Women of Violence: Challenging Perceptions of Enslaved Women's Resistance in the Antebellum United States, 1808-1861.

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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To the Unexpected.

Abstract

Violence permeated all aspects of slavery in the US antebellum South. Historians have devoted considerable attention to the study of the violent forces which shaped American slavery and the responses it engendered among the enslaved who engaged in a plethora of resistance tactics. From 1808 to the start of the Civil War, enslaved women engaged in violent forms of resistance against white Southerners including overseers, enslavers, slave traders, slaveholding family members and other white US citizens. Despite a wealth of evidence demonstrating the pervasiveness of enslaved women's perpetrated violence in the antebellum South, historiographies of slavery have typically characterised enslaved women's resistance as covert, in-direct and crucially, non-violent. Thus, enslaved women's resistance has largely been understood as non-threatening, 'everyday' and less likely to disrupt the day-to-day regime of slavery.

'Women of Violence' strongly challenges the perception that enslaved women's resistance was predominantly bound within the prism of covert 'everyday resistance.' This thesis examines enslaved women's violence against overseers and enslavers, both men and women, providing an in-depth examination of the ways in which enslaved women facilitated their acts of violence and the motives behind their actions. Enslaved women deployed a diverse array of violent techniques including assault, murder, arson, poison, sexual violence, and the weaponisation of commonplace objects and items. Through a comprehensive examination of enslaved people's testimony, fugitive narratives, slaveholder correspondence, legal records and newspaper reports, this thesis opens a new window into the study of Black female resistance in the antebellum South, examining the myriad ways in which enslaved women and girls violently challenged and threatened the system of slavery. This thesis argues for a broader conceptualisation of resistance, one which disrupts the gendered discourse of violence which exists within historical scholarship and public imagination. In doing so, this work explores the intersections of race, gender and resistance in the antebellum South and challenges the gendered boundaries historians have drawn around power and agency in slavery.

Declaration

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Erin Shearer.

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Abbreviations

WPA: Works Progress Administration, Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

FWP: Federal Writers' Project, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves* (Washington, DC, 1941), Vols. 1-16.

LVA: Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

MSA: Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, Missouri.

FHS: Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

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Introduction

During an interview with Fisk University conducted in the late 1920s, a formerly enslaved person recalled his experiences with violence under slavery in Tennessee, describing the abusive actions of his enslavers who regularly whipped their 'property' 'almost to death' for a variety of real or imagined transgressions. The respondent, however, went on to exclaim that the violence he witnessed under slavery was not the monopoly of the white slaveholding family nor that of the overseer who was tasked with supervising the enslaved workforce. Conversely, the unnamed interviewee frankly recalled how his sister violently assaulted a male overseer, describing how she 'jumped up one day and hung a cider bucket over the overseer's head' in response to the overseer who 'tried to make her stop nursing the baby.' This Fisk interview is striking due to the respondent's candid inclusion of what historians have considered to be one of the most volatile and unlikely forms of enslaved women's resistance. Moreover, the respondent went on to further describe how his sister's use of violence was not a lone incident isolated to overseeing men. The Fisk interviewee additionally recalled how his sister attacked their male enslaver, casually noting how she 'chopped him in the head with a hoe she was chopping with.' The respondent reported the motives behind his sister's drastic actions, describing how their enslaver had threatened to 'send her to Mississippi' which thus prompted the woman to retaliate with violence of her own. Bleeding and in disbelief, the informant's enslaver declared: '"She has done almost killed me."' Despite committing a capital offence, the enslaved woman evaded any serious consequences as the respondent exclaimed: 'he didn't do anything with her.' The Fisk interviewee finalised his account with the powerful statement: 'Some of them wouldn't stand for nobody to whip them.'[1]

This Fisk narrative evokes a powerful image of an enslaved woman who violently resisted her oppressors on not one, but two occasions. From the details presented within this testimony, it is possible to elicit how the anonymous enslaved woman facilitated her acts of resistance, as well as the motivations behind her actions. Despite the interference of the overseer and the threats of her enslaver, the enslaved

[1] Fisk University Social Science Institute, *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Negro Ex-Slaves* (Nashville, 1945), 182.

woman clearly perceived violence to be a credible option, allowing her to retain control over her mothering and to challenge the legal right of the enslaver to sell her 'down South.' Violence was inherent to the system of slavery in the United States; enslaved people understood that 'slavery *was* violence' and historians have long recognised the coercive practices of enslavers and other Southern whites in producing and maintaining the institution of human bondage.[2] Violence, however, was not the sole purview of white Southerners nor of Black enslaved men on antebellum slaveholding sites. Enslaved women, including the one described in the Fisk narrative, were credible and conscious users of violence on Southern slaveholding sites in their combat against the institution of slavery. The bondwoman's dual use of violence echoes the physical actions of other enslaved women throughout the antebellum South who resisted overseeing men, as well as male and female enslavers through a variety of violent tactics. This fragment of history constitutes an important piece of evidence in the history of enslaved women's violent resistive action, yet the information presented within this account is by no means rare or unique. A plethora of source materials including archival records and interviews with the formerly enslaved evidence enslaved women's pervasive use of violent resistance against overseers and enslavers throughout the antebellum slaveholding South.

Despite this surfeit of evidence, historiographies of slavery have minimised enslaved women's participation and engagement in violent resistive action. Instead, historians have predominantly characterised enslaved women's resistance as covert, in-direct, and gender specific despite a plethora of primary records demonstrating that enslaved women were pervasive users of violence. Refuted, downplayed, and marginalised – enslaved women's violence has been the subject of minimal investigation within a select number of isolated studies despite the existence of numerous records similar to the anonymous Fisk interviewee's account. To address this minimisation within historiographies of slavery, this thesis explores enslaved women's violent resistance against overseers and enslavers, both male and female, throughout the antebellum slaveholding South between 1808 to 1861. This monographic examination focuses on how and why enslaved women used violent resistance against their oppressors under slavery in the effort to create a broader conceptualisation of violence,

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[2] Kellie Carter Jackson, 'The Story of Violence in America', *Daedalus*, Vol. 151, No. 1 (2022), 11-21, 14.

one which diverges from the established focus on violence against women to open new discussions surrounding enslaved women's own agentic use of physical force.

Through a close engagement with a variety of source materials including legal records, newspapers, interviews with the formerly enslaved, fugitive narratives, and the private writings of enslavers, this thesis rejects contemporary and historical narratives of male exclusivity and masculine dominance in the effort to redirect attention towards the study of bondswomen as perpetrators of violence themselves. In doing so, this study raises a variety of questions: How did enslaved women's gendered experiences of slavery shape and inform the types of violence they chose to commit? In what ways did enslaved women oppose slavery, enslavers, and other whites in the slaveholding South? How did the violent and repressive dynamics of slavery shape our understandings of enslaved women's violent resistance? What motives did enslaved women centre their violent resistance around? How did their relationships with white Southerners and the spaces they were forced to work and inhabit influence their violent tactics of resistance? How did enslaved girls contribute to the use of violent resistive action? Can modern methodologies provide a window into the personal experiences of enslaved women and help uncover their perspectives from fragmented and impartial records in the archives? In tracing these violent themes, this thesis reconceptualises the gendered boundaries of resistance to invite a deeper consideration of enslaved women's lives under slavery and their many uses and possibilities for violent resistance.

Resistance & Slavery: A Historiographical Exploration

The study of resistance has received considerable attention within historiographies of slavery with scholars questioning the nature and extent of enslaved people's resistance on US slaveholding sites from the colonial era to emancipation. Early twentieth century accounts of slavery predominantly echoed and promulgated Lost Cause pro-slavery ideologies from the perspective of white enslavers. These historiographies largely rejected the premise that enslaved people resisted and challenged their enslavement, evoking racist stereotypes of enslaved people as inherently passive and submissive, who

operated within a benign and paternalistic institution largely devoid of cruelty, abuse, and exploitation.[3] Later traditionalist accounts encompassed a narrow definition of resistance, one which heavily focused on how enslaved men overtly challenged slavery through collective, organised revolts. The emergence of the New Social History movement shifted historical attention to the study of enslaved people and their actions from the perspective of the enslaved. This historiographical development widened this narrow conceptualisation of insurgency and resistance to include a broader examination of how the enslaved opposed and contested overseers, enslavers, and slavery more broadly through everyday resistance, flight, abscondence, theft, collective revolt, the destruction of livestock and property, the retention of African customs and clothing, suicide, self-mutilation, assault, murder, and arson. With the exception of Herbert Aptheker who documented the combined efforts of enslaved men and women in collective insurgencies, alongside Raymond and Alice Bauer who examined enslaved women's links to 'everyday resistance', few, if any, scholars prior to the emergence of women's history specifically examined enslaved women's resistance.[4]

Scholars of gender and slavery in the antebellum US South sought to address this glaring gap by highlighting the gendered nature of slavery in their attempts to destabilase the juncture between masculinity and resistance. These historians examined the different aspects of women's opposition to US slavery, with scholars including Darlene Clark Hine, Mary Ellison, Betty Wood, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Amrita Chakmati Myers beginning preliminary discussions on the gendered nature of resistance.[5] Other scholars including Angela Davis, Deborah Gray White, Jacqueline Jones and Leslie

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[3] U.B. Phillips asserted that enslaved people were inherently passive and content in the system of slavery which he projected as a paternalistic and benevolent institution. This depiction of slavery and resistance remained predominantly unchallenged until Bauer & Bauer's 'Day to Day Resistance to Slavery' and Hebert Apetheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*. Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1918); Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labour in the Old South* (Boston, 1939); Raymond Bauer and Alice Bauer, 'Day to Day Resistance to Slavery', *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (1942), 388-419; Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943).

[4] Bauer and Bauer, 'Day to Day Resistance'; Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*.

[5] Darlene Clark Hine, 'Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex', *Western Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1979), 123-127; Mary Ellison, 'Resistance to Oppression: Black Women's Response to Slavery in the United States', *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 4 (1983), 56-63; Betty Wood, 'Some Aspects of Female Resistance to Chattel Slavery in Low Country Georgia, 1763-1815', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (1987), 603-622; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'Strategies and Forms of Resistance: Focus on Slave Women in the United States' in Darlene Clark Hine (ed.), *Black Women in United States History*, Vol. 2 (Brooklyn, 1990), 409-433 - Originally published in Gary Okihito (ed.), *In Resistance: Studies in African, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American History* (Amherst: 1986); Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History*

Schwalm also included women's resistance in their discussions of enslaved women's gender-specific oppressions.[6] These scholars of gender and slavery established a precedent in the study of enslaved women and their participation in resistance and the general consensus conferred that bondswomen resisted their enslavement individually in seemingly small and covert acts of 'everyday' defiance. For example, Stephanie Camp's work on enslaved people's movement as a form of resistance through the creation of rival geographies established day-to-day resistance as the purview of enslaved women, which later historians of gender and slavery echoed throughout their writings.[7] Emily West, for example, stipulated in her 2015 study: 'enslaved women retreated into a world of illicit resistance to bondage that was deeply influenced by their gender.'[8] The association between enslaved women and day-to-day resistance heavily influenced the idea that women under slavery were unlikely to engage in visible, overt forms of resistance. Scholars have also been concerned with ideas relating to how enslaved women opposed slavery through an explicitly gendered and reproductive capacity with Liese Perrin, for example, analysing how enslaved women engaged in gender-specific 'female led' or 'women only' acts of resistance based on their reproductive capabilities, highlighting bondswomen's use of contraceptives, abortifacients, and infanticide.[9] Although infanticide is recognised as a violent practice, with historians including Mary E. Fredrickson and Nikki Taylor evoking the history of Margaret Garner who killed her two children after a failed escape attempt to the North, historians have predominantly limited their

(New York, 1994); Amrita Chakrabarti Myers, '"Sisters in Arms": Slave Women's Resistance to Slavery in the United States', *Past Imperfect*, Vol. 5 (1996), 141-174.

[6] Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York, 1983); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985); Leslie Schwalm, *A Hard Fight For We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana, 1997).

[7] Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, 2004).

[8] Emily West, *Enslaved Women in America: From Colonial Times to Emancipation* (Maryland, 2015), 73.

[9] Liese Perrin, 'Resisting Reproduction: Reconsidering Slave Contraception in the Old South,' *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2001), 255-274. For further readings on enslaved women's reproductive resistance, see, for example: Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004); Emily West and Erin Shearer, 'Fertility Control, Shared Nurturing, and Dual Exploitation: the Lives of Enslaved Mothers in the Antebellum United States', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 27, No. 6 (2018), 1006-1020.

discussions of enslaved women's open displays of violence to the prism of infanticide within enslaved communities.[10]

Although scholars were keen to stress that enslaved women were active in resistance and possessed as much will to resist as enslaved men, they ultimately conferred that gender heavily influenced and *limited* the types of resistance they chose to deploy. Scholars were also of a general agreement that women's resistance rarely, if at all, encompassed open acts of violence. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, for example, observed that 'intermittent struggles' between female enslavers and enslaved women, 'were unlikely to take the form of a frontal attack.'[11] Similarly, studies which included or focused on examinations of women's violence, which the following literature review examines, ultimately conceded that enslaved women 'lived their lives quietly, resisting their enslavement in everyday ways'.[12] Whilst recent studies on slavery have begun to develop ideas of women's 'open' resistance, with Kellie Carter Jackson discussing bondswomen's flight from slavery, the presumption that enslaved women were less likely to engage in violence has remained embedded in slavery historiography as late as 2021.[13] For example, Catherine Armstrong asserted that 'women were less likely to be involved in outbreaks of violent resistance' due to the pervasiveness of 'gender norms in the black community and a desire to protect offspring and family from home'.[14] Covert resistance remains synonymous with enslaved women.

In the words of Stephanie Camp: 'Slave resistance in its many forms is a necessary point of historical inquiry, and it continues to demand research. Yet *how* resistance is studied has changed and must continue to do so.'[15] Whilst late twentieth century historians shone a deliberate spotlight on the many different avenues of enslaved women's resistance in slavery, recent historians have debated

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[10] Mary E. Frederickson and Delores M Walters (eds.), *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner* (Illinois, 2013); Nikki Taylor, *Driven Towards Madness: The Fugitive Slave Margaret Turner and Tragedy on the Ohio* (Ohio, 2016).
[11] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988), 130.
[12] Glenn McNair, 'Slave Women, Capital Crime, and Criminal Justice in Georgia', *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (2009), 135-158, 156.
[13] Kellie Carter Jackson, *Force and Freedom: Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence* (Philadelphia, 2019).
[14] Catherine Armstrong, 'Black Foodways and Places: The Didactic Epistemology of Food Memories in the WPA Narratives', *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (2021), 610-631, 621.
[15] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 2.

whether scholars are guilty of overemphasising the 'unbending defiance' of enslaved communities against slavery. The emergence of resistance studies led some twenty-first century historians to pushback against previous secondary studies which, according to Walter Johnson, overaccentuated the significance of enslaved people's decisions and actions under slavery, overly accrediting their actions as displays of agency and resistance. Johnson claimed that historian's overemphasis on enslaved people's actions as acts of resistance minimised the complex realities of enslavement and he refuted the attempts of historians to 'give the slaves back their agency.'[16] 'Agency', according to Johnson, signified the 'master trope' of the New Social History movement which 'overcodes' the complexity of 'human subjectivity and political organisation' to the extent where historians have categorised enslaved people as 'agents of their own destiny or not'.[17] Sasha Turner similarly warned against the romanticisation of enslaved women's actions within the confines of resistance, arguing that enslaved women's lives have been 'frozen in a 'heroic pose''.[18] This, as Turner argues, risks minimising the 'complexities and vulnerabilities of enslaved subjects.'[19] Although this study is mindful not to romanticise the actions of enslaved women, it follows Stephanie Camp's line of argument that 'complicating the questions that inform the study of resistance need not mean abandoning the category altogether.'[20] With this in mind, this thesis firmly classifies enslaved women's violence within the prism of overt resistance as abandoning this category 'would cost us insight into essential parts of the history of slavery.'[21]

Resistance: Definitions and Debates

The concept of resistance itself has been subject to numerous discussions and debates. As a 'phenomenon with many faces' scholars from intersecting academic fields debate whether a singular definition or categorisation of resistance can exist at all, so much so, that historians of slavery rarely provide an exact definition of the term in their examinations of how enslaved people challenged the

[16] Walter Johnson, 'On Agency', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2003), 113-124, 119.
[17] Johnson, 'On Agency', 113, 114.
[18] Sasha Turner, 'The Nameless and the Forgotten: Maternal Grief, Sacred Protection, and the Archive of Slavery', *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2017), 232-250, 233.
[19] Turner, 'The Nameless and the Forgotten', 233.
[20] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 2.
[21] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 2.

system of slavery.[22] In the words of Mikael Baaz, 'within resistance studies, there exists a plurality of concepts and definitions of actions that are seemingly equal or related in one way or another.'[23] This is certainly the case in slavery studies with historians linking their examinations of enslaved people's resistance to notions of agency, paternalism and slaveholder hegemony, whilst others have probed the concept of resistance within the prism of 'refusal.'[24] Darlene Clark Hine, for example, examined 'refusal' as a method of resisting rape and sexual exploitation through avoidance, sexual abstinence, abortifacients, and infanticide, and Jennifer Morgan in her ground breaking study, *Reckoning with Slavery,* examined enslaved people's 'rejection' of kinship, with enslaved women 'refusing' their commodification through maternal and reproductive resistance.[25] According to Morgan, resistance can be understood as 'refusal to comply with the regimes of labour.'[26] The concept of violence and how it intersects with resistance is also matter of conjecture, with historians, criminologists, philosophers and sociologists considering the term to be undefinable. Indeed, the boundary between violence and non-violence is often unclear, and there are various implications for measuring the concept of violence which can manifest in a variety of different ways, especially in relation to resistance.

Whilst the complexity of defining 'resistance' and 'violence' should be acknowledged, this thesis specifically researches enslaved women's use of violence as a form of resistance and therefore, a workable definition is required. For the purpose of this thesis, 'violent resistance' is conceived as: 'any forceful action which threatens, attempts, or actually inflicts non-consensual physical harm on, or cause damage, to persons or property in the refusal to accept or comply with something.'[27] Despite the

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[22] Mikael Baaz, Mona Lilja, Michael Schulz and Stellan Vinthagen, 'Defining and Analyzing "Resistance": Possible Entrances to the Study of Subversive Practices', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political,* Vol. 41, No. 3 (2016), 137-153, 138.
[23] Baaz, Lilja, Schulz and Vinthagen, 'Defining and Analyzing "Resistance"', 137.
[24] Eugene Genovese in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* examined enslaved people's resistance in the context of paternalism and slaveholder hegemony, asserting that enslaved people ultimately operated within the confines of the control of enslavers. Genovese contended that slaveholder hegemony determined enslaved people's resistance practices and precluded any meaningful opposition beyond the realms of flight and insurrection. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (London, 1975).
[25] Hine, *Hine Sight*; Jennifer Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, 2021), 219-221.
[26] Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery,* 221.
[27] The word 'violence' encompasses a variety of meanings and contextualisations which conjure up different perceptions of the definition. At its most basic, the Cambridge English Dictionary defines violence as 'extremely forceful actions that are intended to hurt people or are likely to cause damage'; the Oxford Dictionary 'the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property'; The United States legal definition of violence suggests that violence is a 'behaviour by persons, against persons

absence of a workable definition in slavery literature, the creation of this specific definition provides a more inclusive approach to the concept of violent resistance to incorporate the many variabilities of enslaved women's violence which extends to non-physical acts including poisoning and arson, alongside non-physical threats, attempts and other non-finished or indirect actions. The concept of 'refusal' also broadens the traditional definition of resistance to incorporate a wider variability of enslaved women's responses in their challenge against the institution of slavery and those within it. The conceptualisation of resistance in relation to refusal provides another lens through which to examine enslaved women's violence, enabling broader discussions to be made concerning the violent actions of bondswomen in opposition to white men's sexual violence. With this in mind, this study firmly classifies enslaved women's violence within the prism of resistance, encompassing refusal and rejection in relation to enslaved women's violence against white male rape and sexual assault. Although a considerable amount of scholarly works exists in relation to enslaved women's resistance in the antebellum South, the following historiographical examination provides a review of the relevant literature which specifically include discussions of enslaved women's violent resistance. This will provide a nuanced historiographical interpretation of works which have inspired and are relevant to this thesis.

Enslaved Women's Violence: A Review of Key Literature

This historiographical review exclusively focuses on secondary writings which incorporate discussions of enslaved women's violence. Foundational works on enslaved women's experiences of slavery included important conversations on the nature of resistance and violence in the antebellum slaveholding South. Scholar and political activist, Angela Davis' pivotal work, 'Reflections of the Black Women's Role in the Community of Slaves', represents a key source of inspiration for the formation of this thesis. Davis' 1972 article directly confronted traditionalist mischaracterisations of the roles of enslaved women within enslaved families and against the system of slavery. Davis forcibly disputed the

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or property that intentionally threatens, attempts, or actually inflicts physical harm.' These are the broadest and most common use of the term in relation to human behaviour which this study draws upon in the effort to capture the variability of violence displayed throughout this study. For a theoretical examination of these definitions, see, for example: for example: Mark Vorobej, *The Concept of Violence* (New York, 2016).

widely held perception that enslaved women 'actively assented' to slavery and slaveholder domination, instead arguing that bondswomen created a 'profound consciousness of resistance' which they facilitated throughout various forms of opposition during moments of collective revolt, maroon insurgency, and individual acts of violent sabotage.[28] Davis lambasted the sparsity of writings relating to enslaved women and their resistance within early twentieth century historiography and her article was unique due to its challenge of male superiority through its inclusion of feminist epistemology as a means of examining slavery from a gendered perspective. Most notable in 'Reflections' is Davis' diversion from the conventional topic of everyday resistance by focusing particular attention to the role of women in overt forms of violent resistance and her assertion that enslaved women's resistance was equal to that of enslaved men. Early slavery historiographies largely neglected and downright refused to acknowledge enslaved women as resistors, making Davis' assertion that enslaved women were 'significant contributors' in the struggles against slavery even more extraordinary: 'she would not act the part of the passive female, but could experience the same need as her men to challenge the conditions of her subjugation.'[29] Whilst Davis confines her analysis to women's violence primarily within the context of revolts, this inclusion nevertheless corrected traditionalist literature which omitted discussions of enslaved women's roles in resistance. As one of the first studies in the twentieth century to include enslaved women's violence, this study represents a key source of inspiration for this thesis which builds upon this unpreceded analysis.

'Resistance to Oppression', published in 1983, built upon Davis's assertion that 'she who passively accepted her lot as a slave was the exception than the rule' through Mary Ellison's declaration that enslaved women were 'persistent rebels and insidious perverters of the tried and dishonest course of slavery.'[30] As a preliminary discussion of enslaved women's resistance, this study provided a vast overview of enslaved women's opposition to slavery, focusing on 'less incendiary or fatal methods of sabotage' which were 'constantly practiced by slave women.'[31] These included everyday acts of

[28] Angela Davis, 'Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves', *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1/2 (1972), 81-100, 82, 89.
[29] Davis, 'Reflections', 99, 96
[30] Davis, *Women, Race, and Class,* 19-20; Ellison, 'Resistance to Oppression', 56.
[31] Ellison, 'Resistance to Oppression', 58.

resistance, including evading work and feigning incompetence, alongside enslaved women's escape attempts to the North. Ellison also devoted attention to enslaved women's violence, incorporating snapshots of evidence from the WPA narratives, noting that threats of violence 'were far from uncommon'. Interestingly, the author outlined the importance of enslaved mothers in teaching their children methods of resistance which were not always covert in nature, as 'blatant resistance could be most effective on certain occasions'.[32] Whilst Ellison outlined how enslaved women resisted rape through a variety of violent and non-violent tactics, she also focused on enslaved women's engagement and involvement in organised rebellions. Ellison devoted particular attention to enslaved women's use of arson and poison, claiming that 'attacks on property' in the 1700s 'were almost as regular on attacks against the lives of harsh masters.'[33] As a preliminary opening discussion of women's resistance, this study provided an important glimpse into a long overdue and neglected area of study establishing a precedent in the topic of Black female resistance as an area of historical inquiry. Whilst this study provides an overview, rather than an in-depth examination, the inclusion of women's violence demonstrates that some early historians of gender and slavery recognised that women's resistance encompassed more than just covert and secretive acts of defiance. In the words of Ellison, 'the available evidence creates a very different image of the black slave woman than that most commonly projected of a strong but passive upholder of a corrupt way of life.'[34]

In line with the historiographical shift relating to women's resistance which Angela Davis and Mary Ellison established, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explicitly stressed the need to distinguish violent resistance from revolt, which she defined as: 'the continuation of violent resistance by other means.'[35] Fox-Genovese argued that in the early period of slavery in North America, enslaved women rejected slavery as 'whole heatedly' as men and they 'confronted their enslavement as uprooted individuals' through revolt in the 1700s and violent resistance in the antebellum era.[36] The author further asserted that in this early period of slavery women's violence 'was as varied and violent as the complexity of

[32] Ellison, 'Resistance to Oppression', 57.
[33] Ellison, 'Resistance to Oppression', 58.
[34] Ellison, 'Resistance to Oppression', 61.
[35] Fox-Genovese, 'Strategies and Forms of Resistance', 414.
[36] Fox-Genovese, 'Strategies and Forms of Resistance', 415.

the class, race, and gender relations of an emerging, frontier slave society.'[37] Fox-Genovese contended that in the eighteenth century forms of enslaved women's violent resistance emerged primarily through arson and poison, which would later 'characterize the entire antebellum period' due to the establishment of slavery laws and legislature which connected slavery to class.[38] This, according to Fox-Genovese, sharpened gender roles and cultural constraints between men and women, white and Black, on slaveholding sites which shaped and influenced the types of violent resistance women chose to deploy. The increasingly gendered division of labour and the specialisation of skills afforded enslaved women new opportunities for resistance, particularly poisoning. Although Fox-Genovese is correct in her assertion that the establishment of gender roles on slaveholding sites influenced the types of violence women performed against enslavers, it is an overgeneralisation to assert that their forms of violence predominantly consisted of 'arson and poison' (as chapters three and four demonstrate). Fox-Genovese further asserted that women's resistance was largely individualistic and whilst this is largely true, enslaved women also participated in collective moments of resistance through their establishment of fluid networks of violence which this thesis discusses in detail. 'Strategies and Forms of Resistance' was a publication ahead of its time due to its detailed inclusion of enslaved women's non-insurrectionary violent resistance, as Fox-Genovese stipulated that the 'challenging – and even murdering' of enslavers and overseers alike was 'not the monopoly of male slaves.'[39]

Betty Wood in her 1987 study, 'Some Aspects of Female Resistance', examined the different modes of enslaved people's resistance in Georgia Low Country between 1760 and 1815. Although Wood acknowledged many different factors influenced the frequency and character of resistance under slavery, her assertion that 'the slave's sex made absolutely no difference whatsoever in determining the will to resist' represented another crucial development within the study of enslaved women's resistance, as it debased gendered assumptions of female passivity and male aggression.[40] Although Wood predominantly focused on abscondence as the primary form of female resistance, instances of enslaved women's violent behaviour were additionally studied through the examination of Savannah gaol records.

[37] Fox-Genovese, 'Strategies and Forms of Resistance', 415.
[38] Fox-Genovese, 'Strategies and Forms of Resistance', 416.
[39] Fox-Genovese, 'Strategies and Forms of Resistance', 420.
[40] Wood, 'Some Aspects of Female Resistance', 610.

Wood located minimal evidence of enslaved women's violent crimes within these gaol records. Modern historians, however, now recognise the methodological challenges of uncovering enslaved women's lives within the traditional archive, acknowledging that these types of records are rarely a true statistical reflection of enslaved women's experiences and actions under slavery. Chapter One of this thesis discusses this in detail. With this in mind, however, Wood stipulated that the existence of these records alone is enough to challenge contemporary academic opinion, and to show that overt resistance was 'not the sole preserve of black men.'[41] Wood's basis for her argument that resistance was 'open to black men and women' originates from Georgia's slave codes which failed to differentiate between men and women and no provisions were facilitated for the lesser punishments of female offenders.[42] Wood therefore contended that antebellum Southern whites perceived enslaved men and women to possess the same rebellious capabilities.

Darlene Clark Hine addressed the gendering of resistance as a masculine preserve in early scholarship and sought to uncover the means in which enslaved women challenged slavery and expressed their 'political and economic' opposition to protect themselves and their family from abuse. Hine outlined the ways in which enslaved women experienced gendered and sexual oppressions under slavery and she framed her study of resistance in relation to how enslaved women challenged this 'dual form of oppression.'[43] Through the concept of 'refusal', Hine examined how enslaved women enacted a form of sexual abstinence through their avoidance or refusals of 'sexual intercourse'.[44] This is followed with an examination of how bondswomen used abortifacients as part of a 'female conspiracy' on Southern plantations. Hine's description of this collective form of opposition speaks to a network of resistance on Southern slaveholding sites which this thesis speaks to directly in later chapters. Hine then addressed the methodological difficulties of examining the extent of infanticide, yet she nevertheless acknowledged that the act itself was more significant than the low statistical evaluations. This represented a shift in historical thought surrounding emperial evidence in relation to understanding the lives of the enslaved under slavery in the context of sexual exploitation and opposition. Hine

[41] Wood, 'Some Aspects of Female Resistance', 622.
[42] Wood, 'Some Aspects of Female Resistance', 604.
[43] Hine, *Hine Sight*, 27.
[44] Hine, *Hine Sight,* 29.

emphasised the importance of enslaved women's 'sexual resistance', asserting that enslaved women's actions 'had major political and economic implications.'[45]

Amrita Chakrabarti Myers in her study, 'Sisters in Arms', analysed the variety of ways in which enslaved women challenged the system of slavery, highlighting the gendered nature of resistance on US sites of enslavement. Through her examination of the WPA narratives, a collection of evidence largely shunned by earlier historians due to issues of bias and unreliability, Myers forcibly disputed prior assumptions that enslaved women were insignificant resistors in the antebellum South. Myers evidenced how enslaved women 'resisted sexual assaults, feigned illness, were insolent, participated in work slow-downs and overt rebellions, murdered their masters, performed acts of sabotage, joined maroon colonies, and fled North to freedom.'[46] As the largest and 'most in-depth body of evidence' of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved, Myers' sole use of the WPA to uncover the nature and extent of women's resistance is significant.[47] Most significant is Myers' acknowledgement that resistance could be shared amongst enslaved men and women, and that resistance tactics did not have to exist on a gendered binary. A key aspect of Myers' work is her recognition of enslaved women's violence as a tactic of resistance in retaliation to sales, personal grievances, and sexual assault.

Although 'Sisters in Arms' utilises evidence from the WPA, Myers' methodological approach of using specific phrases and terms including 'female-only resistance' and 'violence' to search for narratives of women's resistance within the collection's index headings represents a methodological drawback in that respondents rarely referred to these specific phrases in their recollections of slavery and as such, key sources of evidence were omitted within this study. Despite this, however, Myers' study found that violent resistance was the largest category of female resistance within the WPA records.[48] Thus, Myers concluded that women utilised physical resistance against enslavers and overseers for a number of reasons, including protection, revenge, and to thwart sales. Myers forcefully refuted the widely held assumption that women were excluded from overt forms of resistance due to biological differences between the sexes, as she stipulated that 'gender did not keep women from

[45] Hine, *Hine Sight,* 34.
[46] Myers, 'Sisters in Arms', 142.
[47] Myers, 'Sisters in Arms', 146.
[48] Myers, 'Sisters in Arms', 159.

participating in the types of resistance in which slave men were involved.'[49] Myers therefore urged historians to 're-examine their definition of resistance' in order to incorporate the many different aspects of resistance beyond the realm of organised rebellions, making her study an important contribution in broadening prior conceptualisations concerning the nature of violence within resistance literature.[50]

The late twentieth and early twenty-first century witnessed a shift in the study of women's resistance to include discussions of Black female perpetrated violence in the context of criminality and the South's legal justice system. Through the prism of 'criminal resistance' in her 1999 article, 'Slave Women, Criminality and Resistance', Laura T. Fishman broadened ideas of criminality and opposition to include 'extreme forms' of enslaved women's resistance including infanticide, theft, arson, assault and murder.[51] Fishman argued that enslaved women's criminal actions represented a form of resistance as such acts were committed to protest social orders and to improve social conditions. Through 'crimes of resistance' Fishman explored how space, labour, and white initiated violence shaped overt forms of female resistance, concluding that enslaved women 'earned reputations as fighters.'[52] In '"Mad" Enough to Kill: Enslaved Women, Murder, and the Southern Courts', Wilma King probed the rationales behind enslaved women's violent actions against both enslaved people and slaveholding whites, while simultaneously examining how bondswomen's age, status, race, and mentality constituted crucial determinants in antebellum court verdicts throughout the slaveholding South. King examined enslaved women's use of violence in the South's legal framework to determine the various gendered oppressions which 'drove' enslaved women and girls to murder their oppressors and their own children, as well as how white societies and courts perceived their actions.[53] Although King errs on the side of caution in her discussions pertaining to the motivations behind enslaved women's acts of murder, devoting considerable time to psychological explanations, especially in cases involving infanticide, her study

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[49] Myers, 'Sisters in Arms', 168.
[50] Myers, 'Sisters in Arms', 167.
[51] Laura T. Fishman, 'Slave Women, Resistance and Criminality: A Prelude to Future Accommodation,' *Women & Criminal Justice*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2010), 36-65, 38.
[52] Fishman, 'Slave Women, Resistance and Criminality', 55.
[53] Wilma King, '"Mad" Enough to Kill: Enslaved Women, Murder and Southern Courts', *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 92, No.1 (2007), 37-56, 37.

nevertheless provides important contextual information relating to how enslaved women operated within the racial and patriarchal "justice" systems of the slaveholding states.

In his study on enslaved women and capital crime in antebellum Georgia, Glenn McNair similarly discussed enslaved women's use of deadly violence and the impact of gender on slavery and Southern legal systems. McNair raised various questions relating to enslaved women and Southern courts, including the frequency of enslaved women's crimes in the state of Georgia, the circumstances of their actions and whether gender impacted the treatment enslaved women received in the South's criminal justice system. McNair's analysis provides a quantitative insight into enslaved women's capital offences in Georgia from the Colonial period to the end of Civil War. McNair, however, provides conflicting arguments in relation to enslaved people's capital offences. For example, although he stressed the threat and dangerousness of enslaved women's resistance, McNair ultimately concluded:

> …slave women in Georgia rarely committed serious crimes. They lived their lives quietly, resisting their enslavement in everyday ways that created cultural and personal space for themselves and for their families. When these women did commit capital crimes they were of a limited variety, generally different in nature to those committed by men.[54]

In addition, some of McNair's assertions perpetuate traditional gendered understandings of violence. For example, although McNair provides multiple examples of enslaved women murdering enslavers with their bare hands, he untimely conceded that enslaved women disproportionately committed crimes of arson and poisoning, as such crimes required 'minimal physical strength' or the use of weapons.[55] As this study shall demonstrate, enslaved women used weapons and their bare hands in their facilitation of violent resistive action and certain capital crimes were related to circumstance rather than the strength of the perpetrator. McNair also attributed the higher lethality rate of enslaved women's capital offences to the presumption that enslaved women rarely engaged in 'fights' or 'spontaneous moments of violence' compared to enslaved men.[56] Whilst this study provides an insight into the violent activities of enslaved women, it nevertheless perpetuates gendered tropes concerning violence and differing levels of physical

[54] McNair, 'Slave Women',156.
[55] McNair, 'Slave Women', 140-141.
[56] McNair, 'Slave Women', 144.

strength between the sexes. Chapter One of this thesis explores gendered understandings of violence in further detail.

In *Setting Slavery's Limits* Christopher Bouton examined physical confrontations between whites and enslaved people in antebellum Virginia through the analysis of court records, WPA narratives, and executive papers. Bouton explicitly connects violence with enslaved masculinity due to ideas of honour and gender norms amongst enslaved communities which were, according to Bouton, shaped and influenced by white initiated violence. Although Bouton claims enslaved men 'linked violence with their masculinity', he also explores enslaved women's experiences under slavery and how they physically resisted overseers as well as female enslavers.[57] Bouton dedicates two chapters to enslaved women's use of violence consisting of bondswomen's resistance against the sexual exploitation of overseers, as well as enslaved women's violence within the domestic settings of the white Southern household. Bouton examines the circumstances behind enslaved women's use of physical force, as he argues bondswomen struck out to defend their femininity and protest against labour exploitation, sexual violence and unjust punishments. In these instances, Bouton asserts that bondswomen 'resisted in the same ways as men' noting that in these situations, 'bondswomen's violence was identical to that of bondsmen.'[58] In his attempt to document the plethora of ways in which enslaved women physically resisted, Bouton's inclusion of numerous primary cases involving enslaved women's violence creates more of a narration rather than an in-depth examination. Consequently, his analysis of these records lacks nuance and his quick-fire approach to lengthy primary records, especially those located in the traditional archive, mischaracterises examples of enslaved women's violence, especially in instances concerning sexual violence (see Chapter Four). This lack of close engagement, coupled with the rejection of modern epistemological approaches essential to methodological understandings of slavery including 'reading against the grain', is especially detrimental to Bouton's analysis in uncovering the motivations behind bondswomen's acts of violence. However, Bouton's attention to enslaved women

[57] Christopher H. Bouton, *Setting Slavery's Limits: Physical Confrontations in Antebellum Virginia, 1801-1860* (London, 2020), 36.
[58] Bouton, *Setting Slavery's Limits,* 60-63.

within his study on enslaved people's physical confrontations in challenging slavery is nevertheless commendable given the scarcity of monographs which incorporate enslaved women's violent resistance.

The 2020s witnessed a shift in historical thinking surrounding enslaved women's resistance with the emergence of social movements including Black Lives Matter spotlighting the legacies of racism and discrimination in the US. Rebecca Hall's graphic novel *Wake: The Hidden History of Women Led Slave Revolts* is an important new admission in the study of enslaved women's resistance and their use of violence. *Wake* examines enslaved women's violent resistance in colonial America through the prism of insurgency, with Hall unearthing multiple women-led conspiracies and revolts which historians had previously overlooked or branded as individual acts of murder. Published for a mass audience, this graphic novel understandably lacks in-depth analysis, yet Hall's deliberate spotlight on the gendering of violence within slavery historiography signals an important shift in the need for historians to be aware of perpetuating outdated gender norms in academic writings. Due to the deliberate or subconscious continuation of sexist gender roles, Hall deduced that historians remain 'oblivious' to the violent actions of enslaved women, describing an 'echo chamber' of historical thought which perpetuates gendered understandings of aggression.[59] Subsequently, Hall outlined how the actions of enslaved women have been overwhelmingly categorised within the prism of 'individual household violence' despite the involvement of multiple enslaved women, occasionally from different areas of enslavement, contending that:

> the reason this was never classified as a revolt was because it was a woman who led it. And historians teach us that women didn't do this kind of thing. They might kill their masters in some feminine fit of pique, but that's different from participating in, or even planning, a revolt.[60]

Hall's recognition of how gender roles 'warp' historiographical understandings of resistance resonates significantly with this thesis which particularly explores gendered understandings of violence in Chapter One. Whilst Hall's study focuses on violence within the framework of insurgency, her

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[59] Rebecca Hall, *Wake: The Hidden History of Women Led Slave Revolts* (Cornwall, 2021). This publication is a graphic novel and page numbers are unavailable.
[60] Hall, *Wake.*

deliberate spotlight on the violent participation of enslaved women in insurgency signals a clear shift in historical thought pertaining to the resistant activities of enslaved women in colonial America.

A pivotal intervention on enslaved women's violence from an antebellum legal perspective originated with Tamika Nunley's publication, 'Thrice Condemned: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Practice of Leniency in the Antebellum Virginian Courts'. Building on Wilma King's 2007 study, '"Mad" Enough to Kill' which examined how Southern courts perceived murderous enslaved women, Nunley examines the criminal proceedings of antebellum court trials, discussing how the gendered dimensions of race, age, gender and sex influenced the opinions and verdicts of Virginian courts. Crucially, Nunley argues that the homicide of white Virginians occurred beyond the confines of self-defense, as bondswomen's actions possessed 'personal meanings of resistance' serving as 'moments of retribution that contested years of wrongs inflicted on their lives, minds and bodies.'[61] Through her representation of enslaved women's violence as 'articulations of justice', Nunley adds a new dimension to the study of violence to include acts of resistance which were personal and strategic, rather than reactive forms of retaliation.[62] In keeping with her earlier study, Nunley's 2023 monograph, *The Demands of Justice,* examines court and trial records pertaining to enslaved women accused of capital crimes in Virginia from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Nunley explores how enslaved women navigated the legal contours of slavery and the Virginian legal system, which according to Nunley, operated to 'criminalise [enslaved women] and limit their access to legal justice.'[63] *Demands of Justice* particularly focuses on the aftermath of enslaved women's actions, analysing judicial processes and convictions. Nunley does, however, devote attention to the gendered circumstances of enslaved women's lives, outlining how race, gender, class, and age shaped enslaved women's actions in slavery and how these intersectional factors influenced verdicts within the South's legal culture in relation to theft, murder, arson, and infanticide. Nunley therefore provides an in-depth analysis of how racialised gender

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[61] Tamika Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Practice of Leniency in Antebellum Virginia Courts,' *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 87, No. 1, (2021), 5-34, 5-6.
[62] Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned', 6.
[63] Tamika Nunley, *The Demands of Justice: Enslaved Women, Capital Crime, and Clemency in Early Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 2023), 1.

stereotypes both influenced women's resistance and strengthened conviction rates in courts of law, especially in cases involving sexual assault and rape.

Expanding upon her previous work, Nunley considers enslaved women and girls' decisions and actions as 'alternative considerations of justice' which they articulated for their own varied and complex reasons.[64] The conceptualisation of enslaved women's violence as a form of justice provides an interesting addition to the study of women's resistance, broadening ideas of why enslaved women facilitated acts of resistance beyond the traditional paradigm of protection and self-defence. Enslaved women's own understandings and 'articulations of justice' broadens narrow interpretations of women's resistance and complicates ideas surrounding informal justice systems in the antebellum South which are typically perceived as the purview of whites, as enslaved women perpetrated their own versions of justice in the absence of legal protection. Nunley's insight into how Southern courts overwhelmingly operated to suit the financial interests of the slaveholding elite through the lens of enslaved women's capital offences has enabled this study to establish some discernible trends into why some enslaved women escaped capital punishment via sale and transportation. Age, status, and class were also crucial determinants in the target of women's' violence, helping to explain why court records pertaining to enslaved women's crimes against overseeing men occur less frequently in the traditional archive (see Chapter Two). Whilst this thesis does not overly focus on the consequences of enslaved women's violence, focusing instead on the act of resistance itself, Nunley's work provides a crucial insight into how whites and the South's legal systems perceived and reacted to acts of female violent resistance in the antebellum era.

Nikki Taylor's recent 2023 publication, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge: Enslaved Women's Lethal Resistance*, offers a fresh insight into gender and violence in American slavery. Through an interrogation of enslaved women's lives and experiences from 1681 to 1865, in a select number of American colonies and states, Taylor forcibly and graphically challenges prior assumptions surrounding enslaved women's resistance in slavery. Through a selection of specific case studies and judicial records, Taylor analyses the ways in which enslaved women used violence against their enslavers, focusing

[64] Nunley, *The Demands of Justice,* 2.

solely on bondswomen's use of murder and revolt against male and female enslavers through the prism of 'lethal resistance.' Each chapter is devoted to a particular trial record and capital case which highlights the individual or collective actions of enslaved women who murdered enslavers through a 'diversity of arms' including everyday objects, poison and fire.[65]

Brooding Over Bloody Revenge builds on the recent works of Rebecca Hall and Tamika Nunley in its assertion that enslaved women's resistance was not solely covert and nonviolent, signaling another important shift in historical thinking surrounding Black female agency and power. This study especially leans on Nunley's theorisation that enslaved women's resistance served as 'articulations of justice', with Taylor framing enslaved women's deadly violence within the framework of a 'Black feminist practice of justice'.[66] Injustice, argues Taylor, was a central motivating factor behind enslaved women's lethal resistance and throughout the entire era of slavery, enslaved women orchestrated their own 'smaller', 'local' plots of revolt through murder, which were premeditated in nature and highly calculated.[67] Taylor's idea that enslaved women's homicide of individual enslavers on separate slaveholding sites served as moments of revolt echoes Rebecca Hall's call for a broader meaning of insurgency to include the many different avenues of violence available to enslaved women.[68] Taylor's work adds another layer to understanding enslaved women's resistance under slavery, contributing to a changing scholarship which is less 'watered-down' and 'incomplete', and instead, perceives women's resistance as threatening, premediated, organised, and powerful.[69]

Overall, although discussions of enslaved women's violent resistance exist in the form of isolated articles and in contextual examinations of the South's legal justice system, a complete monograph devoted to the many different aspects of enslaved women's violent resistance throughout the antebellum slaveholding South remains to be written. This thesis intends to build upon these earlier and inspiring works in the effort to contribute to the growing body of literature on enslaved women's resistance. As stated at the beginning of this introduction, a plethora of source materials relating to

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[65] Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge: Enslaved Women's Lethal Resistance* (Cambridge, 2023), 8.
[66] Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned'; Nunley, *The Demands of Justice*.
[67] Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, 9.
[68] Hall, *Wake.*
[69] Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, 2.

enslaved women's violence exist and this thesis will shine a deliberate spotlight upon this neglected and overdue area of historical inquiry and conclusively demonstrate that enslaved women were pervasive users of violence in the antebellum South. This thesis disrupts the gendered language of resistance within contemporary and historical writings on antebellum slavery in the reconsideration of Black female opposition to overseers, enslavers, and the institution of slavery itself in order to reclaim the forgotten and the unsaid.

Chapter Outlines

The structure of this thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One, 'Violence, Feminist Thought, and the Archive', provides a contextual insight into the study of enslaved women's violent resistance, exploring the societal and historical factors behind the minimisation of enslaved women's violence within slavery studies, as well as the methodological approaches this thesis relies upon. Through the prism of modern interdisciplinary feminist thought, this opening chapter explores the influence of longstanding societal factors in the gendering of violence as an inherently masculine expression through sociologically constructed gender roles and patriarchal codes of behaviour. By providing an intersectional feminist perspective to the study of enslaved women's violence, this chapter appropriately grapples with how race and gender influence interpretations of Black women's violence through the formation of racialised stereotypes. Chapter One additionally explores how historical factors contribute to the mischaracterisation and malignment of women's violent resistance in historiographies of slavery, exploring how the North American abolitionist movement and the influence of "great male slave revolts" significantly shaped perceptions of enslaved people's resistance tactics and the gendering of physical action as the prerogative of enslaved men under slavery. The final part of this chapter outlines the analytical approach of this thesis and wrestles with the methodological challenges involved in analysing violence as a form of enslaved women's resistance in nineteenth and twentieth century primary materials. Particular consideration is paid to how this thesis overcomes the limits of the archive in the study of women's violence through the use of interdisciplinary methodologies and techniques, alongside more traditional methods of historical analysis.

Whilst the first chapter of this thesis provides a contextual background to the study of enslaved women's violence in the effort to explain the hesitancy of historians to ascribe a nature of violence to enslaved women, chapters two, three, and four specifically examine enslaved women's use of violence throughout the slaveholding South according to the target of their violence: overseers and enslavers. This work refrains from categorising white enslavers and overseers as victims of enslaved women's resistance; the word 'target' is used in place of 'victim' to avoid contentious discussions which could induce pity for those who subjugated and benefited from the enslavement of human beings. The term victim implies a sense of powerlessness and the inherent power dynamics of slavery complicate ideas of victimhood due to patriarchal and white supremacist forces. Exploring enslaved women's resistance according to the target of their violence, rather than the mode of their resistance, provides a nuanced interpretation of enslaved women's violence, enabling new insights into the phenomenon of women's physical resistance including the motives behind their actions and the techniques which enabled its facilitation. Whilst these chapters share similar discussions through their examinations of the most prominent modes of women's violence, each chapter provides a varied understanding of enslaved women's resistant activities through close textual analysis, highlighting both similarities *and* differences depending on the target, place, and labouring circumstances of enslaved women's violence. These three chapters share a similar internal structure in that enslaved women's violence is examined according to a logic of severity, establishing a continuum of violence ranging from assault to murder.

As explored previously in the literature review, particular attention has been paid to the consequences of enslaved women's violence in the context of criminality and the South's legal systems. In light of this, this study predominantly focuses on the actions of enslaved women, analysing how and why they used violence throughout the slaveholding South in the effort to redirect attention to the study of bondswomen themselves and their lived experiences under slavery. Whilst this thesis is mindful to include some specific examples of the results of women's violence in the effort to draw wider conclusions concerning formal and informal modes of slaveholder justice, it refrains from an in-depth discussion in order to focus on the motives and actions of enslaved women. An examination of the consequences of women's crimes would draw attention away from the focus of this thesis which aims to establish enslaved women at the centre of its discussion. This thesis also abstains from examining

enslaved women's violence in the context of insurgency. Firstly, historians have recently shed light into the participation of enslaved women in collective revolt with the works of Vanessa Holden and Rebecca Hall.[70] Secondly, this study focuses on enslaved women's use of non-insurrectionary violence at a localised level on individual slaveholding sites and frames women's actions in the prism of violent resistance in order to incorporate the wide variety of enslaved women's violent tactics beyond the confines of homicide.

The second chapter, 'Enslaved Women's Violence Against Overseeing Men', examines enslaved women as perpetrators of violence against overseers across the antebellum slaveholding South, exploring how enslaved women engaged in a variety of physical acts against white and enslaved overseers ranging from assault, weaponisation, genital mutilation and murder. Whilst this chapter analyses the responses of enslaved women to overseer perpetrated abuse and aggression, it also attempts to establish the key motivations behind bondswomen's violence despite the methodological obstacles inherent in exploring the personal lives of enslaved women. In doing so, this chapter reimagines the traditional motives ascribed to resistant enslaved women, broadening ideas of why enslaved women resorted to physical force beyond the conventional narratives of self-defence and protection exclusively in response to male rape and sexual assault. Enslaved women's violence against overseeing men challenges the gendering of violence, forcibly demonstrating that physical force and aggression, including sexual violence, was not the sole purview of white overseeing males nor enslaved men, as outlined in abolitionist materials, as bondswomen engaged in a variety of violent responses and navigated the volatile terrain of physical resistance with their own complex actions and motivations. Although this thesis as a whole refrains from an in-depth analysis on the consequences of bondswomen's violence, this second chapter demonstrates the ability of enslaved women to manipulate the profession of overseeing and alter the patriarchal dynamics of the South on a localised level to the benefit of themselves and others.

Building upon the foundational works of Thavolia Glymph and Stephanie Jones-Rogers which shone a deliberate spotlight on the violent and coercive techniques of white Southern women, Chapter

[70] Vanessa Holden, *Surviving Southampton: African American Women and Resistance in Nat Turner's Community* (Urbana, 2021); Hall, *Wake.*

Three explores enslaved women's violence against female enslavers.[71] Taking a life-cycle approach to Black female perpetrated violence, this chapter first examines how enslaved girls violently opposed their female enslavers, broadening ideas of childhood resistance in the antebellum South to include violent assault and revenge-based motivations. This is followed with an in-depth analysis of enslaved women's use of violence, establishing how spatial dynamics, the gendering of labour, and the ideology of the Southern home on antebellum slaveholding sites influenced and shaped women's violent resistance. Particular attention is paid to how enslaved women weaponised objects and implements within the slaveholding household, especially manufactured chemicals, drugs, and medicines. An examination of these non-plant based poisons, an overlooked area of research, widens our understanding of poisonings in the antebellum South in its demonstration that female slave networks possessed a diverse knowledge base of toxins which extended beyond traditional folk knowledge of natural, plant based substances. By focusing on the intersection of gender, mastery, and violence, this chapter builds upon historical and contemporary conceptualisations of Black and white female interactions on slaveholding sites to widen notions of white women's slaveholding and Black female opposition to gendered notions of mastery.

The fourth and final chapter of this thesis examines enslaved women's violent resistance against those whites at the very apex of Southern society: male enslavers. Enslaved women's destructive use of violence against the property of male enslavers through incendiary resistance is first outlined and followed with an examination of bondswomen's violence against the personhood of enslavers through a variety of techniques ranging from threats, assault, and murder. The entirety of this chapter challenges the traditional image of male enslavers who retained complete hegemonic control over the enslaved. This projection is most aptly contested through enslaved women's use of threats against slaveholding men which were sufficient to deter some male enslavers from confronting enslaved women either verbally or physically. This paints a contrasting image of slaveholding men complicating notions of power and violence under slavery. Chapter Four also contradicts the widely held assumption that

[71] Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York, 2008); Stephanie Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slaveowners in the American South* (New Haven, 2019).

women's violence, especially against enslavers, was predominantly individualistic. Enslaved women established networks of violence, enlisting the assistance of others including enslaved men and women on their primary sites of enslavement and neighbouring slaveholding sites. This chapter therefore builds upon the foundational work of Stephanie Camp through its exploration of geographies of containment which enslaved women transformed into arenas of resistance and violence through individual and collective means.[72] This creates a more fluid interpretation of enslaved women's movement and resistance through the demonstration that enslaved women's violence was also a shared and collective phenomenon.

Overall, the evidence presented throughout this study forcibly challenges the presumption that violence was an inherently gendered and masculine form of resistance, one which was rarely enacted by women on antebellum slaveholding sites. The primary records examined within all four chapters of this thesis irrefutably demonstrate enslaved women's violent resistance against overseers and enslavers, both male and female, perpetrated throughout the slaveholding South. This thesis signals the need for a broader consideration of enslaved women's resistance in the effort to extend and reconceptualise the gendered discourse of violence which exists within historical scholarship and indeed, popular imagination.

[72] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*.

Chapter One
Violence, Feminist Thought, and the Archive

> Due to gender norms in the black community and a desire to protect offspring and family members from home, women were less likely to be involved in outbreaks of violent resistance.
>
> - Catherine Armstrong, 2021.[73]

> Slave women in Georgia rarely committed serious crimes. They lived their lives quietly, resisting their enslavement in everyday ways that created cultural and personal space for themselves and for their families.
>
> - Glen McNair, 2009.[74]

> as mothers of children and nurturers of their families, they engaged in less confrontational or nonviolent forms of resistance that emphasized the need for creative struggle to survive dehumanization and abuse.
>
> - David Harry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, 1996.[75]

> It is probably safe to assume that women chose violent resistance, particularly that which involved fisticuffs, less often than did men.
>
> - Deborah Gray White, 1985.[76]

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[73] Armstrong, 'Black Foodways and Places', 621.
[74] McNair, 'Slave Women', 156.
[75] David Harry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (eds.), *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington, 1996), x.
[76] White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?,* 78.

In the words of historian Barbara Bush, 'the woman in slave history, like women in most cultures, has been the victim of historical invisibility.'[77] Although the history of enslaved women has made sizeable progress since the 1970s, aspects of enslaved women's lives and experiences remain forgotten and overlooked, not least the history of enslaved women's violent resistance in the US antebellum South. Enslaved women's violent resistance to slavery remains not only a marginalised topic of research, but actively contested within some slavery historiographies. For decades historians of slavery have forcibly promoted the assertion that violence belonged to the prerogative of enslaved men. The above historical statements demonstrate how entrenched the perception is of enslaved women's non-violence within historical scholarship from the 1980s to the 2020s, despite the work of previous historians who initiated preliminary explorations of bondswomen's violent resistive methods. Whilst some historians have explored and considered enslaved women's use of violence, especially in the context of antebellum legal proceedings, as outlined in the literature review, a complete monograph is yet to be written outlining the specific methods and objectives of enslaved women's violent opposition to overseeing men and members of the slaveholding establishment in the antebellum US. Primary records are replete with evidence of enslaved women using a variety of violent methods against overseers and enslavers throughout the antebellum South. This begs the question, why do some historians dispute enslaved women's participation in non-insurrectionary violent resistive action?

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the societal and historical factors behind historians' continued reluctance to acknowledge enslaved women's use of violence in the slaveholding South and to outline the methodological and analytical approach that this study relies upon. The historiography of slavery and resistance has witnessed sizeable progress in the past decade with historians analysing varied forms of enslaved women's resistance under slavery from reproductive refusal to women's involvement in collective insurrectionist activity. Despite these historiographical developments, however, historians remain cautious in ascribing 'everyday' violence as a legitimate mode of enslaved women's resistance to slavery. Whilst the final three chapters of this thesis analyse the varied forms of

[77] Barbara Bush, 'Defiance or Submission? The Role of Black Women in Slave Resistance in the British Caribbean', *Immigrants & Minorities*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1982), 16-38, 16.

bondswomen's violent resistance against overseers and enslavers (both male and female), this specific chapter establishes a contextual background exploring contemporary feminist explanations for society's aversion to violent women, antebellum influences upon this aversion, and how primary materials can be used to uncover Black female physical resistance.

Through an interrogation of contemporary feminist thought, this chapter firstly explores the cultural and societal factors which render women's violence marginalised, mischaracterised, and misrepresented. Feminist thinking is essential in order to both understand and wrestle with continued and outdated notions of female passivity in both popular thinking and modern academic scholarship. The masculinisation of violence within contemporary and modern slavery discourse is further examined in relation to gendered abolitionist propaganda and the notoriety of nineteenth century "great male slave revolts." These historical factors helped cement violence as a masculinised phenomenon in the public and historical imagination of the nineteenth century, enabling the historiographical construction of enslaved women's resistance as overwhelmingly covert and in-direct in slavery scholarship. Finally, this chapter probes the methodological challenges involved in analysing enslaved women's violence in nineteenth and twentieth century primary materials. Specific attention is paid to how historians can overcome the limits of the archive through modern and interdisciplinary methodologies in order to ground how this study wrestles with the history of Black female violence in the antebellum South. In doing so, this chapter challenges historic assumptions regarding female passivity and the minimisation of violent enslaved women in slavery discourse.

The Gendering of Violence & Modern Feminist Thought

> The fact that women can have a connection to violence, other than as a victim, often appears to be sacrilegious […] it violates the image of the gentle female (and worse, of the Good Mother) and upsets the dichotomised order of society.
>
> \- Marie-Jo Dhavernas.[78]

[78] Marie-Jo Dhavernas, 'Les femmes, la guerre et la violence', *La revue d'en face*, Vol. 11 (1981), 87-92, 87.

In 1981, feminist writer, Marie-Jo Dhavernas, lambasted the Women's Liberation Movement for their implicit participation in the myth of feminine non-violence. According to Dhavernas, feminist preoccupation on male dominance and violence committed *against* women endorsed the myth of female passivity, as 'the life-giving gender cannot want to give death.'[79] Dhavernas acknowledged the erasure and denial of women's violence, addressing key topics of concern regarding cultural norms and unconscious biases, yet Dhavernas is a rare and solitary voice. Feminist writings on female perpetrated violence are few and far between. Female led violence has been a contentious topic for decades; feminist scholars Coline Cardi and Genevieve Pruvost described the subject as a 'feminist taboo' and slavery historian Stephanie Jones-Rogers similarly labelled women's violence as 'ugly feminism.'[80] Scholars, historians, and feminist writers have been reluctant to acknowledge and discuss female led violence for a variety of complex and political reasons.

The Second Wave Feminist Movement shone a deliberate spotlight on male violence against women in the effort to garner public awareness and political action. In response to the exclusion of women of colour within mainstream white feminist discourse, 1980s' Black feminism highlighted the multidimensional nature of oppression, foregrounding the vulnerability of women of colour to male inflicted abuse. Angela Davis, for example, highlighted how white feminist movements ignored the victimhood of Black women who experienced intersectional sexual abuses from both Black and white men.[81] Modern day feminist movements continue to focus on the significance of male perpetrated violence, especially male sexual abuse against women through various social movements including the 2017 #MeToo campaign which highlighted women's everyday realities of sexual harassment across the globe.[82] The deliberate distancing of feminist movements from female violent action may stem from the urge to prevent antifeminist discourses from discrediting violence perpetrated against women in the effort to garner public awareness and political action. This is aptly demonstrated in the high-profile

[79] Dhavernas, 'Les femmes', 87.
[80] Coline Cardi and Genevieve Pruvost, 'The Violence of Women: Suppressions and Narratives', *The Social Control of Violent Women: Penal Field,* Vol. 8 (2011), 1-48, 3; American Historical Association (AHA), 'Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Histories in the Americas', 27th May 2021, Stephanie Jones-Rogers.
[81] Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, 175.
[82] It's important to note that even though the #MeToo phrase began with Black activist, Tarana Burke, white feminists quickly monopolised the movement despite women of colour being at a higher risk to sexual violence. Black women were significantly marginalised within the movement.

2022 defamation trial between Amber Heard and Johnny Depp. Despite evidence of violence and abuse perpetrated by both parties, allegations of Heard's alleged violence against Depp became the predominate focus of the trial and her claims of male intimate partner abuse and sexual violence were largely dismissed. Feminist movements across the globe lambasted the decision of the court, describing the *Depp v. Heard* verdict as a major setback for female survivors of male domestic and sexual abuse.[83] This high-profile case demonstrates why feminist movements may wish to distance from the rhetoric of female perpetrated violence.

However, despite this hesitancy, modern feminist writers within the last decade have tentatively begun to explore the topic of female perpetrated violence, chiefly focusing on the portrayal of violent women within mainstream and judicial discourses, in addition to the reasons behind society's entrenched aversion to female violent behaviour. This thesis draws inspiration from modern feminist theoretical writings pertaining to women's violence, most notably from sociologists Coline Cardi, Genevieve Pruvost, Marli-Elizabeth Hardman and Hillary Allen, amongst others. Due to a lack of theoretical writings on the phenomenon of women's violence, these studies are of critical importance in determining the reluctance of historians to acknowledge and analyse evidence of women's violence seemingly hidden in plain sight.

Whilst feminist movements foreground the vulnerability of women to patriarchal structures of abuse, the denial and minimisation of women's violence is nothing new; an association between the categories of "women" and "victim", and "women" and "nonviolence" has existed for centuries. Western cultures perceive violence as a gendered form of force and an inherently masculine expression. Cardi and Pruvost attest that masculinity and violence are perceived to be closely related due to clear distinctions in the gendered social roles assigned to men and women.[84] Patriarchal male codes of behaviour promote and condone the qualities of strength, ambition, self-reliance, competitiveness,

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[83] Observers expressed their concern that the case would reverse previous feminist efforts and discourage victims of abuse from seeking legal protection, as legal professor, Michelle Dauber, declared that the impacts of the trial 'had ramifications way beyond this case.' Gene Maddus, 'Why was Depp-Heard Trial Televised? Critics Call It 'Single Worst Decision' For Sexual Violence Victims', *Variety*, 27th May 2022. [https://variety.com/2022/film/news/johnny-depp-amber-heard-cameras-courtroom-penney-azcarate-1235280060/] (accessed 6th February 2023).

[84] Cardi and Pruvost, 'The Violence of Women'.

assertion, and aggression in men. In comparison, women are viewed to exhibit the opposing characteristics of dependence, gentleness, physical weakness, nurturing maternal tendencies and passiveness. Traditional gender roles thus encourage men to take physical action, whereas gender roles for women endorse passivity and restraint. Sociologically constructed gender roles 'dictated by the male order', according to M.E. Handman, accounts for attributing to women a 'nature' of pacifism.[85] The interpretation of women's behaviour through the prism of gender roles continues to uphold patriarchal frameworks and the social construction of women's non-violence. Cardi and Pruvost therefore contend that the denial of women's violence serves to reinforce the continuation of gender roles and patriarchal assumptions of power:

> The question is then, who has a vested interest in keeping women's violence out of sight? The denial of maternal desertion, of female paedophilia, or of infanticide allows gender norms to be reinforced by preserving the ideal of maternity and lending support to the idea of men's fundamental unfitness for taking care of children, thus encouraging women's delegation to the caring professions.[86]

Gender expectations alongside presumed biological "differences" between the sexes also perpetuates the belief that men possess an increased capacity for violent forms of behaviour due to hormonal differences, alongside height and weight disparities.[87] The clear distinction in the gendered social roles assigned to men and women further reinforces the supposed differences between 'masculine' and 'feminine' attributes. Consequently, *acts* of violence are gendered, as men are presumed to enact more aggressive forms of violence due to physiological differences between the sexes. Whilst men are frequently associated with more aggressive forms of violence including punching, hitting, and kicking, women on the other hand are perceived to enact 'lesser' forms of violence such as slapping, scratching

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[85] Marie-Elizabeth Handman, 'Violences et différences des sexes', *Editions Hazen*, No. 25 (1995), 205-217, 205.

[86] Coline Cardi and Genevieve Pruvost, 'Thinking Women's Violence', *History of the Present*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2015), 200-216, 205.

[87] Biology has often been used to explain the supposed differences in aggression between men and women. Testosterone has long been accredited as an explanation for aggressive male behaviour and impulsive violence. The belief that men are more inclined to turn violent and are more violent has become, according to Martin Wiener, 'a cliché of criminology'. Martin Wiener, *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness, and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge, 2004), 1. See also: Joachim Eibach 'Violence and Masculinity' in Paul Knepper and Anja Johansen (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Crime and Criminal Justice* (Oxford, 2016), 229-249.

and hair pulling during so called "cat fights." Thus, it is presumed that women perpetrate inferior forms of violence in comparison to the violence of men. 'Feminine' forms of violence are therefore subordinated to the violence of men who are seen as, in the words of Cardi and Pruvost, 'constituting the genuine branch of violence or the most dangerous one.'[88] Gendered categorisations of violence continue to shape perceptions of male and female violence as inherently different, with one superior to the other.

Furthermore, the motives for male and female violence are perceived to be inherently different, containing different characteristics depending on the sex of the perpetrator. Men are largely represented as committing acts of violence out of calculation or anger, whilst women on the other hand are largely thought to enact physical responses out of fear and desperation. Sociologist Hillary Allen asserts that society shares 'the underlying predisposition to view criminal women as victims than aggressors, more sinned against than sinning, more to be pitied than blamed.'[89] Belinda Morrissey also stipulates that women are construed 'invariably as victims rather than as actors in the crimes they commit.'[90] As 'victims', women are believed to primarily attack in self-defence, without premeditation. Thus, women's perpetrated violence is often associated within the remit of self-protection which is 'treated and placed outside the boundaries of crime' creating a gendered difference in relation to danger and agency.[91]

Pathological explanations frequently accompany discussions of female violent activity, as psychiatric reasons are sought for women who challenge and contradict standard feminine behaviours. Criminologist Lyndsey Black asserts that in the effort to explain "atypical" and "abnormal" occurrences of female violence, the pathological labels of 'mad, bad, or sad' are deployed to explain why women would be driven to commit acts of aggression.[92] The paradigms of 'mad, bad, or sad' serve to pathologize women's violent actions, reinforcing the notion that violent women are the exception to the

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[88] Cardi and Pruvost, 'Thinking Women's Violence', 207.

[89] Hilary Allen, 'Rendering them Harmless: The Professional Portrayal of Women Charged with Serious Violent Crimes' in Pat Carlen and Anne Worrall (eds.), *Gender, Crime and Justice* (Milton Keynes, 1987) 81-94, 93.

[90] Belinda Morrissey, *When Women Kill: Questions of Agency and Subjectivity* (London, 2003), 177.

[91] Cardi and Pruvost, 'Thinking Women's Violence', 204.

[92] Lynsey Black, 'The Pathologisation of Women Who Kill: Three Cases from Ireland', *Social History of Medicine*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2020), 417-437.

rule and driven to aggression due to exceptional circumstances. This serves to preserve the gender binary, as Cardi and Pruvost contend that such pathological discourses continue to uphold patriarchal gender roles and the social construction of women's non-violence.[93] These archetypes also serve to render women 'harmless' in the eyes of society as they deliberately 'neutralize' women's responsibility, agency and dangerousness.[94] This strategy of agency denial reinforces gender stereotypes surrounding female passivity and the gendered construction of violent motives, as pathological tropes alleviate women of being perceived as rational agents who commit acts of violence for logical and deliberate reasons. Societal expectations surrounding gender roles and patriarchal codes of behaviour continue to influence perceptions of who can and who cannot enact violent activity, and the types of violence deployed.

As this study focuses on the violence of enslaved Black women in the antebellum South, it is imperative that an intersectional feminist approach is undertaken in order to avoid a white exclusionary feminist perspective. With a focus on Kimberle Crenshaw's theorisation of intersectionality, this thesis takes an intersectional feminist approach through the exploration of how race and gender impact interpretations of Black women's violence.[95] Although white women are forced to contend with assumptions of passivity and weakness, discourses of victimhood are often racialised and Black women are predominately excluded from narratives of victimisation due to racialised perceptions of who can and who cannot be "credible" victims. Furthermore, whilst all women who engage in violent behaviour are subject to pathological discourses and misrepresentation, Black women experience additional negative representations which impact perceptions of Black female violence. Discussions of Black women's violence have the ability to incur further disparaging stereotypes which place assumptions of superior physical strength and aggression at the core of explanations. Whilst there have been many racialised-gendered stereotypical images regarding Black women throughout the decades, including the

[93] Cardi and Pruvost, 'Thinking Women's Violence'.

[94] Allen, 'Rendering them Harmless', 85.

[95] Kimberle Crenshaw first voiced the concept of 'intersectionality' in her 1989 study 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Issue 1, Article 8 (1989), 139-167. For further works on intersectionality, see: Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour', *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (1991), 1241-1299.

Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes which originated under slavery, the 'Sapphire' or 'strong, angry black woman' stereotype of Black women as overbearing, abrasive, stubborn and loud remains one of the most enduring depictions of African American women in modern society.

Originating under slavery, the 'angry Black woman' stereotype evolved from the 'Sassy Mammy' stereotype and from enslavers' false justifications that the exploitation of enslaved women was 'natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life' due to racist perceptions of enslaved women's physical and emotional 'invulnerability.'[96] Slaveholders stressed that enslaved women were physically equal to enslaved men as justification of their role as key agricultural labourers. However, the trope of the overbearing and 'angry Black woman' only came to popular fruition in the early twentieth century with the Sapphire stereotype which originated with the character of 'Sapphire Stevens' on the *Amos n' Andy* radio and television shows.[97] The character of Sapphire was depicted as an aggressive, emasculating and domineering wife whose 'primary goal was to castigate her African American husband.'[98] This popularised African American women as abrasive, angry, rude, and overbearing.

The oppressive Sapphire caricature evolved throughout twentieth century popular culture into the 'Angry Black Woman' and the 'Strong Black Woman' stereotype. These two stereotypes are often used interchangeably to negatively portray Black women as masculine and innately tougher than white women with an axe to grind. Black feminist author Michelle Wallace characterised this stereotype with the following description: 'She is hard on and unsupportive of black men, domineering, castrating. She tends to wear the pants around her house. Very strong. Sorrow rolls right off her brow like so much rain.

[96] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, 1991), 68; Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York, 1979), 138.
[97] The *Amos' n' Andy* show popularised the racial characterisation of Black women as emasculating through the Sapphire Stevens character. Created and acted by two white actors who mimicked and mocked Black people's behaviour and dialect, the show was described as an 'auditory minstrel show'. The show continued to be aired on the radio until 1960 and continued to be re-run on the television until 1966. Various characterisations of the Sapphire through the Angry Black Woman stereotype continue to be reproduced throughout television series and popular culture to this day. [https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/antiblack/sapphire.htm] [accessed: 21.11.2022].
[98] J. Celeste Walley-Jean, 'Debunking the Myth of the "Angry Black Woman": An Exploration of Anger in Young African American Women', *Black Women, Gender and Families*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2009), 68-86, 70.
The Sapphire image was further fuelled due to the social and economic status of many Black women in America who were forced to labour alongside their male counterparts. In the words of J. Walley-Dean, this prevented Black women 'from fitting the standard of femineity applied to upper-class white women.' Walley-Jean, 'Debunking the Myth',70.

Tough, unfeminine… Definitely not a dreamer, rigid, inflexible, uncompassionate, lacking in goals any more imaginative than a basket of fried chicken and a good fuck.'[99] Out of all the images and archetypes of Black women, Wallace concludes that the image of the strong and angry African American 'superwoman' remains 'intact and unquestioned in modern day society.'[100] Sociologist Philip Kretsedemas similarly argues that this disparaging stereotype remains embedded within modern society as 'a standard template for portraying all black women, regardless of social class, skin tone or body type.'[101] Tamara Beauboeouf-Lafontant explains that stereotypical assumptions of Black women as 'strong' and 'angry' deliberately minimises the complexity and difficulties of Black women's lives, and 'obscures the fact that many women experience economic and social powerlessness.'[102] Centring stereotypes as explanations for Black women's violence minimises the intersectional oppressions women of colour experience and confines Black womanhood to a narrow and limiting definition of bitter endurance. This thesis draws upon Black feminist epistemology in order to address and dispel racist stereotypes surrounding interpretations and representations of Black women's violence. Through the exploration of the motivations and circumstances of Black women's violent actions under slavery, this study rejects racist and offensive tropes of Black womanhood as explanations for enslaved women's violence in the nineteenth century. It categorically rejects the reduction of Black women's emotions to the simple and confining manifestations of strength or anger, and challenges these weaponised stereotypes to provide an inclusive and intersectional interpretation of enslaved women's violent experiences in the antebellum period.

It should be acknowledged that although slavery historiography is a continually evolving field of historical inquiry and great advances have been made in relation to gender and slavery, it is clear that traditional gender roles continue to shape and influence how historians perceive and characterise enslaved people's resistance, hence the assertion of some historians that women were 'less likely' to

[99] Wallace, *Black Macho,* 107.
[100] Wallace, *Black Macho,* 108.
[101] Philip Kretsedemas, '"But She's Not Black!": Viewer Interpretations of "Angry Black Women" on Prime Time TV', *Journal of African American Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2010), 149-170, 150.
[102] Tamara LaBoeuf-Lafontant, 'Strong and Large Black Women?: Exploring Relationships between Deviant Womanhood and Weight', *Gender & Society*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2003), 111-121, 117; Nadena Doharty, 'The 'Angry Black Woman' as Intellectual Bondage: Being Strategically Emotional on the Academic Plantation', *Race Ethnicity and Education*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2020), 548-562, 556.

engage in violent and physical confrontations.[103] Furthermore, enslaved women's violence is frequently categorised within the remit of self-protection or subject to pathological discourses with phrases including 'driven to kill' or 'induced to violence' featuring in discussions of enslaved women's violent resistance.[104] The inclusion of such phrasing reinforces gender stereotypes of women's supposed aversion to violence and that women who commit acts of aggression are inherently pathological, devoid of logic and reason. As this thesis shall demonstrate, an overwhelming amount of evidence exists demonstrating that enslaved women were users of violence under slavery, enacting physical force for a variety of personal and political reasons. Modern feminist thought can help explain the construction of women's supposed non-violence and partly explain the reluctance of historians to address this specific type of opposition. However, other historical factors including the US abolitionist campaign and the notoriety of "great male slave revolts" in antebellum popular culture are also worthy of consideration in the examination of the gendering of violence.

Slavery, Violence, and the Shaping of the Historical Narrative

To understand the marginalisation of violent enslaved women within slavery scholarship it is important to explore the historical factors which have contributed to the historiographical construction of women's non-violence within slavery discourse, exploring traditional narratives of the highly visible male icon within abolitionist propaganda and enslaved people's insurgency. The North American abolitionist movement played a significant part in shaping contemporary and modern perceptions of enslaved men and women's resistance. Despite the pervasiveness of enslaved women's violent resistance throughout the slaveholding South, traditional gender ideologies of the nineteenth century heavily influenced discourses of enslaved people's resistance within anti-slavery materials. Entrenched gender ideals in the nineteenth century rendered violence the purview of men and thus, abolitionist images and literature largely projected physical force as a male form of resistance to slavery. In doing so, abolitionist materials also aimed to counteract pro-slavery projections of Black men as emasculated and dependant figures who relied upon whites for protection and survival. According to historian Sarah N. Roth,

[103] Armstrong, 'Black Foodways and Places', 621.
[104] King, '"Mad" Enough to Kill'; Nikki Taylor, *Driven Towards Madness*.

'fugitive slave authors insisted on the admirable manliness of the African American men they depicted, including themselves as the protagonists of their own stories.'[105] The glorification of Black masculinity was accentuated and contrasted through the portrayal of Black women as passive and suffering subjects in need of male protection. This is aptly displayed in the 'The Parting' and 'Blow for Blow' within the 1863 image series, *Journey of a Slave from the Plantation to the Battlefield,* which depicts the lifecycle of an enslaved person from slavery to freedom after the Civil War (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Henry Louis Stephens, *Journey of a Slave from the Plantation to the Battlefield* (1863). Harvard Art Museums, Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 'Harvard Art Museums' [https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/330119?position=11] (accessed: 11th September 2022).

[105] Sarah N. Roth, 'How a Slave was Made a Man': Negotiating Violence and Masculinity in the Antebellum Slave Narratives', *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2007), 255-275, 255.

Throughout this printed series, the enslaved man is featured as the main protagonist. An enslaved woman features once in a harrowing auction scene titled 'The Parting' where she is separated from her husband. These 1863 illustrations demonstrate the gendering of resistance within anti-slavery materials. 'Blow for Blow' depicts an enslaved man beating his enslaver with a club in an act of violent resistance. This is contrasted with the image of the enslaved woman begging her enslaver, child in hand, not to be sold without her husband. These two illustrations epitomise the dichotomy between men and women's resistance strategies which followed a strict gendered binary within anti-slavery materials in the nineteenth century. Perceptions of who could and who could not deploy acts of violence were shaped and cemented throughout abolitionist visuals and literature in the US which adhered and appealed to traditional white gender behaviours.[106]

Visual and literary depictions of 'struggling' and 'unprotected' enslaved women and girls were a defining feature of the abolitionist movement. Portrayals of victimised enslaved women were used as emotive appeals, aimed at garnering sympathy for enslaved people, whilst simultaneously highlighting that slavery was a source of shame, degradation, and brutalisation. According to historian Camilla Cowling, 'women functioned as important receptors for appeals to the emotions' as descriptions of female suffering 'pushed specific gendered buttons' for abolitionist readers.[107] Enslavers' exploitation of enslaved women's mothering, coupled with bondswomen's lack of legal protection in comparison to white women and their exposure to sexual violence, rendered them ideal emotive examples of slavery's ruthlessness and exploitative nature. Male fugitive narratives especially employed a rhetoric of female fragility and male protection to highlight the sexual exploitation of bondswomen and girls and to adhere to appropriate gender behaviours which placed men as the providers and defenders of women. William

[106] It is worth noting that not all anti-slavery materials projected Black men within the framework of heroic masculinity. Passive depictions of enslaved men also featured throughout anti-slavery texts and visuals. Passive iconography of enslaved men featured in British abolitionist materials, most strikingly in Josiah Wedgwood's antislavery medallions which depicted an enslaved man begging for emancipation in a kneeling position. This image continued to be widely reproduced and replicated in British and US anti-slavery materials throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Victoria and Albert Museum*, 'The Wedgwood anti-slavery medallion', [https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-wedgwood-anti-slavery-medallion] (accessed: 11th September 2023). Abolitionist representations of Black women, however, were far more limited compared to the complex projections of Black manhood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
[107] Camilla Cowling, *Conceiving Freedom: Women of Colour, Gender, and the Abolition of Slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro* (Chapel Hill, 2013), 122; 108.

Craft, for example, extensively stressed the defencelessness of enslaved women to white perpetrated abuse:

> It is common practice in the slave South for ladies, when angry with their maids, to send them to the calaboose, . . . and have them severely flogged; and I am sorry it is a fact, that the villains to whom those defenceless creatures are sent, not only flog them as they are ordered, but frequently compel them to submit to the greatest indignity. Oh! If there is any one thing under the wide canopy of heaven horrible enough to stir a man's soul, and to make his blood boil, it is the thought of his dear wife, his unprotected sister, or his young and virtuous daughters, struggling to save themselves from falling a prey to such demons![108]

Anti-slavery literature particularly stressed the sexual victimisation of enslaved women and girls in very graphic terms. Solomon Northup emphasised the sexual abuse of enslaved women on his former site of enslavement in Louisiana, highlighting the experiences of Patsey who endured years of rape at the hands of her 'licentious master', Edwin Epps.[109] However, once the documentation of her abuse is finalised, Patsey is 'effectively silenced' from the remainder of Northup's autobiography.[110] According to historian Salamishah Tillet, Patsey's absence demonstrates that her 'primary function was to substantiate Northup's abolitionist agenda and appeal to the sympathy of white northerners who had yet to convert to his cause.'[111] Male authored accounts narrated the victimisation of women whilst reinforcing the heroism of enslaved men who endured or overcame the perils of slavery through masculine strength and fortitude. Whilst Solomon emphasises Patsey's inner strength to attain freedom, her sexual and physical victimisation are central to her literary representation which, in the words of Tillet, 'enable Solomon to emerge as a thoroughly uncompromised hero at the expense of enslaved Black women'.[112]

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[108] William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom, or the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London, 1860), 8.
[109] Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years*: *Narrative of Solomon Northup. A Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, From a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River in Louisiana* (New York, 1853), 189.
[110] Salamishah Tillet, "'I Got No Comfort in This Life": The Increasing Importance of Patsey in "12 Years a Slave"', *American Literary History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2014), 354-361, 356.
[111] Tillet, "'I Got No Comfort in This Life"', 356.
[112] Tillet, "'I Got No Comfort in This Life"', 357.

Historian Frances Foster highlights the unequal depiction of enslaved men and women within enslaved people's narratives, stating that Black men's rigid portrayals of enslaved women were based on nineteenth century gender standards for defining women in relation to manners, morals, passivity, and motherhood.[113] Foster contends that these abolitionist tropes created generic, one dimensional portrayals of enslaved women who were side-lined to the periphery as victimised 'secondary characters.'[114] Although it should be acknowledged that abolitionist narratives typically adhered to a first-person style of writing, it is significant that men make up the majority of abolitionist first-person accounts and thus, women are predominately subsumed within these narratives as supporting secondary characters. Enslaved women were firmly placed within the victim paradigm which aimed to engender ideas of enslaved people's humanity to a predominantly white, middle class, Northern audience. Thus, Foster stipulates that male authored narratives of slavery feature a 'monolithic characterisation of slave women as utter victims.'[115] The characterisation of enslaved women as stoic and perpetual sufferers was central to the abolitionist campaign which adhered to a strict 'prose of passivity' within the constriction of traditional feminine virtues.[116] Stoicism, altruism, sentimentalism and endurance are the major feminine qualities featured throughout fugitive accounts.

According to historian Maria Helena Pereira Toledo Machado, anti-slavery literature in the US, written for a female readership, 'underlined the role of womenfolk in resolving social conflicts, which were to be tackled with patience, resignation, altruism, and a Christly life.'[117] In doing so, these abolitionist materials invoked the image of enslaved women as enduring, passive victims who were inherently non-violent. Depictions of violent Black women threatened abolitionist propaganda which played into white tropes of female passivity and in order to garner white middle class sympathies. Thus, these narratives emphasised the victimisation of enslaved women to avoid presenting enslaved women

[113] Frances Foster, '"In Respect to Females . . .": Differences in the Portrayals of Women by Male and Female Narrators', *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1981), 66-70.
[114] Foster, '"In Respect to Females . . ."', 67.
[115] Foster, '"In Respect to Females . . ."', 67.
[116] Rebecca Hall, 'Not Killing Me Softly: African American Women, Slave Revolts, and the Historiographical Constructions of Racialised Gender', University of California, Dissertation (Santa Cruz, 2004), 42.
[117] Marie Helena Pereira Toledo Machado, 'Maria Firmina dos Reis, Nineteenth-Century Maranhao (Brazil)' in Erica L. Ball, Tatiana Seijas and Terri L. Snyder (eds.), *As If She Were Free: A Collective Biography of Women and Emancipation in the Americas* (Cambridge, 2020), 344-356, 351.

as an additional threat to white Americans. To portray women's resistance within the prism of violence would disrupt and challenge longstanding gender roles and derail abolitionist discourse which relied upon the rhetoric of female passivity.

Read from our present-day perspective, male authored fugitive narratives contain a sexist subtext in addition to other excesses and narrative flaws. However, female authored accounts of slavery provide a more complex portrayal of enslaved women. Whilst abolitionist narratives expose the cruelty and abuse of enslavement, female fugitive authors do not centre their identity and experience on suffering alone. Self-emancipated enslaved women celebrate and discuss their defence and fight against slavery, as well as their achievements in securing freedom. Elizabeth Keckley, Mattie Jackson, Harriet Tubman, Ellen Craft and Harriet Jacobs, among others, frame themselves as far more than victims of degradation and sexual abuse. Spirit, courage, tenacity, faith, bravery and violence are abound in enslaved women's literary works. These women portray a greater variety of experiences under slavery and they centre themselves as heroic actors rather than passive victims. The contrasting characterisations of bondswomen as victims and protagonists in abolitionist narratives reflects the differences and values between male and female authors. Women characterise themselves as survivors of slavery, not just as primary victims. Although female authored autobiographies feature a more rounded and agentic depiction of enslaved women and their various defences against slavery, these works are few in number.

Whilst anti-slavery discourse stressed the victimisation of women, male abolitionist materials gendered physical resistance as an inherently masculine endeavour to align with white patriarchal codes of behaviour. David Walker's 1829 Appeal, for example, only championed Black men's use of violence as a legitimate response to white abuse and Black subjugation. Walker promoted violence as a legitimate form of self-defence against tyrannical enslavers and political power, as he urged: 'Therefore, if there is an *attempt* made by us, kill or be killed.'[118] Walker explicitly framed violent resistance as an exclusively male activity as he expressed to his readers: 'Are we MEN!! – I ask you, O my brethren!

[118] David Walker, *Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, a Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1929* (Boston, 1830), 30.

Are we MEN?'[119] This gendered appeal is mirrored in other abolitionist speeches and writings. Anti-slavery monologues followed similar speech patterns and images of resistance which were explicitly gendered. Henry Highland Garnet similarly directed his calls for violence solely towards enslaved men at the National Negro Convention in Buffalo, 1843. Garnet extolled the virtues of using violence amongst enslaved men and singled out women as the primary victims of slavery's evils. Garnet lambasted the masculinity of those enslaved men who failed to protect their loved ones from abuse, as he lectured: 'You act as though your daughters were born to pamper the lusts of your masters and overseers. And worse of all, you tamely submit, while your lords tear your wives from your embraces, and defile them before your eyes.' Garnet finalised his account with a call to action as he pleaded: 'In the name of God, we ask, are you men?'[120] Emotive language typically accompanied violent imagery as physical resistance and Black manhood were inextricably intertwined within abolitionist discourse.

According to historian David Doddington, Garnet's 'explicitly gendered' speeches were 'not unique to Garnet', as 'contemporaries from both pro and anti-slavery positions consistently utilised a gendered discourse to decry or defend slavery, as well as to explain, justify, and criticise the acts of enslavers and enslaved alike'.[121] An 1855 article from the abolitionist publication, *The Liberator,* for example, asserted that, 'Southern households live in constant terror of fire and of poison, the two weapons by which the slave revenges *himself* on the whites' [emphasis added].[122] Descriptions of violent resistance deployed a gendered language which categorised physical resistance as an expression of manhood. After the failure of the 1840s pacifist campaign and the introduction of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law which endangered self-emancipated enslaved people in the North, Sarah N. Roth stipulates that the abolitionist movement of the 1850s especially glorified violence as a form of resistance and self-defence for enslaved men.[123] The glorification of male violence is reflected throughout the

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[119] Walker, *Four Articles,* 19-20.
[120] James Jakinski, 'Constituting Antebellum African American Identity: Resistance, Violence, and Masculinity in Henry Highland Garnett's (1843) "Address to the Slaves"', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 93. Issue 1 (2007), 27-57, 37.
[121] David Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity in the American South* (Cambridge, 2018)*,* 1-2.
[122] Nehemiah Adams, 'Selections, Rev. Nehemiah Adams On Slavery, From the Christian Examine', *The Liberator,* Vol. XXV, No. 2, 12th January, 1855. *Fair Use Repository*, [http://fair-use.org/the-liberator/1855/01/12/the-liberator-25-02.pdf] (accessed: 12th October 2022).
[123] Roth, 'How a Slave was Made a Man', 268.

autobiographical writings of self-emancipated enslaved men. Frederick Douglass, for example, pridefully documented his physical confrontation with his enslaver, Mr. Covey, as the 'turning point' in his masculinity, describing how his resolution to physically resist 'revived within me a sense of my own manhood.'[124] In a later autobiographical work, Douglass described this episode with the forceful affirmation: 'I was nothing before; I WAS A MAN NOW.'[125] The capitalisation of this affirmation served to emphasise Douglass's resolution that resistance and violence was a route to masculine identity from 'slavehood to manhood.'[126]

The abolitionist campaign also gave rise to the formulation of gendered images of violence. Abolitionist materials especially gendered combat and the weaponisation of objects as a masculinised trope, as demonstrated in Henry Bibb's 1849 autobiographical illustration (see Fig. 2). Bibb is depicted bravely defending his family during their escape with a knife from a pack of ferocious wolves, whilst his wife cowers behind him clutching their child in fear. Bibb described his wife as 'trembling like a leaf' and 'looking up to [Bibb] for protection,' who in stark comparison, brandished his knife 'excited' to defend his 'little family from destruction.' Although Bibb acknowledged that his wife eventually armed herself with a club, it was Bibb who 'rushed forth…to fight off the savage wolves.'[127] Abolitionist materials strongly associated violence strengthened through the use of weapons with manhood, as Bibb framed himself as the main protagonist in his account, evoking 'universal images of manhood' predicated on the responsibility of men to protect female family members.[128]

[124] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston, 1845), 64.
[125] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom. Part I. Life as a Slave. Part II. Life as a Freeman* (New York, 1855), xxxv.
[126] Aisha Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba: La Escalera and the Insurgencies of 1841-1844* (Chapel Hill, 2015), 142.
[127] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York, 1849), 124-127.
[128] Jakinski, 'Constituting Antebellum African American Identity', 36.

Figure 2: Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York, 1849), 125.

Published images of male fugitives resisting slave-hunting canines were, according to historian Bill L. Smith, ‘one of the most widely used and highly effective abolitionist tropes of the antebellum period’.[129] Images of self-emancipating enslaved people frequently depicted enslaved men asserting their strength whilst defending themselves and their loved ones from weaponised canines. In a strikingly similar image to Bibb’s illustration, ‘The Bloodhound Business’ depicts a fugitive man defending his wife and daughter from a pack of dogs (see Fig. 3). Abolitionist writings and autobiographical images, as displayed in Henry Bibb’s account, heavily influenced the production of other visuals relating to slavery and resistance. *The Hunted Slaves* similarly illustrates a self-emancipated man defending his frightened female partner from three ferocious slave-hunting canines with an axe (see Fig. 4). These images showcase the bravery of enslaved men and their ability to use physical force in the face of danger. In stark contrast to the bravery of the men, the women in these images shield themselves from danger behind the attacking men, defenceless, reliant, and non-violent. Inspired by abolitionist writers and

[129] Bill L. Smith, ‘“Open jaws of this monster-tyranny”: Abolitionism, Resistance, and Slave Hunting Canines’, *American Nineteenth Century History*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2022), 61-92, 81.

artists, gendered depictions of resistance continued to be produced and replicated throughout the anti-slavery movement and beyond into the postbellum era. Violence was for men, and men alone.

Figure 3: ‘The Bloodhound Business’, *The Suppressed Book about Slavery! Prepared for Public 1857, Never Published until the Present Time* (New York, 1864). Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library Digital Collections. [https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-75e9-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99] (accessed: 28th October 2022).

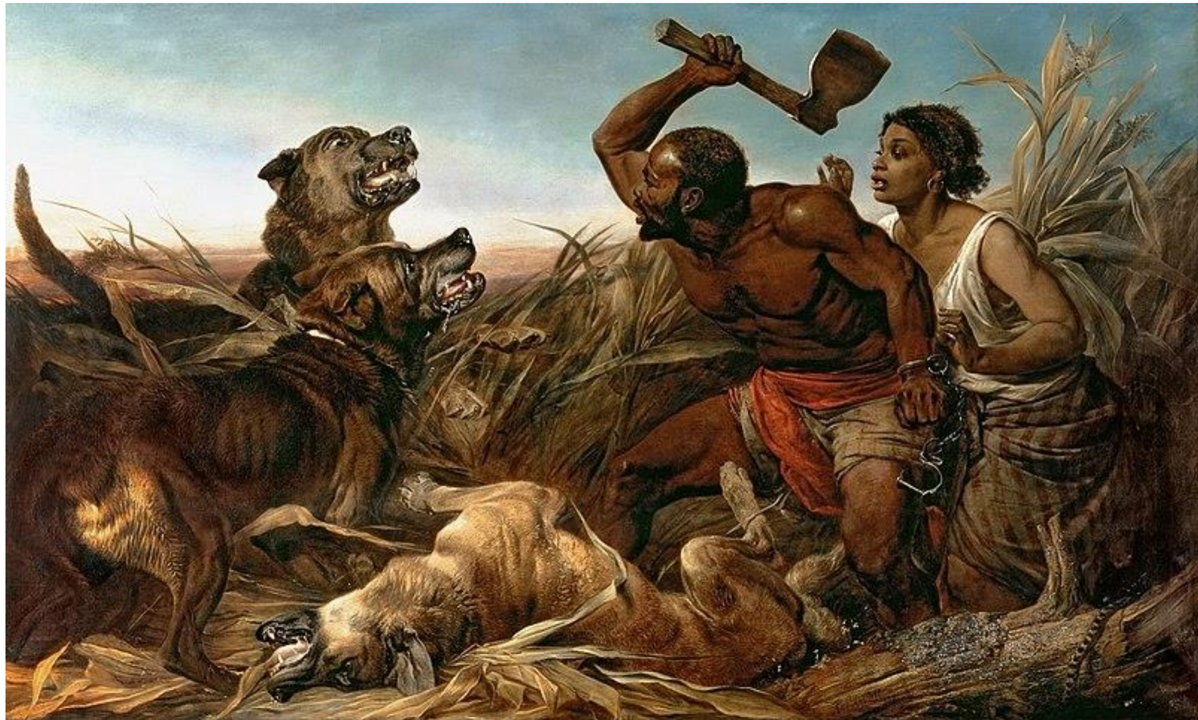

Figure 4: Richard Ansdell, *The Hunted Slaves* (1861). Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington D.C. [https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2009.34ab] (accessed: 28th October 2020).

The highly visible "great male slave revolts" of the colonial and antebellum period also reinforced the perception that violent resistance was the prerogative of enslaved men under slavery. Traditional slavery historiographies gender insurrection as an exclusively male activity. Eugene Genovese in 1979, for example, described revolt as 'a specialist political and insurrectionary male responsibility'.[130] David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine also stipulated that enslaved women 'engaged in less confrontational or nonviolent forms of resistance', including insurrection, due to their roles 'as mothers of children and nurturers of families.'[131] Furthermore, armed insurrections are traditionally referred to by the names of their male leaders; 'The Vesey Rebellion', 'Gabriel's Rebellion' and 'Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion' reflect the centrality of individual male leaders within slavery historiography. Vanessa Holden proposes that historians refer to the events surrounding Nat Turner in

[130] Hall, 'Not Killing Me Softly', 3.
[131] Gaspar and Hine (eds.), *More Than Chattel,* x.

1831 as the 'Southampton Rebellion' in order to acknowledge the collective resistive actions of enslaved women and children who assisted in its production. Holden contends that this creates a broader definition of enslaved people's resistance which 'opens up new possibilities for narrating' rebellions.[132] The traditional assumption that only enslaved men planned and participated in insurrectional activity nevertheless genders the phenomenon of violence as a masculine occurrence in slavery within both academic scholarship and public imagination, 'leaving the impression that women rarely participated in collective, organised, violent acts of resistance.'[133] Uprisings are firmly categorised as the preserve of men and thus Nikki Taylor contends that enslaved women have been 'relegated to the side-lines as mere witnesses or wives of the main organisers of these plots.'[134] Discourses on enslaved people's resistance within slavery scholarship therefore frame enslaved women not as co-conspirators, but as everyday resistors who engaged in predominantly "feminine" forms of non-violent or reproductive protest.[135]

The supposed "absence" of enslaved women within historical records pertaining to antebellum revolts represents a main argument behind the historiographical consensus that enslaved women were not strategically involved in violent insurrection. Some historians contended that enslaved men actively excluded enslaved women from organisational roles and as active participants on the frontline due to the influence of traditional white gender roles.[136] Historian James Sidbury, for example, asserts that enslaved women are absent from plots because they were 'organised in the masculine sphere.'[137] Sidbury further argued in his analysis of the 1800 Richmond conspiracy that Gabriel Prosser 'chose no women' because the 'conspirators may not have trusted Black women.'[138] Although Sidbury went on to

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[132] Holden, *Surviving Southampton*, 6-7.
[133] Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge,* 4.
[134] Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge,* 4.
[135] For further information on 'everyday' and reproductive resistance, see, for example: Bauer and Bauer, 'Day to Day Resistance to Slavery'; Camp, *Closer to Freedom*; Perrin, 'Resisting Reproduction'; West and Shearer, 'Fertility Control'.
[136] For an analysis of gender roles and gendered identities in enslaved communities in the antebellum South, see, for example: Rebecca Griffin, 'Courtship Contests and the Meaning of Conflict in the Folklore of Slaves', *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (2005), 769-802.
[137] James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (Cambridge, 1997), 92.
[138] Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords,* 90.

contend that the 'case for distrust is far from decisive', other historians echoed his line of thinking.[139] Edward Pearson similarly stipulated that enslaved women were deliberately excluded from the Denmark Vesey rebellion in Charleston, 1822, rendering enslaved women with a 'shadowy presence' in the plot.[140] These historians thus characterised violent insurrection as a masculine activity in slavery resulting in the elision of enslaved women in secondary accounts of revolts.

The presumption that enslaved women would or could not participate in violent rebellion also stems from the possibility that contemporary white officials and state authorities actively ignored or unknowingly turned a blind eye to enslaved women's involvement due to gender-based expectations regarding violence. It could be that officials were incapable of viewing enslaved women as violent resistors, as Jennifer Morgan argues that observers 'routinely failed to see enslaved women in the public space of rebellions' and gender expectations, according to Rebecca Hall, shape 'society's ability to see and record' violent acts.[141] Aisha Finch also stipulates that white officials 'presumed male slaves were of greatest interest' to interrogators.[142] This could account for enslaved women's absence within the official archive. It is also worth noting that enslaved women's involvement in US conspiracies and insurrections remains a topic of historical neglect, with the exception of historians Rebecca Hall and Vanessa Holden who offer new methodological approaches concerning enslaved women's rebellious resistance.[143] Holden and Hall challenge the perception of the all-male revolt and call for the inclusion of women in a broader definition of enslaved people's resistant activities, as it can be argued that historians overly focus on the most prominent uprisings in the antebellum South which are few and far between. Hall's definition of revolt as 'any violent, coordinated act of resistance that kills or attempts to kill slave owners or their agents' encourages a more inclusive approach to the study of violence.[144]

Moreover, many primary records pertaining to antebellum slave conspiracies remain to be re-examined, re-read and re-analysed. Holden unearthed multiple documents pertaining to enslaved

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[139] Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords*, 90.
[140] Edward Pearson, *Designs Against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 129-130.
[141] Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery,* 211; Hall, 'Not Killing Me Softly', 23.
[142] Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion,* 150.
[143] Holden, *Surviving Southampton*; Hall, *Wake.*
[144] Hall, 'Not Killing Me Softly', 4.

women's violent insurrectionist activity in the 1831 Southampton Rebellion and Hall uncovered multiple female-led slave conspiracies in the colonial and antebellum US through the examination of previously overlooked sources. Hall contends that various sources pertaining to violent revolt are overlooked in historical scholarship because they were 'planned and led by women.'[145] Hall stipulates that preconceived gender assumptions amongst historians has led to an 'echo chamber' of historical thought surrounding violent resistive action.[146] Consequently, 'historians remain oblivious to the violent agency of enslaved women' who continue to be constricted within a 'prose of passivity.'[147] Hall denotes that this prose of passivity dominates historians' interpretation of sources due to their predisposition to view women as unable or unwilling to engage in violent acts.

The visibility of male centred revolts within public contemporary images, as displayed in the 'Horrid Massacre in Virginia', overshadows enslaved women's use of non-insurrectionary violent resistance within secondary historiography (see Fig. 5). Collective insurrections which resulted in the killing of multiple whites marked one of the most dramatic and visible forms of enslaved people's resistance under slavery. Thus, non-insurrectionary violent resistance is not subject to the same level of historical scrutiny and analysis; "day-to-day" acts of violent resistance are categorised as inherently different from organised and collective protests of revolt. Localised acts of physical resistance have been largely stripped of their political significance due to the notoriety of male-led insurrections. For instance, Genovese asserted that, 'resistance and violence in daily affairs usually represented the settling of personal or local scores rather than a collective attempt to overthrow an overwhelmingly white power.'[148] He further stipulated, 'strictly speaking, only insurrection represented political action…since it alone directly challenged the power of the regime.'[149] Non-insurrectionary acts of violence are not glorified and honoured to the same extent as collective revolutionary activity and this has the unintentional effect of creating a hierarchy of resistance which significantly marginalises other forms of individual and collective violence enacted on slaveholding sites throughout the US South.

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[145] Hall, *Wake*.
[146] Hall, *Wake*.
[147] Hall, 'Not Killing Me Softly', 5.
[148] Eugene Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, 1992), 6.
[149] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 614.

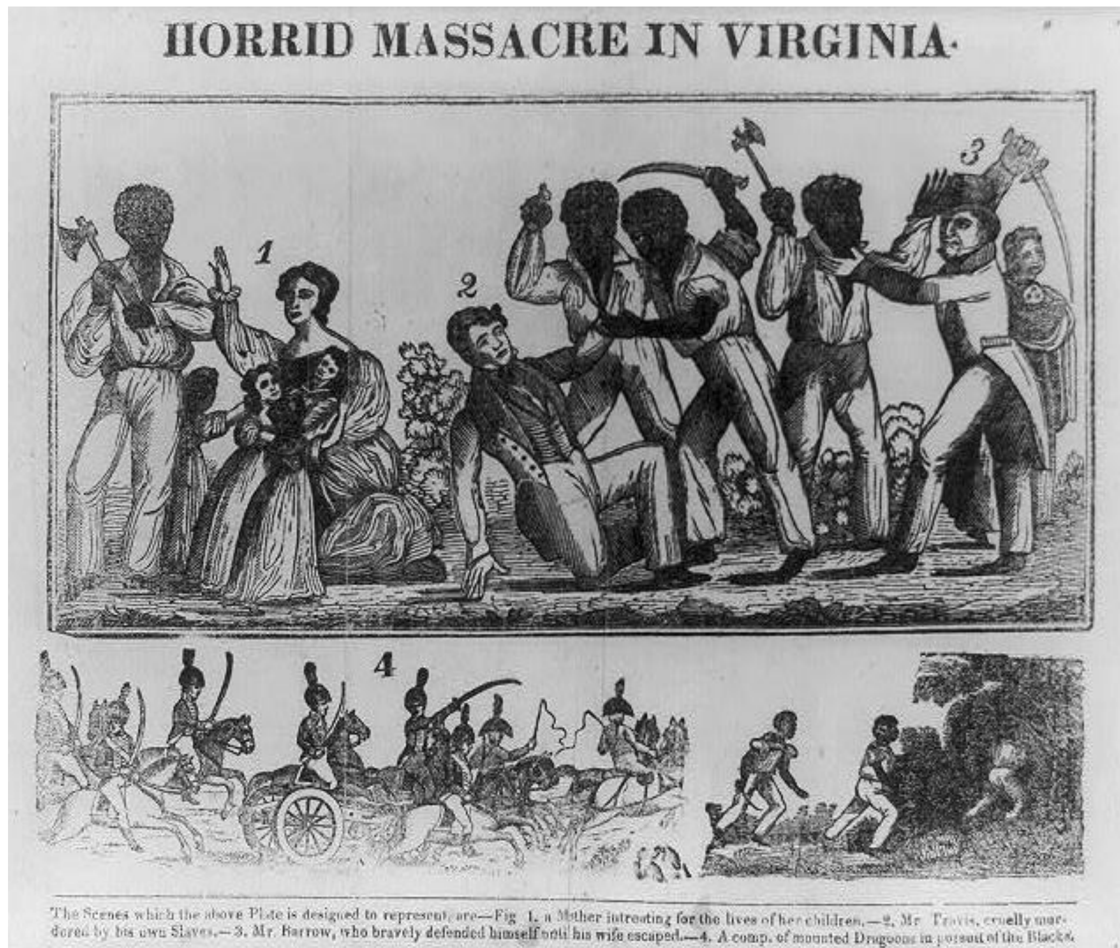

Figure 5: 'Horrid Massacre in Virginia', *Authentic and impartial narrative of the tragic scene which was witnessed in Southampton County* (New York, 1831). Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Washington D.C. [https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a39248/] (accessed: 20th June 2022).

<u>Methodological Approach: Uncovering Enslaved Women's Violence</u>

> When she had about finished a story about how one of the slave woman, "bust de skull" of the head of her master, "cause she was nussin a sick baby ad' he tell her she got to git in dat field an hoe" and with the gory details on what the shovel did to the white master's head, it was time for the visitors to close the interview.
>
> - WPA interview with Mollie Moss, Tennessee.[150]

[150] Mollie Moss, FWP, Tennessee Narratives, Vol. 15, 4-5.

In 1937, Tennessee, Mollie Moss recalled in her Works Progress Administration interview an enslaved woman's deadly use of violence against a male enslaver. Moss graphically detailed how the anonymous enslaved woman used a shovel to 'bust' open the skull of the 'white master's head' after he forced her to labour in a field rather than tend to her sick child.[151] From Moss's interview it is possible to elicit how the enslaved woman perpetrated her act of violence and the motivations behind her deadly use of force. Histories of enslaved women's violent resistance are not difficult to uncover within the WPA narratives - Moss was one of many interviewees who candidly recalled enslaved women's use of violent resistance. Indeed, these interviews represent the largest body of evidence that this thesis draws upon; they are replete with an array of evidence pertaining to enslaved women's varied use of violence against overseers and enslavers, demonstrating the pervasiveness of this type of resistance amongst enslaved women in the slaveholding South. Interviewees, including Mollie Moss, recalled memories, stories, histories and eyewitness accounts of enslaved women's violence in great detail to their predominantly white, middle-class interviewers, whilst other respondents recollected instances of Black female violence in casual, throwaway remarks.[152] Although some historians warn against the use of WPA narratives as a primary source, citing issues of reliability, memory loss, and dissemblance, acts of enslaved women's violence remained firm in the memory of respondents who were able to recollect memories of their own use of violence and that of other enslaved women.[153] Indeed, the sheer volume

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[151] Moss, Tennessee Narratives, 4-5.

[152] Paul Escott stipulated that 52.5% of the WPA narratives were conducted by white interviewers, compared to 17.2% by Black interviewers. Paul Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill, 1979), 10. It is possible that the race of the interviewer affected both the sharing of information and the documentation of testimony. Black interviewers may have been less inclined to redact and censor testimony which comprised of details pertaining to resistance and violence compared to their white colleagues. However, without a quantitative study to prove this, this is speculative. A statistical formulation of testimonies pertaining to enslaved women's violent resistance and the race of the interviewer is not the focus of this study, but it is something to consider when examining the WPA.

[153] The WPA are subject to a range of criticism from historians of slavery. Twentieth century historians cited a number of methodological issues including the age of respondents, the race and class of interviewers, the influence of potential monetary reward and the violent climate of the 1930s Jim Crow South amongst other issues. Michael Tadman dismisses the WPA testimony of the formerly enslaved as 'boastful exaggerations of former youthful days.' Michael Tadman, *Speculations and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (London, 1989), 124. Other historians cite memory issues as a key methodological disadvantage of using the WPA narratives as a source of evidence. John Blassingame, for example, asserts that the advanced age of respondents may have negatively impacted the ability of informants to recall accurate memories of slavery. Blassingame rejected the use of the WPA entirely due to their 'impenetrable' 'weakness'. John Blassingame, 'Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems', *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (1975), 473-492. For further information on the general disadvantages of the WPA narratives, see, for example: John Blassingame, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies*

of narratives pertaining to enslaved women's violent resistance within the WPA serves to demonstrate that acts of Black female violence were highly memorable for informants.[154] Thus, evidence of physical resistance perpetrated amongst communities of enslaved women in the antebellum South are not difficult to uncover and they feature throughout the WPA collection.

However, Moss's testimony also underscores the problems of using the WPA interviews as a source of evidence to uncover histories of enslaved women's use of violence in slavery. Moss's interview was subject to intense interference from her white, female interviewer who deliberately censored Moss's violent account of slavery. The graphic description of the murderous event clearly offended the racial, gender standards of her interviewer who promptly terminated the interview and refused to document the remainder of Moss's testimony, as 'it was time for the visitors to close the interview.'[155] Although the WPA narratives provide a plethora of evidence relating to the violent activities of enslaved women, Moss's interview forces historians to consider how many recollections of Black female violence against whites were purposefully censored, subject to paraphrasing or were deliberately redacted during editing. The deliberate silencing of Moss's testimony after the narrative changed to a more resistive and violent tone may reflect the racial and gender dynamics of the 1930s Jim Crow South, as Moss's narrative failed to adhere to notions of female passivity and Black subservience.

Whilst the 'gory details' of male interviewees' testimonies may also have been subject to redaction and censorship, it is plausible that accounts relating to *women's* violence may have been subject to additional silencing due to gendered notions of violent crime. Black men's violence against whites, although still taboo, may have been viewed with more acceptance compared to the violence of Black women which broke established gender norms. The impact of gender and race are key components in the examination of violence within the WPA narratives. The 'gory details' of the

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(Baton Rouge, 1977); David Thomas Bailey, 'A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimonies on Slavery', *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (1980), 381-404; Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narratives: Its Place in American History* (Boston, 1981); David Henige, *Oral History* (New York, 1982).

[154] Paul Escott determined that there was no link between the age of respondents and memory. Indeed, interviewees recalled emotionally charged incidents such as sales, separations and violence in great detail. Escott, *Slavery Remembered,* 15.

[155] Moss, Tennessee Narratives, 5.

interview also disputed the Lost Cause ideology of the South which promulgated the rhetoric of benign enslavers who paternalistically cared for their contented enslaved labour force. Moss's interview challenged this ideology and thus parts of her testimony were deliberately redacted and lost to history. This narrative is a striking example of the difficulties facing historians who use the WPA interviews to explore enslavement in the nineteenth century South, and more specifically, the history of enslaved women's violent resistance.

Issues of censorship are a key methodological issue when examining the WPA narratives for evidence of female violent resistance. Moss's interviewer recorded her decision to abandon the interview, yet how many other instances of censorship went undocumented? The removal of politically unacceptable topics from the recorded testimony of WPA respondents attests to the larger problems of the WPA evidence. Despite the deliberate redaction of formerly enslaved people's testimony, the existence of Moss's interview nevertheless provides unparalleled insight into the resistant activities of bondswomen from the perspective of the formerly enslaved. Furthermore, unlike published autobiographies of the antebellum period which typically focus on the lived experiences of men, the WPA narratives provide insights into the experiences of enslaved women from a female perspective. Whilst this study incorporates published fugitive narratives which reveal instances of enslaved women's violent resistance, these works are few in number. As previously discussed, the majority of published autobiographical accounts are male authored and subject to nineteenth century gender-based expectations. Thus, fugitive narratives predominantly focus on the experiences of enslaved men following a strict abolitionist prose of female passivity and male heroism. Thus, the WPA offer a more inclusive approach to understanding Black female resistance across the slaveholding South. The importance of this source of evidence cannot be overstressed.[156]

In conjunction with the WPA interviews, autobiographical narratives derived from the Fisk University Social Science collections are also utilised to uncover histories of enslavement from the

[156] Modern slavery historians handle the WPA with less scepticism and promote their use as a key source of evidence for uncovering histories of enslavement. See, for example: Marie Jenkins Schwartz, 'The WPA Narratives as Historical Sources' in John Ernest (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (Oxford, 2014), 89-100; West, *Enslaved Women in America*, 12-13; Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, xviii-xx.

perspective of those who were formerly enslaved. An underexplored source in slavery studies as a non-digitised collection, these autobiographies enrich and compliment the later WPA narratives to a considerable extent. Recorded a decade before the Works Progress Administration came into existence, the Fisk collections provide an exceptional insight into enslavement and the experiences of those previously held in bondage. Conducted between 1927 and 1930, the two Fisk collections, *God Struck Me Dead* and *Unwritten History of Slavery,* seemingly counteract some of the methodological issues raised by historians concerning the WPA.[157] For one, the Fisk narratives were conducted by Black interviewers including the experienced sociologist Ophelia Egypt Settle and as such, the narratives presented in the Fisk collections are strikingly candid. Respondents appear to be far more open in their recollections of slavery compared to those who were interviewed years later by predominantly white interviewers as part of the Federal Writers' Project. Whilst the purpose of this methodology is not to provide an in-depth comparison of the Fisk and WPA narratives, it is nevertheless apparent that the race of the interviewer in the earlier Fisk collections greatly influenced the straightforward responses of informants who divulged information pertaining to abuse, punishment, sales, and resistance in great detail.

In addition, many of the respondents in the Fisk collections were given the option of anonymity. The names of some enslavers and overseers were also omitted or accredited with pseudonyms including '____ X'. Whilst some anonymous interviewees chose to divulge the names of those who abused them, the choice of discretion and the cover of anonymity was likely to have fostered a sense of safety in respondents and a higher degree of openness. Many respondents did not hold back in their accounts on the brutalities of slavery and as such, the Fisk collections are of paramount importance in the study of enslaved people's lives. Furthermore, it is apparent that Settle asked respondents questions relating to white men's rape and sexual assault of enslaved women under slavery in the *Unwritten History of Slavery* interviews. This can be deduced due to the high volume of opening responses from informants

[157] Fisk University Social Science Institute, *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex*-Slaves (Nashville, 1945); Fisk University, *God Struck Me Dead.*

who discussed their experiences of slavery with recollections of sexual violence. This is directly evidenced when Settle documented some of her questions, asking: 'Did they have many love affairs on the plantations? How did they court them?'[158] Whilst Settle uses a less explicit way of asking about white men's sexual violence, adhering to a more respectable use of language in line with early 1900s rhetoric, it is clear that Settle was hinting at non-consensual interracial relations in her questions due to the responses it elicited amongst respondents. Interviewees appear to answer specific questions relating to white men's sexual behaviours under slavery. For example, one respondent began their recollection with 'Yes, some of them had children for them what wasn't married to you' and another started their testimony with, 'Yes, but there wasn't but one family of half-white chillen on our place.'[159] The respondents' answers certainly implies that Settle asked questions relating to rape, sexual violence, and white parentage.

The inclusion of these topics within these interviews conducted by Fisk University researchers, an education centre for African Americans, render these narratives, which are typically longer in length compared to those of the WPA, largely free of redaction or censorship. Consequently, these detailed and lengthy narratives contain insights into the resistance practices of the enslaved and the violent resistance of enslaved women against whites and other enslaved people. These fragments of history provide important glimpses into the lives and responses of the enslaved and these documents should be regarded as valuable source materials due to the rarity of non-abolitionist first-person accounts collected in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Whilst modern historians stress the importance of the WPA testimony, it is apparent that the Fisk narratives are also of paramount importance in uncovering histories of slavery due to the candid and straightforward responses of the interviewees. An underexplored source material in slavery studies, these autobiographies both compliment and enrich the WPA narratives to a considerable extent.[160] These lesser-known autobiographical collections constitute an important source base for this thesis, especially when used in conjunction with the WPA evidence.

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[158] Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery,* 204.
[159] Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery,* 251; 261.
[160] Whilst the Fisk Narratives can be considered part of the WPA, as they form Vol. 18 and Vol. 19 of George Rawick's, *American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, 1979), this thesis categorises the Fisk collections as distinct from the WPA due to the narratives being conducted by a separate organisation, Fisk University, in 1927 and 1930, at least six years prior to the earliest WPA interviews in 1936. The two Fisk

Whilst this thesis centres and prioritises sources which foreground the experiences of the enslaved, records from more traditional archives are also examined. This includes the private correspondence of enslavers, newspaper reports and legal documents. Slaveowning men and women's private writings afford an insight into enslaved women's violent practices and the responses they engendered amongst the slaveholding elite. Determining how enslaved women enacted violent techniques on sites of enslavement from the perspective of the planter-class reveals the attitudes of enslavers to violent bondswomen and the protective behaviours they initiated following instances of resistance. Although enslavers' responses to enslaved women's violence is not the focus of this study, their private writings nevertheless offer an insight into white interpretations of violent women and the types of violence enslaved women deployed on a variety slaveholding sites across the South. Additionally, whilst private letters rarely elicit the motives behind the actions of enslaved women, they offer surprising details into *how* acts of violence were perpetrated.

In conjunction with the use of slaveholder correspondences, this study utilises Southern newspaper reports to complement existing archival sources or to supplement absent pieces of evidence within the official archive. However, these records are used sparingly. Southern newspapers often elected not to release news stories of enslaved people's resistance to quell public fear and adhere to proslavery notions of totalitarian white mastery.[161] In rare instances of criminal reporting, articles framed enslaved people's crimes as failed acts of resistance which were successfully thwarted and met with swift retribution.[162] Historian Molly Rogers contends that violent resistive action was typically 'described as if the threat had been inconsequential and its discovery inevitable, all downplayed to

collections were also published as separate publications in 1945. The Fisk Narratives were only combined in the WPA supplementary series in 1979.

[161] Erin Dwyer, *Mastering Emotions: Feelings, Power, and Slavery in the United States* (Philadelphia, 2021), 34.

[162] In his examination of the Southampton Rebellion of 1831, Patrick Breen asserts that 'enraged' Southern newspapers deliberately exaggerated the number of enslaved and free people of colour killed during and after the insurrection to provide assurance to white Southern communities that the threat posed by the rebellion had been quelled. Patrick Breen, *The Land Shall Be Deluged in Blood: A New History of the Nat Turner Revolt* (Oxford, 2015), 104; 102-105.

alleviate white fears.'[163] Therefore, according to Erin Dwyer, Southern press releases served as affirmations of white superiority rather than accurate reports of information.[164]

In extreme cases, some reports reduced enslaved people's resistance to one sentence summaries, highlighting the execution of the accused individual as a calming resolution to minimise collective fears amongst white Southerners, omitting information on the age, name, position, or motive of the accused. Southern newspapers served to reinforce the dominant values of the slaveholding South, emphasising narratives of 'crime receiving due punishment.'[165] Other newspapers appealed to readers with sensationalised and dramatised reports as they attempted to evoke emotions of shock and outrage in readers. However, whilst Southern press releases present a challenge to historians, these self-censored reports nevertheless demonstrate the degree of fear Southerners held for violent resistive activity amongst the enslaved. Newspaper articles served to soothe the anxieties of the white elite who were evidently aware of their own vulnerability and exposure to danger, reflecting the pervasiveness of violent resistance in the slaveholding South and that the fears of enslavers were valid and justified. In the absence of other primary materials pertaining to a particular case or example of enslaved women's violence, newspaper reports occasionally provide information which would otherwise be lost to history.

Slaveholder petitions (derived from Loren Schweninger's Race and Slavery Petitions Project) to county courts also document enslaved women's methods of violence.[166] These petitions speak volumes about the degree of fear enslavers held for violent enslaved women, as slaveowners, male and female, explicitly stressed their vulnerability to the violence of enslaved women and their exposure to danger, hence their requests to county courts for permission to sell violent enslaved women indentured in wills, trusts and estates. These records provide a rich resource for uncovering patterns and themes in enslaved women's physical resistance practices. In addition, a large number of petitions document

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[163] Molly Rogers, *Delia's Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth Century America* (New Haven, 2010), 145.

[164] Erin Dwyer, *Slavery and Emotions in the Atlantic World Workshop*, 17th-18th November 2022, University of Reading.

[165] Andrew August, '"A Horrible Looking Woman": Female Violence in Late-Victorian East London', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (2017), 844-868, 851. Similar parallels in the reporting of violent women can be drawn in different studies regarding the responses of the courts and the press.

[166] Race & Slavery Petitions Project: Digital Library on American Slavery, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. [https://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions/index.aspx?s=1]

enslaved women by name and provide snapshots of their lives under slavery including their age, enslaved status and position. Interestingly, court petitions evidence that enslaved women's violence was not solely a singular phenomenon. Slaveowners frequently stressed to judges that the enslaved woman in question possessed a *history* of violent resistance. Allegations of repeated acts of violence dispels previous historiographical assumptions that violent resistance was a unique and singular phenomenon on slaveholding sites against enslavers. It is also worth noting that whilst enslavers may have dramatised aspects of their petition, in legal cultures, claims, whether true or not, have to be plausible to stand a chance of success. These claims therefore speak to a discourse that accepted the possibility and reality of enslaved women's violence.

In comparison to the county court petitions of enslavers, criminal trial records document enslaved women's acts of violence in graphic detail. Crimes including arson, poisoning, assault, and murder against a white person were tried as capital offences throughout many slaveholding states in the South and consequently, violent enslaved women are well documented and recorded throughout official court records. Trial records extensively document the violent actions of enslaved women, eliciting how enslaved women responded to whites with physical force and aggression of their own in far greater detail than the WPA and Race and Slavery Petitions. Naturally these records embody their own methodological challenges. The majority of US states prohibited Black people – free and enslaved – from testifying against white people in courts of law. Enslaved women were unable to construct their own historical record due to their inability to read and write. Consequently, enslaved women's encounters with the law were predominantly edited and censored through legal representatives. Legal documents were thus entirely crafted and sustained by white men who had little sympathy or knowledge of enslaved women's lives. Evidence of enslaved women's lives, actions, and motivations are therefore glimpsed within the defence of their state appointed attorneys and the testimonies of the prosecution.[167]

[167] Enslaved women accused of criminal offences were provided with legal defence from court appointed attorneys. Nikki Taylor asserts that these attorneys were appointed in the effort to 'project a semblance of justice to society and because enslaved people were considered too valuable to be executed without the appearance of due process to placate their owners.' Appointed defence attorneys did little to sway the pendulum of justice in their clients favour and some US states, including North Carolina, did not provide accused enslaved people with access to legal counsel or trial by jury. Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge,* 16. For further information on the South's criminal justice system, see, for example: Michael Hindus, 'Black Justice Under White Law: Criminal Prosecutions of Blacks in Antebellum South Carolina', *Journal of American History*, Vol. 63, No. 3

As enslaved women were prohibited from testifying, transcripts predominantly feature "evidence" from the prosecution. The evidence presented within these trials on behalf of the prosecution require caution; transcripts of antebellum court proceedings reflect the discriminatory processes of the South's legal system which was 'subjected to the will and financial interests of the slaveholding class.'[168] This guaranteed a miscarriage of justice for enslaved women who experienced the intersectional oppressions of gender, slavery, and Southern law within legal proceedings, rendering them, in the words of historian Tamika Nunley, 'thrice condemned'.[169] These records should therefore be approached with caution.

Some scholars of slavery, including Nikki Taylor, advocate using the confessions of enslaved women within legal records as an additional source of information.[170] Whilst confessions provide access to the voices and perspectives of enslaved women who were otherwise barred from testifying against whites in courts of law, these confessions should not be used as irrefutable evidence of violent criminal activity. Enslaved women who encountered the law were often threatened, cajoled, and forced to "confess" their crimes or were made to implicate others during moments of interrogation and coroners' inquests. Other "confessions" were obtained through manipulation and promises of escaping the death penalty. Admissions of guilt, which defence attorneys occasionally contested, were often admitted as evidence for the prosecution. For example, the confession of an enslaved woman named Ann was admitted as evidence to the county court of Tappahannock, Virginia, 1860, despite acknowledgement that the confession had been 'improperly extorted' when she was restrained and whipped by local white residents.[171] The defence's motion for dismissal was rejected and the prosecution used Ann's confession to secure her conviction. Furthermore, it is unclear how many recorded confessions were edited, redacted, or embellished to suit the interests of legal officials. The legal historian, Thomas Morris,

(1976), 575-599; Thomas Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law: 1619-1860* (Chapel Hill, 1996); Glenn McNair, *Criminal Injustice: Slaves and Free Blacks in Georgia's Criminal Justice System* (Charlottesville, 2009); Paul Quigley, 'Slavery, Democracy and the Problem of Planter Authority in the Nineteenth-century US South', *Journal of Modern European History*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2013), 514-532; James Campbell, *Crime and Punishment in African American History* (New York, 2013).

[168] Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, 16.

[169] For an analysis of gender, slavery, and the law see, for example: King, '"Mad" Enough to Kill'; Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned'; Nunley, *The Demands of Justice*.

[170] Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge,* 7-16.

[171] *Commonwealth vs. Ann a Slave* (1860). John Letcher Executive Papers, 1859-1863. Accession 36787, Box 2, Folder 3, Misc. Reel 4706. State Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. (Hereafter cited as LVA).

subsequently cautioned scholars against accepting these confessions at face value, as they may not be authentic admissions obtained through legitimate methods.[172] However, although these archival records are fraught with methodological challenges, they nevertheless outline enslaved women's violent resistive action in astonishing detail and despite the limitations of criminal confessions, they provide an unapparelled insight into enslaved women's criminal acts of resistance from their own perspective. Trial statements and confessions are the closest historians can achieve in terms of testimony derived from non-fugitive enslaved women in the antebellum era within the traditional archive. Court records represent an invaluable source of evidence due to their explicit documentation of enslaved women's violent criminal activity. Testimonies, confessions, and trial transcripts within court records therefore represent a 'textual archive' of Black female violence.[173]

However, contemporary records alone cannot reveal the interiority of enslaved women's lives and neither can they fully inform historians of the personal experiences of the enslaved. The deployment of modern epistemological approaches including critical fabulation, informed speculation, and historical creativity, alongside more traditional forms of scholarship, can enable historians to combat methodological challenges in the recovery of enslaved women's lives and perspectives. The works of Saidiya Hartman, Stephanie Smallwood, and Marisa Fuentes are pivotal to the methodological approach of this thesis due to their ground-breaking methodologies concerning the recovery of enslaved women's histories in the archive.[174] Critical fabulation and informed speculation can allow historians to, as Hartman states, 'imagine what cannot be verified' in order to recover the elision of women's thoughts, voices and actions in the traditional archive.[175]

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[172] Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law,* 238-248.
[173] Finch, 'Rethinking Slave Rebellion', 148.
[174] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth Century America*, (Oxford, 1997); Saidiya V. Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2008), 1-14; Stephanie Smallwood, 'The Politics of the Archive and History's Accountability to the Enslaved', *History of the Present*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (2016), 117-132; Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, 2016).
[175] Hartman describes the practice of critical fabulation as: 'by playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.' Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 11.

Furthermore, given the paucity of first-person voices available within official records, Fuentes asserts that historians must be willing to read between the lines, along and against the 'bias grain' in order to engage with the emotional and inner personal lives of enslaved individuals.[176] This approach allows for a closer emotional engagement with the past; reading along and against the grain allows for a more expansive interpretation of events to encourage further insight in ways which, according to Fuentes, 'open up possibilities for historicizing, mourning, remembering, and listening to the condition of enslaved women.'[177] Whilst some historical records explicitly document instances of Black female violence, others are more opaque and require closer engagement, as Aisha Finch argues, the reading of historical documents requires a consciousness that 'privileges utterances meant to be small and insignificant.'[178] Critical fabulation and reading between the lines allows for a close analysis of sources to consider the erased and the unsaid. Both Vanessa Holden and Rebecca Hall urge scholars to read against the grain to uncover the unspoken and 'the blank spaces' in official documents in the recovery of women's roles in violent acts of resistance.[179]

These modern methodological approaches are of paramount importance to the history of enslaved women's violent resistance and these analytical tools are especially crucial for uncovering the motives behind enslaved women's violence. Although primary records frequently detail *how* enslaved women deployed acts of violence against whites, the motivations behind their actions are often omitted from the record or described through opaque and euphemistic language. This is especially true for uncovering enslaved women's physical responses against white male sexual violence. Sexual exploitation is a pervasive theme throughout this study's discussion of resistance, as rape was a leading cause of enslaved women's retaliatory violence in the antebellum South. However, the analysis of rape and sexual abuse in the institution of slavery engenders deep archival challenges for historians. Whilst some sources explicitly document sexual violence against enslaved Black women, others do not. For example, although Harriet Jacobs centred the sexual vulnerability of enslaved women and girls in her

[176] Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives,* 7.
[177] Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives,* 1.
[178] Aisha Finch, "'What Looks Like a Revolution": Enslaved Women and the Gendered Terrain of Slave Insurgencies in Cuba, 1843-1844', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2014), 112-134, 124.
[179] Hall, *Wake*; Holden, *Surviving Southampton,* 48.

autobiography, the author was famously reticent about the sexual abuse she personally experienced at the hands of her enslaver.[180] Elizabeth Keckley confined her personal experience of sexual abuse to one page, summarising the trauma she sustained under slavery with the statement: 'I do not care to dwell upon this subject, for it is fraught with pain.'[181]

Historian Darlene Clark Hine stipulates that emotionally difficult topics including sexual violence were deliberately concealed through coded and opaque language. Women, in particular, undertook a 'culture of dissemblance' in order to shield themselves from trauma and further danger.[182] Some WPA interviewees were also secretive about the circumstances of enslaved women's perpetrated violence under slavery. Mamie Thompson, for example, described how her mother 'whopped' an overseer because he 'tried to take her down and carry on with her.'[183] Thompson's euphemistic wording to describe the overseer's attempted rape of her mother epitomises the culture of dissemblance prevalent throughout the testimony of the formerly enslaved. These examples underscore the problems of using slave narratives in the quest to uncover the personal motives behind enslaved women's acts of physical force, especially during instances of sexual violence, abuse, and coercion.

Archival silences pertaining to enslaved women's personal motives for violence, especially in response to sexual assault, also feature within legal records. Trial records documenting bondswomen's use of assault and murder in response to white men's sexual advances were subject to issues of censorship and redaction. Historian Wilma King asserts that antebellum courts deliberately concealed white men's rape of enslaved Black women in order to preserve white social norms and Victorian etiquette.[184] Witnesses for the prosecution also concealed white men's sexual history in the effort to limit scandal and blame through the withholding of evidence or through the use of euphemistic language to describe white men's rape of enslaved Black women.[185] Sources pertaining to enslaved women's

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180 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (Boston, 1861).
181 Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House Behind the Scenes* (New York, 1868), 38-39.
182 Darlene Clark Hine, 'Rape and the inner lives of Black women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thought on the Culture of Dissemblance', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1989), 912-20.
183 Mamie Thompson, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 6, 1.
184 Wilma King, '"Mad" Enough to Kill', 45.
185 See Chapter Four for examples of the necessity of uncovering archival silences pertaining to white men's rape of enslaved women in court records of enslaved women's capital offences though the use of modern epistemological techniques.

sexual experiences under slavery therefore require an element of reading 'against the grain', as historian Jim Downs asserts that the writing of such histories, 'inherently pushes against the grain and attempts to provide a counter-narrative, to expose history.'[186] Many of the sources used within this thesis were not intended to reveal explicit details about the inner lives of enslaved women and their personal experiences in slavery; Black female violence against white male rape is just one example which requires the use of these epistemological tools and close textual analysis. The deployment of modern historical approaches in conjunction with more traditional methods of analysis are used throughout the entirety of this thesis in the effort to uncover *how* and *why* enslaved women perpetrated violent resistance under slavery.

It is important to consider that uncovering enslaved women's methods of violence has the possibility of reproducing the 'violent fragmentation of the archival tomb.'[187] Archival records largely reflect the violent and horrific realities of US slavery as they embody, according to Stephanie Smallwood, 'part of the process of colonial violence.'[188] Consequently, historians are forced to grapple with how to ethically and morally handle archival documents which record and embody the oppressive power structures which enabled their construction and continue their preservation. Historical narratives, as Janet Dean notes, 'participate in the cultivation and maintenance of power structures' and thus, a critical focus on the violent history of US slavery has the potential to perpetuate and sustain a 'second order' of racial violence against Black people.[189] This begs the question, how do historians avoid replicating the violence of slavery documented and upheld in the traditional archive?

Firstly, this study aims to create what Smallwood has called an 'accountable history' which disrupts the traditional power of the white archive by centralising enslaved women's own experiences, narratives and histories.[190] Secondly, by highlighting Black female *perpetrated* violence, this study

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[186] Jim Downs, 'When the Present is Past: Writing the History of Sexuality and Slavery' in Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie Harris (eds.), *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens, 2018), 189-204, 190.
[187] Brian Connolly and Marisa Fuentes, 'Introduction: From Archives of Slavery to Liberated Futures', *History of the Present*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2016), 105-116, 110.
[188] Smallwood, 'The Politics of the Archive', 124.
[189] Janet Dean, 'The Violence of Collection: Indian Killer's Archives', *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008), 29-51, 44; Hartman, 'Venus', 5.
[190] Smallwood, 'The Politics of the Archive', 118.

centres enslaved women as agents of their own histories and actions and aims to move away from the conventional narrative of white inflicted abuse and terror. In producing a counter-history of violence through the analysis of traditionally hidden and supressed information, this study moves beyond conventional narratives of victimisation to stress the resistant agency of bondswomen who used violence as a vehicle for their own goals and endeavours. Although this work is mindful of the ethical considerations of researching violence within traditional 'white' documents, to omit enslaved women's violent actions from the history of US slavery perpetuates their deletion from the record and continues their 'silence' within official documents and secondary literature. Furthermore, as Sasha Turner stipulates, uncovering enslaved women's lives requires an understanding of the violent emotional regime of slavery.[191] Engaging with histories of white perpetrated abuse lends an important context to enslaved women's lives under bondage and crucially for this topic in particular, it is necessary for uncovering the reasons behind bondswomen's enactment of physical force.

It should be noted that this thesis is not a "discovery" of enslaved women's violence. Women have deployed violence for centuries in a variety of historical contexts and they have continually been 'protestors plain to see.'[192] Thus, this thesis does not claim to have discovered Black women's violence under slavery, but rather it draws attention to a long neglected and disregarded history of antebellum slavery. Nor does this study wish to characterise enslaved women's violence as an exception committed by a minority group during a period of unprecedented historic terror and brutality. Enslaved women should not be deemed as exceptional figures who transcended beyond the norms of womanhood and gender; women have continually used violence in differing circumstances and in varied geographic locations throughout history. Additionally, this study neither glorifies nor celebrates violent behaviour. As previously discussed, historians including Walter Johnson and Sasha Turner warned against romanticising enslaved people's actions and whilst the philosophical debate will continue over whether violence is ever just or acceptable, this thesis simply wishes to establish violence within the

[191] 'Slavery & Emotions Conference', University of Reading, 18th November 2022, Panel Two Discussion.
[192] Arlette Farge, 'Protestors Plain to See' in Natalie Davis and Arlette Farge (eds.), (trans. Arthur Goldhammer), *History of Women in the West: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes* (Harvard, 1993), 489.

conversation of enslaved women's resistance in order to demonstrate the varied and diverse forms of female opposition to slavery.[193]

In addition to these ethical considerations, this study avoids quantifying the scale of enslaved women's violence in the US South. Statistics provide minimal information on enslaved women and their lived experiences of violence, both subjected and perpetrated, as Stephanie Smallwood asserts that quantitative approaches encourage, 'a sense that historical knowledge production entailed nothing more or less than discovery of self-evident facts'.[194] Instead, this thesis focuses on close textual analysis in order to centre enslaved women's experiences and realities of enslavement. Statistical formulas fail to inform us about enslaved women's varied methods of violence or the reasons behind their use of physical force. Strategies of quantification are further compounded by this thesis's approach not to focus on one single state. Geographical limitations impede the ability to trace patterns of enslaved women's violence throughout the slaveholding South. This method of examination provides a richer insight into the complex system of slavery and while this approach is not intended to be a vast survey, it does allow broader discussions to be made about the nature of enslaved women's violence in the Antebellum South, to establish a complex picture of the past and to draw wide meaningful conclusions about enslaved women's violent resistance.

Conclusion

This chapter has established the predominant reasons behind the historiographical construction of enslaved women's non-violence. Through an interrogation of contemporary feminist thought, it has explored the reasons behind the malignment and mischaracterisation of women's violence. Establishing this contextual background is important in understanding why historians gender violence as 'masculine' despite a plethora of evidence forcibly indicating that violence was a shared mode of resistance between enslaved men and women. Unconscious biases and preconceived gender notions regarding the gendering of violence continue to dictate and influence academic opinion in slavery scholarship. In the words of historian Aisha Finch, 'it is important to appreciate how deeply masculinity and male

[193] Johnson, 'On Agency'; Turner, 'The Nameless and the Forgotten'.
[194] Smallwood, 'The Politics of the Archive', 123.

embodiment have structured the way in which we think about black opposition.'[195] Although it must be acknowledged that as an ever-changing and evolving area of study, the historiography of women's resistance is yet to advance to a complete monographic study on physical resistance, the marginalisation and dismissal of enslaved women's violence underscores the pervasiveness of influential traditional gender ideals. Through an intersectional feminist lens, this thesis also addresses racialised-gendered stereotypes surrounding interpretations and representations of Black women's violence in order to dispel and reject racist and offensive tropes of Black womanhood as "explanations" for Black female perpetrated violence.

In addition, the nineteenth century portrayal of enslaved women as suffering victims in male fugitive accounts left limited spaces for discussions of bondswomen as agentic resistors in their own right. Abolitionist discussions of slavery and anti-slavery movements forged the gendered portrayal of resistant tactics which were cast within the confines of nineteenth century gender expectations. This, compounded with the gendering of revolts as 'male', contributes to the historiographical construct of women's non-violence. Ideological gender structures alongside the publicity of antebellum "male" revolts rendered enslaved women 'outside the category of rebel' , cementing historians' assumptions that enslaved women's resistance was limited to non-violent forms of opposition.[196] The gendered language of resistance within abolitionist discourse and nineteenth century revolts rooted the resistance experiences of enslaved women as non-violent and individualised, ascribing to enslaved women a nature of covert passivity which has pervaded into secondary historiographical accounts of enslavement.

Enslaved women's violence in histories of enslavement renders particular challenges for historians. Grappling with the problems of researching enslaved women's violence under slavery is addressed and explored, and the particularities of studying bondswomen's violence in response to sexual abuse is especially outlined in order to highlight both the challenges of this type of research and the need to use modern epistemological techniques to overcome archival limits and absences. Informed speculation, imagination and creativity alongside reading in-between the lines expands the discipline of history, allowing historians to push against the established power of the traditional archive to reclaim

[195] Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion,* 142.
[196] Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery,* 221.

the forgotten and the unsaid. In the words of Jennifer Morgan, historians 'might catch glimpses made visible through slips of the pen or of calculation.'[197] According to Morgan, these 'slips' and 'glimpses' can inform historians about how to 'understand the erasures and how to place them at the heart of our inquires.'[198] The use of modern historical approaches alongside more traditional forms of analysis can provide a broader understanding of enslavement from the perspective of those who were enslaved to invite deeper consideration of how to extend and reconceptualise the gendered binary of resistance which exists within historical scholarship.

[197] Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery,* 209.
[198] Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery,* 209.

Chapter Two
'No Overseer Never Downed Her': Enslaved Women's Violent Resistance Against Overseeing Men

Reflecting on his days enslaved in Arkansas during an interview with the WPA in the 1930s, Leonard Franklin described a violent altercation between his mother, Lucy Franklin, and the residing overseer. After candidly reporting how his mother 'knocked' the overseer 'down' and 'tore his face up', Franklin concluded his interview with the remark: 'There wasn't no use for no one man to try to do nothin' with her. No overseer never downed her.'[199] Franklin was not the only WPA respondent to retell incidences of enslaved women's violent resistance against overseeing men. Many formerly enslaved people recollected violent confrontations between enslaved women and overseers, with bondswomen engaging in a variety of physical acts through avenues of assault, weaponisation, sexualised violence, and murder. Fugitive narratives and judicial court records similarly document enslaved women's varied modes of physical resistance against white and Black men involved in plantation supervision across the antebellum slaveholding South. Through close textual analysis, this chapter establishes violence as a central facet of enslaved women's resistance against overseeing men and emphasises the volatile nature of the profession of overseeing which was subject to various challenges from enslaved women who resisted overseeing authority through their own creative and violent 'articulations of justice.'[200]

This chapter explores enslaved women's most prominent modes of violence against overseeing men according to a logic of increasing severity, beginning with an examination of enslaved women's varied methods of assault, establishing the motivations behind enslaved women's use of physical force including corporal violence and punishment, and other overseer-initiated forms of abuse. The relationship between enslaved women's violence and a cessation of overseeing men's authority and power is subsequently examined, as bondswomen destabilised planter-overseer relations to undermine overseeing men's professional reputation and reduce planter confidence in their employees. This is followed with a review of enslaved women's violent defences against overseeing men's sexual attacks

[199] Leonard Franklin, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1-2.
[200] Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned', 6.

and how bondswomen utilised their own forms of sexualised violence through assault, genital mutilation, and castration. Enslaved women also weaponised a variety of commonplace objects on slaveholding sites against white and enslaved Black overseers through the use of agricultural implements and overseeing men's own flogging devices through 'counter-whippings.' The role of overseers' wives in exacerbating conflicts of power between enslaved women and overseeing men is also examined in relation to the complex gender dynamics of slavery. Finally, this chapter probes how enslaved women murdered men in the overseeing profession through the weaponisation of a variety of objects, items and implements located on slaveholding sites. Through an interrogation of the varied uses and modes of enslaved women's violence, it illustrates the volatile nature of the overseeing profession which was subject to a variety of challenges from enslaved women.

'No figure occupied a position of greater importance in the managerial hierarchy of the southern plantation system than did the overseer.'[201] William Scarborough's statement on the plantation overseer is echoed in other historiographical writings of slavery. Since the 1920s, with John Spencer Bassett's *The Southern Plantation Overseer,* historians have stressed the indispensability of the overseer in the day-to-day running and operations of Southern slaveholding sites.[202] Kenneth Stamp observed that planters 'looked upon the overseer, with all his faults, as an indispensable cog in the plantation machinery' and Tristan Stubbs recently reiterated how overseeing men performed a role 'of singular importance to the plantation economies' of Southern slaveholding sites.[203] Despite the centrality of the overseer in supervising enslaved labour forces, the study of antebellum plantation managers has received surprisingly scant academic attention. Studies of overseeing men predominantly feature in early twentieth century historiographies of slavery up to the 1960s including Bassett's 1925 study and Scarborough's 1966 publication.[204] Due to the methodological implications of these earlier studies, which predominantly drew upon racist Southern heritage and pro-slavery ideology from the experiences of enslavers and whites, this study refrains from heavily citing these historiographies. These early

[201] William Scarborough, *The Overseer: Plantation Management in the Old South* (Baton Rouge, 1966), xi.
[202] John Spencer Bassett, *The Southern Plantation Overseer as Revealed in His Letters* (Northampton, 1925).
[203] Kenneth Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1956), 40; Tristan Stubbs, *Masters of Violence: The Plantation Overseers of Eighteenth-Century Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia* (South Carolina, 2018), 1.
[204] Bassett, *The Southern Plantation Overseer;* Scarborough, *The Overseer.*

accounts of overseers helped propagate the stereotyped image of overseeing men as rough, unsavoury, lower-class white men who relished in their abuse of enslaved people which served to deflect claims of violence and abuse from enslavers.[205] Lewis Cecil Gray in 1933, for example, described overseers as 'cruel, licentious tyrants' who were 'unreliable and dishonest.'[206] These stereotypical characterisations were similarly echoed in later secondary accounts. Scarborough's account, for example, did little to displace the popular stereotype of overseers as inept, lazy managers as he highlighted the fractious relationships between planters and their employees and William Wiethoff described how overseers performed their managerial roles as 'scoundrels'.[207] However, whilst adhering to these over characterisations, many studies of slavery justly cited overseeing men's violent abuses against the enslaved, especially their gendered abuses, demonstrating how overseers abused their power and positions to inflict physical and sexual violence upon enslaved women and girls based on primary evidence. For example, although Jacqueline Jones relegated overseers as 'landless' 'illiterate men', she nevertheless highlighted the centrality of overseers in the violent regime of slavery, articulating how these men abused enslaved girls and women to maintain economic productivity and instil 'sexual submission.'[208]

Modern interpretations have attempted to rebuff previous characterisations of overseers as inept vagabonds, asserting that many planation managers were instead, professional and practical in their overseeing duties, even if these duties incorporated violence and cruelty. Tristan Stubbs provides a more nuanced interpretation of overseers in the eighteenth century, asserting that overseers 'acted as receptacles for planters' fears and frustrations' which helped formulate the paternalistic ideology of the planter-class in the Colonial and antebellum South.[209] Whilst acknowledging the violent actions of men employed in the overseeing profession, Laura Sandy also reconsiders prior interpretations of overseeing

[205] John Spencer Bassett's first full length monologue dedicated to the topic of plantation management stipulated that overseers lacked education, intelligence and ambition due to their lower-class backgrounds. Bassett, *The Southern Plantation Overseer.*
[206] Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Washington, 1933), 557; 502.
[207] Scarborough, *The Overseer*; William Wiethoff, *Crafting the Overseer's Image* (Columbia, 2006).
[208] Jones, *Labor of Love*, 20.
[209] Stubbs, *Masters of Violence,* 8.

men, refuting conventional portrayals of plantation managers as inept, lazy, and sadistic monsters.[210] Sandy notes that, 'the overseer was not necessarily the ne'er-do-well of conventional stereotype' arguing instead that overseers in the colonial South were a 'heterogeneous mix' of people from diverse classes and employment backgrounds who were 'skilled and hard working.'[211]

In their accounts of overseer-enslaved relations, discussion of enslaved women's violent resistance is scarce. Stubbs acknowledges that 'small oppositional acts could transform into violence', yet he ultimately maintains that interactions between overseers and the enslaved were largely 'peaceable' due to overseeing men's predominate use of 'petty privileges' to 'guard against the truculence of the enslaved'.[212] Although Stubbs acknowledges that punishment was a leading motive behind enslaved people's use of physical force against overseers, he nevertheless concedes that violence against plantation managers was 'rare' due to the criminal and social implications of such a crime. Stubbs goes as far to contend that in the colonial South the 'implacably violent, sadistically capricious overseer was largely atypical' and that the 'infrequency of enslaved violence' rendered interactions between overseers and their enslaved charges predominantly 'nonviolent'.[213]

Laura Sandy also analyses enslaved people's violent interactions in the colonial South, examining how overseers experienced violent repercussions from those they attempted to abuse. Sandy cites 'brutal management, mistreatment, loss of privileges, and separation' as key motives behind enslaved people's violent confrontations with overseeing men.[214] Sandy acknowledges that the enslaved could manipulate the professional standing of overseeing men and their families through varied acts of resistance, asserting that the overseeing profession was unstable and subject to the interference of enslaved labour forces. Although these brief examinations of bondspeople's resistance exist, enslaved

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[210] Laura Sandy, 'Supervisors of Small Worlds: The Role of Overseers on Colonial South Carolina', *Journal of Early American History*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2012), 178-210; Laura Sandy, 'Divided Loyalties in a "Predatory War": Plantation Overseers and Slavery during the American Revolution', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2014), 357-392; Laura Sandy, 'Slave Owning Overseers in Eighteenth Century Virginia and South Carolina', *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2017), 459-474; Laura Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery: Supervisors, Enslaved Labourers, and the Plantation Enterprise* (New York, 2020).
[211] Sandy, 'Divided Loyalties,' 357; Sandy, 'Slave Owning Overseers,' 462. Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery*, 302.
[212] Stubbs, *Masters of Violence,* 3; 104.
[213] Stubbs, *Masters of Violence,* 3; 108.
[214] Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery,* 207.

people's violent opposition against overseers is not the focus of these studies and consequently, an exploration of enslaved women's violent interactions with overseeing men in the antebellum South remains to be written. This study builds upon these historiographical explorations of overseeing men to understand how enslaved women engaged with and undermined overseeing hegemony through their own varied and creative modes of violence.

Corporal Violence and Assault

Overseers, also termed as overlookers, bailiffs, managers, and agents, were an integral part of the managerial hierarchy of the Southern agricultural enterprise and the repressive slaveholding system. The management and control of the enslaved workforce was the overseer's principal function, as enslavers employed white overseeing men to supervise the day-to-day aspects of enslaved people's lives and to direct the routine labour of the enslaved workforce, especially those who laboured as agricultural workers. Wealthy enslavers of large slaveholding sites typically delegated the supervision and the facilitation of corporal violence to overseers who enacted a variety of coercive and sadistic methods against enslaved men, women, and children. Although Tristan Stubbs highlights overseeing men's use of 'petty privileges' and 'positive enticements' which rendered overseer-slave interactions 'non-violent', the majority of historians acknowledge that the overseeing profession was predominantly marked by violent force, coercion and control, with Laura Sandy stipulating that 'punishment was freely meted out to the non-compliant' as overseers acted as the 'administrators' of slavery's 'terror and violence'.[215]

Indeed, enslaved people's testimony reveals the extent to which bondspeople associated overseers with violence and coercion, with the understanding that forceful physical aggression underpinned slave management. Southern planters required and expected overseers to punish enslaved people for real and imagined infractions in the quest to instil a productive labour force and maintain racial control. The violence of overseeing men under slavery is a defining feature of the WPA and Fisk narratives, as well as fugitive autobiographical accounts. Katherine Clay, an Arkansas WPA respondent, described the abusive actions of a former 'riding boss' who 'put a scar' on her mother's back which she

[215] Stubbs, *Masters of Violence,* 3; 104-108; Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery,* 195.

'took to the grave.' Clay stressed that her mother's wounds were 'deep and a foot long.'[216] Another respondent named William Adams also recalled the lasting physical effects of overseeing men's abuse, as he demonstrated to his interviewer: 'I got a scar on my eye today whar de ole overseer throwed a fork at me cross the table.'[217] Formerly enslaved people carried the physical and psychological scars left by overseers for the remainder of their lives. Solomon Northup wrote in his autobiography how the qualifications to be an overseer entailed 'utter heartlessness, brutality and cruelty' and Frederick Douglass described how his former overseer, fittingly named Mr. Severe, took 'fiendish pleasure' in 'manifesting barbarity' against enslaved people.[218] Douglass recalled how Mr. Severe was frequently accompanied with 'a large hickory stick and heavy cowskin' which he used to beat those enslaved people who were 'unfortunate' to cross him.[219] Whilst historians including Sandy and Stubbs stress that the overseeing profession contained more aspects and contributions to the antebellum plantation system than just violence, as often portrayed in the brutish, 'ne'er-do-well' stereotype presented throughout contemporary and historical accounts, formerly enslaved people nevertheless recognised that physical force and coercion went hand in hand with plantation management.

Overseeing men's violence was predominantly facilitated and reinforced through the use of whips and other flogging devices. Many formerly enslaved people recalled with fear and anguish the torment of the constant threat of violence from overseers who would observe and monitor the enslaved workforce, whip in hand, to drive and maintain productivity and subservience. One Fisk interviewee recalled how the overseers on his former site of enslavement were 'around all the time, even when they wasn't supposed to be working' and another recollected how their overseer 'would watch you good.'[220] A Michigan traveller named Anson De Puy Van Buren observed that across farms and plantations, overseers could always be distinguished by their possession of the whip 'which is ever in his hand' and the WPA respondent, Campbell Armstrong, similarly described how overseers continually 'carried their straps with them. They had 'em with 'em all the time.'[221] Real or imagined transgressions from men,

[216] Katherine Clay, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1.
[217] William Adams, FWP, Texas Narratives, Vol. 16, Part 1, 1.
[218] Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 224; Douglass, *Narrative of the Life,* 11.
[219] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life,* 11.
[220] Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 222; 203.
[221] Scarborough, *The Overseer,* 8; Campbell Armstrong, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 3.

women, and children regardless of age, sex, or status, could result in whippings or other forms of physical violence, as demonstrated in Henry Bibb's illustration which depicts an overseer wilding his whip against an enslaved woman who is forced to watch her infant child fall prey to a rattlesnake (see Fig. 6). However, in return for the abuse they suffered, enslaved women retaliated with their own forms of violence and physical force. Just as overseer perpetrated abuse manifested in a multiplicity of varied forms, so too did the violence of enslaved women who engaged in a variety of physical assaults and combative action.

Figure 6: 'Oh my child my child.' *Henry Bibb, Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York, 1849), 115.

Although Southern enslavers employed overseers to enforce control and instil productivity in the quest for an efficient plantation enterprise, the day-to-day reality of plantation life, however, was marked by complex tensions and conflict. As an 'intermediary link' between enslavers and enslaved people, 'between the big house and the fields,' overseeing men, according to Sandy, operated in a 'volatile nexus' where race, class and power intersected across various geographies on slaveholding sites.[222] Labouring in close proximity to the enslaved was not without risk. A variety of primary records evidence that overseeing was rarely a profession of peace, as enslaved people, including enslaved

[222] Sandy, 'Divided Loyalties', 361; 366.

women, violently lashed out against the managerial actions and decisions of overseeing men. Responses from the formerly enslaved reveal that bondswomen's violence often occurred in instances of white initiated violence, provoked chiefly by the threatening of, or use of, violent punishments including beatings and especially whippings. One prominent method of enslaved women's violence consisted of assault.

Frederick Douglass wrote of a violent altercation in Maryland between Mr. Sevier, an overseer, and an enslaved woman named Nelly. The incident between the two began due to 'imprudence' on Nelly's part which was preceded by many 'curses and screams' as the overseer attempted to physically abuse Nelly. As Mr. Sevier attempted to drag the enslaved woman towards a tree from which she was to be tied and whipped, Douglass reported that Nelly repeatedly dug her fingers into the overseer, leaving 'numerous bloody marks' on Mr. Sevier's face which increased as the struggle progressed. Although Nelly inflicted numerous 'blows' on the overseer, she was eventually overpowered. Despite being 'severely whipped' for her offence, the overseer's blows failed to subdue Nelly, as she continued to 'denounce the overseer, and to call him every vile name.' Although the overseer had 'bruised her flesh', her 'invincible spirit' remained 'undaunted' and Douglass wrote that Mr. Sevier never attempted to whip Nelly again. According to Douglass, Nelly was determined to 'make her whipping cost Mr. Sevier as much as possible' and her use of her fingernails to scar the overseer's face is indicative of other enslaved women who chose to target that area of the body as a brutal and effective form of defense.[223] The description of Nelly 'sternly resisting' the overseer with multiple 'blows' speaks to this enslaved woman's determination to contest and evade overseer abuse.[224] Sevier's disinclination to whip Nelly in the future speaks to the possibilities for enslaved women's violent resistance to act as a successful deterrent against future abuse.

As explained in Chapter One, abolitionist discourse dominated perceptions of violent resistance in the nineteenth century, as fugitive accounts of slavery typically gendered violence as a masculine preserve in the quest to adhere to traditional gender roles and behaviors. Male autobiographical writings were especially keen to emphasise enslaved women's victimisation under slavery to attest to the

[223] Facial disfigurement and mutilation are examined more closely in the second part of this chapter.
[224] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 92-95.

depravity and cruelty of the 'Peculiar Institution.' Although Douglass strongly associates violence with masculinity throughout his autobiographical writings, his prideful description of Nelly's actions speaks to a wider culture of female violent resistance which enslaved people not only respected, but also applauded. 'Noble' was Douglass's word of choice when he described Nelly's violence against the overseer and he wrote with pride how the imprints of Nelly's nails visibly scarred the overseer's face, professing he was 'glad to see them.' He further wrote that 'the blood on his (and her face)' attested to Nelly's 'skill, as well as her courage and dexterity in using her nails.' Douglass celebrated Nelly's 'invincible spirit' and applauded the ingenuity of her actions which he contrasted sharply with the overseer's 'cowardly and inexcusable' behavior.[225]

Nelly's forceful resistance in which she made her whipping 'cost' the overseer 'as much as possible' resembled the experiences of other enslaved women who resisted the actions of overseers and other multiple white men.[226] For example, the WPA informant, Walter Brooks, described how an enslaved woman 'fought with an overseer for a whole day and stripped him naked as the day he was born.' Brooks did not specify the exact details of this event, nor did he explain the motive behind the woman's actions, yet the extent of her violence is demonstrated in Brooks' expression that she 'stripped him naked as the day he was born.'[227] Other WPA respondents recalled enslaved women's violence in slavery with pride and admiration. This once again indicates that the physical resistance of enslaved women was celebrated and applauded amongst enslaved communities. Henrietta Smith recalled how her grandmother fought a group of white men who attempted to whip her for some undisclosed offence. Smith declared that her grandmother 'wouldn't be conquered' and 'when they got ready to whip her, it would be half a day before they could take her.'[228] America Morgan similarly recollected the violent actions of her aunt who she described as 'very unruly' to the point where 'no one could whip her.' Morgan vividly recalled one occasion when the overseer was forced to 'send' for two men to assist in the whipping. According to Morgan, Catherine, 'fought so hard, it was as much as the men could do to

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[225] Douglass, *My Bondage,* 93-95.
[226] Douglass, *My Bondage,* 93-94.
[227] Waters Brooks, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1.
[228] Henrietta Evelina Smith, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 6, 1-2.

tie her.'[229] This powerful vernacular history of enslaved women's resistance challenges both the construction of heroic fugitive masculinity and past historiographical presumptions of a female network of resistance which was secretive and covert in nature.

Whilst Smith and Morgan do not detail their family members' violence in detail, the use of multiple men to restrain and beat these enslaved women demonstrates how fiercely they fought to protect themselves from white initiated abuse. In a similar vein to Nelly in Douglass's 1855 account, both Susan and Catherine were severely whipped for their resistance, as Smith detailed how the whipping her grandmother endured 'took [her] nearly a year to get over' and Morgan stated it was 'awful' to hear her aunt's screams when she was tied to a joist and lashed with a cowhide.[230] Enslaved women's violence generated complex outcomes and the ramifications for their resistance could be severe. These testimonies reveal that while some women deployed violence in order to resist abuse, their actions were not without risk. This not only highlights the vulnerability of enslaved women and girls to white directed violence, but it also demonstrates the bravery of these bondswomen who chose to violently resist despite the risk of further abuse and punishment. Although bondswomen's actions were rarely consequence free, these women nevertheless perceived their actions to be worth the risk in their attempts to contest and evade white male abuse.

Some enslaved women engaged in pre-emptive action to avoid corporal violence when they failed to meet specific labour demands. Lilly Perry remembered how she deployed violence under slavery against the overseer, Zack Terrell, when she failed to complete the work assigned to her due to illness: 'One day I ain't feelin' so good an' de slops am so heavy dat I stops an' pours out some of it. De oberseer, Zack Terrell, sees me an' when I gits back ter de house he grabs me ter whup me.' Perry, however, avoided this whipping, as she recalled: 'de minute he grabs me I seize on ter his thumb an' I bites hit ter de bone.'[231] Some enslaved women deployed violence as a preventative measure to secure their safety against whippings and other forms of abuse. Although Perry successfully avoided being whipped, she was still subjected to the violent actions of Terrell who assaulted Perry by throwing her

[229] America Morgan, FWP, Indiana Narratives, Vol. 5, 2.
[230] Smith, Arkansas Narratives, 2; Morgan, Indiana Narratives, 2.
[231] Lily Perry, FWP, North Carolina Narratives, Vol. 11, Part 2, 2.

onto a steel mat which left her incapacitated for a week. This WPA testimony once again illustrates the duality of enslaved women's violence which could deter and provoke overseer abuse.

Perry's use of violence against the overseer was not a lone incident; Perry had earned a reputation as a woman who would not be crossed easily, as she recalled that she would 'bite lak a run-mad dog' 'when dey'd start ter whup me.' As with other modes of violence, biting is closely associated with masculinity in slavery studies. David Doddington and Jeff Forret explore the use of biting, alongside gouging and butting, within communities of enslaved men during instances of in-fighting, public combat, and organised competitive wrestling.[232] Biting, according to Forret, represented 'a form of manly assertion' which allowed enslaved men to achieve a verification of manhood and a sense of self.[233] Biting, however, was not solely an expression of manhood. In conjunction to Perry who bit the overseer's thumb 'to der bone', Martha Bradley, a WPA respondent of Alabama, recalled how she 'jumped' on an overseer, and 'bit and kicked him 'til he let me go.'[234] Biting alongside other forms of physical assault enabled enslaved women to effectively combat overseeing men in close quarters, as Bradley described how the overseer relinquished his pursuit of her and she evaded further abuse. These testimonies demonstrate that biting was not a gendered form of violence under slavery, illustrating the diverse nature of enslaved women's physical assaults against overseeing men which ranged from kicking, scratching, biting and punching, as bondswomen lashed out against overseer-initiated abuse and demands of labour.

Violence and the Cessation of Overseers' Power

Enslaved women's violent assaults against overseers were occasionally able to undermine overseeing men's professional reputation and reduce planter confidence in their employees, resulting in the permanent dismissal of some plantation managers. Overseers were charged with the daily supervision of the enslaved workforce to ensure enslavers' capitalistic ventures were efficient and profitable. Enslavers of large slaveholding sites especially relied upon overseeing men to maintain adequate

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[232] Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity,* 188, 198, 202-203, 205; Jeff Forret, *Slave Against Slave: Plantation Violence in the Old South* (Baton Rouge, 2015), 310, 311, 326.
[233] Forret, *Slave Against Slave,* 311.
[234] Martha Bradley, FWP, Alabama Narratives, Vol. 1, 1.

control of the enslaved labour force and planters stressed the need for an overseer to be resolute in their convictions, control and authority. For example, the Arkansas planter, John Brown, declared: 'a very decided and commanding man must be had to make anything on a plantation without the presence of the owner.'[235] Resistance in all its varied forms, however, disrupted and undermined the effectiveness of the plantation enterprise and planters perceived overseers who had failed in their principal duty to maintain order and mastery as culpable in the weakening of its success. Failure to maintain adequate control over the enslaved labour force could result in the termination of an overseer's employment. One Fisk interviewee observed how his former enslaver, 'had an overseer that was bad, the slaves would run away, so's he'd have to get another one.' The unnamed respondent stressed the agency of the enslaved, asserting: 'They wouldn't suffer it.'[236] 'Bad' overseers who abused and victimised enslaved people risked such behaviour at their own peril, as enslaved communities manipulated slaveholder perceptions of overseeing men through resistant activity.

Historiographies of slavery stress the resolute power of overseeing men who retained effective control over enslaved populations through fear and violence, yet the resistant activities of enslaved people successfully destabilised slaveholder-overseer relations. Born in 1843 and enslaved in Georgia, George Womble described how 'slaves were quick to see how far they could go' with recently employed overseers as they were aware that, 'whenever Mr. Womble hired a new overseer he always told the prospect that if he couldn't handle the slaves his services would not be needed.' Womble further explained:

> An overseer had to be a very capable man in order to keep his job as overseer on the Womble plantation because if the slaves found out that he was afraid of them fighting him (and they did sometimes) they took advantage of him so much that that production dropped and the overseer either found himself trying to explain to his employer or else looking for another job.[237]

Enslaved communities clearly understood that the process of publicly resisting white authority significantly weakened overseer jurisdiction, as according to historian William Scarborough,

[235] Orville Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Arkansas* (Arkansas, 1958), 105.
[236] Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery,* 254.
[237] George Womble, FWP, Georgia Narratives, Vol. 4, Part 4, 5.

slaveholders considered the control of enslaved people to be 'the decisive factor in the success of an overseer.'[238] They applied this knowledge both individually and collectively, fostering both temporary and permanent change to the localised dynamics of slavery. Enslaved people, according to David Doddington, 'understood that mastery was not innate but instead embodied' and this awareness amongst the enslaved shaped the resistance strategies they chose to employ.[239] Based on Womble's testimony it can be understood that the enslaved perceived violence to be especially crucial in undermining white masculinise authority and discrediting overseers' professional reputation.

Enslaved women's violence against overseeing men was especially effective in discrediting overseers' professional standing due to gendered perceptions of physical strength and force. Members of the planter elite associated those overseers who publicly failed to manage violent enslaved women with professional ineptitude and masculine weakness. This is aptly demonstrated in the WPA testimony of Alice Alexander who described how an enslaved woman named Mary Malow physically assaulted an overseer who was abusing her sister. In a fit of rage and to prevent her sister from receiving anymore blows, Malow reportedly, 'jumped on him and nearly beat him half to death.' Malow's actions protected her sister from future abuse and cost the overseer his position, as their enslaver, Colonel Threff, declared: 'he didn't want no man working fer him dat a woman could whip.'[240] Historian John Mayfield notes that 'in the highly symbolic structuring of Southern masculinity, to be manipulated and mastered was to be a slave, regardless of race.'[241] Succumbing to the public violence of enslaved women discredited overseers' white masculinised reputations and often created irreparable friction between themselves and their employers. This could secure beneficial effects for enslaved communities who experienced short-term or long-term respite from abusive overseers, as Alice Alexander described their former overseer as the 'meanest man on earth.'[242] Enslaved women's violence therefore had the potential to disrupt the patriarchal landscapes of the slaveholding South, removing troublesome white men to the advantage of themselves and their communities.

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[238] Scarborough, *The Overseer*, 39.
[239] David Doddington, 'Old Age, Mastery, and Resistance in American Slavery', *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (2022), 111-144, 143.
[240] Alice Alexander, FWP, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. 13, 1-2.
[241] John Mayfield, *Counterfeit Gentlemen: Manhood and Humour in the Old South* (Gainesville, 2009), 58.
[242] Alexander, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. 13, 1.

Although historians Eugene Genovese and Tristan Stubbs highlighted enslaved people's use of 'talebearing', in which the enslaved provided negative information of overseers to their enslavers, few scholars have examined how enslaved women's violence exposed overseeing men's professional limitations.[243] Physical success in their controversial conflicts enabled bondswomen to destroy the reputation of overseers and few planters were sympathetic to those overseeing men who succumbed to enslaved women's violence. For example, after Leonard Franklin's mother 'jumped' on an overseer and 'tore him up,' the slaveholder condescendingly remarked: '"Well, if that is the best you could do with her damned if you won't just have to take it."'[244] Slaveholders failed to sympathise with their defeated overseers whom they perceived to have failed in their managerial functions as overseers *and* as men. Chana Littlejohn described a similar incident in which two women, who were 'playing off sick,' collectively fought a plantation overseer in Warren County, North Carolina. Littlejohn recalled the enslaved women's collective actions, describing how they 'flew' at the overseer and 'whupped him.' She also recollected the embarrassed reaction of his enslaver, Peter Mitchell, who shamed the overseer with the declaration: 'if women could whup him he didn't want him.'[245] Although Mitchell allowed the overseer to maintain his employment on the plantation, the incident severely undermined the overseer's position and weakened the enslaver's trust in his managerial abilities.

It can be speculated enslaved women deliberately utilised violence to manipulate relations and create divergent managerial viewpoints between the planter and overseer to rid themselves of tyrannic overseers, while simultaneously creating plantation disruption, as they capitalised on Euro-American nineteenth century gender roles and gendered perceptions of violence. Planters themselves recognised enslaved people's attempts to destabilise slaveholder-overseer relations, as the Virginia slaveowner, Hill Carter, observed: 'Negroes soon discover any little jarring between the master and overseer, and are sure to take advantage of it.'[246] Enslaved women understood that superseding white gender tropes produced negative consequences for overseers, as their physical triumphs emasculated and humiliated overseeing men who relied upon masculine dominance to maintain the racial quo. Sergio Lusanna and

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[243] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll,* 35-36; Stubbs, *Masters of Violence*, 118.
[244] Leonard Franklin, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1.
[245] Chana Littlejohn, FWP, North Carolina Narratives, Vol. 11, Part 2, 3.
[246] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 33.

David Doddington emphasise the importance of violence in the construction of masculine identities in the affirmation of a gendered sense of self.[247] Public failure in violent confrontations, according to Doddington, 'could act as a demonstration of weakness' and represent a 'loss of manhood.'[248] Enslaved women's violence was the antithesis to the masculinised respect and social standing many overseeing whites craved. Indeed, the dismissal of overseers who failed to subdue enslaved women reflects the power of these gender norms which women manipulated to their own advantage to procure immediate and sometimes lasting benefits. Those overseers on the receiving end of enslaved women's aggression had their authority diminished and denied by both the enslaved beneath them and the enslavers considered above them. For example, during her interview, Susan Snow detailed how her 'wild an' mean' mother 'was de cause o' my master a-firing all de overseers.' The overseers' inability to effectively manage and contain Snow's mother led to the termination of their employment contracts and the permanent removal of all future overseers as the slaveholder declared: 'She'll work widout no watchin' an' overseers aint nothin' nohow.'[249]

Laura Sandy asserts that class prejudice towards overseeing men became entrenched in the upper white slaveholding society in the early eighteenth century, as members of the slaveholding elite perceived overseers to lack competent training and moral character.[250] The writings of Southern enslavers certainly reflect this. The prominent South Carolina planter, Issac Ball, lamented in 1805 the difficulty of locating capable white men for managerial positions stating, 'Sobriety, honesty, and industry' were 'very rare qualities among the common run of Overseers.'[251] Bennet H. Barrow, a cotton and sugar planter, described overseeing men in his diary to be 'a perfect nuisance' and Charles Manigault complained that hiring a professional overseer was a 'lottery' with many 'more fond of

[247] Sergio Lussana, 'To See Who Was Best on the Plantation: Enslaved Fighting Contests and Masculinity in the Antebellum Plantation South,' *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (2010), 901-922; Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity,* 171-210.
[248] Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity, 172.*
[249] Susan Snow, FWP, Mississippi Narratives, Vol. 9, 2-5.
[250] Laura Sandy, 'Mary-Anne Schad and Mrs. Brown: Overseers' Wives in Colonial South Carolina' in Marjorie Spruill, Valinda Littlefield and Joan Johnson (eds.), *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times* (Athens, 2009), 60-78, 64.
[251] Mark S. Schantz, '"A Very Serious Business": Managerial Relationships on the Ball Plantations, 1800-1835', *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (1987), 1-22, 5.

shooting and fishing then attending to their business.'[252] Enslaved women's violent activities exasperated and confirmed some enslavers' base and low perceptions of those men employed in the profession of overseeing, to the point where some planters decided to do without them entirely, as demonstrated in Susan Snow's testimony. Enslaved people's testimony reveals that mastery was a transitional phenomenon, one which was subject to change and metamorphism, shaped and altered by the violent tactics of enslaved women who manipulated the gendered and classist beliefs of slaveholders. Enslaved women's violence demonstrated the limits of white male mastery and supremacy, as well as the vulnerability of overseeing men across the US South which helped foster and further uncertainty and diminished patriarchal control on a localised level.

Laura Sandy asserts that enslaved people recognised that, as the 'middleman', overseers were at the bottom of the 'long chain of command' which made them the 'easiest targets' for acts of resistance.[253] The evidence presented certainly indicates that enslaved women perceived overseers to lack the relevant command and mastery of the principal enslaver, hence their inclination to manipulate enslavers' base and prejudiced opinions against their predominantly lower-class employees. Formerly enslaved people certainly held and conveyed negative opinions of overseeing men to their WPA interviewers, with many respondents choosing to present overseeing men as lower-class whites. Fannie Berry, for example, denounced her former overseer as a 'poor white man' and Jim Allen went so far as to characterise his former overseer as 'white trash, jes a tramp.'[254] However, interviewees may have deliberately chosen to negatively characterise overseers for fear of reporting elite white male perpetrated abuses. The decision of some respondents to critique overseeing men rather than members of the slaveholding elite was derived from fear and concern for personal safety, as those interviewed were no doubt aware of the social standing slaveholders and their descendants possessed and their continued connections to violent white supremacy in the early twentieth century. However, although respondents may have felt more inclined to critique men employed in the overseeing profession, it is clear that these opinions also influenced the targeting of women's violence under slavery. Enslaved

[252] Scarborough, *The Overseer,* 16; James Clifton (ed.), *Life and Labour on Argyll Island: Letters and Documents of a Savannah River Rice Plantation, 1833-1867* (Savannah, 1978), 234; 167.
[253] Sandy, *The Overseers of Early America*, 204.
[254] Fannie Berry, FWP, Virginia Narratives, Vol. 17, 2; Jim Allen, FWP, Mississippi Narratives, Vol. 9, 4.

women abused these 'easy targets' and chose to manipulate the already precarious relationships between planters and their employees to effectively weaken plantation hierarchy.[255]

Enslaved women may have capitalised upon slaveholder absenteeism as an opportunity to test the boundaries of overseeing men's authority. Enslavers who owned large estates especially relied upon overseers to manage enslaved workforces during occasions of absenteeism and without the presence of enslavers, bondswomen may have been emboldened to deploy violence against overseeing men who they perceived to be second in command. Leonard Franklin explained to his WPA interviewer how a violent altercation which transpired between his mother and the overseer occurred when 'her boss went off deer hunting for a few weeks.' Franklin described that during his enslaver's absence, his mother, Lucy, 'knocked him [overseer] down' and then 'tore his face up' to the extent that medical intervention was required.[256] Without the reinforcement of the principal enslaver, enslaved women, including Lucy Franklin, took more chances and were more daring in the types of resistance they chose to perform. Although it is difficult to establish a direct correlation between the violent actions of enslaved women and slaveholder absenteeism, it is nevertheless informative that Franklin's mother's use of violence occurred whilst her enslaver was away from the plantation for a prolonged period of time. Men in the overseeing profession lacked the social, economic, and authoritative standing of enslavers and this divided sense of mastery provided enslaved women with another potential avenue for violent resistance. In the words of Mark S. Schantz 'mastery was contingent on the will of others' and enslaved women endeavoured to directly challenge overseer rule with physical resistance to lower the managerial diktat of the overseer.[257]

Overseers predominantly maintained a position second in authority to that of the enslaver, which according to Scarborough, was exacerbated on estates with long-term residential owners.[258] Based on WPA evidence, it is apparent that some overseers attempted to increase their authority during moments of enslaver absenteeism, capitalising on their employers' absence to consolidate their status and position. Some overseers attempted to achieve this through an increased use of managerial violence.

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[255] Sandy, *The Overseers of Early America*, 204.
[256] Leonard Franklin, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 2, 2.
[257] Schantz, '"A Very Serious Business"', 12.
[258] Scarborough, *The Overseer,* 38.

For example, Smity Hodges exclaimed that 'when Marse Cassedy was gone, his overseer would be hard on de slaves.'[259] Overseeing men's assertions of dominance no doubt exacerbated overseer-enslaved conflicts. Laura Sandy asserts that absentee and semi-absentee plantations 'conferred greater power' on overseeing men, 'but also accentuated the danger of their position.'[260] This is exemplified in the testimony of Ida Henry who reported that her former overseer, 'tried himself in meanness over de slaves, as seemingly he tried to be important' during their enslaver's participation in the Civil War in 1861. Although the overseer seized upon his employer's absence to enhance his own power and authority, the absence of the enslaver similarly emboldened the enslaved community under his watch to respond with violence, as Henry described: 'One day de slaves caught him and one held him whilst another knocked him in de head and killed him.' Although Henry did not specify the sex of the enslaved people who committed the offence, it is telling these enslaved people seized upon the opportunity created by absenteeism to injure and murder the overseer. Despite overseer attempts to consolidate their power through extended and increased violence, enslaved communities recognised the authoritative fragility of lone overseers and exploited the absence of enslavers for their own purposes. As Doddington asserts, 'power represented was not always power manifested' and enslaved women recognised that the status vacuity between slaveholder and overseer could be manipulated to their advantage.[261]

Sexualised Violence and Assault

Enslaved women and girls on antebellum slaveholding sites experienced rampant sexual abuse and harassment from various classes of white men, including enslavers and overseers. Overseer perpetrated sexual abuse manifested in a multitude of different forms ranging from assault, harassment, rape, and acts of sexualised punishment. Overseers frequently took advantage of their unrestricted access to enslaved women's bodies, using their positions of authority to force and coerce women into sexual activity via physical strength or under the threat of punishment. Jacqueline Jones argues 'a fine line existed between work-related punishment and rape' and overseers used labour-related punishments as

[259] Smity Hodges, FWP, Mississippi Narratives, Vol. 9, 2.
[260] Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery*, 205.
[261] Doddington, 'Old Age,' 26.

an opportunity to inflict further abuse on enslaved women.[262] Consequently, a variety of punishments which overseers inflicted upon enslaved women were deeply sexualised and gender specific. This is evident in the testimony of Charlie Hudson who declared his former overseer 'jus' whupped 'omans.' The punishments inflicted upon these women were clearly sexualised, as Hudson reported: 'He made 'em take off deir waists and den he whupped 'em on deir bar backs 'til he was satisfied. He done all de whuppin' atter supper by candlelight. I don't 'member dat he ever whupped a man.'[263] Although the removal of enslaved people's clothing allowed unencumbered access to enslaved people's skin, it also provided overseers with additional opportunities to inflict further violence via sexualised attacks and rape.

Intimate violence, however, was not exclusively limited to labour-related punishments. WPA respondents described the pervasiveness of overseer sexual abuse, with white overseeing men frequently abusing their position of authority to take advantage of enslaved girls and women for the purposes of rape and other acts of intimate violence. One formerly enslaved woman, for example, revealed that her grandfather was a plantation overseer, asserting that her father was 'an overseer's child.'[264] The vulnerability of enslaved women to overseer perpetrated violence is evident within Abbie Lindsay's testimony as she emphasised that sexual acts between overseers and enslaved women were *forced* and hence constituted rape: 'You know they whipped people in those days and forced them.'[265] Other respondents acknowledged how the paternity of white overseeing men was evidenced through their skin colour with many describing themselves as 'mulattoes,' 'pale,' 'lighter skinned' or 'almost white.'[266] Whilst Tristan Stubbs asserts that 'sexual relationships' enabled enslaved women to 'exploit gaps in the South's racial hierarchy', as 'sexual gratification' could create ameliorated conditions for some bondswomen, the majority of WPA informants and enslaved people who experienced or witnessed

[262] Jones, *Labor of Love*, 20.
[263] Charlie Hudson, FWP, Georgia Narratives, Vol. 4, Part 2, 5.
[264] Abbie Lindsay, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 4, 1.
[265] Lindsay, Arkansas Narratives, 1.
[266] For evidence of this within the WPA, see: Vera Roy Bobo, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1; William Scott, FWP, North Carolina Narratives, Vol. 11, Part 2, 1-2; Arzella Smallwood, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 6, 1.

sexual assault negatively characterised these attacks with coercion and violence rather than opportunity.[267]

Overseeing men's sexual violence was often inescapable. Enslaved and formerly enslaved people recalled the futility of resisting the sexual advances of overseeing men, with Fanny Berry declaring that, 'if you'll 'belled de overseer would kill yo.'[268] Enslaved people specified that resistance to the sexual advances of white men was often met with serious physical reprisals, as Sophy informed the Civil War diarist, Fanny Kemble, that she relinquished her body to the sexual demands of the overseer in order to obtain 'some rest from de whip.' Sophy made it clear to Kemble that the only possible course of action was to 'follow [him] into the bushes' because 'he have strength to make me.'[269] Kemble's account of Sophy's experiences reveals the risks associated with refusing the sexual overtures of overseeing men. Furthermore, the majority of white overseeing men operated under a sexual free reign, caring little for the consequences of their actions. Despite the illegality of intimate interracial relationships in the nineteenth century South, many enslavers turned a blind eye to overseeing men's sexual assaults, occasionally endorsing overseer sexual violence in the hope that such unions would increase the value of their investments through the children born of rape. The implementation of *partus sequiter ventrem* law in 1662 ensured enslaved status was transferred 'according to the condition of the mother' and this, according to historian Brenda Stevenson, categorised enslaved women's bodies 'as a location of pleasure, production, and procreation as well as a site of exploitation, alienation, loss and shame'.[270] Few enslavers attempted to intervene in the sexual actions of overseers due to the 'generations of forced labour' which followed with children born of rape; those who did attempt to intervene were often ineffective, falling to prevent or limit their employees' sexual violence without

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[267] Stubbs, *Masters of Violence,* 111.
[268] Fannie Berry, FWP, Virginia Narratives, Vol.17, 2.
[269] Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation, 1838-1839* (New York, 1863), 228.
[270] Brenda Stevenson, '"What's Love got to do with it?" Concubinage and Enslaved Women and Girls in the Antebellum South', *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (2013), 99-125, 102. For secondary readings on *partus sequiter ventrem*, see, for example: Jennifer Morgan, 'Partus sequiter ventrem: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery', *Small Axe*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2018), 1-17.
For primary records pertaining to laws surrounding partus sequiter ventrem, see: William Hening (ed.), *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619,* Vol. 2 (New York, 1823), 170. Encyclopaedia Virginia: Virginia Humanities [https://encyclopediavirginia.org/1448-130aa14e39d5a5a/] (accessed: 5th May 2023).

legal address or terminating employment.[271] Joe Clinton, for example, when asked by his interviewer about 'white men molestin' of de darky wimmen' acknowledged the unbridled sexual power overseers retained, endorsed by the slaveholder:

> Dere was a heap of dat went on all de time an' 'course de wimmens, dey couldn't help deyselves and jus' had to put up wid it…Of course all dat couldn't have been goin' on like it did without de mars knowin' it. Dey jus' bound to know dat it went on, but I'se never heered 'bout 'em doin' nothin' to stop it.' It jus' was dat way, en day 'lowed it without tryin' to stop all sich stuff as dat.[272]

Clinton's emphasis that his enslaver condoned the sexual behaviour of his overseer demonstrates how intimate violence was a normalised phenomenon on slaveholding sites which further influenced overseers' perceived sexual rights to enslaved women's bodies.

Whilst many enslaved women and girls were forced into positions of inaction against overseer sexual abuse, some bondswomen responded with physical force of their own, enacting a variety of defences and attacks. Violence enabled enslaved women to ward off sexual attacks from individual and collective groups of overseeing white men, as evidenced in the testimony of Fanny Berry, a Virginian WPA respondent. Berry described how a group of 'ol' white men' attempted to rape her by 'foul means.' In response to this immediate danger, Berry deployed violence as a method to protect herself. 'One tried to throw me' reported Berry, 'but he couldn't. He tusseled an' knocked over chairs an' when I got a grip, I scratched his face all to pieces.' Berry finalised her account with pride, asserting that she was 'one slave dat de poor white man had his match' and that 'dar wuz no more bothering Fannie.'[273] The physical altercation that ensued and Berry's use of her own bare hands as weapons generated immediate *and* long-term protection from overseer sexual abuse. Berry's pride in her evasion of this attack is evident throughout her testimony, even as she recollected this event decades after its initial occurrence. Berry's testimony highlights the vulnerability of enslaved women and girls on slaveholding sites to single and

[271] Catherine Armstrong, *American Slavery, American Imperialism: US Perceptions of Global Servitude 1870 – 1914* (Cambridge, 2020), 152.
[272] Joe Clinton, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 2, 3.
[273] Fannie Berry, FWP, Virginia Narratives, Vol. 17, 2.

grouped overseeing men, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that violent self-defence was occasionally a viable option for some bondswomen.

Berry's euphemistic language in which she used the word 'foul' to describe the overseers' attempted rape is a shared feature in other WPA testimonies. As explained in Chapter One, Black women engaged in a 'culture of dissemblance' which operated as a form of self-protection against trauma and potential white reprisal.[274] Whilst some interviewees were frank in their discussions of white perpetrated rape, others deployed euphemistic wording to describe sexual attacks under slavery. For example, Mamie Thompson described how her mother 'whopped' an overseer because he 'tried to take her down and carry on with her.'[275] Despite the veiled and concealed nature of some narratives in relation to sexual abuse specifically, close textual analysis reveals a clear and distinct theme of enslaved women's violent resistance against overseeing men's intimate attacks. Reading into the silences allows for a closer engagement with these sources, enabling a clear and discernible trend to be established in relation to enslaved women's physical resistance against white male sexual violence.

Other enslaved women deployed their own forms of sexual violence against overseers who attacked them. Sexualised violence, defined in this study as the subversive use of a sexualised physical act for the purpose of resistance, is most evidently demonstrated in enslaved women's deliberate attack, mutilation, and castration of white overseeing men's genitalia. Whilst sexual violence is frequently associated as a male form of violence committed against women, primary records demonstrate that enslaved women enacted their own gender-based violence against overseeing men in response to gendered attacks, predominately rape and sexual assault. Black female resistance embodied many different facets and while constructions of enslaved women's sexuality are inextricably tied to slavery, the notion that enslaved women could use sex as an avenue for resistance is a complicated topic within academic discourse. Scholars have long established the commonality of overseeing men's sexual violence in the US South and studies of white male sexual violence against enslaved women predominantly focus on entrenched narratives of violation, trauma, exploitation and dehumanisation. It cannot be ignored that coerced and non-consensual sexual acts under slavery were used as weapons of

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[274] Hine, 'Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women'.
[275] Mamie Thompson, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 6, 1.

racial subjugation and female terror. In the words of Angela Davis, white men raped enslaved women as an 'elemental form of terrorism' to enforce and retain racial and gender subjugation.[276] However, these historical realities of sexual subjection do not preclude the possibility that enslaved women utilised non-consensual, white initiated sex as avenues of sexual violence themselves. This study neither contests nor disputes enslaved women's lived terror of white sexual harassment; instead, it aims to provide a new perspective on how enslaved women responded to such struggles with sexual resistance and violence of their own.

Particular attention should be paid to Treva Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson who discuss the complicated and uncomfortable terrain of Black women's sexual agency in slavery. Lindsey and Johnson provide a new perspective into the intimate and sexual lives of enslaved women through their analysis of sex as a 'tool of resistance' and a 'vehicle for affirming humanity.'[277] Sexual violence as a tool of women's resistance, according to Lindsey and Johnson, disrupts the conventional paradigm of enslaved women's stoic endurance and it especially disrupts the abolitionist trope of the sexually abused and victimised enslaved woman. In the words of Lindsey and Johnson, the very idea that enslaved women perpetrated sexual forms of violence risks demeaning the serial rape of enslaved women who suffered the 'lived terror' of forced sexual activity in all its varied forms. Thus, 'Theses of black women as victims left little room for exploring black women in the throes of sex acts ranging from outright violence to consensual coupling.'[278] The notion of sexual, genital based acts as tools of resistance can be applied to enslaved women's use of genital violence against overseeing men, especially through mutilation and dismemberment.

In the colonial South, whites typically reserved genital mutilation and dismemberment as punishments for enslaved men.[279] This genital based violence, however, persisted into the antebellum

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[276] Davis, 'Reflections', 96.

[277] Treva Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson, 'Searching for Climax: Black Erotic Lives in Slavery and Freedom', *Meridians*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2014), 169-195, 175.

[278] Lindsey and Johnson, 'Searching for Climax', 179.

[279] Secondary works relating to genital mutilation and castration in the antebellum era under slavery are solely confined within the context of enslaved Black male bodies, explored most notably by scholars Thomas Foster, Vincent Woodward and Jeff Forret. See, Thomas Foster, 'The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2011), 445-465, 451; Vincent Woodward, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within US Slave Culture* (London, 2014); Forret, *Slave Against Slave*, 324.

era as late as the 1850s. In 1853, for example, slaveholders John and George Humphries of Mississippi accused their overseer of murdering an enslaved man through castration. The overseer reportedly nailed the man's 'privates to a bedstead' and whipped him until the enslaved man 'pulled loose from the post to which he had been pinned by driving an iron tack or nail through his penys.'[280] Although castration operated as a male form of punishment, enslaved women nevertheless fell witness to such cruelties and experienced their own sexual and genital attacks, which manifested in the form of reproductive and sexual abuse on a chronic and sometimes daily basis.[281] Enslaved women subverted this tool of white oppression for their own violent, resistive purposes which they deployed against overseers during instances of rape and other sexualised forms of abuse.

The deployment of sexual resistance via castration is graphically demonstrated in the WPA testimony of Pauline Howell, who boldly described to her interviewer how her aunt murdered two male overseers through genital dismemberment. Howell reported that:

> They couldn't manage her. The last one was whipping her with a black snake whip and she grabbed him. Grabbed his privates and pulled 'em out by the roots. That was the way she killed both the overseers. Cause she knowed that was show death. My mama said that he was the nicest little soft man – the last one she killed. She said he just clum the walls in so much misery that night.[282]

Howell's description of the overseers failing to 'manage' her aunt during an act of punishment is likely to be a coded reference to this woman's refusal to comply to their corporal *and* sexual demands. As previously stated, intimate violence was a central facet of enslaved women's experience in slavery and

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[280] *Race & Slavery Petitions Project*, Race, Slavery and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to County Courts, 1775-1867; Part F Parish Courts (Louisiana 1795-1863), Petition 20885323, 17th September 1853, Madison, Louisiana.

[281] It is worth acknowledging that genital mutilation may have occurred during white men's sexual attacks against enslaved women. Although evidence for this is lacking, it is a form of violence which should be considered. Given the pervasiveness of white men's sexual violence on slaveholding sites, it is not improbable to presume that overseeing men also subjected bondswomen to genital mutilation. Additionally, enslaved women were subjected to sexual and reproductive experimentation due to enforced gynaecological procedures and processes of sterilisation. J. Marion Sims, for example, the "father of gynaecology" subjected numerous enslaved women as involuntary medical test subjects to surgical procedures without their consent or the use of pain inhibitors including anaesthetic. For further information on non-consensual reproductive examinations of enslaved women under slavery, see, for example: Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynaecology* (Athens, 2017).

[282] Pauline Howell, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 3, 2.

therefore, it is highly likely this woman was sexually abused by both overseers. The woman's ability to physically 'grab' the overseers' presumably exposed testes by 'the roots' further demonstrates that these attacks occurred during instances of sexual assault. This narrative reveals the extent to which white men were a physical threat to bondswomen who removed the cause of their sexual abuse and rape at the literal root of the problem. Enslaved women's attacks of overseers' genitalia created practical advantages on both an individual and collective basis. The permanent removal and maiming of men's genitalia could prevent future penile rape from those white men who survived and act as a deterrent against alternative forms of sexual violence. These women who enacted sexualised violence were literally removing white men's capacity for rape. By addressing the impetus of their rape and abuse, sexualised violence served as a clear and direct solution to limiting enslaved women's sexual accessibility and vulnerability.

According to historian Victoria Bynum, enslaved women were inherently 'unrapable' due to Southern law which refused to define white perpetrated rape and other sexualised attacks on enslaved women as criminal.[283] In the absence of any legal protection against white men's sexual abuse, enslaved women's gender-based violence enabled bondswomen to enact a process of sexual reclamation and justice. Historian Nikki Taylor asserts that enslaved women enacted a form of 'Black feminist justice' through their deployment of violent 'lethal resistance.'[284] As the only form of justice available to bondswomen, violence enabled enslaved women to facilitate their own personal version of justice against those whites who had abused and exploited them. Taylor's 'Black feminist practice of justice' can be aptly applied to enslaved women's genital based violence which served as a method of punishment and justice for white overseeing men's sexual transgressions upon Black female bodies. Howell specified that her aunt knew dismemberment was a 'show death' and no doubt she derived a sense of satisfaction knowing that one of her abusers 'clum the walls in so much misery.'[285] It is important to recognise that enslaved women preconceived their violent actions as both defence and a

[283] Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1992), 118.
[284] Nikki Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*.
[285] Howell, Arkansas Narratives, 2.

form of retribution for past and continued abuse in order to break established paradigms of women's violence as solely defensive. In line with Tamika Nunley's insight into enslaved women's 'articulations of justice', some enslaved women clearly enacted their own gendered versions of justice in the face of historic rampant abuse and the sexual encounters forced upon them.[286]

Enslaved women also resisted overseers' sexual attacks through collective efforts. Gus Feaster described the sexual tyranny of his former overseer, 'Ole man Wash Evans', who 'used to take 'vantage of all de slaves when he git half a chance.' During one instance when Feaster, his mother, and Lucy Price where tasked with collecting blackberries, the overseer attempted to sexually abuse the two women. Evans resorted to threats of physical force and punishment, stating he was 'gwine to beat dem half to death' if the women did not 'submit' to him. However, Feaster's mother and Price resorted to their own gendered violence to counter Wash's attack:

> Finally dey act like dey gwine to indulge in de wickedness wid dat old man. But when he tuck off his whip and some other garments, my mammy and ole lady Lucy grab him by his goatee and further down and hist him over in de middle of dem blackberry bushes.[287]

Feaster's statement that the two women grabbed Evans *further down* is a coded reference to their attack of the overseer's penis or testes. The irony of the overseer attempting to enact sexual violence, only to be sexually violated himself would not have been lost on Wash Evans. Through a resort to gendered violence, both women were not only physically seizing possession and exclusive control of their own bodies, but also that of the overseer's in a clear reversal of sexual power. Consequently, gender-based violence on overseeing men's genitalia served as a deliberate attack on overseeing men's manhood and masculine identity. Overseers often prided themselves on their ability to subdue enslaved people, enabling them to achieve a sense of masculinity and manhood, as historian Cecil-Fronsman stipulated that the desire to degrade enslaved people 'to a level beneath themselves was a strong and potent force for many common whites.'[288] Compared to the social and economic prosperity of slaveholding men, overseers had no such securities and their masculine identities were often reliant upon their ability to

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286 Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned'; Nunley, *The Demands of Justice*.
287 Gus Feaster, FWP, South Carolina Narratives, Vol.14, Part 2, 12-13.
288 Bill Cecil-Fronsman, *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (Kentucky, 2014), 77.

maintain a sense of patriarchal and racial status. Sexual struggles in particular induced overseers with a sense of mastery through enforced female control and subordination. Enslaved women's physical genital violence served as a method of 'unmanning' and emasculating those overseers who relied and depended on their masculinity and sexual dominance. Gender-based sexual violence was not the prerogative of white men under slavery, with enslaved women mirroring techniques of intimate violence for their own protection and enactment of justice.

<u>Weaponised Assault</u>

Other enslaved women assaulted overseeing men through the weaponisation of commonplace objects and items on slaveholding sites. As discussed in Chapter One, abolitionist materials projected combat with weapons as a masculine activity, with enslaved men wielding a variety of items against whites and fugitive hunting canines in the effort to protect themselves and family members. Popular discourses and images surrounding enslaved male fugitives armed with weapons and enslaved men's collective revolts continue to largely dominate perceptions of armed resistance as a male preserve. For example, in his exploration of intraracial violence within enslaved communities, Forret largely limits the weaponisation of objects to enslaved men. In contrast, he attributes poison and the use of toxins as a feminine form of weaponry, asserting that enslaved women 'generally avoided physical conflicts', especially if those conflicts were against 'stronger' men.[289] Additionally, contemporary and historical perceptions surrounding armed resistance continue to infer that the weaponisation of objects was a non-pervasive mode of enslaved people's resistance, typically used during rare and exceptional instances of armed rebellion.[290] Thus, with the exception of Aisha K. Finch who examined enslaved women's armament of machetes during Cuban insurgencies, few scholars have addressed the phenomenon of enslaved women's weaponised resistance against white overseeing men in the US South.[291] Primary records,

[289] Forret, *Slave Against Slave*, 337.
Chapters Three and Four explore the gendering of poisoning in more depth.
[290] See Chapter One for an in-depth analysis on the gendering of violence and armed rebellion in contemporary and historical works.
[291] Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion*.

however, reveal that enslaved women utilised a plethora of weapons for their own violent endeavours as they subverted everyday tools and equipment through a variety of creative and subversive methods.

One item which was subject to enslaved women's weaponisation included overseeing men's own flogging devices. Overseer-perpetrated abuse through the use of the whip was a prime factor in enslaved women's decision to physically resist overseeing men. The whip represented a symbol of power, control, and authority for overseeing men and historians have extensively analysed flogging devices within the context of enslavement, noting how overseers, as well as male and female enslavers alike, brandished this instrument of pain on a regular and unforgiving basis. Indeed, the whip served as a physical manifestation of the dominance of the overseer over the enslaved. Whilst this study is mindful not to replicate the simplistic 'violent overseer stereotype,' slaveholder journals, correspondences, fugitive narratives and the WPA extensively document overseeing men's callous and frequent use of the whip as a device of punishment, fear, and control. Although historians have acknowledged the centrality of the whip in antebellum slavery, few, if any, however, have examined how enslaved people utilised the flogging devices of overseeing men for the impetus of resistance. 'Counter-whippings', termed in this thesis as the subversive use of a flogging device for the purpose of enslaved people's resistance, is a distinct feature of enslaved people's violent resistance against enslavers and overseeing men in the antebellum South.

The use of counter-whippings for the resistant activities of enslaved men are well documented in male authored fugitive narratives. Austin Stewart, for example, described how an enslaved man caught an overseer 'by the throat' and 'held him in a vicelike grasp', inflicting blow after blow until the overseer 'commenced begging in a humble manner' to spare him. The enslaved man, Williams, as depicted in the image, below, only relinquished his control over the overseer after 'he thought he had thrashed him sufficiently' (see. Fig. 7).[292] Solomon Northup described a similar confrontation in his autobiography in which he 'snatched' a 'three feet long whip' from his enslaver's hand and beat his enslaver, John Tibeats, in a 'frenzy of madness', inflicting 'blow after blow' until his 'right arm ached.'

[292] Austin Stewart, *Twenty -Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman; Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years, While President of Wilberforce Colony, Canada West* (Rochester, 1857), 58-59.

Northup’s weaponisation of the whip, which ‘warped around the cringing body’ of his enslaver, is also demonstrated in the WPA testimony of the formerly enslaved.[293] Whilst counter-whippings are projected as a masculine form of resistance within male fugitive narratives to adhere to gendered abolitionist tropes surrounding physical resistance (see Chapter One), WPA narratives demonstrate that this particular form of violence was also a tactic of resistance amongst enslaved women. Indeed, the WPA narratives present a non-gendered image of counter-whippings which enslaved women used against overseeing men for the purposes of protection and revenge.

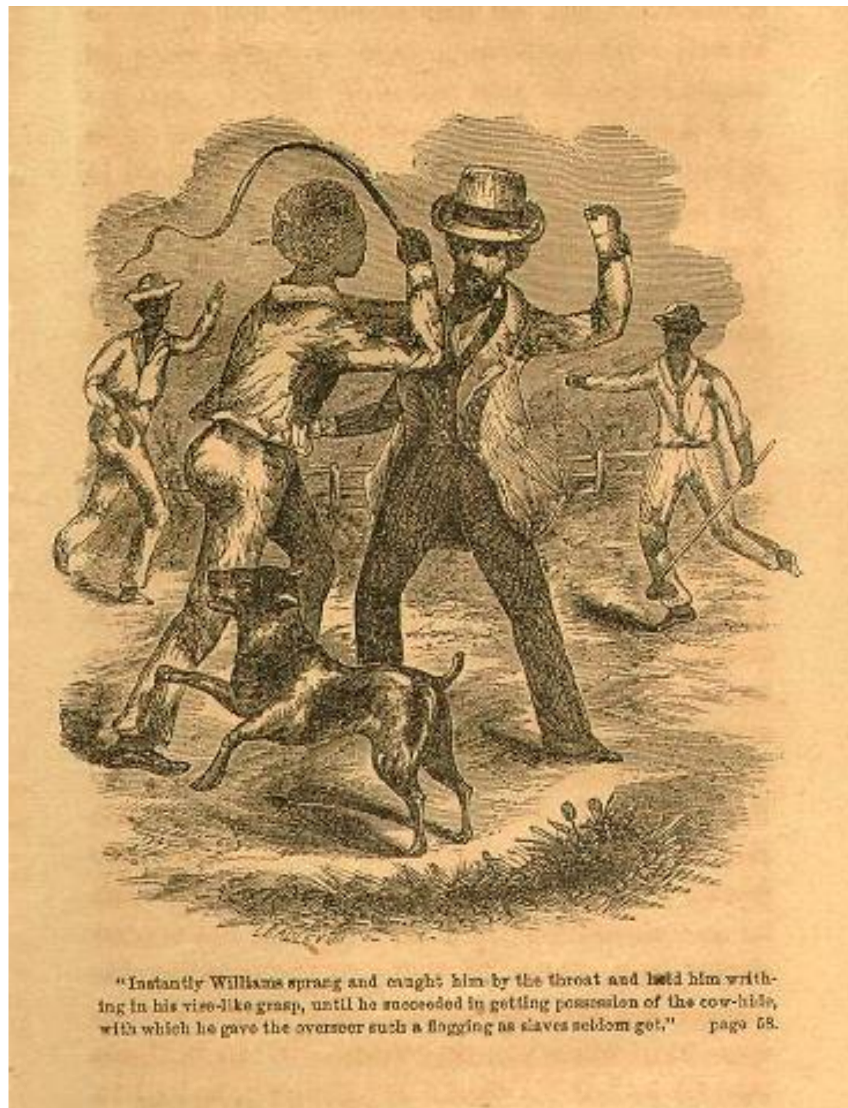

Figure 7: Austin Stewart, *Twenty -Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman; Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years, While President of Wilberforce Colony, Canada West* (Rochester, 1857), 58.

[293] Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 111.

Enslaved in Arkansas, Lula Jackson, described a similar incident to the one in Stewart's autobiography in which her sister, Crecie, flogged an overseer named Sanders in a forceful counterattack against his abuse. Accompanied with two canines 'in case he would have trouble with anyone,' Jackson described how Sanders restrained Crecie to a stump in the ground to limit her movement and prevent any possible recourse on her part and the part of others while he flogged her. However, Johnson reported that, 'When he started layin' that lash on Crecie's back, she pulled up that stump and whipped him and the dogs both.'[294] Crecie's attack of the overseer and his two dogs is highly significant. White Southerners weaponised trained canines to track and attack fugitive slaves, and to reinforce white authority on slaveholding sites.[295] This is demonstrated in Stewart's autobiographical illustration which depicts the overseer's 'ferocious bull-dog' lunging at the enslaved man, Williams, in an attempt to 'defend his brutal master.'[296] WPA respondents often discussed the significance of these animals in the subjugation of enslaved people with graphic detail, as one interviewee recalled: 'Them hounds would worry you and bite you and have you bloody as beef.'[297] However, just as the enslaved man, Williams, was able to defend himself from the canine's attack which 'ran off, howling worse than his master', Jackson's sister was also successfully able to rebuke the attack of the overseer and his two canines through the weaponisation of the overseer's own whip.[298] Crecie's dual attack of the overseer and his *two* dogs speaks to the ferocity and strength of her resistance, whilst demonstrating that the violent use of the whip was not the sole preserve of white overseers or of enslaved men.

The WPA respondent, Dianah Watson, described the sadistic behaviour of her former overseer who used to 'ride in the fields with a quirt and rope and chair on his saddle' so he could restrain and beat those enslaved people whom he deemed to have committed a transgression. On one occasion the overseer targeted Watson's aunt, Susie Ann, and began to beat her 'till the blood run off her on the ground.' However, Susie Ann responded in the following manner, as Watson recalled: 'She fall at his

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[294] Lula Jackson, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 4, 1.
[295] For further information on weaponised canines in the antebellum South, see, for example: David Doddington, 'Slavery and dogs in the Antebellum South', 23rd February 2012, *Sniffing the Past: Dogs and History*, [https://sniffingthepast.wordpress.com/2012/02/23/slavery-and-dogs-in-the-antebellum-south/] (last accessed: 12.10.2020); Smith, '"Open jaws of this monster-tyranny"'.
[296] Stewart, *Twenty -Two Years a Slave*, 58.
[297] Henry Waldon, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 7, 2-3.
[298] Stewart, *Twenty -Two Years a Slave,* 58.

feet like she passed out and he put up the whip and she trips him and gits the whip and whips him till he couldn't stand up.' Watson finalised her recollection of the event with the prideful statement: 'there warn't no more overseers on the place after that.'[299] The humiliation of overseeing men is a distinct feature of female led counter-whippings. This mode of violence served a dual purpose as overseers were forced to endure the physical pain of the whip, as well as the humiliation of being physically abused by an enslaved Black woman. Counter-whippings represented an embarrassing reversal of power and control for overseeing men who predated their white manhood on physical superiority and control over bondspeople. The publicity of Susie Ann's violence which occurred in the open settings of the agricultural field for all to see, both from enslaved onlookers and the white slaveholding family, would have further fostered a sense of shame and failure in the defeated overseer. Indeed, the termination of the overseer's employment and his removal from the slaveholding site speaks to this sense of shame, as his employer clearly deemed him unsuitable to the task of plantation management. Once more, enslaved women's violence had the potential to disrupt the patriarchal dynamics of local slaveholding sites, incurring long-term change to the benefit of the enslaved woman in question and that of their wider communities.

Ann's whipping of the overseer 'till he couldn't stand up' speaks to the ferocity of her resistance and her desire to seize revenge. Although Ann's use of violence began as an act of defence, Watson's testimony demonstrates that counter-whippings quickly evolved into moments of retribution. Indeed, revenge is a distinct feature of enslaved women's counter-whippings against overseers, as bondswomen no doubt relished the opportunity to reverse the status quo, enacting a form of violence primarily reserved for the enslaved. Revenge is also demonstrated in the testimony of Thomas Goodwater who witnessed an enslaved woman beating an overseer with his own whip. Goodwater recalled: 'I wus in the "quarters" one day w'en Black, the overseer start to lick a slave. She take the whip frum him an' close de door an' give him a snake beatin'.'[300] Goodwater's description of how this enslaved woman seized the overseer's whip before she trapped him, barring any means of escape, is indicative of an enslaved woman who was bent on revenge, as the closing of the door was designed to send a clear

[299] Dianah Watson, FWP, Texas Narratives, Vol. 16, Part 4, 1-2.
[300] Thomas Goodwater, FWP, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Part 2, 2.

message to the overseer of his impending abuse though psychological intimidation. The fact that this woman chose to facilitate her violence in private through the symbolic closing of the cabin door, despite the inherent physical and sexual risks of being confined with a male overseer, is a testament to this enslaved woman's belief in her own violent capabilities and her self-assurance that vengeance was hers and hers alone to take. The actions of these women speak to Nunley's theorisation that enslaved women's resistance embodied more than just violence, their resistance served as 'articulations of justice.'[301] Counter-whippings represent one of the most dramatic, symbolic, and visible forms of enslaved women's resistance used for both defence, and public and private retribution. Counter whippings embodied public humiliation and the reversal of traditional power dynamics, as enslaved women's use of the whip destabilised the presumed juncture between the whip and the white male body.

Enslaved women weaponised conventional and unconventional items, objects, and implements across the slaveholding site in order to heighten and enrich their assaults against overseeing men. WPA respondent Richard Jackson divulged how his mother, who was 'bad 'bout fightin'', evaded a flogging when she 'up and throwed a shovel full of live coals from the fireplace' into an overseer's 'bosom' before she 'run out the door' of her living quarters.[302] The invasion of enslaved women's private living spaces was a commonplace occurrence on antebellum slaveholding sites. Enslavers and overseers alike entered enslaved people's living areas to incite terror and invoke vulnerability, especially from Black women who were at risk of further violence via sexualised attacks. Historian Elizabeth Barnes asserts that home invasions and intimate physical abuse were inextricably linked, as enslaved women closely associated home-invading men with sexualised violence.[303] The overseer's infiltration of this enslaved woman's personal space would have been a calculated decision to inspire fear to remind Jackson's mother of her continual exposure to white sanctioned violence even within her own living quarters. This enslaved woman's escape from her cabin in which she ran 'out of the door' further illustrates that bondswomen inherently recognised the risks of being alone with a white overseeing man.[304] Enslaved

[301] Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned'.
[302] Richard Jackson, FWP, Texas Narratives, Vol. 16, Part 2, 1.
[303] Elizabeth Barnes, 'Rape, Power, and Race: Black Women's Responses to Sexual Violence in the Antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction South', Doctoral Thesis, University of Reading (2020), 155-170.
[304] Jackson, Texas Narratives, 1.

women used violence in a multitude of different spaces as they recognised their continual exposure to overseer violence and they were resourceful in their weaponisation of objects, utilising items which were close to hand to evade overseer abuse in the intimacy of their own cabins.

Other enslaved women deployed mundane agricultural items in the defence against overseer abuse. Celestia Avery, for example, divulged how her grandmother, Sylvia, attacked an overseer with a fence railing. Avery recalled that her grandmother had 'not completed the required amount of hoeing for the day' and in response, the overseer instructed Sylvia to remove her clothing in order to be whipped. Sylvia, however, continued to labour with her hoe until she reached the wooden fence surrounding the permitter of the field. As the overseer 'reached out to grab her,' 'she snatched a fence railing and broke it across his arms.'[305] Avery emphasised that the overseer was 'just as cruel' as their enslaver, implying that Sylvia would have been unlikely to plead with the overseer for mercy or turn to the slaveholder for clemency. The urgency of the situation required a prompt solution and Sylvia resorted to violence as her own form of personal protection, strategically weaponising the fence railing and utilising the time afforded to her to plan her defence. Virtually any object could be transformed into a weapon, if wielded with enough force and motivation.

Records reveal that the wives of overseeing men also played important contextual roles in enslaved women's armament against white male plantation managers. The image of the young and single male overseer remains a powerful stereotype throughout historiographies of slavery, yet plantation records demonstrate the presence of non-slaveholding white women who resided on slaveholding sites as the wives of overseers.[306] Historian Laura Sandy asserts that these married women played a 'significant role' on plantations and were inextricably linked to the everyday realties of plantation life.[307] These women, in the words of Sandy, were enmeshed 'in a web of class, race, and

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[305] Celestia Avery, FWP, Georgia Narratives, Vol. 4, Part 1, 4.

[306] Scarborough classified overseers in the cotton and sugar regions of the Southwest as a 'fluid population of young men of little competence…woefully deficient in formal education, possessing little knowledge of agricultural techniques, and incapable of managing a slave force.' Scarborough, *The Overseer*, 5.

[307] Laura Sandy, 'Mary-Anne Schad', 75. For further information on overseers' wives, see: Laura Sandy, 'Homemakers, Supervisors, and Peach Stealing Bitches: The Role of Overseers' Wives on Slave Plantation in Eighteenth Century Virginia and South Carolina', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2012), 473-494; Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery,* 243-278.

gender relationships' which occasionally turned sour and became fraught with tension.[308] Overseers' wives often lived alongside their husbands on slaveholding sites and were thus engaged in a variety of interactions with the enslaved labour force and enslaved women. Whilst the wives of overseeing men left minimal evidence themselves due to their low social standing and poor literacy skills, slaveholder journals and judicial records demonstrate that the presence of these white women on slaveholding sites 'shaped the multiracial plantation society in which they lived and worked' which had the potential to generate ill-feeling and occasionally open conflict.[309]

Sandy asserts that colonial enslavers favoured married men as overseers, as it was presumed that the desirable family attributes of stability and morality would create reliable and trustworthy employees.[310] Some antebellum enslavers, however, openly acknowledged that these white women could have a destabilising effect on slaveholding sites, causing unrest, friction and even conflict between themselves, their husbands and enslaved people. For example, the Savannah rice planter, Charles Manigault, documented his 'annoyances from having an overseer with his family' in a letter to his plantation manager, James Haynes, in 1847. Manigault explicitly instructed Haynes to resolve an issue caused by 'Mrs. Haynes', citing that his 'planting interests cannot go on quietly and prosperously' due to a series of 'disputes' between Haynes' wife and the enslaved workforce concerning 'the ownership of poultry.' Manigault explicitly expressed his annoyance to Haynes, asserting that Haynes' wife 'is not as she ought to be' and that her actions, 'clashed with the welfare and comfort' of his enslaved "property."[311] Manigault's letter demonstrates not only the presence of overseeing men's wives on slaveholding sites, but that their existence complicated the interconnecting social dynamics of slavery.

Indeed, inter-racial disputes between white and Black women had the potential to create open confrontations between enslaved women and married overseeing men. For example, in July 1857, Milly was indicted and charged for the assault of an overseer named John Davenport. It was reported that on the 16th March, 1857, Milly 'cut, stabbed and wounded' Davenport with a pocket knife over an issue of

[308] Sandy, 'Mary-Anne Schad', 60.
[309] Sandy, 'Mary-Anne Schad', 61.
[310] Sandy, 'Homemakers, Supervisors, and Peach Stealing Bitches', 484.
[311] Clifton (ed.), *Life and Labour on Argyll Island*, 49.

punishment which began due to a dispute with Davenport's wife.[312] The incident began after Martha Davenport accused Milly of milking her cow. Milly reportedly replied in a 'short manner' that she did not milk Davenport's 'old cow' [emphasis original]. Martha Davenport attempted to uphold her mastery over Milly, asserting that she was 'not to dispute her word', yet Milly 'continued to do so, and did so some dozen times between her house' and that of her enslaver's. As in the case of Manigault's letter, it appears that disputes over livestock was a source of strife between overseers' wives and enslaved people. After Martha Davenport informed her husband of the incident, John Davenport resolved to 'correct' Milly the next morning as he believed it was his 'duty' to uphold his wife's authority and jurisdiction. However, Davenport's attempt to whip Milly dramatically backfired. After Davenport struck Milly and 'stamped on her', she 'advanced to him with force' and the two engaged in a fierce confrontation with Milly 'fighting him with all her force and in a very ambitious manner.' During the struggle, Milly inflicted a series of stab wounds and cuts on Davenport with a pocketknife, causing him to haemorrhage in front of his wife and other onlookers. After receiving four bloody stab wounds to the arm, abdomen, chest, and face, Davenport disarmed Milly who reportedly declared to witnesses that she 'would have cut him more.' After the fight had finalised, Martha Davenport vehemently accused Milly of 'concealing' the knife, to which Milly replied: 'I brought it in my hand and damn him, I will show him who he fools with.' Based on Milly's response it is possible to ascertain that her actions were preconceived.

The verbal altercation between Milly and the overseer's wife is an important factor in this case which escalated due to the overseer's attempt to restrain and whip Milly with a switch. Milly vehemently disputed Davenport's right to punish her, as she asserted to witnesses that he 'had no right to choke and kick her as he did'. Milly's protestation that the overseer had 'no right' to abuse her reveals that as a domestic to her female enslaver, Milly clearly perceived Davenport's corporal interference to be beyond his remit and jurisdiction. This complicates the spatial dynamics of slaveholding sites and the invisible boundaries of labour which evidently influenced the resistant activities of the enslaved. Milly did not perceive herself to be under the power and authority of the overseer, someone who chiefly operated in agricultural settings, rather than the slaveholding household which was under the purview

[312] *Commonwealth vs. Milly*, Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710, Box 8, Folder, 7, Misc. Reel 4203. State Records Collection, LVA.

of enslavers. Bondswomen recognised that overseers and their wives were socially inferior to their enslavers, and some were prepared to inflict grave and potentially mortal wounds on those whom they perceived to be acting without due jurisdiction or authority.

The court of Henry County, Virginia, found Milly guilty of assaulting 'a white person, with intent to kill' and she was sentenced to be sold and transported 'beyond the limits of the United States.' This graphic court record leaves little to the imagination and the ferocity of Milly's violence is evidenced throughout this narrative. John Davenport, a six-foot-tall overseer, was no match for Milly who stood at five feet and weighed only one hundred and forty pounds. Milly's physical stature actively contests the widely held presumption that physical "inferiority" precluded enslaved women from enacting meaningful and severe forms of violence. In addition to her attack against the overseer, Milly also assaulted the white male officials who attempted to arrest her. It was noted to the court that Milly 'resisted all she could' and it took three men to subdue her as she made 'a good many threats against them' and 'made an effort to bite' one of them, asserting that she would 'put him in hell if he put hands on her.'[313] *Commonwealth vs. Milly* demonstrates enslaved women's fierce refusal to submit to the violent demands of white men including overseers and state officials. Various social situations on slaveholding sites rendered overseeing men at risk and their wives contributed to the volatile world of slavery when enslaved women, especially enslaved domestics, refused to adhere to the authority and control of lower-class whites.

Enslaved women's weaponised resistance also incorporated agricultural hand tools. Enslaved men and women often laboured alongside each other in back breaking conditions from 'sun-up to sun-down' cultivating the land of the upper elite under the watchful eye of overseeing men.[314] Although a gendered division of labour existed on slaveholding sites regarding domestic work, especially in slaveowning households, WPA respondents were keen to stress that no such division existed for agricultural field labour.[315] Spencer Barnett, for example, stressed that 'the women plowed like men in

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[313] *Commonwealth vs. Milly*, LVA.
[314] Henry D. Jenkins, FWP, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Part 3, 2.
[315] Enslaved women and girls were more likely to labour as domestics within the slaveowning household of their enslavers due to nineteenth century gender roles and traditional values which relegated domestic production under the purview of women. Emily West discusses the sexual division of labour on slaveholding sites in the context of what she terms, a 'double day' or a 'double shift.' After undertaking labour during the day, enslaved

plow time' and Wash Dukes emphasised that his 'mother plowed just like a man.'[316] Enslaved women, according to historian Daina Ramey Berry, were 'central figures' in the agricultural workforce of the slaveholding South, and as such, they acquired considerable experience in wielding a variety of farm tools.[317] Enslaved women used this experience to their advantage to assault overseeing men through the subversive use of the hand-hoe. This is demonstrated in the testimony of Martha Bradley who recalled: 'One day I wuz workin' in de field and de overseer he come 'round and say sumpin' to me he had no bizness say. I took my hoe and knocked him plum down.'[318]

Another WPA respondent, Lucindy Allison, recalled how her aunt, Mandy, was forced to toil in the fields and labour 'right among the men at the same kind of work' despite being heavily pregnant. Allison remembered how her grandmother 'nearly got in bad one time' with the presiding overseer when he attempted to whip Allison's pregnant aunt. Despite being valued by enslavers for their ability to reproduce, childbearing and pregnant enslaved women were rarely exempt from hard labour or physical violence. Overseeing men adapted corporal punishments against expectant enslaved mothers, 'not so much in pity as for the protection of the unborn child' but to "protect" the financial interests of their enslavers and their "species of property."[319] For example, pregnant women could be whipped over the shoulders, whilst others were forced to dig depressions in the ground for their stomachs to rest in to protect their unborn child from the blows of the overseer.[320] Exhausted, Aunt Mandy 'didn't keep up' with the work assigned to her and the overseer 'dug a hole with a hoe to pay her in it 'cause she was so big in front.' However, Mandy's mother threatened to murder the overseer if he attempted to punish her daughter: '[she] told him if he put her daughter there in that hole she'd cop him up in pieces wid her hoe.' The enslaved woman's threat against the overseer was successful, as 'he found he had two to

women were often forced to tackle gender-specific domestic work in the evenings which included quilting, carding, cooking, and cleaning. West, *Enslaved Women in America*, 61-62. For further information on the work of enslaved women, see, for example: Daina Ramey Berry, *Swinging the Sickle*, 13-35.

[316] Spencer Barnett, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 2; Wash Dukes, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1.

[317] Berry, *Swinging the Sickle*, 17.

[318] Martha Bradley, FWP, Alabama Narratives, Vol. 1, 1.

[319] Sarah Ross, FWP, Florida Narratives, Vol. 3, 5; Clifton (ed.), *Life and Labour on Argyll Island*, 320.

[320] Ellen Cragin described how her mother was punished in this manner when the overseer forced her to dig 'a hole in the ground to put her belly in.' Ellen Cragin, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 2, 4.

conquer and he let her be.'[321] Allison's grandmother was not the only enslaved woman to use violence to protect loved ones from overseeing men's abuse. Fannie Moore proudly declared to her interviewer that her mother would 'stan' up fo' her chillun' under slavery. 'De ol' overseeah he hate my mammy cause she fight him for beatin' her chillun.' Moore finalised her account of her mother's actions, stating: 'she git more whuppings for dat den anythin' else.'[322]

Historians stress the duality of Black women's mothering under slavery, asserting that it was both a site of joy and trauma. Emily West, for example, described motherhood under slavery as a 'double edged sword' as enslaved women were often forced into positions of inaction as they struggled to protect their children from the evils of slavery and white perpetrated abuse.[323] Harriet Jacobs epitomised this within her autobiography as she lamented the birth of her daughter due to her inability to protect her from the 'sufferings and mortifications' unique to enslaved women and girls.[324] However, although many enslaved mothers were forced into positions of inaction as they struggled to defend their children from overseer abuse, WPA testimony reveals that some bondswomen used weapons to curb the generational cycle of violence which operated on slaveholding sites. Historian Vanessa Holden asserts that enslaved people's resistance was both 'gendered and generational,' as enslaved women of various generations deployed and transferred resistance practices, beliefs, attitudes, and strategies to their children and other family members.[325] Indeed, the testimonies of Allison and Moore demonstrates the presence of female 'generational resistance' on slaveholding sites, as some enslaved mothers strove to protect their loved ones despite the inherent risks associated with violent resistance.

Enslaved women's weaponised violence was not confined to white overseeing men. Enslaved women also protected their children from the abusive actions of enslaved Black overseers and drivers.

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[321] Lucindy Allison, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 2.
[322] Fannie Moore, FWP, North Carolina Narratives, Vol. 11, Part 2, 4.
[323] Emily West, 'The Double-Edged Sword of Motherhood Under American Slavery', [https://blog.oieahc.wm.edu/the-double-edged-sword/] May 7th, 2019. [accessed: 7th March 2022]. For further information of enslaved women's mothering under slavery, see, for example: Morgan, *Laboring Women;* West and Shearer, 'Fertility Control'; Camilla Cowling (ed.), 'Mothering Slaves: Comparative Perspectives on Motherhood, Childlessness, and the Care of Children in Atlantic Slave Societies', *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2017), 223-231; Turner, 'The Nameless and the Forgotten'; Stephanie Jones-Rogers, "[S]he Could…Spare One Ample Breast for the Profit of Her Owner": White Mothers and Enslaved Wetnurses' Invisible Labour in American Slave Markets', *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2017), 337-355.
[324] Jacobs, Incidents *in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 69.
[325] Holden, *Surviving Southampton*, 19; 55.

Termed as drivers, foremen or overseers, enslaved men were occasionally granted managerial positions, sometimes working alone or below the main white overseer in a hierarchical system of exploitation.[326] Enslavers occasionally bestowed enslaved overseers and drivers with the power to discipline and punish enslaved people for major and minor transgressions which created friction and conflict between themselves and enslaved communities. Historian John Blassingame described the role of overseeing or driving as a 'hated position' and Solomon Northup extensively documented his distain in having to perform such a position for his enslaver when he was forced to whip Patsey in a 'demoniac exhibition' of violence.[327] Historians have acknowledged the contentious nature of the profession of enslaved overseeing, with David Doddington describing the role as a 'difficult balancing act.'[328] Enslaved men who held managerial positions struggled to navigate the conflicting position of being an enslaved trustee of authority. Charles Ball acknowledged this 'balancing act' in his account of slavery, as he professed that he was forced to obey his enslaver's 'unreasonable commands' and as such, 'the men under my charge did not consider me a very lenient overseer.'[329] Although some men were respected for their attempted leniency on the side of the enslaved, others who were, as Northup described, 'severe in the extreme' at the expense of others, were subject to resentment and resistance.[330]

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[326] Other contemporary terms used to describe enslaved men who held managerial positions include overlookers, head man, boss, whipping boss, overdriver, underdriver and leading man. The terms 'overseer' and 'driver' were used to denote the hierarchical positions of slaveholding management. White men generally occupied the position of overseer in the antebellum South. The term 'driver' was used to denote an enslaved man who held a position of managerial authority over enslaved workforces and communities. Drivers were generally perceived to be of secondary importance compared to a white male overseer. However, William Wiethoff and Laura Sandy assert that enslaved men occupied the position of overseer more frequently than historians have previously presumed, stating that Black and white men competed for the managerial and supervisory positions of overseer. Formerly enslaved people recalled the sole presence of enslaved overseers or drivers, or stated that enslaved men occasionally held an equal position of authority to white overseers. Scarborough asserts small slaveholding sites were more likely to utilise enslaved men for the position of overseer, driver or foreman due to economic reasons. Scarborough, *The Overseer*, 16-17; William Wiethoff, 'Enslaved African's Rivalry with White Overseers in Plantation Culture: An Unconventional Interpretation,' *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2006), 429-455; Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery.*

[327] John Blassingame, 'Status and Social Structure in the Slave Community: Evidence from New Sources,' in Harry P. Owens (ed.), *Perspectives and Irony in American Slavery* (Jackson, 1976), 137-151, 140; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 256.

[328] Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity*, 58.

[329] Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States. A Narrative of the Life and Adventure of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave Under Various Masters, and was One Year in the Navy with Commodore Barney, During the Late War* (New York, 1837), 35; 341.

[330] Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave,* 226.

Enslaved women violently strove to protect their children from the abusive actions of enslaved Black overseers and drivers. J.T. Times recalled how his former enslaver, 'Miss Ann', attempted to whip him for some undisclosed offence, yet Times resisted, and his enslaver delegated the whipping to an enslaved driver named Williams. Times described how events on his former site of enslavement escalated quickly, as he recalled:

> Ma had been peeping out from the kitchen watchin' the whole thing. When William come up to beat me, she come out with a big carving knife and told him, "That's my child and if you hit him, I'll kill you."[331]

Times' mother only interfered when Williams attempted to beat her child. This provides an interesting insight into perceptions of power and authority on slaveholding sites. Although the enslaved occasionally perceived enslaved managers as authoritative figures despite their enslaved status, as exemplified in the testimony of Young Henson who described their enslaved overseer's orders as 'law', some enslaved women rejected Black overseeing men's attempts to flex their disciplinary powers.[332] The enslaved status of Black men who held managerial positions may have influenced enslaved women's decision to use or threaten violence against them. Enslaved women may have perceived these men to possess a subordinate degree of power compared to white overseers and of course, male and female enslavers. Times' mother's armament of the 'big carving knife' and her singular intervention against Williams serves to emphasise this enslaved woman's conviction that Williams was not to harm her child.

During his WPA interview, Bryant Huff exclaimed that 'some of the overseers were negroes and occasionally there was trouble when they attempted to punish another slave.' Huff recalled how one of the Black overseers questioned his mother, Janie Huff, in relation to her movements the previous evening whilst she was loading a wagon with tree limbs. When Janie Huff refused to answer and the overseer approached her 'in a threatening manner,' she 'threw piles of twigs upon him' and he 'fled in terror.'[333] Huff's description that there was 'trouble' when enslaved overseers 'attempted to punish

[331] J.T. Times, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 5, 1-2.
[332] Annie Young Henson, FWP, Maryland Narratives, Vol. 8, 2.
[333] Bryant Huff, FWP, Georgia Narratives, Vol. 4, Part 2, 3.

another slave' [emphasis added] signifies that enslaved people were acutely aware of Black overseeing men's enslaved status which afforded them resentment and conflict from enslaved communities. This disputes William Wiethoff's assertion that enslaved people 'did not distinguish between an overseer who was white and an overseer who was Native American, a Mexican, or a slave.'[334] The conflicting status of Black managers as enslaved men may have functioned as a double provocation for bondswomen. David Doddington asserts that 'the language of mastery and control was highly gendered in the antebellum South' and as such, enslaved women were prohibited from transcending positions of authority due to nineteenth century white gender roles.[335] Consequently, those bondswomen, as described in Alexander's testimony, would have experienced the additional sting of witnessing an enslaved man climb the hierarchal ladder of plantation power – a route primarily reserved for men.

Other enslaved women collectively protested the disciplinary actions of enslaved managers. According to Fannie Alexander, a WPA respondent previously enslaved in Arkansas, a group of armed enslaved women attempted to violently assault a 'coloured foreman', as Alexander recalled that the 'overseer was going to whoop one of the women 'bout somepin' and in response 'all the women started with the hoes to him and run him clear out of the field.' Alexander stressed, 'they would killed him if he hadn't got out of the way.' Alexander additionally explained that prior to the incident, 'the master hadn't put an overseer over them for a long time.' Although their violence was provoked due to the overseer's attempt to assert his disciplinary powers, it is likely that his status and gender served as influential factors in their decision to 'run him clear out of the field.'[336] These women rejected the supervision of this man, a member of the enslaved community, after a prolonged period of autonomous work, protesting against his presumed authority and capacity to administer physical discipline through an outward display of collective protest. Although it is difficult to ascertain whether the race and gender of Black overseeing men served as a primary influence for enslaved women's violence, it is nevertheless noteworthy that some respondents chose to specify the race and enslaved status of overseeing men in their recollections of enslaved women's violent resistance. The collective armament of these women

[334] Wiethoff, *Crafting the Overseer's Image*, xvi.
[335] Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity*, 81.
[336] Fannie Alexander, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1.

signifies a network of resistance on Southern slaveholding sites, as enslaved women refused to submit to male patriarchal power in all its varied forms.

Weaponised Murder

Overseeing was a dangerous profession in the antebellum South. Major and minor disputes surrounding corporal abuse, threats of punishment, or simple disagreements between overseers and enslaved women had the potential to escalate into open forms of physical assault and even murder. Anna Huggins, a WPA respondent of Arkansas, openly attributed the death of a former overseer to the violent actions of her mother, stating: 'She caused that overseer's death, she got him while he was beating her.'[337] Huggins's mother 'got' the overseer via some undisclosed means, yet her daughter's testimony demonstrates the degree to which overseeing men faced challenges from bondswomen, as they operated in a contentious and 'volatile nexus' between enslavers and the enslaved.[338]

Far from the resolute image of the fearless, whip wielding, gun-toting overseer, primary records reveal that some overseeing men feared their profession and acted according to their own self-interests and safety. The Georgian rice planter and enslaver, Ebenezer Jackson, detailed in a letter to his wife how his overseer struggled to retain control over the enslaved workforce which led to his voluntary removal from Jackson's plantation. 'Mr Denmark', wrote Jackson, 'tells me he cannot stay with me another year. He says the negroes have become prejudiced against him, that he does not like to manage them another year.' Ebenezer complained in a previous letter that his enslaved workforce 'was not as obedient as formerly, and much more insolent.'[339] Clearly, the enslaved labour force had become too troublesome and potentially dangerous for Jackson's overseer, who refused to renew his employment contract. Overseers were not always confident in their convictions; whilst some chose to terminate their employment contracts for fear of danger, others attempted to consolidate any perceived lapse of authority with violence, engendering disastrous consequences.

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337 Anna Huggins, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 3, 4.
338 Sandy, 'Divided Loyalties,' 366.
339 *Ebenezer Jackson Papers, 1784-1873*. Ebenezer Jackson Correspondence, 1814-1819, MSS83842, Box 1, Folder 3. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Overseers had good reason to act cautiously. A Florida WPA interviewee named John Henry Kemp graphically recalled an episode of deadly violence on the Mississippi plantation of his former enslaver, John Gay, which resulted in the bloody murder of an overseer. The incident began when the overseer reprimanded an elderly enslaved woman for her slow pace of work whilst she was ploughing. This, as Kemp recalled, provoked 'some back talk' from an unnamed woman labouring nearby. The consequences were severe, as Kemp reported how the overseer 'lashed her severely' with a 'long closely woven whip.' In response to being whipped 'the woman became sore' and in retaliation, 'she took her hoe and chopped him across the head.' Kemp vividly exclaimed to his interviewer: 'child you should have seen how she chopped this man to a bloody death.'[340] The weaponisation of the hand-hoe proved to be an effective and deadly weapon and Kemp's candid description is mirrored in the testimony of Irene Coates, who recalled one of the most extreme incidences of female perpetrated violence to feature in the WPA collection. Coates graphically described how an unnamed field hand murdered an overseer in a bloody attack in response to being whipped:

> She whirled around, struck the overseer on his head with the hoe, knocking him from his horse, she then pounced on him and chopped his head off. She went mad for a few seconds and proceeded to chop and mutilate his body; that done to her satisfaction, she then killed his horse.

Although this women's use of violence is indictive of self-defence, her mutilation of the overseer's dead body and that of his horse, to her 'satisfaction', is indicative of her desire to seize revenge against a man who Coates described as 'very hard on the slaves'.[341] Coates' description that the enslaved woman 'went mad' emphasises the criminality of this woman's actions, as she chose to weaponise an object of labour to not only assault the overseer, but also to engage in post-mortem mutilation. Both Kemp and Coates' testimony powerfully illustrate how the weaponisation of commonplace objects and implements, particularly the hand-hoe, played significant roles in the deaths of overseeing men.

It is important to stress that whilst physical punishments were a decisive factor in enslaved women's use of violent resistance, minor disputes and disagreements also had the potential to escalate into acts of open and deadly violence. Rose, the property of Joseph Epperson in Campbell, Virginia,

[340] John Henry Kemp, FWP, Florida Narratives, Vol. 3, 1-2.
[341] Irene Coates, FWP, Florida Narratives, Vol. 3, 2-3

was charged with the murder of an overseer named John Deanor in August 1859. Before his death, Joseph Epperson discovered his overseer on the 28th June bleeding 'considerably' to the head with a wound 'five inches long'.[342] It was reported that 'Deanor and Rose had got into a fight' and Rose had struck the overseer to the left side of his skull with the helve of her weeding hoe during a routine day of ploughing. The incident began whilst Rose was 'scrapping tobacco' halfway across the field after the overseer ordered her to 'sit down under a tree and rest' with the other enslaved workers. Contrary to his orders, Rose responded that she felt well enough to work, prompting the overseer to take offence and threaten Rose before he eventually 'struck her with intention to do her injury' across her head and shoulder. However, Rose refused to submit to the overseer's abuse, as witnesses reported that, 'as he was going to strike her another lick, she pitched her hoe back and struck him on the head.' Deanor remained incapacitated until he succumbed to his injuries later in the evening.

This court record exemplifies the volatile nature of plantation spaces and how quickly routine situations could escalate into incidents of murderous resistance. The overseer's offence at Rose's dispute over the issue of rest, the original cause of the argument, illustrates the fragility of overseeing men's authority which they desperately attempted to uphold and reinforce through violence. Indeed, the unsavoury character of Deanor who clearly perceived Rose's disobedience as an attack to his command and control, is apparent in the testimony of witnesses who were sworn for the prosecution. Numerous witnesses to the murder, enslaved and free, emphasised the overseer's use of foul language against Rose, describing similar derogatory terms and threats. 'Stinking slut', 'stinking bitch', and 'infernal bitch' feature throughout numerous witness statements and witnesses emphasised the overseer's threats to 'knock [Rose's] brains out' as he demanded, 'do you have assurance to tell me not to hit you with the hoe?'

The insecurity of Deanor to Rose's affront is readily apparent throughout the record, as overseeing men endeavoured to consolidate their projections of white male dominance through threats of violence and force. Moreover, this record demonstrates the volatility and the hazardous nature of the overseeing profession as Joseph Epperson testified that Deanor had only been employed as an overseer

[342] *Commonwealth vs. Rose,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1859 August – October Pardons. Accession 36789, Box 19, Folder 5, Misc. 4216. State Records Collection, LVA.

on the plantation for eighteen months before the fatal attack. Whilst this record exemplifies the vulnerability of enslaved women to white male abuse, it also demonstrates the vulnerability of overseeing men to the resistive actions of those abused women who lashed out violently with weapons when faced with danger and threatening remarks. This adds a different outlook to overseer-enslaved relations on antebellum slaveholding sites which were marked by eruptive tension and conflict. A post-mortem examination concluded that the fracture to Deanor's skull was five inches long and produced by a 'pretty considerable blow'. In the face of imminent danger and attack, enslaved women utilised agricultural objects which were to hand, capitalising on their available weaponry and their close proximity to abusive overseeing men. Disagreements between overseers and enslaved women were occasionally violent and sometimes fatal. The court determined that Rose was guilty of murdering Deanor and she was condemned to sale and transportation beyond the limits of the United States. This case, however, was recommended to the governor of Virginia, Henry A. Wise, who, for unspecified reasons, commuted Rose's sentence to 'labour in the public works.'[343]

It should be considered whether the nature of the overseer's instigated abuse, his explicit use of language, alongside prejudiced views against lower-class whites, helped sway Wise's decision. It is worth noting that the court's initial sentencing of sale and transportation seems especially "lenient" given the nature of the case which entailed a murderous capital offence against a white male citizen. According to Tamika Nunley, the age and class status of the target of enslaved women's violence shaped the decisions of Southern courts. Nunley contends that enslaved women's crimes against individuals from poorer backgrounds were less likely to result in a severe sentence or even reach court proceedings in the first place. Southern courts primarily operated to accommodate the financial interests of the planter class, as Nunley asserts that in Richmond, Virginia, the judicial establishment 'supported the idea of execution as the least desirable outcome and a last resort' as courts attempted to prioritise the 'profitability of clemency for slave traders, slave owners, pens and slave markets within and beyond the commonwealth.'[344] Eugene Genovese also described the judicial system of the slaveholding South

[343] *Commonwealth vs. Rose*, LVA.
[344] Nunley, *The Demands of Justice,* 9.

as a 'complementary system of plantation justice.'[345] According to Genovese, various laws pertaining to race and slavery were implemented to support the planter class and as such, Southern legislature was designed and adapted to protect the property rights of enslavers. Sale and transportation, in which Rose was valued at $800, ensured that enslavers, including Joseph Epperson, retained financial compensation and fiscal security. Southern courts therefore 'situated the parameters of leniency squarely within the interests of slaveholders and the slave trade.'[346] In addition to protecting the 'financial interests of the master class', Nunley asserts that 'clemency was an important performative gesture' in the slaveholding South for political reasons as courts attempted to portray an 'evenhandedness' in the face of international scrutiny for chattel slavery.[347] Nunley further stipulates that "lenient" sentences of sale and transportation 'allowed white southerners to remove any persons who posed a threat, while preserving their own liberal convictions about the justness of the law.'[348]

Southern courts catered to the needs and demands of the planter elite and as such, judicial records pertaining to enslaved women's violence against white overseeing men are few and far between. The scarcity of records featuring men of the overseeing profession as plaintiffs certainly suggests that enslavers were hesitant to pursue legal avenues of justice against criminal enslaved women. Slaveholders would have been reluctant to report such crimes due to the cost, hassle, and embarrassment a criminal trial would incur if reported to the authorities and as such, members of the slaveholding elite 'effectively blocked' legal enquiries into criminal cases against overseeing men due to their power, position and status in the antebellum South.[349] Judith Schafer asserts that a 'solidarity' existed amongst whites and members of the planter class in the antebellum South which 'prevented whites who witnessed atrocities or who had seen physical evidence of them, from pressing charges or even reporting the abuse to the authorities.'[350] The lack of criminal prosecutions in relation to enslaved people's violence against overseeing men certainly indicates that a hesitancy existed in reporting such crimes.

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345 Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 64.
346 Nunley, *The Demands of Justice,* 9-10.
347 Nunley, *The Demands of Justice,* 8-9.
348 Nunley, *The Demands of Justice,* 17.
349 Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 633.
350 Judith Kelleher Schafer, '"Details Are of a Most Revolting Character": Cruelty to Slaves as Seen in Appeals to the Supreme Court of Louisiana' in Paul Finkelman (ed.), *Slavery and the Law* (Madison, 1997), 241-268, 247.

Enslavers may have perceived incidences of enslaved people's violence to be a normative, albeit dangerous aspect of the overseeing profession which did not require intercession from the state despite the illegality of enslaved people's actions. One overseer in 1849 declared, for example, 'He [an overseer] has to punish and keep in order the negroes, at the risk of his life'.[351] Frederick Olmsted also reported from Mississippi that overseers were continually equipped with firearms and in fear of their lives.[352] Overseeing was a dangerous and occasionally perilous profession, and enslavers and overseers alike were aware of the risks associated with plantation management. Laura Sandy stipulates that the 'casual reactions' of planters towards enslaved people's violent crimes against overseers is 'indicative of the nonchalant views' they held towards men in the overseeing profession, who received minimal support from their employers in the face of violent attacks.[353] It is worth noting that the enslavers of Milly, the bondswoman who repeatedly stabbed her overseer, John Davenport, did not report her capital offence to the authorities. Davenport's wife, Nancy, was the one who reported the crime and informed the authorities that Milly was to be arrested for attempted murder.[354] The inaction of Milly's enslavers speaks volumes about how the planter elite perceived capital crimes against overseeing men.

Furthermore, many slaveholding sites operated their own 'informal' systems of plantation justice in which enslavers and overseers acted as 'judge, jury and executioner' with the 'law's prohibition against slave murder and neighbourhood disapprobation as the only limiting factors.'[355] Enslavers and overseers enacted their own varied modes of punishment and according to James Campbell, 'there was no hard and fast rules as to when slaves would be brought before the courts rather than subjected to informal discipline.'[356] Overseers and enslavers may have taken action into their own hands, rather than relying on state interreference which could be both costly and lengthy. This can account for the dearth of criminal records pertaining to judicial investigations involving enslaved women and overseeing men. The lack of criminal prosecutions in relation to enslaved people's violence

[351] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 634.
[352] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 634.
[353] Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery*, 205.
[354] *Commonwealth vs. Milly*, LVA.
[355] Glenn McNair, *Criminal Injustice: Slaves and Free Blacks in Georgia's Criminal Justice System* (Charlottesville, 2009), 6-7.
[356] James Campbell, *Crime and Punishment in African American History* (New York, 2013), 39.

against plantation managers certainly suggests that both enslavers and overseers were reluctant to pursue judicial avenues of justice, even in cases concerning capital offences. As Southern courts predominantly operated to maintain the interests of enslavers, overseeing men themselves may have been reluctant to pursue legal proceedings against the women who attacked them, and by proxy, the enslavers who legally owned these women as property. According to Schafer, judicial Southern courts 'almost always supported the property interests of the masters against their overseers' and thus, overseeing men knew that the scales were not tipped in their favour and they avoided legal proceedings which were likely to be a lost cause.[357] Unlikely to match the financial funds of the slaveholding elite, overseers who were the targets of women's violence may have settled outside of court in private agreements with their employers, although evidence of this practice is limited. These factors can account for the lack of criminal proceedings and prosecutions in the archive involving enslaved women and overseeing white men.[358]

Despite a dearth of judicial evidence pertaining to capital offences committed against men employed in the overseeing profession, those rare and surviving court records powerfully illustrate the fragility of overseeing men's authority, control, and mastery. The 1857 North Carolina trial *State v. David, a Slave* details an indictment for murder in which an enslaved woman named Fanny was charged with the assault and murder of a plantation overseer, Abner F. Griffin, in Pitt County, 1857.[359] This judicial record further demonstrates how minor disagreements between enslaved women and plantation managers erupted into violent and deadly confrontations, as overseers perceived the slightest of disputes and 'disobedience' from enslaved women as an affront to their power and mastery. Upon noticing an enslaved boy riding to and from the plantation 'about dark' by the apparent instruction of Fanny, Griffin

[357] Schafer, '"Details Are of a Most Revolting Character"', 251.

[358] Due to the scarcity of court records pertaining to overseeing men, evidence or enslaved women's violence against white overseeing men predominantly derives from the testimony of the formerly enslaved. WPA narratives form the majority of evidence for this chapter, demonstrating how essential these records are in this particular study of slavery.

[359] Fanny and her husband were tried separately. The original court record of Fanny's trial is missing and presumed to be destroyed. Consequently, details of Fanny's involvement in the murder of Abner F. Griffin are only available in the North Carolina Supreme Court Case file of her husband. *State v. David, a Slave* (1857), North Carolina Reports (v.049, Dec. Term 1856-Aug. Term 1857), Pitt Superior Court, North Carolina. 'North Carolina Digital State Documents Collections', State Library of North Carolina, 353-359. [https://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/collection/p16062coll14/id/50284/rec/49] (accessed: 10.12.2020).

entered the cabin of Fanny and her husband, David, and accused them of illegally obtaining a 'jug of liquor.' When the overseer 'told her [Fanny] she ought to have asked him about it,' Fanny contested Griffin's authority as she informed him 'her master had permitted her to do so' and that 'it was a very big jug, and he would see it when it came.' For her offence Griffin instructed Fanny to cross her hands so she could be restrained and whipped. Fanny refused and declared, 'he would not whip her that night.' The situation quickly escalated into deadly violence when the overseer attempted to punish Fanny by force:

> when he struck her with a stick, which he had in his hand, she threw up her arms and received the blow upon them. David, who was standing about twelve feet off, then advanced and said, "you ain't got to do so," or "you must not do so here." The witness did not see that he raised his arms. As he approached, the deceased turned from Fanny, and struck David a blow on the head with his stick, which brought him nearly, or quite, to the ground. About the time the deceased struck David, Fanny struck him on the head with a pine-knot, or stick of light-wood, which knocked him down.

A witness intervened and prevented Fanny from continuing any further violence, but the damage was done. When presented in court, the jury declared Fanny and her husband guilty of murder. The reasons for Fanny's possession of the joint of wood can be debated, however the evidence indicates that her actions were premediated. Violet, an enslaved woman belonging to the same plantation and enslaver, testified she overheard Fanny declare some time before the homicide, 'that if the overseer tried to whip her, she would fight him.' Fanny's public threat that she would fight Griffin if he attempted to whip her and her initial refusals to comply with him are evidence that her resistance was preconceived and entirely intentional.

Although Fanny's husband attempted to intervene on her behalf, it was Fanny who personally delivered the fatal blow to kill the overseer. It is telling that David approached the overseer in a relatively non-threatening manner when he pleaded with Griffin not to punish his wife, as the witness reported he 'did not see that he raised his arms.' David's counsel also asserted that he was not 'cognizant of her [Fanny's] intention to strike.' Although the court framed David's advancement as an 'overt act' of violent 'intention' to ensure a guiltily conviction of murder, witness testimonials firmly allocate Fanny

as the principal actor who struck the overseer in an attempt to defend herself and her husband. The court also framed Fanny as the primary perpetrator, noting that David was the 'assistant' of Fanny's capital offence. Although Fanny did not act alone, her defence of her husband through violent means strongly contradicts male abolitionist discourse which denoted protection as a patriarchal male prerogative. Although enslaved men, including David, sought to protect loved ones when they could, their actions did not preclude or inhibit women from enacting their own personal defence. The image of Fanny standing triumphant over an incapacitated Griffin speaks loudly to female agency and their capability to protect themselves and others during instances of abuse. Additionally, Fanny's public assertion of her willingness to deploy violence in the event of corporal abuse is a testament to her strength of character and pride, as well as her desire for autonomy and the right to refuse punishments.

This judicial case also sheds light into overseer-enslaved relations. Fanny's refusal to comply with the overseer's demands and her 'imprudent' responses before her enactment of violence is an indication of her disparagement and disregard for the overseer, who she patently perceived to lack the command and mastery of the principal slaveholder. Laura Sandy highlights how enslaved people 'refused to accept the legitimacy of the overseer's rule because he was not a "master"' and this is aptly demonstrated in Fanny's initial attempt to override the overseer's authority.[360] Fanny unquestionably deemed the mandate and permission of the overseer, who was at the bottom of the chain of command, to be inconsequential in comparison to the slaveholder, as she replied, 'her master had permitted her to do so, and she intended to do it, as long as there was a horse on the plantation.'[361] Aware that breaking the chain of command and subverting the overseer's authority could create a confrontation, Fanny clearly considered her actions to be a potential and viable option. Her combative action was thus preconceived and delivered as a response to overseer-initiated aggression, as enslaved women weaponised a variety of nearby objects and items for their own violent endeavours. This record once again highlights the precarity of overseeing and how seemingly mundane disputes possessed the potential to escalate into armed moments of violence with deadly consequences.

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360 Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery*, 204.
361 *State v. David, a Slave* (1857), State Library of North Carolina, 353-359.

Conclusion

The scale and extensivity of corporal physical punishment inflicted upon the enslaved in all its varied manifestations constituted a key motivation and factor in enslaved women's decision to deploy violence as a form of resistance. Managerial violence, especially overseeing men's use of the whip, often acted as the tipping point in which strained overseer-enslaved relations erupted into violence, as bondswomen deployed physical force to assault overseers in response to immediate and historic mistreatment. The profession of overseeing was not without risk and this chapter challenges the presumed mastery of non-slaveholding whites over enslaved people and especially enslaved women. Through their assault of overseers, enslaved women were able to defend themselves from white male abuse and also destabilise enslaver-overseer relations through their manipulation of managerial viewpoints. Enslaver scepticism in overseeing men and their occasional removal from slaveholding sites demonstrates the power of enslaved women's resistance which could alter the patriarchal landscape of the South and engender beneficial change for the bondswomen in question and enslaved communities. Whilst this chapter has stressed the dual nature of enslaved women's violence which could facilitate both protection and dangerous reprisal, it should nevertheless be emphasised that violence could undermine white male authority and create plantation disruption on a localised level. Bondswomen could rid themselves of overseeing men through this strategic use of physical force both individually and collectively to reshape local dynamics of mastery and dominance in the slaveholding South.

Bondswomen's varied forms of sexualised violence further displaces the presumption that men were the sole instigators of intimate, sexual abuse. Enslaved women's adoption of sexual methods of violence through their attack of overseeing men's genitalia dismantles the traditionally masculinised domain of sexual power and force. It also demonstrates the variability of enslaved female perpetrated violence as an alternative, yet significant feature of enslaved women's resistance against overseeing men, as they enacted their own gender-based violence in response to white male rape and assault. The phenomenon of counter-whippings, an unexplored area of enslaved people's resistance, also represents a pronounced reversal of power and a highly effective and symbolic form of violence. The weaponised actions of the enslaved women described evidences one of the most dramatic and visible forms of

resistance used for both personal defence and vengeance against overseeing men. Counter-whippings, alongside enslaved women's subversive utilisation of other everyday plantation objects deconstructs the embedded presumption of the male monopolisation of weaponry within both male fugitive slave narratives and wider secondary historiography.

Bondswomen challenged the very norms of slavery through their reversal of everyday objects into weapons and symbols of rebellion to heighten and enrich their assault on whites. Despite the methodological limitations of uncovering violence against overseeing men within official state records, the few court records examined here provide an interesting insight into enslaved women's murder of overseeing men, which was predominately facilitated through the weaponisation of objects, especially the hand-hoe, which proved to be an essential weapon of women's deadly resistance. The use of WPA testimony in conjunction with judicial records reveal the volatile nature of slaveholding spaces and how quickly mundane disagreements between overseers and enslaved women could escalate into incidents of murderous resistance. This adds another dimension to the study of women's violent resistance which was not always instigated through physical or sexual abuse. Overall, violence was not the sole monopoly of white men nor the preserve of overseers alone. Neither was these women's violence and militance against overseers an unusual, unique or sporadic occurrence, but rather a defining and recursive feature of enslaved women's resistance throughout the slaveholding South, as enslaved women acted on their own behalf and on the behalf of others to protest and resist overseer mechanisms of control.

Chapter Three
'She is Satan's Own Darling': Enslaved Women's Violence Against Female Enslavers

Mildred Fry Bullitt, a slaveholding woman of Jefferson County, Kentucky, accused her enslaved domestic, Lucy, of poisoning her well water with bluestone, otherwise known as copper sulphate, in February 1861. Bullitt wrote an extensive letter to her children detailing how the poisoning occurred and she vehemently described Lucy as 'Satan's own darling.' For her crime of attempted murder, Bullitt sold Lucy 'down south' to New Orleans for the sum of $1,350. Lucy's act of poisoning offers an intriguing insight into the violent practices of enslaved women against Southern female enslavers. Despite the shocking nature of the poisoning, which came close to killing Bullitt, Lucy's actions and her facilitation of the attempted murder were in no way unique or specific to her. WPA narratives, court records and petitions, and Southern press reports also detail complex cases in which enslaved girls and women targeted white female slaveowners through avenues of assault, murder, and the weaponisation of commonplace fixtures, objects, and household products. This chapter closely analyses cases of Black female violence against white women in order to establish the complexity of violent resistance on antebellum slaveholding sites, probing how, why, and where enslaved women and girls utilised their own methods of physical force against white slaveowning women. In doing so, this study broadens conceptualisations of both slaveholding women's mastery and the responses it engendered amongst enslaved female communities.

This chapter takes a life-cycle approach to Black female violence, beginning with an examination of enslaved girls' physical assaults against slaveowning women. This analysis of female childhood resistance broadens notions of agency amongst enslaved youths and adolescents, and establishes an undeniable use of violence amongst enslaved girls in and around the slaveowning household. This is followed by an examination of enslaved women's violence according to a logic of increasing severity. Throughout the analysis of enslaved women's assault against slaveowning women, themes are identified in the establishment of why enslaved women deployed violence against female enslavers which ranged from white women's interference in the domestic labours of enslaved women,

the facilitation of abuse, to enslaved women's attempts to expose limitations in white women's mastery through the disruption of the ideology of the Southern household. The efforts of slaveowning families to sanitise, minimise and conceal accounts of enslaved women's violence against female enslavers are additionally explored. The final part of this chapter demonstrates how bondswomen murdered white slaveowning women through the weaponisation of commonplace items, permanent household fixtures and poisons derived from manufactured drugs, chemicals, and medicines. By focusing on the intersection of gender, mastery, and violence, this chapter builds upon historical and contemporary conceptualisations of Black and white female interactions on slaveholding sites to widen notions of white women's slaveholding and Black female opposition to gendered notions of mastery.

'Southern plantation mistresses developed an explicit pattern of benevolent activity inspired by their understanding of appropriate behaviours for women. For southern women, concern for the lives and well-being of slaves was a logical and natural extension of the female sphere.'[362] Marli Weiner's statement concerning Southern slaveholding women in her 1986 study was widely echoed throughout other twentieth century accounts of slavery. The perception of white women's diminished involvement in the institution of slavery originated in the antebellum era, with contemporary commentators, including the newspaper journalist and abolitionist, James Redpath, describing Southern white women in 1859 as being shielded from 'most obnoxious features' of slavery which included sales, auctions, and corporal violence.[363] The Lost Cause narrative of the South further popularised this gendered and patriarchal image of slaveholding women with the character archetype of the 'Southern Belle' which encapsulated planter class women as benign, romanticised figures.[364] This sanitised version of white Southern women remained cemented in both public imagination and historiographical studies of slavery for decades, as slaveholding women's abuses of enslaved people were largely ignored until twenty-first century scholarship.

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[362] Marli F. Weiner, 'The Intersection of Race and Gender: The Antebellum Plantation Mistress and Her Slaves', *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, Vol. 13, No. 1/2 (1986), 374-386, 378.
[363] John McKivigan (ed.), *Roving Editor: Or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States, by James Redpath* (Pennsylvania, 1996), 165.
[364] Margaret Mitchell's portrayal of slavery and Southern white womanhood in her novel *Gone with the Wind* further influenced the idealised and romanticised perception of the Southern lady and plantation mistress. Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (New York, 1936).

Past historiographies largely projected slaveholding women as either 'dual victims' of male patriarchal control where 'white men ruled' and 'Cotton was King', or as or benevolent enslavers who attempted to improve the lives of their enslaved people for the better.[365] For example, Weiner's work focused on slaveholding women's efforts to improve the care and living conditions of enslaved people, asserting that white women 'mediated the harshest aspects' of enslavement and were responsible for 'making slavery a positive good for slaves in daily practice.'[366] Secondary accounts widely echoed the supposition that white women mediated slavery's cruelties and abuses. Catherine Clinton, for example, similarly stipulated that enslaved people perceived the plantation mistress as 'a positive influence on the slave system' and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese wrote that mistresses represented the 'feminine face of paternalism that endowed the ownership of some people by others with whatever humanity it could muster.'[367] Studies also promoted the notion that Black and white women were united through the commonality of womanhood and motherhood. According to Vera Lynn Kennedy, 'shared' experiences of mothering 'created bonds' which 'had the effect of linking women, black and white, together.'[368]

White women were predominately analysed within the framework of subordination to white male authority and as such, it was assumed that mistresses wielded little or no power compared to their male counterparts. Historians therefore presumed that Southern women were generally excluded from the negative practice of slaveholding and the violent trappings of slavery. According to this view, Southern women were 'dual victims' of male patriarchal control which rendered white women closet feminists and 'all at heart abolitionists.'[369] This framework secured the image of white women as inherently non-dangerous and removed from acts of real mastery. The term *mastery* was therefore explicitly gendered; slaveowning women's practice of mastery differed from the mastery of slaveholding men. In addition, the reigning ideology of domesticity further alienated white women from wielding power over the enslaved. Women were confined to the domestic sphere of the plantation home,

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[365] Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York, 1982), 50.
[366] Weiner, 'The Intersection of Race and Gender', 375; 382.
[367] Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress,* 187-188; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 132.
[368] Vera Lynn Kennedy, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South* (Baltimore, 2010), 6.
[369] Virginia Ingraham Burr (ed.), *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Thomas, 1848-1899* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 167-168.

where they "gently supervised" enslaved domestics and undertook roles associated with the 'cult of True Womanhood.'[370]

The assumption that Southern women wielded a lesser form of mastery, precluded them, in the eyes of some historians, from deploying acts of violence altogether, as Drew Gilpin Faust declared: 'In the pre-war years, exercise of the violence fundamental to slavery was overwhelmingly the responsibility and prerogative of white men. A white woman disciplined and punished as the master's subordinate. Rationalised, systematic, autonomous, and instrumental use of violence belonged to men.'[371] Those historians who acknowledged slaveholding women's violence typically framed acts of abuse as spontaneous outpourings of emotion, acute irritability and hysteria, or as 'one off' events which were 'seldom calculated or premeditated.'[372] Jacqueline Jones, for example, asserted that white women 'devised barbaric forms of punishment' 'in the heat of the moment' and Stephanie Camp noted that white female violence was 'typically impulsive and passionate.'[373] As explained in Chapter One, the denial and downplaying of women's violence is nothing new. Gendered tropes and patriarchal codes of behaviour concerning physical force and expression continue to govern how violent female action is perceived and interrogated. Jessica Moore in her 2015 study of the female enslaver, Matilda Fulton, concluded that Fulton overwhelmingly used non-corporal means of motivating her enslaved workforce, suggesting she 'never resorted to the lash' despite her extensive involvement in her husband's plantation and 'careful supervision.'[374] White female violence is antithetical to perceptions of victimhood and reigning gender ideals where power, force and mastery are presumed to be the purview of white masculinity. Violence on the part of white Southern women differed starkly from the violence of slaveholding men who were ultimately the true 'masters' of enslaved people.

Whilst it cannot be disputed that white women operated within the confines and limits of white male patriarchal authority, Thavolia Glymph argued that white women 'were far from being victims of

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[370] Barbara Welter, 'The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860', *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1966), 151-174.
[371] Drew Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 63.
[372] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage,* 28-29.
[373] Jones, *Labor of Love*, 26; Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 132.
[374] Jessica Parker Moore, '"Keeping All Hands Moving": A Plantation Mistress in Antebellum Arkansas', *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (2015), 257-276, 272; 259.

the slave system.'[375] Glymph's ground-breaking study, *Out of the House of Bondage,* was the first monograph to challenge previous conceptualisations of white women, emphasising that Southern women 'wielded the power of slave ownership' and shared equally in slavery's culture of violence. Glymph examined the 'gendering of violence', asserting that gender and racial politics continue to dictate historians' opinions on who *was* and who *is* capable of inflicting violence: 'white women's violence contradicted prevailing conceptions of white womanhood – and still does.'[376] Stephanie Jones-Rogers' 2019 study, *They Were Her Property,* also revealed white women's substantial involvement in the many violent atrocities and financial processes of antebellum slavery. Jones-Rogers vehemently challenged previous interpretations of mistresses as benevolent and passive 'co-victims', asserting that Southern women controlled, disciplined, bought and sold human property throughout the South at slave auctions and public marketplaces in their own right as individual slaveholders. Such 'public expressions of mastery', according to Jones-Rogers, were no rarity in the slaveholding South. Pushing against the gendered lens of violence, Jones-Rogers forcibly argued against previous historical assertions that white women's violence was uncommon and passionate exceptions. In reality, Southern white women were abusive and violent disciplinarians who expected and enforced total servitude and obedience from their enslaved "property." In the words of Jones-Rogers, white women were 'not passive bystanders. They were co-conspirators.'[377]

Jones-Rogers also explored how historians perceive the term 'mistress' in relation to notions of mastery and power. Whilst some scholars, including Jennifer Gross, stipulate that the term 'mistress' denotes passivity, arguing that southern mistresses were relegated to 'dependent positions of daughter, wife and mother', Stephanie Jones-Rogers advocates for the use of the term stating that in Western Europe, a 'mistress' was 'a woman who govern[ed]; correlative to [a] subject or to [a] servant' and someone who exercised 'dominion, rule, or power.'[378] Jones-Rogers specified that 'mistress' neither signified a 'married woman's subservient legal position' nor a 'woman's subordinate status to that of a master.' Instead, Jones-Rogers contends that the terms 'master' and 'mistress' were synonymous, as

[375] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 4.
[376] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage,* 5.
[377] Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property,* 205.
[378] Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property,* xiv-xv.

Southern laws recognised 'the comparable powers and authority that these women possessed.' Mastery and 'mistress-ship', according to Jones-Rogers, were equivalent manifestations of power and carried equal weight.[379] With this in mind, this chapter uses the term 'mistress' and 'female enslaver' interchangeably to refer to single, married, and widowed women who legally owned enslaved people in their own right, as well as white women who resided in slaveowning households and engaged in the supervision of enslaved people as the family members of enslavers.

Both Glymph and Jones-Rogers evidenced slaveholding women's violence against enslaved people, especially enslaved girls and women who laboured as domestics in the Southern home. Christopher Bouton continued this line of analysis through an exploration of white and enslaved women's relations in the slaveowning household, documenting how instances of Black women's violence disrupted the ideology of white supremacy in the domestic sphere.[380] Although these studies document the 'warring intimacy' which existed between female enslavers and enslaved women through select examples of bondswomen's physical resistance, a comprehensive study of enslaved women's violent resistance against slaveowning women remains to be written.[381] Through the analysis of enslaved women's violent resistance, this chapter expands upon these foundational discussions of women's physical resistance against white Southern women to incorporate a parallel discussion concerning how enslaved women violently challenged slavery and protested white female mastery from girlhood to womanhood.

'Small and Indispensable Servants'

Henrietta King described to her WPA interviewer the torturous physical abuse she suffered at the hands of her female enslavers when she was eight years old. Born in the 1840s and enslaved as a house 'servant' in Virginia, King laboured under the watchful eye of her young mistress and her mistress's mother, Octavia, who purposefully underfed and beat her enslaved domestics. On one occasion King stole a piece of peppermint and in response to this offence, Mrs. Octavia and her daughter, Josephine, placed

[379] Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property,* xv.
[380] Bouton, *Setting Slavery's Limits*, 89-119.
[381] For examples of enslaved women's violent resistance against mistresses in Glymph's *Out of the House of Bondage*, see pages 36-37.

King's head underneath a rocking chair whilst they whipped her continuously for over an hour. The damage to King's head and face was horrific. King described how the rocking chair had crushed her young bones 'into soft pulp' and 'dey warn't no bone in de lef' side at all.'[382] The violence King suffered at the hands of her former mistresses was atrocious, but her testimony is neither exceptional nor unusual within the WPA narratives. Many formerly enslaved people testified to being witnesses and victims of white women's cruelty and acts of barbarity whilst they were enslaved as young children and adults on antebellum slaveholding sites. Female domestics in particular suffered a life cycle of exploitation and abuse at a young age which lasted well into maturity.[383]

To create an efficient plantation enterprise, enslaved children were often required to undertake various forms of labour both within and beyond the confines of the Southern household.[384] The sexual division of labour on slaveholding sites due to nineteenth century gender ideals predominately relegated domestic tasks within the white Southern home to enslaved girls and women.[385] In order to be 'trained,' enslaved children were frequently separated from their parents at a young age and confined to the 'Big House' under the supervision of slaveholding women. For example, the WPA interviewee, Mary Flagg,

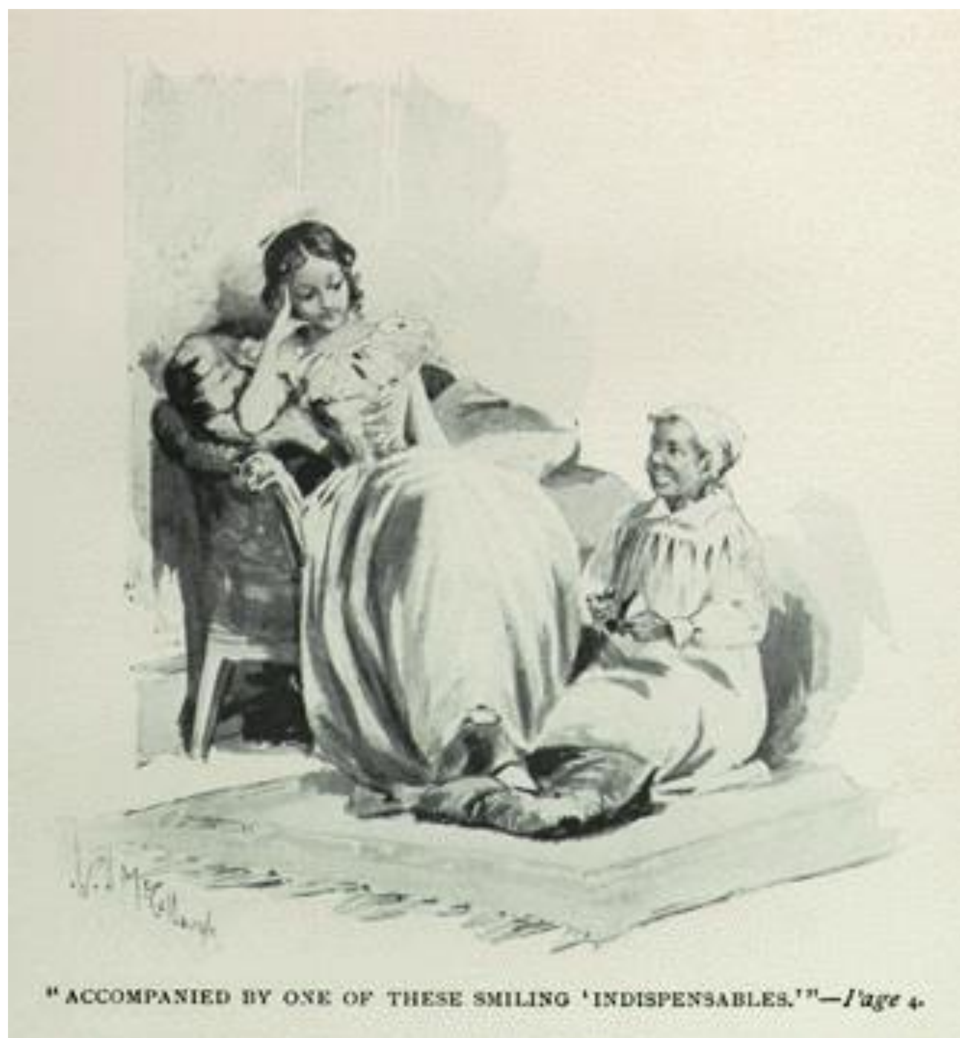
[382] Charles L. Perdue Jr, Thomas E. Barden, Robert K. Phillips (eds.), *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, 1976), 190–192.

[383] For more information on enslaved childhood and enslaved children, see for instance: Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution;* John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*; Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (Oxford, 1996); Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing up Enslaved in the Antebellum South*, (Cambridge, 2000); Damian Alan Pargas, 'From the Cradle to the Fields: Slave Childcare and Childhood in the Antebellum South', *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2011), 477-493; Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth Century America* (Bloomington, 2011); Rachael Pasierowska, 'Up from Childhood: When African-American Enslaved Children Learned of their Servile Status', *Slavery and Abolition,* Vol. 37, Issue 1 (2016), 94-116.

[384] Scholars' views regarding the age of when enslaved children entered the plantation workforce differ. Some historians including Peter Kolchin argue that young enslaved children 'spent much of their time playing' and were removed from the economy of the South 'until they could be put to regular work, usually between the ages of eight and twelve.' Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York, 1993), 141. Brenda Stevenson, however, stipulated that children from as young as six years old were expected to undertake forms of labour on slaveholding sites which removed enslaved youth from a carefree childhood. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*. Wilma King similarly argued that enslaved youngsters were forced into the adult world of labour from a young age which resulted in a 'stolen childhood.' King, *Stolen Childhood*. It should be noted, however, that the types of labour enslaved children undertook and the age of when enslaved children were forced to partake in regular work differed widely across the antebellum South due to regional economic and agricultural differences, climate, and plantation size. For more information on regional labour variations across the South, see Pargas, 'From the Cradle to the Fields'.

[385] Walter Johnson argues that slaveholding sites reproduced nineteenth century Euro-American gender ideals and as such, domestic labour within the Southern household was widely perceived to be the purview of enslaved girls and women. Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery & Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, 2013), 161. Wilma King asserts that as children grew of age, the work they performed became increasingly routinie and gender specific. King, *Stolen Childhood*, 74.

reported how her mistress, ‘took [her] away’ from her mother at the age of four to undertake housework and ‘all kinds of sewin’.’[386] The 1895 memoir of Letitia M. Burwell, the daughter of Virginian slaveholders, details how Burwell’s mother selected certain enslaved children from the ages of ten and twelve to be ‘instructed in the branches of household employment.’ Burwell’s mother chose those children who displayed signs, in her eyes, of capability, ‘obliging in disposition and quickest at learning.’ The image below depicts a sanitised illustration of an enslaved girl’s experience in the slaveholding household, as was common in romanticised white postbellum accounts of the South, yet the girl’s difference in status and rank is readily apparent. Whilst Burwell is elevated above the enslaved child surrounded by lavish furnishings, the enslaved girl kneels at her enslaver’s child’s feet ‘indispensable and omnipresent’ at any given moment (see Fig. 8).[387]



“ACCOMPANIED BY ONE OF THESE SMILING ‘INDISPENSABLES.’”—Page 4.

[386] Mary Flagg, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 3, 2.
[387] Letitia M. Burwell, *A Girl’s Life in Virginia Before the War* (New York, 1895), 4.

Figure 8: 'Accompanied by one of these smiling "indispensables."' Letitia M. Burwell, *A Girl's Life in Virginia Before the War* (New York, 1895), 4.

As enslaved children matured, their workloads became increasingly demanding and labour intensive. Labour, according to historian Wilma King, was 'the thief of the childhood of youthful bondservants' and a 'life altering experience.'[388] Monotonous labour in conjunction with displaced bonds and separation anxiety rendered enslaved "childhood" within the white home difficult and distressing.[389] Walter Johnson argues that enslaved children became aware of their commodification as living property before they reached adulthood. This early process of commodification was frequently characterised with coercion and violence as enslaved children were 'forcibly shaped to their slavery.'[390] The shattering of childhood innocence due to enforced labour consistently features within fugitive narratives. Frederick Douglass, for example, wrote how the spectre of field work continually 'awaited' him as a child, as 'work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day than at night.'[391]

Slaveholding women utilised a variety of methods to control, train, and "raise" enslaved girls within the domestic settings of the Southern home. Disciplinary measures frequently incorporated violence and enslaved girls were highly vulnerable to continual and systematic abuse. Mistress-perpetrated abuse is a key feature of many WPA recollections from those formerly enslaved people who were forced to labour as domestics from a young age. For example, Julia Brown recalled how she was forced to sleep on her female enslaver's floor for nine years during her enslavement to the Mitchell

[388] Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood,* 71-72.
[389] A timescale and definition of childhood is a matter of contention within historiographies of slavery, alongside the issue of whether childhood can exist under slavery at all. Historians assert that the recognition of slavery and race diminished the concept of childhood for enslaved youngsters. Rachael Pasierowka stipulated that enslaved children experienced several stages in their lives in which they began to perceive and recognise their enslaved identity. According to Pasierowka, recognition of race and slavery traumatised enslaved youngsters which ended any notions of childhood. Pasierowska, 'Up from Childhood'. Damian Alan Pargas suggested that experiences of enslaved children and their concept of childhood differed according to their geographic region. Pargas, 'From the Cradle to the Fields'. Wilma King argued against the concept of childhood for enslaved youth claiming, 'enslaved children had virtually no childhood because they entered the work place early and were more readily subjected to arbitrary plantation authority, punishments, and separations.' According to King, the volatile world of slavery caused children to grow 'old before their time.' King, *Stolen Childhood,* xx. Eugene Genovese on the other hand claimed 'slave children had a childhood' on slaveholding sites. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll,* 518.
[390] Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, 1999), 21.
[391] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 206.

family. Brown recollected how Mrs. Mitchell 'lashed [them] with a cowhide whip' and sadistically 'took delight in sellin' slaves.'[392] The withholding of adequate and nourishing food from enslaved children was another method of abuse, as Sarah Byrd testified that her former enslaver only allowed her enslaved "property" to eat 'but the coarsest foods' after 'it had soured.'[393] In addition to being on the receiving end of slaveholding women's control and abuse, children also witnessed the sufferings of others which contributed to their feelings of vulnerability and terror. William Pratt, for example, watched how his mother fell victim to one of his enslaver's rages as his mistress, 'got mad at her and hit her on the head with a coffee paddle.'[394]

Not all slaveholding women physically abused their enslaved property, but enslaved children were nevertheless exploited and subjected to slavery's 'invisible scars', as they were forcibly assimilated into the world of enslaved labour from a young age.[395] Under the pretence of motherly concern and care, slaveholding women exploited domestic youngsters and their enforced isolation from kin for their own gain and advantage. Historian R.J. Knight asserts that slaveholding women's limited displays of care and affection were mechanisms to manipulate the behaviour of young enslaved children and to enable slaveholding women to 'perceive or construe themselves as benevolent slaveholders and mother-like figures.'[396] Marie Jenkins Schwartz similarly argues that slaveholders separated children from their families from a young age in order to 'transfer the love and allegiance from parents to themselves' and to ensure subordination through feigned emotional intimacy.[397] Slaveholding women possessed a clear and explicit agenda when it came to raising and training enslaved people which was for the purpose of work or monetary gain through sale. Tom Hawkins, for example, recalled how his former mistress, Miss Annie, 'was all time sellin' 'em for big prices atter she done trained 'em for to be

[392] Julia Brown, FWP, Georgia Narratives, Vol. 4, Part 1, 1.
[393] Sarah Byrd, FWP, Georgia Narratives, Vol. 4, Part 1, 2.
For further information on the malnourishment of enslaved people on Southern slaveholding sites and food as punishment, see, for example: Richard Steckel, 'A Peculiar Population: The Nutrition, Health, and Mortality of American Slaves from Childhood to Maturity', *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (1986), 721-741; Herbert Covey, *What the Slaves Ate: Recollections of African American Foods and Foodways from the Slave Narratives* (Santa Barbara, 2009).
[394] William Pratt, FWP, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Part 3, 1.
[395] Turner, 'The Nameless and the Forgotten', 234.
[396] R.J. Knight, 'Mothering and Labour in the Slaveholding Households of the Antebellum American South', *Past and Present,* Vol. 246, No. 15 (2021), 145-166, 162.
[397] Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 77.

cooks, housegals, houseboys, carriage drivers and good wash 'omans.'[398] The treatment and abuse prepubescent children experienced contradicts previous historical rhetoric which claimed slaveholding women were motherly figures to Black children.[399] WPA descriptions of slaveholding women contrasts starkly with Genovese's assertion that enslavers 'generally doted on them as if they were playthings or pets' and Rachael Pasierowska's declaration in 2016 that mistresses 'tended to be more likely to coddle their enslaved charges'.[400] However, WPA narratives also evidence how enslaved girls responded to slaveholding women's control and abuse through violence of their own, principally through the use of physical assault in a multitude of varied and imaginative ways for the purpose of self-protection and retribution.

The testimonies of the formerly enslaved offer fascinating insights into how enslaved girls adapted to life and labour in and around the slaveholding household and how they responded to repeated acts of slaveholding women's abuse with violence of their own. It is generally understood within slavery scholarship that as children, enslaved youngsters were less able to physically resist and retaliate with as much force as their adult counterparts. Wilma King, a leading expert on enslaved childhood, disputes the idea of childhood resistance and asserts that enslaved youngsters were incapable of committing acts of violence due to their lack of physical and emotional development.[401] Vanessa Holden, however, contradicts King's assertion, citing the 1831 Southampton Rebellion as evidence of the involvement and participation of children in acts of resistance. Using the testimonies of the formerly enslaved and antebellum court records, Holden argues that 'generational resistance practices along with resistive attitudes, beliefs and survival strategies' were transferred between generations which enabled enslaved youngsters to 'resist enslavement effectively.'[402] Whilst it is true that enslaved children were especially vulnerable to mental, emotional and physical abuse, their youth did not preclude them from acts of

[398] Tom Hawkins, FWP, Georgia Narratives, Vol. 4, Part 2, 3-4.
[399] Historian Katy Simpson Smith suggests that although mistresses were 'intrusive and insensitive' to Black women's mothering, slaveholding women ultimately provided care and protection for enslaved children within the white home. Katy Simpson Smith, *We Have Raised All of You*: *Motherhood in the South, 1750-1835* (Baton Rouge, 2013), 235.
[400] Genovese*, Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 528-529; Pasierowska, 'Up from Childhood', 100.
[401] King, *Stolen Childhood*, 216.
[402] Vanessa M. Holden, 'Generation, Resistance, and Survival: African-American Children and the Southampton Rebellion of 1831', *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2017), 673-696, 675; Holden, *Surviving Southampton*, 56-80.

physical resistance. The WPA narratives clearly and distinctly reveal childhood perpetrated violence with examples of enslaved girls engaging in physical confrontations with their female enslavers.

The isolation of enslaved children within the slaveholding home is an important consideration when examining how enslaved girls perpetrated violence. Parental interventions were a rarity on slaveholding sites, especially when children were forcibly removed to the confines of the white household. Henry Bibb lamented the isolation of his young daughter, Mary Francis, who was regularly beaten 'black and blue' whilst she laboured in the white home for her 'unmerciful old mistress.'[403] Bibb and his wife Malinda were able to offer their daughter love, but little in the form of protection. One Fisk interviewee described how his sister was tied to a tree and whipped in front of her parents and siblings, yet, 'no-one could come to her rescue.'[404] After describing the abuse he experienced at the hands of his enslavers who 'knocked and kicked' him 'like a mule', another Fisk respondent declared: 'we had no protection.'[405] Enforced isolation may have forced some enslaved girls to develop a sense of resiliency and resourcefulness from a young age. Childhood autonomy and self-sufficiency is evident within the testimony of those who were formerly enslaved. The WPA informant, Julia Brown, for example, was forced to labour as a domestic under the supervision of a cruel enslaver who would lash her domestic servants 'with a cowhide whip.' Brown finalised her account with the declaration: 'I had to shift fur myself.'[406] Similarly, Elizabeth Keckley, who was forced to care for her mistress's baby at the tender age of four, testified: 'I had been taught to rely upon myself.'[407] Faced with harsh punishments, monotonous labour and continual fear, enslaved children could not always rely upon the protection of enslaved adults and consequently, enslaved girls were forced to develop their own methods of self-reliance and resistance which could be violent in nature.

Enslaved girls learnt methods of self-reliance and survival from the actions and behaviours of Black adults within enslaved communities. Vanessa Holden asserts that enslaved children were surrounded by histories and examples of resistance and, as such, 'enslaved children were trained to

[403] Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, 42-43.
[404] Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 43-44.
[405] Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 105.
[406] Julia Brown, FWP, Georgia Narratives, Vol. 4, Part 1, 1.
[407] Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 19.

resist slavery' as they witnessed and replicated the resistance practices of enslaved adults.[408] 'Generational resistance' also included the use of violence, as evidenced in the testimony of Cornelia, whose mother, Fannie, instructed her to fight back, informing her: ''I'll kill you, gal, if you don't stand up for yourself….fight and if you can't fight, kick; if you can't kick, then bite.' Violence as a legitimate survival tactic was instilled in Cornelia from a young age, with Cornelia describing her mother's teaching as a 'doctrine' 'which was branded upon [her] senses'. The Fisk interviewee recalled her mother's repeated use of violence, which included ripping her mistress's clothing 'off her body', with pride and admiration, describing her mother as a 'captain' and a 'hawk on chickens.' Cornelia herself implemented her mother's teaching, describing how she got into 'scraps' with 'the children from the big house' rendering observers to declare: 'Cornelia is the spit of her mother.' By her own admission, Cornelia 'delighted in hearing this', confessing that she 'wanted to be like ma'.[409] Cornelia's admiration for her mother is palpable throughout her testimony and her interview explicitly documents the generational transfer of violence as a legitimate tactic of female resistance. In the words of Holden, 'children's observations of resistive strategies went hand in hand with their participation in resistive practices' and this is certainly demonstrated in Cornelia's testimony.[410]

The testimony of WPA informants provide detailed insights into the violence of enslaved girls from the perspective of the formerly enslaved. Corporal violence was a prime provocation for enslaved people's physical resistance and this represents a common theme and motivation behind adult and childhood violence. Born in 1850, Jenny Proctor began her domestic duties in Alabama as a 'little gal' before the age of ten.[411] Her responsibilities consisted of caring for the white children of her enslavers and cleaning their home 'jes' lak ole miss tells me to do.' Proctor experienced abusive conditions in the home of her enslavers; she was underfed and her mistress exposed her to numerous beatings. After eating a biscuit from her mistress's room, proctor recalled how Mrs. Proctor began to shout degrading insults at her whilst beating her 'over de head' with a broomstick. These abusive acts and behaviours surmounted to a physical confrontation between Proctor and her female enslaver:

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[408] Holden, *Surviving Southampton,* 66.
[409] Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery,* 284-289.
[410] Holden, *Surviving Southampton,* 69.
[411] Jenny Proctor, FWP, Texas Narratives, Vol. 16, Part 3, 1-3.

> I jes' clean lost my head 'cause I know'd better den to fight her if I knowed anythin' 'tall, but I start to fight her and de driver, he comes in and he grabs me and starts beatin' me wid cat-o'-nine-tails, and he beats me 'till I fall to de floor nearly dead.

This slaveholding woman's excessive use of punishment in response to such a minor transgression, clearly served as the catalyst for Jenny Proctor's own violent actions and her decision to physically confront her mistress. Her act of physical retaliation is characteristic of enslaved women's use of violence which was often provoked through the threatened or attempted facilitation of corporal violence. Proctor's decision to deploy violence, however, was not solely derived from fear and self-preservation, as her acknowledgement 'I clean lost my head' indicates that she reacted out of fury and rage rather than self-defence. Given that the majority of drivers supervised field slaves away from the white home, the struggle between Mrs. Proctor and Jenny Proctor must have been ferocious enough to attract the attention of those geographically distanced from the white home. This attests to Jenny Proctor's sizeable use of force despite her age as 'a very young girl.' The consequences of Proctor's violence were severe, however, as she explained how her back was cut 'all to pieces' with salt administered to her open wounds for 'mo' punishment.'[412] Nevertheless, this act of violence demonstrates that enslaved children, even those below the age of ten, were able to physically resist white adult women.

Enslaved girls resisted slaveholding women via the use of their bare hands or through the weaponisation of nearby objects, as demonstrated in the testimony of Mary Armstrong who assaulted her mistress's mother with a rock when she was just ten years old. During her WPA interview, Armstrong accused her former mistress, Polly Cleveland, of having whipped her infant sister to death ''cause she cry like all babies do.' Armstrong, however, enacted revenge on her former mistress for the death of her sister when Cleveland visited her daughter's plantation. During one instance when Cleveland attempted to whip Armstrong for some undisclosed offence, Armstrong armed herself with a rock ''bout as big as half [your] fist' and struck Cleveland on her face which 'busted' her eyeball. While Polly Cleveland screamed in pain, which could reportedly be heard 'for five miles,' Armstrong declared victory over her former mistress stating: 'that's for whippin' my baby sister to death.' Revenge

[412] Proctor, Texas Narratives, 1-3.

was the primary motivation for Armstrong's use of violence as she triumphantly exclaimed to her interviewer: 'I got some even with that old Polly devil.'[413]

Although her act of weaponised violence began as an act of self-defence against punishment, Armstrong overwhelmingly framed her act of resistance within the context of revenge. Armstrong's attack combined both protection for herself and personal vendetta for the murder of her infant sister. Enslaved children were aware of their physiological disadvantage against adult slaveholders. Mary Armstrong's testimony indicates that prepubescent enslaved girls enriched their own physical violence through the weaponisation of natural resources. Armstrong's successful attack on her sister's murderer demonstrates that some young girls were able to physically overpower adult enslavers who abused them. While corporal punishment provoked her use of violence, Armstrong clearly utilised the opportunity as an avenue for overdue retribution to avenge the abuse of a family member. Revenge as the driving force for enslaved girl's violence transgresses beyond conventional historical thought which largely relegates childhood dissidence as minor inconsequential acts of self-defence, and instead reveals how far political discontent shaped the day-to-day actions and identities of enslaved children as much as adults. This adds an important dimension to the study of childhood resistance, demonstrating that notions of 'personal justice' also heavily influenced the actions of enslaved girls.[414]

Enslaved girls also used imaginative methods of enacting assault and physical revenge upon female enslavers through 'indirect' forms of violence which were devoid of direct physical contact. The WPA informant, Esther Easter, devised a way in which she could enact violence upon her mistress without physically assaulting her herself. Born in 1852 and enslaved as a domestic, Easter described the repetitive physical and psychological mistreatment she received at the hands of her master, Jim Moore, and that of his wife. Easter recalled that Jim Moore's wife (who is unnamed within Easter's testimony and referred to only as the 'demon') was the principal instigator of the abuse she suffered, as she regularly authorised and implemented calculated brutalities upon Easter by manipulating her husband into beating her for real and imagined offences.[415] Easter recalled: 'every time Master Jim

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[413] Mary Armstrong, FWP, Texas Narratives, Vol. 16, Part 1, 1-2.
[414] Nikki Taylor argues that enslaved women's acts of 'lethal resistance' served as 'a type of personal justice'. Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, 7.
[415] Esther Easter, FWP, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. 13, 2-3.

come home he whip me 'cause the Mistress say I been mean.' Remaining physically safe from abuse and mistreatment was a difficult and continual challenge for enslaved girls who laboured in close proximity to their owners and Easter struggled to evade the sadistic assaults she experienced at the hands of her enslavers. However, in 1861 when she was nine years of age, Easter plotted and facilitated her revenge against her mistress through the use of 'indirect violence.'[416] Easter's interview reveals how she deliberately spied on her mistress and collected sensitive information regarding her enslaver's sexual affair in order to relay the details of her transgressions to her mistress's violent husband, Jim Moore:

> The Mistress is fiddling round with a neighbour man, Mister Headsmith. I is young then, but I knows enough that Master Jim's going to be mighty mad when he hears about it. The mistress didn't know I knows her secret, and I'm fixing to even up for some of them whippings she put off on me. That's why I tell Master Jim next time he come home. See that crack in the wall? Master Jim say yes, and I say, "Its just like the open door when the eyes are close to the wall. He peek and see into the bedroom. That's how I find out about the Mistress and Mister Headsmith, I tells him, and I see he's getting mad. What do you mean? And Master Jim grabs me hard by the arm like I was trying to get away. "I see them in the bed." That's all I say.

In taking advantage of her enforced proximity to her mistress, Easter successfully gathered controversial information which could be used to her own advantage and to the disadvantage of her abusive female enslaver. Easter deliberately reported Mrs. Moore's infidelities as she predicted her male enslaver would react violently. Upon learning of his wife's extra-marital affairs, Easter described how Jim Moore entered into a fit of rage and severely beat his wife to the extent where Mrs. Moore received life threatening injuries:

> The demon's got him and Master Jim tears out of the room looking for the Mistress. Then I hears loud talking and pretty soon the Mistress is screaming and calling for help, and if old Master Ben hadn't drop in just then and stop the fight, why, I guess she be beat almost to death, that how mad the Master was.

[416] The terms 'invisible' and 'indirect' violence are used within this chapter for the purpose of describing indirect physical retaliation, facilitated through the manipulation of another person.

Easter's testimony offers a new way of conceptualising the subject of childhood violence. Although Easter acknowledged her extreme youth, she was nevertheless able to devise an effective strategy of facilitating violence against her mistress through indirect means. This method of 'invisible' or 'indirect' violence reveals how young, enslaved domestics took advantage of their position within the household to use and abuse their knowledge of their mistresses' personal lives. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese asserts within her study of the Southern household that enslaved women, especially those who laboured in the home, 'had good reason to know their mistresses better than their mistresses knew them.'[417] Domestics exploited their knowledge of their mistresses' intimate lives for their own benefit and Easter was no exception, as she took advantage of the closeness associated with the domestic role to overhear and witness personal aspects of Mrs. Moore's life.

Despite being only nine years of age, Easter successfully orchestrated an act of violence against her mistress and once again, revenge is a key motive and characteristic of this perpetration of physical resistance. Easter's statements: 'I'm *fixing* to even up for some of them whippings she put off on me'; 'I *know* that Master Jim's going to be mighty mad' [emphasis added] demonstrates that Easter's decision to inform Jim Moore about his wife's sexual infidelities was calculated and in retaliation to sustained abuse. The ingenuity of Easter's resistance at such a young age is to be applauded. As a child, Easter was conscious of her physical disadvantage in using violence herself as an effective form of revenge. Easter was also acutely aware of the dangers and risk of deploying acts of open resistance directly against enslavers, as she recalled in her interview the traumatising experience of witnessing an enslaved person being whipped: 'I done see one whipping and that enough.' Witnessing first-hand the abuse of an enslaved person 'full of misery' no doubt influenced Easter's decision to use a more extenuated form of violence. With this awareness, Easter manipulated and utilised Jim Moore and as a vehicle for her own personal retribution in order to expose her mistress to patriarchal violence which suffused the antebellum South.[418] Crucially, it is important to emphasise that although Jim Moore physically

[417] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household,* 122.
[418] For further information on male patriarchal violence in the slaveholding South, see, for example: Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 88-90.

perpetrated the assault against his wife, it was Easter who orchestrated and instigated the abuse in the first place. Violence could take manipulative forms.

It is highly informative that Esther Easter replicated her mistress's own method of violence through the same vehicle of abuse (Jim Moore) and through the same method of 'telling', as Easter learnt how to use this manipulated form of violence to her own advantage in an almost identical manner to that of her mistress. Wilma King stipulates that enslaved children learnt to be 'adult-like' through self-restraint and compassion.[419] It is apparent from Easter's testimony that children learnt 'adult like' behaviours from an early age which included the use of violence. As a normative phenomenon which was both observed and experienced, children learnt to utilise violence and they imitated the actions of those around them, including the violence of slaveholding women who meted out emotional, psychological, and physical abuse on a regular and unforgiving basis. As the receptacle for white women's violence, it is unsurprising that enslaved girls learnt to deploy similar modes of violent behaviour when they laboured in such close proximity to slaveholding women. Easter described her male enslaver as 'Demon Jim' and asserted that he was 'one of the meanest men', who was 'reckless with the whip.' Easter purposefully weaponised and manipulated the abusive behaviour of her patriarchal male enslaver for her own pursuit of revenge. Hearing her mistress screaming and 'calling for help' as she was beaten 'almost to death', no doubt created a sense of gratification for Easter, and her satisfaction from the event is evident within her testimony seventy years later, as Easter finalised her recollection by contemplating: 'I wonder if Master Jim beat her again when he gets back.'[420]

The young ages in which Proctor, Armstrong, and Easter enacted their modes of violence disputes the historical assumption that physiological immaturity precluded enslaved children from both perpetrating and facilitating acts of physical resistance. Whilst there is a degree of separation between personal acts of violence and the orchestration of violence, as most notably demonstrated in the testimonies of Armstrong and Easter, these WPA narratives nevertheless reveal the multifaceted nature of enslaved girl's resistance and the turbulent landscape of domestic enslavement. Whilst the actions of these young girls were provoked by a combination of varying factors, including repetitive abuse and

[419] King, *Stolen Childhood*, 92.
[420] Easter, Oklahoma Narratives, 2-3.

punishment, these WPA informants overwhelmingly framed their acts of violence within the context of vengeance and long-overdue retribution. Far from an existence of inaction, enslaved girls utilised violence in all its varied forms to 'get even' with slaveholding women as they took vengeance and justice into their own hands. Girlhood violence was not solely defensive and reactional, adding another dimension to enslaved female resistance which can be too easily categorised and dismissed as acts of self-protection driven solely from fear. These examples specifically demonstrate that a hatred of slavery and a hatred for slaveholding women existed at all lifecycles of the plantation enterprise which would continue to evolve as enslaved girls reached adolescence and eventually adulthood.

Enslaved Women and Assault

Violence against female enslavers was not just a childhood phenomenon; acts of violence occurred well into maturity as enslaved girls reached adulthood. Enslaved women who laboured under the supervision of white women were also the targets of extensive physical violence. Fugitive autobiographies and WPA narratives extensively document the cruelty of slaveholding women who exploited enslaved women for profit and status. Harriet Jacobs, for example, documented the abuse she experienced at the hands of her former mistress who inflicted 'jealous passions' upon her.[421] Sarah Douglass, a WPA informant from Arkansas, recalled how her female enslaver took sadistic pleasure in beating enslaved people:

> Sometimes she tied our hands around a tree and tie our neck to the tree with our face to the tree and they would get behind us with that cow hide whip with a piece of lead tied to the end and Lord have mercy! The last whipping old miss gave me she tied me to a tree and oh my Lord! Old miss whipped me that day. That was the worst whipping I ever got in my life. I cried and bucked and hollered until I couldn't. I give up for dead and she wouldn't stop.[422]

White female perpetrated violence was a common occurrence on slaveholding sites and descriptions of violent slaveholding women are a regular feature of enslaved people's testimony. In turn, however, enslaved women responded to white female aggression with violence of their own, as they retaliated

[421] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 29.
[422] Sarah Douglass, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1.

against the conditions of their bondage through a multitude of ways which this chapter explores through the prism of increasing degrees of severity.

A key manifestation of enslaved women'*s* violence consisted of physical assault. Primary records reveal how enslaved women assaulted their female slaveholders with their bare hands or with weapons when provoked with threats and acts of corporal violence. Claims of violence against white women are especially prevalent in the WPA. The ways in which WPA informants retold memories and experiences of violent events under slavery is highly revealing. Some WPA respondents spoke candidly about instances of physical aggression between white and Black women, discussing violent events in casual throwaway remarks. James V. Deane, for example, casually described how his aunt physically assaulted her female enslaver: 'The mistress slapped her one day, she struck her back.'[423] Leah Garrett also reported the violent actions of an enslaved woman in a similar manner: 'One day mistress jumped on her 'bout something and de gal hit her back.'[424] These narratives illuminate how enslaved women responded to white women's abuse with violence of their own through the use of assault with their own bare hands. These narratives also speak to enslaved women's lack of fear at potential reprisals, indicating that some bondswomen were willing to risk their lives and safety in their refusals to be assaulted in the first place. Testimonies of enslaved women's use of physical force against female enslavers reveal a composite of evidence within the WPA collection which reveals the extent of, and everyday nature to enslaved women's violence across the slaveholding South. The matter-of-fact way in which respondents chose to openly retell violent experiences under bondage indicates that physical confrontations between white and Black women were an unexceptional feature of domestic servitude within the plantation household.[425]

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[423] James V. Deane, FWP, Maryland Narratives, Vol. 8, 2.

[424] Leah Garrett, FWP, Georgia Narratives, Vol. 4, Part 2, 3.

[425] Claims of violence against white women had the potential to endanger respondents in the twentieth century yet, informants chose to expose these recollections regardless of the consequences. The discussion of violent acts exposed the volatile nature of slavery and aimed at correcting the romanticised pro-slavery myth of a benign institution fostered through slaveholder paternalism. Historian Beth Wilson asserts that the candour of WPA respondents represented a form of emotional and political resistance. Wilson defines 'emotional resistance' as the 'transgression of emotional standards', as formerly enslaved women resisted the racial and gender dynamics of the Jim Crow South through their discussions of anger and candid testimonials regarding racial oppression. Speaking candidly about their experiences of violence, both subjected and perpetrated, was a way for informants to express political discontent and to reject the racial and gender dynamics of the Jim Crow South. Beth Wilson, '"I Ain't Mad Now and I Know Taint No Use to Lie": Honesty, Anger, and Emotional

Slaveholding women's acts of cruelty and their administration of corporal abuse were chief provocations for enslaved women's own physical retaliation. As with enslaved women's violence against overseeing men (see Chapter Two), bondswomen were not averse to physically assaulting white women to protest the conditions of their enslavement. *Peters et al v. State of Missouri,* a court record concerning 'cruelty to a slave' between 1857-1859, illuminates both slaveholding women's violence and enslaved women's subsequent use of retaliatory force.[426] In September 1857, Emelie Peters and two other members of her family appeared on trial for 'cruelly and inhumanly torturing and beating a female slave' named Lucy. The trial ignited a debate amongst the residents of St. Louis regarding the correct use of force necessary to punish an enslaved woman who reportedly struck her mistress on multiple occasions.[427] In July, 1857, a number of witnesses testified to witnessing Emelie Peters, Lewis Peters, and John Peters savagely whipping Lucy with a carriage whip to the point where Lucy's back was 'cut and mangled' and 'entirely raw as a piece of raw beef.' Witnesses specifically testified that Emelie Peters was the primary orchestrator of this abuse, overseeing and personally whipping Lucy herself. Isabella Thompson recalled that 'Mrs. Peters had a foot upon [Lucy's] neck beating her with that whip as hard as she could.' Thompson emphasised 'Mrs. Peters was whipping her all the time, it was a continuous whipping.' During a second incident on September 25th, 1857, witnesses reported that Mrs. Peters 'gave orders to her brother-in-law to whip her and he did it by her orders.'

The Peters did not deny the allegations. Their defence provided a variety of reasons in their justification of why Lucy 'deserved' to be punished. The Peters' legal defence recited numerous attacks on Lucy's personality and character asserting that she was 'stubborn, imprudent, saucy, lazy and

Resistance in Formerly Enslaved Women's 1930's Testimony', *American Nineteenth Century History*, Vol. 22 (2021), 307-326.

[426] *Peters et al v. State of Missouri* (1859). Supreme Court Case Files, Missouri Supreme Court Report: 2 Mo. 241, Box 433, Folder 06, Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City, Missouri. (Hereafter cited as MSA).

[427] Numerous barbarities occurred on slaveholding sites, however, it helped if such acts were hidden from observation, ideally occurring on rural locations away from the public gaze. The Peters' excessive and public displays of physical force within an urbanised neighbourhood failed to adhere to the paternalistic principle of violence "in moderation." Emelie Peters' excessive use of corporal violence against Lucy offended local sensibilities as her actions contradicted gender ideals of passive femininity and Southern paternalistic codes of honour. Local slaveholders and overseers spoke of their abhorrence in witnessing the unmitigated violence of Emelie Peters. For example, G.S. Gannel, a former overseer admitted to whipping enslaved people, yet he acknowledged that he 'never saw one as unmercifully beaten before.' One local slaveholder declared that she 'never saw any slave punished as this slave was.' White residents turned on the slaveholding elite when the actions of female slaveholders publicly violated gender ideals and codes of conduct. *Peters et al v. State of Missouri* (1859), MSA.

disobedient.' Crucially, the Peters stated that Lucy had warranted such severe punishments because she had 'struck' her mistress on repeated occasions. Lewis Peters, the husband of Emile, testified that Lucy was 'bad and vicious' and as such, she had 'repeatedly attempted to lay violent hands on Mrs. Peters and had on one or several occasions struck her.' During the cross-examination, Lewis Peters stated that Lucy retained a history of violence against her female enslaver during the thirteen months in which the Peters had owned her. Peters alleged that 'On one occasion she jumped up and caught Mrs. Peters by the head' and on another occasion Lucy 'defended herself against Mrs. Peters.' Pressed for further details surrounding Lucy's conduct which specifically led to her whipping in 1857, Lewis Peters declared that 'Mrs. Peters said something to her and she raised her hand and struck Mrs. Peters.' Emelie Peters herself emphasised that Lucy had 'assaulted and attempted to kill her.' Emelie had also reportedly informed various witnesses that 'the girl was very imprudent and struck her.' Other witnesses for the defence attested that Lucy had apparently 'assaulted and attempted to kill' Mrs. Peters and she was therefore worthy of severe chastisement. Crucially, one witness who oversaw Lucy's punishment on the 25th September recalled that when Mrs. Peters attempted to whip Lucy, 'she resisted.'

Despite her status as a married woman, Emelie Peters is described throughout the trial record as Lucy's principal owner, as her husband declared: 'I am the husband of Mrs. Peters, she owns the slave.' The defence were keen to emphasise that Lucy was the sole property of Emelie Peters who had 'bought her with her money' and consequently 'she had a right to do as she liked with her own property.' Witnesses for the prosecution attested that Emelie was the one who facilitated and supervised Lucy's whippings, even wielding the whip herself, which as enslaved people's testimony has demonstrated, was no rarity in the antebellum South. This court record provides a powerful example of the mastery of married female enslavers who acted independently of their husbands and male family members, supporting Stephanie Jones-Rogers' assertion that slaveowning women were not 'insulated by southern patriarchs', but rather wielded a 'master's power.'[428]

Lucy is documented within the record as 'eighteen to twenty years of age.' Further details of Lucy within the surviving trial record are minimal. As an enslaved person, Lucy was prohibited from

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[428] Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, ix-xii.

testifying against her white enslavers and consequently, Lucy's voice and perspective is omitted. Despite these silences, details within the record provide a vivid portrait of both suffering and resiliency, and it is possible to obtain insights into Lucy's motivations for violence. Based on the testimonies of the court witnesses, it can be deduced that Lucy was subjected to sustained and prolonged mistreatment and abuse. Mrs. Jones, a witness for the prosecution, reported that the carriage whip used to beat Lucy was substantially 'worn at the end' to the extent where the interior whalebone had been split. Others detailed that the 'prong was all worn off' and Lucy's back was observed to have been 'covered with scars some fresh and others longer standing.' The descriptions of the deteriorated condition of the whip, alongside reports of Lucy's heavily scarred back illustrates that the whip was in frequent use against this enslaved woman who bore the brunt of her female enslaver's savagery on a recurrent basis. Yet, despite this constant abuse and torture, Lucy maintained a determination to fight and resist Emile Peters regardless of the consequences.

The racial undertones of this court record should be acknowledged in order to analyse the ways in which Lucy's character and actions were presented and vilified to the court. The defence provided damaging testimony regarding Lucy's 'bad and vicious' character to shape the opinion of the court and procure leniency for Emelie and John Peters to justify their excessive whippings.[429] The negative characterisations of Lucy as 'stubborn', 'imprudent', 'saucy', 'lazy' and 'disobedient' were clear attempts to eclipse Emelie Peters' excessive use of violence by highlighting Lucy's disobedient and subversive conduct. The defence repeatedly emphasised to the jury, which was wholly comprised of slaveholding men, that Lucy deserved to be punished and that it was the unquestionable right of Emelie Peters as a slaveholder to legally discipline her slave through the 'raising of the whip' to 'render the submission of the slave perfect.'[430] Lucy's supposed criminality and culpability is emphasised throughout the record which reflects contemporary racial discourses surrounding perceptions of Black

[429] For further information regarding the judicial procedures of enslaved women's criminal convictions, see: King, '"Mad" Enough to Kill'; Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned'; Nunley, *The Demands of Justice*.

[430] Emilie Peters' defense cited the 1829 decision of the North Carolina Supreme Court trial, *North Carolina v. Mann,* as legal justification for Peters' acquittal. *North Carolina v. Mann* ruled that enslaved people were the absolute property of their owners and thus, enslavers could not be indicted or found guilty for committing violence against them. The judge, Thomas Ruffin, authored the opinion of the court, in which he asserted: 'the power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect.' Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*, 190.

women's 'innate deviancy' and white women's 'innocence.' Historian Tamika Nunley stipulates that Southern courts 'accentuated the criminality of enslaved women' which 'worked in tandem to expunge white culpability.'[431] This is evident throughout *Peters et al v. State of Missouri* as the Peters attempted to further criminalise Lucy as an immoral and deviant woman who was innately prone to acts of rebellion regardless of the conduct of her enslaver.

The numerous descriptions of Lucy 'resisting' and striking her mistress 'about the head' presents a powerful image of an enslaved woman who retaliated against her violent abuser.[432] The abuse and whippings inflicted upon Lucy at the hands of Emilie Peters were most likely a direct result of her utilisation of violence when she assaulted her mistress, striking her, apparently, multiple times over the course of her thirteen-month enslavement. No further records of Lucy's subsequent existence with the Peters family exist following the Peters family trial, yet this case reveals that enslaved women deployed violence against their female slaveholders on more than one occasion as a means of resistance to counteract repeated and systematic abuse.

Exposing Female Limitations of Power

Enslaved women retaliated against the abuse of their female enslavers which, according to historian Christopher Bouton, served as an effective method of exposing limits to white women's authority and power, 'especially in relation to their husbands.'[433] This is demonstrated in the WPA testimony of Josie Jordan who described how her enslaver's recently married wife came into conflict with her mother, Salina Jordan, who laboured as a domestic within the white household. Jordan recalled: 'the mistress was trying to make mammy hurry up with the work and she hit mammy with the broom stick.' In response to this abuse, Salina Jordan responded with her own physical retaliation: 'Mammy's mule temper boiled up all over the kitchen and the Master had to stop the fighting.' Jordan reported that as a domestic, her mother 'was round the house most of the time' and consequently, 'right away they had trouble.' Jordan's testimony highlights how enslaved women's violence could expose or create tensions

[431] Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned', 32.
[432] *Peters et al v. State of Missouri* (1859), MSA.
[433] Bouton, *Setting Slavery's Limits*, 103.

between married slaveholding men and women who disagreed on matters of discipline, as Jordan explained to her interviewer how her male enslaver, Mark Lowry, refused to whip her mother for her act of violence despite his wife's protestations. In response to this refusal, Mrs. Lowry attempted to subvert her husband's authority when she summoned other male family members to whip Salina Jordan. Once again, Mark Lowry intervened and refused to allow Jordan to be whipped due to his belief that whippings rendered enslaved people to be ineffective workers. Mark Lowry did not attempt to uphold his wife's authority over her domestic household which no doubt created tension and discord between the two.[434]

A Fisk interviewee recalled a similar incident in which her female enslaver was forced to concede to the patriarchal authority of her husband. Vergy recollected how her 'ole missus got mad at mammy' and requested the assistance of her husband 'so he could come and whip mammy.' Vergy's male enslaver refused to whip her mother declaring that 'he didn't see nowhere to whip her' due to the amount of scar tissue present on the enslaved woman's back and according to Vergy, 'the old master just bucked against his own wife and wouldn't hit mammy a lick.'[435] Although white slaveholding women possessed considerable power and influence, patriarchal ideology rendered some women's authority subordinate to that of the male slaveholder. Another Fisk respondent noted how her male enslaver intervened on her behalf after her mistress 'whipped the blood out of [her]'. According to the interviewee, 'he told her if she whipped me again like that he would cut the blood out her.'[436] Violence created lapses in slaveowning women's authority and according to Bouton, bondswoman recognised 'that the power of their mistresses rested on uneven ground' and as such, violence could create marital discord and circumvent the authority of white Southern women. Although female enslavers exercised considerable power over the enslaved both publicly and privately, they were nevertheless 'still women in a patriarchal society.'[437]

[434] Josie Jordan, FWP, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. 13, 2-3.
[435] Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 64-65.
[436] Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 195.
[437] Bouton, *Setting Slavery's Limits,* 91.

Enslaved women purposefully exploited limitations to their mistresses' power to gain improved working conditions for themselves and their families. *French v. Campbell* (1850) details how an enslaved woman named Harriet deployed a range of violent acts as a method to secure improved living conditions and alleviated workloads for herself, her husband Manuel, and their two children, Julia Ann and Washington.[438] Thomas Hardeman, a planter of Boone County, Missouri, owned Harriet and her family who were placed in trust for Hardeman's daughter, Sophia Campbell. In June, 1822, Hardeman loaned his enslaved property to Sophia and her husband, William Campbell, to assist them in the formation of their new farm in Clay County on the condition that they would be well treated and not subject to separation. However, less than three months later, Harriet and her family were returned to Hardeman due to their complaints of ill-treatment at the hands of the Campbells. Sophia Campbell wrote a letter to her father complaining that Harriet and Manuel had violently assaulted her and her husband on multiple occasions:

> I very much fear that I shall not by any means be able to keep the negroes that it has been your pleasure to give me, as they both fight Mr. Campbell and me to the very last struggle. Manuel has bit Mr. Campbell's thumb and Harriet has a bit my thumb, and they say and bitterly swear that they never will stay with me. They both have threatened to take lives.

Information detailing the reasons for Harriet and Manuel's use of violence are omitted within Sophia's letter. However, in August 1822 it was reported that 'Manuel ran off from them and communicated his dissatisfaction' to Sophia's brother, John Hardeman, who thereupon expressed his grievances that the family were to be 'kept together, and well treated, old and young.' Julia Ann and Washington were separated from their parents, and the family was reported to have been malnourished and inadequately clothed, as evidenced when Hardeman billed the Campbells for food and clothing expenses. Hardeman strongly implied in his letter that the abuse and mistreatment Harriet and her family experienced was the primary cause of their discontent and subsequent violence. According to Hardeman, this produced 'a difference between Campbell and them' and consequently Harriet and Manuel were unable to 'render

[438] *French v. Campbell* (1850), Supreme Court Case Files, Box 008, Folder 08, MSA.

them any service.' In September 1822, Harriet and her family were returned to Thomas Hardeman and loaned to 'other persons' in Tennessee.

Through the use of repetitive violence which incorporated biting, fighting, and threats of murder, Harriet and Manuel successfully secured their family's release from the Campbells after less than three months of enslavement in Clay County. Harriet and her husband refused the authority of their temporary female enslaver and they deployed violence as a primary means of expressing their reluctance to labour for the Campbells who abused and mistreated their family contrary to the conditions Thomas Hardeman established prior to their loan. Harriet and her husband were aware of these conditions, as Hardeman had previously promised Manuel that the family would remain together and be well treated. Harriet and Manuel exploited this knowledge and their mistress's limited power as a temporary enslaver who was subject to terms and conditions, to their own advantage to secure improved working conditions and to rid themselves of their abusive enslavers. Harriet and Manuel's joint protestation against their mistreatment through violent demonstrations of dissatisfaction and discontent, successfully brought about their removal from Clay County, back into the fold of an arguably more "benevolent" enslaver. *French v. Campbell* illuminates how enslaved women manipulated gaps in authority and power through violent actions to ensure an improved quality of life for themselves and their loved ones.

The court testimony of John Hardeman additionally reveals that the enslaved women who resided with the Campbells were vulnerable to sexual abuse and harassment, as Hardeman accused William Campbell of committing 'sinful deeds' upon the body of a woman named Lucinda. Hardeman also stated that Mr. Campbell expressed an interest in specifically 'favouring his wife and her children, of the said Manual' which he feared 'would cause a separation' between Sophia and her husband. These references of sexual violation are an important consideration in the examination of Harriet and Manuel's resistance. It is possible Harriet was a sexual target of William Campbell and this may have incurred the animosity of his wife, who according to Hardeman's court testimony, resented her husband's sexual transgressions. Perhaps this heightened antipathy and animosity between the two women, as slaveholding women projected their frustrations onto those enslaved women who were the targets of

their husband's sexual abuse.[439] The unique exploitations of enslaved women's sexual experiences under slavery may have further influenced Harriet and her husband's decision to physically confront and fight the Campbells to the 'very last struggle' in order to secure their release.[440]

Enslaved women - alongside their husbands - violently manipulated their surroundings and environments to secure improvements for themselves and their family. Although Sophia Campbell's letter does not inform the reader of Harriet and Manuel's violence in great detail, it nevertheless demonstrates that Harriet and Manuel both deployed acts of violence equally, sharing violent strategies between each other. This court record demonstrates that violence was a male *and* female phenomenon under slavery between bondswomen and their husbands.[441] Harriet participated equally in these acts of physical resistance, which she directed specifically against Sophia Campbell who was their principal slaveholder in trust. Harriet's targeting of Sophia may also have been due to her positioning as a domestic in the confines of the slaveholding household. Whilst any details of Harriet and Manuel's work are absent from the record, it can be deduced that Harriet laboured in the domestic space due to the gendered division of labour on slaveholding sites. Harriet's violent focus towards Mrs. Campbell is telling, as it reveals how enslaved women utilised violence as an avenue for implementing change in the quest to secure preferential treatment. Aware of the conditions of their loan to the Campbells, Harriet and Manuel were able to capitalise on their knowledge of Sophia's temporary and restricted authority. Overall, slaveholders who abused and mistreated their enslaved "property" ironically created the motivations and conditions for enslaved spouses to engage in shared acts of violence.

Violence and Demands of Labour

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[439] The violence of female enslavers in response to enslaved women's rape and sexual harassment at the hands of married slaveowning men is explored in further depth later in this chapter.

[440] *French v. Campbell* (1850), Missouri Supreme Court Case Files, MSA. For additional court records relating to the estate settlement disputes of Sophia Campbell and Thomas Hardeman, see: *Campbell and Campbell v. Hardeman* (1832), Supreme Court Case Files, Box 106, Folder 14, MSA; *Campbell v. Campbell* (1833), Probate Estate Files, Box 0002, Folder 0001, Misc Number c41601, MSA; *Campbell v. French* (1850), Supreme Court Case Files, Box 088, Folder 08, MSA; *Campbell v. French* (1850), Supreme Court Case Files, Box 088, Folder 09, MSA.

[441] The dual use of shared violence between enslaved spouses is demonstrated in other primary materials in Chapter Four.

Domestic labour demands were a source of conflict between white and Black women, as female enslavers lashed out against their household domestics for both severe and trivial offences relating to standards of work. White slaveholding women were quick to find fault and they frequently expressed their impatience and disapproval through corporal violence if they found the domestic tasks their enslaved women performed to be substandard to their exacting approval. Austin Stewart in his 1857 autobiography described his former mistress, Mrs. Helm, as 'a great scold' who was 'continually finding fault with some of the servants.' In response to these perceived faults, Mrs. Helm frequently punished her household slaves 'by striking them over the head with a heavy iron key … or else whipping them with a cowhide, which she always kept by her side when sitting in her room.' Austin emphasised the difficult nature of his mistress and the precarious situation of her enslaved domestics who were punished for 'every trifling fault' and 'for the slightest offences' to the point where 'no slave could possible escape being punished' regardless of how 'attentive' or 'industrious' they were. Austin finalised his scathing account of Mrs. Helm stating, 'Punished they must be, and punished they certainly were.'[442] Elizabeth Keckley also described the difficulty she experienced in her attempts to please her mistress: 'I did the work of three servants, and yet I was scolded and regarded with distrust.'[443] WPA informant Douglas Dorsey similarly described the impossible standards of his former mistress who would 'whip the slaves herself for any misdemeanour.'[444]

The interference of slaveholding women in the work of their household domestics, alongside their impossibly high standards, no doubt antagonised bondswomen who resented their mistresses' intrusion. Slaveholding women of large and wealthy households rarely engaged or directly participated in household labour. Consequently, these women failed to witness, understand, or recognise the intensive labour processes of enslaved women's work and as such, planter-class women seldom acknowledged enslaved women's effort, skill, or craft. According to historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese: 'mistresses saw only the result, or its absence, never the details of the work that produced it.'[445] The failure of slaveholding women to acknowledge the depth and intensity of enslaved women's labours

[442] Stewart, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave,* 24.
[443] Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 32.
[444] Douglas Dorsey, FWP, Florida Narratives, Vol. 3, 2-3.
[445] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 126.

undoubtedly produced strikingly different perspectives on aspects of household production. These contrasting perceptions and white women's intrusion in domestic labour, which they themselves were unlikely to physically partake in, was a source of strife and discord for enslaved women who resisted their mistresses' meddling and encroachment with violence.

Enslaved women's deployment of violence in retaliation to the interference of female enslavers during routine domestic labour is demonstrated in the testimony of Susan Hamilton, who described how an enslaved woman named Clory and her former plantation mistress, Mikell Fuller, came to blows during an argument over the production of clothing:

> One day our missus gone in de laundry an' find fault with de clothes. Clory de washer 'didn' do a t'ing but pick up her bodily an' throw 'er out de door. Dey had to sen' fur a doctor 'cause she pregnant an' less than two hours de baby wus bo'n.

Susan Hamilton described Clory as 'very high-tempered', who reportedly 'didn' take no foolishness frum anybody.'[446] This suggests Clory possessed a history of violent behaviour. Although this enslaved woman may have held a propensity for deploying acts of aggression, Hamilton clearly denotes Clory's actions to be in response to her mistress's interference during a supposedly routine aspect of household labour. The washing of clothing was monotonous and arduous, and wealthy slaveholding women including Mistress Fuller, delegated this domestic drudgery to enslaved women. This slaveholding woman's complaints about the quality of Clory's work was the catalyst for her use of physical violence, as she protested her mistress's intrusion and exacting standards of labour.

Clory's assault, which resulted in the premature birth of her mistress's baby, speaks to the severity of Clory's violence and her complete disregard for the health of her mistress and that of her mistress's unborn child. Mikell Fuller's pregnancy did not deter Clory from deploying violence, which contradicts previous historical thought that motherhood acted as a unitary force between Black and white women.[447] Although Hamilton did not specify whether Fuller's infant survived, her testimony includes details into the nature of Clory's relationship with her enslavers and the consequences of her

[446] Susan Hamilton, FWP, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Part 2, 2.
[447] According to historian Vera Lynn Kennedy, 'shared' experiences of mothering 'created bonds' and 'had the effect of linking women, black and white, together. Kennedy, *Born Southern*, 6.

resistance. As punishment for her offense, Clory was brutally whipped to the extent where 'dere wusn't a white spot on her body.' However, this did little to curb her violent behaviour as Hamilton informed her interviewer that Clory 'didn't get any better but meaner' as she 'hated an' detest both of them an' all de fambly.' Clory was eventually hired away from the plantation and she 'willingly agree since she wusn't 'round missus.' This enslaved woman's acceptance and 'willingness' to be hired out of state, away from her loved ones and kin, reveals the depth of her animosity towards Mrs. Fuller and that of the white family. This enslaved woman was willing to risk it all in order to escape the supervision and control of her female enslaver.

Hamilton testified to the rampant abuses which occurred on the Fuller plantation, as she spoke of the frequency of family separations which were undertaken 'widout warnin' to sell' and the extreme punishments of enslaved women who were 'hung fum de ceilin'' and whipped until 'dere wusn't breath in de body.' Hamilton summarised her enslavement to her interviewer stating, 'I had some terribly bad experiences.' These regular incidences of cruelty and abuse reveal additional motives behind Clory's decision to assault her mistress. Mikell Fuller owned enslaved people before her marriage to Edward Fuller, as Hamilton explained that she was a 'slave owner' related to 'grand people.' Female enslavers who grew up accustomed to managing enslaved people often retained no qualms about utilising corporal violence as a means of subjugation and control. It can therefore be speculated that Mikell Fuller participated and contributed to the violent realities of enslavement on the Fuller plantation due to her status as a descendant of prominent slaveholders. Given that Clory perpetrated her violence specifically against her female enslaver and she framed her "escape" from the plantation as being away from the 'missus', it can be deduced that Mrs. Fuller severely ill-treated Clory as one of her domestic servants.[448]

Clory's physical removal of her mistress from the vicinity of the laundry is also highly informative. Enslaved women utilised external domestic areas as spaces for resistance and they severely opposed mistress interference. Clory's actions in which she *threw* Fuller beyond the confines of the room signifies her desire to work independently without the supervision of a mistress, demonstrating that Clory wished to resist her enslaver's control and surveillance. The removal of Fuller from the

[448] Hamilton, South Carolina Narratives, 2-5.

laundry served as a literal dismissal of her mistress's intrusion and her unwillingness to be scolded over a menial task which her mistress would never deign to perform herself. Violence allowed domestics the opportunity to reclaim autonomy over their work loads and the type of labour they undertook, even if only momentary. The desire for workplace autonomy was no doubt amplified in the vicinities of the Southern home which offered enslaved domestic women minimal respite from the supervision of their enslavers. Through the deployment of physical force enslaved women reclaimed their space and their labour, even if it was only temporarily.

Through the use of spatial analysis, it is possible to gain additional insights into enslaved women's resistance and their use of violence within traditionally feminine spaces of labour. The laundry, as well as other slaveholding areas of labour, were sites of significant labour, control, and exploitation. Spatial control was a central feature of enslavement as whites sought to limit and control bondspeople's movements and activities in their creation of what Stephanie Camp has called 'geographies of containment.'[449] Enslavers used spatial organisation to control and manipulate the enslaved, as historian Theresa Singleton stipulated: 'nearly every aspect of plantation space…resulted from conscious decision making on the part of planters to maximize profits, exercise surveillance and reinforce the subordinate status of enslaved people.'[450] In the words of Stephanie Camp, 'space mattered' and 'places, boundaries, and movements were central to how slavery was organised'.[451] This analytic framework can be applied to enslaved women's confinement within sites of domestic labour as female enslavers preserved and enforced their own geographies of surveillance and control in traditionally feminine spaces. Spaces of enslavement, however, were also crucial for the resistant activities of the enslaved, as enslaved women created 'rival geographies' on slaveholding sites that 'conflicted with planters' ideals and demands.'[452] Building upon Camp's conceptualisation of geographies of containment, Vanessa

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[449] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*.

[450] Theresa Singleton, 'Slavery and Spatial Dialectics on Cuban Coffee Plantations', *World Archaeology*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2001), 99-114, 99. For further information on plantation spatial discipline, see, for example: Megan Bailey, 'Spatial Organisation as Management Practice at L'Hermitage Plantation', *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2022), 2-29.

[451] Postcolonial theorist, Edward Said, coined the term 'rival geography' to describe resistance attempts against colonial occupation. Camp adapted this term in her analysis of how the enslaved strategically navigated space and movement in the US slaveholding South. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, 1994); Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 7.

[452] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 7.

Holden asserts that enslaved women transformed spaces of surveillance and control into competing 'geographies of evasion and resistance' through a myriad of techniques and resistance practices.[453] Susan Hamilton's WPA testimony demonstrates how enslaved women transcended the spaces they worked and inhabited into spaces of violent resistance in the effort to deliberately circumvent systems of control and exploitation.

Enslaved women learnt to navigate slaveholding spaces differently and they contested their female enslavers' power through the creation of their own competing geographies of violence. Sites of labour were continually changing environments and bondswomen transformed traditional geographies of containment into spaces of agency and resistance through their use of violence. Liminal sites of domestic labour including external kitchens, laundries, and wood stores between the plantation home and the rest of the slaveholding site, especially provided enslaved women with the means to transcend these areas into spaces of resistance. Historian Andrea Mosterman asserts that the limited oversight and surveillance of external areas of labour away from white main living quarters enabled enslaved people to develop 'alternative ways of knowing and navigating these spaces.'[454] Temporary moments of autonomy due to the decreased surveillance of these spaces enriched enslaved women with a sense of autonomy which they fiercely attempted to uphold during moments of mistress interreference, as demonstrated in the case of Clory who physically threw her mistress from her area of work. The relative seclusion of these liminal spaces also enabled enslaved women to engage in violent confrontations with white women away from the prying eyes of overseers and other slaveholding family members. Hamilton's testimony illustrates the unpredictable and changeable nature of these domestic spaces which could transgress into arenas of resistance and subversion against female enslavers within seconds.

Hamilton's WPA interview follows the line of analysis that physical abuse was not always the prime provocation in enslaved women deployment of violence. This incident, alongside the evidence presented in Chapter Two, broadens our understanding of enslaved women's resistance to include contexts which began during instances of non-violent white interference. Enslaved women physically

[453] Holden, *Surviving Southampton,* 22-25.
[454] Andrea C. Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement: A History of Slavery and Resistance in Dutch New York* (Cornell, 2021), 3.

confronted female slaveholders during routine instances of labour and their use of retaliatory force often reflected the domestic labours and conditions of the household. Hamilton's testimony disputes Fox-Genovese's assertion that 'however taxing and bitter on both sides, the struggle followed the lines established by the relations of gender, race and class.'[455] Private struggles between slaveholding women and their enslaved female "property" did not always follow established lines of race and gender, as white and Black women contradicted prevailing gender norms of female passivity and non-aggression through their dual deployment of violence. The constant and draconian supervision of their enslavers caused tensions and white women's open fault with enslaved women's labour antagonised bondswomen to the extreme, as enslaved women responded to their mistresses' complaints with violence as a method to create rival geographies of resistance in the domestic spaces of the slaveholding site.

Violence Against the Ideology of the Southern Household

Enslaved women's violence against female enslavers also stemmed from their resentment at performing the brunt of household labour which helped to uphold the privileged positions of white women within the slaveholding household and Southern society more broadly. The gendered division of labour and the nineteenth century ideology of the separate spheres placed the management of the home and other extensions of domestic production firmly within the purview of women. Married Southern women were required to excel in the field of housewifery and their competence as managers of the private sphere was held in high regard. Mary Boykin Chesnut, for example, wrote with pride and admiration to the 'capable and unquestionable generalship' of her mother-in-law as a plantation mistress. Mary Cox Chesnut's household operated like 'a well-oiled clock which Mrs. Chesnut wound every morning by the apparently simple device of giving detailed daily orders to her head cook, pastry cook, maids, and seamstresses, who in turn oversaw the work of twenty-five house servants.'[456]

Nineteenth century and historical accounts of slaveholding women largely promulgated the notion that female enslavers experienced intensive and unceasing labour responsibilities within the Southern home, as exemplified in Marli F. Weiner's statement: 'the round of obligations that absorbed

[455] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 133.
[456] Elizabeth S. Muhlenfeld, *Mary Boykin Chesnut: A biography* (Baton Rouge, 1981), 46.

women's days was long, varied, and arduous.' According to Weiner, the Southern lady lived a life of continuous responsibility as 'the slave of slaves.'[457] However, recent scholars of gender and slavery including Thavolia Glymph and Kelly Fanto Deetz assert throughout their studies on slaveholding households that white women simply delegated and appropriated the domestic skills and cooking of enslaved women.[458] To meet the standards of domesticity, slaveholding women relied upon the exploitation of enslaved women to undertake the physical labour of the household to fulfil their personal and domestic ambitions in the quest to achieve the marker of true white Southern womanhood. Bondswomen bore the brunt of the domestic household responsibilities, labouring long hours from sun-up to sun-down, and beyond. The formerly enslaved woman Ellen Cragin remembered the arduous work her mother performed as an enslaved domestic in the 'big house' when she 'worked at a loom.' According to Cragin, her mother 'worked so long and so often' and she would 'sleep at the loom' she was operating due to exhaustion.[459]

The effective upkeep of the Southern home required continuous labour from bondswomen who experienced minimal respite from white female supervision. Letita Burwell in her 1895 memoir documented the unrelenting work of bondswomen who were, 'constantly darting about on errands from the house to the kitchen and the cabins, upstairs and downstairs.' Burwell insisted that no respectable Southern establishment would be considered 'complete without a multiplicity' of enslaved domestics to answer every whim of the slaveholding family to which they legally belonged.[460] The 'indispensable' tasks within the Burwell household, as demonstrated in the image, below, ranged from the fanning of white infants to endless polishing (see Fig. 9). Burwell wrote that it was the 'sole employment' of one enslaved woman to polish the posts of her grandmother's bed which was 'carried quite to the excess' as 'every inch of mahogany was waxed and rubbed to the highest state of polish, as were also the floors, the brass fenders, irons, and candlesticks.'[461] Enslaved women were at the heart of the domestic illusion

[457] Marli F. Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80* (Urbana, 1997), 25.
[458] Thavolia Glymph asserts that the image of the hardworking plantation mistress was created and reinforced in order to uphold the ideology of Southern white female domesticity and to discredit enslaved women's domestic capabilities. Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 86-88; Kelley Fanto Deetz, *Bound to the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent American Cuisine* (Lexington, 2017).
[459] Ellen Cragin, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1.
[460] Burwell, *A Girl's Life in Virginia,* 4.
[461] Burwell, *A Girl's Life in Virginia,* 43.

of the well-ordered and paternalistic Southern household which white women proudly displayed to guests and family as an example of their true white womanhood and effective slave management.

"THREE WOMEN WOULD CLEAN UP ONE CHAMBER."—*Page* 43.

Figure 9: 'Three Women Would Clean Up One Chamber.' Letitia M. Burwell, *A Girl's Life in Virginia Before the War* (New York, 1895), 42.

Enslaved women, however, challenged and disrupted the idealised domestic ideology of the nineteenth century Southern home through their use of physical resistance. Bondswomen pushed back against the harmonious and well-ordered image of the Southern household through their open deployment of violence which destroyed the fantasy and illusion of slaveholding women's domestic success and mastery. Enslaved women's displays of household resistance through physical violence rejected the authority of the plantation mistress and by extension, in the words of historian Christopher

Bouton, 'the ideological construction of the Southern household itself.'[462] According to Bouton, acts of violence 'undercut' white women's claims to domesticity, as they forced slaveowning women to acknowledge their own deception in maintaining the mirage of the paternalistic and disciplined Southern home.[463]

Enslaved women's refusal to comply with slaveowning women's ideological expectations possessed the capacity to escalate into open forms of physical confrontation and this is demonstrated in the WPA testimony of Sophia Word. Enslaved as a domestic servant for nineteen years on a Kentucky plantation, Word graphically recalled how a physical confrontation erupted between herself and her mistress:

> One day my mistress Lydia called fer me to come in the house, but no, I wouldn't go. She walks out and says she is gwine make me go. So she takes and drags me in the house. Then I grabs that white woman, when she turned her back, and shook her until she begged for mercy.

Sophia Word and other enslaved women vehemently opposed slaveholding women's attempts to enforce their domestic servitude within the confines of the 'Big House.' Lydia's attempts to consolidate her power over Word dramatically backfired, as Word in turn responded with violence of her own. Word's assault of 'Mistress Lydia' until she *begged* for mercy serves as an indication into the extent of Word's use of violence and evokes a clear reversal of mastery and dominance. Begging, an act of requesting permission, would not have been associated with members of the 'master class.' No doubt Word took gratification in witnessing her female enslaver plead for mercy. Indeed, satisfaction in her act of retribution is evident within her testimony, as despite receiving a 'terrible beating' from Lydia's husband, she informed her interviewer: 'I didn't care fer I give the mistress a good 'un too.'[464]

Although Word did not explicitly detail the reasoning behind her reluctance to return to the plantation household, her outright refusal to be within the home's domestic setting is highly revealing. Word's refusal to return speaks to some enslaved women's rejection of this domestic sphere and the gendered division of labour which was integral to the production of slavery. Fox-Genovese stipulated

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[462] Bouton, *Setting Slavery's Limits*, 91.
[463] Bouton, *Setting Slavery's Limits*, 113.
[464] Sophia Word, FWP, Kentucky Narratives, Vol. 7, 1-2.

that the slaveholding household possessed 'multiple and far-reaching consequences for all spheres of southern life' including law, politics, economy and ideology. As a 'dominant unit of production and reproduction', Fox-Genovese argued that the Southern household was integral to the maintenance of white society's power and control over the enslaved and free people of colour.[465] Whilst enslaved women's resistance operated as a form of protest against the conditions of their enslavement and labour, Black women's household violence also served as a challenge to enslavement more broadly. The political undertones of enslaved women's violent actions should neither be underestimated nor diminished within historical accounts of enslaved people's resistance. Their violence challenged white authority within the plantation home as they struck back against the sexual division of labour which bound them to domesticity and by extension, slaveholding women. Enslaved women including Sophia Word refuted slaveholding gender constraints and attacked the ideology of the Southern home, the very powerhouse of slavery.

Contemporary Attempts to Conceal Enslaved Women's Violence

Although contemporary records evidence enslaved women's enactment of violence upon slaveowning women, enslavers and their white family members attempted to discredit and shroud bondswomen's acts of physical resistance within a gendered language of 'misbehaviour.' Enslavers attempted to rid themselves of violent enslaved women through petitions to Southern county courts for permission to sell certain bondswomen who were indentured in wills, trusts, or inheritances. These records not only evidence the fractious relationships between slaveowning women and the enslaved, they crucially demonstrate how references to enslaved women's violence were deliberately shrouded within a vocabulary of misconduct. Petition records repeatedly feature certain words and phrases including 'turbulent; unruly; troublesome; disobedient; unmanageable; injurious; uncontrollable; ungovernable.' Slaveholders used these "buzzwords" to mask enslaved women's violent actions in non-explicit ways. Thavolia Glymph argues that racist and sexist terms to describe the personalities of enslaved women, including 'mean, high-tempered, sassy and headstrong', were used interchangeably throughout court

[465] Fox-Genovse, *Within the Plantation Household,* 2.

petitions in order to couch enslaved women's resistance as behavioural problems within an idiom of racial disorder and inferiority.[466] Scholar Rachel Feinstein asserts that white women adopted 'performative strategies' within divorce petitions through the use of 'powerful language' in order to gain the sympathy of courts.[467] This 'performative strategy' is also evident in the petitions of slaveholding women who wished to heighten their chance of success by framing their petitions using racist stereotypes that represented enslaved women as untrainable.

The petitions of slaveholding families provide an important lens in which to examine the roles of slaveholding women and their relationships with resistant enslaved women. Themes of misbehaviour and delinquency are evident throughout antebellum petition records concerning the sale of enslaved women. Slaveholding families regularly accused enslaved women of personality defects within the gendered language of domesticity, as they complained of their insufficient dedication to white household chores or to the personal needs of the family. For example, the legal guardian of Flora Johnson described his ward's inherited property, Alice, as 'turbulent, troublesome, and unmanageable' and 'impossible to control or look after.' Johnson's guardian petitioned the sale of Alice in order to invest the proceeds into a 'more productive slave.'[468] Another enslaver, Minerva Spiers, complained that her enslaved woman, Lizza, possessed a 'disposition not to be managed or controlled.'[469] The trustee of Ann Norman similarly petitioned for the sale of an enslaved woman named Josephine who was described as 'very bad and mean of character.'[470] Other petitioners utilised a language which was related to enslaved women's monetary worth (or supposed lack of worth) through terms such as 'worthless' or 'unprofitable.'[471]

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[466] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 66.

[467] Rachel Feinstein, *When Rape Was Legal*: *The Untold History of Sexual Violence during Slavery* (New York, 2019), 8.

[468] *Race & Slavery Petitions Project,* Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part B: Maryland (1775-1866), Delaware (1779-1875), District of Columbia (1803-1865), Petition 20986028, 5th September 1860, Baltimore, Maryland.

[469] *Race & Slavery Petitions Project,* Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part C: Virginia (1775-1867) and Kentucky (1790-1864), Petition 21685017, August 1850, Sussex, Virginia.

[470] *Race & Slavery Petitions Project,* Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part B: Maryland (1775-1866), Delaware (1779-1875), District of Columbia (1803-1865), Petition 20985551, 9th October 1855, Baltimore, Maryland.

[471] One slaveholding woman described her enslaved woman as 'next to impossible' and subsequently she labelled her as 'practically worthless.' *Race & Slavery Petitions Project,* Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part D: North Carolina (1775-1867) and South Carolina (1784-1867),

In her examination of the deliberate minimisation of enslaved women's resistance, Glymph argued that these descriptions of Black women were invoked to support 'the contrasting image of the plantation mistress as weak and fragile, yet tireless in her efforts to manage her household and teach black women the niceties of domesticity.'[472] As previously discussed, successful domestic maintenance was inextricably linked to womanly achievement, morality and respectability. Slaveowning women deliberately attempted to conceal the resistance strategies of enslaved women through carefully selected wording in the effort to minimise women's violent actions as marginal and non-threatening. Slaveholding women frequently asserted that bondswomen were ineffective learners and workers which served to deflect accusations of poor domestic management. Harriet Martineau, for example, repeatedly emphasised the 'untrainability' of enslaved domestic women asserting that, 'The slave women cannot be taught' and 'it is universally said that they cannot learn.'[473] The deliberate wording and concealment of enslaved women's resistance served a dual purpose. It promoted the notion of Black women's inferiority whilst simultaneously serving as an excuse for white women's inability to control their enslaved property, a marked failure of Southern domesticity. Attributing enslaved women's violent actions to 'misbehaviour' caused by immoral and inferior biology enabled slaveholding women to maintain a position of superiority without alluding to a loss of control. It was imperative that female enslavers upheld an outward display of retained mastery within their petitions, whilst simultaneously reinforcing negative stereotypes of enslaved women in order to win the sympathy of judges.

Glymph further asserts that the dialogue of misbehaviour and domestic ineptitude served to 'construe black women's resistance as a problem of character rather than politics.'[474] According to Glymph, the portrayals of bondswomen as 'childlike and irresponsible' rendered the threat and rebelliousness of enslaved women negligible.[475] This is consistent with proslavery ideology which

Petition 21285627, 1st January 1856, Paquotank, North Carolina; Another Petitioner in Mississippi claimed their enslaved woman, Maria, was 'unsuitable and unprofitable' due to her 'ungovernable temper and disposition.' *Race & Slavery Petitions Project,* Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part A: Georgia (1796-1867), Florida)1821-1867), Alabama (1821-1867), Mississippi)1822-1867), Petition 20686429, 5th September 1864, Muscogee County, Georgia.

[472] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 74.

[473] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 88.

[474] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 92.

[475] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 94.

wished to contradict claims that enslaved people were discontent and possessed the capacity to be independent of slaveholder authority. Christopher Bouton supports this line of argument asserting: 'it was much easier to blame enslaved women's violence on a few "bad" slaves then re-examine the social order that had driven them to violence in the first place.'[476] The comforting language of 'problem behaviour' was more palatable for Southerners than resistance which possessed the potential to threaten the safety of white families and deconstruct the politics of paternalism. Enslavers thus attempted to transform enslaved women's resistance into behavioural problems which was far less threatening to both enslavers and white Southern society.

In extreme and desperate cases, petitioners openly stressed the violent actions or violent capabilities of their enslaved women, as enslavers pleaded with courts to remove bondswomen on the grounds that they or their family members were in immediate danger. Edward and Martha Gray, for example, petitioned for the sale of their slave, Harriet, who 'at various times wantonly, and out of a spirit of mere malicious mischief, abused and inflicted great bodily pain' upon the Grays and had also 'exposed to serious peril the lives of their infant children.'[477] The attributing of Harriet's 'abuse' which endangered the lives of the Gray's children to 'mere malicious mischief' demonstrates that even graphic descriptions of women's violence nevertheless operated within a language of 'mischief.' The guardian of Georgia Charter similarly petitioned for permission to sell an enslaved woman, Lucy, based on the accusation that she was violent and unmanageable: 'Lucy became so unmanageable and turbulent that her mistress could not control her and after said slave had threatened to strike her own mistress, she refused to keep her any longer.' Lucy's 'violent and insubordinate conduct' led to her eventual imprisonment alongside her five children before they were sold.[478] These carefully worded petitions demonstrate enslavers' deliberate acts of self-censorship as they attempted to create sanitised accounts of enslaved women's violence. These documents chronicle the fractious relationships which existed

[476] Bouton, *Setting Slavery's Limits*, 107.
[477] *Race & Slavery Petitions Project,* Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part B: Maryland (1775-1866), Delaware (1779-1857), District of Columbia (1803-1865), Petition 20985821, 12th November 1858, Baltimore, Maryland.
[478] *Race & Slavery Petitions Project,* Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part C: Virginia (1775-1867) and Kentucky (1790-1864), Petition 21684809, 7th August 1848, Henrico County, Virginia.

between slaveowning women and their enslaved female property. Moreover, these records clearly exhibit enslaved women's violent resistance, while also underscoring slaveholding women's fear of certain bondswomen and their violent capabilities to the extent where white women relinquished their rights over inherited slaves or requested to sell them out of state through careful and deliberate wording.

Murder & Domestic Weaponisation

White Southern women were sometimes valid in their anxieties surrounding 'malicious' enslaved women, as bondswomen occasionally murdered their female enslavers with their bare hands or through the use of weapons. Slaveowning women feared their enslaved domestics and they documented their suspicions regarding enslaved women's murderous capabilities within their memoirs, diaries, and autobiographies. These suspicions reflect the pervasiveness of bondswomen's physical violence, as well as the fear and paranoia of planter class women. Mary Boykin Chesnut's sister, for example, communicated her distrust of an enslaved woman, writing: 'I cannot make up my mind. Does she mean to take care of me – or murder me?'[479] Chesnut also wrote of her own anxieties surrounding the issue of enslaved perpetrated violence which led to a recurring nightmare: 'I sleep and wake with the horrid vision before my eyes of those vile black hands smothering her.'[480] While Chesnut and her family's suspicions of enslaved women's potential for violence were heightened due to the political, economic, and social turmoil of the Civil War, female enslavers privately vocalised their suspicions of enslaved women's capacity for violence throughout the antebellum period. For example, although Rebecca Latimer Felton paid tribute to the 'fidelity and general excellence' of domestic Black women, she nevertheless acknowledged that, 'the seeds of violence might have been sown if the soil had been receptive.'[481] Marion Harland also openly acknowledged the violent capabilities of some bondswomen when she described in her autobiography how an enslaved woman murdered a white infant in 1847 by pounding glass into the child's milk. 'Dark sides of the Slavery Question', wrote Harland, posed a real threat to the safety of slaveholding families as she declared, 'a volcano slumbered fitfully beneath us.'[482]

[479] C. Vann Woodward (ed.), *Mary Boykin Chesnut's Civil War* (Yale, 1981), 199.
[480] Woodward, *Mary Boykin Chesnut's Civil War,* 164.
[481] Rebecca Latimer Felton, *County Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth* (Atlanta, Georgia), 99.
[482] Marion Harland, *Marion Harland's Autobiography: The Story of a Life Long* (New York, 1910), 194-5.

Female enslavers clearly recognised the threat enslaved women posed to their lives and their writings reveal an awareness of their vulnerability to violent resistance, as well as the antagonisms prevalent within the Southern household. These suspicions reflect the fears of slaveowning women who clearly perceived enslaved women to be capable of inflicting deadly acts of violence.

Indeed, female enslavers had good reason to fear enslaved women. White and Black women co-existed within the volatile institution of slavery which continually possessed the potential to erupt into extreme and deadly forms of violence, as bondswomen successfully and unsuccessfully attempted to murder slaveholding women through a variety of techniques and devices. As explored in Chapter Two, the physical space of the Southern plantation and its accumulation of commonplace objects provided enslaved women with the necessary weapons to inflict both assault and murder. Just as enslaved women weaponised agricultural objects against overseeing men, the weaponisation of commonplace objects in and around the slaveholding household would also prove to be an important factor in enslaved women's murderous resistance against female enslavers. Primary records reveal enslaved women transformed various substances and objects of domestic labour including hatchets, knives, fire pokers, candlesticks, and household substances into weapons for their own deadly designs. The spaces in which enslaved women laboured provided opportunities to commit acts of murder with enslavers' own displays of wealth and power.

The sexual division of labour on antebellum slaveholding sites predominantly relegated food production as a domestic and feminine form of labour. Areas of food production on slaveholding sites were often fully equipped with every available amenity needed to ensure the continuous production of food, and these various amenities and implements were subject to weaponisation for the purposes of violent resistance.[483] Liza Rudd, the mother of WPA respondent, John Rudd, attempted to stab her mistress with a butcher knife while she was labouring as a cook in one of the plantation kitchens. John Rudd explained that while his mother was preparing food in the smoke house at the back of the 'big kitchen,' her mistress, Jane Moore, began to beat her across the shoulders, ''thout tellin' her why' with

[483] Kelley Fanto Deetz documents the materiality of plantation kitchens in *Bound To the Fire: How Virginia's Enslaved Cooks Helped Invent American Cuisine*. Deetz explicitly frames areas of food production as fully furnished 'feminized landscapes.' 18-41; 27.

a 'long whip' which she deliberately concealed before entering the smoke house.[484] In response, Rudd reported that his mother, who was slicing ham at the time of the attack, 'wheeled around and started runnin' after old Missus Jane.' Unable to catch her mistress, Liza 'throwed the butcher knife' in her direction, but ultimately missed her target. Rudd emphasised how his mother threw the implement with such force that the knife 'stuck in the wall up to the hilt.' Consumed with fear for her life and safety, Moore locked herself away until her husband arrived home that evening.

This WPA testimony provides a stark difference to the mammy trope projected in pro-slavery and Lost Cause literature. The fearful actions of Jane Moore, who hid for her life inside a locked bedroom demonstrates that she was terrified of Rudd's mother and her apparent murderous capabilities. We cannot know for certain whether Rudd intended to fatally stab Moore with the knife, or whether she simply threw the object in her direction as a warning. However, the fact that the knife was indented in the wall 'up to the hilt' demonstrates that the implement was thrown with substantial force. Moore's response also demonstrates that she herself believed Rudd to be capable of murder. Liza Rudd unapologetically explained to Jane Moore's husband, Henry Moore, that her actions were the direct result of being whipped and 'she show him the marks of the whip' and 'the butcher knife stickin' in the wall.' For her act of violence, Liza Rudd was separated from her three sons and hired out of state to Louisville.

In addition to labouring as the cook for the plantation, Liza Rudd also performed domestic work as a house maid. Moore and Rudd would have frequently rubbed shoulders within the confines of the Southern home and experienced a multitude of exchanges within the toxic atmosphere of the slaveholding household. John Rudd's testimony provides contextual information in relation to the personality and character of Jane Moore as a female enslaver. Moore's father, Thomas Rakin, was reportedly, 'one of the meanest men where slaves was concerned' and Rudd insinuated that his former mistress was inclined to acts of cruelty stating that: 'she had learnt the slave drivin' business from her daddy.' Rudd's statement that Moore had 'learnt' the art of slaveholding from her father further suggests that gendered distinctions in mastery were at best, illusionary. Clearly, both men and women from

[484] John Rudd, FWP, Indiana Narratives, Vol. 5, 2-3.

slaveholding families were well adverse in the business of slavery and instructed in the profession regardless of gender. Furthermore, Rudd's description insinuates that acts of violence at the hands of Mistress Moore were a regular occurrence. Rudd himself experienced the trauma of witnessing an enslaved person being abused, describing how enslaved people were unmercifully whipped over a 'large barrel' by one of the seven white men who were reportedly employed for the sole purpose of administrating corporal violence.[485] Liza Rudd's act of resistance therefore occurred amidst a backdrop of abuse and terror, and this history of violence is an important consideration, indicating that her decision to stab her female enslaver was potentially long standing. The description of Rudd, armed with a knife, pursuing Moore as she fled for her life, evokes a powerful image of enslaved women's violent resistance.

Whilst Moore escaped with her life, other female enslavers were not so fortunate. In 1858, Lucy was executed for the murder of her enslaver, Maria Dougherty, who died from a series of headwounds in her home in the County of Galveston, Texas. Based on the two 'sizable wounds on the head,' the local authorities determined that Maria Dougherty's skull had been crushed through the use of a hatchet or some other 'sharp instrument' between the hours of midnight and 3am on January 5th, 1858.[486] Although court records relating to Lucy's trial have not survived, contemporary newspaper reports provide an insight into the events which transpired from the discovery of Dougherty's body to Lucy's execution. According to the *Galveston Daily News,* Lucy was discovered 'secreted in an outhouse' and on being asked whether she had killed Mrs. Dougherty when confronted with her corpse, Lucy replied: '"Yes, and I would do it again."'[487] In conjunction to her apparent confession, Lucy's fate was sealed when portions of her dress were found in the wounds of Maria Dougherty's skull. Reports of Lucy's 'general bad conduct' and character 'removed all doubt as to her guilt.' After only a 'brief absence' of deliberation, the jury declared Lucy guilty of murder in the first degree and she was executed March

[485] Rudd, Indiana Narratives, 1-3.
[486] 'Shocking Murder', *Civilian and Gazette Weekly*. Vol. 20, No. 50, Ed. 1 Tuesday, 5th January, 1858. Galveston, Texas, p. 2. 'Newspaper Archive' [https://newspaperarchive.com/disaster-clipping-jan-05-1858-2340559/] (accessed: 21st March 2022).
[487] 'Murdered Her Mistress', *The Galveston Daily News, Sunday September 9th, 1888,* Galveston, Texas, p. 5. Rosenburg Library, Galveston, Texas.

5th, 1858, in the Galveston County jail.[488] Local newspapers reported that Lucy maintained an 'air of solid indifference' and expressed a 'perfect willingness to die' as she boldly declared to the crowd, 'she was willing to be hung.'[489]

Details relating to Lucy and her life are fleeting within the Galveston newspaper reports. As previously explained, the analysis of antebellum Southern press reports requires a degree of caution. Newspaper reports of enslaved people's capital offences were often subject to dramatisation, as newspapers attempted to induce in white readers a sense of shock and outrage. Hyperbolic accounts of bondspeople's violence deliberately highlighted gruesome details, whilst emphasising the swift retribution of the law in order to reaffirm white authority and control. In Lucy's case, the *Civilian and Gazette* titled the event 'SHOCKING MURDER', highlighting the 'tragedy' of Dougherty's brutal death 'at the hands of Lucy', 'a most ill-favoured looking wench who seems to have committed the diabolical act after deliberately maturing it.'[490] Readers were not spared the gruesome details of the murder. Press accounts of Lucy's capital offence contain gendered and racialised tropes which adhered to white supremacist ideologies regarding slaveowning, as the local newspapers attempted to paint Lucy as an inherently violent individual, who harboured a murderous vendetta against her innocent white mistress.

Lucy's physical appearance was noted in a later 1859 county court petition, in which Joseph Dougherty sought compensation for his 'loss of property', as forty-five years of age, 'complexion black' and 'height about five feet two inches.'[491] The Doughertys had recently purchased Lucy from Captain J.H. Sherritt and it was reported that Lucy came to the auction block 'not bearing a very good character.'[492] This is highly suggestive that her previous owner had experienced difficulties managing Lucy. Additionally, Lucy's age at the time of her sale to the Doughertys indicates that Sherritt sought to rid himself of her despite the low cost she would fetch at auction.[493] In 1859 the equity court awarded

488 'Shocking Murder', *Civilian and Gazette Weekly*, 2.
489 'Shocking Murder', *Civilian and Gazette Weekly*, 2.
490 'Shocking Murder', *Civilian and Gazette Weekly*, 2.
491 *Race and Slavery Petitions Project*, Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series I: Petitions to Southern Legislatures, 1777-1867. Petition 11585901, 20th December 1859, Galveston County, Texas.
492 'Murdered Her Mistress', *The Galveston Daily News,* 5.
493 According to Daina Ramey Berry, middle aged enslaved people were considered in the antebellum era to be between the ages of twenty-three and thirty-nine. Ramey Berry asserts that enslaved women were considered to

Joseph Dougherty the sum of four hundred and sixty dollars for loss of services and property. This further indicates that Lucy was sold to the Dougherty's for a low sum of money reflecting both her age and a potential history of resistant behaviour, as historian Ariela Gross states that numerical values were placed on enslaved people's character.[494] As one of the most important forms of capital in the antebellum South, 'commodification meant always thinking about slave character in dollar terms.'[495] This enslaved woman clearly possessed a history of resistant behaviour which her previous owners found difficult to manage. From the onset of her purchase, Lucy and Maria Dougherty immediately experienced a fractious and violent relationship as it was reported that Lucy, 'seemed dissatisfied with her new mistress.'[496] Contemporary newspaper texts reveal corporal violence was a substantial factor in Lucy's decision to commit homicide. Following the murder, Galveston newspapers reported that Mrs. Dougherty had punished Lucy twice for some 'trivial offence.'[497] This suggests Lucy was subject to severe levels of abuse for minor infractions. Lucy's supposed exclamation that she wished to kill Maria Dougherty twice, if she had the chance, alongside her resolute nature during sentencing and execution, is indicative of a personal vendetta specifically against Maria Dougherty.

It is likely Lucy attacked her mistress with the hand axe in the early hours of the morning, between midnight and 3am, to avoid unwanted interference from hotel guests and to avoid suspicion from those who would note her absence during more social hours. The inclusion of Lucy's dress, most notably the hooks and eyes closures, within the head wounds of Dougherty suggests a fierce struggle ensued between the two women. As previously explained, the weaponisation of everyday tools and equipment was a common feature of enslaved women's resistance. As the Dougherty's residence operated as a hotel, it is highly likely that Lucy's weapon of choice, the hatchet, was in the vicinity of the property and at the immediate disposal of Lucy who subverted its intended use for a more sinister

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hold their highest monetary value between the ages of thirty-three and thirty-nine due to their reproductive capabilities and their ability to labour as 'full hands.' Once enslaved women surpassed thirty-nine years of age, their monetary value declined as enslaved women were considered to be less fertile and physically capable to carry out heavy labour. Daina Ramey Berry, *Price For Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved from Womb to Grave in the Building of a Nation* (Boston, 2017), 100-134.

[494] Ariela Gross, 'Pandora's Box: Slave Character on Trial in the Antebellum Deep South' in Paul Finkelman (ed.), *Slavery & the Law* (Madison, 1997), 291-329, 294.

[495] Gross, 'Pandora's Box', 294.

[496] 'Shocking Murder', *Civilian and Gazette Weekly*, 2.

[497] 'Murdered Her Mistress', *The Galveston Daily News*, 5.

purpose. The subjective nature of this evidence reveals only a fragment of the crime and only a fraction of Lucy's story. While the personal details and perceptions surrounding Lucy have been erased from the archive, it is important to note that the immediate conditions of Lucy's enslavement both informed and engendered this enslaved woman's response. The resolute nature of Lucy who declared before the crowd during her execution that she was 'willing to be hung' signifies an enslaved woman who was willing to commit desperate acts in order to escape her female enslaver and the institution of slavery itself.[498]

Other enslaved women weaponised fixed household furnishings in their attempt to murder their female enslavers. On the 23rd of July, 1857, fourteen year old Catherine stood before the court in the county of Louisa, Virginia, for the murder of her enslaver, Salena Hall. On the 27th June, 1857, Salena Hall was discovered dead in her hallway with significant burns to her body. Witnesses who discovered Hall's body expressed their repulsion and trauma at seeing the partially naked body which they described as 'dreadfully burned' on her 'face, down her side and breast.'[499] An autopsy concluded that Hall had come to her death due to third-degree burns and 'many bad wounds about the head.' Her nose was broken, her right ear torn off, and her head had reportedly sustained deep 'lacerations' and 'depressions' along the front and back of the skull. Following an investigation, a 'very bloody' iron shovel was discovered secreted under the house covered with human hair. Suspicion immediately befell Catherine who insisted that her mistress's death had occurred due to an ironing accident whilst she was away from the home collecting firewood. Despite Catherine's assurance that Salena Hall had burnt to death whilst ironing in the kitchen, she was subsequently arrested and executed for first-degree murder at the Louisa County public gallows on the 21st August, 1857.

Catherine's voluntary or unvoluntary confession to Hall's husband reveals how events in the Hall household quickly unraveled and descended into violence, as she admitted at the scene of the crime to murdering Salena Hall in response to being whipped:

[498] 'Shocking Murder', *Civilian and Gazette Weekly*, 2
[499] *Commonwealth vs. Catherine*, Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710, Box 8, Folder 7, Misc Reel 4203. State Records Collection, LVA.

> Prisoner was sitting down getting a splinter out of her foot, Mrs. Hall told her to get up and go and get wood. She said she would after she got the splinter out of her foot. Mrs. Hall got a cowhide and commenced whipping her, as she rose, she struck Mrs. Hall under the chin and she fell dead…the prisoner then said she struck Mrs. Hall with the shovel, that she struck her twice before she fell.[500]

Based on the numerous wounds on Hall's skull, it can be deduced that Catherine struck her mistress on more than two occasions. The broken nose and the lacerated right ear suggests that Catherine repeatedly struck her mistress with the shovel before setting her clothes on fire, possibly by throwing her, alive, into the lit kitchen fireplace.[501] The location of Hall's corpse, protruding out of the kitchen door, reveals that Salena Hall had desperately attempted to flee her assailant before succumbing to her injuries.

Hall's quick use of the cowhide to whip Catherine suggests that as a female enslaver, Hall was prone to using violence on a number of occasions for minor transgressions. The image of Catherine being whipped on the floor, before she rose to strike her mistress 'under the chin' evokes a powerful image of a young enslaved woman who refused to submit to another of her enslaver's beatings. In addition to Catherine's confession, Thomas Hall, Salena's widowed husband, detailed how the murder took place during his absence, as Hall stressed to the court that 'no one knew of my going to Gordonsville except the said negro and my wife.' Catherine took advantage of her enslaver's isolation to retaliate with physical force of her own in response to her mistress's use of corporal violence. Furthermore, the court asked Thomas Hall whether Catherine possessed a known 'temper', yet Hall declared that Catherine, who had been temporarily hired to them from a woman named Maria Thompson, 'did not appear to have much of a temper.' Hall further emphasised to the court that Catherine did not possess a reputation for disobedience and that he had personally 'never had any occasion to correct her.' This further insinuates that Salena Hall was the one who abused and disciplined

[500] For a methodological analysis on enslaved people's confessions during formal and informal criminal investigations, see Chapter One.
[501] Christopher Bouton asserts that Catherine used a hot iron to set fire to Hall's body. This is also the alibi Catherine used when originally questioned by witnesses at the scene of the crime. However, court details reveal that Hall's comb was located in the fireplace. Logistically, it would make sense for Hall's clothing to have been set on fire quickly through the use of the fireplace, rather than a hot iron and this would explain why Mrs. Hall's comb was found in the fireplace. For Bouton's analysis of this crime, see: Bouton, *Setting Slavery's Limits,* 94-95.

Catherine, which further dispels previous historical and contemporary tropes surrounding white female passivity in the slaveholding South. Selena Hall was a violent disciplinarian who targeted her enslaved "property" without hesitation.

Commonwealth vs. Catherine also possesses immediate parallels with the case of Maria and Manuel who assaulted their temporary enslavers in Boone County, Missouri.[502] White men and women who hired enslaved people in a temporary capacity were not immune to the violence of enslaved women. Salena Hall's status as a temporary enslaver did little to protect her in the wake of Catherine's violent reprisal. This court record further illustrates enslaved women's use of commonplace objects as means to assault and murder slaveowning women. The iron shovel which Catherine furiously deployed against her female enslaver proved to be an effective murder weapon and the use of the lit kitchen fireplace was presumably used to inflict further pain on Salena Hall and to disguise the head wounds inflicted upon her. It was reported that upon the discovery of Hall's corpse, her body and clothes were still burning and witnesses perceived Catherine to be 'very much excited…She showed no symptoms of distress'.[503] This undignified end to Salena Hall no doubt produced a sense of gratification in Catherine who had most likely been the subject of her mistress's abuse for the entirety of her enslavement to the Halls. Commonplace objects and even permeant household fixtures including lit fireplaces, were credible sources of danger to female enslavers during moments of enslaved women's resistance.

Catherine's use of the lit fireplace was not unique to her case. In Alexandria County, Virginia, Jenny murdered her mistress, Elizabeth Hall (no relation to Salena Hall), who 'languished' in pain until her death on December 14th, 1857, after being repeatedly thrown into a lit fireplace.[504] *Commonwealth vs. Jenny* represents one of the most graphic cases of enslaved women's deadly resistance. Witnesses who testified on behalf of the prosecution, including trained medical professionals, emphasised the severity of Hall's wounds, with one doctor stressing that Elizabeth Hall had been burnt 'pretty much to a crisp.' Before her death, Elizabeth Hall lamented on the state of her wounds, stating: 'I must die I am burnt to death.'

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[502] *French v. Campbell* (1850), MSA.
[503] *Commonwealth vs. Catherine*, LVA.
[504] *Commonwealth vs. Jenny*, Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710, Box 11, Folder 3, Misc Reel 4206. State Records Collection, LVA.

The trial record details how the violent incident took place in Hall's kitchen 'some fifteen yards from the house.' The confrontation began after Jenny disobeyed Hall's instructions to collect water from a nearby spring. In response to Jenny's 'insolence', Hall 'struck her in the mouth' which prompted Jenny to retaliate as she reportedly, 'caught her and put her in the fire and held her there.' Elizabeth Hall personally testified on her death bed that Jenny repeatedly attempted to murder her through a variety of techniques which included barring her escape, burning flammable items above her head, and actively pursuing her throughout the slaveholding household:

> She then caught me and put my head in the fire. I begged and plead with her not to do me so, my clothes were all in flames. Jenny shut the door and held it so I could not get out. I tore off my clothes as best I could. She again came in and threw me in the fire the second time…she again went out and held the door…I busted the door open and ran to the window and in attempting to get out she find me and came in and caught me and pulled me back…she dragged me back to the fire and threw me in the third time. She also caught the child's clothes and the clothes that I had tore off and held them over the fire. When they were all up in flames she held them over my head.

Hall once again attempted to escape through an open window, only to be dragged back into the house and into the lit fireplace. Although Hall was able to attract the attention of others who came to her rescue when she 'hollered murder', Jenny's enslaver did not live past twenty-four hours.[505] Jenny's determination to kill her mistress is demonstrated throughout this record. From barring her escape, to repeatedly throwing her into the fireplace and holding flammable items above Hall's head, Jenny was clearly determined and resolved to murder her enslaver by any means necessary. Furthermore, it was recorded in the trial that Hall was pregnant at the time of her death. As in the case of the WPA example of Clory who assaulted her pregnant mistress, Mickell Fuller, pregnancy and motherhood did not afford slaveowning women protection from enslaved women's physical resistance.[506] Jenny was unflinching in her assault of Elizabeth Hall and Hall's unborn child.

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[505] *Commonwealth vs. Jenny*, LVA.
[506] Susan Hamilton, South Carolina Narratives, 2.

These two cases illustrate the distinct use of fire to maim and murder individual slaveowning women. The throwing of female enslavers into lit fireplaces demonstrates that enslaved women were imaginative and resourceful in their deployment of violence. Even the most unorthodox of objects and fixtures could prove to be effective weapons. These two strikingly similar cases demonstrate the unpredictable nature of domestic sites of enslavement which possessed the potential to transcend into arenas of confrontation within seconds over minor and trivial disagreements. White women's use of violence triggered the violent responses of enslaved women; the domestic sphere of the white home was a volatile and ever-changing environment which enslaved women manipulated for their own murderous agendas. In the words of Christopher Bouton, 'by handing the power to maintain their households over to enslaved women' white Southerners 'had also given their bondswomen the power to destroy them.'[507] Enslaved women could utilise even the most mundane and unorthodox of household fixtures, subverting their conventional use for the purpose of homicide.

Dangerous Drugs & Household Poisons

Another method of murder included the poisoning of female enslavers through the use of commercial chemicals, medicines, and drugs found within the white Southern home. In March, 1834, Rachel O'Connor, a slaveowning woman of Louisiana, wrote of an incident in which a fourteen year old enslaved domestic attempted to murder her cousin, Charlotte Doherty, with rat poison. O'Conner described how the unnamed enslaved domestic, who was 'given to Charlotte for a house girl', mixed the rat poison 'with sugar in the sugar dish' which Charlotte and her family consumed on multiple occasions before 'becoming sick.' O'Conner stressed how the 'dreadful attempt' 'came near killing' Charlotte and her two sons. The attack on Charlotte and her family was clearly premediated, as O'Conner detailed how the enslaved woman 'stole the keys' to the store house which contained the rat poison.[508] The poisoning of female enslavers and occasionally their immediate family members through commercial products kept on slaveholding sites is demonstrated in a plethora of primary records, as

[507] Bouton, *Setting Slavery's Limits,* 92.
[508] *David Weeks and Family Papers 1782-1957*, Iberia Parish, Louisiana, Box 5, Folder, 37, March 1836. Southern Life and African American History, 1775-1915, Plantation Records, Part 1, LVA.

enslaved women utilised their enforced domestic servitude to female slaveowners as an avenue and opportunity for violent resistance.[509]

Concern about malicious poisoning was a major source of white anxiety in the antebellum South and a common trope within slaveholding records, with correspondences abound with references of potential and suspected poisonings. Doctoring practices amongst enslaved people and the availability of medicinal substances which could be potentially used as poisons were prime concerns for slaveholding states.[510] The eighteenth century witnessed the enactment of various Southern slave statutes which sought to curb the use and practice of medicine among enslaved communities in the effort to eliminate the possibility of enslaved perpetrated poisonings. A 1748 Virginia law, for example, implemented the death penalty for 'any negro, or other slave, [who] shall prepare, exhibit or administer any medicine whatsoever.'[511] Virginia deemed this legislation necessary due to 'many negroes, under the pretense of practicing physic, have prepared and exhibited poisonous medicines, by which many persons have been murdered, and others have languished under long and tedious indispositions.'[512]

Additional laws and statutes across the South also restricted the sale of apothecary substances to the enslaved and free people of colour to limit Black people's access to medicines, drugs and chemicals. In 1835 Georgia explicitly prohibited the employment of 'Slaves and Free Persons of Color from compounding or dispensing medicines in Druggists or Apothecaries' stores' and arsenic was deemed a particularly toxic substance to the extent that it was ordered to be kept 'under lock and key.'[513] Anti-poison and anti-medicine statutes continued to be updated and enforced throughout the slaveholding South until the Civil War, with Georgia only allowing the sale of 'arsenic, strychnine,

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509 For the purpose of this examination, poison is defined as a substance that is capable of causing the illness or death of a living organism when introduced and absorbed.

510 Kelley Fanto Deetz asserts that tales of poisonings spread prolifically throughout circles of the planter elite, inciting fear and panic amongst the plater class which led to the implementation of anti-poisoning laws in the eighteenth century. Deetz, *Bound to the Fire*, 73; 92-98

511 Deetz, *Bound to the Fire*, 59.

512 Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 166.

513 John Cuthbert, *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, passed in Milledgeville at an Annual Session in November and December, 1835*, Vol. 1 (Milledgeville, 1836), 268-269. 'Digital Library of Georgia' {https://dlg.usg.edu/record/dlg_zlgl_14853031} (accessed 27th July 2023).

hydrocyanic acid, and aconite' to white 'practicing physicians' in 1860.[514] The white Southern elite perceived enslaved people's perpetrated poisoning to be a highly credible threat and Southern lawmakers recognised the dangers of medicine's harming capabilities to the safety of the white population. The implementation of various legislature throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reflected the paranoia of the Southern white elite, who, according to historian Kelley Fanto Deetz, lived 'in a culture of fear.'[515]

Poison paranoia was occasionally justified, however, as contemporary documents illuminate how bondswomen utilised household medicines, drugs, and chemicals for their own deadly and subversive purposes. Despite the wide availability of contemporary evidence suggesting enslaved women used commonplace medicines and chemicals as effective poisons, the study of enslaved women's utilisation of medicinal substances predominantly occurs within the prism of healing and doctoring. Historians including Sharla M. Fett, for example, stress the central role of bondwomen as unofficial domestic healers who 'grew herbs, made medicines, cared for the sick, prepared the dead for burial, and attended births in black and white households across the South.'[516] Furthermore, historians have predominately focused on poisons derived from plants, herbs, and roots. Kelley Fanto Deetz, for example, asserts that enslaved Afro-Virginians 'brought their knowledge of both poisoning and foodways with them from Africa' and Douglas Chambers argues that 'the use of poison especially evokes a different matrix of meaning rooted in African conceptions of efficacy.'[517] Whilst enslaved women did use naturally derived poisons, recorded instances of poisoning in judicial records and the private writings of enslavers centralise the use of manufactured toxins as available poisons to contaminate white foodways.[518] With the exception of Nikki Taylor and Tamika Nunley, few historians

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[514] John Cuthbert, *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, passed in Milledgeville at an Annual Session in November and December, 1860*, Vol. 1 (Milledgeville, 1860), 54. 'Digital Library of Georgia', {https://dlg.usg.edu/record/dlg_zlgl_35041770}(accessed: 27th July 2023).
[515] Deetz, *Bound to the Fire,* 61.
[516] Fett, *Working Cures,* 6.
[517] Deetz, *Bound to the Fire,* 93; Douglass Chambers, *Murder at Montpelier: Igbo Africans in Virginia* (Jackson, 2005), 14.
[518] The availability of poisonous plants, roots and herbs varied across the South depending on the location and climate. In the absence of potentially poisonous vegetation in urbanised areas in particular, non-herbal poisons including chemical substances and medicines within the slaveholding households proved to be effective alternatives. Household manufactured toxic substances could be easier to locate, omitting the need to travel beyond the confines of the slaveholding site.

have analysed these substances in relation to enslaved women's violent resistance and how they were used to harm and kill slaveowning women.[519] Taylor advocates for enslaved people's use of chemicals, asserting that in contrast to herbs, roots, plants and fruits, 'manufactured poisons and chemicals, by contrast, are always harmful when ingested or when in contact with the skin.'[520]

Contemporary documents centralise the use of commonplace manufactured chemicals for the purpose of homicide. Southern households were awash with potentially dangerous drugs and chemical substances. With limited access to medical care and trained physicians, many Southerners relied upon their own commercial medicines, remedies and methods of treatment to address common illnesses and cures.[521] Historian Catherine Clinton asserts that plantation mistresses especially 'spent a great deal of time and effort' keeping their medicine cabinets well supplied, as white women were predominantly assigned the role of medical caregivers, relying on medical manuals and pre-purchased medicines available within the home.[522] 'The Age of Drugs' illustrates the popularity of commercialised chemicals and medicines in the nineteenth and twentieth century United States (see Fig. 10). This satirical illustration depicts the interior of a drugstore with a pharmacist dispensing a variety of substances including 'arsenic, strychnine, antipyrine, nerve stimulant, opium and cocaine' to a crowd of eager consumers. The pharmacist walls state 'The Killem' Quick Pharmacy' is 'open all night' with 'prescriptions carefully compounded.'

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[519] For an analysis of poisoning incidents in early Virginia, see, for instance: Nunley, *The Demands of Justice*, 53-86. For an analysis of poisoning incidents in the colonial South, see, for instance: Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, 31-51.
[520] Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, 34.
[521] Glenda Sullivan asserts that white Southerners predominately provided their own healthcare to address common illnesses and cures due to the lack of medical treatment available in the rural South and the general mistrust of physicians' care. See: Glenda Sullivan, 'Plantation Medicine and Health Care in the Old South', *Legacy*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2010), 17-36. For more information on medical practices and healthcare in the antebellum South, see: Sullivan, 'Plantation Medicine'; Marli F. Weiner, *Sex, Sickness, and Slavery: Defining Illness in the Antebellum South* (Illinois, 2012); Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*; Fett, *Working Cures.*
[522] Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 166.

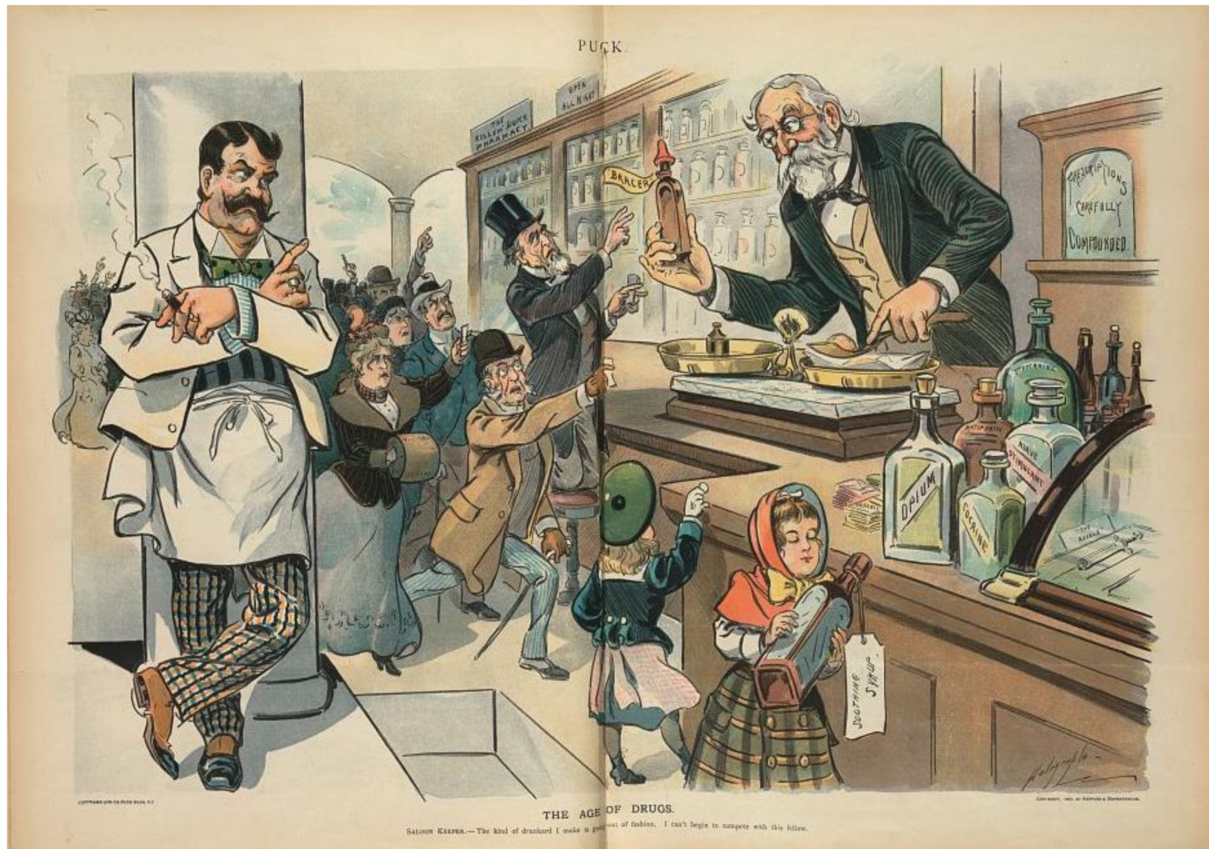

Figure 10: Louis Dalrymple, ‘The Age of Drugs’ in *Puck,* Vol. 48, No. 1231 (1900), Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington DC, [http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print] (accessed: 3rd March 2023).

Manufactured toxic substances, including those sold in the ‘Killem’ Quick Pharmacy’, were well stocked in white Southern households as both vermin control and medicine. Laudanum, camphor, mercurous chloride, strychnine, arsenic and other manufactured substances proved to be available and efficient poisons for enslaved women’s violent resistance. Gendered divisions of labour on Southern slaveholding sites placed enslaved women within close proximity to their female enslavers and by extension, the white medical stores of the plantation home. Bondswomen who laboured as household domestics, cooks, and nurses capitalised on their domestic confinement, positions of trust and access to white provisions to surreptitiously slip poisonous substances into the food and drink of slaveholding women in revenge for past and present abuse. Whilst some enslaved women utilised more open forms of violence against female slaveholders including aggravated assault or weaponised murder, the use of poison was occasionally a preferable method of facilitating harm and death. Firstly, poison could be

administered in secrecy; deaths and illnesses could be misconstrued as natural occurrences. According to Sharla M. Fett, a 'fragile line' existed 'separating medicine from poison and healing from harming.'[523] Slaveholding women were often unaware that their household medicines were a threat to their wellbeing and safety, and that their plentiful supplies of medical provisions ironically provided bondswomen with an effective means to harm and kill their mistresses when administered into enslavers' foodways.

Poison is traditionally - and continues to be - associated as a 'women's weapon' and a 'weapon of the weak' due to its predominantly covert and secretive usage, and unlike other forms of violence, the use of poison requires minimal physical force. Glenn McNair states that in the state of Georgia 'the figures for poisoning are even more skewed in the direction of female defendants' as he concludes that crimes of poisoning required 'no physical strength or weapons, just sufficient quantities of poison and access to food.'[524] Poisoning has thus retained a strong association as a gendered form of female violence and some debate whether poisoning can be classified as a violent offence due to its covert and secretive nature.[525] Whilst this thesis does not contain a quantitative comparison of how many women were convicted of poisoning compared to other forms of violence in the antebellum South, it should be acknowledged that bondswomen did not select poison as an outlet for their resistance simply because they were physiologically "weaker" than their enslaved male counterparts. Poisonings within the white home were related to opportunity and circumstance, rather than the physical capabilities of the yielder. Female perpetrated poisonings occurred within the Southern home due to nineteenth century sexual divisions of labour which confined bondswomen to domestic roles to a greater extent than enslaved men.

Although historians have stressed that enslaved men experienced greater mobility due to their increased access to skilled trades, Vanessa Holden asserts that the gendered division of labour on slaveholding sites 'facilitated greater mobility for enslaved women.'[526] Holden stipulates that enslaved

[523] Fett, *Working Cures,* 160.
[524] While McNair acknowledged that enslaved women 'were in an ideal position to poison their owners' due to nineteenth century sexual divisions of labour, he ultimately concluded that poisoning was the preferred method of violence for enslaved women (along with arson) as these crimes required minimal physical strength. McNair, 'Slave Women', 142**.**
[525] John Savage, '"Black Magic" and White Terror: Slave Poisoning and His Colonial Society in Early 19th Century Martinique,' *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2007), 635-662, 649.
[526] Holden, *Surviving Southampton*, 35.

women were able to move seamlessly between the 'imagined boundaries' of field labour and domestic tasks, which thus granted them greater access to their enslavers and increased opportunities for resistance.[527] Their experience as gendered labourers, knowledge of labour sites, and their close access to dangerous substances perfectly positioned bondswomen to inflict physical violence upon slaveowning women through poisoning. Female domestics used their positions to infiltrate white spaces for the purpose of violent resistance. Nikki Taylor forcibly argues that the poisoning of white foodways should be re-classified as a form of 'armed resistance' due to the 'extensive damage it causes to the body'. In the words of Taylor, poisoning 'is anything *but* non-violent'.[528] Indeed, primary records demonstrate the ability of toxic substances to create a variety of violent bodily reactions ranging from sickness, fever, diarrhoea, internal bleeding, convulsions, seizures, chocking and death.

Enslaved women certainly perceived poison as an effective avenue for targeting female enslavers to induce sickness, injury, and even death using toxic chemicals located within the immediate vicinity of the 'Big House.' As referred to in this chapter's opening vignette, Mildred Fry Bullitt, a slaveowning woman of Kentucky, wrote of an incident in which she accused her enslaved domestic, Lucy, of poisoning her water with bluestone (copper sulphate) in February 1860:

> I tell you of Lucy having prepared me a demi-john of artesian well water for my official use by putting a quantity of bluestone into it. Fortunately I discovered it as soon as I drank one tumbler full which she was careful to bring to me in a dark corner before day light; and as soon as I swallowed it, I made her empty the water out of the demi John into a bucket, and found it deeply coloured. Helen secretly looked at the doctor's jar of bluestone which she had her self-filled full, and stopped tight, and found it considerably emptied, and the cork loose.[529]

Bullitt expelled the contents from her stomach and avoided serious illness and death. She then sold Lucy out of state for the sum of $1,350. Bullitt's correspondence provides an interesting insight into the poisoning practices of enslaved women. Lucy's actions were clearly preconceived as she was careful to

[527] Holden, *Surviving Southampton*, 35.
[528] Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, 36.
[529] *Mildred Bullitt Letter to Children, February 1860,* Bullitt Family Papers: Oxmoor Collection, 1683-2003, 164 cu.ft. Call No: Mss. A B939c 282. Mildred Fry Bullitt (1789-1879), Misc Letters and Papers, Filson Historical Society, Kentucky. (Hereafter cited as FHS).

prepare the poisonous concoction beforehand and serve it to Bullitt 'in a dark corner before daylight' so her enslaver would be unaware of the drink's electric blue colouring from the dye of the bluestone. Furthermore, the 'filled-full doctor's jar', which Lucy had 'considerably emptied', demonstrates Lucy's determination to murder her female enslaver through Bullitt's own medical supplies. Lucy and other enslaved women took advantage of their accessibility to available 'doctor's jars' within the slaveowning home for the purpose of homicide.

Whilst Lucy's personal motivations are omitted in the historical record, it is clear that this enslaved woman held an established neighbourhood-wide reputation for violence or a capability to inflict violence, as Bullitt wrote that others in the local area, 'believed Lucy would do something of the kind.' Furthermore, Bullitt's children had previously urged their mother to sell Lucy, despite Bullitt's best efforts 'to make her good.' This suggests, again, that the Bullitt household had experienced other non-disclosed resistant practices from Lucy. Bullitt's letter is characteristic of women of the planter-class who often attempted to absolve themselves of any wrongdoing or fault. Bullitt omits any information as to how Lucy was treated or why she would resort to attempted murder beyond the conventional excuses of perceived Black inferiority. Although Bullitt pondered whether Lucy's husband and mother in-law (who resided on a neighbouring plantation) 'may have egged her on,' she ultimately dispelled this supposition by declaring Lucy to be 'Satan's own darling.'[530]

Bullit's response to Lucy's attempted murder, in which she was sold privately without judicial state intervention, sheds an interesting light into how enslavers perceived and reacted to enslaved women's violent resistance. According to Kentucky law, enslavers were legally required to report incidents of enslaved people's capital offences which included poisoning. Despite this legal requirement, Bullitt retained independent control of the situation and privately sold Lucy to a buyer in New Orleans. The decision of enslavers not to report enslaved people's capital offences is a matter of debate and conjecture. According to historian Paul Quigley, Southern slaveowners represented a 'paradox of commitment'; although the ideology of slaveholding was upheld and reinforced through the political legal systems of the South, slaveholders deferred to the state in matters of enslaved people's criminal

[530] *Mildred Bullitt Letter to Children, February 1860,* FHS.

activities in fluctuating and varying degrees.[531] Practically speaking, it would have been easier for slaveowners to handle incidents of enslaved people's violence swiftly and privately. Crimes which did not attract outside attention could go unnoticed and enslavers could avoid the potential shame and embarrassment of a court trial which could raise negative opinions regarding their competency as slaveholders. Enslavers may have been less inclined to report acts of enslaved people's violence due to the inconvenience, embarrassment, and expense of state intervention.

Mildred Bullitt clearly perceived Lucy's offence and punishment to be within her own jurisdiction and not the purview of the state. The documented reaction of Mildred Bullitt forces historians to rethink the power and jurisdiction of female members of the slaveholding class who at times, acted independently of state laws and defined their own routes for dealing with resistant offenders, despite the assertion of some historians, including Thomas Morris, that 'capital cases normally went to the public courts.'[532] Bullitt's correspondence demonstrates that capital offences could be managed out of the public eye with some enslavers refusing to defer to the state. Although Bullitt failed to report the enslaved woman's offence to judicial officials, Lucy was punished privately within the 'informal' criminal justice systems of the South, as Bullitt acted according to her own self-interests, shaping the criminal justice system to her own needs and will.[533]

Although the reasons behind Bullitt's decision not to report Lucy's crime to the state authorities remains speculative, her reaction perhaps indicates that bondswomen's violence was a more pervasive and expected phenomenon than previously presumed. If physical incidents occurred frequently, as in the case of Lucy who repeatedly caused trouble for her enslaver, slaveholders clearly dealt with these situations themselves, albeit with exasperation. Female slaveholders may not have perceived these

[531] Quigley, 'Slavery, Democracy and the Problem of Planter Authority', 514.
[532] Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*, 230.
[533] Historians of slavery and the law have stressed the prominence of informal criminal justice systems in the slaveholding South. According to Glen McNair, informal systems of justice operated within the private confines of the slaveholding site and enslavers meted out whatever punishments they saw fit 'with their consciences, the law's prohibition against slave murder, and neighbourhood disapprobation as the only limiting factors.' McNair, *Criminal Injustice*, 7. James Campbell goes as far to state that, 'in the United States legal institutions and the state played a secondary role in regulating the institution's everyday workings.' Campbell, *Crime and Punishment,* 19.

crimes to be rare and exceptional and as such, they handled these situations privately with their own informal systems of "justice." Moreover, the tone and formation of Bullitt's letter further suggests that bondswomen's violence was a non-exceptional occurrence, as Lucy's attempted murder is not the sole topic of the letter. Bullitt informs her children of the incident as a secondary subject after a normative topic of conversation concerning groceries and supplies. While on the subject of Lucy's perpetrated poisoning, Bullitt informs her children of another poisoning incident in which a local enslaved woman attempted to kill her mistress and her mistress's two children with glass which she pounded into their food. Bullitt then shifts the tone of the conversation and continues to write of everyday life in Kentucky. The tone of Bullitt's letter is not of shock or astonishment, but rather that these enslaved women's actions were unexceptional occurrences to unfortunate slaveowners.

Catherine Clinton asserts that slaveholding women's reactions to enslaved people's violence 'remained conservative.'[534] Clinton denotes this conservativeness to Southern pro-slavery attitudes in which slaveholding women perceived and portrayed their slaves as simple, dependent, and easily led astray.[535] This 'psychologically comforting denial' played into paternalistic attitudes which may account for why some slaveholding women, including Mildred Fry Bullitt, chose to sell violent enslaved women privately rather than involve state judicial processes.[536] The "merciful" act of selling enslaved people served to affirm in mistress' minds that they were 'tender-hearted' and benevolent slaveholders. According to Clinton, 'these women functioned by resolving the moral dilemmas of slavery through the displacement of guilt.'[537] The matter-of-fact tone presented within Bullitt's letter corroborates Clinton's argument that female enslavers were conservative in their responses to resistance, however, paternalistic attitudes cannot solely account for why these women chose to blatantly ignore state laws concerning capital offences. It could very much be the case that perpetrations of enslaved women's violence were an accepted part of slaveholding life and as such, slaveholding women dealt with these issues with routine indifference.

[534] Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 219.
[535] Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 219-221.
[536] Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 220.
[537] Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 221.

Other white Southern women succumbed to the poisoning practices of enslaved women who administered lethal doses of commercialised chemicals into the foodways of their enslavers. Jane Porter, a married slaveholding woman of Henry County, Kentucky, died in December 1859 after she inadvertently drank a quantity of strychnine which her enslaved domestic, Jane, had mixed into her water. One witness who was present during Porter's death, testified that Porter repeatedly vomited, contracted her limbs, and engaged in 'deranged behaviour' immediately after she had consumed the "medicine" which Jane had prepared.[538] When a witness inquired into who had produced and administered the medicinal tonic that morning, Jane interposed and answered in a 'loud and trembling voice': '"Yes, I gave it to her."' The witness additionally testified that when she attempted to seek the assistance of a doctor, Jane replied: 'It is of no use, all the doctors in the world can't save her.' Jane Porter had given birth to a healthy child only two days prior to her death on 22nd December, however, four local doctors who examined Porter's corpse concluded that she had irrefutably died of 'foul play.' Post-mortem examinations discovered a 'large portion' of strychnine in Jane Porter's stomach and suspicion immediately befell Jane who was arrested. Under interrogation, Jane confessed that she had murdered Jane Porter 'with two grains [of strychnine] in sugar and water.' Jane was declared guilty of first-degree murder and she was hanged in 1860.

Strychnine, a highly toxic chemical compound, was widely used and stored in Southern households as both vermin control and medicine to counteract a number of ailments and diseases. A local doctor testified to selling the husband of Jane Porter, Henry Porter, a vial of strychnine two years previously in August 1857 which was reportedly similar in shape, colour and branding to the vial of strychnine Jane used to murder Porter. The use of 'two whole grains' demonstrates Jane's determination to kill her female enslaver and the calculated addition of the sugar to disguise the taste of the bitter strychnine is highly indicative of premeditation. Historian Tamika Nunley asserts that poisoning incidents reveal 'the inner workings of a knowledge war' as enslaved women 'tapped into a pharmacopeia filled with various intellectual and incorporeal dimensions.'[539] Jane and other enslaved women deployed their knowledge of poisonous substances and monopolised on their easy access to

[538] *Humphrey Marshall, 1812-1872,* Papers 1827-1921, Mss./A /M368 5,11,20. FHS.
[539] Nunley, *The Demands of Justice*, 53.

resources within the slaveholding household, utilising both medicinal and mundane food items to achieve their violent objectives. The lethal quantity of strychnine discovered in Porter's stomach certainly suggests that enslaved women possessed a basic knowledge of toxins and medicines traditionally reserved for white families.

The silences relating to Jane's perspective within this trial record leaves many unanswered questions regarding her motivations and past traumas. Traditional and non-traditional historical approaches including informed speculation can aid our understanding into the reasons behind Jane's actions from her own perspective and allow historians to uncover 'what is said silently.'[540] Court testimony reveals that Henry Porter repeatedly raped Jane which resulted in the in the birth of multiple children.[541] One jailer overheard Jane lament: 'see what a fix you have got me into Henry. Oh Henry your children, my children.' The birth of multiple children demonstrates that Jane experienced years of sustained abuse and sexual exploitation in the Porter household at the hands of her male enslaver. Studies including *Driven Toward Madness* and '"Mad" Enough to Kill' have examined the ways in which rape and trauma influenced enslaved women's violent reactions to slavery, however, it is interesting that Henry Porter, Jane's rapist, was not the target of Jane's violence.[542] The murder of Mrs. Porter alone speaks volumes about Jane's hostile feelings towards her female slaveholder and the antipathy between the two women.

Enslaved women who were the targets of white men's sexual attacks were often subjected to a double headed abuse, as the sexual infidelities of married men occasionally engendered jealously and violence from married slaveowning women who displaced their anger and abuse onto their enslaved female "property." Harriet Jacobs detailed the animosity of her own mistress who resented her husband's sexual attention towards Jacobs and Solomon Northup wrote extensively of the abuse Patsey

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[540] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London, 2004), 155. For further information on this study's methodological approach, see Chapter One.

[541] Contrary to antebellum laws which did not recognise the rape of enslaved women, Henry and Jane's relationship is classified within this examination as non-consensual and abusive due to issues of consent and the unequal power dynamics present in slavery. The sexual relationship between Jane and Henry Porter is thus classified within this study as serial rape. For more information regarding issues of rape and sexual abuse under slavery, see, for example: Fay Yarbrough, 'Power, Perception, and Interracial Sex: Former Slaves Recall a Multiracial South', Journal of Southern History, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2005), 559-588; Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in the Early America* (Chapel Hill, 2006).

[542] Taylor, *Driven Towards Madness*; King, '"Mad" Enough to Kill'.

suffered under the jealous attention of Mary Epps who punished Patsey through a range of sadistic acts.[543] The plantation mistress Fanny Kemble also acknowledged enslaved women's vulnerability to dual abuse as she wrote: 'Jealousy is not an uncommon quality in the feminine temperament; and just conceive the fate of these unfortunate women between the passions of their masters and mistresses, each alike armed with power to oppress and torture them.'[544] Given that Henry Porter repeatedly raped Jane, it is likely that Jane's female enslaver physically abused her in retaliation for her sexual "offences."

The majority of slaveholding women failed to acknowledge the sexual vulnerability and victimisation of enslaved women, who were instead perceived to be at fault due to nineteenth century racialised stereotypes which labelled Black women as licentious 'Jezebels' who lured and entrapped respectable white men into sexual relationships.[545] Harriet Jacobs exemplified this within her autobiography as she declared: 'The mistress who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage.'[546] Detrimental stereotypes surrounding Black female sexuality precluded enslaved women from obtaining white female sympathy, rendering them vulnerable to the 'jealous passions' of white women's violence which could encompass emotional, psychological and physical abuse.[547] It can therefore be speculated that Jane's enslavement within the Porter household was marked by dual abuse. The serial rape Jane experienced at the hands of her male enslaver no doubt engendered the 'jealous passions' of Mrs. Porter who may have responded with violence of her own. The murder of Mrs. Porter alone, demonstrates that Jane harboured a strong sense of resentment towards her mistress who must have made her life unimaginably difficult.

Crucially, Jane murdered her female enslaver only two days after Mrs. Porter had given birth to a healthy child. The timing of this murder suggests that Jane administered the poisonous drink to her mistress in the attempt to disguise her death as a postpartum complication. The childbed murder of Mrs.

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[543] Jacobs, *Incidents in in the Life*, 32-36; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 122-130.
[544] Catherine Clinton (ed.), *Fanny Kemble's Journals* (Massachusetts, 2000), 158.
[545] For further information on the sexual stereotyping of enslaved women under slavery and the Jezebel image, see, for example: White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 69-97; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, 'African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race', *Signs*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1992), 251-274; Rupe Simms, 'Controlling Images of the Gender Construction of Enslaved African American Women', *Gender and Sexuality*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (2001), 879-897.
[546] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, 30.
[547] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, 31.

Porter disputes previous historical thought that 'shared' experiences of mothering created unifying 'bonds' between enslaved women and their white female enslavers.[548] *Jane a slave vs. Commonwealth of Kentucky* demonstrates that motherhood did not deter enslaved women from deploying acts of violence. Instead, enslaved women utilised white women's childbirth as an opportunity for violent resistance, as they monopolised on their female enslavers' vulnerability to administer poisoned food and drink under the guise of medical care.

Jane's own status as an enslaved mother is an important consideration in understanding the reasons behind her decision to poison her enslaver. Emily West asserts that the 'double-edged sword of motherhood' signified both joy and trauma for enslaved women under slavery.[549] The capitalistic exploitation of enslaved women's reproductive capabilities due to the 1662 Virginian law of *partus sequitur ventrum*, which rendered enslaved children free or enslaved 'according to the condition of the mother', meant enslaved women endured a complex relationship with mothering, as enslavers manipulated their fertility according to their own financial and sexual interests. Nikki Taylor subsequently argues that, 'slavery corrupted everything about motherhood and prevented a full expression of the ideals of womanhood.'[550] Whilst enslaved women navigated the complex terrain of motherhood in varying ways, Jane's status as an enslaved mother, to enslaved children born of rape, no doubt served as an influential factor in her decision to murder her enslaver.

The position of Jane Porter and her newly birthed child differed considerably from the status and condition of Jane and her children who were subjected to the constant threat of abuse, harm, and family separation despite their shared white parentage. The enslaved children of slaveowners did not always experience alleviated conditions under slavery. A formerly enslaved woman who was interviewed as part of the Fisk Narrative Collection in 1929, conveyed how shared parentage did not grant enslaved children or their mothers protection from white abuse: 'Of course, the mixed blood, you

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[548] Kennedy, *Born Southern,* 6.
[549] Emily West, 'The Double-Edged Sword of Motherhood Under American Slavery', May 7th, 2019, [https://blog.oieahc.wm.edu/the-double-edged-sword/] (accessed: 7th March 2022). For further information of enslaved women's mothering under slavery, see, for example: Morgan, *Laboring Women;* West and Shearer, 'Fertility Control'; Cowling (ed.), 'Mothering Slaves'; Turner, 'The Nameless and the Forgotten'; Jones-Rogers, "[S]he Could…Spare One Ample Breast'.
[550] Taylor, *Driven Towards Madness,* 4.

couldn't expect much from them.' The unnamed interviewee further divulged how her male enslaver, Dr. Gale, fathered multiple children, yet these children were still required, 'to work just like we did and they had to call him master too; and the overseer would take them down and whip them just like the others.'[551] White parentage did not always afford a preferential change in status or treatment for enslaved children. Indeed, white parentage occasionally engendered abuse from white slaveowning women who lashed out against those mixed-race children who represented the physical embodiment of their husband's sexual infidelities. One Fisk interviewee remembered how his former mistress pulled out handfuls of his father's 'straight hair' in retaliation for him being the son of his white enslaver.[552] Children who were born of rape sometimes experienced increased abuse and oppression in slavery at the hands of vindictive white women and it is possible Jane's children were on the receiving end of their mistress's wrath and violence.

An enslaved man testified that Jane Porter had been 'bragging about what a fine child she had' and another witness similarly described how Porter continuously 'bragged' about her infant child. It can be speculated that Mrs. Porter's boastful assertions of her 'fine' baby, deliberate or not, were a source of frustration for Jane. Despite their shared parentage, Jane's children enjoyed none of the luxuries white parentage afforded. Separate references of Mrs. Porter's 'bragging' from individual witnesses, both free and enslaved, are an unusual feature of this trial record and their inclusion should neither be overlooked nor downplayed. Witnesses clearly perceived this information to be worthy of consideration and they described Porter's bragging seemingly without prompt or ceremony. Jane's status as an enslaved woman and mother no doubt underscored her act of violence against her female enslaver. Chapter Four demonstrates that rape was a leading cause of women's retaliatory violence against slaveholding men, yet Jane singularly targeted her mistress. Proctor's boasts of her 'fine child' represented a stark reminder for Jane that her enslaved children would always be secondary to the white family.[553] This heart-breaking reality is likely to have influenced Jane's decision to poison her mistress and deny her the pleasure of motherhood.

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[551] Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 2.
[552] Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, 83.
[553] *Humphrey Marshall 1812-1872,* FHS.

Other enslaved women used more creative and unorthodox methods of obtaining lethal substances from within the white home for the express purpose of poisoning white women. In November 1856, Edward, Charles, and Tabitha Gowen petitioned the judicial court of Davidson County, Tennessee, for permission to sell an enslaved woman named Ellen from their late father's estate. The petitioners asserted that Ellen had been 'accused of various crimes, once of an attempt to poison the person to whom she was hired.'[554] George W. McCurry, Ellen's temporary enslaver, reported in his deposition to the county court that, 'it was his wife, who charged that Ellen tried to poison her.' It was detailed within the Gowen's petition that Ellen offered Mrs. McCurry a roasted apple which was discovered to be 'laced with mercury.' Ellen's mistress survived the ordeal and Ellen was sold out of state for the sum of $750 'in consequence for her vicious habits and immoral character.'

George McCurry, who testified on behalf of his wife, gave a detailed account describing how Ellen admitted to inserting the poisonous substance into the core of the apple. Mrs. McCurry discovered that the apple had been poisoned when she divided the apple into slices to share between her children. The singular use of *her* within the petition charge reveals that Mrs. McCurry was Ellen's sole target, as McCurry stated that Ellen had 'tried to poison her.' Ellen confessed that she had 'scraped' and melted the mercury from the back of a looking glass in her mistress's room. Given that enslaved women predominantly deployed violence in response to white initiated abuse, it is likely Ellen experienced violent conditions within the McCurry household which was severe enough to warrant such an extreme response from Ellen who was hired to her enslavers in a temporary capacity.

Ellen's resourcefulness to obtain the mercury 'scraped' from the 'back of a looking glass' demonstrates the extreme, yet imaginative lengths some enslaved women undertook to procure toxic chemicals for the purpose of homicide. The preparation *and* concealment of the melted mercury within the apple, which was roasted to disguise the insertion of the poison, demonstrates that Ellen's actions were highly premeditated and calculated. When questioned privately, Ellen supposedly confessed to George McCurry that she had poisoned the apple on behalf of another enslaved woman who the

[554] *Race and Slavery Petitions Project*, Race, Slavery, and Free Blacks, Series II: Petitions to Southern County Courts, Part E: Arkansas (1824-1867), Missouri (1806-1860), Tennessee (1791-1867). Petition 21485637, 1st November 1856, Davidson County, Tennessee.

McCurry's owned, named Mary. Whether Ellen acted on the behalf of another enslaved woman is a matter of conjecture, and she may simply have informed on Mary to absolve herself from full culpability and responsibility. The fate of the other bondswoman, Mary, is unknown, and details of her involvement in the plot are sparse within the petition record. Ellen, however, is framed as the main protagonist and facilitator of the attempted poisoning.

Details of Ellen's other 'crimes' prior to the poisoning, as outlined in the Gowen's petition, are absent from the record. These offences were severe enough though, alongside her attempted poisoning, to create such an adverse reputation that Edward Gowen complained that it was 'impossible to hire her to others.' The Gowens further related in their petition: 'that the whole neighbourhood has become excited and apprehensive and demand that she be immediately sold or sent out of the county and some even threaten violence to her.' Ellen's expulsion from the neighbourhood signifies that her other 'various crimes' were severe enough to warrant an extreme reaction from the local white community who were reluctant to possess ownership of her. The court statement, 'some even threaten violence towards her' demonstrates the magnitude of Ellen's actions which threatened to undermine and expose the volatility of slavery. This speaks to the ferocity of Ellen's resistance which sparked fear in the white residents of Davidson who were frightened of her violent capabilities and apprehensive of future retaliation.

The terror and unease of the local white populace is exemplified in George McCurry's closing declaration: 'I never wish to see her again, and this seems to be the feelings of my neighbours.'[555] This court petition illuminates how enslaved women's individual actions were severe enough to generate significant unrest in local Southern communities. The legal intervention of Southern courts and the forced removal of violent enslaved women to neighbouring states, is a testament to enslaved women's methods of resistance which were believed to endanger whites of all stations and class, as both enslavers and residents pleaded to court judges for their removal. This supports Tamika Nunley's assertion that, 'acts of violent resistance did not have to occur in overwhelming numbers to disrupt life in Southern towns.'[556] The case irrefutably demonstrates that the resistive actions of individual enslaved women

[555] *Race and Slavery Petitions Project*, Petition 21485637, 1st November 1856, Davidson County, Tennessee.
[556] Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned', 24.

were powerful enough to challenge the institution of slavery at a localised level to inspire real fear amongst white men and women of all ranks.[557] The targeting of white women within slaveholding families further solidifies the notion that enslaved women's violence was deeply connected to their relationships with their female enslavers. Such connections, which were principally forged through abuse, labour demands, exploitation, and disdain, occasionally resulted in death as enslaved women plotted their revenge through the use of their enslavers' own medicines, chemicals and drugs. Their proximity to slaveholding women within the Southern home worked to their advantage and it ironically provided bondswomen with the means to facilitate acts of deadly violence. Previous historiographical studies have stressed the use of plants, herbs, and roots as instruments to poison enslavers, however, the cases presented here demonstrate that manufactured household products were also utilised as prime poisons.

Conclusion

A lifecycle of violence existed on slaveholding sites. Enslaved girls and women of all ages experienced slaveowning women's abuse in a variety of different settings which they responded to with violence of their own. Enslaved girls and women alike, countered their mistresses' use of force demonstrating that a degree of violent agency existed at all ages and on all levels of the plantation enterprise. This sheds new light into prior preconceptions surrounding the resistance strategies of young children and adolescents on slaveholding sites. Enslaved girls were able to resist female enslavers and they did so through extremely creative methods including direct physical contact or through indirectly manipulating the violence of others. Enslaved girls' violence also transgressed beyond the remit of self-protection, as they dually used physical force as a means of enacting revenge against white adult women who abused, mistreated, and exploited them on a perpetual basis. Revenge and retribution are central characteristics of enslaved female perpetrated violence amongst girls and women, as demonstrated in the WPA testimonies of the formerly enslaved who framed their acts of violent resistance within the

[557] Despite common knowledge of the attempted poisoning and Ellen's notoriety within the neighbourhood, her act of attempted murder did not receive state judicial intervention. Ascertaining why this capital offence was not reported to the authorities is difficult to understand and it demonstrates that enslaved women's violence was subject to a variation of outcomes.

context of retribution, rather than self-defence. This broadens understandings of childhood resistance under slavery to include physical resistance which occurred within *and* beyond the remit of self-protection.

Black female violence against slaveholding women frequently occurred in response to the brutal conditions of their enslavement. Whippings and other acts of corporal violence were often catalysts for enslaved women's resistive action, as strained relations between white and Black women erupted into open confrontations both within and beyond the Southern home for the slightest of provocations. Interference from a female enslaver was enough to spark open confrontations which led to assault and even murder. Examples of enslaved women's violence within this chapter refutes previous historical assumptions that physical confrontations between Black and white women were unlikely to occur. This chapter has demonstrated that enslaved women utilised a variety of violent methods against female enslavers as they struggled for autonomy, control and protection within the volatile world of the slaveholding site and the plantation household.

Enslaved women also engaged in various forms of assault against female enslavers to protest domestic interreference and to expose the domestic illusion of the well-ordered slaveholding household. Whilst acts of corporal discipline including beatings and whippings often sparked enslaved women's acts of violence against their mistresses, primary records demonstrate that women's violence also stemmed from deeper causes as forms of longstanding retaliation against the person who abused them and also the system which allowed and condoned such abuse to occur. Violence did not always engender violence, as enslaved women reacted to mundane instances of female slaveholder intrusion with physical force. Once more, this expands conceptualisations of enslaved women's physical resistance to include acts of violence which occurred beyond the remit of provoked defence during instances of white aggression. Enslaved women also murdered slaveowning women with weapons ranging from household items to permanent fixtures within the white home. Indeed, the use of permanent household settings including open fireplaces suggests that enslaved women were extremely resourceful in moments of deadly resistance. The death of female enslavers through the weaponisation of the white

home and its objects of ornamentation, wealth, and labour represents an ironic end to slaveowning women who were 'co-conspirators' in the oppression of enslaved people.[558]

The use of manufactured medicines and chemicals within the white Southern home also demonstrates how enslaved women infiltrated geographies of domestic containment to transform the genteel domestic sphere of the 'Big House' into one of 'evasion and resistance', and even death through the poisoning of white foodways.[559] Enslaved women's poisoning of white female enslavers varied drastically from the violence of enslaved women who predominantly targeted overseeing men in open agricultural settings. Enslaved women choose items which were accessible and close to hand, utilising the intimacy of the domestic sphere and its accumulation of objects and substances. Building upon the works of Glmyph and Jones-Rogers, this study has demonstrated the violent nature of white female mastery which operated via methods of control, violence, and fear. Female enslavers' methods of subjugation, however, were met with violent reprisal from enslaved women and girls, who were undeterred against using physical forms of resistance against female members of the 'master class.'

[558] Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, 205.
[559] Holden, *Surviving Southampton,* 31.

Chapter Four
'Aunt Sallie Kilt Marse Jim': Enslaved Women's Violence Against Slaveholding Men

In the antebellum period an enslaved woman named Sallie murdered her male enslaver in Arkansas with a fire poker which she 'cracked' over her enslaver's head, fracturing his skull. His corpse was discovered with a substantial head wound and the enslaved community immortalised the incident within the folk song: '"If yo don' bleave Aunt Sallie kilt Marse Jim de blood is on huh under dress."'[560] This WPA account epitomises one of enslaved women's most radical forms of resistance: deadly violence against a male member of the slaveholding elite. Sallie was not alone in her act of violence against a male enslaver. A plethora of records document enslaved women's varied and imaginative methods of violence against slaveholding men who were at the very apex of the South's social structure. Enslaved women poisoned, assaulted, strangled, used weapons, and burnt down buildings to main and murder male enslavers. Through a comprehensive analysis of primary evidence including trial records, petitions, executive papers, WPA narratives, and slaveholder correspondences, this chapter refutes the masculinisation of violence and illuminates the diverse modes of enslaved women's physical resistance, discussing the complex motives behind their criminal actions. In doing so, this chapter challenges historic assumptions relating to enslaved women's resistance against the practice of slaveholding in the antebellum South to widen notions of gender and violent opposition.

Firstly, this chapter examines how enslaved women used incendiary violence to deliberately destroy the property of enslavers, underlining the political and personal dimensions of their violent resistance. This is followed with an analysis of women's crimes against the personhood of enslavers, discussing enslaved women's threats of violence, real and perceived, against slaveholding men which is followed by an analysis of enslaved women's physical assaults against junior and senior male members of the slaveholding elite in response to corporal abuse and sexual violence. The theoretical concept of 'intergenerational violence' is explored in relation to enslaved women's violence against the

[560] Charity Morris, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 5, 1.

sons of enslavers. Lastly, this chapter discusses the varied ways in which enslaved women murdered male enslavers ranging from poisoning to the weaponisation of commonplace objects. Bondswomen also killed male enslavers in individual and collective efforts of violence through the formation of collaborative networks of resistance, demonstrating the shared nature of violence between bondspeople against their principal enslavers and neighbouring slaveholding men. Through an interrogation of enslaved women's violence through a framework of severity from property to person, this chapter demonstrates the precarity of slaveholding and the unpredictability of Southern slaveholding sites which continually existed on the edge of violence.

Governor George M. Troup expressed to the Georgia legislature in 1824 that 'the negro has never yet found a sincere friend but his master'.[561] Troup's proslavery conviction that Black people benefited from the institution of slavery due to enslavers' protection was echoed by other leading politicians. Governor George McDuffe of South Carolina, for example, similarly declared that slavery, 'is strictly patriarchal, and produces those mutual feelings of kindness which result from a constant interchange of good offices.'[562] Southerners and slaveholding men lulled themselves into a false sense of security through their deception that slavery was a benign system built on paternal love and friendship rather than abuse, cruelty, and exploitation. Although historical works on Southern male enslavers have exposed the rampant myths and abuses of the 'Peculiar Institution', certain ideas regarding slaveholder control have pervaded into modern scholarship, whilst other historical themes pertaining to enslaved people's physical resistance remain underdeveloped and neglected.

The works of Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese centre discussions of slavery on the male members of the slaveholding elite promoting studies on paternalism and hegemony within the slaveholding South. *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, *The Mind of the Master Class* and *Fatal Self Deception* promote the unwavering control of male enslavers in contrast to the projected vulnerability of the enslaved.[563] Slaveholding men and enslaved people existed, according to the Genoveses, in a state of 'mutual

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[561] Edward Jenkins Harden, *The Life of George M. Troup* (Savannah, 1859), 242.
[562] Scott Hammond, Kevin Hardwick and Howard Lubert (eds)., *The American Debate over Slavery, 1760-1865: An Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis, 2016), 141.
[563] Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll;* Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge, 2005); Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fatal Self Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* (Cambridge, 2011).

dependency and manipulation' based on reciprocal rights, privileges, and responsibilities within the complex hegemonic regime of the South.[564] Genovese stipulated that 'overt resistance…did not lay bare the essence of the slave experience', as compared to enslaved populations in South America, bondspeople in the US 'had always faced hopeless odds.'[565] Although Genovese proposed a variety of ways in which enslaved people expressed their discontent, he ultimately contended that enslaved people faced 'overwhelming power' which thus 'discouraged frontal attack'.[566] Craig Thompson Friend in his exploration of white Southern masculinity in the antebellum South focused on violence inherent to the practice of mastery and Bertram Wyatt-Brown extolled the all-imposing hegemony of the master class, asserting that violence on Southern slaveholding sites was largely one-sided and non-interchangeable 'with whites the first to attack.'[567] Wyatt-Brown declared that enslaved people's resistance 'ordinarily took on a much more personal and subtly orchestrated form, a mingling of resistance, and reluctant, self-protective accommodation that was suited to survival'.[568]

David Doddington's study on the advanced age of male enslavers examines the intersection of patriarchal mastery and enslaved people's resistance. Doddington asserts that the 'process of ageing destabilised mastery' which aided and gave impetus to enslaved people's resistance.[569] Furthermore, Doddington explores a variety of enslaved people's temporary and permanent resistance practices against aged male enslavers on antebellum slaveholding sites. Examples of enslaved women's violent resistance against slaveholding men are included within Doddington's analysis. The inclusion of enslaved people's resistance against male enslavers signals a new trend of historical analysis which

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564 Genovese and Fox-Genovese, *Fatal Self Deception*, 67.
565 Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 606; 611.
566 Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 611.
567 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behaviour in the Old South* (Oxford, 1983), 413. For further works on white Southern masculinity from authors Craig Thompson Friend and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, see: Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover (eds)., *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South* (Athens, 2004); Craig Thompson Friend, 'From Southern Manhood to Southern Masculinities: An Introduction', in Craig Thompson Friend (ed.), *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South Since Reconstruction* (Athens, 2009), vii-xxvi; Craig Thompson Friend, 'Sex, Self, and the Performance of Patriarchal Manhood in the Old South' in L. Diane Barnes, Brian Schoen, and Frank Towers (eds.), *The Old South's Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress* (New York, 2011), 246-265; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (Oxford, 1986); Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture.*
568 Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 404.
569 Doddington, 'Old Age', 112.

debates past historical assumptions surrounding the immovable mastery of slaveholding men and the presumed incapacity of enslaved people to openly resist male members of the 'master class.'

Although scholars of antebellum slavery have contributed a rich body of work on male enslavers and their interactions with enslaved people, the study of slaveholding men remains largely undeveloped since the foundational works of Genovese, Thompson, and Brown with the exception of Doddington's 2022 study.[570]Although the study of white men formed the foundation of early slavery studies, tools of gender analysis, as used in modern discussions of female enslavers, remain largely un-used in the examination of the prism of the male gender. This lack of contemporary historical development renders the study of white male mastery and enslaved women's resistance against planter class men a neglected area of historical enquiry. Through an intersectional approach, this chapter explores slaveholding men and their relationship with enslaved women in greater depth, highlighting the complexity of white male mastery through the acknowledgement of planter class men as racialised, gendered, class-bound and age influenced figures. Through the specific analysis of enslaved women's resistance against white male mastery, this chapter both challenges and expands traditional conceptualisations of totalitarian white hegemony, alongside the projected image of the static and immovable male slaveholder in contrast to the passive vulnerability of enslaved women.

Incendiary Resistance

Enslaved women targeted male enslavers' wealth, assets, and property through incendiary resistance. Violence against property through arson possessed a number of advantages. For one, the destruction of property could engender serious economic consequences for male enslavers. Financial loss through the destruction of the 'big house' or agricultural buildings such as cotton gins, corn cribs, carriage houses, barns and stables could be economically damaging to slaveholding men. The depletion of wealth also had the potential to reduce male enslavers' social and economic standing within the social hierarchy of the South. Historian Glen McNair stipulates that enslaved women disproportionally represented arson cases across Georgia and Virginia, attributing this higher percentage to the premise that 'arson is a crime

[570] Doddington, 'Old Age'.

of stealth that does not require weapons or physical strength.'[571] The assumption that enslaved women engaged in this crime because they lacked the strength to forcefully confront their enslavers risks minimising incendiary activity as a "weapon of the weak." Although it is true that arson enabled bondswomen to covertly resist their enslavers, this study forcibly evidences the ability of enslaved women to directly confront their enslavers through a plethora of violent ways. Arson should not be categorised as a female form of resistance due to the assumption that reduced physical strength impedes the ability to be violent. This correlates with the gendering of poisoning as a distinct form of women's violence due the in-direct nature of the crime compared to bodily violence. Incendiary resistance was a crime of opportunity and enslaved domestic women strategically chose their targets and the opportune moment to strike in their attacks against their principal and temporary enslavers, as well as neighboring white men in their quest to resist and undermine the institution of slavery. Enslaved women targeted agricultural buildings and the principal residence of enslavers - the 'big house' - the powerhouse of individual slaveholding sites.

In their rejection of judicial courts of law enslavers occasionally petitioned chancery and equity courts for permission to sell enslaved women indentured within wills, trusts and estates, whom they suspected of having committed arson against their property.[572] Daniel George of Kent County, Delaware, sought permission to sell Maria who reportedly set fire to his house at 11 o'clock in the evening after the family had 'retired to bed' in June, 1825. George declared he was 'at a loss to conceive what motive induced the commission of this crime by which the lives of a whole family were eminently endangered.' Maria's 'deformity of heart', alongside her attempt of arson, resulted in George's petition to export and sell Maria 'to any persons' out of state. Enslaved women's incendiary activity against enslavers' homes sent shockwaves throughout local white communities who reacted with genuine fear and anxiety. Their insecurities to enslaved women's resistance are evidenced in their supporting petitions to local judges,

[571] McNair, 'Slave Women', 140-141.
[572] Male enslavers petitioned chancery and equity courts rather than criminal courts of law for a variety of reasons. Firstly, enslavers may have wished to avoid gossip and scrutiny, as well as the costs of a judicial criminal trial. Secondly, equity courts allowed enslavers to privately sell enslaved women indentured within wills and trusts away from prying eyes enabling slaveholders to recuperate costs. Enslavers were not always eligible for compensation following the transportation or execution of an enslaved person convicted of a criminal offence. The state of Missouri, for example, did not provide compensation to enslavers. These petitions demonstrate the many avenues available to enslavers outside of the criminal justice system.

as communities urged state authorities to grant requests of sale and transportation. Forty-three residents of Kent County submitted an additional petition to the court urging the judge to approve George's request to sell Maria out of state 'because they are apprehensive of further consequences which may result from the suffering said Maria to reside in said county any longer.'[573]

The court permitted the request and Maria was sold. Whilst incendiary activity engendered moral panic amongst local white communities who feared their homes would be targeted or caught in the blaze, arson, unlike poisoning, was often easy to detect and the evidence was often indisputable. Although the residents of Kent County signed their supporting petition in a state of paranoia, the panic of the local community was nevertheless a direct response to Maria's arsonist activity. The submission of two petitions to the Kent equity court, one which included forty-three signatories, illuminates the magnitude of enslaved woman's incendiary resistance which disrupted local power dynamics in private and public spaces throughout the South. Whilst enslaved women's physical resistance operated as a form of protest against the conditions of their enslavement and labour, arsonist activity also served as an ideological attack against the institution of slavery more broadly in enslaved women's targeting of enslavers' principal residences and status symbols. These petitions demonstrate that enslaved women's resistance produced fear amongst slaveholding men and incited terror, anxiety, and unease amongst local white communities. The citizens of Kent were acutely aware of the ideological implications of Maria's arsonist behaviour, hence their eagerness to secure her total expulsion from the state of Delaware.

Another enslaved woman named Maria set fire to her enslaver's home in Kent County, Delaware in 1827. Lewis Prettyman sought the court's permission to sell Maria, claiming she possessed a history of resistant behaviour which included running away, poisoning, and arson. Prettyman alleged that Maria set fire to a room in his home after the family 'had retired to bed' in 1826.[574] The fire was extinguished after Prettyman discovered smoke 'coming into the room in which he lay.' Maria's enslaver stressed to the court that 'had he discovered it five minutes later' the fire 'would have been

[573] Race and Slavery Petitions Project. Accession #20382504, Series II, County Court Petitions. Kent County, Delaware (1825).
[574] Race and Slavery Petitions Project, Accession #20382701, Series II, County Court Petitions. Kent County, Delaware (1827).

impossible for him to extinguish.' Maria acknowledged that she had been in the same room prior to the fire with a lit candle, yet she gave no reason as to why she was there so late in the evening. Prettyman was thus left with 'no doubt the act was done intentionally by Maria to consume his house' due to the suspicious circumstances of her location and her 'general bad character.' Following the fire Maria was forced to sleep in the same room as her enslavers, yet this failed to hinder Maria's arsonist activity, as Prettyman suspected another attempt was made to set fire to his home. Enslaved women chose their moments to commit arson strategically, typically choosing the evening after the slaveholding family had retired to bed to minimise detection and discovery. It should also be considered whether Maria perpetrated the act of arson with the intention of killing Prettyman and his family. The presence of Prettyman and his family inside the burning home certainly suggests that Maria intended to commit both arson and homicide.

It was reported to the equity court that Maria's former owner, Samuel Patterson, later alleged to Prettyman that Maria had previously attempted to poison him. Thus, Prettyman informed the equity court he would 'not have purchased her' in 1823 'if he had known her true character.' Prettyman attested he was 'afraid to have [Maria] about his house' and he described his desperate attempts to sell Maria in the county, 'but could not do it.' He also informed the court that 'since the night of setting fire' Maria had run away three times 'and twice in the last three weeks.' Exasperated with Maria's repeated acts of resistance, Prettyman had Maria temporarily incarcerated at the local jail whilst the petition was lodged to the court. Local residents also attested to Maria's 'dangerous' capabilities, with one community member describing Maria as 'dangerous in a family'.[575] The court subsequently granted Prettyman permission to sell Maria out of state. The reluctance of other enslavers to purchase Maria throughout the county of Kent undercuts the limiting confines of hegemonic masculinity and the normative myth of white male confidence. In the case of Maria, the impression of established unwavering masculine confidence was broken. Fear and anxiety accompanied enslaved women's incendiary resistance with county citizens reluctant to procure those enslaved women who represented a threat to their financial

[575] Race and Slavery Petitions Project, Accession #20382701 (1827).

riches and personal safety. This contrasts widely with contemporary and historical projections of enslaved women's non-violent passivity and white masculine superiority.

Other enslaved women successfully destroyed enslavers' agricultural dwellings engendering financial instability and loss. Lee Guidon, a WPA respondent of Arkansas, reminisced how an elderly enslaved woman set afire her owner's barn which resulted in the loss of thirteen horses and mules.[576] In August 1819, Andrew K. Russell of Newcastle County, Delaware, petitioned the local court for permission to 'sell, export, or carry out of state' Mary whom he suspected of having committed the crime of arson. Russell stated that his barn, stable, carriage house, and outbuildings were 'set on fire and consumed to ashes' 'together with all of his hay, grain, and a very valuable horse and hogs.' Russell stressed that the lives of his family would be endangered if his petition was denied and he successfully urged the court to export Mary, whom he referred to as 'the evil', from the state of Delaware. Male petitioners stressed the dangerousness of enslaved women, emphasising their acute fear and anxieties. Their petitions to county courts further underscores enslavers' desperation to be removed of resistant bondswomen at any cost. The burning of Russell's stable, carriage house, barn, and other outbuildings, alongside the loss of his agricultural produce, including the 'valuable' hogs and horses, would have been financially devastating. The unflinching finality of Mary's actions is demonstrated in Russell's statement that his property and earnings were *'consumed to ashes'* [emphasis added].[577]

According to historians Michael Hindus and Eugene Genovese, arson was a crime 'of terror' and one of the 'most feared by whites' which enslavers dreaded almost constantly.[578] Paranoia surrounding arson led to many enslavers implementing certain restrictions regarding their enslaved property's access to flammable items including candles and matches. Despite these restrictions, enslaved women were resourceful in their efforts to obtain flammable substances for the purpose of arson. In 1862, for example, Martha, an enslaved woman in Saline County, 'feloniously set on fire and burnt' the barn of her owner, Aaron D. Lawton. Martha labored in the home of her enslaver as a cook and it was reported that she procured the fire from the cooking stove in the kitchen. Martha's enslaver

[576] Lee Guidon, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 3, 3.
[577] Race and Slavery Petitions Project, Accession #20381902, Series II, County Court Petitions. Newcastle County, Delaware (1819).
[578] Hindus, 'Black Justice Under White Law', 596; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 629.

emphasised that the kitchen stove was the 'one fire in the house' and he stressed 'servants are not allowed to have matches.'[579] Enslaved women who laboured as cooks and domestics were experienced in their handling of kitchen fires, with enslaved women forced to cook multiple meals a day and 'bound to the fire…twenty-four hours a day.'[580] Enslaved women therefore created ingenious ways of procuring or producing fire for arsonist activity which they obtained from lit fires and stoves within the kitchens of their enslavers.

In the town of Palmyra, Marion County, Missouri, Ellen set fire to the property of William B. Phillips whilst she was hired to a local resident named George Hefsen. Between nine and ten o'clock in the evening of the 28th February, 1850, Ellen, the fourteen year old property of Edward Towler, 'willfully set on fire' Phillip's stable, crib and buggy house destroying $340 worth of produce and property.[581] Ellen obtained the fire from Hefsen's cooking stove which she then transported to Phillip's stable 'only six feet away' under the guise of fetching wood from her enslaver's wood stock, which Ellen 'was regularly in the habit of going out after wood every night.' At the time of the fire, Marion County experienced a severe lack of rainfall with local residents describing the month of February as 'the dry time.' Inundated with flammable materials and constructed from wood, Phillip's stable was 'entirely consumed and destroyed'. Ellen chose her moment and target strategically, using the neighbour's stable as a tinderbox to engulf the property into flames. After her arrest Ellen stated her reasons for starting the fire:

> she heard them say it was such a windy night it would burn the whole town up and she wanted to burn the house of Mr. Hefser and family up, she did not want to live there, she wanted to go home.

Ellen's heart-breaking confession renders an image of a vulnerable, young enslaved woman who had reached extreme levels of desperation to escape her temporary enslaver, George Hefsen. Ellen had been

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579 Although this record occurs beyond the time limits of this study (1808-1861) it nevertheless highlights both the ingenuity of enslaved women and the paranoia of enslavers who desperately attempted to limit their enslaved property's access to flammable substances. *State of Missouri vs. Martha, a Slave* (1862), Circuit Court Case Files, Box 0021, Folder 0096, Misc c55403, MSA.

580 Deetz, *Bound to the Fire*, 15.

581 *William B. Phillips vs. Edward Towler* (1856), Supreme Court Case Files, Box 371, Folder 02, MSA.

hired to Hefsen for five years and the abuse she suffered is evident within Hefsen's testimony regarding his discovery of the fire:

> The coloured girl Ellen was at that time laying on her bed on the floor, while I was putting on my clothes, I kicked her with my foot on the head to wake her up and told her to go over immediately and tell Mr. Phillips that his stable was on fire, she accordingly started out the door.

Before her arrest, Towler re-took possession of Ellen and it was reported that Towler asserted that she 'should never go to Palmyra again.' Although Ellen's sentencing records are absent from the trial document, she did ultimately achieve her aim of escaping her temporary enslaver George Hefsen as she returned to the residence of Edward Towler. Although Ellen was sold to a local slavetrader for $325 before her eventual arrest, for Ellen, arson was an effective means to escape the control and abuse of her temporary enslaver. Clearly, Ellen feared her enslavers and loathed the local inhabitants of Palmyra. Her pitiful confession that she 'did not want to live there' further supports the argument that Ellen laboured in an abusive environment for a volatile enslaver. From Ellen's perspective, Phillip's stable was collateral damage and arson a risk worth taking to escape Hefsen's control.

During the trial a fierce debate ensued as to who legally controlled Ellen and who was liable to pay for the damage sustained through the burning of Phillip's property. Ellen had been hired to the Hefsen's for five years and Towler argued that Ellen was neither in his possession nor under his control and as such, he was not her 'owner or master.' Towler insisted that Hefsen was Ellen's legal owner during the time of the fire as she was under his 'exclusive control.'[582] This reached the Supreme Court which reversed and remanded the decision of the lower court which ordered Towler to pay Phillip's compensation. A similar debate occurred in 1838 when Eliza, an enslaved woman from Marion, Missouri, destroyed the barn of her hired "master", Patrick Woods. Eliza was convicted of arson and was ordered to be sent out of the state for twenty years after receiving 'thirty-nine stripes upon her bare back.'[583] A dispute ensued over who was legally responsible for Eliza and who was liable to pay the $500 in damages, as Samuel Reed, Eliza's permanent enslaver, argued that Eliza had been contracted

[582] *William B. Phillips vs. Edward Towler* (1856), MSA.
[583] *State of Missouri vs. Eliza a Slave* (1838), Supreme Court Case Files, Box 124, Folder 10, MSA.

to Woods for one year. Thus, he argued that Eliza was 'in the possession and under the control' of Woods. However, the court affirmed that Eliza's principal enslaver, Reed, was required to pay the damages sustained by the fire as the judge decreed: 'the owner, and not the temporary master of a slave convicted…is the proper person to pay the costs of conviction.' The court further stipulated: 'The words "owner or master" are synonymous and mean the owner and not the temporary master.'[584] Although the pendulum of justice swung widely for male enslavers regarding issues of liability, for enslaved women, prosecution in judicial courts of law was swift and brutal, typically resulting in transportation or execution.

Violence Against the Personhood of Enslavers

Enslaved women's violent resistance was not confined to the targeting of property; male enslavers themselves were also vulnerable to bondswomen's violence which manifested in a variety of modes and behaviours including assault and murder. The WPA narratives evidence enslaved women's ability to evade abuse and alter the behaviours of slaveholding men through threats of violence alone. A menacing look, a reputation for confrontation, or a vocal threat of violence were sufficient in manipulating the conventions of white male mastery on slaveholding sites throughout the South. Indeed, WPA respondents vocalised the power of threats, whether real or perceived, which possessed the ability to create divergences in male enslavers' private behaviours within the confines of the slaveholding site. The WPA informant, Susan Snow, for example, described the violent character of her mother, Venus, who was reportedly so 'wild an' mean . . . Dey couln' whup her widout tyin' her up firs'.' Snow recalled how Venus's reputation for violence afforded her mother a degree of protection as she remembered: 'Sometimes my master would wait 'till de nex' day to get somebody to tie her up, den he'd forgit to whup 'er.' Snow concluded her recollection with the powerful statement: 'dey was scared of 'er.'[585]

It is unlikely that Snow's enslaver would simply 'forgit to whup' Venus. The reluctance of Snow's former enslaver to punish Venus without external assistance speaks to his fear of Venus and her reputation for violent activity. One widely held theory of risk perception is 'the knowledge theory'; the

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[584] *Samuel Reed vs. Howard Circuit Court* (1839), Supreme Court Case Files, Box 124, Folder 10, MSA.
[585] Susan Snow, FWP, Mississippi Narratives, Vol. 9, 2.

notion that people perceive 'something to be dangerous because they know them to be dangerous.'[586] Clearly, perceptions of threat, whether accurate or not, were enough to deter some enslavers from instigating or continuing acts of corporal abuse.[587] Snow's enslaver perceived Venus to be a credible source of danger due to her continuous 'wild an' mean' behaviour, resulting in the abandonment of corporal acts of discipline. Snow's boastful assertion that the white men on the slaveholding site were frightened of her mother serves to demonstrate the sizeable degree of fear these men held for Venus due to her established history of violence which enabled Snow's mother to escape abuse which in turn, altered the fear and confidence of her enslaver. Whilst WPA respondents may have wished to convey female family members as powerful and brave to their interviewer, the valorisation of these women does not undermine the pervasiveness of fear amongst the planter elite who clearly regarded certain members of their enslaved female 'property' with trepidation, dread and unease, as evidenced in the deferring or abandonment of physical punishments.

An awareness and knowledge of enslaved women's capacity for violence created divergences in male enslavers' private displays of mastery, as some enslavers deferred the act of whipping to others, whilst others abandoned punishments all together. For example, Eliza Overton recalled how her former enslaver 'war afraid of his slaves an' had someone else te do de whippin'' and Rachel Goings described how her former enslaver feared her mother, Cynthy, to such an extent that he actively avoided all interactions with her.[588] Cynthy was reportedly 'always mad and had a mean look in her eyes' and consequently, 'de white folks let her alone.' Goings recalled that on one occasion, 'Masta lookin' like he had sumthin' to tell mammy but was skeered to' because 'she had her mad up that day.'[589] Enslaved women did not have to instigate real acts of violence or even verbally threaten slaveholding men to evade abuse. The 'mean look' in Cynthy's eyes, alongside her 'mad' demeanour rendered her enslaver incapable of even verbally chastising her. Apprehension and anxiety surrounding matters of corporal

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586 Aaron Wildavsky; Karl Dake, 'Theories of Risk Perception: Who Fears What and Why?', *Daedalus*, Vol. 119, No. 4 (1990), 41-60, 42.

587 Perceived threat is defined as 'an individual's cognitive assessment of the likelihood a danger will affect them and how bad it will be if it does.' *Sage Knowledge* [https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/encyclopedia-of-health-communication/n412.xml] [accessed: 25th February 2020].

588 Eliza Overton, FWP, Missouri Narratives, Vol. 10, 1.

589 Rachel Goings, FWP, Missouri Narratives, Vol. 10, 1-3.

punishment suggests that enslavers experienced and expected resistant behaviour from enslaved women. Past threatening events clearly elevated the perceived risk of facilitating acts of discipline, undercutting slaveholding men's desire to personally oversee or carry out acts of abuse. Enslaved women were a credible threat to slaveholding men, hence why some, including Cynthy's enslaver, abstained from any, if not all interactions with certain enslaved women who they deemed to be a risk to their personal safety.

Slaveholding men's implementation of protective behaviours to minimise personal risk against certain enslaved women who lived and laboured around them highlights the precarity of white masculine dominance on Southern slaveholding sites, as male enslavers shaped their private behaviours and actions according to the resistant activities of enslaved women. Enslavers were expected and encouraged to display a public front of unfaltering confidence in their domination of enslaved people. In contrast, the enslaved were presumed to live in abject fear of violent punishment and they were expected to display absolute deference to those who legally subjugated them. However, the enactment of protective behaviours on private slaveholding sites highlights how precarious certain enslavers perceived their own mastery to be at times during real or perceived threats of danger.[590] Descriptions of white masculine fear and private behavioural shortcomings, as conveyed in WPA evidence, contrasts strongly against the traditional image of the resolute and uncompromising male enslaver projected within past scholarly materials. Descriptions of fearful slaveholding men speaks to the agency of bondswomen who were able to actively contest and manipulate white male authority, order, and control through real and perceived threats of violence.

Verbalised threats also accompanied 'mean looks' and 'wild' behaviours, as enslaved women verbally threatened slaveholding men with acts of violence in order to protect themselves and others from physical abuse and harm.[591] Verbal confrontations between enslaved people and slaveholding men has received minimal attention in historiographies of slavery. Jeff Forret explored oral confrontations as a portent to violence within enslaved communities, yet Forret exclusively frames threatening

[590] For further information on the public performative style of enslavers, specifically in antebellum South Carolina, see, for example: Liana Valerio, 'Scripts of Confidence and Supplication: Fear as the Personal and Political Among the Elite Male Slave-owners of South Carolina and Cuba, 1820-1850' (University of Warwick, 2020).
[591] Rachel Goings, Missouri Narratives, 3. Susan Snow, Mississippi Narratives, 2.

language as an expression of enslaved masculinity: 'For enslaved men, it marked the proper medium for asserting masculinity, whether through threats, boasts, or insults.'[592] Threats of physical harm, writes Forret, enhanced the masculinity of enslaved men as 'the boasting of male slaves often featured direct references to enslaved manhood, toughness, and readiness to take on challenges physically.'[593] The testimonies of the formerly enslaved, however, evidence enslaved women's deployment of threatening language as a mechanism of pre-emptive violence against male enslavers.

The WPA respondent, Mamie Thompson, recalled how her mother, Mattie Thompson, 'was put on the block' for her repeated use of violence which included a verbal confrontation with her enslaver 'Master Redman.' The incident began after Thompson's mother physically defended herself from the sexual advances of an overseer who 'was mad cause he couldn't overpower her.' To escape the overseer Mattie Thompson ran to the home of her enslaver who upon discovering her resistance, 'got her in the kitchen to whoop her with a cow hide.' Thompson, however, 'got a stick' and 'told him she would kill him'. Although Thompson escaped the violence of her overseer and enslaver, verbal assaults were not without risk. Following the incident Redman attempted to sell Thompson to a local trader, yet Thompson was spared the anguish of sale due to the intercession of Redman's wife who prevented her removal from the slaveholding site. Although Thompson was perilously close to being sold away from her family, her daughter's testimony highlights how acts of verbal resistance could produce advantages for enslaved women in certain circumstances, as she recalled that following the incident her mother became a domestic to 'Old Mistress.'[594] Although working within the domestic setting of the Southern home was not always advantageous, it physically distanced Thompson from the sexual clutches of the overseer and her threats of violence granted her immediate protection from the physical abuse of her male enslaver.

Leonard Franklin's mother, Lucy, was sold on multiple occasions for her repeated use of violence against slavers. After facially disfiguring an overseer who attempted to abuse her, Lucy was

[592] Forret, *Slave Against Slave*, 297.
[593] Forret, *Slave Against Slave*, 300.
[594] Mamie Thompson, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 6, 1.

sold to Jim Bernard.[595] According to Franklin, 'Bernard did a lot of big talk' and on one occasion he exclaimed to Franklin's mother: 'Look out there and mind you do what you told . . . If you don't, you'll get that bull whip.' Lucy responded with the threat: 'Yes, and we'll both be gittin' it.' Although Lucy was sold for her threatening remark, Franklin emphasised the advantages of her sale as he exclaimed that Lucy's next enslaver, 'was good to her; so she wasn't sold no more after that.'[596] Overt declarations of violence produced mixed results for enslaved women. Some enslavers were unwilling to ignore or overlook such challenges to their authority and mastery. A.J. Mitchell, a formerly enslaved person from Arkansas, similarly remembered how his 'Aunt Susan' was sold away from the plantation after she boldly asserted to her enslaver: 'I ain't goin' to let you whip me.'[597] Although enslavers sold these women as punishment for their resistance, verbal warnings were an effective mechanism of pre-emptive violence which could secure enslaved women immediate, if not long-lasting protection from slaveholding men's abuse.

Enslaved women also deployed threatening language against slaveholding men on the behalf of their children, as demonstrated in the testimony of Harriet Tubman's brother, Henry Stewart. Enslaved to Edward Broadis in Maryland, Stewart described how his younger brother was sold in secret to a Georgian slaveholder. After witnessing the transaction, Stewart's mother, Rit, hid her son for over a month to prevent his separation. When the child was eventually located, Rit 'ripped out an oath' and declared: 'You are after my son; but the first man that comes into my house, I will split his head open.' According to Stewart, Rit's threat of murder 'frightened' the men who 'would not come in' and the trader departed the plantation without the procurement of Stewart's brother.[598] Given the stark realities of family separation, threats of violence were not a panacea to all situations, yet in certain circumstances, verbal threats of physical harm enabled bondswomen to expand their rights over their children to prevent sale and separation. Explicit threats of violence, especially murder, were occasionally effective

[595] For information relating to Lucy Franklin's violent resistance against overseeing men, see for reference, Chapter Two.
[596] Leonard Franklin, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 2, 2.
[597] A.J. Mitchell, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 5, 1.
[598] Jean M. Hurez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life of Stories* (Wisconsin, 1930), 281.

deterrents against slaveholding men who clearly believed these threats to be capable of manifesting into open forms of physical force.

Enslaved women also verbally threatened slaveholding men on the behalf of enslaved people who resided on neighbouring plantations. A Texan WPA respondent, John Day, recalled how his mother, Mariah, threatened to stab a neighbouring slaveholder with a knife in order to protect an enslaved man from being abused. Day described the abusive actions of the nearby enslaver in Dayton, Tennessee, who would beat his two slaves, Taylor and Jennie, 'even if dey hadn't done nothin'.' Mariah came to Taylor's assistance during one instance of excessive violence, as Day recollected: 'She gits a butcher knife and runs out dere and say, "Iffen you hits him 'nother lick, I'll use this on you."' Mariah's female enslaver witnessed the event and reportedly 'backed her [Mariah] up. So he quit beatin' on Taylor.'[599] Day's testimony illuminates how enslaved women engaged in violent activities on the behalf of others and crucially, on the behalf of enslaved men. As discussed in Chapter One, the abolitionist campaign gave rise to the formulation of gendered images and descriptions of resistance. Male fugitive narratives overwhelmingly employed the language of female fragility and male heroic protection. This particular example of an enslaved woman using violence as a source of defence for an enslaved man, on a separate plantation, challenges abolitionist discourse of exclusive male heroism. Mariah is the protagonist within Day's testimony providing protection and defence for a man belonging to a different enslaver. This reconceptualises gendered historical notions surrounding who could, and who could not provide physical protection. Although this case is not representative of the majority of enslaved people who were predominately forced into a position of inaction when it came to slaveholder abuse, it does nevertheless provide a powerful example of the possibilities for, and uses of, violent resistance for enslaved women in the nineteenth century South. Indeed, Mariah's actions were part of a broader pattern of Black female violence which sought to limit and mitigate male slaveholder abuse.

This WPA narrative also complicates understandings regarding spatial control and resistance. Stephanie Camp and other historians have established that slavery entailed the strictest control and

[599] John Day, FWP, Texas Narratives, Vol. 13, Part 1, 2.

criminalisation of physical and social mobility.[600] Indeed, the fugitive author Charles Ball stressed how the physical restraint of enslaved people's movements was so great that 'no slave dare leave' the plantation to which they were enslaved, 'not for a single mile' or a 'single hour, by night or by day', without being exposed to danger and violence.[601] Bondspeople were forbidden from leaving their owner's property without written consent and slave patrols ensured that slavery's 'geographies of containment' were maintained.[602] This makes Mariah's act of resistance all the more extraordinary. Mariah's unauthorised movement to the neighbour's farm - 'half a mile' away – to intercede on behalf of a neighbouring enslaved man, establishes a mobile network of resistance across Southern slaveholding sites. Enslaved women's violence was not limited to their own areas of enslavement. John Day's testimony establishes a geographic mobility to women's resistance, creating a fluid interpretation of their violence which could transcend to areas belonging to other male enslavers.

Vanessa Holden stipulates that enslaved women were able to move seamlessly between the 'imagined boundaries' of field labour and domestic tasks, which granted them increased opportunities for resistance.[603] Clearly, this is also true for external spaces of labour connecting neighbouring slaveholding sites. Bondswomen, including Mariah, created 'permeable borders' of resistance in their challenging of enslavers' authority and jurisdiction across local slaveholding sites.[604] Historian Anthony Kaye stipulates that slaveholding neighbourhoods 'were the arena for battles of every sort with slaves' every antagonist' where enslaved people 'confronted drivers, overseers, owners, slave patrols and where they found allies and plotted conspiracies to rise up or run away.'[605] These 'antagonisms' also included neighbouring white male enslavers. This reveals a geographical 'boundlessness' to women's violence which sheds new light into the social contexts of neighbouring enslaved communities and the physical

600 Camp, *Closer to Freedom*. For other secondary works on slavery and spatial control, see, for example: Singleton, 'Slavery and Spatial Dialectics'; Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement;* Bailey, 'Spatial Organisation as Management Practice'.
601 Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, 141.
602 Camp, *Closer to Freedom*.
603 Holden, *Surviving Southampton*, 35.
604 Quigley, 'Slavery, Democracy and the Problem of Planter Authority', 515.
605 Anthony Kaye, *Joining Places*: *Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 120; 124.

movement of resistance which bondswomen altered for themselves and others, as they challenged and manipulated the spatial mechanisms of control imposed upon them.[606]

Assault and Corporal Violence

Enslaved women were no stranger to the use of physical force against male enslavers, as threats of physical force were also accompanied by real acts of violence. When words turned into deeds, enslaved women responded to white male aggression and abuse with their own violent methods which mirrored the types of physical force enacted against overseers and female enslavers. Despite being at the 'apex of the antebellum southern social structure', slaveholding men's social, economic, and political status did not afford them immunity from enslaved women's violent resistance.[607] This is demonstrated in the WPA testimony of Hattie Matthews who exclaimed to her interviewer: 'Ma grandmuthuh got whipp'd only onc'd' an de master wuz sorry cause she fought back.'[608] Despite evidence of the use of violence against slaveholding men throughout the slaveholding South, historians have downplayed this form of action noting how, in the words of William Dusinberre, 'Violence was likely to lead to the death of the violent resister, and most slaves wanted to stay alive.'[609] Although it should be acknowledged that violence was a dangerous and unpredictable form of resistance which some bondspeople avoided, enslaved women, including Matthews's grandmother, were able to manipulate the slaveholding system to their own advantage, securing long lasting relief from future white male corporal abuse. Dusinberre is correct in his assertion that 'most slaves wanted to stay alive', but modes of survival were not restricted to illicit forms of 'underworld' resistance, and we need not draw such a stark line between resistance and survival. Moreover, the responses of enslavers, as touched upon in the previous chapters, were varying and rarely followed an established trend of corporal violence and state interference. Evidence of enslaved women's physical resistance certainly challenges previous historical thought that

[606] Thavolia Glymph, 'Rose's War and the Gendered Politics of a Slave Insurgency in the Civil War', *The Journal of the Civil War*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2013), 501-532, 505.
[607] Daniel Fountain, 'A Broader Footprint: Slavery and Slaveholding Households in the Antebellum Piedmont North Carolina', *The North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (2014), 407-444, 422.
[608] Hattie Matthews, FWP, Missouri Narratives, Vol. 10, 2.
[609] William Dusinberre, 'Power & Agency in Antebellum Slavery', *American Nineteenth Century History*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2011), 139-148, 140.

the enslaved were unwilling to resist and challenge the authority of slaveholding men due to fear of reprisal.

Belle Butler, a formerly enslaved woman from Indiana, recalled how her aunt and mother collectively assaulted their enslaver when he attempted to whip them. Butler described her former enslaver, Jesse Coffer, as 'a mean old devil' who sadistically tortured his enslaved property 'for nothing at all.' Coffer's preferred methods of abuse included eye-gouging and the use of the whip, but events escalated on the plantation when Coffer attempted to beat Butler's aunt and mother:

> After whipping them very hard, he started throwing them down, to go after their eyes. Chaney grabbed one of his hands, her sister grabbed his other hand, each girl bit a finger entirely off on each hand of their master. This, of course, hurt him so he had to stop their punishment and never attempted to whip them again.

Southern enslavers who experienced bondswomen's violent resistance occasionally created their own methods of "justice" devoid of state interference, as Coffer threatened to 'put them in his pocket' if Chaney and her sister 'ever dared to try anything like that again in life.' Although both sisters escaped the grief of an official auction, each of the women were eventually separated from their family and kin after they were 'given' to Coffer's two daughters who lived out of state in North Carolina. Survival on slaveholding sites was a complex and difficult terrain to navigate. Although Coffer 'never attempted to whip them again', the emotional anguish of their separation demonstrates the duality of violence which could occasionally afford enslaved women some protection, but not all.[610]

The WPA informant Josie Jordan described how her mother, Salina Jordan, was sold on multiple occasions to different enslavers for her repeated use of violence. Jordan fought her first enslaver after years of sustained abuse from a man who 'was always whipping and beating his slaves':

> She couldn't stand it no more. She just figured she would be better off dead and out of her misery as to be whipped all the time, so one day the master claimed they was something wrong with her work and started to raise his whip, but mammy fought back and when the ruckus was

[610] Belle Butler, FWP, Indiana Narratives, Vol. 5, 1-2.

over the Master was laying still on the ground and folks thought he was dead, he got such a heavy beating.

Jordan's ability to overpower an armed male enslaver who possessed the advantage of a whip was no small feat. The 'heavy beating' she enacted against her enslaver - to the extent that onlookers assumed he was dead - underscores the power of her violence and her desire to seize revenge as reparation for this man's history of sadistic abuse and cruelty. This speaks to Tamika Nunley's theorisation that enslaved women's enaction of violence served as 'articulations of justice.' Crime and criminality enabled bondswomen to implement change and enforce their own ideas surrounding justice despite the reprisals they faced in formal and informal legal systems of the South.[611] Jordan's enslaver survived the assault and in response to her act of violence she was sold 'right away'. However, this did not deter Jordan from using violence against her future enslavers, and her success emboldened her to resist more regularly. Jordan reportedly assaulted her next enslaver, Mark Lowry, by pushing him through an open cellar door and she fought his wife after being struck with a broomstick.[612] Despite being sold to three different enslavers, Jordan clearly perceived violence as an effective form of resistance and a risk worth taking in order to protest and evade mistreatment and abuse, hence her assertion that she would be 'better off dead' then 'whipped all the time'.[613] This woman's preference for death speaks volumes about enslaved women's ideas and conceptualisations of 'justice' and how these competing ideas of reparation shaped the tactics of their resistance.

Elizabeth Keckley detailed her dual use of violence against her enslaver, Mr. Burwell, and the local school master, Mr. Bingham, within her 1868 autobiography *Behind the Scenes*. Keckley described the 'hard struggles' which ensued between herself and Bingham who became her enslaver's 'ready tool' for inflicting acts of abuse against her on multiple occasions. Bingham frequently ordered Keckley to strip her clothing and Keckley emphasised the shame of imparting with her clothes as 'a woman fully developed' at the age of eighteen. Eventually she refused, and replied with the following: 'No, Mr. Bingham, I shall not take down my dress before you. Moreover, you shall not whip me unless you prove

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[611] Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned'; Nunley, *The Demands of Justice*.

[612] See Chapter Three for an examination of Salina Jordan's use of violence against her female enslaver, Mrs. Lowry.

[613] Josie Jordan, FWP, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. 13, 1-3.

the stronger.' During one physical confrontation Keckley bit Bingham's finger 'severely.' Enslaved women resented the interference of local white men who attempted to impose their white patriarchal jurisdiction in matters of discipline, and they refused to submit to the authority of those who were not their principal enslaver, as Keckley forcefully exclaimed to Bingham: 'No-body has the right to whip me but my own master, and nobody shall do so if I can prevent it.' Dissatisfied with Bingham's inability to subdue Keckley, Burnham resolved to beat Keckley himself and once more, Keckley used violence as a form of self-defence, describing how she 'fought him' and his attempts to 'conquer' her with a 'heavy handle'. Although Burwell 'proved the strongest', he was unable to 'subdue' Keckley's 'proud, rebellious spirit' and her 'determination to offer resistance'. Following their joint failure to subdue her 'rebellious spirit', Bingham and Burwell vowed to abstain from physically abusing Keckley.[614] This example demonstrates the positive repercussions of enslaved women's violent resistance which occasionally induced preferential change in the cessation of future physical abuse. Whilst some enslaved women's violence engendered negative consequences including physical punishment and family separation, for others, violence was a way of achieving immediate and occasionally long-term relief from physical abuse. Violent resistance engendered a variety of complex results which enslaved women were willing to risk in order to protest mistreatment and evade abuse.

Whilst violence occasionally ensured enslaved women's personal safety, the use of physical resistance was crucial for enslaved women in their assertions of agency, humanity, and spirit. In her own words, Keckley's deployment of physical force was a chief-source of inner-strength, resiliency, and determination which enabled her to survive the 'excruciating agony' of enslavement. 'I went home sore and bleeding' wrote Keckley, 'but with pride as strong as defiant as ever.'[615] Keckley's references to her attainment of inner fortitude through the use of violence are traditionally echoed in the autobiographical writings of enslaved men. Frederick Douglass, for example, centred his violent resistance as the 'turning point' in his masculine identity.[616] However, as evidenced throughout this study, violence was not solely a performance of manhood. *Behind the Scenes* presents a more complex

[614] Keckley, *Behind the Scenes,* 32-38.
[615] Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 34, 36-37.
[616] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life,* 72.

portrayal of enslaved women and their resistance which is largely omitted in male narratives, as Keckley centres herself as the protagonist and heroic actor within her own autobiographical account. Physical resistance was equally integral to enslaved Black womanhood which manifested emotive feelings of strength, fortitude, and resiliency.

Assault and Sexual Violence

Enslaved women also deployed violence in response to white male sexual abuse and rape. Just as enslaved women were vulnerable to the sexual abuse of overseeing men (see Chapter Two), male enslavers were no exception and enslaved women responded accordingly with violence of their own as both retribution and protection. Although Southern law (theoretically) protected white women from sexual assault, enslaved women received no such legal protection against rape or attempted rape.[617] Their status as property rendered enslaved women, in the words of Victoria Bynum, legally 'unrapeable' and the rape of an enslaved woman by another white man was classified as a trespass against the enslaved women's owner.[618] This facilitated the widespread rape of enslaved women on antebellum slaveholding sites throughout the South which the legal system protected and upheld.[619] The 1662 law of *partus sequitur ventrem* which decreed that children born of enslaved mothers inherited slave status further encouraged sexual violence against enslaved women.[620] The legal 'unrapeability' of enslaved women is epitomised in Harriet Jacob's autobiography, as Jacobs lamented: 'My master had power and law on his side…there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from

[617] Thomas R.R. Cobbs influential treatise on slave law decreed that 'the violation of the person of a female slave, carries with it no other punishment than the damages which the master may recover for the trespass upon his property.' Thomas R.R. Cobb, *An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery in the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1858), 82.
[618] Victoria E. Bynum coined the term 'unrapeable' in her study, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1992), 118. Despite the legal tensions surrounding the use of the term 'rape' in the context of antebellum slavery, this study uses the term 'rape' when referring to sexual relations between enslaved women and white men under slavery. Discussions based on the legal technicalities of the term obscure the reality of white men's perpetration of non-consensual sexual abuse of enslaved women. Categorisations of sexual encounters outside the term of rape – the use of force, coercion, or threat – risks diminishing enslaved women's lived experiences under slavery.
[619] Rachel Feinstein notes that the legality of sexual violence against enslaved women was a 'distinctive aspect of North American slavery' which was supported by centuries of laws and legislature. Feinstein, *When Rape Was legal,* xiv.
[620] For further information on the sexual and reproductive exploitation of enslaved women, see, for example: Morgan*, Laboring Women*; Morgan, 'Partus sequitur ventrem'.

death.'[621] Through coded language Jacobs described at length the sexual violence she personally experienced at the hands of her male enslaver, Dr. Norcom, during her adolescent years:

> Master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him. If I went out for a breath of fresh air, after a day of unwearied toil, his footsteps dogged me…his dark shadow fell on me everywhere.[622]

The routine sexual abuse of enslaved women is also well documented within the testimonies of the formerly enslaved. WPA respondents generally spoke about the rape of female family members in coded discussions of racial heritage. For instance, Savilla Burrell declared: 'Old Marse was de daddy of some mulatto chillun.'[623] Other informants emphasised the use of violence, punishment, and fear to coerce and force enslaved women into sexual relations: 'They would catch young coloured girls and whip them and make them do what they wanted.'[624] These testimonies elucidate the frequency with which sexual violence occurred in the South.[625] Historian Angela Davis referred to white men's sexual abuse of enslaved women under slavery as a gendered form of institutional 'terrorism' which thus rendered enslaved women, in the words of Deborah Gray White, 'the most vulnerable group' of Americans in the antebellum South.[626]

This lack of legal protection, alongside the inability of partners and family members to impede such gendered abuses, rendered enslaved women especially vulnerable to intimate white male violence, forcing many to endure such trauma alone or to rely upon their own actions. Enslaved women could rarely call upon their male kin or other members of the enslaved community for protection against white men's sexual violence due to the fear of violent reprisal. Indeed, some enslaved men were forced to turn

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621 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, 130.
622 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life*, 132.
623 Savilla Burrell, FWP, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Part 1, 2.
624 Lewis Brown, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 3.
625 For further information on the sexual exploitation of enslaved women in the antebellum South, see, for example: Thelma Jennings, '"Us Colored Women Had to Go Through a Plenty": Sexual Exploitation of African American Slave Women', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1990), 45-74; Peter Bardaglio, 'Rape and the Law in the Old South: 'Calculated to Excite Indignation in Every Heart'', *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (1994), 756-757; Wilma King, '"Prematurely Knowing of Evil Things": The Sexual Abuse of African American Girls and Young Women in Slavery and Freedom', *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (2014), 173-196; Andrea Livesey, 'Conceived in Violence: Enslaved Mothers and Children Born of Rape in Nineteenth-Century Louisiana', *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2017), 373-391; Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie Harris (eds.), *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens, 2018).
626 Davis, 'Reflections', 96; White, *'Ar'n't I a Woman?'*, 15.

a blind eye to the sexual abuse of their female partners, including Henry Bibb, who wrote: 'if my wife must be exposed to the insults and licentious passions of wicked slave drivers and overseers…Heaven forbid that I should be compelled to witness it.'[627] Bibb's autobiography demonstrates the inability of some enslaved men to deter white men from their sexual attacks upon enslaved women. Furthermore, 'abroad' partner formations where partners resided on separate sites of enslavement further reinforced the need for enslaved women to act on their own accord and independence.[628] With a lack of legal recourse and protection from male family members, enslaved women initiated and perpetrated their own 'articulations of justice' to resist white men's sexual power, control, and domination. [629]

The WPA respondent Thomas Goodwater recollected the violent actions of his mother who physically assaulted her enslaver, Lias Winning, who attempted to rape her. 'One day ma wus in de field workin' alone…he [Lias Winning] went an' tried to rape 'er.' Goodwater commented that Winning 'liked his slave women', yet his mother refused to be targeted as she 'pull his ears almos' off so he let 'er off'. Goodwater's testimony foregrounds the self-reliance of enslaved women who were forced to depend on their own violent actions as a defence against white male rape. To ensure her future compliance, Winning warned Goodwater's father that 'he better talk to ma'. Goodwater emphasised the reaction of his father who 'jus' laugh[ed]' upon being informed of the violent altercation.[630] In order to ensure enslaved women complied with their sexual demands, some male enslavers manipulated enslaved men to additionally coerce and pressure enslaved women into sexual submission, illustrating the patriarchal framework of the South where male sexual dominance was expected and normalised. The sexual violence of slaveholding men did not always engender collective action from enslaved men and women, leaving women to battle their enslavers alone, even in the presence of their male partners.

One formerly enslaved person described the actions of Clarinda who resorted to physical violence in order to protect herself from sexual assault: 'She hits massa with de hoe 'cause he try 'fere with her and she try to stop him.' The consequences of this woman's violent resistance appeared worth

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[627] Bibb, *Narrative of the Life,* 42.
[628] For further information on cross-plantation partnerships, see, for example: Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana, 2004).
[629] Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned', 6.
[630] Thomas Goodwater, FWP, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Part 2, 2.

emphasising to the respondent who stressed that Clarinda received '500 lashes' for her resistance: 'The worst whippin' I seed was give to Clarinda…she am over dat log all day and when dey takes her off, she am limp and deadlike.' Clarinda remained 'deadlike' for seven days before she began her long recovery.[631] Violent defence was not always consequence free. Enslaved women risked injury and even death in their efforts to resist enslavers' sexual demands, which some WPA respondents emphasised in their interviews. The duality of violence, which could engender a variety of responses, afforded enslaved women immediate protection from white male rape, but not always long-lasting relief from other forms of physical violence. One anonymous WPA respondent described the consequences of her own resistance in explicit detail after she refused the sexual demands of her 'young master' who 'tried to go with [her]'. The respondent detailed how she 'fought him back because he had no right to beat me for not goin' with him.' The physical confrontation between the two attracted the attention of her young enslaver's mother. The enslaved woman explained the circumstances of the feud to her mistress who reacted with vindictive rage:

> 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…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…They never carried me back home after that; they put me in the N***** Trader's Office to be sold.[632]

The response of this enslaved woman's mistress is typical of other slaveholding women who predominantly blamed bondswomen for entrapping respectable white men into 'sexual relations' with their "licentious promiscuity". This served to excuse and legitimise white men's serial rape of enslaved women on Southern slaveholding sites. Others perceived white men's rape of enslaved Black women as a legitimate right of passage and a marker of manhood. Enslavers' viewed the sexual abuse of enslaved women, according to historian Lorri Glover, 'as another manifestation of self-mastery' which

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[631] Unnamed respondent, FWP, Texas Narratives, Vol. 16, Part 2, 2-3.
[632] Unnamed respondent, FWP, Georgia Narratives, Vol. 4, Part 4, 3-4.
For further information on the redaction of derogatory and racialised language within historical accounts of slavery, see, for example: Holden, *Surviving Southampton,* 10-11; Vanessa Holden, '"I was born a slave": Language, Sources, and Considering Descendant Communities', *Journal of Early Republic*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2023), 75-83.

was met with 'tacit acceptance unless it generated public scandal.'[633] White slaveholding women aligned their interests 'along racial and familial lines, as opposed to gender' and many perceived the sexual abuse of enslaved women and girls as a legal right for male members of the slaveholding elite.[634] The consequences of the unnamed respondent's resistance illustrates the gendered system of racism in the antebellum criminal justice system which upheld and reinforced the sexual abuse of enslaved women.

Intergenerational Violence

White perpetrated violence occurred throughout various generations of the slaveowning elite. White men on slaveholding sites posed a physical threat to enslaved women and this included enslavers' male children. Methods of coercion and control were fostered amongst planter class children from a young age, as slaveholding parents attempted to instil the practice of mastery and white supremacy 'through an instructional process that spanned their childhood and adolescence.'[635] The sons of enslavers posed an additional threat to enslaved women and girls, as male members of the slaveholding elite deployed a variety of violent practices from their childhood which persisted well into maturity. Scholar Rachel Feinstein discusses the 'intergenerational transmission of white masculinity' to explain how slaveholding families transmitted violent behaviours and attitudes throughout generations of white men.[636] Feinstein stipulates that this contributed to the 'perpetuation of white masculine privilege and power' over the enslaved which resulted in modified forms of oppressive violence perpetuated throughout various generations of white men.[637] However, WPA narratives demonstrate that enslaved women engaged in their own forms of 'intergenerational violence' as they deployed a range of violent techniques and strategies across generations of both junior and senior male members of the slaveholding elite.[638]

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633 Glover, *Southern Sons*, 87; 126.
634 Feinstein, *When Rape Was legal,* 25.
635 Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, 1-2.
636 Feinstein, *When Rape Was legal,* 37.
637 Feinstein, *When Rape Was legal,* 38.
638 David Doddington also explores the phenomenon of 'intergenerational conflict' amongst slaveholding families during distributions of wealth, assets and human property upon the death of the principal enslaver. Doddington, 'Old Age', 116.

The white children of enslavers practiced techniques of slave management and modified their behaviour according to the violent practices of white supremacy. Rebecca Latimer Felton, the child of prominent Georgian slaveholders, recalled in her autobiography her own violent actions as a child, writing: 'one time I got impatient and slapped Mammy.'[639] Felton and other enslavers' children did not hesitate to use violence against enslaved people. Salutations, alongside violent and coercive behaviours, were also implemented from early childhood to reinforce racial distinctions. The WPA informant, Rebecca Jane Grant, recalled how her female enslaver savagely whipped her with a 'raw cowhide strap' for not addressing her child as 'Marse Henry.' Grant expressed her annoyance at having to use this salutation to an infant: 'Marse Henry was just a little boy bout three or four years old. Wanted me to say Massa to him, a baby!'[640] Hannah Davidson described a similar incident when she was forced to address her enslaver's young son as 'Master Mayo.' Davidson resisted this projection of authority as she declared: 'I fought him all the time. I never would call him 'Master Mayo'.'[641] Southern sons replicated the behaviours of their slaveholding parents, yet their attempts to impose authority and mastery were met with opposition from enslaved women and girls who responded with resistance and physical force of their own, as they fiercely contested intergenerational projections of mastery and power from male members of the planter family.[642]

Born in 1853 and enslaved in Missouri to Joe Lane, James Monroe Abbot recalled how his mother violently assaulted their enslaver's eldest son. The vulnerability of enslaved women to additional abuse from junior male members of the planter family is exemplified in the personal account of Abbot, who described how 'Young Joe' attempted to whip his mother for chewing tobacco:

> She wuh hoeing corn in de field an he cum ridin' – I spect he war jes tryin' to be smart but he tells her to swallow dat tobaccy she got in huh mouth. She don' pay him no mind en' he tell her agin. Den she say, "You chewing tobaccy? Whyn't yuh swaller dat?" Dat makes him mad

[639] Felton, *County Life in Georgia*, 99.
[640] Rebecca Jane Grant, FWP, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Part 2, 2.
[641] Hannah Davidson, FWP, Ohio Narratives, Vol. 12, 2.
[642] Historian Joan Cashin stipulates that, 'young white men learned the fundamental lessons in exercising power from older white men' and Lorri Glover similarly asserts that gentry boys 'modelled themselves after their elder kinsmen, embracing their masculine values. Joan Cashin, *Our Common Affairs*: *Texts from Women in the Old South* (Baltimore, 1996), 11; Glover, *Southern Sons,* 21.

> and he take a double rope en whack her cross de shoulders. Den she grab huh fingers roun' his throat, en his face wuh all black es my own fore dey pulls her offen him. She puddin near kill young Joe.[643]

Although Young Joe's use of corporal punishment was the catalyst for this woman's resistance, her use of violence also stemmed from her refusal to submit to the commands of Young Joe, a junior member of the slaveholding family. Historian David Doddington asserts that 'mastery was not static or stable but was instead a performance shaped by the temporal rhythms of the life cycle.'[644] Doddington contends within his study on advanced age and mastery that 'enslaved people understood' that 'age affected the application of white power' which impacted and shaped their resistance practices.[645] Historians typically focus on enslavers in the 'prime of life,' and few, with the exception of Doddington, consider the life cycles of enslavers and how age impacted perceptions of mastery. Considering different age categories amongst white planter men illuminates the complexity of power dynamics on slaveholding sites and the wider applicability of age as a category of analysis.

Whilst the advanced age of male enslavers created opportunities for resistance, so too did the qualities of youth and adolescence which influenced perceptions of power and mastery amongst the enslaved. The enslaved woman's indifference to the son of her enslaver, to the extent where she ignored his orders before she insulted him, underscores her disregard and lack of respect as she refused to submit to the projected authority of a junior member of the slaveholding family. Enslaved women recognised the hierarchies of white male dominance on slaveholding sites and some bondswomen perceived the adult children of enslavers to have diminished authority compared to the principal enslaver. According to Doddington, 'Age was a vector of power in the antebellum South' and the perception of reduced power amongst enslavers' sons was a weakness that enslaved women, including Abbott's mother, were willing to exploit.[646]

The Southern slaveholding elite perceived physical prowess and forcefulness as key male attributes in the nineteenth century. Historians of slavery generally agree that 'to be a man in the eyes

[643] James Monroe Abbot, FWP, Missouri Narratives, Vol. 10, 2.
[644] Doddington, 'Old Age', 119.
[645] Doddington, 'Old Age', 132.
[646] Doddington, 'Old Age', 124.

of the Southern elites was to be white, autonomous, and the master of others.'[647] Lorri Glover stipulated that Southern elites 'held clear and unwavering expectations of what made a boy a man.'[648] Additionally, Christopher J. Olsen affirmed that 'notions of masculinity and the ethic of honour placed a premium on men's public behaviour' which valued courage, dependability, and independence 'above all traits.'[649] This incident in which Young Joe was almost strangled to death in the open settings of the slaveholding field for all to see, both from enslaved onlookers and the white planter family, would have been deeply shaming for this young man who perceived this physical defeat as a loss of white manhood, control, and autonomy. In the words of historians Craig Thompson Friend and Anya Jabour, for the Southern planter family, 'appearances meant everything, and everyone had an investment in it.'[650] Through public displays of independent mastery, slaveholding heirs attempted to distinguish themselves as capable members of the planter elite and worthy recipients of the 'intergenerational transmission of wealth.'[651] However, Young Joe's public attempt of mastery dramatically backfired, as he failed to navigate the 'gender values' of the plantation South and fulfil the standards of white masculinity. Acts of violence were an effective means of damaging the masculine identities of young white men keen to prove themselves as capable future slaveowners.

After the death of his father, Young Joe and his wife attempted to consolidate their recently inherited authority over the enslaved workforce. Abbot recalled how the enslaved were required to approach and address their new enslavers as 'Mustuh an' Missus Jane.' However, once again Abbot's mother resisted the authority of 'Young Joe' and refused to address him as Master:

> when he call mah mutha up an' say de same tuh her – she look at him a minnit den she say, "I know'd yuh all dese years as Joe an' her as Jane, an' I ain't gonna start now callin' you Musta or Missus. I'll call you Joe an' Jane like I allus done", an' she walked away.

This enslaved woman's reasoning that she had 'known' Joe and Jane for years was a decisive factor in her decision not to acknowledge her new enslavers via their new salutations. Enslaved women who

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647 Glover, *Southern Sons,* 26.
648 Glover, *Southern Sons*, 1.
649 Cristopher J. Olsen, 'White Families and Political Culture in the Old South' in Craig Thompson Friend and Anya Jabour (eds.), *Family Values in the Old South* (Gainsville, 2010), 210-133, 215.
650 Friend and Jabour, 'Introduction' in *Family Values*, 1-17, 1.
651 Joe Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York, 2006).

possessed an established history with the children of their enslavers occasionally rejected the principle that they were to be addressed in such a way. Abbot attested that his mother 'nevuh worked in de house none' but it is clear that she accorded some form of connection or association with Joe, hence her deliberate rejection of his newly acquired command and mastery.[652] Enslaved women resisted the sons of their enslavers change in status and the rejection of their mastery exposed the limits of white male power and authority. Thus, enslaved women possessed the ability to diminish patriarchal power amongst the master class on a localised level through their resistance. Abbot's testimony provides an important insight into the fractious and turbulent relationships between enslaved women and their male enslavers, both young and old. It also illuminates the transmission of enslaved women's violence to different generations of slaveholding men.

Enslaved women who "grew up" alongside their enslaver's heirs also engaged in physical confrontations. Eliza Washington, for example, recalled how her mother 'was raised' with her 'young master' and the two were close in age 'between sixteen and seventeen.' While Washington's mother laboured in the kitchen, her enslaver's son and 'some other white boys' began to threaten her with acts of violence. 'Just try it', responded Washington's mother and a fight subsequently ensued. According to Washington the 'young master' and her mother 'fought for about an hour' and 'she whipped him clear as a whistle.' Once again, authority was a factor in this enslaved woman's decision to use violence, as her daughter recalled: 'She said that her old master never did whip her, and she was sure she wasn't going to let the young one do it.' Washington's reference that her mother would not allow the 'young one' to whip her demonstrates enslaved women resented the interference of junior, adolescent males who attempted to flex their muscles and consolidate their perceptions of power through violence. Clearly, from this enslaved woman's perspective, the only person who possessed the right to abuse her was the principal, adult enslaver. According to Washington, her enslaver's son 'wanted to show off' and attempted to prove himself to his peers through a physical confrontation which ultimately backfired. This defeat would have been humiliating for this adolescent man who desperately attempted to assert his masculinity, only to be beaten 'clear as a whistle.'[653] Bondswomen rejected the white, patriarchal

[652] Abbot, Missouri Narratives, 1-2.
[653] Eliza Washington, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 7, 5.

mastery of young men whom they had known during their youth, and they vehemently opposed their white, legal privilege to beat and abuse them. Additionally, in using violence enslaved women established their own versions of mastery over enslavers' heirs, establishing clear boundaries as to what they were and were not willing to endure during intergenerational power struggles.

Adult enslaved women also deployed physical force against enslavers' young children during instances of white initiated violence or moments of disrespect. Ellen Cragin of Arkansas recalled the long hours her mother, Levenia Polk, was forced to undertake as a weaver. Exhausted, Polk 'went to sleep at the loom' and her mistress ordered her son to 'take a whip and wear her out.' The boy proceeded to beat Cragin's mother with a stick for her offence which proved to be a grave mistake: 'When she woke up, she took out a pole out of the loom and beat him nearly to death with it.' Despite the boy's desperate protestations that he would not allow his parents to whip her, Polk continued to beat him, exclaiming: 'I'm going to kill you. These black titties sucked you, and then you come out here to beat me.' The boy's injuries were severe as Cragin exclaimed, 'he wasn't able to walk after.' Aware that her enslavers would 'kill her if she stayed', Cragin's mother fled the slaveholding site and she remained a fugitive until the end of slavery.[654]

Reproductive exploitation is central to this enslaved woman's use of violence. Wet-nursing under slavery was a uniquely gendered form of exploitation; enslavers manipulated bondswomen's mothering and appropriated their breast milk for their own gain and benefit. According to historians Emily West and R.J. Knight, enforced wet-nursing represented one of the most potent examples of the dual exploitation and commodification of enslaved women as both labourers and reproducers.[655] Enslaved women's mothering was a contested site of manipulation and abuse, as lactating enslaved women were forced to prioritise and feed enslavers' infants at the expense of their own children.[656] The

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[654] Ellen Cragin, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1-2.

[655] Emily West and R.J. Knight, 'Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet-nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South', *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (2017), 37-68, 38.

[656] For further information on enslaved women's wet-nursing, see, for example: Sally McMillen, 'Mother's Sacred Duty: Breast-Feeding Patterns among Middle-and Upper-Class Women in the Antebellum South', *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (1985), 333-356; Janet Golden, *A Social History of Wet Nursing in America: From Breast to Bottle* (New York, 1996); Jennifer Morgan, ''Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1700', *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (1997), 167-192; Morgan, *Labouring Women;* Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, 2006); Camilla Cowling, *Conceiving*

WPA respondent Jeff Calhoun, for example, recalled how his mother was forced to breastfeed fifteen of his enslaver's children 'cause his wife was no good to give milk.'[657] Wet-nursing, a 'bitterly complex practice', did not always foster a sense of closeness between white children and enslaved Black women.[658] The actions of Cragin's enslaver's child fostered a sense of betrayal in Polk, as despite feeding him with her own breasts, this child still did not hesitate to punish and abuse his former wet-nurse. It is therefore worth emphasising that a history of personal relations and a sense of familiarity between white children and enslaved Black women did not impede the use of violence from both parties. In addition, an established history of wet-nursing did not protect white children from enslaved women's violence indefinitely. Enslaved women were far from clouded with affection or sentimentalism for the children they were forced to nurse; enslaved women were acutely aware of their reproductive commodification and they did not hesitate to respond with violence against those white children who abused and disrespected them.

Enslaved women also deployed more dramatic forms of violence against enslavers' young children, including attempted murder. The WPA informant Water Brooks recalled how his adult mother 'took' her enslaver's child and 'threw it into the bayou' after he deliberately threw dirty river water into her washing area. The child survived after it managed to 'scramble out' of the water. Although Brooks did not comment on the consequences of his mother's actions or whether she was punished, his interview provides important contextual information regarding his mother's actions, as he described that a few years prior to the incident his mother's enslaver had her brutally whipped from 'seven in the morning until nine at night' for some undisclosed offence. He then went on to explain that 'some years after she got that whipping' she threw her enslaver's child into the bayou.[659] It is not difficult to imagine that these two events were connected and that Brooks's mother used the white child as a pawn to enact revenge on her enslaver. Had the child been unable able to escape from the riverbank, it is likely he would have drowned. Brooks's mother was acutely aware that this boy's death would have been

Freedom: Women of Colour, Gender, and the Abolition of Slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro (Chapel Hill, 2013); West and Knight, 'Mothers' Milk'.
[657] West and Knight, 'Mothers' Milk', 58.
[658] West and Knight, 'Mothers' Milk', 61.
[659] Walter Brooks, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1-2.

emotionally devastating for his parents. This made some planter-class children vulnerable to the violence of enslaved women who were aware that their enslaver's children represented readily available pawns for revenge and retribution. The deliberate throwing of the child into the water underscores the extreme lengths some enslaved women were prepared to reach to both reprimand white children and resist planter class adults. Enslaved women rejected performances of white male mastery and they directed their resistance against multiple generations of males as they challenged white masculine power in intergenerational power struggles across the South.

Individual and Collective Acts of Poisoning

'You know in slave times, sometimes when a master would git too bad, the n****** would kill him – take him off out in the woods somewhere an git rid of him.'[660] The WPA respondent, Lucretia Alexander, spoke candidly of enslaved people's deadly acts of violence against slaveholding men in the antebellum period. Her frank testimony epitomises one of the most dangerous and volatile forms of enslaved people's resistance: the murder of a male member of the slaveholding elite. Although the planter elite projected the public image of unflinching patriarchal mastery, their private writings candidly acknowledged the vulnerability and paranoia of the master class to collective and individual acts of violence perpetrated by the enslaved. Reflecting on a failed uprising in Wilkinson County, Mississippi, the slaveholder, John Burruss, expressed alarm to his father that 'some 200 [slaves] were implicated' in the suspected plot. Despite his assertion that the plot had been foiled Burruss anxiously wrote, 'the alarm is untruly gone.' Burruss concluded his letter with the opinion: 'But do we not dwell in constant danger, are we not living down – slumping on a smothered – not extinguished volcano?'[661] Violent resistance generated recurring panic amongst slaveholding men over the safety of their slaveholding sites and individual enslavers were acutely aware of the dangers they faced from their enslaved "property." John Burruss and other members of the slaveholding elite acknowledged and voiced their concerns over the burgeoning threat of violent resistance and the murderous capabilities of the enslaved

[660] Lucretia Alexander, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 6.
[661] *Burruss Family Papers 1827-65,* Papers, Burruss Family, 1840-1841, Wilkinson County, Mississippi. Collection 105, Folder 6. LVA.

despite their outward display of resolute control. Indeed, male enslavers had good reason to fear their enslaved property. Antebellum court records, pardon papers, and WPA testimonies graphically detail the murderous activities of enslaved women who committed acts of homicide through varied and creative methods on individual slaveholding sites across the South.

Although enslavers, including Burruss, typically associated open and armed revolt with enslaved men, on an individual, localised level slaveholding men were acutely aware of the threat enslaved women posed to their lives, safety and very existence. Although the masculinisation of overt acts of rebellious resistance frequently overshadows the violent contributions of enslaved women, the strategy of homicide against male enslavers was never the sole domain of enslaved men. Armed and deadly resistance was not confined to insurrection, and neither was it an exclusively male pursuit devoid of political significance. Enslaved women murdered slaveholding men through a myriad of subversive methods in individual and collective attacks. Individual and small-scale collective acts of resistance occurred amongst communities of enslaved women who weaponised a number of substances and objects for their own deadly designs. Whilst some enslaved women murdered their oppressors to settle old scores, the political significance of such a highly overt form of resistance against a male member of the planter-class would not have gone unnoticed. Enslaved women's localised acts of deadly violence against slaveholding men, members of the South's elite, represented a clear attack on the ideology and institution of slavery and this study signals the need to incorporate a more complex analysis of armed resistance to include non-insurrectionary murder against individual enslavers.

Commercial drugs, medicines and chemicals also posed a threat to male enslavers, furthering the line of thought, as explored in the previous chapter, that enslaved women looked closer to home in their violent endeavours to maim and murder enslavers. In January, 1827, an enslaved woman named Docia was executed for administering 'a certain poisonous medicine of white arsenic' into her enslaver's bread in St. Charles, Missouri.[662] Docia was not the only enslaved woman to use poison against her male enslaver; primary records detail complex cases in which enslaved women targeted male enslavers, slaveholding family members, and neighbouring white men, as lone operators or with the assistance of

[662] *State of Missouri vs. Docia a Negro Girl Slave* (1827), Judicial Court Records, Box 40, Folder, 039, Misc c54287, MSA.

others through established networks of resistance. Fannie rocked the Virginia county of Botetourt in September, 1858, when she was 'charged with an attempt to poison her master, John W. Jones.'[663] One morning Jones found his coffee 'remarkably dark and obnoxious' and he discovered the cup's silver spoon to be discoloured which he described as a 'dark leaden hue.' Jones's son, Edward, suggested that his father's beverage had been poisoned and 'after some effort' Jones 'threw up acid matter.' The Botetourt court declared Fannie guilty of mixing corrosive sublimate, otherwise known as mercury chloride, into her enslaver's coffee and she was sentenced to be hanged. Throughout the trial, Jones expressed utter disbelief that his enslaved servant had attempted to murder him. Jones continually attested to Fannie's 'general good character', stating that Fannie had 'lived in his family' for fourteen years and 'had never manifested any other than kind feelings towards them.' Jones regarded Fannie as a 'faithful and trusted servant' who had nursed his children. With the inclusion of thirty signatures from 'respectable citizens', Jones successfully petitioned Henry A. Wise, the governor of Virginia, and Fannie's sentence was commuted to transportation and 'hard labour in the public works.' The success of Jones's petition relied upon his endorsement that Fannie was of 'uniform good conduct' prior to the incident.[664]

Jones's 1858 clemency petition which emphasised Fannie's 'faithfulness' demonstrates both the naivety of slaveholding men and their vulnerability to enslaved women's violent attacks. Enslavers may have implicitly trusted some enslaved women who had previously acted in a reproductive capacity due to gendered notions of maternal affection and feminine domesticity. The thought that some enslaved women could try to kill a member of the family who they had known for more than a decade would have been inconceivable to some slaveholding men. It was reported to the court that Jones had

[663] *Commonwealth vs. Fannie* (1858), Henry A. Wise Executive Papers (1858), Accession 36170, Misc 4210, Box 15, Folder 1, State Records Collection, LVA.

[664] Tamika Nunley examines the varied outcomes of Southern court proceedings involving enslaved women accused of capital crimes. Nunley explores how gendered and racialised stereotypes influenced court verdicts and the commuting of sentences via petitions. It is possible that Fannie's history as a wetnurse and her enslaver's protestations of her general 'obedience' served as positive racial affirmations, feeding into gendered stereotypes surrounding female passivity which helped sway the decision of the governor to commute her sentence. Nunley also contends that in Virginia, state officials were keen to display a sense of 'evenhandedness' in their projections of the South's 'fair and just' judicial handling of enslaved people. Clemency was an 'important performative gesture politically' for courts of the slaveholding South. Nunley, *The Demands of Justice*, 9.

'corrected' Fannie the previous evening for an undisclosed offence and his son testified that he harboured a strong suspicion that Fannie 'might have taken revenge on his father for whipping her.' The physical assault she endured at the hands of her enslaver proved to be the driving force behind Fannie's actions and it was emphasised that only Jones's coffee was contaminated.

Once more, the sexual division of labour on slaveholding sites proved to be important in how enslaved women were able to perpetrate acts of homicide through the use of poison. Enslaved women who laboured at the heart of the slaveholding household took advantage of enslavers' misplaced trust and confidence, capitalising on their domestic confinement to centre their attacks away from public onlookers within the concealed settings of the home. The food and drink of slaveholding men proved to be effective vessels for containing poisonous substances and Fannie's ability to poison her enslaver proved to be straightforward and unchallenging. Jones exclaimed to the court that Fannie possessed 'entire control of his house' and he further emphasised that Fannie 'had access to *everything*' [emphasis added]. The use of coffee is a continual theme throughout various trial records pertaining to the poisonous activities of enslaved women. The dark, hot properties of the drink, alongside its bitter taste, could disguise the acidic taste of poison and it was a substance which was readily available and consumed regularly.

As discussed previously, anti-poison legislature prohibited enslaved and free people of colour from purchasing toxic and harmful substances throughout Southern slaveholding states. Historian Sharla M. Fett asserts that Virginia 'took a particularly aggressive stance' in passing laws which restricted medicine, healing and poison amongst enslaved communities, resulting in the enactment of the death penalty for 'any negroe, or other slave, [who] shall prepare, exhibit, or administer any medicine whatsoever.'[665] Virginia implemented additional legislation in 1856 which made it illegal for druggists to sell 'any poisonous drug' to enslaved or free people of colour without the written consent of an 'owner or master.'[666] Yet white Southerners could purchase and acquire alkali substances at the direction of enslaved women who requested poisonous substances under the pretext of ordinary household activities. This is evidenced in *Commonwealth vs. Fannie*, as court officials were informed

[665] Fett, *Working Cures,* 165-166.
[666] Fett, *Working Cures,* 167.

that a week prior to the poisoning incident, Jones's son, Edward, purchased the corrosive sublimate at Fannie's request which she 'kept in her possession' for the feigned purpose of eradicating bed bugs within her living quarters.[667] Historian Vivien Miller asserts that mercurous and alkali substances in North America were 'mass manufactured, easily available and generally unregulated until the early twentieth century' and anti-poison legislation failed to impede enslaved women's ability to procure these widely available chemical substances.[668] Enslaved women successful navigated state restrictions to obtain toxic substances through the manipulation of slaveholding family members who unknowingly provided bondswomen with the means to cause their own illness and death.

Whilst some Black female poisoners were solo operators, enslaved women occasionally sought the assistance of other bondswomen in their quest to poison slaveholding men. In the county of Platte, Missouri, Harriett was indicted in September, 1843, for the attempted murder of John D. Helverson, a local male enslaver. Harriett's court record details how she prepared 'poisonous powders' and instructed another enslaved woman, Mariah, who belonged to a neighbouring enslaver to administer the lethal concoction into Helverson's coffee.[669] This case is unusual as neither Harriett nor Mariah were enslaved or loaned to Helverson. According to Mariah's testimony, Harriett, the property of Henry Bradley, attempted to poison Helverson because 'he had threatened to whip her.' Harriett informed Mariah that she could 'do it herself' but practical logistics had thwarted her previous attempts, as Helverson rarely ate at her enslaver's home. Harriett and Mariah met three consecutive nights before the poisoning attempt to discuss Helverson's demise, however, unbeknown to Harriett, Mariah had already informed her enslaver about Harriett's 'plot' 'to destroy his life.' Mariah proved to be instrumental in Harriett's downfall and she was promptly arrested.[670] Further records of Harriett's fate are missing and the outcome of the trial is lost to history.

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[667] *Commonwealth vs. Fannie* (1858), LVA.

[668] Vivien Miller, 'Vitriol Throwing in Victorian America', *American Nineteenth Century History*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2022), 1-19, 4.

[669] *State of Missouri vs. Harriett, a Slave* (1843), Judicial Court Records, Box 008, Folder 0091, Misc c42044, MSA.

[670] The shared condition of enslavement was not always a unifying factor between enslaved women. Mariah's duplicity was likely an attempt on her part to secure individual survival, as the historian Sasha Turner Bryson asserts that enslaved people were often forced to collaborate with their oppressors as an 'alternative mechanism of survival.' It is important to acknowledge that enslaved women struggled to navigate the complex and dangerous world of antebellum enslavement and their individual reactions varied widely. Sasha Turner Bryson,

It was reported that Mariah was provided with certain 'white powders' which consisted of rattlesnake venom and ground glass, and Harriett was especially particular about how these powders were to be prepared and administered. Harriett stressed to Mariah that the powders 'were not fine enough' and she demonstrated to Mariah the best method to 'beat' them into a finer consistency. Once these powders were 'made very fine', Harriett emphasised that 'coffee was the best thing to give it in', as the powders 'might stick in his teeth' and 'shine' if mixed with water. Harriett admitted that her knowledge of poisoning derived from her previous site of enslavement in Kentucky, as she boasted to Mariah that she had 'lived in Kentucky long enough to know what would poison.' Harriett assured Mariah of the effectiveness of the poison stating that the powders had poisoned 'two or three of her relatives' including her previous enslaver.[671]

Harriett's knowledge that the poison would be unsuitable in watery substances demonstrates that this enslaved woman possessed a clear understanding of firstly, which poisons were effective and secondly, how best they were to be administered undetected. Harriett's familiarity with these poisons demonstrates how subversive information was transferred across state lines as slavers forcibly moved bondswomen to different sites of enslavement. Although Mariah ultimately betrayed Harriett, the enlistment of her assistance nevertheless demonstrates that bondswomen operated across slaveholding boundaries to communicate and transfer tactics of violence in their quest to destroy the lives of individual male enslavers. Poisoning techniques were thus a 'shared knowledge' amongst communities of the enslaved which had the potential to be transferred and practiced across state lines and separate slaveholding sites. This once again speaks to the mobility of enslaved women's violence which could be collective in the formation of successful or unsuccessful networks of resistance.

State vs. Harriett sheds additional light into the history of enslaved women's violent resistance in its demonstration that neighbouring slaveholding men were not immune to the violence of enslaved women who belonged to other enslavers. Harriett's desire to seek revenge against the man who had

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'The Art of Power: Poison and Obeah Accusations and the Struggle for Dominance and Survival in Jamaica's Slave Society', *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (2013), 61-90, 72.

[671] It is unclear whether Harriett was involved in the death of her 'old master', as Harriett attested to having only 'heard of people being poisoned with it.' However, her specific instructions pertaining to the 'poisonous powders' perhaps speaks to some prior personal experience in perpetrating acts of poisoning. *State of Missouri vs. Harriett, a Slave* (1843), MSA.

threatened to whip her for some real or imagined offense underscores enslaved women's detestation for those local enslavers who attempted to impose their patriarchal jurisdiction over them. Neighbouring white men who threatened or instigated acts of violence were continually in the line of fire regardless of whether they were bondswomen's legal enslavers, as demonstrated in Elizabeth Keckley's use of violence against the local school master, Mr. Bingham. Enslaved women challenged the authority and mastery of *all* slaveholding men, enlisting the assistance of others in their establishment of shared networks of violence which transcended white spatial dynamics of control and discipline across neighbouring sites of enslavement.

Poisoning had the ability to both divide and unite enslaved female communities. Poll and Lavina were indicted in Washington County, North Carolina, for the murder of their enslaver, Samuel Skinner, who died from arsenic poisoning in April 1821. The two women confessed to mixing a 'tablespoon' of arsenic into Skinner's soup and evening glass of water which he consumed and subsequently 'puked like a dog.'[672] Skinner 'languished' in pain until his death on the 10th May, 1821. A substantial amount of the prosecution's evidence derived from the testimony of an enslaved man named Moses who reportedly witnessed the two women discussing at length how to murder Skinner.[673] According to Moses's testimony, Lavina administered the poison into the pot of soup which Skinner consumed alongside his wife and neighbour. Upon hearing that the soup had been consumed by all three, Poll declared: 'damn him it will kill him [and her] too.' Lavina's satisfaction in her own actions is evident within her statement: 'he ate it all up and ate it like a dog.' Enslaved women were willing to compromise the lives of anyone who inadvertently consumed poisoned substances in order to kill their principal target. This included neighbouring whites and female enslavers who were perceived to be 'co-conspirators' in the oppression of enslaved people.[674]

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672 *State vs. Poll and Lavina* (1821), North Carolina Court Reports 1820-1821, v.008, 254-249. 'North Carolina Digital Collections' [https://digital.ncdcr.gov] (accessed: 12th July 2020).
673 It should be noted that the testimony of enslaved individuals should not be used as irrefutable evidence of violent criminal behaviour. Enslaved people were often made to implicate accused enslaved individuals during moments of questioning and interrogation through threats, manipulation, and promises of preferential treatment or that they would not be implicated in the crime. See Chapter One for further information on the methodological constraints of enslaved people's testimony and confessions in judicial court records.
674 Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, 205.

Collective forms of female violence on Southern slaveholding sites illustrates that acts of poisoning were not always individualistic occurrences. In his study on the French colony of Martinique, historian John Savage asserts that a 'powerful underground network' existed amongst enslaved domestics who worked collectively to destroy the plantation system through subversive acts of resistance. Savage emphasises the importance of domestic workers including nurses and cooks within these networks due to their access to household provisions and the white family.[675] Collaborative 'underground' systems of resistance were also prevalent in the US antebellum South. Poll and Lavina were described as 'domestics in the family of Samuel Skinner' and they utilised their gender specific roles to poison Skinner and his guests, as Poll asserted to Lavina: 'you on cooking, you will have a better chance to mix it then I should.'[676] As household labourers, Poll and Lavina were acutely aware of their enslaver's routine and they possessed almost unlimited access to household provisions which they used to their advantage, choosing the opportune moment to contaminate their enslaver's food and beverages. Through their shared experience of enslavement, bondswomen collectively conspired to perpetrate acts of violence against slaveholding men regardless of the consequences.

John Skinner, a free white man of Washington County and the brother of the deceased, was indicted as a defendant alongside Poll and Lavina for the poisoning and murder of Samuel Skinner. According to his trial record, John Skinner purchased the poison 'under false pretences' and gave it to the two enslaved women under the instructions it was to be administered into Skinner's food and drink.[677] John Skinner's fate is unknown and the reasons for his involvement in the crime remain undisclosed. Family strife or the possibility of inheritance upon the death of Samuel Skinner may have been potential factors. The motivations behind Poll and Lavina's involvement are also hidden within the record. However, Poll and Lavina's conversations, as highlighted in Moses's testimony, suggests revenge was their primary motive as their hatred for Skinner is overwhelmingly evident within the trial record. Whilst Poll and Lavina were unable to personally purchase the arsenic due to anti-poison legislature which prohibited the selling of toxic substances to enslaved and free people of colour, it is

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[675] Savage, '"Black Magic" and White Terror', 639.

[676] *State vs. Poll and Lavina* (1821),'North Carolina Digital Collections'.

[677] 'Melancholy Occurrence', Western Carolinian, 12th June 1821, Salisbury, North Carolina, 2. *Newspapers.com* [https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/67700987/] (accessed: 19th May 2022).

clear the two women used the opportunity provided by John Skinner to even the score and poison their enslaver who died a slow and painful death.

In 1859 the Harris court of Georgia decreed that on the 7th October, 1858, Sarah poisoned the breakfast of her owner, Benjamin Williams, with 'certain powders.'[678] Benjamin Williams complained that the family's coffee and bread had 'a bitter taste' and they immediately suspected 'it was poisoned.' Williams's son also testified that he 'took a piece of meat, fried ham' and it 'tasted very bitter.' Several other people, including a local man named James Smith, inadvertently consumed the poisoned breakfast and were immediately 'sick at the stomach.' A piece of bread was given to Williams's dog and 'before he finished eating half if it, he died and dropped dead in his track.' All members of the Williams family survived apart from the family dog. Sarah confessed that the 'bread, meat, coffee, all were poisoned' with 'white powders' of strychnine and arsenic which were discovered secreted under a fence rail nearby. Historians have stressed the use of natural poisons derived from roots, herbs and plants. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, for example, asserted that 'herbs and conjure doctors, like preachers, were extremely suspect' yet, enslavers were forced to look closer to home, as poisoners proved to be their own domestic servants whose poisons predominately derived from manufactured toxins, as the Williams family exclaimed to the authorities that 'Sarah the prisoner was the cook'.[679] As the cook, Sarah had many opportunities to poison her enslaver's food and drink. The insertion of the poison into the breakfast items in the morning, a communal time of eating, demonstrates the lengths enslaved women undertook to ensure the poison was consumed.

This trial record parallels *State vs. Poll & Lavina* due to its inclusion of a free white man as a defendant. William Howell was also tried before the Harris Superior Court and he confessed to poisoning William's well bucket with strychnine and arsenic. Howell's testimony is striking due to the nature of the confession which attempted to absolve Sarah of any crime or wrongdoing. Howell testified before the court that he 'did not tell Sarah he was going to put the poison in the bucket' and that he had previously asked Sarah to poison the well 'but she would not do it.' Despite Howell's admission of guilt,

[678] *Sarah a Slave vs. the State* (1859), Records of the Superior Court of Harris County, Draw 165, Box 16. Georgia Archives, Morrow, Georgia.
[679] Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor,* 424.

Sarah was found guilty and she was executed at the Harris Gallows. The court found Howell guilty of 'the most diabolical crime known to the laws of society' of 'attempting to procure a negro to commit the crime of poisoning' and he was sentenced to five years in jail. The court judge decreed that 'after his open and bold confession he would sentence him for seven years' and he further stated that 'if there was any law for it, he would sentence him for fifty years.'[680] The nature of this crime and Howell's bold attempt to exonerate Sarah clearly offended the moral sensibilities of the Harris court officials and jury.

This record reflects the double standards and the discriminatory processes of the South's criminal justice system which protected Howell from life imprisonment and execution. No such leniency was shown to Sarah who was executed at the Harris Gallows despite Howell's forceful and complete admission of guilt. Building upon Phillip J. Schwarz's characterisation of enslaved people as 'twice condemned' by Southern law and slavery within the legal courts of the South, Tamika Nunley asserts that enslaved women were 'thrice condemned' in antebellum criminal proceedings due to the 'gendered contours' of slavery and Southern law.[681] Nunley asserts that the 'gendered contexts' of enslaved women's lives were used alongside racialised gender stereotypes to 'strengthen or undermine the case for condemnation.'[682] In Sarah's case the court refused to show leniency despite Howell's numerous assertions of guilt. Howell's white masculine privilege spared him from execution, while the 'triple burden' of Sarah's enslaved status, sex and race served as affirmation of her guilt.[683] *State vs. Sarah* epitomises the 'gendered system of racism' enslaved women experienced within Southern courts of law which ensured the imbalance of power remained with slaveholders and whites in general. [684]

The discovery of the poisoned breakfast indicates that Sarah was one who committed the act of poisoning. Howell's numerous confessions and testimonies to the court that he 'did not care for what length of time the court sentenced him', suggests that the two were involved in a sexual or intimate relationship.[685] Historian Glenn McNair speculates that Howell and Sarah were sexual partners,

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[680] 'Judicial Cases Concerning Slavery: Georgia' in Helen Catterall and James Hayden, *Judicial Cases Concerning American and the Negro* (New York, 1926) 71.
[681] Phillip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705-1865* (Baton Rouge, 1998).
[682] Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned', 6.
[683] Davis, 'Reflections on the Black Woman's Role'.
[684] Feinstein, *When Rape Was legal,* xiv.
[685] *Sarah a Slave vs. the State* (1859), Georgia Archives.

describing them as 'lovers.'[686] Due to issues of consent and the unequal power dynamics present between Howell, a free white man, and Sarah, an enslaved Black woman, this study abstains from describing the two as 'lovers' or 'romantic' partners. However, although the evidence is speculative, Howell's attempt to take responsibility for the crime and his effort to remove the entirety of the blame from Sarah indicates that Sarah and Howell must have possessed some form of personal connection or relationship. Historian David D. Baker describes this case as 'unique' due to the 'interracial nature of the crime' and McNair similarly asserts, 'interracial cooperation in serious crime was rare.'[687] The inclusion of local white men as defendants within *State vs. Sarah* (1859) and *State vs. Poll & Lavina* (1821) demonstrates that interracial criminal connections were occassionally fostered on antebellum slaveholding sites. These trial records evidence how bondswomen poisoned male enslavers with the assistance of local white men, expanding understandings of the ways in which enslaved women perpetrated criminal offences and navigated the gendered contours of the South's racialised legal system. These records thus contribute an additional element to the study of enslaved female poisoners, establishing interracial networks of resistance which enslaved women forged for their own varied and complex reasons.

<u>Collaborative Networks of Violence</u>

Enslaved women also killed male enslavers through collective networks of resistance, with enslaved female communities weaponising a variety of objects in their quest to murder slaveholding men. Eliza and Ann were indicted in the county of Essex, Virginia, in 1860 for the murder of their enslaver William J. Croxton. It was established that Croxton had been killed 'by a blow or blows from a grubbing hoe' on the 30th January.[688] Croxton's overseer, James Shearwood, was the first to notice his employer's absence from the farm and he testified that upon examining the grounds he noticed Croxton's saddled horse 'but the stirrups and the bridle had been cut off.' The presence of blood on the saddle further

686 McNair, 'Slave Women', 142-143.
687 David V. Baker, *Women and Capital Punishment in the United States: An Analytical History* (Jefferson, 2016), 116; McNair, 'Slave Women', 143.
688 *Commonwealth vs. Ann a Slave* (1860), John Letcher Executive Papers, 1859-1863. Accession 36787, Box 2, Folder 3, Misc. Reel 4706, State Records Collection, LVA; *Commonwealth vs. Eliza a Slave* (1860), John Letcher Executive Papers, 1859-1863. Accession 36787, Box 2, Folder 3, Misc. Reel 4706, State Records Collection, LVA.

raised Shearwood's suspicion that his employer had been assaulted or killed. The following morning bones were discovered in the ashes of a lye hopper (a nineteenth century laundry device) alongside Croxton's pocketknife and spectacle case 'which the decedent always carried his spectacles in except when he had them on.' Upon further investigation, a grubbing hoe was discovered secreted underneath the main house covered in 'blood and human hair.' It was also reported that the ashes were 'very recently' placed in the lye hopper, as they were described as 'warm' to the touch.

The evening of Croxton's disappearance, Shearwood noted that the 'only persons left on the farm at the time besides the decedent were the prisoner Ann, a negro woman named Eliza and an old negro woman named Edna…and some small negro children.' The two enslaved women were subsequently confronted and Ann confessed that her and Eliza had attacked their enslaver together: 'Eliza struck her master the first blow and that the prisoner struck him the second blow after he had fallen on the ground.' Both women then dragged his lifeless body into the kitchen and 'put him in the fireplace.' It was noted that Croxton's body was longer than the width of the fireplace and Eliza confessed that 'she and Ann put him on the fire until his legs burnt off and then put his legs on the fire, boots and all, and burnt them up.' Crucially, it was revealed to the court that Croxton had whipped Ann prior to his death and an enslaved man who testified on behalf of the prosecution stated that Ann 'intended to kill her master and burn him up because he had whipped her and sent her out of the house where she had been at work to work upon the farm.'[689] Eliza and Ann were found guilty and executed.

Eliza protested her innocence before the court and declared that she had only assisted Ann in destroying Croxton's body. Ann, however, fiercely insisted that Eliza had also struck Croxton with the hoe and Eliza's petition for clemency was denied. It is likely that Ann, who was whipped a week prior to Croxton's death, orchestrated the homicide and was the principal instigator in the murder that resulted in his demise. Although both Eliza and Ann attempted to blame each other for Croxton's murder during interrogation, their shared participation in the crime, either in the murder or the destruction of Croxton's lifeless body, once again reveals of a collaborative network of resistance amongst bondswomen on slaveholding sites. This record establishes a collective web of violence amongst enslaved female

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[689] *Commonwealth vs. Ann a Slave* (1860), LVA; *Commonwealth vs. Eliza a Slave* (1860), LVA.

communities, where enslaved women participated in the perpetration of violent crimes and assisted in the concealment of evidence. The collective eradication of their enslaver's body in the kitchen fireplace and the dispersion of his ashes in the lye hopper establishes that aggravated homicide on slaveholding sites was occasionally a joint and collaborative form of resistance.

Networks of resistance for the purpose of committing homicide also occurred between enslaved women and enslaved men. Residents were shocked to discover the remains of Hiram Beasley an 'old resident' of Boone County, Missouri, who had been murdered 'by four of his own negroes' on the 20th March, 1843. Beasley's dead body was discovered in the road leading to Perche Creak with 'several mortal fractures' to the skull caused by multiple blows from an axe.[690] America, Henry, Simon, and David were arrested and tried before the Columbia judicial court. The murder of Beasley, a local slaveholder of Columbia, demonstrates the existence of grouped networks of resistance between enslaved women and men who participated in the killing and disposal of a male enslaver. America and Henry were found guilty of first-degree murder and executed. Simon and David were found guilty of second-degree murder and were transported out of state after receiving thirty-nine lashes.

Trial records exist for three of the defendants: America, Henry, and Simon. Throughout these records America is portrayed as the lead architect who devised and orchestrated Beasley's murder. Confessions and statements throughout these individual records detail that America instigated the murder, as she was the first to strike Beasley multiple times with the axe before Henry, Simon and David began their subsequent assault: 'America picked up the axe and struck master in the back of the neck…Henry then ran up and struck him with his fist and knocked him down'; 'America struck master the first lick with the axe and when he was in the act of running that Henry struck him under the chin with his fist and then struck him with a stick and killed him'; 'America came to her and told her that she had killed her master.'[691] These accounts clearly establish America as the initiator of the attack, only to be followed by her husband, Henry, who finalised the murder. The court also perceived America and

[690] William Switzler, *History of Boone County* (St. Louis, 1882), 341.
The inclusion of Hiram Beasley's murder, a local Missouri farmer, four decades later in the 1880s publication *The History of Boone County* exemplifies the severity of the crime which was clearly significant and memorable enough to be recorded in the local history of the county.
[691] Testimony from Simon in *State vs. America* (1843), Circuit Court Case Files, Case 2368, Misc c19718, MSA; Testimony from David, *State vs. America*, MSA; Testimony from Mary, *State vs. America*, MSA.

her husband to be co-conspirators in Beasley's death, since both were convicted of murder in the first degree and were sentenced to death. Although Beasley's death was the product of collective action, America is portrayed as the primary perpetrator and Henry as the secondary accomplice. The case of *State vs. Henry* would appear to reify gendered tropes surrounding violence, but, looking deeper, the trial records flip this gendered script and explicitly centre America as the main protagonist and the enslaved men as the accessories to the crime: 'Henry, Simon and David feloniously, wilfully and of their malice aforethought were present aiding, helping and abetting, conforming, assisting and maintaining the said America in the felony and murder'.[692] Although the masculinisation of overt resistance within fugitive male narratives and secondary historiographies of slavery overshadow the violent contributions of enslaved women, these trial records place America at the forefront of this combative act of resistance.

The description of Beasley as an 'old resident' within a later 1882 publication, *The History of Boone County,* raises the possibility that Beasley's advanced age may have been an influential factor in his untimely death.[693] David Doddington asserts that the advanced age of male enslavers influenced and aided enslaved people's resistance. The 'process of ageing' according to Doddington, 'destabilised mastery' alongside perceptions of dominance and power.[694] Enslaved women understood the declining powers and abilities of their enslavers to be potential avenues of resistance and they exploited their aged enslavers' mental and physical frailty. For instance, the WPA respondent, Sarah Wilson, described the violent actions of her aunt who assaulted her 'old' and 'feeble' enslaver. When threatened with a whipping, Wilson's aunt 'just screamed out loud and run at him with her fingers stuck out straight and jabbed him in the belly.'[695] Knowledge of enslavers' advanced age shaped and impacted enslaved people's 'individual and collective strategies for survival and forms of resistance, both temporary and permanent.'[696] Sojourner Truth also relayed how an enslaved woman named Soan physically assaulted her aged and infirm enslaver:

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[692] *State vs. Henry a Slave* (1843), Circuit Court Case Files, Case Number 2368, Misc c18718, MSA.
[693] Switzler, *History of Boone County*, 341-343.
[694] Doddington, 'Old Age', 112.
[695] Sarah Wilson, FWP, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. 13, 3.
[696] Doddington, 'Old Age', 112.

> She would clutch his feeble frame in her iron grasp, as in vice; and, when her mistress did not see, would give him a squeeze, a shake, and lifting him up, set him down again, *as hard as possible*…as soon as Missus's eyes and ears were engaged away, another grasp – another shake – another bounce.[697]

Beasley's enslaved 'property' may have perceived his advanced age as an opportunity to create permanent change through his murder due to a real or perceived cessation of power. However, the ailing conditions of slaveholding men did not always engender alleviated conditions or respite from corporal abuse, as Henry confessed that he had previously 'ran off' to evade being whipped.[698] There appeared to be no cessation to Beasley's corporeal powers and ability to discipline despite his status as an 'old resident.' According to Doddington, 'enslaved people understood that excessive punishment stemmed from their enslavers' fears that their powers were declining and that they needed to dominate while they still could.'[699] Henry's testimony portrays an abusive, elderly enslaver who was loathed by his enslaved property, as Henry attested that Simon had previously 'beat up a large quantity of ground glass' for the purpose of poisoning Beasley. Henry further asserted that others had been 'determined for years to take his life.'[700] Despite Beasley's continued use of corporal discipline, his advanced age nevertheless made him vulnerable to assault, and America took matters into her own hands when she struck him with the axe. *State of Missouri vs. America, a Slave* demonstrates the instability of white male mastery on Southern slaveholding sites. Power was transitional amongst the free and the enslaved, and interchangeable between men and women, white and Black. 'Power represented was not always power manifested' and enslaved women exploited the advanced age of their enslavers to enact murderous assault, with America striking the first blow.[701]

Enslaved women murdered their male enslavers through collective efforts with the aid and assistance of their male partners. The phenomenon of violence considered in a collective sense between enslaved men and women has received minimal scholarly attention, with the exception of historian

[697] Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828* (Boston, 1850), 83-84.
[698] *State vs. Henry a Slave* (1843), MSA.
[699] Doddington, 'Old Age,' 131-132.
[700] *State vs. Henry a Slave* (1843), MSA.
[701] Doddington, 'Old Age', 135.

Laura T. Fishman, who asserts that 'men and women conspiring together to kill overseers and their masters was not out of the ordinary.'[702] This is evidenced within the testimony of the WPA informant, Dave Lawson, who described how his grandparents collectively murdered their male enslaver, Drew Norwood, on an North Carolina plantation. Lawson described the sadistic actions of his family's former enslaver, who he characterised as 'a mad bull' and 'de meanes' white man Lawd ever let breathe de breaf of life.'[703] According to Lawson, Norwood whipped enslaved people 'to death' and he was keen to emphasise that his former enslaver 'made his money 'buyin' an' sellin' n******. He bought dem cheap an' sold dem high.' Lawson's grandparents, Cleve and Lissa, were separated from their infant child at the time of their purchase to Norwood. Lawson exclaimed that Norwood refused to buy Lissa's child because in Norwood's opinion infants, 'was a strain on de mammy what breas' nussed it.' Lawson described the pain his grandmother experienced at being separated from her infant child as he exclaimed: 'Lissa cut up powerful kaze he made her leave de baby behin', but Marse Drew jus' laughed an' tole her dat he would give her a puppy…Den he snapped de chains on dey wris' an' led dem off.' Lawson emphasised that was the last time his grandmother and mother were physically together. However, Lawson's grandparents later took their revenge on Lawson when they collectively restrained him and poured boiling water down his throat.

Family separation and the threat of sale underscore Lissa and Cleve's capital offence.[704] Lawson's grandparents were informed that Lissa was to be sold and Cleve contrived a plan to murder Norwood in order to prevent their separation. Cleve instructed Lissa to boil a pitcher of water while he searched for Norwood and 'when he come back he had Marse Drew all tied up wid de rope and gagged so he couldn' holler'. Lawson reported that his grandfather 'stuffed' a funnel spout 'way down'

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[702] Fishman, 'Slave Women, Resistance and Criminality', 55.
[703] Dave Lawson, FWP, North Carolina Narratives, Vol. 11, Part 2, 2.
[704] For further information on the sale and separation of enslaved people in the antebellum South, see, for example: Michael Tadman, 'Slave Trading and the Mentalities of Masters and Slaves' in Leonie Archer (ed.), *Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour* (London, 1988), 188-206; Edward Baptist, '"Cuffy", "Fancy Maids," and "One-Eyed Men": Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 5 (2001), 1619-1650; Adam Rothman, 'The Domestication of the Slave Trade in the United States' in Walter Johnson (ed.), *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Traders in the Americas* (Yale, 2005), 32-54; Berry, *The Price For Their Pound of Flesh*; Stephanie Jones-Rogers, 'Rethinking Sexual Violence and the Marketplace of Slavery: White Women, the Slave Market and Enslaved People's Sexualized Bodies in the Nineteenth-Century South' in Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie Harris (eds.), *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens, 2018), 109-123; Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property.*

Norwood's throat and he began to threaten him with death if Norwood did not abandon his plans to sell Lissa. Although Lissa was originally ignorant of her husband's plan, Lawson described at length how Lissa assisted her husband in murdering Norwood as he graphically explained to his interview: 'She didn' tell Cleve not to do it nor nothin'; she jus' filled de pitcher wid water, den she went over an' set down on de floor an' hol' Marse Drew's head so he couldn' move.' Cleve then proceeded to pour the boiling water down his enslaver's throat. Whilst Norwood rived in pain, 'Lissa brung another pitcher full' and according to Lawson, 'dey wuzn' no pity in her eyes as she watched Marse Drew fightin' his way to torment'.

Although Lawson framed Cleve as the protagonist who orchestrated the murder, Lissa's contribution should neither be ignored nor dismissed. The image of Lissa holding Norwood down while she watched her husband pour the boiling water down his throat with 'no pity in her eyes' conjures a powerful image of an enslaved woman who was beyond sympathy for a man who systematically abused his enslaved "property." The detailed narration of Norwood's slow and agonising death in which Lawson graphically explained how 'the water scaled its way down his th'oat, burnin' up his insides' whilst Norwood 'kicked an' struggled', evokes a torturous element to this act of homicide. The dual process of scalding and drowning would have been a prolonged and painful death; no doubt Lissa and Cleve derived some form of satisfaction in their revenge against a man who had abused them and sold away their only child. Lawson himself expressed gratification in the re-telling of Norwood's reaction when he realised his grisly fate, as he expressed to his interviewer: 'When Ole Marse seed what dey was fixin' to do to him, his eyes near 'bout busted out of his head'.

Unsurprisingly, retaliation against Cleve and Lissa was swift and severe. The following morning after Norwood's body was discovered, the local authorities hanged Lissa and Cleve without trial from a nearby oak tree. Lawson emphasised how his grandparents 'knew 'twuzn' to use to run, dey couldn' get nowhare' and they were discovered 'settin by de door han' in han' waitin'' for the sheriff's arrival.[705] The description of Cleve and Lissa waiting hand in hand for the authorities to arrive produces a poignant image of two partners who remained resolute to the very end. Lawson's testimony

[705] Lawson, North Carolina Narratives, 1-6.

underscores the vulnerability of enslaved families to permanent sale and separation, and enslaved people undertook drastic action to escape this ever-present possibility. This narrative illustrates the duplexity of violence which was a shared phenomenon among enslaved couples who assisted each other in the permeant removal of cruel and abusive enslavers. Lawson's testimony illustrates the shared nature of physical resistance on antebellum slaveholding sites which could be interchangeable between enslaved men *and* women.

Murder and Sexual Violence

Other enslaved women murdered their male enslavers with weaponised objects as solo perpetrators during isolated incidents of white male sexual violence and rape. Just as bondswomen targeted male overseers with commonplace objects, as discussed in the second chapter, slaveholding men were also subject to brutal acts of murder with domestic and agricultural objects. In May, 1836, an enslaved woman named Phoebe was charged and executed for the murder of Carter Lumpkin in Tappahannock, Virginia. Lumpkin's mangled body was discovered eight yards from his house and the murder weapon, a grubbing hoe, was discovered 'covered in blood and hair.'[706] Despite Phoebe's attempts to dispose of Carter's body by dragging him to a nearby spring, the evidence against her was overwhelming as the murder weapon was located underneath her hog pen and blood was found on Phoebe's door, clothing, and person. It was reported to the court that Phoebe murdered her enslaver at midnight following a dispute. Lumpkin's widow, Frances, testified on behalf of the prosecution and extracts from her testimony demonstrates that Phoebe possessed a history of violent resistance against her male enslaver. It was reported that a year prior to the murder, Phoebe and Lumpkin 'had a difference last fall and the deceased struck her when she resisted him and threw him down.' Phoebe was whipped for her offence and she vowed that Lumpkin 'should never whip her again.' Whilst this act of corporal abuse was a powerful motive for Phoebe's subsequent resistance, it is possible to glean an additional motive behind her use of violence in the May of 1836.

[706] *Commonwealth vs. Phoebe* (1836), Wyndham Robertson Executive Papers, 1836-1837. Accession 43097, Box 1, Folder 1, Misc. Reel 6342-6345, State Records Collection, LVA.

Historian Christopher Bouton attributes Lumpkin's murder to a dispute 'over food and punishment.'[707] Reading this record against the archival grain, however, uncovers a history of sexual abuse and harassment on the Lumpkin plantation. Extracts from the testimonies of witnesses evidences a pattern of sexual abuse in which Lumpkin deliberately supplied his enslaved female property with alcohol to induce compliance and sexual subordination. An enslaved woman named Lucy, for example, testified that on the evening of his death, Lumpkin 'carried her to his house and gave her a dram.' The description of this enslaved woman being 'carried' to Lumpkin's home heavily hints at sexual violence and that Lumpkin raped Lucy. The lack of details in Lucy's testimony regarding her sexual encounter and her euphemistic language evokes Darlene Clark Hine's notion of dissemblance in which Black women shielded 'the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.'[708] Lumpkin's wife corroborated Lucy's account as she attested that on the evening of Lumpkin's murder, her husband 'went to the house of another negro woman belonging to him and brought her in and gave her a dram and sometime after he went out again'.

Frances Lumpkin relayed information of her husband's sexual activities to the court with apparent indifference and denial. Whilst some married slaveowning women violently displaced their anger and jealousy onto enslaved women, as outlined in the previous chapter, others including Mrs. Lumpkin ignored their husband's sexual abuse of bondswomen and girls. The Civil War diarist, Mary Boykin Chesnut, discussed the feigned ignorance of Southern women to their husbands' sexual transgressions in her writings: 'the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children – and every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own seems to think drop from the clouds, or pretends to think so.'[709] The coded nature of this trial record highlights the necessity for reading against the grain in order to uncover silences that pervade the traditional archive. The vague nature of France's testimony in which her husband 'brought [Lucy] in', alongside Lucy's euphemism of being 'carried', all heavily suggest that Carter Lumpkin raped the enslaved women on his plantation.

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[707] Bouton, *Setting Slavery's Limits,* 61.
[708] Hine, 'Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women', 37.
[709] Comer Vann Woodward and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld (eds.), *The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries* (Oxford, 1984), 29

These details evidence an additional motive for Phoebe's use of deadly force against her enslaver. Whilst corporal abuse was a powerful motive for Phoebe's resistance, sexual violence is central to Lumpkin and Phoebe's conflict. According to Mrs. Lumpkin, on the evening of her husband's death she 'heard him at the house of the prisoner after midnight and there appeared to be considerable noise as if the prisoner and deceased were quarrelling.' It can be deduced that Lumpkin visited Phoebe's cabin in the early hours of the morning to rape Phoebe which led to a confrontation and his eventual demise, as Phoebe grabbed the nearby grubbing hoe to defend herself against his attack. Lumpkin's skull was fractured in two places, with 'several wounds about the face' indicating that they were inflicted 'by more than one blow.'[710] The image of Phoebe repeatedly hacking at her enslaver's face and skull suggests this was both an act of self-defence and revenge. Phoebe no doubt took gratification in destroying the man who had raped and abused herself and others on a systematic basis. The disfigurement of Lumpkin's face before she dragged his lifeless body from her cabin evokes a personal element to this act of violence, echoing Nikki Taylor's theorization that enslaved women's lethal resistance served as a method of Black feminist justice.[711]

State of Missouri vs. Celia a Slave (1855) remains one of the most well-known and documented cases of enslaved women's weaponised resistance against sexual assault.[712] On the evening of June 23rd, 1855, Celia clubbed her enslaver to death after five years of repeated rape and sexual abuse in Callaway County, Missouri. After striking Newsom on the head twice with a large stick 'two hours after dark', Celia burnt his body in her cabin fireplace before dispersing his ashes throughout the farm.[713] Celia was found guilty of murder in the first-degree and after an unsuccessful appeal to the Supreme Court, she was executed on December 21st, 1855. Celia's case epitomises the sexual experiences of enslaved women and girls who were systematically abused and raped throughout the antebellum South. It

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[710] *Commonwealth vs. Phoebe* (1836), LVA.
[711] Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*.
[712] Contemporary newspapers widely reported Celia's trial throughout the Northern and Southern US states, with publications detailing the gruesome aspects of the murder, without eliciting the motives behind Celia's crime. However, Melton McLaurin's 1993 historical monograph of Celia's life and trial widely publicised Celia's experiences of slavery to a modern audience. Other accounts of Celia's life include the theatre performance, *Celia, a Slave*. The contemporary and modern depictions of Celia's trial account for why this particular case of enslaved women's violence remains one of the most sensationalised and well-known. See: Melton A. McLauren, *Celia, a Slave* (New York, 1993).
[713] *Newsom Celia a slave vs. State of Missouri* (1855), Supreme Court Case Files, Box 356, Folder 14, MSA.

remains one of the most harrowing and explicitly detailed cases regarding the sexual realities of antebellum slavery. Unlike other enslaved women who sometimes retreated into a 'culture of dissemblance', Celia was frank about her experiences under slavery and she attested to her sexual victimisation on numerous occasions.[714] Celia's cabin was conveniently located only 'sixty steps' from Newsome's home; far enough from prying eyes, but close enough for easy accessibility. Before bludgeoning Newsom to death, Celia made a number of threats warning her enslaver 'she would hurt him if he did not quit forcing her while she was sick.' Celia's desperation is evidenced when she 'told the white family' of Newsom's sexual behaviour in a bid for them to intervene. However, based on Newsom's continued pursuit of Celia, her warnings and pleas for help fell on deaf ears.

Despite her use of threats, Celia remained vulnerable to sexual abuse and she resorted to desperate and increasingly violent measures to defend herself from Newsom's attacks, as she chose and hid her weapon of choice before Newsom's arrival: 'she told him not to come, and that if he came she would hurt him, she then put a stick and put it in the corner.' Newsom approached Celia's cabin regardless of her warnings and while the two were conversing, Celia struck him twice with the stick. The second blow to Newsom's skull proved to be fatal. Celia then attempted to destroy the evidence by burning his body in her cabin fireplace and distributing his remains around the farm. All that remained of Newsom were his bones and trouser buttons. Celia was arrested and indicted in Callaway County court the following morning after Newsom's remains were discovered in her cabin fireplace and scattered around the farm.

The term 'rape' is omitted within the court records pertaining to the *State vs. Celia, a Slave*. Officials termed and described Newsom's rape of Celia as 'sexual intercourse', reflecting the attitudes and legal legislation of the antebellum era which decreed that as property, enslaved women could not be legally raped.[715] Despite enslaved women's 'unrapeable' status, Celia consistently emphasised that

[714] Hine, 'Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women'.

[715] Rachel Feinstein argues that this particular use of language was a deliberate attempt to minimise and sanitise the rape of Black women and girls, and to disguise the violent behaviour of white men. Feinstein, *When Rape Was legal,* 5.

Newsom coerced and *forced* her into sexual relations.[716] Celia's legal defence repeatedly used the word 'forced' to appeal to the jury in the emphasis that Celia's violence was an act of self-defence:

> If the jury believe from the evidence that Celia did kill Newsom, but that the killing was necessary to protect herself against forced sexual intercourse with her, on the part of said Newsom, and there was imminent danger of such forced sexual connection being accomplished by Newsom, they will not find her guilty of murder in the first degree.

Despite the impassioned pleas from Celia's defence, the all-white male jury found Celia guilty of murder in the first degree. Saidiya Hartman theorises that the gendered ideals surrounding enslaved Black women's sexuality served to reinforce the 'presumption of both culpability and acquiescence' amongst enslaved women in courts of law.[717] Hartman argues Newsom's 'constant violations were eclipsed by the criminal agency of Celia' and according to Tamika Nunley, 'verdicts that accentuated the criminality of enslaved women worked in tandem to expunge white culpability.'[718] Additionally, a not guilty verdict would have set a dangerous precedent by establishing enslaved people with the legal right to defend themselves and to use force against whites as a justifiable method of self-protection. Furthermore, the all-male jury, seven of whom were slaveholders, would have been reluctant to relinquish their right to rape their enslaved female property. The jury agreed that Newsom was within his rights to use and abuse his enslaved property, even if that abuse surmounted to rape. *State vs. Celia, a Slave* highlights the racialised sexual contours of the South which permeated all areas of life including the South's criminal justice system.

Celia's defence carried clear political undertones as her insistence that she was forced into sexual intercourse challenged the failure of the South's legal system to recognise the rape of enslaved Black women. Her insistence that she was raped was a form of political resistance, as Celia set her own boundaries as to who and who could not have sexual access to her body. Celia and other enslaved women expressed their agency in courts of law when they contested their enslavement and white men's sexual right to abuse their bodies. The legal boundaries of the South's judicial system therefore became

[716] Block, *Rape and Sexual Power,* 115.
[717] Saidiya Hartman, 'Seduction and the Ruses of Power,' *Callaloo,* Vol. 19, No. 2 (1996), 537-560, 541.
[718] Hartman, 'Seduction and the Ruses of Power', 541; Nunley, 'Thrice Condemned', 32.

a site of further resistance as enslaved women, including Celia, vocalised their abuse and their desire for jurisdiction over their own bodies. Furthermore, Celia's affirmation that she was indeed raped rejected the stereotypes of Black women's licentious hypersexuality which served to excuse white men's license to sexually abuse. As historian Melton McLaurin asserts, 'the case of Celia, a slave, reminds us that the personal and the political are never totally separate entities.'[719] Celia's case has been hailed as 'a true story of violence and retribution' and while this is certainly true, Celia exclaimed on numerous occasions that she had only intended to hurt Newsom 'not to kill him.'[720] It is difficult to discern whether this was simply a ploy to avoid accusations of premeditation and to evade execution, but regardless of Celia's true intentions it is indisputable that Celia perceived violence to be a legitimate course of action to repel her enslaver's sexual advances. Celia's threats of violence before her use of physical assault, again indicates that in a climate of volatile exploitation and minimal protection from the law, violence was Celia's only recourse. The weaponisation of the stick 'about as large as the upper part of a Windsor chair, but not so long' provided Celia with the physical protection she so desperately sought, demonstrating that enslaved women were resourceful when it came to arming themselves for moments of physical resistance.[721] Although Celia and other enslaved women lacked the legal right to defend themselves, it did not prevent them from deploying violence through the weaponisation of objects as an effective means of ending or preventing their sexual victimisation.

Conclusion

Enslaved women's violence against slaveholding men encompassed a variety of different modes and methods. This study has demonstrated that enslaved women's resistance did not have to include physical acts of violence: real and perceived threats of violence alongside verbal warnings were an effective deterrent against white male abuse. Although the reactions of slaveholders to external levels of threat varied widely, some male enslavers attempted to minimise their personal risk through the enactment of protective behaviours which included the withdrawal of punishments or the delegation of punishments

[719] McLauren, *Celia, a Slave*, xii.
[720] McLauren, *Celia, a Slave*.
[721] *Newsom Celia a slave vs. State of Missouri* (1855), MSA.

to others. Thus, male enslavers shaped their behaviours and actions according to the violent resistance of enslaved women. This speaks to the power and magnitude of enslaved women's violence which could change the patriarchal dynamics of slavery at a localised level. The perception of threat, whether real or perceived, stresses the agency and power of enslaved women who navigated the volatile world of slavery for their own ends and needs.

Enslaved women's methods of assault mirrored those perpetrated against overseeing men as bondswomen weaponised commonplace objects and their own bare hands to resist corporal punishment and sexual exploitation. Enslaved women also enacted various modes of assault against multiple generations of the slaveholding elite. Age was an influential factor in enslaved women's violent resistance and the testimony of the formerly enslaved provides a new insight into the fractious and turbulent relationships between bondswomen and their male enslavers throughout different life cycles. Violence on slaveholding sites was interchangeable. Although slaveholding men and their sons engaged in intergenerational violence, so too did enslaved women as they targeted both junior and senior members of the slaveholding family. Shifting power dynamics on individual slaveholding sites did little to quell some enslaved women's use of violence, as bondswomen rejected performances of white manhood across generations of the male slaveholding elite.

Enslaved women also partook in incendiary modes of resistance. The complex and often unspoken motivations for enslaved women's arsonist behaviour highlights the complexity of the above cases as bondswomen manipulated their environments through the destructive use of fire, sending shockwaves within the immediate slaveholding family and throughout local white communities who responded with trepidation and fear. This form of resistance enabled enslaved women to undermine the institution which exploited them as they obstructed and thwarted the economic prosperity of their male enslavers. Enslaved women also created permanent changes to individual slaveholding sites through the murder of their male enslavers. Primary records demonstrate a plethora of ways in which enslaved women murdered slaveholding men through creative and vindictive methods. Methods of murder included the weaponisation of agricultural objects as well as the use of household alkalis as key poisons. Arsenic, strychnine, mercury chloride and other chemical substances were mixed into the food and drink of male enslavers and others during instances of deliberate revenge and collateral damage.

Poisoning records also evidence the presence of inter-racial cooperation amongst enslaved Black women and local white men which bondswomen forged for their own varied and complicated reasons.

Enslaved women facilitated acts of violence through individual *and* collective efforts, as bondswomen forged successful and unsuccessful networks of violence with other enslaved women and men. The diverse and varied collaboration of violence against slaveholding men is a major theme throughout this chapter demonstrating the importance of mobility within enslaved women's strategies of violence. Enslaved women's methods of violence crucially evidence the formation of cross-plantation networks of resistance where bondspeople participated in the perpetration of violent crimes or they assisted in the concealment of evidence. Collective networks of violence demonstrate the geographic movement of women's violence which had the ability to transcend to neighbouring sites of enslavement belonging to other white male enslavers. The mobile positioning of their resistance sheds new light on enslaved women's illegal movement between slaveholding sites and how they utilised this movement for their own resistant purposes. 'Geographies of evasion and resistance' were thus more fluid and interchangeable than previously presumed.[722] Overall, enslaved women were no stranger to the use of force against slaveholding men. Their resistance against the elite members of the South speaks to the bravery and fortitude of bondswomen who were unafraid to target the political, economic, and social elite of the South. Thus, their acts of resistance carry clear political undertones as enslaved women sought to undermine and destroy the patriarchal leaders of slavery at a localised level, creating temporary and enduring change throughout the South in their violent refusal to be conquered and exploited.

[722] Holden, *Surviving Southampton*, 39.

Conclusion

> A great deal has been said about the black *man* and resistance, but very little about the unique relationship black women bore to the resistance struggles during slavery. To understand the part she played in developing and sharpening the thrust towards freedom, the broader meaning of slavery and of American slavery in particular must be explored.[723]

In 1972 Angela Davis highlighted the critical need to redefine and re-examine American slavery in understanding the lives of bondswomen and their roles in the resistance practices of the enslaved. Davis's powerful call for a 'broader meaning' of the US institution of slavery resonates today with this thesis, five decades later. Echoing Davis' articulation for a comprehensive re-examination of US enslavement, this thesis communicates the need for a broader understanding of enslaved women's resistance, one which encompasses the many varying and intersecting forces of power, violence, and gender in the effort to reconceptualise the gendered boundaries of resistance within slavery discourse. Although the subject of enslaved women's resistance under slavery has made sizeable progress since Davis' unprecedented publication, especially in gender-specific forms of reproductive resistance, the varying and complex facets of enslaved women's violent opposition to slavery remains a neglected area of historical inquiry. As has been shown, enslaved women were violent in their interactions with enslavers and overseeing men as they navigated the complex terrain of enslavement, drawing upon violence – in many forms, in many situations, and for many different reasons – to combat the intersectional oppressions inherent in the 'Peculiar Institution.' Although survival under slavery required caution, not all women were forced into positions of inaction. Enslaved women were significant contributors, individually and collectively, to the violent struggle against slavery and its many dehumanising exploitations at the hands of white enslavers and overseeing men.

It was not only adult women who deployed violence. A lifecycle of violence existed on Southern slaveholding sites; enslaved girls and women alike withstood the abusive conditions of slavery

[723] Davis, 'Reflections', 84.

at all life stages which they countered with their own methods of force. Enslaved girls and adolescents perpetrated acts of physical aggression and they did so with unflinching certainty. Examples of girlhood violence, as examined in Chapter Three, raise new questions surrounding children's agency, especially young girls who were able to inflict physical harm upon their enslavers through direct and indirect methods. Enslaved girls were acutely aware of their enslavement and they manipulated the exploitative forces of slavery through their own violent endeavours which would continue and evolve as enslaved girls reached adolescence and eventually adulthood. These cases also question the traditional motives assigned to female violence with WPA respondents in particular framing acts of childhood resistance within the prism of retribution.

Violence on the part of enslaved women and girls was not solely a product of fear and self-preservation. Whilst whippings and other acts of corporal violence including labour interference, threatening remarks, and white male sexual abuse acted as catalysts for resistive action, Black female perpetrated violence was not solely defensive. Revenge-based acts of violence were perpetrated at various life stages with enslaved girls and women alike utilising violence for the dual purpose of protection and vengeance. Many of these cases carry clear undertones or explicit references to retribution as bondswomen and girls enacted their own versions of justice in the absence of any real or meaningful legal protection. Violence enabled these women to protect themselves, but it also served as an extension of vengeance. This broadens perceptions of female resistance under slavery to include physical acts which occurred within *and* beyond the remit of self-protection.

These cases challenge the traditional motives ascribed to violent enslaved women, establishing that violent resistive action did not solely occur due to white initiated abuse. Whilst this thesis has established that corporal punishment and sexual violence were leading causes behind bondswomen's use of force, physical confrontations also erupted over minor disagreements and issues. Disputes surrounding rest and provisions, labour interferences, alongside threats of punishment were sufficient to engender physical responses from enslaved women which were occasionally fatal for overseers and enslavers alike. Once again, this broadens perceptions of enslaved women's violent resistance to incorporate instances of resistance which occurred beyond the remit of physical and sexual abuse. That these acts of violence occurred due to minor confrontations and disputes suggests that violent resistance

on slaveholding sites was more ubiquitous than existing scholarship would have us believe. Moreover, the use of violence in response to minor disagreements and everyday conflicts obliges us to reconsider the nature, dynamics, and purpose of violent resistance. These cases challenge the perception that violent resistance was only used during exceptional circumstances or when bondswomen were exposed to real or imminent danger.

A key theme of enslaved women's violent resistance consisted of weaponisation. Enslaved women were resourceful in their enactment of violent techniques, capitalising on the variability of the slaveholding site and its panoply of fixtures, objects, and substances to make everyday, otherwise innocuous items into potentially lethal instruments of their resistance. The space in which bondswomen laboured heavily influenced the weaponry they chose to deploy, with enslaved women brandishing predominantly agricultural items against those white Southerners who operated in agricultural settings including overseers and male enslavers. The agricultural weeding hoe, for example, features prominently throughout a variety of primary records pertaining to enslaved women's assault and murder of male overseers and enslavers, demonstrating its centrality as both an object of labour and resistance. While a select number of isolated studies have outlined enslaved women's methods of violence, few have analysed enslaved women's weaponisation of commonplace items and substances. The evidence compiled within this thesis demonstrates that the use of weapons was not the sole purview of enslaved men as documented and illustrated in abolitionist materials. The phenomenon of counter-whippings, as vividly demonstrated in the fugitive writings of Stewart and Northup, represents one of the most symbolic and underexplored forms of enslaved women's violent resistance to date.

The racial and gendered positions of enslaved women shaped the types of weaponised violence bondswomen deployed against male and female enslavers within and around the domestic settings of white Southern home, with domestics utilising a variety of fixtures and objects of both function and wealth. Enslaved women utilised even the most mundane and unorthodox of household fixtures, subverting their conventional use for the purpose of resistance, with others capitalising on their access to household medicines, drugs, and chemical substances for poisoning practices. Although historians have emphasised the use of plant-based poisons, records reveal the predominant usage of manufactured toxins as effective poisons in enslaved women's quest to maim and murder slaveholding men and

women, as well as other whites as collateral damage. The varied and complex modes of enslaved women's violent resistance demonstrate that poisoning was connected to opportunity and circumstance, rather than the physical capacities of the perpetrator, displacing the assumption that poison was a 'women's weapon' and a 'weapon of the weak.' Enslaved women capitalised on slavery's gendered divisions of labour to achieve their violent aims. Moreover, enslaved women's poisoning practices crucially reveal the establishment of networks of resistance, as bondswomen successfully or unsuccessfully enlisted the assistance of other bondswomen and even enslavers themselves who were unknowingly manipulated into procuring substances for enslaved women's violent designs as bondswomen bypassed state legislature or utilised poisons in their immediate vicinity.

Enslaved women forged successful and unsuccessful alliances of violence in their creation of collaborative networks of resistance with enslaved women and men, and even white Southerners. Enslaved women feature prominently in records pertaining to collective strategies of resistance, with Southern courts framing some enslaved women as ringleaders and lead instigators. These cases are a far cry from contemporary abolitionist projections concerning masculine protection and female dependency. This thesis's conceptualisation of shared violence disrupts the widely held assumption that enslaved women's resistance was individualistic, creating a more fluid and interconnected interpretation of violent resistive action, with enslaved women targeting both their immediate oppressors and other neighbouring enslavers. These instances reveal a fluidity to women's violence which could traverse slaveholding boundaries to other sites of enslavement, contributing to historical conceptualisations concerning geographies of containment and resistance in their creation of respective alliances of violence. The formation of collaborative networks of resistance showcases enslaved women's ability to capitalise on community ties with other enslaved people on both immediate and neighbouring sites of enslavement in their violent disruption of white supremacist spatial enforcement, control, and discipline.

In addition, these records also challenge perceptions of sexual violence under slavery with enslaved women engaging in their own sexualised attacks against overseers through their assault, mutilation, and dismemberment of white male genitalia. This previously unexplored mode of resistance disrupts established understandings of sex-based aggression under slavery, demonstrating that sexual violence was not the sole prerogative of white males, even if white men were the instigators of such

attacks. Whilst the traditional feminist focus on male violence against women under slavery is neither incorrect nor un-deserving of focus, this recognition should not obscure the fact that enslaved women were also capable of perpetrating sexualised acts of physical force. Although it is indisputable that sexual violence was a tool and extension of white patriarchal authority, and continues to be so, it can be argued that examinations of enslaved women's experiences of male violence under slavery are incomplete without an analysis of how some enslaved women used their own sexual methods of violence in response to such intimate attacks. Gender-based violence was not limited to white men under slavery, and the notion of gender-based violence as a broader concept other than simply 'male violence against women' instigates new discussions surrounding power and sexual force in the antebellum slaveholding South.

Enslaved women's violence under slavery further challenges historians to look beyond the conventional historiographical paradigms of white mastery and hegemony. The evidence presented projects a complex understanding of power, one which diverges from traditional models of the immovable enslaver and overseer in contrast to the projected powerlessness of enslaved women. Enslaved women's violence could contest, alter, and manipulate white authority, order, and control through real and perceived threats of violence. The implementation of protective behaviors amongst overseers, white women, and even male enslavers underscores the precarity of white dominance on Southern slaveholding sites, forcing historians to acknowledge the dynamic gendered politics of power with violence and power being interchangeable occurrences crossing racial and gendered divides. Descriptions of fearful slaveholding men in particular, illustrate how the strategy of violence ruptured white male confidence, as enslavers shaped their private behaviours and actions in response to the resistant activities of enslaved women. Enslaved women's violence therefore possessed the potential to undermine private displays of mastery and manipulate the patriarchal landscapes of local slaveholding sites. These cases challenge and expand the traditional and dated emphasis of totalitarian white hegemony, as well as perceptions of white slaveowning women's mastery to invite a deeper consideration of the intersection of gender, mastery, and opposition on antebellum slaveholding sites. Enslaved women were not powerless in their assertions of agency and womanhood, and their physical

interactions with overseers and enslavers provides a window in which to question the broader power dynamics of slavery.

To conclude, this study has outlined the main themes of enslaved women's violent resistance in the antebellum South, demonstrating similarities and differences in how enslaved women facilitated their acts of violence and the motivations behind their actions according to the target of their resistance. In tracing these violent themes, methods of assault, weaponisation, and murder are readily apparent throughout all three chapters pertaining to the violence of enslaved women against overseers, as well as male and female enslavers; yet, these chapters equally demonstrate the complexity of women's violence and the myriad ways in which their violence was implemented according to the spaces in which they laboured and the targets of their resistance. One thing is readily apparent: enslaved women did not solely retreat into a world of covert, illicit resistance. 'Women of Violence' opens new discussions surrounding the violent capabilities of enslaved women, suggesting that violence on the part of enslaved women was not as rare and uncommon as previously projected in slavery historiographies. Enslaved women were conscious and determined users of violence throughout the antebellum slaveholding South and their actions under slavery force historians to reconceptualise the gendered boundaries of violence in the quest to uncover the 'broader meaning' of enslaved women's resistance under slavery.

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