University of Reading

Fertility control, shared nurturing, and dual exploitation: the lives of enslaved mothers in the antebellum United States

Article

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0 (CC-BY)

Open Access

West, E. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3444-3814 and Shearer, E. (2018) Fertility control, shared nurturing, and dual exploitation: the lives of enslaved mothers in the antebellum United States. Women's History Review, 27 (6). pp. 1006-1020. ISSN 1747-583X doi: 10.1080/09612025.2017.1336849 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/66790/

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/10.1080/09612025.2017.1336849

Publisher: Taylor and 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.

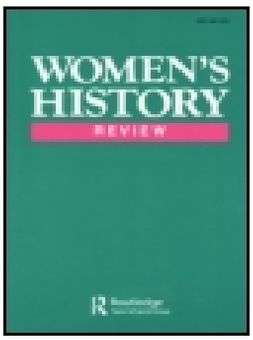
www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

University of Reading

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online



Women's History Review

ISSN: 0961-2025 (Print) 1747-583X (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwhr20

Fertility control, shared nurturing, and dual exploitation: the lives of enslaved mothers in the antebellum United States

Emily West & Erin Shearer

To cite this article: Emily West & Erin Shearer (2017): Fertility control, shared nurturing, and dual exploitation: the lives of enslaved mothers in the antebellum United States, Women's History Review, DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2017.1336849

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2017.1336849

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 14 Jun 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 162

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rwhr20

Download by: [University of Reading] **Date:** 19 July 2017, At: 08:15

WOMEN'S HISTORY REVIEW, 2017
https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2017.1336849

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Fertility control, shared nurturing, and dual exploitation: the lives of enslaved mothers in the antebellum United States

Emily West and Erin Shearer

Department of History, University of Reading, Reading, UK

ABSTRACT

Slaveholders believed women could both labour and care for their children simultaneously, and they routinely exploited enslaved mothers as both workers and as reproducers. Using Stephanie Camp's conceptualization of enslaved women's bodies as sites of resistance, this article argues that despite slavery's arduousness motherhood provided a place of refuge for enslaved women to enjoy their children and the camaraderie of their peers. However, women sometimes lamented bringing enslaved children into the world and strove not to do so, especially when pregnancy resulted from sexual assault. Slavery's unique burdens meant many women participated in shared and more communal forms of mothering than their white counterparts.

> When the slave women were confined with the babies having to suck and they were too little to take to the fields, the mammies had to spin. I would take them the thread and bring it back to the house when it was spun. If they didn't spin seven or eight cuts a day they would get a whippin'. It was considerable hard on a woman when she had a baby. But every morning those babies had to be taken to the big house so that they white folks could see if they were dressed right. There was money tied up in little nigger young' uns. WPA respondent Cato Cater[1]

Cato Carter's memories of slavery highlight the ways in which slaveholders maximized the profit-making opportunities generated by enslaved mothers. Only a young boy himself, Cato assumed responsibility for delivering thread for mothers with infant children to spin. Neither children nor postpartum mothers were spared the rigours of plantation labour. Throughout the Southern states slaveholders made pragmatic decisions about how best to work enslaved mothers who also needed to nurture their babies, and they commonly employed such women in more sedentary roles such as weaving and sewing. Slaveholders believed mothers could both labour and care for their children simultaneously, and Carter's comments also speak to the financial value of slave infants and children. Well aware of the future value of enslaved women's offspring, Carter's owners demanded that they see for themselves just how much care and attention enslaved women devoted to the appearance of their children.

CONTACT Emily West e.r.west@reading.ac.uk Department of History, University of Reading, Whiteknights, Reading RG6 6AA, UK

© 2017 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 License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Motherhood was essential to the development of slavery in the US and elsewhere because only through the reproduction of the enslaved labour force could the regime continue, indeed thrive. From 1662 onwards, the Virginian law of *partus sequitur ventrem* rendered the child of any enslaved woman a slave themselves, and similar legislation soon spread across the Southern colonies, becoming entrenched by the revolutionary era.[2] These laws strengthened whites' assumptions that slavery was 'natural' for black people and gave slave-hungry masters every incentive to sexually assault their enslaved women who might bear them valuable children. Slaveholders increasingly began to regard their female slaves as both labourers *and* potential reproducers for future economic enterprises. Colonial slaveholders had primarily regarded their enslaved women as *labourers* because they could easily import or buy more slaves from Africa. So they failed to permit women adequate respite from work when pregnant or postpartum, and rates of stillbirth, infant and child mortality, and maternal mortality often stood at more than 50% in the colonies.[3] Only slowly did natural decrease give way to natural increase. The abolition of the international trade in slaves in 1808 also meant reproduction became more profitable for slaveholders because thereafter it became illegal to import slaves from abroad, and masters now had to reproduce their labour forces from their own enslaved women. The view that enslaved women should be *both* reproducers and labourers hence grew more entrenched over time. Economic as well as legal and political developments also affected the lives of enslaved women. The invention of a mechanical cotton gin in 1794 raised the amount of profit owners could extract from their chattel because the gin separated cotton fibres from seeds quickly and efficiently. Moreover, a rising demand for cotton within the industrializing societies of Western Europe and the USA created opportunities for slaveholders to acquire yet more profits from their enslaved people.[4]

Stephanie Camp argued enslaved women's bodies existed in a political arena as places of resistance. Their bodies took on three dimensions: a site of domination acted and exploited upon by slaveholders; the subjective experience of that suffering and terror; and the third, conversely, represented a source of pleasure, pride, and self-expression.[5] This article shows how various forms of exploitation directed against enslaved mothers highlight the specific components of Camp's bodily dimensions. Despite slavery's arduousness, motherhood provided a place of refuge for enslaved women within which they could both enjoy their children and the camaraderie of their peers—even as they sometimes lamented bringing enslaved children into the world. Motherhood brought women pleasure and pride, but slavery's unique burdens meant many women participated in shared and more communal forms of mothering than their white counterparts.

According to Evelyn Nakano Glenn, motherhood is a 'culturally variable relationship in which one individual nurtures and cares for another', but in the US, she argues, an idealized model of motherhood based on a white middle-class notion that maternal responsibility rests exclusively with biological mothers has been projected as universal.[6] However, enslaved women were excluded from this dominant ideology of private, domestic motherhood through a racial discrimination that ironically denigrated their ability to mother at the very same time that whites left their own infants with slave women to raise. Enslaved women's mothering hence took multiple forms and allows for a broader and more flexible conceptualization of motherhood that goes beyond what Glenn describes as a binary perception of mothers in much of Western culture.[7] Historians of American motherhood

tend to stress its broad ideological changes in the nineteenth century. Rima D. Apple attributes changing mothering practices to the growth of 'scientific motherhood' from the 1840s onwards. New ideologies suggested that the care and nurture of children was a 'profession, about which women should keep themselves informed', and gendered tropes about feminine care and nurture developed into a plethora of progressive era maternalist discourse directed towards and about mothers.[8] Proponents of new 'sensationalist' forms of psychology, writes Jan Morris, deemed mothers exclusively responsible for the physical development and moral education of their children. She emphasizes how the nineteenth-century idealization of motherhood was about more than the structural changes brought about by industrialization and removal of men's work from the household. It also involved a moral component, where virtuous, self-sacrificial forms of motherhood became increasingly revered and sanctified as representative of the culmination of women's allegedly innate caring and nurturing roles.[9]

But the antebellum (pre-Civil War) South was different. Enslaved men did not move their labour away from the home, as was increasingly the case in the industrializing North. Slaves lived under a unique set of relationships with different power dynamics, and their lives remained unaffected by some of society's wider structural changes. Few studies have spoken specifically to the concerns of black mothers, whether enslaved or free, and broad generalizations about the changing ideology of motherhood too often exclude African American women (also sometimes also white Southern women). Running their regime alongside white men, white Southern women remained (though to a lesser extent than enslaved women) largely exempt from the ideology of 'Republican motherhood', which stressed the civic virtues of mothers' moral role in educating subsequent generations.[10] Katy Simpson Smith argues for a distinctive form of 'Southern' motherhood that did not confine black or white to a 'private' domestic sphere.[11] She claims enslaved mothers strove to carve out a modicum of power though their public roles as providers, teachers, spiritual guides, protectors, and 'aunts' even as they suffered under bondage.[12] Yet Patricia Hill Collins has critiqued a tendency among writers to 'glorify' black motherhood, to celebrate and stereotype strong black women who nevertheless put everyone else's needs above their own.[13] So although enslaved women sought to use their motherhood to survive the regime, it was not always a positive, empowering experience because slaveholders exploited female slaves' motherhood for their own ends.

Enslaved motherhood and 'resistance'

Well aware of the tensions their dual roles as workers and reproducers caused slaveholders, enslaved women sought to wrench a degree of control over their lives by prioritizing their children above all others and seeking to control their fertility in the face of slaveholder exploitation. Maternal love for children hence co-existed alongside more ambivalent attitudes towards motherhood itself for many enslaved women. Motherhood undoubtedly imbued enslaved women with a sense of dignity, hope, and self-worth, but it does not fit easily into a paradigm of resistance where maternal love and devotion provided a bulwark against slavery's oppressions. Indeed, motherhood could be a double-edged sword for women in bondage because they knew that their babies held

pecuniary value to slaveholders and that they might forcibly be separated from their offspring at any time.

Women also knew their daughters would probably encounter, at some point, the ultimate horror of sexual assaults by white men. Harriet Jacobs famously described her feelings at bearing a female child in her autobiography, written under the pseudonym of 'Linda Brent':

> When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own.[14]

However, for the majority of enslaved women (Jacobs included), the immediate aftermath of childbirth was not followed by a longer-term systematic ambivalence towards their children, even though white slaveholding women passed judgement on slaves' ability to mother. Fanny Kemble (the British actor who married a Georgian slaveholder) often professed astonishment at her female slaves' lack of mothering skills: 'Anything, however, much more helpless and inefficient than these poor ignorant creatures you cannot conceive; they actually seemed incapable of drying or dressing their own babies, and I had to finish their toilet myself.'[15] Yet Kemble's enslaved women no doubt resented her opinionated interference and strove to do things their own way.

Limited surviving evidence shows how some women attempted not to become mothers or more rarely attempted infanticide of their children.[16] Interviewed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s, Lou Smith remembered her mother describing another woman who bore three children while enslaved, only for her master to sell them away when they reached 'a year or two', an experience that 'broke her heart'. When she gave birth for the fourth time, she refused to let her master sell her infant, and when the baby reached two months old, 'she got up and give it something out of a bottle and purty soon it was dead'. She also described wider female support networks in explaining how 'didn't nobody tell on her or he'd beat her nearly to death'.[17]

Such desperately sad practices denied slaveholders valuable future offspring and also meant enslaved women would not bring infants into the harsh world of bondage. Little is known about those who remained childless through infertility though because surviving evidence makes it hard to differentiate between women who were deliberately childless and those who were unable to bear children.[18] Childless women obviously missed out on parenthood's pleasures. Even under slavery, motherhood gave women the opportunity to express maternal love, to receive affection from children, to gain a sense of worth, to give and receive comfort, and to nurture; notwithstanding all the agonies of sale, separation, ill-health, physical punishments, and death that enslavement brought. Women without children also remained more vulnerable to sale and separation at the hands of slaveholders who wanted the future profits of offspring. Others fell victim to medical experimentation in an attempt to 'cure' their infertility. The notorious physician J. Marion Simms routinely made intrusive and painful incisions into women's cervixes—believing that obstructions blocked the flow of sperm into their wombs.[19]

Women who desired not to bear children (rather than those unable to have them) used whatever means they could in an attempt to control their fertility, and some chewed cotton roots—readily available to enslaved labourers—believing that this could prevent

pregnancy. Dave L. Byrd told his WPA interviewer that enslaved women secretly chewed cotton roots: 'All of their masters sho' did have to watch them, but sometimes they would slip out at night and get them a lot of cotton roots and bury them under their quarters.'[20] Mary Gaffney commented more personally on the alleged contraceptive effects of cotton roots after having been cajoled into an intimate relationship with a slave man she disliked by her master:

> I just hated the man I married but it was what Maser said do … . I would not let that negro touch me and he told Maser and Maser gave me a real good whipping, so that night I let that negro have his way … but still I cheated Maser, I never did have any slaves to grow and Maser he wondered what was the matter. I tell you son, I kept cotton roots and chewed them all the time but I was careful not to let Maser know of catch me, so I never did have any children while I was a slave. Then when slavery was over I just kept on living with that negro, his name was Paul Gaffney. Yes after freedom we had five children four of them is still living.[21]

That chewing cotton roots held contraceptive benefits appears to have been widely accepted among enslaved people, and Mary Gaffney felt a sense of pride in 'tricking' her slaveholder out of valuable future offspring, choosing to bear children only after emancipation, by which time she appears to have reconciled herself to her relationship with Paul.

Somewhat differently, Lu Lee spoke of how enslaved women tried to induce abortions to end unwanted pregnancies. They 'unfixed' themselves by taking calomel and turpentine: 'In them days the turpentine was strong and ten or twelve drops would miscarry you. But the makers found what it was used for and they changed the way of making turpentine. It ain't no good no more.'[22] Such measures were risky, however, and enslaved women's actions must surely have risked their health, and perhaps their future fertility. The historian Liese Perrin has focused on the scientific evidence behind enslaved women's attempts to control their fertility. Suggesting that the practice of enslaved women chewing cotton roots might have been brought over from West Africa, she argues that gossypol (a toxic, crystalline compound) found in cotton root most likely provided women with an effective contraception, although women's high birth rates also suggest the practice was probably unsuccessful. What is more certain is that women knew how they might attempt to deny slaveholders 'the labour and profits that their children would one day provide'.[23]

Aside from using methods of contraception or attempting to induce abortions, especially when pregnancy resulted from sexual assault, female slaves also simply fought off sexual attackers, most commonly white men.[24] Since slaveholders gained profits from any child their slave women bore, they had a real motive for sexually assaulting and raping them. Women's responses to sexual assaults varied. Some used their physical strength to fight back, regardless of the consequences their actions might bring. Slaveholder Lias Winning tried to sexually assault Thomas Goodwater's mother. Goodwater recalled: 'One day Ma wus in de field workin' alone an' he went there an' try to rape 'er. Ma pull his ears almos' off so he let 'er off.'[25] Goodwater's mother's recourse to violence thus worked in this instance, but this was not always the case. The enslaved woman Celia, just nineteen years of age, hit her slaveholder, Robert Newsom, with a stick after he raped her. She was later found guilty of murder and executed.[26] Other women simply cowered in terror when sexually assaulted. Just fifteen when her master

began to abuse her, Harriet Jacobs simply tried to turn away from him 'with disgust and hatred'.[27] But she also used her propensity to reproduce as a means of seeking to improve her situation. Enslaved women did not enter purely loving and consensual relationships with their owners because of the power dynamic involved. However, their responses to white men's sexual advances need to be situated on a spectrum. Some, including Harriet Jacobs, tolerated sexual relationships with white men in the hope of gaining a better life for themselves and—crucially as mothers—for their children. Jacobs began a sexual relationship with a white man, 'Mr Sands', in the hope that he would manumit her. She bore him two children, children she loved dearly, but he did not free any of them, and Harriet's hopes of negotiating her enslavement to her family's advantage were dashed.[28]

Historians have spent more time researching the extent of sexual assaults on enslaved women than on considering what the offspring of sexual violence (mindful that not all rape resulted in pregnancy and birth) symbolized for slave mothers.[29] WPA testimony, evidence that mostly came from the perspective of the children of intimate relationships rather than mothers themselves, suggests that, like Harriet Jacobs, women loved all their children equally, whether born of sexual violence or not. But respondents could be coy about their fathers' identity. Ed Barber described how his mother, Ann, belonged to a man named James Barber, but when probed on his own parentage, retorted: 'Dat's not a fair question when you ask me who my daddy was. Well, just say he was a white man and dat my mother never did marry nobody while he lived.'[30] Ann Barber was probably a victim of sexual abuse by her slaveholder, who also forbade her from marrying an enslaved man. His actions ensured enslaved offspring as well as his own personal sexual gratification. Somewhat differently, Alexander Robertson described how the identity of his father was kept a secret from him, although he suspected he was the son of his master.[31] Isiah Jeffries referred to himself as an 'outside child' because his master (rather than his mother's spouse) fathered him. His mother, Jane, had three such 'outside chilluns' while married to Ned. Isiah felt that Ned was 'as good to me as he was to his own chillun'.[32] For this family at least, then, enslaved people drew together in mutual systems of support, to raise children born in slavery. Slave mothers and fathers did not differentiate between children born in or out of wedlock, of sexual assault or within loving relationships. Instead they stood together and helped each other survive the regime and the raising of children within it.

Some women, unhappy at their masters' attempts to 'breed' their chattel for profit, simply refused to have sexual intercourse with their male 'partners', especially when their masters tried to pair women off with dislikeable men not chosen of their own volition. Darlene Clark Hine has persuasively described a 'culture of dissemblance' regarding instances where African American women have felt unable to divulge their sexual abuse or domestic violence at the hands of black men, including rape. Their dissemblance also served as a 'survival strategy' for black women seeking to pull though some of the consequences of sexual assault, by avoiding disclosure of their inner lives.[33] Occasionally slaveholders deliberately forced or cajoled women into intimate relationships with men with a view to producing valuable children, but evidence of this is fairly scant.[34] However, for young women who were already anxious about the prospect of becoming a mother under slavery this must have been a terrifying ordeal. Two female WPA respondents described being forced into intimate relationships against their will. Mary Gaffney,

described above, recalled how she initially hated the man her slaveholder forced her to marry, but she eventually relented and remained with him after slavery, when she finally bore him free, rather than enslaved, children.[35] Notably, Gaffney's new spouse seems to have regarded it as right to impose himself on his new wife, in keeping with wider societal norms of the nineteenth century about the role of women within marriage.[36]

In Texas, Rose Williams's owner sold her on an auction block when young. A man named Hawkins bought her, along with her mother. After about a year, aged sixteen, Hawkins told her to go and live with a slave man named Rufus in his cabin. Naively, Williams thought that Hawkins intended her to perform domestic work for Rufus, but when he climbed into her bunk at night, she realized his true intentions and protected herself with a poker. Williams's attempts to free herself from this situation by approaching her mistress for help came to nothing, indeed, her mistress frankly explained that: 'De massa wants you-uns to bring forth portly children'. She then explained how her owner threatened her with a whipping if she did not submit to Rufus's sexual demands, 'and so I yields'.[37] Rose Williams's heartbreaking dilemma at just sixteen years old reveals something of the anguish of enslaved women forced to make pragmatic choices in life when all their options were undesirable. Rufus's voice is also lacking here. No doubt he felt his expectation of sexual relations with a woman deemed to be his wife were reasonable; in this sense of course both were victims of the power of slaveholders.[38] But Williams also disliked Rufus and was fully aware of his ability, as a man, to impose himself on her. The unnamed WPA interviewer noted that their relationship did not survive and that Williams left Rufus after slavery and never married. However, she bore him two children, one of whom was born after emancipation.[39]

Sexual assaults committed by enslaved men in positions of relative power and authority were more common than enforced intimate relationships, although both could force slave women into motherhood against their will.[40] Fanny Kemble's slave, Sophy, had a boy, named Isaac, to a black driver after he forced himself upon her. 'Almost beyond my patience with this string of detestable details', Kemble wrote. 'Don't you know', she said to Sophy, 'did nobody ever tell or teach any of you, that it is a sin to live with men who are not your husbands?' Sophy then seized her by the wrist, and proclaimed:

> Oh yes, missis, we know—we know all about that well enough; but we do anything to get our poor flesh some rest from the whip; when he made me follow him into the bush, what use me tell him no? He have strength to make me.[41]

Sophy seems wearily to have accepted her sexual assault and its consequence of motherhood, whereas Fanny Kemble herself typically 'blamed the victim' by assuming Sophy lacked morality.[42]

Shared mothering

Returning to Camp's conception of there being three dimensions to enslaved women's bodies, a range of evidence conveys how women attempted to thwart slaveholders' violence and domination and assert a degree of control over their bodies and their reproductive capacities. Regardless of the circumstances by which enslaved women became mothers, the biological process of giving birth could be less significant than cooperating with each other to care for and nurture needy infants under a regime of oppression, so women

often shared childcare responsibilities in a more communal way than in white society. Women adopted flexible forms of parenting, including relying on the support of step-parents, wider kin networks, and their female peers. They looked after other people's babies and children, and fostered female-centred systems of support among wider kin networks by 'sharing' mothering regardless of whether one was a biological mother or not.[43]

Sometimes women shared their breast milk with other enslaved babies. WPA respondent Charlie Davenport stressed this sense of camaraderie among enslaved women, who no doubt felt a sense of feminine pride in their ability to suckle their young and use this skill to help assist their peers. Davenport said he was fed by a variety of enslaved women after his mother died while giving birth to him: 'Any woman what had a baby 'bout my age would nuss me so I growed up in de quarters en wuz ez well en happy ez any other chile.'[44]

Evidence about these practices among enslaved women rarely survive, and Davenport's rare testimony speaks to the shared, more communal nature of mothering among enslaved women, who rallied together to support infant children together. In practising forms of shared mothering, enslaved women conveyed their camaraderie and gendered forms of mutual support, but these 'matrifocal' enslaved communities with mothers at their heart should not be seen in a purely positive, celebratory way. Rather, they represented one of the myriad of ways in which women strove to survive, and hence to indirectly resist, their enslavement through mutual support.[45]

For example, the horrors of slavery meant some women had no choice but to 'mother'. Enslaved in Georgia, Annie Norton described how her aunt's baby was taken away: '[She] … fought back when dey start to whip her. My mammy say to her, "You tell dem you ain' done nothin' to git a whippin' for." She start to take her baby an' go away, and dey shot her an' took her baby an' turn it over to an ole mammy to raise.'[46] Somewhat differently, Emmanuel Elmore explained about his unusual family formation, where two women shared mothering after slaveholders broke up his family through sale. Elmore's mother, Dorcas, escaped her new slaveholders in Alabama and returned to the family's plantation in South Carolina. Her old master, Colonel Elmore, agreed she could stay, but Emmanuel's father, no doubt believing he would never see his wife again, had re-married a woman named Jenny. Jenny proved to be a great stepmother to Dorcas's children, and Dorcas decided she liked her. Both women then resided in the same house as Elmore's father, sharing the responsibilities of raising Elmore and his siblings.[47] Enslaved women's mothering necessarily had to be flexible, adaptable, and characterized by strength and resilience in the face of adversity. All of these attributes brought women pleasure and pride from their mothering, whether 'biological' or not.

Slaveholders' exploitation of enslaved mothers

Enslaved mothers' work conveys various realms of slaveholder domination and exploitation. Women cared for their own children, those of other enslaved women, and sometimes slaveholders' offspring as well. They laboured in a variety of roles on plantation fields, farms, and white households, and they also performed the bulk of domestic chores for their own families at the end of the working day. Slave mothers were also disproportionately more likely to have to undertake additional work after 'sundown', including typically gendered tasks such as sewing and weaving. These multiple responsibilities meant that under bondage enslaved mothers worked harder than anyone else. Moreover,

profit-seeking slaveholders encouraged frequent childbearing, for example by offering material benefits to women who bore lots of children and denying these 'rewards' to childless women. White Southern women also manipulated female slaves' motherhood, typically in the more 'domestic' sphere of the plantation household (so conveying this domestic realm as standing at the heart of the regime).[48] Slaveholding women, as 'co-masters' of the regime, utilized enslaved women as *de facto* mothers who raised their own white children.[49] White Southerners displayed a contradictory racial ideology that dismissed black women's ability to mother, while at the very same time white women left their young children in enslaved women's arms to nurture and care for, and sometimes even to suckle.

The most pressing need for shared forms of mothering among enslaved women came from their demanding 'double day' of labour where they worked outside the home during daylight hours then performed chores within it thereafter. Enslaved women additionally had to perform additional chores for slaveholders after 'sundown', in contrast to enslaved men.[50] This workload, coupled with the frequent bearing and rearing of children, meant enslaved mothers' lives were often characterized by sheer exhaustion.[51] WPA respondents interviewed in the Carolinas frequently mentioned the specific burdens placed on enslaved mothers with domestic responsibilities dictated by their gender. Benjamin Russell described enslaved mothers devoting Saturday afternoons to domestic work such as washing.[52] Anna Mitchell said her mother worked as a seamstress and frequently had to work all through the night making clothes, in contrast to those who performed field labour. Female fieldworkers with children were granted time 'off' on a Saturday afternoon, but only to wash clothes and care for their children, and owners revoked this 'freedom' at busy times of year such as the annual harvest. Hannah Plummer remembered her mother performing all household chores in their cabin before staying up all night to make clothes.[53] George Woods recalled how his mistress made enslaved mothers repair their families' clothes on a Saturday afternoon because she 'did not like to see their clothes needing patching'.[54]

These memories, considered in a collective sense, convey the sheer arduousness of slavery for enslaved mothers as well as its unfairness. They also speak to a longer-run context of mothers' gendered and racial oppression. 'Women done the cooking and washing same as now', reminisced William Oliver.[55] They assumed prime responsibility for domestic labour in the late antebellum era just they did in the late 1930s (when the WPA interviews took place). But enslavement brought additional burdens for mothers because slaveholders assigned them additional work. Struggling with the demands of being an enslaved labourer, a wife, and a mother, Eliza grew angry at her mistress's complaints about her housekeeping. Elizabeth Franklin Perry described to her slaveholding husband how:

> She [Eliza] had no time to work for herself, that she could not see to wash at night, her eyes were bad, and after getting her supper and putting her children to sleep, there was very little time until nine o'clock, the time … she must go to bed, and after working all day steadily for me, she was not able to work at night.[56]

Motherhood exacerbated Eliza's exhaustion by increasing her workload at home, but her mistress—a woman with slaves to perform her own domestic tasks—remained characteristically unsympathetic to Eliza's 'double day'.

Enslaved mothers' reproductive abilities also exposed them to a unique form of gendered exploitation at the hands of slaveholders, namely wet-nursing. The practice uniquely and literally encompasses the intersection of reproductive exploitation based on the ability to bear children; and the exploitation of women's labour where they provided both their time and their milk supply to those who held them in bondage. It therefore symbolizes the meeting point of enslaved mothers' dual exploitation as labourers and reproducers. While women took pleasure and pride in their ability to breastfeed their own infants, their deployment as wet nurses by whites conveys how their bodies served as sites of exploitation and commodification. Wet-nursing represented the ultimate exploitation of enslaved motherhood and often deprived women's enslaved infants of their own mother's milk in order to prioritize the families of their white owners.[57] Enslaved in Mississippi, WPA respondent Mattie Logan described her mother's role as a wet nurse:

> Mother nursed all Miss Jennie's children because all of her young ones and my mammy's was born so close together it wasn't no trouble at all for mammy to raise the whole caboodle of them … . They say I nursed on one breast while that white child, Jennie, pulled away at the other! That was a pretty good idea for the mistress, for it didn't keep her tied to the place and she could visit around with her friends most any time she wanted.[58]

Logan's mother hence had to endure the exhaustion caused by simultaneously feeding two babies (her own and that of her white slaveholder), while her mistress enjoyed the liberating benefits of not feeding her own child. Slaveholders had the power to place the needs of their own white infants above those of enslaved mothers and babies in this highly intimate and exploitative intervention into black mothering practices.

Conclusion

Some enslaved women were understandably ambivalent about the prospect of motherhood, and women sought to control their fertility in various ways. Motherhood brought a change in status women did not always welcome, especially when it arose, as it did so commonly, from sexual assault. But women did not differentiate between children born of assault and those born out of love, and bearing children enabled women's varied attempts to survive the regime. When women became mothers, they pooled resources and shared their mothering to the best of their ability in order to raise their children as best they could. These practices brought pleasure and pride, even as slaveholders exploited black women's mothering for their own ends. Stephanie Camp's three dimensions of enslaved women's bodies thus also relate to the specific context of mothers. Slaveholders exploited mothers as labourers and reproducers, and women responded in different ways to that exploitation, sometimes by resisting, at other times by sharing the work of motherhood with others. Ultimately, motherhood increased enslaved women's workload, and their capacity to experience joy and pride, as well as heartbreak.

Notes

1. George P. Rawick (Ed.) (1979) *The American Slave: a composite autobiography, supplement series 2*, Vol. 4. *Texas Narratives*, Pt 2 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), p. 642. The authors are grateful for a University of Reading Undergraduate Research Opportunities (UROP) award, which enabled Erin Shearer to research the work of enslaved mothers in the Carolinas.

2. See Jennifer Morgan (2004) *Laboring Women: reproduction and gender in new world slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 71–72; Emily West (2014) *Enslaved Women in America: from colonial times to emancipation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), chapter two.
3. For mortality rates, see Ira Berlin (2003) *Generations of Captivity: a history of African American slaves* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press), pp. 72–73.
4. There is a plethora of recent literature on slavery and the development of modern capitalism, but motherhood as a process that enabled the reproduction of slaves has not always received the attention it deserves here. See Edward E. Baptist (2014) *The Half Has Never Been Told: slavery and the making of American capitalism* (New York: Basic Books); Sven Beckert (2014) *Empire of Cotton: a global history* (New York: Vintage); Matthew Pratt Guterl (2015) Slavery and Capitalism: a review essay, *Journal of Southern History*, 81(2), pp. 404–420; Peter James Hudson (2016) The Racist Dawn of Capitalism: unearthing the economy of bondage, *Boston Review*, 14 March, https://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/peter-james-hudson-slavery-capitalism; Walter Johnson (2013) *River of Dark Dreams: slavery and empire in the cotton kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press); Anthony Kaye (2009) The Second Slavery: modernity in the nineteenth century South and the Atlantic world, *Journal of Southern History*, 75(3), pp. 627–650; Scott Reynolds Nelson (2015) Who Put Their Capitalism in My Slavery, *Journal of the Civil War Era*, 5(2), pp. 289–310.
5. See Stephanie Camp (2002) The Pleasures of Resistance: enslaved women and body politics in the plantation South, 1830–1861, *Journal of Southern History*, 68(3), pp. 533–572, especially pp. 538–545.
6. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1994) Social Constructions of Mothering: a thematic overview, in Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang & Linda Rennie Forcey (Eds) *Mothering: ideology, experience, and agency* (New York and London: Routledge), pp. 1–32, especially p. 3.
7. For example, 'mothering' (defined here as caring for and nurturing children) has too commonly been seen as a phenomenon applicable to females rather than males, bodies rather than minds, emotion rather than reason, existing in a private rather than public sphere. Ibid., p. 13.
8. Rima D. Apple (1997) Constructing Mothers: scientific motherhood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in Rima D. Apple & Janet Golden (Eds) *Mothers and Motherhood: readings in American history* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press), pp. 90–110 (quotation on p. 90). See also Camillia Cowling (2013) *Conceiving Freedom: women of color, gender, and the abolition of slavery in Havana and Rio de Janeiro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), pp. 121–122.
9. Jan Lewis (1989) Mother's Love: the construction of an emotion in nineteenth-century America, in Andrew E. Barnes & Peter N. Stearns (Eds) *Social History and Issues in Human Consciousness: some interdisciplinary connections* (New York and London: New York University Press), pp. 209–229, especially pp. 210–211.
10. Linda Kerber (1980) developed the concept of 'Republican Motherhood' in *Women of the Republic: intellect and ideology in revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press).
11. Katy Simpson Smith (2013) *We Have Raised All of You: motherhood in the South, 1750–1835* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), pp. 5–7. V. Lynn Kennedy (2012) has also recently noted the specificity of enslaved motherhood in the South, writing that 'precious human beings' were also 'precious economic investments'. See *Born Southern: childbirth, motherhood, and social networks in the Old South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 102–103.
12. Simpson Smith, *We Have Raised*, pp. 179–180.
13. Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 2000) *Black Feminist Thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (New York: Routledge), p. 174.
14. Harriet Jacobs (1861) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Published for the Author), p. 119. Electronic edition: http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html

15. Frances Anne Kemble (1863) *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation, 1838–1839*. Electronic edition: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12422/12422-h/12422-h.htm
16. A well-known example of enslaved women's infanticide remains Margaret Garner, who took the lives of her two children rather than witness them grow up enslaved. For recent interpretations of Garner, see Mary E. Frederickson & Delores M. Walters (Eds) (2013) *Gendered Resistance: women, slavery and the legacy of Margaret Garner* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press).
17. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. 13 (Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration; Manuscript Division, Library of Congress), p. 302. http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html
18. For recent research on childlessness in enslaved communities, see Diana Paton (2017) 'Maternal Struggles and the Politics of Childlessness under Pronatalist Caribbean Slavery', and Jenifer Barclay (2017) '"Bad Breeders" and "Monstrosities": racializing childlessness and congenital disabilities in slavery and freedom', both in 'Mothering Slaves; motherhood, childlessness and the care of children in Atlantic slave societies' (Part 1), Special edition of *Slavery and Abolition*, 38(2), pp. 287–302.
19. Elaine Tyler May (1995) *Barren in the Promised Land: childless Americans and the pursuit of happiness* (New York: Basic Books), p. 43 (Simms) and pp. 54–57 on enslaved women.
20. Byrd also suggested that the state 'finally made a law' against women chewing cotton roots. Rawick, *The American Slave, supplement series 2*, Vol. 3. *Texas Narratives*, Pt 2, p. 568. Anna Lee also suggested that there had been a law passed against women chewing cotton roots: ' … cause when slavery was ended they was not being any new slaves born, we had done quit breeding.' Rawick, *The American Slave, Supplement Series 2*, Vol. 6. *Texas Narratives*, Pt 5, 2284. I have been unable to find any reference to such a law in Gammel's Laws of Texas, http://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/GLT/.
21. Rawick, *The American Slave, Supplement Series 2*, Vol. 5. *Texas Narratives*, Pt 4, p. 1453.
22. Rawick, *The American Slave, Supplement Series 2*, Vol. 6. *Texas Narratives*, Pt 5, p. 2299.
23. Liese Perrin (2001) Resisting Reproduction: reconsidering contraception in the old South, *Journal of American Studies*, 35(2), pp. 255–274, especially p. 274. Likewise, Nicole Rousseau (2009) frames women's efforts to control their fertility though a paradigm of resistance. In denying slaveholders their children, enslaved women effectively disrupted the regime. See *Black Woman's Burden: commodifying black reproduction* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan), p. 67. Other historians who have written about women's ability to resist their enslavement through their reproductive capacities include R. A. & A. H. Bauer (1942) Day to Day Resistance to Slavery, *Journal of Negro History*, 27(4), pp. 388–419; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1986) Strategies and Forms of Resistance: focus on slave women in the United States, in Gary Y. Okihiro (Ed.) *In Resistance: studies in African, Caribbean and Afro-American history* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press), pp. 143–165. Janet Farrell Brodie (1994) writes more generally about the US in *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth Century America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), pp. 52–54. Diana Paton (2017) questions the term 'gynecological resistance' for its focus on enslaved women's bodies rather than their minds when women used both in their efforts to deny slaveholders profits. See 'Maternal Struggles and the Politics of Childlessness'.
24. The systematic sexual abuse of enslaved women by white men has been well documented by historians. Angela Davis (1971) defined the rape of black women by white men under slavery as a form of 'institutional terrorism'. See 'Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves', *The Black Scholar*, 3(4), pp. 2–15. Other key literature on the sexual assaults of enslaved women by white men includes Sharon Block (2006) *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina Press); Darlene Clark Hine (1989) Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: preliminary thought on the culture of dissemblance, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14(4), pp. 912–920; Wilma King (2014) 'Prematurely Knowing of Evil Things': the sexual abuse of African American girls and young women in slavery and freedom', *Journal of African American History*, 99(3), pp. 173–196; Diane Miller Sommerville (2004) *Rape and*

Race in the Nineteenth Century South (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press).

25. WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Pt 2, p. 167.
26. Cited in King, 'Prematurely Knowing of Evil Things', p. 179.
27. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p. 44.
28. Ibid., p. 85. See also Rachel L. Swarns (2012) *American Tapestry: the story of the black, white, and multiracial ancestors of Michelle Obama* (New York: HarperCollins), pp. 245–246. Paul Finkelman (1989) believes enslaved women probably had a better chance of gaining freedom than enslaved men because of their intimate interracial relationships with them. See Finkelman (Ed.) Introduction, in *Women and the Family in a Slave Society* (New York: Garland), p. ix.
29. For an exception to this, see Andrea Livesey (2017) Conceived in Violence: enslaved mothers and children born of rape in nineteenth-century Louisiana, *Slavery and Abolition*, 38(2), doi:10.1080/0144039X.2017.1317033.
30. WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Pt 1, p. 35.
31. Ibid., Pt 4, p. 32.
32. Ibid., Pt 3, p. 17.
33. Hine, 'Rape and their inner lives of Black Women', pp. 912–920.
34. While the idea of systematic slave breeding on so-called 'stud farms' was a common abolitionist trope, owners permitted a variety of family formations and intimate relationships among their enslaved people, including permitting cross-plantation marriages if this led to more infant slaves. They cajoled and persuaded women to bear valuable children. Gregory D. Smithers (2012) attributes the discourse of breeding within WPA interviews with formerly enslaved people in the 1930s—with their common references to 'bucks', 'studs', and 'wenches'—to the popular racial language of the 1930s, imbued with social Darwinism and eugenics; to vestiges of abolitionist rhetoric; and to the chauvinism of black nationalism at this time. WPA respondents portrayed their experiences of sexual violence in this way because it was the only way they knew how to conceptualize their experiences to white interviewers. See *Slave Breeding: sex, violence and memory in African American history* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), chapter five.
35. Rawick, *The American Slave, Supplement Series 2*, Vol. 5. *Texas Narratives*, Pt 4, p. 1453.
36. Tracing rape within marriage in the past is undoubtedly incredibly difficult for historians because such acts were neither a legal nor a conceptual possibility. And seeking to find rape within marriage *under slavery* is obviously harder still. The 'culture of dissemblance' meant cases of domestic sexual violence simply never made it to the historical record. Moreover, US states only legislated against rape within marriage in the second half of the twentieth century. By 1993 it was deemed a crime in all 50 states. See Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*, pp. 78–79; Elsa Barclay Brown (1992) What Has Happened Here?: the politics of difference in women's history and feminist politics, *Feminist Studies*, 18(2), pp. 295–312, especially p. 306; Estelle B. Freedman (2013) *Redefining Rape: sexual violence in the era of suffrage and segregation* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press), p. 202.
37. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Texas Narratives, Vol. 16, Pt 4, pp. 176–178.
38. This point is made more broadly by Thomas A. Foster (2011) The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 20(3), pp. 445–464, especially p. 457.
39. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Texas Narratives, Vol. 16, Pt 4, p. 174.
40. Historian Susan Brownmiller (1976) first drew attention to enslaved men's rape of female slaves. See *Against Our Will: men, women and rape* (New York: Bantam Books), pp. 153–173 especially p. 163.
41. Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*.
42. For more about the white notion that enslaved women were immoral, promiscuous 'Jezebel' figures, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1988) *Within the Plantation Household: black and white women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press), pp. 291–292; Morgan, *Laboring Women*, p. 34; Deborah Gray White (1985) *Ar'n't I a*

Woman? Female slaves in the plantation South (New York and London: W. W. Norton), pp. 27–46.

43. Initially denigrated by early historians of slavery as 'matriarchal', Deborah White (1983) instead celebrated mother-centred enslaved communities, referring to them as 'matrifocal'. See 'Female Slaves: sex roles and status in the antebellum plantation South', *Journal of Family History*, 8(3), pp. 248–261. For more on 'shared' mothering, see Glenn, 'Social Constructions of Mothering', pp. 5–7.
44. Rawick, *The American Slave, Supplement Series 1*, Vol. 6. *Mississippi Narratives*, Pt 1, p. 558. See also Emily West with R. J. Knight (2017), 'Mothers' Milk': slavery, wet-nursing, and black and white women in the antebellum South, *Journal of Southern History*, 83(1), pp. 37–68, especially p. 62.
45. Several historians have urged for a re-consideration of enslaved people's 'agency' and their ability to resist the regime. See Walter Johnson (2003) On Agency, *Journal of Social History*, 37(1), pp. 113–124, especially p. 116; Orlando Patterson (1998) *Rituals of Blood: consequences of slavery in two American centuries* (New York: Basic Civitas), chapter one; Peter Kolchin (1993) *American Slavery* (New York: Penguin), pp. 148–149; Wilma Dunaway (2003) *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), especially the introduction; William Dusinberre (2009) *Strategies for Survival: recollections of bondage in antebellum Virginia* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press), especially chapter twelve; and Ben Schiller (2009) Selling Themselves: slavery survival and the path of least resistance, *49th Parallel*, 23, pp. 1–23.
46. Rawick, *The American Slave, Supplement Series 2*, Vol. 8. *Texas Narratives*, Pt 7, pp. 29–30.
47. WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Pt 2, p. 9. Philip D. Morgan (1998) notes polygamy had declined by the antebellum era, but was more common in low-country areas than elsewhere due to the high concentration of enslaved people there. *Slave Counterpoint: black culture in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), pp. 553–554.
48. R. J. Knight (2017, forthcoming) 'Mother, Home and Mammy': motherhood, race and power in the antebellum South (PhD thesis, University of Reading).
49. For white women as 'co-masters', see Thavolia Glymph (2008) *Out of the House of Bondage: the transformation of the plantation household* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press), p. 5 and p. 123.
50. West, *Enslaved Women in America*, chapter four.
51. For more on enslaved women and work, see Jacqueline Jones (1985, 1995) *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: black women, work and the family from slavery to the present* (New York: Vintage), chapter one; Diane Mutti Burke (2010) *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's small-slaveholding households, 1815–1865* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press), chapter three; Dusinberre, *Strategies for Survival*, chapter six; Damian Alan Pargas (2011) From the Cradle to the Fields: slave childcare and childhood in the antebellum South, *Slavery and Abolition*, 32(4), pp. 477–493.
52. WPA Slave Narrative Project, South Carolina Narratives, Vol. 14, Pt 4, p. 52.
53. Ibid., Vol. 11, Pt 2, p. 114 and p. 179.
54. Ibid., Vol. 14, Pt 4, p. 248.
55. Ibid., Vol. 14, Pt 3, p. 218.
56. Letter to Benjamin Franklin Perry from Elizabeth Perry, 'Monday afternoon', [no year], Benjamin Franklin Perry Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.
57. See also Emily West with R. J. Knight, 'Mothers' Milk', and R. J. Knight, 'Mother, Home and Mammy'.
58. WPA Slave Narrative Project, Oklahoma Narratives, Vol. 13, p. 187.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Emily West is professor of American History at the University of Reading. She publishes on gender and slavery in the pre-Civil War US South. Her most recent book, *Enslaved Women in America*, was published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2014.

Erin Shearer is an MA student in the Department of History at the University of Reading.

ORCID

Emily West http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3444-3814