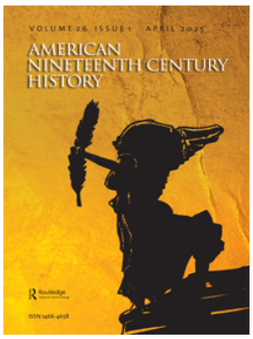
Challenging the overseer: enslaved women's violent resistance in the US antebellum South



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Challenging the overseer: enslaved women's violent resistance in the US antebellum South

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ABSTRACT

This article examines violent confrontations between enslaved women and white overseeing men, exploring how enslaved women opposed overseers through the weaponization of objects and fixtures on sites of enslavement across the antebellum South. Few studies have explored enslaved women's weaponized resistance and how they shaped the landscape of the US slaveholding South for their own violent purposes. Guided by judicial records, fugitive narratives, and the testimony of the formerly enslaved, the cases included in this study illuminate how enslaved women radically re-interpreted violence for their own use, highlighting the complexity of their actions in slavery to include physical acts which occurred within *and* beyond the remit of self-protection. In creating a counter-conceptualization of armed violence, "Challenging the Overseer" considers the possibilities for, and uses of, enslaved women's armed resistance against male overseers and underscores that female militance existed alongside the armed resistance of enslaved men, as more commonly portrayed in abolitionist materials. This examination aims to create a broader conceptualization of violence, one that diverges from the established focus on violence against women to open new discussions surrounding enslaved women's own agentic use of physical force.

KEYWORDS

Slavery; violence; resistance; women

During an interview with Fisk University in the late 1920s, a formerly enslaved person candidly divulged his experiences of 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 neither the monopoly of the white slaveholding family nor that of the overseer tasked with supervising the enslaved workforce. Conversely, the unnamed interviewee frankly recalled how his sister violently assaulted an 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." The Fisk interviewee finalized his account with the

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powerful statement: "Some of them wouldn't stand for nobody to whip them."[1] This interview is striking due to the respondent's candid inclusion of armed, violent resistance, something historians have projected as one of the most volatile and unlikely forms of enslaved women's opposition. This fragment of history constitutes an important piece of evidence in the history of enslaved women's violent resistance, yet the information presented within this account is by no means rare or unique. Fugitive narratives, interviews with the formerly enslaved, and judicial records not only document violent confrontations between enslaved women and overseers, but they also centralize enslaved women's weaponization of commonplace objects and implements as a defining and recurring feature of enslaved women's resistance throughout the slaveholding South. Enslaved women were not only violent in their interactions with Southern overseers through avenues of assault, homicide, and attempted murder, but they were also *armed*.

This article examines violent confrontations between enslaved women and white overseeing men in the antebellum US, showing how enslaved women capitalized on the variability of the slaveholding site and its panoply of fixtures and objects to make everyday, otherwise innocuous items into violent and potentially lethal instruments of resistance. From the perspective of enslaved women, enactments of weaponized resistance, as this study demonstrates, served to reinforce their personal defense against overseeing men in a variety of situations and crucially, enable them to engage in moments of retribution in the face of immediate and past abuse. The cases examined in this study provide a powerful example of the possibilities for, and uses of, violent resistance for enslaved women in the nineteenth-century South, providing an in-depth examination of the ways in which enslaved women facilitated their acts of violence and the motives behind their actions. From reading these descriptions, it is apparent that violence, contrary to popular belief, was far from being an exclusively male pursuit. These records illuminate the multi-layered nature of enslaved women's violence and the gendered contexts of enslaved women's lives, revealing the illusionary belief that weaponized violence was confined to male insurrectionist activity. Moreover, these cases highlight enslaved women's armed resistance in instances of day-to-day, non-insurrectionary conflict to disrupt established understandings of power and opposition under slavery; the examples studied here demonstrate that violence was neither the sole prerogative of enslaved men nor of white Southern males, even if white men were the instigators of such attacks.

It is indisputable that overseer-perpetrated violence, in all its varied forms, functioned as a weapon of terror and an extension of white authority to degrade, torture, demoralize, and impose power over the enslaved, yet examinations of enslaved women's experiences of overseer-perpetrated abuse are incomplete without an analysis of how enslaved women utilized their own methods of violence in response to such routinized degradation. While this article in no way disputes or marginalizes white-perpetrated violence against enslaved women, it does aim to create, in the words of Stephanie Smallwood, a "counter-history the archive tells only reluctantly."[2] For Smallwood, this meant creating an "accountable" history of enslavement to push against "the artifice of the story the archive wanted to tell" by centralizing enslaved women's own experiences, narratives, and histories.[3] This work, however, is mindful of the ethical considerations of researching violence, as historian Hannah Cusworth poignantly considers, "how do we avoid replicating the extractive nature of transatlantic slavery?"[4] In light of this consideration, historians, especially white scholars, are forced to grapple with how to ethically and morally handle

documents that record and embody the horrific realities of US slavery. Yet, 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. By highlighting enslaved women's perpetrated violence, this study centers enslaved women as agents of their own histories and actions, disrupting conventional narratives of white-inflicted abuse and terror. Women, as this study demonstrates, were victims and agents of physical force, both acted upon and actors in the violent regime of slavery in their combat against the intersectional oppressions inherent in racial bondage. As the scholarship of women's resistance continues to develop, it is necessary to examine all aspects of women's opposition in slavery, especially those histories that remain unaccounted. In producing a counter-history of violence through the analysis of traditionally hidden and suppressed information, this study moves beyond narratives of victimization to stress the resistant agency of bondswomen who used violence as a vehicle for their own goals and endeavors.[5]

The 2020s is currently witnessing a historiographical shift in relation to historical interpretations of enslaved women's opposition under slavery with historians Rebecca Hall, Wilma King, Nikki Taylor, and Tamika Nunley incorporating discussions concerning insurgency, crime, gender, and violence under US slavery in the colonial and antebellum eras.[6] As these studies demonstrate, enslaved women were violent in their interactions with white Southerners as they navigated the complex terrain of enslavement, drawing upon violence to combat the racial and gendered horrors of enslavement. These studies also showcase that enslaved women were occasionally armed in their violent confrontations, with Hall and Nunley spotlighting the myriad ways women contested slavery through their occasional armament of objects and household fixtures. In *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, Taylor powerfully argues for historians to reconceptualize their understandings of armed resistance in her demonstration that women "chose and secured weapons" in their lethal resistance against slavery.[7] "Just as important as their location, era, or type of bondage," writes Taylor, "are the weapons they used."[8] "Challenging the Overseer" builds upon these recent works, examining enslaved women's armed resistance, specifically against white male overseers, to enrich this area of historical research, which is witnessing a surge in historiographical attention concerning gender, resistance, and power in the US South.

In the words of Taylor, "most historians of women's history have insisted that enslaved women rarely chose armed, lethal, or overt forms of resistance."[9] This begs the question, why? The subject of enslaved women's resistance under slavery has made sizeable progress since the 1970s, especially in gender-specific forms of resistance with scholars demonstrating bondswomen's use of contraceptives, abortifacients, and infanticide.[10] Pathbreaking studies on women's resistance, including Stephanie M. H. Camp's *Closer to Freedom*, emphasized enslaved women's use of "everyday" resistance through the feigning of illness, abscondence, work slowdowns, dissemblance, alongside other forms of non-confrontational dissidence.[11] This gendered association between non-confrontational "day-to-day" resistance and enslaved women remained cemented in slavery scholarship with historians largely concurring that while enslaved women possessed as much will to resist as enslaved men, gender heavily influenced and limited the types of resistance enslaved women deployed. Rebecca Hall shone a deliberate spotlight on the pervasiveness of gender roles, which continue to "warp" historiographical understandings of resistance, with historiographical thought existing within an "echo chamber" in its

perpetuation of gendered understandings of aggression.[12] Historians' preconceived gender notions surrounding violent action based on real or presumed physical discrepancies between men and women, alongside the presumption that childcare responsibilities precluded violent resistive action on the part of enslaved women, characterized violent opposition as the prerogative of enslaved men.

For decades, historians explicitly linked violent resistance to enslaved masculinity. According to Aisha Finch, "it is important to appreciate how deeply masculinity and male embodiment have structured the way in which we think about black opposition."[13] The abolitionist movement played a decisive factor in shaping contemporary and modern perceptions of enslaved people's overt resistance tactics, and the gendering of physical, armed action as the prerogative of men under slavery. Traditional nineteenth-century gender ideologies rendered violence the purview of men and thus, abolitionist images and literature largely projected an exclusionary image of physical force as a male form of resistance to slavery. In doing so, abolitionist materials aimed to counteract pro-slavery projections of Black men as emasculated and dependent figures who relied upon whites for protection and survival. The gendering of Black men's violent struggles against enslavement became, in the words of historian David Doddington, "central" to the abolitionist "moral and political platform."[14] David Walker's 1829 *Appeal*, for example, solely 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-defense against tyrannical enslavers and political power, as he urged: "Therefore, if there is an *attempt* made by us, kill or be killed."[15] 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! Are we MEN?"[16] This gendered appeal is mirrored in other abolitionist speeches and writings. Anti-slavery monologues followed similar speech patterns and images of resistance with Henry Highland Garnet lambasting the masculinity of those enslaved men who failed to protect their loved ones from abuse, as he lectured: "In the name of God, we ask, are you men?"[17] Frederick Douglass famously centered his use of violence against his enslaver as the "turning point" in his masculinity, describing how his resolution to physically resist "revived within me a sense of my own manhood."[18] In a later autobiographical work, Douglass described this episode with the forceful affirmation: "I was nothing before; I WAS A MAN NOW."[19] Emotive language typically accompanied violent imagery as physical resistance and Black manhood were inextricably intertwined within abolitionist discourse.

Nineteenth-century abolitionist materials especially gendered armed physical force within the confines of masculinity, as demonstrated in Henry Bibb's 1849 autobiographical illustration (see Figure 1). 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."[20]

Abolitionist writings and autobiographical images, as displayed in Bibb's account, influenced the production of other visuals relating to slavery and resistance. In a strikingly similar image to Bibb's illustration, "The Bloodhound Business" showcases a fugitive man defending his wife and daughter from a pack of dogs (see Figure 2). Images of self-emancipating enslaved people often depicted enslaved men asserting their strength through

Figure 1. Henry Bibb,: Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself (New York, 1849), 125. Courtesy of Documenting the American South, Libraries of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Figure 2. "The Bloodhound Business," The Suppressed Book about Slavery! Prepared for Public 1857, Never Published until the Present Time (New York, 1864). Courtesy of the New York Public Library, Digital Collections.

the armament of objects whilst defending themselves and their loved ones from weaponized canines.[21] 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, defenseless, reliant, and nonviolent.

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. Visual and literary depictions of struggling and unprotected enslaved women and girls were a defining feature of the abolitionist movement. Portrayals of victimized 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 brutalization. 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 behaviors, which placed men as the providers and defenders of women.

Solomon Northup emphasized 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.[22] Whilst Northup emphasizes Patsey's inner strength to attain freedom, her sexual and physical victimization are central to her literary representation.[23] Male-authored accounts narrated the victimization of women whilst reinforcing the heroism of enslaved men who endured or overcame the perils of slavery through masculine strength and fortitude.[24] It should be acknowledged, however, that as male-authored narratives, these accounts of slavery privilege male subjectivity and their first-person dimension leads to prioritizing the story of the protagonist with others given roles as antagonists or stock characters. As historian Sarah N. Roth stipulates, "fugitive slave authors insisted on the admirable manliness of the African American men they depicted, including themselves as the protagonists of their own stories."[25] While female-authored accounts of slavery provide a more complex portrayal of enslaved women with spirit, courage, tenacity, faith, bravery, and violence abounding in enslaved women's literary accounts, these works are few in number. Moreover, depictions of violent enslaved women in abolitionist materials threatened to undercut established gender norms and derail the abolitionist movement, which relied heavily on the suffering of enslaved women and girls as emotive appeals.

The testimony of the formerly enslaved in the WPA and Fisk collections, alongside judicial records, as considered, here, counter abolitionist projections of armed resistance, especially in response to white overseers, as the primary prerogative of enslaved men.[26] White Southern overseers, also termed as overlookers, bailiffs, managers, and agents, were integral to the repressive slaveholding system and scholars have long recognized the violent and coercive practices of white overseeing men in producing and maintaining the institution of racial slavery. Southern enslavers employed overseers to enforce control and instill productivity in the quest for an efficient plantation enterprise, yet the day-to-day reality of slaveholding life was prone to disruption, tension, and conflict. Laboring in close proximity to the enslaved, distanced from the ideological powerhouse of the slaveowning household, was not without risk. Relations between white overseeing men and the enslaved rested on complex and contingent balances of power, with violence from both sides an ever-present possibility. While the formerly enslaved connected weaponized violence with white overseeing men, especially the act of whipping through flogging devices, respondents also spoke of the violent and weaponized actions of

enslaved women who challenged and occasionally ruptured overseeing men's authority through their own enactments of physical force.

From reading the testimony of the formerly enslaved, alongside judicial trial records, it is apparent that weaponized acts of armed violence were not the domain of men, but rather a *shared* phenomenon transcending gendered binaries. Indeed, enslaved women responded to overseer-aggression with their own varied and creative modes of violence, capitalizing on slavery's material culture in their weaponization of conventional and unconventional objects and implements across the slaveholding site to heighten and enrich their assaults against overseeing men. Indeed, these cases illuminate how enslaved women deployed their own enactments of weaponized violence in response to historic and immediate violence and gendered exploitation. As highlighted in the opening vignette in which the respondent's sister "hung a cider bucket over the overseer's head," virtually any object could be transformed into a weapon of resistance in the face of oppression. Enslaved women were violent in their interactions with white 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 under racial bondage.

Historians have most commonly acknowledged how physical confrontations between white Southerners and the enslaved occurred due to white-initiated abuse, yet not all instances of violence were provoked through the threatening or facilitation of corporal punishment. Martha Bradley attested to this in her WPA interview when she described how she "took [her] hoe and knocked" an overseer "plum down" in response to the man who "say sumpin' to me he had no bizness to say."[27] Historians have previously emphasized enslaved people's need for survival in slavery in the face of immediate or historic danger, yet violence on the part of enslaved women was not solely a product of fear and self-preservation.[28] This example reveals how enslaved women's notions of resistance and survival were not mutually exclusive, nor restricted to illicit modes of opposition, challenging previous assumptions that the enslaved were unwilling to openly resist and challenge overseeing men's authority due to fear of reprisal. Bradley's affront to the overseer's remark reveals that, in some cases, enslaved women were willing to risk the consequences of assaulting a white male citizen in instances of nonphysical aggression, complicating notions of why and how enslaved women engaged in acts of physical force.

Violence did not always engender violence in the antebellum slaveholding South; enslaved women reacted to routine instances of overseer intrusion**,** with enslaved women's violent resistance occurring beyond the remit of provoked defense during instances of overseer aggression. Minor disputes and disagreements between overseers and enslaved women possessed the potential to escalate into acts of open and deadly violence, as evidenced in *Commonwealth vs. Rose*. On June 28, 1859, in Campbell, Virginia, Joseph Epperson discovered his overseer, John Deanor, bleeding "considerably" to the head with a wound "five inches long."[29] 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 plowing. The incident occurred while Rose was "scrapping tobacco" halfway across the field after the overseer had 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 offense and threaten Rose before he eventually "struck her with the intention

to do her injury" across her head and shoulder. Rose, however, 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 and succumbed to his injuries later that evening. In a culture of racial and gendered exploitation, minor disputes surrounding rest and provisions, labor interference, 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. This court record exemplifies the volatile nature of slaveholding spaces and how rapidly routine situations could unravel into incidents of weaponized resistance. Assaulting a white male citizen in the antebellum South, however, could engender serious consequences for enslaved women, and Rose's resistance did not go unpunished. A judicial court declared Rose guilty of murder and she was condemned to sale and transportation beyond the limits of the United States.

Other enslaved women reacted to instances of overseer-led corporal violence, with whippings and other acts of aggression leading factors behind bondswomen's weaponized action. Recent historiographical works on the profession of overseeing have shed new light on the managerial roles of white overseeing men, rebuffing previous characterizations of overseers as inept vagabonds, as often portrayed in the brutish, ne'er-do-well stereotype presented throughout contemporary and historical accounts.[30] Formerly enslaved people, however, nevertheless recognized that physical force and coercion underpinned the profession of overseeing, with bondspeople carrying the physical and psychological scars left by overseers for the remainder of their lives. Katherine Clay, a WPA respondent, described the abusive actions of her former "riding boss" who "put a scar" on her mother's back which she "took to the grave."[31] 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."[32] Others recalled the terror of overseer-inflicted sexual violence, with respondents conveying disturbing accounts of assault, harassment, rape, and acts of sexualized punishment against enslaved women and girls. One respondent acknowledged overseeing men's unbridled sexual power, asserting to his interviewer, "Dere was a heap of dat went on all de time" and another interviewee candidly divulged, "You know they whipped people in those days and forced them."[33] Indeed, enslaved people's testimony reveals the extent to which bondspeople associated overseers with violence, with the understanding that forceful physical aggression and coercion went hand in hand with overseeing men's methods of subjugation and control.

Given the pervasiveness of violence that suffused the so-called "Peculiar Institution" throughout the antebellum South, weaponized violence as a form of self-defense constituted a predominant motive behind enslaved women's enactments of resistance. Just as overseer-perpetrated abuse manifested in a multiplicity of forms, so too did the violence of enslaved women who engaged in a variety of physical assaults and combative action. Enslaved women weaponized a variety of objects in their violent assaults against overseers for reasons including self-defense and protection. Celestia Avery, who was interviewed by the WPA in the 1930s, divulged how her grandmother, Sylvia, assaulted an overseer with a fence railing on her former site of enslavement. According to Avery, 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. As the overseer "reached out to grab her," "she snatched a fence railing and broke it across his arms."[34] Despite slaveholding surveillance and slavery's physical restrictions, the material culture of enslavement that suffused the landscape of the South afforded some enslaved women the opportunity to engage in physical acts of weaponized violence; objects of labor and the very parameters of slavery's physical restrictions could be used against overseeing men in the face of immediate danger.

The subversion of everyday objects and items of enslavement also occurred in the most intimate of spaces, with enslaved women weaponizing objects of domestic labor in their own living quarters. The WPA respondent, Richard Jackson, divulged how a white overseer on his former site of enslavement forcibly entered his mother's quarters "to whip her." Jackson's mother, however, evaded the overseer's attempted violence when she "up and throwed a shovel full of live coals from the fireplace" into the overseer's "bosom" before she "run out the door."[35] White men in supervisory positions invaded enslaved people's dwelling spaces to inflict additional violence, instill terror, and invoke a sense of constant surveillance. Indeed, the enslaved woman's escape from her quarters in which she ran "out of the door" further illustrates that bondswomen inherently recognized the risks of being alone with overseeing men.[36] In her emphasis on white people's intrusion into Black domestic spheres, Saidiya Hartman describes enslaved people's living areas as "a threshold between the public and private rather than a fortified private sphere."[37] While enslaved women, including Jackson's mother, could neither prevent nor dictate who entered their living quarters, they nevertheless attempted to "fortify" and manipulate these confined domestic spaces through any means necessary with homemaking objects immediately at their disposal. Enslaved women armed themselves in a multitude of captive areas, transforming the slaveholding South into a resistive cultural landscape, violently contesting the confines of their own intimate spaces for preservation and seclusion.

In instances of overseer aggression, enslaved women placed their own bodies at the center of their resistance during conflicts involving labor and corporal violence. Frederick Douglass wrote of an 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 Sevier attempted to drag the enslaved woman toward 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.[38] Reflecting on his days enslaved in Arkansas, Leonard Franklin described a similar altercation between his mother, Lucy Franklin, and the resident overseer. Franklin candidly reported how his mother knocked the overseer down and "tore his face up" in response to an attempted whipping. Franklin finalized his account of his mother with the powerful statement: "There wasn't no use for no one man to try to do nothin' with her. No overseer never downed her."[39]

Lilly Perry detailed her own enactment of violence against 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 recalled: "de minute he grabs me I seize on ter his thumb an' I bites hit ter de bone."[40] In conjunction to Perry who

bit the overseer's thumb "to der bone," Martha Bradley, a WPA respondent of Alabama, recalled how she ""on an overseer, and "bit and kicked him 'til he let me go."[41] It is worth acknowledging that as adults speaking in the 1930s, Perry and Bradley perpetrated their acts of violence against their respective overseers as adolescents. Female-perpetrated violence in slavery occurred across generations with enslaved girls *and* women engaging in weaponized force in the face of labor exploitation and physical abuse.[42] While overseers failed to mitigate their violence according to the age or sex of their target, the actions of Perry and Bradley reveal the undeniable presence of violent resistance among enslaved girls who used their own bodies as vehicles of resistance to counteract the actions of grown white adult men. Violence, as a strategy of opposition, was intergenerational in slavery, spanning childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Enslaved women and girls on antebellum slaveholding sites experienced rampant sexual abuse and harassment from various classes of white men, including overseers. Whilst some 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 defenses and attacks, as evidenced in the testimony of Fanny Berry, who 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 finalized her account with pride, asserting: "dar wuz no more bothering Fannie from him."[43] Acts of weaponized force could produce mixed results for enslaved women. 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 testimony highlights the vulnerability of enslaved women and girls on slaveholding sites to single and grouped overseeing men, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that violent self-defense was occasionally a viable option for some bondswomen. While violent action could engender negative repercussions for enslaved women, with some overseers unwilling to ignore or overlook such overt challenges to their authority, violence for some enslaved women could secure immediate, if not long-lasting, protection from male overseer abuse.

White initiated abuse, specifically the act of whipping, engendered a unique form of resistance amongst the enslaved who violently assaulted Southern white men through overseers' own flogging devices. Historians have extensively analyzed flogging devices within the context of slavery's brutality, documenting how overseers and drivers, as well as male and female enslavers alike, brandished these instruments of torture on a regular and unforgiving basis.[44] Few, if any, have analyzed how the enslaved, and enslaved women in particular, circumvented the traditional usage of whips for their own violent endeavors. Counter-whippings, defined in this study as the subversive use of a flogging device for the purpose of resistance, are well documented in male-authored autobiographies. Solomon Northup famously described a confrontation in which he "snatched" an overseer's "three feet long whip" from the hand of his hired "master," John Tibeats. Northup proceeded to beat his temporary enslaver in a "frenzy of madness," inflicting "blow after blow" until his "right arm ached."[45] Austin Stewart similarly described how an enslaved man caught an overseer "by the throat" and "held him in a vicelike grasp, until he succeeded in getting possession of a cowhide, with which he gave the overseer such a flogging as slaves seldom get." The enslaved man, Williams, continued his assault until the overseer "commenced begging in a humble manner" to

spare him. Williams, as depicted in Figure 3, only relinquished his control over the overseer after "he thought he had thrashed him sufficiently."[46]

In line with abolitionist propaganda, which typically gendered violence as a male preserve, male fugitive authors characterized this particular form of weaponization as an inherently gendered phenomenon under slavery. The WPA narratives, on the other hand, contradict this gendered portrayal of counter-whippings, with respondents testifying to enslaved *women's* armament of overseeing men's own flogging devices during moments of opposition. These accounts suggest that gendered distinctions in physical resistance were at best, illusionary, with violence an interchangeable phenomenon

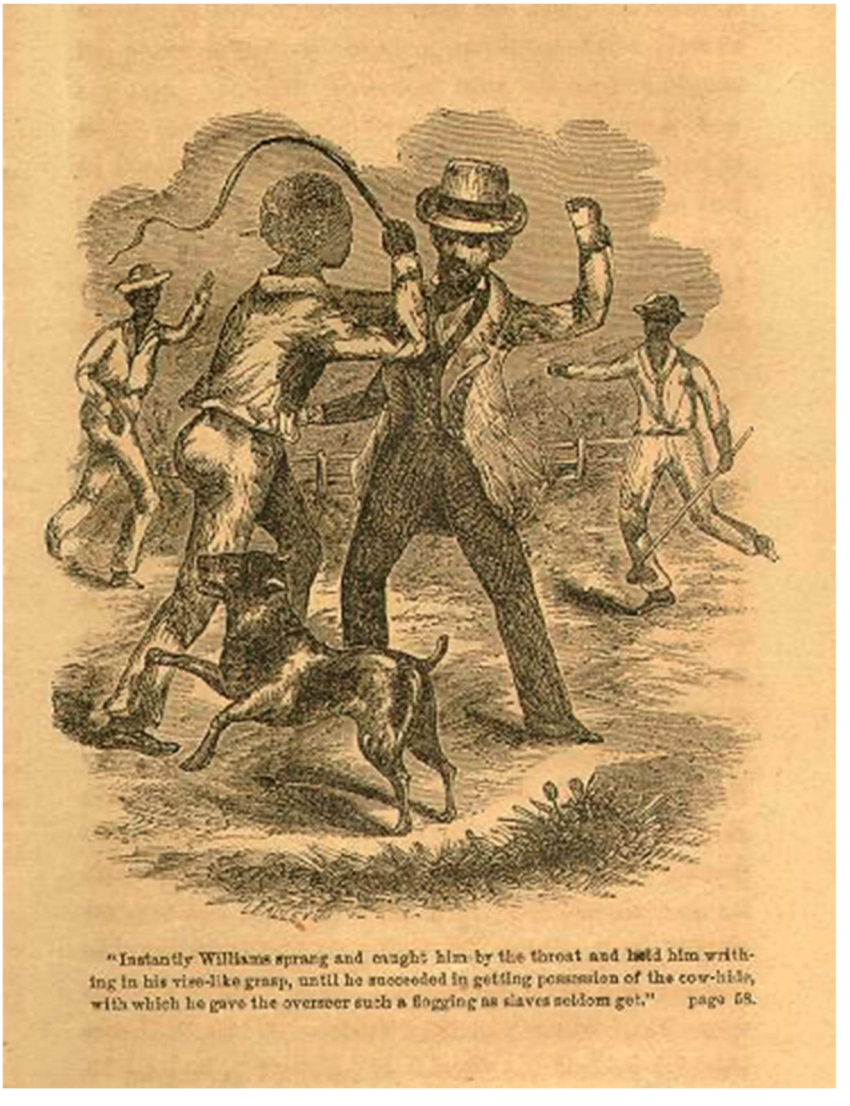

Figure 3. Austin Stewart, Twenty – Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman; Embracing a Correspondence of Several Years, While President of Wilberforce Colony, Canada West (Rochester, 1857), 58. Courtesy of Documenting the American South, Libraries of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

enacted amongst enslaved men and women. In a strikingly similar incident to the counter-whipping portrayed in Stewart's autobiography, Lula Jackson testified to this gendered illusion in her account of enslavement in Arkansas:

> Early Hunt had an overseer named Sanders. He tied my sister Crecie to a stump to whip her. Crecie was stout and heavy. She was a grown woman and big and strong. Sanders had two dogs with him in case he would have trouble with anyone. When he started layin' that lash on Crecie's back, she pulled up that stump and whipped him and the dogs both.'[47]

Crecie's attack of the overseer and the dogs strongly resonates with Austin's account of Williams who "thrashed" the overseer and his "ferocious bulldog," as depicted in Figure 3.[48] Just as the enslaved man, Williams, was able to defend himself from the attack of the dog 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 her weaponization of the overseer's own whip.[49] The duality of her counter-attack speaks to the strength of her resistance, whilst demonstrating that the violent use of the whip was neither the sole preserve of white overseers nor of enslaved men. Jackson's account is corroborated in the testimony of Dianah Watson. Watson recounted a similar episode to her WPA interviewer, detailing how her former overseer "got mad at my mother's sister, Aunt Susie Ann, and beat her till the blood run off her on the ground." In response to this abuse, Susie Ann retaliated in the following manner: "She fall at his 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." Taking pride in her aunt's actions, Watson finalized her account with the statement: "there warn't no more overseers on the place after that." While respondents may have wished to convey female family members as powerful and brave to their interviewer, the valorization of these women neither undermines the strength of their weaponized action nor mitigates their use of violence as a tool directed against the horrors of slavery, as evidenced in Susie Ann's beating of the overseer "till he couldn't stand up."[50]

Watson's testimony raises the issue of intentionality. Uncovering the personal motives of enslaved women in interviews collected in the 1920s and 1930s with those who witnessed acts of violence as children, decades ago under slavery, raises methodological questions over whether historians can truly uncover the personal and occasionally unspoken intentions of resistant women beyond the perspective of interviewees who recalled events on the behalf of some enslaved women. Historians of slavery have stressed the need to deploy modern epistemological techniques including critical fabulation and informed speculation to combat archival silences in the quest to reclaim the forgotten and the unsaid.[51] In the words of Jennifer Morgan, these approaches can enable historians to "catch glimpses made visible through slips of the pen or of calculation."[52] While the personal motives of women including Susie Ann remain elusive, glimpses of their intentions can be gleaned from the testimony of witnesses, providing rare insights into the phenomenon of counter-whippings alongside other acts of weaponized opposition. Through informed speculation, alongside more traditional forms of analysis, the Fisk and WPA narratives provide a window in which to invite a deeper consideration of the apparent motives behind enslaved women's armed opposition against overseeing men.

In line with these modern approaches, it can be deduced that counter-whippings served a dual purpose; overseers were forced to endure the physical pain of the whip, alongside the humiliation of being physically assaulted by an enslaved woman. While

enslaved women's counter-whippings were often provoked by overseers' threats of corporal violence, the desire to humiliate overseers and discredit their professional standing was also central to this specific mode of violence. Counter-whippings – a distinct reversal of violence – represented a humiliating cessation of power and control for overseers who predicated their white manhood on physical superiority and control over the enslaved. 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. Enslaved women's violent assaults could undermine overseeing men's professional reputation and reduce planter confidence in their employees, resulting in the permanent dismissal of some plantation managers. Indeed, the termination of the overseer's employment on Watson's former site of enslavement and his removal from the slaveholding site speak to this sense of shame, as his employer clearly deemed him unsuitable to the task of plantation management.

Watson's testimony diverges from traditional historiographical models of the immovable male overseer in contrast to the projected powerlessness of enslaved women. 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 testimony of Alice Alexander, who described how an enslaved woman, Mary Malow, physically assaulted an overseer who was abusing her sister. To prevent her sister from receiving any more 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."[53] Through the deployment of violence, enslaved women could alter, contest, and manipulate white authority and control, fostering temporary and permanent change to the localized patriarchal dynamics of slavery.

Enslaved women's practices of violence were neither solely motivated by self-defense nor the desire to humiliate overseers; retribution was central to bondswomen's deployment of counter-whippings. Enslaved people who witnessed the phenomenon of counter-whippings overwhelmingly framed these reversals of violence in the context of retribution shaped by individual circumstances and wider cultural wrongs. Witnesses testified to bondswomen's prolonged use of violence, inflicting blow after blow, to the extent that targeted overseers were deprived of pride, honor, and physical strength. Indeed, Susie Ann's whipping of the overseer "till he couldn't stand up" speaks to the emotional and physical ferocity of her resistance. Ann was not content to simply beat the overseer, she needed to vanquish him entirely, whipping him to the extent where the overseer was physically weakened and unable to stand. Thomas Goodwater similarly positioned an enslaved woman's counter-whipping as an act of retribution. 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'."[54] The methodical process of this woman's response in which she "take the whip frum him" and "close[ed] de door" before she proceeded to beat the overseer, despite the inherent physical and sexual risks of being confined with a white man, is a testament to this enslaved

woman's belief in her own violent capabilities and her self-assurance that retribution was hers and hers alone to take away from the interference of potential onlookers. Some enslaved women no doubt valued the opportunity to reverse the status quo, enacting a form of violence primarily targeted toward the enslaved, seizing upon their own version of justice for present and past wrongs.

The responses of these women, as relayed by WPA informants, speak to Tamika Nunley's theorization that enslaved women's actions under slavery embodied more than just violence, but their acts also served as "articulations of justice." Criminal acts of violence enabled bondswomen to implement change and enforce their own ideas surrounding justice despite the reprisals they faced in formal and informal legal systems across the South.[55] Nikki Taylor similarly contends that enslaved women enacted their own Black feminist practices of justice through their deployment of lethal resistance. Violence enabled enslaved women to facilitate their own personal versions of justice against those whites who abused and exploited them, and the institution of slavery itself. "Because protection and justice for enslaved women were elusive through traditional moral and legal channels," writes Taylor, "the only form available to them is what they secured with their own hands."[56] This sense of "personal justice" is evident in enslaved women's deployment of counter-whippings. These women's preference for retaliation, inflicting blow after blow, despite the inherent risks of assaulting a white male citizen in the US South, speaks volumes about enslaved women's ideas and conceptualizations of "justice" and how these competing ideas of reparation shaped the tactics of their resistance.

Enslaved women's enactments of justice can be seen as an extension of retribution, occurring separately and simultaneously together. "Retaliatory violence," as termed by Nikki Taylor, exercised beyond the confines of the legal system, incorporated both judgement and personal revenge.[57] Understanding these acts as expressions of retribution rather than expressions of self-defense disrupts established paradigms that marginalize women's violence as primarily defensive. Some WPA respondents conveyed memories of violent enslaved women within a framework of retaliatory violence, as demonstrated in the testimony of John Henry Kemp who graphically detailed an altercation between an overseer and an "old" enslaved woman who "took her hoe and chopped him across the head" after the overseer violently reprimanded her for her slow pace of work. Kemp vividly exclaimed to his interviewer: "child you should have seen how she chopped this man to a bloody death."[58] The brutality of this assault 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.

This women's use of violence began as an act of self-defense, yet her mutilation of the overseer's dead body and that of his horse, to her "satisfaction," suggests her actions were, in part, motivated by retaliatory justice.[59] Male fugitive authors also emphasized

the importance of retribution in their attainments of manhood, with Northup articulating this sense of justice in his description of his use of force against Tibeats: "he who had shown no mercy did not receive it."[60] Northup detailed how his initial fear at committing violence against Tibeats "changed to anger" which "seemed to course through [his] veins like fire."[61] Northup explicitly acknowledged the emotions he experienced during his use of violence, writing how his "blood was up" as he relished in the abuse of his enslaver who was "completely in [his] power."[62] Male-authored fugitive accounts and abolitionist works provide in-depth descriptions of the emotional and mental process of violent acts of resistance as self-actualizing acts of manhood. While the testimony of WPA respondents do not always explicate this process in the same intimate level of detail, it is nevertheless apparent that women experienced similar emotional processes, with Goodwater and Watson, among others, testifying to enslaved women's engagement in violent acts of resistance beyond the immediate confines of self-protection.

Expressions of violence provided a way for enslaved men *and* women to express their emotional discontent in their refusal to submit to white practices of corporal abuse in shared displays of violence. Enslaved women similarly refused to extend the hand of mercy to their assailants, striking them repeatedly with slavery's various instruments of racial control. The desire for immediate protection from overseer abuse was no doubt a leading factor in these women's use of armed resistance, yet descriptions of their violence from those who witnessed these acts first-hand, demonstrate that counter-whippings occurred within and beyond the remit of self-protection. In light of enslaved women's systematic denial to justice in the legal systems of the South, enslaved women enacted their own versions of "justice" in their deployment of weaponized resistance. These women refused to submit to the conditions of their bondage, transforming objects of routinized labor and violence into their own weapons of physical and deadly force.

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These cases showcase the violent unpredictability of slavery and the volatile nature of the profession of overseeing, which was subject to various challenges from enslaved women who resisted overseer authority through their own creative methods of weaponized force. The complex and occasionally unspoken motivations behind enslaved women's weaponized resistance reveal bondswomen's ability to maneuver within the constraints of slavery, transcending the spaces in which they worked and lived into arenas of armed violence in their effort to circumvent systems of control and exploitation. As the experiences of these women show, the use of weapons was not the sole purview of enslaved men as documented and illustrated in abolitionist materials. Moreover, these cases destabilize the presumed juncture between violence and the male body. Enslaved women were resourceful in their enactment of violent techniques, capitalizing on the variability of the slaveholding site and its panoply of fixtures, objects, and substances to repurpose everyday, otherwise innocuous items into potentially lethal instruments of their resistance. The phenomenon of counter-whippings, as vividly demonstrated in the WPA narratives, represents one of the most symbolic and underexplored forms of enslaved women's violent resistance to date. These cases are a far cry from contemporary abolitionist projections concerning masculine protection and female dependency. While the responses of

some of these individual women are absent in the record, the descriptions of their violence from first-hand witnesses provide an explicit narration of violent acts which rapidly evolved into moments of personal retribution. While whippings and other acts of corporal violence acted as catalysts for resistive action, Black female-perpetrated violence was not solely defensive. Many of these cases carry clear undertones or explicit references to retribution as bondswomen enacted their own versions of justice in the absence of any real or meaningful legal protection. This important and underexplored history of enslaved women's resistance provides historians with the opportunity to expand traditional conceptualizations of physical force under slavery to reconfigure understandings of gender and violence in the quest to acknowledge bondswomen as multi-layered individuals capable of inflicting real acts of physical harm to combat the intersectional oppressions inherent in racial slavery. These women refused to submit to the conditions of their bondage, enacting weaponized resistance as an assertion of agency and identity in their physical interactions with overseers. Their actions require historians to reconceptualize the gendered boundaries of violence in the quest to uncover the broader meaning of enslaved women's resistance under slavery in the antebellum South.

Notes

1. Fisk University Social Science Institute, *God Struck Me Dead*, 182.
2. Smallwood, "The Politics of the Archive," 125.
3. Smallwood, "The Politics of the Archive," 118, 125.
4. Cusworth, "Whose Emotions?," 173.
5. The purpose of this study is to focus on the actions of enslaved women, analyzing how and why they used violence against overseeing men in the slaveholding South in the effort to redirect attention to the study of bondswomen and their lived experiences under slavery. This study therefore refrains from discussions concerning the aftermath and consequences of women's resistance in order to maintain focus on the actions of enslaved women rather than the white power structures of slavery's formal and informal judicial systems. Scholars of Southern slavery and the law have provided comprehensive overviews of enslaved people's experiences with antebellum legal systems across the slaveholding South. Historians of crime and gender have also paid particular attention to the legal meanings of women's resistance, underscoring the criminality of certain resistive action, especially violence against a white US citizen, a criminal offense under slavery, and how these women interacted with the South's judicial processes. For further information on the South's criminal justice system, see, for example: Hindus, "Black Justice Under White Law"; Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*; McNair, *Criminal Injustice*; Quigley, "Slavery, Democracy and the Problem of Planter Authority in the Nineteenth-century US South"; Campbell, *Crime and Punishment in African American History*.
6. King, ""Mad" Enough to Kill"; Nunley, "Thrice Condemned"; Nunley, *The Demands of Justice*; Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge.*
7. Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, 6.
8. Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, 8.
9. Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, 4.
10. For further information on enslaved women's reproductive resistance, see: Perrin, "Resisting Reproduction"; Morgan, *Laboring Women;* Frederickson and Walters (eds.), *Gendered Resistance*; Taylor, *Driven Towards Madness:* West and Shearer, "Fertility Control, Shared Nurturing, and Dual Exploitation"; Nunley, *The Demands of Justice.*
11. Camp, *Closer to Freedom.*

12. Hall, *Wake*.
13. Finch, *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba,* 142. David Doddington echoes Finch: 'it is virtually impossible to enter any discussion on the topic [masculinity] without first considering resistance to slavery.' Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity,* 22.
14. Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity*, 26.
15. Walker, *Four Articles,* 30.
16. Walker, *Four Articles,* 19–20.
17. Jakinski, "Constituting Antebellum African American Identity," 37.
18. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life,* 72.
19. Douglass, *My Bondage*, 246.
20. Bibb, *Narrative of the Life*, 124–127.
21. For further information on white Southerners' weaponization of trained canines against enslaved people, see, for example: Smith, "'Open jaws of this monster-tyranny'."
22. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 189.
23. Salamishah Tillet asserts that while Northup emphasizes Patsey's inner strength to attain freedom, her sexual and physical victimization are central to her literary representation which 'enable Solomon to emerge as a thoroughly uncompromised hero at the expense of enslaved Black women', Tillet, "'I Got No Comfort in This Life'," 357.
24. 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. Foster, '"In Respect to Females . . ."'
25. Roth, "How a Slave was Made a Man," 255.
26. Fisk University Social Science Institute, *Unwritten History of Slavery*; Federal Writers' Project, *Slave Narratives* (hereafter cited as FWP). While the Fisk Narratives can be considered part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) collection, forming Vol. 18 and Vol. 19 of George Rawick's *American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, 1979), this study categorizes the Fisk interviews as distinct from the WPA. The Fisk Narratives were conducted by a separate organization, Fisk University, between 1927 and 1930, at least six years prior to the earliest WPA interviews. The Fisk Narratives were published as separate narratives in 1945 and only combined in the WPA supplementary series in 1979.
27. Martha Bradley, FWP, Alabama Narratives, Vol. 1, 1.
28. According to William Dusinberre, 'Violence was likely to lead to the death of the violent resistor, and most slaves wanted to stay alive.' Dusinberre, "Power & Agency in Antebellum Slavery," 140.
29. *Commonwealth vs. Rose,* Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1859 August – October Pardons. Accession 36789, Box 19, Folder 5, Misc. 4216. State Records Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
30. Sandy, "Supervisors of Small Worlds"; Sandy, "Divided Loyalties"; Sandy, "Slave Owning Overseers"; Stubbs, *Masters of Violence*; Sandy, *The Overseers of Early American Slavery*.
31. Katherine Clay, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1.
32. William Adams, FWP, Texas Narratives, Vol. 16, Part 1, 1.
33. Joe Clinton, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 2, 3; Abbie Lindsay, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 4, 1.
34. Celestia Avery, FWP, Georgia Narratives, Vol. 4, Part 1, 4.
35. Richard Jackson, FWP, Texas Narratives, Vol. 16, Part 2, 1.
36. Jackson, Texas Narratives, 1.
37. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 160.
38. Douglass, *My Bondage*, 92–95.
39. Leonard Franklin, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1–2.
40. Lily Perry, FWP, North Carolina Narratives, Vol. 11, Part 2, 2.
41. Martha Bradley, FWP, Alabama Narratives, Vol. 1, 1.
42. Vanessa Holden asserts that enslaved people's resistance was both 'gendered and generational'. Enslaved women across generations deployed and transferred resistance practices,

beliefs, attitudes, and strategies to community and family members including children. Holden, *Surviving Southampton*, 19, 55.
43. Fannie Berry, FWP, Virginia Narratives, Vol. 17, 2.
44. For secondary works on female enslavers' use of violence, see: Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage;* Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property.*
45. Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 110, 111.
46. Stewart, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave,* 58–59.
47. Lula Jackson, FWP, Arkansas Narratives, Vol. 2, Part 4, 1.
48. Stewart, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*, 58.
49. Stewart, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave,* 58.
50. Dianah Watson, FWP, Texas Narratives, Vol. 16, Part 4, 1–2.
51. For further information on the use of modern epistemological approaches including critical fabulation, informed speculation, and historical creativity, see, for example: Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"; Smallwood, "The Politics of the Archive"; Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*.
52. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 209.
53. Alice Alexander, FWP, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. 13, 1-2.
54. Thomas Goodwater, FWP, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Part 2, 2.
55. Nunley, "Thrice Condemned"; Nunley, *The Demands of Justice*.
56. Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, 7.
57. Taylor, *Brooding Over Bloody Revenge*, 7.
58. John Henry Kemp, FWP, Florida Narratives, Vol. 3, 1–2.
59. Irene Coates, FWP, Florida Narratives, Vol. 3, 2–3.
60. Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 111.
61. Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 110–111.
62. Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 111.

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