African women, in comparison to the perceived laziness of the men. The Puritanical divinization of work in the hegemonic American psyche ensured that both pro- and anti-slavery writers moralized labor. Both sides' ability to use gendered labor theories in their argumentation evinces the complex, often contradictory, meanings assigned to male and female enslaved bodies upon their arrival at ports like Savannah, and the dialogical relationship between racialized gender connotations and labor assignments.

As the demand for African laborers in the Trans-Atlantic trade increased, pro-slavery writers weaponized the divergences in the gender cultures of West Africans and Europeans by depicting African sex-segregated labor practices as hallmarks of the degeneracy that condemned captives and their descendants to generations of servitude. By the antebellum period, 17th- and 18th-century accounts of West and West-Central African social structures mingled with moralistic pro-slavery defenses to suggest the improved status of Africans, particularly African-descended women, in slavery. Thomas Mogill's 1860 publication, *The Governing Race: A Book for the Time and for all Times* offers a marked example of the convergence of Christian apologetics, racial theories, and Trans-Atlantic gender discourses in pro-slavery apologia:

The hieroglyphical records of the oldest monuments of old Egypt show the
black man then a slave. Nearly the whole continent of Africa is now a
place of black slaves. If some few of these men, as rulers, have liberty to

¹⁰⁶ Owen, *Journal of a Slave Dealer*, 52.

destroy or sell others of their own race, the women, one-half the population, are without exception slaves to the physical force and brutal lusts of the male descendants of Ham. From the ferocious king of the Ashantees, whose ornaments and monuments are the skulls and bones of his slave victims; to the Yorubas of Central Africa, whose government is a ‘perfect despotism,’ and on to the Makolos of the South, described by Rev. Dr. Livingstone, where the negro man is supported by the labor of his slave wives, we find two conditions of life, *Polygamy* and *slavery*, everywhere. Till the first is overcome it is in vain to talk of freedom or improvement for the black race.¹⁰⁷

Notwithstanding the irony of Mogill’s depiction of West African women as “slaves” to the labor and sexual demands of their male counterparts, his treatise echoes the raced labor theories that substantiated defenses of slavery and exposes the oft-overlooked gendered foundations of such theories. Europeans’ gender perceptions of West Africa contributed to the racialization of African bodies. Proponents of slavery continued to disparage the perceived labor exploitation of women in West Africa, even as they depicted U.S. Africans as eternally infantile and innately lazy, unless compelled to work by their masters.¹⁰⁸ This contradictory reasoning did not escape anti-slavery writers,

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Mogill, *The Governing Race: A Book for the Time and For All Times* (Washington D.C., 1860), in *Slavery in North America: From the Colonial Period to Emancipation: Volume 3.*, ed. Jonathan Daniel Wells (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 236.

¹⁰⁸ Depictions of enslaved Blacks as innately lazy and racially inferior by virtue of their laziness abound in essays on the management of enslaved people and pro-slavery responses to abolitionist pressures. In his “Management of Servants,” a man writing under the name Foby confides to his reader that “plantation negroes are much more ignorant than most persons suppose,” and consequently “require a guardian.” He concedes that they are “willing to work,” but will not work to any “advantage” unless directed by the master. Foby, “Management of Servants,” *Southern Cultivator 11* (August 1853: 226-228) in *Slavery in North America: From the Colonial Period to Emancipation: Volume 3*, ed. Jonathan Daniel Wells (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 33. Likewise, in his seminal study *American Negro Slavery*, Ulrich

who, similar to their opponents, pointed to the sexual abuse and laborious existence of enslaved women as indicators of slaveholders' and other members of the southern power castes' depravity.

While the licentiousness of southern slaveholders was a prominent motif in anti-slavery writing, abolitionists also referenced the gendered forms of delinquency that resulted from surrogate labor. In a comparison between the non-aristocratic classes of England and America, traveler J.S. Buckingham noted the "roughness," "rude health," and "plainness of attire" of young women of "inferior station" in England, in contrast to the young women of the American South, where "they are brought up to be waited on by a negro girl, who does all that is required." As a consequence of the labor of enslaved girls and women: "every white woman's daughter, begins from the earliest years to think herself a lady. Fine dress and delicate appearance, with an imitation of genteel manners, are the business of her life, until she gets married which is here often at 14 and 15; and then her utter inefficiency as a mother may be readily conceived."¹⁰⁹ To be sure, Buckingham painted European-descended American women using broad strokes; by 1860, only two-fifths of the Georgia population owned enslaved people.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, the race-based labor subordination of African-descended women contoured the gender hierarchies of slaveholding societies in Georgia.

Bonnell Phillips declared arrogantly that "a negro was what a white man made him." Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor Determined by the Plantation Regime* (1918; Reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 291.

¹⁰⁹ J.S. Buckingham, *A Journey Through the Slave States of North America* (1842; Reprint, Charleston: The History Press, 2006), 120. Buckingham, who began his tour in 1839, was an advocate for social reforms in the British Parliament, and therefore, presented a harsh critique of slavery in his portrayal of America at the height of the cotton boom.

¹¹⁰ Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 30. According to Stampp's formulation, Georgia was only subordinate to South Carolina and Mississippi in the proportion of slaveholders. Approximately half of the citizens of both states owned enslaved peoples.

The alliance between West and West-Central African labor, and Trans-Atlantic commerce forged on the African continent and in the Caribbean in the centuries prior to the January 1, 1751 legalization of slavery in Georgia bequeathed to the nascent colony a blueprint for the exploitation of their enslaved human resources. Because land grants privileged applicants with a ready labor force, established planters from South Carolina and British colonies in the Caribbean, such as Barbados, quickly ascended to the apex of the Georgia economy.¹¹¹ By the time slavery was legalized in Georgia, almost 1 million captives had disembarked in the British Caribbean, while a little over 41,000 had already arrived in South Carolina.¹¹² Due to the movement of migrant planters into the colony, until 1766, the bulk of Georgia's enslaved people came from either South Carolina or the West Indies.¹¹³ Consequently, the earliest arrivals to Georgia directly from West Africa entered a mature gendered labor hierarchy, despite the colony's infancy.

European gender roles shaped the preference for males reflected in slave ship demographics, yet enslaved women's duties encompassed tasks that distinguished them from free women and enslaved men. Enslavement constructed Black womanhood as a

¹¹¹ Betty Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia, 1730-1775* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 90-93, 98. The land grant policy allowed heads of household to petition for 100 acres for the head of household, plus 50 additional acres for each additional member of the household, which included enslaved people and servants. The distribution was based on the premise that the rapid development of the colony required the allotment of land only to people with sufficient means for cultivation. Persons already in possession of enslaved workers were able to buy land for as cheap as 1 shilling per 10 acres in some instances. According to Wood, between 1747-65, 41% of South Carolinians applying for land in Georgia held enslaved peoples. Their labor force, coupled with their increased knowledge of rice cultivation, in comparison to the German, Scotch-Irish, and Acadian settlers enabled them to dominate the colonial hierarchy. West Indian migrant planters were the sole exception to the dominance of South Carolinians. See also Julia Floyd Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture in Low Country Georgia, 1750-1860* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 24-25. Smith surmises that by 1773, 5% of the total landholders held 20% of the lands granted by the government.

¹¹² Voyages Database, <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces?yearFrom=1501&yearTo=1750&disembarkation=305.304.307.306.309.308.311.203.310.301.302.303>. (accessed January 16, 2014). Enslaved people had been imported into the British Caribbean colonies since the 1600s and into South Carolina since around 1710, although these numbers do not account for enslaved people who might have moved from other colonies.

¹¹³ Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 98.

paradox. Female captives were women in accordance with the “bio-logic” of Anglo-European norms; however, different social meanings accrued to their sex as a consequence of their Africanness. As Oyewumi so succinctly points out: “African females were colonized by Europeans as Africans and as African women.”¹¹⁴ The uneasy convergence of norms in the gendered existences of enslaved women becomes evident in the autobiographical narrations of women such as Nancy Boudry, whose defiantly candid speech about enslavement distinguished her amongst the Georgia interviewees. Similar to her matter-of-fact declaration about her children, Boudry described the paradoxes of gender amongst the enslaved:

“My husband din’ live on de same plantation where I was, de Jerrell place in Columbia County. He never did have nuthin’ to give me ‘cause he never got nuthin’. He had to come and ask my white folks for me. Dey had to carry passes everywhar dey went, if dey didn’t, dey’d git in trouble. I had to work hard, plow and go and split wood jus’ like a man. Sometimes dey whup me. Dey whup me bad, pull de close off down to de wais’ - my master did it, our folks didn’ have overseer...

‘Mistis was sorta kin’ to me, sometimes. But dey only give me meat and bread, didn’ give me nothin’ good — I ain’ gwine tell no story. I had a heap to undergo wid. I had to scour at night at de Big House — two planks one night, two more de nex’. De women peoples spun at night and reeled, so many cuts a night. Us had to git up befo’ daybreak be ready to go to de fiel’s.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*, 122.

¹¹⁵ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 113-114.

As evidenced by Boudry's account, slaveowners expected enslaved women to perform the same agricultural tasks as their male counterparts, in addition to domestic tasks designated as "women's work" in accordance with hegemonic understandings of gendered labor. Due to the uncultivated state of most of Georgia's lands during the first decades of legalized slavery, many of the earliest arrivals worked extreme, sometimes sixteen-hour or more, days to cultivate the rice, indigo, corn, and silk that were amongst the earliest exports from the colony.¹¹⁶ Female and male captives from areas with a similar agricultural output, like the Windward Coast, were already attuned to the labor processes required for production. Yet, the production of goods for the sustenance of a rapidly expanding population and supply of a global trade introduced new rigors. The tidewater rice culture of lowcountry Georgia required the construction of canals and ditches, embankments, and drains to control the irrigation of rice fields using the tidal flow of rivers, and as a consequence of the need, early enslaved Georgians engaged in the arduous task of cultivating the river swamps of the colony.¹¹⁷ Due in no small part to the concentration of arable land along the coast under the ownership of a small number of elite planters, seasonal rhythms surrounding rice agriculture remained fairly constant between the colonial and antebellum periods, though the Revolutionary War temporarily disrupted the growth of the industry.

¹¹⁶ For information on Georgia's earliest exports, see Buckingham, *A Journey Through the Slave States of North America*, 62. Buckingham reports that the value of annual exports increased from 10,000 pounds in 1752, to 27,000 pounds in 1763 and 125,000 pounds in 1773. For an account of the work hours, see Thomas Cooper. *Remarkable Extracts and Observations on the Slave Trade. With Some Considerations on the Consumption of West India Produce* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1791), 5. See also, Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 113-114. According to Wood, the 1755 Georgia slave code's stipulation that enslaved people could not work for more than sixteen hours each day suggests that some enslaved were exceeding these hours.

¹¹⁷ Phillip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 156-159. According to Morgan, enslaved people "moved at least five hundred cubic yards of river swamp for every acre of rice field" to construct the irrigation structures. The Waccamaw, Pee Dee, Santee, Ashely-Cooper, Edisto-Ashepoo, Combahee, and Savannah Rivers were the primary sites for tidal rice culture.

Prior to the 1790s, indigo was the other primary staple of the region and its cultivation, along with rice and other staples. Collectively, they ensured that enslaved agricultural workers engaged in a continuous cycle of plowing, hoeing, planting, and harvesting.¹¹⁸ In accordance with the task system of labor, enslaved rice growers were required to cultivate a certain amount of land per day: generally 1/2-1/4 acre daily during the flooding and hoeing of the rice in May and 1/2 acre daily for the weeding and planting of other staple crops intermittently.¹¹⁹ Task assignments were calculated based upon a laborers' classification as either a full or a fractional "hand," and age, health, and skill most frequently dictated classification.

Despite the popular assertion that a day's work for a female "full" hand consisted of a 3/4 share, women were far from an auxiliary labor force. As historian Daina Ramey Berry has illuminated, women composed the bulk of the enslaved, agricultural labor force on lowcountry plantations during the antebellum period, and constituted the majority of "prime" laborers, or full hands, on one St. Simon's Island plantation.¹²⁰ In the assignment of agricultural tasks, sex was subordinated to productivity.¹²¹ As cooks, nurses, seamstresses, maids, and midwives, women also composed the majority of the non-agricultural, domestic labor force on plantations and in urban areas like Savannah,

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 159-160. Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 137. Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture*, 49, 54-55. Following the preparation of the fields in January and February, rice was planted at different points between March and May. After rounds of flooding, draining, and hoeing the fields, the rice was harvested in August and September. Threshing, winnowing, and movement to the market occurred in November and December. Indigo was also planted in March and early April and required daily hoeing during its short growth cycle.

¹¹⁹ Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture*, 45-46. Wood, *Slavery in Colonial Georgia*, 137. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 179. A 105 foot square constituted the basic unit of a task.

¹²⁰ Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*, 16-24. Berry argues against the gendered skilled and unskilled dichotomy that populates historical accounts of slavery and instead contends that skill, seniority, experience, personal relationships, and circumstance contributed to notions of skilled labor in slavery. To draw her conclusions regarding the lowcountry, Berry analyzes the records of the coastal, Kelvin Grove and Elizafield plantations of Glynn County, Georgia.

¹²¹ Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*, 14-19.

while men's training as cobblers, blacksmiths, fishermen, carpenters, and various trade laborers situated non-agricultural, enslaved men as the most mobile, enslaved labor force.

The task system remained a hallmark of rice and Sea Island cotton production throughout the antebellum period. Meanwhile, the displacement of the Creek population and westward expansion of Georgia following the land cessations of the late 18th century and confiscations in the 1810s and 1820s eventuated the proliferation of short-staple cotton farms and plantations and, in turn, the expansion of the gang labor system in the state.¹²² Although the small farm structure of many cotton-producing regions placed enslaved workers side-by-side with slaveholders in the fields and supplanted the plantation paradigm, cotton planters did not significantly alter the gendered labor patterns established amongst the rice planters. On the contrary, there were even fewer sex-segregated tasks in the cotton-producing regions. While visiting a cotton plantation near Charleston, Frederick Law Olmsted noted that enslaved women "were in the majority, and were engaged at exactly the same labor as the men; driving the carts, loading them with dirt, and dumping them upon the road; cutting down trees, and drawing wood by hand, to lay across the miry places; hoeing, and shoveling."¹²³ The uniformity of menial

¹²² Watson W. Jennison, *Cultivating Race: The Expansion of Slavery in Georgia, 1750-1860* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012) 91-125, 185-197. In his discussion of the westward expansion of Georgia, Jennison contends that the increased political influence of backcountry settlers, which began with their role in securing the colony against Loyalist forces during the Revolutionary War, compelled the fledgling government of the colony to support the settlers' claims to Native lands. However, the persisting numerical force of the Creek Nation prompted the federal government to renegotiate land claims in favor of peace in the 1790 Treaty of New York. The contrast between the peace politics of the federal government and lowcountry planters, and the antagonistic expansionism of backcountry settlers initiated a series of military and political maneuvers that would continue into the beginning of the 19th century. The continued growth of the upcountry that accompanied the rise in the white population in Georgia contributed further to their political rise. The election of a governor from the upcountry in 1819 legitimized the anti-Native platform of the region and set the stage for the forcible removal of Creeks.

¹²³ Frederick Law Olmsted. *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States with Remarks on Their Economy*. (1856; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 386-387. Daina Ramey Berry observed Georgia cotton plantations where the majority of field laborers were female. See Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*, 17-19.

labor required for the production of cotton developed familiar patterns, able to be transferred between state lines. Consequently, Olmsted's observations of South Carolinian enslaved women mirrored the daily labors of Georgia's enslaved. Like their male counterparts, female cotton laborers worked from between 4 and 6 a.m. to approximately 7 and 7:30 p.m. in the fields and picked 150 to 200 pounds of cotton each day.¹²⁴

Where sex did factor into task allotments or daily quotas, there were only degrees of distinctions between male and female agricultural workers, which oftentimes were not impressed upon the memories of the formerly enslaved. Similar to Nancy Boudry's reflections upon the gendered division of labor in slavery, Isaiah Green declared that "his mother could plow as well as any man."¹²⁵ Only in a few instances, such as pregnancy, when a woman might be considered slightly infirm, did femaleness mitigate the amount of agricultural work required of enslaved women.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, as in the rice-producing region, the nebulous relationship between sex and labor on cotton farms and plantations did not transmit to the domestic sphere; enslaved women in cotton-producing areas assumed the lion's share of the domestic tasks in the slave cabins and planters' homes.

Despite the vast differences in treatment and station between enslaved people and their slaveholding counterparts, the division of labor in the non-agricultural sphere inculcated the gendered labor ideologies of the planter class in the enslaved. Enslaved

¹²⁴ Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*, 26. According to Berry, on short-staple cotton plantations, enslaved people labored from 4:45 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. in the summer and 6:15 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. in the winter.

¹²⁵ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 50-51.

¹²⁶ Smith reports some distinctions during the threshing of rice when women were required to complete 500 sheaves, while men were required to complete 600. Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture*, 46.

women's roles as domestic surrogates, or at the very least supports, for slaveholding women established them as ubiquitous figures within the gendered hierarchy of the southern slaveholding household.¹²⁷ In a March 1833 letter from New Orleans, Georgia native Maria Bryan Harford Connell expressed the paradoxical mixture of indispensability and invisibility that characterized the culture of domestic labor in slavery. Discussing the illness of her servant Jenny with her sister Julia, Bryan remarked incredulously: "Jenny is sick, or at least keeps her chamber, for some days past and I have to depend upon Henny for everything—to cook, wash, milk, etc. Don't you pity me?"¹²⁸ Men and children also engaged in domestic service for slaveholders; yet the importation of Western European notions of gendered labor into the slave system ensured that the bulk of household tasks fell to enslaved women, even on the smaller plantations and farms where they also worked the fields.¹²⁹ More than any other enslaved group, women's labor obfuscated the house/field labor divide. The romantic, gender-biased notions of domestic work during slavery, which were frequently propagated by nostalgic slaveholders and sympathetic travelers, belied the long hours, diminished privacy,

¹²⁷ Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 65. In her discussion of southern, White notions of woman-gendered domesticity, Glymph brilliantly analyzes the relationship between the ideology of domesticity and racial ideologies of Black femaleness, arguing: "To function and to meet the standards of domesticity, the plantation household required the labor of enslaved women—to beautify, clean, order, and thus civilize it. At the same time, it required negative representations of enslaved women and their labor—filthy and disordered—to deny them consideration as anything more than tools of the civilizing mission."

¹²⁸ Maria Bryan, *Tokens of Affection: The Letters of a Planter's Daughter in the Old South*, ed. Carol Bleser (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 149. Bryan was born on January 1, 1808 in Mt. Zion in Hancock County, Georgia, 7 miles northwest of Sparta, which was the county seat. By 1820, Hancock County allegedly produced more cotton than any other Georgia county. The county was founded in 1793, and Maria's father migrated there shortly thereafter from Connecticut by way of Savannah. She grew up in a pious Presbyterian household with a father that was a member of the American Colonization Society, despite his ownership of enslaved people. Her sister Julia was married to the wealthy Henry Harford Cumming of Augusta. Xxiv - xxv.

¹²⁹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*, Revised (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 21. Jones estimates that only five percent of enslaved adults served in domestic roles exclusively during the antebellum period.

intimate violence, and heightened isolation of “house” labor that disproportionately affected women.¹³⁰

Moreover, the alliance of enslaved womanhood and domesticity extended beyond the domestic chores of plantations, farms, and businesses into the slave cabins. After hours, enslaved women’s second- and third-shift domestic work supported the entire work force and enabled some plantations and farms to achieve self-sufficiency. Women not only shouldered the bulk of the childrearing, cooking, and cleaning responsibilities in their households, but in some cases, performed domestic tasks for the corps of unmarried, enslaved men as a part of their second shift responsibilities.¹³¹ Many enslaved people’s definition of “work” as labor for slaveholders and other taskmasters rendered women’s second shift labors invisible. Yet, formerly enslaved Georgia woman Amanda Jackson recalled the particularly frenzied existence of women:

‘Every mornin’ de slaves had to git up an’ by de time it wuz light enuff to see dey had to be in de fiel’ workin’ ...’ Dey wuz in de fiel’ fore de sun rose an’ dere ‘till after it went down—fum sun to sun.’ ‘De fiel’ han’s had one hour fer dinner—dem dat had families done dere own cookin’ an’ dere wuz a special cook fer de single ones. De women whut had families would git up soon in de mornin’s ‘fore time to go to de fiel’ an’ put de

¹³⁰ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 24-25. Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe*, 44. Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 37-38. Glymph discusses the “warring intimacy” between slaveholding women and their female servants in plantation households and argues that such tensions force scholars to reexamine the notion of the household “as a space of domesticity apart from the public world of labor and labor disputes.”

¹³¹ Enslaved women’s second and third shift tasks are well-documented and appear throughout sources such as the WPA narratives. One formerly enslaved person remarked that women were allowed Saturday afternoons “off,” so that they could wash and repair clothing for their households and for the single men as well. Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 183. In addition to spinning thread, women’s second shift responsibilities also included the preparation and preservation of foods, soaps, and candles, sewing, weaving, and dying cloth. Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 29.

meat on to boil an' den dey would come in at dinner time an' put de vegetables in de pot to cook an' when dey come home in de evenin' dey would cook some corn breat in de ashes at de fireplace.'"¹³²

Additional duties were not the sole province of enslaved women, however. Some men were required to gin cotton, shell peas, and care for livestock following the cessation of their daytime labors.¹³³ Still, the breadth of women's ancillary labors stretched well beyond that of their male counterparts. Upon the completion of their household responsibilities, many women's days continued with the third-shift task of spinning thread into cloth for the production of blankets and clothing for the entire work force—a chore which frequently lasted well into the night.¹³⁴ This combination of labor for slaveholders and for the enslaved community contoured women's daily lives differently from men's and shaped gender norms amongst the enslaved.

Finally, the paradoxes of enslaved womanhood are not properly understood without attention to the relationship between the gendered labor ideologies of slavery and violence. Indeed, enslaved women and men's work cannot be divorced from the numerous iterations of psychological, physical, sexual, and sociocultural violence that compelled them to toil for others. As the infrastructural support for the entire system, violence was an omnipresent feature of enslavement. Although many enslaved people

¹³² Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 288-289. Many enslaved people characterized the time following their labor for Whites as time "off," yet it is during this time that many enslaved women performed domestic tasks for their household. One enslaved person remarked: "Nobody on our place had to wuk in de fields on Saddy evenin's. Dat was de time de 'omans washed deir clothes and cleaned up." Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 233.

¹³³ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 300-301.

¹³⁴ Formerly enslaved people reported that women worked to eleven or twelve o'clock in some instances. For one of many examples of enslaved women spinning at night, see Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 41, 93. According to historian Jacqueline Jones, many women were required to spin approximately three hundred yards, called a "cut," every night, and between four and five cuts on rainy and frosty days. Jones, *Labor of Love: Labor of Sorrow*, 29.

regarded sex-specific labor demarcations, or the lack thereof, as a normative feature of enslavement, their responses to violence against women revealed internally-authored nuances in the gender code. Spectacular acts of physical violence enacted towards women emerged as pronounced examples of slavery's brutality in the recollections of the formerly enslaved. Heard Griffin recalled the merciless beating of a pregnant woman named Hannah, which resulted in her death the same night. The psychological and emotional exigencies of enslavement are encoded in Griffin's succinct summation of the story: "Before day break he [the master] had carried the baby off and buried it. We never knew the burial place."¹³⁵

Memories of violence towards women were not limited to relations between master and enslaved. Bryant Huff narrated an altercation between his mother and a Black overseer, who attempted to discern the woman's whereabouts the previous evening and reported her to the master after she refused to answer his inquiries. Huff remembered the scene, as the overseer entered the cabin with the master, tied his mother's hands, and led her from the cabin she shared with him and his siblings. She was subsequently "carried quite a distance down the road and severely beaten."¹³⁶ Instances of violence such as those witnessed by Griffin and Huff abounded in planting and trade districts during slavery and represented only a small fraction of coercive methods deployed to maintain social hierarchies. Nevertheless, in every instance, various configurations of gendered labor and violence worked in tandem to assign meaning to female embodiment in slavery. The varieties of violent acts visited upon enslaved women and witnessed by the larger

¹³⁵ Ibid, 74.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 240.

community demarcated the boundaries of gender convention governing enslaved femaleness and infiltrated the collective psyche of enslaved men, women, and children.

Conclusion

Enslaved women, men, and children wrestled with the implications of their ontological designation as slaves, wombs' resignification, laborious daily existences, and violent subjugation in their religious consciousness and forged their sacred cultures amid the turmoil and challenges posed by such conditions. Indeed, the broader existential crisis of dismemberment—and the sacred cultures of re/membrance that developed in response to the crisis—cannot be fully comprehended without attention to the everyday, psychic and material iterations of dismemberment. These psychic and material iterations were profoundly gendered: the female presence in the enslaved lower South, specifically Georgia, changed the nature of the crisis of dismemberment for enslaved women, men, and children.

Although enslaved females' experiences of capture, transport, and sale paralleled, in many ways, the experiences of their male counterparts, the divergences point to the distinctiveness of women's enslavement. In an opening disclaimer, Nancy Boudry's interviewer apologized for Boudry's refusal to romanticize enslavement, declaring that: "Nancy's recollections of plantation days were colored to a somber hue by overwork, childbearing, poor food and long working hours."¹³⁷ Yet, Nancy's dour outlook likely echoed the sentiments of the majority of enslaved women, for whom the vacillation between the roles of reproductive and productive laborer fundamentally altered their existential questions. Their bodies, their wombs, and their children were currency in the

¹³⁷ Ibid, 113.

southern economy, therefore enslaved women's day-to-day, year-to-year existences were inextricably tied to the financial aims of the slaveholder and whims of the slave markets. Their femaleness bound them to the culture of sexual dismemberment that sustained American slavery. In such an environment, it is not remarkable that some women understood their self-worth monetarily, but rather, extraordinary that others did not. Instead, they constructed alternative systems of re/membrance, specifically ethical and "common sense" knowledge systems, aimed at survival and a better quality of life for themselves and their kin.

Chapter Two

The Sacred Womb: Ethics and Common Sense in the Lives of Enslaved Women

Introduction

During a hearing before the British House of Commons in 1791, seaman Isaac Parker described a horrific incidence of physical and psychological violence perpetrated against a female captive and her nine-month-old infant aboard the slaver *Black Joke* in 1765. According to Parker, the ship's captain, Thomas Marshall, severely beat the child with a cat o' nine tails and tied a thirteen-pound mango log around her neck over a series of days, in response to the child's refusal to receive sustenance from the breast and solid foods. Indifferent to the extent of psychological trauma experienced by the infant over the days or months spent in the slave trade, Marshall's severe response was designed to discourage other captive witnesses from engaging in voluntary starvation, a common act of individual and collective resistance aboard slave ships. While beating the child for the last time, he allowed her to drop from his hands to the deck, whereupon she died less than an hour later. To punctuate his cruel point, he instructed the child's mother to throw the infant's body overboard. She resisted, received a beating, and eventually complied. Consumed by grief, regret, and probably a host of other emotions, she "cried for several hours."¹³⁸

Although the West and West-Central African peoples who boarded European slavers were no strangers to infant death, the conditions under which they witnessed their children die, experienced childbirth, participated in sex, and reared their children shifted drastically as their bodies became the primary currency in a global trade. For the mother

¹³⁸ Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 286. The sex of the child is unknown.

of the tortured infant aboard *The Black Joke*, the child was likely one of the woman's last tangible ties to her family group, separated from her by the chambers of the slave ship, death, and/or an ever-widening expanse of ocean. For the other captive witnesses, the child's public torture, the mother's anguish, and the unceremonious disposal of the infant's body added to an expanding repository of harrowing images designed to indoctrinate them into the meanings of the enslaved body in the Americas. As *Black Joke* docked in South Carolina in 1765, the narrative of the mother and her infant child, along with similar tales of dismemberment, undoubtedly infiltrated the lowcountry and settled into the collective psyches of the surrounding enslaved communities.¹³⁹ Such stories of the journey to southern North American shores likely found their way to Georgia and circulated among the newly imported and country-born, in conjunction with tales of the auction block where children were literally and symbolically sold "away from their mother's breast" in colonial and antebellum narratives.

Whether experienced personally or through the memories of others, didactic tales concerning sex, reproduction and their social consequences informed enslaved people's concepts of being, morality, and sense. In the chronological and geographical space between West Africa and North America, the sexual lives of enslaved people acquired more complex meanings and ramifications—meanings and ramifications which

¹³⁹ Voyages Database, <http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1740&yearTo=1800&shipname=Black+Joke> (accessed July 10, 2014). According to the database, South Carolina was the principal point of disembarkation for the captives transported during the 1765 voyage of *Black Joke*. However, Joseph Marshall Pollard, and not Thomas Marshall, is listed as the captain of this voyage. Thomas Marshall is named as captain for the 1766 voyage of the ship, which landed in Barbados. I have chosen to adhere to the date provided in Rediker's account, given the possibility that Thomas Marshall could have been a part of the leadership on the 1765 voyage. Furthermore, according to the records in the *Voyages* database, Thomas Marshall was not the captain of another slaving vessel in 1765. Even if the incident occurred during the 1766 voyage to Barbados, it is not too far fetched to hypothesize the circulation of the story in the lowcountry, given the close ties between Georgia and South Carolina planters, and Anglophone Caribbean countries like Barbados.

communities confronted in the collection of familial memories, cautionary narratives, and proverbs that composed their moralistic communal texts. The resignification of African-descended women's wombs by their captors—more specifically, the reduction of the womb and its (re)productions to machinery in the account books of slaveholders—inaugurated an ontological modality in which enslaved people's social and biological processes carried monetary significance in a transcontinental economy. Arguably the most socially and psychologically disruptive method of dismemberment, the resignification of the womb informed a broader culture of sexual dismemberment, which authorized various forms of sexual exposure, compromised enslaved people's sexual choices, disassociated the biological process of reproduction from the social act of parenting, and routinized sexual violence.

Sexual dismemberment, the womb's resignification, and the consequent reduction of enslaved, African-descended peoples to human property created an existential problem for persons marked as slaves in body and law. As an existential problem, bondspeople contended with the implications of sexual dismemberment in their most private and intimate decisions, namely those regarding carnal and familial relationships. Given their physiological link to childbirth, social link to childrearing, and increased susceptibility to coercive sexual encounters, none were more familiar with the forms of sexual dismemberment normalized by enslavement and the attendant existential ramifications than enslaved women. Slaveholders' co-optation of female creative power transformed the womb into a site of ongoing struggle, wherein women fought to re-member their sexually dismembered selves and reclaim their creative power amid the onslaughts of slaveholders and their collaborators. They did so through the cultivation of womb ethics

and “common sense” knowledge cultures aimed at mitigating the social, psychological, and sexual trauma wrought by resignification and dismemberment, and improving their quality of life.

“Common sense” names the shared knowledge born of socialization into enslaved women’s communities and experience within enslaved female embodiment. It was a mode of perception—a recognition of female-specific concerns among women—that arose out of personal and collective experience. This shared sense enabled and sustained womb ethics—the woman-gendered ethical cultures that evolved in response to the womb’s resignification and the various forms of sexual dismemberment that accompanied female enslavement. Arising out of female-specific experiences of sexual dismemberment, “womb ethics” denotes the logic and processes through which enslaved women defined the evil and the good. Contrary to the Judeo-Christian concepts of right and wrong, womb ethics acknowledge the constraints dismemberment placed upon enslaved women’s choices, which preclude universalized notions of morality. For most enslaved people, ethical action was defined by the circumstances and constraining factors that contoured their choices. This situational ethic, indigenous to enslaved communities, acquired distinctive features when engaged by women.

As a part of a broader tradition of Black women’s moral reasoning, womb ethics emerged from the “everyday,” lived experiences of African-descended women, operated within a limited range of choices, and worked towards the development of coping strategies to preserve women’s humanity.¹⁴⁰ The particular aim of enslaved women’s

¹⁴⁰ Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 4. Cannon argues that, contrary to the presentation of Black women as pathological, Black women operate within an integrated, alternative ethical system, represented by the four ideas of invisible dignity, quiet grace, unshouted courage, and unctuousness, which grants them a positive self-valuation, even in moments of threatened humanity.

ethics was to re-member their sexual selves, reclaim their creative power, and ensure their children's survival, as well as their own. This emphasis upon the survival of self and community, the preservation of humanity, and ethical fluidity locates womb ethics within a womanist thought tradition. As womanist scholar Layli Phillips lays out, womanism “does not function by relating back to a set of rules or principles and evaluating whether one is in conformity. Rather it functions by constantly moving towards a horizon of healing and commonweal by whatever method seems best at the moment.”¹⁴¹ Though rooted in the experiences of enslaved females, womb ethics were not practiced by women alone. Rather, enslaved men and children also engaged strategies such as intentional forgetting, circumspect speech, and public exposure to mitigate the damaging effects of sexual dismemberment.

An examination of the ethics and “common sense” arising from women's sexual experiences not only offers a glimpse into the intimate, sacred lives of enslaved peoples, but reveals the ways female-specific bodies of knowledge shaped the interpretive lenses, norms, and behavioral codes of the entire enslaved community. In the aftermath of the chilling scene aboard *Black Joke*, some captive witnesses likely appealed to deities, ancestors, and all that would listen for redemption from their fates. Others, out of a sense of foreboding, dishonor, shame, pride, or defiance, either contemplated or gave themselves up to death. Whatever the response, the captives aboard the *Black Joke* undoubtedly began to register the cataclysmic shift in their ways of being and to devise

¹⁴¹ Layli Phillips, introduction to *The Womanist Reader*, in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006), xxxiv.

According to Phillips, womanism is, by nature, antioppressionist, vernacular, nonideological, communitarian, and spiritualized. She also asserts that the womanist label can be applied retrospectively. Theologian Delores Williams's argument that the desire for survival and a better quality of life for self and others characterized enslaved women's decision-making hinges upon an understanding of womanism as a challenge to any force that impedes the survival of Black women and their families. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 6-9.

methods for establishing a modicum of equilibrium amidst the turmoil. The plight of the woman and her offspring served as a harbinger of the experiences, dilemmas, and atrocities to come upon their disembarkation and dispersal throughout the lower South. Through these experiences, the enslaved became aware of the ways that the combination of their legal status and racial identification assigned new meanings to their sexual lives. Their rejoinders to these meanings became a basis for their ethical and “common sense” knowledge cultures, aimed at countering the dismemberment wrought by their enslavers, securing a better quality of life, and ensuring the enslaved community’s psycho-social survival.

Scenes of Dismemberment: Sexual Exposure and “Common Sense” Cultures of Protection

Even prior to West and West Central African captives’ arrival in the ports of Charleston and Savannah, racist theories of the innate licentiousness of African-descended people, notions of the sexual availability of female and male human property, and inclusion of bondspeople’s conjugal relationships within the purview of planter power converged to normalize the exposure of captive bodies within the culture of sexual dismemberment. European travelers to the African continent frequently deciphered West and West Central Africans’ customs in accordance with Western European gender and sexual norms. As a consequence, notions of the alleged sexual deviance of Africans populated transcontinental traveler accounts. Though threads of homoeroticism certainly appeared, the overwhelming dominance of the heteronormative, European male

perspective in traveler writings rendered West and West-Central African women's sexual habits more conspicuous in racialized discourses.¹⁴²

Published travelers to West Africa such as William Bosman and William Smith frequently alluded to the perceived libidinous nature of the women they encountered, and Bosman went so far as to suggest that the women of Guinea possessed a greater proclivity for carnality than their male counterparts.¹⁴³ Even Joseph Corry, a well-meaning advocate for the abolition of the slave trade, could not resist the temptation to impose gendered, European codes of conduct upon West African females' bodies. In his description of a dance performance in the Windward Coast, Corry noted "the females in particular, whose actions and shew [sic] of luxuriant pleasure are highly offensive to delicacy, exhibiting all the gradations of lascivious attitude and indecency."¹⁴⁴ In an attempt to vindicate the women's sensuality in the eyes of his readers, Corry followed the observation of the women's performance with a description of their hasty retreat to their matronly chaperones. He characterized the withdrawal as a demonstration of "ingenuous

¹⁴² Historian Jennifer Morgan has done extensive work on traveler accounts and the construction of sex-based, racial ideologies in the White imagination. She argues that movement of Africans to "Blacks" and then "slaves" did not occur in the initial moments of mass contact in settler societies, but rather happened first in the imaginations of potential settlers, fueled by the accounts of male travelers. Images of long-breasted African and Native American women who could suckle over their shoulders became central to lexicons of conquest. Moreover, the sagging breasts, along with tales of cannibalism and excessive fecundity, marked sexual and racial difference, consistent with the trope of mechanical and meaningless childbearing. The trope enabled the imagining of enslaved women as reproductive machines, capable of excessive physical labor. Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 13, 23, 36, 40. Also, Deborah Gray White begins her seminal work with an examination of the controlling images of the Mammy and Jezebel, which functioned to substantiate southern claims of the perfectly ordered, domesticity of the South and normalize the excessive sexual abuse of enslaved women, respectively.

¹⁴³ White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 29.

¹⁴⁴ Joseph Corry, *Observations upon the windward coast of Africa, the religion, character, customs, &c. of the natives; with a system upon which they may be civilized, and a knowledge attained of the interior of this extraordinary quarter of the globe; and upon the natural and commercial resources of the country: made in the years 1805 and 1806. With an appendix, containing a letter to Lord Howick, on the most simple and effectual means of abolishing the slave trade* (London, 1807), 67, *The Making of the Modern World*, <<http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/mome/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=MOME&userGroupName=emory&tabID=T001&docId=U3603226126&type=multipage&contentSet=MOMEArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>> (accessed July 16, 2014).

and amiable modesty” that “wretches only, degraded by debauchery and systematic vice, are capable of insulting...”¹⁴⁵ Clearly, Corry anticipated his readers’ responses and reprimanded his audience, even as he praised the subjects of his observation.

Most Western European observers of West and West Central African cultures did not share Corry’s judiciousness, however. The majority of travelers failed to grasp the nuances of non-European, gendered sexual conduct, and as a consequence, fantastical ideas regarding African women’s sexuality circulated in discourses preoccupying the European imagination. In her study of the co-production of race and gender through discourses on reproduction, historian Jennifer L. Morgan highlights the trope of “meaningless and mechanical childbearing” that populated early traveler writings and complemented the racist iconography of African women breastfeeding their children over their shoulders.¹⁴⁶

Yet, such unforgiving and fanciful images were not solely the productions of Western European men. While in Sierra Leone, Anna Maria Falconbridge, wife of abolitionist Alexander Falconbridge, read the native women’s bodies similar to her male counterparts, saying that the women were “very prolific” and kept “their breasts always suspended, which, after bearing a child or two, stretches out to an enormous length; disgusting to Europeans, though considered *beautiful* and *ornamental* here.”¹⁴⁷ The women’s alleged ability to give birth without pain and breastfeed without effort bespoke their sexual deviance and, more significantly, located West and West Central African

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 68.

¹⁴⁶ Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 40-45.

¹⁴⁷ Anna Maria Falconbridge, *Two Voyages to Sierra Leone During the Years 1791-2-3, In a Series of Letters* (London, 1794), 68, Empire Online, <http://www.empire.amdigital.co.uk.proxy.library.emory.edu/Documents/Images/Two%20Voyages%20to%20Sierra%20Leone%20During%20the%20Years%2017913/0>, (accessed July 17, 2014).

women outside of the curse of Eve presented in the first book of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁴⁸ In the absence of Eve's pain during childbearing, African females were not "women" within the gender mythology of Christianity, upon which European social norms were allegedly predicated. The combined images of African women as licentious and somehow removed from the category of "woman" supported notions of their sexual availability long before the first African female captive ever disembarked upon North American shores.

As might be imagined, the circulation of fantastical ideas regarding West and West Central African women's sexuality prior to their disembarkation in the Americas supported gross abuses of women's bodies once they cycled into the Trans-Atlantic trade. Although men, women, and children were subjected to the humiliation of defrocking prior to boarding slave vessels, the male dominance onboard slavers, coupled with Western European ideas regarding the relationship between women's dress and sexuality, heightened the significance of female captives' bodily exposure. The exposure of the women's bare breasts, even if normative in their originating contexts, bore different implications in the eyes of the crew members. What was mundane in some West and West Central African cultures became pornographic in European and North American contexts. For the crewmembers, the women's exposure signaled female captives' existence outside of the normative parameters of sexual propriety and conduct. Consequently, the men were "permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure," and, even in the eyes of slave trade veteran Alexander Falconbridge, were often "guilty of

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 47. In accordance with the *Genesis* myth, the penalty for Eve's transgression against God is pain during childbirth.

such brutal excesses, as disgrace human nature.”¹⁴⁹ The experience and witnessing of sexual assault in the holds of coastal slaving outposts and on board slaving vessels likely awakened captive women to the cultural meanings surrounding the exposure of their legs and breasts in their new contexts.

Ironically, the variant understandings of the pornographic among Western Europeans and West and West Central Africans did not inspire modesty in enslavers’ visual representations of African women. Early print advertisements for the auction of newly-imported captives frequently depicted an African man in a loin cloth and an African woman in a grass skirt, both with chests exposed.¹⁵⁰ In doing so, the advertisements visually validated the discourses of African primitiveness through homogenizing, stereotypical depictions and, more implicitly, reified gender-based racial taxonomies. Though male and female captives bore the consequences of such cultural humiliation, the exposure of eroticized parts of African women’s bodies in print representations sexualized them in the North American imagination and laid the groundwork for the sexual politics that would characterize Black and White relations in the Lower South.

As female captives and their descendants adapted to the cultural codes of their European captors and recognized the sexual implications of bodily exposure, the connotations of nakedness among them aligned more closely with those of their enslavers.

¹⁴⁹ Alexander Falconbridge, *An account of the slave trade on the coast of Africa, by Alexander Falconbridge, Late Surgeon in the African Trade*, Second edition (London, 1788) *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale. Emory University Robert W. Woodruff Library. <http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=emory&tabID=T001&docId=CW104935646&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>. (accessed July 21, 2014)

¹⁵⁰ See for instance, the advertisement for the sale of Windward Coast captives: “[To be sold, on board the ship Bunce Island, negroes just arrived from the Windward and Rice Coast].” Photographic Print. From Library of Congress. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98503865/>.

In the aftermath, bodily exposure evolved into a tool of punishment and humiliation wielded by members of the enslaving establishment. Although captive men in certain regions of Georgia during the late 18th century continued to wear small amounts of clothing while performing arduous tasks, as slavery settled and matured in the region, southerners centralized overt displays of public nakedness in the auction block and the whipping post.¹⁵¹ Buyers' and sellers' definition of enslaved people's physical and mental health in terms of the concept of "soundness" in the antebellum domestic slave trade granted potential slaveowners and their proxies legal and cultural license to inspect the unclothed bodies of bondspeople in the slave pens and examination areas of active auction sites.¹⁵²

Soundness relied upon the presumption that enslaved people's physical bodies could be "read" and correlated with their monetary valuation. Since fecundity factored heavily into enslaved women's monetary worth in the slave economy, the inspection of women's bodies often involved crude and invasive examinations at the hands of potential buyers and insuring doctors, who checked for evidence of venereal disease, prolapsed

¹⁵¹ Mrs. Smith Journal, 1793 (unpublished), 10-11, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University. Smith recorded her journey to Savannah and the Sea Islands with her husband between February 3, 1793 and June 12, 1793. While walking along an area river, she observes the wharf "where the Sons of Slavery half naked were rolling up Hogs-head[?] of Rum upon the Bluff which is so steep and Sandy as to be difficulty to assend [sic] others carrying Stone [Stove] ballast out of ships..." Still, "nakedness" must be qualified in the consideration of enslaved people, since 17th, 18th, and 19th century European dress conventions, coupled with enslaved people's reliance upon slaveholders for clothing, meant that bondspeople were frequently in various states of undress. I limit my analysis here to the auction block and whipping post for the sake of brevity. However, I acknowledge that there were a number of public spaces, in which enslaved people were exposed.

¹⁵² Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Health, Healing, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 20-23. In the first chapter of her book, Fett explores the concept of soundness and enslaved people's responses to the monetary assessment of their physical and mental health. According to Fett, due to the frequency and severity of warranty suits, Georgia buyers were expected to acquire a warranty of soundness from the seller at the time of sale. In doing so, the buyer forfeited the right to sue, in the event that the enslaved person was found to be unwell after purchase. According to historian Walter Johnson, the majority of enslaved people who cycled into the domestic slave trade were sold through private transactions brokered in the slave pens managed by slave dealers, and not at auction. See Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 7.

uterus, and/or nursing ability.¹⁵³ In his observation of a Virginia auction, abolitionist James Redpath described in dramatic detail the sale of a “poor black mother—with her nearly white babe” on her breast and her seven year-old daughter at her side:

Twelve hundred and fifty dollars were bid for her, but she was not sold. She was worth, a Virginian told me, ‘fifteen hundred dollars of any man’s money.’...She was ‘warranted sound and healthy,’ with the exception of a female complaint, to which mothers are occasionally subject, the name and nature of which was unblushingly stated.

She was taken into the inner room, after the bidding commenced, and there indecently ‘*examined*’ in the presence of a dozen or fifteen brutal men. I did not go in, but was told, by a spectator, coolly, that ‘they’d examined her,’ and the brutal remarks and licentious looks of the creatures when they came out, was evidence enough that he had spoken the truth.¹⁵⁴

Two-thirds of the one million enslaved people who were relocated to Lower South states, like Georgia and South Carolina, between the Revolutionary era and the Civil War were moved through the domestic slave trade in Upper South states, such as Virginia and Maryland. It is highly likely that a percentage of Georgia bondswomen endured a similar experience of sale.¹⁵⁵

Like the slave ships, the slave pens and auctions of the Trans-Atlantic and domestic human trade were primarily male spaces. Regardless of the sexual inclinations

¹⁵³ Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 263-264.

¹⁵⁴ James Redpath, *The Roving Editor, or Talks with Slaves in the Southern States*, ed. John R. McKivigan (1859; Reprint, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 218.

¹⁵⁵ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 5.

or intentions of potential buyers, the power to expose and examine enslaved people's bodies, particularly women's bodies, constituted a form of sexual dismemberment often overlooked amid rape narratives. Pornographic portrayals of Black women's bodies became so integral to North American interpretations of Black femaleness, that the lewd eroticism of bodily examination during sale was rendered normative. The impropriety of such transactions was not lost upon all slave auction participants, however. In response to the sale of the mother and her children, Redpath remarked bleakly that he "would have either been less than a man, or more, to have looked on stoically or with indifference as she and her little ones were sold."¹⁵⁶

Yet, many White and slaveholding southerners bore silent or apathetic witness to the scenes of public humiliation enacted upon enslaved people, especially in regards to punitive measures. Even though enslaved men and women were generally required to disrobe—at least to the waist—in order to receive a lashing, the eroticization of female breasts in Euro-North American cultures heightened the sexualized perception of women's nakedness at the whipping post. On the Butler plantation, women were suspended from a tree or post either by their wrists or thumbs with their clothes rolled to their waists, whereupon they were whipped with a cowhide. Much to the astonishment of mistress Fanny Kemble, the enslaved woman from whom she gleaned the information about punitive practices on the plantation did not regard the ritual as "anything strange, unusual, or especially horrid and abominable," even though pregnant women endured the punishment as well.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Redpath, *Roving Editor*, 218.

¹⁵⁷ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 109-110.

All enslaved women did not voice such a dispassionate response to displays of routinized public nakedness and punishment, however. In an unconcealed articulation of outrage, one formerly enslaved Georgia woman recounted her resistance to her young master's sexual advances and her subsequent exile to the courthouse, where enslaved people frequently suffered public whippings and other forms of disciplinary violence as punishment for alleged transgressions:

My young marster tried to go with me, and 'cause I wouldn't go with him to[o] pretended I had done somethin' and beat me. I fought him back because he had no right to beat me for not goin' with him. His mother got mad with me for fightin' him back and I told her why he had beat me. Well then she sent me to the courthouse to be whipped for fightin' him. They had stocks there where most people would send their slaves to be whipped. These stocks was in the shape of a cross, and they would strap your clothes up around your waist and have nothin' but your naked part out to whip. They didn't care about who saw your nakedness. Anyway they beat me that day until I couldn't sit down. When I went to bed I had to lie on my stomach to sleep. After they finished whippin' me, I told them they needn't think they had done somethin' by strippin' me in front of all them folk 'cause they had also stripped their mamas and sisters. God has made us all, and he made us just alike.¹⁵⁸

As evidenced by the woman's recounting, sex and violence were inextricably linked in the design and execution of the mechanisms of enslavement. The narrator's frequent references to her nakedness during the public whipping, as well as the rare, public

¹⁵⁸ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 293-294.

declaration that her master had “no right” to violate her either sexually or physically, suggest that the indecency and immorality of the status quo was not lost upon a number of enslaved women.

The elision of gender distinctions in punitive practices evinced the moral and theological depravity of enslaving systems and, most significantly, violated enslaved people’s common sense notions of woman-gendered sexual propriety. The woman’s bold reference to her abusers’ “mamas and sisters” prove that, as a part of their common sense consciousness, some if not most, enslaved women recognized the hypocrisy of southerners’ concepts of White female modesty and purity, when juxtaposed against spectacular public displays of Black women’s naked bodies. By evoking the presence of southern White women in her moment of humiliation, the woman contested the segregation of southern White and enslaved Black women’s bodies in the White imagination, and asserted her rightful place within the gender conventions that acknowledged the impropriety of female nakedness in public space.

Like their female counterparts, enslaved males often alluded to how the lines between sex and violence blurred in punitive situations involving women, and in the process, revealed the sordid extremes of bodily exposure. The routinization of public scenes of violence towards unclothed or partially clothed female enslaved bodies enabled some members of the slaveholding establishment to give full expression to their sadistic impulses.¹⁵⁹ Born during the final years of legal slavery, Charlie Hudson recounted the sadism of the overseer on his plantation: “Dat overseer, he was a clever man, but I can’t ricollect his name... He had whuppin’s all time saved up special for de ‘omans. He made

¹⁵⁹ Deborah Gray White offers a number of examples of sexual sadism, including the instance of a thirteen year-old Georgia girl, who was beaten on all fours “until froth ran from her mouth.” White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 33.

‘em take off deir waistes and den he whupped ‘em on deir bar backs ’til he was satisfied. He done all de whuppin’ atter supper by candle light. I don’t ‘member dat he ever whupped a man. He jus’ whupped ‘omans.’”¹⁶⁰ Some overseers’ sadistic appetites craved more spectacular displays of bodily exposure and public humiliation. Henry Gowens, who was enslaved through adulthood in a number of states, discussed one overseer’s practice of forcing enslaved women to bend over cotton baskets with their skirts over their heads, as he flogged them mercilessly for not picking cotton quickly enough. The overseer would do so “without reference to any particular condition they might be in at the time”—a delicate allusion to the indiscriminate punishment of pregnant, nursing, ill, and otherwise indisposed women.¹⁶¹ At times, the violent sexual fetishes of overseers and masters extended beyond enslaved women to include other actors. The same overseer occasionally required the woman’s husband to assist in her punishment in order to, in Gowens’ words, “cramp down the mind of the husband.”¹⁶²

Although less frequently discussed, enslaved males were also subjected to sadistic forms of homoerotic violence. Enslaved throughout his boyhood, George Womble, recalled his master’s practice of whipping “especially us boys, just to give himself a little fun.”¹⁶³ The boys’ bodies would be tied “to form an angle” as they were whipped, and upon the completion of the whipping, they were required to respond to the thinly veiled

¹⁶⁰ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 225. Hudson was born March 27, 1858 to enslaved parents. Given his young age upon emancipation, it is probable that he acquired this knowledge from his mother or other adults, who lived on the plantation.

¹⁶¹ Drew, *The Refugee*, 98-99. Upon learning of this practice from an older enslaved woman, the mistress complained to the master, whereupon the master installed restrictions upon how the overseer punished women. Following the master’s intervention, the overseer was no longer permitted to raise the women’s skirts, but rather, had to observe the more widespread practice of removing the women’s clothing from the waist up.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 180.

sexual query, “Who do you belong to?”¹⁶⁴ No doubt, the language and legal rights of ownership and property created a ripe environment for routine displays of sexual humiliation, such as those witnessed at the auction block and whipping post, as well as more taboo demonstrations of sadistic behavior, namely those enacted against children and by candlelight.

All acts of violence—whether physical, psychological, or sexual—were carefully calibrated to indoctrinate new and natal captives into the ideologies that sustained the social caste system. Yet acts perpetrated against women and children carried a heightened psychosocial impact amid the routine horrors enumerated in the narratives of the enslaved. A formerly enslaved man by the name of John described the admixture of pain, anger, and helplessness that he experienced as his ten year-old daughter Nancy was regularly blindfolded and beaten “half to death” in front of him and his wife: “I tell you, my heart would bleed sometimes when I’d see how my child was treated. I could do nothing for my wife and children. I was not allowed to open my mouth.”¹⁶⁵ The sorrow reverberated in John’s memory. According to interviewer Octavia Rogers Albert, John could “hardly suppress the tears from his eyes while relating the sad condition of his wife and the inhuman abuse of his daughter when he left them in Georgia, although it had been many years.”¹⁶⁶ In a statement intended to illustrate the remarkable cruelty of Georgia enslavement, Henry Crowthon of Kentucky contemptuously recalled that planters and/or overseers used “bucking-paddles” on women on the farms surrounding

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Octavia V. Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves* (1890; Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 66-67).

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

Savannah.¹⁶⁷ Despite the heightened visibility of eroticized violence towards women, humiliation through public stripping, nakedness, and violence was a tool of psychosocial control wielded against all segments of the enslaved population. Enslaved women, men, and children's recognition of gross violations of propriety, in spite of slaveholders' efforts to normalize scenes of sexualized public violence, evinced the existence of common sense gender and sexual norms, emanating primarily from the experiences of women, yet indigenous to the entire community.

Public nakedness was not the sole means of enslaved women's sexual exposure within the culture of dismemberment, however. The matrix of sex, violence, and gender witnessed in commercial and punitive spaces branded and exposed Black womanhood in public discourse as well. Sketches of sexual violations perpetrated against enslaved women became a dominant image in anti-slavery writings, as abolitionists waged a moral war with pro-slavery apologists. Although well-meaning, the images fed the culture of voyeurism surrounding enslaved women's bodies and sexual lives, and sexually exposed enslaved women through discourse. Written during a tour of the southern states in 1852 and 1853, C.G. Parsons's anti-slavery travel narrative deployed sexualized images of violence against enslaved women to counteract the moralistic proclamations of pro-slavery advocates and northern perceptions of Black female libidinousness:

The female slaves cannot be otherwise than degraded. Subjected at all times to the passions of the whites, chastity and refinement are out of the question. They are stripped entirely naked to be punished, not only on the plantations, but by the city marshals in the cities, to whom the masters send them for this purpose. And often they are exposed in public for sale,

¹⁶⁷ Drew, *The Refugee*, 180.

in the same condition. Let the Northern tourist visit the slave market, or the whipping post, and he will frequently behold scenes at which the most degraded African, just imported, would hang his head in shame! A slave woman, entirely naked, surrounded by a profane and vulgar crowd, while she writhes under the lash, or is offered, for purposes of prostitution, to the highest bidder! Such is the ‘Christianizing influence’ of which the advocates of the slave trade so loudly boast!¹⁶⁸

The early alliance of African femaleness with carnality in the European imagination undoubtedly validated southerners’ vindications of slavery on account of its civilizing and/or Christianizing effects, even in the eyes of non-slaveholding northerners. For this reason, Parsons and other abolitionists frequently presented enslaved women as victims of circumstance.

Still, the widespread perception of enslaved women’s sexual deviance, in contrast to the alleged chastity of White women, along with the prevalence of the heteronormative, male perspective in public discourse yielded a disproportionate interest in the sexual lives of enslaved women. In an 1863 interview with the American Freedman’s Inquiry Commission, Georgia-born Harry McMillan initially responded to questions regarding enslaved people’s social practices, yet the line of inquiry quickly turned to enslaved women’s sexual habits:

Q. What induces a colored man to take a wife?

A. Well; since this affair there are more married than ever I knew

before, because they have a little more chance to mind their families and

¹⁶⁸ C.G. Parsons, MD, *Inside View of Slavery: or a Tour Among the Planters* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1855), 295.

make more money to support their families. In secesh times there was not much marrying for love. A man saw a young woman and if he liked her he would get a pass from his Master to go where she was. If his owner did not choose to give him the pass he would pick out another woman and make him live with her, whether he loved her or not.

Q. Colored women have a good deal of sexual passion, have they not? they all go with men?

A. Yes, Sir, there is a great deal of that. I do not think you will find five out of a hundred that do not; they begin at 15 and 16.

Q. Do they know any better?

A. They regard it as a disgrace and the laws of the Church are against it.

Q. They sometimes have children before marriage?

A. Yes, Sir; but they are thought less of among their companions, unless they get a husband before the child is born, and if they cannot the shame grows until they do get a husband. Some join a Church when they are 10 years old and some not until they are 20; the girls join mostly before the men, but they are more apt to fall than the men. When ever a person joins the Church, no matter how low he had been, he is always respected. When the girls join the Church after a while they sometimes become weary and tired and some temptation comes in and they fall.

Sometimes the Masters, where the Mistress was a pious woman, punished

the girls for having children before they were married. As a general thing the Masters did not care, they like the colored women to have children.

Q. Suppose a son of the Master wanted to have intercourse with the colored woman was he at liberty?

A. No, not at liberty, because it was considered a stain on the family, but the young men did it. There was a good deal of it. They often kept one girl steady and sometimes two on different places; men who had wives did it too sometimes, if they could get it on their own place it was easier but they would go wherever they could get it.¹⁶⁹

The Commission's interview with South Carolinian Robert Smalls assumed an even more salacious tone:

Q. Have not colored women a good deal of sexual passion?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Are they not carried away by their passion to have intercourse with men?

A. Yes, sir; but very few lawful married women are carried away if their husbands take care of them.

Q. How is it with young women?

A. They are very wild and run around a great deal.

Q. What proportion of the young women do not have sexual intercourse before marriage?

¹⁶⁹ John W. Blasingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 381-382.

A. The majority do, but they do not consider this intercourse an evil thing. This intercourse is principally with white men with whom they would rather have intercourse than with their own color.

Q. Do they do this for money?

A. The majority of the young girls will for money.

Q. At what age do the colored girls begin to have intercourse with white men?

A. I have known them to as young as twelve years.

Q. What proportion of the colored girls join the Church?

A. Most all the girls join the Church. Generally between 15 and 16 years of age they go through a certain probation and are admitted as members. No matter how bad a girl may have been as soon as she joins the Church she is made respectable.

Q. Does this joining the Church make a difference in their conduct?

A. Yes, sir; the change is very great—as great as between the sunshine and a hail-storm. She stops all this promiscuous intercourse with men. The rules of the Church are strict about it.¹⁷⁰

As evidenced by the interviews, public discourse surrounding enslaved life frequently transgressed the boundaries of propriety and either teetered on the edge of or trespassed into sexual voyeurism. Most bondspeople rarely, if ever, enjoyed sexual privacy. However, the public interest in slave courtship, sex, and reproduction hinged on narratives and information about the sexual conventions and exigencies of enslaved womanhood, even though, in a cruel twist of irony, enslaved women rarely publicly

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 375-376.

narrated their own stories. It is difficult to tell whether McMillan and Smalls were aware of the ways their and other male-narrated accounts of women's sexuality affected enslaved women's everyday experiences, and to gauge the accuracy of their depictions. Nevertheless, it is evident that some facets of the White American public indulged their fascination with sex, more specifically the exoticized sex of non-White females, in their discursive productions about enslaved people.

Thus, the physical and discursive dimensions of sexual exposure converged to create an environment in which enslaved women's bodies were constantly on display. In response, enslaved women and men fashioned ethical codes of conduct and common sense modes of sexual protection, aimed at mitigating the dismemberment of sexual exposure. Not surprisingly, the principle of modesty figured prominently in indigenous, woman-gendered codes of conduct. Formerly enslaved Georgia woman Lucy McCullough recalled an incident during which her mother deemed her dress too short and took immediate action to rectify the breach in aesthetic propriety: ““She tuk it offen me, en rip out de hem, en ravel at de aig’ er little, en den fus’ thing I knows, she got dat dress tail on ter de loom, en weave more cloff on hit, twel it long enuf, lak she want it.””¹⁷¹

The hasty response of McCullough's mother bespoke the gravity of voluntary bodily exposure in the moral ecology of her enslaved community. McCullough's mother, like so many bondswomen, recognized the limited degree of control enslaved females exercised over when and how their bodies were displayed, and consequently, sought to exert her moral agency in reference to a mundane aspect of female decorum, namely her daughter's dress length. In her enforcement of woman-gendered ethical codes, McCullough's mother also transmitted a female-specific, common sense lesson on gender

¹⁷¹ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives, Part III*, 69.

propriety to her daughter. In this way, enslaved women's womb ethics and common sense knowledge cultures were created and perpetuated. Decades after the end of slavery, Lucy McCullough reflected upon the gendered codes of conduct observed by her mother and other enslaved women, commenting nostalgically that "'omans en gals, day stayed kivvered up better den."¹⁷²

Modesty had its limitations, however. For this reason, enslaved people sometimes used exposure, in the form of the public shaming of others, to enforce and reify indigenous ethical mores. As Priscilla McCullough of Darien, GA reported, some of the public shaming rituals deployed in the lowcountry re/membered West and West Central African protocols aimed at the sexual censure of young women:

'I heahd many time bout how in Africa wen a girl dohn ack jis lak dey should dey drum uh out uh town. Dey jis beat duh drum, an call uh name on duh drum an duh drum say bout all duh tings she done. Dey drum an mahch long and take duh girl right out uh town. "Girls hab tuh be keahful den. Dey caahn be so trifling lik some ub em is now. In Africa dey gist punished. Sometime wen dey bin bad, dey put um on duh banjo. Dat wuz in dis country...' 'Wen dey play dat night, dey sing bout dat girl an dey tell all about uh. Das putting uh on duh banjo.

Den ebrybody know an dat girl sho bettuh change uh ways.'¹⁷³

As a communal form of public exposure indigenous to the U.S. Southern enslaved culture, being "put on the banjo" served a didactic purpose. The practice not only used humiliation to ensure individuals' compliance with ethical norms, but also outlined the

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 154.

boundaries of acceptable female conduct for the entire community. Similar to individual women's quick action on their daughters' and other female kin's behalf, communal censure via public exposure helped to define for participants the ethical rules governing female propriety. It served as a vehicle for the dissemination of insider knowledge, and through the inculcation of a shared ethical value system, helped to contour the boundaries of enslaved communities. Moreover, communally recognized ethical guidelines provided the basis for a shared, "common" sense.

While public exposure served a moralistic purpose among insiders, enslaved people also used exposure to shame communal outsiders and thus force acknowledgment of indigenous ethical systems through identification of the unethical. In an inversion of the culture of dismemberment, one enslaved woman on the Butler estate "tore up her scanty clothing" and bore her body to mistress Fanny Kemble as evidence of the savage effects of "childbearing and hard field labor."¹⁷⁴ The woman's display was designed to alert Kemble to the psychosomatic effects of dismemberment, specifically (re)productive dismemberment, and decry slaveholders' amorality through a presentation of the bodily consequences of their indiscriminate policies. By bearing somatic witness to the impact of enslavement upon female bodies, the woman presented her mistress with material evidence of dismemberment.

Moreover, the protest evinced enslaved women's understandings of the ethical and unethical uses of their bodies as legal chattel. Although it goes without saying that the woman, like most enslaved people, would have preferred to control her (re)productive labor, the objective of her protest—to exact a change in policies around childbearing and confinement on the plantation—must be understood within the survival/quality-of-life

¹⁷⁴ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*, 9.

paradigm. Through her ethical protest, she sought to re-member herself by attaining a better quality-of-life for herself and others as *enslaved* women. Though the material outcomes of the woman's demonstration are difficult to gauge, her protest hit its affective mark. Upon the woman's public baring of her body, Kemble was treated to a "spectacle with which [she] was inconceivably shocked and sickened."¹⁷⁵

Despite the affective impact of the above-enslaved woman's bodily protest, many enslaved people chose other means of public exposure to register their objections to slaveholding practices they deemed unethical. Strategic verbal communication was one of the most frequently deployed protest strategies within enslaved women's ethical repertoires, particularly in regards to sexual violence. When enslaved women publicly exposed their stories, they selected their audiences and crafted their narratives in accordance with their principle motive: to survive and improve their quality of life. Sophy, an enslaved servant on the Butler estate, disclosed her intimate contact with a White mill worker to mistress Fanny Kemble, but only did so in response to Kemble's probe, prompted by Sophy's admission that she had children, but "had never had any husband."¹⁷⁶ No doubt, Sophy's initial decision to conceal her story hinged upon complex calculations of the risks and benefits of disclosure. In the end, Kemble's power to grant or deny Sophy's request for a bag of rice, the primary motivation for Sophy's visit to her mistress, overrode the potentially perilous repercussions of her revelation. Enslaved women's womb ethics dictated that survival and quality of life trump reticence.

Even when enslaved women remained publicly silent about their experience, their reticence could not, and often did not impede others' observations of the various forms of

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 126-127.

sexual violence perpetrated against them. Though enslaved males recognized blatant transgressions of the boundaries of sexual propriety, the common sense of enslaved femaleness—specifically, the knowledge born of socialization into enslaved women’s communities and experience within enslaved female embodiment— enabled other enslaved women to more readily observe the evidence of sexual trauma. Women’s common sense observations, coupled with the shared confidences of homosocial spaces, cultivated shared knowledges amongst enslaved women. Upon delivering her second child with the White mill worker, Sophy shared hospital space with Judy and Sylla—two enslaved women who had also recently given birth to biracial offspring. The father of Judy’s and Sylla’s newly born children was none other than the Butler plantation overseer, Roswell King.¹⁷⁷ Whether Sophy was aware of the paternity of Judy’s and Sylla’s children prior to the encounter in the hospital or gleaned the information in the shared space of the postpartum recovery room, she shared in the knowledge and peril of Judy’s and Sylla’s predicament. She, along with Judy and Sylla, endured the jealousy of Mrs. King, who had the women severely flogged and sent to the punitive, Five Pound swamp, a little under a month into their recovery. Sophy’s recognition of the two other women’s sexual dismemberment originated from a common sense that stemmed from shared experiential, corporeal, and spoken understandings.

This common sense enabled enslaved women to cultivate ethical cultures that included the public exposure of sexual abuses on behalf of others—a type of communicative surrogacy. Sophy exposed Judy’s and Sylla’s perpetrator to Kemble, as well as the dire ramifications of powerful White men’s sexual coercion, in her communication. By sharing the illicit knowledge to which she, Judy, Sylla, and other

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

similarly compromised women were privy with Kemble, Sophy rendered the covert sexual practices of plantation men public. Knowledge only became public when shared with members outside of the “sense” community; Sophy and other women clearly possessed ready knowledge of the sexual happenings within their communities. Despite the potentially perilous consequences, Sophy likely understood her exposure of hers and others’ humiliation as an opportunity to publicly shame Roswell King and, in doing so, to impede the repetition of similarly abusive practices on the plantation.

Thus, though the discussion of intimate knowledge with outsiders constituted a dire step, it was frequently aimed at survival and an improved quality of life. In a similar move on a Virginia plantation, Aunt Dinah, a “religious old woman” who served as the nurse for enslaved children while their mothers were in the field, recognized “how cruelly the women were treated” and “at last, when the master was absent, picked up courage to go to the mistress and complain of the dealings of the overseer.”¹⁷⁸ In particular, Dinah highlighted the sexual intimacies between enslaved women and the overseer, and the overseer’s sadistic practice of flogging women with their bottoms exposed. Her strategy of exposing the overseer to the mistress was apparently successful. As a result of Dinah’s protest, the master intervened and required the overseer to observe the normative practice of flogging women on their backs.¹⁷⁹ The unique position within the enslaved communal hierarchy afforded by Dinah’s advanced age and recognized piety empowered her to name the immoral alliance of sex and violence in punitive practices towards women and to force recognition of sexual impropriety. Although Dinah’s intervention most likely did not eradicate the sexually coercive culture of the plantation, her exposure of

¹⁷⁸ Drew, *The Refugee*, 98-99. Although this incident occurs in Virginia, enslaved women in Georgia likely used similar strategies.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

violations against silenced women on her plantation undoubtedly attenuated the instance of rape and public humiliation. Like the Butler plantation women, Dinah wielded public exposure to mitigate other enslaved women's sexual exposure. Dinah's location in Virginia suggests that such interventions characterized women's cultures throughout the South.

Though a few enslaved women readily chose to brave the potentially calamitous consequences to expose their illicit liaisons with powerful men, the frequent power discrepancy between the perpetrators and their victims contributed to a culture of reticence around coerced intimacies, even when the circumstances of such intimacies were known. When asked about his parentage, Renty—a young “mulatto” on the Butler estate—identified his mother as “Betty, head man Frank's wife” and named “Mr. King” as his father.¹⁸⁰ In response to Kemble's question of whether he referred to the elder Mr. King or his son, Renty replied that he was too “ashamed” to ask his mother, and disclosed that he had only learned the identity of his father from the children of a neighboring plantation.¹⁸¹ Clearly, some women chose not to discuss the traumatic aspects of their lives, even with their own children.¹⁸²

This decision not to disclose details of certain traumatic events, at times, represented more than a trauma-induced reserve: it was an attempt to re-member through the excision, or exclusion, of dismembering memories. Intentional forgetting, or dis-

¹⁸⁰ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*, 114.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. Kemble later confirmed Renty's admission with “old House Molly,” which further testifies to the widespread knowledge of Betty's violation amongst enslaved people on the Butler estate and beyond. Molly also confirmed that Renty was born when Betty was already married to Frank. Although described as “young” by Kemble, Renty's speech suggests that he is not a young child at the time of his interview with his mistress.

¹⁸² Some enslaved women also withheld information about childbirth from their young daughters, in an attempt to usher them slowly into womanhood. See White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 96. Given Renty's age at the time of his conversation with Kemble, it is unclear whether his mother would have eventually divulged some of the details surrounding his birth.

remembering, was a tool of psychosocial survival.¹⁸³ Susan Castle, a formerly enslaved woman, used the language of “disremember,” which suggests that the term was a part of the parlance and psychic structure of the formerly enslaved. Despite the willingness of women and children of the Butler estate to name assailants, few interviewees of biracial ancestry or with biracial siblings, knew or chose to disclose the identities of the fathers. Formerly enslaved Georgia woman Minnie Davis’s careful narration of her mother’s sexual history in a WPA interview reveals how enslaved women adopted and instilled in their children ways of remembering that resisted dismemberment:

“Aggie Crawford was my mother and she was married to Jim Young. My only sister was Mariah, and my three brothers were Ned, John, and Jim. Ned was a mulatto. I know who his father was, but of course you won’t ask me that. I wouldn’t want to expose my own mother or the man who was Ned’s father. I was quite a small child during the war period, and I can tell you very little of that time, except the things my mother told me when I grew old enough to remember.”¹⁸⁴

Davis communicated the aberrant ancestry of one of her brothers, but in a skillful, protective gesture, shielded her mother from public scrutiny.

Though speech and silence seemingly resided at opposite ends of enslaved women’s ethical spectrums, women learned when and how to wield the two simultaneously in order to survive and improve their quality of life. Dinah, Sophy, and others communicated details of illicit interactions between powerful men and enslaved

¹⁸³ See Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 178. The concept of disremembering has been most eloquently theorized by author Toni Morrison in her use of the terms “disremember” and “rememory” in the fictional work *Beloved*. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 274-275.

¹⁸⁴ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 253.

women to their sympathetic mistresses in hopes of improving conditions for themselves and others. Yet, their disclosures also pointed towards the pervasiveness of knowledge about the sexual abuse of enslaved women—born of shared confidences and experiences—amongst enslaved women. As evidenced by Minnie Davis’s and Renty’s disclosures, enslaved women frequently socialized their male and female children into a similar ethic of measured communication surrounding enslaved females’ sexual lives. This ethic grew out of a recognition of the extent of involuntary, public exposure to which enslaved women were routinely subjected and the peril oftentimes associated with exposure, which prompted women to carve out spaces of sexual privacy and protection.

Circumstance and Response: Coercive Sex and Assertions of Sexual Choice

Still, despite their efforts at privacy and protection through ethical prescriptions regarding speech, silence, and memory, enslaved women occupied a central position in the erotic, national imagination, and the preoccupation with captive female bodies supported a fascination with their sexual lives. Of these fascinations, none were more discursively and materially conspicuous than the sexual relationships between White men and enslaved Black women and girls. Public interpretations of such relationships ranged from unsympathetic notions of enslaved women as acquiescent mistresses in pursuit of social and monetary gain (as insinuated by Smalls’s interviewer) to romantic fancies of un-coerced affection and marital bliss, as depicted in Mary Hayden Pike’s 19th-century novel *Caste*.¹⁸⁵ In reality, enslaved women’s experiences of and responses to sex with

¹⁸⁵ Thomas, Ella Gertrude Clanton, *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr and Gertrude T. Despeaux (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 147-148. In the novel, the daughter of a “mulatto” slave becomes engaged to a White man, but the engagement is terminated upon discovery of her Black racial identity. The man

White men spanned the spectrum from coercion to consent. Yet, the disproportionate power of White males within the race-based caste system, coupled with the marriage of lasciviousness and availability in the social and legal construction of Black womanhood, blurred the denotative boundaries of both categories. Throughout the colonial and antebellum periods, “passions” served as the explanation for socially acceptable (i.e. heterosexual, marital) sexual desire, as well as aberrant and violent sexual acts: “consensual acts could be physically forceful, and rape could originate in consensual sexual relations.”¹⁸⁶ The normalization of physical force in sexual desire prevented the erection of boundaries between coercion and consent, particularly in interactions between White males and women ethnically or socioeconomically outside the bounds of sexual propriety.

As a result, slaveholding societies recognized few, if any, markers of sexual coercion, distress, and/or trauma in relationships between enslaved women and White men. Many, including some anti-slavery advocates, held fast to the view that enslaved women often tempted White men into sexual relationships in order to increase hers and her offspring’s value within the social economy of slavery. Although Benjamin Drew’s *The Refugee: A North-Side View of Slavery* aimed to attenuate the positive presentation of slavery presented in Boston minister Nehemiah Adams’s 1854 *A South-Side View of Slavery*, the book’s overwhelmingly male, ex-slave sources, coupled with Drew’s

eventually overcomes his race-based caste aversion and marries the woman in Italy. Georgia’s own Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas describes the novel in her journal and, despite her slightly more progressive views on race, admits that she was “sufficiently Southern to think him justifiable in breaking off the engagement.” The plot and Thomas’s response to it speak to the widespread interest in sexual relationships between the races, as well as southerners’ fears surrounding the infiltration of Black blood into their caste ranks.

¹⁸⁶ Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 17.

parochial interpretation of enslaved women's ethics, yielded a stereotypical appraisal of the women's sexual practices and motives:

Again, I am a white man, and I know that mulatto women almost always refuse to cohabit with the blacks; are often averse to a sexual connection with persons of their own shade; but are gratified by the criminal advances of Saxons, whose intimacy, they hope, may make them the mothers of children almost white—which is the quadroon girl's ambition: is it likely, then, that a young man will resist temptation, when it comes in the form of a beautiful slave maiden, who has perhaps—as is often the case—a fairer complexion than his own, and an exquisitely handsome figure?¹⁸⁷

Drew's reasoning mirrored the prevailing wisdom on the subject: enslaved women's passionate nature and moral laxity rendered them culpable, or at the very least, complicit in their relationships with White men. Given the prevalence of such views, enslaved women's accusations of coercion often fell upon deaf ears, even on the rare occasion that a prominent member of the slaveholding community advocated on their behalf. In 1861, popular Presbyterian minister and elite slaveholder Charles Colcock Jones attempted to initiate legal action against a fellow minister for the sexual assault of a young, enslaved female servant during the minister's roughly two-month stay in Jones's household. According to the woman's confession, the visiting minister commenced a sexual relationship with her shortly after his arrival and continued the affair until a week prior to his departure. The birth of her biracial child, whose resemblance to the minister in question was apparently unmistakable to Jones and three other members of the White

¹⁸⁷ Drew, *The Refugee*, 127.

community, served as corporeal evidence of the liaison. Still, despite Jones's endorsement of the woman's character, the correspondence between the child's birth and the minister's visit, and another enslaved woman's similar accusation against the minister just twenty miles away, the officers of the church and courts dismissed Jones's allegations of coercion.¹⁸⁸ The woman's enslaved status, and the implied incriminations of her sexual ethics, factored heavily in their September 24th, 1861 response to Jones:

Look at the parties. The woman is a servant—a slave. We have no doubt but that she has been carefully trained and instructed in morals and religion; that she has been taught to observe the strictest rules of chastity. But all this is true of Mr. —,...

Now, dear sir, the fact is apparent that your woman, the mother of the child, has departed from the rules of chastity. She can plead no breach of promise of marriage. She gave no alarm of any coercive measures having been used. Her own declaration is the only positive evidence. The only corroborative evidence is the coincidence in time and resemblance of the child—that is, so far as the facts appear from your letter. On the other side there is the unequivocal denial of the accused, his former character and position in society, and the interest he must have in maintaining a good moral character.¹⁸⁹

In his response, Jones shrewdly discerned the men's indictment of the woman's character on the basis of her race and legal status, and countered their argument with a

¹⁸⁸ Rev. C.C. Jones to Mr. -, Maybank, Aug. 26, 1861 and Rev. C.C. Jones to Hon. John Johnson and Mr. A.G. Redd, Maybank, Oct. 16, 1861, in *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War*, ed. Robert Manson Myers, 741-742, 773-776.

¹⁸⁹ Hon. John Johnson and Mr. A.G. Redd to Rev. C.C. Jones, Columbus, September 24, 1861, in *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War*, ed. Robert Manson, 752-754.

bold acknowledgement of the power dynamics that compromised enslaved women's capacity to consent or refuse. Against the racialized sexual discourse of his class, he retorted that enslaved women "are particularly slow to father their children upon white men without the best of reasons" and "are more open to the seductions of their superiors (not in character but in station in society)," due to their "humble and exposed condition."¹⁹⁰ Jones went on to point out that the minister in question—a married man, twice the woman's age, who served as the president of the Young Men's Christian Association and principal of a female high school in Columbus, Georgia—commanded the woman not to divulge the interaction and, as evidence of his influence, ordered another accuser publicly whipped for her allegations. To Jones, the power complications surrounding the affair were clear. Most members of the power-holding caste, however, shared Drew's and the officers' assessment of sexual relationships between White men and enslaved women. Consequently, Jones failed in his request for church disciplinary action against the minister, and the young victim, like so many enslaved women, was left to wrestle with the consequences of her sexual assault.

The legal and social liberties afforded to members of the power establishment, along with the racialized sexual taxonomies and structures of violence that supported such liberties, diminished, or in many cases, eradicated enslaved women's sexual choice. Women's protests were immaterial. A matrix of violence, including but not limited to physical beatings, familial threats, social humiliation, and discursive stereotyping guaranteed the success of power-wielding men's sexual conquests. Judy, a bondswoman on the Butler plantation, was raped by the plantation's former overseer Roswell King and,

¹⁹⁰ Rev. C.C. Jones to Hon. John Johnson and Mr. A.G. Redd, Maybank, Oct. 16, 1861, in *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War*, ed. Robert Manson Myers (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 773-776.

afterwards, severely flogged and sent to the penal Five Pound Swamp to work as punishment for her attempt to resist.¹⁹¹ She located her story of sexual assault amidst a more comprehensive autobiographical narrative that included her temporary descent into madness and subsequent flight to the forest, her husband's abandonment on account of her mental illness, and the birth of her first child as a consequence of King's assault. Although Judy does not disclose the sequence of the events, it is not unlikely that King's assault and the resultant birth of a child precipitated a severe depression or some other trauma-induced mental illness.

Psychological violence constituted another layer of the culture of dismemberment that estranged enslaved women's sexual bodies from their volition. The circumscription of sexual choice—an integral aspect of the reproductive economy and social psychology of slavery—rendered coercive sex inevitable and, in turn, resistance futile, if a member of the power caste desired such a liaison. As formerly enslaved Georgian Bob Lampkin so succinctly put it: “In them times white men went with colored gals and women bold. Any time they saw one and wanted her, she had to go with him...”¹⁹² Consequently, physical violence was not always required to secure success. The circumstances surrounding King's affair with Betty, the wife of “head man” Frank, offer insight into the ways non-physical forms of violence functioned within the culture of sexual dismemberment. Unlike Judy, Betty's interaction with King was not episodic, but rather, spanned a period of time, during which she was removed from the cabin that she shared with her husband and forced to live with King as his sexual consort.

¹⁹¹ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 107-108.

¹⁹² Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 292.

While the flagrantly intimate nature of the arrangement added one dimension to the affair, Betty's husband's position in the plantation hierarchy contributed another. As the lead driver on the Butler rice plantation, Frank was second in command to oversee King in the years of King's reign from 1802-1838. During the summer months, when lowcountry planters and overseers retreated to the cities to escape the malaria threat posed by coastal swamps, men like Frank managed the day-to-day operations of the plantation.¹⁹³ It is unclear whether Frank already occupied the post of head driver prior to Betty's ordeal or received the post as consolation for King's flagrant transgression. Despite King's many sexual liaisons and resultant children with enslaved women, Renty, his son with Betty was the only one of his many ill-begotten offspring that he acknowledged, due, no less, to the intervention of his employer, Major Pierce Butler, the grandfather of Fanny Kemble's husband.¹⁹⁴ Though the acknowledgement was forced, knowledge of Renty's and other children's paternity was well known by the Butler plantation enslaved community. "Old House Molly," a senior domestic servant whose service spanned the years of King's presence, corroborated the sordid story of Renty's origins and identified the notorious overseer as the boy's father.¹⁹⁵ To all parties, the psychosocial features of King's violence were clear. His power to either bestow a favorable position upon Frank or deprive the lead driver of his elevated post constrained

¹⁹³ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 114-115. See also Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 220-221. According to Morgan, at least two-thirds of the enslaved Lowcountry population worked under a Black driver around the mid-18th century. Despite the implementation of laws requiring one white man for every ten enslaved people in South Carolina, on a number of plantations, there were no White men when the slaveholder was absent. Although Frank worked with an overseer, he likely assumed responsibilities that paralleled those of drivers where overseers were not present.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 128-129. King denied paternity in every other instance, although numerous enslaved women claimed him as the father of their children. The biracial appearance of Betty's son Renty, along with the notoriety of her husband on the plantation, likely brought the matter to the master's attention. Kemble did not disclose, or more likely, did not know the reasons for Major Butler's intervention in this particular instance. The elder Butler died in 1822, prior to Kemble's marriage to his grandson.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

Betty's and Frank's decision-making power in the affair. As she endured King's assaults night after night, Betty, like other enslaved women who found themselves in similar predicaments, likely rehearsed the consequences of resistance for herself and her family, and resigned herself to an acquiescent posture. In doing so, she merely mimicked the consent that she was not at liberty to deny.

As evidenced by the entanglement of sex, power, and status in the situation between Betty, Frank, and King, the culture of sexual dismemberment surrounding enslaved women was not delimited by the contours of women's physical bodies. Although bondswomen's bodies were the primary sites of violation, rape and rape cultures encompassed enslaved men, children, and un-assaulted women as well. Spectacles of sexual violence unfolded on a communal stage and reified the raced and gendered social caste system through demonstrations of coercive power. Whereas enslaved women were gendered as Other in relation to their White female counterparts—as a part of their racialization, enslaved men, ironically, were feminized. 19th-century racial theorists, such as the influential Count Gobineau, naturalized White males' sexual pursuit of colonized Black women through the transposition of Western gender hierarchies upon racial categories. White-raced groups were characterized as the male/masculine/superior race, while non-Whites were branded the female/feminine/inferior races. In this way, “The orthodox hierarchy of gender [was] confirmed and reaffirmed at the level of race,” and both males and females became subject to the sexual domination of White men.¹⁹⁶ The “feminization” of Blackness within the racial hierarchy not only naturalized White males' sexual conquests of

¹⁹⁶ Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity Theory, Culture and Race* (London:Routledge, 1995), 109-111.

enslaved Black women, but also enabled the “inter-racial homo-eroticism” that often characterized relationships between enslaved men and members of the power structure, even when women were the object of assault.¹⁹⁷

The extent to which women’s sexual assault functioned as a demonstration of gendered power aimed at men and women becomes evident in the ways White men weaponized sexual violence to humiliate enslaved men. William Ward of Jasper County, Georgia recalled the taunts of one of his farm-owning masters: “One day he tol’ me dat if my wife had been good lookin’, I never would sleep wid her again ‘cause he’d kill me an’ take her an’ raise chilluns off’n her.”¹⁹⁸ Yet, murder was very rarely required, due to the expansive power White men, particularly slaveholding men, wielded over the enslaved. Slaveholders, overseers, and other men in power often assaulted enslaved women in the very cabins they shared with their partners, and they sometimes did so with others in the room.¹⁹⁹ The close quarters of slave cabins, coupled with the frequent presence of multiple family groups within the confines of a cabin, meant that White men’s visits to the quarters regularly occurred in the presence of other household members. In other cases, such as Betty’s, women were “kept” in the main house or in separate cabins in a possessive gesture that barred women from sexual relationships with the men of their

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 133.

¹⁹⁹ Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 279. James Smith was interviewed by Henry Bibb in 1852. A formerly enslaved field hand in Virginia and Georgia, Smith reported being discovered upon entering his slave cabin to reunite with his wife and children, due to the presence of an unidentified white man who was “lying with a slave girl” in the cabin. In another instance reported by Virginian John Clopton, a slave owner required married men to exit the beds they shared with their wives, in order to enable his assault. Drew, *The Refugee*, 113.

choice.²⁰⁰ Thus, enslaved men were forced to acknowledge and acquiesce to the sexual domination of White men, even though most were only witnesses to women's violation.

Betty's tumultuous array of undisclosed emotions was matched by Frank's own despondency. Kemble described the lead driver as a "serious, sad, sober-looking, very intelligent man," and from this assessment of Frank's disposition, remarked: "I should think he would not relish having his wife borrowed from him."²⁰¹ Indeed, enslaved women and men suffered the psychosocial consequences of sexual assault long after physical intimacies concluded. In a rare, fleeting moment of disclosure, one enslaved man expressed the psychological burden borne by enslaved people, given the normalization of sexual impropriety within slaveholding societies:

"Are the wives of slaves respected as married women?"

'No, mass'r, dey don't make no diff'rence wedder de colored women is married or not. White folks jest do what dey have a mind to wid dem...'

'I should think, then,' I said, 'that colored people who are married, and are parents, would be the most discontented with slavery?'

'I dunno, mass'r,' said the slave, with a heavy heart-born sigh, 'I knows *I's* tired on it. I's seen my daughter—treated so dat'—

He hesitated, looked savagely gloomy, muttered something to himself, and added:

'Well, mass'r, *I's* tired on it. Mass'r, is it bery cold at the North?'²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Drew, *The Refugee*, 156. A North Carolina man recalled his owner running out "in his shirt, like a madman" one night and accusing particular men of going "up to the house to see his girls—two slave girls he kept at the house." The man's testimony, along with the similar illicit arrangement on the Butler plantation, point to the commonality of the practice throughout the enslaved South.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 114-115.

²⁰² Redpath, *The Roving Editor*, 93.

Among other things, the man's abrupt deviance from the subject suggests one of the ways enslaved people, particularly enslaved men, endured the sense of powerlessness that accompanied the sexual assault of their daughters, partners, sisters, and other female members of their communities.

Womb ethics aimed at privacy and sexual protection extended to the male members of enslaved communities and mitigated their responses to coerced sexual encounters between enslaved women and White men. Similar to the child witnesses and female victims of such crimes, enslaved men often adopted a reticent posture in regards to the sexual assault of their loved ones. By excising the violation from his speech, the male interviewee denied his interviewer access to his painful memories of helplessness, as well as to the sordid details of his daughter's assault.

Intentional forgetting and circumspect speech also helped to maintain the integrity of gender roles and norms indigenous to the community. Like their female counterparts, enslaved men could not afford to enforce rigid notions of right and wrong. Rather, in accordance with women's womb ethics, they "forgot" injuries for the greater good of themselves and their families. Though it is impossible to determine whether headman Frank's despondency extended to the semi-private spaces he shared with his wife, not one enslaved person on the Butler plantation offered Kemble an account of Frank's thoughts on his wife's assault. Frank, seemingly, never discussed the matter. It is not unlikely that Frank used reticence to "disremember" the event, and lay claim to a mode of masculinity unique to enslaved communities. The preservation and reinvention of gender norms was one of the ways womb ethics ensured the psychosocial survival of the community.

Such reconciliatory maneuvers were vital to the social health of enslaved communities, since the psychological, emotional, and physical aftereffects of sexual coercion were oftentimes augmented by the corporeal consequences—that is, the presence of offspring conceived during illicit interracial affairs. Like Betty and Judy, many enslaved women carried, birthed, and raised the evidence of their coerced encounters. Likewise, men like Betty’s husband Frank resided in the same household with and, in many instances, functioned in a paternal capacity to their oppressors’ children. For many women, the children were undoubtedly embodied memories of scenes of violence and violation, which stunted, complicated, and/or shaped their maternal performances, or lack thereof. It is not unlikely that the constant reminder of violation contributed to some women’s, such as Judy’s, descent into mental illness and self-enforced seclusion in the woods. For husbands, grandfathers, uncles, and other surrogate fathers, the children served as living testaments to White men’s sexual omnipotence.

Yet, whether due to the community’s strivings for social stability, slaveholders’ mandates concerning household configurations, or a combination of the two, enslaved households often absorbed the children born of coerced unions and raised them alongside their other offspring. Women claimed their offspring, regardless of paternity, as a part of their womb ethics. In the formulaic rehearsal of geographical origins and parentage that introduced WPA interviewees, biracial children and their siblings frequently alluded to the diverse paternal lineages of members of the same maternal household. Regarding his and his siblings’ parentage, Elisha Doc Garey stated simply: “Sarah Anne Garey was my Ma and I was one of dem shady babies. Dere was plenty of dat kind in dem times. My

own sister was Rachel, and I had a half sister named Sallie what was white as anybody. John, Lindsay, David, and Joseph was my four brothers.”²⁰³ Garey’s referral to himself as a “shady” baby and allusion to his “white” sister acknowledged and normalized the lineal irregularities that resulted from White men’s sexual liaisons with enslaved Black women. Whether Garey’s brothers were also biracial or, rather, the product of his mother’s relationship(s) with Black men is difficult to decipher; many, if not most, enslaved people identified progeny of the same maternal line amongst their list of siblings, “shady” or not. Still, the casual treatment of divergent paternity belied the, oftentimes coercive, sexual subtext of bondspeople’s conjugal structures.

Though some conjugal arrangements, such as Judy’s first marriage to Temba, disintegrated in the wake of the psychological and emotional tumult precipitated by sexual assault, many other households, like Betty’s and Frank’s, persevered. Due to the ever-present possibility of forced infidelities, such as the assault experienced by Betty and Frank, and the mutation of West and West Central African familial configurations in the Americas, enslaved women’s ethical cultures incorporated various permutations of conjugality, including plural marriage. Indeed, participation in sexual and conjugal relationships that confounded the notions of domesticity populating southern rhetoric was one of the ways enslaved people asserted their sexual choice. In a letter written by proxy, Dinah, one of southern mistress Maria Bryan’s servants who had been hired out for a period of time, requested to remain in her contract position because “she had married and did not like to leave her husband.”²⁰⁴ Though Dinah’s letter expressed a sentiment common to enslaved women and men, her mistress’s response suggested that Dinah’s

²⁰³ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 2.

²⁰⁴ Bryan, *Tokens of Affection*, 223-224.

notion of marriage and its expectations were at variance with those of Bryan and other members of her caste. Despite her professed commitment to the preservation of enslaved families, Bryan offhandedly dismissed Dinah's request with the striking remark that "Dinah has a husband every few months."²⁰⁵ It is impossible to say whether Bryan's statement accurately described Dinah's orientation to the men in her life. Dinah very well could have had one husband on the Thomas plantation and another in the location of her contract position, with no discrepancy in her application of the "husband" title. On the other hand, it is far more likely that Dinah used the language of "husband" to signal the seriousness of the connection to her White employers, yet merely lived with one or the other men her mistress presumed her husband.

Though it is difficult to assess the prevalence of plural marriage in Western Africa prior to the onset of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, polyandry was less common than polygyny, or perhaps, suspected less frequently. Polygyny, in particular, became more widespread, as the European demand for males and African demand for females produced imbalanced sex ratios in affected areas.²⁰⁶ Given the long history of the slave trade prior to the direct exportation of West and West Central Africans to the lowcountry, a number of captive women likely already had experience within polygynous households and merely imported the practice into the Americas, along with their male counterparts. Instances of polygyny populate the historical records from very early in Georgia's slave history into the late 19th-century. In a 1774 runaway ad, Nathaniel Hall reported the disappearance of a man named Stephen, and speculated upon his whereabouts, based

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ John T. Dalton and Tin Cheuk Lueng, "Why is Polygyny more Prevalent in Western Africa?: An African Slave Trade Perspective" *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 62, No. 4 (July 2014): 606, accessed February 5, 2015. See also, Thornton, "Sexual Demography," in *Women and Slavery in Africa*, ed. Claire C. Robertson and Martin Klein, 40-47.

upon the location of the man's wives.²⁰⁷ However, it is clear that enslaved people frequently had multiple spouses, some of whom were undoubtedly aware of their participation in a plural marriage. One woman traveled to her husband John's plantation and appealed to his mistress Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas to allow him to "still keep her [the woman] for a wife" and visit her, despite Thomas's disclosure that John had another wife.²⁰⁸

Enslaved people's participation in plural marriages harkened back to sexual structures in some parts of West and West Central Africa and, in the connection to the African continent, became sexual signifiers of the moral degeneracy of Blacks in pro-slavery rhetoric.²⁰⁹ Early European visitors among the Bullom and Temne of Sierra Leone noted the correlation between wealth and multiple wives, given the centrality of women to a household's agricultural production.²¹⁰ Despite the obvious economic motivations for the acquisition of multiple wives, European travelers continued to connect polygyny to a moral deficit, as opposed to a sociological development in their commentary on West African sexual relations. Regarding an early 19th-century marriage ceremony in the Windward Coast, traveller Joseph Correy remarked disdainfully that: "it does not attach to the union any sacred obligation, the bond being broken at the moment of caprice in either party, or predilection in favour of any other object."²¹¹ Decades later and an ocean away, White Americans expressed similar sentiments in their assessment of marriage among captive Africans and their descendants. Even anti-slavery sympathizer

²⁰⁷ *Savannah Georgia Gazette*, September 14, 1774, in ed. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements*, 56.

²⁰⁸ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr and Gertrude T. Despeaux, 133.

²⁰⁹ Deborah Gray White discusses Europeans' perception of plural marriage as an outgrowth of "Africans' uncontrolled lust." White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 29.

²¹⁰ J.D. Fage, "Slaves and Society in Western Africa, c. 1445-1700," *Journal of African History* 21, No. 3 (1980): 304.

²¹¹ Correy, *Observations Upon the Windward Coast of Africa*, 11.

Fanny Kemble betrayed her contempt for enslaved people's sexual ethics in her reference to the "universally accepted fiction which passes here by the title of marriage."²¹²

Yet Kemble's and others' assessments of marriage among the enslaved belied the precariousness and/or complete impossibility of co-residence, even in the event of marriage, and the ever-present specter of absolute removal from a geographic region, which forced enslaved people to adopt a plurality of sexual structures as a means to remember their sexual selves. Enslaved people participated in a range of sexual arrangements, such as living together, "taking up," and "sweethearting" that included and transcended the monogamous, male and female marital relationship.²¹³ There often existed a discrepancy between a spouse in name and one in regard. In a famous example of the polysemous nature of the terms "husband" and "wife" within enslaved communities, Molly, a bondswoman on the Butler estate, remarked to her mistress Fanny Kemble that Tony, the man with whom she had conceived nine children, was not her "real husband," but rather the man the overseer "provided her with" after her "real husband" was sold.²¹⁴

As evidenced by Molly's conversation with Kemble, enslaved people often demonstrated their rejection of their masters' and mistresses' interference into their

²¹² Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*, 112. Kemble makes this statement in her commentary on Molly's reference to her "real husband."

²¹³ Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 52. Though Kaye's analysis centers upon evidence from the Natchez district, his use of enslaved people's parlance to identify distinctive sexual arrangements offers greater insight into the ways their sexual politics deviated from those of their masters. According to Kaye: "In the Natchez District, slaves made fine distinctions between 'sweethearting,' 'taking up,' 'living together,' and marriage. Sweethearting - neither permanent, nor monogamous, nor subject to the neighborhood's sanction - was an open-ended relationship for the young. Taking up was temporary, too, but was for mature couples prepared to submit to neighbors' informal recognition. Living together, by contrast, was a permanent bond, perhaps the most familiar to modern eyes, and entitled men and women to share a surname as well as a cabin. Marriage was permanent as well, yet distinguished from cohabitation by the formal recognition of weddings."

²¹⁴ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*, 112. Deborah Gray White also cites this conversation in her discussion of enslaved people's marriages. See White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 149-150.

private, sexual lives in their application of conjugal terms, despite their cohabitation and production of offspring with the men or women their masters chose. In a countersignification of the womb and assertion of indigenous ethics, enslaved women could and often did divorce sex and reproduction from affection and marriage, even outside of coercive interracial encounters. As formerly enslaved woman Catherine Beale revealed in a 1929 interview, if the master denied a couple's wish to marry, "they would slip off and sleep together anyhow."²¹⁵

Where possible, the extension or refusal of conjugal rights became a means of asserting sexual choice and re-membering the self. "Right" or "good" sex was not defined by marriage, but rather by the ability to choose one's partner. Lina Hunter, a formerly enslaved Georgia woman, reported that attempts to control enslaved people's sexual lives via coerced marriages and religious injunctions "didn't stop courtin'" in the slave quarters "'cause day jus' tuk anybody day lakes; it didn't matter whose man or 'woman day had.'"²¹⁶ Though Hunter's assessment of the liberality of enslaved people's sexual ethics might have been somewhat exaggerated, it was certainly true that many acted in accordance with a sexual rubric that deviated from White southerners' professed principles. Contrary to the primacy of virginity and marriage in many White southerners' concepts of ethical sex between persons of the same caste, some enslaved people advanced the notion that "'two clean sheets can't smut," or as one interviewer put it, "a devout man and woman may indulge in the primal passion without committing sin."²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Susan Myrick, "Catherine Beale," *Macon Telegraph*, February 10, 1929, in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. John Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 575.

²¹⁶ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 261.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 88. For a discussion on enslaved people's views on sex apart from "marriage," see Christie Farnham, "Sapphire?: The Issue of Dominance in the Slave Family, 1830-1865," in *To Toil the Livelong Day: America's Women at Work, 1780-1980*, ed. Carole Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, (Ithaca:

Consequently, enslaved women's indulgence in sexual pleasure prior to or outside of marriage did not locate them beyond the pale within many enslaved communities. Rather, the collective recognition of the need to assert sexual choice opened pathways for multiple forms of community-sanctioned sexual relationships.²¹⁸

Ironically, enslaved couples who asserted their sexual choice through fidelity to a distant spouse also endured the displeasure of their masters and mistresses. Lettie, an enslaved woman in Green County, persisted in her relationship with her runaway husband Jesse, as evidenced by the birth of two children "who were the exact duplicate of Jesse," yet denied knowledge of her husband's whereabouts when questioned by her infamously cruel master.²¹⁹ Much of the enslaved community knew that Jesse visited his wife "two and three times a week at night."²²⁰ In a similar demonstration of choice, one woman grieved her husband's sale and refused to marry again after promising her husband that she would await his return.²²¹ These women's fidelity to their spouses was not only a testament to the persistence of love and affection through slavery's exigencies, but also an outright defiance of the system's mercenary estimations of the enslaved's sexual relationships. Fidelity to an absent partner could suspend the procreative cycle

Cornell University Press, 1987), 80-82. Also, Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 63. As Farnham demonstrates in her historiographical analysis of sexual ethics in the enslaved household, Gutman's project is a response to images of the emasculating matriarch described in the 1965 Moynihan report. Gutman contends that, although premarital sex was common, the practice did not preclude marriage.

²¹⁸ Farnham, "Sapphire?," 81. In a comparison of West African and enslaved people's sexual practices, Farnham distinguishes between consanguinity and conjugality and argues that the primacy of the former within many West African cultures rendered the female-headed household and other sexual configurations less foreign to enslaved people than to White observers. I agree with Farnham's assessment that, "the consanguineal model formed a general perspective towards marriage and family which could become the basis of patterns of behavior developed to meet the exigencies of slavery."

²¹⁹ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 52.

²²⁰ Ibid. This story was conveyed by neither Lettie nor Jesse, but rather by a formerly enslaved man that lived on a neighboring plantation.

²²¹ Ibid, 239.

upon which slaveholder wealth was built. In this way, women wrested control of their sexual lives, while subverting the very system that authorized their disempowerment.

Clearly, while some bondspeople re-membered their sexual selves and asserted their choice through practices that defied the professed sexual norms of southern culture, such as plural marriage, others re-membered through unwavering fidelity to their loved ones in the face of familial disruption and attempts to control their sexuality. In both cases, they developed indigenous ethical systems that operated on the principle of choice and aimed to ensure their communal survival. Many, if not most, outsiders to enslaved communities failed to consider the sociological features of enslavement that mandated alternative sexual structures for psychosocial survival. One enslaved man described the correlation between enslavement and sexual decision-making in his discourse on his decision to take a wife on another plantation:

If I marry one of my master's girls here at home, I may never be permitted to leave the plantation while I live; but if I go off ten or fifteen miles and take a wife, every Saturday night my master will let me go to see her, and pass the Sabbath. In doing this, I shall pass by other plantations, and become acquainted with other slaves,—and thus there will be a little novelty,—a little more variety to life.²²²

As evidenced by the man's explanation, marriage was sometimes a means to an end—a way to circumvent certain aspects of the system and add “a little more variety to life.” Beyond their pragmatic function, bondspeople's sexual relationships had an affective purpose. The elasticity of enslaved people's ethics—that is, their understanding of ethical prescriptions as situational, as opposed to universal—enabled their

²²² Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery*, 121.

communities to sanction a variety of sexual relationships, aimed at mitigating coercive sexual cultures and offering solace amidst the exigencies of enslavement.

The Paradoxes of In-Betweenness: Biracial identity, the Fancy Trade, and the Ethics of Acquiescence

Coercive sexual relationships were not the only conspicuous aspects of the culture of dismemberment, however. Biracial people were declarations of enslaved women's sexual histories, and as such, were corporeal disclosures of powerful White men's, and in some cases women's, sexual transgressions. For this reason, "mulattos" became a fixture in the White public imagination as the incarnation of racial anxieties and symbol of interracial carnal relations. Perhaps more importantly, their presence functioned as a powerful contradiction to notions of the intrinsic quality of racial differences, upon which the American racial order was founded. In the absence of the "slave" designation, some members of the class were racially undetectable and their ability to move between spaces exposed the arbitrary nature of racial categories.²²³ As a population "in-between" Black and White, the biracial population not only threatened the fragile logic upon which race operated, but also challenged the racialized gender norms that upheld distinctions between southern White ladies and enslaved Black women. Even though ideas of the libidinous nature of Black women persisted, southerners labored to maintain the myth of Black women's undesirability in the face of the growing biracial population.²²⁴ In many ways, "mulattos" offered the most damning evidence against the idea that enslaved Black

²²³ James A Noel argues that the figure of the mulatto posed a challenge to the new form of materiality, specifically the exploitable, Black body, that was invented in the White imagination through the concept of race. See Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World*, 107-120.

²²⁴ For a discussion of the myth of Black female libidinousness, see White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 30-31.

women's existence outside of Western European and White American paradigms of femininity removed them from the sphere of sexual desirability. Without question, bi- and multi-racial women became the primary symbols of illicit White male desire, whether or not they ever participated in an interracial sexual relationship, and it was this symbolic status that subjected them to a distinctive brand of sexual dismemberment and compelled some to incorporate compromise in their ethical repertoires.²²⁵

As a part of the vicious cycle of exploitation within the culture of sexual dismemberment, some of the products of illicit unions between enslaved women and White men became the linchpins of a trade founded upon White males' desire for Black women. Desire, access, and commodification converged in the so-called "fancy trade"—an industry that exploited the legalized power discrepancies between the enslaved and Whites in order to satisfy White men's sexual appetites. Whereas most enslaved women were marketed and sold on the basis of their prowess as productive and/or reproductive laborers, the "fancy trade" peddled attractive women for the express purpose of serving as mistresses and concubines for wealthy men. Despite pro-slavery apologists' moralistic assertions of southern familial values, the purpose of the fancy trade was well known among all segments of southern society. The same formerly enslaved woman who received punishment for resisting the sexual advances of her young master euphemistically described the sexual basis of the fancy trade, remarking that "if you was a real pretty young gal, somebody would buy without knowin' anythin' 'bout you, just

²²⁵ By correlating bi- and multiracial identity with the fancy trade and other interracial sexual arrangements, I do not mean to suggest that such women were the only objects of White male desire, but rather that they became paradigmatic of the fancy trade. Moreover, I question the characterization of the women in the trade as "mulattoes," "quadroons," "octoroons," etc., given the prevalence of racist associations between European ancestry and Black female beauty that prompted a number of observers to assume the ancestry of the woman in question. There were likely a number of women, who merely appeared biracial, but were in fact the product of two enslaved parents.

for yourself.”²²⁶ Even though the woman claimed indirect knowledge of the trade, her tale of sale and quick resale at the behest of her jealous mistress, who questioned the purchase of a “half white nigger,” pointed to the ways the tentacles of the practice stretched into the everyday lives of some women.

Situated between White women’s ire and White men’s desire, women presumed to be bi- or multi-racial negotiated their precarious positions under the critical eyes of southern White mistresses, who frequently commented upon enslaved women’s ethical decision-making. In a letter to her sister dated January 2, 1859, mistress Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas pondered the multi-racial identity of her servant Lurany’s daughter Lulah, who being “as white as any white child,” substantiated the sexual relationship between the, presumably, biracial Lurany and an unidentified White man. True to southern cultural form, Thomas first indicted the sexual ethics of her servant Lurany, wryly asking: “How can she reconcile her great professions of religion with the sin of having children constantly without a husband? Ah after all, there is the great point for an abolitionist [sic] to argue upon...”²²⁷ Yet, in a moment of astute observation, Thomas acknowledged the structural features of slavery that circumscribed enslaved women’s capacity to make “ethical” choices and implicated White men in the compromised moral integrity of the southern household:

They are subject to be bought by men, with natures but one degree removed from the brute creation and with no more control over their passions. Subjected to such a lot are they not to be pitied.

²²⁶ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 295.

²²⁷ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 167.

I know that this is a view of the subject that is thought best for women to ignore but when we see so many cases of mulattoes commanding higher prices, advertised as ‘Fancy girls,’ oh is it not enough to make us shudder for the standard of morality in our Southern homes?²²⁸

Thomas limits her pity to enslaved women “raised among the refining influences of a white family,” but her reasoning is novel nonetheless.²²⁹

Few slaveholding women acknowledged the power differential that severely limited enslaved women’s sexual choices. As a consequence, mistresses engaged in woman-specific forms of violence against enslaved women and co-created the culture of sexual dismemberment, along with their male counterparts.²³⁰ Indeed, the same culture of dismemberment that enabled White men to publicly examine enslaved women’s naked bodies, engage in coercive sexual affairs, and sire offspring with enslaved women, also authorized southern mistresses to subject enslaved women to a variety of violent whims and sexual demands. Intent on securing an eligible match for her nephew and heir, Sella Martin’s mistress forced Martin’s mother Winnifred to serve, almost exclusively, as her nephew’s mistress for over ten years, until his intended bride came of marriageable age. During those years Winnifred lived in a separate cabin, ate food from her mistress’s table, performed “nominal” duties on the estate, and bore the mistress’s nephew two children. When, in an ironic twist, the mistress discovered her nephew’s emotional attachment to Winnifred, she sent him on an errand to Virginia and sold Winnifred in his absence.²³¹

²²⁸ Ibid, 167-168.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ For an in-depth discussion of southern mistresses’ violence towards their enslaved domestic servants, see Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 1-96.

²³¹ Sella Martin, “Sella Martin Autobiography,” in *Slave Testimony*, ed. John Blassingame, 703-704. Martin was born in North Carolina, but enslaved in Georgia and Alabama. The commonality of long periods of forced concubinage becomes evident in the story of a Louisiana woman by the name of Hattie,

To her mistress, Winnifred was no more than a sexual body to be used and discarded at the behest of her social superiors.

Even if not purchased for the purpose of sexual concubinage, enslaved women, particularly attractive, bi- and multi-racial women, posed a threat to southern familial stability in the eyes of wary southern mistresses. The mythology of sexual receptivity, coupled with the ubiquitous presence of enslaved women in southern households, led to tenuous relationships between enslaved women and their mistresses. Although some mistresses showed flashes of solidarity with enslaved women, particularly personal servants, many channeled their jealousies and insecurities into mundane and spectacular displays of violence in retaliation for their husbands' known or suspected infidelities. Julia Rush, an enslaved woman born on St. Simon's Island in 1826, described her mistresses' routine acts of violence, which included "beating her on her forearms for the slightest offense" and requiring the master to beat Rush with a cowhide on her bare back, on account of the mistress's suspicion of intimacy between the enslaved woman and the master.²³²

The mistress's cruelty did not stop at physical violence. Public humiliation and other forms of psychological torture numbered among the instruments of dismemberment wielded by the woman. Not only did she routinely require Rush to sleep under the house, but in a gesture indigenous to slaveholding women's culture in the south, the mistress cut

who was prevented from marrying the man of her choice by her master, in order to "keep" her for his son. Hattie bore the master's son three children, the last of which she delivered and buried in the woods. Whether the child died of natural causes or at Hattie's own hands is unclear. It is clear, however, that Hattie routinely absconded for months at a time and experienced some form of psychological trauma (signaled by her reference to tearing her clothes from herself in the woods). Hattie's story points to some of the ways enslaved women responded to such arrangements. Albert, *The House of Bondage*, 70-73.

²³² Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 230.

all of Rush's long, straight hair from her head, as well.²³³ As evidenced by Rush's recollection of her relationship with her mistress, enslaved women recognized the sexual rivalry that motivated southern White women's violent demonstrations of power in the household. Despite the necessarily intimate contact between mistresses and the enslaved women who nursed their children, cooked their food, dressed them, washed their menstrual rags, and performed other personal tasks, the master/slave relationship trumped all other relational loyalties. Remarkably, Rush and her mistress had been childhood playmates.

The culture of sexual dismemberment constructed and perpetuated an iron curtain between the types of gendered humanity ascribed to enslaved women and White slaveholding women, and as a consequence, some slaveholding women's violence trespassed beyond enslaved women to the bodies of enslaved children. A formerly enslaved woman recalled a heinous and inhumane perpetration of violence against an enslaved mother and her child, during which a neighboring mistress "slipped in a colored gal's room and cut her baby's head clean off 'cause it belonged to her [the mistress's] husband."²³⁴ Though the master apparently beat and nearly killed his wife for the offense, the woman remained mistress of the household. Meanwhile, "he kept goin' with the colored gal and they had more chillun."²³⁵ Like other women who bore and raised the children of their masters in the same household as the White heirs that would someday legally own their biracial siblings, the enslaved woman at the center of the controversy was entrapped by the social, sexual, and legal structures that granted slaveholding men and women unmitigated power over her body and the bodies of her children.

²³³ Ibid, 230-231.

²³⁴ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 295.

²³⁵ Ibid.

It was this entrapment within the social and legal matrix of White and male power that compelled some enslaved women to use their desirability to survive and achieve a better quality-of-life. As evidenced by southern mistresses' responses, enslaved women of mixed racial ancestry became emblematic of White men's sexual attraction to Black women, and, even more dangerously, the potential for sexual rivalry between enslaved Black women and free White women. Caught between White women's suspicions and White men's conquests, some enslaved women chose sexual compromise—that is, they assented to sexual relationships with powerful men in hopes of achieving better social conditions for themselves and/or others.

Although most closely allied with biracial women in the antebellum popular imagination, sexual compromise featured prominently in enslaved women of all shades' repertoires of moral action. Certainly, not all participants in the fancy trade and other forms of concubinage were biracial. The identification of such arrangements with biracial women bespoke the public fascination with the "mulatto," as well as racist associations of Black females' physical attractiveness with European ancestry. At the same time, the women who were branded as "fancy girls" by the aesthetically driven market forces of the South were forced to develop modes of ethical reasoning to reconcile them to their fates. Within the logic of sexual compromise, women defined the "good" in terms of social, material, and other forms of improvement, and in many cases, reluctantly chose the lesser of multiple evils.

These ways of reasoning represented the types of compromises many enslaved women brokered with themselves and others to survive the brutalities of enslavement. During her conversation with her mistress Fanny Kemble, Sophy, a Butler plantation

bondswoman, disclosed the limited range of enslaved women's ethical choices, which precipitated acquiescence to the distasteful sexual demands of powerful men. In addition to the children born of her encounter with a White man, Sophy also bore a child with "Driver Morris," the enslaved plantation driver who "forced her" during her exile in the Five Pound Swamp. Upon hearing the grim details of the encounter, Kemble, impetuously exclaimed "'Ah! But don't you know—did nobody ever tell or teach any of you that it is a sin to live with men who are not our husbands?'"²³⁶ Sophy's response expressed the bitter truths that constrained enslaved women's sexual choices and, in turn, shaped their ethical decision-making: "Oh yes, missis, we know—we know all about dat well enough; but we do any thing to get our poor flesh some rest from de whip; when he made me follow him into de bush, what use me tell him no? He have strength to make me."²³⁷ Like many other enslaved women, Sophy's decision whether to resist or acquiesce to the driver's and other influential men's sexual demands was powerfully conditioned by her assessment of the risks and benefits associated with various courses of action. As she intimated in her response to Kemble, most enslaved women stood outside of the social, economic, and legal structures that supported ideals like chastity and enabled choice. Enslavement forced women to adopt a brutally practical understanding of morality: the minimization of suffering and the increased probability of survival defined moral acts.

A perception of the futility of resistance was not the sole factor that compelled some enslaved women to adopt sexually acquiescent postures. The acknowledgement that, in some cases, their bodies afforded them a measure of influence over the men who

²³⁶ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*, 127.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

sought to access them—or at the very least, some reprieve from the daily brutalities of enslavement—alerted women to the benefits of acquiescence. Their acquiescence might offer some measure of protection for their biracial progeny. In a discussion of Jim Smith’s Georgia plantation, one formerly enslaved man euphemistically alluded to the illicit happenings on the plantation using the term “devilment” and communicated that Smith never married, but had a Black son to whom he willed all of his land.²³⁸ Although such instances of biracial children’s inheritance of White property were uncommon, the children of White men and their enslaved Black mistresses sometimes attained elevated positions on the plantation, access to apprenticeships, and in rare cases, liberation, on account of their paternity.²³⁹ Martha Bentley’s Scots-Irish father liberated her and all but one of the children born of his sexual liaisons with his enslaved “wives,” and sent his biracial progeny to school in Cincinnati.²⁴⁰

Behind such instances of paternal magnanimity lurked enslaved mothers’ narratives of sexual compromise and psychological trauma. Bentley’s mother was, in her words, “kidnapped” by her father while she was on the run from a previous owner. She lived on her master/”husband’s” farm, along with the White mistress and her Black co-“wives.”²⁴¹ It is nearly impossible to gauge Bentley’s mother’s orientation towards the odd familial configuration. However, given the opportunities extended to her children, the woman likely resigned herself to her position within the household for the material

²³⁸ Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 333-334. The man relayed that the son was later cheated out of the land and disappeared.

²³⁹ Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint* 408-409. Morgan records a number of instances of White fathers liberating and/or bequeathing their belongings to their biracial offspring in the Lowcountry during the 18th century.

²⁴⁰ Drew, *The Refugee*, 100-101. Bentley also includes the White mistress amongst the number of her father’s wives. Bentley’s father lived in Georgia and later left for Mississippi, therefore it is unclear which state he resided in at the time of these events.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

and social good of her children, even though her resignation required a sexual relationship with the man who re-enslaved her. Such improvements in children's quality of life were purchased by their mothers' sexual sacrifices.

As a result of the potential for a better quality-of-life for themselves and their children, some women did not merely acquiesce to, but rather, willingly entered into sexual relationships with White men. Minerva, Bentley's sole sibling who remained enslaved, bore two children with her White lover, despite her White father's prohibition against interracial relationships.²⁴² When Minerva was snatched from her position as a milliner and placed in her father's fields for her transgression, her lover offered three thousand dollars, as well as five adult slaves, to purchase her and her children out of bondage. According to Bentley, the man wanted to "marry" her sister. Whether this marriage included other wives, as it had for Bentley's mother, or described a desire for monogamous cohabitation is impossible to tell. In spite of her lover's multiple attempts at purchase, Minerva's father refused to sell, and she and her children remained enslaved. Though Minerva and her lover were unable to overcome her father's decree, the potential benefits of an alliance with an affluent White man become clear in the narrative. Without question, such benefits played a role in enslaved women's declarations of affection for their slave-owning, White paramours.²⁴³

Even if strong, mutual affection motivated some relationships, the power discrepancies between enslaved Black women and free White men blurred the lines between affection and opportunism. Indeed, enslaved women's ethical reasoning around

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative offers one of the most famous examples of the potential benefits and complications of un-coerced relationships with White men. Jacobs gave birth to two children by her White lover, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, called "Mr. Sands" in her narrative. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself*, ed. Jennifer Fleischner (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010).

interracial sex often included both motivations in varying degrees. The privileges afforded by Whiteness undoubtedly impressed upon some Blacks the social capital attached to its acquisition. Women, in particular, were aware of the socially subversive potentialities of sex. Through plays on powerful men's lust and/or affection, some women strove to situate themselves in the households of seemingly generous benefactors. Nancy, a "perfectly white" enslaved woman, appealed to a northern businessman to buy her, because "she saw at once that he would be a kind master."²⁴⁴ Described by the businessman as "elegant," "highly accomplished," and one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen, Nancy was likely inured to her role as the sexual consort of her owners and sought to improve her quality of life with a more benevolent master. Aware of the sexual meanings assigned to her body and ensconced in a culture of routinized sexual violence, she attempted to choose her assailant. After hearing of Nancy's appeal, northern traveler C.G. Parsons offered an insightful commentary on the woman's keen perceptiveness and survival-oriented maneuvering, observing that: "No one can read the countenance at a glance better than slaves. More than in the heavens, sunshine and storm are seen approaching in the glance of the master's eye. They study the human face as the sailors do the sky."²⁴⁵

While enslaved women of all complexions engaged in such machinations, the dual foes of racial ambiguity and sexual availability forced women like Nancy to adopt strategic approaches to their relationships with White men. Women who were phenotypically White, yet legally enslaved occupied a precarious position within the

²⁴⁴ Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery*, 287. Enslaved people throughout the South sought to choose their new owners by appealing to local slaveowners and/or the owners of family members. Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 264-265.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

color-centric southern society. As racial impostors to the White eye, they were the embodiment of the racist fears that motivated prohibitions against interracial sex and procreation. Their multiracial bodies functioned as constant reminders that sex had the power to upturn the delicate, race-based social order of southern society, and multiracial women's procreation with White men only continued this subtle subversion of the southern social hierarchy. At the same time, colonial and antebellum bondswomen were trapped by the social and legal strictures of southern culture, which excused the enslavement of Black offspring by their White sires and absolved White parents of any responsibility for their enslaved progeny. Thus, rather than decry the inevitability of sexual assault, women like Nancy sought to reframe their experiences with White men as a part of an ethic of survival and, no doubt, psychological self-preservation. Like the West and West Central African women who preceded them on slave trading coasts and slave ships, country-born enslaved women used their sexual desirability to secure a more stable future for themselves and their children.

Responding to Resignification: Abortion, Infanticide, and the Ethics of Surrogacy

Of the many manifestations of dismemberment, the resignification of the womb—that is, the evaluation of enslaved women's wombs and its (re)productions as property and machinery upon their entry into the North American slave economy—constituted, perhaps, the most significant aspect of enslaved women's sexual dismemberment. Whereas, for upper class White women, female reproduction was linked to the ideological concept of motherhood, in the woman-gendered slave economy established

by Whites, monetary valuations trumped motherhood, conjugality, and other relational bonds. The inseparability of production and reproduction in slaveholders' appraisals of the enslaved, female womb meant that enslaved women were assessed not only on the basis of their past childbearing successes, but based on estimations of their future fecundity as well. This system of valuation was endemic to the slave economy and transcended racial alliances.

On November 1, 1836, Maria Cohen, a free woman of color in Savannah, sold an eight-year old enslaved girl named Nancy and Nancy's five year-old brother John—both the children of Cohen's "woman Eve"—to fellow Savannah resident Levi D'Lyon for \$500. Though the sale implied the exchange of both children's physical bodies for the agreed-upon sum, the document twice specified the trade of an additional commodity: "the future [illegible] and increase of Nancy."²⁴⁶ Indeed, the (re)productions of Nancy's womb functioned as a separate article of trade, as evidenced by the closing lines of the document, which reiterated the exchange of "said slaves Nancy, John and the increase of Nancy."²⁴⁷ This evaluation of the womb as a distinct commodity in commerce rendered enslaved women's experiences of sexual dismemberment distinctive from those of their free counterparts.

Unlike Eve, Maria Cohen and other free Black women did not contend with the knowledge that their (re)production, reproductive potential, and every parental ministrations sustained and augmented the cycle of human bondage. With the linkage of childbirth and childrearing to the economy, the creative power generally attributed to women shifted to the slaveholder—the legal and social proprietor of the enslaved female

²⁴⁶ Bill of Sale, Slavery Series, 1831-1843, Box 1, Folder 6, African-American Miscellany, 1757-1983, Duke University Rare Books, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

womb. Enslaved girls like Nancy, were sexually dissected and divested of their reproductive choice before they reached their childbearing years, and biological and social mothers were powerless to prevent the dismemberment. The deprivation of reproductive choice—more specifically, the extension of the legal and social norms of slaveholding culture into the intimate interiors of enslaved females’ bodies and social relationships—negated the social act of parenting, thereby creating a vicious cycle of sexual dismemberment for enslaved women. Women like Eve birthed female children, only to see their daughters’ reproductive potential and future offspring bartered and sold in southern markets as a part of the slaveholder’s prerogative.

Bondswomen’s consciousness of this cycle of dismemberment, and entrapment within the legal and social matrix that rendered it virtually inescapable, constrained their ethical choices. In the absence of sexual choice and parental rights, some women chose to claim the sole aspect of creative power to which they still had access: the power to extinguish new life. The thwarting of the reproductive cycle through abortion and infanticide constituted a pointed subversion of the enslaving system and bold reclamation of the womb’s creative power. Enslaved women used plants such as cedar berries, camphor, cotton root, tansy, and rue as abortifacients according to antebellum southern medical journals and popular wisdom amongst slaveholders, though the scant evidence for the practice attested to the secrecy surrounding indigenous, female knowledge cultures.²⁴⁸ Upon emancipation, a few women admitted to the intentional termination of pregnancies.²⁴⁹ But many, if not most, shielded their reproductive choices and medicinal

²⁴⁸ White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?*, 84-86. Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*, revised edition (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 33. Fett, *Working Cures*, 65, 176-177.

²⁴⁹ See Jones, *Labor of Love*, 33.

repertoires from public exposure. The women's apparent fecundity following their legal liberation served as the only evidence of past artifice.²⁵⁰

Although it is difficult to discern how frequently enslaved women deployed such mechanisms to reclaim their reproductive power, it is clear that methods of pregnancy prevention and termination circulated as a part of a female-specific, common sense knowledge culture. Even if a woman did not possess the knowledge herself, she could readily access it through midwives and other female networks. The availability of such knowledge among many female community members rendered it "common sense" and the economically disastrous potentialities of frequent application demonstrated the power of female "sense."

Yet, due to an unavailability of resources, the absence of a knowledgeable female community, and/or the failure of herbal remedies, some women resorted to more difficult and drastic measures to recover some of the creative power misappropriated by the womb's estrangement from the enslaved female will and subsequent resignification. Of these measures, none presented more legal risk and ethical complexity than infanticide. Infanticide resided at the opposite pole from child birthing and childrearing on the reproductive spectrum, and thus epitomized the darker, more enigmatic aspects of female creative power. The moral and legal codes surrounding infanticide, along with the economic threat the act posed, forced the practice into the veiled inner recesses of enslaved women's common sense and ethical cultures. Most enslaved women who engaged in infanticide colluded with midwives and other female members of their communities to carry out and conceal their children's deaths.

²⁵⁰ See White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*. 84-85. White cites multiple instances in which women labeled "barren" gave birth to multiple children after emancipation. One woman refused to bear children with the man her master forced her to marry, yet bore ten children upon remarriage after liberation.

Lucy, one of minister Charles Colcock Jones's servants, vehemently denied her pregnancy for its duration and later denied delivering a full-term child, despite Jones's declaration that she was "known to be in a family way by driver, midwife, and generally all on the plantation."²⁵¹ Under the guise of a "bad bile," Lucy took to her bed on Tuesday, October 11th, 1859, and the midwife Rosetta attended her routinely for four days. According to Jones, Rosetta, was "sent for" on the night of Friday, October 14th by Lucy's mother Katy with whom Lucy lived, but when questioned about the alleged birth, the woman claimed "she saw something, but not the child." Much to Jones's chagrin, the midwife and Lucy's mother maintained that they "never saw *it*" and both women "endeavored to make the impression that she [Lucy] never had a child, and could not have been in a family way."²⁵² Lucy was examined by someone on Monday, October 17th and again by a physician on the 22nd of October; both examinations confirmed her delivery of a full-term child. Still she denied it. It was not until October 25th—when the child was found partially decomposed, wrapped in a piece of cloth, "*secreted in grass and bushes*"—that Lucy confessed to her pregnancy and delivery.²⁵³

Lucy did not confess to infanticide, however. Rather, the woman claimed that the child was stillborn and, in an effort to absolve her mother and the midwife of culpability, professed to have birthed the child alone around midday on Thursday, October 13th and concealed it out of shame. As the layers of dissemblance began to unravel, midwife Rosetta admitted to observing the afterbirth on the day following the birth and to relaying

²⁵¹ C.C. Jones to C.C. Jones, Jr., Montevideo, November 10, 1859 in *The Children of Pride*, ed. Robert Manson Myers, 532. This incident is also discussed in Erskine Clarke's monograph on the Jones family and their enslaved people. The names of the midwife, Rosetta, and Lucy's mother, Katy, come from Clarke's research and are not mentioned in the letter. Erskine Clarke, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 387-388.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

the information to Lucy's mother. Contrary to their earlier declarations, both women were aware of Lucy's delivery.²⁵⁴ Yet, whether the child was dead or alive upon its emergence remained a mystery to all but the three women involved. Though Jones vocalized his misgivings about the plausibility of Lucy's story in light of her deception, Lucy was only prosecuted for the crime of "concealment," while her mother and the midwife were declared "*accessories to the concealment.*"²⁵⁵ For her transgression, Lucy received eight days of imprisonment, along with ninety "stripes," while the "accessories" received a "few lashes over their jackets."²⁵⁶ With the trial and punishment, the legal part of the matter ended. Though Rosetta's position as a long-time nurse to Jones's family shielded her from major repercussions, Lucy and her mother were rented to the railroad two days later.²⁵⁷

As evidenced by Lucy's case, the demarcation of the birthing room as a distinctly female space sustained sexual knowledge cultures and enabled ethical repertoires indigenous and exclusive to enslaved women. Although Lucy's claim of stillbirth was certainly feasible, her earlier denial of her pregnancy and proclamation "to the driver that if she was, neither *he nor anyone else should ever see the child*" insinuated pre-meditated action.²⁵⁸ Yet the relegation of female reproductive processes to the sphere of "women's knowledge," and resultant dependence upon enslaved midwives and other female community members in the management of enslaved women's pregnancies and births, carved out a realm of privacy within the culture of sexual exposure. This realm of

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 532-533.

²⁵⁶ C.C. Jones to C.C. Jones, Jr., Montevideo, December 10, 1859, in *The Children of Pride*, ed. Robert Manson Myers, 544.

²⁵⁷ Clarke, *Dwelling Place*, 388.

²⁵⁸ C.C. Jones to C.C. Jones, Jr., Montevideo, November 10, 1859 in *The Children of Pride*, ed. Robert Manson Myers, 532.

privacy enabled enslaved women like Lucy to usurp the power to choose their reproductive fates and cloaked their reclamation of the womb in the mystery and unpredictability of human reproduction. As in Lucy's case, the reclamation of creative power was often a communal endeavor. Fellow enslaved women—who understood with brutal clarity the exigencies of enslavement that shaped and constrained women's ethical choices—often conspired with other female community members to conceal, and in the case of midwives, perpetrate infanticide.²⁵⁹

For this reason, infanticide should not be understood primarily as the outgrowth of individual women's desperation and/or depression, although enslaved women almost certainly suffered from postpartum psychological concerns. Rather, infanticide resided within enslaved women's ethical repertoire as one response to the co-optation of women's reproductive choice to further the economic ends of slavery. Like abortion, infanticide was at once intensely personal and socially subversive. According to her mistress, Sylva, an elderly enslaved woman, birthed thirteen children "every one of whom she destroyed with her own hands, in their infancy, rather than have them suffer in slavery."²⁶⁰ Indeed, enslaved women were acutely aware of the economic ramifications of infanticide and, at times, used it as leverage against their masters. In response to her master's decision to sell her and her bi-racial child to Alabama in order to protect the

²⁵⁹ One Virginia woman discussed a similar instance of infanticide and the uniquely female culture of concealment: "Then they tried to make him tell about a slave girl who had put her child aside: but he knew nothing about that..."

"They took a rheumatic boy, who had stopped with us, whom I charged not to tell... Then they questioned him about the girl and the child, as if that boy could know any thing about it!...—the master made a remark to the overseer about my shape. Before striking me, master questioned me about the girl. I denied all knowledge of the affair. I only knew that she had been with child, and that now she was not, but I did not tell them even that." Drew, *The Refugee*, 159.

²⁶⁰ Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery*, 212. Historian Steven Deyle discusses a number of instances throughout the South where enslaved women took theirs and their children's lives, upon learning of their impending sale. In Nashville, a woman jumped into a river with "a child in each arm," while a Maryland mother cut her child's throat and then her own upon learning of her sale. Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 256.

child's White father, one Augusta enslaved woman "declared...she would rather kill her brown boy than let him go to Alabama."²⁶¹ British traveler J.S. Buckingham, who narrated the story, communicated the gravity of the threat to his readers, saying that "either of these steps would lessen the value of the master's property" and "negroes have often resolution enough to put such threats into execution."²⁶² Though the mother and her son were sold separately in the end, neither ended up in Alabama. By acknowledging and wielding their power to extinguish life, enslaved women recovered, in some small measure, the ability to exercise their parental prerogative.

In some cases, this parental prerogative included the decision not to parent their children. Since the entanglement of enslaved women's mothering with the health of the enslaved labor force rendered attendance to the physical needs of their children mandatory, some women chose to remove themselves from the matrix of socially- and economically-mandated parenthood by absconding without their children. Rose, one of St. Simons Island mistress Anna King's female servants, absconded in the summer of 1852—leaving behind two sets of twins.²⁶³ Anna speculated that Rose self-liberated in response to a proposed relocation, yet the precise reasons for Rose's decision were unknown. Protest of an impending event could have most immediately triggered Rose's action, but it is likely that her decision stemmed from the convergence of a number of factors. Given the correspondence between a woman's peak reproductive period and the prime runaway years, antebellum enslaved women engaged in truancy—temporary

²⁶¹ Buckingham, *A Journey Through the Slave States of North America*, 125.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Anna Matilda Page King, *Anna: The Letters of a St. Simons Island Plantation Mistress, 1817-1859*, ed. Melanie Pavich-Lindsay (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 154-155.

periods of absence and/or delinquency—more frequently than self-liberation.²⁶⁴ Self-liberation was a highly gendered and age-dependent phenomenon. The majority of runaways in the Georgia lowcountry and greater United States were males in their teens and twenties, who either lacked or ignored the “incentives,” such as spouses and property, that some owners and overseers used to curb the desire for freedom.²⁶⁵ Such incentives were generally unnecessary for women; socially prescribed gender norms surrounding childbearing and childrearing presented a sufficient barrier to self-liberation attempts. Even during the colonial era, when Georgia runaway advertisements frequently featured bondswomen, the women were often accompanied by their children. Over time, familiarity with slavery, along with concerns regarding the physical survival and material quality of life of their progeny, probably mellowed enslaved women’s impulses to self-liberate.

Contextualized in the gendered social matrix of enslaved femaleness, the logic of Rose’s decision becomes evident. Similar to infanticide, a woman’s decision to abscond without her children constituted a reassertion of sexual choice and, correspondingly, a subversion of the cycle of sexual dismemberment. Despite slaveholders’ rhetoric regarding their roles as the matriarchs and patriarchs of enslaved families, systems of enslavement relied upon gender norms regarding the sexual division of labor in the slave quarters to ensure the social reproduction of slavery. Specifically, members of the slaveholding establishment depended upon bondswomen’s cooking, cleaning, tending, and other childrearing activities to safeguard the health of the labor force and transmit the

²⁶⁴ Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 39-42. Camp points out that, though truancy was a tactic women deployed more frequently than absconding, it should not be understood as a “‘female form’ of resistance.” The majority of truants were still male.

²⁶⁵ Berry, *Swing the Sickle*, 101.

skills essential for enslaved children's integration into the community of laborers. By deciding not to parent her children, Rose effectively halted her role in the social reproduction of slavery. Though none but Rose knew the catalysts for her disappearance, the disruptive power of her action was not lost upon her mistress, who, in response to the news of Rose's running away, groused: "It is probable that she [Rose] will spite me by neglecting her children."²⁶⁶

Yet, the absence of a biological parent rarely left enslaved children neglected. Enslaved women's ethical repertoires encompassed the relinquishment of parental rights to one's own children, as well as the voluntary assumption of parental responsibilities for the children of others. The realities of sexual and familial dismemberment mandated cultures of surrogacy among Black women in order to ensure the psychosocial survival and quality of life of enslaved children. Though Black men could and did participate in cultures of surrogacy as well, the accounts of formerly enslaved people suggest that enslaved men rarely raised children, their own or those of others, in the absence of a female household presence.²⁶⁷ Gender norms surrounding childrearing materialized in slaveholders' policies: mothers, biological or surrogate, raised enslaved children in matrifocal households, with or without a male presence.²⁶⁸ Consequently, to live apart from one's father was normative, but to exist without the supervision and protection of a mother rendered an enslaved child extremely vulnerable. As insinuated by Anna King's

²⁶⁶ King, *Anna*, 154-155.

²⁶⁷ I found only one incidence of an enslaved child living with his father, in lieu of his mother or a female family member. The occurrence was so rare, that the interviewer added the caveat that "he [the man] did not explain the reason for this" unusual configuration. When his father was away with the master, the man stayed in his mother's cabin. The arrangement confirms that enslaved men and women who shared offspring could and did live separately on the same plantation. Rawick, *Georgia Narratives, Part I*, 269.

²⁶⁸ Berry, *Swing the Sickle*, 73. As Berry describes, the Georgia Slave Code of 1755 specified that enslaved children would "follow the condition of the mother," but in addition to the legal mandate, slaveholders doled out rations, cabins, clothing, and other household necessities to enslaved women. The combination of legislation and social norms rendered enslaved households matrifocal.

response to Rose's departure, motherless children were in danger of becoming the master's or mistress's "pet" or, at the very least, growing up alienated from the enslaved community. The circumstances under which they became motherless were often moot. Formerly enslaved Macon woman Della Briscoe and her siblings were deprived of their biological mother, as a consequence of the spatial politics surrounding labor roles on her large plantation. Her mother's role as a domestic in the "big house" left Briscoe, her brother, and her sister in the care of their grandmother, who posed as their mother for much of their childhood. Not until their biological mother was on her deathbed following the Civil War did they discover that their "older sister" had given them life.²⁶⁹

Although grandmothers and other female kin featured prominently in enslaved women's surrogate networks, women and men who were not biologically connected to enslaved children also chose to adopt motherless children as a part of an indigenous code of ethics. An October 16, 1783 runaway advertisement insinuated a connection between the disappearance of two young men—twenty year-old Jeffrey and sixteen or seventeen year-old Aleck—and the escape of sixty year-old Jupiter and his forty-something wife Molly the previous July with the disclosure that Jupiter and Molly "raised the two boys...from their infancy, and look upon them as their children."²⁷⁰ The fate of Jeffrey and Aleck's biological parents and whether the two were biologically related to one another or either of their adopted parents is unknown.

The movement of enslaved people between labor sites in the early stages of slavery's establishment in Georgia and later during the boom of the domestic slave trade in the period between 1789 and the beginning of the Civil War presented immense

²⁶⁹ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives, Part I*, 125.

²⁷⁰ Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements*, 108-109.

obstacles to familial stability. According to historian Walter Johnson, “Of the two thirds of a million interstate sales made by the traders in the decades before the Civil War, twenty-five percent involved the destruction of a first marriage and fifty percent destroyed a nuclear family—many of these separating children under the age of thirteen from their parents.”²⁷¹ The numbers do not even begin to consider the extent of familial dismemberment caused by movement within the state and between labor sites, premature death, and other struggles native to enslaved existence. Consequently, cultures of surrogacy between Black women were necessary to mitigate the trauma and damage of familial dismemberment. Through surrogate performances of motherhood, enslaved women re-membered families and ensured the survival of enslaved children, even though how they parented and whose children they parented were conditioned by the circumstances of their enslavement.

At the same time, though the resignification of the womb circumscribed enslaved women’s rights to parent their own children, it did not eventuate a complete devaluation of enslaved women’s mothering within slaveholding cultures. On the contrary, the segregation of the social and physiological aspects of enslaved female reproduction enabled slaveholders to evaluate the two as separate, marketable commodities: enslaved women could be bought and sold not only for their capacity to ensure the biological and social reproduction of slavery, but for their ability to perform surrogate functions for White mothers as well. Domestic Belle, Kate, Fannie, and Nellie collaborated in the care of Liberty County mistress Cornelia Jones Pond’s infant daughter and made possible Pond’s nostalgic recollections of lazy plantation life: “We had every comfort. Your father received a good salary, \$1400, and we had 3 servants. I often think of those days.

²⁷¹ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 19.

Nellie had made my baby a complete set of infant's clothing. I had very little to do."²⁷² Tellingly, Pond's reminiscences of her daughter's early life frequently included enslaved women's voices by proxy. Discussing her infant daughter's beauty, Pond admitted that she was "proud of her and would ask Kate what people said about her."²⁷³ Likewise, Pond's memory of her daughter's first words relied upon the testimony of "Mama Belle," the nurse who actually witnessed the milestone.²⁷⁴ Although the "Mama" designation suggested that Belle was a more senior domestic, contrary to the "Mammy myth," many of the caregivers in the Pond household were young women around fifteen to sixteen years of age.²⁷⁵ Since many were either in or approaching their prime childbearing years, the numerous tasks associated with nursing their White charges often pulled them away from their own children.

Enslaved nurses' constant care of their young masters and mistresses sometimes troubled boundaries within the master/slave hierarchy and exposed the ethical complications that accompanied acts of surrogacy. In a conversation with undercover abolitionist C.G. Parsons, one slaveholder described his close attachment to the enslaved woman who mothered him as a child, after engaging in a public display of affection with the woman:

The manifestation of attachment you have witnessed between that good woman and myself, is really the affection between parent and child.

²⁷² Pond, Cornelia Jones. *Life on a Liberty County Plantation: The Journal of Cornelia Jones Pond*, ed. Josephine Bacon Martin, Illustrations by Anne Lee Haynes (Darien, GA: Privately Printed, 1974), 81.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 79-80. Pond wrote in her diary: "Our little daughter was beginning to talk. One day when I was walking, she began to fret for me, so her nurse, Mamma Belle, took her up to my room saying, 'less go look for your maa.' When she opened the door, the baby looked around and surprised Mamma Belle by saying 'No Maa here.'"

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 114. Although Pond does not offer Belle's age, she states that, following the departure of the Union army, her family "still had [their] negroe nurses, girls about 15 years who slept in the house to help" them. See also White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 60.

Not that I am her son. But my own mother was an unnatural mother. She used to whip me terribly, and she treated me with great cruelty in every respect. This slave mother nursed me when I was an infant; and whenever she saw my own mother abuse me, she would take me up in her arms, and carry me away to her little hut, to soothe me, and caress me. I soon loved her more than I did my own mother. I have always continued to love her better than my own mother! And she says that I have always treated her so kindly, and affectionately, that she loves me as much as she does either of her own sons. She says she means to kiss me every time we meet as long as she lives, unless I forbid it; and I tell you, sir, that I shall never have it in my heart to do so; for I know I shall want to kiss her every time I see her, as long as she lives.²⁷⁶

Given the ever-present legal and social power differential between enslaved women and slaveholding White males of any age, it is difficult to determine the extent of and motivations behind the woman's displays of parental affection for the man. Certainly, the potential for genuine affection existed, despite the power inequity. Although slaveholding parents frequently attempted to reinforce the master/slave boundary between enslaved nurses and their White charges by requiring servants to refer to the children using the "master" and "mistress" honorific and to bow or curtsy to their young wards, social hierarchies were, at times, suspended in surrogate parental relationships between enslaved women and White children. As evidenced by the slaveholder's remembrance of the elderly woman's maternal protection, occupation of the role of caretaker to newborns and small children presented enslaved women with the moral

²⁷⁶ Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery*, 210-211.

imperative to ensure the safety and survival of their charges, even in instances where the imperative breached the bounds of their assigned responsibilities.

Though constant contact undoubtedly inspired various permutations of affection between enslaved nurses and their young masters and mistresses, how enslaved women understood, negotiated, and demarcated the boundaries of their nurse roles relied upon complex ethical equations. The slaveholder's elderly former nurse, who openly transgressed social boundaries, perhaps responded to a moral impulse to protect the helpless child, in spite of the precariousness of her social position. There were, no doubt, a number of enslaved people who demonstrated ethical modalities that approximated altruism in their engagement with their legal owners. At the same time, their ethical choices were shaded by the ethos of survival that punctuated the power discrepancy between enslaved and enslaver. For enslaved nurses and other favored servants, faithful service and careful ministrations could pay future dividends; the aforementioned slaveholder supplied his former nurse with a comfortable living space and money in her old age. His kindness did not emanate from a general respect or regard for long-serving, elderly enslaved women, however. Upon discussing the slaveholder's interactions with his former nurse with the man's wife, Parsons learned of the capriciousness of slaveholders' consciences: the very same slaveholder who allowed his former nurse to kiss him had removed the toes of another elderly enslaved domestic with blacksmith's tools in a fit of rage.²⁷⁷ Enslaved people's awareness of slaveholders' moral whimsies most likely compelled some to attempt to ingratiate themselves with their legal owners and other members of the power caste. The status of favored servant often translated into a better quality of life not only for oneself, but for one's family as well. It is within the

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 212.

dual framework of humanitarian benevolence and survival-oriented common sense that enslaved women's surrogate mothering practices become ethically intelligible.

Still, the potential benefits of maternal domestic surrogacy oftentimes did not mitigate the immediate and enduring psychological, emotional, and physical costs associated with the commodification of enslaved mothering. Of the myriad surrogate mothering tasks enslaved women performed, none illustrated the crisis and dilemma of sexual dismemberment more potently than wet nursing. Although some southern mistresses only employed White wet nurses, others like Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas viewed postpartum enslaved women as a ready supply of nourishment for their newborn and infant children. In a July 31, 1863 entry, Thomas contemplated her father's kind offering of his enslaved woman Emmeline as a wet nurse to Thomas's infant daughter, in the event that "Nancy's milk" did "not agree with" the child.²⁷⁸ Two years earlier, Thomas employed Emmeline's sister America and another woman, Georgianna, similarly, despite her later remonstrance that "people who do not have nourishment enough for their children ought not to have them."²⁷⁹ Indeed, the treatment of enslaved women's sexual bodies as a composite of usable, marketable parts enabled southern mistresses to disregard the psychological, emotional, and physical rigors associated with nursing White children. Thomas wrote casually of the circumstances surrounding America's and Georgianna's employment as wet nurses:

²⁷⁸ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 218. Although there are many recorded incidences of enslaved women nursing their masters' and mistresses' children, in a letter to her son, southern mistress Mary Jones records that her daughter had "such an abundance of nourishment" that she had "to nurse one of the little Negroes." Mrs. Mary Jones to Dr. Joseph Jones, Montevideo, May 13, 1858, *The Children of Pride*, ed. Robert Manson Myers, 415.

²⁷⁹ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 218.

On Sunday we sent down to the Rowell plantation for America. She has lost her baby which would have been three weeks old (had it lived) tonight. Pa has kindly permitted us to have her as a wet nurse for my baby. I do not give sufficient milk for him. I have tried cows milk. Then we had a goat. After we moved down here Georgianna nursed him and he commenced to fatten but her baby is nearly a year old and she did not have milk enough for both.²⁸⁰

Like America and Georgianna, many enslaved women were required to breastfeed White children in lieu of, in addition to, or in the wake of the loss of their own children. William McWhorter recalled the plight of his Aunt Mary, who nursed her and her master's newborn children, following the death of her mistress: "If Aunt Mary was feedin' her own baby and Miss Lucy started cryin' Marse John would snatch her baby up by the legs and spank him, and tell Aunt Mary to go on and nuss his baby fust."²⁸¹ Unable to protest the master's abuse of her newborn child, Aunt Mary was often observed crying "'til de tears met under her chin."²⁸² Enslaved women and men created ethical and common sense cultures to mitigate the psycho-social effects of many forms of sexual dismemberment, but they could not answer every violation. As evidenced by Aunt Mary's tears, there were some cruelties for which the only response was sorrow.

Conclusion

Experiences of sexual dismemberment—such as, sexual exposure, coercion, and the resignification of the womb— invariably shaped the sexual ethics and common sense

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 187.

²⁸¹ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part III*, 96-97.

²⁸² Ibid, 97.

of enslaved women, as well as informed the innermost values of enslaved men and children. Arising out of experiences of enslaved femaleness, womb ethics and common sense cultures enabled enslaved women and their families to survive within the culture of sexual dismemberment. For cultural outsiders, the women's ethical compromises violated the hegemonic norms of sexual propriety, norms which legally and socially excluded enslaved women, but ironically, shaped White assessments of bondspeople's sexual cultures. Despite the venom of popular discourses, enslaved women adopted situational ethical cultures predicated upon the realities of sexual exposure, routinized sexual violence, circumscribed choice, and familial uncertainty, as opposed to the ideals of the White, Judeo-Christian imagination.

Their womb ethics and common sense encompassed a range of responses to dismemberment, including "disremembering," public shaming, and sexual compromise. Although many did not welcome the advances of White men, some understood such relationships, when properly arranged, as opportunities to achieve a better quality of life. For others, acquiescence was merely an acknowledgment of the futility of resistance. Acquiescence to sex, procreation, and the raising of children with and for the very men and women who whipped, tortured, and disrespected their mothers, fathers, husbands, and children required women to acquire a mental fortitude that kept their eyes fixed on the prize. For many, the code of ethics dictated the care and protection of children—their own and those in their care—and they demonstrated, in many instances, an attentiveness to the future lives of their progeny that outweighed the care of themselves. All were not so altruistic, and some certainly sought to attain a better quality of life for themselves alone. Nevertheless, the accounts of the men and children who witnessed scenes of

women's dismemberment suggest that a number of women adopted ethical rubrics that prioritized the welfare of their families, in addition to their own, in their quests to re/member their sexual selves.

This sexual re/membrance included a reclamation of the creative power that slaveholders coopted in their resignification of the womb. Yet, ethical and "common sense" cultures were not the only ways enslaved women recreated themselves. Rather, for many, the mitigation of the dismemberment of their "second creation" began well before their first sexual encounter, in the birthing room, with the ritual remembrances of their foremothers.

Chapter Three

Re/membered Cycles: Women and the Creative Power of Ritual in Enslaved Life

Introduction

Just as creative power fueled enslaved people's ethical and "common sense" cultures, so it also undergirded their ritual life and shaped how they marked the seasons. In a context where quotidian life was structured by the daily labor regime, and seasons were marked by the ebb and flow of planting, harvesting, and selling staple crops, the enslaved managed to redefine rites of passage and eke out space for communal celebrations. Thus, on plantations, harvest time became a "big time," celebrated not only through social events such as corn shuckings and quiltings, but also ritualistic ceremonies.²⁸³ As Shad Hall recalled, the enslaved would sing and pray throughout the night, until the "fus cock crow," after which they would commence to dance in a circle, shout, and bow to the sun as it rose in the sky.²⁸⁴ The celebration not only marked the end of the harvest, the most grueling labor season where everyone from the cook to the field hands participated in the reaping, but also harkened back to the ceremonial performances that characterized the harvest in West Africa.²⁸⁵ Whether the enslaved continued to thank the ancestors for the harvest or offer the spirits the first fruits of the

²⁸³ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 260. Minnie Davis's account of the events surrounding the harvest match those of a number of enslaved people. Cornshuckings and cotton pickings were generally competitive events, after which enslaved people had a "frolic," or celebratory social gathering, while quiltings were generally all-female social gatherings. Davis recalled that, "Those things took place at harvest time, and everyone looked forward to having a good time at that season."

²⁸⁴ Georgia Writer's Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 168.

²⁸⁵ For the difficulties of "picking season," see Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 265-266. Mose Davis described the diminished work load following the harvest: "Field hands planted and tended cotton, corn, and other produce grown on the plantation until harvest time when everybody picked cotton. Slaves usually worked harder during the picking season than at any other time. After harvest, the only remaining work was cleaning out fence corners, splitting rails building fences and numerous other minor tasks. In hot weather, the only work was shelling corn."

bounty as did their ancestors is unknown.²⁸⁶ Given the rigors of labor prior to the harvest, it is equally likely that the ceremony celebrated the end of the most labor-intensive season and appealed to the spirits for the health and restoration of participants. Whatever the case, such instances make clear that bondspeople reinterpreted and expanded remembered protocols in order to accommodate new conditions and needs.

More than simply a social celebration, moments of communal gathering and ritual engagement—in which the community re/membered the cultural values of their ancestors—functioned as powerful responses to the dismemberment of enslavement. Despite the geographical and, for some, generational space between Georgia and Africa, bondspeople remained anchored in the ritual structures of their ancestors. True to the re/membered calendrical cycles of some of their West African ancestors, many bondspeople used the lunar cycle to mark the seasons. This is not to say that the sun did not command a central role in structuring the daily existences of the enslaved. Without question, the labors that occupied enslaved people from sunup through sundown heavily influenced their ritual lives, and indeed, enslaved people used the sun to tell time and gauge their locations in the work-driven chronology of the day.²⁸⁷ Yet, the association between daylight hours and work for others, coupled with the primacy of the moon to the measurement of time in some West African cultures yielded seasonal calendars governed

²⁸⁶ W.T. Harris and Harry Sawyerr, *The Springs of Mende Belief and Conduct: A Discussion of the Influence of the Belief in the Supernatural among the Mende* (Freetown: Sierra Leone University Press, 1968), 18-19. They describe a harvest ceremony, during which community members go to a designated hill—generally a hill associated with the crop—and call the names of the ancestors, first to promise them the rice crop, and then to fulfill the promise with an offering of ground rice flour. The flour is given as a “first-fruits” offering to begin the harvest, after the reaping of the first crops. The second ceremony occurs after all of the rice has been harvested and involves the sacrifice of animals and prayers for protection.

²⁸⁷ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 362. Regarding the work schedule, one enslaved woman reported that certain timekeepers blew the horn for dinner at twelve o’clock, “but they didn’t have to ‘cause everybody knowed when it was dinner time. Us could tell time by the sun. Whenever the sun was over us so us could almost step in our shadow it was time to eat...”

by the lunar cycle. Formerly enslaved Georgian, Manuel Johnson offered an interviewer a quick lesson on lunar-based gardening:

“...’Plant ev’ything dat makes under de groun’ lak ‘taters, goobers, tunips an’ sick, on de dark ov de moon; plant ev’ything dat makes on top de groun’ on light nights. Plant yo’ crap on de wast ov de moon an dat crap sho’ gwine ter waste er way, an’ dat’s de truf, I ain’t never seed hit fail yit. Plant corn on de full ov de moon an’ you’ll have full good-made years, plant on de growin’ ov de moon an’ you’ll have a full growed stalk, powerful stalks, but de years won’t be fullled out.”²⁸⁸

Since enslaved peoples’ only opportunity to work personal gardens came at night, it is not surprising that many were adept at planting by the moon. However, planting was not the only activity that the enslaved undertook in accordance with the lunar cycle. Georgia mistress Dolly Lunt Burge observed the relationship between the moon and the domestic activities of her servant Julia, who began making soap upon the change of the moon. According to Burge, Julia was a “strong believer in the moon and never [undertook] to boil her soap on the wane of the moon” for fear that the soap would not thicken.²⁸⁹ Julia also retained ideas about the moon and planting, telling her mistress that they “must commence gardening this moon.”²⁹⁰ Similarly, Uncle Sam, one of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas’s servants, had “great faith in the effect of the moon,” and influenced Thomas to such a degree that she “did not have as much killed...when the ‘Moon was (to use Uncle Sam’s expression) on the waste’ as...when it was beginning to

²⁸⁸ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 341.

²⁸⁹ Dolly Lunt Burge, *The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge*, ed. James I. Robertson, Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1962), 110.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

fill.”²⁹¹ On the authority of Uncle Sam, the waning of the moon induced a “shrinking away of meat killed.”²⁹²

Clearly, enslaved people’s use of the moon to mark the rhythms of their personal lives was more than just an outgrowth of the slavery-driven labor regime. Rather, the study of the moon to determine everything from planting to soap-making accessed West African ideas surrounding the lunar cycle. In contrast to the importance of the solar cycle in Kongo culture, the Temne and a number of other peoples of the Windward Coast timed their ritual cycles in accordance with the moon.²⁹³ But, like the relationship of the sun to Kongo culture, the moon’s significance transcended agricultural rotations. As early as 1623, travelers to the region noted that the inhabitants measured the months by new moons.²⁹⁴ And in his account of religion among the Bulums of the Windward Coast, slave dealer Nicholas Owen observed disdainfully that women commonly sacrificed to

²⁹¹ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 198.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Frederick Lamp, “Heavenly Bodies: Menses, Moon, and Rituals of License Among the Temne of Sierra Leone,” in *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 215. In Kongo cosmology, the sun’s movement around the planets corresponds to the cycle of the human spirit through the embodied and disembodied states, as well as the social expectations that accrue to each spiritual state. As scholar Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau states in his exposition of Kongo cosmology, “Man is a second sun rising and setting around the earth”—an idea visually conveyed by the BaKongo cosmogram. Kimbwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, *Tying the Spiritual Knot: African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo, Principles of Life and Living*, Second Edition (Brooklyn: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2001), 25. Evidence of Kongo cosmology is particularly prevalent in the lowcountry. Ras Michael Brown’s study on the persistence of *simbi* beliefs in South Carolina, Jason Young’s survey of Kongo culture in the lowcountry, and the presence of the BaKongo cosmogram on the floors of First African Baptist Church of Savannah all point to the strong influence of Kongo spirituality upon the religiosity of enslaved people. The predominance of Kongo culture, with its strong emphasis upon the solar cycle, in the lower South and throughout the Western hemispheric African diaspora heightens the novelty of the moon’s prominence in enslaved people’s sacred systems. On Kongo culture in the lowcountry, see Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry*, 2012, and Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 2007. Regarding the relationship between the BaKongo cosmogram and religious cultures of African-descended people in the West, see for instance Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 34-40, and Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 158-160.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 214.

their “household gods” at the new moon.²⁹⁵ More importantly, the “coming out” ceremonies of the sex-segregated initiatory societies, particularly Bundu, the Temne all-female society, coincided with the moon cycle.²⁹⁶

The relationship between Bundu and the moon is no coincidence. As the wife of the sun, the moon is imaged as female. Its phases not only function as a metaphor for the human life cycle from birth to death, but also for women’s movement through the reproductive stages of pregnancy and childbirth.²⁹⁷ Consequently, when a woman is menstruating, she is said “to wash the moon,” to have “seen the moon,” or “to be in the East.”²⁹⁸ Despite the latter euphemism’s reference to a cardinal point, the connection to the female reproductive cycle remains. The East is the “place of beginnings (the beginning of creation, the source of the ancestors, the place of birth, the site of initiation, etc.)...²⁹⁹ Thus, the linkage of menstruation to creation and the ancestors acknowledges the (pro)creative potentiality of menstruating women and alludes to the spirituality of creative power—biological and otherwise. However, the spiritual connotations of the moon do not end with its association with women. Evil spirits also fear the moon, on account of its power to expose the evil intentions and ill doings that flourish under the cover of darkness.³⁰⁰ Such interpretations of the moon’s power informed notions of women’s creative power, and vice versa. Since the link between women, the moon, spiritual power, and seasonality was native not only to the Temne, but to other African cultures from which the enslaved originated as well, the belief became a part of the

²⁹⁵ Owen, *Journal of a Slave Dealer*, 49.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 217.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 218-219.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 225. Harris and Sawyerr, *The Springs of Mende Belief*, 96.

²⁹⁹ Lamp, “Heavenly Bodies,” 225.

³⁰⁰ Harris and Sawyerr, *The Springs of Mende Belief*, 120-121.

“common sense” of enslaved communities. Consequently, when asked whether she planted “by the moon,” the formerly enslaved Nancy Boudry responded: “Plant when de moon change, my garden, corn, beans. I planted some beans once on de wrong time of de moon and dey didn’ bear nothin’ — I hated it so bad, I didn’ know what to do, so I been mindful ever since when I plant. Women peoples come down on de moon, too.”³⁰¹

This “common sense” cosmology was one of the primary ways female creative power—that is, spiritual power explicated through females’ reproductive capacities—infiltrated the ritual repertoires of entire enslaved communities. The absence of women among the recognizable leadership in institutional religious spaces, such as Christian churches, belied the association between femaleness and spiritual power in the colloquial spirituality of the slave quarters. Similar to their foreparents, the enslaved took for granted the spiritual power of esteemed women. Or, more accurately, esteemed women often earned their prestige and authority through demonstrations of their spiritual power. As the chief midwives and doctors on plantations, farms, and other enslaved contexts, enslaved women were generally present from the first breath to the last, while their roles in childbearing and childrearing made them central to each life stage in between. It is for this reason, that they assumed a particular place of authority in the ritual life of the enslaved. Of these life stages, none was perhaps more critical to the arc of an individual’s life than birth, and of the female spiritual authorities, none was more central to the ritual life of the community than the midwife.

“nikki yimi nikki yimi:” Midwives, Initiation, and the Spirituality of Childbearing

³⁰¹ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 115-116.

As a result of the resignification of the womb, childbirth acquired complex, and at times, contradictory significations in the individual and communal lives of enslaved peoples. On one hand, the birth of an enslaved child represented the expansion of the enslaved workforce—an expansion which enlarged individual slaveholders' human holdings, corroborated pro-slavery advocates' claims of the beneficence of the "peculiar institution," and inevitably enabled the perpetuation of the system itself. Although, given the monetary valuation of enslaved women's reproductive potential, enslaved children were commodified long before they took their first breaths, birth marked their entry into the southern economy as liquid human property. Moreover, an enslaved child's birth also heralded slaveholders' displacement of enslaved parents as the legal guardians and social dictators of children's lives. Paradoxically, for enslaved people, physiological birth portended the virtual death of parental claims and initiated a child's steady progression towards full comprehension of their legally-ordained destinies. Though born enslaved, with each passing day of their abbreviated childhoods, enslaved children learned the ontological meanings of "slave."

Yet, despite the life-destroying rigors of enslavement, a child's birth also materialized the community's creative power and will to survive. Birth marked a profound moment of countersignification and power for all bondspeople, but particularly for women, who sought to mitigate the effects of the dismembering contexts into which their children were born by re/membering the rituals of their ancestors. Surrounded by female community members, away from White surveillance, and under the guidance of a powerful, enslaved midwife, enslaved women established childbirth and birthing spaces as important sites for ritual re/membrance. On Anna King's St. Simon's Island plantation,

Big Sarah gave birth attended by two fellow enslaved women, Rhina and Maria, and under the watchful eye of the formidable Pussy, the plantation's chief midwife and plantation doctor.³⁰² Without question, the absence of White surveillance and male presence enabled ideas about childbearing and postpartum protocols to flow freely between the generations of women, while the knowledge exchanged contributed to a woman-gendered consciousness among female community members. Although the diverse origins of enslaved Georgians impede a precise explication of the multiple threads of thought, the “relational basis of selfhood” appears as a common theme across cultures, even if it is an approximation of more intricate, culture-specific philosophies.³⁰³ In one of the most widely-read expositions of the theme, religious studies scholar John S. Mbiti contends that communally-recognized personhood is not intrinsic to physical existence, rather the community must “make, create or produce the individual” through didactic, initiatory rites aimed at the development of the person at various stages.³⁰⁴ Participation in the spaces and conversations surrounding reproduction helped to initiate enslaved women into indigenous modes of womanhood in slavery—modes constructed from memories of ancestral rites and developed in response to dismemberment. The

³⁰² King, *Anna*, 114. Anna King discusses the birth in a November 13, 1851 letter, but details of Pussy's ministrations as a midwife and plantation doctor thread throughout her correspondence. In regards to the widespread illness among her enslaved workers in 1852, King wrote that she considered herself “much blessed in having so good & faithful a nurse as Pussy...” Ibid, 198.

³⁰³ Lesiba J. Teffo and Abraham P.J. Roux, “Metaphysical Thinking in Africa” in *The African Philosophy Reader*, ed. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (London: Routledge, 1998), 145. The authors assert general tenets of “African philosophy,” even as they acknowledge the necessity and efficacy of culture-specific approaches. They present “African” metaphysics generally in order to facilitate the critical evaluation of African metaphysics by a wider audience and encourage more culture-specific studies. I introduce their phrase in order to offer a broader context for the discussion of Mende philosophy, specifically, that follows.

³⁰⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy, Second Edition* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1989), 106. Mbiti's theory is only one of many theories of personhood, and has been critiqued on the basis of an obfuscation of the individual in favor of communalism. See Didier N. Kaphagawani, “African Conceptions of Personhood and Intellectual Identities,” in *The African Philosophy Reader*, ed. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (London: Routledge, 1998), 172-174. Kaphagawani asserts that “ontological pluralism” is embedded within forms of communalism, therefore the individual is never totally eclipsed by the community.

precariousness of marriage in enslavement, along with the power of female-dominated and -dictated space rendered childbirth, not marriage, as the most important rite of enslaved womanhood.³⁰⁵

As a woman-gendered rite of passage, childbirth was ensconced in a realm of female power for the enslaved and their West and West Central African forebears. Among the Mende, Temne, and other ethnic groups originating from the Windward Coast, this female power was institutionalized in formidable, all-female initiatory societies, called Sande, or Bundu, dependent upon the region. Sande initiation introduces young girls into the social realm of adult womanhood via ritual processes and gendered knowledge, aimed at ensuring that the initiates (*nyaha*) successfully achieve and execute their most important social role: motherhood.³⁰⁶ Sande is more than an organization, it is a body of knowledge regarding the cultural, spiritual, and practical dimensions of childbirth, fertility, and wifhood; female-directed, and -deployed ritual objects and medicines; and a cultural ideology of womanhood.³⁰⁷ It is, in short, “women in fellowship.”³⁰⁸ The one who initiates, the *Sande Waa Jowei* or *Majo*, is not only responsible for the proper instruction of the initiates-in-training (*mbogboni*), but as one of the *sowo*, or expert rank, is considered an authority on all matters female, particularly childbirth.³⁰⁹ The *Majo*, or head woman, of each Sande lodge also serves as the chief midwife among the women within her lodge’s jurisdiction, and in turn, the majority of

³⁰⁵ White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 107.

³⁰⁶ Carol P. MacCormack, “Biological Events and Cultural Control,” *Signs* 3, No. 1 (Autumn 1977): 95.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 95. Boone, *Radiance from the Waters*, 17-18.

³⁰⁸ Sylvia Ardyn Boone, *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 18.

³⁰⁹ Kenneth Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone*: (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1951), 126. MacCormack, “Biological Events and Cultural Control,” 96. Boone, *Radiance from the Waters*, 27. Little and MacCormack identify the chief administrator of Sande initiations as the *Majo*, or “head woman,” while Boone offers an extensive explanation of the the *Sande Waa Jowei* title, which in its literal translation means “Sande Initiating Sowei.” Boone interprets this translation as “the Sowei who initiates a Sande.”

midwives are “paramount chiefs” in Sande.³¹⁰ Although most *Majo* are elderly women, her elevated status emanates from her adeptness as a midwife and mastery of privileged medicinal and ritual knowledge systems, as opposed to her age.³¹¹ She is equal parts religious authority, ritual specialist, and medical practitioner. It is under her guidance that *nyaha* socially mature from girls into “those who may procreate.”³¹² And, during the time of the slave trade, it would have been to her that *nyaha* and other initiates returned to birth their children in the presence of their mothers.³¹³ For initiates, as for many other West and West Central African women, “successful” childbearing and childrearing was “informed by Sande knowledge about hygiene, nutrition, medicine, and a myriad of other practical techniques rather than being a careless matter of doing what comes naturally.”³¹⁴

Consequently, for African captives and their descendants, birth was a “cultural and social process” that could not be understood apart from its socioreligious context.³¹⁵ As a result of the legal and social linkage of the enslaved women to childbearing and childrearing in the South, and the cultural memory of Sande and similar structures, enslaved women (re)created birthing spaces as sites of ritualized creative power in the Americas. The birthing room was a definitively female space, presided over by none other than the high priestess of the enslaved community: the midwife. Georgia mistress

³¹⁰ MacCormack, “Biological Events and Cultural Control,” 96. Carol P. MacCormack, “Health, Fertility, and Birth in Moyamba District, Sierra Leone,” in *Ethnography of Fertility and Birth* (London: Academic Press, 1982): 118. Amara Jambai and Carol MacCormack, “Maternal Health, War, and Religious Tradition: Authoritative Knowledge in Pujehun District, Sierra Leone,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 10, No. 2 (June 1996): 275, 281. Boone, *Radiance from the Waters*, 27. Boone refers to the head of the Sande lodge as the Soweï.

³¹¹ MacCormack, “Health, Fertility, and Birth in Moyamba District, Sierra Leone,” 118. MacCormack, “Biological Events and Cultural Control,” 96.

³¹² MacCormack, “Health, Fertility, and Birth in Moyamba District, Sierra Leone,” 120.

³¹³ MacCormack, “Biological Events and Cultural Control,” 95.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

³¹⁵ MacCormack, “Health, Fertility, and Birth in Moyamba District, Sierra Leone,” 118-119.

Fanny Kemble observed that the midwife was “rather an important personage both to master and slave,” since it was the midwife’s “unassisted skill and science” to which “the ushering of all the young negroes into their existence of bondage [was] intrusted.”³¹⁶ Without question, midwives enjoyed greater mobility than the majority of enslaved women and an elevated status within the communal hierarchy, on account of their roles in ensuring the reproduction of a healthy enslaved population.³¹⁷ Greene County native Dosia Harris’s mistress gave Harris’s grandmother Crecia Downs a mule to travel between farms when Downs “started out to wuk for herself as a granny ‘oman.”³¹⁸ And, Isaiah Green’s grandmother Betsy Willis was esteemed not only for her expertise as a midwife, but also as a “skilled seamstress,” who taught other women the “art of sewing.”³¹⁹

Often called “grannies” due to their advanced age, enslaved midwives were more than birth facilitators. Like their West and West Central African forebears, they were ritual specialists whose medicinal knowledge evinced an understanding of childbirth as a somatic and spiritual event.³²⁰ Although ensconced within a context where Western European notions of health and medicine reigned, enslaved midwives maintained understandings that more closely approximated those of their continental foremothers. Medicine denoted “physical substances with pharmacological properties,” as well as “physical substances which link[ed] persons with sources of power in the universe.”³²¹

³¹⁶ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*, 8.

³¹⁷ On the increased mobility and prestige of enslaved midwives, see White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 129. Fett, *Working Cures*, 129-130.

³¹⁸ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 113.

³¹⁹ *Ibid*, 51.

³²⁰ For an instance of the use of the term, see Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 199. Deborah Gray White records the use of the term in other locations, as well as the advanced age of the women who carried the designation. White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 115.

³²¹ MacCormack, “Biological Events and Cultural Control,” 95.

Enslaved midwives were renowned for the breadth of their herbal knowledge, which extended beyond matters concerned with childbirth. In her reflections upon her grandmother's work, Dosia Harris recalled the integral role "grannies" played in ensuring the health of the entire enslaved community:

"Dere was three old 'omans what Old Mist'ess kept to look atter sick slave 'omans. Dem old granny nurses knowed a heap about yarbs (herbs). May apple and blacksnake roots, king of de meadow, (meadow rue) wild asthma (aster) and red shank, dese was biled and deir tea give to de slaves for diffunt ailments.'...'Back in dem days folks wore tare (tar) sacks 'round deir necks and rubbed turpentine under deir noses. When deir ailments got too hot, lak when Mammy died, dey made 'em swallow two or three draps of turpentine."³²²

Evidently, enslaved midwives frequently devised integrative treatments that drew upon the spiritual qualities of herbal medicines, and vice versa. As historian Sharla Fett has demonstrated, enslaved people understood herbalism as a "sacred art."³²³ And their medicinal botanical practices reflected a "spiritual relationship to the land" and an understanding of power "as the capacity not only to control but also to create and transform."³²⁴

As a "sacred art," midwifery was not merely learned through apprenticeship, but rather inherited as a part of an intergenerational cycle of ritualized creative power. When midwife Rosa was twelve years-old, her grandmother, Katherine Basden, ordained Rosa her successor, telling her that when she "[grew] up" she "would take huh [Basden's]

³²² Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 112.

³²³ Fett, *Working Cures*, 76.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 52, 62.

place an carry on duh wuk she wuz doin.”³²⁵ Enslaved midwives’ vast medicinal knowledge, along with their roles in facilitating birth—the ultimate creative act—situated them as ritual and pharmacological authorities within their respective communities. Consequently, their pedigree was paramount. In their homelands, captive females would have entrusted their care to the midwives that attended their female family members, delivered previous children, and/or studied under a trusted midwife.³²⁶ Skilled midwives possessed a wealth of medicinal, spiritual, and ritual knowledge, honed by years of training under a distinguished specialist, who, through training, shared her creative power with her apprentices. For this reason, distinguished lineages of midwifery often paralleled female bloodlines in parts of West Africa and the lower South.³²⁷ In some cases, midwives passed their knowledge to male descendants, as well. According to Jack Waldburg, his grandmother, a midwife from West Africa, was the one that taught him to “make medicine from root.”³²⁸ Although accounts of midwives, specifically, teaching their descendants medicinal arts are rare, it is highly likely that a number of enslaved specialists—male and female—learned their crafts from skilled midwives.

Perhaps more importantly, Waldburg’s revelation confirms that skilled midwives entered the slave trade and arrived in the Americas, despite slaveholders’ proclivities for males and the young. Since skill was gauged by successful births and aptitude, and not merely age, some captive women most likely possessed the expertise to continue the rituals of their homelands in their new contexts and passed their knowledge on to their descendants. Hence, some enslaved midwives’ ritual lineages undoubtedly stretched

³²⁵ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 131.

³²⁶ Jambai and MacCormack, “Maternal Health, War, and Religious Tradition,” 281.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

³²⁸ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 68.

back to the African continent. Similar to their West African counterparts, they were agents of creative power, and, as such, served as gatekeepers to female-exclusive ritual spaces like the birthing room. True to the legacy of their foremothers, within the ritual space of the birthing room, the ritualistic, medicinal, and spiritual dimensions were intertwined.

Yet, their wholistic understandings of childbirth ran counter to prevailing medical theories. Relegated to the realm of superstition, the association between elderly enslaved women and herbalism was so pronounced that members of the emergent field of professionalized medicine frequently decried medicinal folk knowledge with references to “old women’s” remedies.³²⁹ Medical doctors’ scathing indictments of midwives and the types of medicinal knowledge they represented emanated not only from racist and sexist understandings of Black female competency, but also from a desire to usurp the midwives’ esteemed place in obstetrical and gynecological matters. When southern mistress Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas went into labor one month early, her mother sent for the enslaved Aunt Tinsey, while Thomas herself called for Dr. Eve. Dr. Eve did not arrive until “three quarters of an hour after the baby was born,” however Thomas wrote: “Aunt Tinsey’s presence inspired me with a great deal of confidence.”³³⁰ Given the use of the “Aunt” honorific, which suggested Aunt Tinsey’s advanced age and elevated status, she was most likely a midwife and delivered her young mistress’s child in the doctor’s

³²⁹ Fett, *Working Cures*, 45-46, 51. Fett relays an incident during which two White doctors rebuffed plantation midwife Mildred Graves’s attempts to attend a woman’s birth by remarking that they didn’t want “any witch doctors or hoodoo stuff.” Fett rightfully points out that, in the reference to hoodoo, the remark racialized Graves’s knowledge and relegated it to the realm of “African superstition.” As Catherine M. Scholten has shown, questions of competency were not directed solely at enslaved and Black midwives, but rather were a part of a larger national phenomenon that coincided with the emergence of obstetrics as a field of medicine. See Catherine M. Scholten, “On the Importance of the Obstetrick Art: Changing Customs of Childbirth in America, 1760-1825,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 34 (1977): 437-441.

³³⁰ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 164. Thomas recorded the incident on Wednesday, November 17, 1858.

absence. Five years later, when Thomas again experienced complications with her pregnancy, she “immediately wrote a note for Ma and Aunt Tinsey to come over” and only afterward “sent in town for Dr. Joe Eve.”³³¹

Despite some medical professionals’ attempts to discredit enslaved midwives, southerners—Black and White, enslaved and free—continued to rely upon the vast experiential and medicinal knowledge of enslaved midwives to birth their babies.³³² For this reason, many doctors chose to work with Black midwives, even after Emancipation, when slaveholders ceased to rely upon midwifery. Nancy Boudry was a midwife to “black and white, after freedom,” and boasted that all of the doctors in her hometown of Thomson, Georgia liked her and “tole people to ’git Nancy.”³³³ Like many other midwives during slavery and post-Emancipation, Nancy used herbs, such as “taney tea’ ,” “heap o’ little root,” and “black pepper tea” to help her patients manage their pain, and only called the doctors when she encountered a difficult birth.³³⁴ Nancy’s continued application of herbal remedies to treat laboring patients, despite attempts to train Black midwives according to the principles of Western medicine after Emancipation, points to the strength of indigenous midwifery practices among enslaved women and their descendants.³³⁵

³³¹ Ibid, 215. This entry is dated July 24, 1863.

³³² Todd L. Savitt, *Race and Medicine in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century America* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2007): 76. Savitt cites one medical professional who estimated that physicians attended less than half of all the births in Virginia. Between nine-tenths and five-sixths of Black deliveries, and half of White deliveries in the state were supervised by midwives, many of whom were Black.

³³³ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 116.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Wendy Phillips, “Cravings, Marks, and Open Pores: Acculturation and Preservation of Pregnancy-Related Beliefs and Practices Among Mothers of African Descent in the United States,” *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology* 33, No. 2 (June 2005): 235. In her framing of pregnancy practices among the Gullah women of lowcountry South Carolina, she notes that midwifery was taught as a profession at the Penn Center, a Quaker school for recently freed Blacks on St. Helena Island, South Carolina. Consequently, midwives in the area were encouraged to adopt Western medicinal principles into their practices. To this end, many midwives also apprenticed with White doctors.

Indigenous midwifery practices often included non-herbal prescriptions that demonstrated their understanding of childbirth as more than merely a physiological event. True to the perception of the birthing room as a ritual space, enslaved midwives used symbolic gestures, songs, and other measures to exact their intended physical outcomes. Midwives commonly placed scissors, knives, smoothing irons, and other sharp objects under their patients' pillows to "cut" the pain during childbirth.³³⁶ Although the practice defied the medical logic of physicians, it was apparently efficacious. As one woman reported: "Once wen I wuz in pain a midwife put a peah of sizzuhs unduh muh pilluh. All of a sudden the pain stop right quick. The pain wuz cut right off."³³⁷ Another woman contrasted the "pain-easin' medicines" of Black women's post-slavery, hospital experiences of childbirth, with the psychosomatic approaches of midwives: "We didn't go to no harspitals as they do now. We jest had our babies and had a granny to catch 'em. We didn't have all the pain-easin' medicines then. The granny would put a rusty piece of tin or a ax under the mattress and this would ease the pain. The granny put a ax under my mattress once. This wuz to cut off the after-pains and it sho did too, honey."³³⁸ According to one midwife, in order for the remedy to retain its efficacy, the patient should not witness the placement of the instrument—a stipulation which suggested the treatment effected its purposes less through psychosomatic means and more through the midwife's interaction with the metaphysical dimensions of pain.³³⁹ Without question, concealment of such practices also helped to shield midwives from the scrutiny of the doctors and mistresses who sometimes attended births, thereby allowing enslaved

³³⁶ Georgia Writer's Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 128. See also, White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 112.

³³⁷ *Ibid*, 125.

³³⁸ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 142-143.

³³⁹ Georgia Writer's Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 128.

midwives to maintain indigenous traditions of childbirthing amid racist and sexist derogations of their methods.

Enslaved midwives used similar ritual gestures with the babies that they delivered. One midwife, who apprenticed with her grandmother, reported that her grandmother would sing a song that repeated the phrase “nikki yimi nikki yimi” in the ears of newborn babies, although the meaning and intent of the song was undisclosed.³⁴⁰ The woman’s rhythmic performance of the song, which included the movement of her shoulders “in rhythm” and clapping of her hands—elements indigenous to many sacred performances in African contexts—further suggested the ritualistic dimensions of her grandmother’s singing. The repeated phrase “nikki yimi nikki yimi” was, most likely, more than a corruption of English words obscured by the granddaughters’ memory. Rather, together with the song’s performance, the untranslated words offered more evidence of the transmission of midwifery rituals and beliefs about birth between West and West Central African captives and their American descendants. For the enslaved, as for their Mende, Temne, and other African ancestors, it would have been “important to ensure that infants [were] properly initiated into the world of human society.”³⁴¹ Consequently, it is not unlikely that the grandmother’s words were an incantation intended to protect the newly born child from evil spirits—embodied and disembodied—and/or to direct the newborn’s spirit on proper integration into the community.

Rituals of Reproduction: Prenatal and Postpartum Protocols

³⁴⁰ Ibid, 131.

³⁴¹ Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 90. Gittins makes this statement in reference to the significance of birth rituals among present-day Mende.

In the eyes of most enslaved midwives, the spiritual fortification of mothers and babies was a part of reproductive health. Southern bondswomen persisted in their African foremothers' understandings of the vulnerability of a mother and her unborn or newborn child, and their ideas shaped spiritual and physiological protocols around pregnancy and childbirth. Pregnancy and birth marked the entry of potentially dangerous spirits into the community. Among women of the former Windward Coast, the believed susceptibility of pregnant women to the machinations of infant blood-sucking *ndilei* and soul-eating *honamoi* eventuated the conviction that an expectant mother should neither announce her pregnancy nor allow her stomach to be touched, lest she become the target of ill-intentioned entities.³⁴² Similarly, in the U.S. American South, grannies often created charms and instructed their patients in rituals aimed to protect the unborn from maleficent spirits. To this end, one midwife instructed her patient to put “a spoonful of whiskey in her left shoe every morning.”³⁴³

In addition to protocols designed for the protection of infants and mothers from ill-intentioned spirits, there were also less grave, but equally as indispensable observances. From their foremothers, enslaved women inherited the belief that a

³⁴² Phillips, “Cravings, Marks, and Open Pores: 244. In the study, Phillips compares pregnancy related beliefs among recently immigrated Sierra Leonean women in Atlanta, Georgia; African-descended women from St. Helena Island, South Carolina; and African-American women from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Given her use of acculturation theories as a framework for her argument, she compares the women from Sierra Leone with those from St. Helena Island, due to the well-documented cultural similarities between Sierra Leoneans and the Gullah people. Her study demonstrates the persistence of West African views concerning pregnancy in the lowcountry and suggests that captive women not only continued to observe their ancestral protocols, but more significantly, passed their ideas to their country-born daughters and other female family members. Given the chronological distance between the women in the study and their enslaved ancestors, it is likely that enslaved women adhered to a more extensive list of protocols. Interestingly, she presents the African-American women from Chattanooga as a foil to the other two groups, given the absence of any significant, documented connection to Sierra Leonean or other West African cultures.

³⁴³ Catherine M. Scholten, “On the Importance of the Obstetrick Art:’ Changing Customs of Childbirth in America, 1760-1825,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 34 (1977): 430, 443-444, as quoted in White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 111.

mother's interactions with the environment affected her fetus.³⁴⁴ Consequently some women not only adhered to dietary prescriptions, but also monitored their behavior. Nancy Fryer claimed to have "marked" three of her children through hers and others' ill-considered actions during pregnancy. When she was, in her words, an unthinking, "young gal" pregnant with her son, she laughed at an old man that "was ruptured" and wore a white apron. According to Nancy, she "ruin't [her] boy" with her behavior; he was apparently born with the same affliction from which the aproned man suffered. More than an iteration of "what goes around comes around," the incident, and subsequent explanation, evidenced enslaved peoples' understandings of the direct relationship between prenatal moral protocols and the child's appearance, since to Nancy's mind, her behavior was the sole cause of the child's condition. To this point, she confessed that when she looked at her son, she felt "so bad" and thought: "'dat didn' have to be."³⁴⁵ Nancy's description of the "marking" of another son articulated an additional West African belief concerning prenatal protocols: namely that a pregnant woman must indulge her cravings, in order to prevent birthmarks on the fetus.³⁴⁶ While pregnant with another son, Nancy lusted after some cherries as she scratched her wrist—an action which, according to her, caused her child to be born with a cherry-shaped birthmark on his wrist. She was not alone in her belief in the correlation between prenatal occurrences and birth outcomes, however. Following the baby's birth, Nancy showed her child's birthmark to "old man Jim," the man who denied her the cherries, and Jim cried, prayed, and asked for Nancy's forgiveness.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ Philips, "Cravings, Marks, and Open Pores," 248. This belief is indigenous to Sierra Leone.

³⁴⁵ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 338.

³⁴⁶ Phillips, "Cravings, Marks, and Open Pores," 248-249.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

Despite Jim's acknowledgement of culpability, among the Mende and in Georgia, women bore the brunt of the ritual responsibility around childbearing. According to the Mende, a child receives its physical aspect from semen, but its spirit (*ngafei*) from the mother. Consequently, there exists a psychic connection between a mother and her child, well before the child's birth.³⁴⁸ Via dreams and other signs, the unborn child may instruct its mother in the appropriate preparatory measures for its birth, and she must ensure that the unborn spirit's demands are met, lest the spirit choose not to remain with the family. In some cases, infant and mother deaths functioned as signs of *Ngewo*'s discontent and/or proof of the mother's or community's errant ways. For this reason, pregnant Mende women observed a number of moral protocols in order to be deemed virtuous and "confessed" their transgressions in the event of a difficult labor.³⁴⁹ When the mother did confess her sins and secrets during childbirth, she did so to none other than a midwife, whose knowledge of the private matters of households heightened her power within her community.

The acknowledged precariousness of childbirth and infancy rendered such protocols essential to the socioreligious life of the community. Spirits dissatisfied with their environment may choose either to depart, resulting in the death of the infant, or worse, lie in wait to occupy and vacate the next child's body, resulting in successive deaths. In the event of the suspected return and subsequent departure of a dissatisfied spirit, the infant's body is "denied social identity" and buried naked, on a pile of rubbish, without ceremony in order to discourage the spirit's return in later children.³⁵⁰ Prior to the infant's burial, it is the mother's responsibility to mark the child's body in order to

³⁴⁸ Harris and Sawyerr, *The Springs of Mende Belief and Conduct*, 129.

³⁴⁹ Ibid, 90-91.

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 92-93.

ensure her recognition of the return of a dissatisfied spirit in a subsequent child. A mark on a later child serves as proof of a spirit's return and prompts the family to take further ritual measures—such as naming the child *Jiilo* (“let this one remain”), *Kone* (“please, I beg”), or other imploring names—to persuade the spirit to remain.³⁵¹

Though it is difficult to tell whether enslaved women continued to interpret infant deaths in terms of restive spirits, the same communal unease about wandering spirits manifested in prenatal protocols regarding funeral attendance in the lower South. In accordance with the Sierra Leonean belief that pregnant women should not attend funerals, because the spirit of the deceased may desire to harm or “take” the unborn child, enslaved and formerly enslaved women understood fetal and newborn spirits as vulnerable to the spirits of the dying.³⁵² Understandings of the parlous balance between new life and imminent death pervaded one midwife's description of the events preceding her grandmother's death:

“Muh granmudduh wuz took very sick. She knew she wuz gonnuh die.
 Dat wuz jis wen muh oldes chile wuz bawn. Muh granmudduh jis refuse
 tuh die fo she seen me an duh baby. She say she hab tuh see us fo she die.
 Ebry day she ax fuhrus. She git weakuh and weakuh but she jis wohn die.
 Wen duh baby wuz a dew days ole, I git dress and go tuh see uh. Fus I
 wuz fraid tuh bring duh baby intuh duh sick ruhm fuh dey say it bad luck
 fih somebody bout tuh die tuh look at a baby. Sometimes duh baby die too.
 I tell did tuh muh gran an she laugh at me an tell me ain gonuh take duh
 baby wid uh. Den I bring duh baby in an she sing tuh us an hole uh ahms.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Phillips, “Cravings, Marks, and Open Pores,” 243.

She tell me she wuz gonuh die now an dat I wuz tuh continue uh wuk wid
duh folks yuh. Right attuh dat she die.”³⁵³

Expressed in a precautionary didacticism about “bad luck,” enslaved women’s belief in the spiritual fragility of the newly born mirrored the ideas of their West African foremothers and offered a spiritual explanation for otherwise inexplicable infant deaths.

Though social connotations of motherhood undoubtedly shifted in the wake of the womb’s resignification, protocols aimed at the protection of infant life suggest that many enslaved women hoped for the survival of their children, despite slavery’s horrors. Certainly, as evidenced by cases of infanticide, women defined “survival” differently. Nevertheless, the presence of West African protocols around infant survival in the lower South indicates enslaved women repackaged remembered cosmologies in order to retain some of their (pro)creative power. In a context where their diet, labor, rest, and care were dictated by the economic interests and/or moral conscience of their legal masters, protocols calibrated towards infant survival extended women an element of control.

The women who chose motherhood were likely anxious about the survival of their children, and for good reason. For the enslaved, like their West and West Central African foremothers, birth was precarious. Yet the physical and psychological rigors of enslavement intensified the innate and imminent dangers of childbearing for mother and child. Enslaved women frequently suffered from illnesses stemming from constant childbearing, such as prolapsed uteruses and arthritis. And, indeed, childbirth was understood as “practically the only form of a Negro woman’s ‘coming down.’”³⁵⁴ Moreover, the threat of infant death continually loomed. The likelihood of infant death

³⁵³ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 131-132.

³⁵⁴ Redpath, *The Refugee*, 127.

within one month of birth during the antebellum period was 23.3% on cotton farms, 35% on sugar farms, and a whopping 47.2% on rice plantations.³⁵⁵ Inexperienced mothers under the age of twenty were twice as likely to lose their infants after the first month than mothers over the age of thirty. Given that this increased likelihood of infant survival coincided with a woman's prime, labor-intensive years, older women's higher levels of experience were most likely the primary determinant of infant health outcomes.³⁵⁶ Young enslaved mothers could not afford to ignore prenatal protocols, if they wanted their children to survive.

Young women's need for the support of experienced women fortuitously intersected with some planters' observances of health- and age-based labor conventions to create cultural and physical space for non-kin based, intergenerational female communities, in which protocols could thrive. As a consequence of some planters' self-interested incubation of pregnant women from rigorous labor, expectant mothers often joined elderly women and early-adolescent aged children either sewing and spinning, or performing light agricultural work on the "trash gang."³⁵⁷ According to historian Deborah Gray-White, the "trash gang" not only provided a space for female community, but also functioned as an important rite of passage for enslaved girls. There, among pregnant, nursing, and elderly women, female adolescents most likely learned about "life under slavery, as well as particulars regarding men, marriage, and sex."³⁵⁸ Apart from the "trash gang," some plantations had a separate space for mothers and children—

³⁵⁵ Richard H. Steckel, "A Dreadful Childhood: The Excess Mortality of American Slaves," *Social Science History* 10, No. 4 (Winter 1986): 437.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 446.

³⁵⁷ White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*, 94, 100, 110. White suggests that lighter work might have been an incentive to get pregnant on some plantations.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

presided over by a midwife—which also offered a space for the entrenchment of prenatal and postpartum protocols.³⁵⁹

Even though pregnancy and new motherhood created the possibility for a heightened sense of community between women, all-female “hospital” and infirmary spaces also allowed women to witness the potential horrors of childbearing.³⁶⁰ The Butler plantation infirmary—a two-story building with inefficient, dingy shutters and no beds—housed a number of women in various states of health and stages of childbearing, all under the care of Rose, the plantation midwife. In evocative detail, mistress Fanny Kemble described the foul conditions under which the women experienced prenatal and postpartum care:

“Here lay women expecting every hour the terrors and agonies of childbirth, others who had just brought their doomed offspring into the world, others who were groaning over the anguish and bitter disappointment of miscarriages—here lay some burning with fever, others chilled with cold and aching with rheumatism, upon the hard cold ground, the draughts and dampness of the atmosphere increasing their sufferings, and dirt, noise, and stench, and every aggravation of which sickness is capable, combined in their condition—here they lay like brute beasts.”³⁶¹

³⁵⁹ Formerly enslaved Georgian Martha Colquitt describes a separate space for mothers and children, supervised by “a granny ‘oman who didn’t have nothin’ else to do but look atter colored babies and mammies.” Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 246.

³⁶⁰ White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 110. White argues that the potential for temporarily incapacitated women to be assigned to the “trash gang” and other areas of decreased labor on large plantations created opportunities for female community.

³⁶¹ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation*, 11-12.

A far cry from the community of the birthing room, the infirmary exposed women to the numerous perils of childbearing and, no doubt, generated a context in which women routinely reflected upon the volatility of life and death in birthing spaces.

Even in the absence of shared birthing spaces, enslaved people participated in a shared context of mother and infant peril. Formerly enslaved Lina Hunter reported that the largest funeral that she ever witnessed on her Oglethorpe County plantation was for a woman that “drapped down in de path and died when she was comin’ in from de field to nuss her baby” at “Granny Rose’s” cabin.³⁶² Although Hunter failed to elaborate upon the woman’s death, it is probable that the combined rigors of childbirth, breastfeeding, and field labor contributed to the mother’s demise. Clearly, the community shared in the tragedy. Slavery presented a number of obstacles to infant and maternal health, which often resulted in childless mothers and motherless children. Susan McIntosh of Oconee County relayed the extent of her family’s personal experience with high infant and child mortality, stating matter-of-factly: Oh! there was thirteen of us chillun, seven died soon after they was born, and none of ‘em lived to git grown ‘cept me. Their names was . . . , and the twins what was born dead; and Harden.”³⁶³

Such litanies to the dead abounded in the narratives of enslaved women. In her interactions with the women of her husband’s plantation, Fanny Kemble became so inured to childhood mortality among the enslaved, that she recorded women’s childbearing and child loss histories along with their visits:

“*Fanny* has had six children; all dead but one. She came to beg to have her work in the field lightened. . . .

³⁶² Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 262.

³⁶³ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part III*, 79.

Sukey, Bush's wife, only came to pay her respects. She had had four miscarriages; had brought eleven children into the world, five of whom are dead.

Molly, Quambo's wife, also only came to see me. Hers was the best account I have yet received; she had had nine children, and six of them were still alive."³⁶⁴

Women's diligent recollection of their births and losses was perhaps one of the ways they remembered their children and re-membered themselves in the wake of loss.

To be sure, the high rate of infant mortality, coupled with the known brutality of slavery, shifted the meanings of child and fetal death for some mothers, and engendered mixed emotions. Nevertheless, bondswomen keenly felt the loss of their children. Upon witnessing a set of enslaved parents' reaction to the death of their thirteenth child, Kemble puzzled over "...whether it was the frequent repetition of similar losses, or an instinctive consciousness that death was indeed better than life for such children as theirs..." that prompted the parents' apparent apathy. Whatever the case, Kemble marveled at the child's father, mother, and nurse grandmother "old Rose," all of whom "seemed apathetic, and apparently indifferent to the event." However, the parents did, in fact, emote: "The mother merely repeated over and over again, 'I've lost a many; they all goes so,' and the father, without a word or comment, went out to his enforced labor."³⁶⁵ As in many cases of enslaved people's responses to child loss, the parents' reserve belied their grief. In a haunting display of composure, Lydia, the house servant of one of Gertrude Thomas's neighbor's, told Thomas of the discovery of her baby's death: "I

³⁶⁴ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation*, 103-105.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

hadn't no idea it was going to die. I found its feet was cold and I got up and warmed them but after a while its nose got cold and you know' said she (with a laugh), 'there was no way of warming its nose and then I knew it was going to die.'³⁶⁶ It was, perhaps, due to the trauma of high infant mortality that enslaved people circulated "signs" that portended infant death. According to the formerly enslaved Celestia Avery, sweeping off bedsprings with a brush and witnessing a dog sliding on its stomach both augured the death of a child. In the wake of witnessing the former, Avery lost her eight year-old child and, after observing the latter, she lost her nine month-old infant.³⁶⁷

The constant specter of death for mother and child, along with the ever-present possibility of separation—akin to death in its finality—intensified the importance of postpartum rituals. Through rituals, such as naming, enslaved women re/membered ties to kin and asserted their creative power, in spite of slaveholders' and others' denials of parental rights and notions of enslaved women's perfunctory childbearing. As evidenced by the use of naming to soothe restive spirits, names had power within West African cultural contexts. According to the Mende, a person's name is wedded to his/her spirit (*ngafei*), and knowledge of an individual's name can grant others, particularly *honamoi* and similarly ill-intentioned personages, access to the spirit of a potential target.

Names had a similar spiritual significance among the enslaved, and suggested that enslaved Africans and their descendants not only continued to use the names of their homelands, but even when ancestral names no longer appeared in plantation records, some of the enslaved continued to adhere to West African philosophical approaches to naming/personal identification. According to one heavily edited WPA account, "it was

³⁶⁶ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 216.

³⁶⁷ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 28-29.

always thought best for the mother to name her children if the proper name for the babe was revealed to her during pregnancy.”³⁶⁸ Interestingly, the word “dream” appeared to follow “revealed to her” in the original transcription—suggesting that the informant pointed to dreams as the site of revelation—but the word was written over by the interviewer in a later revision. Nevertheless, the idea that a child’s name was not simply chosen, but rather revealed to the mother, echoed Mende ideas regarding the fetuses’ reception of its spirit (*ngafei*) from its mother and consequent psychic connection to its mother. Yet, the links between enslaved people’s beliefs about naming and those of their African ancestors did not end there. True to West African understandings of the relationship between an individual’s spirit (*ngafei*) and his/her name, some enslaved believed that, if the child was not given its revealed name, the “correct one would be so firmly implanted in his subconscious that he would never be able to resist the impulse to turn his head when that name was called.”³⁶⁹

Clearly, the interrelationship between a person’s spirit and name prompted the enslaved to regard naming as a spiritual imperative. Naming rights were also a parental prerogative that enslaved people claimed whenever possible, in order to counter the dismembering effects of enslavement. During the colonial era and well into the antebellum period, slaveholders assigned enslaved people names such as “Ready Money” and “Fortune” that boasted of bondspeople’s economic value and broadcast their statuses as human property.³⁷⁰ Even when enslaved children were not assigned derogating names, some slaveholders completely usurped naming power in an effort to establish the primacy

³⁶⁸ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 41.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

³⁷⁰ Lathan, *Runaway Slave Advertisements*, 167-168.

of their parental authority.³⁷¹ David Goodman Gullins recalled the popularity of mistresses naming enslaved children after their best friends—a trend which resulted in his younger brother being named Willie Richard Edgar Mappins.³⁷²

Although an innocuous form of violence, such practices fed into the larger structures of violence that inculcated the meanings of enslavement into the cultures and ontology of the enslaved. Emerging from a context in which one's name and spirit (*ngafei*) were intertwined, the captives most likely interpreted the act of renaming as the ultimate act of re-creation—an attempt to inscribe enslavement upon their very spirits. In the face of such insidious agendas and demeaning appellations, it is no wonder that a number of captive Africans defiantly continued to refer to themselves using their country names and assigned West African names to their colony-born children. This predilection made it highly likely that enslaved people frequently answered to one name from their masters, while referring to themselves by another. A January 5, 1774 runaway advertisement described three men by name, physical description, and country. Yet, the ads recorded two names for each man: the name presumably given to them by their purchaser and their “country name.” Thus, Madingo-born “Massery” was dubbed “Somerset” in Georgia, “Serrah” was called “Limus,” and “Mussee” was designated “Mark.”³⁷³ Likewise, one “country born,” or colony born, woman was called Zarra by her master, but according to the ad announcing her disappearance, referred to herself as Zanna.³⁷⁴ Remarkably, enslaved people continued to dub their children West African

³⁷¹ There are a number of accounts from formerly enslaved people that suggest that slaveholders routinely named all of the children under their power. See Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 190.

³⁷² Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 80.

³⁷³ *Ibid*, 46.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 141.

names even beyond the colonial period. Names such as Quash continued to appear in plantation records, well into the antebellum period.³⁷⁵

Yet, even when generations no longer used the appellations of their ancestral homelands, bondspeople continued to recognize the spirituality of naming and create memory ties through names. As a result of the, often, tenuous possibility of cohabitation with their partners and legal primacy of the mother/child relationship, it is not surprising that a number of enslaved women chose to establish the child's paternity via naming.³⁷⁶ Although Milton Hammond's mother and siblings were legally owned by Bill Freeman, Hammond's mother defiantly adopted her husband's surname for herself and her children.³⁷⁷ Though a seemingly innocuous convention embraced by a number of enslaved women, the practice acknowledged paternal and conjugal ties and reclaimed naming power from slaveholders. It was a way to re-member relationships denied and/or destabilized by slavery's social and legal rigors, and to assert the parental prerogative of naming. Due to the sex-segregation of the birthing space, along with the gendered labor and social norms of enslavement, enslaved women were often the chief facilitators of postpartum rituals of remembrance.

It was, perhaps, for this reason that maternal grandmothers figured prominently in familial naming lineages. In one of her final acts before succumbing to a childbirth-related illness, Mariah Callaway's mother named her daughter after her own mother, Mariah Willis, who became the two-day old child's guardian following the mother's

³⁷⁵ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation*, 134. Kemble mentions "Boatman Quash" in the entry.

³⁷⁶ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 109. White cites Herbert Gutman's finding that enslaved children were more likely to be named for their father, than their mother, and points to the possibility of separation as a reason. Yet, she departs from Gutman's conclusion that the trend confirmed the centrality of the father to the enslaved family. Rather, she rightly asserts that such naming practices affirm the mother as the critical link between father and child.

³⁷⁷ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 91.

death.³⁷⁸ Though such naming practices were not uncommon among White southerners, the unstable social dynamics of enslavement and West African cultural background of the enslaved infused the gesture with a heightened significance. When enslaved women named their children after fathers, grandfathers, and grandmothers, they not only forged ways of re/membering kin who could, at any moment, be removed or killed, but also sought to imbue their offspring with the qualities of their namesake. Congruent with the logic of the Mende and other West Africans, the name both articulated a quality of the child's spirit, presumably revealed to the mother, as well as imposed a framework of being for the new spirit. In this way, naming was a powerful assertion of creative power. Within a context where parental rights were frequently usurped by the slaveholder, child naming empowered mothers to create a spiritual trajectory for their children's being—coupling names with mythologies that shaped the names' meanings. In some cases, the mythology incited offspring to take on the names of treasured elders. Mary Colbert's grandmother, Hannah Crawford, occupied mythic proportions within Colbert's memory. The small statured woman was apparently brought to Crawford, Georgia from Virginia, was "smart as a whip," and lived to be 118 years old—all qualities which contributed to Colbert's desire to be "named Hannah for her." Despite Colbert's advanced age, her mother assented to the child's request, and the former "Mary" became "Mary Hannah."³⁷⁹ Thus, as a postpartum protocol, naming was more than a requisite act for social integration. Names functioned as oral family trees, which re/membered lost relationships and homelands, while also establishing spiritual ties to loved ones.

³⁷⁸ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 172.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

Naming protocols were not the only postpartum ideas that enslaved people absorbed from their West African forebears. Bondspeople also continued to harbor the idea that physical manifestations at birth portended spirit presences and heightened spiritual powers that had to be ritually managed for the safety of the community. Among the Mende, the birth of malformed children signals the enfleshment of an evil spirit (*ngafa nyamui*), and the spirit must be ritually cleansed from the community to ensure the safety of its members.³⁸⁰ The birth of twins, and the child that immediately follows, also carries a significance that extends beyond the statistical rarity of multiples. Indeed, some “twins” are actually singletons who foretold their twinship in dreams to their mothers or other community members. Regardless, a child’s status as a twin indicates the presence of a *honei*, or “witch-spirit” that grants him/her the ability to detect similarly endowed persons who wield their powers towards antisocial ends (*honamoi*). In this way, twins’ powers are ambiguous: they protect farm occupants and family members from *honamoi*, but also elicit fear from the community on account of their volatility. Though not ill-intentioned, twins are believed to have an erratic spiritual power—a power interpreted and managed by the *gbese*, the child that follows the twins in birth order. The *gbese* functions as the spirit mediator between twins’ and the rest of the community, and³⁸¹ possesses the ability to communicate directly with spirits (*ngafa*). Born into his/her

³⁸⁰ Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 95-96. Although Gittins finds little evidence for the ritual killing of malformed children in his experience with the Mende, he records a missionary account from the 1920s, in which the old women of the *humoi* society—the society concerned with sexual relationships—kill a malformed child. The child was killed, in accordance with the belief that its physical impediments signaled the presence of evil spirits attempting to wreak havoc on the community disguised in a human body. As a part of the ritual, the mother was declared impure, quarantined, and bathed by the older women, as she confessed her sexual transgressions. Upon the killing of the child and burning of its body, the ashes were rubbed on the bodies of the women to discourage the spirit’s return through the body of another.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 171-173.

ability, the *gbese*'s power is functional from birth and believed to emanate from *Ngewo*. As a consequence of birth order, the *gbese* is destined to be a ritual specialist.

Although it is difficult to tell whether enslaved people regarded twin births differently from single births, there is evidence that they continued to understand certain circumstances of birth as indicators of an individual's spiritual capacities. Some bondspeople regarded the seventh child as "lucky" and accorded the child favor.³⁸² On the other hand, babies born with teeth were believed unlucky for the duration of their lives, although their ill luck appeared to affect them alone. To substantiate this belief, one woman pointed to a man—born with teeth—who eventually ended up on a chain gang, which, in the woman's eyes, was "sho nuff bad luck."³⁸³ By far, the most spiritually significant circumstance of birth was being born with a caul, or with the amniotic sac covering the face. Stories about the implications of being born with a caul abounded among the enslaved. As one woman matter-of-factly stated: there were "lots uh dem tings bout babies Wen dey bawn wid a caul."³⁸⁴ However, the enslaved most commonly believed that the phenomenon accorded the individual the power to commune with the spirits.³⁸⁵ Lowcountry resident Liza reported that she was born with a caul, and added quickly for the benefit of the interviewer: "That means I see ghos."³⁸⁶ But, unlike other professors of spiritual power, Liza's ability was not permanent. According to the woman, she ceased to see ghosts once she finished having children.³⁸⁷ Whether other similarly endowed women experienced the same suspension of powers is unknown.

³⁸² Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 42.

³⁸³ Georgia Writer's Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 77.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

However, Liza's linkage of spiritual power and fertility acknowledges, to a greater degree than expressed elsewhere, the spiritual dimensions of females' (pro)creative power.

Even though, in most instances, birth with a caul merely accorded a type of second sight. As in West and West Central Africa, anomalous births elicited a mixture of awe and fear from enslaved communities, which were managed through ritual prescriptions. One midwife cautioned that "Folks hab tuh be mighty keahful wen duh chile is bawn lak dat," or with a caul, because the child will be "haunted" all of his/her life, unless preventative ritual measures are taken.³⁸⁸ According to the woman, the caul needed to be dried, prepared in a tea, and given to the child to drink, in order to make the "ebil" disappear.³⁸⁹ With a function akin to a protective power object, the medicine apparently enabled the child to see ghosts, without the fear of harm.

Despite their geographical and, in many cases, chronological distance from their originating homelands, enslaved people continued to "read" circumstances of birth, such as the caul, as signifiers of spiritual power and devised protocols to address incidences of anomalous power. Shifts in diet and nutrition, climate, and other environmental factors undoubtedly changed the nature and extent of birth manifestations. Nevertheless, true to their cosmological roots, enslaved people responded to these manifestations with ritual protocols that evinced both remembered and revised interpretations of phenomena.

Conclusion

Like their West and West Central African ancestors, bondspeople did not regard birth, and the circumstance surrounding it, as mere accidents of chance. Rather, one's

³⁸⁸ Ibid, 128.

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 129.

birth influenced his/her powers and choices, thereby making it one of the most spiritually significant moments in an individual's life—a moment marked by re/membered cosmologies and rituals. Given women's physiologically and socially dictated roles in childbirth and childrearing on both sides of the Atlantic, it is not surprising that they were the primary architects and transmitters of the counter-signifying practices that formed the cornerstone of birthing rituals in the enslaved South. Guided by powerful midwives, some of whose lineage stretched back to the African continent, enslaved women re/membered the medicinal and ritual cycles of their foremothers, and in doing so, constructed ceremonial responses to the dismembering effects of enslavement. Prenatal and postpartum protocols acknowledged the spiritual significance of (pro)creative power, and women's observance of the protocols enabled them to reclaim a measure of the creative power usurped in their womb's resignification. Indeed, the birthing room afforded enslaved women the ultimate earthly creative power: the choice to give life or destroy it. And it was this power—and the creative tension indigenous to it—that formed the basis for women's spiritual power in the ritual spaces connected to childbirth, as well as in the psychic spaces of the sacred imagination.

Chapter Four

It Looked Like A Woman: Women and the African-American Sacred Imagination

Introduction

Almost three decades after slavery's end, one commentator lamented that Blacks on southern plantations continued to “cling to some very barbarous beliefs and superstitions, and oftentimes these strange fancies” were “wrapped about with the garb of religion,” despite the “civilizing” influence of Whites and Christianity.³⁹⁰ Though White Americans' assessments of enslaved southerners' religiosity were often laced with thinly veiled allusions to the alleged primitivism of African-descended peoples, the critic's observation attested to the persistence of West African cosmological frameworks in the African-American South, long after the last captive had reached American shores. Indeed, enslaved Georgians inhabited a world alive with religious meaning—a world in which aspects of the known, sense world interacted with and shaped invisible domains.

The sacred imagination—a repository of shared symbols, myths, and spirits—provided the infrastructure for such a world. Powered by the narratives of the enslaved and hosting a bricolage of religious thought, by its very definition, the sacred imagination was a site and iteration of creative power. It animated the sense world, naturalized the extraordinary, and enabled the enslaved to move seamlessly between the visible and invisible in thought, conversation, and practice. In short, the sacred imagination hosted enslaved people's interactions with and ideas concerning the trans-sense realm—the world “of, beyond, and between” the sense world. For outsiders, such as the

³⁹⁰“Certain Beliefs and Superstitions of the Negro,” *Atlantic Monthly*, LXVIII, Boston, August 1891, in *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth Century Periodicals*, ed. Bruce Jackson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 257.

aforementioned observer, engagement of the enslaved people's sacred imagination incited questions of accuracy and truthfulness, and prompted the subsequent assessment of their religious cultures as "superstitious," "barbarous," and "strange." For most of the enslaved, however, veracity was not at issue; they assumed a world animated by spirits and governed by relationships between the embodied, formerly embodied, and incorporeal.

Housing cosmological ideas that spanned both sides of the Atlantic, the sacred imagination was an exercise in memory—a repository for the West and West Central African notions of materiality and extraordinary power that traveled with African captives to the Americas and developed as their descendants encountered new topographies and challenges. As a collection of remembered beliefs, examined and reinterpreted for a new context, the sacred imagination helped the enslaved to re-member themselves in the wake of the dismemberment of enslavement. It was fueled by creative power—the impulse to create out of the shards of trauma for the sake of cultural survival. For this reason, the sacred imagination represented a (re)creation of culture, or more accurately, the creation of an indigenous, enslaved, African-American culture.

Among the inhabitants of the enslaved African-American sacred imagination, none perhaps illuminated the persistence of West African cosmologies and distinctiveness of enslaved people's religious thought more cogently than the witch, or hag. Historical examinations of witches and hags among enslaved people in the South have offered descriptions of shape-shifting, body-leaving, nocturnal entities that "ride" their hapless victims, and generally attributed enslaved people's witchcraft beliefs to

Western European influences.³⁹¹ Yet, studies of enslaved people’s spiritual cultures have failed to problematize the nature and meaning of “witch” and “witchcraft” in West African and African-American cultures, and elided the possibility that enslaved peoples might have harbored understandings of anomalous, extraordinary, and/or destructive power that deviated from those of their Western European captors. More than just a relic of West African and/or European folklore, the “witch” of bondspeople’s sacred imagination expressed indigenous ideas regarding destructive female-embodied power and testified to abiding suspicions of women’s creative power. When analyzed in the context of enslavement, the idea of destructive female-embodied power acquired new meaning: not as a sanction against women, but rather as a testament to the sociological importance of women within enslaved communities. Such beliefs neither emerged *ex nihilo* nor represented enslaved people’s uncritical adoption of European folk beliefs. On the contrary, concepts of extraordinary female power developed within a rich, imaginative context that bridged the psychic space between West and West Central Africa and the Americas and mapped spirit power upon the mundane sites of enslavement—exposing the distinctive creativity of enslaved people’s religious consciousness.

³⁹¹ Religious historian Albert Raboteau declares outright that, “Many Afro-American witchcraft beliefs are European in origin.” Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 85. Although Yvonne Chireau parallels African-American and European witchcraft beliefs similar to Raboteau, she nods towards the body of literature regarding West African witchcraft to suggest a dual African and European influence upon folklore surrounding the African-American witch. However, she stops short of making concrete connections between the West African and African-American “witch.” Instead, she locates African-American “witchcraft” on the spectrum of harming traditions indigenous to Black American folk culture, and in this way, draws connections to Africa. Despite the extent of the details on witchcraft offered in the section, Chireau hesitates to distinguish “witchcraft” from conjure. Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African-American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2003), 83-88.

Exploring the Imaginative Context: Shadows, Ghosts, and Other Spirits of the Georgia Landscape

The hag mythology of enslaved, African-descended Georgians cannot be understood apart from the broader imaginative environment, in which the cosmologies, imagery, and narratives of enslaved people's West African forebears conversed with one another, and the imaginative vocabularies of Western Europeans and Native Americans. Upon their arrival on Georgian and South Carolinian soil, captive Africans imbued the southern landscape with spiritual forces that followed them from their homelands, and evidence of beliefs from their ancestral homelands appeared throughout enslaved people's narrations about their origins, environment, and existence.³⁹² At the same time, they recreated narratives as their descendants became African-Americans, yielding a distinctively African-American sacred imagination.

This distinctiveness and creativity was on full display in the enslaved's narratives of the world's origins and end. Contrary to the more anthropocentric myths of their hegemonically Christian contexts, enslaved people's genesis stories presented non-human animals as the engineers of the sense world and predecessors to humankind. According to one informant, the "jay-bird" brought the first grain of dirt to the earth, the "mournin-dove" dug the first spring, the "white dove" planted the first ear of corn, and the robin planted the first cedar tree.³⁹³ Birds, particularly the "jay-bird," featured prominently in enslaved people's stories regarding creation and the world's end. In one account, the bird carries a grain of sand to the Devil's domain every year: upon transmission of the final

³⁹² This is one of the primary premises of Ras Michael Brown's argument regarding the presence of the Kongo *simbi* in the lowcountry. See Brown, *African-Atlantic Religion and the South Carolina Lowcountry*, 2-6.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 260.

grain, the world will end.³⁹⁴ In another version, the jay-bird transmits a grain at 1:00 p.m. every Friday.³⁹⁵ Notwithstanding narrative nuances, the myths exemplified the radical immanence of cosmological forces within the sacred imagination of Georgia's bondspeople, even in their articulation of Christian theological ideas. For them, the eschaton was not the intervention of a divine force into creation, but rather an event precipitated by the movements of the seemingly innocuous "jay-bird."

Though such stories likely represented a convergence of creation stories, the prominence of birds in enslaved Georgians' sacred myths carried strong resonances of West African thought. According to the Mende, birds' ability to fly affords them an elevated status among animals. They serve as omens and "messengers from the spirits," not only as a consequence of their capacity for flight, but also their "affinities with animals, people, and spirits."³⁹⁶ Birds are also particularly integral to the symbology and mythology of the all-female, initiatory Sande society. The Mende believe that senior members of the society possess the power to interpret "bird language" and, as a consequence, acquire the ability to decipher messages of future death, fortune, and danger.³⁹⁷ Furthermore, Sande initiates pledge allegiance to the "bird-laws" and receive an assurance of fertility in return.³⁹⁸ Birds such as the chicken and the *sokele* also offer models for good motherhood, according to the mores of the Sande society, and

³⁹⁴ Thaddeus Norris, "Negro Superstitions," *Lippincott's Magazine VI*, Philadelphia, July 1870, in *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth Century Periodicals*, ed. Bruce Jackson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 137.

³⁹⁵ "Certain Beliefs and Superstitions of the Negro," in *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth Century Periodicals*, ed. Bruce Jackson, 260.

³⁹⁶ Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 59-60. Boone, *Radiance from the Waters*, 206. Some similarities between birds and humans include the ability to walk upright, the construction of nests for their families, and their capacity to imitate human speech.

³⁹⁷ Boone, *Radiance from the Waters*, 206.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 211.

consequently, both serve as the subjects of proverbs on childbearing and childrearing.³⁹⁹

Given the critical role of women's fertility, childbearing, and childrearing practices to the successful propagation of a people and culture, it is perhaps no coincidence that the informant's story links birds to the earth's establishment.

At the same time, the creation stories also testified to enslaved people's adaptation of Native American, European, and Christian narratives to the cosmological frameworks of their West and West Central African foreparents. The prominence of animals in origin stories resembled Native American creation myths, yet many enslaved people retained a sense of human founding ancestors with the idea that "Many of de animals you see now was once folks, old-time folks..."⁴⁰⁰ Rattlesnakes were once "bad folks," the "squinch" and "swamp" owls were once old women, and, true to European and African-American mythology, cats were "witcher-men and witcher-women."⁴⁰¹ The presence of monkeys—animals indigenous to the African continent—among the list of wildlife that used to be human, and "ac like folks yit," suggests that the enslaved transmitted, exchanged, and blended the stories of their ancestral homelands to construct culturally distinctive narratives. Yet, in the U.S. American context, the stories took on elements that reflected enslaved people's immersion in a Christian context. The primordial old women turned into swamp owls only after refusing to give "de Lord" a piece of bread as he walked the Earth.⁴⁰² Moreover, the "white dove" that planted the

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ "Certain Beliefs and Superstitions of the Negro," in *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth Century Periodicals*, ed. Bruce Jackson, 260.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

first ear of corn in the aforementioned account did so after it “flew out of Noray’s Ark,” and the first fire originated with the unquenchable blaze of hell’s flames.⁴⁰³

As evidenced by the role of non-human animals in origin myths, a range of powers animated the sense world and imbued it with meaning. Ideas about the relationship between the seen and unseen realms intersected and converged in enslaved people’s understandings of their environment. In response to the question, “What is wind?,” one southerner expounded poetically:

“‘Hit’s a blaze,’ was the reply; ‘hit’s red like fire, but hit’s cold. How does I know hit’s red? ‘Caze dem folks what can see wind, and t’o’her folks can’t. Hogs can always see wind; dee des run and grunt when dee see hits whirlin’ redness. If any pusson will suck a sow, dat pusson will git power in his eyes to see wind. And whenever a wind rises, hit is risin’ en dyin’ breaif. Breaif of de dyin’ folks in de worril fills de wind’s wings and makes ‘em strong.’”⁴⁰⁴

Whereas the wind housed the breath of the dying, the sun sang her way across the sky and muted sound at the height of her song at midday. Imaged as a woman in this mythology, the sun apparently had a face and eyes that “can see all you do.”⁴⁰⁵ Likewise, springs, waterfalls and other bodies of water were the domains of Kongo nature spirits called “cymbee” or *simbi*, who imposed moral sanctions upon communities through the control of the destructive and life-giving forces of water.⁴⁰⁶ Far from the stark duality of the animate and inanimate domains of the sense world within post-Enlightenment,

⁴⁰³ “Certain Beliefs and Superstitions of the Negro,” in *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth Century Periodicals*, ed. Bruce Jackson, 260.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁴⁰⁶ Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry*, 3.

Western European worldviews, the enslaved retained a cosmology, in which spirit powers—seen and unseen, familiar and unspecified—animated aspects of the sense world.

Paradoxically, among the familiar entities, there were also unspecified creatures that populated the imaginative landscapes of the enslaved. The moonack resided in the forest, in caves or hollow trees, and if encountered, drove the passerby to psychological and physical illness. According to the lore of the enslaved, the person who encounters the moonack “dares not speak of it.” Yet, despite this prescribed reticence, evidence of the encounter is always readily apparent to the “old knowing negroes,” who “shake their heads despondingly” and remark desparingly “‘He’s gwine to die: he’s seed de moonack.’”⁴⁰⁷ Mythical creatures such as the moonack likely served as one explanation for seemingly sudden onsets of mental and/or physiological illness. But such entities also bespoke enslaved people’s importation of West and West Central African notions of the bush or wilderness as the realm of unpredictable and disruptive spirits. Among the Mende, non-ancestral, nature spirits (*jinanga*) resided beyond the village and assumed a variety of forms—from the small, humanlike forms of the *temuisia* to the hairy, male image of the *ndogbojusui*. Though enslaved people’s understanding of the moonack probably represented a blend of African spirit beliefs, the Mende mythology surrounding *ndogobojusui* resembled moonack narratives. According to the Mende, *ndogobojusui* lives in the bush and attempts to entice people into contracts through promises of success, luck, and riches. If the spirit successfully gains control of the individual during the

⁴⁰⁷ Thaddeus Norris, “Negro Superstitions,” in *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth Century Periodicals*, 138. See also, Alexander F. Chamberlain, “Algonkian Words in American English: A Study in the Contact of the White Man and the Indian,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 15, No. 59 (Oct.- Dec. 1902): 249. Though the term “moonack” was commonly used to refer to a woodchuck or a groundhog in the Maryland-Virginia region. Chamberlain also defines the term as “a mythic animal much feared by some Southern negroes.” However, despite the topic of the article, Chamberlain does not connect the term to Native American lore.

course of the contract, then it will attempt to remove the person from the town to the bush. The ill-fated person that manages to escape *ndogobojusui* will return to the village “crazy.”⁴⁰⁸

Clearly, for West Africans and their descendants, the seen world was fraught with spirit forces. Yet, for enslaved people, mythic creatures were not the only purveyors of spirit power in the sense world. Humans too possessed the power to transcend the ordinary bounds of human capability; and nowhere was this capability more celebrated than in the lore regarding people, specifically persons from Africa, who could fly. Sea Islander Prince Sneed recounted the tale:

“Muh gran say old man Waldburg down on St. Catherin own some slabs wut wuzn climatize an he wuk um hahd an one day dey wuz hoein in duh fiel an duh dribuh come out an two ub um wuz unuh a tree in duh shade, and duh hoes waz wukin by demself. Duh dribuh say ‘Wut dis?’ and dey say, ‘Kum luba yali kum buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe,’ quick like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly back to Africa. Muh gran see dat wid he own eye.”⁴⁰⁹

True to the mythology of the phenomenon, the persons in the story are African captives, who have either resisted or avoided acclimatization to the labor regime of U.S. enslavement and its accompanying cultural dimensions, and exercised their prerogative to return to their homelands in protest of their captivity. In the African-American sacred imagination, as in the story, native Africans possessed the ultimate superhuman ability in the context of enslavement: the ability to fly away from their captors. Similar to the

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, 76.

⁴⁰⁹ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 79. Accounts such as these populate the narratives of formerly enslaved people. For another variation on the tale, see page 18 of the same volume.

Mende's attribution of spiritual power to birds because of their ability to fly, enslaved people endowed those who resisted acculturation, and instead clung to their language and culture, with the spiritual power to assume the physical capacities of birds. In another account of the story, the people actually grew wings.⁴¹⁰ Whether the Africans in the story possessed spirit power because of their ability to fly or are able to fly as an outgrowth of their broader spiritual capacities is unclear. Given the observation about the hoes working by themselves—another trope in narratives about native Africans—it is evident that enslaved people viewed those who resisted the mandates of enslavement as imbued with extraordinary powers that transcended those of the diviner and other ritual specialists.⁴¹¹

Yet, even in the absence of such evidence, the country-born enslaved endowed native Africans with “magic” power on account of the new captives’ origins. Jack Wilson’s mother told him of the “supreme magic powuh” of people newly imported from West Africa and of the potential for the captives to “pass” the power to others. The key to the power was belief—an unsurprising prerequisite, given Wilson’s entrenchment in the religious context of the southern U.S. However, the stipulation could also indicate native Africans’ attempts to more firmly embed African metaphysical ideas among their American compatriots using familiar Christian rubrics. The incentive for belief: those who believed in the magic could “scape an fly back tuh Africa” or “disappeah lak duh win.”⁴¹²

⁴¹⁰ Ibid, 17.

⁴¹¹ For another account of hoes performing work without human aid, see Ibid, 137. According to the informant, one can make a hoe perform the work “ef yuh kin wok it right.”

⁴¹² Ibid, 7.

Such stories not only pointed to the perception of native Africans as extraordinary humans, but also counter-narrated tales of capture by presenting residence in the U.S. as a matter of choice, as opposed to compulsion, for some captives. In the same vein, as historian Michael A. Gomez has analyzed, the story also offered a narrative complement to tales of suicide.⁴¹³ In a nod to West African, particularly Igbo, notions of death and regeneration, the people in the story undergo a process of transubstantiation to return to Africa. Yet, whereas in the story the people change from land-dwelling to avian human, in Igbo belief, the spirit leaves the body and travels back across the waters to its homeland. Through a play on the concept of flight, enslaved people repackaged stories of suicide as fanciful tales of human flight in the sacred imagination. In doing so, they signaled an important communal ethic—namely that self-inflicted death constituted a legitimate means to escape slavery's rigors. Those who took flight were not vilified in the communal lore that remembered them. On the contrary, they were admired for their audacity and immortalized as persons of extraordinary power. This idolization of flying Africans was the enslaved's meditation on freedom. As they spied the autonomy of native birds, many bondspeople undoubtedly reflected upon their captivity and longed for the ability and courage to fly away from their enslavement.

As evidenced by the relationship between stories of flying Africans and historical accounts of suicide among the enslaved, the sacred imagination was a repository for communal histories, ethics, and cosmologies developed by the enslaved themselves. For the enslaved, the earth housed a number of powers and entities, some of which transcended the sensory capacity of the average human. Amid tales of flying humans and

⁴¹³ Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 117-120. Gomez connects the tales of flight with the story of Ebo Landing, where a group of enslaved Igbo's collectively drowned themselves.

forest creatures were narratives of encounters with spirits and “shadows” that roamed the unseen realms of known landscapes. One formerly enslaved person reported the ability to “see duh spirits going by,” and to this point, described a “whole crowd uh lill wite tings” headed for the local spring.⁴¹⁴ The presence of little white things in the spring, which historian Ras Michael Brown identifies as Kongo nature spirits called *simbi*, suggests a topography alive with powers, albeit powers that are not always readily perceivable by all.⁴¹⁵ Bondspeople narrated a world constituted of layers of spirits, to which people had varying degrees of access. Another woman claimed not to “know bout” conjure, but professed the ability to see “shadduhs”—spirit entities that assumed known material forms and manifested to those with extraordinary sight. During one encounter, the spirit appeared first as a man and then turned into a spotted ox as the woman and her husband walked home from church. Evidently, even upon sustained contact with Christian cosmologies, the enslaved maintained a belief in a broad spectrum of embodied and disembodied powers. True to notions of extraordinary sight or privileged seeing, the woman reported that her husband claimed not to have seen anything, despite his close proximity to the spirit. The encounter taught her the importance of discretion for those gifted with extraordinary sight: “wen yuh see um, yuh musn talk bout um.”⁴¹⁶

Despite the common instruction to keep such experiences secret, stories of encounters with the invisible world populated the everyday conversation of the enslaved, and at times, housed indigenous histories. Paul Singleton, a formerly enslaved man,

⁴¹⁴ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 157.

⁴¹⁵ Brown, *African-Atlantic Religion and the South Carolina Lowcountry*, 231-250. Though Brown discusses the appearance of nature spirits as white bundles or white babies in the context of seeking, the account coheres with his analysis of the color symbolism and imagery of *simbi* in the lowcountry. Mechal Sobel documents a similar experience with “a little white man” in enslaved people’s conversion narratives. Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 113-114.

⁴¹⁶ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 160.

recalled a story told to him by his father about an illegal slave ship that attempted to elude detection in the rivers and creeks of coastal Georgia. Upon the threat of imminent discovery, the slave runners tied rocks around the necks of the approximately fifty captives onboard and threw them to their deaths overboard. According to Singleton: “Dey say yuh kin heah um moanin an groanin in duh creek ef yuh goes neah deah tuh-day.”⁴¹⁷ The development of ghost lore around the event ensured the story’s retelling and, in this sense, functioned as a memorial to the captives who lost their lives in the creek. As the intergenerational narration of the story suggests, the enslaved recorded their histories and commemorated important events through markers in the sacred imagination. Certainly not all of the stories alluded to historical events, and some most likely represented a melding of factual accounts. However, stories such as the one narrated by Singleton demonstrated the important didactic and commemorative function of tales of the invisible, as well as the challenge the sacred imagination posed to questions of veracity. Within the sacred imagination of the enslaved, a broader range of considerations determined whether or not an encounter, creature, and/or event was “true,” and truth emanated from the corridors of the seen and unseen, known and unknown realms. It is within this context that they developed and disseminated ideas about the female-embodied entities “of, beyond, and between” the sense world.

Translating the Trans-Sense: The Problem with “Witches” in Mende Culture

“Trans-sense” describes the condition of being “of, beyond, and between” the visible and invisible, known and unknown domains. Trans-sense entities inhabited the unknown and/or mysterious spaces of the sense world and elicited fear and awe from the

⁴¹⁷ Ibid, 17.

humans with which they interacted. Spirits embodied as humans, they derived their power from their liminal status. Trans-sense beings possessed powers that surpassed those of ordinary humans, such as the ability to shape-shift. Yet like humans, they were bound by their embodiment and mortality. They were Other beings—understood as more creaturely than entities such as the *basimbi*. Even though they could be harmed or killed, their special abilities endowed them with an elusive quality. And it was this elusiveness that situated them within the hierarchy of spirits and creatures of the enslaved people’s sacred imaginations.

Of the trans-sense beings that populated the sacred imagination, none was perhaps more universally recognized among Anglophone Blacks and Whites in the United States than the witch. Though, at times, enslaved people applied the term to men *and* women who wielded destructive and/or manipulative powers, the witch was almost uniformly imaged as female.⁴¹⁸ The female embodiment of the trans-sense witch not only bespoke the interaction between the West African and Western European sacred imaginations among the enslaved, but also communicated indigenous ideas regarding female creative power.

West African concepts of destructive and/or anti-social power persisted among Africans and their descendants in the Americas, yet the nature and extent of “witches” prior to contact with Western Europeans is difficult to pinpoint. The historical denigration of African religious practices as witchcraft, along with the broad range of specialists and personages with access to spirit power in many African societies, rendered “witch” a broad and imprecise category in the West African context. Slave trader Nicholas Owen’s observations of a Bolum ritual—during which a family prayed over a

⁴¹⁸ Ibid, 19. The informant describes a witch as a “conjuh man” that someone paid to torment the victim.

basin of rice and palm oil, distributed it among the family, and then scattered some on the ground—led him to conclude that the nation had “very little reverance [sic] for a devine [sic] being,” despite his acknowledgment that the ritual was a “sacrafice [sic] to him [a divine being] for the safe gard [sic] of their houses and fortunes.”⁴¹⁹ Besides the aforementioned ritual, the only other form of religiosity that Owen noted were the “great many kinds of witchcraft, which they practice upon one another as they please.”⁴²⁰ Given Owen’s belief in the general spiritual deficiency of natives of the region, it is not unlikely that his definition of witchcraft extended well beyond those of the natives. At the same time, the slave trader indicated that the Bolom had their own understandings of taboo practice. Those who were convicted of witchcraft were “obliged to drink a large quantity of poyson, comonly caled red watter, which soon puts an end to thier days.”⁴²¹

Though trial by red water represented an indigenous mode of conviction, anti-slavery commentators noted the connection between witchcraft accusations, red water trials, and the slave trade. According to traveller Joseph Corry, enslavement was “uniformly the consequence” of witchcraft convictions.⁴²² Among the Temne, those accused of witchcraft and their accomplices either underwent the trial by red water, redeemed themselves through the exchange of enslaved people, or relinquished themselves to enslavement.⁴²³ Corry corroborated Owen’s account of the fatal effects of the red water, and added that, in the event of the accused’s death, his/her entire family

⁴¹⁹ Owen, *Journal of a Slave Dealer*, 29. Recorded between the years of 1746 and 1757, Owen’s account referred to the Bolom, or Bolom, people of Sierra Leone. Bolom is described as a “chiefdom” in H. Osman Newland’s 1916 study of Sierra Leone. See H. Osman Newland, *Sierra Leone: It’s People, Products, and Secret Societies* (London: John Bales, Sons & Danielsson, 1916), 172.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Ibid. See also, Corry, *Observations Upon the Windward Coast of Africa....*, 71. According to Corry, the trial consisted of drinking the juice of the “melley or gris-gris tree.”

⁴²² Corry, *Observations Upon the Windward Coast of Africa....*, 138.

⁴²³ Ibid.

was sold into slavery.⁴²⁴ Given the prominence of enslavement as a punitive response to witchcraft, Corry concluded disgustedly that slaves were “created” through fraudulent adjudication.⁴²⁵ The capacity for wealthy elites to buy themselves out of such allegations rendered witchcraft convictions and punishments a class-based phenomenon, similar to other enslaving structures, and heightened anti-slavery advocates’ suspicions regarding the authenticity of judgments.⁴²⁶

In her examination of the relationship between witchcraft and the slave trade, anthropologist Rosalind Shaw noted a similar correlation between witchcraft accusations, class, and the slave trade. Examining missionary observations of the Temne during the era of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Shaw argues that the correlation between witchcraft accusations and sale into the trade produced witch stories that included capture, transportation, and coerced labor.⁴²⁷ The Sierra Leonean belief that witches possessed shape-shifting abilities, special guns, an affinity for eating children, and a tendency to hoard money echoed the deceptive practices, economic motivations, and deleterious effects of the slave trade and its purveyors.⁴²⁸ Moreover, understandings of witchcraft as the source of inexplicable misfortune tellingly declined following the abolition of the slave trade by the British. Rather, “spirit attack” and/or the Devil became the primary explanations for incomprehensible adversity.⁴²⁹ Shaw powerfully concludes that the

⁴²⁴ Ibid, 71.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Ibid, 71, 74. Corry observed that, when chiefs were accused of witchcraft and other offenses requiring the red water trial, the poison was removed in order to absolve the chief of guilt. Consequently, Corry condemned the entire enterprise as a tool wielded by elites for financial gain. See also, Rosalind A. Shaw, “The Production of Witchcraft/Witchcraft as Production: Memory, Modernity, and the Slave Trade in Sierra Leone,” *American Ethnologist* 24, No. 4 (Nov. 1997): 867.

⁴²⁷ Shaw, “The Production of Witchcraft/Witchcraft as Production,” 857-858.

⁴²⁸ Ibid, 859.

⁴²⁹ Ibid, 865. P.E.H. Hair, “Heretics, Slaves, and Witches: As Seen by Guinea Jesuits c. 1610,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, No. 2 (May 1998): 135-139. Hair also casts doubts upon Europeans’

slave trade produced new understandings of witchcraft and, perhaps more significantly, such witchcraft imagery housed memories of the slave trade.⁴³⁰ When applied to the North American context, Shaw's theory situates witch mythology as a repository for collective memories of trauma that link transported Africans and their descendants to their kinspeople an ocean away, not unlike the ghost stories and other lore of bondspeople's imaginative contexts discussed above. More than a mythologized relic from a distant, and in some cases, forgotten cultural system, the witch becomes a conduit for didactic, indigenous histories, through which captive Africans in the U.S. South and those spared Trans-Atlantic displacement cautioned against greed and warned of life's volatility.

Often described as "anti-social," witchcraft in many West African cultures represented an articulation of personal desires and/or assertion of the individualistic will, without regard for the cosmic order.⁴³¹ Enslavement on the basis of manufactured allegations and/or to ensure the financial prosperity of elite groups undoubtedly constituted a grave violation of the cosmic order for those enslaved. It also likely scarred

characterizations of Sierra Leonean religious practices as "witchcraft" in the 17th century, given the interpretative convention of conceptualizing all African religion through the lenses of medieval European witchcraft. According to Hair, the Jesuit witnesses did not question the "realness" of the "paranormal" activity, but rather its source. Thus, they connected such activities with the work of the devil and failed to distinguish between the deployment of ritualized, spirit power for healing and harming purposes.

⁴³⁰ Ibid, 869. See also Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 129-132. Although Gittins does not attempt to make an argument regarding the chronological origins of witchcraft, he does review literature regarding the existence of cannibalistic Leopard, Baboon, and Alligator societies, in which members collectively engage *halei nyamui*, or power for evil ends. He, along with others, notes the influence of colonialism upon the mythology surrounding the societies. For example, the consumption of human flesh was alleged to give one power over European colonizers. Furthermore, stories about the societies do not appear prominently, or at all, until 1860 when the British began to extend their power over the region. The presence of such societies, or rumors of them, perhaps points to a relationship between colonialism and the deployment of extreme, and more nefarious, forms of power.

⁴³¹ Ibid, 123-126. Harris and Sawyerr, *The Springs of Mende Belief and Conduct: A Discussion of the Influence of the Belief in the Supernatural among the Mende* (Freetown: Sierra Leone University Press, 1968), 76. On the widespread understanding of witchcraft as antisocial among West Africans, see Evan M. Zuesse, "On the Nature of the Demonic: African Witchery," *Numen* 18 (Dec. 1971): 218.

relations between elites and the victimized lower classes, which contributed to the latter's resignification of the witch to mirror the negative characteristics of their enslavers. For these reasons, it is not implausible that populations ravished by the slave trade altered witch imagery, in the wake of the slave trade's social and economic devastation.

At the same time, the diverse manifestations of antisocial and/or malevolent power, coupled with the broad range of spiritual specialists within West and West Central African socioreligious structures, offered a foundation for the understandings of witches that would shape the African-American sacred imagination in the wake of the slave trade. In many cultures, there exists a fine distinction between witches who act upon an involuntary power and persons who engage malevolent and/or anti-social powers, although the "witch" label may be applied in both cases.⁴³² Among the Mende, "having" a witch enables an individual to see the non-ancestral spirits who wield their anti-social power through the bestowal of unmerited riches, sexual gratification, and other forms of socially reckless favor.⁴³³ However, witchcraft accusations also function as sanctions against "malevolent individualism," and thusly, help to maintain power balances within communities.⁴³⁴ In Mende culture, all power derives from *Ngewo*, the supreme creator, yet *halei* describes human manifestations and applications of *Ngewo*'s power through healing and harming practices, objects, rituals, and secret societies.⁴³⁵ Though the Mende delineate between good and bad *halei*, the power itself is amoral. Its amorality lends *halei* a volatility that renders it frightening, even when wielded for protective and

⁴³² Gittins, *Mende Religion*, n.97 p. 123, 127. Gittins distinguishes between sorcery, which he defines as the use of "artifacts to procure anti-social ends" and witchcraft, which he understands as the capacity to act without direct recourse to objects. However, he acknowledges that the Mende frequently use the term "witchcraft" in regards to both demonstrations of power. I maintain Gittins distinction given my observation of a similar semantic slippage among the enslaved.

⁴³³ Ibid, 76-78.

⁴³⁴ Ibid, 44.

⁴³⁵ Ibid, 101-103.

medicinal ends.⁴³⁶ The deployment of *halei* for anti-social and/or malevolent ends (*halei nyamui*) elicits fear, and those who practice such arts (*hale nyamubla*) use the power to harm or pursue selfish successes, similar to the attributes associated with “having a witch.”

The nuances of the Mende’s usage of the “witch” label becomes most evident in the relationship among *halei nyamui*, *ndilei* possession, and the *honei*, or witch spirit. Though definitively not understood as a witch, *ndilei*—the material manifestation of a certain form of “bad” *halei* (*halei nyamui*)—“feed” upon the blood of newborn children and infants in order to maintain their efficacy, just as witches allegedly feed upon the blood of infants.⁴³⁷ Similar to witches, *hale nyamui* “in the form of *ndilei*” is often cited as an explanation for inexplicable infant deaths.⁴³⁸ However, *hale nyamubla* and/or persons that possess *ndilei* are not witches according to Mende thought, but rather are persons who possess a “witch-type ‘power’”.⁴³⁹ Their power is voluntary and, in some ways, mechanical, similar to the conjure men and women on southern plantations in the U.S. Indeed, the Mende’s and other West Africans’ broad application of the term “witch” to include persons who wield a “witch-type” of anti-social power, yet are understood not to be possessed by the witch spirit (*honei*), perhaps accounts for enslaved Africans’ and their descendants’ equally broad applications of the term.

Though similar to the African-American conjuror, unlike the conjuror, possessors of *ndilei* are generally older women who are unmarried and/or childless.⁴⁴⁰ Because of their abnormal familial autonomy, the women are believed to direct their bad *halei*

⁴³⁶ Ibid, 109.

⁴³⁷ Ibid, 126.

⁴³⁸ Ibid, 127.

⁴³⁹ Ibid. Gittins discusses the potential for English speakers to confuse the meaning of “witch” for the Mende, given their loose usage of the term. However, Gittins makes clear that the Mende are aware of the fine distinctions between persons possessing a “witch-type” power in the form of bad *halei*, and those possessed by a witch spirit.

⁴⁴⁰ Harris and Sawyerr, *Springs of Mende Belief*, 77-79.

toward the harming of children, particularly infants. Or more accurately, the women possess the *ndilei*, which requires the blood and fat of infants to retain its power, thereby leading the *ndilei* possessor to harm children.⁴⁴¹ In any case, the possessor is rumored to “hate” children.⁴⁴² The association of older, unmarried and/or childless women with malice towards children speaks to Mende norms surrounding womanhood—namely the expectation of marriage and fecundity—and suggests the function of *ndilei* accusations as sanctions against female social deviance. Since in Mende culture, “the primary function of a woman is to bear children,” *ndilei* accusations undoubtedly penalize women who experience reproductive challenges, as well.⁴⁴³ In response to communal pressure, women who have experienced the loss of multiple children often “confess” some form of malevolent interference.⁴⁴⁴

Though variations in approaches to socially anomalous women almost certainly exist, according to the logic of *ndilei* accusations, a woman who does not create life, ultimately seeks to destroy it. The absence of normative social ties locates the women on the margins of society, and, coupled with the women’s alleged malevolent objectives, renders their power “anti-social.” The connection between anomalous women and bad *halei* in Mende culture suggests a possible cultural foundation, among others, for the association of the trans-sense witch with femaleness and “bad” power in Georgia and other parts of the enslaved South. As evidenced by the Mende example, women’s

⁴⁴¹ Ibid, 78-79. Gittins, 126-127.

⁴⁴² Harris and Sawyerr, 79.

⁴⁴³ According to Sylvia Ardyn Boone, barrenness constitutes the “most serious *gbama*.” The meaning of *gbama* ranges from empty vanity to staggering disappointment, and describes a disconnect between a woman’s form and her function and/or character in Mende culture. A woman who is unable to bear children is understood as non-functional, given her inability to fulfill her primary social function. Boone, *Radiance from the Waters*, 141.

⁴⁴⁴ Harris and Sawyerr, 80. Harris and Sawyerr imply a relationship between women, high infant mortality, and witchcraft confessions connected to the possession of *ndilei*, but only mention the ways the women’s anomalous statuses likely induce accusation and harassment, in the event of excessive child death.

capacity to create and/or destroy—their creative power—often lay at the heart of this bad power.

Without question, some stateside female captives and their descendants used the mythology of their power to gain or solidify socioreligious authority. Even though witchcraft accusations were often merely a tool employed by the elite to manage trade relationships with Europeans and others, it is not unlikely that some of the accused actually did possess *ndilei* and engage in other forms of *halei nyamui*. Thus, persons believed to possess a “witch-type” power undoubtedly inhabited southern plantations and established reputations as powerful and dangerous people. Despite the enslaved’s loose usage of labels like “witch” and “conjurer,” it is clear that certain individuals occupied a different category of power than the average practitioner of healing and harming arts. According to formerly enslaved Georgian Rias Body, there were a few elderly enslaved people who “the Negroes looked up to, respected, and feared as witches, wizzards [sic], and magic-workers.” The people were believed to have “either brought their ‘learning’ with them from Africa or absorbed it from their immediate African forebears,” and were described as “highly sensitized” people who engaged in “secret doins and carrying-ons’.” Rias recalled giving them “as wide a berth as opportunity permitted him” and ended his recollection with the sycophantic declaration that “had the Southern Whites not curbed the mumbo-jumboism of his people...it would not now be safe to step out of his doe at night.”⁴⁴⁵

Whereas persons possessing *ndilei* have a “witch-type” power, witches, on the other hand, are possessed by the *honei*, or witch spirit, therefore their power is

⁴⁴⁵ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 89.

involuntary and rooted in spirit.⁴⁴⁶ Yet, not all persons possessed by the *honei*, or witch spirit, wield their power towards anti-social ends. On the contrary, the Mende believe that some humans, such as twins, are born with *honei*, but choose to direct their power towards the discovery of witches, as opposed to nefarious, anti-social ends.⁴⁴⁷ In Mende thought, only “witches can see or detect witches.” Therefore, twins can see and detect anti-social witches, as well as protect a household against them, by virtue of their possession of the *honei*. While other humans require *halei*, in the form of ritual objects and other materials, for protection against anti-social witchcraft, twins’ immunity emanates from their innate endowment with a witch-spirit that comes from *Ngewo*, the Creator.⁴⁴⁸

The attribution of twins’ *honei* to *Ngewo*, as opposed to an evil spirit, constitutes a significant difference between Western European and Mende denotations of the “witch” and exemplifies the multivalent connotations of “witch” and “witchcraft” in West African cultures. Among the Mende, so-called “witches” are not necessarily evil, but rather in possession of or possessed by an anomalous power. The absence of linguistic counterparts in English capable of encompassing the range of understandings of anomalous power in Mende and other West African societies likely contributed to the polysemous nature of the term in the parlance of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Americas. Thus, the variations in the application of the “witch” label in English are only understood through identification of the Mende linguistic equivalent.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁶ Harris and Sawyerr, *Springs of Mende Belief*, 73. Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 127.

⁴⁴⁷ Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 157,172. As Gittins points out, a “twin” in Mende culture is not primarily defined in terms of multiple birth. Rather, omens of twinship prior the delivery of a child, even a single child, foretell the anomalous powers of the child and the sibling that follows. Thus the Mende understanding of twins includes, but extends beyond, the medical definition.

⁴⁴⁸ *ibid*, 170-171.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 172.

Although persons born with the *honei* possess an extraordinary, ambiguous power and are referred to as “witches” in English descriptions, they are not antisocial witches as connoted by Western Europeans’ usage of the term.

The antisocial “witch-host,” or *honamoi*, has a *honei* and indulges the spirit’s malicious impulses, although the *honamoi* may not initially recognize his/her state of possession.⁴⁵⁰ Anthropologist Anthony J. Gittins defines witchcraft among the Mende as “the exercise, conscious or unconscious, of illegitimate power by a person with a destructive, anti-social spirit.”⁴⁵¹ It is believed that the *honei* takes over its host’s *ngafei*, or spirit, as a part of the possession, and as a consequence of this conquest, the “witch-spirit” becomes the individual’s animating spirit, or “personality-soul.”⁴⁵² The element of possession renders the *honamoi*’s power involuntary, but the indistinguishability of the *honei* from the *ngafei* implicates the human host. The “unconscious” aspect of Gittins’s witchcraft definition likely stems from the idea that, when unsuccessful in its attempt to kill a child, the *honei* will possess and grow up with the child, unbeknownst to its young host.⁴⁵³ Although most accused *honamoi* are women, how or why the spirit selects a particular sex and/or individual is not elaborated in literature on witchcraft in Mende culture.⁴⁵⁴

Nevertheless, a clue, perhaps, lies in the Mende understanding of the relationship between spirit and materiality, as evinced in the interactions of the *honei* (witch-spirit),

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid, 160. Harris and Sawyerr, *Springs of Mende Belief*, 73.

⁴⁵¹ Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 157.

⁴⁵² Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 89, note 149, page 159. Harris and Sawyerr, *Springs of Mende Belief*, 88-89. Harris and Sawyerr use the language of “personality-soul” in congruence with the Akan concept of a *sunsum*, although the Mende do not appear to have an equivalent to the Akan *kra*, or “life-soul.” Though Harris and Sawyerr use the term *ngafa* to describe the spiritual component of humans, Gittins uses *ngafei* to distinguish between the “spirit” that animates humans and a “spirit” (*ngafa*) that “enjoys a different mode of existence from ordinary humans.” I apply the terms in congruence with Gittins’s definitions.

⁴⁵³ Harris and Sawyerr, *Springs of Mende Belief*, 75.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, 80. Harris and Sawyerr note that “witches for the most part women.”

the *ngafei* (personality soul), and the host-body. When the *honei* attacks an infant, it partially or completely “eats” the *ngafei*.⁴⁵⁵ The *ngafei* is understood to mirror the physical body, consequently, being “eaten” by the *honei* precipitates more than a simple change in disposition or possession by the spirit. Rather, the victim, generally an infant, dies, hence the association between witchcraft and infant mortality. Meanwhile, the spleen of the *honamoi*—theoretically engorged with the blood of infants—harbors the evidence of the *honei*’s activities.⁴⁵⁶ Thus, the activities of the *honei* manifest in the bodies of the victim and the *honamoi*, even though the *honei* is itself a spirit, invisible to the average human. Definitively spirit and non-human, the *honei* has a personality, so to speak, as well. It is the invisible *honei*, and not the physical body of the *honamoi*, that travels to its victims, participates in covens, and shape shifts into animal forms, while the *honamoi* remains at home, bound by her bodily limitations.⁴⁵⁷ At the same time, the *honei*’s dependency upon the *honamoi*’s body renders the spirit vulnerable to protective objects and rituals leveled at its host’s body. The spirit is not indestructible. However, if the *honamoi* dies still possessed by the *honei*, then the spirit survives in a disembodied state as a *kanga faun*, or “spirit-bird.” In this state, the spirit becomes immune to protective measures, such as talismans and other ritual objects designed to shield the wearer from spiritual attack.⁴⁵⁸

As a spirit, at times, dependent upon a host body and a body possessed by a powerful spirit, the *honei* and *honamoi*, respectively, coexist in a manner that mirrors the physical and spiritual connection between a pregnant woman and her unborn child. It is,

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid, 74.

⁴⁵⁶ Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 159.

⁴⁵⁷ Harris and Sawyerr, 74, 88-89.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid, 73. Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 166.

perhaps, no coincidence that the *honei* is an anomalous spirit (*ngafa*) that is believed to reside in the abdomen of the host and kill infants, just as some fetuses and infants are believed to house anomalous spirits (*ngafa*) that abandon their hosts and result in death.⁴⁵⁹ Though both scenarios offer spiritual explanations for excessive infant mortality, they also implicate women, given the physiological realities of childbearing that render women socially responsible for their children's health. Multiple infant deaths and/or unhealthy infants induce suspicions that the mother has been bewitched, failed to confess a crime, or is a *honamoi* herself.⁴⁶⁰ The latter case draws upon the lore surrounding the *honamoi*, which describes the requirement for the *honamoi* to relinquish her child in order to demonstrate allegiance to the coven. Yet, sociological interpretations of the mother-as-*honamoi* idea point out the role of psychological, emotional, and social duress in the witchcraft confessions of mothers.⁴⁶¹ Certainly, the successive deaths of children in and out of utero has the capacity to precipitate a guilt complex that, when paired with the logic of witchcraft, can persuade a woman of her unconscious possession by the *honei*. Confession is a prominent feature of *honamoi* trials and pregnancy rites, given the latent possibility of maleficence or chaos in both instances. For this reason, the *honamoi* and pregnant women are both “dangerously liminal.”⁴⁶² Their association with infants and the unborn—factions which are necessary for the continuation of the culture, but also vessels for potentially feral or anomalous spirits—positions both as mediums for latent threats to the well-being of the group. Consequently, during labor, a pregnant woman must confess her transgressions—lest she and her child

⁴⁵⁹ Harris and Sawyerr, *Springs of Mende Belief*, 73. Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 89.

⁴⁶⁰ Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 91. Harris and Sawyerr, 74.

⁴⁶¹ Harris and Sawyerr, 74, 80.

⁴⁶² Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 90. Gittins uses the phrase “dangerously liminal” to describe a Mende's woman status while pregnant.

become more vulnerable to dangers posed by entities, such as the *honamoi*.⁴⁶³

Meanwhile, a woman's childbearing successes, or lack thereof, have the potential to serve as evidence of her own status as a *honamoi*.

Therefore, the pregnant woman and *honamoi* exist at opposite poles on the same axis in terms of the connection between spirit and materiality, and their statuses as points of access for *ngafa* that endanger the community's children. The social expectations that ally womanhood and motherhood in Mende and many West African cultures occasion the evaluation of woman-gendered females in terms of their potentiality for, and performance or non-performance of the mother role. Socially, woman-gendered females are either mothers, future mothers, or "should have been" mothers, and it is this constant state of social relation to motherhood that most likely locates many women in the orbit of *honamoi* accusations. As in the case of the *ndilei*, the integral nature of women's biological and social reproductive roles to the vitality of the community renders them susceptible to socioreligious sanctions.⁴⁶⁴ Although a male can be a *honamoi*, the preponderance of women among the numbers of the accused exemplifies the double-edged nature of female creative power. The capacity to create also harbors the potential to destroy. And rites surrounding pregnancy and the *honamoi* offer ritualized responses to the destructive potentialities of female creative power. Thus, the *honamoi*'s femaleness is not inconsequential. Rather, it attests to the linkage of femaleness and the

⁴⁶³ Ibid, 91. Gittins describes the confession ritual that apparently involves a description of offenses, as a tool for the

⁴⁶⁴ Although I have not read any explanations for the association between femaleness and *honamoi* accusations in Mende culture specifically, a few theories recur in scholarship on West African witchcraft. The most popular hypothesis mirrors theories regarding Western European witchcraft and postulates that women's power to disrupt social relationships at will through interventions in the childbearing and childrearing processes relegated them to a realm of the "Other of man," both in terms of their femaleness and ability to transcend the boundaries of ordinary humanity/man. For an example of this argument, see Zuesse, "On the Nature of the Demonic," 235.

spirits (*ngafa*) in the West African sacred imagination—an imagination that enslaved Georgians mapped upon their new contexts.

“She come lak a nightmeah tuh duh folks wile dey sleeping:”⁴⁶⁵ The Hag-Witch and the Enslaved’s Sacred Imaginings

Even though linguistic distinctions between ritual practitioners, such as the *ndilei*, and trans-sense entities, such as the *honamoi*, disappeared in enslaved people’s transitions from their ancestral tongues to English, captive Africans and their descendants retained the association between femaleness and the *honei*, or witch spirit, as well as the West African notion of the relationship between the spirit (*ngafa*) and materiality. Semantically, the “witches” of the South included male and female conjurors and root workers, in addition to the antagonistic nocturnal spirits of West African and southern U.S. American lore. Serina Hall of St. Catherine’s Island declared matter-of-factly that “Witches an root men” were the “same ting,” in response to a question about conjurors.⁴⁶⁶ But a closer investigation of her description revealed the ways southern enslaved people maintained distinctions between ritual specialists and embodied spirit entities, despite the compression of such distinctions into a single term. According to Hall, “witches” could change their shape, take off their skin, and travel through keyholes to “git at yuh”—powers generally not attributed to the average conjuror or root worker.⁴⁶⁷ Tellingly, Hall ceased to use either the term conjuror or root worker as she progressed in her explanation, and instead, referred to the skin-shedding, keyhole-entering entity as a “hag,” a

⁴⁶⁵ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 4.

⁴⁶⁶ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 80-81.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

designation applied exclusively to the spirits believed to “ride” their male and female victims during the night.⁴⁶⁸

“Hag” was one of the few terms that enslaved people used to differentiate between “witch,” in its general application, and embodied witch spirits (*honamoi*). Though all hags were understood as witches, not all witches were hags. Another Sea Island woman, Bessie Royal, communicated the breadth of the hag-witch’s power in her recollection that her father was “conjuded by a suttu uhman dat wuz said to be a hag.”⁴⁶⁹ The conjuring apparently resulted in a psychological illness that, although diagnosed by a “root doctor,” subsequently killed Royal’s father. The association of witches with psychological illness appeared sporadically in enslaved people’s narrations on conjure. In a rare account, one coastal Georgian described a suspected conjuring by two male witches, one of whom “went crazy” and another whom the police found in the woods.⁴⁷⁰ Despite the differences between the cases, the linkage of witchcraft and mental illness echoes Mende ideas around possessors of *ndilei*. Individuals suffering from certain manifestations of mental illness were frequently the target of *ndilei* accusations.⁴⁷¹ With this in mind, it is not unlikely that some of the so-called “witches” described in conjuring accounts were figures akin to *ndilei* possessors—believed to wield a “witch-type” power—but not possessed by the *honei*, or witch spirit.

At the same time, some hags, or embodied witch spirits, were also conjurers. Despite the pervasive belief in witches, enslaved people rarely described the activities of so-called “witches” as witchcraft. Consequently, “conjure” described the activities of

⁴⁶⁸ The idea of a witch riding its victims was prevalent throughout the enslaved South and represents the most popular mythology surrounding witches.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, 79-80.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid, 35.

⁴⁷¹ Harris and Sawyerr, *Springs of Mende Belief*, 79.

ritual specialists like the *ndilei* possessors, as well as more extraordinary manifestations of power, as evidenced in one woman's explanation:

“Conjuh is magic some folks is bawn wid,’ she explained. “It gibs um powuh obuh tings udduh folks dohn unnubstan. Dey kin wuk dat pweuh fuh good aw bad. Dey kin put spells on yuh nad lif duh spell some udduh root wukuh hab put on yuh. Ef a root wukuh break yuh spirit, he kin hanl yuh lak he want tuh. A witch is a conjuh man dat somebody paid tuh tawment yuh. I know uh folks dat wuz rid so much by witches dat dey jis pine way an die.”

Clearly, the roles of the conjuror, root worker, and hag converged in the woman's statement. Similar to the Mende understandings of the person possessed by the witch spirit (*honamoi*), the above described conjuror possessed an inbuilt “magic,” had the capacity to invade and control the spirit (*ngafei*) of another, and engaged in activities that were antagonistic and/or fatal to his/her victims. It is probable that, over time, the characteristics of the conjuror and root worker were funneled into the figure of the hag to produce an entity that not only engaged in the traditional nocturnal activity of “riding” victims, but also inhabited the role of the conjuror and root worker when in embodied form. Nevertheless, though some southerners described the “witch” as a conjuror, few failed to distinguish the difference between a person who used ritual objects to exact their purposes and the embodied spirits whose power emanated from their liminality. Julia Rush recalled the denotation of “hag,” yet communicated the crucial distinction between the traditionally termed “conjuror” and the hag: “De old folks uster call witches hags.

Dey wus some kind of sperrits (spirits) an' dey would ride anybody. My grandmother uster sleep wid de sissors under her pillow to keep 'em away.”⁴⁷²

The hag-witches of the South, like the *honamoi* of Sierra Leone, were trans-sense beings—that is, they occupied the liminal space between human and spirit, or perhaps more accurately, were spirits embodied as humans. As spirits that existed in human forms, witches resembled ghosts, shadows, and other visible spirit entities, and indeed, the lore surrounding witches and ghosts converged in the narrations of some formerly enslaved people. Enslaved as a child, Susan Castle reported that “Dey used to tell de chillun dat when old folks died day turned to witches.”⁴⁷³ Likewise, Mrs. Betty Brown conveyed the belief that individuals that died angry at someone generally returned in the form of a witch to ride the person with whom they were vexed.⁴⁷⁴ Although the correlation between witches and ghosts was infrequent, the idea was pervasive enough to influence prescriptions around the handling of corpses within some enslaved communities. According to a man simply referred to as “Mr. Leonard,” the spirits of dead people returned as witches to the houses in which they died and, subsequently, the house became haunted. For this reason, the enslaved “used to put a pan of salt on de corpse to keep it fum purgin’ an’ to keep de witches away.”⁴⁷⁵ The anti-witch precautionary measures did not stop there, however. Members of the community also “burned lamps all night long” for three weeks after the person’s death and periodically sprinkled salt and pepper around the corpse to deter witches.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷² Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 266.

⁴⁷³ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 181.

⁴⁷⁴ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 266.

⁴⁷⁵ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 267.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Despite the alliance of witches and the dead in some pockets of enslaved communities, most people recognized witches as more powerful and sinister entities with a different relationship to materiality than the formerly embodied. Martha Page was born with a caul, which, among the enslaved, endowed her with the ability to see generally unseen spirit entities—in this case, ghosts. Even so, her recollection of hers and her sister’s experiences of being “ridden” by a witch revealed the palpable differences between witches and ghosts:

Witches use tuh ride uh regluh till it seem she gwine swivel away an die. One day a man tell uh tuh tro salt on duh bed and no witch would bodduh uh. So dat ebenin muh sistuh sprinkle a heap uh salt on uh cubbuh. Soon attuh we git tuh bed, I see a cat come right in duh doe and look me in duh eye. I try tuh holluh but uh couldn make a soun. Nex ting I know sistuh wuz poin watuh in muh face. “I dohn take tuh witches, “. . . “I dohn mine ghos, cuz I caalm see em as I wazn bawn wid a caul. But I dohn want no mo sperience wid witches. Das wy uh sprinkle salt down ebry night un muh life.”⁴⁷⁷

Whereas ghosts were understood as the disembodied spirits of the dead, hag-witches were “libin people” that evinced the ability to shift into different material forms and travel away from their bodies, similar to the Mende *honamoi*.⁴⁷⁸ When in their embodied, human forms, hags were almost always women, particularly elderly women, not unlike

⁴⁷⁷ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 24.

⁴⁷⁸ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 6. The informant takes special care to point out the distinction between ghosts and witches, perhaps in response to the tangential belief that witches were the spirits of the “old folks.” For the latter belief see Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 181. Shape shifting ability appears to be a feature of witchcraft in multiple contexts, see also Zuesse, “On the Nature of the Demonic,” 216.

the *ndilei* possessors. Describing what he termed “the worse kind of witch,” one coastal Georgia man reported an incident during which the blood was sucked from the body of another woman, leaving the victim “so thin and weak” she couldn’t “stand up.”⁴⁷⁹ He identified the perpetrator as “an old woman on Gwinnett Street with some cows,” whose seemingly innocuous existence made her malevolent, nocturnal activities all the more condemnable.⁴⁸⁰ The association of the hag with the consumption of blood echoed Mende understandings of the need to “feed” the *honei* and pointed to enslaved Africans’ and their descendants’ continued conceptualizations of witches in accordance with West African rubrics, such as the *honei* and *honamoi*. Still, the connection of witches to infants had disappeared in Georgia by the antebellum period. Without question, the resignification of the womb altered enslaved people’s indigenous values regarding reproductive imperatives, and the shift manifested in ideas about destructive female power in the sacred imagination. The concept of a malicious spirit entity who “rode” her victims to the point of death or, at the very least, exhaustion expressed concerns more befitting the enslaved context, where overwork threatened the vitality of communities.

Moreover, the culture of enslavement, in which a person’s biological kin could be removed, killed, or otherwise prevented from maintaining contact and/or a shared residence with their conjugal partner, children, and other relations precluded the association of hag activity with unattached women in African American mythology. The hags of the enslaved’s sacred imagination often had husbands and other relations, yet evinced the ability to travel away from their bodies and shape shift in ways that confounded their kin and enabled their activities to remain a secret. Formerly enslaved

⁴⁷⁹ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 16.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid. Given the woman’s ownership of cows, it is likely that the incident occurs post-slavery.

Georgian Amanda Styles relayed the story of a woman who married, despite rumors that she “would turn her skin inside out and go round riding folks horses” nightly. According to Mrs. Styles: “her husband didn’t know she was a witch so somebody tole him he could tell by cutting off one of her limbs so one night the wife changed to a cat and the husband cut off her forefinger what had a ring on it. After that der wife would keep her hand hid cause her finger wuz cut off; and she knowed her husband would find out that she wuz the witch.”⁴⁸¹

Notwithstanding the overwhelming incidence of elderly women among the population of suspected hags, the above narrative and others like it suggest that the African-American hag-witch did not function sociologically as a sanction against any particular class of women, as did their Mende and European American counterparts.⁴⁸² As evidenced in the story, hags were not required to confess, submit to any ritual purification, or undergo punitive procedures in the vast majority of cases. Rather, discovery functioned as a sufficient penalty to deter the alleged hag-witch’s ill-intentioned agenda. Thus, the femaleness of the hag-witch, indeed the very mythology regarding the hag’s appearances, likely represented the enslaved’s importation of West African and European conventions into enslaved communities, as opposed to an attempt to impose sanctions upon a vulnerable population.

⁴⁸¹ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part III*, 343-344.

⁴⁸² Carol F. Karlsen has argued that witchcraft accusations in colonial New England functioned as sanctions against propertied European American women, who were unattached to husbands and/or other male family members. Similar to the Mende *ndilei* possessors, the women were generally “widows and spinsters, over forty years of age,” who were beyond their childbearing years. The latter characteristic of the accused rendered the women unlikely to produce male heirs to inherit property, and according to Karlsen, explained charges against married women. Interestingly, “accusations were rarely taken seriously by the community until the accused stopped bearing children.” Carol F. Karlsen, “The Economic Basis of Witchcraft,” in *Spellbound: Women and Witchcraft in America*, ed. Elizabeth Reis (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1998), 3, 11.

This is not to say that enslaved people's understandings of hags did not express an indigenous logic of woman-gendered power. On the contrary, the pattern of accusation evinced a suspicion of women's, particularly elderly women's, spirit power that coincided with women's social statuses within the slave economy. The very features that rendered women more vulnerable and less mobile than their male counterparts—namely their roles in the biological and social reproduction of enslaved, and in some cases, White families—also accorded them elevated statuses within enslaved communities. When asked which parents enslaved children “regard[ed] the most,” the formerly enslaved Robert Smalls replied simply “The mother; they would be inclined to obey the mother.”⁴⁸³ Overwhelmingly, it was the women who received the rations for their households, performed surrogate functions for Black and White families, lived with and raised the children, and “stayed behind” when the men absconded or worked elsewhere. They were fixtures on the plantation, and as such assumed authoritative roles, such as plantation doctor, midwife, nurse, and “Mammy,” that granted their occupants the power to either heal and sustain, or harm and kill.

Clearly, some women enjoyed esteemed positions in the social hierarchy of slavery. And no group was more esteemed and authoritative than the corps of venerable elderly women, generally referred to by all using the honorific “Aunt.” Although the title was often applied to highly regarded, aged women, not surprisingly, women known to possess extraordinary power were also frequently referred to using honorifics. Alice Bradley, known as “Aunt” Alice to members of the formerly enslaved community,

⁴⁸³ Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony*, 376. Smalls was interviewed in South Carolina in 1863 as a part of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission interviews.

apparently ran “cards” and claimed “to be a seeress.”⁴⁸⁴ Doubtless, women’s physiological and sociological creative power endowed them with an authoritative status that extended into the sacred imagination. The hag’s harming and, potentially, fatal power was an inversion of the creative power that granted women elevated statuses within enslaved communities: rather than work for the survival and an improved quality of life for herself and those around her, the hag overworked and almost killed her victims. Even if the enslaved merely integrated aspects of Western European witch mythology into their preexisting, West African understandings of destructive female-embodied power, the hag reflected the sociological realities of enslaved culture and continued alliance of femaleness with trans-sense power. Hence, the femaleness of the embodied hag was not insignificant.

Still, though embodied as female, the hag was a spirit. In accordance with the Mende understanding of the *honei* (witch-spirit) as invisible to all except those endowed with extraordinary sight, one accuser began his hag account with the declaration that he can “see witches,” but “not everybody can tell a witch.”⁴⁸⁵ To his point, others were apparently unable to discern the movements of the accused’s witch-spirit; for this reason, they were unaware that the elderly woman possessed, or rather was possessed by, such power. In the sacred imagination of the enslaved, those without extraordinary sight never saw the witch as she executed her nocturnal agendas, because it was the spirit and not the physical body that moved between spaces. More than an artful detail of the hag mythology, the idea suggested the persistence of the West African belief that the witch-

⁴⁸⁴ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 119. Blacks and Whites generally referred to distinguished, elderly enslaved women using the “Aunt” honorific. Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas’s reference to one of her father’s servants as “Aunt Tinsey” points to the commonplace nature of the designation within southern culture. Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 123.

⁴⁸⁵ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 16.

spirit (*honei*) could leave the host body, wander, and injure the spirit (*ngafa*) of another as the bodies of the *honamoi* and victim slept.⁴⁸⁶ The concept of spirits wandering the night was not specific to hag mythology. However, beliefs about hags brought to the fore enslaved people's ways of understanding the relationship between spirit and materiality, as evidenced in one woman's explanation:

“‘Ebuh since I kin membuh I hab heahd bout spirits wanduhin roun at night,’ she continued. ‘muh mothuh nebuh would let us go tuh bed at night widout leabin plenty uh watuh in duh pails fuh duh spirits tuh drink wile yuh sleep. Ef yuh dohn leab no watuh dey wohh leh yuh res good. I tink das wy hags ride some folks, cuz dey dohn leab no watuh.’⁴⁸⁷

The woman went on to state her belief that “witches” were people that “sole deah soul tuh duh debil”—an idea which demonstrates the marriage of West African cosmological and Western European Christian concepts in African-American religious beliefs.⁴⁸⁸

Although defined as a spirit, similar to western African and European “witches,” the U.S. African-American hag possessed the ability to transform herself into different material forms. Yet, even in their shape shifting, hags retained their ties to human corporeality in ways that strongly resembled the English witch. In the most famous and elaborate trial of an individual accused of witchcraft in England's history, Amy Duny was accused of bewitching a woman's infant son, after Duny, his elderly caretaker, confessed that she had “given suck to the child” and he became ill. On the recommendation of a man referred to as Doctor Jacob, the child's mother placed the

⁴⁸⁶ Harris and Sawyerr, *Springs of Mende Belief*, 89.

⁴⁸⁷ Georgia Writer's Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 59. Carrie Nancy Fryer, a formerly enslaved Georgia woman, also discussed putting a basin of water under the bed as a witch deterrent. Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 342.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

boy's blanket in the chimney corner during the day and, prior to placing the child in the blanket that night, examined the blanket for any foreign presences. To her surprise, she found a large toad and threw it into the fire. Dunny was apparently found badly scorched the next day, and the child recovered.⁴⁸⁹

Similarly, in the absence of ritual specialists designated specifically for the discovery of witches, bondspeople generally ferreted out alleged hags through artifice that exploited the entity's corporeal vulnerability. In the lore of the enslaved, hag-witches most often took the form of a cat, but could also appear as a dog, insect, or buzzard. A notorious hag-witch was discovered through the machinations of one of her alleged victims' husband, who awaited the hag's nocturnal entry into his home and, upon perceiving his wife's struggles against an unseen entity, began wildly swinging an axe until he hit the spirit. After the strike, the man heard a "screech" and saw a cat exit through the window. He followed the cat's trail and found "ole Malinda Edmonde wid tree rib broke."⁴⁹⁰

Similar stories of discovery populated the narrative repositories of the enslaved's sacred imaginations and communicated the intimate relationship of the hag-witch spirit to the host body. Although a spirit, similar to the *honamoi*, the hag was not immune to the protective measures enacted by their victims. Hags could change form, but in order to do so, they had to take off their human skin, literally. This feature of the hag's corporeality rendered the spirit vulnerable, as Serina Hall explained: "" Tuh tun intuh sumpm else dey

⁴⁸⁹ This incident is mentioned in Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World: being an account of the tryals [sic] of several witches lately executed in New England*, 3rd edition (London: 1862), 112, *Sabin Americana*, Gale, Cengage Learning, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/servlet/Sabin?af=RN&ae=CY107600499&srchtp=a&ste=14>. Though the trial occurs in England, Mather uses the famous case to outline the problems with the methods of witch detection deployed in New England.

⁴⁹⁰ Georgia Writer's Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 6.

hab tuh hab duh powuh tuh take off deah skin. Wen duh hag go tuh put is skin back on, huh salt and peppuh bun so he couldn't git it on. Duh folks wuz able tuh ketch im an dey fine it wuz one uh deah neighbuhs. He beg an plead an so dey fuhgrib im. Dey nebuch hab no mo hag ridin.”⁴⁹¹ Placing salt or pepper in the hag's skin to prevent the spirit from re-inhabiting its human form was a popular method of detection. Among the less popular anti-witch customs was the use of Benne seed, which was said to be “bad” for the hags and repel them from potential victims.⁴⁹² Other conventional protective measures included the placement of a broomstick, salt, sifter, or newspaper at the threshold of the door, consistent with the idea of hag-witches as compulsive counters.⁴⁹³ Reputedly, the articles would entice the hag to such a degree that it “would have to stop to count the grains or letters or holes or straws,” and remain in this posture until daylight, “at which time it had to scoot home or be captured.”⁴⁹⁴ This same logic accorded to the practice of placing a Bible under one's pillow for protection—another common practice among the enslaved and their descendants.⁴⁹⁵ True to her nature, the hag would “count all the letters before getting down to the business of possession.”⁴⁹⁶

Counting letters was not the only reason some of the enslaved perceived the Bible as a hag deterrent. Consistent with the Western European, Christian witch tradition, some enslaved peoples believed that the hag derived its power from a pact with the Devil. According to British settlers of the New England colonies, witches possessed the power

⁴⁹¹ Ibid, 80-81.

⁴⁹² Ibid, 157.

⁴⁹³ Ibid, 16. Susan Showers, “A Weddin’ and a Buryin’ in the Black Belt,” *New England Magazine*, XVIII (Boston, 1898) in *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals*, Bruce Jackson, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 293.

⁴⁹⁴ Showers, “A Weddin’ and a Buryin’ in the Black Belt,” in *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals*, Bruce Jackson, ed., 293.

⁴⁹⁵ Georgia Writer's Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 20.

⁴⁹⁶ Showers, “A Weddin’ and a Buryin’ in the Black Belt,” in *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals*, Bruce Jackson, ed., 293.

to kill and inflict harm through a curse or ban, as a result of their endowment with the Devil's diabolical power. As New England minister Cotton Mather enumerated in his chapter "An Abstract of Mr. Perkins's Way for the Discovery of Witches," death or any other evidence of "mischief" following the utterance of a curse or ban by a suspected witch was grounds for an examination of the individual.⁴⁹⁷ But conviction required more substantial evidence—namely proof that the individual "called upon the Devil, or desired his Help," "entertained a Familiar Spirit...in the likeness of some visible creatures," "used Enchantments, divined things before they come to pass, raised Tempests," or "caused the form of a dead man to appear."⁴⁹⁸

In such cases, the hag was not understood as a spirit that made itself visible through the colonization of human or other material forms, but rather, as a human imbued with extraordinary abilities. Among the enslaved, the nuance manifested in a noticeable difference in commentators' hag narratives, as illustrated by one man's story:

"One night muh wife an me git ready tuh go tuh bed. We fastenduh doe an winduh. Attuh a time we heah a noise. Den we heah a click. Duh winduh come open jis lak somebody open it. I strike a match an uh see a big yulluh cat walkin long side duh bed. It hab a face jis lak a pusson. It go right out duh winduh. I fine out latuh dat duh cat wuz a witch. Witches is jis livin people wut bin sole tuh duh debil⁴⁹⁹."

Whereas in other narratives, it is the hag's existence as a spirit that enables it to shift material forms, in the above narrative, a covenant with the supreme malevolent entity in Christianity enables the human to shape-shift, hence the encounter with a cat that looks

⁴⁹⁷ Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, 30.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁴⁹⁹ Georgia Writer's Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 34.

“jis lak a pusson.” Nowhere else does a narrator profess to seeing an animal with a human face. However, the infiltration of Christian ideas into African-American hag myths also appeared in recommendations such as those expressed by a “Mr. Strickland,” who claimed that if a person “can say any three words of the Bible such as: ‘Lord have mercy,’ or ‘Jesus save me’ the witch will stop riding.”⁵⁰⁰

Despite the elaboration of similar beliefs among certain pockets of the enslaved, according to the beliefs of the majority, Christian language had no dominion over the hag once she commenced her riding. For she was a trans-sense being, “of, beyond, and between” the sense world—a spirit created by *Ngewo*, even if antagonistic to the community. Consequently, most people simply attempted to deter the witch spirit (*honei*) and avoid the spirit’s host (*honamoi*). As one coastal Georgian declared: “We shuts duh doe ef we sees uh comin. She come lak a nightmeah tuh duh folks wile dey sleeping.”⁵⁰¹

Conclusion

Endowed with the capacity to assume embodied form, yet possessed of power beyond the sense world of embodiment, the hag-witch resided at the nexus of gendered imagination and gender practice. Elaborations of her spirit power harkened West African cosmologies and beliefs about female creative power, yet her prominence in the sacred imagination of the enslaved bespoke the sociological significance of women within the hierarchies of enslavement. She was at once a product of remembered ancestral beliefs and re-created ideas about destructive, female-imagined power—ensconced within a context that perceived the sense world as alive with seen and unseen spirit forces. In the

⁵⁰⁰ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 267.

⁵⁰¹ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 4.

wake of the cataclysmic economic and social shifts precipitated by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the many forms of dismemberment endured by the enslaved, the hag-witch anchored bondspeople to West African cosmological ideas about the relationship between spirit and materiality and imaged formidable, female-embodied power. Despite the antagonistic nature of her presence within enslaved African-descended communities, the hag-witch was a response to dismemberment. She evinced the enslaved's creation of a shared socioreligious context from the cultural, religious, and ritual fragments of their destabilized social worlds. The sacred imagination formed the psychic foundation for this shared cultural context, even though many of its constituents were relegated to the category of folklore or superstition through the machinations of time and forces inimical to non-institutional manifestations of religion. Of these forces, none was more influential than Christianity. Yet, as evidenced by the persistence of the sacred imagination, enslaved people did not relinquish their cosmologies in the encounter with the religion of their captors. Rather, they merely integrated Christian ideas, symbols, and rituals into their re/membered West and West Central African sacred systems.

Chapter Five

Resignifying Sunday:

Re/membering the Foundations of Enslaved People's Sacred Lives

Introduction

Following the legalization of slavery in Georgia, the Georgia Assembly passed an act aimed at curbing the power of the emergent planter class and aligning Georgia's labor culture with the declared Judeo-Christian aims of European colonialism. Pursuant to the statute, it became unlawful for a free person to employ an enslaved person in labor on "the Lords Day commonly called Sunday," except in the instance of "Works of absolute necessity and the necessary Occasions of the Family."⁵⁰² The prohibition allowed a fair amount of latitude in the interpretation of "works of absolute necessity," and consequently, permitted the exclusion of personal servants and other domestics, many of whom were women, from the weekly reprieve. Nevertheless, in a divergence from the French and Spanish Catholic colonies, the Protestant British colonies endeavored to maintain at least a semblance of observance of the Sabbath as a day of rest, in accordance with Christian precepts.⁵⁰³ Although many planters assumed only a perfunctory interest in the religious practices of their workers, the narratives, precepts, and vocabularies of Christianity became integral to the parlance of the Lower South as southerners used

⁵⁰² *Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the Colony of Georgia: 1755-1774*, 83.

⁵⁰³ Enslaved people who moved from Georgia to colonies such as Louisiana remarked upon the absence of provisions for the Sabbath in Catholic colonies. John Goodwin, originally from Georgia, noted that the only difference between Louisiana and Georgia was that, "white people did not regard the Sabbath day" and would "make the darkies work all day Sunday sometimes when they was pushed up with the grass in the cane." Octavia V. Rogers Albert, *The House of Bondage or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). [1890], 61. Although the 1724 Code Noir mandated the religious instruction of enslaved peoples, many planters dissented, which might account for Goodwin's experience. See Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 113.

theological language to defend their most sacred institution: slavery.

Yet, the resultant theological assault upon Black being, specifically the definition of Black ontology in terms of the master/slave relationship in southern Christian apologetics, was met with a resistance rooted in alternative notions of the Black Self.⁵⁰⁴ These notions of the Self originated in the cosmologies of the ancestral religions of the enslaved and became the foundations for the parallel systems of religiosity that sustained their personhood during slavery—systems inclusive of, but not reducible to, Black Christianity. Even when steeped in Christian lexicons, enslaved people’s Christianity was not expressed via doctrine, but rather, through the cultural “grammars” and modalities of their ancestors: sociality, sound, movement, and power. In spite of many southerners’ attestations of familiarity with their enslaved workers, ministers like John B. Adger and C.C. Jones frequently noted the foreignness of the enslaved’s religious performances:

Their religion consists, in a great measure, of forms and ceremonies and excitement. Conversion is with many of them a dream, a trance, a vision, a voice from heaven. One who is in high authority declares that ‘Sometimes principles of conduct are adopted by church members, at so much variance with the Gospel, that ‘the grace of God is turned into lasciviousness.’ For example, members of the same church are sacredly bound by their religion not to reveal each other’s sins, for that would be backbiting and injuring the brotherhood. And again, that which would be an abominable sin, committed by a church member with a worldly person,

⁵⁰⁴ Long, *Significations*, 183-184. This statement draws upon Long’s contention that the “hegemony of the oppressors” was interpreted as a “myth” by the enslaved. However, the myth possessed elements of truth and fiction. Although the enslaved had to contend with the truth of White hegemony in their daily activities, this hegemony bore no ontological significance, and consequently, was “fictive.”

becomes no sin at all, if committed with another church member, for the brethren must bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.' To know the extent of their ignorance, even where they have been accustomed to the sound of the Gospel in white churches, a man should make investigation for himself; —the result will frequently surprise and fill him with grief...⁵⁰⁵

Clearly, bondspeople infused Christianity into the theological and ritual structures of their foreparents, much to the consternation of the missionaries who purported to convert them. Within the religious psyche of captive West Africans and their descendants, conversion marked an intrusion of the spirits (*ngafa*) and/or ancestors (*ngafanga*) into embodied existence, and signaled the beginning of a process of initiation, which bound initiates to indigenous ethical codes.

Historian Mechal Sobel documented a similar deviance amongst enslaved Baptist converts, who experienced and theorized their Christian conversion in terms of “soul travel,” during which one aspect of the soul—the “little me,” or essence of the human—traveled through heaven and hell to commune with the High God.⁵⁰⁶ In agreement with Sobel, Akan, Kongo, and other West and West-Central African cosmologies, rituals, and norms circulated throughout the enslaved South and formed the context for the emergence of enslaved, Black Christianity. However, a heightened consideration of the

⁵⁰⁵ John B. Adger, *The Religious Instruction of the Black Population. The Gospel to be Given to our Servants. A Sermon Preached in Several of the Protestant Episcopal Churches in Charleston on Sundays in July 1847, by the Rev. Paul Trapier. Printed by Miller & Brown. A Discussion on 'the Religious Instruction of the Blacks' in the Charleston Mercury, between 'Many Citizens' and the Rev. J.B. Adger* (Charleston, SC, 1847), in *Slavery in North America*, ed. Jonathan Daniel Wells, 315-316. Adger quotes from C.C. Jones's *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes. In the United States* (Savannah: Thomas Purse, 1842), 125-126. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/jones/jones.html#p127>.

⁵⁰⁶ Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), xx, 107-113.

cosmologies of West African peoples tempers Sobel's assertion that enslaved people's search for religious coherence, following the Christian disruption of the "neo-African" religious consciousness, propelled them towards the development of an Afro-Christian faith.⁵⁰⁷

For the Mende and other inhabitants of the Windward Coast and Sierra Leone regions, doctrinal coherence was not the object of a religious system. Rather, *halei* (mystical power), *ngafanga* (spirits), initiatory societies, and interpreters (diviners, prophets, etc.) collectively formed the religious repertoires from which men, women, and children drew to address personal difficulties, enforce ethical sanctions, resolve problems, and theorize existence.⁵⁰⁸ Similar to other West and West-Central African cultures, the Mende actualized their cosmology through a variety of ritual performances—most conspicuously, communal displays that incorporated song and dance, or more broadly, rhythmic sounds and movements. Although both the all-male *Poro* and the all-female *Sande* Mende initiatory societies were known as "dancing societies," the elements of religious performance and practice that appeared in the lower South were paramount to and sustained by the women in particular. Like the songs that buoyed the daily tasks and shaped the sacred cultures of the enslaved, the *Sande* song not only inculcated the values of the society, but kept the women company and paced their movements as they

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid, xxi-xxii. According to Sobel, Africans' diverse worldviews coalesced around a set of core understandings, which she names the "Sacred Cosmos," and these views produced a neo-African consciousness in the early phases of slavery. As Christianity was incorporated into the neo-African consciousness, a dichotomized understanding often resulted. After the loss of coherence within the neo-African consciousness, Blacks created a coherent Afro-Christian faith, which preserved and revitalized African understandings of the spirit and soul travel, while incorporating individual salvation and Jesus.

⁵⁰⁸ Anthony J. Gittins, *Mende Religion* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag-Wort und Werk, 1987), 204. Gittins defines *halei* as "metaphysical power." The definition of the term as "mystical power" comes from William P. Murphy, "The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics: An African Aesthetic of Charismatic Power," *American Ethnologist* 25, No. 4 (Nov. 1998): 568, accessed February 18, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/645855>.

performed the myriad of agricultural tasks assigned to their sex.⁵⁰⁹ Dance was the communally performed counterpart to song and, like collective singing, functioned as a somatic metaphor for social harmony.⁵¹⁰ Though communal harmony was central to all aspects of Mende life, women's roles as co-wives and co-laborers heightened the necessity for social cohesion in their ranks and rendered *Sande* both a fellowship and an ideal.⁵¹¹

Undoubtedly, the similar need for support from other women—to aid in moments of trauma and transition, function as surrogate mothers in the event of familial disruption, and assist with childrearing, among other things—impressed upon North American enslaved women the importance of sociality for their quality of life and survival and, perhaps, accounted for their numerical majority at recorded ritual gatherings. Mende and other West and West-Central African women bequeathed to their descendants an understanding of the important social function of ritual gatherings, and as a result, sound, movement, and sociality remained integral to the sacred lives of enslaved peoples. Finally, power—social, mystical, sexual, and creative—resided at the center of women's and men's religious performances in the Windward Coast and the other parts of West and West-Central Africa from which enslaved Georgians emerged and fueled the religious choices of their descendants.

Aspects of Christianity were incorporated into these repertoires and, in many cases, Christian language was mapped onto West and West-Central African cosmologies. Yet as Adger's account suggests, Christianity never displaced ancestral religious repertoires during slavery. The dreams, trances, and visions of enslaved people's

⁵⁰⁹ Boone, *Radiance from the Waters*, 69-71.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 69, 153.

conversion stories, along with the “excitement” and corporeal performances of their Christian religiosity, were not cultural relics imported into a Christian metastructure, but rather, constituents of the infrastructure upon which Christian narratives and practices were grafted. Such practices acquire a more robust meaning when analyzed in light of the myths of Georgia’s Christian heritage and through the sacral rubrics of West and West Central African peoples, who bequeathed their ways of religious knowing to the enslaved populations of the Lower South.

The Sacred Sabbath?: Rethinking the Christian Context of Enslaved People’s Religious Practice

Despite the early legislative intervention and the rhetoric of southern Christian benevolence of subsequent decades, early Georgia residents fell remarkably short of the ideal in their Sunday practices.⁵¹² During his tour of Georgia between 1852 and 1853, abolitionist C.G. Parsons remarked upon the tenuous Christianity of antebellum Georgians and the misrepresented religiosity of the South:

“All over the planting districts, as I have before said, very few attend church, and very few of the churches have constant preaching. There was

⁵¹² A number of scholars have claimed that the lack of ordained clergy, isolation of parishes, and frontier culture contributed to a general disinterest in religion in the South during the colonial period, as the first Great Awakening swept northern colonies. See for example, John B. Boles, introduction to *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: 1740-1870*, John B. Boles, ed. (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1988), 3. Yet, some scholars of southern religion have challenged the consensus, and argued that the small number of converts belied the impact of such revivals upon southern religious developments. For instance, Alan Gally contends that the interaction between revivalist George Whitefield and the wealthy, slaveowning Bryan family catalyzed a chain of events that enabled the enslaved Andrew Bryan to become the pastor of First African Baptist Church of Savannah. Alan Gally, “Planters and Slaves in the Great Awakening,” in *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: 1740-1870*, John B. Boles, ed. (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1988), 34. At the same time, historical narratives on American religion have argued that the antebellum period represented a period of increased religiosity in the South, due to planters’ adoption of Christian language to advance their sociopolitical agendas. See, Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 156, 203.

not a settled minister of the gospel, of any denomination, who preached constantly at the same place, for more than two hundred miles, on the stage road leading from the coast to the capital; and yet, in each of those counties, from six to thirteen churches are returned in the census.

Traveling ministers preach at several different stations, and the number of sermons delivered at each church will not average more than one a month.”⁵¹³

Regarding the observance of prohibitions concerning Sabbath labor, Parsons noted that a “large majority” of enslaved people in the planting districts labored on the Sabbath, not at their usual tasks, but rather, they washed and ironed, made and mended their clothes, cut wood, and worked in their gardens.⁵¹⁴ Far from the bastions of American evangelicalism of southern lore, many colonial and antebellum southern regions were, to the anti-slavery northern eye, decidedly secular. The topography of Georgia and much of the early American South did not lend themselves to the routinization and institution-building intrinsic to more conspicuous versions of Christian practice. Sprawling plantations, interspersed with smaller farms meant that, for many southerners, the church consisted of a ramshackle structure with infrequent services and benches hewn out of trees, in contrast to the imposing edifices and liturgical regularity of urban centers, such as Savannah and Augusta.⁵¹⁵ Moreover, according to Parsons, Sunday was viewed more as a “holiday—

⁵¹³ Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery*, 259. At the same time, historical narratives on American religion have argued that the antebellum period represented a period of increased religiosity in the South, due to planters’ adoption of Christian language to advance their sociopolitical agendas.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁵¹⁵ J.S. Buckingham described the religious landscape of Savannah in the early 19th century through an inventory of religious edifices: “Of churches there are ten; two Presbyterian, one Episcopal, one Methodist, one Baptist, one Roman Catholic, one Unitarian, one Lutheran, and two meeting-houses for coloured people, as well as the synagogue for the Jews, who are here as numerous and wealthy as at Charleston.” Buckingham, *A Journey Through the Slave States of North America*, 69.

occupied mainly in pleasure and sport,” than either a day of rest or worship amongst Georgians: “The first sounds that salute the ear, not only in the country, but in many of the cities of the South, on Sabbath morning, are the firing of guns, the beating of drums, and the noise of the hunting horn. They have boat parties, riding parties, hunting parties, fishing parties, drinking parties, gaming parties, and dancing parties. And the Sabbath is almost invariably the day for horse races, and military parades.”⁵¹⁶ The designation of the first Sunday prior to the state elections as “free liquor day” in Georgia sealed his perception of the corrupt soul of southern Christianity.⁵¹⁷

To be sure, Parsons’ commentary on southern churches aimed to support ideas of slavery’s morally degenerating effects and must be understood in light of his abolitionist agenda. However, anti-slavery advocates were not the sole producers of appalled commentaries on the laxity of Sabbath compliance in the colonial and antebellum South. Charles Woodmason, an Anglican itinerant in the pre-Revolutionary South Carolina backcountry, provided a similar account of the Lower South in his journal. Woodmason documented denominational “wars” between Baptists, Presbyterians, and Anglicans, during which the worship services were frequent casualties. The hire of “a band of rude fellows” to bring fifty-seven dogs to his church and initiate a dog fight during the service—an act invariably perpetrated by the Presbyterians—solidified for Woodmason that he was “in the same situation with the clergy of the primitive church, in midst of the

⁵¹⁶ Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery*, 254-255. Parsons cites Augusta as one of the few places that felt “like home” to him on the Sabbath, since people generally attended church and refrained from labor and amusements. (257)

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid*, 257. On this day, potential candidates would invite voters to their headquarters to partake of liquor at the candidate’s expense.

Heathens, Arians, and Hereticks.”⁵¹⁸ Even in the years following the spectacular growth of southern evangelicalism during the opening decades of the 19th century, minister W.W. Flemming remarked upon the “coldness and barrenness [sic]” of Georgia parishioners, despite the large crowds that assembled in sabbath schools and meetinghouses for preaching, and lamented the profanity, sabbath breaking, and liturgical irreverence of the “majority.” His assessment of Georgia’s Christians was summed up in his remark that “something surely is wrong.”⁵¹⁹ Two years later, in 1850, Flemming offered an almost identical assessment of self-professed Christians in Georgia; in his estimation, he preached “with little or no apparent effect on the minds of sinners.”⁵²⁰

To those accustomed to the ritual regularity of established Christian communities, the architecture of northern religious structures, or the solemnity of Anglican liturgies, Georgia exemplified the secular South. Yet, the frequent evocation of Christian language to locate the South and slavery, its most sacred institution, in the teleology of American and human history suggests that Georgia was not at all secular. Rather, the values and aims of Western Christianity were subjugated to those of enslavement. In short, slavery was the religion of Georgia and much of the American Lower South. As slavery evolved into the South’s “domestic institution,” southerners defended their worldview through public censorship and discursive reinforcement. They built colleges and universities in the south to avoid the infiltration of anti-slavery ideas through

⁵¹⁸ Charles Woodmason, “The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of Revolution. The Journals and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant,” in *Voices of the Old South: Eyewitness Accounts, 1528-186*, Alan Gallay, ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 194-195.

⁵¹⁹ Letter from nephew W.W. Flemming, August 8, 1848, Cherokee County, Georgia, Box 1 of 1, James H. Saye Papers, part of the Harry L. and Mary K. Dalton Collection, Duke University Special Collections Library, Duke University.

⁵²⁰ Letter from nephew Wm. W.W. Flemming, August 22, 1850, Cherokee County, Georgia, Box 1 of 1, James H. Saye Papers, part of the Harry L. and Mary K. Dalton Collection, Duke University Special Collections Library, Duke University.

northern educational institutions, and so “effectually suppressed” abolitionist ideas that it was “as if there were a censorship of the press, or a holy inquisition.”⁵²¹ Southern journals overflowed with essays that declared slavery’s coherence with biblical precepts and Divine law, in response to abolitionists’ claims to the contrary.⁵²² And pro-slavery commentators, such as H.O.R., blended philosophical, political, and Christian vocabularies to theorize and authenticate their civil religiosity, arguing that:

“if the system of negro slavery in the United States is based on the law of God, it will most assuredly vindicate its own righteousness, and overcome the false idea of the unbeliever—that ‘all men are born free and equal.’ Christians will be brought to feel and acknowledge that all created beings are amenable to the laws of the Creator, and are entitled to no freedom, no ‘inalienable rights,’ which He has not bestowed; that the differences of outward condition, of natural gifts, are all made even in that righteous revelation of the will of the Most Highest—*that all shall be judged according to the measure they have received.*”⁵²³

⁵²¹ Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 37, 97-98. Olmsted bases his remarks regarding the shift from northern to southern educational institutions amongst the wealthier classes upon a conversation with “persons connected with the business of education.” He continues: “On inquiring the cause of this change, the reason assigned was this: that the students returning from the north so often came home ‘tainted with Abolitionism,’ (that was the exact phrase used) and with such a ‘distaste for their *domestic institutions*,’ meaning slavery, (thus being the terms usually substituted for this disagreeable word), that it was thought dangerous to the welfare of the country any longer to continue the practice of sending their children to the north, where they imbibed such dangerous doctrines ad Abolitionism, and were thus rendered averse to the ‘domestic institutions’ of the south.” Numerous anti-slavery travelers commented upon their precarious situation as visitors to the South, and many concealed their sentiments in order to ensure their safety as they traveled.

⁵²² In the 1st Volume of the 1835 edition of *The Southern Literary Journal*, the president of Columbia College declares that the claim of slavery’s inconsistency with biblical laws is an “impudent,” “unprincipled, unblushing falsehood.” In the same volume, an article entitled “Remarks on Slavery, by a Citizen of Georgia” discusses the tolerance of slavery in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. Both are quoted in Buckingham, *A Journey Through the Slave States of North America*, 39-40.

⁵²³ H.O.R., *The Governing Race*, as quoted in *Slavery in North America: Volume 3*, ed. Jonathan Daniel Wells, 250.

Southerners who admitted the immorality of enslavement justified the institution as a necessary evil.⁵²⁴

Thus, despite the legal designation of Sunday as the Sabbath and the deployment of the Christian lexicon in early policies regarding the treatment of enslaved peoples, for southerners, the defense of the southern caste system was paramount. In the confrontation between the egalitarianism of early evangelicalism and the hierarchy of slave societies, the latter triumphed. It was not until evangelicals adopted a neutral stance on slavery and affirmed the mastery of the White male patriarch that the planter class relented in its opposition to the proselytization of its workers.⁵²⁵ To circumvent the denunciations of their northern counterparts, in the late 1830s, the Georgia and South Carolina conferences of the Methodist Church declared that slavery “as it exists in these United States” was not a moral evil, but rather, a “civil and domestic institution” over which the church had no authority. Consequently, the southern branches of the evangelical denomination recused themselves from the sociopolitical debate and, instead, contended that their primary responsibility was the amelioration of slavery through the

⁵²⁴ Ibid, 68.

⁵²⁵ Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 156, 224. Blake Touchstone, “Planters and Slave Religion in the Deep South,” in *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South, 1740-1870*, ed. John B. Boles (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1988), 100-109. Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 75-90. Heyrman, Touchstone, and Cornelius mark the expansion of evangelicalism from 1810 forward, although the popularization of methods advanced by figures such as Charles Colcock Jones during the 1830s efforts accelerated after the 30’s. Touchstone argues that the move to Christianize enslaved peoples accompanied a number of broader developments, such as the growth of southern nationalism, development of paternalism as a social ideal, and spread of abolitionism. Likewise, Cornelius cites southern nationalism, and the rhetoric of slavery as fulfilling “God’s plan” as catalysts. Although the work of missionaries was slowed by abolitionist paranoia, by the 1850s, the missionaries began to laud the South as the “redeemer nation” that offered the model of Christian life: a benevolent patriarch, flanked by a dedicated wife and grateful enslaved workers. Notwithstanding the disciplinary structures that kept such a vision intact, southern slaveholders’ rhetoric boasted of the positive, Christian influence wrought upon enslaved people, as a result of bondspeoples’ sustained contact with Whites.

conversion of the enslaved and their owners.⁵²⁶ Most denominations adopted a similar stance. They acknowledged the need to respond to abolitionists' denunciations of enslaved people as the "domestic heathens" of a self-professed Christian nation, but also sought to affirm the South's doctrine of divinely ordained social hierarchy.⁵²⁷

One of the most successful ministers to execute the balance between Christian mandates and southern domestic policy was Charles Colcock Jones, the Presbyterian slaveholder from Liberty County, Georgia who wrote the influential *Catechism of Scripture, Doctrine, and Practice: For Families and Sabbath Schools. Designed also For the Oral Instruction of Colored Persons*, published in multiple editions beginning in 1835. The catechism's question and answer format, which covered non-controversial topics such as the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, enabled the slaveholders and ministers to contour religious instruction to the objectives of the slaveholding society and, in doing so, helped allay the fear of insurrection that fomented in the wake of the Denmark Vesey conspiracy of 1822 and Nat Turner insurrection of 1831.⁵²⁸ Jones worked in tandem with

⁵²⁶ *Southern Christian Advocate*, as quoted in Buckingham, *A Journey Through the Slave States*, 285. See also Lucius C. Matlack, *The History of American Slavery and Methodism, from 1780-1849: and A History of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America; in Two Parts, With an Appendix* (No. 5 Spruce Street: New York, 1849), 81-83.

⁵²⁷ Elizabeth Ferguson to Mary Jones, August 20, 1831, Box 3, Folder 2, Charles Colcock Jones Papers, Collection 154, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University. Regarding the conversion of blacks and the mounting opposition to the enterprise amongst the planter class, Ferguson wrote the following: "I trust there will be some pious capable men who will undertake the work in which he was engaged[.] [I]t has always seemed to me a strange inconsistency in in our country people, to contribute to the societies formed to convert the foreign heathen, and neglect them in our own land when it is our duty, as well as good policy to have the Gospel preached to our slaves. Their characters are in no disgrace worse but I think [illegible] better than the Hindoos and other eastern nations." Her statement reflects the logic frequently used by supporters of Jones's proselytization efforts.

⁵²⁸ The linkage of Denmark Vesey's conspiracy and Nat Turner's insurrection to the increased efforts to proselytize enslaved Southern Blacks is well-documented. Vesey was a free, member of the A.M.E. Church and used the Christian Bible to advocate for the liberation of Blacks and, ultimately, enact his liberation theology through a planned rebellion. Although Vesey's plan was discovered prior to its execution, Nat Turner's insurrection constituted, arguably, the most successful rebellion of enslaved people on U.S. soil. The apocalyptic Christian imagery of Turner's narration of the plot was recorded by Thomas Gray and made *The Confessions of Nat Turner* a widely-read sensation in 1831. According to supporters of the Christian instruction of Blacks, the attempts at self-liberation were the product of improper instruction.

South Carolina Methodist minister William Capers, who began the work of organizing plantation missions over two decades prior to the publication of the catechism. By 1830, South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi hosted the most extensive Christian missions to enslaved peoples.⁵²⁹ Yet the visibility of plantation missions in the Lower South belied the widespread resistance amongst White and enslaved Georgians to the religious regime proposed by Capers and Jones, and missionaries' moderate conversion successes.

Although the number of missionaries increased from 101 to 570 between 1830 and 1850 in the Presbyterian denomination alone, in his 1842 publication *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*, Jones observed that the religious instruction of enslaved adults by approved religious authorities was “not of frequent occurrence” in the slave states.⁵³⁰

Fear of the entitlements engendered by Christian doctrines made many 19th century planters wary of the proselytization practices proposed by Capers and Jones, despite the two's pro-slavery stance. Outspoken South Carolina planter William Whitmarsh Seabrook affirmed the humanity of enslaved people and the project of Christianization, yet expressed reservations regarding the clergy's methods and cautioned against planters' wholesale acceptance of the plans proposed by their respective denominations. In response to the December 1833 report of the Georgia and South

For a discussion of the relationship see, Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 147-149, 163-165. Cornelius, *Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South*, 51. However, others, like South Carolina planter William Whitmarsh Seabrook cited Vesey and Turner, in addition to Toussaint L'Ouverture as evidence of the dangers of Christianity when taught by Blacks and justification for the prohibition of Black preachers in Georgia and South Carolina. According to Seabrook, “Coloured preachers, lecturers, and catechists, have been the instruments of positive evils to society...” Seabrook, “An Essay on the Management of Slaves and Especially on their Religious Instruction Read Before the Agricultural Society of St. John's Colleton,” 20.

⁵²⁹ Cornelius, *Slave Missions and the Black Church in the Antebellum South*, 89.

⁵³⁰ Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Thomas Purse: Savannah, 1842), 117. For the report on the number of missionaries: *Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, Presented May 1851 (The Board of Missions: Philadelphia, 1851).

Carolina Synod of the Presbyterian Church, Seabrook decried the impropriety of Christian verses such as “‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’” and “‘God is no respecter of persons’,” given their uses as “‘the foundation argument on which the emancipationist proposes to erect the superstructure of his schemes.’”⁵³¹ The parallel language of the “emancipationist” and the Synod prompted Seabrook to accuse the denomination of insinuating the immorality of slavery—an accusation which echoed the suspicions of others and likely catalyzed the pro-slavery proclamations of southern Presbyterians during the latter half of the decade. The extent of some slaveholding factions’ mistrust of plantation missions becomes clear in Seabrook’s recommendations: 1.) no clergyman that advocates emancipation or “believes in the illegitimacy of personal servitude” should be allowed to practice ministerial offices, even if a slaveholder, and 2.) pro-slavery, non-slaveholding clergy should be supervised by two or more white slaveholders.⁵³²

Whereas many denominations stipulated either a pro-slavery stance or membership in the planter class as a precondition of missionary activity, few supported measures as extreme as those proposed by Seabrook. His recommendations reflected the widespread paranoia surrounding the infiltration of abolitionists into the ranks of southern society, which stunted the expansion of the missionary movement at its outset. In a letter to his wife dated November 5th, 1835 from Charleston, C.C. Jones named abolitionism as the supreme antagonist in southern public discourse and as the root of the feverish obsession that has “most seriously injured” efforts towards the religious instruction of the enslaved. As a consequence of the paranoia, Jones conjectured that all

⁵³¹ Seabrook, “An Essay on the Management of Slaves...”, 16.

⁵³² Ibid, 26.

efforts to expand instruction beyond the already operational Sabbath Schools would be violently opposed. His conjecture proved correct when his proposal for the establishment of a Society for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes in Charleston was rejected. In response, Jones conceptualized the problem in terms of a struggle between “the Religious” and “the Infidels” and situated the paranoia as a tool deployed by the Infidels, who “pretend to approve religion,” to stem the expansion of Christianity.⁵³³ William Capers expressed a similar sentiment four years earlier when he remarked to Jones that “the Devil was the headman in Columbia.”⁵³⁴ Despite the early setbacks, by the 1850s, the tide turned; slaveholders began to perceive the potential for religious instruction to extend their control beyond the legal and material, and into the spiritual realm. By the time many enslaved heard the Christian gospel, it was already wedded to the doctrines of the slaveholding state.

Creative Constraints: The Culture of Surveillance and Black Christianity in Georgia

Slaveholders’ attempts to develop a more pliant labor force through the inculcation of select Christian ideas failed, in many cases, because their pupils perceived the duplicity of the teachings. Despite the disproportionate scholarly emphasis upon African-American Christianity in the colonial and antebellum South and the approximately 3,397 members of First, Second, and Third African Baptist Church of Savannah, it is estimated that a mere 22% of enslaved people in the U.S. were Christian

⁵³³ C.C. Jones to Mary Jones, Charleston, South Carolina, November 5, 1835, Box 4, Folder 2, Charles Colcock Jones Papers, Collection 154, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

⁵³⁴ Jones reports this in a letter to his wife. C.C. Jones to Mary Jones, Columbia, South Carolina, December 3, 1831, Box 3, Folder 3, Charles Colcock Jones Papers, Collection 154, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

by the start of the Civil War.⁵³⁵ The low percentage of participation can be attributed to a number of factors, including the early resistance to Christianization amongst the planter class, the dearth of predominantly Black churches outside of Savannah and Augusta, restrictions upon Black preachers, and the pervasive indifference surrounding Christian religiosity in Georgia.

Yet, enslaved peoples' rejection of Christianity—or rather Christianity as purveyed by southern masters, mistresses, and missionaries—was neither solely a response to the means deployed to convert them nor a consequence of their limited access to Christian education. Rather, enslaved men and women made conscious choices regarding their spiritual practices, and many *chose* not to join the membership ranks of Georgia churches prior to the end of slavery. Once the enslaved encountered Christianity, conversion was not a foregone conclusion. Even C.C. Jones, Georgia's champion of enslaved Black Christianization, remarked upon the myriad challenges facing the project of proselytization:

He who carries the Gospel to them, encounters depravity entrenched in ignorance, both real and pretended. He discovers deism, skepticism, universalism. He meets all the various perversions of the Gospel, and all the strong objections against the truth of God; objections which he may perhaps have considered peculiar only to the cultivated minds, the ripe scholarship, and profound intelligence of critics and philosophers!

⁵³⁵ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 198. The Savannah churches apparently held 3 services: a prayer meeting, a 10 a.m. service, and a 3 p.m. service on Sundays to accommodate the large membership. The 22% is Gomez's estimate of enslaved Christians. Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks*, 260.

Extremes here meet on the natural and common ground of a darkened understanding and a hardened heart.”⁵³⁶

As Jones and, unquestionably, many other missionaries discovered, enslaved men and women’s objections to Christianity were rooted in theological, cosmological, and philosophical concerns, in addition to linguistic and ritualistic differences. Contrary to the image of enslaved people as passive, even if resistant, recipients of slaveholding Christianity, Jones’s characterization suggests that some bondspeople verbalized their challenges to the religious teachings of Christian missionaries and articulated counter-theologies and cosmologies, rooted in the socioreligious lineage of their West and West Central African foreparents.

Moreover, the objections were not solely the product of interactions with White Christians in the Americas. Though Christianity had made inroads in the Kongo kingdom by the 15th century, the mid-18th century slave trader Nicholas Owen’s observation that Christianity had “made no impression in the least otherwise than in a matter of ridicule [sic] or laughter,” in spite of the number of years of contact between Christianity and the people of Sierra Leone, expressed the depth of some West Africans’ resistance to the foreign system.⁵³⁷ The cosmologies and philosophies that grounded their opposition to the religious encroachment of the European visitors undoubtedly traveled to the Americas and, in part, formed the basis for the failed early attempts at

⁵³⁶ Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*, 315-316.

⁵³⁷ Owen, *Journal of a Slave Dealer*, 71. Regarding the Christianization of certain factions in the Kongo kingdom, see Jason Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, 42-66. Despite missionaries’ successful proselytization of some Kongo elites and peasants, Young declares: “Christianity was, at best, a faith highly mediated by Kongolese notions of spirit and cosmos—so much so that conversion, such as it occurred in the country, ‘rarely involved any fundamental religious change.’” (57) Likewise, historian John Thornton argues that the absence of a strong Christian priesthood among African converts and West Africans’ notions of multiple, continuous revelations—as opposed to the single revelatory experience espoused by Christian missionaries—contributed to the lax adoption of Christian rituals and theologies in Kongo and other regions. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*, 249-250.

Christianization in the Lower South. A century before figures such as Capers and Jones began their plantation missions, Francis Le Jau, a South Carolina Anglican priest, advanced a similar project of proselytization amongst the enslaved and encountered similar challenges. Le Jau tailored his catechism to protect the rights of ownership of planters and delegitimize West and West-Central African religious and ethical systems by requiring the catechumens to disavow the connection between baptism and material liberation, and to renounce cultural practices like polygyny.⁵³⁸ However, two decades of missionary work yielded nominal results. While Le Jau and Anglican missionaries throughout the Anglophone Americas continued to present planter opposition as the main obstacle to the conversion of the enslaved, in 1727, Edmund Gibson, bishop of London cited an oft-overlooked component of their failures: enslaved peoples', particularly adult Africans', unwillingness to relinquish their ancestral religions and pointed disdain of Christianity.⁵³⁹

By the time Georgians began their missionary efforts, many enslaved Africans' and African-Americans' contempt for southern iterations of Christianity had likely mellowed into indifference. As a part of the plantation system of Christianization, some masters and mistresses required their workers to attend Sunday meetings at their churches, where the enslaved frequently either sat in a separate gallery or remained outside, and received a short sermon following the main sermon to the White congregants. Not surprisingly, the sermon for the enslaved generally consisted of a reiteration of the ethical

⁵³⁸ Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African-American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 65-66.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 68. Although Le Jau's parish contained approximately 2,000 enslaved people, between 1708 and 1715, he baptized only 19. According to Frey and Wood, similar numbers were encountered all over the Anglophone Americas.

codes of southern slavery through the vocabularies of Christian scripture. As formerly enslaved woman Leah Garrett surmised: “Dey never said nothin’ but you must be good, don’t steal, don’t talk back to your marsters, don’t run away, don’t do dis, and don’t do dat.”⁵⁴⁰ Even the presence of a Black preacher did not alter the monotonous uniformity of the message to enslaved people, due to the constant specter of White surveillance. In his discussion of church attendance, Lewis Favors humorously recounted that, from the White preacher in the morning, enslaved congregants would hear the message, ““Don’t steal your master’s chickens or his eggs and your backs won’t be whipped,”” and from the Black preacher in the afternoon, “Obey your masters and your mistresses and your backs won’t be whipped!””⁵⁴¹

The compromise brokered between missionaries and the planter class guaranteed the conformity of all religious speech to the racist, caste-based mores of the slaveholding culture. As a result, many enslaved people regarded the southern-branded Christianity espoused in bi-racial churches with a discerning wariness that undoubtedly cultivated a prejudice towards its doctrines. Similar to Garrett and Favors, Johnny Poore recalled the incessant reinforcement of the oppressive status quo in his encounters with Christianity, yet in a departure from the tempered speech of the others, cited the alliance between Christianity and slavery as one of the primary barriers to conversion for many:

⁵⁴⁰ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives, Part II*, 15-16. Similarly, C.G. Parsons remarked upon the monotony of sermons to enslaved people, saying: “I have been intimately acquainted with the religious opportunities of the slaves,—in the constant habit of hearing the sermons which are preached to them. And I solemnly affirm that, during the forty years of my residence and observation in this line, I never heard a single one of these sermons but what was taken up with the obligations and duties of slaves to their masters. Indeed, I never heard a sermon to slaves but what made obedience to masters by the slaves the fundamental and supreme law of religion.” Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery*, 275. Although Parson’s social location as an anti-slavery traveller from the North shaped his perspective, his and Garrett’s characterizations of antebellum sermons corroborate the accounts of other formerly enslaved people.

⁵⁴¹ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives, Part I*, 323.

“‘Washin’ton Church was de name of de meetin’ house whar us Niggers on de Poore plantation went to church wid our white folks. Couldn’t none of us read no Bible and dere warn’t none of de Niggers on our plantation ever converted and so us never had no baptizin’s. De preacher preached to de white folks fust and den when he preached to de Niggers all he ever said was: ‘It’s a sin to steal; don’t steal Marster’s and Mist’ess’ chickens and hogs; ‘and sech lak. How could anybody be converted on dat kind of preachin’? And ‘sides it never helped none to listen to dat sort of preachin’ ‘cause de stealin’ kept goin’ right on evvy night.’”⁵⁴²

The frequent presence of their masters, mistresses, and overseers as the enslaved participated in sanctioned Christian exercises situated “church” as yet another disciplinary space in the eyes of many. In instances where attendance was not mandated, those that chose to attend Sunday meetings endured the culture of surveillance that characterized planter-sanctioned versions of Black Christianity. Similar to Garrett, Favors, and Poore, Alec Bostwick recalled that the absence of a church designated specifically for Blacks required enslaved men and women who desired Sunday attendance at a Christian church to accompany “der white folkses, if day went a tall.” Bostwick continued: “De white folks sot in front, an’ de Niggers sot in de back. All de time dat overseer wuz right dar wid his gun.”⁵⁴³ Clearly, slaveholders’ not-so-subtle attempts to marry the violent, disciplinary structures of the southern caste system to the brand of Christianity doled out to enslaved participants on a weekly basis did not escape the notice of bondspeople. On the contrary, such blatant displays of force within

⁵⁴² Rawick, *Georgia Narratives, Part II*, 131.

⁵⁴³ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives, Part I*, 109-110.

Christian spaces heightened the enslaved's wariness of Christian propagandizing and widened the chasm between Black and White religiosity in their estimations.

Even predominantly Black churches offered little reprieve from surveillance. First African Baptist Church of Savannah, formed under Andrew Bryan in 1788, and Springfield Baptist Church of Augusta, founded by Jesse Peter (Galphin) in 1793, represented two of the earliest examples of the institutionalization of Black Christianity in the Lower South; yet, as predominantly Black churches, their independence was tenuous at best. Both churches were the product of the social disruption that accompanied the years leading up to and immediately following the Revolutionary War, during which some enslaved people sought the protection and autonomy offered by the British. Among the wartime refugees was David George. On the Silver Bluff, South Carolina property of his owner George Galphin, George converted to Christianity through the ministrations of Connecticut preacher Wait Palmer and the formerly enslaved, traveling preacher George Liele.

Formed between 1773 and 1775, the eight-person congregation, known as the Silver Bluff Church, expanded to over thirty under the direction of David George, who assumed the preacher's mantle upon the planters' prohibition of clergy visits at the onset of the war. Upon relocation to the British-occupied Savannah, the congregation reunited with George Liele and baptized others, among them Andrew Bryan and Jesse Peter, who would lead the two most famous Black Christian churches in Georgia. Unlike George and Liele, Bryan and Peter remained enslaved following the war, and it is perhaps such perceived demonstrations of loyalty to the South's domestic institution that enabled the two to establish predominantly Black congregations, housed apart from White

congregations. Both were granted uncommon latitude in their ministerial efforts, due, in no small part, to the support and influence of their respective owners.⁵⁴⁴

Notwithstanding their sanction from prominent Savannah and Augusta citizens and ordination by White Baptist minister Abraham Marshall, Andrew Bryan and Jesse Peter did not operate with impunity. As Margaret Washington Creel so aptly observed: “These churches were closely controlled and carefully watched. They essentially were under receivership of prominent white Baptists such as Abraham Marshall. While the ‘regulating touches’ of white authority reportedly gave the black churches ‘standing and influence,’ this scrutiny probably gave them little autonomy.”⁵⁴⁵ Indeed, in a November 28, 1842 entry, A.T. Havens described the “well draped and orderly” appearance of one of Savannah’s “coloured” churches, and innocently remarked upon the presence of a “white gentlemen” who preached in the pastor’s stead.⁵⁴⁶ In the account, Havens not only unwittingly identified the culture of surveillance that obligated the presence of White witnesses in Black churches, but also disclosed the culture of White spectatorship that formed around Black gatherings.

Whether the spectatorship emanated from a genuine attraction to enslaved people’s styles of worship or a recreational fascination with exoticized religions is difficult to tell; most likely, a range of considerations factored into some Whites’ participation in predominantly Black gatherings. Northern and foreign travellers’ frequent descriptions of Black worship services in their accounts pointed towards a self-

⁵⁴⁴ Walter B. Henderson, *The Sliver Bluff Church: A History of Negro Baptist Churches in America* (Washington D.C.: Press of R.L. Pendleton, 1910), accessed March 4, 2014, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/brooks/brooks.html>. Creel, *A Peculiar People*, 133-135.

⁵⁴⁵ Creel, *A Peculiar People*, 135.

⁵⁴⁶ A.T. Havens, “November 28, 1842 entry,” A.T. Havens Journal of a Trip to Georgia and Florida, 1842-1843, Manuscript 1337, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia.

perpetuating cycle of interest, born of curiosity regarding African-descended Christian religiosity and reports of the peculiarities of Black religious practice. While traveling in Savannah and the Sea Islands in 1793, Massachusetts woman Mrs. Smith regularly attended the Black worship service on Sunday mornings, presumably at First African Baptist Church of Savannah, and admitted that the “performances” exceeded her expectations: [“T]he Preacher a very good looking Man deep[?] in black[,] his Wool rather gray but curled up very handsome[,] his delivery was good and quite the Orator; when he Prayed the Negros in general kneel[,] some prostrate upon their faces[,] they Sung finely and their [sic] was great order and decorum.”⁵⁴⁷ The juxtaposition of Black Christians’ punctilious observance of the Sabbath against the laxity of Savannah’s White citizenry added to the reputation of Black congregations, such as First African Baptist, and firmly established the spectator culture that compelled A.T. Havens’s visit to the very same church five decades later.⁵⁴⁸ Smith again commented upon the propriety of the Black Savannah congregation as they baptized converts in the river, and noted the “numbers of White people” that assembled to see them.⁵⁴⁹ Clearly, the culture of spectatorship extended beyond the northern and foreign traveler community.

Prominent, evangelical citizens, such as Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas of Augusta, also recorded attendance at Black Christian gatherings, where Black preachers, such as Peter Johnson and Sam Drayton, regularly exhorted to Black and White crowds. In the absence of a space designated specifically for Black Christian worship, some Black

⁵⁴⁷ Mrs. Smith Journal, 1793 (unpublished), Newburyport, Mass., 22. Duke University Rubenstein Library, Duke University.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid, 10. In one of her earliest entries on Black Christianity in Savannah, Smith noted with some incredulity that, as the members of the Black congregation assembled for Sunday worship exercises, their White counterparts engaged in shooting, riding, and other recreational activities.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid, 13.

congregations formed around religious leaders, who exhorted publicly and covertly in cabins, brush arbors, and shared church spaces. In the latter case, the premium upon meeting space in some areas required Black and Whites, Methodist and Baptist congregations to share an edifice on Sundays and meet either at different times on the same day or on alternating Sundays.⁵⁵⁰ Black congregations housed by White churches generally assembled in the afternoon following the main service, and although the chronological proximity of the services probably accounted for the presence of some onlookers, curiosity and supervision cannot wholly account for the White presence in predominantly Black congregations.⁵⁵¹ Congregations such as Drayton's became so popular among Blacks and Whites during the antebellum period that benches had to be removed from the White church in order to accommodate the crowds.⁵⁵² By the end of the Civil War, Drayton commanded a following large enough to join the African Methodist Episcopal church as an independent congregation.⁵⁵³ Like Bryan and Peter, Drayton was ordained by the White church, and renowned by White Christians, such as Ella Thomas, as a "polished" and "talented" preacher.⁵⁵⁴ Thomas's and other White

⁵⁵⁰ Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr and Gertrude T. Despeaux (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 126. In the May 2, 1855 entry, Clanton also offers insight into the sharing of meeting space, although where the congregation met is unclear.

⁵⁵¹ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part III*, 72. Thomas and Havens also report attending the Black gatherings in the afternoon. If in Savannah, Havens is possibly attending an afternoon service at First African Baptist Church of Savannah. Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 126. A.T. Havens, "November 28, 1842 entry," University of Georgia.

⁵⁵² Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 126. Thomas refers to the removal of benches from the white church to accommodate the crowd, which suggests that the predominantly Black congregation is either outside or in the basement of the church. Both locations are plausible, given the sharing practices in other areas.

⁵⁵³ Wesley John Gaines, *African Methodism in the South; or Twenty-Five Years of Freedom* (Atlanta: Franklin Publishing House, 1890), 9, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/gaineswj/gaines.html>. William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 86.

⁵⁵⁴ Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 126. Although she remarks that Black exhortations "appeal to the heart more than the understanding," Thomas exudes a genuine respect for Drayton and the Black service. Her and her husband's hurry to attend the meeting and subsequent decision to excuse themselves in order not to mar the

citizen's unmistakable respect for Drayton as a religious leader created space for Black gatherings, albeit surveilled, and demonstrated the practical benefits of Christian conversion. Even in the midst of the culture of surveillance, religious gatherings offered enslaved peoples the space to enact and develop autonomous, indigenous value systems that countered those espoused by the hegemonic voices of their religious context. Yet, in accordance with the sacral rubrics of their ancestors, Christianity also afforded the enslaved a much more significant sacred commodity: power.

Harnessing the Unseen, Creating the Seen: Cosmologies of Power in the Enslaved's Religious Cultures

Among the Mende, *Ngewo*, the Supreme Power and Creator, existed not as an anthropomorphic personality, but rather as the source from whence all sacred objects and processes procured their power.⁵⁵⁵ Humans accessed, harnessed, and actualized the power of *Ngewo* (*kpaya*) through *halei*. As the human-derivative of *kpaya*, *halei* imbued objects, spaces, medicines, and other aspects of the human, sense world with *Ngewo*'s power, and along with the intermediary ancestral and non-ancestral spirits, afforded humans access to and a degree of control over the unseen.⁵⁵⁶

Displaced from the localities of their ancestral spirits—their most powerful allies in the unseen realm—enslaved Mende and their descendants likely conceptualized Christianity, and the personal relationship with a deity that it preached, as a means to

“solemn” ritual of the Lord’s Supper suggests the myriad of ways Whites participated in Black Christian exercises. It is difficult to tell whether Thomas’s orientation towards Black meetings bespoke the sentiments of her social counterparts. Reared in the evangelical Protestantism of the North, she likely articulated a more radical evangelicalism than other southerners.

⁵⁵⁵ Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 49-50.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

power. Whether explicitly stated or implied in their hermeneutic, discourses on power coursed through enslaved people's Christian narrations. Sea Islander Thomas Smith attributed the transformation of Moses' staff into a snake in the Exodus narrative to a "magic power" that originated in Africa and persisted amongst the descendants of Africans in Georgia: "Dat happen in Africa duh Bible say. Ain dat show dat Africa wuz a lan uh magic powuh since duh beginning uh histry? Well den duh descendents ub Africans hab duh same gif tuh do unnatchul tin."⁵⁵⁷ In his reference to "unnatchul tin," Smith denoted human-enacted phenomena, such as Africans' rumored ability to fly, derived from a mystical source and distantly connected, in this case, to the Christian God. The attribution of extraordinary acts perpetrated by humans in the Christian Bible and during the slave period to the same power extended the theological boundaries of the Western European Protestantism espoused by masters, mistresses, missionaries, and others and theorized Christian power as *halei*.

The moral neutrality of *halei*—that is, the potential for *halei* to be deployed for either beneficent or nefarious ends—offered a cosmological framework through which to understand the contradictions of White Christianity and the various demonstrations of mystical force within the enslaved community. It is not unlikely that some of the earliest captives attributed Europeans' ability to capture and enslave Africans to the mystical power of Western European religion. As Michael A. Gomez has discussed, the color red, particularly in the form of red flannel, figured prominently in enslaved people's collective memories of capture and transport to the Americas, and symbolically linked

⁵⁵⁷ Georgia Writer's Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 28.

capture to trickery and unseen forces.⁵⁵⁸ By what mechanism red flannel assumed this symbolic significance is difficult to pinpoint. Similar to the association of red with death in Kongo color symbolism, the Mende regard red as a denotation of danger and trouble.⁵⁵⁹ Enslaved Georgians' use of red flannel as a constituent of bundles and talismans aimed to harm pointed towards its ritual significance in their communities, and its prominence in capture stories suggested their perception of the operation of vicious, unseen powers in Europeans' successes.⁵⁶⁰ In short, the red flannel was *halei*— a mystical power that could either be deployed by them or against them.

The understanding of *halei* as a morally neutral, yet personal agent also offers an explanation for the prominence of the devil in the cosmological and causal narratives of enslaved cultures. To be sure, the character demonstrated features of the Trickster archetype, frequently linked to the Yoruba deity of the crossroads Esu, and most likely assumed a variety of features in accordance with the ethnic lineage of the enslaved community.⁵⁶¹ However, the concentration of the detrimental and deceptive into one spirit figure in southern Black Christian parlance suggests that, over time, the diverse manifestations of destructive mystical power funneled into the spirit personality of “the Devil.”

⁵⁵⁸ Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 199-209. Paul Smith's story, presented in chapter one, offers a good example of the presence of the red motif in Georgia narratives.

⁵⁵⁹ For Mende symbolism, see Boone, *Radiance from the Waters*, 236. Regarding Kongo color symbolism, see Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 205-206. Gomez cites the work of Anita Jacobson Widding, *Red-White-Black as a Mode of Thought: A Study of Triadic Classification by Colours in the Ritual Symbolism and Cognitive Thought of the Peoples of the Congo* (Uppsala, 1979), 157-174.

⁵⁶⁰ For an instance of the use of red flannel in Georgia, see Rawick, *Georgia Narratives, Part IV*, 260.

⁵⁶¹ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 18-20. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, 168. Stewart discusses Esu-Elegba and the “African sign of the cross” as they relate to Kumina and Myal in Jamaica. Her focus on Africana religions in the Anglophone Americas makes her discussion particularly relevant to an analysis of the U.S. context.

The intersection of *halei* as dangerous mystical power, personal agent, and power object in enslaved Christianity was most evident in enslaved men and women's incorporation of the Devil into harming protocols. In a late 19th-century demonstration of ritualized harming power, one practitioner described the composition of a harming bundle, as well as the “ceremony” and appeal to “the devil to cause this to have the desired effect”⁵⁶² that accompanied the bundle's planting. As in Mende culture, the efficacy of the needles, hairs, roots, and other components of the bundle were not wholly ascribed to the properties of the components, but also to the animating power that rendered mundane objects *hale nyamui*, or *halei* wielded for “anti-social” ends.⁵⁶³ In the religious cultures of the Black Lower South, the Devil made objects *hale nyamui*. Or, more accurately, enslaved people renamed the animating power of anti-social ritual objects the Devil, in accordance with the Christian vocabularies of the southern context. While some people ritualized the Devil's power, others identified the Devil as the spirit cause of physiological distress. One woman's treatment for her illness entailed the removal of live reptiles from her body and a bath of mullein and moss, following which the doctor discarded the bath water towards the sunset with a repetition of the lines “As the sun sets in the West so should the works of the Devil end in judgment.”⁵⁶⁴ The woman made a full and rapid recovery.

Accounts of the invocation and implication of the Devil in harming and healing practices appear more frequently in the post-Reconstruction period and, perhaps, reflect

⁵⁶² A.M. Bacon, “Folk-lore and Ethnology: Conjuring and Conjure Doctors,” *Southern Workman*, 24, No. 11 (November 1895) and 24, No. 12 (December 1895) in *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals*, Published for the American Folklore Society (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 287.

⁵⁶³ Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 123-124. *Ndilei* is the term most often associated with *hale nyamui* and more closely approximates the bundles described in the harming cultures of U.S. America. For the sake of clarity, I have used the more general term to describe the bundles and connect them to the concept of *halei*.

⁵⁶⁴ Bacon, “Folk-lore and Ethnology:” 290.

the proliferation of Christianity within formerly enslaved communities that resulted from the influx in the number of predominantly Black churches during the period. However, the identification of certain healing and harming practices, termed “voodoo”, with the Devil by some enslaved Christians during enslavement is evident in Martha Colquitt’s description of her mother’s and grandmother’s teachings on the subject: “‘Us all de time heard folkses talkin’ ‘bout voodoo, but my grandma wuz powerful ‘ligious, and her and ma told us chillun voodoo wuz a no ‘count doin’ of de devil, and Christians wuz to be happy in de Lord, and let voodoo and de devil alone.’”⁵⁶⁵ As evidenced by the ascription of practices termed “voodoo” to the powers of the Christian devil, some enslaved Christians adopted the same stance towards southern iterations of West and West-Central African practices as their Western European counterparts. No doubt, the acceptance of such convictions distinguished the brand of Christianity practiced by some enslaved Blacks and condoned by White missionaries like C.C. Jones, from the so-called distortions witnessed by many commentators.

Nevertheless, enslaved people’s widespread participation in healing and harming religious cultures suggests that the majority did not share the opinion of Colquitt’s mother and grandmother. On the contrary, the marriage of Christian lexicons and West and West-Central African cosmologies produced a strand of Christianity unique to enslaved and formerly enslaved peoples. The incorporation of Christian symbols into West and West Central African cosmological structures intensified Christianity’s power potentiality. As Cecile Fromont and other scholars of pre-colonial Kongo Christianity have noted, the cross was a “space of correlation” in which the Kongo concept of *nkisi*, or a material object animated by mystical power, and Christian notions of consecration

⁵⁶⁵ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 245.

merged.⁵⁶⁶ The merger expanded the ritual purview of Kongo religion and Christianity: “A Kongo *nkisi* became a Christian sign and a Christian cross, a Kongo power object.”⁵⁶⁷

Yet the resignification of Christian symbols did not cease with the transport of captives to the Americas. Cross-shaped ground symbols appeared throughout the African American diaspora and reflected the reinterpretation of Christian and West and West Central African concepts through symbology.⁵⁶⁸ Coastal Georgia residents Sarah and Ben Washington explained the ominous meanings of a ground cross in the lowcountry: “‘Ef yuh ebuh see a cross mahk in duh road, yuh nebuh walk obuh it. Das real magid. Yuh hab tuh go round it. It’s put deah by a enemy an ef yuh walks cross it, duh ebil spell will cause yuh hahm. Duh cross is a magic sign an hab tuh do wid duh spirits.’”⁵⁶⁹ As evidenced by the Washingtons’ explanation of the ground cross, agents of the unseen world—and not theological ideas—imbued Christian symbols with the mystical power that rendered them efficacious. Although the Washingtons did not elaborate upon the nature of the spirits, a similar correlation between ground drawings and the invocation of spirits appears in Brazilian Macumba, where priests sing and mark points reminiscent of Kongo customs.⁵⁷⁰ Coastal Georgians’ association of the cross with harming practices and spirits implied that, as in the case of Brazilian Africana religions, Christian theology did not supplant West and West Central African symbology in the Lower South. Rather, the Christian cross became a “power object” within African-American religious cultures.

⁵⁶⁶ Cecile Fromont, “Under the Sign of the Cross in the Kingdom of Kongo: Religious Conversion and Visual Correlation in early Modern Central Africa,” *RES Anthropology and Aesthetics* 59-60, (2011): 112.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁸ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 108-115. Thompson discusses the prevalence of “mystic ground signs” either portraying or resembling a cross in Afro-Cuban, -Brazilian, and -Trinidadian religious traditions.

⁵⁶⁹ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 135.

⁵⁷⁰ Thompson, 113.

The prevalence of Christian symbols and lexicons in enslaved Blacks' religious cultures was not indicative of Christian theological dominance, however. On the contrary, enslaved peoples' interpretation of Christian symbols and resignification of Christian vocabularies using West and West Central African cosmological frameworks yielded distinctive understandings of the source and nature of the Christian cross's animating power. As religious studies scholar Dianne M. Stewart has pointed out, in contrast to Christian theology's alliance of the cross with Jesus's crucifixion for human salvation, the Kongo *yowa* cross does not symbolize death, but rather, "counteracts death by mediating extended life, connection, and metaphysical continuity across the visible-invisible world domains."⁵⁷¹ Indeed, as a visual representation of Kongo cosmology, the *yowa* cross represents the human being as a "living-dying-living-being" and the human's life as a process of continuous transformation.⁵⁷²

While the Christian notion of everlasting life approximated the Kongo concept of continuous incarnation, the fluidity between the sense and non-sense worlds, embodied and disembodied spirits, in Kongo and other West and West Central African modes of thought diverged from the spirit/flesh dualism characteristic of Western Christian theologies and resulted in intensely incarnational religious orientations amongst the enslaved.⁵⁷³ In agreement with Stewart, Africana religions in the Americas prioritized spirit, or pneumatology, over Christ-centered theologies, or Christology, in their deployment of the language and symbols of Christianity. In many cases, enslaved people

⁵⁷¹ Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, 160. In her analysis, Stewart incorporates Robert Farris Thompson's discussion of the relationship between the Kongo *yowa* cross and Christian theology. Thompson defines *yowa* as the "Kongo sign of cosmos and the continuity of human life." Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 108-109.

⁵⁷² Fu-Kiau, *Tying the Spiritual Knot*, 35.

⁵⁷³ Stewart contends that the incarnational emphasis functions as the "theological strainer...through which a majority of enslaved Africans filtered Christian symbols and religious ideas." Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, 160.

transposed the qualities of ancestral and other foreign spirits and deities into the figures of the Christian pantheon. C.C. Jones remarked upon the tendency of “Mohammedan Africans” to equate God and *Allah*, Jesus and Muhammad, in their explanations of Christianity and to explain the variant nomenclature with the notion that “the religion is the same, but different countries have different *names*.”⁵⁷⁴

More commonly, “the spirit” or “the Lord” named the mystical power that animated and authorized human manifestations of extraordinary power. Like so many imported and country-born Africans in the Americas, Uncle Tim, an Africa-born enslaved man who labored in South Carolina and Louisiana, skillfully reconciled the ritual performances of his ancestral homeland with the Christian lexicon of his context. As a part of a ritual intended to stem a master’s poor treatment of a woman and her brother, Uncle Tim instructed the pair to repeat the words ““Malumbia, Malumbia, peace I want, and peace I must have, in the name of the Lord”” as they planted a ritual bag.⁵⁷⁵ When the woman attributed her reprieve from a whipping to her prayers to “Daniel’s God,” and not to her adherence to Uncle Tim’s ritual instructions, the elderly man encouraged her to keep on praying, saying enthusiastically ““Daniel’s God is a great God. He will hear his children when they cry.””⁵⁷⁶ It is evident that Uncle Tim affirmed the divine power and ritual performance that rendered the woman’s prayers effective. But, whether Uncle Tim understood the “Lord” of his ritual and “Daniel’s God” as the same power is unclear. Although many enslaved people’s first introduction to the English term “God” as the linguistic referent to a mystical, in some cases supreme, power occurred in

⁵⁷⁴ Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes. In the United States*, 125.

⁵⁷⁵ Albert, *The House of Bondage*, 94-96.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 99.

their encounters with Christianity, the term assumed nuanced and expanded meanings as it interacted with West and West Central African cosmological concepts.

Contrary to the Trinitarianism and Christocentrism of the Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, and Baptist doctrines that swirled about them, for many of the enslaved, “God” was the principal power of the spirit world that authorized manifestations of power in the sense world—hence their seamless integration of ancestral spiritual protocols and the Christian lexicon. In an explanation of his psychic abilities, lowcountry root doctor James Washington attributed “duh powuh tuh see tings” without the aid of cards and other instruments to “Duh spirit” that “show [him] eberyting,” and added: “I got dis gif frum Gawd.”⁵⁷⁷ While Washington’s use of the terms “spirit” and “God” could signal a semantic slippage, the description of Washington’s residence cautions against the easy correlation of “Gawd,” named as the source of the Washington’s gift, and “Duh spirit,” identified as the animating power of his everyday practice. Washington’s residence housed a “‘spirit picture’ showing the head of one of the creatures of the “‘shad duh worl,’”—a detail which aroused the curiosity of the researcher interviewing Washington, perhaps because it pointed towards spiritual entities that transcended the Christian pantheon. It is possible that, for Washington and other enslaved people in the Lower South, “Gawd” constituted the source of human manifestations of creative power, while “Duh spirit” encapsulated the range of spirits that interacted with the sense world.

The Mende acknowledged various classes of spirits, including formerly embodied, ancestral spirits, collectively called *ngafanga*, and non-ancestral, nature spirits, broadly

⁵⁷⁷ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 39.

termed *jinanga*.⁵⁷⁸ As the disembodied spirits most closely aligned with the embodied world, *ngafanga* constituted humans' most powerful spirit allies. Yet as intermediaries between *Ngewo* and embodied life, both classes of spirits functioned as means to access the power (*kpaya*) of *Ngewo*. In short, *Ngewo* was the power source, but the immediate, day-to-day distribution of power was meted out by intermediary spirits. These intermediaries facilitated humans' access to *Ngewo*'s power, and as facilitators, functioned as power sources themselves. The invocation of ancestors (*ngafanga*) and other spirits for human demonstrations of mystical power (*halei*) acknowledged *Ngewo*'s endowment of the ancestors with the power to exert a direct effect upon the sense world.⁵⁷⁹ Contrary to the presumptions of Western European monotheism, invoking *ngafanga* for *halei* was not a negation of *Ngewo*'s power, but rather an affirmation of the ancestors' empowerment with *kpaya*—the creative power of *Ngewo*.

No doubt, the Mende and other West and West Central African people's similar understandings of the relationship between the supreme deity and other spirits accompanied captives to Georgia shores and structured the enslaved's concepts of mystical power. As evidenced by Washington's explanation of his psychic abilities, it should not be assumed that enslaved and formerly enslaved peoples' recurrent references to God and the spirit signaled their adoption of Christian power cosmologies or alluded to the Christian pantheon at all. His conclusion of his discussion of God and the spirit, with a distinction between "magic wut gahd yuh frum hahm" and "ebil magic wut kin put yuh

⁵⁷⁸ It should be understood that each spirit category (*ngafanga* and *jinanga*) encompasses a number of sub-categories, thereby further representing the complexity of Mende understandings of the disembodied spirit world. I exclude other classes of spirits, such as the anomalous human in my discussion here because of my focus on the disembodied. I use the term "disembodied" to signal spirits that are not enfolded in a human form. *Jinanga* can have humanoid features, yet are understood as definitively non-human. Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 59-72, 74-76, 86-87.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 108-109. This power to act directly and execute a result is how Gittins defines *kpaya*, since according to him, the Mende acknowledge *Ngewo* as the source of all such power.

down sick aw eben kill you,” points towards an understanding of the complex relationship between the supreme deity, disembodied spirits, and humans’ social and anti-social uses of power—an understanding that closely approximates the Mende concept of *halei*.⁵⁸⁰ Enslaved peoples’ widespread acknowledgment of humans’ ability to wield mystical power, often termed “magic,” intimated their entrenchment in the cosmological assumptions of their ancestral homelands, even in instances where the Christian pantheon was directly invoked. The same late 19th-century conjure doctor that named “the Devil” as the author of one woman’s illness, also healed another “in the name of the Lord” by drawing blood from her injured foot, mixing the blood with a cream, and uttering ““God bless her.”” Not surprisingly, the woman’s foot injury was the result of her being “conjured” by a rejected, older suitor during church one night.⁵⁸¹

The influx of Christian conversions following the Civil War offers an explanation for the pronounced fusion of Christian concepts and West and West Central African cosmologies in post-slavery accounts. Yet, the similarity between the above doctor’s ritual and Uncle Tim’s suggests that some enslaved people integrated elements of Christianity into their ancestral practices prior to widespread conversion. Certainly, their understandings of power—transmitted over generations through explicitly and tacitly communicated norms—shaped which elements of Christianity and other religions they adopted and how they incorporated the elements into their religious systems. The Mende’s and other displaced African peoples’ understanding of spirits, and not the supreme deity, as the custodians of mundane, human concerns might account for the pneumatic emphasis witnessed in the religiosity of many of the enslaved. Like their

⁵⁸⁰ Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 39.

⁵⁸¹ Bacon, “Folk-lore and Ethnology:” 290.

continental ancestors, enslaved Georgians understood access to efficacious mystical power as central to their religious cultures and, true to the pragmatic edge indigenous to many West and West Central African religions, they wielded mystical power for practical ends.

Of the religions encountered in North America, Christianity undoubtedly promised the most potential for power. Despite the tepid religiosity of many southern, self-professed Christians, the discursive coupling of Christianity and emergent American identity situated the religion as a barometer of cultural competency in the colonies and, later, the new nation. Of the competencies potentially acquired through engagement with Christianity, none offered the enslaved more power or incited more opposition from southern Whites than literacy. Although many southerners turned a blind eye towards the occasional instruction of valued servants in reading, writing, and bookkeeping, on the whole, the steep penalties and pervasive hostility surrounding the educational instruction of enslaved people ensured a largely illiterate enslaved population.⁵⁸² Opponents of C.C. Jones's and William Capers's plans for the religious instruction of the enslaved fortified their arguments with the threat of a literate enslaved population—educated through biblical instruction—and fear of literate Blacks motivated many of the restrictions upon visiting Black religious exhorters in the wake of the Nat Turner insurrection. Indeed, the success of C.C. Jones's catechism was primarily due to its oral format. Consequently, the enslaved persons who were literate became so either through channels sanctioned by their White owners or covert internal networks.

⁵⁸² Fanny Kemble recorded heavy fines for the first and second offense, and imprisonment for the third as the penalties for slave owners. For the enslaved, the penalty was often the loss of a limb. Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*, 84.

When operating amongst a tolerant White constituency, Black exhorters could acquire skills and resources beyond their social stations. Preachers such as Samuel Drayton achieved a measured autonomy, controlled mobility, and most significantly, functional literacy that worked in tandem with their oratorical abilities to elevate them to positions of prominence within enslaved and free Black communities. It is clear that persons ordained by White clergy, such as Andrew Bryan and Samuel Drayton, benefited from lenient owners and magnanimous benefactors, however, it is less clear how non-ordained exhorters, itinerant Black preachers called “chair backers,” and prayer meeting leaders achieved literacy. London, the head cooper on the Butler plantation, provided the meeting space for this fellow servants, read them prayers and the Bible, and exhorted to his comrades on all but one Sunday of the month, when the enslaved were permitted to attend the White-pastored, predominantly Black Baptist church in nearby Darien.⁵⁸³ However, when questioned by his mistress regarding the acquisition of his reading capabilities, London remained reticent. Kemble observed the persistence of this reticence amongst London and others, despite their repeated appeals to her for prayerbooks and Bibles. In response to her rejoinder ““But you can’t read, can you?,”” she “generally received for answer a reluctant acknowledgement of ignorance,” the credibility of which she readily doubted.⁵⁸⁴ While it is difficult to be sure of the source of London and others’ reading instruction, it is possible that literate persons used Christian materials to introduce others to the fundamentals of reading; hence the Butler servants’ frequent appeals for Bibles and prayerbooks.

⁵⁸³ Ibid, 30.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid, 70, 84.

In such instances, religious communities formed around literate persons, due to the premium placed upon literacy in the slave quarters. Like London, Aunt Vic read the Bible to the workers on the Thomas plantation and during Sunday school at Landon Chapel, where some of the enslaved attended church.⁵⁸⁵ Although her “Aunt” title pointed to her seniority within the community, her literacy undoubtedly contributed to her elevated position of authority in religious spaces. Most of the enslaved community understood the ways their illiteracy safeguarded the institution of slavery, therefore in the eyes of many, literacy was power.

Beyond the practical benefits, the West and West-Central African foreparents of American captives bequeathed to their descendants a correlation between literacy and mystical power. In the Windward Coast region from which a number of Georgia captives hailed, Mande-speaking *morimen*, or Muslim diviners, achieved prominence as ritual specialists, as a result of their Arabic literacy.⁵⁸⁶ The correlation of written text with mystical power persisted in the Americas, as evidenced by enslaved peoples’ incorporation of biblical and Quranic verses into amulets and other power objects. For this reason, some of the enslaved population might have associated the ability to read and/or write with spirit forces, particularly in instances where the source of the skill was unknown. For some ritual specialists, literacy-of-unknown-origin became a part of their mystical autobiographical narrative. When asked how she learned to read, formerly enslaved woman Mary Gladly replied simply, ““The Lord revealed it to me.””⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸⁵ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 180.

⁵⁸⁶ Caroline H. Bledsoe and Kenneth M. Robey, “Arabic Literacy and Secrecy among the Mende of Sierra Leone,” *Man*, New Series, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Jun 1986): 209-210. Non-Muslim natives began to regard written Arabic texts as ritually efficacious and the texts became constituents of religious power objects.

⁵⁸⁷ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 18. Gladly claimed to have never received any formal instruction.

At the most basic level, enslaved communities created, adapted, and extended their repertoires of communal narratives, songs, and speech through participation in the oral and written cultures of Christianity. Even if unable to read or write, they acquired a literacy in the moral and ethical languages of southern Christians, which enabled them to narrate their conditions and frame their religiosity in opposition to the South's domestic doctrines. In an inversion of southern Whites' narratives regarding the burdens of executing their Christian duty towards enslaved people, Christian enslaved men and women depicted themselves as the long-suffering servants, who embodied the Christian ethos and modeled Christianity for their White counterparts. This narrative of Christian suffering appeared poignantly on the commemorative tombstone for First African Church of Savannah's Andrew Bryan, which was erected by parishioners of the church in 1821. True to the martyrdom tradition of Christianity, the stone spoke of Bryan's imprisonment and beating for his efforts and of his declaration of his willingness "to suffer death for the cause of CHRIST." The assertion that Bryan had "done more good among the poor slaves than all the learned Doctors in America," not only alluded to the efforts of White missionaries, but hinted at Black Christians' perceptions of the efficacy of such efforts.⁵⁸⁸

Although members of First African of Savannah were likely more well-versed in Christian theology than most of their enslaved counterparts, their use of the biblical narrative demonstrated the rhetorical potential of Christian lexicons. Christianity offered the enslaved an expanded cultural repertoire, which they deployed to critique the religiosity espoused by their alleged religious instructors and to translate their sociopolitical and psychic concerns for the prejudiced White ear. In this way, engagement of the religion afforded free and enslaved Blacks a cultural and linguistic

⁵⁸⁸ Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, 408.

literacy that endangered southern myths of Black heathenism and infantilism. As a dislocated and disenfranchised people ensconced within West and West Central African power cosmologies, the enslaved would not have delineated between the mystical power afforded by Christianity and the practical capability to exact results in the sense world. Much to the chagrin of Christian missionaries, for Africans and their descendants, the spiritual promise of liberation did not supplant expectations for the sense world. On the contrary, enslaved religions hosted concepts of power that were simultaneously mystical and practical, lineal and contextual, disembodied and sense-based.

Un-surveilled Spaces and Re/membered Practices: Movement, Sound, and Sociality in the Brush Arbor

Despite Christianity's appeal as a means to literacy, many enslaved people never personally engaged the Bible during slavery. Uncle Willis, a centenarian from Burke County, recalled: "Not many culled peoples know de Bible in slavery time," instead they "had dances, and prayers, and sing."⁵⁸⁹ Indeed, contrary to the primacy of exhortation in churches, prayer, sound, and movement took center stage during the meetings in the cabins and brush arbors. Perceptions of the positive benefits of Christianity in the development of more faithful and industrious workers compelled some planters to encourage, or at the very least tolerate, prayer meetings and similar religious gatherings on Sundays and other days throughout the week, irrespective of the presence of a White

⁵⁸⁹ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 169. Georgia Baker of Taliaferro County described a similar orientation to the Bible: "Niggers was more skeered of newspapers den dey is of snakes now, and us never knowed what a Bible was dem days." Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 45.

chaperone.⁵⁹⁰ On Tuesdays, Fridays, and/or Sundays, women, men, and some children traveled between cabins and plantations holding prayer meetings, where they sang, danced, and exhorted, oftentimes with no surveillance.⁵⁹¹ Whereas church was generally presided over either by a White minister or a closely monitored Black preacher, the prayer meeting was almost uniformly the domain of religious leaders ordained by the enslaved community. Traveling Black preachers, called “chairbackers,” along with communal elders like Aunt Vic and Aunt Jane frequently led the meetings as hymn leaders, exhorters, and liturgists, whose ritual repertoires incorporated and transcended the performances witnessed in White Christian churches. Yet, even in closely monitored Christian gatherings, the enslaved operated within norms of sociality indigenous to the community and imprinted their foreignness upon the colonial and antebellum religious context. At the most basic level, religious meetings afforded the enslaved the opportunity for mobility, a site for the development of meaningful sociality, and space to exercise varying degrees of autonomy. In the surveilled and un-surveilled spaces of religious gatherings, flashes of cultural autonomy united with West and West Central African ritual texts to produce a re/membered, North American brand of Africana religion.

Due to the culture of surveillance that pervaded enslaved existence, social spaces—whether supervised or autonomous—were necessary for the construction of a communal infrastructure independent of the systems and mores imposed by the slaveholding classes. As a part of the culture of surveillance, as early as 1757, planters organized a patrol system that policed Black movement from 9 p.m. to dawn and authorized White male citizens between the ages of sixteen and forty-five to enter and

⁵⁹⁰ Kemble discusses the tolerance of prayer meetings and planters’ reason for it. See Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 38-39.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid, 132. Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 57.

search Black houses, businesses, and gatherings with little to no provocation. By 1845, the patrollers were also legally able to inflict up to twenty lashes upon a person found to be in violation of a curfew—a power that earned the “paddy rollers” a reputation as menacing, disciplinary forces in the narratives of formerly enslaved people.⁵⁹² Yet, the patrollers were only one unit of a much larger system aimed at the psychological, social, and physical circumscription of Blacks in Georgia. Enslaved and free Blacks were prohibited from playing instruments recreationally after sunset without the permission of the mayor or two members of the Council, absenting themselves from their place of residence after curfew without a pass, and having lights on in their homes after 10 p.m.⁵⁹³

Although some enslaved people, most routinely women, were allowed to work late into the night and early morning completing third-shift tasks, such as spinning thread, on the whole, the prohibitions were designed to control Black movement and space. The blanket policies weighed heavily upon free and enslaved alike, yet for enslaved Blacks, the extent of the psychosocial confinement was far more acute. With the exception of personal servants, hired out workers, and some urban laborers, few classes of enslaved workers ever left the geographical confines of the businesses, farms, and plantations where they lived and worked. William Pease described the deprivation of mobility as the worst aspect of his experience of enslavement: “It was worse imprisonment than the

⁵⁹² Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 321. These codes were established by ordinances in Augusta and are representative of the types of measures deployed by Whites in the city to regulate the activity of free and enslaved Blacks. As historians Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry point out in their examination of similar codes in Savannah, some ordinances were passed in response to specific concerns and either later repealed or unenforced in practice. Moreover, disciplinary measures varied between farm/plantation and urban settings. Nevertheless, such regulations reflect the tug and pull between Blacks and Whites for autonomy and control, respectively. Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry, “Slave Life in Savannah: Geographies of Autonomy and Control,” in *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah*, Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry, eds. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2014), 95-98.

⁵⁹³ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 325.

penitentiary. In the penitentiary, a man expects to get out in a few months, but on the plantations they do not expect to get out until they are dead.”⁵⁹⁴

Pease’s description of slavery’s confinement was not, however, limited to enslaved men. On the contrary, the practice of marrying across planters’ plat lines expanded the geo-social range of enslaved men with ““abroad wives” and powered a culture of visitation around courtship that did not extend to enslaved women. Although some planters, like Pease’s, allowed neither men nor women to leave the work space and forbade abroad marriages, many others issued visitation passes during Christmas and select nights of the week to authorize movement between spaces. While Christmas visitation passes were granted based on a range of factors, weekly passes disproportionately favored enslaved men visiting female partners.⁵⁹⁵ One of the primary exceptions to this gendered mobility bias were passes for attendance at religious meetings. A number of planters granted their enslaved workers passes to attend religious meetings on Sundays, and in some cases, prayer meetings on other plantations on Tuesdays and Fridays.⁵⁹⁶ Not surprisingly, women were disproportionately represented among the church members and attendees. As the “visited,” rather than the visitor, and the adult

⁵⁹⁴ Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: A North-Side View of Slavery* (1856; Reprint, Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969), 91. Pease was enslaved in Arkansas and self-liberated in 1854. Although not from Georgia, Pease provided the only commentary on the significance of confinement to the plantation for an enslaved person. Yet, Susan Eva O’Donovan’s exploration of the industrial labor of enslaved people in antebellum Savannah reveals the extent of some bondspeople’s mobility, in the wake of the cotton boom. As Savannah became a major port for the exportation of upland cotton, the enslaved population grew to include ever-growing numbers of watermen, teamsters, railroad workers, domestics, and other workers necessary for the maintenance of the commercial hub—many of whom were sent by their owners from plantations or farms. Susan Eva O’Donovan, “At the Intersection of Cotton and Commerce: Antebellum Savannah and Its Slaves,” in *Slavery and Freedom*, Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry, eds. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2014), 48-51.

⁵⁹⁵ White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?*, 76. White discusses the heightened mobility of enslaved males due to the practice of hiring out, some men’s positions as artisans, abroad marriages, and the greater incidence of self-liberation amongst males. On the other hand, she points out that women were less familiar with the terrain and therefore less likely to abscond, and were in their prime reproductive years when most males were self-liberating (between 16 and 35 years of age).

⁵⁹⁶ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part IV*, 57.

class least likely to be hired out, enslaved women were the most immobile of the adult enslaved labor force.⁵⁹⁷ Attendance at a religious meeting afforded the women a rare opportunity to leave the confines of the spaces where they lived and worked to interact socially with others from the surrounding area, since in most cases, patrolled Christian meetings were the only sites for regular social interaction beyond the business, plantation, or farm.⁵⁹⁸

For many of the transplanted West and West-Central African peoples and their descendants in the Lower South, formative and meaningful sociality remained a prerequisite to full personhood. The social and ritual cultures that blossomed around attendance at religious gatherings highlighted the importance of relationships to the development of individual and communal identities. Groups of enslaved people from surrounding areas gathered together to walk distances as far as nine miles to church, and no doubt used the journey as an opportunity to form new relationships and reconnect with friends. The multi-service structure of many biracial churches—where Blacks attended a morning and afternoon meeting—made church an all day affair for many, and in the summertime, church-goers frequently prepared food baskets to consume on the church lawn between and after the services.⁵⁹⁹ Local revivals were considered “big times,” due not only to the performances witnessed inside of the church, but to the festivities that commenced after the services. Formerly enslaved Jasper Battle of Taliaferro County

⁵⁹⁷ Market women and the personal servants of travelling slaveholders were the exceptions to the general rule of female mobility. See, O’Donovan, “At the Intersection of Cotton and Commerce,” in *Slavery and Freedom*, Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry, eds., 56. Alisha M. Cromwell, “Enslaved Women in the Savannah Marketplace,” in *Slavery and Freedom*, Leslie M. Harris and Daina Ramey Berry, eds. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2014), 54-55..

⁵⁹⁸ Corn-shuckings, log rollings, and other seasonal events were also opportunities for enslaved people to interact with others from the surrounding area, but were held much less regularly than religious services, even if the Christian meetings were only once a month.

⁵⁹⁹ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 97-98.

recalled: “When de sermon was over dey had a big dinner spread out on de grounds and dey had jus’ evvything good t’eat lak chickens, barbecued hogs and lambs, pies, and lots of watermelons.”⁶⁰⁰ Although the enslaved, namely the women, took part in biracial dinners as participants and servants by serving the White parishioners and preparing the feast beforehand, their labors did not dampen their enthusiasm for the gatherings.⁶⁰¹ In the intervals before, between, and after church services, enslaved people, especially the women generally confined to their live/work spaces, cultivated the expanded networks afforded by an extended geo-social range. These expanded networks frequently included potential suitors. According to Elisha Gary, enslaved men and women did “some tall courting” in the brush arbors that functioned as churches on some plantations, since the brush arbor was “de onliest place whar you could git to see de gals you lakked de best.”⁶⁰² Indeed, enslaved and free men used Sunday gatherings to court women from the surrounding area, and in doing so, sustained the “abroad wife” culture.⁶⁰³

The restrictions upon Black sociality, evidenced by the early colonial act aimed at curbing gatherings “Especially on Saturday Nights[,] Sundays[,] and other Holidays,” endured from the colonial through the antebellum period, and bespoke Whites’ fear of insurrection and Blacks’ proclivity for assembly.⁶⁰⁴ Yet, the fear of insurrection was merely one iteration of the more extensive neurosis surrounding Black collectivity, particularly when independent of the regulatory presence of a White witness. Some, like

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid, 66.

⁶⁰¹ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 318-319. These revival meetings generally occurred in July and August. One formerly enslaved person described the types of labor enslaved women and children performed on the day: “Slave gals sot de long tables what was built out under de trees, and dem same gals cleant up atter evvybody had done got thoo’ eatin’. Niggers et atter de white folks, but dere was allus a plenty for all. Little Niggers kept de flies off de tables by wavin’ long branches kivered wid green leafs for fly brushes.”

⁶⁰² Ibid, 5.

⁶⁰³ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 350.

⁶⁰⁴ *Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the Colony of Georgia: 1755-1774*, 91.

Butler Island plantation overseer Mr. King, recognized the dangerous potential of social cohesion among enslaved people within a given geographical area and forbade workers from attending Sunday meetings more than once a month. In defense of King's prohibition, Fanny Kemble explained that Sunday meetings led the enslaved "off on their own through neighboring plantations," provided "opportunities for meetings between the negroes of the different estates," and likely occasioned "abuses and objectionable practices of various kinds."⁶⁰⁵ Embedded in Kemble's explanation is evidence of another, perhaps more alarming, concern: without the cultural and corporeal circumscription that often accompanied the White gaze, Black, particularly enslaved, social spaces assumed a dangerous foreignness, incongruous with southern doctrines of domestication. Proscriptions against "Drums[,] Horns[,] or other loud Instruments" used to "call together or give Sign or Notice of their wicked Degins [sic] and purposes" pointed towards the preponderance of West and West-Central African sounds in the Americas and Whites' association of these sounds with Black gatherings.⁶⁰⁶

To be sure, a percentage of women and men travelled to and participated in the oft-discussed church meetings as a demonstration of their Christian devotion. Yet, the low number of enslaved church members—that is, people who claimed conversion to Christianity—relative to the number that voluntarily attended the gatherings pointed towards the operation of other factors: namely, the opportunity for cultural expression and social interaction in accordance with indigenous norms. The dances, prayers, and

⁶⁰⁵ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 122. According to Kemble, there was a church on St. Simon's that the Butler Island people could attend, but King forbade attendance at that church specifically. Instead, they were forced to go to a church in Darien once a month. It is possible that the St. Simons church was a praisehouse, or more broadly, a predominantly Black gathering space. Whatever the case, the enslaved people on the plantation knew that the potential for interaction with persons from other plantations was King's primary reservation regarding their church attendance. See Kemble, 150.

⁶⁰⁶ *Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the Colony of Georgia: 1755-1774*, 91.

singing that served as the infrastructure for the majority of predominantly Black and/or enslaved religious gatherings allowed for the importation of ancestral cosmologies and cultural repertoires into gatherings simply termed “prayer meetings” or “church” by their participants. While for some, “church” represented an opportunity for religious commune, for others, it was an opportunity for social engagement and mobility, in other words “somewhere to go.” As Amanda Jackson explained matter-of-factly: ““We didn’t have no holidays except Sundays an’ den we did’nt [sic] have nowhere to go except to church in de woods under a Bush-arbor.””⁶⁰⁷

The “Bush-arbor,” also known as the “brush-arbor” or “hush harbor,” and other predominantly Black religious spaces afforded the enslaved some degree of cultural autonomy and privacy, which likely heightened the appeal of such gatherings for enslaved Christians, Muslims, African diasporic religious practitioners, and agnostics alike. Contrary to most biracial and even some predominantly Black Christian churches, where the specter of White cultural and Christian religious hegemony loomed, the brush arbor operated in accordance with the mores and cultural sensibilities of the enslaved communities in which they resided—a reality facilitated, not in the least, by its spatial location and architectural dimensions. Formerly enslaved Georgian Pierce Cody described the construction of one type of brush arbor space:

As a beginning, several trees were felled, and the brush and forked branches separated. Four heavy branches with forks formed the framework. Straight poles were laid across these to form a crude imitation of beams and the other framework of a building. The top and sides were formed of brush which was thickly placed so that it formed a solid wall. A

⁶⁰⁷ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 290.

hole left in one side formed a doorway from which beaten paths extended in all directions. Seats made from slabs obtained at local sawmills completed the furnishing.⁶⁰⁸

True to its biotic construction, the constructed brush arbor existed at the intersection of cultivated space and undomesticated wilderness, and as a consequence, was at the mercy of the natural elements. In the event of transitory showers, participants used umbrellas, newspapers, and other nominally protective articles to shield them from the conditions and continue their gatherings. During extremely inclement weather, gatherings could not be held at all. Yet, the intentional separatism of the brush arbor was not only an attempt to achieve a momentary reprieve from the culture of surveillance. Enslaved people's demarcations of space drew upon West and West Central African cultural norms of public and hidden performance, which prompted them to seek private, topographically prohibitive spaces for their important meetings, religious or otherwise. The Mende, Temne, and other groups shared an understanding of unrestricted, public and restricted, concealed realms of knowledge, and the spatial correlatives to these domains of knowledge.⁶⁰⁹ As the site for the meeting of initiatory and other decision-making societies, the forest functioned as both an "animating" center of society and a place of secret knowledge and rituals.⁶¹⁰ Secret, hidden knowledge was considered the most

⁶⁰⁸ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 196-197.

⁶⁰⁹ For a discussion of the Temne, see Rosalind Shaw, "Gender and the Structuring of Reality in Temne Divination: An Interactive Study," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 55, No. 3 (1985): 289.

⁶¹⁰ Murphy, "The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics:" 570-571. For a similar understanding of the forest amongst Central Africans in the lowcountry, see Ras Michael Brown, "'Walk in the Feenda:' West Central Africans and the Forest in the South Carolina-Georgia Lowcountry," in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the African Diaspora*, Linda M. Heywood, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 312. As Brown discusses, the persistence of the term "feenda" to name the forest in the lowcountry indicates the transplantation of West-Central African ways of understanding the natural world to the Americas. Regarding the forest as a site of secret gatherings, Brown points to the secluded location outside

powerful; consequently, secluded, natural spaces not only regulated access to restricted bodies of knowledge, but protected the informational core of a given community.

Although the shadow of sociocultural repression and threat of interference loomed over every gathering of the enslaved, the brush arbor and other un-surveilled gathering spaces allowed enslaved people to engage rituals and ways of knowing, informed by and encoded with the social and religious values of the community. For this reason, they—like their ancestors—generally used talismans and other *halei* to protect their gathering spaces. The placement of a turned over kettle pot at the entryway of the space resembled the Mende practice of partially burying an iron pot and/or a small trunk filled with stones next to the threshold of a dwelling to deter potential offenders.⁶¹¹ In the case of the enslaved, potential malefactors included the violent “paddy rollers,” bent on the disruption of gatherings they deemed unauthorized, as well as the malevolent and/or unpredictable spirits that inhabited natural spaces. As historian Ras Michael Brown explains regarding the centrality of demarcations of space to Central African cosmologies in the South Carolina and Georgia lowcountry, the forest was the site “in which the material realm of flora, fauna, earth, and water existed inseparably with the invisible domain of spiritual beings and their powers.”⁶¹² These beings included the Central African nature spirits—known as *simbi* among inhabitants of the lowcountry and their ancestors—as well as other entities of the sacred imagination, such as the dangerous Plat-Eye.⁶¹³ At the same time, the understanding that the act of gathering transformed a space into a place of hidden forces necessitated the presence of *halei* and the performance of

of Charleston, where Gullah Jack, the Central African ritual specialist (*nganga*) of the Vesey conspiracy of 1822, met with and performed rituals for co-conspirators.

⁶¹¹ Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 111.

⁶¹² Brown “Walk in the Feenda,” 290.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*, 306-307, 312.

rituals to deter detrimental forces of the sense and spirit worlds from wreaking havoc upon cultivated and policed spaces alike.⁶¹⁴

Even when under surveillance or professedly Christian, the brush arbor represented self-determined, indigenous religious spaces for the enslaved. Fed up with the discriminatory conventions of the biracial Christian church, one group of Black Georgians formed a separate “‘brush arbor’ church” in which to hold their religious meetings.⁶¹⁵ As evidenced by the congregation’s secession to the brush arbor and many formerly enslaved people’s memories of the ritual performances that occurred therein, the brush arbor was the spatial representative of the indigenous sociality and cultural foreignness that rendered Black religiosity peculiar, even in biracial and/or Christian contexts. Using their spectators’ inability to recognize many of the marks of foreignness that were encoded in ritual performances and structures, enslaved and free people were able to transform even the most heavily patrolled gatherings into brush arbor spaces. Thus, First African Baptist Church of Savannah could house images of the BaKongo cosmogram on its church floors, while still being lauded as a model of Black Christianity in Georgia by its White visitors. On the other hand, glimpses of the peculiarity of enslaved performance and sociality did appear to outsider eyes in moments when the disciplinary function of the White gaze was temporarily suspended. During Christmas, the longest holiday for the majority of the Lower South’s enslaved, one northern traveller to a rice plantation in the South Carolina lowcountry noted the persistence of West and West-Central African social performances, observing that “ intermixed with the native

⁶¹⁴ Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 572.

⁶¹⁵ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 197.

born negroes, were others from various tribes and nations of Africa, reverting to the languages, and acting over the sports and gambols of their father-land.”⁶¹⁶

As evidenced by the South Carolina scene, space was not the sole means of fostering communal sociality and preserving cultural foreignness. Sound and movement marked the sacred spaces and rites of enslaved peoples. Yet neither can be disengaged from the secret and mystical sources of creative power that animated them. Similar to their West and West Central African predecessors, enslaved Georgians closely aligned human manifestations of extraordinary, charismatic power (*halei*) with *kabande*, a term whose denotations and connotations include “wonder,” “awe,” “magic,” and “mystery.”⁶¹⁷ As anthropologist William P. Murphy discusses, the concept of *kabande* in Mende society is ensconced in a cultural universe that includes, “a religious ideology of extraordinary power, a political culture of hidden strategizing, and an aesthetics of secrecy.”⁶¹⁸ In agreement with Murphy’s analysis of contemporary *Poro* and *Sande* dance, for the enslaved Mende and their descendants, dance—or more broadly, rhythmic sacred movement—manifested “secret sources of creativity” to transcend “the ordinary boundaries of movement, expression, and even allowable social behavior.”⁶¹⁹

The dual access to specialized *halei* and ancestral and non-ancestral spirits, coupled with the sociopolitical and sociocultural power of initiates, rendered *Poro* and

⁶¹⁶ G.S.S., “Sketches of the South Santee,” *American Monthly Magazine*, 8 (November 1836), in *Slavery in North America: From the Colonial Period to Emancipation, Volume 3*, ed. Jonathan Daniel Wells (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 22.

⁶¹⁷ Murphy, “The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics”: 564, 566. In his article, Murphy links the sublime and charisma through a definition of both as references to “powers transcending normal routines and expectations.” Although the article explores the role of such charismatic power in political strategizing, his discussion of the relationship between hidden and public space, dance, and extraordinary power works well for an analysis of the multi-use brush arbor space. Murphy also links the idea of *kabande* with Rudolf Otto’s concept of *mysterium tremendum*, which is frequently used to discuss awe in the context of humans’ sacred experiences.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid, 567.

Sande the “executors” of *Ngewo*’s power in human society.⁶²⁰ They represented and wielded institutionalized iterations of *halei*; consequently, the masked dances functioned as the public expressions of their reservoirs of power. In his mid-18th century account of Sierra Leone, slave trader Nicholas Owen described the effect of the public appearance of a *Poro* masked spirit amongst the “Bulum’s”:

There is a secret mistery that these people has kept for many ages or, as for what we know, since thier first foundation, of great consequence to the pace of the country; it goes by the general name of *Pora* or *Pora* men. These men are maked in thier infincey by thier priests with 3 or 4 rows of small dints upon thier backs and shoulders; any that has not these marks they look upon as nothing...when ever the women or white men or any that’s not *Pora* men hears, they imadately fly to the houses and s[h]ut windows and doors; in a short time afterward this mock devil apears in the town with all his gang about him, speakeing through a reed, where he tell[s] upon what acount he comes, and demands liquer and victuals from the white man, if there is any in the place; after this is over he goes away with singing and danceing as before and all quiet again.⁶²¹

The appearance of the spirits of the all-male *Poro* were not the only ritual performances to garner such reverence. Likewise, the public display of the *Sowo*, the representative mask of *Sande*, demanded the respect of onlookers, given the divine origins of the classical *sowo-wui*, or sacred wooden head, that adorns the dancer.⁶²² In its

⁶²⁰ Gittins, *Mende Religion*, 102-103, 147-155. Gittins argues that the combined relationship with power and spirits distinguishes the so-called “Secret Societies,” such as *Poro* and *Sande* from “Specialist Societies” that exercise group control over forms of *halei*. The representation of spirits exclusive to the societies through public display is also a distinguishing feature of the “Secret Societies.”

⁶²¹ Owen, *Journal of a Slave Dealer*, 29.

⁶²² Boone, *Radiance of the Waters*, 153.163. Boone distinguishes between two types of *sowo-wui*, the most revered is the representation of the *Sande* spirit, while the second type is fashioned to the preferences of a specific *Sande* dancer and remains her personal property. According to Boone, the sacred mask boasts “classical” features, while the second mask type is generally more adorned.

ritualized, danced appearance, the Sowo manifests the *Sande* spirit; witnesses cannot gaze directly into the eyes of the masked dancer for fear of encountering the eyes of the spirit.⁶²³ In both *Sande* and *Poro* masked performances, mystical power, spirits, and concealed processes unite to invoke the mysterious awe (*kabande*) of sacred temporality.⁶²⁴ The dances signify the presence of powerful spirits, and as such, instill a sense of the extraordinary in the psyches of other participants in the ritual drama.

Thus, the ritual movements and sounds of enslaved Georgians must be understood in accordance with the performance scripts of their originating contexts. No doubt, the synergy between West and West Central African philosophies of sacred performance and the emphasis upon public evidence of inner spiritual conversion amongst charismatic Christian denominations, such as the Baptists, drew some enslaved people willingly to Christian gatherings. Yet, despite the presence of behaviors described as “shouting” amongst White Christians, Blacks’ “shouting,” whether professedly Christian or not, encompassed a range of performances that extended beyond the pronounced vocalizations and random movements of their counterparts. In the communal parlance of the enslaved, shouting included a combination of rhythmic sounds—such as clapping, singing, and chanting—along with the rhythmic movements of individuals and groups. One formerly enslaved coastal Georgia man recalled Saturday night celebrations termed “call shouts,” which employed a drum composed of a hollowed beehive log and hide, and a fife made from reed cane.⁶²⁵ Movement and sound were always united in the performance simply and deceptively called the “shout” in the communal parlance of many of the enslaved.

⁶²³ Ibid, 178.

⁶²⁴ Murphy, “The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics”: 567, 568, 572.

⁶²⁵ Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 100.

Perhaps the most famous of the shouts was the “ring shout,” frequently observed in coastal Georgia and South Carolina. In an 1863 essay, H.G. Spaulding described the peculiar cadences, movements, and sounds of the shout that occurred following a plantation praise meeting:

Three or four, standing still, clapping their hands and beating time with their feet, commence singing in unison one of the peculiar shout melodies, while the others walk round in a ring, in single file, joining also in the song. Soon those in the ring leave off their singing, the others keeping it up the while with increased vigor, and strike into the shout step, observing more accurate time with the music. This step is something halfway between a shuffle and a dance, as difficult for an uninitiated person to describe as to imitate. At the end of each stanza of the song the dancers stop short with a slight stamp on the last note, and then, putting the other foot forward, proceed through the next verse. They will often dance to the same song for twenty or thirty minutes, once or twice, perhaps, varying the monotony of their movement by walking for a little while and joining in the singing. The physical exertion, which is really very great, as the dance calls into play nearly every muscle of the body, seems never to weary them in the least, and they frequently keep up a shout for hours, resting only for brief intervals between the different songs. Yet, in trying to imitate them, I was completely tired out in a very short time. The children are the best dancers, and are allowed by their parents to have a

shout at any time, though, with the adults, the shout always follows a religious meeting, and none but church members are expected to join.⁶²⁶

Although Spaulding drew his observation from the recently liberated Black population on St. Helena's Island, the recollections of formerly enslaved people confirm the omnipresence of the shout in their sacred rites during slavery. Describing the sights and sounds of a funeral, one man recalled: "Now ole man Dembo he use tub beat duh drum tuh duh fewnul...Dey go in a long prubcession tuh duh burying groun an dey beat duh drums long duh way an dey submit the body tuh duh groun. Den dey dance roun in a righ an dey motion wid duh hans. Dey sing duh body tuh duh grabe an den dey let it down an den dey suckle roun in duh dance."⁶²⁷ However, as the same man explained, rhythmic sounds and movements not only marked sacred rites, but accompanied sacred utterances as well: "We dance roun in a sucle and den we dances fuh prayin. I membuhs we use tuh hab drums fuh prayin. I membuhs we use tug hab drums fuh music an we beat duh drum fuh dances."⁶²⁸ His admission that the people of his community had no access to a church, but rather had to identify a hidden location to "make a great prayuh" suggests that, similar to their West and West Central African ancestors, enslaved Georgians not only "shouted" in sacred spaces, but used shouts to demarcate sacred time and space.

Of the participants in the sacred performance cultures of enslaved peoples, none were more skilled in the art of demarcating ritual space than enslaved women. In a May 18, 1859 letter to his wife, Rev. R.Q. Mallard, the son-in-law of C.C. Jones, disdainfully

⁶²⁶ H.G. Spaulding, "Excerpt from *Under the Palmetto*," *Continental Monthly IV* (New York, 1863) in *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals*, ed. by Bruce Jackson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 67-68.

⁶²⁷ Georgia Writer's Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 180.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.* See also, Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 40. Stuckey cites the performance of the ring shout at enslaved people's funerals and Christian services as evidence of the West African call-and-response tradition of ceremonial engagement and dance. For Stuckey, such intersections substantiate his claim regarding the centrality of the circle as a metaphor and ritual posture within West African and African-American cultures.

recounted a Black revival and honed in on the performance of one woman to convey the perceived disorder of the scene:

I was much interested, and yet at the same time shocked, by a spectacle which I witnessed two nights ago....The Negroes were holding a revival meeting. Some were standing, others sitting, others moving from one seat to another, several exhorting along the aisles. The whole congregation kept up one loud monotonous strain, interrupted by various sounds: groans and screams and clapping of hands. One woman specially under the influence of the excitement went across the church in a quick succession of leaps: now down on her knees with a sharp crack that smote upon my ear the full length of the church, then up again; now with her arms about some brother or sister, and again tossing them wildly in the air and clapping her hands together and accompanying the whole by a series of short, sharp shrieks. I was astonished that such proceedings were countenanced in even a Cumberland church. One of the women servants at this hotel, I understand, kept up her shouting after she returned from the meeting the entire night, and was not quieted until next day at nine o'clock.⁶²⁹

Mallard was not the only outsider to note that women appeared to dominate the somatic displays of sacred spaces. In an effort to observe the infamous singing and dancing of enslaved southerners, Swedish traveller Frederika Bremer attended a Black prayer meeting and, upon entering, observed “an assemblage of negroes, principally

⁶²⁹ Rev. R.Q. Mallard to Mary S. Mallard, Chattanooga, May 18, 1859, in *The Children of Pride*, ed. Robert Manson Myers, 482-483.

women, who were much edified and affected” in their engagement of the sermon.⁶³⁰ The numerical dominance of women at religious meetings is an oft-observed feature of enslaved religiosity, and explanations for the phenomenon range from women’s roles as the arbiters of morality and religiosity in enslaved households to the appeal of purification language, such as vocabulary around baptism, in the wake of sexual assault.⁶³¹ As Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood point out, Black women in Protestant denominations established patterns of mystical authority through “ecstatic behaviors,” including visions and trances, and used religious spaces to publicly exercise this authority.⁶³²

Yet, women’s performances cannot be understood primarily as attempts to designate female ritual space amidst Christian patterns of male religious leadership, since an expanded purview reveals realms of female sacred authority that included and transcended Christian spaces. Women frequently led the prayer meetings that many of the enslaved attended in lieu of patrolled Sunday meetings. Rather, enslaved women’s ritual performances drew upon West and West Central African notions of power and performance to delineate sacred space for the entire community. Similar to the function of the *Sande* and *Poro* masked dances, the rhythmic movements of women during religious gatherings signaled the presence of extraordinary, mystical powers and incited the awe due to the Spirit and/or spirits. Women’s sacred movements and sounds were demonstrations and arbiters of creative power. Although some undoubtedly assumed this role in a spontaneous moment of inspiration, formerly enslaved man Elisha Garey’s

⁶³⁰ Fredericka Bremer, *The Homes of the New World; Impressions of America* (Harper and Brothers Publishers: New York, 1863), in *Voices of the Old South: Eyewitness Accounts, 1528-861*, Alan Galley, ed. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), 252.

⁶³¹ See Frey and Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion*, 95.

⁶³² *Ibid.*, 109.

disclosure that “Sunday was meetin’ day for grown folks and gals” suggests that girls might have been socialized into the ritual cultures of the religious meeting space earlier and with greater frequency than their male counterparts.⁶³³ In this case, the female dominance of somatic ritual performance in the sacred spaces of the enslaved points towards sex-segregated patterns of ritual socialization and gendered power complementarity, as opposed to a struggle for religious authority in ritual spaces.

At the same time, women did not confine their performances to sanctioned religious spaces and times. Much like the challenge to the norms of “movement,” “expression,” and “allowable social behavior” posed by the Mende masked dancer, some enslaved women used their religious sounds and movements to transgress the psychological and physical boundaries of their slave designations.⁶³⁴ Martha Colquitt recalled the transgressive religious performances of her grandmother in the biracial church that her family attended while enslaved: “Grandma would git to shoutin’ so loud she would make so much fuss nobody in de church could hear de preacher and she would wander off from de gallery and go downstairs and try to go down de white folkses aisles to git to de altar whar de preacher wuz, and dey wuz always lookin’ her up for ‘sturbin’ worship, but dey never could break her from dat shoutin’ and wanderin’ ‘round de meetin’ house, atter she got old.”⁶³⁵ Colquitt’s grandmother apparently sang and shouted outside of sanctioned “slave” spaces so routinely that, when Union soldiers came to the plantation, she was locked in the loom house “a-singin’ and a-shoutin’ . . . all by herself.”⁶³⁶

⁶³³ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 6.

⁶³⁴ Murphy, “The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics,” 567.

⁶³⁵ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part I*, 247.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*

Through performance, enslaved women not only stretched the boundaries of racially segregated social space, but engaged in powerful acts of spatial resignification as well. Susie Johnson recounted an incident during which, after beginning to sing ““Glory to the Dying Land”” in the cotton field, her mother “got so happy she couldn’t be still and she danced all over Masta’s cotton patch.”⁶³⁷ In doing so, Johnson’s mother defied the social strictures that aimed to signify enslaved embodiment through demarcations of space and time and, instead, repurposed the sounds, movements, and space of the cotton field in service of the spirit(s). More than a simple act of spontaneous religious ecstasy, the woman’s performance evinced a cosmology of power that eclipsed the violent hegemonic forces of her enslavement—a fact represented, no less, by her destruction of the master’s cotton during the performance. As demonstrated by Johnson’s mother and Colquitt’s grandmother, enslaved women established sound and movement as powerful tools in their religious repertoires, and deployed their ritual power in ways that challenged and inspired their communities. Consistent with the objectives of the Mende masked dances, the individual shouting performances inspired wonder and surprise, as opposed to harmony and regularity.⁶³⁸ Although men certainly participated in such displays, the culture of inspired dance and vocalization was sustained and cultivated by women.

Conclusion

Despite the culture of surveillance, enslaved people’s social spaces retained their efficacy as sites for the enactment and cultivation of re/membered cosmologies and ritual

⁶³⁷ Rawick, *Georgia Narratives Part II*, 344.

⁶³⁸ Murphy, “The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics,” 574.

performances, which harkened ontological structures rooted in West and West-Central Africa and signaled notions of personhood independent of the slave ontology. As acts of re/membrance aimed at sociocultural and psychosocial survival, these foreign elements of enslaved cultural practice, whether African-originated, African-derived, or African-inflected, imbued enslaved sociality with a sacred quality. In their sacred spaces, enslaved people cultivated communities, in which to develop the relational Self apart from the disciplinary structures imposed by the hegemonic gaze. Their mere presence in a Christian edifice, engagement of Christian symbols, and participation in Christian rituals did not render the time-space of Sunday sacred. Rather, the vocabularies, narratives, symbols, and rituals of Christianity were subsumed under a broader sacral rubric that demarcated the sacred through power, sound, sociality, and movement.

Indigenous features of a number of West and West Central African religious cultures, power, sound, sociality, and movement became the cornerstones of African-descended religiosity in Georgia, due in no small part to enslaved women. As the persons primarily responsible for childrearing, enslaved women modeled ritual movements, transmitted sacred sounds, demarcated social space, and imparted cosmologies of power for and to their children. It was the women, who often shouted, attended religious gatherings, and instilled religious values into their offspring. And they did so with the aim of redressing the effects of dismemberment and ensuring the survival of themselves and persons under their care. Their performances were acts of creative power. Through them, bondswomen recreated themselves amid the existential and material rigors of enslavement, and offered the entire enslaved community a socioreligious infrastructure upon which to construct their religious cultures.

Conclusion

In her reflections upon enslaved life on the Butler plantation, foreign-born mistress Fanny Kemble tellingly concluded that: “In considering the whole condition of the people on this plantation, it appears to me that the principal hardships fall to the lot of the women—that is, the principal physical hardships.”⁶³⁹ Yet, despite past and present-day observers’ recognition of slavery’s gendered dimensions, historical explorations of enslaved people’s religious cultures have assumed a genderless subject in their considerations of the religious consciousness and productions of bondspeople. The inordinate emphasis upon race as the primary paradigm through which the enslaved comprehended their “slave” statuses and the Middle Passage as the experiential genesis of U.S. African-American religious consciousness neglects the crucial experiences of dismemberment that preceded African captives’ embarkation on Georgia-bound vessels—experiences conditioned by and understood through the paradigm of gender. Taking race as the starting point for captive Africans’ religious consciousness locates the “second creation” in the European/African encounter on West African coasts and aboard westbound slaving vessels. However, beginning with gender situates captives’ “second creation” in the enslaved female wombs that were resignified by global and local political, economic, and cultural shifts, well before the initial moment of capture.

As their (re)productions became global commodities, enslaved women’s wombs were dislocated from their bodies and resignified as property and machinery in a transoceanic economic and sociocultural system. This sexual dismemberment, along with the other forms of dismemberment that collectively constituted the existential crisis of enslavement, fundamentally shifted the nature and objective of African captives’

⁶³⁹ Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation*, 143.

religiosity as they traveled to and made their homes in the Western Hemisphere. In the wake of dismemberment, the re-membrance, or recreation, of self and community and remembrance, or recollection, of creative power through the re/membered cosmologies, rituals, and performances of their cultural foreparents became the aim of enslaved people's, but particularly women's, religious cultures. As a consequence of the cooptation of the enslaved female womb and subsequent commandeering of enslaved women's creative power by members of the power caste, women fought to reclaim their power through ethical and common sense systems, childbearing rituals, foreign modes of religious performance, and other re/membered sacred modalities. Rituals, cosmologies, and practices calibrated to restore creative power, ensure survival and a better quality of life, and mitigate the dismembering effects of enslaved people's "second creation" as human property defined the sacred for enslaved women. Thus, abortion, infanticide, surrogate mothering, naming, storytelling, and other acts—ranging from the mundane to the extreme—were recast as responses to enslaved people's most profound existential questions.

Although born of enslaved women's experiences, these responses were not engaged by enslaved women alone. Men and children also conspired to redress the dismembering sexual effects of enslavement, even as some also participated in and benefitted from cultures of dismemberment. Womb experiences—such as, rape, childbirth, and child death—intersected with and informed the innermost values of enslaved men and children. Through these experiences, the enslaved became aware of the ways that the combination of their legal statuses, racial identification, and gender assigned new meanings to their sexual lives.

Attentiveness to enslaved women's sacred experiences and productions cautions against the deployment of "slave religion" as a gender-amorphous category in the study of Black religious formations in the U.S. and, through the emphasis on creative power, acknowledges the dynamism of bondspeople's religious productions. U.S. slavery was radically corporeal. Consistent with its radical corporeality, enslavement was powerfully conditioned by region, demography, work, and embodiment. Enslaved people's sacred productions and consciousness cannot be thoroughly understood without consideration of the ways embodiment, and the meanings assigned to enslaved bodies, yielded experiences that intersected and diverged along gendered lines. The use of the womb—literally a part of the female anatomy—as the conceptual metaphor for the examination of enslaved religiosity takes seriously the radical corporeality of enslaved people's religious cultures and embeds the crisis of dismemberment and potentialities of (pro)creative power into the methodological structure of the study.

A woman-gendered, Africana methodological approach to the study of enslaved people's religiosity not only offers a more robust interpretive lens for the exploration of the complex cosmologies that lay behind enslaved religious practices, but liberates non-ordained authorities, non-Christian practitioners, and women from their relegation to the margins of African-American religious history. Deploying methodological paradigms such as W.E.B. DuBois's insightful, but limited "preacher, music, and frenzy" typology to explain the religious cultures of enslaved peoples confines the cosmological and ritual scope of the enslaved's sacred productions to Christian, namely Protestant, religious categories, and overlooks the broader sacral rubric that rendered such formations

efficacious amidst diverse, shifting contexts.⁶⁴⁰ Despite the frequent linkage of enslaved religious performances with Christian doctrine and theology, Christianity was merely one of the new materials from which the enslaved configured their re/membered practices in the wake of geographical, psychological, and social displacement. The preacher was merely one iteration of human-embodied, mystical power among enslaved Georgians and their turn-of-the-century descendants, since it was the power to effect outcomes in the sense world, or rather to access the Supreme Power's creative power (*kpaya*), that imbued humans with religious authority. Midwives and hag-witches, along with other communally- and denominationally-ordained religious authorities, inhabited the enslaved's human pantheon of power and broadened religious authority beyond the gender-biased Christian leadership structures of denominational bodies.

Though organizational pioneers like Andrew Bryan and Jesse Peter were central to designating predominantly Black space in Georgia's urban religious landscapes, manifestations of human-embodied mystical power in social spaces were not limited to exhortation. In the religious cultures of the enslaved, extraordinary, creative power fueled the rhythmic movements and sounds that demonstrated the presence of the spirit(s), and evoked the awe, wonder, magic, and mystery (*kabande*) of encounters with powerful, unseen forces. More than "music" and a "frenzy," clapping, stomping, vocalizations, and

⁶⁴⁰ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003), 135-137, 139. [1903] Although DuBois identifies West and West Central Africa as the geo-cultural progenitors of the religions of the enslaved, he confines his understanding of "slave religion" to the performances witnessed within a Christian church, and as a consequence, does not account for ancestral practices that coexisted with and transcended Christian rituals. For example, though he brilliantly acknowledges the "Priest or Medicine-Man" as a precursor to the preacher, he appears to suggest that the three could not and did not exist concurrently. I reference DuBois's typology not just because of its notoriety, but also because Albert J. Raboteau affirms the paradigm in his seminal text *Slave Religion*, and adds the "conversion experience" to the typology. Raboteau's addition highlights the preoccupation with Christianity in earlier methodological approaches to the study of enslaved religious cultures. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 266.

instruments, united with individually and collectively performed movements to cultivate an atmosphere in which the prayers and supplications of the participants were efficacious.

The shouting, drumming, doctoring, and other ritual performances that persisted in colonial and antebellum Georgia signified the presence of indigenous cosmologies and “world-senses,” and communicated the enslaved’s deliberate choice to respond to the exigencies of enslavement using re/membered religious repertoires. Given the ontological, psychosocial, sexual, and physical havoc wrought by dismemberment, these repertoires were not merely features of a religious experience, but an imperative for the survival and quality-of-life of the participants. For this reason, “retentions” is a misnomer for the West and West Central African practices that formed the sacred spine of enslaved people’s cultures. The term’s static connotation obfuscates the inherent dynamism of the practices that remained productive for displaced Africans and their descendants for over two centuries in the Lower South.

The creative power that fueled this dynamism found its physiological and symbolic expression in the wombs of enslaved women. As the form of embodiment through which African-American bodies materialized, the enslaved female body, particularly the womb, is indelibly imprinted upon the sacred consciousness of Blacks in the United States. Upon their disembarkation on Georgia soil, captive women had already begun to respond to the ontological crisis caused by their capture, transport, and wombs’ resignification. Their responses would create the foundations for a new African-diasporic, sacred culture.

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