

*“The master wished to reproduce”:
slavery, forced intimacy, and enslavers’
interference in sexual relationships in the
antebellum South, 1808–1861*

Article

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

Open Access

Djelid, A. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4869-6857>
(2024) “The master wished to reproduce”: slavery, forced
intimacy, and enslavers’ interference in sexual relationships in
the antebellum South, 1808–1861. *American Nineteenth
Century History*, 25 (1). pp. 21-43. ISSN 1466-4658 doi:
10.1080/14664658.2024.2317499 Available at
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/116166/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher’s version if you intend to cite from the
work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2024.2317499>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

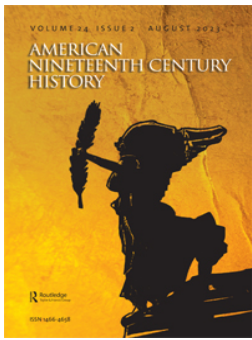
All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law,
including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other
copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in
the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online



“The master wished to reproduce”: slavery, forced intimacy, and enslavers’ interference in sexual relationships in the antebellum South, 1808–1861

Aisha Djelid

To cite this article: Aisha Djelid (24 Apr 2024): “The master wished to reproduce”: slavery, forced intimacy, and enslavers’ interference in sexual relationships in the antebellum South, 1808–1861, American Nineteenth Century History, DOI: [10.1080/14664658.2024.2317499](https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2024.2317499)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2024.2317499>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 24 Apr 2024.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

“The master wished to reproduce”: slavery, forced intimacy, and enslavers’ interference in sexual relationships in the antebellum South, 1808–1861

Aisha Djelid 

Department of History, University of Reading, Reading, UK

ABSTRACT

This article examines the extent to which enslavers across the antebellum South forced enslaved men and women to reproduce. Using a spectrum of violence as a tool of coercion, enslavers coerced, cajoled, and forced enslaved people to reproduce the institution of slavery, selecting specific individuals for their desirable characteristics and then exploited their offspring. This article explores the gendered experience of this forced reproduction and investigates how enslavers hired out or reserved enslaved men as “stock men” to breed with enslaved women, the age of these sexually exploited women and girls, how some enslaved men navigated forced reproduction to their advantage, and the concept of agency within this situation. The study of forced reproductions proves an important historiographical addition to the histories of slavery, capitalism, and sexual violence.

KEYWORDS

Slavery; gender; sexual violence; relationships

In 1937, Louisa Everett recalled the traumatic start to her marriage with her husband, Sam Everett. Their enslaver, Jim McClain, used violence as a tool of coercion to force over one hundred enslaved people on his Virginia plantation to “mate indiscriminately and without any regard for family unions.” McClain paid close attention to who he predicted might produce “strong, healthy offspring,” and forced these individuals to “consummate [their] relationship in his presence.” One evening, McClain summoned Sam and Louisa before him, ordered Sam to undress, and asked Louisa “do you think you can stand this big [man]?” while holding “that old bull whip ... acrost his shoulder,” reminding them he “could hit so hard!” Fearful of McClain’s violent retribution, Louisa answered in the affirmative, “and tried to hide [her] face” to spare Sam’s modesty. McClain then told them that they “must git busy and do it in his presence,” after which they “were considered man and wife.” Because Louisa and Sam were “a healthy pair” who went on to have “fine big babies,” McClain “never had another man forced on” Louisa.¹ The couple had fulfilled their purpose: to perpetuate the machination of slavery by providing McClain with exploitable, commodifiable bodies for labor and sale. Contemporaries called this “slave breeding.”

CONTACT Aisha Djelid  aisha.djelid@reading.ac.uk

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Across the South, enslavers trafficked in the flesh of enslaved people they deemed particularly fertile. In a distinctly pro-natalist action, they then forced, cajoled, and coerced enslaved men and women into reproducing the workforce in the form of exploitable children that they could extract labor from, sell for a profit, or a combination of the two.² As one formerly enslaved person described, “they were crazy about slaves that had lots of children.”³ William Dusiherre used the term “regimentation” to define enslavers’ regulation of the everyday lives of enslaved people.⁴ This included the strict control of labor (the type of work, when to start and stop), leisure time, and, crucially, marriages. Enslavers determined when and whom an enslaved person could marry, as well as what characteristics determined an appropriate intimate partner.⁵ This article builds upon Dusiherre’s theory of regimentation by exploring *reproductive* regimentation – the interference in the lives of enslaved people with the explicit aim of reproducing the population to maximize profit. While this includes the regulation or regimentation of areas such as the distribution of food and medicine, exercise, and familial relationships, this article will explore the regulation of enslaved people’s intimate sexual lives, and argue that the term “reproductive regimentation” encapsulates the pro-natalist and proto-eugenic actions and ideology of enslavers in the antebellum south as they aimed to increase their workforce to “rear” or “cultivate” the best “stock.”

Using primarily Black-authored evidence from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Slave Narrative Project interviews with formerly enslaved people, published slave narratives, and slaveholder documents from across the antebellum South, this article examines how slaveholders interfered in enslaved couples’ intimate lives and forced them to reproduce the institution of slavery by examining issues of permission and consent, arranged marriages, hiring out, and the gendered experience of these methods. It looks specifically at the period of 1808–1861, beginning after the ban on the international trade of enslaved people, as it became even more important to cultivate and encourage this increase of the enslaved population as they could no longer import or forcibly traffic people from communities in west and central Africa.⁶ Indeed, Daina Ramey Berry makes the distinction in the language of breeding before and after 1808. Before 1808, “breeding” or “breeder” referred to women who were pregnant. After 1808, these words referred to the reproduction of children “for profit.”⁷

Historically, forced reproduction has been a contentious topic, which Gregory D. Smithers accurately refers to as an “elephant in the room” that historians find challenging to define.⁸ Twentieth-century scholars such as Robert Fogel, Stanley Engerman, and John Boles dismissed forced reproduction as an abolitionist trope, where anti-slavery advocates spoke about rumors of “breeding farms” dedicated to the systematic sexual exploitation of enslaved people.⁹ There is little evidence of such farms. However, this article defines forced reproduction more holistically, arguing that enslavers primarily *unsystematically* matched individuals using a range of methods across a spectrum of violence to cajole them into sexual relationships. Thomas Foster argues that not *all* enslavers forced enslaved people to reproduce, but they all expected them to, and often “allowed” enslaved people to choose their own relationships.¹⁰ However, the term “allow” indicates that control ultimately rested with the enslaver, who could revoke this allowance on a whim. These pro-natalist slaveholders governed their slaveholdings by actively prioritizing the importance of fertility and the “rearing” of strong people to meet their pecuniary demands. By encouraging those they deemed of an equal size and value to reproduce

with one another, and *discouraging* those that were not, enslavers emphasized both the alleged “quality” and quantity of their enslaved property.

Enslavers implemented this type of proto-eugenic practice before Francis Galton coined the term in 1883. Pro-natalist ideology and activity were present in the South, despite the absence of a developed literature on “social Darwinism” or eugenics. Paul Lombardo argues that the definition of eugenics is fluid and has a variety of different meanings and methods of implementation. He defines eugenic practices as the encouragement of the “most prosperous and successful” to reproduce, while preventing the “deviant, the disabled, the diseased, or the criminal” from reproducing. This was in an effort to prevent the “inferior races” from reproducing.¹¹ However, enslavers actively *encouraged* those whom they deemed the “inferior race” to reproduce within the confines of slavery. Outside of slavery, free Black people had no use to enslavers, and thus no reason, in their opinion, to reproduce.

This eugenic language particularly stands out in the language used by formerly enslaved people. For example, Charlotte Martin recalled that in Florida, her enslaver, Wilkinson, “found it very profitable to raise and sell slaves,” and “*selected* the strongest and best male and female slaves and mated them exclusively for breeding.”¹² According to one unnamed WPA respondent, enslavers in Kentucky only allowed “the strong healthy slave women ... to have children,” and often prevented them from “mat[ing] with their own husbands.” Instead, their enslavers “bred them like live stock to some male ... who was kept for that purpose because of his strong physique.” The respondent compared this selection process to livestock, stating that it was “just like [how] horses, cattle, dogs and other animals are managed today in order to improve the stock.”¹³ On this plantation, the enslaver carefully selected specific individuals and encouraged them to reproduce due to their possession of what they deemed valuable characteristics. Though Foster argues that enslavers’ selection of particular men for reproduction created a hierarchy and isolated them from their communities, this language is indicative of a hierarchy created by the enslaver, *not* the enslaved communities themselves.¹⁴ Though enslavers saw some enslaved people as inherently reproductively “better” than others, but this does not necessarily mean that the enslaved themselves felt this way as they were aware of their enslavers desire to regiment their intimate lives.

It is within this language where theories of pro-natalism, slavery, and capitalism, intertwine. In the last decade, historians such as Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman have argued that historians have only just begun to link the more general histories of slavery and capitalism together, observing that we know slavery is tied to the US economy, but we do not yet know *how*.¹⁵ Walter Johnson stated that enslavers’ commodification of labor and commodification of laborers are “two concretely intertwined and ideologically symbiotic elements of a larger unified though internally diversified structure of exploitation.”¹⁶ Slavery could not exist without capitalism, and this is clear in the ways that enslavers regimented enslaved people’s lives to exploit the most labor – sexual and physical – out of them. As Caitlin Rosenthal defines a “prime field hand” as an “enslaved man or woman whose productivity was among the maximum that could be expected from a single individual,” we can also apply this to enslavers’ maximum extraction of enslaved people’s *sexual* productivity.¹⁷ Amy Dru Stanley, who has examined “slave breeding and free love” by exploring evidence from pro- and anti-slavery advocates in Congress, concludes that forced reproduction created “a link between human bondage and capitalist

revolution,” but there is still little work explicitly tying forced reproduction, pro-natalism, proto-eugenic ideology and the history of capitalism together from the point of view of the enslaved.¹⁸ She further states, “by no means is it clear what transpired between master and slave to produce an increase of slaves,” but, as this article shows, if we turn to Black authored testimony, it is clear what transpired.¹⁹

This article builds upon the germinal scholarship of historians of gender, family, and work such as that from Emily West, Rebecca Fraser, Daina Ramey Berry, David Stefan Doddington and Tera Hunter, by arguing that the financial continuation of the institution of slavery relied on sexual intimate ties.²⁰ While West and Fraser have explored how enslaved people used marriages and intimate relationships as a survival mechanism and source of comfort, this article instead argues that these relationships were often arduous, as enslavers exploited this desire for love and family for financial gain.²¹ In particular, this article is inspired by Hunter and Berry, who discuss the idea of the “third flesh” or “third-party rape.”²² It argues that through reproductive regimentation, enslavers indirectly raped enslaved men and women by cajoling them into unwanted sexual relationships with one another. Thus, enslavers acted as a third participant in their relationships by forcing them to reproduce slavery. By exploring enslavers’ methods of control along a spectrum of violence, and by probing the dichotomy of perpetrator and victim, as enslaved men were both participators in, and victims of, reproductive regimentation, this article questions to what extent enslaved men used forced reproduction as a patriarchal tool to negotiate their masculinity, leaving women “bound in wedlock” and “bound in slavery.”²³

Meanwhile, more recent works from scholars such as Sergio Lussana and Doddington have developed ideas on slavery and masculinity. Lussana argues that enslaved men were empathetic to one another and embraced a collective brotherhood, as friendship “framed, shaped, and gave meaning to the homosocial relationships of enslaved men.”²⁴ Meanwhile, Doddington argues that some enslaved men took advantage of forced reproduction and used sexual relationships as a means of promoting a masculine identity, even if that meant encroaching on other men’s relationships.²⁵ Having multiple sexual partners was a “proof of manhood” for some enslaved men.²⁶ According to Doddington, forced reproduction provided opportunities for enslaved men to compete with one another for female sexual partners, and to prove their masculinity.²⁷ The “expectations of male dominance” influenced forced reproduction, and sex was used to “demonstrate their dominance over men and women.”²⁸ However, we must question to what extent enslaved men controlled these relationships if it all hinged on the enslaver’s permission, and could be dismissed if they decided to sell either party, or partner them with someone else.

Matters of agency and power complicate how enslaved men tested the boundaries of slavery by asserting their masculinity over enslaved women while simultaneously operating under the pro-natalist demands of their enslavers.²⁹ Even though it appeared that enslaved men were choosing their wives of their own volition, they were doing so under the control and decision of their enslavers, and so their ability to choose their sexual partner was a false autonomy: slaveholders had the ultimate say on who could marry. While enslaved men treated their wives as their property, they did not have any formal power over them because they did not own themselves.³⁰ Despite this, some enslaved men wielded a modicum of *informal* power over the women they wished to

marry by bypassing the women's consent and appealing directly to their enslaver, all within the confines of their enslaver's control. Doddington maintains that formerly enslaved people's use of the word "want" in relation to their desire for enslaved women "suggests a degree of agency, as opposed to unrelenting [sexual] pressure."³¹ However, enslaved men traversed the difficult combination of both sexual desire *and* pressure to marry – experiences that are not mutually exclusive. While Doddington explores the concept of masculine dominance within these relationships and admits that "ultimate control clearly rested with the white enslaver," this alleged choice bestowed on enslaved men was, ultimately, meaningless, as they were acutely aware of the fragility of their relationships due to their enslavers' regimentation.³²

Traditional arguments reason that enslaved people generally had a degree of autonomy in their relationships. While Peter Kolchin maintains that enslavers allowed "considerable freedom of choice," downplaying the typicality and frequency of forced relationships, Thelma Jennings and Foster argue that enslaved men chose the women they wanted.³³ Scholars of the history of enslaved women such as White have argued that "slave families were usually egalitarian" and enslaved women were "equal partner[s]" in their relationships, as women could not rely on their husbands to provide for and protect their families.³⁴ Despite these historians' assertions that enslaved people generally had a choice in sexual partners, the initial formation of their marriage did not *always* allow women autonomy in their choice of intimate partner. As such, enslaved women faced a dual exploitation. Where some men were able to use coerced reproduction to affirm their masculinity and compete with other men for wives, enslaved women remained oppressed by both slaveholders and enslaved men.

Men contributed to the layers of subjugation enslaved women experienced as they navigated their enslavers' desire for sexual reproduction to sustain their masculine authority. This was mainly because enslavers allowed enslaved men the *illusion* that they were in control of their intimate lives, but ultimately managed their relationships. For example, enslavers sometimes forced men before groups of women for sale, deferring to the man to choose his "wife" from the lot. Enslaved in Alabama, Alice Wright's father was only fifteen years old when his "master told him to go pick out a wife from a drove of slaves that were passing through."³⁵

Though countless enslaved men undoubtedly regarded "marriages" such as these with disdain and unwillingly complied lest their enslaver punish them, others embraced them, and Doddington suggests it was common for enslaved men to request a particular enslaved woman that had caught his eye to be his wife, rather than wait for their enslaver to inevitably force them with someone specific.³⁶ For example, William Hunter's father saw his future wife on an auction block in Mississippi, and, considering her a "mighty pretty young woman," asked his master to "buy that woman for him a wife," suggesting that he deemed this request a demonstration of his agency.³⁷ Similarly, Charles Hinton's father "saw [his] mother, [and] decided he wanted her for his woman."³⁸ Hinton's father notified his enslavers who then "fixed up a cabin for them to live in together. There was no ceremony."³⁹

However, an example from Marshall Butler suggests that enslaved men were acutely aware that control rested with the enslavers. For Butler, courtship and gaining women's consent was a waste of time, as he understood that his enslaver held the ultimate power and ability to couple two enslaved people together. He dismissed the

"week or so" it took to court a girl by supplying her with gifts such as "pulled-candy." Butler "had no time for sich foolishness." Instead, he would "pop the question" to his enslaver rather than the woman.⁴⁰ This image of the enslaved man proposing to a woman *through* the enslaver supports Hunter's assertion that enslavers were a "third flesh" in enslaved people's relationships.⁴¹ On one hand, none of these men attained the consent of the enslaved women they wanted to marry. But on the other, they recognized that even after spending time courting a woman and securing her consent, their enslavers had the power to refuse the relations. Instead, they bypassed the courting process and cited it as a waste of time, understanding that enslavers had the ultimate decision – not the enslaved men and women involved. If their enslaver said "no," pursuing and engaging in an emotional relationship may have felt futile when their enslaver worked to keep them apart. Yet, this absence of consideration for enslaved women's consent and wishes allowed men to perform a limited domineering and masculine role within the constraints of their enslaver's power and control.

Some enslaved men went further and held little sympathy for the plight of enslaved women. John Cole remembered that if a "woman wasn't willing" to marry him, "a good, hard-working hand could always get the master to *make* the girl marry him – whether or no, willy-nilly."⁴² Cole suggested that enslaved men needed skills to coerce a woman into marrying him, but these skills were in labor for the enslaver, not in courting. Favored men stood a greater chance of the slaveholder buying the woman that they desired than those who were not "key slaves" or who did not stand out to their enslavers.⁴³ Choosing their wives affirmed men's sense of patriarchy and masculinity at the expense of the will and happiness of the women they were marrying.

Though some women grew to love their husbands, this was not always the case. Some enslaved women were already married to other men. In Texas, Moses Jeffries argued that if he saw someone he wanted to marry, he could ask his enslaver to buy her, and it "wouldn't matter if she were somebody else's wife; she would become mine."⁴⁴ In a society so reliant on natural increase, Jeffries knew that his owner would happily buy an enslaved woman if it resulted in children he could commodify, even if she was already married to another man. In this way, both enslavers *and* enslaved men dictated the space that women inhabited. By requesting of their enslaver a certain woman for a wife, enslaved men set in motion events that would enable their enslaver to force women away from their family and loved ones. For slaveholders, marriage was a game where they were always the financial winners, regardless of the emotions of the pawns they played, and some enslaved men seized this opportunity to express their male authority within an institution and society that continually attempted to deny men any authority at all.

Despite this, reproductive regimentation was inherently capitalistic, and as such enslavers refused to defer to enslaved men's choice if it was not financially beneficial. Instead, many found themselves in the same situation as enslaved women, as enslavers matched up those they saw fit to. Enslavers exposed themselves as organized, business-minded, abusers by negotiating with other slaveholders to arrange sexual relations between enslaved individuals, often without the consent of either party. Warren Taylor's parents, enslaved in Virginia, had no choice in their marriage. The only courting that occurred was between their enslavers, and – like any business arrangement – they were unlikely to let their slaves court or marry if the slaveholders did not like each other or suffered

disagreements. According to Taylor, one enslaver would say “I got a good boy. I’m going to let him come over to see your girl.” If this was accepted by the other slaveholder, the couple soon married. However, Taylor remarked that they were “married in the way they always married in those days ... there was no marriage at all.” Taylor’s enslaver simply announced, “there she is. You are man and wife.”⁴⁵ A sexual, financial transaction was carried out between the enslavers, with the enslaved the transportable, commodifiable goods.

Moreover, this relationship was not sanctified in any traditional form, signifying the emphasis on reproduction rather than traditional marital values and ceremony valued by heteronormative white society. Similarly, J.W. Whitefield recalled what his father told him about enslaved people’s marriages in North Carolina: “They didn’t count marriage like they do now.”⁴⁶ Instead, two slaveholders, who held enslaved people they desired to marry off, would force the said couple together.⁴⁷ According to Whitefield, if a boy was born from this marriage, “they would reserve him for breeding purposes if he was healthy and robust. But if he was puny and sickly, they were not bothered about him.”⁴⁸ Their enslaver would also sell any of these “desirable” enslaved boys by the time they were 13 years old.⁴⁹

Though evidence from formerly enslaved respondents repeatedly confirms stories such as these, there is little evidence of such practices from the enslavers in question who arranged relationships specifically with forced reproduction in mind. This could be due to a variety of reasons: because they did not want outsiders, especially abolitionists, finding evidence of such activities that may be deemed immoral, because they did not think it was important or interesting enough to note, or because they regarded it as intrinsic. Moreover, documents may simply have not survived. A rare example of reference to forced reproduction from an enslaver in Bourbon County, Kentucky is seen in a damaged partial letter from 1817, signed with the initials W.N.J. to John Corlis. The first line of the letter reads: “Dear Sir, I should be pleased to have your man Charles and my woman brought together[.] The proposition I have made was 750 Dollars in hand[.]”⁵⁰ Both the letter to Corlis and Whitefield’s evidence highlights the collective effort it took enslavers to sexually exploit and “breed” enslaved people. Two enslavers with “desirable” slaves came together to negotiate terms of marriage – whether one should sell to the other, or whether they would have a cross-plantation marriage – then forced them together to produce children fit for sale or work, or more callously, to “reserve them for breeding purposes” when they reached the appropriate age, thus perpetuating the violent cycle of forced reproduction.⁵¹

Cross-plantation marriages therefore required financial negotiation between different slaveholders to reach a benefit for both enslavers. Those who desired women on other plantations required the consent of the woman’s enslaver as well as his own, and on some plantations the consent of one of the owners stood in the way of a relationship. Solomon Lambert described the logistics involved in arranging marriages between plantations. He told his interviewer that “the way they married[,] the man ask his [master] then ask her [master]. If they agree it be all right.”⁵² After securing permission, the slaveholders relocated the slaves: “if the man want a girl and ther[e] be another man on that place wanted a wife the [masters] would swop the women mostly. Then one announce they married. That what they called a double wedding.”⁵³ Similar agreements occurred on Mary Minus Biddie’s plantation. If an enslaved couple that wanted to marry lived on different plantations, “the master would consult [the enslaved woman’s] master.”⁵⁴

Generally, the enslaver agreed, and their relationship “was encouraged for it increased the slave population by newborns, hence, being an asset to the master.”⁵⁵

However, James Henry Stith remarked that sometimes the enslaver “would [not] want them to go and would even buy the woman the men wanted to keep them contented on the plantation.”⁵⁶ Though it may appear that Stith’s enslaver wanted to keep his slaves happy due to his own belief in his allegedly paternalistic and benevolent intentions, it was more likely that he did not want to lose any property to another plantation. By purchasing the enslaved women, Stith’s enslaver exploited the man, the woman, and any children they produced. According to Stith, “it was just like raising stock and mating it.”⁵⁷

When Simon Phillips’s interviewer asked him about the “marriage situation” in Alabama, he replied that the men would “jus’ go the massa and tell him that there’s a gal over in Capn’ Smith’s place that he want for a wife[.]” His enslaver, Smith, would place an offer with the woman’s enslaver and then it would be contingent on whether the women’s enslaver was willing to sell them. Phillips emphasized that his enslaver would only consider buying the woman if she was “good[,] strong [and] healthy.” Enslaved people, according to Phillips, “was bought mostly like hosses,” and so slaveholders considered the health and ability of the enslaved woman to labor – physically and sexually.⁵⁸

In these instances, the slaveholders moved the women around as objects or property in a negotiation, revealing their capitalistic tendencies. While men traditionally had more mobility than women, in the context of potential procreation and commodification of infants, slaveholders mobilized enslaved women’s wombs and moved them to whichever slaver won the profits of her sexual labor. Additionally, as Fraser shows, slaveholders desired to impose geographical constraints, and hence encouraged marriages within their own plantations.⁵⁹ Most male respondents unsurprisingly expressed only *their* perspective of the marriage process, and the women in these stories thus remain silent. Enslaved men centered themselves in the narratives, and portrayed women as passive bodies moved at the will of their husband and enslavers.

On Jefferson Franklin Henry’s plantation, his enslaver allowed his slaves to “take” women that they desired, with the permission of their enslavers.⁶⁰ Importantly, Henry remarked that “if the girl lived on one plantation and the man on another that was luck for the girl’s marster, ‘cause the chillun would belong to him.”⁶¹ This demonstrates the central concern for procreation and the financial benefits that enslavers of women gained from marriage. Both enslaved and slaveholding men ignored women’s voices as they dictated the movements of their bodies and determined who sexually possessed them. Just as some men physically “took” enslaved women as wives, others were “given” to them by their enslavers. Andrew Boone, enslaved in North Carolina, recalled that his father had “several children cause he had several women besides mother.”⁶² These women, he recalled, “were given” to him and “no udder man wus allowed to have anything to do wid ‘m.”⁶³ Despite the passive tone of “given,” their enslaver probably forced these women to procreate with this man, further supporting the practice of enslavers forcing one man to procreate with multiple women.

White slaveholding women, who, as Stephanie Jones-Rogers demonstrates, also actively hired out enslaved women, mainly for wet-nursing, were further cognizant of the value and benefit of purchasing or producing enslaved children.⁶⁴ Indeed, slaveholding women were just as financially minded as slaveholding men and saw economic potential where men did not.⁶⁵ Historians have masculinized sexual exploitation, often

assuming that all instances of sexual abuse came from white slaveholding *men*, including the carrying-out of reproductive regimentation.⁶⁶ However, slaveholding women were equally complicit in enforcing reproduction amongst the enslaved people, sexually exploiting both men and women. These women, and those that commanded authority over enslaved people through their husbands, saw fit to arrange marriages between enslaved people, and, as Fraser shows, usually paired off their “favoured female domestics.”⁶⁷ Though white women could serve in budding couples’ favor, for example by ferrying messages back and forth, slaveholding women were still business-women who cared about maximizing profit.⁶⁸ Fraser argues that white women cared about the “personal choice of certain slave women,” but in general, slaveholding women dismissed enslaved women’s feelings in favor of an equally matched and fertile couple.⁶⁹ These women felt they had the right to interfere in the emotional lives of enslaved people as a means to assert their own control and ensure their property produced children to exploit.⁷⁰

In Kentucky, when their enslaver sold away Sam, Hannah’s husband, Mrs. Gaines (the “mistress”) did not feel sorry for Hannah as the rest of white members of the family supposedly did. Instead, she saw this as an opportunity to move Cato, a field worker, into the house with Hannah. Calling Hannah before her, Gaines informed her of her plans to marry her to Cato:

Your master has sold Sam, and he’s gone down the river, and you’ll never see him again. So go and put on your calico dress, and meet me in the kitchen. I intend for you to jump the broomstick with Cato. You need not tell me you don’t want another man. I know there’s no woman living that can be happy and satisfied without a husband.⁷¹

Unsympathetic to the grief that Hannah felt for the loss of her husband, Gaines dismissed Hannah’s pleas that she did not want an intimate relationship with Cato and that she could never love him, for the love she held for Sam was still strong.⁷² Instead, Gaines told Hannah to “shut up, this moment” and patronized her, questioning “what do you know about love?”⁷³ Gaines placed her own societal pressures to marry onto Hannah and other enslaved women on the plantation: “I didn’t love your master when I married him, and people don’t marry for love now.”⁷⁴ White women often endured marriages they did not always fully emotionally consent to, and so held intimate and first-hand knowledge of arranged marriages.⁷⁵ However, in many cases, arranging enslaved people’s marriages extended beyond the reflection of their own sufferings. This enabled white women some control over enslaved people, and therefore their *own* lives, whilst their husbands and other male kin controlled their private and public lives. The slave regime, and the pro-natalist society they lived in, allowed white women a semblance of control at the detriment and suffering of Black women.

Though both reduced to the role of “breeder,” white and Black women experienced this in distinctly different ways. Where society emphasized the duty that white women had to raise their sons, they were not necessarily physically forced to do this through violent means, whereas enslaved women were – not only by patriarchal society, but also by the very white women who faced their own pressures to marry and reproduce. Black and white women were not united along gendered lines and white women had an active role in the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. By forcing Hannah and Cato to marry one another, Gaines was able to “have them both in the house under my eyes,” and was able to exact control in any way she saw fit.⁷⁶

Hannah attempted to appeal to Cato and pleaded with him to tell Gaines that he did not want to marry her.⁷⁷ Believing that, as a man, Cato would be able to defend her, Hannah told Cato to “tell missis dat you don’t want me.”⁷⁸ However, Cato’s reaction challenges the notion of a dichotomy between “perpetrator” and “victim.” He demonstrates the lack of empathy that some enslaved men had for women as he seized the opportunity to fulfill his own desires, whilst simultaneously complying with the subtle breeding practices enforced by their enslaver. Cato refused to take Hannah’s side, arguing that “I does want you, and I ain’t a-gwine to tell a lie for you ner nobody else.”⁷⁹ Cato asserted his masculinity at the expense of Hannah, and Gaines’s actions made this possible.

Abolitionist Lydia Maria Child also gave evidence to the participation of slaveholding women in the arrangement of intimate relationships. Describing an enslaved woman named Phillis as “handsome” and who “sang delightfully,” Child reported that a slaveholding man on another farm asked “Mrs. B.,” Phillis’s enslaver, if she could marry one of his enslaved men. Mrs B. was not concerned with the consent of Phillis, nor did she consider “that there could be any appeal by her slave to her decision.”⁸⁰ Thus, Mrs B. did not consult Phillis, and the wedding went ahead without her consent. Phillis married her husband on a Sunday in the parlor of the plantation house, and then served food to Mrs B. and the enslaved witnesses.⁸¹ The meal, Child reported, “was in a solemn, puritanical way ... There were no presents, no congratulations, for the young couple.”⁸²

Child’s depiction of Mrs B.’s assumption that Phillis wanted to marry a stranger she never met is most likely a sanitized version of the true story, or of other stories similar to this. Like other abolitionist literature, anti-slavery writers tried to avoid alienating white Northern women, and so were more likely to present a softer version of the truth. In reality, it is likely that Mrs B. simply did not care about Phillis’s consent or emotions, and instead saw their marriage as a financial opportunity, especially as she was in possession of the female slave and could capitalize on her children. Child’s insistence that Mrs B. was a “kind mistress” despite forcing Phillis to labor in the potato fields on her wedding day is indicative of the opposite.⁸³

Slaveholding women recognized that they and their husbands retained ultimate control over slave marriages. For example, Paul’s mistress ordered him to marry an enslaved woman named Sally. When he objected, his mistress “interrupted a little hotly” and threatened to “make it a command.”⁸⁴ Giving up on Paul, she instead tried to force Sally to marry Abram Williams instead.⁸⁵ Sally had never met Abram before, nor did she know about their plans to marry until her mistress brought it up.⁸⁶ Her mistress argued that as she was 13 years-old, it was time for her to marry.⁸⁷ Paul remarked that although this couple worked out and they liked each other, “the same power could have been employed, had they disliked each other.” Enslaved people were therefore acutely aware of the extent and intensity of control enslavers had over them and their relationships. “What think you of a system,” questioned Paul, “which gives such unlimited control, not only over the time and labor of men and women, but over their most sacred affections?”⁸⁸ Although some men found opportunities within forced reproduction, others felt empathy for their female counterparts and understood the oppression that they faced.

Slaveholding women also interfered in the courting practices of enslaved people, and intervened if they decided a certain person did not meet their standards. For example, Benjamin Russell, enslaved in South Carolina, recalled that the “master and mistress

were very particular in the slave girls," and frequently questioned them about who they were spending time with.⁸⁹ Russell's mistress warned one enslaved girl that she better not "ever let me see you with that ape again," and "if you cannot pick a mate better than that I'll do the picking for you."⁹⁰ Russell explained that women on this plantation "must breed good strong serviceable children."⁹¹ Thus, Russell's mistress saw it necessary that she intervene in the courting practices of her slaves. Similarly, in Arkansas, Lizzie Hawkens maintained that her mother and father, who lived on different holdings, would never have been able to marry if her mother's mistress had not died.⁹² "Mistress Marshall," for an unspecified reason, did not want Hawkens's mother to marry into the Scott family.⁹³ Similarly, in Alabama, Sarah Porter's enslaver did not allow her to marry Andy White, as he was "too light in color and light [men] ... didn't think as strong as a good black one."⁹⁴ Despite this, White and Porter ran away and married, eventually having 11 children.⁹⁵ Lastly, Ellen Wallace, a slaveholding woman from Kentucky, wrote in December 1857 about her domestic slave, Jinny, arriving late and drunk. "As we had considered her one our most faithful servants and the nurse of our children," wrote Wallace, "our vexation and distress may be imagined."⁹⁶ Though Wallace did not mention what Jinny had been doing with her time (beyond drinking) it is implied that she spent time away from the slaveholding house, socializing. Wallace does not opine whether or not she was against Jinny courting others, but the anger directed at her suggests an implicit policing of Jinny's pleasure and leisure time.

As shown by Jones-Rogers, white slaveholding women also used violence as a means of control and thus aligned themselves with other violent male enslavers such as Jim McClain (Sam and Louisa Everett's enslaver) in their attempt to regiment reproduction.⁹⁷ John Boyd recollected that his enslaver, Polly Meador, "did her own patrolling with her own whip and two bull dogs."⁹⁸ Boyd recalled the night that "Bill Pea Legs" snuck into an enslaved woman's quarters. When Bill heard Meador coming, he climbed under the enslaved woman's bed, but Meador's dog pulled him out and "she gave him a whipping that he never forgot. She whipped the woman, also."⁹⁹ White women thus used violence to police and control the courting lives of enslaved people. Though they wanted their enslaved people to reproduce, enslavers wanted this to happen on *their* terms, and thus attempted to control whom they had relations with. The use of dogs is reminiscent of the gangs of white slave patrollers who policed the plantation boundaries thwarting enslaved people who had snuck away to visit loved ones or attend illicit parties.¹⁰⁰ Slaveholding women like Meador thus used violent means to police enslaved people's bodily and emotional pleasure by preventing them from meeting.

Violence extended further than this, and male enslavers' rape of Black and enslaved women was systemic. But while they carried out these acts of violence, enslavers also benefited financially if the women consequently became pregnant, explicitly linking sexual exploitation and capitalism together. Though reproductive regimentation occurred throughout the South, the size of the slaveholding determined the methods that enslavers utilized. Marie Jenkins Schwartz found that enslavers with small holdings in South Carolina relied on cross-plantation marriages, and argued that wealthier enslavers felt obliged to "accept alliances between their slave men and bondswomen belonging to poorer neighbours."¹⁰¹ Those on smaller slaveholdings, such as just one family, often had little choice but to allow the enslaved men and women to marry outside.

Evidence of hiring enslaved men for sexual purposes may have been one way that enslavers worked around the smaller enslaved demographic.

By hiring out enslaved men to other plantations so they could impregnate enslaved women, not dissimilar to the trafficking of enslaved women for sex, enslavers treated these interactions as business transactions. One enslaver received financial compensation, whilst the “customer” – the other enslaver – received financial gain in the commodification of enslaved infants. In an explicit form of sexual assault and rape of enslaved men, enslavers hired out what they termed “stockmen.” Enslavers did not encourage these men to marry but used them in an overt form of regimented reproduction. Maggie Stenhouse claimed that there were “stockmen” on her plantation.¹⁰² After being weighed and “tested,” slaveholders hired these men out and locked them in a “room with some young women” that the other enslaver wanted “to raise children from.”¹⁰³ Presumably, money exchanged hands. In an explicitly “eugenic” example on a neighboring plantation, “only the strong healthy slave women were allowed to have children.” Their enslaver “bred” enslaved women

like live stock to some male negro [who] was kept for that purpose because of his strong physique, which the master wished [*sic*] to reproduce, in order to get a good price for his progeny, just like horses, cattle, dogs and other animals are managed today in order to improve the stock.

According to Stenhouse, their enslaver forced these “stockmen” to work in the field and “fed [them] up good.” Furthermore, Stenhouse’s experience raises more questions than historians can necessarily answer. How did others in her community, particularly men, feel about these individuals receiving preferential treatment just for being of a large physique? How did these “stockmen” feel about the favored treatment? Did they enjoy this display of masculinity, or did they feel ashamed, especially as it came at the detriment and rape of other women? How and why did the enslaver choose these specific women to procreate with the “stockmen”? What would the women locked in the room have said? Did they resent him? Did they feel empathy for both of their situations?

When the enslavers went to the locked room the next morning to let them out, the enslaved man was glad to be released as “them women nearly kill him.”¹⁰⁴ Though, as Doddington argues, some enslaved men used forced reproduction to assert their individual masculinity, women *and* men in their communities ultimately did not condone this. Indeed, one WPA respondent stated that “the women hated him [the enslaved man known as the “breeder”], and the men on the place done as well. They hated him too.”¹⁰⁵ Though some enslaved men may have believed they had power over women, and enslavers themselves may have believed they were paternalistically granting this agency, enslaved women knew that this display of power from dominating enslaved men was simply that: a display endorsed by enslavers to maximize profit.

In Stenhouse’s narrative, the enslaved women banded together and protected themselves and one another using violent resistance. But we do not know how this man reacted. Though outnumbered, the enslaved man may have made advances toward the women, or the women might have immediately defended themselves before he could act. Locked alone in a room with multiple women, they may have been able to work together and lie to the enslavers, claiming that they had engaged in sexual intercourse. On the other hand, if all parties lied, and then not a single baby came out of this interaction, the slaveholders could have exacted retribution.

As there are few *explicit* references to the hiring out of slaves for “breeding” purposes, historians must read between the lines of more implicit recollections. For example, John Smith recalled that his enslaver owned three hundred enslaved people across three plantations. Smith’s enslaver “started out wid 2 ‘oman slaves [Long Peggy and Short Peggy] and raise 200 slaves.” Long Peggy gave birth to 25 children, but he does not mention how many children Short Peggy had. Smith ended his story by exclaiming, “just think o’date, raisin’ 300 slaves wid two ‘omans. It sho is de truf tho.”¹⁰⁶ His assertion that the enslaver started out with only two women suggests that he must have either married them to enslaved men on a different plantation, or, crucially, hired men from another plantation just as Stenhouse’s enslaver did. There was no mention in this interview of the enslaver purchasing an enslaved man or of any marriage, indicating that he instead hired an enslaved man for sexual purposes.

Smith’s story also emphasizes change over time, as enslavers invested in their children’s future and ensured the continuation of slavery from one generation to the next by regimenting reproduction through the hiring of enslaved people. Gaining access to slavery without generational wealth proved more challenging – though not impossible. Mollie Williams of Mississippi recalled the struggle that her mother’s enslaver had when trying to start his own venture in cultivation and slave labor. Williams’s enslaver, named only as George, came from Virginia to Mississippi “lak young folks venturin’ about,” and married a woman named Margurite. Unfortunately for George, he was poor, and “foun’ out ye can’t make no crop wid’out’n a start of darkies.” George went back to Virginia to purchase some enslaved people but only found four men and an elderly cook called Harriet. Realizing that he could not ensure natural increase with four men and an elderly woman, George went with his uncle, John Davenport – who was more experienced in this business – to a slave auction in Grand Gulf, Mississippi. Davenport told George to “pick hisself out a pair of darkies to mate so’s he could git hisself a start of darkies fer to chop his cotton an’ like.”¹⁰⁷ George first chose Williams’s father, Martin, and then saw her mother, Marylin, who he deemed “big an’ strengthly.”¹⁰⁸ However, George did not have enough money to purchase both. Davenport therefore bought Marylin and in an explicitly reproductive action, “loan[ed] her over to Marse George for pappy.”¹⁰⁹ In this arrangement, George and Davenport agreed that the first child of this forced relationship would be Davenport’s, and the second would be George’s, continuing in a repeating pattern.¹¹⁰ George and Davenport both invested in Marylin’s womb, gambling their money on the likelihood of her giving birth to multiple children that George and Davenport could enslave and exploit labor from. The slave market provided George with the tools to start a plantation with enslaved workers through the forced intimate relationship of Martin and Marylin, and Davenport provided the knowledge and experience that could be handed down through the generations.

The language Williams used to describe this initial purchase – “a start of darkies” – is indicative of the dehumanizing language comparing enslaved people to livestock that was vital for enslavers to justify their trade in human flesh. Enslavers and traders used this language in formal and informal settings, appearing in both WPA interviews, published narratives, and municipal records. For example, Anne Patterson, Susan Cobbs, and Elizabeth Cobbs, the daughters of the late Thompson Mills, petitioned the court to divide up the enslaved people belonging to their deceased father.¹¹¹ In the proceedings, references are made to the “the original stock” of enslaved women, Rachel and Pollina,

who had collectively given birth to 11 children.¹¹² By referring to these women and others within this original group of people as “stock,” and as one homogenous group rather than identifying individuals who led unique lives, the Cobbs heirs detached themselves emotionally and morally from the institution of slavery, specifically the trade and movement of bodies, rather than people.

Frederick Douglass’s 1892 work, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, reports a similar story about Edward Covey, a poor white man, who could only afford to purchase one enslaved woman, Caroline, “as a breeder.”¹¹³ To increase his human “property,” Covey “compelled [Caroline] to abandon herself to the object for which he purchased her; and the result was the birth of twins at the end of the year.”¹¹⁴ As Covey only owned one enslaved person, he hired a man named Bill Smith to reproduce with her: “Mr. Covey himself locked the two up together every night, thus inviting the result.”¹¹⁵ This is not only a blatant example of forced reproduction and the sexual exploitation of both women and men, but is also revealing of the hypersexual stereotypes enslavers forced on enslaved men and women.¹¹⁶ Covey expected Caroline and Bill’s inability to resist their allegedly inherent carnal sexual desires to result in multiple sexual interactions, and, consequently, a child.

Meanwhile, other enslavers had more informal agreements with slaveholders on neighboring plantations. In Alabama, if Carrie Davis’s enslaver “wanted to mix his stock of slaves wid a strong stock on ‘nother plantation, dey would do de mens an’ women jest lak horses.”¹¹⁷ In this instance, Davis’s enslaver and his neighbor arranged, “jest lak horses” to lend enslaved people to one another to “improve their stock.”¹¹⁸ Some enslavers also reserved these “stock men” for exclusive use on their own plantations, rather than hire them out or lend them to other enslavers. For example, Dora Jerman informed her interviewer that her mother’s enslaver would not sell her as “she brought fine children,” and would force her to procreate with the “regular stock man,” suggesting that their enslaver explicitly set aside this man to have sexual relations with the enslaved women on their plantation.¹¹⁹ In Alabama, Luke Blackshear’s enslaver labeled him the “Giant Breeder.”¹²⁰ Their enslaver identified him as the “stock Negro,” and Luke consequently fathered 56 children.¹²¹ According to his grandson, Ida Blackshear Hutchinson, Luke “was bought and given to his young mistress in the same way you would give a mule or colt to a child.”¹²² Blackshear’s comparison to livestock demonstrates how this particular enslaver carried out reproductive practices by exploiting both the male and female body. Evidence from neither Jerman nor Blackshear mention marriage or a ceremony, suggesting breeding practices motivated these slaveholders, and others took similar steps to ensure the expansion of their plantation workforce.

A further recollection from Hutchinson not only suggests that enslavers forced people into a room together with the purpose of procreation more commonly than previously thought, but also highlights that enslavers regimented the reproduction of both adults and children. Discussing his father, Isom, Hutchinson reported that his father’s enslaver routinely sexually exploited boys and girls as young as 13 years old by forcing them into a barn:

They took all the fine looking boys and girls that was thirteen years old or older and put them in a big barn after they had stripped them naked. They used to strip them naked and put them in a big barn every Sunday and leave them there until Monday morning. Out of that came sixty babies.¹²³

Hutchinson's evidence reveals the sexually exploitative disposition of his family's enslaver and the integrational violence he enacted. Not only did he force them into a barn every Sunday – evidencing the systematic nature of this abuse – but he also forced children into sexual labor. The age of “thirteen years old or older” suggests that Blackshear began sexualizing young girls once they experienced menarche, and thus deemed this the appropriate time to begin sexually exploiting them. Although males do not have as obvious a physical marker for supposed “sexual maturity” as females with their menstrual cycle, Hutchinson's enslaver used the age of 13, assuming this was the average age that girls on this plantation started their periods, to classify boys as sexually exploitable, too. He did not apply this categorization to *all* enslaved people from the age of 13, only “all the fine looking boys and girls.”¹²⁴ Hutchinson's enslaver hence practiced a type of pro-natalist “eugenics” by forcing the “fine looking” enslaved boys, girls, and adults, to procreate.

It is therefore important to consider the age of those in the evidence examined in this article, especially as the majority of the WPA respondents experienced slavery exclusively as children. These respondents experienced what Courtney E. Thompson calls “precocious pregnancy,” in which they gave birth at age 14 or younger.¹²⁵ Enslavers considered the profit enslaved people could generate before they were even born and were eager for the enslaved to begin reproducing as soon as possible. This included the sexualization of enslaved boys and girls as soon as they began to express interest in the opposite sex or at menarche. The age varied depending on the enslaver. Willie McCullough's mother told him “that they were not allowed to pick their husbands,” and that the enslaver arranged their marriages as soon as the women turned 16 years old.¹²⁶ This was evidently when their slaveholders deemed they “became a woman” and decided this was the best time for them to conceive children.¹²⁷ When McCullough's mother reached this age, her enslaver “went to a slave owner near by and got a six-foot ... man, almost a stranger to her, and told her she must marry him.”¹²⁸ McCullough did not consider whether the enslaved man, clearly bought for the purpose of marriage and procreation, consented, or if he found himself in the same unwilling position as McCullough's mother. The ceremony consisted of the enslaver reading “a paper” to them, and then declared that they were man and wife.¹²⁹ Their enslaver ordered the man to “take her to a certain cabin and go to bed.”¹³⁰ Their enslaver, motivated by profit, systematically arranged marriages as the girls turned 16.

Though most enslaved people married in their late teens, enslavers forced adolescent girls such as McCullough's mother to have children at a relatively young age, often before they had married.¹³¹ Berry estimates the childbearing range to be between 15 and 35, whilst Schwartz places first conception at 15 – the average age of their first menstrual cycle.¹³² Furthermore, enslaved women's value decreased as their fertility decreased, so enslavers encouraged women to procreate as soon as possible.¹³³ Although enslaved girls “tried to resist gaining first-hand knowledge about ‘evil things’ [sexual abuse],” by appealing to elders for protection, enslavers ultimately pressured young girls to become sexually active at a very young age.¹³⁴

WPA respondent Hilliard Yellerday maintained that “when a girl became a woman she was required to go to a man to become a mother” as she “was expected to have children as soon as she became a woman.” Many of these mothers were only 12 or 13. Their enslaver would then “read a paper,” after which the couple jumped over a broom “and the

master would then tell them they were man and wife and they could go to bed together.” In this instance, as soon as a girl experienced menarche, their enslaver forced them to marry and produce children. Moreover, he “would sometimes go and get a large hale hearty Negro man from some other plantation to go to his Negro woman. He would ask the other master to let this man come over to his place to go to his slave girls.”¹³⁵ This language of “man” and “girl” suggests a significant age difference between the couples. Moreover, the emphasis on the physicality of the enslaved men suggests that the enslaver specifically chose these men based upon proto-eugenic ideology.

Marrying at 13 or 14 years old, or even younger, placed them around their first menstrual cycle, hence emphasizing the reproductive expectations of enslaved girls. Dusingberre found that due to the disease and environment of the Lowcountry, “most enslaved women had sex young, and married young.”¹³⁶ Moreover, it was “custom” for enslaved women to marry men older than them, and Dusingberre cites age gaps as high as 34 years.¹³⁷ Age gaps of more than nine years on the Gowrie plantation – the focus of Dusingberre’s research – made up 20% of marriages; 30% of marriages had age gaps of five to eight years.¹³⁸ Enslavers forced these women to marry older men, focusing on the women’s youth and fertility rather than the men’s age. For those enslavers who did not allow their male slaves to marry off-plantation, there was a smaller pool of people to marry, and it was, therefore, less likely they would be able to marry someone of their own or similar age.¹³⁹ Nor did they have a choice in the matter.

Respondents emphasized the age of their mothers, but not their fathers, suggesting that enslaved women and girls felt more sexual pressure than men from a young age. Minnie Johnson Stewart’s mother married her husband when she was just 14 years old.¹⁴⁰ Tom Stanhouse’s parents married in South Carolina when his mother was only 13 years old, and Millie Evans recalled that she was not “quite grown when [she] married.”¹⁴¹ Evans was approximately 16 years old at the end of the war in 1865, and so must have been even younger when she married her husband.¹⁴² Enslaved people thus did not consider those under 16 years old as “grown,” unlike enslavers. These young girls were trapped in a triple bind of age, race, and gender, and they could not consent to marriage or sexual relations because of their status as young, enslaved females.

Forcing enslaved girls to be sexually active before they were biologically ready or capable caused long-term medical consequences. Writing in *The Stethoscope* in 1854, William G. Craghead of Danville, Virginia, highlighted a case of “retention from occlusion of the vagina” from May 1839. The enslaved girl in question, described as “very stout,” was sixteen in 1839, and her enslaver had hired her out to S. Slate, who called in a physician once her ailment became apparent. Craghead inspected the girl, and decided that the adhesion on her vagina “must have resulted from inflammation caused by a rape committed on her *before she was twelve years old*, and which followed by an [infected] discharge from the vagina.” Craghead noted that he had seen her “two or three times this year,” as she was afflicted with “a most violent attack of colic, with irritable stomach, constipation and tumefaction of the abdomen.” Craghead proceeded to perform an examination, where he learned:

the vagina, at a distance of an inch and half, terminated in a cul de sac, through which no aperture could be detected. I stretch the sides of the vagina apart, with a double bladed

speculum, and pressed for some time the point of female catheter against the bottom of the sac, without finding any aperture. After withdrawing the instruments, strong uterine contractions came on, and the adhesion so far gave way as to permit the exit of the menstrual fluid, which, from the quantity, must have been accumulating for more than twelve months. After this, there was no mechanical obstruction to the menstrual excretion.

The unnamed girl died a year later of “mesenteric and peritoneal disease.”¹⁴³ This girl, who had been raped by an unnamed assailant at only 12 years old, suffered from debilitating pain and physical trauma that affected her daily life, and was noticeable enough that her hired enslaver called a physician to treat it. Though Craghead did not note *who* committed the rape against her, it likely came from either her enslaver, overseer, another enslaved man, or one who their enslaver forced her to have sexual intercourse with. This case further demonstrates not only the long-lasting emotional and physical trauma that enslaved women and girls experienced post-rape, but also how sexual exploitation, especially of young girls, led to reproductive issues and infertility.

* * *

Although scholars such as West, Fraser, and White have demonstrated the importance of family as a survival mechanism for slavery, it is important not to neglect those who wanted to marry for love and yet were unable to due to the interference of their enslavers. Each slaveholding was different, but all enslavers regimented intimate relationships. Where some enslavers deferred to men and allowed them the deception of choice to the detriment of the non-consenting woman, others did not allow them this illusion at all and matched men and women up as they saw fit. Yet, in the end, despite enslaved men’s ability to use their enslavers’ reproductive motivations to their advantage, this “choice” of intimate partner ultimately resided with the enslaver who desired the “strong” and “healthy” bodies to exploit, sell, and further sexually abuse.

The women and girls whom enslavers forced into unwanted relationships were often extremely young, with formerly enslaved people proclaiming that girls as young as 13 were entering marriages with enslaved men much older than them. The emphasis on young girls suggests that enslavers were preoccupied with their menstruation and cajoled them into marriages in order to produce more children as soon as possible. Not only were these girls not able to consent due to their status as slaves, but also due to their age. Thus, the spectrum of sexual violence and exploitation becomes ever more complicated.

It is also important to consider that although slaveholders sexualized enslaved women by valuing their fertility, labelling them “breeding women,” some men also suffered similar explicit sexual exploitation. The reservation of certain “stock men” for the purpose of forced reproduction and the hiring out of these men to other slaveholders to have sexual relations with their enslaved women demonstrate the insidious nature of profit-driven slaveholders, and the lengths they went to ensure the reproduction of a “healthy” workforce. The interference of enslavers often threw up challenging barriers, and frequently prevented enslaved people from choosing their own romantic partners as they regimented their intimate lives. It was only in emancipation that enslaved people found freedom, not only for their own lives and status as free human beings, but also the freedom to choose who they loved, to have children because they wanted to, and to reunite with those that slavery had taken from them.

Notes

1. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Federal Writer's Project, United States Works Progress Administration; Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/> (hereafter, WPA Slave Narrative Project), Vol. 3, *Florida*: 127–8.
2. The use of the words “forced,” “coerced,” and “cajoled,” sit along a spectrum of violence. For this article, I have used the term “forced” to suggest a direct threat or use of physical violence to make enslaved people reproduce such in the case of Sam and Louisa Everett, whereas the terms “cajole” or “coerce” suggests a less violent, yet still insidious method of forced reproduction, such as threats to sell away or divide relationships.
3. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, *Arkansas*, Part 3: 288.
4. Dusinberre, *Strategies for Survival*, 95.
5. *Ibid.*, 97.
6. Sasha Turner has explored forced reproduction in Jamaica thirty-years prior to the 1808 ban on trade to the US. See Turner, *Contested Bodies, Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica*.
7. Berry, *Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 20–1.
8. Smithers, “American Abolitionism and Slave-Breeding Discourse,” 552.
9. Fogel and Engerman, *Time on the Cross*, 78–86; Boles, *Black Southerners*, 69–70.
10. Foster, *Rethinking Rufus*, 49.
11. Lombardo, “Looking Back at Eugenics,” 6–7.
12. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 3, *Florida*, 167 [italics added].
13. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 7, *Kentucky*, 72.
14. Foster, *Rethinking Rufus*, 55–9.
15. Beckert and Rockman, “Introduction,” 3.
16. Johnson, “The Pedestal and the Veil,” 306.
17. Rosenthal, “Slavery's Scientific Management,” 75.
18. Stanley, “Slave Breeding and Free Love,” 120.
19. *Ibid.*, 143.
20. West, *Chains of Love*; West, “Reflections in the History and Historians of the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves”; Fraser, *Courtship and Love Among the Enslaved in North Carolina*; Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh*; Doddington, “Manhood, Sex, and Power in Antebellum Slave Communities”; Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity*; Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*.
21. See West, *Chains of Love*; Fraser, *Courtship and Love*.
22. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 54; Berry, *The Price for their Pound of Flesh*, 79.
23. Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 79; Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 6, 54.
24. Lussana, *My Brother Slaves*, 9.
25. Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity*, 2.
26. *Ibid.*, 158.
27. *Ibid.*, 17.
28. *Ibid.*, 146, 150.
29. Marisa Fuentes problematizes this well by arguing that the expression of sexuality does not equal agency (Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 67–8).
30. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 54.
31. Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity*, 164.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 111; Jennings, “‘Us Colored Women,’” 47–8; Foster, *Rethinking Rufus*, 49.
34. White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?* 158.
35. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, *Arkansas*, Part 7, 245.
36. Doddington, “Manhood, Sex, and Power,” 150.
37. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 2, *Arkansas*, Part 3, 367.
38. *Ibid.*, 278.

39. Ibid.
40. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1*, 156, 166.
41. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 6.
42. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1*, 228 [italics added].
43. Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, xix–xxxvii.
44. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 4*, 39.
45. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6*, 274.
46. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 7*, 138.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., 139.
49. Ibid.
50. Letter, 1817, Corlis-Respass Family Papers, Mss A C799b, Folder 7, Filson Historical Society, Kentucky.
51. Ibid.
52. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4*, 229.
53. Ibid.
54. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 3, Florida*, 36.
55. Ibid., 36–7.
56. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6*, 243.
57. Ibid.
58. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 1, Alabama*, 313.
59. Fraser, *Courtship and Love*, 34. South Carolina enslaver James Henry Hammond also allowed cross-plantation marriages, but only if it was on one of his *own* plantations. This meant that he reaped the pecuniary benefits of enslaved couple's sexual labor (see, Hammond, *Planation Journal of James H. Hammond*, <http://www.scpnet.com/modjeskaschool/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/James-Henry-Hammond-Plantation-Manual.pdf>, 16).
60. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2*, 189.
61. Ibid.
62. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1*, 136.
63. Ibid.
64. Jones-Rogers, *They were Her Property*, 135–6.
65. Ibid.
66. Jones-Rogers, "Rethinking Sexual Violence," 109.
67. Fraser, *Courtship and Love*, 40.
68. Ibid., 39–40.
69. Ibid., 40.
70. Ibid., 41.
71. Brown, *My Southern Home*, 40–1.
72. Ibid., 42.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 16–17.
76. Brown, *My Southern Home*, 42.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid., 43.
80. Lydia Maria Child and African American Pamphlet Collection. *Authentic anecdotes of American slavery*, 11.
81. Ibid., 11–12.
82. Ibid., 12.
83. Ibid., 11.
84. Unknown, *The Story of a Slave*, 47–8.
85. Ibid., 49.
86. Ibid., 51.

87. Ibid.
88. Ibid.
89. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 4*, 53.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid.
92. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 3*, 205.
93. Ibid.
94. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 1, Alabama*, 337.
95. Ibid.
96. Ellen Kenton McCaughy Wallace, *Journal, 1849–1864*, Kentucky Historical Society, Box 1, FF2.
97. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property*, 60–79.
98. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 1*, 73.
99. Ibid.
100. For more on slave-patrols, see Hadden, *Slave Patrols*.
101. Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 195–6.
102. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6*, 223.
103. Ibid.
104. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 7, Kentucky*, 72.
105. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 1*, 112.
106. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2*, 274.
107. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 9, Mississippi*, 157.
108. Ibid., 157–8.
109. Ibid., 158.
110. Ibid.
111. Cobbs and Paterson vs. Evans, Caroline County, Virginia (16th May 1832), Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia, Race and Slavery Petitions Project, Series 2, County Court Petitions, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
112. Ibid.
113. Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 150–1.
114. Ibid., 151.
115. Ibid.
116. For stereotypes of enslaved men and women, see Morgan, “Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder,” 167–92.
117. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 1, Alabama*, 107.
118. Ibid.
119. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4*, 50.
120. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 3*, 370.
121. Ibid.
122. Ibid.
123. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 3*, 373.
124. Ibid.
125. Thompson, “Child-Mothers and Invisible Fathers,” 126.
126. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2*, 78.
127. Ibid.
128. Ibid.
129. Ibid.
130. Ibid.
131. White, *Ar’n’t I A Woman?* 99.
132. Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 15; Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave*, 78.
133. Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, 95.
134. King, “Prematurely Knowing of Evil Things,” 179.
135. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 2*, 434.
136. Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days*, 104.
137. Ibid., 164–5.

138. Ibid., 104.
139. Ibid., 104–6.
140. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 6*, 236.
141. Ibid., 216; WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 2*, 248.
142. WPA Slave Narrative Project, *Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 2*, 240.
143. Craghead, “Case of Catamenial Retention from Imperforated Hymen,” 193.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Professor Emily West and Dr Rohan Deb Roy from the University of Reading for their feedback on this work in its early form, and the reviewers for their helpful comments. The author would also like to thank the University of Reading, the Filson Historical Society, the Kentucky Historical society, and the association of British American Nineteenth Century Historians (BRANCH) for supporting the research used in this work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Aisha Djelid is a visiting fellow in the Department of History at the University of Reading, researching forced reproduction and gender in the antebellum South.

ORCID

Aisha Djelid  <http://orcid.org/0009-0005-4869-6857>

Bibliography

- Beckert, Sven, and Seth Rockman. “Introduction.” In *Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of America’s Economic Development*, edited by Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, 1–28. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
- Berry, Daina Ramey. *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2017.
- Boles, John. *Black Southerners, 1619-1869*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984.
- Brown, William W. *My Southern Home, or, The South and Its People*. Boston, MA: A.G. Brown & Co., Publishers, 1880.
- Clinton, Catherine. *Fanny Kemble’s Journals*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Clinton, Catherine. *The Plantation Mistress: Women’s World in the Old South*. New York: Pantheon, 1982.
- Cobbs and Paterson Verses Evans, Caroline County, Virginia (16th May 1832), Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia, Race and Slavery Petitions Project, Series 2, County Court Petitions, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
- Corlis-Respass Family Papers, Mss A C799b, Folder 7. Filson Historical Society. Kentucky.
- Craghead, William G. “Case of Catamenial Retention from Imperforated Hymen.” *The Stethoscope*, Vol. 5. Medical Society of Virginia, 1854.
- Doddington, David. “Manhood, Sex, and Power in Antebellum Slave Communities.” In *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas*, edited by Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie Harris, 145–158. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018.

- Doddington, David Stefan. *Contesting Slave Masculinity in the American South*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*. Boston, MA: De Wolfe & Fiske, 1892.
- Dusinberre, William. *Strategies for Survival: Recollections of Bondage in Antebellum Virginia*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009.
- Dusinberre, William. *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Ellen Kenton McCaughy Wallace, Journal, 1849–1864, Kentucky Historical Society, Box 1, FF2.
- Fogel, Robert W., and Stanley L. Engerman. *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*. London: Little, Brown and Company, 1974.
- Foster, Thomas A. *Rethinking Rufus: Sexual Violations of Enslaved Men*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019.
- Fraser, Rebecca. *Courtship and Love Among the Enslaved in North Carolina*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007.
- Fuentes, Marisa J. *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
- Hadden, Sally E. *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Hammond, James Henry. *Planation Journal of James H. Hammond*. The Hammond Collection of the South Carolina Collection. University of South Carolina Library (1857–1858). <http://www.scpronet.com/modjeskaschool/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/James-Henry-Hammond-Plantation-Manual.pdf>.
- Hunter, Tera W. *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Jennings, Thelma. "'Us Colored Women Had to Go Through a Plenty': Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women." *Journal of Women's History* 1, no. 3 (1990): 45–74. doi:10.1353/jowh.2010.0050.
- Johnson, Walter. "The Pedestal and the Veil: Rethinking the Capitalism/Slavery Question." *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 2 (2004): 299–308. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4141509>.
- Jones-Rogers, Stephanie. *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.
- King, Wilma. "'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* 99, no. 3 (2014): 173–196. doi:10.5323/jafriamerhist.99.3.0173.
- Kolchin, Peter. *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Lombardo, Paul A. "Looking Back at Eugenics." In *Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era*, edited by Paul A. Lombardo, Angela Logan, and Maxwell J. Mehlman, 1–8. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Lussana, Sergio A. *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016.
- Lydia Maria Child and African American Pamphlet Collection. *Authentic Anecdotes of American Slavery*. Newburyport Mass.: Published by Charles Whipple, 1838. <https://www.loc.gov/item/92838862/>.
- Morgan, Jennifer L. "'Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997): 167–192.
- Rosenthal, Caitlin. "Slavery's Scientific Management: Masters and Managers." In *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of America's Economic Development*, edited by Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, 62–86. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016.
- Schwartz, Marie Jenkins. *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

- Schwartz, Marie Jenkins. *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Smithers, Gregory D. "American Abolitionism and Slave-Breeding Discourse: A Re-Evaluation." *Slavery & Abolition* 33, no. 4 (2012): 551–570. doi:[10.1080/0144039X.2011.622119](https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2011.622119).
- Stanley, Amy Dru. "Slave Breeding and Free Love: An Antebellum Argument Over Slavery, Capitalism, and Personhood." In *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America*, edited by Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith, 119–144. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Tadman, Michael. *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.
- Thompson, Courtney E. "Child-Mothers and Invisible Fathers: The Paradox of 'Precocious Maternity' and the Pervasiveness of Child Sexual Abuse in Nineteenth-Century America." *Journal of Women's History* 34, no. 4 (2022): 125–146. doi:[10.1353/jowh.2022.0039](https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2022.0039).
- Turner, Sasha. *Contested Bodies, Pregnancy, Childrearing and Slavery in Jamaica*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.
- Unknown. *The Story of a Slave. A Realistic Revelation of a Social Relation of Slave Times – Hitherto Unwritten – From the Pen of One Who Has Felt Both the Lash and the Caress of a Mistress*. Chicago, IL: Wesley, Elmore & Benson, 1894.
- West, Emily. *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- West, Emily. "Reflections in the *History and Historians* of the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves: Enslaved Women and Intimate Partner Sexual Violence." *American Nineteenth Century History* 19, no. 1 (2018): 1–21. doi:[10.1080/14664658.2018.1429333](https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2018.1429333).
- White, Deborah G. *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.
- WPA Slave Narrative Project. *Federal Writer's Project*. United States Works Progress Administration. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>.