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“NOBODY COULDN’T SELL’EM BUT HER”: SLAVEOWNING WOMEN, MASTERY,
AND THE GENDERED POLITICS OF THE ANTEBELLUM SLAVE MARKET.

By

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Historians richly document white women’s social, ideological, and cultural roles within nineteenth-century slaveholding households and communities, yet they rarely consider their economic relationships to slavery. Scholars also recognize enslaved people’s understandings of how profoundly male slaveowners’ economic decisions affected their lives, but they neglect enslaved people’s knowledge about how female slaveownership—not just domestic management—shaped their experiences in bondage as well. Drawing upon slaveowners’ correspondence, slave trader’s papers, ex-slave narratives, travel writing, illustrations, newspapers, city and business directories, financial records, as well as legal and military documents, my dissertation examines the ways that gender shaped white married women’s experiences of slaveownership in the nineteenth century, it demonstrates how slaveownership afforded them particular kinds of power that pivoted upon the right to enslave and own human beings, and it sees white slaveowning women and their economic activities through the eyes of the enslaved African-Americans who served them.

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INTRODUCTION

Shedding Light on the Invisible: Constructing a History of White Slaveowning Women, their Slaves, and the Antebellum Slave Market

When journalist and *New York Tribune* editor James Redpath penned his account of what he observed as he toured the antebellum South, he claimed that white women rarely saw slavery's "most obnoxious features; never attend auctions; never witness 'examinations;'" seldom, if ever, see the negroes lashed. They do not know negro slavery as it is... They do not know that the inter-State trade in slaves is a gigantic commerce."¹ Although recent scholarship has begun to dismantle some of Redpath's contentions, little has changed in the ways we envision white women's relationships to, investments in, and understandings of economies of slavery since he wrote them in the mid-nineteenth century.²

Studies of American slavery richly document white women's social, ideological, and cultural roles within nineteenth-century southern communities and their astute management of slaveholding households, but historians rarely consider their profound economic relationships to

¹ James Redpath, *The Roving Editor: or Talks with Slaves in the Southern States*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968 [1859], 184.

² When discussing white southern women's commitment to slavery scholars such as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese do not deny that white women were ideologically, socially and psychologically invested in slavery, nor do they ignore white women's power to brutalize and sometimes kill enslaved people, particularly those within the plantation household.² However, because many of them seek to understand white women's experiences within plantation households that were dominated by white men, their analyses ignore a number of economic dimensions underlying many white women's commitments to slavery. For example, scholars acknowledge that white women owned their own slaves, but few contemplate how personal slaveownership may have shaped white women's understanding of, or commitment to, chattel slavery. They also neglect to contemplate how white women's slaveownership could have affected gender relations within plantation households. Their tendency to ignore these questions is due in part to the general assumption that marriage in the nineteenth century resulted in white women's "civil death" vis-à-vis the common law and coverture. See also Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982 and Merli Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997. Historians such as Kirsten Wood, Linda Sturtz and Thavolia Glymph are exceptions to this cadre of scholars. See Kirsten Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*. Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004, Linda Sturtz, *Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia*, Routledge, 2002, and Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

slavery.³ Moreover, scholars often neglect enslaved people's knowledge about how female slaveownership—not just domestic management—shaped African-American lives in bondage. The chapters that follow challenge both this historiography and Redpath's assertion that white women were only distantly involved in the economic dimensions of slavery. White women were not idle bystanders who watched as white men crafted a system of perpetual bondage that was

³ According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese: "The bourgeois ideology of domesticity...insisted upon women's primary identity as wives and mothers under the protection and domination of their husbands. At law, it embraced the Blackstonian version of coverture and shuddered at the possibility of women's independent property." She goes on to say that "[a] concern with locking women firmly into coverture and domesticity prevailed throughout the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century. No region encouraged divorce or ownership, much less the effective control, of property by married women, but southerners and their courts proved especially intransigent, the precocious married women's property act of Mississippi (1839) notwithstanding." Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988., 205. See also Richard Chused, "Married Women's Property Law: 1800-1850." *Georgetown Law Journal*, June 1983 and Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986. While many scholars encourage us to think about the restrictions and constraints imposed upon white women by these bodies of law in relation to the privileges enjoyed by white men. Yet the circumstances in which white women could wield power and control often involved their ownership of and relationships with enslaved people. Aside from a handful of studies that reveal the darkness and brutality which characterized many of the interactions between white women and enslaved people, most scholars of southern women tend to explain white women's relationship to slavery as a sentimental one, not an economic relationship. Even some that do explore economic dimensions of their investments in slavery characterize their relations of power with enslaved people, as slaveowners, differently. (See Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1985, 15-35 for example.) Such an approach has impaired our ability to fully understand white slaveowning women's multifarious articulations of power. Furthermore, many scholars privilege "the legal authority and rights of household members rather than informal relations" or experiences as they unfolded "on the ground" and this tendency renders much complexity, especially within slave societies, invisible and unexamined. See Carole Shammas, "Anglo-American Household Government In Comparative Perspective." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), 107. We need to understand white women's relationship to slavery as a relation of property. Some scholars have looked closely at the importance of other forms of property for white women, but widows and single women dominate these studies. Suzanne Lebsock's examination of free women in Petersburg, Virginia, is an exception, for she not only shows how gender relations changed in the post-Revolutionary era, she also examines white women's relationship to property during the era in which most scholars have emphasized the obstacles white property owning women faced. See Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1985. 15-35. As Laura Edwards has suggested, historians have looked at the "common law," the system of laws under which women were legally, politically, and socially disabled vis-à-vis coverture, as "the law" and yet the common law was a corpus of laws among other coexisting systems of law, bodies of law that sometimes counteracted the disabilities of common law for married women. In declaring common law to be "the law" historians of southern women have made it easier to ignore the implications of women's personal slaveownership upon their identities and their relations with male members of their households and communities. See Laura F. Edwards, "Enslaved Women and the Law: Paradoxes of Subordination in the Post-Revolutionary Carolinas" *Slavery and Abolition* Vol. 26, No. 2, August 2005, 307. By circumscribing the study of the lives of elite women to their experiences as subordinates under the patriarchal control of white men, we miss the ways in which white women were equally brutal and controlling, as Glymph tells us, and we miss the significant ways that slaveownership shaped white southern women's ideals of womanhood. See Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 3.

crucial to the regional economy; they helped to make the system of American slavery what it was.

This dissertation seeks to change how we understand the history of slavery, the African American experience and our conceptualizations of white southern women's lives in the nineteenth century in at least four primary ways. It proposes a "re-gendering" of economic studies of American slaveholders by defining white slaveowning women as active participants who engaged in the slave market economy and showing how their demands for certain kinds of labor and their economic investments in slavery more generally contributed to the development of the region's slave trade. It also redefines antebellum slave markets by revealing their synergistic relationships with southern households and by exploring how this convergence allowed white slaveowning women to engage in slave market activities without leaving the confines of their homes. Unlike previous studies, my project focuses primarily upon married slaveowning women and explores their engagement in slave market activities within their households and beyond them. I argue that their status as slaveowners afforded them particular kinds of power that they did not otherwise possess, and I show how this power shaped their gender identities and their marital relationships, and allowed them to navigate many of the social, legal and economic constraints that southern laws and institutions imposed. Finally my work is distinct from existing scholarship because it sees these slaveowning women and their economic activities through the eyes of the enslaved people who served them, and thereby situates enslaved perspectives on and experiences with these women at its center. Enslaved people not only belie sentimentalist visions of white women's relationships to the institution, they make it abundantly clear that their female owners were more than complicit in their subjugation. They tell us that

female slaveowners were profoundly invested and actively engaged in slave market activities, helped to perpetuate the institution, and made multi-generational bondage possible.

In Chapter One, I trace white women's ideological development as slaveowners from childhood to adulthood. I argue that white slaveowning families' inheritance practices played a formative role in how white women conceptualized their personal relationships to the enslaved people they owned, how they understood their power and authority as slaveowners, and how they would exercise that power in matters pertaining to their slaves. I also contend that white slaveowning parents raised their daughters with particular expectations related to owning slaves and, that as a consequence, many white women did not see marriage as a period during which they relinquished control over their slaves as scholars have argued. Rather, it marked a point at which their identities as slaveowners were fully realized.

Having established the importance of slaveownership for white women's identity formation and examining the ways their economic investments in slavery shaped their marital relationships and strategies for mastery, I move on to explore the synergistic relationship between slave markets and southern households in Chapter Two. I explore how their convergence allowed white slaveowning women to engage in commercial activities without leaving the confines of their homes. I also reveal the ways in which the slave market was transported throughout the rural and urban South by the people who traded in human flesh, and how white slaveowning women sometimes took advantage of the opportunities presented to them by these individuals.

I build upon this discussion in Chapter Three by examining the market that white southern mothers created for enslaved wet nurses, the intimate labor that they performed in southern households, and the ways that this market intersected with southern slave marketplaces

in the antebellum era. I contend that white women were crucial to the commodification of enslaved mothers' breast milk and the nutritive and maternal care they provided to white children. Their crucial role enhanced enslaved women's value in southern slave markets.

Chapter Four turns to white slaveowning women's direct encounters with and navigation of southern slave markets. Using antebellum New Orleans as my primary site of investigation, I show that once they decided to buy or sell slaves, white women usually relied upon slave traders and dealers to do so; but sometimes, they took it upon themselves to enter slave yards and attend slave auctions in order to select and purchase the individuals they wanted. In addition to this, women served as agents, proxies and attorneys-in-fact for other women and men who sought to buy and sell slaves and others who worked alongside white men in the immensely profitable slave trading business. I reveal the intersecting worlds of white female merchants and slave traders in the city, and I demonstrate how these women benefited from their ties to this sector of the southern economy. Through sketches, illustrations, narratives and interviews, I call attention to the ways that ordinary southerners, male and female travelers, and enslaved people imagined white women in southern slave markets, and how they talked about the women they encountered in these spaces.

I conclude by interrogating white slaveowning women's responses to the economic havoc wrought by the Civil War and the destruction of slavery in Chapter Five. I show that as its end approached, white women took steps to protect their investments in slavery by liquidating them, hiding them, or demanding government protection for them. In order to underscore white women's continued economic attachments to the institution of slavery during the war and well after its abolition, I look at the requests they made to the federal government for compensation after the Union confiscated their slaves or when their slaves enlisted in the Union Army, as well

as their attempts to reclaim their slaves by personally visiting Union encampments and contraband camps. I then examine the methods and strategies they employed to stave off black freedom and their subsequent adaptation to the vagaries of the region's free labor system.

Reimagining the Antebellum Slave Market

Generally, when we think of the domestic slave market, we imagine a physical location—an architectural construct, usually in urban areas, in which slaves were housed, bought and sold.⁴ We might also think of auction blocks or southern courtrooms where white southerners battled each other for possession of their ideal slaves. According to Walter Johnson, this was only part of the story. The slave market, he contends, was “bounded in place” but “in practice the slave market suffused the antebellum South.” It was “a pyramidal network of information gathering and slave selling that stretched from the slave pens through...hotels and barrooms—a network in which every bartender was a potential broker and every broker tried to control every bartender. The lively traffic in information and influence that joined the slave traders to the hotel and bars where travelers and traders gathered and discussed their business suggests that the practice of trading slaves far outreached the cluster of pens publicly identified as ‘the slave market.’”⁵ Historian Thomas Russell agrees with him, but adds another important dimension to the slave market. In his study of court-supervised slave auctions and sales, he contends that even the courthouse steps became an intrinsic part of this commercial landscape, and the state became a slave trading entity.⁶ Barrooms, hotels, street corners, courthouse steps, and many other features

⁴ Johnson suggests that while that slave market was “bounded in place, in practice the slave market suffused the antebellum South” Johnson speaks of discursive, commercial and pecuniary practices embraced by slave traders, prospective sellers and purchasers of slaves as well as those who engaged in industries that supported the slave trade more broadly. See Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, 7 and 30.

⁵ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 52.

⁶ Thomas Russell, “Slave Auctions on the Courthouse Steps: Court Sales of Slaves in Antebellum South Carolina” in *Slavery and the Law*, ed. Paul Finkelman Madison, Wisconsin: Madison House, 1997, 329-364, and “Sale Day in

of southern cities and towns constituted the slave marketplace. Although white women rarely appear to traverse the landscape described in these expansive visions of the slave market, they were there.⁷

Certainly historians have been attentive to the gendered dimensions of the domestic slave trade and the slave market.⁸ But their focus often centers on the gendered politics of enslavement and the relationship between slaveownership, mastery and southern masculinity. In other words, historians document the gendered experiences of enslaved people as they moved from seller to seller and across state lines, and they examine the masculine experience of slaveownership, but

Antebellum South Carolina: Slavery, Law, Economy, and Court-Supervised Sales.” PhD Dissertation, Stanford University, 1993.

⁷ Russell discusses women at the court-supervised auctions he analyzes, and Steven Deyle’s study of the domestic slave trade includes women who bought and sold slaves and participated in the slave trade. See Russell, “Slave Auctions on the Courthouse Steps.” The work of historians who study the lives of nineteenth century American women in urban spaces suggest that such an exclusion from the commercial and consumer districts of antebellum cities is difficult to reconcile with the actual experiences of white women in urban spaces. Historian Mary Ryan argues that “[a]ccounts of everyday life in the city streets fractured the false universalism of polite gender symbolism” because one could find “diverse manifestations of womanhood in the public streets.” While much of this diversity could be attributed to the presence of prostitutes, beggars and female criminals of all stripes, much of it also came from laboring women, those traveling to and from work, and whose livelihood opened their homes to the public like the keepers of boarding houses. Southern cities were spaces where a person could find “diverse manifestations of womanhood.” As Mary Ryan reminds us “gender was deeply divided by class” and when it came to the slave market, this distinction seems to hold true. In her study of New York, New Orleans and San Francisco Ryan contends that “[w]omen of all classes took to public spaces for routine shopping an occasional recreation. As workers or consumers they circulated through the streets crowded with strangers.” Furthermore she claims, “[t]o the extent that the informal socializing in American cities early in the nineteenth century approximated a public domain, it was relatively careless of male/female distinctions.” See Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, 73 (first quote) and 64 and 69.

⁸ In her study of slave sales in nineteenth century Georgia, Daina Berry found that gender and skill affect the price slaveowners were willing to offer or accept for female slaves they owned and wanted to sell or those who they wished to purchase. While scholars like Michael Tadman, Walter Johnson, Steven Deyle and others have demonstrated that this was the case for male slaves, few of them explored the important relationship between slave prices and the particular skills female slaves possessed. See Daina Berry, “In Pressing Need of Cash”: Gender, Skill, and Family Persistence in the Domestic Slave Trade. *Journal of African American History*, Winter 2007, Vol. 92 Issue 1, 22-36. Michael Tadman and Steven Deyle both acknowledge the presence and/or role of women in this trade. While their studies offer a cursory view of this relationship, they nonetheless encourage us to contemplate how our previous assumptions have obscured the importance of women’s economic activities in the domestic slave trade.

white women remain tangential actors in these studies. Consequently, scholars marginalize and often ignore the particularities of white women's slave market activities.⁹

This project builds upon Johnson and Russell's conceptualizations of southern slave markets by situating white slaveowning women in these spaces and recognizing their economic relationships to and investments in slavery. But such a task requires a conceptual shift in the way we think about slave markets and the economy that thrived because of them. White women's market activities, and enslaved people's recollections about the actions of the women who owned them, make it clear that commercial ventures related to slavery involved both formal and informal economic networks through which enslaved people circulated, networks that reached into southern households. In order to elucidate these networks, we must begin our discussion in the southern household because it is here where white females first acquired a rudimentary, and in many cases, sophisticated knowledge about the slave market economy. By gradually moving the discussion out of the household and into the formal slave market this study traces the myriad connections between the two. From this perspective we can interrogate white women's navigation of and activities within the spaces we traditionally associate with the slave market.

⁹ Michael Tadman's study *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* was one of the first book length studies to challenge the idea that the domestic slave trade was a marginal aspect of southern slavery and its perpetuation and to take up the question of how the domestic slave trade affected enslaved people. Steven Deyle's work builds upon Tadman's analysis by showing the ways in which local trading networks interlaced interregional and interstate trading. By looking at the local dimensions of the trade, Steven Deyle is able to make an important observation: virtually every slaveowner engaged in the slave trade and as a consequence almost every southern community was touched by this larger system of the slave economy. Detailing the daily transactions in slaves taking place on country roads and plantation estates as well as in the headquarters of slave trading and auctioneering firms, Deyle's work implicates every slaveholder in the domestic slave trade. His analysis does not discuss gender extensively nor is it particularly bound by (antiquated) ideas of paternalism. As a consequence, Deyle's work leaves room for the kind of questions I am hoping to address in my project. See Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989 and Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. In her study of slave sales in nineteenth century Georgia, Daina Berry found that gender and skill affect the price slaveowners were willing to offer or accept for female slaves they owned and wanted to sell or those who they wished to purchase. While scholars like Michael Tadman, Walter Johnson, Steven Deyle and others have demonstrated that this was the case for male slaves, few of them explored the important relationship between slave prices and the particular skills female slaves possessed. See Daina Berry, "In Pressing Need of Cash": Gender, Skill, and Family Persistence in the Domestic Slave Trade. *Journal of African American History*, Winter 2007, Vol. 92 Issue 1, 22-36.

Formal and Informal Sectors of the Antebellum Slave Market

Throughout this project, I refer to the slave market as both formal and informal and I do so for a number of reasons. Prevailing studies of the domestic slave trade and southern slave markets tend to focus upon the most formalized dimensions of the slave market economy, those transactions which involved the exchange of human beings for currency and credit as well as those that were defined by and within the commercial districts of southern cities and towns and legitimated in southern courts. Yet, in the day-to-day life on plantations, enslaved people experienced a different slave market—a mobile, spatially unbounded, economic network that often included plantation estates, the roads that led to them, and the tragic pathways that took slaves away. More profoundly, enslaved people firmly situate white women in all dimensions of the slave marketplace. My understanding of the slave market and the slave market economy relies heavily upon the ways that formerly enslaved men and women remembered this aspect of slavery, memories that define these institutions as including the plantation landscape, southern homes and the roads surrounding them.

When WPA interviewers asked formerly enslaved people whether they had ever seen slave auctions, many confirmed that they had; but others articulated a far more pervasive and equally traumatic phenomenon. Local slave traders traveled to plantations to buy and sell laborers, and enslaved African Americans vividly recalled seeing these individuals carrying their family and friends away on their wagons. Others remembered the droves and coffles of slaves that traveled along the roads near plantation estates, most likely on their way to the lower South. Far more recalled seeing fellow bondsmen sold “on the stump,” and even the small step their mistress used to climb into her carriage.¹⁰ Others saw the trade firsthand because their owners

¹⁰ For recollections of slaves being “on the stump” see Interviews with Charlie Richardson. Missouri Narratives, Volume X. *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress,

were slave traders, their mistresses were married to them, or these men came to their owners' estates to rest before making their way to the markets in the lower South. For these enslaved people, the auction block was terrifying, but there were myriad dimensions of the plantation landscape that invoked the terror of sale. Enslaved people's primary fear, as expressed in their narratives and interviews, was the trauma enacted by family disruption and separation. This inevitable consequence of sale was far worse than the architecture of the slave market—no matter where that sale was initiated—and this concern shaped enslaved people's understanding of the domestic slave market more broadly.

Formerly enslaved people did not limit the scope of the slave market economy to transactions contingent upon the exchange of cash for slaves. In their rendering, the slave market economy consisted of malleable, formal and informal economic networks within which white women actively took part. White slaveowning women bought, sold and hired their slaves to non-slaveowners in formal sectors of the market, and each of these transactions augmented white women's personal wealth in slaves and their commitments to slavery. Yet formerly enslaved people also spoke of a more informal economic system in which slaveowners, usually comprised of networks of families and friends, gifted, bequeathed, borrowed, and exchanged the slaves they owned amongst themselves. The slave market economy included these transactions, which were in fact transfers of wealth that did not involve the exchange of currency. Acts of self-purchase amongst enslaved people and their owners as well. Although money did not change hands in

Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (Accessed May 25, 2009) and Annie Griegg, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 3. *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (Accessed February 2, 2010). Joe High remembered "a block in de yard, where missus got up on her horse. There were two steps to it. Slaves were sold from this block." See Joe High, North Carolina Narratives Part I, Volume 13, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (Accessed August 7, 2009).

these transactions, commodified bodies certainly did, and in those moments, the values assigned to bodies and labor of enslaved African Americans shifted from one person to another. In this way, wealth circulated in and through southern households and communities, and these circulations of property were made possible because of African-Americans' status as commodified subjects.

The Household, the Family and the Economy of Slavery

When enslaved people talked about inheritance practices amongst slaveowners, they saw often tied bequests and the events that occurred after the dispersal of property, to the slave market economy. While they tended to describe a slaveowner's refusal to sell his or her "family negroes" to a slave trader as a noble or benevolent act, they still recognized that all of these decisions were made possible because their bodies had a price and they could be bought and sold. In this way, they tied the circulations of commodified black bodies to pecuniary matters, and to the slave market economy, and connected inheritance to the slave market. Even more than this, they testify to the roles white slaveowning women played in these decisions and their traumatic consequences. They recognized that the decision to keep slaves in the family did not mean that enslaved kin would remain in the same physical space, community or state. Younger generations of planters tended to migrate west to begin their lives and make their own fortunes, and they took their slave inheritances with them. While slave *sale* was not a factor in bequests and gifts exchange, and while money did not change hands, they nevertheless resulted in a transferal of property to and augmentation of wealth for new adult members of the slaveowning class. Thus, while a slave may not have been sold to speculators, they could easily be torn from everything and everyone they knew if a member of their owner's family decided to move away,

or even get married, and such trauma was made possible because of the wealth bound up in black bodies and slaveowners' ability to move them from one household to another.

In additional, when white women became mothers, they often borrowed and exchanged enslaved wet nurses amongst themselves and, in so doing, they initiated a temporary transfer of wealth from one household to another. When they could not acquire enslaved wet nurses through these informal economic circuits, they sought out such labor in the formal marketplace. Their demand for enslaved wet nurses resulted in the development of a niche market in which white slaveowners hired, bought and sold enslaved, lactating mothers. White women prioritized the nutritional needs of their children above the desires of enslaved mothers to form maternal bonds with their own infants. In the process, they shaped a sector of the slave market economy and contributed to the development and perpetuation of informal economic networks that never reached the commercial centers of southern cities and towns, but were nonetheless tied to them.

At the same time, countless African-Americans negotiated with their owners about the terms upon which they could buy their freedom. For the most part, southern courts did not recognize the legitimacy of the agreements they made with them and thus, these transactions fall outside of the traditional scope of the slave market. However, they were nonetheless part of the slave market economy because they involved the sale and purchase of enslaved people for cash or terms of credit. Many enslaved people who bought themselves in this way received bills of sale upon final payment. Enslaved people devised their plans for self-purchase by acquiring an extraordinary understanding of the slave market, its economy and its lexicon. Yet because the enslaved person assumed the role of the owner and the owned, and because the courts could invalidate the arrangements made in these transactions, scholars have not considered self-purchase to be a slave market activity.

Careful examination of self-purchase reveals that this practice was a financial transaction that could be considered both a formal and informal slave market activity. It met all the criteria that define a formal slave market transaction because one party exchanged money for rights of ownership to the body and labor of an enslaved person who was owned by someone else. Additionally, it was predicated upon all the processes used in the formal sector of the slave market. However, the lack of legal recognition, the slave's simultaneous status as owner and owned, and the fact that they often took place outside of the slave marketplace made these transactions precarious and unstable. Thus self-purchase is a transaction that bridged the informal and formal sectors of the slave market economy. More importantly for our purposes here, white slaveowning women frequently entered into self-purchase negotiations with enslaved people and these transactions are examined in this project.

The story of women's participation in the slave economy is a history of empowerment, but it is also one of oppression, subjugation, and sorrow. In some respects, white slaveowning women found themselves shut out of many domains of political, social and economic life in the South. But they seized opportunities to enter these domains whenever they could. As individuals who owned human beings within a region defined by the institution of slavery, one which often privileged the wants and rights of slaveowners over all others, these white women used their slaveowning status to increase their access and exposure to social, political, and especially economic power. This dissertation shows some of the ways they accomplished this. By doing so, it seeks to "rescue them from victimhood" [something that Sara M. Butler has attempted to do for the women she studies in medieval London].¹¹ Moreover this project also positions enslaved people as the individuals most equipped to attest to these women's profound economic

¹¹ Quote from personal conversation with Sara M. Butler, January 26, 2012.

contributions to their continued enslavement and the trauma that came as a consequence of their bondage.

Each chapter shows that white women understood “the most obnoxious features of slavery” all too well. Even as little girls, they began to cultivate identities intrinsically tied to slaveownership. They learned vicarious lessons about mastery and they crafted their own systems of discipline and control over the people they eventually came to own. Once married, they continued to reinforce relationships of power with their slaves and sometimes their decisions to do so created marital conflicts that shaped the contours of their households and the gendered dynamics of authority within them. Sometimes white women refused to relinquish control over their property to their husbands, and electing to exercise their rights as slaveowners, some white women buy and sell slaves within the confines of their homes, while others blended into the crowds that surrounded public auction blocks. They sat in the front rows of the more aesthetically pleasing slave auction venues dressed in luxurious silks, satins and jewels and watched as enslaved people were exposed for sale and auctioned off to the highest bidders. They glided past local slave markets and walked the streets where slaves were displayed. They attended auctions and talked about the rightness of slavery while justifying the sale of mothers and children. They interrogated slaves who piqued their interests and bought them and took them home. They owned slave yards and bought and sold slaves and transported them hundreds of miles into the lower South for a living. They also terrorized enslaved people with the threat of sale, and eventuated their worst fears when they bought and sold them in marketplaces across the South.¹² They knew about the gigantic commerce that was the inter-state slave trade and they invested heavily in this sector of the southern economy too. They operated businesses that exposed them to the market and collaborated with those who transacted in slaves. They knew

¹² Kirsten Wood, *Masterful Women*, 53.

exactly what “negro slavery” was because they helped to make it what it was. White women understood that slavery was an economic system, one from which they could profit, and those most intimately aware of their economic investments in the peculiar institution leave no doubt that they did.

CHAPTER ONE

“Missus done her own bossing”: Reconstructing White Slaveowning Women’s Narratives of Power in the Post-Revolutionary South.

*There wuz about one dozen slaves on de plantation. Dere were no hired overseers. Missus done her own bossing... One of the young masters got after father, so he told me, and he went under de house to keep him from whippin’ him. When missus come home she wouldn’t let young master whup him. She just wouldn’t ‘low it.*¹—Charles Dickens

Scholars argue that women could not be “masters” of enslaved people. In spite of the fact that white women inherited slaves, hired them out, bought, sold and bequeathed them; in spite of using a spectrum of management and disciplinary strategies to get them to work; and despite the courts’ general recognition of white women’s rights as slaveowners with the power and authority to dispose of slaves as they wished. They could be masters of household operations, they could be “fictive masters,” they could be “masterful”; but historians contend that they did not possess the strength or power to make a servile class submit to their will. Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

This chapter problematizes and disrupts a prevailing narrative of powerlessness that positions white slaveowning women as victims of a hierarchical social order premised upon white, male supremacy. It argues that as white persons who could own African Americans, white women’s status as slaveowners afforded them particular kinds of power they did not otherwise possess. It granted them access to a community of citizenship that was predicated upon the ownership of human property, a community that possessed rights and powers recognized by local, state and federal courts. White women embraced their roles within this community, they

¹ Interview with Charles S. Dickens, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States, from Interviews with Former Slaves*. North Carolina Narratives, Part I, Volume 13. St. Clair Shores: Scholarly Press, Inc, 1976, 256.

assumed positions of power over slaves within and outside their households, and they challenged those who attempted to infringe upon that power. Scholars view white married slaveowning women in particular as especially victimized by southern marital and property laws and by the enfranchised men around them.

After sketching out the basic tenets of slave mastery, I examine prevailing paradigms that historians use to explain how women could be masters of slaves. While important to reimagining the role of slave mistresses, these models of female mastery are inadequate because they do not recognize mastery as a set of skills which white women acquired and refined over the course of their entire lives. White women's ideological development as slaveowners can be traced from childhood to adulthood. In this process, inheritance practices among white slaveholding families played a formative role in how white women conceptualized their personal relationships to human property, the powers they would possess once they became slaveowners, and their techniques of slave control. Contrary to existing studies of white southern women in the nineteenth century South, this chapter contends that marriage signified a transition in white women's identities as slaveowners, not an end. Having been raised with particular expectations related to owning slaves since girlhood, many white women did not see marriage as a period during which they relinquished control over their slaves. Rather, it marked a point at which their identities as slaveowners were fully realized. Because they entered marriage with their own set of ideas about slaveownership, white women frequently clashed with their husbands, male kin and the white men they hired over matters of slave sales and discipline. Intriguingly, white slaveowning women did not discuss these issues extensively in their personal correspondence. However, such narratives appear frequently in the oral testimony of their former slaves, and thus,

enslaved people construct counter-narratives of power, which white slaveowning women seemed reluctant to tell.

Enslaved people also describe white slaveowning women's methods of management. By analyzing their narratives, it becomes clear that white slaveowning women did not govern and control their slaves using "feminine" styles of discipline and management; they used a wide array of strategies employed by a cross section of slaveowners. They delegated slave management and discipline to male kin, friends, and employees, they shared these responsibilities with the men around them, and they did their own "bossing." They used various tactics to manage and discipline their slaves, which ranged from giving incentives for exceptional service and behavior to brutal beatings and whippings. A study about the power white female slaveowners possessed over enslaved people would not be complete without a discussion of those who chose to treat their slaves cruelly, to torture them, and sometimes even murder them as well. The various ways that white southern slaveowning girls and women managed their human property challenge us to reconsider the ways we think about gender, power, and slavery.

Female Slave Masters?

What did it mean to be the "master" of slaves? By conventional definitions, a "master" was a white, enfranchised, propertied, and typically slaveowning, man, and "mastery" signified his control over his household and the people within it. When talking about slave mastery in particular, these sought to secure absolute power over their slaves, they hoped to "achieve 'perfect' submission" among them and they sought "to utilize their labor profitably." Since most

slaves would not submit perfectly or recognize the absolute power of the people who owned them, slaveowners developed systems and techniques of management and control in hopes of creating a servile, submissive and productive labor force. In creating these systems of management and control, they hoped to “accustom him [the slave] to rigid discipline, demand from him unconditional submission, impress upon him his innate inferiority, develop in him a paralyzing fear of white men, train him to adopt the master’s code of good behavior, and instill in him a sense of complete dependence.”² In other words, slave mastery was the cultivation and refinement of a skill set, one which allowed owners to effectively manage and discipline enslaved people, to make them work efficiently, and to extract the most profit from their labor.³

With few exceptions, historians of the South wholly reject the possibility that white women could be masters of slaves.⁴ They argue that because white women were disenfranchised and legally and economically constrained by the institution of marriage and marital property laws, they could not effectively manage enslaved people without the heavy-handed assistance of men. Moreover, they see violence as the cornerstone of slave mastery and claim that brutality was the purview of men, asserting that women were generally averse to resorting to calculated acts of violence against enslaved people. According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese: “The law—not to mention the social emphasis placed on male governance of the household and its members—

² Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963, 143 and 148 respectively. For a more expansive examination of how slaveowners secured mastery over enslaved populations see Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 141-191.

³ James Oakes provides an exceptional discussion of the complexity of slave mastery and of slaveowners’ attempts to secure it. See *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*. New York, Alfred Knopf, 1982 153-191. He is also one of the few historians that write about white slaveowning women as economic actors who belonged to the “master class.”

⁴ Thavolia Glymph brilliant study of white and black women’s changing relationships within nineteenth century slaveholding households is an exceptional example. Glymph demonstrates that white women consistently meted out ruthless, calculated acts of violence upon the bodies of the slaves who served them. While she maintains that white women could not be “masters,” her study reveals that they could nonetheless behave like them. See Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

discouraged women from managing slaves.” Fox-Genovese also contends that “both the law and the tradition of male dominance sharply limited the practical and psychological effectiveness of their [slaveholding women’s] discipline.”⁵ Moreover, Fox-Genovese claims that “[t]he master normally administered the heavy punishments and the slaves knew it...The plantation mistress’s class and race enabled her to tell slaves what to do, to try to get them to do it and to box or whip them if they did not. *But her gender plainly informed them that she was no ‘massa.’*”⁶

Very little historical scholarship on the antebellum South challenges the idea that white women played only marginal or unwanted roles in the management and discipline of enslaved people and this holds true even when circumstances like the Civil War called for white women to assume these responsibilities. According to Drew Gilpin-Faust, the war “transformed the structures of domestic authority, requiring white women to exercise unaccustomed—and unsought—power in defense of public as well as private order.” And while Faust does recognize that “slavery’s survival depended less on sweeping dictates of state policy than on tens of thousands of individual acts of personal domination exercised by particular masters over

⁵ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988, 97. She also claims that white women’s “lack of business knowledge constituted only part of the problem for these southern women, for—romance aside—they could not exercise mastery of their own slaves, much less contribute to the control of the slaves in their communities. Women who managed plantations were, like all other planters, responsible for contributing to the patrols and to other community responsibilities such as building and repairing the levees on the delta, but women could not meet those obligations in person...Thus, although some women owned plantations and more had to assume responsibility when their husbands were away, they ‘managed’ them through men in all except the rarest of cases. Ibid., 205-206.

⁶ [Emphasis added]. Yet Fox-Genovese also admits that “[a]s slaves would have been the first to insist, and as both male and female slaveholders well knew, mistresses could very well be the devil. A mean mistress stood second to no master in her cruelty, although her strength was less.” This tended to be particularly characteristic of white women’s relations with enslaved women for Fox-Genovese contends that “on the grounds of physical strength they were less likely than men to kill them. Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 61. “Missus” is the most common salutation used by interviewees when talking about their mistresses. Historians tend to interpret enslaved people’s use of “massa” and “missus” as an indication of formerly enslaved people’s understanding of gendered power when in fact they seem to use these terms like we use “Ms., Mrs., and Mr.” More research needs to be done on the implications of slaves’ use of gendered salutations. But as Thavolia Glymph has shown, most enslaved people cared little for salutations. White women may not have been able to command the same respect that a “massa” could but they nonetheless desired and eventually acquired some degree of mastery over enslaved people as “missus.”

particular slaves,” she suggests that white women imagined themselves to be “unfit masters” thrust into a realm of responsibility and power for which they were profoundly unprepared. She goes on to contend that “for many white women this physical dimension of slave control proved most troubling...Just as ‘paternalism’ and ‘mastery’ were rooted in concepts of masculinity, so violence was similarly gendered as male within the ideology of the Old South...A white woman disciplined and punished as the master’s subordinate and surrogate. Rationalized, systematic, autonomous, and instrumental use of violence belonged to men.”⁷

Perhaps this was true in some cases, but formerly enslaved men and women remembered many white women, and their use of violence, differently. Addy Gill was a slave in Raleigh, North Carolina and she recalled that “de missus done the whuppin on Mr. Krenshaw’s plantation an she was mighty rough at times.” Addy and other enslaved men and women recalled mistresses who consistently meted out calculated, systematic and rationalized violence and discipline, not as masters’ subordinates and surrogates, but as slaveowners with the authority to do so.⁸ Moreover, slave testimony also emphasizes that mastery did not always require violent methods of management and control and if we acknowledge this fact, it becomes possible to consider how white women could be masters of slaves.

⁷ See Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 53-54, 56, and 62-63. William Scarborough and Kirsten Wood agree. See William Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth Century South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2003, 117-118 and Kirsten Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004, 52. Talking about the years leading up to the Civil War Wood suggests that her sources also support Faust’s contention that women enacted “frenzied” acts of violence, not systematic brutality. Yet at the same time she also finds that white women contemplated how best to use force to control enslaved people.

⁸ See interview with Addy Gill, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed April 14, 2009)

Although historians are now equipped to undertake a more complex analysis of women's relationship to slavery, Thavolia Glymph contends that "[h]istorians of southern women continue to work within a framework that gives...priority to patriarchy, paternalism, and a particular brand of domesticity and freedom." As a result, we have limited our understanding of how white women could be constrained by male power and control while simultaneously, actively and willingly, subjugating enslaved African Americans.⁹ Glymph offers a much-needed corrective to the notion that white women did not employ systematic violence toward enslaved people.

Glymph's study of white and black women's relations within southern households from slavery to freedom breaks new ground upon which a new conceptualization of white women, power and slave mastery can begin. Glymph reminds us that "[w]hite women wielded the power of slaveownership. They owned slaves and managed households in which they held the power of life and death and the importance of those facts for Southern women's identity—black and white—was enormous."¹⁰ In situating white women's power over the bodies of enslaved women within the context of plantation households, which were themselves arenas of brutality, she provides a new paradigm, one which recognizes the household as site of white female power, control and violence. Examining white women's economic investment in slavery then broadens our view of their role in the perpetuation of slavery for, as Glymph maintains, white women were personally invested in slavery. Glymph successfully demonstrates that white women played active roles in the subjugation of enslaved people and she problematizes the coupling of violence and southern white masculinity.¹¹

⁹ Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Glymph, 28.

Although Glymph never defines mastery, she does suggest that white women could acquire mastery over others without being “masters.” In some respects, Glymph agrees with other scholars who argue that masters were white slaveholding men, but she also implies that they were not the only ones to possess violent mastery over slaves.¹² She thus encourages us to explore the ways in which white women within slaveholding households were able to acquire and maintain mastery over enslaved people, and she aptly shows that white women’s violence—both psychological and corporeal—was integral to this process. But the “female side of domination”—violence that occurred in the “great house”—was accompanied and reinforced in other places where white women wielded brutal power over enslaved people.¹³ As this chapter shows, enslaved people recalled white slaveowning women acting violently towards them outside the plantation household, and these incidents reveal how white women’s status as slaveowners allowed them to exercise power in their relations with white men.

Recent work of historians Kirsten Wood and William Henry Foster has also begun to complicate prevailing ideas about female mastery. In her study of slaveholding widows from the colonial era to Reconstruction, Wood argues that these women “developed a distinctive version of mastery, which harnessed ladyhood to householding and privileged both over mere white manhood.” They did not call themselves “masters,” but continued to refer to themselves as “mistress,” a term which signified “inferiority and power” because it “connoted simultaneous authority over slaves and children and subordination to her husband.” Slaveholding widows could not engage in “many components of male mastery” such as “voting, mustering, serving on

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Glymph, 2.

juries, and holding public office” or put their mastery on display through “affairs of honor.”¹⁴

Yet in spite of these limitations, slaveholding widows could perform the duties of a master. They maintained plantation operations, secured and disposed of property, hired white employees, delegated tasks to them and fired them, and controlled enslaved laborers directly and indirectly through hierarchical systems of order. In this way, being a master in title and carrying out the duties of a master were not always entwined. Yet Wood argues that white slaveholding widows commanded authority over their affairs and over others precisely because they couched their responsibilities and demands in a discourse of ladyhood and feminine dependence, and this discourse profoundly shaped how they articulated their power and mastery over slaves. They were, she argues, less likely to use violence or sexual exploitation because “ideals of ladyhood discouraged it.”¹⁵ For Wood, the journey to become a master began with widowhood. Thus she does not recognize that many of these women were raised in slaveholding families prior to marriage, or that they developed particular ideas about slaveownership, and the rights, power and authority it conferred upon them from the time they were young girls and women. And these ideas may have profoundly shaped the ways they chose to “master” their slaves as widows.

It is important to acknowledge several key factors that distinguish slaveowning widows from their married counterparts. In many respects they assumed the role of master out of necessity. They were obliged to engage with the legal and financial world that existed beyond their households because their husbands were dead. While they could delegate these tasks to male kin and proxies, they nonetheless had to attend to many household affairs and still had to worry about the propriety of those they hired to perform the role of master in their stead. Because

¹⁴ Wood, 6.

¹⁵ Wood, 9-10, 36, 49.

they were thrust into this new role, they never seemed to feel quite comfortable serving as masters of slaves. But this was not necessarily the case for married slaveowning women whose husbands remained viable heads of households.

In his survey of female slaveownership and mastery across time and space William Foster suggests that we legitimate white slaveowning women's mastery and try to understand their management and control of slaves within the context of the family. He contends that white slaveowning women developed and engaged in "maternalism," a slave management style that resembled white southern men's paternalist strategies of mastery. "Maternalism" he argues, "was the female equivalent of father-rule," or the authority of fathers within households and slaveholding societies, and that "maternal status was often the only means available to fully establish their [slaveowning women's] legitimate use of authority and, by extension, their complex forms of mastery." Single and widowed slaveowning women also attempted to "access the mantle of the mother...which maximized their chances of being taken seriously by their families, neighbours, male clerical and secular authorities—and by their servants and slaves." It behooved slaveowning women to adhere to maternalistic styles of slave management because "[d]eviations from the maternal could place women in danger of being used in negative cultural and religious propaganda or being attacked themselves."¹⁶

While Foster correctly situates white slaveowning women in a matrix of shared authority and power, his theory of maternalistic slave management is faulty for a number of reasons. Just as many white male slaveowners engaged in styles of slave management and discipline that did not conform to paternalistic models, white slaveowning women also developed management

¹⁶ William Henry Foster, *Gender, Mastery, and Slavery: From European to Atlantic Frontiers*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 8 and 15 respectively.

styles that did not center upon “the maternal.” Although some of these women undoubtedly encountered family members, neighbors, and enslaved people who contested their authority, many did not. As a consequence, not all women felt the need to “access the mantle of mother” to legitimate their mastery over slaves.

Formerly enslaved people recalled different hierarchies of authority and power that placed white slaveowning women at the top, not at the “mid-levels.” Some remembered white slaveowning women who were “de real bosses” on the estates where they resided, and while they might talk about kind and caring mistresses, they rarely describe this kindness and caring in the context of maternalism. And finally, abolitionists saw the majority of white women in slaveowning households, communities and regions as complicitous in the perpetuation of slavery, and thus as subjects for comment, ridicule and disparagement, regardless of their explicit ownership of slaves or their management styles.

In spite of these limitations, Wood and Foster offer fertile ground upon which to cultivate a more expansive theory of female mastery. In order to do so, it is critical that we understand mastery as a set of skills that white males and females acquired over time. Mastery was learned, and slaveowning households, estates, and slaveowner/slave interactions provided the context for instruction.

“Their special property”: Slave Inheritances and Mistresses-In-the-Making

In his study *Life and Labor in the Old South*, Ulrich B. Phillips argued that “the plantation was a school,” in which masters “civilized” their slaves and taught gifted bondsmen

specialized skills.¹⁷ It was also a place of training for the white soon-to-be slaveowning child. From the moment slaveowning couples had children, they began to teach their offspring about the principles of slaveownership and helped them develop and refine the skills of slave mastery. White boys and girls learned vicariously through their parents' actions, but their parents also initiated the learning process when they gave their children slaves.

In examining inheritance practices in early America, historians Marylynn Salmon and Cara Anzilotti discovered that women often received more slaves than land as part of their inheritances.¹⁸ Moreover, other scholars have found that parents often distributed property to daughters while they were still alive, and the amount and value of the property they passed along to women in this way does not always figure into studies of inheritance practices in the colonial period. These practices, which continued into the post-Revolutionary era, may have strengthened slaveowning women's relationships to human property in contrast to other forms,

¹⁷ Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, [1929]1957, 198-199.

¹⁸ Scholars have argued that property-owning parents reinforced prevailing ideologies of female dependence because they distributed their property unequally among male and female children, often giving the most property to their eldest male child. This was most certainly true in many areas throughout the colonies in the pre-Revolutionary period, but less so for the nineteenth century. In the British metropole, a system of inheritance called primogeniture stipulated that property holding fathers should bequeath all of their property to their eldest sons; daughters might inherit property if there were no sons in the household. Many settlers in the British North American colonies adopted this system. When primogeniture was not the rule of the law, fathers often granted their eldest sons double shares of their estates and bequeathed smaller portions to younger sons and daughters. However, during the Revolutionary period, states began to abolish primogeniture and the practice of giving eldest sons' double shares, and "[d]aughters often inherited personal property, including slaves, equally with their brothers." (Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986, 142 and 158.) Cara Anzilotti also finds this to be the case. She states that "[i]n families with children of both sexes, daughters and sons inherited property of equal value, and girls with brothers were often given tracts of the fathers' land, although sons were more likely to receive realty, whereas daughters were the principal heirs of personalty, which included their parents' slaves." She also found that "[m]any of the bequests to daughters in the wills of Carolina planters state that young women were to receive their shares 'at 16 or marriage'" which further supports the assertion that slaveownership and coming of age, as well as marriage, were entwined for white southern women and could therefore encourage them to construct identities as slaveowners before and during marriage. See Cara Anzilotti, *In the Affairs of the World: Women, Patriarchy, and Power in Colonial South Carolina*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002, 143 and 74 respectively.

and might have served as a motivation for women to establish astuteness in slave management and control.

In the oral testimony of formerly enslaved people, we find evidence that slaveowning parents often gave their daughters slaves, or at least let them know which slaves would eventually be theirs, while they remained within the household. Young white girls received slaves in infancy, as Christmas presents, and as gifts on their wedding days. An unnamed formerly enslaved woman told historian Frederic Bancroft that her owners gave her to her "mistiss's daughter fer a present. Dey make *presunts* o' niggahs in *doze* days, dey did dat.¹⁹ In a phraseology that seems peculiar to South Carolina, slaveowners gave enslaved people to their daughters as 'daily gifts' or 'free gifts.'²⁰ Filmore Hancock's grandmother 'was given to missus as her own de day she was born. Coarse old missus was only a year old den.'²¹ Charity Bowery's first mistress "made it a point to give one of [her] mother's children to each of hers." Charity eventually came to belong to her mistress' second daughter Elizabeth.²²

Enslaved children often grew up alongside their owners' daughters as playmates, nurses, and companions; but these future slaveowners eventually came to realize that the African

¹⁹ Frederick Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, [1931]1996, 292.

²⁰ See for example, Interviews with Mary Scott Gourdin, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Jane Hollins, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 2, Amy Chavis Perry, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 3, and Amos Gadsen, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 20, 2010).

²¹ Interview with Uncle Fil Hancock, Missouri Narratives, Volume X, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 22, 2010).

²² Interview with Charity Bowery, in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*. Ed. John Blassingame, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977, 261-267.

American children they shared their days with were far more than that.²³ They came to know that these African American children were their property and they treated them as such. Sylvia Watkins said that her "young missis' allus called me her little nig."²⁴ A formerly enslaved woman named Melinda recalled that her young mistress would frequently tell her "when I get big and get married to a prince, you come with me and 'tend all my chilens." When her mistress later married Honore Dufour, she did indeed take Melinda with her as she and her husband established their new household.²⁵ Melinda's mistress dreamt of a future life with a princely man, and her fantasy was not complete without Melinda in it. From what Malinda tells us, her mistress did what was necessary to make at least part of that fantasy a reality.

Even after marriage, white slaveowning parents offered their daughters enslaved people as gifts. Kitty Stanford recalled that her "mother belonged to Mrs. Lindsay. One day when I was ten years old, my old mistress take me over to her daughter and say 'I brought you a little nigger gal to rock de cradle.'"²⁶ Kitty said nothing about whether her mother came along with her, but her old mistress seemed unconcerned about the likely separation of mother and child. Moreover,

²³ Nell Irvin Painter argues that white children often found themselves in situations under which they had to identify with either the enslaved or the enslaver. Furthermore, she argues that young girls often identified with slaves while young boys identified with slaveowners. See Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Full Loaded Cost Accounting," in *Southern History Across the Color Line*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002, 34-35. In my own research I found cases that support Painter's assertion, however, many white slaveowning women did not identify with the slaves they owned.

²⁴ Interview with Sylvia Watkins, Tennessee Narratives, Volume XV, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed February 28, 2010).

²⁵ Interview with Melinda, *Mother Wit: The Ex-Slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writer's Project*, ed. Ronnie Clayton, New York: Peter Lang, 1990, 167-168.

²⁶ Interview with Kitty Stanford, Arkansas, Volume II, Part 6, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed January 15, 2010).

this demonstrates that even slaveowning mothers participated in this kind of wealth transfer, making it difficult to define bequests and gifting as paternalist practices in which only slaveowning men engaged in.

Beyond merely claiming ownership of enslaved children, young white children practiced styles of mastery as they assumed the roles of instructors and disciplinarians. Nancy Thomas recalled that she "was de special little girl fo' Mistress Harriett's daughter. Her name was Palonia. Even durin' dem days I would sew and knit. I had a little three-legged stool and I'd set it between Palony's legs, while she was settin' down. Den she'd watch me when I knitted. If I done somethin' wrong, she'd pinch my ear a little and say, 'Yo' dropped a stitch, Nannie.'"²⁷

As Nancy Thomas' testimony shows, Palonia was a mistress-in-the-making, responsible for overseeing Nancy's production and disciplining her when it diminished in quality. Palonia learned that Nancy was under her command and that as her "special little girl" she possessed the power to have Nancy do whatever she desired. Delicia Patterson remembered the one whipping she ever received; and it came at the hands of her young mistress. She explained "I was working in the garden with one of my owner's daughters and I pulled something she did not want pulled up, so she up and slapped me for it." This mistress-in-the-making clearly crossed the line with this enslaved girl and what happened next taught her how far she could reasonably go: "I got so mad at her" Delicia recalled, "I taken up a hoe and run her all the way in the big house."²⁸

²⁷ Interview with Nancy Thomas, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 2* -- Volume 9: Texas Narratives, Part 8, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979.

²⁸ Interview with Delicia Patterson, Missouri Narratives, Volume X, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 15, 2010).

No matter how amicable relations between young white girls and enslaved people may have been, these white southern girls frequently articulated and exercised their power over them as slaveowners-in-the-making. Writing to his sister Elizabeth in North Carolina, John A. Burwell relayed an incident involving his daughter Lizzie Anna that supports this view:

Lizzie Anna frequently talks of you of her own accord though this is not wonderful (?) as she is altogether above most children in natural mind and in things remarkable. She is very fond of flowers, and spends most of her time in the garden either with her Mama or her maid, a tall, negro girl Fanny who stays a good deal with her and for whom Lizzie Anna has formed a great attachment. She got vexed with Fanny however a few days since and told me please to cut Fanny's ears off and get her a new maid from Clarksville.²⁹

As a young white southern girl in a slaveowning household, Lizzie Anna learned that it was not unusual to stroll through her family's garden with an enslaved woman in one moment and in the next, threaten to mutilate her and buy another slave to take her place. In the comfort of her home, she recognized that she possessed the power to command others to do so, and her father did little to discourage her from believing in her powers of control. Moreover, Lizzie Anna's father felt a level of comfort relaying this incident to the girl's aunt, which also suggests that she too may have accepted the logic behind her niece's behavior.

What did it mean to young white girls to be given human beings as their own property, or to expect to receive them during the course of their lives? How did witnessing slave punishments or hearing conversations about the value of enslaved human beings affect the relationships they cultivated as they matured? As the recollections and accounts above suggest, young white girls came to realize very early on that they could own and control other human beings, and the ability

²⁹ John A. Burwell ALS to Elizabeth T. Guy, Lynesville, N.C., April 30, 1847, *Burwell-Guy Family Papers*, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

to do so may have been integral to their identities as young white women.³⁰ In the minds of some of these women, their property was a measurement of their personal worth. When Floride Clemson's grandmother died in July of 1866, she learned that she would inherit property worth between fifteen and twenty thousand dollars. When articulating her response to her new fortune, she wrote of it as an augmentation of her own value, not the price assigned to inanimate and animate commodities.

Watching their mothers and fathers, and other white people around them interact with enslaved people, order them about, brutalize them, and buy and sell them served as a foundation upon which white females constructed identities as slaveowners, developed ideas about what kinds of slaveowners they would be and established the terms upon which others could or could not have a say in how they lived out those ideas. It is important to recognize that all of this—the gifting of slaves, the development of relationships of love and power with those slaves, and instruction about how to control or manage them—frequently occurred *prior* to marriage. White southern women, then, possessed a certain set of ideas about slaves and slaveownership prior to marrying; they did not suddenly wake up one morning and find themselves surrounded by a system of labor and control completely unfamiliar to them. And we must bear this in mind as we contemplate whether and how marriage affected white southern women's relationships to human property after they said their vows.

The laws concerning property in the nineteenth century seem straightforward enough when it comes to married women: when a property owning woman married she became a “feme covert.” Her legal identity became subsumed under her husband's—a legal status referred to as

³⁰ As Thavolia Glymph has argued, white women “owned slaves and managed households in which they held the power of life and death and the importance of those facts for Southern women's identity—black and white—was enormous.” Glymph, 4.

“coverture” or “unity in person.”—unless she established her legal right to own, control, and sell her property by devising a marriage settlement, a separate estate, or a trust or by operating as a “feme sole trader,” (a woman who could engage in commercial endeavors without her husband’s permission). Under coverture, a woman’s property, including her slaves, became her husband’s. He had the right to sell her property and benefit from the revenue it produced.³¹

Many scholars point to statutes related to women’s changing status upon marriage as evidence of their powerlessness; and women who lived during the period, in both the North and the South, support their assertions. In the “Declaration of Sentiments” Elizabeth Cady Stanton stated that “He (mankind) has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead...He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns...”³² Her southern sister, Mary Boykin Chesnut, drew parallels between the constraints of marriage and the enslavement of African Americans after witnessing the sale of an enslaved woman at auction in Montgomery, Alabama. She echoed Stanton’s view of marriage when she asked: “You know how women sell themselves and are sold in marriage, from queens downward eh? You know what the Bible says about slavery—and marriage. Poor women. Poor slaves...”³³

In spite of these women’s seeming consensus upon this issue, historian Marylynn Salmon suggest that Stanton and Chestnut’s characterization of marriage was not uniformly the case for white women in either region. Indeed, Stanton and Chesnut both controlled property and made independent decisions about their families and households throughout their lives. Salmon observed that “[u]nity of person was based on the perfect marriage,” in which “men always acted

³¹ Bertram Wyatt Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, 254-256.

³² Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *A History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1. Rochester, N.Y.: Fowler and Wells, 1889, 70-71.

³³ March 4, 1861, *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, ed. C. Vann Woodward, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981, 15.

wisely and fairly” and as a consequence “it inevitably created hardships in marriages that were less than ideal.”³⁴ Slaveholding parents knew the risks associated with granting their daughters’ new husbands absolute power and control of their property and they attempted to reduce those risks in a number of ways. They frequently gave their daughters less “real” property than sons, they imposed limits upon the amount of time their daughters could hold property (usually only granting them ownership for their lifetimes), and they established trusts and separate estates for their daughters, which protected this property from husbands’ debts or from sale.³⁵ White slaveholding women also alerted each other to these risks. They wrote about the woes of property-owning female friends and family members who seemed blinded by love and oblivious to the danger unscrupulous men posed to their economic security.³⁶

Yet, in spite of slaveowning parents’ fears, and the horror stories shared among slaveowning women, young white women frequently received slaves as wedding gifts. Emma Knight remembered that: “We belonged to Will Ely. He had only five slaves, my father and mother and three of us girls...Dr. Ely had eight children. Dere was Paula, Ann, Sarah, Becky, Emily, Lizzie, Will, Ike, and Frank. Lizzie was de oldest girl and I was to belong to her when she

³⁴ Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986, 15.

³⁵ See Cara Anzilotti, *In the Affairs of the World*, 145. Real property generally refers to land. Parents tended to give their daughters cash, slaves, and personal property, which they could continue to control under most circumstances. Historians tend to interpret these methods of property distribution as indicative of parents’ gender biases and favoritism shown to sons. But in reality, such strategies maximized the chances that their daughters would not be left destitute by the men they married.

³⁶ The courts recognized the risks that coverture posed to married property-owning women as well. They required “private examination” of a married woman when they received a request to sell her property and they mandated “women’s signatures on land deeds,” they supported separate estates, and guaranteed “common law dower to widows.” See Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*, 13 and 158, Carol Shammas, Marylynn Salmon, and Michel Dahlin, *Inheritance in America*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1987, 57 and 112, and Carole Shammas, *The History of Household Government in America*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002, 60, 76, 96-97. For women who talked of the financial risks associated with friends’ and family members’ marital choices see *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone, 1861-1868*, ed. John Q. Anderson. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1955, 176.

was married.”³⁷ This was a common practice. According to ex-slave James Baker “[w]hen a girl or a boy would marry, why they’d givem [sic] them as many black folks as they could spare. I was give to one of the daughters when she married.”³⁸ Former slave Bill Homer provided a vivid account of how grand these events could be for the most elite members of the planter class:

... I's given to Missy Mary. She was de Marster's on'y daughter...In de yeah ob 1860, Missy Mary gits mai'ied to Marster Bill Johnson an' at de weddin', Marster Homer gives me an' 49 udder niggers to her fo' de weddin' present. Marster Johnson's father gives him 50 niggers too. Aftah de weddin' was over, deys give de couple de infare. Dere's whar dis nigger comes in. I's wid de udder niggers was lin' up, all wid de clean clothes on, an' new suits. Den de Marster says, “Fo' to give my lovin' daughter de staht, I's give you dese 50 niggers”. Marster Bill's father does de same thing fo' his son, an' each give de statement fo' ever' nigger. Dere weuns was, 100 niggers wid a new Marster....De treatment f'om de new Marster am jus' lak f'om de ol' Marster. Dat am 'cause ob Missy Mary. She don' 'lows dem to 'buse her niggers. She says to Marster Bill, “If you mus' 'buse de nigger, 'buse your own.” She means de ones dat his father gives him, so dey don' 'buse any.³⁹

Bill’s memories of his new master and mistress suggest that she possessed distinct ideas about what her husband’s relationship to her property should be. By refusing to allow her husband to mistreat the slaves her father gave her and by insisting that “[d]e treatment f'om de new Marster am jus' lak f'om de ol' Marster” she articulated a particular vision of slaveownership and management which differed from her husband’s, one that Bill tells us developed prior to her

³⁷ Interview with Emma Knight, Missouri Narratives, Volume X, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed July 29, 2010).

³⁸ Interview with James Baker, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed July 28, 2010).

³⁹ Interview with Bill Homer, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 2 -- Volume 5: Texas Narratives*, Part 4, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979.

marriage to Marster Bill. More importantly, her husband accepted and abided by her word and wishes when it came to her slaves.⁴⁰

The marriage ceremony concretized the economic relationship between slaves and young white women's coming of age in another important way; slaves were often sold in order to finance their young mistresses' weddings. Ben Johnson's master sold his brother Jim in order to pay for his daughter's wedding dress.⁴¹

While Mary and Bill Johnston seem to have come to an understanding about slave management, Bill Homer's mistress clashed with her husband on matters pertaining to her slaves. White slaveowning couples resolved these marital conflicts in myriad ways. Some women, like former slave Litt Young's mistress, simply did not allow their husbands to interfere with their attempts to control and manage their slaves. As Litt recalled:

I's born in 1850 in Vicksburg, and belonged to Missy Martha Gibbs... Old Missy Gibbs had so many niggers she had to have lots of quarters... Missy was a big, rich Irishwoman and not scared of no man. She lived in a big, fine house, and buckled on two guns and come out to the place most every morning. She out-cussed a man when things didn't go right... She had two husbands, one named Hockley and he died of yellow fever. Then she marries a Dr. Gibbs, what was a Yankee, but she didn't know it till after the war... Dr. Gibbs was a powerful man in Vicksburg. 'Fore the war he'd say to missy, "Darling, you oughtn't whip them poor, black folks so hard. They is gwine be free like us some day." Missy say, "Shut up. Sometimes I 'lieve you is a Yankee, anyway."⁴²

A strong willed remarried widow, Martha Gibbs possessed a vision of her relationship to her

⁴⁰ It is equally important to note that her insistence that he refrain from abuse did not apply to the slaves he owned. In fact, she encouraged him to abuse them if he so pleased.

⁴¹ Interview with Ben Johnson, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed July 31, 2010).

⁴² Interview with Litt Young, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 5 -- Texas Narratives*, Parts 3 and 4, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. ed George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rsb1&chapterID=rsb1-010-024&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

slaves and her obligations as a slaveowner that differed immensely from those embraced by her second husband. In spite of his prestige within their community, Martha exercised the kind of control over her property that the law really afforded to her husband. Some might say that she went beyond that. Out-cussing men who displeased her and carrying two guns while overseeing the estate, Martha was a different kind of “southern lady,” but she was not exceptional in this regard.

Although written marital property laws seemed to wrench control of human property from white slaveowning women, formerly enslaved people frequently talked about the women who circumvented the constraints these laws imposed and the ways they shaped white men’s relationships with their wives’ slaves. Slaveowner Sally Nightingale owned Alice Marshall and her mother and Alice claimed that her mistress’ husband “Jack Nightingale ain’ had nothin’ to do wid me an’ my mother—we belong to mistiss by law an’ not her husband.”⁴³ Whether Sally had a separate estate, received permission to act as a feme sole trader, or merely demanded that her husband leave her property alone, is something Alice did not share. However, she did give voice to the importance of the law in Sally’s relationship with her husband and her property.

Married slaveowning women confronted their male kin, employees and representatives of the state in matters pertaining to their slaves; and many of these women retained control and authority over slaves in the households, estates, and communities in which they lived. White slaveowning women frequently clashed with white men over matters of sale and discipline, and as slaveowners, these women exercised the most power over these two dimensions of slaveholding. They contested patriarchal authority by determining when, if, and how others

⁴³ Interview with Alice Marshall in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-slaves* Eds. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976, 201.

could sell or discipline their slaves, by sharing the responsibility of slave management and discipline with others, and by doing “their own bossing.”

“De Mrs. She nevah let me be sold.”

Slaves constituted the majority of wealth held by southerners in the nineteenth century, and over the course of the century, the value of slaves increased exponentially. If they chose to sell a slave, they might profit enormously from the proceeds of that sale, but decisions not to sell a slave could be even more so. By keeping a slave, an owner retained the wealth that both enslaved bodies and labor represented.

Slaveowners and their slaves understood that the ability to sell a slave and the power *not* to sell their slaves were two of the most profound articulations of a slaveowner’s power.⁴⁴ Male and female slaveowners sold slaves that they no longer needed, they sold them in order to profit from the sale, to pay debts with the proceeds of the sale and, in the case of bequests, they frequently sold slaves in order to distribute estates equitably among heirs. They also used sale, or the threat of sale, as methods of punishment. Thus when enslaved people did not conduct themselves accordingly, their owners threatened to sell them far away from all they knew.⁴⁵ Yet, when historians find accounts of white women who prevented the sale of slaves by their husbands or male kin, or clashed with these men about the sale of enslaved people, they interpret their interventions and encounters as benevolent acts towards enslaved people, not conflicts

⁴⁴ Stamp, 154.

⁴⁵ Millie Simkins said that “Mah fust missis sold me kaze I wuz stubborn. She sent me ter de “slave yard”aat Nashville. De yard wuz full ob slaves. I stayed dere two weeks 'fore marster Simpson bought me. I wuz sold 'way fum mah husband en I nebber se'd 'im 'gin. I had one chile which I tuk wid me.” Interview with Millie Simkins, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 16 -- Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Virginia, and Tennessee Narratives*, ed George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rsb1&chapterID=rsb1-010-024&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

arising over property. Moreover, they argue that in most cases, white women's attempts to conform to and live out nineteenth century ideals of domestic womanhood motivated their actions.⁴⁶ But no matter how benevolent they might seem, these *were* conflicts over property and over who would control it.

Former slave Ella Washington's experience for example. As Ella told her interviewer about her childhood she recalled how her mistress rescued her mother, sister and herself from the auction block. Instead of a weeping southern belle clinging to her husband while pleading with him to change his mind, Ella remembered a fiery mad slaveowning mistress who confronted her husband about his illegal attempt to sell her slaves:

One time he [her master] take de notion to sell us. He put mother and me and sister on de block up in Marion. Us all cryin' hard, 'cause us thunk us gwine git sep'rate. Den I looks up sudden and right at my young miss, Miss Mary. She so mad she pale like de ghost. She say, 'Ella, you git 'way from dat block and come over to me, and you too, Della.' Me and my sister runs over dere to her and wrop ourself round her dress and hold on with all our might. De massa come after us and Miss Mary say, 'What you mean sellin' my slaves?' He say us slaves his and she say, do he want to have to prove what he say. Den she start in and raise so much sand he have to call mammy down off de block and take us back home.⁴⁷

Angered by her husband's audacious act, Ella's mistress challenged her husband's power and authority to dispose of her property in a very *public* forum. As historian Thomas Russell has asserted, local slave auctions were often community affairs, drawing people from surrounding areas into towns for these occasions. Indeed, former slave George Fleming said that "[i]n town dey have big nigger sellings, and all de marsters frum all over de countryside be dar to bid on

⁴⁶ Marli Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998, 74-80. See also Nell Irvin Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery," 34.

⁴⁷ Interview with Ella Washington, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed January 15, 2010).

‘em.” Anne Maddox said that when slaves were exposed for sale at public auction in her community “[w]hite peoples [were] dere from everywhere; de face of de earth was covered by dem.”⁴⁸ It is quite possible that there was a sizeable crowd in attendance when Ella, her sister and her mother were placed upon the auction block to be bid upon and sold. A prospective buyer or bystander might cross paths with friends, acquaintances and family members at these events.

The likelihood that the slave auction was a community affair makes Mary’s challenge to her husband’s authority all the more profound. In contesting her husband’s right to sell these three enslaved females in a public forum, she pulled back the curtain of the patriarchal household to reveal its unstable order. Her challenge to her husband’s power may have humiliated him in the presence of friends and foes, and we can only imagine what visits to town must have been like for him after this altercation. Mary’s “intervention” may have been benevolent but her grounds for contesting her husband’s authority were predicated upon her status as a slave owner and her rights and power to dispose of her property as she saw fit. When he attempted to dismiss her claims, she made clear that she would not be ignored and that he must establish his rights to sell her property by furnishing proof. Ella does not tell us what life within this slaveholding household was like after she and her family returned home, but we can speculate. A disagreement between husband and wife in the confines of the home poses its own set of

⁴⁸ Thomas Russell, “Slave Auctions on the Courthouse Steps: Court Sales of Slaves in Antebellum South Carolina” in *Slavery and the Law*, ed. Paul Finkelman (Madison: Wis.: Madison House, 1997), 329-364. and “Sale Day in Antebellum South Carolina: Slavery, Law, Economy, and Court-Supervised Sales.” PhD Diss., Stanford University, 1993, Interview with George Fleming, In *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series I -- Volume 11: North Carolina and South Carolina Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa11&chapterID=raa11-009-066&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood/>. (accessed June 25, 2010); Interview with Anne Maddox, Alabama Narratives, Volume I, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed May 25, 2009).

challenges, but one that takes place in an already charged public forum, in the presence of peers and subordinates, poses an entirely different problem.

Mamie Thompson's mistress also confronted her husband about his decision to sell her mother. Mamie recalled that her mother was "out on the block but her mistress come took her down." The confrontation at the auction was part of a longer context over who controlled Mamie's mothers. "Master Redman had her in the field working. The overseer was a white man. He tried to take her down and corry on with her. She led him to the house. He wanted her whopped cause she whooped him sort of. He was mad cause he couldn't overpower her. Master Redman got her in the kitchen to whoop her with a cowhide; she told him she would kill him; she got a stick. He let her out and they come to buy her—a Negro trader. Old Mistress-his wife-went out and led her down from there in the house and told Master Redman that if he sold Mattie she would quit him-she meant leave him. Mistress Redman kept her with her and made a house girl out of her."⁴⁹

Miss Mary and Mistress Redman were two of many slaveowning women who defied their husbands' authority to sell their slaves. Although most did so in less public and explicit ways, married slaveowning women challenged their husband's decisions to sell their slaves time and time again. Susannah Wyman said that "[o]nce de Martster tried to sell my brudder and anodder youngster fer a pair of mules, and our Mistis said, 'No! You don' sell my chillun for no mules!' And he didn't sell us neither."⁵⁰ Julia Williams' mistress not only defied her husband's

⁴⁹ Interview with Mamie Thompson, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 6, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed November 14, 2011).

⁵⁰ See Interview with Susannah Wyman in "Slavery by Ruby Lorraine Radford, Compilation Made from Interviews with 30 Slaves and Information from Slavery Laws and Newspaper files." Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript

decision to sell a slave, she bought the slave that her husband sold and prevented Julia from being sold as well:

De Mrs. She never let me be sold...Sho I saw slaves sole...De slaves on aukshun block day went to highes bidder. One colored woman, all de men want her. She sold to de master who was the highers bidder, and den I saw her comin down de road singin 'I done got a home at las!' She was half crazy. De maste he sole her and den Mrs. Buy her back. They let her work around de house...⁵¹

The decision of Julia's mistress to buy the enslaved woman back after her husband sold her speaks to her disapproval of his actions. Instead of having him reverse the sale, she did it herself. Julia's mistress might have gotten along swimmingly well with her husband on other matters, but in these two cases, she asserted her power and authority as a slaveowner with the authority to keep one slave away from the auction block and the means to undo the damage her husband caused to another enslaved person. In Julia's supplemental interview she told of another instance in which she "was to be sold de next day, but de missy tole the men who cried the block not to sell me, but deh sold my mother and I didn't see her aftar dat till just befoh de war ovah." It is not clear how Julia came to be exposed for sale or who placed her in this state. What is clear is that her mistress possessed enough power to prevent that transaction from ever happening and she exercised that authority to do so.⁵²

Even slaveowning women who were married to men who made their living buying and selling slaves, women might be presumed to be more agreeable to the sale and purchase of

Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (Accessed May 22, 2010).

⁵¹ Interview with Julia Williams, Ohio Narratives, Volume XII, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (Accessed July 29, 2010).

⁵² Interview with Julia Williams, Ohio Narratives, Volume XII, Supplemental Story, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed March 19, 2012).

enslaved people, protected their investments in human property from the men they loved. Mattie Logan remembered: “Master Lewis was a trader. He couldn't sell none of our family, for we belonged to Mistress Jennie.”⁵³ As her husband discussed his business and the intimacies of the slave trade, perhaps Mistress Jennie decided to cling to her slaves even more tightly because she learned firsthand just how valuable they were. One thing is clear; she did not let them fall into her slave trading husband's hands.

In the cases discussed above, white slaveowning women's husbands ultimately heeded the wishes of their wives, albeit begrudgingly. There were, however, white men who ignored their wives' demands, and on some occasions, these husbands went to extremes to infringe upon their wives' authority and control over their slaves.⁵⁴ Carrie Lewis' master waited until her mistress took a trip into town in order to sell Carrie's mother. He did not sell Carrie because she belonged to his daughter.⁵⁵ Although Carrie's recollections seem to support the idea that white men ultimately had final control over the disposition of their wives' property, it is important to remember that Carrie's master schemed and calculated when his wife would be gone from the house long enough to surreptitiously sell her slave. This act which suggests that he may have tried, and failed, to circumvent his wife's wishes and demands outright on previous occasions.

⁵³ Interview with Mattie Logan, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 7 -- Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa11&chapterID=raa11-009-066&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

⁵⁴ In cases where the identity of the slaveowner is ambiguous or when the owner was male, we find white men ignoring their wives consistently. In most of the cases that I studied which involved the wives' slaves, men generally listened.

⁵⁵ See Interview with Carrie Lewis in “Slavery by Ruby Lorraine Radford, Compilation Made from Interviews with 30 Slaves and Information from Slavery Laws and Newspaper files.” Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed May 22, 2010).

While slaveowning women challenged their husbands' authority to sell their slaves in public and private forums, they sold their own slaves and used such sales and the threat of sale as mechanisms of control. Millie Simkins told of how her "fust missis sold me kaze I wuz stubborn. She sent me ter de 'slave yard' at Nashville...I wuz sold 'way fum mah husband en I nebber se'd 'im 'gin. I had one chile which I tuk wid me."⁵⁶ The experience of Sarah Debro's grandfather reveals how the threat of sale could be an effective disciplinary tool in the hands of white slaveowning women: "One day gran'pappy sassed Mis' Polly White an' she told him dat if he didn' 'have hese'f dat she would put him in her pocket...she meant dat she would sell him den out de money in her pocket. He never did sass Mis' Polly no more."⁵⁷ Furthermore, enslaved children came to fear sale more than any beating they might receive and their mistresses used that fear to make them behave. Henry Walker recalled that "[w]hen I was real little they drove the hands to the block to be sold out along the road. Old mistress say: 'If you don't be good and mind we'll send yare off and sell you wid'em.' That scared me worse than a whooping."⁵⁸ Even if they did not sell their slaves or refused to allow others to do so, they could still make economic decisions that separated them from family members and their communities. Rosie Johnson

⁵⁶ Interview with Millie Simkins, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 16 -- Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Virginia, and Tennessee Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa11&chapterID=raa11-009-066&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood/>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

⁵⁷ Interview with Sarah Debro, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (Accessed May 14, 2009).

⁵⁸ Interview with Henry Walker, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 7, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (Accessed November 14, 2011).

recalled her father telling her that his mistress “Jane Robertts wouldn’t sell her slaves” but “[t]hey was aired (heired) down mong the children.”⁵⁹

In preventing others from selling their slaves white slaveowning women engaged in seemingly benevolent acts that were simultaneously pecuniary ones. White women knew that slaves were a prime investment, one that increased in value up to the last days of the Civil War. These acts could also shape their relationships with their slaves in favorable ways because enslaved people could see them as protectors and as women who possessed the power to make their lives livable under slavery. However, we should not lose sight of the reality that many slaves cared little about whether their owners were male or female, because they remained unfree and subject to sale. For them liberty was the ultimate goal, whether from a mistress or a master.

“Missus done her own bossing”

White slaveowning women not only used their authority as property owners in ways that protected the human beings they owned from the psychological trauma of sale but also from the physiological trauma brought about by the brutality of others. White slaveowning women’s husbands, community slave patrollers, and even other women consistently challenged their authority and the styles of slave management and discipline they preferred. These moments of conflict offer unparalleled views of how mistresses understood, asserted and reasserted their power as slaveowners.

⁵⁹ Interview with Rosie Johnson, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 8, 2012).

As historians Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Drew Gilpin Faust have pointed out, many white slaveowning women delegated slave management and discipline to white men in their families or those they hired. But contrary to what these scholars contend, slave management and discipline were not always “a man’s business.”⁶⁰ White slaveowning women had every reason to prepare themselves for violent confrontations, even with enslaved females, because they could potentially encounter enslaved people who even white men could not control. Former slave Pauline Howell recalled that her aunt was sold along with her children for killing two overseers. Her aunt “grabbed [their] privates and pulled ‘em out by the roots...she knowed that was show death.”⁶¹ If a woman could mutilate two adult males in this way, there was no telling what kind of damage she might cause to her mistress. So just as white slaveowning men developed and employed various tactics to maintain some semblance of order amongst enslaved people they owned, so too did white women.

Some white slaveowning women made sure that the men they married and the men they hired honored their preferred styles of slave management, whether that involved violence or less brutal forms of incentives. Rebecca Brown Hill told this story when asked about the white woman who owned her parents: “She was good as she could be to her [mother] and papa both. One time the overseer was going to whip them both. Miss Bessie said, ‘Tell Mr. Carrydine to come and let us talk it over.’ They did and she said, ‘Give Mr. Carrydine his breakfast and let

⁶⁰ Drew Gilpin Faust, “‘Trying to Do a Man’s Business’: Slavery, Violence and Gender in the American Civil War.” *Gender and History* Volume 4 No. 2. 197-212. Even more than this, Faust argues that “violence was similarly gendered as male within the ideology of the Old South.” (198) The accounts described in the pages that follow suggest that white women sometimes ignored this ideology.

⁶¹ Interview with Pauline Howell, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 8, 2012).

him go.’ They never got no whippings.”⁶² Rebecca’s narrative does not tell us what her parents’ mistress said to the overseer to convince him not to punish them that day. But the process of “talking it over”—one which implies negotiation and compromise between equals—seemed more like an order passed from employer to employee; and in this case, the mistress was in the position of power.

Slaveowning women like Hester Hunter’s mistress went beyond merely talking white men out of brutally disciplining their slaves. Hester’s mistress “wouldn’ allow no slashin round whe’ she was.” Hester went on to say:

I remember my boss had one of my old Missus niggers up dere in de yard one morning en say he was gwine whip him en my Missus say, ‘John O., you let my nigger alone.’ You see my Missus had her niggers en den old Boss had his niggers cause when old Missus been marry Massa John C. Bethea, she had brought here [sic] share of niggers from whe’ she was raised in de country. It been like dis, old Missus father had scratch de pen for everyone of his chillun to have so many niggers apiece for dey portion of his property so long as dey would look after dem en treat dem good.⁶³

Hester’s mistress delivered on that promise, and she made sure her husband did too.

Hester told her interviewer that one could easily differentiate between those slaves owned by her mistress and those owned by her master; and this was no accident. Her slaves’ homes, clothing and demeanor were superior to those of her master’s and her mistress lodged her slaves on one side of the slave quarters, while her master’s were kept on the other side. Clearly, at least

⁶² Interview with Rebecca Brown Hill, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (Accessed September 30, 2009).

⁶³ Interview with Hester Hunter, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 20, 2010).

one member of this slaveowning couple wanted to demarcate their division of property, even if it meant reconfiguring the architectural landscape of the plantation to do so.

Ex-slave Lizzie Williams mistress also refused to allow her husband to abuse her slaves: “I went to Marse Ellis Mixon’s, he tubble mean to his niggahs. But I belong to de Missus, she allus treat me good...I mind one time I got tubble mad an’ say some ugly words. Marse Ellis he come up ahin’ me and he say: ‘Lizabeth I gwina wallup yo’ good for dat.’ I ‘mense cryin’ and run to de missus and she say: ‘Look heah Ellis Mixon, y’all mind yo’ own business an’ look atter yo’ own niggahs. Dis one belongs to me.’”⁶⁴ Kitty Stanford’s mistress would send her to her mother’s house anytime her husband set his mind to beating Kitty. Ben Horry recalled that when “anybody steal rice and they beat them, Miss Bessie cry and say, ‘Let ‘em have rice! My rice – my nigger!’”⁶⁵ Even men who grew up in the North met and married southern slaveowning women who made their stance on the treatment of their slaves clear. Lucy Galloway had such a mistress.

Miss Frances’ wuz the onliest girl Dr. Hoyer had so when she married Mr. John Gray he give her his big house and some slaves, den he goes back to his old home...Mr. Gray come down from de north and he didn’t have no slaves, but “Miss Frances’ didn’t ‘low nobody to mistreat her slaves. She say dat dem niggers wuz her property and her living and she want goin’ to ‘low nobody to whup ‘em.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Interview with Lizzie Williams, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 13, 2009).

⁶⁵ See interview with Ben Horry in “Uncle Ben and visitors,” South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 2 (accessed September 30, 2009). Interview with Kitty Stanford, (Accessed February 8, 2012) and Interview with Lizzie Williams, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>.

⁶⁶ Interview with Lucy Galloway, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 1 -- Volume 8: Mississippi Narratives, Part 3*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978. The

White men were not the only members of southern communities that challenged or attempted to ignore white slaveowning women's power and control over human property. Ellen Campbell was brutally assaulted by the woman to whom her mistress had hired her, and the circumstances surrounding this incident forced Ellen's mistress to assert and articulate her power as a slaveowner:

When I was fifteen year old Missus gib me to Miss Eva, you know she de one marry Colonel Jones. My young Mistus was fixin' to git married, but she couldn't on account de war, so she brought me to town and rented me out to a lady runnin' a boarding house. De rent wus paid to my Mistus. One day I was takin' a tray from de out-door kitchen to de house when I stumbled and dropped it. De food spill all over de ground. De lady got so mad she picked up de butcher knife and chop me in de haid. I went runnin' till I come to de place where mah white folks live. Miss Eva took me and wash de blood out mah head and put medicine on it, and she wrote a note to de lady and she say, "Ellen is my slave, give to me by my mother. I wouldn't had dis happen to her no more dan to me. She won't come dere no more."⁶⁷

Ellen's story is intriguing because both of these white women possessed and exercised control over her, one as owner and the other as hirer, and they chose to exercise this power in strikingly different ways. Ellen spoke very highly of her mistress and her mistress' family, claiming that her mistress' father rarely mistreated his slaves and that her mistress adopted a similar philosophy when managing her slave. However, the female boardinghouse operator who assaulted Ellen with a butcher knife chose a more brutal way of demonstrating her power. Ellen found herself in the midst of a conflict between the two, but ultimately her legal owner had the

African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group.
<http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa08&chapterID=raa08-002&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>.
 (accessed June 25, 2010).

⁶⁷ Interview with Ellen Campbell, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed August 7, 2009).

final say over how Ellen would be treated, who would control her and the mechanisms of control that could be employed.

White slaveowning women reinforced their power and authority even when people were not trying to challenge them. When Joe High was a young boy he strolled through a potato patch, dug one out of the ground and took it to the white woman who cooked for his mistress. When he did, the woman took Joe and the potato to his owner to and accused him of stealing it. She approached Joe's mistress and said: "Look here missus, Joe has been stealin' taters. Here is the tater he stole."⁶⁸ She probably expected a different response than the one she received because instead of punishing Joe, his mistress told the woman "Joe belongs to me, the tater belongs to me, take it back and cook it for him." In approaching her employer and accusing Joe of theft, this white female servant was claiming a distinction between her labor and that of the slaves she worked alongside. But little did she know that this difference would tilt the outcome of this incident in Joe's favor. The fact that he was her property and not a free servant seems to have made the difference as to whether she would punish him or not.

When white female slaveowners like the mistresses of Hester Hunter and Lizzie Williams prevented others from mistreating their slaves they were protecting property that held sentimental value and financial significance for them. Yet female slaveowners were not always protectors. They were often more brutal than their husbands, especially when they dealt with slaves owned by others, including the men in their households.⁶⁹ Silas Glenn remarked that his master was "a good man and was not hard on slaves; but the mistress was mean to some of the

⁶⁸ Interview with Joe High.

⁶⁹ On this point see Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York; Vintage Books, 1976, 83.

slaves that come fro the Glenn side. She was good to the slaves that come into her from her daddy.” Ex-slave Susan Merritt said that her “massa good but missy am the devil...Lots of times she tie me to a stub in the yard and cowhide me till she give out, then she go and rest and come back and beat me some more. *You see, I’s massa nigger and she have her own niggers what come on her side and she never did like me.* She stomp and beat me nearly to death and they have to grease my back where she cowhide me and I’s sick with fever for a week.”⁷⁰ Another unidentified female slave recalled that when her master’s new wife moved into the household, her new mistress not only ousted her from her domestic duties within the home and placed her in the fields, she installed one of her own slaves in her place. Furthermore, her mistress exhibited particular disdain for her husband’s slaves, ordering one of her own slaves to beat them in his absence. On one occasion, she prevented him from stopping the beating of two of his young slaves by locking the door to the room where the beating was taking place. The two little boys died shortly after their mistress brutally beat them.⁷¹

Some slaveowning women’s understandings of how much power their husbands possessed over the people they owned did not end with physical brutality; it included the sexual violation of enslaved women too. Jacob Manson recalled how “One of de slave girls on a plantation near us went to her missus a tole her ‘bout her marster forcing her to let him have

⁷⁰ Interview with Silas Glenn, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 13, 2010) and Interview with Susan Merritt, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed March 12, 2010). Emphasis added.

⁷¹ “Mistreatment of Slaves” in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 13 -- Georgia Narratives, Parts 3 and 4*, ed. George P. Rawick, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa08&chapterID=raa08-002&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood/>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

sumthin to do wid her an her missus tole her, ‘Well go on you belong to him.’”⁷² She refused to come to this enslaved womans aid, but not because she feared her husband as patriarch. Her refusal to intervene was grounded in her obscene respect for his property rights, which apparently granted her husband unfettered access to the commodified human beings he owned. One cannot help but wonder if she would have protected her slave from such sexual violation and violence if she had belonged to her instead.

White slaveowning women sometimes passed their strategies for slave management and discipline onto their children. When Tom Hawkins master died, his mistress oversaw plantation operations. Shortly thereafter, her daughter assumed the same role. Tom remembered that “Miss Annie done her own overseein’. She rid over dat plantation onct or twict a day on her hoss.” She did this in spite of having a perfectly capable husband to handle it for her. Former slave Tines Hendrick remembered that a similar kind of “schooling” that occurred between her mistress and her son and all her master could do is stay out of their way:

Old mis’ and Mars Sam [her son], dey de real bosses an’ dey was wicked. I’s e telling you de truth, dey was. Old mars, he didn’t have much to say ‘bout de runnin’ of de place or de’ handlin’ of de niggers. You know all de property and all the niggers belonged to old’ mis. She got all dat from her peoples. Dat what dey left her on their death. She de real owner of everything... De young mars, Sam, he never taken at all atter he pa. He got all he meanness from old mis’ an’ he sure got plenty of it too. Old mis’, she cuss an rare worse ‘an a man. Way ’fore day she be up hollerin’ loud enough for to be heerd two miles, ‘rousin’ de niggers out for to git in de fields even ‘fore light...⁷³

⁷² Interview with Jacob Manson, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 24, 2012).

⁷³ Interviews with Tom Hawkins, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 2, and Tines Hendricks, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed March 12, 2010).

While many white slaveowning women often found their children to be agreeable pupils who easily absorbed their lessons in slave mastery, they sometimes clashed with them over proper strategies for slave management. Former slave Mary Armstrong's mother belonged to a couple, which she described as "the meanest two white folks what ever lived"; but in Mary's estimation her mother's mistress was particularly cruel. She went onto say that,

[O]ld Polly—she was a Polly devil if there ever was one—whipped my little sister what was only 9 months old an' jes' a little baby, to death. She came an' took the diaper off my little sister an' whipped 'till the blood jes' ran jes' 'cause she cry like all babies do an' it killed my little sister. I never forgot that, but I got some even with that Polly devil, 'cause when I was about 10 years old I belonged to Mis' Olivia, what was their daughter, an' one day old Polly devil come to where Mis' Olivia lived after she got married, an' tried to give me a lick out in the yard, an' I picked up a rock 'bout as big as half your fist an' hit her right in the eye an' busted the eyeball an' told her that was for whippin' my baby sister to death. You could hear her holler for five miles, but Mis' Olivia when I told her, say, "Well, I guess mamma has learnt her lesson at last."... "Mis' Olivia had took a likin' to me an', 'though her ma an pa was so mean, she was kind to everyone, an' everyone jes' love her."⁷⁴

After years of watching her mother abuse and, in at least one case, murder the family's slaves, Olivia chose a different approach to managing the people she came to own as an adult; she chose kindness. More profoundly, she allowed Mary to defend herself against Olivia's own mother, something that may have created tension between them and altered their relationship thereafter.

Of course, not all young slaveowning women diverged so significantly from the systems of management and discipline used by their mothers. Elizabeth Sparks remembered her young

⁷⁴ Interview with Mary Armstrong, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 2 -- Volume 2: Texas Narratives, Part 1*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group.
<http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa08&chapterID=raa08-002&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>.
 (accessed June 25, 2010).

mistress using physical violence when she deemed it necessary, but her mistress' mother was far more severe in the forms of punishment she used:

My mistress's name was Miss Jennie Brown...Bless her. She 'uz a good woman. Course I mean she'd slap an' beat yer once in a while but she warn't no woman fur fighting fussin' an' beatin' yer all day lak some I know. She was too young when da war ended fur that. Course no white folks perfect. Her parents a little rough...I lived at Seaford then an' was roun' fifteen or sixteen when my mistress married...I 'member jes' as well when they gave me to Jennie. We wuz all in a room helpin' her dress. She was soon to be married, an' she turns 'roun an' sez to us. Which of yer niggers think I'm gonna git when I git married? We all say, "I doan know." An' she looks right at me an' point her finger at me like this an' said "yer!" I was so glad. I had to make 'er believe I 'us cryin', but I was glad to go with 'er. She didn't beat. She wuz jes' a young thing. Course she take a whack at me sometime, but that weren't nuffin'. Her mother wuz a mean ol' thin'. She'd beat yer with a broom or a leather strap or anythin' she'd git her hands on...She uster make my aunt Caroline knit all day an' when she git so tired aftah dark that she'd git sleepy, she'd make 'er stan' up an' knit. She work her so hard that she'd go to sleep standin' up an' every time her haid nod an' her knees sag, the lady'd come down across her haid with a switch. That wuz Miss Jennie's mother. She'd give the cook jes' so much meal to make bread fum an' effen she burnt it, she'd be scared to death cause they'd whup her. I 'member plenty of times the cook ask say, "Marsa please 'scuse dis bread, hits a little too brown." Yessir! Beat the devil out 'er if she burn dat bread.⁷⁵

Like Miss Olivia, Elizabeth Sparks' young mistress watched her mother enact cruelty upon the family's slaves and elected to modify her system, at least as Elizabeth saw it. As Elizabeth stood in that room surrounded by other enslaved women who knew what their young mistress' impending marriage signified for them and their families, she hoped that Mistress Jennie would choose her as her wedding gift, and she was relieved when Jennie made her choice.⁷⁶ More profoundly, Elizabeth tells us that she was relieved because Mistress Jennie beat her slaves *less* severely than other slaveowners she knew, not because she did not punish them at all.

⁷⁵ Interview with Elizabeth Sparks, Virginia Narratives, Volume XVII, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 19, 2009)

⁷⁶ Oddly, Elizabeth admitted to feigning displeasure at her mistress' decision to take her and she does not offer any logic for this performance.

While the above cases focus on generational differences in treatment, slaves also commented on differences between women and men. Some saw a clear differentiation between the systems of management and discipline used by masters and mistresses, but others did not. Analiza Foster told her interviewer that, “My mammy belonged ter a Kr. Cash an' pappy belonged to Miss Betsy Woods. *Both or dese owners wuz mean ter dere slaves an' dey ain't carin' much if'en dey kills one, case dey's got plenty.*” Claiborne Moss told of how the slave patrollers “didn’t whip nobody” in the Arkansas community where he lived. He said these white men “[c]ouldn’t whip nobody on our place...on Jesse Mills’ place...on Stephen Mills’ place...on Betsy Geesley’s place...on Nancy Mills’ place...on Potter Duggins’ place...Nobody run them peoples’ plantations but theirselves.”⁷⁷ Regardless of what the formal laws said about slave patrollers’ rights to discipline slaves in their communities, and no matter how much authority those laws afforded to slave patrols, these slaveowners—men and women—defined systems of management and control that denied these men their power. More importantly, in Claiborne’s estimation, the slave patrollers recognized the power of female slaveowners on the same basis as their male counterparts.

In households comprised of two married slaveowners, sometimes the couple divided up the labor of discipline and used different instruments of punishment. Many times, however, this was not the case. White women used anything they could get their hands on to punish a slave.

⁷⁷ Interview with Analiza Foster, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 14 -- North Carolina Narratives, Part 1*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa08&chapterID=raa08-002&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood/>. (accessed June 25, 2010). [Emphasis added.] and Interview with Claiborne Moss, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 5, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed August 3, 2010).

But they also relied upon traditional instruments and methods to punish like whips, “pancake sticks”, “cat-o-nine tails”, and various forms of deprivation. According to Angelina Grike Weld, a woman she knew “used to keep cowhides, or small paddles, (called ‘pancake sticks,’) in four different apartments in her house; so that when she wished to punish, or to have punished, any of her slaves, she might not have the trouble of sending for an instrument of torture.”⁷⁸

On the plantation where former slave Anna Miller resided, her master whipped the men and her mistress whipped the women and “[s]ometimes she whups wid de nettleweed. When she uses dat, de licks ain’t so bad, but de stingin’ and de burnin’ after am sho’ misery. Dat jus’ plum runs me crazy. De mens use de rope when dey whups.”⁷⁹ Initially, Anna’s emphasis on the different the instruments of discipline used by her master and mistress seems to imply that her mistress chose a milder method of punishment, which would thereby support the contention that white women were more sensitive to their slaves’ well being. This was not the case however. The small hairs that cover the stems of the nettleweed plant, also known as “stinging nettle,” likely caused the stinging and burning sensation Anna described. These small hairs contain chemicals that cause intense pain when they come into contact with the skin, and as Anna establishes, her mistress’ instrument of choice had an enduring, painful effect on her body.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ See “Testimony of Angelina Grimke Weld.” in Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*. New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839, 52-54. While “deprivation” seems innocuous when compared to the physical pain inflicted by whips, Cecelia Chappel thought otherwise: “Sum times she would lock us up in a dark closet en bring our food ter us. U hated bein’ locked up.” Interview with Cecelia Chappel, Tennessee Narratives, Volume XV, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 16, 2011).

⁷⁹ Interview with Anna Miller, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 28, 2010).

⁸⁰ “Stinging nettle,” Complementary and Alternative Medicine Guide, University of Maryland or the Center for Integrative Medicine, <http://www.umm.edu/altmed/articles/stinging-nettle-000275.htm> (Accessed January 31,

Other slaveowners like Cecelia Chappel's master and mistress shared the responsibility of punishing the slaves who labored in the house, while the overseers disciplined the enslaved people who worked in the fields.⁸¹

Some white men gave their wives no other choice but to assume the role of disciplinarian. Julia Blanks remembered the over punishment that took place between her mother's master and mistress: "My mother's marster was good; he wouldn't whip any of his slaves. But his wife wasn't good. If she got mad at the woman, when he would come home she would say: 'John, I want you to whip Liza. Or Martha.' And he would say, 'Them are your slaves, You whip them.' He was good and she was mean."⁸²

Whether by persuasion or command, white slaveowning women made clear to the people around them that only they would determine how their slaves were to be treated. Sympathy for those who they kept in bondage was only one motivating factor in their interactions with their slaves because in the larger scheme of things, they premised these behaviors upon their rights, power, authority, and self-interests as property owners. These white women were often shrewd and astute businesswomen who understood the value of their property and what it took to preserve that value. Mistreating and otherwise abusing slaves ultimately worked against their

2011). According to the University of California's Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program, "[t]he prickly hairs of both burning and stinging nettle consist of a minute tubelike structure that has a hard round bulb at the tip and a softer vessel at the base. This bulb breaks off after contact with skin and exposes a needlelike point. When the tip contacts and penetrates the skin, it puts pressure on the basal vessel and results in the needlelike injection of irritating substances under the skin. The contents of the structures are not fully known, but have been found to contain active concentrations of the neurotransmitter chemicals acetylcholine and histamine."
<http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74146.html> (Accessed January 31, 2011).

⁸¹ Interview with Cecelia Chappel.

⁸² Interview with Julia Blanks, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed July 18, 2010).

owners' pecuniary interests, for, as Walter Johnson has shown, prospective slave buyers "read" the marks of violence left upon slaves bodies and used them to reconstruct the lives they lived before entering the slave pens.⁸³ Like their male counterparts, slaveowning women adopted strategies of slave management which took this fact into consideration. One former slave recalled that "Mistis never 'lowed no mistreatin' of de slaves, 'case dey was raisin' slaves for de market, an' it wouldn't be good bizness to mistreat 'em."⁸⁴ However, other slaveowning women chose to ignore the negative ramifications of their methods of discipline. They did more than their "own bossing" when they attacked, brutalized and murdered the slaves they owned.

"A Ferocious Virago": White Slaveowning Women, Violence, and the Patriarchal Order of Things.

Whether they chose to sell or punish a slave or not, whether they allowed others to do so or not, white married slaveowning women behaved as other slaveowners did. They drew from and employed strategies of slave management and discipline that formed part of a spectrum of violence. The slaveowning women who brutalized, tortured and murdered their slaves engaged in acts of violence also employed by men of the master class. Yet scholars have limited our ability to understand their behaviors in this more expansive context because they frame white slaveowning women's violence as unnatural and exceptional. For example, Drew Gilpin Faust argues that "[i]n the exigency of war...many mistresses did inflict violence with their own hands. But more often than not rage had to override deep-seated feelings of conflict and ambivalence to

⁸³ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, 135-161.

⁸⁴ "Dey Kep' Niggers in Good Condition to Sell," Alabama Narratives, Volume I, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed April 20, 2011).

make such actions possible... White women's violence often represented a loss of control over both themselves and their slaves."⁸⁵

Abolitionists also argued that white women were behaving in extraordinary ways when they brutalized their slaves, but they did not believe that rage or a lack of control were the causes. They argued that the institution of slavery made white women violent. Corrupted by the arbitrary power afforded to those who lived in slaveholding societies, abolitionists claimed that white women became monsters who no longer protected the weak, but brutalized them instead. Even northern women were no match for the peculiar institution because when they traversed the Mason-Dixon line, they became "ferocious viragos"—violent, bad-tempered and domineering women—just as their southern sisters did.⁸⁶

Some white slaveowning women seem to support these views. They consistently write about their battles to control themselves and to interact with recalcitrant slaves only when calm, cool, and collected; but this did not always mean that they were trying to avoid punishing those slaves. Sometimes they wanted to calm down so that they *could* discipline them. For example, former slave Cecelia Chappel said that, "[w]'en de Missis got ready ter whup me, she would gib us sum wuk to do, so she would kind ob git ober her mad spell 'fore she whup'd us."⁸⁷

In light of some historians' claims that white women most often wielded violent power over slaves while enraged and out of control, some women's attempts to remain calm before

⁸⁵ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, 64. If rage and a loss of control were the primary reasons why most white women committed violence against enslaved people, they must have been constantly enraged and out of control; their victims testify to the terror invoked by their mistresses and about the brutal acts they committed throughout the days, afternoons and nights.

⁸⁶ Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class called Africans*, Boston: Allen and Ticknor, 1833, 28-29.

⁸⁷ Interview with Cecelia Chappel.

disciplining slaves appears as a peculiarly feminine practice. However, their actions were in line with the guidelines set forth by male slaveowners, and their attempts to regain a sense of calm prior to inflicting punishments followed the advice that appeared in numerous agricultural journals throughout the nineteenth-century South. Slaveowners wrote letters to the editors of journals such as *Debow's Review*, *Southern Cultivator*, *Farmers' Register*, *Southern Agriculturalist*, and the *Southern Planter*, which sketched out their ideas about the proper "management" and "governance" of negroes, and they frequently advised readers and fellow slaveowners to punish enslaved people only when calm.⁸⁸ Moreover, journals advised those who employed overseers to adhere to this practice as well. Although some white slaveowning women struggled with their anger and rage and others mastered their emotions in a way that allowed them to avoid impulsive acts of violence, many behaved in vicious and sinister ways towards the people they owned.

Egregious cases of white slaveowning women's brutality, some leading to disfigurement, disability, and death, occurred throughout the South. But many of these incidents went unnoticed by the press and have escaped scholarly analysis for a number of reasons. Above all, the majority of white slaveowning women's crimes against their slaves remained confined to their

⁸⁸ See for example, *Southern Planter*, "Management of Negroes," February 1851, 39-42; *DeBow's Review of the Southern and Western States*, "Management of Negroes" October 1851, 369; *Southern Cultivator*, "Management of Servants," August 1853 and "Overseers," September 1860. For scholars who see this behavior as peculiarly feminine see Drew Gilpin Faust, "Trying to Do a Man's Business": Slavery, Violence and Gender in the American Civil War," *Gender and History* 4, no. 2 (1992), 197-212 and *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding Southern the American Civil War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. It is quite possible that white women may have written some of these letters. Several authors only use initials or nom de plumes, such as "Hurricane." Louisa McCord, a slaveowning woman descended from several well-known slaveholding families in South Carolina penned a letter that appeared in *Debow's* using only her initials. We have very few written documents that record white slaveowning women's attempts to calm themselves in order to avoid or to mete out punishments. Only literate white women who had the time to record the events that shaped their days left these kinds of records behind. We have little personal documentation available for the vast majority of women who owned slaves, but their lives appear to us in fragments that can be pieced together from the memories of the slaves they owned.

households. In many cases, enslaved people were the only witnesses to their brutality, and since southern laws forbade them to testify against white people, their testimony had little to no value in court. By some accounts, white slaveowners concealed their most brutalized slaves from those who might object to their violence, even going as far as to borrow healthy slaves from neighbors when they entertained visitors. When slaveowners inflicted punishments that resulted in slaves' deaths, some slaveowners rid themselves of the bodies or told inquisitive people that the slaves died from sickness. If cases of cruelty made it to the courts, a woman's guilt might be muddled by the courts' decision to identify her husband as the defendants.⁸⁹

Despite the cover that southern households provided to women who committed brutal acts against their slaves, slaveowners' efforts to conceal their crimes, and the courts' gender-biased processes, white slaveowning women's cruelty could not always remain hidden. Formerly enslaved people clearly remembered the brutality committed by mistresses. Henry Walton told his WPA interviewer that: "When I was three or four years old my mother was whipped to death

⁸⁹ For mistresses' whose crimes remained confined within their households see, Thomas Rankin, *Letters on American Slavery: Addressed to Thomas Rankin, Merchant at Middlebrook, Augusta Co., Va.* Fifth Edition. Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838, 54-55. Many nineteenth century abolitionist tracts provide first-hand accounts of brutal acts committed in the confines of southern households. See for example, Weld, *American Slavery as It Is*, Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon Which the Story is Founded. Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work*. Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1853, 49, and C.G. Parsons, M.D. *An Inside View of Slavery, or a Tour Among the Planters*, Boston: John Jewett and Company, 1855, 206-209. For slaveowners who hid their cruelty see Weld *American Slavery as It Is*, 53-55, 87-88, 101-102, and 129-130. A New Orleans brothel owner and slaveowner named Fanny Smith was "arrested on a charge of burning with hot irons, and other wise cruelly ill-treating, two slave boys whom she owns, and who live with her in a house on St. Louis St." Her cruelty would have gone unnoticed if not for the escape of an enslaved woman she owned and also brutalized. Taking the enslaved woman's accusations seriously, officials arrived at Smith's establishment to inquire about the allegations and they asked to see the slaves in question. She presented a healthy and unharmed enslaved boy for their inspection. They took her at her word until the enslaved woman informed them that she kept the boys locked up in the backyard. When they returned, they found the boys "marked in a number of places with the sears of fresh and old burns and punctured wounds...in different parts of their bodies." See *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, "A Star Chamber in New Orleans," November 17, 1854 and *The Ohio Observer*, November 29, 1854. For courts that identifies husbands as defendants when their wives stand accused see *Mann v. Trabue* 1 Mo. 709, 1827 WL 1987 (Mo.). A detailed account of this incident can also be found in, Weld, *American Slavery as It Is*, 71.

by my mistress with a cowhide whip.”⁹⁰ Moreover, as abolitionists combed through southern newspapers in search of stories about the horrors of slavery, they repeatedly discovered violent mistresses who reached beyond impulsive acts of brutality. Moreover, they compiled eyewitness testimonies from neighbors, guests and slaves who attested to the brutal acts these women committed against those they kept in bondage. A number of these cases highlight the inner workings of southern households and how white married women’s slaveownership sometimes altered dynamics of power within them.

The story of New Orleans creole Marie Delphine Macarty Lalaurie is one of the most notorious cases of slaveowning women’s cruel mastery. On the morning of April 10, 1834, Marie’s slave Rachel turned New Orleans, Louisiana upside down when she set her mistress’ kitchen on fire while chained to the floor.⁹¹ She did not cry out for help, nor did she try to free herself.⁹² Seeing the flames, neighbors notified officials who rushed to the home to help the residents escape and to extinguish the fire. A multi-ethnic and cross-racial conglomerate of

⁹⁰ Interview with Henry Walton, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement, Series 1, Volume 10, Mississippi Narratives, Part 5*. Ed. George P. Rawick, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977, 2168.

⁹¹ *New Orleans Bee*, April 11, 1834. Although the American newspaper accounts do not name the enslaved woman who set the fire, one account printed in the French language newspaper *Le Courier des Etats-Unis* claims that her name was Rachel. See L. Souvestre, (trans. Harriet Molenaar) “Madame Lalaurie: A Contemporary French Account.” In *A Franco-American Overview, Volume Six*. Louisiana. Compiled by Mathé Allain and Carl Brasseaux. Cambridge, Mass.: National Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, ESEA Title VII, 1981. After consulting the *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy Database, 1718-1820* I learned that Barthelemy de Macarty, Marie’s father, purchased an enslaved woman named Rachel in 1818 and she had three children. It is not clear from this record whether Rachel was purchased along with her children. But Louisiana’s *Code Noir* forbid the separate sale of mothers and children of a certain age, which suggests that Rachel’s children accompanied her and that the account in *Le Courier des Etats-Unis* may have been accurate. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, ed., *Databases for the Study of Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy 1699-1860*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000, <http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/individ.php?sid=78565> (accessed October 2, 2008). Without reviewing the court records, is unclear whether Barthelemy bequeathed Rachel to Marie before or after his death in 1832. Louisiana. Court of Probates (Orleans Parish) General Index of All Successions, 1805 - 1846, <http://nutrias.org/~nopl/inv/probates/iasm.htm> (accessed October 10, 2008).

⁹² The American newspaper accounts agree on this point but the account that appeared in *Le Courier des Etats-Unis* claims that Rachel expressed her reasoning for setting the fire; the death of her son at the hands of her master, and her wish to die consumed by the flames. *The Liberator*, May 3, 1834.

citizens gathered around the house, apprehensive of the situation developing inside. Everyone was shocked by what was found.

According to Judge Jean-Louis Canonge's later deposition, an unidentified individual informed him that the Lalauries escaped their burning home but they left "manacled slaves" inside.⁹³ Canonge decided to query "friends of the family" about the matter; but they appeared indifferent. When he learned that the allegations were becoming "a subject of general comment," he approached the Lalauries to ask them whether the charges were true. The Lalauries denied the accusations. But instead of assuaging the judge's concerns, they fueled his fears. Canonge and his assistants searched the Lalaurie home and found seven malnourished and mutilated slaves trapped in various rooms throughout the house. Some were unable to walk without assistance; others could not walk at all. A reporter at the scene described the condition of one of the Lalaurie slaves: "His head bore the appearance of having been beaten until it was broken, and the worms were actually to be seen making a feast of his brains!"⁹⁴ One member of Canonge's search party found two enslaved women in a room after breaking the window of a locked door. One of them wore leg irons and a metal collar around her neck. Another man identified as Mr. Guillotte informed the judge that he also *knew* where another enslaved person could be found and with his help, they located a bedridden enslaved woman who suffered from a "very deep wound to the

⁹³ Judge Jean-Louis Canonge headed the search party as a civilian not a court official, which in part explains his deposition.

⁹⁴ Men with the same last names of the individuals who accompanied him, men named (B.J.) Montreuil, (Anthony) Fernandez, and (Felix) LeFebvre, were all City Council members (Aldermen) in Denis Prieur Mayoral Administration from May 12, 1828-April 9, 1838 in New Orleans. However further examination of the deposition or other court documents will be necessary to verify their identity. See Administrations of the Mayors of New Orleans, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library < <http://nutrias.org/info/louinfo/admins/prieur.htm> > (accessed November 1, 2008). Judge Canonge's deposition reprinted in *The Liberator* "Hear Ye Deaf, and Look Ye Blind, That Ye May See—Isaiah (News) Canonge," May 03, 1834. William Lloyd Garrison claimed that they were sailors and mechanics in an article he wrote several years later but no other source I located confirmed this. See, *The Liberator*, June 21, 1839.

head.” Members of the search party had to carry her out of the room on her mattress. As Canonge and his assistants gradually discovered the Lalaurie slaves, he approached Marie’s husband Louis to determine whether there were more slaves trapped in the home. Louis told the judge to mind his own business.⁹⁵ Undeterred by Louis’ lack of cooperation, Canonge and his team located and rescued all of Marie’s slaves, and officials escorted them to the mayor’s office where they were given food and questioned about their treatment. Public officials also collected various instruments of torture as evidence of Marie’s crimes.⁹⁶

Over the next two days, “4,000 persons at least, it was computed, had already visited these victims to convince themselves of her sufferings.” After witnessing the extremity of Marie’s crime and learning that she had received a figurative slap on the wrist as recompense, a mob of 2,000 to 5,000 people destroyed her home and its furnishings. The crowd then targeted the homes of other local slaveholders suspected of similar brutality. The deputy sheriff John Holloway sought the assistance of the legion and federal troops to disperse the crowd and deter them from their intended task; and the armed forces eventually ended the mob’s rampage. No one seems certain about what happened to the Lalauries after that day, but their reputation was irreparably damaged in the city they once called home.

Although Louis was in the house and by Marie’s side when Judge Canonge and others searched the home, none of the (non-abolitionist) press accounts considered him guilty, or even complicit in Marie’s crimes.⁹⁷ According to David Lee Child, interim editor of the abolitionist

⁹⁵ *The Liberator*, May 3, 1834.

⁹⁶ Henry C. Castellanos, *New Orleans As it Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, [1895] 2006, 54.

⁹⁷ The exception to this characterization was the abolitionist paper *The Liberator*. David Lee Child wrote of Louis as though he were equally responsible for the crimes committed against Marie’s slaves. Child argued that Louis should be brought to justice alongside his wife.

paper *The Liberator* in William Lloyd Garrison's absence in 1834, "nothing is said in *any* paper, of the arrest of the *man*—of him who refused the keys meantime that that *woman*'s 'back was cooked.'" ⁹⁸ While news reports recognized that Louis possessed some type of authority within the Lalaurie household, Marie's power over property shaped this particular household's internal system of order. ⁹⁹ What was Louis doing while Marie tortured her slaves in rooms scattered throughout their home? Did he participate in these acts? Did he try to stop her? Abolitionists and southern slaveowners could only speculate, for answers to these questions never emerged in the press.

But Marie Lalaurie was not alone. According to her legal defense, Eliza Bee Rowand was the first woman in the state of South Carolina to be put on trial for the murder of a slave in 1847. Eliza was accused of commanding a male slave named Richard to strike an enslaved woman named Maria multiple times in the head with a block of wood, administering a beating which eventually led to Maria's death. South Carolina law stipulated that if a slave died as a result of their master's punishment, their owner could exculpate themselves by claiming that they did not inflict the violence maliciously, and when no other white persons were present to witness

⁹⁸ Most of the newspaper accounts described the conditions of the slaves found in the Lalaurie home and while Child suggests that the "cooking" of one slave's back was a consequence of the fire, the report claimed that her back was "literally cooked by the lash" thereby implying that it was part of the torture Marie inflicted upon her. *The Liberator*, "Hear Ye Deaf, and Look Ye Blind, That Ye May See—Isaiah (News) Canonge," May 03, 1834 (Reprint of *New-Orleans Mercantile Advertiser*, *New-Orleans Bee*, *New-Orleans Courier*, *New York Journal of Commerce* and the Deposition of Judge Canonge). [Emphasis in original]

⁹⁹ For example, the *New Orleans Bee* informed its readers that: "These slaves were the property of the demon in the shape of a woman who we mentioned in the beginning of this article. They had been confined by her for several months in the situation from which they had thus providentially been rescued..." The *New Orleans Mercantile Advertiser* however, chose to open their coverage in a different way, "Shocking Barbarity.—Yesterday at about 10 o'clock, the dwelling house of a Mr. Lalaurie...was discovered to be on fire, and whilst the engines were occupied in extinguishing it, it was rumored that several slaves were kept chained in some of the apartments..."

the crime.¹⁰⁰ Eliza exculpated herself by her own oath because slaves were the only witnesses to the beating. The jury found her not guilty.¹⁰¹

The court seemed to be confused about who actually owned Maria. They identify Maria as the property of Eliza's husband. But a bill of sale records a purchase made by Eliza's aunt Frances Bee for a slave named Marie who was of the same age and description as Maria. Moreover, it was clearly Eliza who commanded Richard to discipline the slave who died as a consequence and nothing was said at trial about her husband or his role as patriarch in this household.¹⁰²

The juries and the courts that deliberated on cases like this may have been moved by the defendant's sex, but their opinions, judgments and rulings were premised upon slave laws. Moreover, by acquitting these white women of such crimes, juries and southern county judges recognized white women's power and authority as slaveowners and as individuals with the right to dispose of their property as they pleased. It is critical that we acknowledge this because the gendered language used in these laws suggest that the laws and courts only recognized male "masters," while their rulings demonstrate something altogether different.

¹⁰⁰ They could also do so if two white witnesses could not be found to attest to the crime. Other southern states had similar laws. See Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, 162.

¹⁰¹ *The Southern Patriot*, "Trial of Mrs. Eliza Rowand," May 7, 1847 and *The Emancipator*, "An Extraordinary Trial," June 16, 1847.

¹⁰² Richard was tried around the same time as Eliza and was subsequently found not guilty. The freeholders, who adjudicated the case, made this judgment because Richard was "merely the instrument of his mistress's cruelty." See *Pennsylvania Freeman* "The Charleston Case: A Trial for Murder," January 28, 1847. Similarly, William Wells Brown told a London audience that "[a] woman was recently tried for causing the death of a negro girl; she was acquitted, on the ground that it was her slave-woman who actually committed the deed. The slave-woman was afterwards tried and acquitted, on the ground that she committed the murder on the authority of her mistress!" *The North Star*, "From the London Standard of Freedom." October 5, 1849.

The Lalaurie case was such a powerful account of the barbarity of slavery that newspapers along the entire east coast reprinted reports of Marie's cruelty.¹⁰³ But cases involving less fanfare abound in abolitionist and southern newspapers as well. In Paris, Kentucky, Margaret Lewis had one of her female slaves "stripped entirely naked" and "her heels tied up to a tree about four or five feet from the ground." She "then directed one Negro man to force a pump and a Negro woman to direct a stream of cold water from a hose against the helpless slave; while the lady pelted her with stones till she was tired, and then burnt her badly in several places, including the most sensitive part of the body, with hot irons."¹⁰⁴ The case was brought to court, Margaret (and her husband) were found guilty, and by Kentucky law, the mistreated slaves were removed from Margaret and her husband's possession and sold. On the day of the sale, the Lewises had their agent bid upon and purchase the slaves who were then placed back into their possession. The case received sparse coverage in the local and national press. According to one abolitionist, people in the community alleged that the Lewises used their social and financial

¹⁰³ *Spectator* (New York) May 3, 1834; Accounts of the events disagree about the number of individuals that destroyed Marie's home from April 10 to 15, 1834; *The New Orleans Bee*, April 15, 1843. The legion was an assemblage of local troops. Some accounts claim that Marie was arrested. See reprint of the article that appeared in the *New York Journal of Commerce* and in *The Liberator*, May 3, 1834. Others suggest that Marie, her daughters from her second marriage, and Louis eluded capture (albeit by different means). Fewer accounts claim that Marie either remained on the outskirts of New Orleans or fled to France and assumed a false identity. Marie was involved in a court case which notes she resided in New Orleans in 1837. Louis appears, disappears, and reappears in these accounts. I found an account which places him in New Orleans in 1870. See *Daily Evening Bulletin*, "The Last Duel in New Orleans," May 14, 1870. The following examples represent the "coastal" reach of this case: *Daily National Intelligencer* "Shocking Brutality," April 29, 1834; *Providence Patriot*, *Columbian Phenix* May 03, 1834, *New-York Spectator* "Atrocious Cruelty," May 03, 1834, *The Liberator* "Hear Ye Deaf, and Look Ye Blind, That Ye May See—Isaiah (News) Canonge," May 03, 1834 (Reprint of *New Orleans Mercantile Advertiser*, *Bee*, *Courier*, *New York Journal of Commerce* and the Deposition of Judge Canonge), *Vermont Chronicle* "Horrible Barbarity," May 09, 1834 (Reprint of *New Orleans Courier* and *New York Journal of Commerce*), *Indiana Journal* "Shocking Brutality" May 10, 1834, *The Ohio Observer* "The Sabbath.—No. XVII" May 15, 1834 (Reprint of article by New Orleans correspondent of *N.Y. Journal of Commerce*), *The Arkansas Gazette* "The New-Orleans Bee, of April 11th, says" May 20, 1834 (Reprint of *New Orleans Bee*), *Scioto Gazette and Independent Whig*, May 21, 1834 (Reprint of *New Orleans Bee*)

¹⁰⁴ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, "Slavery As It Is. Slavery Illustrated," May 11, 1855.

clout to threaten local editors and employees who sought to publish details about the case in their newspapers, and few accounts thus exist outside of local hearsay and scattered court records.¹⁰⁵

In another case, we only learn of the story because John Oliver, who visited Richmond, Virginia in 1866, wrote about in a letter he wrote to abolitionist Wendell Phillips. In it, he recounted a story told to him by the sixteen-year-old girl who appears in the photograph below (Fig. 1.1):

This girl with a twin Sister and their morth[e] [sic] Lucy [sic] Richardson were Slaves to a Mr Henry Abrams. his wife, one of the most cruel tyrent [sic] read of in any age put out the left eye of the mother, and her constent [sic] habite [sic] has been to take the Childr[e]n and burn their backs in the man[n]er which this picture explains, this chil[d] is now 16 years old and when brought to me, at the freedmen's Court was too weak to walk withe me 4 square to gete [sic] something to eate[sic]. I took her to Gen. Terry. He has had the case worked up and Mrs. Ann Abrams, brought into a Judge Advocate's Court two weeks ago, but I have lost sight of the case and can't up to this time tell any more what has been done or will be done withe her than a person in Boston. She was for a week under \$5000 bonds.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ John Oliver to Wendell Phillips, July 6, 1866. *Wendell Phillips Papers*, [bMSAm1953(942)]. Houghton Library, Harvard University. A sketch of this photograph also appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, (July 28, 1866), 477. I hope to search through the Freedmen's Bureau records in hopes of finding additional details about this case.



Figure 1.1: Photo of young girl with scarred back, enclosed in Letter from John Oliver to Wendell Phillips, July 6, 1866. Wendell Phillips Papers, [bMSAm1953(942)]. Houghton Library, Harvard University

Mr. Oliver does not indicate whether the slaves belonged to Henry or his wife Ann, nor does he tell us if Henry ever tried to prevent his wife from committing acts of cruelty against them. He does not convey or conjecture about what caused Ann Abrams to conduct herself in such a reprehensible way. Nevertheless, the details he recounts make several things clear. Ann Abrams committed acts of cruelty toward slaves repeatedly in a household in which a white, potentially slaveowning man resided with her. If these three enslaved females committed offenses for which punishment was necessary, she could have asked her husband to assume the role of disciplinarian. Using John as her scribe, this formerly enslaved teenage girl recognized her mistress' power above all else and situated her "master" in the background.

When brought to court, Mrs. Abrams posted a fairly heavy bond, a sign that the court may have suspected her guilt on some level.¹⁰⁷ This case is even more profound because what could be construed as an abolitionist's attempt to scrutinize the dehumanizing effects of the institution of slavery and exaggerate the conditions under which this young woman and her family suffered, is told after slavery's end and is supported by visual evidence. The deep scars on the back of her head, along her back and the backs of her arms leave no doubt that this young woman suffered a brutal and painful existence under slavery, and she wanted John Oliver to know that her life, and the lives of her mother and sister, were made that way at the hands of a white woman. While other white women ordered slaves to commit acts of cruelty in their stead, women like Ann Abrams chose to do so themselves.

All the cases discussed above reveal how the household sometimes concealed white women's cruelty towards their slaves, at least for a time. They also suggest that slaveholding households were not always domains characterized by domestic bliss; that they were sites of brutality, torment, and murder, and that white slaveowning women were sometimes the perpetrators of such violence. The fact that white women committed such calculated and methodical acts of cruelty against their own human property, both in and around their homes, that they occasionally used their economic and social clout to keep themselves out of the legal system or avoid the juridical consequences of their actions, and that they did so while they were supposedly dependent upon husbands and male kin destabilizes prevailing understandings of the patriarchal order of southern households and gendered conceptualizations of cruel mastery over slaves.

¹⁰⁷ This amount would equate to \$70, 219.05 today. See *Historical Currency Conversions* <http://futureboy.us/fsp/dollar.fsp> (Accessed June 13, 2011).

Reconsidering Mastery

White married slaveowning women were unexceptional in many respects because when they owned slaves, they behaved like other slaveowners did. Many white women strove to protect their human property, and in the process of doing so they constructed narratives of power that contested the alleged patriarchal order of their households and in some cases, their communities as well. They considered themselves active members of a community premised upon the ownership of human beings and that community accepted their membership. They were as humane, as ill- or well-tempered, and as cruel as slaveowning men. They developed systems of slave management and discipline that were similar to those used by slaveowners throughout the South regardless of gender.¹⁰⁸ Their brands of slave mastery were not “feminine” in character, nor were they always gentler by design. If we rely upon formal, written marital property laws to understand slaveownership in the context of marriage, these white married slaveowning women should not have wielded the power that they did; they should have relegated power and authority over their slaves to their husbands, male kin or male employees. Yet when we peek inside their households and take a look outside of them, we learn that many women did not. They sought to control their own slaves, to decide when to sell them and when to punish them, and to “do their own bossing.” And in the cases discussed above, they managed to do so.

White slaveowning women were powerful, even while they and their historians have generally constructed narratives of powerlessness. The enslaved people they owned bore witness

¹⁰⁸ In the various articles and editorials appearing on the “proper management of negroes” in publications like *Debow’s Review* and the *Southern Cultivator*, we find the ideal styles of management crafted by slaveowners throughout the South. White slaveowning women employed many of the strategies and practices outlined in these articles. See *Advice Among Masters: The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old South*. Ed. James Breeden, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980.

to this power, their lives were shaped by this power, and the stories they told about their female owners reveals that white slaveowning women did not have to be called “massa” to secure and maintain mastery over their slaves. Their power rested firmly upon the economic and legal rights afforded to those who owned human beings and there was nothing pretty, frilly or feminine about it.

CHAPTER TWO

“She thought she could find a better market”: White Slaveowning Women, Enslaved People’s Quests for Freedom and the Convergence of the Slave Market and the Antebellum Household.

“[M]istress McKinley wouldn’t let me have my children. One after another—one after another—she sold ’em away from me. Oh, how *many* times that woman broke my heart!...At last, what do you think that woman did? She sold me and five of my children to the speculators! Oh, how I *did* feel when I heard my children was sold to the speculators!”¹ This painful remembrance was part of Charity Bowery’s recollection about her futile attempts to buy her children’s freedom from her mistress. Her heartbreak did not end there.

One day Charity’s mistress sent her on an errand that required that she wait until it was complete and when she returned her “mistress was counting a heap of bills in her lap.” Charity knew that something was wrong because she saw her daughter crying, standing behind the chair of her mistress “as she counted the money—ten dollars—twenty dollars—fifty dollars...” At first she did not know the reason for her daughter’s tears, but her little girl eventually “pointed to mistress’ lap, and said, ‘Broder’s money! Broder’s money!’” Charity’s mistress had sold yet another one of her children and when she asked her whether she had done so, she proclaimed “Yes Charity; I got a great price for him!” Charity later learned that that her mistress sold him to a man in Alabama.

By Charity’s estimation, her mistress was “a rich woman” that “rolled in gold”; she did not need to sell any slaves to sustain her livelihood nor did she need the money that she gained from their sale. Yet time and again Charity’s mistress ventured back into the slave market to sell

¹ Interview with Charity Bowery, in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*. Ed. John Blassingame, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977, 261-267.

her slaves. In the confines of this slaveowning household, a white woman thought about, and repeatedly sold her slaves into the domestic slave trade. It was in response that the mother of these enslaved children approached her, attempted to negotiate a price at which to buy her children, and to establish the terms of payment for them. But this slaveowning woman calculated the value of those slaves and repeatedly rejected offers for their freedom because “she thought she could find a better market” in which to sell them for a higher price.

Chapter One contends that slaveownership afforded white women particular kinds of power they did not otherwise possess, and that from girlhood they secured and refined mastery over the slaves they owned and continued to do so after marriage. In many cases, the household obscured their exercise of power over slaves and white men’s recognition of their authority to do so. However, formerly enslaved people frequently discussed white slaveowning women’s mastery over them, in public as well as private spaces, and the variety of ways these women managed and disciplined them. Their testimony also reveals the ways in which the household and the slave market sometimes converged.

This chapter argues that the slaveholding household—its parlors, porches, kitchens and bedrooms—and the fields, pathways, and roads surrounding them, were part of the slave market. It contends that when slaveowning women sat in their homes and imagined buying and selling slaves, assessed the feasibility of these decisions, appraised the value of various slaves they sought to buy or sell and finally bought or sold them, they brought the slaveholding household and the slave market together. This convergence provided slaveowning women with knowledge about and access to the slave market which they used to their economic advantage. It further suggests that their negotiations with slaves, who hoped to buy their own freedom, or the liberty

of their loved ones, constituted “slave market activities” and thereby complicates our understanding of white women’s economic relationship to the institution of slavery and prevailing conceptualizations of the home and the market in the antebellum South.

The Convergence of the Household and the Slave Market

Walter Johnson has described the slave marketplace as “a pyramidal network of information gathering and slave selling that stretched from the slave pens through the city’s hotels and barrooms.” He also contends that “[t]he lively traffic in information and influence that joined the slave traders to the hotel and bars where travelers and traders gathered and discussed their business suggests that the practice of trading slaves far outreached the cluster of pens publicly identified as ‘the slave market.’”² Indeed it did. But Johnson does not find a place for white women in his expansive view of the slave market because they “found ways to participate in the market without going to the marketplace” such as “through instructions given in a letter or arguments made in a parlor discussion.”³ In this conceptualization, the household and the slave market never really meet in *tangible* ways. This depiction of the slave market, and white women’s alienation from it, present us with a peculiar characterization of the slave trade *and* the slaveholding household because, as this chapter will show, the slave market permeated the slaveholding household and in many instances the household and slave market were one and the same. Furthermore, slaveowning women moved freely between the two. Later chapters show that slaveowning women could be found in southern slave markets engaging in the business that thrived in these spaces; they witnessed and enacted the brutalization of enslaved, racialized, and

² Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 52.

³ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 89-97 and “Masters and Slaves in the Market: Slavery and the New Orleans Trade, 1804-1864.” PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 1995, 117.

sexualized bodies, attended slave auctions, bid upon enslaved people and took those slaves home to do their bidding. But they did not always have to go there in person in order to do so.

As many scholars have observed, enslaved people were forced to “perform” in what Saidiya Hartman has called the “theatre of the marketplace.” They were charged to enact fitness, pleasure and contentment before an audience of prospective purchasers by those who hoped to sell them. Yet what often remains obscured is the reason why this process was necessary in the first place. Walter Johnson has discussed the logic behind these performances at length and he contends that slave traders crafted these “shows” in order to make enslaved people conform to the sometimes fantastical expectations of prospective buyers. While slave traders, auctioneers, and brokers crafted the performances that took place in southern auctionhouses and slave trading establishments in southern towns, white men and women began building ideal slaves in their imaginations long before they visited these marketplaces, a process that often originated in their homes.⁴

The slaveholding household was a site of production, racial and sexual exploitation, and imagining. As a space within which white southerners contemplated the sale and purchase of slaves and used commodified bodies in ways that reinscribed their pecuniary value, the slaveholding household became an extension of the slave market. Walter Johnson has asserted that “it was often women who did the thinking about slave buying” within southern households.⁵ However, they did more than think about buying and selling slaves in these domestic arenas. Southern homes were spaces within which white slaveowning women envisioned their needs and

⁴ Saidiya V Hartman. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 37.

⁵ Johnson, “Masters and Slaves in the Market,” 110. But for him, women’s thoughts about the commerce that took place within the slave market and their actual presence in the marketplace were two very different things.

the kinds of bodies that could fulfill them. Then they orchestrated the sale, purchase, and exchange of slaves, and when they were ready to finalize their decisions, slave traders and speculators entered households to transact their business with the women residing there.⁶ White slaveowning women did not always need to go to the slave market because the slave market came to them.

Formerly enslaved people remembered these commercial encounters and the traumatic aftermath they wrought in the lives of the people they knew.⁷ Their imaginations were marked with fear and anxiety at the mere sight of suspected buyers, Fanny Moore recounted the terror that enslaved people experienced when speculators came to her owner's estate:

It was a tubble sight to see de speculators come to de plantation. Dey would go through de fields and buy de slaves dey wanted. Marse Jim nebber sell pappy or mammy or any ob dey ehillun. He allus like pappy. When de speculator come all de slaves start a shakin'. No one know who is a goin'.⁸

On the one hand Fanny seems to offer a tale of a benevolent and caring master who refused to sell his slaves. But her owner only rejected the speculator's offers because he favored her family. He did not feel so sentimental when it came to some of the other people he owned.

⁶ In *Soul by Soul*, Johnson mentions the "private sales on a slaveholder's land" but he does not venture to say that these sales brought the slave market and the household together, nor does he interrogate the significance of these sales for the enslaved people who were sold or the white women who may have benefited from them. See Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 48.

⁷ It is important to note that the Works Projects Administration interviews with formerly enslaved people make it very difficult to pinpoint precise dates of sale and purchase, or changes in the slave market over time. Many of the interviewees were only children when enslaved and this also makes it difficult to do so. While some interviewees recalled specific years when they or people they knew were bought or sold, most do not. In those cases, clues lie in the prices they quote and references to historical moments and events like the deaths of owners (which might be verified in wills or obituaries) and the beginning of the Civil War. Bills of slave sale would also offer more concrete information.

⁸ Interview with Fanny Moore, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 15 -- North Carolina Narratives, Part 2*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aac.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rsa&chapterID=rsa-099&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010)

Some slaveowners were far more calculating when they decided to sell their slaves. J.W. Loguen, who later became a well-known minister in the North, recalled a scene that took place when slave traders came to his owner's plantation one morning:

The next morning, Manasseth sent the adult negroes...into the fields at their labors, detaining all the children at the house. The arrangement, though unusual, was made in such a manner as to excite no surprise. Nor could they [the slaves] have supposed this in his [their master's] change of character and relations, his heart susceptible of the diabolical intents which he must have cherished over night, and felt in the midst of his impious devotions. Some hours after the mothers had gone into the fields, and while the children were sporting in the yards about the premises, two or three men on horseback rode up...The occurrence was rare and the appearance of the strangers so marked, that they attracted the notice of the children who left their sports and stood at a respectful distance to eye them. After a short conversation with the strangers, during which time the eyes of Manasseth and his companions were turned toward the children, he called all of them into the yard, and commanded the oldest of them, in a stern voice, to stand perfectly still, and say not one word unless spoken to, while the strangers examined them...After this order to the children, he then told the men to examine the children and take their choice. The elder children instantly knew the men were negro traders...Now it was apparent that some of them were to be sold to these traders, and that their mothers had been sent out of sight and hearing in the fields to avoid the scene the separation would produce if they were present.

Loguen then described the chaos that ensued:

The rude men immediately began to examine the bodies and limbs of the children—who had been taught by their mothers that the touch of such men was more dreadful than the touch of wild beasts...[t]hey rushed through the enclosures, screaming with fright; and in spite of the commands of Manasseth, fled into the fields and woods in the direction of their mothers...The mothers heard the wail of their children, and came running through the fields to know the cause and relieve them. Learning, by the way, that the slave drivers were at the house binding the children, and as they approached, seeing at a distance, a long coffle of little children...marching towards the house, they broke into howls and screams and groans, which filled the air.”⁹

In the terror of that moment, as the women watched their children stolen from them, they lost the opportunity to hold them in their arms, to kiss them, to affirm their love for them for the last

⁹ Jermain Wesley Loguen, *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman. A Narrative of Real Life*. Syracuse, N. Y.: J. G. K. Truair & Co., 1859, 113-116.

time. Slavery already robbed them of the types of maternal relationships that other mothers had with their children. But here the slave market, and the men who plied their trade in human beings, robbed them of their goodbyes.

The landscape of this plantation metamorphosed into a slave market. Lined up for inspection, examination, and sale, just as they would in southern slave yards, enslaved children learned that despite their distance from the slave market they were not safe from its reach. Their mothers also learned that the horrors associated with the slave market could easily follow them into the fields in which they labored. If they happened to have other children, or if their children were spared from sale this time, they had to prepare themselves for their master's deceit on subsequent occasions; they could no longer rest assured that he was better than any other slaveholder.

These fears were likely magnified when their owners or masters were slave traders themselves. After being sold away from her twin sister, Mary Wooldridge was owned by a Kentucky slave trader who held her captive in a stockade for several years before he sold her to Thomas McElroy.¹⁰ A slave speculator not only owned Sarah Ashley, he made her travel with him in a drove for upwards of ten years before selling her in the New Orleans slave market. She vividly remembered the day she was sold, the overwhelming fear she experienced during the bidding process, and the price she commanded too.¹¹ After watching slaves on the coffle bought and sold, seeing them come and go, sensing their misery and hearing about the experiences of the

¹⁰ Interview with Mary Woolridge, Kentucky Narratives, Volume VII, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed October 20, 2011).

¹¹ Interviews with Sarah Ashley, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 2 -- Volume 2: Texas Narratives, Part 1* ed. George P., Rawick, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977,

slave market for years, Sarah felt a sense of dread that no words could adequately convey. A Virginia slave trader named Mr. Boley owned Sarah Thomas' mother and grandmother. When her mother was sixteen years old he sold her for five hundred dollars.¹²

White women married these men. Mattie Logan's mistress was married to a slave trader and she warned him not to think about selling the slaves she owned.¹³ Armstead Barrett's mistress was also married to a slave speculator. Armstead told his WPA interviewer, "Ben Walker, our master, he was not allowed to sell us because Miss Ann, our mistress, owned us as her father Simes gave us to Ann when she married Ben Walker, and all her increase and she would not allow us to be sold because our master was a spectator [speculator]." Amy Elizabeth Patterson's owner "ran a sort of agency where he collected slaves and yearly sold them to dealers in human flesh." His wife's economic well-being was tied to his trade. Whether connected by bloodline or nuptials, white southern men who involved themselves in the business of buying and selling slaves brought their trade home with them. Their wives and female kin knew about their work and the stakes involved, and many sought to protect their property from the men they loved.¹⁴

¹² Interview with Sarah Thomas, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 1, Volume 10, Mississippi Narratives, Part 5*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977, 2104-5.

¹³ Interviews with Mattie Logan, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 7 -- Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972 and Armstead Barrett, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 2 -- Volume 2: Texas Narratives, Part 1*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rab02&chapterID=rab02-007-070&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

¹⁴ See interview with Amy Elizabeth Patterson, Indiana Narratives, Volume V, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 2, 2010). The subject of slave traders' families is one that has yet to be explored, particularly the ways in which female kin fit into the larger scheme of the slave trade. How did slave traders' wives contend with their husbands' line of work knowing that their livelihood depended upon it? How did they deal with the presence of their husbands' business partners and associates staying in their homes? Did these women help their husbands conduct their business in any way? We know that some of these women lamented their husbands' long absences

Sometimes, slave traders and speculators were neighbors or members of slaveowners' families and they brought their trade into the homes of their friends and kin. Susan Merritt's owner lived on a plantation that was adjacent to a man who operated a slave market. Alex Woods' owner was related to a man who traded in slaves:

My old marster's brother John wus a slave speculator. I 'member seein' him bringin' slaves in chains to de plantation when he wus carryin' 'em to Richmond to put 'em on de auction block to be sold. Dey were handcuffed wid a small chain to a large chain between 'm, two men side by side; dere wus 'bout thirty in a drove. Dere wus 'bout three or four white men on horses. Dey wus called slave drivers; some went before, an' some behind. Dey carried pistols on dere sides. De distance wus so fur, dey camped out at night. De slaves set by de fire, and slept on dese trips wid de chains on 'em. Evertime de mens come to our house I wus afraid my mother and father would be sold away from me.¹⁵

Other times, speculators stayed with people they knew while traveling into the lower South or passed through plantation estates as they made their way to slave markets. Former slave Harriet Casey remembered that “[d]e traders would come through and buy up slaves in groups like stock. On de way south dey would have regular stoppin’ places like pens and coops for de slaves to stay in; at each of these stoppin’ places some of de slaves would be sold.” Talking about his stepmother who was a house servant, Felix Street recalled that “she could get on to a lot of things the others couldn't. She stayed in the house. That was in slavery times. The speculators who were buying colored folks would put up at that place. Looked like a town but it

from home and that some of these women were adamant about keeping their husbands away from their own slaves. We also know that at least a few female kin worked with their slave trading family members as well (See chapter two). But we know little more than this. These are questions I hope to take up and address in a second book or article length study.

¹⁵ Interviews with Susan Merritt, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed March 10, 2010) and Alex Woods, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 15 -- North Carolina Narratives, Part 2*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rsa&chapterID=rsa-325&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

all belonged to one person. The name of the place was Cloverdale, Tennessee. My stepmother said that a gang of these folks put up at Cloverdale once and then went on to Nashville, Tennessee.”¹⁶

When Robert Glenn’s owner put him up for auction, a slave trader by the name of Long bought him. After the sale, they set out for Long’s home, and he “stopped for refreshments, at a plantation” along the way. During Robert’s time there, he learned that his life would never be the same: two white women were the bearers of this horrid news.

[W]hile he was eating and drinking, he put me into a room where two white women were spinning flax. I was given a seat across the room from where they were working. After I had sat there awhile wondering where I was going and thinking about mother and Home, I went to one of the women and asked, ‘Missus when will I see my mother again?’ She replied, I don’t know child, go and sit down. I went back to my seat and as I did so both the women stopped spinning for a moment, looked at each other, and one of them remarked, “Almighty God, this slavery business is a horrible thing. Chances are this boy will never see his mother again.” This remark nearly killed me, as I began to fully realize my situation. Long, the Negro trader, soon came back, put me on his horse and finished the trip to his home. He kept me at his home awhile and then traded me to a man named William Moore who lived in Person County.¹⁷

When Long came into their home, bringing along the slave he bought at auction, he brought his business with him. These two women clearly knew what he did for a living. They knew that Long purchased the little boy who sat across the room as they went about their work. They knew someone else would likely purchase him from Long and that he would probably never see his

¹⁶ Interviews with Harriet Casey, Missouri Narratives, Volume X, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed November 14, 2011) and Felix Street, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 10 -- Arkansas Narratives, Parts 5 and 6*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=RSV&chapterID=RSV-005-086&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

¹⁷ Interview with Robert Glenn, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 10 -- Arkansas Narratives, Parts 5 and 6*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=RSV&chapterID=RSV-005-086&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

parents thereafter. And as they looked upon Robert's inquisitive face, neither of them could deliver the news of his inevitable, motherless fate. Yet, only moments later they talked about it between themselves, as if he were invisible. For them, Robert's separation from his mother was an unfortunate, horrible, yet necessary consequence of Long's business. But with all they knew about it, they still allowed Long, and his trade, into their home, they did nothing to change Robert's fate, and they went on spinning their flax.

Local businessmen and merchants served and accommodated slave traders passing through their towns and those who owned or operated hotels frequently provided these individuals, and the slaves they hoped to sell, with shelter. W.L. Bost's master owned a hotel, two plantations and a home in Newton, North Carolina and he remembered that:

[T]he speculators come through Newton with droves of slaves. They always stay at our place. The poor critters nearly froze to death. They always come 'long on the last of December so that the niggers would be ready for sale on the first day of January... The speculators stayed in the hotel and put the niggers in the quarters jes like droves of hogs. All through the night I could hear them mournin' and prayin'. I didn't know the Lord would let people live who were so cruel. The gates were always locked and they was a guard on the outside to shoot anyone who tried to run away. Lord miss, them slaves look jes like droves of turkeys runnin' along in front of them horses. I remember when they put 'em on the block to sell 'em. The ones 'tween 18 and 30 always bring the most money. The auctioneer he stand off at a distance and cry 'em off as they stand on the block. I can hear his voice as long as I live.¹⁸

W.L. remembered these people and the torment of their condition. "They never had enough clothes on to keep a cat warm. The women never wore anything but a thin dress and a petticoat and one underwear. I've seen the ice balls hangin' on to the bottom of their dresses as they ran along, jes like sheep in a pasture 'fore they are sheared. They never wore any shoes. Jes run along

¹⁸ Interview with W. L. Bost, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> accessed May 14, 2009).

on the ground, all spewed up with ice... When they get cold, they make 'em run 'til they are warm again.” It is interesting that in this same memory, W.L. said that his master’s wife “was good” and that she “never allowed the Massa to buy or sell any slaves.” Perhaps she made this demand after observing the same visible signs of cruelty and disregard for humanity that W.L. witnessed. If she too heard “them mournin' and prayin'...all through the night” as he did, she had an opportunity to sense the horror of the slave trade and its market firsthand, and maybe this was too much for her to bear.

Enslaved people like Caleb Craig were present on multiple occasions when slave drovers came to their owners’ plantations to ply their trade. Caleb recalled that “slave drovers often came to de June place... They buy, sell, and swap niggers, just like they buy, sell, and swap hosses, mules, and hogs.”¹⁹ Speculators enticed slaveowners with their sales pitches and their human goods, but other slaveowners, like Liza Jones’ mistress, refused speculators’ offers to buy their slaves. Liza said that “Aint no use in talkin’, I had a good mistress, I never was sold. Old mistress wouldn't sell. There was a speculator come there and wanted to buy us. When we was free, old mistress say, ‘Now I could a sold you and had the money, and now you is goin’ to leave.’ But they didn't, they stayed. Some stayed with old mistress till she died, but I didn't. I married the first year of freedom.”²⁰

When slave traders and speculators did not actually venture onto plantations, enslaved people watched them traveling down the roads nearby. Wright Stapleton said that “[o]ne day a

¹⁹ Interview with Caleb Craig, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 21, 2010).

²⁰ Interview with Liza Jones, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 9 -- Arkansas Narratives, Parts 3 and 4*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rsu&chapterID=rsu-123&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

slave trader come through an' bought 'em and brought 'em through the country in wagons an' had auction sales along the way. Dey would sell some ob 'em off an' buy mo' in."²¹ Calvin Moye told his WPA interviewer the following story:

De speculators would comes through wid big long droves of slaves dey would buy, sell or trade just like de horse traders did a few years ago, just travel from place to place makin a livin dat way and some of dem made some good money, de ones dat was good traders. Dar was never but one bunch dat stopped by Maser Ingrams, and dis man tried his best to sell Maser some slaves and he would'nt buy none. Dis speculator tried to trade some wid Maser but he would'nt do dat, den he begins askin what he would takes for dis one and dat one and Maser Ingram said he did'nt wants to sell any of us slaves. Den he pointed at me and ask what he would takes for dat boy up dar and I begins backin off and went off aroun de blacksmith shop and says to myself "I don't believe dat Maser Ingram would sells me, but dis man just keep on tryin to do some tradin he might just to gits rid of him."²²

On occasion, owners approached these men to inquire about the human property they had for sale. Pick Gladden told his interviewer that "...droves of niggers used to come down the road by Squire Hardy's front gate...One day Squire Hardy went out and stopped a drove coming down de road in the dust. He pick him out a good natured looking darky."²³ Charity Bowery's mistress sold her to a speculator that would pass by her estate too. Unbeknownst to her, Charity often served this man oysters from her stand even when he was unable to pay. He remembered

²¹ Interview with Wright Stapleton, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement, Series 1, Volume 10, Mississippi Narratives, Part 5*. Ed. George P. Rawick, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977, 2019.

²² Interview with Calvin Moye, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 2 -- Volume 7: Texas Narratives, Part 6*. Ed. George P. Rawick, 1979.

The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group.

<http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa08&chapterID=raa08-002&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood/>.

(accessed June 25, 2010). Lou Smith also remembered that "once they had a sale in town and I seen them pass our house in gangs, the little ones in wagons and others walking." See interview with Lou Smith, Oklahoma Narratives, Volume XIII, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed September 1, 2010).

²³ Interview with Pick Gladden, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed September 1, 2010).

her kindness and set her and one of her children free (her other children remained in his possession).²⁴

The individuals who engaged in the slave trade knew exactly what they were doing because passing by plantations on their way to local slave markets was an astute business strategy. According to former slave George Patterson, a slave trader named Joe Crews captured his Native American father and sold him into slavery. George's father also told him that Crews would intentionally "stop at various plantations and sell Indians and niggers into slavery."²⁵

Enslaved men and women spoke of the dread they felt when slave speculators came to their owners' homes to buy or sell slaves, and if they experienced this as children the trauma of the slave trade haunted them in adulthood. Calvin Moye said that "[d]ey was lots of dem speculators coming by de road in front of de plantation after dat, we could see dem but dey did'nt stop, and ever time I see dem coming cold chills run over me till I see dem go on by our lane dat leads up to our place, den I feels better. After dat de speculators kept going on by our place." Viney Baker recounted the pain she felt when a speculator bought her mother and took her away to be sold: "One night I lay down on de straw mattress wid my mammy, an' de nex' mo'nin' I woked up an' she wuz gone. When I axed 'bout her I fin's dat a speculator comed dar de night before an' wanted ter buy a 'oman. Dey had come an' got my mammy widout wakin' me up. I has always been glad somehow dat I wuz asleep..."²⁶ Samuel Boulware described the equally

²⁴ *The North Star*, "Selections. Charity Bowery." March 3, 1848.

²⁵ Interview with George Patterson, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 24, 2010).

²⁶ Interview with Viney Baker, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 10, 2010). For references to speculators stealing enslaved children see interview with Amy Else,

harrowing scene that took place when a slave speculator came to his master's plantation and took enslaved mothers away after his master sold them: "It was sad times to see mother and chillun separated. I's seen de slave speculator cut de little nigger chillum with keen leather whips, 'cause they'd cry and run after de wagon dat was takin' their mammies away after they was sold."²⁷

According to some former slaves, since speculators stole children from plantations, their owners urged them to stay away from strange passersby. Amy Else said that her mother told of "how she was out in the yard feeding chickens and a speculator come up to the fence and say to her, 'Come here, young one, I'se got something for you.' She went to him and he grabbed her up and put her in a wagon under some quilts. She says he had a wagon load of chil'ren he had stole."²⁸ While stealing enslaved children was a risky business practice, it was one of the many ways that speculators maximized the profits they sought to gain from selling human merchandise.

Over the course of their lives in bondage, these were experiences that enslaved people could not forget and they came to recognize the people who plied their trade in human beings. They named them, they described what they looked like and even knew where they lived and

in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 2 -- Volume 4: Texas Narratives, Part 3*, The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa08&chapterID=raa08-002&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010) and Eugene Wesley Smith, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 10, 2010). <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rsz1&chapterID=rsz1-007-013&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

²⁷ Samuel Boulware, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 10, 2010).

²⁸ Interview with Amy Else, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography. Supplement, Series 2 -- Volume 4: Texas Narratives, Part 3* ed. George P. Rawick, 1979. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa08&chapterID=raa08-002&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

where their businesses were located.²⁹ They associated these men (and women) with the terror of the slave market. They signified the sundering of familial ties, the humiliation of sale, and the forced reconstruction of lives in places unknown. Some enslaved people, particularly children like Viney, could not protect themselves from this terror, but others did. Drawing upon their knowledge of the people who made their living buying and selling slaves, and signs that their owners were preparing to sell them, they sometimes prepared themselves for the inevitable possibility of sale.³⁰ When Martha Adeline Hinton's owners tried to sell her father, he did just that: "Durin' slavery dey tried to sell daddy. De speculator wus dere an' daddy suspicion sumpin. His marster tole him to go an' shuck some corn. Dey aimed to git him in de corn crib an' den tie

²⁹ Eugene Welsey Smith said that "[s]peculators used to steal children," and "had plantations where they kept the children until they were big enough to sell, and they had an old woman there to tend to those children." interview with Eugene Wesley Smith, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 10, 2010). For enslaved people who named slave traders see interviews with William George Hinton, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 14 -- North Carolina Narratives, Part 1*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rsz1&chapterID=rsz1-007-088&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood/>. (accessed June 25, 2010), George Fleming, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 1 -- Volume 11: North Carolina and South Carolina Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa11&chapterID=raa11-009-066&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood/>. (accessed June 25, 2010), and Millie Simkins, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 16 -- Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Virginia, and Tennessee Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rsb1&chapterID=rsb1-010-024&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood/>. (accessed June 25, 2010). For descriptions of slave traders' businesses see, interview with Millie Simkins and "Mistreatment of Slaves" in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 13 -- Georgia Narratives, Parts 3 and 4*. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rsb1&chapterID=rsb1-010-024&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood/>. (accessed June 25, 2010). Sam T. Stewart named a slave speculator and two "negro drivers" who were "white men employed by the speculators" that he knew of. He even knew where they lived. See interview with Sam T. Stewart, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 13, 2009).

³⁰ Former slave Charlie Richardson said that "[w]e always knowed when they was going to sell, cause they would let them lay around and do nothin'. Just feed them and git fat. They even smeared their faces with bacon rine to make 'em look greasy and well fed before the sale. See interview with Charlie Richardson, Missouri Narratives, Volume X, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 5, 2009).

him an' sell him but when he got to the crib he kept on goin'. He went to Mr. Henry Buffaloe's an' stayed two weeks den he went back home. Dere wus nuthin' else said 'bout sellin him.'”³¹

Imagining white southern women as alienated from slave markets and immune to the machinations of these places seems far-fetched when we acknowledge the ubiquity of slave traders and speculators, and their business, in urban *and* rural landscapes, as well as non-commercial spaces. These individuals visited white women’s households, sometimes stayed in their homes, brought slave coffles to their estates in hopes of selling some of them, approached them about buying slaves they owned and passed by their places of residence on their way to slave markets. More profoundly, some white women were related to these men. Whether they actually went to southern slave markets to buy or sell slaves or to inquire about doing so is irrelevant when we consider all of the ways that white women could access the slave market on their own terms. Why would they go to the market if they could negotiate a slave sale at home or purchase one from the many traders or speculators that passed through or approached them for this very purpose?

To be sure, white women could have simply ignored these men when they came around them. But many were clearly paying attention. Sallie McNeill, a white slaveholding woman residing in Brazoria County, Texas in the mid-nineteenth century, talked about her grandfather’s business negotiations with John Evans, a man who was involved in the slave trade. On June 21, 1859, Sallie recorded her concerns about Mr. Evans who “had been gone for negroes two months” and “after drawing Grandpa’s \$10,000 he has suddenly disappeared from the horizon of

³¹ Interview with Martha Adeline Hinton, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 14 -- North Carolina Narratives, Part I*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aac.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rsz1&chapterID=rsz1-007-086&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

our limited vision.”³² Evans eventually came back and in spite of concerns about his delayed return, Sallie’s grandfather sought his services on subsequent occasions when he wanted to buy slaves: “Mr. Evans returned several weeks ago. Accompanied by a dozen negroes. Grandpa will take ten or eleven, one a woman, half-indian, bought for Mrs. Adams.”³³ While Sallie discusses her neighbors’ suspicions about Mr. Evans’ trustworthiness, her grandfather seemed relatively comfortable buying slaves from him repeatedly. Furthermore, her grandfather seemed to have made no attempts to shield Sallie from his dealings with Evans. Sallie never talks about buying slaves herself, but she was privy to the transactions John negotiated with her grandfather, even going so far as to cite the amount of money that passed from one man to the other, the number of slaves he purchased and for whom he purchased them. If she knew this information it is also quite possible that she knew about additional circumstances as well.

White women like Sallie were often passive observers of slave market activities, but through their observations they learned about the mechanics of the marketplace. Others assumed more active roles when they orchestrated slave sales and auctions or witnessed them take place on their estates. When asked about his mistress, Tom Hawkins explained that she “was her own whuppin’ boss” who beat on her slaves “for most anything.” She was also responsible for training and selling them: “She was all time sellin’ ‘em for big prices attar she done trained ‘em for to be cooks, housegals, houseboys, carriage drivers, and good wash ‘omans... Yes Ma’am, I

³² *The Uncompromising Diary of Sallie McNeill, 1858-1867*. Eds. Ginny McNeill Raska and Mary Lynne Gasaway Hill. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2009, 45.

³³ October 5, 1860, *The Uncompromising Diary of Sallie McNeill*, 87.

seed Old Miss sell de slaves what she trained. She made ‘em stand up on a block, she kept in de back yard, whilst she was a-auctionin’ ‘em off.’³⁴

Within the confines of her household and in the open spaces of her estate, Tom’s mistress trained the slaves she owned, beat them, and sold them off to the highest bidders. Tom’s mistress was not married to a slave trader or speculator, she did not approach the men of the trade who walked past her estate in hopes of buying one of the slaves in their coffles, nor did she send male family members, friends, or business associates to the local market to buy or sell her slaves. She transformed her backyard into a slave market with its own auction block to boot; and the men who made their living selling and buying humans knew about her business. From Tom’s recollections, it would seem that her business was well known to these men, for he remembered seeing them all the time.

Tom’s mistress was not only a slave master; she was a slave trader *and* auctioneer. She knew that training enslaved African Americans to be particular kinds of slaves would augment their values and she knew that she could command specific prices for them. She also knew that if she had these types of slaves to sell, the buyers would come from all around to bid upon them. And so they did.³⁵ Joe High remembers that slaves were sold on the block his mistress used to

³⁴ Interview with Tom Hawkins, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed March 12, 2010). Apparently, this was not uncommon. Dicey Thomas remembered her master never sold her or the slaves his father gave him but he bought enslaved infants who he would raise for market and sell. But instead of taking them to the local slave market, he would auction them off in the yard surrounding his home. He “had a block built up high just like a meat block out in the yard” and he would “have a yard man bring the little niggers out and put them on this block...If there would be about five or six [prospective buyers] come in, here’s this nigger sitting up here. Here’s a lot of folks waiting to buy him.” Interview with Dicey Thomas, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 6, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 13, 2010).

³⁵ She would likely have announced the day and time of the sale as James Bolton remembered. He said that “when they had sales of slaves on the plantations they let everybody know what time the sale gwine to be. When the crowd

mount her horse: “There was a block in de yard, where missus got up on her horse. There were two steps to it. Slaves were sold from this block. I remember seeing them sold from this block.”³⁶ When she used this block to mount her horse did Joe’s mistress recall the enslaved people who stood upon it as they were auctioned off to the highest bidder right in her yard? Did she remember their faces? Did she hear their groans and cries? Did she recognize the role she played in their continued enslavement, in the severing of their familial and community ties, or in the trauma that came with being sold away from everything they knew? We can only imagine that she did. In those moments when she stood observing the auction and bidding process unfold, she was also learning about the slave market. She had no need to leave her estate because she could watch slave sales initiated and finalized without leaving home.

White southern women may have also acquired adeptness at buying and selling slaves in another important way—their financial negotiations with the slaves they owned—and they did not have to leave their homes to do it. Formerly enslaved people offer countless examples of mistresses who bargained with them for their freedom or the liberty of their loved ones. These transactions offered slaveowning women and enslaved people opportunities to acquire pecuniary knowledge about the market economy and the region’s financial structure more generally, and they may have served as preparation for more sophisticated fiscal dealings thereafter.

git togedder they put the niggers on the block and sell ‘em. Leas’wise, they call it ‘puttin’ on the block’.” See interview with James Bolton, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed August 7, 2009).

³⁶ Interview with Joe High, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed August 7, 2009).

It seems to go without saying that white slaveowning women were astute in financial and commercial matters. They acquired their business acumen for the same reasons that white slaveowning men did; they were property owners. Admittedly, they only developed these skills out of necessity. Faced with the deaths of patriarchs, widowhood, fiscally inept spouses, war and destitution, women quickly learned how to protect their assets and their families' financial well-being.³⁷ White women also acquired and refined their pecuniary knowledge when they entered into financial negotiations with their slaves.

Historians are uncovering the myriad ways that enslaved people also became knowledgeable about the slave market economy and the region's economy more generally. But when it comes to self-purchase enslaved people generally appear as passive parties who simply handed over their wages to the women who owned them. In this conceptualization, white slaveowning women come to these financial negotiations empowered and prepared to demand their prices, while enslaved people agreed to the terms set before them. Yet as human property that was exchanged, bought, sold, hired, and divided amongst white southerners, enslaved men and women were not simply objects of sale or potential liquidation; they took an active interest in the market processes to which they were subjected and acquired extensive financial information as a consequence.

The Pervasive Nature of the Slave Market in Enslaved People's Daily Lives

When enslaved people wanted to purchase their freedom from their mistresses, they had to do more than just accumulate the funds necessary to pay for themselves; they had to know just

³⁷ See Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1985. 15-35, Kirsten Wood, *Masterful Women*, Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention*. To be sure, some white women developed business and fiscal acumen because they wanted to. But overall, scholars argue that these women were exceptional.

how much their female owners would charge them and they had to be familiar with the methods by which they could pay the sum. This knowledge was rooted in discourses and ideologies of the slave market. As they began to strategize about accumulating enough money to purchase their freedom or the liberty of family members, enslaved people mastered a certain understanding of their own commodification by imagining how much they would be worth to prospective slave buyers and sellers, and they used this knowledge to develop a financial plan to purchase themselves and their families. This process that, if effective, could reduce if not altogether eliminate the prospect of sale upon the dreaded auction block or courthouse steps.³⁸

Enslaved people consistently refer to the prices and values of slaves in their narratives and testimony, and virtually none of them were out of the reach of the slave market, its lexicon or its ideologies.³⁹ Time and again we find them talking about how much they sold for or how much they were worth in the slave market. For example Sarah Benjamin recalled being

³⁸ Johnson's work has been influential in my thinking about enslaved people's imaginings of their own commodification. He describes this process as one of "doubleness"; enslaved persons "learned to view their own bodies through two different lenses, one belonging to their masters, the other belonging to themselves" and they "experience[d] their bodies twice at once." As this study shows, self-purchase made the process of imagining far more complex. Enslaved people who sought to purchase themselves no longer just experienced their bodies in ways that aligned their vision of themselves with those of their masters. They imagined themselves as commodified human beings from the eyes of current and future masters. In other words, they had to experience their bodies thrice at once when they sought to purchase freedom. How much they would be worth to their masters sometimes differed markedly from values placed upon them in the slave market, and from those that prospective buyers would pay. Enslaved people had to account for that difference and they did this by imagining themselves from the perspective of buyer and seller. Self-purchase made this imagining far more complex because enslaved people were the buyers. See Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 21-22.

³⁹ Walter Johnson differentiates between prices and value. He claims that "like other pieces of property, slaves spent most of their time outside the market, held to a standard of value but rarely priced. They lived as parents and children, as cotton pickers, card players, and preachers, as adversaries, friends, and lovers. But though they were seldom priced, slaves' values always hung over their heads." See Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 19. In my review of formerly enslaved people's narratives and testimony, I found no reason to make such a distinction because they rarely separate the two. In fact, as they told their stories of slavery, many formerly enslaved people drive home the fact that they were always priced. As their stories make clear, living in a world in which an owner could buy or sell a slave on a whim, putting them "in their pockets" so to speak, was a reality in which appraised values and affixed prices were often, if not always, one and the same.

exposed for sale: “I was stripped start [sic] modern named and put on de auction block when I was a child and bid \$350.00 but marster says no case I was good and fat.”⁴⁰

Formerly enslaved people also describe the sales of loved ones. Ishe Webb told his interviewer, “My father was sold to another man for seventeen hundred dollars. My mother was sold for twenty hundred. I have heard them say that so much that I will never forget it.” Charlie Richardson remembered that “...there was some buyers from south Texas was after to buy my step-Pappy for two years runnin’ ...But the Marster tried to git rif of that buyer agin by saying I don’t take no old offer of \$2,000 for Charlie, an’ I won’t sell under \$2,055. The buyer said right quick like. ‘Sold right here’. So that’s how he come to leave us and we never seed him agin...” Bill Simms recalled that “[a] man who owned ten slaves was considered wealthy, and if he got hard up for money, he would advertize and sell some slaves, like my oldest sister was sold on the block with her children. She sold for eleven hundred dollars, a baby in her arms sold for three hundred dollars. Another sold for six hundred dollars and the other for a little less than that.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Interviews with Annie Griegg, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 2, 2010) and Sarah Benjamin, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed August 7, 2009)

⁴¹ Interview with Ishe Webb, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 7, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed July 28, 2010). Interview with Charlie Richardson, Missouri Narratives, Volume X, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 25, 2009) and Bill Simms, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed July 28, 2010), Bill also remembered that his master refused to sell him in spite of receiving several offers to pay him fifteen hundred dollars.

Clearly, concepts of property and the value property possessed did not escape enslaved people's notice. Many of them recognized how these dimensions of the southern economy intersected to shape their mistresses' actions and their lives in bondage. Leonard Franklin certainly did, and his statement on the subject is poignant in this regard: "They didn't kill niggers then—not in slavery times. Not 'round where my folks were. A nigger was money. Slaves were property. They'd paid money to git 'im and money to keep 'im and they couldn't 'ford to kill 'em up. When they couldn't manage them they sold them and got their money out of them."⁴² As heartwrenching as it may seem, many enslaved people learned about property—how to acquire it, how to maintain it, how to keep it, and how to liquidate it—by watching fellow enslaved people hired, bought, sold and circulating through the slave market economy.

Slaveowners' insolvency emerges as a central feature of many formerly enslaved people's stories about how they became the property of specific individuals.⁴³ Jerry Eubanks told his interviewer that his master "lived in a fine house but couldn't meet the debt" so he "fell into the speculator's hands and was brought to Columbus, Mississippi" and "sold to Joe Eubanks for \$1100." Mattie Curtis recalled that, "Marse Whitfield ain't never pay fer us so finelly we wuz sold to Mis' Funn Long in Franklin County." Angie Garrett remembered being "sold ter Mr. Johnny Mooring, 'caze de property was in debt." As Henry Gibbs testimony elucidates, family members met similar fates: "Mars David bought my mammy from a

⁴² Leonard Franklin, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 3, 2011),

⁴³ This is not a novel assertion. However, much of the work that has been done on American slavery, the slave market and the domestic slave trade examines the centrality of slaveholder insolvency and its relationship to slave sales and the destruction of kinship ties within enslaved communities. In my review of this literature, I have yet to find any discussion of how enslaved people learned about debt, fiscal management, inheritance and estates from their encounters with slaveholders' indebtedness. This chapter tries to do just that.

speculator drove. She was sold because her old Marster was in debt and she went to de highest bidder.”⁴⁴ Thus, enslaved people who were subjected to sale as a consequence of their owners’ debts offered one of the most traumatic lessons about the value of being debt free and securing economic independence.

Insolvent owners forced enslaved people into marketplace and these experiences not only exposed enslaved people to the consequences of debt; they also learned about the various means by which they could pay for themselves while avoiding it. They learned that white southerners who hired and bought slaves did not always pay in full; they paid in installments and secured mortgages. Jane Baker’s mother told her that “de worse side ob slabery wuz when de slabes war ‘farmed out’. A master or slabe holder wud loan or sub-let slabes ta a man fur so many months at so much money. De master agreed ta supply so many clothes. De man who rented de slabes wud treat den jus lik animals. Ma muther wuz sole twice....” Charles Coates told his interviewer that his owner “Mr. L'Angle sold him on time payment to W.B. Hall” and he went on to explain that he was “put upon the block twice to be sold after belonging to Mr. Hall.” Each time he was offered for sale, his master wanted so much for him, and refusing to sell him on time payments, he was always left on his master's hands. His master said of Coates

⁴⁴ Interviews with Jerry Eubanks, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement, Series 1, Volume 7, Mississippi Narratives Part 2*, Ed. George P. Rawick, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977, 687 and Mattie Curtis, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 10, 2010), Angie Garrett, “Mules Be Eatin’ and Niggers be Eatin’” in Alabama Narratives, Volume I, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 28, 2010), and Henry Gibbs, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supp Series I, Vol 8, Miss Narrative Part 3*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rsz1&chapterID=rsz1-007-086&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood/>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

that "being tall, healthy and robust, he was well worth much money." Mary Armstrong described how "Old Cleveland take a lot of his slaves what was in 'custom' and brings 'em to Texas to sell. You know, he wasn't sposed to do that. 'cause when you's in 'custom', that's 'cause he borrowed money on you, and you's not sposed to leave the place till he paid up." Sarah Graves said that "when a slave was allotted, somebody made a down payment and gave a mortgage for the rest."⁴⁵ Loans, sublets, renting, installments, time payments, and mortgages were all financial processes that African Americans would need to be familiar with as they approached their female owners about self-purchase.

Enslaved people learned about these important dimensions of the slave market and the southern economy in a variety of ways.⁴⁶ Whether they belonged to slave traders and speculators, their family members or neighbors; whether they were subjected to sale or they experienced the trauma associated with the sale of loved ones; or whether they encountered it

⁴⁵ Interviews with Jane Baker, Missouri Narratives, Volume X, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 2, 2010), Charles Coates, Florida Narratives, Volume III, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 2, 2010), Mary Armstrong, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed September 30, 2009), and Sarah Graves, Missouri Narratives, Volume X, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed July 18, 2010).

⁴⁶ Again, other scholars have made this point. But the key difference here is that I understand these modes of acquisition and learning as more than disadvantageous encounters with the vagaries of the slave market, or opportunities to be seized in hopes of simply mitigating the trauma of sale. They did not spend "most of their time outside the market, held to a standard of value but rarely priced." They could not just live as "parents and children, as cotton pickers, card players, and preachers, as adversaries, friends, and lovers" as Johnson claims. Enslaved people were always in the slave market because the discourses of the slave market, and the people who made it work, were everywhere. We need only read the tragic accounts of children who feared that their parents would be sold every time their master's slave speculating brother came to visit, or the harrowing stories of the enslaved mothers who came running out of the fields because they heard the distant cries of their children who were being carted off after their master made them line up in the front yard so that slave traders could choose the ones they wanted, to know that enslaved people could never "spend most of their time outside the market."

when slave traders and speculators came to their owners' estates, the slave market, its arbiters, and its horrors shaped the lives of most enslaved people beyond the confines of commercial spaces in the nineteenth century South.⁴⁷ Even enslaved people who did not find themselves in these circumstances acquired knowledge about the slave market. In the parlors of slaveowners' homes, in the fields, in the slave quarters, on the roads leading to town and on the streets of those towns, slaves could and did learn about the machinations of the market. They watched as their owners bought or "swapped" slaves with speculators who brought coffles and droves of enslaved people to their plantations. They accompanied their owners to the market to buy slaves, formed parts of the crowds that gathered to watch slaves sold on the

⁴⁷ For slaves owned by slave traders and speculators or their relatives and/or neighbors, see interviews with Alex Woods, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 2, 2010), Armstead Barrett, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 2, 2010), Sarah Ashley, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 2, 2010), and Susan Merritt, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed July 13, 2011). For reference to slave traders and speculators coming to slaveowners' estates to buy and sell slaves see interviews with Charlie Richardson, Missouri Narratives, Volume X, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 5, 2009), Felix Street, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 6, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 10, 2010), Gable Locklier, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 10, 2010), George Rogers, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 13, 2009), and Fannie Moore, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 13, 2009).

auction block, they were held captive in the establishments where fellow slaves were exposed for sale publicly and privately, and sometimes they went to talk to the slaves awaiting sale in local traders' yards.⁴⁸ They also learned about their value in the slave market through discussions with elders and kin.

⁴⁸ The WPA Narratives are replete with testimony about enslaved people overhearing their owners discuss possible sales and their negotiations with prospective buyers [see interview with Lou Smith, Oklahoma Narratives, Volume XIII, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 26, 2009) and *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves*. Nashville: Fisk University Social Science Institute, 1945, 77-78], seeing slave buyers select slaves from their owners' fields and cart them off to slave markets [see interview with Fannie Moore, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 13, 2009)] and watching slave droves and coffles pass by plantations as they made their way to the slave markets in town and in the lower South [see interview with W.L. Bost, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 10, 2010), Interview with Calvin Moye, Supplement, Series 2, Volume 7: Texas Narratives, Part 6 and *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves*, 129]. They also talk about their owners' interactions with slave speculators who came to neighboring plantations every New Year's day to buy or swap old slaves for new ones. (see Interview with Shack Thomas, Florida Narratives, Volume III, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed December 25, 2009). As young enslaved boys, Mr. Chapman and his brother stayed in a slave trader's yard for three or four weeks, time when they likely spoke to the slaves being held there before sale, *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves*, 33. They also describe the landscapes of slave markets in vivid detail. [see Interview with Isaac Stier, Mississippi Narratives, Volume IX, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 28, 2010), *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves*, 118, and Interview with Sarah Louise Augustus, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 14, 2009)]. For slaves who attended auctions see Interviews with W. L. Bost, Eugene Welsey Smith, George Fleming, Henry James Trentham, and Nan Stewart, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed July 29, 2010). Ellen Betts' owner took her along when he was selecting slaves to buy and take back to his estate. See interview with Ellen Betts, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 28, 2010). After buying his freedom Edward Lycurgas' father George went to the slave market and witnessed the sale of "some pretty gals." Interview with Edward Lycurgas, Florida Narratives, Volume III, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from

The conversations that took place between old and young formerly enslaved people and their kinfolk was an extremely important means by which financial knowledge—particularly about human commodification, the value of specific types of labor and skills, and the slave market more generally—was passed on. Katherine Clay told her interviewer that “Mama said she was sold once, away from her mother but they let her have her four children... She sold for one thousand dollars. She said that was half price but freedom was coming on...” Similarly, Tom Mills said that “I have heard my mother tell about slaves bein’ sold. It was kinda like a fair they have now. They would go there, and some of ‘em sold for a thousand dollars. They said something about puttin’ ‘em on a block; the highest bidder, you know would buy’ em.”⁴⁹ All of these encounters were forays into the slave market and opportunities to understand the way it worked.

As slaveholders talked amongst themselves, contemplated or declined prospective buyers’ offers to buy their human property in the very presence of those slaves, they repeatedly informed and reminded enslaved people of their value in the market. As some of the cases discussed above show, slaveowning women emerge in formerly enslaved people’s accounts of these experiences, and they repeatedly learned that their female owners’ economic investments were equally bound up in their bodies, their productive and reproductive labor and the products

the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 20, 2010). For reference to slaves visiting slave yards to talk to those held there, see interview with Rebecca Brown Hill, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed September 30, 2009).

⁴⁹ Interview with Katherine Clay, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 2, 2010) and interview with Tom Mills, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 20, 2010).

of that labor. For example, one formerly enslaved woman remembered overhearing her mistress tell a prospective buyer that “‘I wouldn’t sell her for nothing. I wouldn’t take less than a thousand dollars for him (brother) and I wouldn’t take two thousand for her; that’s my little breeder.’ In response to her mistress’ assertion she ‘cussed and said, ‘Damn you, I won’t never be no breeder for you.’”⁵⁰ Had this young enslaved girl decided to buy her freedom from her mistress she would have known how much she could expect to pay from hearing this conversation between her owner and a prospective buyer. She did not need to visit the slave market or be sold there to obtain this information because her mistress made it plain in the interaction which occurred in her own home.

Encounters between white slaveowning women and prospective buyers and sellers like this one reveal some of the ways in which the household converged with the slave market, and allowed these women to engage in slave market activities without leaving the confines of their households. These incidents also shed light upon white women’s economic investments in and relationships to slavery; and this fact was important for the slaves they owned, especially those who hoped to buy their freedom. Recognizing their female owners’ pecuniary interests in slavery gave enslaved people clues as to who to approach with an offer of self-purchase, and hearing these women state exactly how much they would accept for their bodies and labor gave them concrete ideas about the amount of money they would have to accumulate in order to buy themselves. They also came to understand that white women were not pawns in white slaveowning men’s pecuniary chess game. Instead, these women played the game quite well themselves.

⁵⁰ *Untold History of Slavery*, 77.

Precarious Transactions between White Women and their Slaves

While most southern states prohibited enslaved people from entering into legally binding contracts, they consistently struck financial deals with their mistresses and potential allies in hopes of purchasing themselves. Although their female owners were not bound by law to honor the particularities of these negotiations, their transactions were contractual by definition.⁵¹ Enslaved people understood the precarious nature of the agreements they made with white slaveowning women, and they learned important lessons about the ways race and gender shaped their economic and contractual vulnerability.

In spite of considering every factor that might determine whether their female owners would accept their requests to purchase their liberty, enslaved people frequently faced rejection of their proposals or violation of the agreements once made. When Dred Scott decided to purchase his freedom and the liberty of his family he approached his mistress Irene Emerson to establish the terms upon which he could do so. When Dred learned her asking price, he realized that he was unable to offer his mistress full payment, so he proposed to give her a lump sum as a

⁵¹ Michael L. Nicholls found that self-purchase was far more common in the British territories during the American Revolution and shortly thereafter, but white fears of black rebellion gave rise to restrictions that made it increasingly more difficult or costly—economically and socially—for enslaved people to buy themselves in the post-Revolutionary era. Michael L. Nicholls, “Strangers Setting Among Us.” *Virginia Magazine of History & Biography*, 2000, Vol. 108 Issue 2, 155-180. Through a system called *coartación*, Spanish colonial Louisiana provided enslaved people with a legal means by which to contract for and buy their freedom, even if their owners refused to do so. Kimberly Hanger, *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997, 25-26. According to Jennifer Spear, the slaves who became free via this system “accounted for half of all manumissions in Spanish New Orleans.” Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, 13. In French colonial Louisiana, slaves were indeed forbidden from entering into contracts. However, Louisiana’s *Code Noir* recognized that slaveowners continued to strike bargains with their slaves when they wanted to buy their freedom, in spite of this prohibition. Fearing that slaves might attempt to secure the funds to buy their freedom through dishonest means, the Code required slaveowners to obtain a “decree of permission” to do so. In other words, the Louisiana Code Noir required that such agreements be legitimated by law. B. F. French, *Historical Collections of Louisiana: Embracing Translations of Many Rare and Valuable Documents Relating to the Natural, Civil, and Political History of that State* (New York: D. Appleton, 1851). Judith Schafer, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846-1862*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003, 45-58.

down payment and to pay the rest in installments. He even secured a reputable “co-signor” to act as his security. His mistress rejected the offer, and as a consequence of her decision, the nation witnessed one of the most important court cases defining the relationship between race and citizenship in United States history.

In the case *Dred Scott vs. Irene Emerson*, Scott sued his mistress, claiming that his (deceased) master had repeatedly taken him into free territory for extensive periods of time, that he was in fact a free man, and that his mistress kept him in bondage illegally.⁵² He also charged her with false imprisonment and claimed that she “made an assault...and then and there beat, bruised and ill treated him... imprisoned him...and kept and detained him in prison there, without any reasonable or probable cause whatsoever...” and he asked the court for ten dollars in damages for his trouble. The St. Louis circuit court initially ruled in Irene’s favor, but Dred appealed and the court granted his motion for a new trial, which he won. But the Missouri Supreme Court stepped in and ruled that Dred and his family were not entitled to their freedom. He appealed and lost. His lawyers took the case to the United States Supreme Court, where Dred lost again.

While Irene’s role in this historical moment remains obscure, we know that the case made its way to the United States Supreme Court and that Dred ultimately lost his bid for freedom. Many years later Irene denied ever being directly involved in any part of these negotiations, the Scott family’s continued enslavement, or the court cases that followed her rejection of Dred’s proposition. Scott's case also demonstrates that negotiations that took place

⁵² *Dred Scott vs. Irene Emerson*, Petition for Leave to Sue For Freedom. St. Louis, Missouri: Missouri State Archives-St. Louis, April 6, 1846. <http://digital.wustl.edu/dre1846.0001.001> (Accessed June 4, 2010)

outside of southern slave markets possessed the same power to transform the lives of slaves as those that occurred within them.

Enslaved people throughout the South confronted equally precarious circumstances when they attempted to negotiate the terms upon which they could buy their freedom. After an enslaved man named Henry negotiated with his mistress for the purchase of his freedom, and after he paid her close to the full amount they agreed upon, she sold him to a slave dealer. Former slave Lunsford Lane knew exactly what risks he faced when he agreed to the terms his mistress set forth for the purchase of his liberty because “[l]egally, my money belonged to my mistress; and she could have taken it and refused to grant me my freedom...I have known of slaves, however, served in this way.”⁵³ The enslaved people who decided to purchase their freedom also understood how their status as property shaped the ways in which they could or could not rely upon the state, or local courts, to protect their financial interests. They knew that the courts would protect their mistresses' pecuniary interests before their own and they kept this in mind as they implemented their plans for self-purchase.

Self-purchase required enslaved people to engage in slave market activities, and in order to do so effectively, they had to possess a certain amount of knowledge about the slave market and the economy that thrived because of it. It was also perplexing for some enslaved people because in buying themselves, they funneled more currency into the domestic slave trade while simultaneously removing a human being from the slave market economy. Self-purchase was tricky because some enslaved people came to realize that their mistresses developed systems of

⁵³ Henry's story can be found in *The North Star*, March 3, 1848. Fortunately, individuals that were sympathetic to his plight intervened and helped to free him. See Lunsford Lane. *The narrative of Lunsford Lane, formerly of Raleigh, N. C., embracing an account of his early life, the redemption by purchase of himself and family from slavery, and his banishment from the place of his birth for the crime of wearing a colored skin*. Boston: Hewes and Watson's Print, 1845, 16.

value that were based upon their own assessment of how much their slaves were worth, and they had to adapt their knowledge of the slave market, and their strategies for purchasing themselves accordingly. When the grandparents of an unidentified African American approached their owners to buy their daughter's freedom they were "charged \$100 for every year that she was old."⁵⁴ Enslaved people had to be attuned to the slave market *and* the systems of value their owners developed.

Slaveowning parents frequently bestowed female slaves on their daughters and granted them ownership of any children these enslaved women might produce. Enslaved women thus had a distinct set of concerns to consider when trying to establish the terms upon which they hoped to secure their freedom from their mistresses. Their capacity to reproduce increased their value in southern slave markets which meant they might have had to pay higher prices for themselves. Living children complicated the process of self-purchase for many enslaved mothers for several reasons. When they decided to buy their freedom and were able to accumulate the funds to do so, they had to consider several different options. They could try to purchase the liberty of their children before their own, leaving their children in bondage until they could afford to buy their freedom, or remaining in bondage until they all could be free. They also faced the possibility that their female owners might not be willing to sell their children to them for any price, and as consequence, negotiations could be tense and tenuous. To be sure, enslaved men also contemplated the fate of the loved ones that they would leave in bondage, but these were

⁵⁴ *Untold History of Slavery*, 153, 85-86 respectively. Enslaved people also knew that the capacity to bear children greatly increased the value of enslaved women. In a recent study by Daina Berry, she found that enslaved women who possessed certain skills frequently had higher values in some slave markets than their male counterparts. See "'In Pressing Need of Cash:' Gender, Skill and Family Persistence in the Domestic Slave Trade," *Journal of African American History*, 92, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 22-36.

overwhelming concerns for enslaved women who were typically responsible for the care and well being of their children.⁵⁵

Curiously, some slaveowning women approached their slaves about the possibility of self-purchase. Harriet Jacobs' mistress did, but only after her father rejected Harriet's offer to buy herself. After his rejection of her offer and in light of her grandmother's failed attempts to buy her freedom from the same man, Harriet decided to steal herself instead. In order to protect herself from Dr Flint's sexual advances, remain close to her children, and prevent him from selling them, Harriet decided to hide in her grandmother's attic for nearly seven years. During that time she was able to send her children North, and when the opportunity arose, she managed to get there as well.

After taking up residence in the North, Harriet traveled to Europe, and upon her return, she received a letter from her female owner. In it her mistress put forth the following proposition:

I should have answered the letter you wrote to me long since, but as I could not then act independently of my father, I knew there could be nothing done satisfactory to you...I have always been attached to you, and would not like to see you the slave of another, or have unkind treatment. I am married now, and can protect you... I am very anxious that you should come and live with me. If you are not willing to come, you may purchase yourself; but I should prefer having you live with me... Think this over, and write as soon as possible, and let me know the conclusion. Hoping that your children are well, I remain your friend and mistress.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Scholarship about slave resistance most frequently establishes the difficulties that enslaved mothers faced when trying to free themselves and their children from the bonds of slavery. (See for example Deborah Gray White *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985, 1999 [2nd ed]) and Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004.) Mother/child relationships and slaveowners' desires to profit from separate sales and women's capacity to reproduce future laborers also shaped enslaved women and children's experiences in southern slave markets and their experiences of sale and separation just as much. Enslaved women often talk about their heart wrenching decisions to either buy themselves or their children's liberty and to separate themselves from their children as a consequence.

⁵⁶ Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* ed. Lydia Maria Child, Boston: Published for the Author, 1861, 280-281.

Harriet understood the implications underlying her mistress' offer; buy yourself or return to a state of bondage in the South. She was insulted and determined to deprive her mistress of an answer. More than this, her recollection is dripping with sarcasm: "Of course I did not write to return thanks for this cordial invitation. I felt insulted to be thought stupid enough to be caught by such professions. 'Come up into my parlor,' said the spider to the fly; 'Tis the prettiest little parlor that ever you did spy.'" She would not be caught in her mistress' web.

Harriet's decision to ignore her mistress' offer was motivated by far more than her suspicions about the Flint family. She had better ideas about how to spend her money, and buying herself was not one of them:

It seemed not only hard, but unjust, to pay for myself. I could not possibly regard myself as a piece of property. Moreover, I had worked many years without wages, and during that time had been obliged to depend on my grandmother for many comforts in food and clothing...I knew the law would decide that I was his property, and would probably still give his daughter a claim to my children; but I regarded such laws as the regulations of robbers, who had no rights that I was bound to respect.

After watching her grandmother toil day and night in hopes of buying her freedom and the liberty of her children, and subsequently observing slaveholders like the Flints make promises to enslaved people and then defraud them of their earnings and their freedom, Harriet understood the precarious nature of her mistress' proposition. If she decided to return to her mistress, there was no guarantee that she would ever be free, and her children might be re-enslaved because they were her mistress' property too. So she decided to remain a fugitive in the North and take her chances. She would not pay for something that was only hers to have and she would not return to a state of bondage either.

When her mistress' husband set his mind to find Harriet and take her back to the South, Harriet's white benefactors decided to enter into negotiations with him for the purchase of her freedom. Harriet was adamantly against it. She proclaimed: "The more my mind had become enlightened the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property; and to pay money to those who had so grievously oppressed me seemed like taking from my sufferings the glory of triumph... being sold from one owner to another seemed too much like slavery" and "such a great obligation could not be easily cancelled..."⁵⁷ Harriet's mistress was prepared to put forth terms upon which she could buy herself, but she refused to pay another deceptive and treacherous slaveholder for something every human being had a right to possess.

Harriet was not the only enslaved person to receive such an offer from a former mistress after running away. Reverend J. W. Loguen's mistress did the same, but her correspondence is markedly different in tone. In February 1860 she sent Loguen the following letter:

...I write you these lines to let you know the situation that we are in,—partly in consequence of your running away and stealing Old Rock, our fine mare. Though we got the mare back, she was never worth much after you took her; and, as I now stand in need of some funds, I have determined to sell you; and I have had an offer for you, but did not see fit to take it. If you will send me one thousand dollars and pay for the old mare, I will give up all claim I have to you. Write to me as soon as you get these lines, and let me know if you will accept my proposition. In consequence of your running away, we had to sell Abe and Ann and twelve acres of land; and I want you to send me the money that I may be able to redeem the land that you was the cause of our selling, and on receipt of the above named sum of money, I will send you your bill of sale. If you do not comply with my request, I will sell you to some one else, and you may rest assured that the time is not far distant when things will be changed with you...You had better comply with my request. I understand that you are a preacher. As the Southern people are so bad, you had better come and preach to your old acquaintances. I would like to know if you read your Bible? If so, can you tell what will become of the thief if he does not repent? and, if the blind lead the blind, what will the consequence be? I deem it unnecessary to say much more at present...S L.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 300.

⁵⁸ "A Voice from the South!" *Douglass' Monthly*, April 1860.

Replete with threats, accusations of theft and immorality, as well as passages intended to invoke guilt, Loguen's mistress *demand*ed that he pay for himself.

Casting all of her woe and bad fortune upon Loguen's shoulders, she simultaneously positioned him as her savior. By stealing himself, he placed her in a precarious financial position and forced her to sell two slaves and several acres of land, and yet only he could rectify the situation by buying himself. Part appeal and part demand, Loguen's mistress seemed confused about which approach would be more effective in getting the money she needed, so she incorporated both. She saw the financial negotiation with her former slave as the resolution to her financial woes. She claimed to reject someone's offer to sell him, which seems odd considering the efforts involved in trying to extract money from a fugitive slave, and that an immediate sale would have most likely lessened her financial problems. Even with all of these elements interwoven throughout her letter, Reverend Loguen rejected his former mistress' offer and took his chances as a fugitive in Syracuse, New York.

Although slaveholder indebtedness and estate divisions gave rise to some of the most traumatic experiences of enslavement—sale and familial separation—and brought slaves like Reverend J.W. Loguen head-to-head with the feisty women who owned them, they sometimes offered enslaved people economic opportunities not otherwise presented to them. Along with their knowledge of the slave market, enslaved people were in prime positions to take advantage of them. Lunsford Lane's master died and because of an insolvent estate, his mistress was forced to sell some of her slaves and hire out the rest. Lane was one of the fortunate ones because she permitted him to hire out his time, and he used this opportunity to accumulate the funds necessary to buy his freedom from her.

Lane's experience more explicitly reveals the ways that the discourses of the slave market permeated negotiations with his mistress:

[A]fter paying my mistress for my time, and rendering such support as was necessary to my family, I found in the space of some six or eight years, that I had collected the sum of one thousand dollars. I kept my money hid, never venturing to put out a penny, and never let anybody but my wife know that I was making any. *The thousand dollars was what I supposed my mistress would ask for me, and so I determined now what I would do.* I went to my mistress and inquired what was her price for me. She said a thousand dollars. I then told her that I wanted to be free, and asked her if she would sell me to be made free. She said she would; and accordingly I arranged with her, and with the master of my wife, Mr. Smith, already spoken of, for the latter to take my money and buy of her my freedom, as I could not legally purchase it, and as the laws forbid emancipation, except for 'meritorious services.'⁵⁹

Lane does not tell us how he and his mistress arrived at the same asking price; but we do know that as fellow residents in the slaveholding South, both of them encountered some dimensions of the slave market economy at some point in their lives.⁶⁰ The fact that his mistress settled upon the same sum implies that *she* was attuned to the value of her slaves, and perhaps, Lane became privy to this information when she sold her other slaves or while hired out to

⁵⁹ Lunsford Lane. *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N. C., Embracing An Account of His Early Life, The Redemption By Purchase of Himself and Family from Slavery, and His Banishment from the Place of His Birth for the Crime of Wearing a Colored Skin.* Boston: Hewes and Watson's Print, 1845, 16. [Emphasis mine]

⁶⁰ As historians Walter Johnson and Daina Berry have shown, enslaved people developed keen understandings of their value in the slave market and they sometimes used that information to shape their sales or the circumstances of their sales. They did so because they hoped to find and secure kind masters and they wanted to keep their families intact. Johnson argues that enslaved people gleaned significant information about their value, the particulars of the slave buying process, i.e. the qualities, skills and character slave buyers sought in the market, as well as the local slaveholding culture. While being coached by slave traders and being examined by potential owners, enslaved people assessed the character of the individuals that hoped to buy them and acquired the knowledge to "shape their sale." Berry's work shows that slave buyers paid particular attention to the gender of the slaves they hoped to buy and enslaved women possessed skills that prospective buyers valued highly. Enslaved people recognized this fact and promoted those skills in their attempts to keep their families together in the slave market. Formerly enslaved people's narratives suggest that this process of knowledge acquisition began long before they reached the market; but enslaved people used the information they acquired to shape a different kind of transaction. Enslaved people developed a sophisticated understanding of the slave market and they used their knowledge to establish and negotiate the terms upon which they could purchase and secure their freedom. Using the same information owners used to calculate the profits of a potential slave sale—skills, character, gender, and appraised market value—enslaved people sought to ensure that they, or their loved ones, would never have to enter the slave marketplace. See Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 176-188 and Daina Berry, "'We'm Fus' Rate Bargain: Value, Labor, and Price in a Georgia Slave Community," in Walter Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas, 1808-1888*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, 55-71.

various individuals in his community. Such a process was quite possible because, as scholars who study the domestic slave trade tell us, the slave market, its ideologies, and its discourses, were everywhere. Here it is important also to recognize that Lane was able to negotiate with his mistress for his freedom because he offered her a competitive price for which to buy himself, one that she could demand of any buyer if she had chosen to sell him in the slave market instead, and this transaction took place outside of the traditional spaces of the slave marketplace.

When white slaveowning women negotiated with slaves for the purchase of their freedom, they engaged in a type of slave market activity that reduced some of the risks they encountered when dealing with slave traders and speculators. If they fulfilled their part of the bargain, the purchaser would not sue them for false advertising, and in most cases, they were sure to receive their asking prices. On the other hand, enslaved people assumed significant risk. If they did not pay the full amount, their female owners could keep them in bondage. Even if they did pay their asking prices, their owner could deny that they did because local and state courts did not recognize these agreements. But these transactions, which technically occurred outside of the slave market, were in fact slave sales. They brought white women and the slaves they owned together, money changed hands, freedom papers and sometimes bills of sale documented the execution of the sale, and much of this process occurred within southern households.

Miserable and trapped inside her home by torrential rains, slaveholder Miriam Hilliard imagined how she might resolve the problem: “Oh, that I had a million slaves or more, To catch

the rain drops as they pour.”⁶¹ Although this is merely a fantasy it is telling nonetheless. Sitting entrapped in her home, Hilliard feels that owning slaves is the key to escaping its confinement. She does not imagine her husband buying a million slaves so that he could order them to catch the rain drops that kept her isolated in her home when she would rather be out visiting or shopping. She wishes that they were *her* slaves and they would catch a million raindrops because *she* ordered them to do so. To be sure, they would make her life more pleasant at home, but they freed her from it too. Like Hilliar, many white slaveowning women imagined their perfect slaves. Slave traders and speculators tried to fulfill those imaginings. They came to their homes and brought them slaves to examine and buy. They also bought slaves that these women no longer wanted or needed. Sometimes white women avoided the risks associated with doing business with these men by bargaining directly with the slaves they owned. White women rarely talked about these experiences, but their slaves testified to the ways these moments shaped their lives. And the southern household was integral in all of these transactions.

⁶¹ *Mrs. Isaac H. Hilliard Diary*, Mss. 178, 762, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La., 7.

CHAPTER THREE

Black Milk: Maternal Bodies, Wet Nursing, and Black Women's Invisible Labor in the Antebellum Slave Market

Sometime during the early decades of the twentieth century, an elderly man referred to as Uncle Anthony sat with an interviewer and recounted his experiences as a slave in the nineteenth-century South. As his narrative progressed, his interviewer asked him about how he came to be separated from his sister Emma. In response to this query, Uncle Anthony told an unexpected story about white mothers, enslaved nurses, and the slave market:

[I]f a Missus want a new gal fo' ter nuss de babies, she gwine look roun' an' fi' one. Dat how come my sister Emma was sold away. Massa tuk her to Camden. Put her on de banjor table an' Missus in de town bid highes'. Emma nuss fo' her till freedom.¹

Uncle Anthony not only situated white women within the commercial space where enslaved African Americans were bought and sold. He remembered these women as active participants, not disinterested bystanders, in the slave marketplace. In Uncle Anthony's estimation, these female slaveowners were members of a community that pivoted upon the southern market in black women's bodies. White mistresses assessed the labor needs of their families, went into the slave market to purchase healthy young women, and then brought them into their homes to perform maternal labor. Uncle Anthony's remembrances reveal one of the ways in which southern slave markets and slaveowning households converged, and the vital roles that women, particularly mothers, assumed in forging connections between the two.

¹ Orland Kay Armstrong, *Old Massa's People: The Old Slaves Tell Their Story*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1931, 127. Sylvia Cannon recounted a similar experience. Earlie Hatcher purchased her to serve as her child's nurse when she was only a young girl. She recalled, "Miss Hatchell want a nurse en dat how come she buy me." Interview with Sylvia Cannon, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed January 10, 2010).

This chapter examines the demand that white southern mothers created for enslaved wet nurses, the intimate labor that such nurses performed in southern households, and the ways that this commerce intersected with southern slave marketplaces more generally in the antebellum era. White women were crucial to the commodification of enslaved mothers' reproductive bodies, their breast milk, and the nutritive and maternal care they provided to white children. In the process, white women appear to have enhanced enslaved women's value in southern slave markets. Indeed, slavery and the slave market transformed enslaved mothers' ability to suckle into a form of largely invisible skilled labor. At the same time, white women's decisions to borrow, hire, or buy enslaved wet nurses often broke the already fragile, yet sacred bonds enslaved mothers had with their children, and intensified familial trauma within their communities. In all of these ways, white women once again brought the southern household and the slave market together. But this case sheds particular light on the informal as well as the formal markets through which enslaved mothers circulated, examining the roles white women played in these markets, and challenging prevailing conceptualizations of skilled labor among antebellum southern slaves.

Reconsidering the Role of Enslaved Wet Nurses in White Southern Households

Enslaved wet nurses' labor remains relatively invisible in historical studies of southern motherhood. Historians of southern women and motherhood tend to agree that white elite- and middle-class mothers used enslaved wet nurses as a last resort, not because they were readily available. White mothers therefore often hid their existence, use and importance of enslaved wet nurses within plantation households. As author Sally McMillen's observes,

Middle- and upper-class women could have turned to black women for child rearing and wet-nursing, [but] the majority of healthy white women accepted their maternal role with

commitment and love...Because of the presumed easy availability of black wet nurses, it is sometimes imagined that plantation women typically delegated breast-feeding to slaves. A romantic vision of the antebellum mistress—slightly debilitated, crinoline clothed, eternally beautiful, and untouched by any burden that could be taken on by slaves—adds to this misunderstanding...[However] careful examination of personal letters and journals reveals that a large proportion of middle- and upper-class southern women breast-fed their infants, out of concern for the children's health and development as well as in recognition of their own duties as mothers.²

Writing against a post Civil War nostalgic “lost cause” historiographical tradition, scholars like McMillen construct an equally problematic narrative about white slaveholding women. Many white women were *not* always healthy following childbirth, and enslaved people consistently performed the most intimate of tasks within southern slaveholding households—such as combing and styling their owners’ hair, lacing their corsets, warming their beds and massaging their feet at night. Enslaved women were regularly charged with caring for white infants and children at the expense of their own. Still, some historians promulgate a vision of self-reliant and highly sentimental white mothers who refused the aid of enslaved wet nurses just so that they could perform this particular labor themselves.³

² Sally McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth and Infant Rearing*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990, 5-6 and 111-112 respectively. It is important to note that McMillen bases her contentions about her subjects’ infrequent use of enslaved wet nurses on the references made in southern women’s letters and diaries. In Appendix One, Table IV, McMillen quantifies infant feeding practices for the years 1800-1860 and finds only 73 comments about the subject in her selected sources. She concludes that twenty percent of these women used wet nurses (she does not indicate whether these women were bound or free), 118. Scholars Valerie Fildes and Geraldine Youcha study wet nursing and infant nursing in a global context from antiquity to the present and they do not find the practice of cross-class or cross-racial wet nursing to be an anomaly. See, Valerie Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles, and Babies: A History of Infant Feeding*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986, 138-143 and Geraldine Youcha, *Minding the Children: Child Care in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, New York: Scribner, 1995, 60-66.

³ Slaveowning women often wrote about why they could not nurse their children, and the most frequent rationale was insufficient milk production. Ella Gertrude Thomas cited this reason for her decision to use an enslaved wet nurse: “Pa has kindly permitted us to have her as a wet nurse for my baby. I do not give sufficient milk for him. I have tried cows milk. Then we had a goat. After we moved down here Georgianna nursed him and he commenced to fatten but her baby is nearly a year old and she did not have milk enough for both” (See “Tuesday, July 16, 1861,” Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*. Ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990, 186-187). Enslaved people knew this too. Mary Kincheon Edwards nursed her mistress’ baby for this very reason: “De most work I done for de Vaughns was wet nuss de baby son, what name Elijah. His mammy jes’ didn’t have ‘nough milk for him.” [Interview with Mary

Unfortunately, available sources grant us limited insight into the decisions that white southern mothers made with regard to using enslaved wet nurses and this makes it difficult to determine how many used enslaved wet nurses with any degree of certainty.⁴ Most nineteenth century mothers did not leave diaries and records behind, nor did they have time to write down their thoughts about the activities that shaped their days. Those women who did have time to record their maternal experiences in diaries and personal correspondence were part of a literate and privileged stratum of southern society and thereby offer a class-specific narrative of maternal practices in nineteenth-century households.⁵ Moreover, advice and prescriptive literature, which figures prominently in studies of southern motherhood, presented guidance based on *ideal*, and not always *real*, situations, and often drew upon impractical philosophies, which we know were

Kincheon Edwards, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 28, 2010).] T.W. Cotton said that “Grandma raised me on a bottle so mother could nurse Walter (white). There was something wrong wid Miss Fannie” [Interview with T.W. Cotton, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 2, 2010)]. Jeff Calhoun’s “massa had 15 chillun and my mamma suckled every one of dem, ‘cause his wife was no good to give milk.” [Interview with Jeff Calhoun, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 13, 2010)]. Louise Pettis recalled that her grandmother nursed some of her owners’ children while her mother nursed her mistress’ son Mike. She claimed that her mother did so because “His mama got sick.” [Interview with Louise Pettis, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 5, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 13, 2010)].

⁴ Existing studies of southern motherhood tend to focus on specific states and/or communities and thereby offer wonderful microhistories that do not necessarily provide us with an understanding of maternal practices across the region. For these reasons, I think it is important that we incorporate the testimony and narratives of formerly enslaved people and clues offered in southern newspapers along with white southern women’s personal correspondence and letters as we seek a broader understanding of this phenomenon.

⁵ For example, Sally McMillen’s study of motherhood in the southern United States was drawn primarily upon the records of “[m]iddle- and upper-class women who were literate and who bothered to record their experiences.” She also notes that “because southern mothers considered breast-feeding the norm, they rarely felt impelled to write on the subject.” McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth and Infant Rearing*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990, 2 and 118-119 respectively.

often hard to live up to.⁶

The limited accounts left behind by enslaved wet nurses themselves also makes documenting their experiences difficult, and those that do exist often leave us with impartial descriptions of their lives. Indeed, McMillen claims that “few slaves mentioned their role as wet nurses,” that “[p]ersonal narratives by former slaves do little to contradict the idea that nineteenth-century southern mothers usually breast-fed their infants” and that “southern mothers used slaves...primarily for infant care rather than breast-feeding.”⁷ A quick review of formerly enslaved people’s narratives reveals what appears to be silences about white mothers’ use of enslaved wet nurses and they therefore seem to reinforce McMillen’s assertions. But we must remember that silences, or what appear to be silences, do not always signify absence.

White southerners’ use of enslaved wet nurses and the importance of these women within southern households become apparent in a more extensive review of ex-slave narratives which took the range of possible terms and phrases they used into consideration. A review of the oral histories compiled by the WPA only yielded twenty-eight references to enslaved “wet nurses.” However, being mindful of the varying terminology and phrases used by interviewers for the Work Projects Administration (WPA) when recording formerly enslaved people’s testimony, far more cases surfaced. In many narratives, interviewers used terms like “nuss” instead of nurse. In other cases interviewers recorded the terms “wet nurse” and “nurse” interchangeably or did not use the terms wet-nurse, nurse, or nuss at all when ex-slaves spoke of white children being at the

⁶ Anne Firor Scott asserted that “...southern women in the years before 1860 had been the subjects-perhaps the victims-of an image of woman which was at odds with the reality of their lives.” Scott eloquently showed that elite southern women’s lives rarely conformed to the image of the southern lady set before them since childhood. Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, x and Jay Mechling, “Advice to Historians on Advice to Mothers.” *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 1 (Fall 1975), 44-63 and McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 114n5.

⁷ McMillen, “Breastfeeding and Elite White Motherhood” in *The Old South*, ed. Mark Smith, Malden: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd, 2001, 251 and *Motherhood in the Old South*, 124-125.

breasts of enslaved women.⁸ Other terms like “suckle” were also used. All of these terms appear far more frequently than “wet nurse.” “Nurse” appears an estimated two hundred and twenty-seven times, “nuss” appears sixty-two times, “suckle” appears twenty times, and “breast” appears fifty-two times in formerly enslaved people’s narratives.⁹ Even when enslaved people simply talked about enslaved women serving as nurses to white infants, they often clarified the kind of nursing they spoke of, and sometimes included wet-nursing.¹⁰ While historians who have written about white southern women’s use of enslaved wet nurses do not discuss these differences in terminology, it is crucial to consider them because they reveal the ways that different discursive assumptions and frameworks constructed differently understandings of the practice and its scope.

It is also important to note that the questionnaire which the WPA’s National Advisor on Folklore and Folkways developed for interviewers’ use did not include any questions about slaveowners’ maternal or parenting practices, nor did it include specific questions about the practice of wet nursing.¹¹ Moreover, it is even more vital for us to remember that the WPA interviewed about two percent of the formerly enslaved people who were still alive at the time.¹²

⁸ Interview with Peggy Sloan, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 6, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 2, 2010).

⁹ I am in the process of carefully analyzing these narratives to determine that nature of the nursing ex-slaves are talking about, because it is also possible that they were discussing their own maternal care. It is also important to note that enslaved mothers nursed other enslaved women’s children as well.

¹⁰ Interview with Rachel Sullivan, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 13, 2010).

¹¹ See “Supplementary Instructions # 9-E to the American Guide Manual” April 22, 1937. Records of the Library of Congress Project, Writers’ Unit, NA. republished in *Slave narratives, a Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*. Library of Congress, 1941.

¹² Norman. R. Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection,” *American Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Fall 1967), 535n2.

Bearing these two points in mind, it is quite possible that the formerly enslaved people that were interviewed neglected to mention wet nurses because the nature of the questions did not compel them to do so, and that a larger sample of formerly enslaved people would have produced more references to the practice.

In addition to slave narratives, nineteenth-century newspapers throughout the South not only document the demand for and supply of enslaved wet nurses, but also reveal a niche market for these women whether for hire or sale to white southern families. A sample of southern newspapers from 1800 to 1865 provides ninety separate references to wet nurses, and more than one thousand when reprinted ads are considered. Of the ninety references, twenty-seven specify racial preferences; two preferred white wet nurses only; one preferred a free colored woman; one offered an enslaved wet nurse for sale, another sought one to purchase, and the remainder offered or sought enslaved wet nurses for sale or to hire.¹³ Moreover, even if the number of white women who used enslaved wet nurses was small, the data above suggests that it would behoove us to consider the significance of this practice and its broader implications for black and white women, their children, and the economy of slavery in the nineteenth century South. Sally McMillen found that twenty percent of the white women she studied used wet nurses, including enslaved women. Given the propensity towards multiple births among these women, and the far larger number of women that remained outside the scope of her analysis, a more significant number of women may have demanded black women's maternal labor.¹⁴

The Paradox of Cross-Racial Wet Nursing in the South

¹³ Many simply specified that one was "wanted." There were 1,012 references to wet nurses in the sample of southern newspapers when reprinted ads were taken into account. More careful analysis of these ads is forthcoming.

¹⁴ Sally McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth and Infant Rearing*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990, 118.

White southern women's use of enslaved African American wet nurses was troubling and problematic to outsiders and to many southerners as well.¹⁵ Their discomfort was not because wet nursing was an unusual practice. Women have placed their infants at the breast of wet nurses since antiquity. There were however, always underlying concerns about the power of body fluids and a child's ability to imbibe its mother's moral and racial essence through her milk among Americans, especially in the South.¹⁶ In the nineteenth century, as the United States witnessed unparalleled waves of European immigration and as nativist fears shaped American-born whites' perspectives on the people tenting the country's major urban centers, male physicians and pseudo-scientists embraced this understanding of breast milk with renewed fervor. They cautioned white mothers against sending their children to immigrant women to nurse because breast milk served as a means by which mothers passed their traits onto infants.¹⁷ These ideas about moral and physiological contagion vis-à-vis mother's milk spread throughout the South, and in light of their use of enslaved African-American wet nurses, white southerners faced a peculiar paradox.¹⁸

¹⁵ Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1972 [1938], 55-57.

¹⁶ Valerie Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles, and Babies: A History of Infant Feeding*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986, 188-210 and Geraldine Youcha, *Minding the Children: Child Care in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, New York: Scribner, 1995, 61.

¹⁷ On the long history of wet nursing see Valerie Fildes, *Wet nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present*. New York: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1988. On American ideas about wet nursing and the role of medical and scientific professionals in shaping women's understanding of wet nursing see, Janet Lynne Golden, *A Social History Of Wet Nursing in America: From Breast to Bottle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 51-57 and Sally McMillen, "Mothers' Sacred Duty: Breast-feeding Patterns among Middle- and Upper-Class Women in the Antebellum South." *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Aug., 1985), pp. 333-356 and *Motherhood in the Old South*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990, 4-5.

¹⁸ When we take the character of wet-nursing across the globe and throughout time into account, cross-racial wet-nursing in the American South should not have been peculiar at all. As Fildes, Youcha and other scholars have shown women have consistently used wet-nurses of different ethnic, religious, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds to nourish their infants. However, it would seem that the specificity of racial slavery in the United States and the ideologies that were fundamental to this particular system of bondage may have made this practice peculiar. I would like to thank Rickie Solinger and other participants in the "Motherhood and the State in the

If breast milk carried the racial and moral essence of the lactating mother on the one hand and African-Americans were morally and biologically inferior beings on the other, what would be the fate of white children who were being nourished at the breasts of enslaved black women? This was indeed a question that white southern women tried to work through and they did so in a number of ways. Many, it would seem, reconciled these incongruities by prioritizing the needs of their children over all else. Others thought of their own fragile health, which prevented them from nursing or producing an adequate milk supply, and decided that using a wet nurse was essential. Some may have ignored the moral and social implications of using enslaved wet nurses because they were more concerned about the negative effects breastfeeding would have on their physical appearance. While many scholars have dismissed the idea that southern mothers put their children at the breasts of wet nurses for aesthetic reasons some ex-slaves thought differently. According to Betty Curlett, “[w]hite women wouldn’t nurse their own babies cause it would make their breast fall.”¹⁹

Some white southerners decided that the bound condition of the mother was the problem, not the racialized body offering nourishment to their white children. John Van Hook claimed that in the part of Georgia where he resided, “it was considered a disgrace for a white child to feed at the breast of a slave woman, but it was all right if the darkey was a free woman.”²⁰ John’s great-grandmother Sarah Angel earned her freedom because of this aversion. A member of the

Waning Age of Empire” workshop at the 2011 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women for their feedback and insight about this point.

¹⁹ See my discussion of Ella Gertrude Thomas below. See interview with Betty Curlett, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 13, 2010).

²⁰ Interview with John Van Hook, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 2, 2010).

Angel family needed a wet nurse and since Sarah was nursing a child of her own, they chose to use her. They did not want Sarah sleeping in the slave quarters while she was nourishing the baby, so they freed her.

Most slaveowners were not so generous. On some plantations, like the one where Peggy Sloan was raised, slaveowners “had a woman to look after the little colored children, and they had one to look after the white children.” Peggy’s owners charged her enslaved mother with wet-nursing the white infants, and in spite of this racial division in maternal care, Peggy’s mother was permitted to suckle her along with her mistress’ children. However, her owners did not free her so that she could perform this labor.²¹ All in all, white southerners grappled with the paradox of cross-racial wet nursing by privileging the health of white infants over all else and subordinating the needs of enslaved women and their children in the process.

White southern women’s decisions to use enslaved wet nurses victimized African-American mothers and further commodified their bodies. Enslaved mothers were hired out as wet nurses and some of the most intimate parts of their bodies were used in ways that white female bodies were not. When owners sold black women as wet nurses slave dealers used lactation as a selling point and thus a kind of skilled labor. Enslaved women were forced to care for white children who could eventually own them, and were, more often than not, separated from their own children in the process. Moreover, it was often in the midst of the trauma and loss that frequently accompanied the death of a child that slaveowners pushed enslaved lactating

²¹ Peggy’s narrative also gives credence to my earlier assertion that sometimes enslaved people used the terms nurse and wet nurse interchangeably. Interview with Peggy Sloan, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 6, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 2, 2010).

women into the slave market. They were then hired or sold and forced to nourish and care for the children of white southerners who may or may not have sympathized with their pain.

White women understood that this particular kind of exploitation was not lost on the enslaved women who nursed white children, and they feared the consequences. In her diary, slaveholder Emma Holmes told of how an enslaved nurse who was accused of making her cousin's newborn baby swallow twelve metal pins. This act caused panic throughout the estate, resulted in imprisonment and trials of all but one slave, and the subsequent relocation of the white family pending the outcome of the investigation. It was, as Emma called it, "the most diabolical wickedness." But such an act was made possible because white slaveholding mothers forced enslaved women to care for their children while denying them the opportunity to nurture their own.²²

White southern mothers were active agents in these ordeals. They decided that an enslaved wet nurse could best serve them and their children, and only they knew the reasons why they made these decisions. Only they knew whether they could withstand the physical toll breastfeeding imposed upon their bodies. Only they knew whether their bodies could produce adequate supplies of milk to feed their children. The decision to borrow, hire, or buy an enslaved wet nurse was ultimately their call. Propriety and the politics of white respectability ensured that few men would dare violate the sanctity of white women's bodies, especially of the elite and planter classes, and thus physicians, husbands and other men had to take these women at their

²² "July 16, 1861," *Diary of Miss Emma Holmes, 1861-1866*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979, 63-64.

word.²³ In all of these ways, white women created a demand for enslaved wet nurses and shaped a niche market for the skilled labor their lactating bodies performed.

Yet, in spite of the fact that white “mothers usually made the final decision about breast-feeding” and “seem to have ignored the concerns of husbands and physicians,” white southern mothers remain in the background of scholarly conversations about the demand for and marketing of enslaved women as wet nurses.²⁴ We are led to believe that these mothers allowed their husbands and male physicians to decide whether they needed a wet nurse or not. While this might certainly have been true in some cases, evidence suggests that white women often played active roles in the decision-making process when a wet nurse was needed. Moreover, some of these white women were instrumental in shaping a market for enslaved wet nurses’ labor and may thereby have augmented enslaved women’s potential values within southern slave markets more broadly.

The Formal and Informal Markets in Milk: North and South

Historians typically describe southern slave marketplaces as the disorderly domains of white men, and they also contend that the slave market was far more than the architectural spaces where enslaved people were housed and subsequently exposed for sale, and this is critical when we think about white women’s roles in southern slave markets. We must also recognize that enslaved people were not only objects of sale that traversed the spaces of the slave marketplace;

²³ In her discussion of J. Marion Sims’ gynecological experimentation on enslaved women in nineteenth-century Alabama, Deborah Kuhn McGregor argues that “Sims operated openly and publicly on nude African American women, when to do so with white middle- and upper-class women patients would have caused severe repercussions.” To expose middle- and upper-class white female bodies to white male gazes and their touch, even if they were medical professionals, was taboo. Sims and many white southerners had such access to enslaved women’s bodies because they were property. See Kuhn McGregor, *From Midwives to Medicine: The Birth of American Gynecology*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998, 61 and 48.

²⁴ McMillen, 131.

they were commodities that could also provide prospective buyers with information about the specific terms of their sale, and as such, the slave market traveled with them. When we acknowledge these facts, it becomes possible to understand that the slave market was everywhere and that white women could actively engage in slave market activities without ever visiting the spaces where slaves were housed and sold. Both inside and beyond official slave markets, some white women procured the services of the perfect enslaved wet nurse. Several scholars have written extensively about the existence of a “wet nurse marketplace” but their studies focus primarily upon the northern United States and other countries. Even so, their work is useful in understanding some of the contours of the southern wet nurse marketplace and in identifying key differences between these markets in the North and the South.

In her study *The Social History of Wet Nursing*, historian Janet Golden describes a primarily urban marketplace in the northern United States in which free white women, who were often poor immigrants, single mothers, or those who had “fallen” in the eyes of society, were its primary laborers. This marketplace involved a number of public facilities, private entrepreneurs, and benevolent organizations that gradually institutionalized the use of wet nurses and offered white women’s services to infants born to parents from all social classes. They were particularly active from the 1850s to the 1870s, in what Golden calls “the heyday of wet nursing.” This was a market largely “configured by patterns of immigration, ethnic stereotypes, and racial prejudice, as well as medical thinking and local domestic practices.” Whereas the formal marketplace rested on medical and employment referrals and recommendations that one would expect to find in sectors of industry, Golden also finds an informal wet nurse market which formed as a product of familial and communal networks, one in which white parents sought and procured wet nurses

by word of mouth. She also identifies a distinct discourse that circulated within the wet nurse marketplace and served as a “kind of shorthand, which...combined the vernaculars of medicine and domestic service.” In northern newspaper advertisements, Golden finds that advertisers relied upon this discourse when seeking the ideal wet nurse. They “emphasized four qualities: good health, upstanding character, plentiful milk, and milk that was fresh.”²⁵

While Golden gives some attention to this market’s southern counterpart, she finds little to talk about, particularly when addressing white southern women’s use of African-American wet nurses. She admits that a “southern tradition of cross-race wet nursing [existed] in the antebellum years” but suggests that this tradition had more to do with a large African American domestic workforce, especially after the Civil War. Based on her analysis of a sample of nineteenth century southern newspapers, Golden argues that “the degree to which...the preference for wet nurses of a particular race, shaped the marketplace is not revealed in the advertisements...” In her analysis, the southern wet nurse marketplace did not seem to be much of a market at all; but it was.²⁶

While the urban wet nurse marketplace of the North involved “private entrepreneurs” who profited from the labor of free white women, advertisements posted in southern newspapers reveal the existence of a formal market in which slave traders and slaveowners offered wet nurses for sale and hire. According to Frederic Bancroft, the “slave wet nurse was a peculiar but not rare commodity” and that “she could, if buxom, spare one ample breast for the profit of her

²⁵ Janet Golden, *A Social History of Wet Nursing in America: From Breast to Bottle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 27 and 72 respectively.

²⁶ Golden, *A Social History of Wet Nursing*, 64-96.

owner.” Furthermore if she was “of good character and appearance, she was at a premium.”²⁷ A survey of southern newspapers shows that he was right. The formal market in enslaved wet nurses was primarily a hiring one, but, as mentioned earlier, offers for sale appear in scattered the advertisements as well (See *Fig. 3.1-3.3* below). Interestingly, a large number of advertisements do not specify whether enslaved wet nurses are for sale or hire; they merely indicate that enslaved women’s invisible labor and the use of their maternal bodies could be had for a price (*Fig. 3.4*).

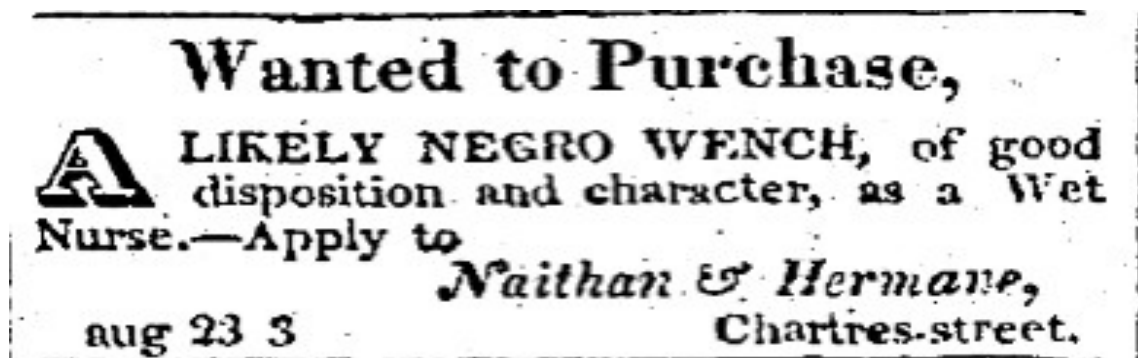


Figure 3.1 “Wanted to Purchase.” *Orleans Gazette, and Commercial Advertiser*, (New Orleans, LA) August 24, 1819

The free or bound status of wet nurses marked a critical difference in southern wet nurse marketplaces. To be sure, the conditions under which many white wet nurses labored in the North were anything but ideal. But they were free persons and thus were able to change the terms of their labor when they saw fit. Under most circumstances enslaved wet nurses could not quit or desert their duties, or even demand better treatment.

²⁷ See Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, [1931]1996, 154 and 155n27.

Private Sales.

Healthy Young Wet Nurse.

Capers & Heyward

Offer at private sale, a young and healthy WET NURSE: For further particulars, apply at our office, SOUTH SIDE ADGERS' WHARF.

June 7 smw3

Delivered to the Hand

Figure 3.2: "Private Sales: Healthy Young Wet Nurse." *The Charleston Mercury*, (Charleston, SC) June 07, 1856

January 12 J

WANTED TO PURCHASE OR HIRE—A WET NURSE; must be perfectly healthy, of even temper, and unexceptionable character. Apply to WM. ALLSTON GOURDIN, Meeting-street, opposite S. C. Institute Hall.

January 12

Figure 3.3: "Wanted to Purchase or Hire: Wet Nurse." *The Charleston Mercury*, (Charleston, SC) January 12, 1859

A WET NURSE.—A healthy young woman with a fresh breast of milk, is to hire. She is recommended as sober, honest and good natured. Apply at No. 153 Common street.

Figure 3.4: "A Wet Nurse." *Louisiana Advertiser*, (New Orleans, LA) September 17, 1827.

Enslaved women's bodies belonged to others, their labor belonged to others, and the products of their productive and reproductive labor, including their milk, belonged to others as well. The free white women who became wet nurses in the North were often separated from their children, but they were encouraged to care for their children, and more often than not they retained their maternal rights and could reclaim their children if they so desired.²⁸ Owners, sellers, buyers and hirers rarely presented enslaved wet nurses with these choices because their children were property too. The slave marketplace and thus frequently separated enslaved mothers and children with no prospect of reuniting.

Though far more work needs to be done in order to establish market patterns with certainty, the availability of enslaved wet nurses or wet nurses more generally in the nineteenth century South may have been contingent upon a regional, communal, rural and/or urban contexts and networks. Expansion into the lower South and westward movement in already established southern states meant that all types of resources and labor were scant in these newly populated areas.²⁹ Cities then likely developed the most formal market in wet nurses while settled rural areas characterized might hold fast to an informal wet nurse marketplace that relied upon word of mouth and communal and familial ties.

As Janet Golden found for the North, southern advertisers used a discourse that emphasized good health, upstanding character, and plentiful, fresh milk when they sought the services of wet nurses. But the discourse that characterized the *enslaved* wet nurse marketplace did not simply combine vernaculars of medicine and domestic service. It drew upon the lexicon

²⁸ Golden, *Social History of Wet Nursing*, 64-96.

²⁹ Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 19.

of the slave market and created a distinct terminology in the process (see *Fig. 3.5*). Scholars of the domestic slave trade have paid particular attention to discourses that characterized and circulated through southern slave markets.³⁰ Specific terms like “first rate,” “likely” and “No. 1” allowed slave traders to assign value by placing slaves within “saleable lots,” enabled slave dealers to “pack them into racial categories,” and came to signify the ideal characteristics prospective buyers sought in slaves. Character and personal history were equally important factors in selecting enslaved laborers too.³¹

FOR SALE or to hire, a colored girl, 17 years of age, a first rate house servant, washer, ironer and cook; also, a good wet nurse, with a child 3 months old: and raised in the country since ten years of age, trusty and of good disposition, fully guaranteed against the vices and diseases prescribed by law.
Terms: 6 and 12 mos credit, for approved endorsed notes, secured by special mortgage until final payment.
Acts of sale to be passed before Wm Boswell, Esq. not pub.
a26-1w

Figure 3.5: “For Sale or to Hire.” *New-Orleans Commercial Bulletin*, (New Orleans, LA) April 26, 1836

The language and business practices of the slave market made finding a suitable wet nurse a bit easier and owners as well as prospective hirers and buyers used it in their searches and offers for enslaved wet nurses. Many advertisements sought “a healthy Negro woman, with a fresh breast of milk, to suckle and nurse an infant child” or a “healthy, well-disposed colored woman.”³² Others requested or offered wet nurses who were “without encumbrance” or “without a child” (See *Figures 3.6* and *3.7*).³³ The terms that appear in these and other advertisements mirror those

³⁰ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 123-127.

³¹ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 144-147.

³² *Louisville Public Advertiser*, April 20, 1830 and *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 18, 1835.

³³ *The Daily Dispatch*, February 14, 1863 and *The Charleston Mercury*, September 03, 1856. The opposite can be found as well. Some individuals indicated that enslaved women had infants, they noted the age of their children. There are a few reasons why they may have felt it necessary to include this information. From the advertisements

used in the marketplace for free wet nurses. Yet in others, the discourses of the wet nurse marketplace merged with that of the slave market. For example, Thomas Theriner's Intelligence Office placed an advertisement in the *Charleston Mercury* that offered "a likely COLORED WET NURSE, 17 years old" for hire (Fig. 3.8). A.R. Phillips also sought to hire out "a LIKELY GIRL, 20 years old, as a Wet Nurse." Others sought wet nurses that were "neat and sound in body and reputation."³⁴

WET NURSE.—To hire, a wet nurse who is a fine healthy woman, has lain in about six weeks ago, and is now unincumbered with her child. Apply to Madame JONES, No. 83 Girod street, near the corner of Magazine street, suburb St. Mary. New Orleans, July 11, 1827—21*

Figure 3.6: "Wet Nurse." *Louisiana Advertiser*, (New Orleans, LA) July 11, 1827.

WANTED.—A colored wet nurse without a child, as soon as possible. Apply to DR. J. M. SULLY, State street, St. James' Sqr. may 18

Figure 3.7: "Wanted." *Daily Morning News*, (Savannah, GA) May 18, 1858.

like those shown in Figures 4.5 and 4.6, it is clear that some prospective hirers preferred enslaved wet nurses who did not have children or whose children could remain with their owners during the period of hire. Including information about their children allowed these individuals to pass over those ads which did not appeal to them and thus reduced the likelihood of miscommunications between hirer and hiree. Others may have included this information in order to inform prospective hirers that enslaved women would be hired along with their children.

³⁴ *The Charleston Mercury*, August 03, 1857, *The Daily South Carolinian*, January 16, 1858 and *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette*, August 14, 1845.

HAVE YOU GOT NEGROES FOR HIRE?
 Are you in want of Domestic SERVANTS, LABORERS, MECHANICS, etc.? Or do you want EMPLOYMENT? At TH. THEINER'S INTELLIGENCE OFFICE, No. 333 King street, can be obtained information to the above questions.
WANTED TO-DAY, White and Colored COOKS, CHAMBERMAIDS, NURSES, HALF-GROWN GIRLS, a COLORED BOY to drive a Cart, and an accomplished WAITER.
FOR HIRE, a likely COLORED WET NURSE, 17 years old, and male and female SERVANTS of every description.

Figure 3.8: "HAVE YOU GOT NEGROES FOR HIRE?" *The Charleston Mercury*, (Charleston, SC) August 03, 1857; Issue 9992; col A

Prospective hirers or buyers sometimes wanted the enslaved women who came into their children's nurseries to do more than suckle; and the agents, brokers, and slaveowners who hired them knew exactly how to appeal to employers. Louisa Street not only served as wet nurse to her mistress' child while she nursed her own daughter, she was also her maid.³⁵ Advertisers touted enslaved wet nurses' skills as seamstresses, washers, house servants, and ironers, or advised prospective hirers that enslaved female laborers could double as wet nurses if the need arose (Fig. 3.9).³⁶ For example, Mrs. Pendleton placed the following advertisement in the *Richmond Daily Dispatch*: "A Woman suitable for a wet nurse. She is a good seamstress washer and ironer. Apply at Mrs. Pendleton's on Cary street, between 3d and 4th."³⁷ Slave trader Thomas J. Bagby advertised "A Woman, as wet nurse with a child about six weeks old. She is strong and healthy, and can also wash and iron well."³⁸ When Thomas Boswell advertised an enslaved woman for hire, he touted her skills as an excellent house servant and told prospective hirers that she was a

³⁵ Interview with Amy Elizabeth Patterson, *Indiana Narratives, Volume V, WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 2, 2010).

³⁶ *The Daily Dispatch*, February 24, 1863 and *The Daily South Carolinian*, July 31, 1856.

³⁷ "For hire" *The Daily Dispatch*, February 24, 1863.

³⁸ *The Daily Dispatch*, August 1, 1863.

new mother who could serve as a wet nurse as well. For him, and hirers like the one who posted the advertisement below, enslaved women's ability to serve as wet nurses offered an added bonus.³⁹

Some advertisements for wet nurses placed in southern newspapers do not specify racial preferences.⁴⁰ Others, like those shown below, certainly did (*Fig. 3.10 and 3.12*). Still others reveal that prospective hirers did not care about the racial background of the women who would nurse their children. They were willing to take "white" or "colored" women into their homes (*Fig. 3.11*).⁴¹

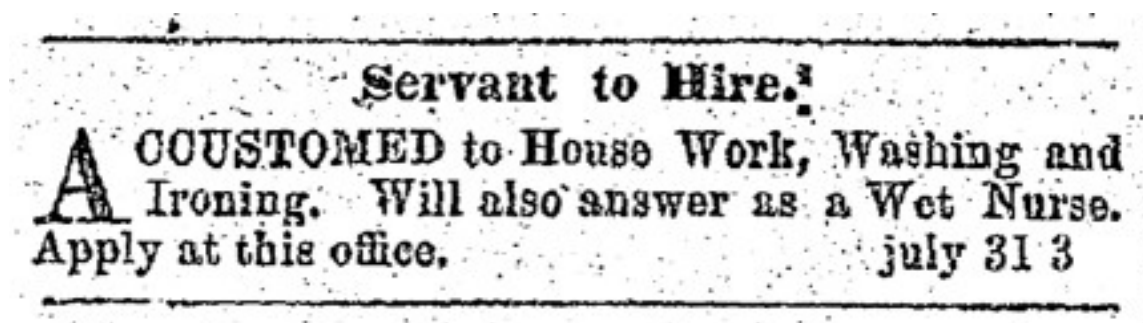


Figure 3.9: "Servant to Hire." *The Daily South Carolinian*, (Columbia, SC) July 31, 1856.

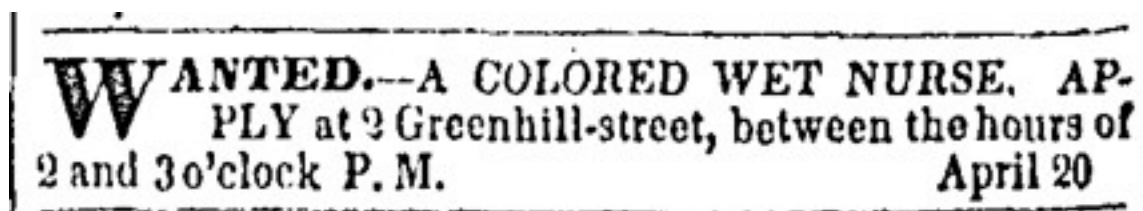


Figure 3.10: "WANTED,--A COLORED WET NURSE." *The Charleston Mercury*, (Charleston, SC) April 20, 1858.

³⁹ "For hire" *The Daily Dispatch*, March 22, 1862.

⁴⁰ Golden, 73-74.

⁴¹ *Daily Morning News*, April 23, 1851, *Daily Louisville Public Advertiser*, December 08, 1830, and *Daily Morning News*, May 06, 1853.

WANTED—A WET NURSE, (white or colored)
without a child. Apply in Alexander street, East
side, three doors above Charlotte. June 17

Figure 3.11: “WANTED,--A WET NURSE, (white or colored) without a child.” *The Charleston Mercury*, (Charleston, SC) Tuesday, June 17, 1856; Issue 9639; col A

WANTED,
A GOOD WET NURSE—white preferred. Also, a
competent DRY NURSE, for which liberal wages will
be paid. Apply at this office. oct23

Figure 3.12: “WANTED,--A GOOD WET NURSE—white preferred.” *Daily Chronicle & Sentinel*, (Augusta, GA) October 23, 1855; Issue 261; col A

When we place wet nurses in the context of the slave market, we understand that this was a very different kind of marketplace than its northern counterpart. White northerners had limited access to the actual bodies of the white wet nurses they hired to feed their children. In stark contrast, slaveowners, slave traders, prospective slave hirers and buyers were permitted to manipulate and examine enslaved women’s bodies.⁴² Certainly, white southern women were among those who desired physical knowledge of enslaved wet nurses’ bodies.

In a letter to her mother-in-law, South Carolinian slaveholder Alicia Middleton gave voice to one mother’s search for a woman to nurse her baby and the ways that such endeavors brought the enslaved wet nurse marketplace and the southern slave market together:

A wet nurse has at length been procured, in rather an unexpected way. Mrs. Girardeau, meeting a good natured healthy looking Negro woman in the street with an infant in her arms, inquired of her if she knew of a wet nurse to be hired. She said that she was one

⁴² There are a number of parallels that can be drawn between the urban wet nurse marketplace and the enslaved wet nurse marketplace of the South. For example, much like the northern parents who employed physicians to aid them in their quests for healthy, morally upstanding white women to nurse their infants, prospective slave buyers relied upon medical professionals to evaluate enslaved people’s health and “soundness” prior to purchase as well. See Walter Johnson, “Masters and Slaves in the Market: Slavery and the New Orleans Trade, 1804-1864.” (PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 1995), 128.

herself and was in the hands of a broker for sale, but did not know if she could be hired. Mr. T, with his usual alacrity, applied to the broker, and found that the woman was from Georgetown, and had been brought up in the family of Mrs. John Kirth, he obtained from Mr. R a pretty satisfactory account of her, and having had her on trial a few days, and finding her good tempered and anxious to please, they determined to purchase her, from the funds to be rec^d from the sale of the horses, and thus if possible to be relieved from the present, and perhaps future difficulties of the like kind. She has had many children, and is therefore somewhat experienced in the care of them. Her child, is a fine healthy looking infant, and may grow up to be useful to them. I am sure you will wish success to the plan.⁴³

On the surface, this extract from Alicia Middleton's letter might appear to support white women's exclusion from the slave marketplace. But Mrs. Girardeau's encounter challenge the way scholars have understood white southern mothers' uses of enslaved wet nurses and have imagined white women's relationships to southern slave markets more generally. Mrs. Girardeau and the mother did not actually go into the slave market. The former crossed paths with this enslaved wet nurse by chance, and both she and the mother left the remaining labor of finding out about the enslaved woman's character and history of infant care to two southern men. The two women did not visit the broker to inquire about the terms of sale for the enslaved woman, nor were they the ones to do the footwork necessary to learn about the enslaved woman's past and her moral character, information used to determine whether she was a satisfactory choice. Instead, Mr. T and Mr. R, assumed these roles. We are led to believe that it was Mr. T, and not the invisible mother, that made the final decision to purchase the enslaved woman and the infant

⁴³ Alicia Middleton to Anne M. Dehon, Undated Letter, *Dehon Family Papers*, South Carolina Historical Society. Sally McMillen also cites this letter but she makes one important semantic change. In the first sentence, she transcribes the word unexpected as unsatisfactory and this imbibes a significantly different meaning here. By seeing the exchange and procurement of an enslaved wet nurse as unexpected instead of unsatisfactory, we begin to consider the possible acceptance of this kind of labor in southern maternal communities and within the marketplace more broadly. Seeing it as unsatisfactory forecloses those possibilities and substantiates the idea that southerners viewed white women's use of enslaved wet nurses as unfavorable, when this may not have been the case. See Sally McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth and Infant Rearing*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990, 125-126.

child she happened to be holding during her chance encounter with Mrs. Girardeau. And he apparently did not seek to purchase the “many children” to whom she had already given birth. But other details tell a different story.

Mrs. Girardeau played a key role in the orchestration of the later negotiations that took place with the slave broker because her encounter with this enslaved mother was the catalyst for the subsequent actions of all parties. Furthermore, she may have been the first one to assess the healthy appearance of the infant in the enslaved woman’s arms, which was an important indication of the nutritive quality of her milk, and a key factor in the selection of wet nurses. On the other end of this transaction we find Mrs. John Kirth, or someone acting on her behalf, as the person offering the enslaved woman for sale. While the letter does not identify the white mother who sought the services of a wet nurse, we know that she too was involved in the transaction because she assessed the enslaved mother’s qualifications during a trial period in which the woman was brought into her home to care for her child. These white women, like so many others, were thus instrumental in shaping the demand for a particular kind of labor that could be bought and sold in southern slave markets and they engaged in slave market activities that happened beyond the walls of the slave yard.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Historian Frederic Bancroft claimed that if an enslaved wet nurse was “of good character and appearance, she was at a premium,” But it is difficult to address the question of whether lactation augmented enslaved women’s values in southern slave markets for a few reasons. Not one price or appraised value appears in the data collected, analyzed and interpreted for this study. A thorough analysis and comparison of lactating and non-lactating women’s prices has yet to be undertaken, and this might bring us closer to an answer. But even then, uncertainty abounds because it is quite possible that not all advertisers mentioned an enslaved woman’s lactation in their ads and hirers and buyers may have learned of enslaved women’s lactation after hire or purchase and employed them as wet nurses once they arrived in their homes. Notwithstanding, we can begin this work by raising these important questions and doing all that we can to provide answers. Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, [1931] 1996, 155n27.

The Informal Market in Black Milk

Mrs. Girardeau's encounter, and similar circumstances that arose in southern slaveholding communities, suggest that an informal market in enslaved mothers existed and intersected with the formal networks of the slave marketplace. Enslaved people's narratives, and some white southern women's personal letters and diaries, attest to the existence of an informal "market" in black milk in which slaveowners borrowed and lent enslaved wet nurses to new white mothers.⁴⁵ This market was contingent upon the circulation of commodified African American lactating bodies, but it did not generally involve the exchange of these individuals for currency. In this way, the informal market in enslaved wet nurses, in which white women were the primary arbiters and beneficiaries, resembled the systems of barter and exchange in colonial and pre-Revolutionary households. As historian Jeanne Boydston has shown, white women produced household goods and foodstuffs and then bartered and exchanged them with other women in their communities. The growing use of currency and the emergence of a market economy displaced much of this exchange but it did not stop it completely. To be sure, white women did not "produce" enslaved wet nurses, but they could claim ownership of their bodies and the products of their labor. Although enslaved women were commodities that could not be "consumed," the product of their lactating bodies—their milk—could be. They were property, a kind of living "good" that was bartered and exchanged among white women, and as such, they could be transferred from one person to another without diminishing or obliterating their value in a formal market that involved the sale and hire of slaves. More profoundly, the informality of

⁴⁵ While money did not change hands in these exchanges, I am including them in this study because they involved commodified human beings and should therefore be seen as market activities. It should also be noted that enslaved people discussed enslaved wet nurses far more than white southern women did in their personal letters and correspondence and thus my paper reflects this disproportionate representation.

this market has heretofore obscured it from historians' view. But enslaved wet nurses, and those who knew them, testify most poignantly to its existence.

Formerly enslaved women talk about their own experiences as wet nurses and sometimes make the trauma of these experiences palpable. Mary Kincheon Edwards told her WPA interviewer that “[d]e most work I done for de Vaughns was wet nuss de baby son, what name Elijah [because] [h]is mammy jes’ didn’t have ‘nough milk for him.”⁴⁶ Eugenia Woodberry served as wet nurse to “four head uv Miss Susan chillun a’ter she marry Massa Jim Stevenson” for “Miss Susan ne’er didn’t suckle none uv dem chillun.”⁴⁷ Henrietta Butler said that her “damn old missis was mean as hell...She made me have a baby by one of dem mens on de plantation. De old devil! I gets mad every time I think about it. Den dey took de man to war. De baby died, den I had to let dat old devil’s baby suck dese same tiddies hanging right here. She was always knocking me around. I worked in the house nursin’.” Her mistress not only perpetrated sexual violence against her, which appears to have been an unwanted pregnancy, but she forced Henrietta to provide maternal care to her child in the midst of mourning the death of her own. Henrietta lived with the trauma and injustice of these acts and when she conveyed them to her interviewer, she included them in a laundry list of cruelties perpetrated by her owner.⁴⁸

Enslaved men and women also spoke about the experiences of women they knew who served in this capacity. Warren Taylor’s mother served as his mistress’ wet nurse.⁴⁹ Moses

⁴⁶ Interview with Mary Kincheon Edwards.

⁴⁷ Interview with Eugenia Woodberry, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (Accessed May 2, 2010).

⁴⁸ Interview with Henrietta Butler, *Mother Wit: the Ex-Slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writers’ Project*, ed. Ronnie Clayton, New York: Peter Lang, 1990, 38.

⁴⁹ Interviews with Warren Taylor, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 6, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave

Slaughter's mother did too. She had "ten children of her own, which she nursed and tended and also was wet nurse of ten Fauntleroy children of Master Joseph and Mistress Fauntleroy. All of us children, black and white, called my mother 'Mamma' and she never turned a deaf ear to a child..." Jeff Calhoun's mother suckled all 15 of her mistress' children.⁵⁰ A formerly enslaved woman named Mary Jane remembered that "mother would have a baby every time my mistress would have one, so that my mother was always the wet nurse for my mistress." Many slaves told of their grandmother's invisible labor as well. Sara Louise Augustus said that her grandmother "wet nursed so many white children" and "nursed all babies hatched on her marster's plantation." On some occasions, formerly enslaved people like Louise Pettis explained that both their mothers *and* grandmothers served as wetnurses for their owners' families. Pettis's grandmother Rachel Willis suckled some of her master's children and Louise claimed that her mother nursed her alongside her mistress' son at her grandmother's breast.

Some former slaves believed that white women's use of enslaved wet nurses was a widespread practice and that some communities may have been more or less tolerant of the practice. Rachel Sullivan said that "[a]ll de white ladies had wet nusses un dem days."⁵¹ Former

Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (Accessed February 2, 2010), Moses Slaughter, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 1 -- Volume 5: Indiana and Ohio Narratives*, ed George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977, The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa08&chapterID=raa08-002&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood/>. (accessed June 25, 2010), Jeff Calhoun, Mary Jane [No Last Names included], in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Supplement, Series 1 -- Volume 8: Mississippi Narratives, Part 3*, ed George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: 1978, The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=raa08&chapterID=raa08-002&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood/>. (accessed June 25, 2010), Sarah Louise Augustus, and Louise Pettis, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 5, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed May 13, 2010).

⁵⁰ Interview with Jeff Calhoun.

⁵¹ Interviews with Rachel Sullivan and Ellen Vaden, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 7, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in

slave Ellen Vaden's mother nursed her and the infant son of her mistress. But Ellen said that "[w]hen they had company, Miss Luisa was so modest she wouldn't let Tobe have 'titty'. He would come lead my mother behind the door and pull at her till she would take him and let him nurse. She said he would lead her behind the door." While some white mothers like Miss Luisa hid their reliance upon enslaved women's invisible labor from their friends and neighbors because of "modesty" or communal mores, others were not so bashful. Rachel Sullivan's owners allowed a white mother visiting from Russia to use her aunt as a wet nurse while she resided on their plantation. Rachel said, "I was a nu's gal, 'bout 'leben years old. I nu'sed my Auntie's chillun, while she nu'sed de lady's baby whut come from Russia wide de Marster's wife—nu'sed dat baby fum de breas's I mean."

In trying to ensure that their children's health was secured, white slaveholding mothers often made enslaved mothers prioritize white children's nutritional needs over those of their own offspring, and they did so in various ways. T.W Cotton's mistress made his grandmother feed him from a bottle so that his mother could wetnurse her infant.⁵² Far more frequently, white mothers placed twice the demand on these women by making them feed white and black children alike. Peggy Sloan's mother suckled her and her mistress' son Johnnie together. Emmett Beal's mother also suckled him and his mistress' son William.⁵³ William McWhorter's heartbreaking memory of his Aunt Mary proves that even masters could partake in this kind of coercion:

My Aunt Mary b'longed to Marse John Craddock and when his wife died and left a little baby- dat was little miss Lucy- Aunt Mary was nussin' a new baby of her own, so Marse

Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (Accessed February 2, 2010).

⁵² Interview with T.W. Cotton.

⁵³ Interviews with Peggy Sloan and Emmett Beal, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 13, 2010).

John made her let his baby suck too. If Aunt Mary was feedin' her own baby and Miss Lucy started cryin' Marse John would snatch her baby up by the legs and spank him, and tell Aunt Mary to go on and nuss his baby fust. Aunt Mary couldn't answer him a word, but my ma said she offen seed Aunt Mary cry 'til de tears met under her chin.⁵⁴

White slaveholding mothers rarely wrote about enslaved wet nurses. But when they did, they offer insight into the exchange of enslaved wet nurses between friends and family members and the roles they played in this informal market. From the scant sources we have available to us, it is clear that many of them failed to account for the impact such decisions had upon the enslaved women and children involved or the psychological trauma associated with the circumstances that led to these exchanges. Scattered entries from Ella Gertrude Thomas' diary grant us a unique opportunity to understand this informal wet nurse marketplace and its effects upon the enslaved women who circulated through it:

In my last entry in this book I was so much interested in the political events of the past few months that I did not allude to a domestic event of much greater personal interest to me, the birth of my little Jefferson. Darling little fellow! I have just nursed him and laid him down in such a sweet slumber. He was born on the 27th of April. He was born on Saturday and Mamie's Joe was born exactly two weeks after. . . . On Sunday we sent down to the Rowell plantation for America. She has lost her baby which would have been three weeks old (had it lived) tonight. Pa has kindly permitted us to have her as a wet nurse for my baby. I do not give sufficient milk for him. I have tried cows milk. Then we had a goat. After we moved down here Georgianna nursed him and he commenced to fatten but her baby is nearly a year old and she did not have milk enough for both. My baby's bowels have been very much out of order for the past month but he is much better now. . . .⁵⁵

In the midst of her concern about an inadequate milk supply and her unsuccessful attempts to bottle feed her baby, we learn a bit about how enslaved wet nurses fit into her life as a new

⁵⁴ Interview with William McWhorter, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 28, 2009).

⁵⁵ "Tuesday, July 16, 1861," Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*. Ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990, 186-187.

mother. For reasons that remain unclear, Ella used two enslaved wet nurses, America and Georgianna. Perhaps she needed Georgianna because the trauma of losing a child weighed too heavily upon America and she couldn't fulfill her duties. Or perhaps it was just a matter of timing. As the milk of one wet nurse dried up, another was found to take her place. Several things are clear however. Ella seems unconcerned about the sorrow that America may have experienced after the loss of her child; nor does she seem to care about the psychological toll that wet nursing someone else's child may have placed upon the mother so soon after her child's death. She says nothing of America's separation from a slave community that may have offered her support during a difficult time. Ella mentions the burden that nursing two babies placed upon Georgianna but in the end, her mind returns to her son Jefferson's once disturbed, but now better, bowels. In later entries, Ella mentions her use of other enslaved wet nurses to feed the daughter she birthed after Jefferson and similar disregard colors her reflections. In her entry for Friday July 31, 1863 Ella talks about her father's "kind proposal" to lend her Emmeline (America's sister) who gave birth a few months earlier. Emmeline would replace Nancy, another enslaved mother, as wet nurse for her new daughter if Nancy's milk did not "agree with her."⁵⁶

As Ella's personal experiences attest, white slaveowning women were sometimes central to the circulation of enslaved women's bodies and in using those commodified bodies to suit their needs and the needs of their children.⁵⁷ Family members like her father willingly loaned enslaved mothers to each other without contemplating the impact such exchanges would have

⁵⁶ "Friday July 31, 1863," Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*. Ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990, 218.

⁵⁷ It also reveals the part that some slaveowning played in this marketplace as well.

upon the women being moved from one household to another.⁵⁸ Perhaps Ella was an exceptional case of a white southern mother who had no qualms about using enslaved wet nurses. But her experience sheds light upon the roles some white women played in the economy of slavery and the continued commodification of enslaved women.

Reimagining “Skilled” Labor

Slavery and the slave market transformed enslaved women’s ability to suckle into a form of invisible skilled labor that could be extracted, bought, and sold. To say that an action, which we traditionally associate with the intimate relationship between mother and child, could in fact be a form of skilled labor may strike some as peculiar at first. But as Daina Ramey Berry has argued, prevailing conceptualizations of skilled labor in the context of American slavery are far too narrow to account for the kind of work enslaved women performed, for the prices some enslaved women brought when exposed for sale, for understanding the ways slaveowners, prospective buyers and hirers assigned value to certain types of skilled labor and for gaining a sense of how gender shaped their appraisals.⁵⁹ In her study of slave sales in nineteenth century Georgia, Berry found that gender and skill affected the price slaveowners were willing to accept for female slaves they wanted to sell or offer for those whom they wished to purchase. While scholars like Michael Tadman, Walter Johnson and Steven Deyle have demonstrated that this was the case for male slaves, few of them explore the important relationship between slave prices and the particular skills female slaves possessed.

Recognizing wetnursing as a form of skilled labor requires that we continue to broaden

⁵⁸ John Van Hook recalled that “one of the Angel women died and left a little baby soon after one of Granny’s babies was born, and so she was loaned to that family as wet nurse for the little orphan baby.” Interview with John Van Hook.

⁵⁹ See Daina Berry, “In Pressing Need of Cash”: Gender, Skill, and Family Persistence in the Domestic Slave Trade.” *Journal of African American History*, Winter 2007, Vol. 92 Issue 1, 25.

our conceptualization of what constituted “skilled labor” in the context of slavery. Berry found that slaveowners assigned value to the kinds of labor that women performed everyday; they praised the skill and expertise of enslaved women who were responsible for everything from cooking in their kitchens to thrashing rice in their fields.⁶⁰ Like other kinds of labor, nursing a child involved skills that women learned, refined and mastered over time, and some women were more adept at it than others. Just as white southerners complained about the cooks that burnt their food or the washers who overstarched their clothing, they complained about the enslaved wetnurses who did not suckle and care for their children properly. While we might not be convinced that something as allegedly natural as nursing a child was a form of skilled labor, the white mothers who sought the services of enslaved wet nurses and the men and women who sold and hired out enslaved women for this purpose most certainly saw it this way.

To be sure, white women’s milk and their ability to nurse was also commodified in northern and southern wet nurse marketplaces; but their bodies belonged to them. In stark contrast to white nurses in the North, enslaved mothers’ lactating bodies were not just for hire, they were also for purchase and sale. In light of this, we should not discount the value of enslaved maternal bodies, the milk that only those bodies could produce, and white mothers’ roles in ascribing particular value to this kind of labor. Female slaveowners most certainly took all of these factors into account. Having learned that her female slave had been accused of theft by the man to whom she was hired, a white slaveowning women ordered him to whip the slave thoroughly for her crime, but she asked that he “spare her breasts, *as she is giving suck to a very young child.*”⁶¹ Whether this enslaved woman was nursing her own child or the child of her

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ *The Liberator*, (Boston, MA) Saturday, March 26, 1831; pg. 50; Issue 13; col D. Emphasis in original.

mistress is unclear, but we can be certain that her owner assigned immense value to her breasts and the milk that flowed from them, a value shaped by the slave market and the economy of slavery.

To think of a human being as a thing to be bought, sold, gifted and bequeathed allowed for the devaluation of certain kinds of human relationships and the feelings brought about by those connections. We have yet to grapple with some of the ways that the process of commodification made some female bodies more valuable than others and adversely affected enslaved mothers and children in different ways. Historians have established the point that enslaved women's sexualized, reproductive and productive bodies possessed myriad values in southern slave markets. Scholars also make clear that slaveowners expropriated the labor of enslaved women's bodies in ways that allowed them to extract the most profit while remaining mindful of the prices enslaved women commanded in the slave marketplace. Additionally, they have demonstrated that enslaved people who possessed specialized skills, such as blacksmithing, carpentry, and shoemaking for example, were by far the most expensive to buy. Yet, the ways we understand the value of enslaved people's gendered and skilled work does not take all types of labor into consideration and thereby renders certain dimensions of slavery and certain groups of laborers, and extractors of labor, invisible. By looking at the ways in which the southern household and the slave marketplaces converged, we find that white women not only engaged in slave market activities, they shaped sectors of this market when they created a demand for specific kinds of intimate labor.

CHAPTER FOUR

“That ‘oman took delight in sellin’ slaves”: White Women and the Re-Gendering of the Slave-Trading Community.

In some respects, situating white women in southern households buying and selling slaves, and negotiating with them for their freedom supports prevailing understandings of the restrictive ways gender shaped women’s experiences of slaveownership and the masculinization of nineteenth century slave markets. However, as noted in previous chapters, southern households, particularly those dependent upon slave labor, were complex sites defined by a host of functions and factors. They were places of respite, workplaces, and spaces characterized by violence and terror. They were domains where white and black southerners cultivated their identities apart from and in relationship to each other. They were also testing grounds upon which white women learned about the slave market economy. More importantly, southern slaveowning households had a synergistic relationship with slave markets, and the connection forged between the two made it possible for white women to engage in slave market activities from afar without limiting their ability to visit these spaces to conduct business when they deemed it necessary to do so. This convergence also equipped them with the pecuniary knowledge they would need in order to negotiate sales and purchases once they got there.

White women grew up in households where the people around them talked about the value of the people they owned, about what depreciated and increased their worth, and how they could extract and reap the rewards of that value in southern slave markets. They were listening. Once they reached the age to act on their own behalf in legal and financial matters, many white women had no qualms about venturing into local slave markets to buy and sell slaves, and they put all the information they gleaned from their parents’ conversations and the discussions of

visitors who came to their homes to good use. Aunt Sarah's recollections about her abduction and subsequent sale in Louisiana offer an exceptional example of a white woman who did just that:

Reckon you heard bout de nigger traders?... Well suh, dey done stole me! Yas suh. Dey done so. Stole me erway from South Car'line an' tuk me down to Louisian'... I got on de block, an' de white folks pass by. White lady stop an' look at me. She go over an' talk to de trader, an' come back an' talk to de gen'lemen. "I think dat nigger gal was stole!" she say. She come to me ergain.

"Whar yo' live at, gal?" de lady ask.

"My home in South Car'lina, Ma'am."

"Don' you want ter come live wid me?" she say.

"Yas'um," I says.

"I'll take dat little nigger," she say. "Bid hundred an' fifty dollars!"

"Sold!" De man say. An' she pay him.¹

In this exchange, Sarah's owner displayed a sophisticated knowledge about the politics of the slave market. She clearly possessed an understanding of the litany of questions a prospective buyer should be prepared to ask the slave they hoped to purchase, and she did not hesitate in approaching Sarah to find out what she wanted to know. Upon seeing this young female slave exposed for sale that day, something suggested to her that Sarah was in an unfamiliar place, and perhaps her young age implied that she had been stolen away from her mother.² On the other hand, she may simply have known that allegations of unlawful sale would decrease the number of people willing to bid upon her, would keep the bidding price low, and would subsequently increase her chances of securing the slave she hoped to buy. Whatever the reasons, she used her knowledge of the slave market, slave traders' shady business practices, and other southerners'

¹ Orland Kay Armstrong, *Old Massa's People: The Old Slaves Tell Their Story*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1931, 130-132.

² Louisiana law prohibited the separate sales of enslaved mothers and children they may have had who were under the age of ten. There was one caveat; anyone could sell a child under ten if they were orphans. Interviews with former slaves reveal that slave speculators took advantage of this loophole by stealing children and selling them in distant slave markets where owners could not find them and potential buyers could not trace their origins. Judith Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana*, Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1997, 134.

fears to manipulate the auction for her own benefit. Confronting the slave trader and canvassing the crowd of prospective buyers to spread news of her suspicions, Sarah's owner exhibited her slave market savvy and a measure of comfort within a community comprised of individuals who shared a common desire to buy and sell slaves.

The historical silences surrounding white slaveowning women's relationships to antebellum slave markets seem to suggest that they had no place in these spaces.³ Typically, scholars depict southern slave markets as places hustling and bustling with nothing but white men and enslaved African Americans.⁴ White men transported the slaves to market. They were the individuals that went to the market to inspect and examine slaves, interrogate them about their pasts and assess their suitability for the labor they would subsequently perform. They were

³ Historians who study women and slavery in the colonial period do not make this assertion. For example Cara Anzilotti states that white women in colonial South Carolina "actively participated in the slave marketplace, buying and selling laborers, used them as a source of revenues by renting them out, and expected these slaves to further their relatives' economic welfare" and that "[m]any women managed the task of buying and selling slaves themselves." Cara Anzilotti, *In the Affairs of the World: Women, Patriarchy, and Power in Colonial South Carolina*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002, 54 and 60. However, when historians turn their attention to the nineteenth century, they interpret white women's relationships to antebellum slave markets quite differently.

⁴ We can trace this historiographical trend as far back as Frederic Bancroft and his comprehensive study of the domestic slave trade in America. While we have far more access to archival documents that situate white women in slave marketplaces than he had, historians continue to replicate gendered assumptions about these spaces. See Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, [1931]1996, Edward Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States." in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 5. (Dec., 2001), pp. 1619-1650, *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*. Ed. Walter Johnson, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, Daina Ramey Berry, "In Pressing Need of Cash": Gender, Skill, and Family Persistence in the Domestic Slave Trade." *Journal of African American History*, Winter 2007, Vol. 92 Issue 1, 22-36. To be sure, some historians talk about a few women who did not avoid slave marketplaces and its commerce but they either classify them and their activities as exceptional or they ignore the possible significance of their presence in these spaces. See Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, 76, Thomas Russell, "Sale Day in Antebellum South Carolina: Slavery, Law, Economy, and Court-Supervised Sales." (PhD Dissertation, Stanford University), 1993, 103-104, John Inscoe, "The Civil War's Empowerment of an Appalachian Woman: The 1864 Slave Purchase of Mary Bell" in *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996, 61-81, Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1999, 89-102, Kirsten Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*. Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004, and Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 110 and 317n33.

the ones to prepare and expose them for sale and to auction them off. They were the ones to sell them or buy them and take them home. Taken at face value, many archival documents might lead us to believe that men were the primary buyers and sellers of slaves, that slave trading was by and large a family business run by them, and that white slave trading men and their associates created exclusionary, homosocial communities that were bound together by a market in slaves. This was often true; but it was not always the case.

Travel narratives, interviews with former slaves, slave traders' papers and correspondence, notarial records, slave bills of sale, court documents, city and business directories, as well as censuses of merchants compiled by city officials to show that a host of witnesses, both in southern courts and outside of them, attested to white southern women's entry into and navigation of formal slave markets in New Orleans and suggest their participation elsewhere across the South. Whites and African Americans witnessed recalled these women's active engagement in slave market activities and *even* documented their participation in local slave trading businesses. Bringing their remembrances together creates an alternative conceptualization of antebellum slave markets, by situating white southern women squarely within these spaces. Their slave market activities, both real and imagined, encourage us to reconsider the ways that gender shaped economies and communities woven together by the institution of slavery in the nineteenth-century South.

White Women and the Formal Antebellum Slave Market

Prevailing arguments about white women and southern slave markets imply that they used different processes than men to buy and sell slaves when, in most cases, they did not.⁵

⁵ However, marital property laws did shape women's transactions in ways that they did not for men. For example, in Louisiana, married women who retained control of their property needed their husbands' permission to sell it and

White women hired agents and attorneys to buy and sell slaves, and they frequently relied upon their male kin to take care of this business for them. As a consequence, some historians assert that women's actions were profoundly shaped by their gender and the legal and customary constraints of antebellum southern societies.⁶ But their choices were not peculiarly "feminine."

White slaveowning women relied upon men to act as their proxies in southern marketplaces in the same ways that white slaveowning men did; and this holds true for women who employed family members as proxies too.⁷ Historians who examine white women's slave market activities without also looking at those of their male counterparts run the risk of reifying antiquated conceptualizations of women's economic powerlessness. Even a cursory look at white men's engagement in slave market activities reveals that they routinely depended upon male

the acts of sale included the clause "separated in property" and "duly authorized and assisted by her husband." This did not necessarily mean that their husbands were personally involved in the transactions; it only meant that they acquiesced to the sales.

⁶ According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese white women did not possess business acumen and this "lack of business knowledge constituted only part of the problem for these southern women, for—romance aside—they could not exercise mastery of their own slaves, much less contribute to the control of the slaves in their communities. Women who managed plantations were, like all other planters, responsible for contributing to the patrols and to other community responsibilities such as building and repairing the levees on the delta, but women could not meet those obligations in person... Thus, although some women owned plantations and more had to assume responsibility when their husbands were away, they 'managed' them through men in all except the rarest of cases. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988, 205-206. Drew Gilpin Faust supports her view. When the Civil War created circumstances that forced southern women to manage plantation estates and the business affairs related to its operation, they begrudgingly assumed managerial roles but they often leaned heavily upon their husbands' advice and direction. See Faust, "'Trying to Do a Man's Business': Slavery, Violence and Gender in the American Civil War." *Gender and History* Volume 4 No. 2. 197-212. When it comes to buying and selling slaves, scholars tend to point to white women's use of male agents, proxies, and kin to buy and sell slaves for them as a practice that they relied upon because they wanted to avoid slave markets and their commerce. Many white women did indeed consult with male kin and proxies about their slave market business and did delegate the tasks of selecting, purchasing and selling enslaved people to them. However, white men did the same thing. Walter Johnson talks about white men's ambivalence about slaveownership and management and their attempts to work through the issues they faced by frequently consulting each other about their decisions to buy or sell in the slave market. More importantly, men often talked to elder males who may have possessed more knowledge about what were often unfamiliar entrepreneurial endeavors. Women consulted with men for the same reasons. They sought out advice from individuals who knew about the commercial world and how to navigate it. See Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*. 78-88.

⁷ For planters and slaveowners' use of factors to conduct planting and personal business affairs as well as the close relationships that developed between factors and their clients see Harold Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers: Financing and Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800-1925*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, [1969]1998, 30-48.

factors to conduct professional and personal business affairs for them. While most of their partnerships were between men who did not consider themselves kin, friends, or even social equals, understanding the relationships between factors and their clients sheds light upon the ways white slaveowning women's business relationships with male kin and family friends functioned.

Factors operated as proxies for their clients and they were widely used because planters often lived "far from the commercial centers"; and they employed factors to "buy and sell, contract and pay his debts, and in general have his affairs cared for without being required to travel to town or to concern himself with problems of exchange, transfer of funds, discounts, and the like." Even more than this, factors attended to personal requests for products and goods that had nothing to do with planting. In other words, white southern men relied heavily upon other white men to conduct their daily business and to attend to the products and goods they deemed necessary for their pleasure. More importantly, factors became close acquaintances with some of their clients, developed longstanding friendships over many years and established kinship ties when marriages took place between members of their families.

Planters' decisions to employ factors were risky because such business partnerships required them to initially invest enormous amounts of trust in men they often only knew cursorily, men who could take their crops and their money and run. White slaveowning women also used factors to conduct their business, and they were equally susceptible to these risks. Not unlike their male counterparts, some of them opted to reduce these risks by employing family members and friends to act as factors for them. This is not to say that family and friends were

above betrayal. However, one can presume that the likelihood of betrayal would be much less because of the connections these women had with the men they entrusted with their business.

Perhaps some women did indeed feel more comfortable engaging in slave market activities from afar by employing agents and factors to buy and sell slaves, but this does not imply that they felt inept at conducting this business themselves.⁸ When we think and talk about women's business relationships with white men, we should not assume that men dominated these partnerships or that women relinquished control of their financial affairs to them because of coverture, local custom, gender biases in the marketplace or some sense of ineptitude. It would also be wrong for us to situate kinship as the overriding factor in business relationships between male and female family members. Indeed when we evaluate the correspondence that passed between them, we see that these partnerships operated very much like those between factors and their clients.

Regardless of whether they conducted their business personally or by proxy, women astutely managed their affairs in southern slave markets. Slaveowner Elizabeth Guy employed her brother John Burwell to transact her business affairs, including the sale and hire of slaves. While one might assume that a tone of warm collegiality would characterize their communications, John speaks to her with formality, explaining every delay and possible discrepancy in her financial matters. In addition to this he provides her with itemized statements, which delineated every penny spent. At the end of his June 8, 1848 letter, he relays news about the family, but when he talks to her about the hire of her slaves and other financial matters attended to on her behalf, he grants her the respect we would expect a factor to pay to his client:

⁸ Wood, *Masterful Women*, 59.

Enclosed I send you a check [?] on the Exchange Bank Richmond for \$80.31 cts which settled all accounts between us. You will find a statement of the whole matter on the opposite sheet~~~~~I regret not being able to send it sooner but had [illegible] the pleasure of those owing you and have not yet collected the hire of Jim Guy but you will see that share accounted for it under settlement. Neither have I paid Dr. Jefferson's medical bill, not being able to see him or to get the precise amt of the account but have retained \$12 which is about what I understood it was through Jno Read(?) should there be any difference either way it can be settled when I see you. You will please acknowledge receipt when you next write to me. I would be write you more but feel quite unwell at this time from eating cherrys [sic] and cake, which has given me very bad diareah [sic]...⁹

White propertied women like Elizabeth benefited financially from their decisions to employ family members as agents, factors and proxies.¹⁰ In light of this, it should not be surprising to find them employing their husbands or male relatives to buy and sell slaves for them.¹¹

Travelers, White Southern Women and the Spectacular Slave Market

Although white women often delegated the task of slave buying and selling to men, they were not afraid of or averse to slave markets, or the business conducted in these spaces. In fact, they frequently entered and navigated the slave markets scattered throughout the region and they bought, sold, and hired slaves using the same business strategies and practices that white men employed. Three groups in particular—travelers, enslaved African Americans and slave traders—paint a rather intricate picture of the women who ventured into and navigated slave marketplaces.

White male and female travelers seized opportunities to visit southern slave markets and attend slave auctions during their excursions through the South, and occasionally they observed

⁹ John A. Burwell ALS to Elizabeth T. Guy, Lynesville, N.C., June, 8, 1848, *Burwell-Guy Family Papers*, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁰ As Kirsten Wood tells us, they conducted their business in much the same way as white men: “[l]ike their male peers, slaveholding widows did much of their business by letter, through agents, or at home” but they also “ventured beyond their enclosures.” Wood, *Masterful Women*, 84.

¹¹ Wood, *Masterful Women*, 84, 87. Wood also says that “[w]henver possible, they did business with people they knew personally” and “[t]ransacting with kin kept money in the family.” Many of the white slaveholding widows that Wood talks about not only relied upon family and acquaintances to conduct their business, they frequently continued to engage in business with the men whom their husbands trusted most.

women present at these affairs. Former slaves mention the women who stood in crowds that encircled the auction blocks, who queried them about their backgrounds, skills, and desires to be purchased, and who bid upon them and took them home. When white women decided to buy or sell enslaved people, they sometimes sought out the assistance of the men who plied their trade in human flesh. Slave traders, often documented their encounters with these women in their account books and personal correspondence. As they wrote about the women who approached them to buy or sell slaves, they offer unparalleled insight into how these encounters unfolded and how some white women conducted themselves during these transactions. More profoundly, they talk about the women who worked for them or with them in their daily business. Through these narratives we begin to recognize and understand white women's encounters with the slave market in all of its guises.

One of the most powerful testaments to white women's presence and activities within southern slave markets arises from the experiences of male and female travelers who not only made time to venture into these commercial spaces, but who also talk about the women they met while there. Travelers like John Theophilus Kramer, Jonathon Holt Ingraham, and William Henry Venable occasionally remarked on the women they encountered in the slave market and they captured their likenesses in the illustrations that appeared in their publications. Just like their male counterparts, white female travelers toured the South and seized opportunities to visit southern slave markets. Fredrika Bremer, Theresa Pulszky and Harriet Martineau attended slave auctions during their excursions and occasionally they too observed women at these affairs. White slaveowning women such as Mary Boykin Chesnut also recount their strolls through southern towns and their encounters with slave auctions.

In 1859, John Theophilus Kramer published an account of a slave auction held in the spectacular Rotunda of the St. Louis Hotel, located in the New Orleans French Quarter. Kramer wrote about the procession from beginning to end, describing each slave exposed for sale, the auctioneer's bantering and the bidding process in great detail. He also remarked upon "[f]our ladies, splendidly dressed in black silk and satin, and glittering with precious jewels are entering the hall. Eight or ten gentlemen, who were already comfortably seated next to the platform jump up from their chairs, and politely offer seats to the fair guests..."¹² These splendidly dressed and bejeweled women were not situated on the outskirts of the festivities; they sat in close proximity to the platform upon which slaves would be sold. Kramer's description of their attire suggests that they may have been members of the upper class and that they were the kind of "ladies" that we might think would avoid such affairs. Indeed, their mere entry into the room commanded chivalrous acts from the men already present. What is even more interesting here is that these four women came to the slave auction together and men did not escort them. How did they decide to attend the slave auction and what was their motivation for doing so? Were they single, married or widowed women? What did their male friends and kin think about them attending a slave auction without male escorts? Did they refuse such protection? What compelled them to go together, to dress "splendidly" and to adorn themselves with jewels? Were there other women present who Kramer did not write about? Kramer's account shows us that sometimes women preferred to engage in slave market activities in the company of others like themselves. They attended slave auctions together, collectively observing, selecting and subsequently buying

¹² John Theophilus Kramer, *The Slave-Auction*, Boston: Robert F. Wallcut, 21 Cornhill, 1859, 6.

enslaved people.¹³ They had economic agendas of their own, agendas that sometimes involved buying and selling slaves, and had little to do with the wants and needs of white men.

In many respects, this particular venue does not conform to the kind of slave auction we tend to associate with the slave market. In contrast to the sale that we have become familiar with—the scantily clad slave upon an auction block in the center of a male-only audience of prospective buyers, usually in an auction house located in an obscure section of a city’s commercial district—Kramer describes an upscale, sanitized and more palatable scene. The St. Louis Hotel was one of the finest lodging establishments in the city, offering accommodations to hundreds of guests, including military and political officials, and providing entertainment for them and city residents as well. The hotel’s Rotunda was made of marble and encircled by columns and offices where auctioneers and others conducted their business. Perhaps here, amidst the marble columns, dressed in the finest silks and glimmering jewels, was a slave marketplace suitable enough for “ladies.” Indeed “J.Y.S.” who wrote about his/her visit to a slave auction in Columbia, South Carolina suggested that class shaped prospective buyers’ selection processes and bidding behaviors. “Ladies” and “gentlemen” may not poke and prod enslaved people exposed for sale, or engage in similar processes of inspection and interrogation but they still attended auctions, bought slaves and took them home.

We might expect the auctioneer to regard these women as mere observers or acquaintances of prospective male buyers; but according to Kramer, this was not the case. As the auctioneer called off the slaves for sale, he addressed the men and the women in the room as potential bidders: “*Ladies* and gentlemen, look here at this healthy child! Can any darkey upon

¹³ See J.Y.S. “A Slave Market.” *The National Era*, June 25, 1857. To be sure, these grandiose spectacles that unfolded in the Rotunda were not the only kinds of auctions that took place there, but white women could be found among the observers and prospective buyers nonetheless.

God's beautiful earth beat him? Wouldn't he whip Hercules, if that personage should happen to be present? What a splendid fellow he is!"¹⁴ From what Kramer tells us, these four women did not partake in the auction proceedings and he offers us a theory as to why they chose not to do so:

...[T]he four ladies, present at the commencement of this auction sale, did not bid, nor did they remain for more than half an hour. For the honor of their sex, I am bound to mention that they (though most probably themselves owners of slaves,) seemed to feel very uneasy while present. I believe that there is a certain natural feeling with the great majority of the gentler sex, which is more just, and more open to the truths of the gospel, than we of the masculine race are able to comprehend.¹⁵

Although Kramer deems it plausible that these four women already owned slaves, and thus possessed the quintessential qualities that characterized slaveowners as a group, he attributes their decision to refrain from purchasing any slaves at the auction to their feminine sensibilities. Yet, it is equally possible that they attended the auction with particular ideas about the types of slaves they wanted to buy, that upon inspection they determined that the slaves exposed for sale did not meet their criteria and thus they elected to sit and watch. Still, the fact that Kramer acknowledges their presence, and identifies elite women in the slave market, moves us closer to the goal of evaluating the ways that they entered and navigated these spaces more extensively.

Like Kramer, Joseph Holt Ingraham also saw a white woman in a local slave market he visited. But she was no spectator; she came there determined to buy slaves. Before she left she selected and purchased three slaves being exposed for sale and took them home with her:

Shortly before leaving the slave mart—a handsome carriage drove up, from which alighted an elderly lady, who, leaning on the arm of a youth, entered the court. After looking at and questioning in a kind tone several of the female slaves, she purchased two,

¹⁴ John Theophilus Kramer, *The Slave-Auction*, Boston: Robert F. Wallcut, 21 Cornhill, 1859, 11. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ Kramer, *The Slave-Auction*, 42-43.

a young mother and her child, and in a few minutes afterward, at the solicitation of the youth, purchased the husband of the girl, and all three, with happy faces—happier, that they were not to be separated—flew to get their little parcels, and rode away with their mistress,—the wife and child sitting within the carriage on the front seat—and the man on the coach-box beside the coachman.¹⁶

In spite of requiring the physical assistance of a young companion, this elderly woman settled upon making a trip to the slave market to buy her own slaves. She could have delegated the task of selecting, interrogating and purchasing these enslaved people to a male friend or family member, or even an agent. Yet, she decided to forego any advice or aid they might be able to provide and engage in this business for herself. Ingraham did not express the same surprise as Kramer about seeing a woman at this kind of venue; nor did he feel the need to rationalize her presence there, or her slave buying behavior. He found her mode of transportation more remarkable than all of this.

William Henry Venable witnessed a strikingly different scene when he traveled through Mount Sterling, Kentucky toward the latter part of 1858,

By ten o'clock on New Year's morning the town was overflowing with a much greater multitude than was seen on Christmas. White and black; male and female; men, women, children of all ranks and conditions, in wheeled vehicles, on horseback, on foot, — hundreds came pouring in from every direction. Owner and owned flocked from various parts of the county to readjust their property relations for the ensuing year. It was the day set apart for slave-holders to sell, buy, let and hire human chattels. And the slaves were permitted to exercise a limited privilege of choosing homes and masters... One woman was crying because it had fallen to her lot to serve a mistress whom she feared. "If I could only please her," sobbed the poor girl, "I wouldn't care; but she won't like me, she won't like me."¹⁷

¹⁶ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The South-West By a Yankee. In Two Volumes*. Volume 2
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/35156>

¹⁷ William Henry Venable, *Down South Before the War. Record of a Ramble to New Orleans in 1858*. Reprinted from the Ohio archaeological and historical quarterly, v. 2, no. 4
<http://www.archive.org/details/downsouthbeforew00vena>

Venable describes a slave marketplace of an entirely different character. It was a space that extended beyond the slave yard and flooded over into the streets. It was a place where the sale, purchase and hire of enslaved people occurred among men, women, and children. The people who “flocked from various parts of the country” represented every strata of society, including whites and blacks, represented all age groups, and both sexes. This was a family and community affair. Although Venable claims that enslaved people who were present had some say in whom they would serve, it becomes clear from the enslaved girl’s dismay about her new mistress that this may not have always been the case. Moreover, her lamentations suggest that her new mistress may have developed a reputation among slaves for being difficult to please or even cruel and she felt a measure of comfort talking to fellow slaves about it.

All three of these men gave voice to white women’s presence in the spaces of the slave market. They were there to evaluate the slaves exposed for sale or hire, to interrogate them and to buy and employ them. Some, like the four women Kramer saw at the slave auction in the St. Louis Hotel rotunda, left empty handed. Others like the one Johnathon Ingraham observed, left with three. And even more, like William Henry Venable saw, crossed paths with slaves that they could hire or buy for themselves. Male travelers’ recollections suggest that the women they saw felt at ease in these spaces and they were not averse to the business that took place there. These women did not express or exhibit signs of shame, at least none that were visible to the authors, and their conduct and comportment implies that they did not see the slave market as a place that was off-limits to them.

If women distanced themselves from southern slave markets and if they were not deemed viable and reliable customers, we might expect the men who conducted business in the slave

trade, as well as enslaved people exposed for sale, to ignore the white women who dared to venture into these spaces. But time and time again we find that the opposite was true. Slave traders and dealers did not immediately label the white women who entered slave marketplaces as “non-buyers” because prospective female buyers were not an anomaly. And when white women entered slave traders and dealers’ establishments, the enslaved people waiting to be bought and sold in New Orleans acknowledged them as property owners with the money, power and authority to buy them. Apparently, travelers, were more amazed about their visibility in southern slave markets than black and white southerners were.

Southern slave markets were, it would seem, tourist attractions for white travelers. According to Fredrika Bremer, the New Orleans slave market was “one of the great sights of ‘the gay city’.” She and women like Theresa Pulsky and Harriet Martineau were keenly interested in visiting slave auctions, markets, and yards during their forays into the South; and they wrote in detail about their experiences when they did.¹⁸ Like Kramer, Pulsky also visited the slave auction held in the St. Louis Hotel Rotunda. But even more than this, she was a guest in the hotel and she offers a clearer idea of how easy it was for white women to come face to face with the New Orleans slave market.

Visiting the town with her husband, Theresa describes the hotel and the rotunda with an air of wonderment and she details the slave auction she and her husband observed while staying there:

We are here again the guests of the city, in the splendid St. Louis Exchange Hotel, where, in a magnificent rotunda, surrounded by arcades and galleries, commercial business is transacted every day. It is the Exchange and the Auction-room; we have only to step from our apartment to see it. Yesterday, in the morning, I was told that an auction

¹⁸ Fredrika Bremer, *Homes of the New World: Impressions of America*, Volume II. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858, 198.

of slaves was to be held. I went with Mr. Pulszky to the gallery, and saw a gentlemen on a platform, who sold lots of houses by auction. On a bench around the stand, sat six negro women, one man, and a boy. The crowd presented towards them, and examined their countenances. The slaves looked very sullen. The auction began, a woman was announced... "Gentlemen, an excellent cook, accomplished laundress and ironer; guarantees against all the vices and diseases mentioned in law—thirty-five years old." The offers began; she was knocked down for seven hundred dollars. A woman was now bid out with her child in her arms. The auctioneer described her, and concluded with saying: "Mother and child, gentlemen! Both together." They were bought. Then came the turn of the lad, who seemed to be lame; he was obliged to show his leg, to satisfy the bidders that it was only accidentally a sore. I could not stand it longer.¹⁹

This was the scene that unfolded merely steps away from Theresa's room. Somehow, from somewhere, Theresa acquired information about the slave auction, passed it onto her husband and then settled upon going to see it. Was Theresa averse to the sale of human beings or to the ways that auctioneers and slave traders exposed enslaved men, women and children for sale? She stayed long enough to see a woman, a mother and child, and a young boy sold; but only after seeing prospective buyers examine the sore on the young boy's leg did she seem repulsed by it all.

Theresa's later activities suggest that she was less revolted by men selling human beings than the manner in which they did it. Further into her stay, Theresa actually *asked* her escort to take her to a local slave market, and she chose to do so in spite of her husband's inability to accompany her:

In the afternoon, I requested our aide-de-camp to take me to the slave-market. He told me that here no such thing existed; but he went with me to the slave-warehouses,--shops where, instead of wares, colored people are exposed for sale. One of the slave-dealers was an acquaintance of my companion, and we entered his establishment. I never felt so much ashamed in my life as when I talked to the slave-dealer; I hardly could find words

¹⁹ Francis and Theresa Pulszky. *White, Red, Black: Sketches of American Society in the United States During a Visit of their Guests. Volume II*. New York: Redfield, 110 & 112 Nassau Street, 1853. 96-97. Theresa Pulszky is listed as a co-author of this text but the two passages related to the New Orleans slave market in this volume are extracted from her diary.

to address the man. I said that we had no colored people in our country, and that I was interested in seeing them, though I had not the slightest intention to buy. The man was polite and exhibited his merchandise courteously. The blacks passed in review before us; the men and boys in smart blue attire and clean shoes; the women and girls in gaudy calico dresses,--all tidily combed and curled. A tall girl of yellow-brown complexion mistook me probably for a buyer; she seemed to like my countenance, and did her best to please me. I told her that I was no Southerner; and I inquired what she could do. She answered: "A little of everything." Most of those whom I asked from whence they came, were Virginians or South Carolinians, raised for sale...²⁰

Even after expressing disgust at the open examination of human bodies set for sale, something compelled Theresa to seek out an additional opportunity to see another dimension of the slave market. Once she arrived in the "slave-warehouse," as her escort called it, she was not ashamed about being in such a space nor was she shamed by the sight of human commodities on display. She was, however, put off by the discussion she had with the man who dealt in slaves. Was she uneasy because of the nature of his business, his socioeconomic standing, or the manner in which he spoke to her? We do not know. But she nonetheless navigated her way through the slave warehouse. Notice too that it was Theresa was the individual interacting with the slave dealer, not her male escort, and at least one enslaved person being held there mistook her for a buyer, evaluated her countenance, considered her a potentially amiable mistress, and attempted to shape the sale by appealing to her and answering her questions in the most favorable way.²¹ The only thing that seemed to discourage the enslaved woman's appeals was Theresa's warning that she was not there to buy any slaves.

²⁰ Francis and Theresa Pulszky, *White, Red, Black*, 100.

²¹ On the strategies enslaved people used to "shape" their sales see Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 176-188 and Daina Ramey Berry, "'We'm Fus' Rate Bargain': Value, Labor, and Price in a Georgia Slave Community." in *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, 55-71.

Fredrika Bremer wrote of a similar experience when she visited the New Orleans slave market. Also accompanied by a male escort, she ventured into *three* slave trading establishments; and by her account, she encountered the slave market before she stepped through any doors:

The excellent, agreeable Mr. B. accompanied me a short distance to the rail-road, on the other side of the river. On our way we passed through the slave market. Forty or fifty young persons of both sexes were walking up and down before the house in expectation of purchasers. They were singing; they seemed cheerful and thoughtless. The young slaves who were here offered for sale were from twelve to twenty years of age. There was one little boy, however, who was only six: he belonged to no one there. He attached himself to the slave-keeper. . . . Some gentlemen were on the spot, and one or two of them called my attention to the cheerful looks of the young people. ‘All the more sorrowful is their condition,’ thought I; ‘the highest degradation is not to feel it!’²²

Fredrika came face to face with the landscape of the slave market; it was more than the slave yards, slave depots, warehouses and auction houses, it was also comprised of the city streets. Is the scene that Fredrika describes here—of seeing upwards of fifty slaves walking in front of the establishment where they were being held for sale—one that other white women could avoid? Perhaps, but only if they avoided commercial centers altogether. Slave trading was not a business that was sequestered in urban vice districts because it was not a vice.²³ It was part of the very fabric of the southern economy, it was regarded as such by many, and the geography of southern slave markets attests to the trade’s centrality to southern commerce. To be sure, slave traders often clustered in segments of southern commercial districts, but as Fredrika observes in

²² Fredrika Bremer, *Homes of the New World: Impressions of America*, Volume I. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858, 373.

²³ In 1856, property holders petitioned the Common Council and Board of Assistant Alderman of New Orleans to remove a slave market and depot on “the lower side of Esplanade street, at the corner of Chartres” and “several of the adjoining buildings...together with all slave markets and depots that may be on, or near Esplanade street, within six months, under penalty of \$20 per day, for each and every day, said slave markets shall remain in contravention.” They submitted this petition because the slave market had “become a nuisance to the neighborhood.” While the Council ultimately rejected their petition, it nonetheless lends credence to the ways in which these establishments imbricated the everyday geography of the city. See *New Orleans Daily Creole*, August 21, 1856 and November 27, 1856.

the passage below, their establishments were not distinguished by their geographic location per se, but by the enslaved men, women, and children that stood outside:

I will, at my ease, converse with you about the occurrences of the last few days, about the slave-market and a slave-auction at which I have been present...I saw nothing especially repulsive in these places excepting the whole thing ...The great slave-market is held in several houses situated in a particular part of the city. One is soon aware of their neighborhood from the groups of colored men and women, of all shades between black and light yellow, which stand or sit unemployed at the doors. Accompanied by my kind doctor, I visited some of these houses. We saw at one of them the slave-keeper or owner—a kind, good-tempered man, who boasted of the good appearance of his people. The slaves were summoned into a large hall, and arranged in two rows. They were well fed and clothed, but I have heard it said by the people here that they have a very different appearance when they are brought hither, chained together two and two, in long rows, after many days' fatiguing marches...I observed among the men some really athletic figures, with good countenances and remarkably good foreheads, broad and high. The slightest kind word or joke called forth a sunny smile, full of good humor, on their countenances, and revealed a shining row of beautiful pearl-like teeth. There was one negro in particular—his price was two thousand dollars—to whom I took a great fancy, and I said aloud that "I liked that boy, and I was sure we should be good friends." "Oh yes, Missis!" with a good, cordial laugh.²⁴

In forcing enslaved people to line up, perform, and market themselves, slave traders and dealers extended the boundaries of the slave market. White women did not have to enter slave traders' establishments in order to see the commodities they exposed for sale, nor did they have to ask them about the temperaments, qualities, and skills these enslaved people possessed. As Fredrika's experience shows, women could examine enslaved people's bodies, talk to them, and express their desires to buy them right on the street. Fredrika's recollections also imply that she talked with others about the New Orleans slave market, how slave traders brought enslaved people there, and how they prepared them for sale prior to entering this space. She thought about all of this, and she acted on those thoughts.

²⁴ Frederika Bremer, *Homes of the New World: Impressions of America, Volume II*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858, 202-204.

Curiously, Bremer was not content with just visiting slave markets in the center of the nation's domestic slave trade. She also went to a slave pen in the District of Columbia accompanied by her "good hostess" Mrs. J, who went there for the express purpose of finding an enslaved boy to buy:

I went thither one morning with Dr. Hebbe and my good hostess, before we went to the Capitol, because the "Slavepen" of Washington is situated near to the Capitol of Washington, and may be seen from it, although that gray house, the prison-house of the innocent, hides itself behind leafy trees. We encountered no one within the inclosure, where little negro children were sitting or leaping about on the green-sward. At the little grated door, however, we were met by the slave-keeper, a good-tempered, talkative, but evidently a coarse man, who seemed pleased to show us his power and authority. Mrs. J. wished to have a negro boy as a servant, and inquired if she could have such an one from this place. "No! children were not allowed to go out from here. They were kept here for a short time to fatten, and after that were sent to the slavemarket down South, to be sold; no slave was allowed to be sold here for the present. There were now some very splendid articles for sale, which were to be sent down South..."²⁵

Although Dr. Hebbes escorted Bremer and Mrs. J. to the slavepen he was not the person interacting with the slave-keeper; Mrs. J took care of this herself. She arrived at the slavepen with a precise idea of what kind of slave she wanted to buy there, and she likely knew how much she planned to pay for him too. The slave-keeper did not shun or dismiss her; he seemed ready to cater to her needs. But he was unable to do so. To her chagrin, she learned that this particular slavepen was a sort of holding station in which enslaved children were prepared for sale in the slave markets of the lower South. This was the only reason why Mrs. J did not go home with the slave she wanted. Since Bremer does not remark upon it, we can only speculate as to whether she resumed her search elsewhere.

²⁵ Frederika Bremer, *Homes of the New World: Impressions of America, Volume I*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858, 493. She also traveled to the slave jails of Virginia, where enslaved people were held until their owners were ready to sell them. Frederika Bremer, *Homes of the New World: Impressions of America, Volume II*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858, 535.

Other white women had far more sinister intentions when they engaged in slave market activities. Eliza Potter was a free woman of color who recorded her time spent as a hairdresser in antebellum New Orleans. While there, she crossed paths with a white woman who bartered and traded everything from coffee to cotton to pianos, bought and sold slaves, swindled an enslaved woman out of the money she paid her for her freedom and even proposed to partner with a free black woman who she wanted to pretend to be her slave so she could sell her and split the money:

I remember well a lady and her two daughters who, about this time, came to New Orleans. The daughters were very gay, and very pretty. The first time I saw their mother she was in the hall speculating in pianos, and the next time I saw her she was in her own room...In a few days I again saw this same lady in Camp Street, buying and selling bales of cotton; at another time I saw her in a wholesale store, buying sacks of coffee, and speculating on them. There was a family in the hotel, from off the coast, who had with them a very pretty maid, and a very good hair-dresser. She made her dissatisfied with her owner, that she might purchase her; she told the girl that so soon as she would earn what she paid for her, besides fixing her two daughter's heads, she would give her her freedom. The maid brought home forty dollars every month, until she had nearly paid for herself; this woman then turned round and sold her for very near as much again as she paid for her — saying nothing of what the girl had paid her. She then left the hotel and went traveling. I did not see her again for a long time, but frequently heard of her...On one occasion I saw a very nice free girl. She proposed to this girl to sell her, and divide the money between them, and then she was to kick up a row and swear she was free.²⁶

The South was filled with white women who preferred to distance themselves from the slave market. But there were other women, like the one that Eliza met, who saw slavery for what it was, a system of bondage from which they could profit immensely.

The St. Charles Hotel was the St. Louis Hotel's counterpart in the American quarter and it staged equally memorable slave auctions in its rotunda. Eliza visited the St. Charles quite

²⁶ Eliza Potter, *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life*. Cincinnati: Published for the Author, 1859, 150-151.

frequently when she styled her female clients' hair there and she speaks to the ease with which she could leave the hotel's guest rooms in order to attend a slave auction below:

While combing two ladies, from Bigbury, who were in the habit of stopping at the St. Charles, I found them very angry, and, on inquiry, they said they owned hundreds of slaves, but would not sit at the table with negro-drivers and negro-traders. I said, "Neither would I, madam, sit at the table with any such persons... She immediately exclaimed, "Oh, there is a necessity for such men, but I do not wish to associate with them"... I had now got so much excited I did not wish to continue the conversation, and told her I would see her again, when we could finish our subject, as I had staid past my time. I bade her good-by, and dashed down stairs, and on going down, I heard a great shout below me. I stopped on the stairs and looked down in the rotunda, and there was a slave-market... I stood for some time watching this market. Several were put up and sold off to the highest bidder; some seemed satisfied with their lot, and others, apparently, grieved to death... I continued on combing the ladies but was now very anxious for them to leave so I could get away from this place, where I have seen people as white as white could be and as black as black could get, put up and sold in this elegant hotel. On my going in I always went by the private door, and tried to come out in the same private manner, but it seemed, in spite of my feelings, some loadstone or electricity always drew me to the rotunda, where I daily saw people, both young and old, bought and sold.

Eliza was able to see a slave auction in the St. Charles every day that she visited the establishment, and a stairwell was the only thing that separated these events from the guest rooms above. Eliza's female clients who stayed as guests in the hotel would likely have seen these auctions as well.

South Carolina's Charlestonians could readily observe and attend public slave auctions, the largest of which occurred right in front of the town's customhouse, and this might have been where Harriet Martineau had her first encounter with the slave market as well. The auctions that took place there were so large that the city passed an ordinance in 1856, which forbade such commerce from occurring because "the crowd often overflowed into the East Bay street and obstructed traffic" and "was sure to attract the attention and excite the condemnation of Northern

and foreign travelers.²⁷ Prior to this however, British sociologist, feminist and traveler Harriet Martineau consciously chose to visit the Charleston slave market and attend a slave auction, and she found herself standing alongside another white woman who made the same decision. Amidst Harriet's mounting horror about what she saw as the auction unfolded, she and this unnamed woman had a very interesting and enlightening conversation about the sale of human beings:

My mind was full of the contemplations of the heights which human beings are destined to reach, when I was plunged into a new scene; one which it was my own conscientious choice to visit, but for which the preceding conversation had ill-prepared me. I went into the slave market, a place which the traveler ought not to avoid to spare his feelings... The sale of a man was just concluding when we entered the market. A woman, with two children, one at the breast, and another holding her apron, composed the next lot... I should have thought that her agony of shame and dread would have silenced the tongue of every spectator; but this was not so. A lady chose this moment to turn to me and say, with a cheerful air of complacency, "You know my theory, that one race must be subservient to the other. I do not care which; and if the blacks should ever have the upper hand, I should not mind standing on that table, and being sold with two of my children." Who could help saying within himself, "Would you were! so that that mother were released!"²⁸

Interestingly, Harriet did not find anything peculiar about meeting another woman at the slave auction, nor did she remark upon anyone else's amazement or discomfort arising from their presence there. If we analyze the brief encounter between them, we immediately gather that this other woman not only felt comfortable in the slave market, she was not repulsed or disgusted at the sight of an enslaved mother being sold with her children. In fact, she seemed relatively comfortable with the idea of human beings, be they men, women or children, being sold to the highest bidder. She apparently had no qualms about offering Harriet her unsolicited opinion and innermost thoughts about the justness of slavery either. This white mother's gender did not

²⁷ Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South*, Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, [1931]1996, 170.

²⁸ Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel. Volume I*. London: Saunders and Otley, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1838, 234-235.

compel her to sympathize with the enslaved woman's plight. She was no abolitionist; she was not merely there to reinforce the idea of her own moral position by witnessing the horrors of humanity, or to prevent this enslaved mother and her children from being sold. Perhaps she was an archetypical southern belle who protected her beloved family slaves, but when she stood before a strange enslaved woman and her children, her thoughts were in step with the proslavery ideology of her time.

Hailing from a wealthy slaveowning political family and married to a leading South Carolina politician who served instrumental roles in the Confederacy, Mary Boykin Chesnut frequently wrote of her quarrels with the institution of slavery in her diary, troubles she did little to alleviate. She expressed sympathy for enslaved people because she saw something familiar in their bound condition; she argued that women were similarly enslaved by the constraints of marriage and civil inequality.²⁹

Surrounded by the comforts that slavery afforded, she occasionally confronted the institution's ugly underbelly; the slave market: "So I have seen a negro woman sold—up on the block—at auction. I was walking. The woman on the block overtopped the crowd. I felt faint—seasick. The creature looked so like my good little Nancy [her slave]..."³⁰ Several days later, as Mary strolled through town with her English friend, she found herself in this very place; but this time she was obliged to respond to her friend's discomforted reaction to the scene that had made Mary feel faint a few days before: "Mrs. Browne was telling of her English friends last summer...Just then our walk led by that sale of negroes. The same place that I saw it before. 'If

²⁹ "Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut, 1823-1886" in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* ed. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris Copyright by the University of North Carolina Press, 1989.
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/chesnut/bio.html> (accessed September 19, 2011)

³⁰ *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*. Ed. C. Vann Woodward. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981, 15.

you can stand that, no other Southern thing need choke you.’ She said not a word. After all it was my country and she was an Englishwoman. There are ugly sights all over the world. I could see she was sorry for me in her heart...”³¹ Mary’s encounters with this slave auction tell us something significant; the slave market was not off-limits to white women, even those of elite standing. In fact, this particular sale was public enough for Mary and her lady friend to walk right by and stop to watch. Mary did not need to search for the auction. It was in plain view. She did not say that she felt out of place, or that any of the other observers treated her like she was. In many respects, Mary behaved like any slaveowner would have, had they been there in her place.

Although antebellum slave marketplaces and the auctions that occurred within these spaces represented two of the most remarkable and macabre features of the institution of American slavery, white women were quite familiar with both of them. They traversed and navigated the spaces in which traders, speculators, brokers, and ordinary southerners bought and sold human beings, separated families, and forced enslaved people to reconstruct their lives in new and unfamiliar places. Even more than this, white slaveowning women were also active participants in this commerce, and no group could testify more powerfully to their involvement than the slaves they bought and sold.

“Missus in de town bid highes”

As Mary Chestnut’s March 1861 journal entry reveals, the enslaved men, women and children that stood upon the block could very well have female owners; they could be some woman’s “good little Nancy.” And as the commodities circulating within southern slave markets, no group could testify more powerfully to white women’s involvement in these activities than

³¹ Mary Chestnut’s *Civil War*, 23.

enslaved people. They were in the ideal position to situate white women in these marketplaces; and this is exactly what they did.

Enslaved people frequently reflect upon the women who bought them, their family members and friends, and in spite of what historians have heretofore contended, formerly enslaved people remembered these women as astute, sophisticated and calculating slave market consumers. Liza Larkin bought Ank Bishop's mother at a slave auction. Ank recalled "My mother was brought out from South Car'lina in a speculator drove, an' Lady Liza bought her at de auction at Coke's Chapel. She lef' her mammy an' daddy back dere in South Car'lina an' never did see 'em no more in dis life. She was bidded off an' Lady Liza got her, jes' her one from all her family."³² Liza Larkin did not delegate the task of selecting, bidding upon, and purchasing a slave to any of the white men she knew; she chose to do all of this herself. Furthermore, in buying an enslaved woman of childbearing age who could perform a host of tasks in and around her home she made an economically sound choice. Ank's mother cooked, washed, and milked her mistress' cows. She also gave birth to Ank and five other children, and with each infant, Larkin watched her investment increase in value.³³

As mentioned earlier, even elderly women went to southern slave markets to buy and sell slaves. Sometimes their motivations were benevolent, but most times they were not. When

³² Interview with Ank Bishop, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 6 -- Alabama and Indiana Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=RSR&chapterID=RSR-005-012&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

³³ Jennifer Morgan's examination of white slaveowners' wills in colonial South Carolina and Barbados aptly demonstrates the importance that enslaved women's childbearing potential held for these individuals as they sketched out their bequests to heirs and heiresses. As recipients of these slave inheritances, white women undoubtedly understood that black women's children constituted the augmentation of their wealth just as white men did. While Morgan's work focuses upon an earlier period than I cover here, her study is useful in tracing a way of thinking about black women and children long before the antebellum era. See Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, 102.

Harriet Jacobs' master Dr. Flint sold her grandmother at public auction, white community members refused to bid upon her and cried shame upon the man who subjected her to sale not only because she had established social connections with them but also because they knew about her character and her mistress' desire to free her. In a collective act of protest, they refused to bid on her and allowed her mistress' elderly sister to purchase her for the purpose of granting her freedom. Harriet explained that:

When the day of sale came, she took her place among the chattels, and at the first call she sprang upon the auction-block. Many voices called out, " Shame! Shame! Who is going to sell *you*, aunt Marthy? Don't stand there! That is no place for you." Without saying a word, she quietly awaited her fate. No one bid for her. At last, a feeble voice said, " Fifty dollars." It came from a maiden lady, seventy years old, the sister of my grandmother's deceased mistress. She had lived forty years under the same roof with my grandmother; she knew how faithfully she had served her owners, and how cruelly she had been defrauded of her rights; and she resolved to protect her. The auctioneer waited for a higher bid; but her wishes were respected; no one bid above her. She could neither read nor write; and when the bill of sale was made out, she signed it with a cross.³⁴

This elderly woman knew Harriet's grandmother personally, and when she bid upon her, she was motivated by great moral convictions. Yet she did not have to attend the slave auction and personally bid upon Harriet's grandmother. She could have asked a male family member or friend to assume this responsibility, or she could have hired an agent to do it. But she committed herself to traveling to town and standing in a crowd of prospective purchasers to carry out her sister's wishes. In buying Harriet's grandmother, she committed an act of benevolence, even though she went into the slave market, and engaged in slave market activities, to do so.³⁵

³⁴ Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. Lydia Maria Child, Boston: Published for the Author, 1861, 20-21.

³⁵ According to Thomas Russell, community members often collaborated with each other in this way. News of family deaths and the disposition of certain people's estates often circulated through town as did the plans of their heirs who hoped to save their legacies from the greedy hands of creditors. When creditors seized family property and put it up for sale, family members would attend auctions in order to buy the property back, and slaves were often purchased in this way. Community members would attend the auctions but would not bid. Unfortunately,

To be sure, benevolence was rarely the motivation driving white women into southern slave markets. They understood that the marketplace was a source of economic promise and possibility, and they knew that extracting the value embodied by the slaves they bought and sold there could be immensely profitable. Sometimes they saw financial opportunity in the very situations that white men considered burdensome. Former slave H.B. Holloway offers an interesting scenario that demonstrates this. He recalled that at some slave auctions “a woman would have a child in her arms. A man would buy the mother and wouldn’t want the child. And then sometimes a woman would holler out: ‘Don’t sell that pickaninny...I want that little pickaninny.’ And the mother would go one way and the child would go another.”³⁶ Many prospective buyers saw enslaved infants and toddlers as financial burdens because they had to expend money and resources for the care of slaves that were too young to earn their keep. But this was a short-sighted investment strategy. Children cost far less than enslaved adolescents or adults, and if a slaveowner was willing to invest money in the smaller purchase price and the care of the child until they were old enough to work, they would see that investment grow exponentially over the enslaved child’s lifetime. The woman that H.B. remembered buying a “pickaninny” probably understood this. When she went to the slave market that day, she had likely sketched out a long-term financial plan which involved a small investment that would eventually pay off handsomely.

during the height of the domestic slave trade, interstate slave traders, and some local ones, would foil these collaborations. At other times, community members who were motivated more by profit than sentimentalism did as well. They would outbid the heirs and would walk off with enslaved people that some families hoped to keep out of southern slave markets or out of the hands of strangers. See Thomas Russell, *Sale Day in Antebellum South Carolina: Slavery, Law, Economy, and Court-Supervised Sales*. (PhD Dissertation, Stanford University, 1993) 95-101 and 120-132.

³⁶ Interview with H.B. Holloway, *Arkansas Narratives*, Volume II, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed October 2, 2011).

From the testimonies of Ank Bishop, Harriet Jacobs and H.B. Holloway and other slaves, white women did not avoid slave marketplaces; they went there for the same reasons that white men did—to buy slaves—and just as many went there to sell them. Sometimes they did so to save beloved slaves from the auction block, to fulfill the dying wishes of family members or because they needed the funds they received from the sales; but they sold them for other reasons too.³⁷ Millie Simkins' mistress was one of these women. Millie recalled that: "Mah fust missis wuz very rich. She had two slave 'omen ter dress her eve'y mawnin' en I brought her breakfast ter her on a silvah waitah. She...sold me kaze I wuz stubborn. She sent me ter de 'slave yard' at Nashville. De yard wuz full ob slaves. I stayed dere two weeks 'fore marster Simpson bought me. I wuz sold 'way fum mah husband en I nebber se'd 'im 'gin. I had one chile which I tuk wid me."³⁸

An unidentified female slave told of being sold twice for equally disturbing reasons. Two women were responsible for putting her in the slave market and one took her out:

My young marster tried to go with me, and 'cause I wouldn't go with him he pretended I had done somethin' and beat me. I fought him back because he had no right to beat me for not goin' with him. His mother got mad with me for fightin' him back and I told her why he had beat me. Well then she sent me to the courthouse to be whipped for fightin' him...After they finished whippin' me, I told them they needn't think they had done somethin' by strippin' me in front of all them folk 'cause they had also stripped their mamas and sisters...They never carried me back home after that; they put me in the Nigger Trader's Office to be sold. About two days later I was sold to a man at McBean.

³⁷ Miss Margaret Tony owned Charles Cabriel Anderson and she also sold him when he was just a young boy. He could not recall any particular reason why she had done so. See interview with Charles Cabriel Anderson, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 11 -- Arkansas Narratives, Part 7*, and Missouri Narratives, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=RSW1&chapterID=RSW1-007-006&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

³⁸ Interview with Millie Simkins, Rawick, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 16 -- Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Virginia, and Tennessee Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=rsb1&chapterID=rsb1-010-024&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//>. (accessed June 25, 2010).

When I went to his place everybody told me as soon as I got there how mean he was and they said his wife was still meaner. She was jealous of me because I was light; said she didn't know what her husband wanted to bring that half white nigger there for, and if he didn't get rid of me pretty quick she was goin' to leave. Well he didn't get rid of me and she left about a month after I got there. When he saw she warn't comin' back 'til he got rid of me, he brought me back to the Nigger Trader's Office. I didn't stay in the market long. A dissipated woman bought me and I done laundry work for her and other dissipated women to pay my board 'til freedom come. They was all very nice to me.³⁹

Beaten and sold for refusing to allow her owner's son to sexually violate her, and then sent back to the slave market for being too light, this formerly enslaved woman did not remember white women initiating sales out of necessity; they were executed out of shame, jealousy and anger.

White women followed a variety of paths to the slave market. Most realized that some slaves were more valuable than others, that enslaved women and men possessed values contingent upon their biologically distinctive bodies, and they banked on this knowledge. Henrietta Butler's mistress Emily Haidee knew the value that enslaved women in particular possessed and she developed financial strategies to maximize their worth. Henrietta recalled that "[t]hey made my ma have babies all de time. She was sellin' the boys and keepin' the gals." This was not an isolated or exceptional case. She later forced Henrietta to have sex with an enslaved man who was not of her choosing. She gave birth to a baby who died shortly thereafter.⁴⁰

As discussed in the previous chapter, the slave purchases and sales of some women remain invisible because they occurred outside of, but nonetheless closely tied to, formal slave markets. Some took place between family members. George Womble's mistress Mrs. Ridley

³⁹ "Mistreatment of Slaves", Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 11, 2010).

⁴⁰ Interview with Henrietta Butler, *Mother Wit*, 38.

sold him to her brother for five hundred dollars.⁴¹ Smokey Eulenberg's slaveowning mistress would likely have stayed invisible had it not been for his interview. She tried to sell Smokey's mother and siblings to another woman in their community but the sale fell through for reasons Smokey made readily apparent: "I rec'lect one time missus sold my mother and four children but it wasn't no trade. De woman's name was Mrs. Sheppard and she was a sassy old woman. She come into my mother's cabin and grabbed her and told her she going to take her home. Mother jes' pushed her out de door and said she wouldn't go—and she told missus she wouldn't go—so dey had to call it off—it was no trade."⁴² Smokey did not recall any slave traders or speculators involved in the transaction, nor did he place any white men in this "trade" at all. These women did not need chivalric assistance or "manly" business acumen. In this instance, they came together to buy and sell slaves and they deemed themselves capable of executing the sale on their own. However, neither of them seemed prepared for a determined and resistant enslaved woman to stand between them and the sale they hoped to finalize.

Martha Organ offered an account of a similar transaction: "Missus Jones had sold a girl dat she raised named Alice ter a neighborhood 'oman. Alice had been ust ter goin' to de Missus house an' warmin', so she went inter dis 'omans house ter warm de 'oman made her stand fore de fire till her legs burned so bad dat de skin cracked up an' some of it drapped off. Missus Jones

⁴¹ Interview with George Womble, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed February 2, 2010). Mrs. Ridley's brother was not completely at ease about the purchase just because the seller was his sister and he took the same precautions that any purchaser would. He bought George only after three doctors examined him and gave him a clear bill of health.

⁴² Interview with Smoky Eulenberg, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Volume 11 -- Arkansas Narratives, Part 7, and Missouri Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972. The African American Experience. Greenwood Publishing Group. <http://aae.greenwood.com/doc.aspx?fileID=RSW1&chapterID=RSW1-007-031&path=/primarydocenc/greenwood//> (accessed June 25, 2010).

found it out an' she give de 'oman back her money an' took Alice home wid her."⁴³ When white women bought and sold slaves, they dealt with the men who took their slaves to market, but they also confronted each other. Like Smokey's mistress, and Missus Jones they were able to negotiate sales that were favorable to both parties. But other times, these women came to blows over appropriate ways to deal with the slaves they owned.

There were occasions when white women preferred to have other individuals conduct their slave market business for them, and they sought out the services of local slave traders and dealers because they knew the most about this commerce. While women rarely talk about their exchanges with these individuals, slave traders' correspondence occasionally records their encounters with women who hoped to buy or sell slaves for them. For example, on August 10, 1853, slave trader A.J. McElveen notified his partner Ziba Oakes that he had sent him a slave he purchased from a Mrs. Pedrow while in Sumterville, South Carolina. Nineteen days later, he wrote Oakes again from the Darlington, South Carolina Courthouse to tell him that he "saw the lady Mrs. Blackwell who wishes to Sell 4 of 5 negros. She has promised to waite [sic] until I Return from charleston [sic] before She sells..." Two years later, McElveen wrote to Oakes seeking advice on how to handle a matter arising from a sale to a woman he called Miss Fleming. In his January 13, 1855 letter he told Oakes "I have just Received a note from Miss Fleming, the lady I bought George & lefegett from...She will take boath [sic] the boys as I could not Settle with them by Returning one." Three days later he asked Oakes for assistance again: "Will you advise me the course to persue [sic] in this Case[?] Miss Fleming is not willing to take

⁴³ See interview with Martha Organ, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 13, 2009).

one boy without the other therefore I am at a lost [sic] to Settle the matter as She has my note and will not Give it up.”⁴⁴

While white women do not appear regularly in McElveen’s letters, the instances that do emerge reveal that they were interacting with slave traders on multiple occasions, that they entrusted them with their economic investments and bought slaves from them and sold to them too. More importantly, McElveen never mentioned the involvement of male kin or proxies; nor did he express reservations about dealing directly with women; or imply that these women had concerns about dealing with him. In fact, his letters show that *his female clients* were in control of the sales and purchases and that at least one of them exerted enough pressure on him during their exchanges that he felt compelled to write Oakes more than once about a resolution.

Bills of sale reveal that slave traders throughout the South, men such as George Ann Botts, John Hagan, John White, and William Talbott, and Ziba Oakes, bought slaves from and sold slaves to women on a regular basis.⁴⁵ For example, in 1850 Miss Eleanor Hainline bought a slave from George Ann Botts, John Hagan sold a slave to Mrs. Mathilda Mascey, John Rucker White bought a slave from Margaret Flood, and William Talbott sold a slave to Mrs. Louise Marie Eugenie Bailly Blachard. On December 16, 1845, Harriet A. Heath purchased a twenty-three year old slave named Jane from Ziba Oakes. On July 8, 1846, she came back to him for another purchase. This time she purchased a twenty-eight year old slave named Dianna who was

⁴⁴ A.J. McElveen to Z. B. Oakes, Sumterville, S.C., 10 August 1853, A.J. McElveen to Z. B. Oakes, Darlington Courthouse, S. C., 29 August 1853, A.J. McElveen to Z. B. Oakes, Sumterville, S.C., 13 January 1855, A.J. McElveen to Z. B. Oakes, Sumterville, S.C., 16 January 1855 in *Broke by the War: Letters of a Slave Trader*. Ed. Edmund L. Drago. Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1991, 49, 53, 112-113.

⁴⁵ See Act of Sale, Marie Aimee Carraby to Elihu Creswell, Recorded before Theodore Stark, July 25, 1850, Act of Sale, George Ann Botts to Miss Eleanor Hainline, Recorded before Stuart Lewis, November 11, 1850. Act of Sale, John Hagan to Mrs. Mathilda Mascey, Recorded before Theodore Guyol, February 19, 1850. Act of Sale, Margaret Flood to John Rucker White, Recorded before Theodore Stark, May 17, 1850. Act of Sale, William Talbott to Mrs. Louise Marie Eugenie Bailly Blachard, Recorded before Adolphe Boudousquie, November 28, 1850., Annual Conveyance Vendor and Vendee Indexes, New Orleans Conveyance Records Office, New Orleans, La. (NOCO)

“warranted sound and healthy.” Gracie Peixotto purchased three slaves from Oakes too—Belinda, Judy and Joe. In 1846, Mary Juste went to Oakes when she wanted to sell her twenty-seven year old slave named Lizzy and her four children, Rebecca (ten years old), Celia (around eight years old), Adam (about six years old), and another child who was unnamed in the bill of sale. She sold them on New Year’s Eve. Elizabeth Morrison also sold her slave Susan to Oakes in August of 1850.⁴⁶

White women did not always delegate the purchase and sale of slaves to men, be they kin or otherwise, and New Orleans notarial records demonstrate this.⁴⁷ These records not only identify buyers and sellers, but also agents or attorneys who may have been involved in the sale as well as husbands who might have been present at the time when the notary public recorded the transaction. Single and widowed women appear quite frequently in notarial records and other official documents pertaining to the sale and purchase of slaves, and contrary to what some scholars contend, married women appear in these documents too. Close examination of these records makes clear that women frequently bought and sold slaves without male assistance and, in many transactions, the notary public was the only male involved.

Strikingly, notarial records and bills of sale also demonstrate that the very women who were married to slave traders often decided to handle their slave market business themselves. Take Samuel Nelson Hite’s wife Adelaide for example. Born in 1822 to the Vinot family, Adelaide married Samuel when he was one of the most active traders in New Orleans. Beginning in 1845, she appears in the New Orleans conveyance records buying and selling slaves on her

⁴⁶ These sales provide further support for the implications of McElveen’s letters. Johnson consults and discusses McElveen’s letters, but he fails to acknowledge that women appear in them.

⁴⁷ The city of New Orleans maintains notarial records which document the purchase and sale of property from 1827 to the present day. The New Orleans Conveyance Office (NOCO) maintains indexes that summarize each sale and the Notarial Archives of New Orleans (NANO) possesses copies of the original acts of sale.

own account. And while these documents often mention Samuel as her husband, he did not act as her agent or broker.⁴⁸ While married to Samuel, Adelaide bought and sold slaves *twenty-six times*, and purchased and sold other kinds of property *seven times*. She continued to buy and sell slaves without his help well in to the Civil War period; she bought her last slave Charles on July 30, 1862.

If we consider all that historians have said about white women and southern slave markets, particularly about their seeming aversion to these commercial spaces and the legal constraints they faced, Adelaide's choices are striking. Why would she venture into the slave market to buy and sell her own slaves when she could have asked Samuel to handle this business for her? He was certainly in an ideal position to do so. His daily business was buying and selling slaves and he knew the machinations of the market from the inside. He was also a part of the intricate commercial network of slave traders, dealers, and auctioneers, and he could have used these social connections to facilitate the sale and purchase of Adelaide's slaves. But even after weighing her options, Adelaide *still* chose to do all of this herself. In spite of constraining laws and social customs, Adelaide made up her mind to not only buy and control her own, separate property, but she also elected to handle her slave market activities without the aid of the slave trading man she married.

Notarial records further complicate prevailing understandings of white women's economic relationships to southern slave markets because they reveal the myriad roles they

⁴⁸ Whenever a married woman bought or sold property the notarial record included the clause "duly authorized and assisted by her husband" or something similar. When he represented her during the transaction the record clearly stated his role. In all of Adelaide's transactions, the language "duly authorized and assisted" or "duly assisted and authorized" by her husband appears, which means that Samuel merely gave his permission for her to act on her own behalf when she bought or sold property. See for example, Act of Sale for Slave Julia, Adelaide Hite to Antonio Rodi, Recorded before Theodore Guyol, June 2, 1859. Annual Conveyance Vendor and Vendee Indexes, (NOCO)

assumed in transactions involving the commerce in slaves. In records of slave sales notary publics not only identified white women as titleholders of slaves; but also note when women acted as agents, representatives and “attorneys-in-fact” for other women *and* men. For example, Mrs. Jane Elizabeth Decoin served as Mrs. Sarah Jane Hinton’s attorney-in-fact and representative when Sarah sold her female slave to Mrs. Mary Sutton Muller. Mrs. Mary Jane Williams acted as Alice Martin’s attorney-in-fact when she sold her slave to Caleb Pruel.⁴⁹ Mrs. Marie Dorothee Morel represented Charles Alexis LeBean when he sold his slave to slave trader Elihu Cresswell.⁵⁰ If white women entered slave markets, attended auctions, bought and sold their own slaves, and served as legal appointed agents and proxies for women and men who hoped to do the same, existing contentions about the gendered relationship between white women and the slave market rest on shaky ground because all of these activities reveal white slaveowning women’s astute business acumen and the trust that others placed in them and the knowledge they possessed about the slave market economy.

White Women, their Men and the New Orleans Slave Market

White women did not simply ask their male kin to buy and sell slaves for their personal use; they also partnered with them in order to trade in slaves for profit. Although the number of women who did so was small, an exploration of the cases that do exist reveals dimensions of southern slave trading communities that have heretofore remained obscure. Careful examination

⁴⁹ See Act of Sale, Mrs. Sarah Hinton to Mrs. Mary Sutton Muller, Recorded before J.P. Gilly, January 21, 1850 and Act of Sale, Miss Alice Martin, represented by Mrs. Mary Jane Williams, her attorney in fact, to Caleb Pruel, Recorded before Michael Geruon, June 29, 1850. Notarial Archives of New Orleans

⁵⁰ Wood, *Masterful Women*, 89. See for example Act of Sale, Charles Alexis LeBean represented by Mrs. Marie Dorothee Morel his attorney in fact, to Elihu Cresswell, Recorded before Alphonse Barnett, September 4, 1850. Elihu Cresswell happened to be a well known New Orleans slave trader. Annual Conveyance Vendor and Vendee Indexes (NOCO)

of court and notarial records makes it possible to bring these individual women and their involvement in the slave trade, into full view.

Like scores of other women throughout the antebellum South, Mathilda Bushy remains virtually invisible in existing studies of the domestic slave trade and antebellum slave markets. She was a widow who did not pen her thoughts in diaries or letters, and as a consequence of this silence, we know very little about her. However, fragments of her life can be traced in and through notarial and court records, and it is here that we learn more about her extensive investments in the New Orleans slave market and trade, and her relationship to one of the most infamous and wealthiest slave traders in the city.

When Mathilda decided to sell seven of her slaves in the New Orleans market she hired Bernard Kendig to do it. This sale became one of the many he transacted for her during his lucrative career in the slave trade.⁵¹ For two years, Bernard acted as Mathilda's agent and attorney-in-fact, and in this capacity he bought and sold numerous slaves for her.

In one scholar's analysis of the financial and legal documents that record Mathilda and Bernard's business relationship, he contends that it was a partnership that formed between acquaintances, that she was merely an underwriter for Kendig's trade, and that the slaves Bernard bought and sold may not have really been hers.⁵² Court testimony from the case *Folger v. Kendig* seems to support this presumption. N. and J. Folger sued Bernard for payment of a debt he owed them. Bernard refused to pay it because he claimed that he was insolvent and that

⁵¹ In the 1860 census, Bernard Kendig was the third wealthiest slave trader in New Orleans. Richard Tansey, "Bernard Kendig and the New Orleans Slave Trade." *Louisiana History*, Volume 23, Issue 2, 177. There were at least two other Kendig men in the slave trading business. Benjamin Kendig and Henry B. Kendig were auctioneers that sold slaves and other merchandise in various auction houses throughout the city. See New-Orleans Commercial Bulletin, Monday, July 01, 1844, Monday, July 08, 1844, and Saturday, September 07, 1844.

⁵² Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 52-53.

by doing so, he would jeopardize his livelihood and his family's well being. The Folgers contested his claim because they said that he possessed considerable wealth and would not suffer any hardship by paying the debt. Their legal counsel called upon Bernard's former business partner J.W. Boazman to support their assertions. Boazman testified that Bernard conducted business in Mathilda and another woman's names in order to avoid paying his creditors. He also claimed that Mathilda and the other woman, named Mrs. Dewey, had absolutely nothing to do with their slave trading business because he had never *seen* them and did not personally know them.⁵³

Unfortunately, Boazman did not tell the court the whole story. *Folger v. Kendig*, and other cases like it, reveal that Mathilda and Bernard were more than business associates. Moreover, they show that she was more intricately involved in Bernard and J.W.'s slave dealing business than Boazman wanted the court to believe. She was in fact Mathilda Kendig Bushy, Bernard's aunt, and the 1860 United States federal census identifies her as one of the many individuals in his household.⁵⁴

In the 1853 case *Nixon v. Bozeman et. al.* Bernard appeared in court and attested to his aunt's immense financial investment in the slave market and in the slave trade. In Bernard's testimony Mathilda is not an underwriter for his business; he is an employee in hers. William H. Nixon petitioned the court to rescind the sale of a slave that Boazman sold him because the slave

⁵³ Testimony of J.W. Boazman, *Folger v. Kendig* #5337, Unreported Case, June 1858. Louisiana Supreme Court Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans (UNO). In cross-examination, Boazman also admitted to holding ill-feeling toward Bernard at the time of his testimony, which might also explain his desire to situate Mathilda as a disinterested party in their partnership.

⁵⁴ After reviewing census records I learned that a woman named Margaret Dewey also resided in Bernard's household. She may have been the woman J.W. Boazman identified as Mrs. Dewey in his court testimony. On November 28, 1856, Margaret Miller, widow of William Dewey, "personally appeared" before Notary Public William Shannon to sell Bernard Kendig thirty-two slaves for "thirty thousand one hundred and seventy five dollars cash to her in ready money." See "Document 'D' Filed 28 Nov 1856," *Folger v. Kendig* #5337, Unreported Case, June 1858. (UNO).

became sick shortly after purchase. His counsel called on Bernard to testify. When asked whether he had a personal stake in the outcome of the case, Bernard claimed that he had no interest in the final judgment. More profoundly, he qualified his financial disinterest by explaining his business relationship with Mathilda: “I was furnished money by Mrs. Bushy to buy and sell negroes and was so at the time this boy was brought. I was to share with Mrs. Bushy the profits of the trade; was to get so much of the profits. Mrs. Bushy furnished the money to buy all the boys and I presume the one in question included. Mrs. Bushy is an aunt of mine.” When cross examined Kendig stated that “when I say I was to get a share of the property I mean a commission on each transaction as it took place; after the boy is sold I got a share of the profits made on the sale and that is the compensation which I get for my services.”⁵⁵

Nixon’s suit also betrays the allegations Boazman put forth in his discrediting testimony in *Folger v. Kendig*. Nixon sued Boazman and Bushey, and named them as co-defendants in the case. In light of Boazman’s claims to never have known or even seen Bushey, this seems strange. The court records reveal why Nixon’s legal counsel chose to do so; Bushey and Boazman were “partners in trade in buying and selling slaves.”⁵⁶ Surprisingly, Boazman did not deny this fact at anytime during court proceedings. Bernard also testified in this case and he claimed that “Boazman negotiated the sale from Mrs. Bushy to Nixon.” This case not only establishes J.W. and Mathilda’s business connection, but also calls his later denial of having known her, and his dismissal of her slave trading activities, into question. Furthermore, in the case *Kendig v. Cutler*,

⁵⁵ Testimony of Bernard Kendig, *Nixon v. Bozeman et. al*, 1856. Louisiana Supreme Court Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans. J.W. Boazman’s name was incorrectly spelled in the court records as Bozeman. But he was in fact the defendant named in this case. Additionally Mathilda’s name is spelled a variety of ways (Matilda and Mathilda and her surname is spelled Bushey and Bushy). Bernard is identified as Barnard and Barney in court records as well as notarial acts.

⁵⁶ *Nixon v. Bozeman et. al*, 1856, (UNO).

one witness testified that he also acted as Mathilda's agent in a slave sale. Boazman testified in this case as well and *personally* claimed to have "bid off the negro Willis" for Mathilda and that Willis was "bought to be resold."⁵⁷

Bernard made his aunt Mathilda's economic investment in the New Orleans slave market abundantly clear when he was again called to testify in the suit *Moore v. Bushey*. He told the court that:

I was interested in business with Mrs. Bushey at that time. I was running a big lot of drays; my money pretty much was laid out in these drays and mules. Mrs. Bushey had some money and whenever I thought there was money in a negro, I would buy it having a power of attorney to do so. If there was any money made on a negro lot, that way I got a part of the profits and together with a man named Boazman; when money was made that way the profits were immediately divided...Mrs. Bushey's interest in the profits was the same as witness' - they divided the grose[sic] profits. Mrs. Bushey's money was kept at the Bank sometimes at Matthews, Finsley(?) & Co and afterwards at Citizen's Bank in the name of B. Kendig agt Mathilda Bushey- witness had a special power of attorney; a notarial act to draw the money out [?] power was given before W^m (William) Shannon and the other before [P.W.] Robert. I never mixed my private money with Mrs. Bushey...I have made a final settlement with Mrs. Bushey of all transactions growing out of this slave business. Mrs. Bushey's profits were added to her money and placed in the Bank.⁵⁸

In addition to establishing Mathilda Bushey, as an individual keenly interested and invested in the New Orleans slave market, Bernard's testimony also suggests that she was not new to the trade in human flesh; she was already profiting from the slave trade before Bernard

⁵⁷ Testimony of Bernard Kendig, *Nixon v. Bozeman et. al*, 1856. In light of his later denial of his relationship with Mathilda it seems that Boazman dismissed Mathilda as a straw woman only after he had a falling out with Bernard. While it is plausible that Boazman did not dispute the plaintiff's claims about his partnership with Mathilda because he did not want to jeopardize his business with her and Bernard, it is also possible that his animosity toward Bernard colored his later testimony against him, and for our purposes here, against Mathilda as well. For testimony related to Boazman's business relationship with Mathilda see, Testimony of Emile Beauregard, *Bushey v. Kellar* # 3615 January 1856, Unreported Case 11 La. Ann. xvi and Testimony of J.W. Boazman, *Kendig v. Cutler* #3978 Unreported Case, Delay Docket, November 1856, (UNO).

⁵⁸ *Moore v. Bushey*, Unreported Louisiana Supreme Court case #4544 (1857), (UNO).

decided to take his chances with slave speculation.⁵⁹ Bushey, had been buying and selling slaves without the aid of a proxy for years before Bernard became her agent and business partner, and even more than this, she may have owned a slave yard. In the 1856 case *Bushey v. Kellar*, Mathilda brought suit against John Kellar in hopes of rescinding a slave sale. Kellar sold her a slave named William and she subsequently sold him to another person. The buyer returned him to her claiming that he was “ruptured.” In a letter she forwarded to Kellar, she stated that “the boy William, sold to her under full guarantee...has been returned to her by her vendee [purchaser] as ruptured—that the boy is now in the city at *her* slave yard.”⁶⁰ Beyond this, she appears in numerous court cases in which purchasers sued her for selling them sick, diseased, or otherwise “faulty” slaves, and some others where she had done the same. It was only after extensive engagement in the New Orleans slave market that she chose to appoint Bernard as her agent and permitted him to buy and sell slaves in her name.⁶¹ More crucially, she not only gave him money to buy slaves, she received *fifty percent* of his profits.

After Kendig established himself in the slave trade, Mathilda Bushey, continued to be an equal and viable partner in his slave dealing business with J.W. Boazman. To be sure, Kendig may have perjured himself in both cases, but notarial records support his claims far more those made by Boazman. Aunt Mathilda may not have been standing in the room when Bernard

⁵⁹ Bernard co-owned a horse stable with his partner Oliver Dubois sometime before 1843 when they went bankrupt. He began trading in slaves in the 1850s. See Richard Tansey, “Bernard Kendig and the New Orleans Slave Trade.” *Louisiana History*, Volume 23, Issue 2, 162n8.

⁶⁰ See “Letter to Deft: Market A” and Testimony of Augustus Davezac, *Bushey v. Kellar* #3615 Jan 1856. Unreported Case 11 La. Ann. xvi. Davezac claims that “the plaintiff” had a “yard.”

⁶¹ In the case *Moore v. Bushey*, 1857 we learn that Mathilda appointed Bernard as her duly authorized agent by notarial act on August 14, 1852. See also Notarial Act passed before P.W. Robert, Power of Attorney, August 14, 1852. Prior to Bernard’s appointment, there are numerous Acts of Sale in which the notary public identifies Mathilda without any proxy or agent involved. See for example Act of Sale, William Barnes to Mathilda Kendig, Widow Jacob Bushey, Recorded before S.H. Lewis, May 28, 1849; Act of Sale, George Ann Botts to Mathilda Kendig, Widow Jacob Bushey, Recorded before Joseph Beard, June 15, 1849. Act of Sale, Mathilda Kendig, Widow Jacob Bushey to William Carroll. Recorded before Antoine Abat, May 31, 1851 Act of Sale, Mathilda Kendig, Widow Jacob Bushey to William Jackson Maynard, Recorded before William Woods, July 2, 1851. (NANO)

negotiated the sales of her slaves or the purchase of others in her name, but she was deeply invested in the outcome of these transactions; far more than scholars have heretofore acknowledged.⁶²

These earlier transactions and lawsuits, her possible slave yard ownership, and her legal partnership with Boazman make it difficult to label Bushey a straw woman that simply funded Bernard's slave trading business. She employed her nephew to carry out a trade she was *already* engaged in. What is more, Bernard Kendig is well known to historians of the slave market and the domestic slave trade because he purchased faulty slaves and resold them as healthy ones, even though he possessed full knowledge of their ailments, and this shady practice earned him a nasty reputation among his fellow slave traders.⁶³ Curiously, Bushey's court records reveal that she too engaged in this practice. Was Bernard the mastermind behind such a sinister and underhanded strategy to maximize profits in the slave market? Or did he learn this business practice from his aunt Mathilda? Was this a dear aunt looking after her nephew's financial interests and well being or was this a woman who sought to engage in and reap the financial benefits of the lucrative trade which her nephew practiced? Mathilda Bushey did not leave behind any clues as to why she chose to do so, but we can speculate from the records we have at our disposal.⁶⁴

⁶² While Mathilda's seeming avoidance could easily be attributed to her gender, she had a reason not to be in the slave market. According to Bernard his aunt was "old and weak for the last years, affected with asthma."

⁶³ Richard Tansey, "Bernard Kendig and the New Orleans Slave Trade." *Louisiana History*, Volume 23, Issue 2, 159-178. Judith Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana*, Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 140-142. Thomas Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999, 111. Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 122.

⁶⁴ Bernard Kendig is a very interesting character, especially in his dealings with the women in his family. After he discontinued his agency for Mathilda, he began selling a number of slaves that belonged to his wife. Boazman does not mention her, Jane Miller Kendig, or Bernard's sale of her slaves. She does not appear in the court records either and thus we cannot determine the precise relationship she had to Bernard's business. Did he buy slaves in his wife's

If we sift through the often confusing legal and financial documents proffered by the parties in these cases, we can craft a picture of some white women's economic roles and investments in the slave market and the slave trade more broadly. Catharine Mordecai Solomon Hyams, like Bushey, engaged in this commerce as well. Hyams belonged to one of the most well-established and well-known slaveholding Jewish families in the South. She was related to lawyer, anti-abolitionist, Confederate soldier, and later Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana, Henry M. Hyams. Many members of the Hyams clan moved from South Carolina to Louisiana in the early part of the nineteenth century and Catharine was one of them.

Prior to relocating in New Orleans, she was a South Carolina widow who owned several slaves and residential and commercial properties in the city of Charleston. She appears in numerous bills of sale in which she bought or sold enslaved people in the state. Catharine Mordecai Solomon Hyams was also involved in a petition to the state which complained about a new tax imposed upon those who housed people of color in their establishments. Of the ten petitioners listed she is the only white female. Unfortunately the records do not specify the kind establishment she operated or how she came to house people of color there. After the death of her husband Mordecai, she found herself in court because her daughter—and her daughter's husband—contested her distribution and management of Mordecai's estate. They also argued that she had unlawfully sold several slaves, and bought others to replace them.⁶⁵

name and then sell them to avoid creditors? We cannot know. But the notary public identified Jane as the lawful owner of these slaves and as Bernard's wife, she undoubtedly benefited from these sales. See for example, Act of Sale, Bernard Kendig to Cecilia Palao, Recorded before Philippe Lacoste, March 28, 1854. Annual Conveyance Vendor and Vendee Indexes (NOCO)

⁶⁵ Petition to the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina now met in General Assembly (circa 1825), Records of the General Assembly, ND #1798, Ceathrin Hyams to Hannah Levy, Bill of sale for a slave named Ceathrin and her son John. Recorded 2/6/1822; John Austin and Samuel Woolfolk of Augusta, Ga. to Catharine Hyams, Bill of sale for a slave named Maria and her 2 children Adeline and James Henry, Recorded 6/14/1822. Woolfolk was a member of a prestigious slave trading family from Augusta, Georgia; Catharine Hyams

Shortly after this fracas Catharine moved to New Orleans, and unlike Matilda, her engagement in the city's slave trade is intermittent and often less clear. Between 1842 and 1859, she appears in only sixteen slave sales recorded by notary publics, but she was also named in a court case, which brings her ties to the slave market into full relief. In 1851, Catharine Hyams sued Harriet Smith for compensation due to her for the housing, food and medical care she provided to several of her slaves. Harriet's husband had placed them in Catharine's care while he was visiting New Orleans. Unfortunately, he died shortly thereafter, but Catharine did not know it.

So when he did not return, and when Harriet did not claim her slaves, Catharine went to court and requested help in securing recompense for her expenditures. She also asked the court for permission to sell Harriet's slaves in order to recoup the expenses she incurred if she was unsuccessful in her efforts. The court granted her request. There was a problem though. Harriet Smith had no idea what her husband had done with her slaves, so she was surprised to learn that they had been in Catharine's possession in the first place. Harriet appealed the court's decision and it is in her appeal that we learn a number of interesting things about Catharine's life and slave market activities, and about how white women navigated the commercial dimensions of the slave trade.

Like Mathilda Bushey, Catharine Mordecai Solomon Hyams also owned a slave yard in New Orleans, and this is where Harriet's husband lodged her slaves. Catharine also employed

to Thomas Bonneau, Bill of sale for a slave named Katy. Recorded 2/22/1823, Catharine Hyams to David Haig, Bill of sale for a slave named Grace and her son George, Recorded 3/7/1823; Catharine Mordecai Hyams, to Elizabeth Harris, Bill of sale for a slave named Matilda, Recorded 2/3/1824; and Catharine Mordecai Hyams, to Solomon Hyams, trustee for Susannah and Esther Jackson, Bill of sale for a slave named Rose, Recorded 5/3/1826, Miscellaneous Records (Main Series), 1732-1981, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina. Levy Solomons and Anna Hyams Solomons vs. Catherine M. Hyams, Hester Hyams and Nathan Hyams (both minors) August 22, 1833, Records of the Equity Court, Bills, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina.

family members to conduct her business in the slave trade. Levy J. Solomons was not just her legally appointed agent, he happened to be her son-in-law, the same man who sued her in Charleston. Levy was not always Catharine's legally-appointed agent though, and an interesting set of circumstances led to his assumption of this role. When Levy appeared in court in Catharine's stead, Harriet Smith's legal counsel argued that he had no right to do so because he was not her legal agent and thus had no authority to represent her in the case. In response to this, Catharine declared Levy to be her legal agent in all matters related to her property and finances, a move which suggests that she either delegated this task to him without the formality of legal declaration before the case, or that she may have acted on her own behalf prior to doing so. We learn another important fact about Catharine in the court record; she could not read or write. But this did not prevent her from buying and selling slaves, land, and bank stock with and without Levy's aid. To be sure, Catharine used familial networks to profit from the New Orleans slave trade. But more profoundly, she was an illiterate businesswoman who owned and operated a slave yard in the country's largest slave market; and people in the city, and those from as far away as Alabama, housed their slaves in her establishment.

Henry M. Hyams and his brother Eleazar were other relatives who engaged in the slave trading business and may have benefited from Catharine's slave yard operation.⁶⁶ New Orleans notarial records document the numerous slaves Eleazar and Henry purchased, but Catharine is not identified as a party in any of these transactions.⁶⁷ This may be another case in which a woman employed male relatives to do her business in the slave market. It is also possible that

⁶⁶ Harriet's legal counsel also contested Eleazar's involvement in the case because he "was not a good and solvent security." *Hyams v. Smith*, 6 La. Ann 362, 1851, (UNO).

⁶⁷ John Claiborne, 1850, Volume 1 and 1851 Volumes 2-3, Historical Notaries' Indexes (<http://www.notarialarchives.org/notarychrono.htm>) (NANO)

Eleazar and Henry bought the slaves and Catharine housed them in her yard until they could be sold. Unfortunately, legal and financial records do little to clarify the extent of their business relationship and at this point, all we know is that they were kin who happened to engage in slave market commerce during the same historical period.

Some might arguably say that although women like Mathilda and Catharine owned establishments that were deeply entrenched in and fundamental to the domestic slave trade and southern slave markets, they were not the faces of those establishments nor were they the faces of the trade. Indeed, the names and faces that were most infamously linked to southern slave markets belonged to men; but these men sometimes partnered with women who helped to make their wealth possible and who ostensibly profited from their decisions to do so.

Whether it was their mothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, wives or perfect strangers, men who made their living buying and selling slaves had all sorts of women in their lives. There were women like the one Harriet met in the Charleston slave market. There were women like Adelaide, who ventured into the slave market without the aid of their slave dealing husbands. There were women like Mathilda who owned slave yards and profited directly from the slave market, and from their business dealings with its primary arbiters. But there were also women like Ann Robertson, Ann Young, Malinda Dade/Dalle and “jumping Jinny” who got their hands dirty and stood toe-to-toe with the men who traded in human flesh.

Slave Trading Women and Female Soul Drivers

At the close of the American Revolution, Ann Robertson engaged in activities that historians would undoubtedly characterize as part and parcel of the domestic slave trade. Ann attended slave auctions; she sought out sickly slaves and purchased them; she nursed them back

to health; and she sold them for a profit. In spite of doing all of this, historians do not count her among the people who made the slave trade the insanely profitable business that it was. Ann left very few documents behind that tell us about her life. It is in her death, and her neighbors, friends, and business associates' remembrances, that we find out how profoundly significant Ann Robertson was and how she took advantage of the financial opportunities provided by the emerging domestic slave trade.

Through her speculation and other commercial endeavors, Ann amassed considerable wealth and a substantial amount of property in her own name. Unfortunately, she was childless and intestate when she died, and her husband John had passed just the year before. Upon her death, Ann's mother Catharine Megrath, who was a citizen of Ireland, claimed that all of her daughter's property belonged to her. But the administrators of Ann's and John's estates argued that all of her assets belonged to his heirs, and thus must be disposed of as the administrators saw fit. They contended that Ann was a feme covert, because the courts never legally recognized her as a feme sole trader who could conduct business in her own name, and as a consequence, all of her property and earnings were subsumed into John's estate. Catharine's counsel disagreed. They brought in a host of witnesses who attested to Ann's operation as a feme sole trader within their community, to her husband's acknowledgement of her status as such, and his somewhat strained relationship with his headstrong wife, who often ignored his advice regarding her slave market business. These "respectable and well informed witnesses stated that for many years she had acted as, and been considered a sole trader; was active and industrious, and she made great profits in her separate dealings, and bought property for herself. That her husband knew and acquiesced in her conduct: that he sometimes borrowed money from her, and returned it." Part of

this business involved buying and selling slaves. They also recalled that when her husband tried to warn her about her risky bidding behavior, she “repelled his interference, and said the money was her own, and she would do as she pleased with it; to which he replied that was no reason she should ruin herself.”

Ann likely recognized that the slave trade involved uncertainties that could prove ruinous, but she was willing to take her chances. She knew that sick slaves costs less than healthy ones, and she bought them in hopes of making them well. She understood that there was no guarantee that they would ever recover from what ailed them; but if they did, she could sell them for much more than she paid for them.⁶⁸ The court ruled that Ann had in fact operated as a feme sole trader, that her husband approved of her activities as such, and that her mother was indeed the rightful heir of her estate.

Ann Robertson was a feme sole who was also a slave trader; there is no other way to describe her. And so was Ann Young. Yet we would know nothing about her if it not for a court case filed by a couple who hired her to sell their slaves for them. In the later months of 1852, Wisconsin slaveowners Elias and Mary Gumaer hired Ann Young to sell their slaves Letty and her son William in the District of Columbia.⁶⁹ They stipulated that she should not sell them to slave traders or to anyone who would remove them from the commonwealth. Ann Young kept her end of the bargain, even going so far as selling them for a much lower price than their worth and rejecting higher offers put forth by several local slave traders. Unfortunately, Peter Hevener,

⁶⁸ Court Brief, *Catharine Megrath v. Administrators of John Robertson and Ann Robertson*. March, 1795 1 Des. 445, 1 S.C.Eq. 445 (S.C.), 1795, Court of Appeals of South Carolina, South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

⁶⁹ *Elias and Mary Gumaer v. Peter Hevener*, Records of the United States Circuit Court, Chancery Dockets and Rule Case Files, National Archives, Washington, D. C., Record Group 21, Document Number 885, Box: 76, Folder 20, Book: Rules #5

the man who bought the Gumaer's slaves, did not bind himself to the same terms. The Gumaers suspected that Hevener intended to sell Letty and William to slave dealers who would subsequently remove them from their community and family. They petitioned the court to prevent him from doing so.

Although no recorded decision exists, this court case is interesting for a number of reasons. Who was Ann Young and how on earth did the Gumaers learn about her ability and willingness to sell their slaves in the Washington D.C.? Was this Ann's first time selling slaves for other people, or was this one of many occasions when she sold or bought slaves for people who hired her? Did they pay her to sell Letty and William? It should not escape our notice that Ann negotiated with several individuals prior to finalizing the sale with Peter Hevener, two of whom were slave traders. Although uncertainty surrounds the circumstances of this sale, the Gumaers' petition suggests that they considered Ann Young to be a competent, astute, and trustworthy arbiter of the slave market, or someone who could skillfully navigate it. The slave traders and prospective buyers who approached Ann about buying Letty and her child likely saw her in this light as well.

Clearly, Ann had no qualms about acting as the Gumaers' slave dealing proxy or agent. She possessed important knowledge about the slave market economy that allowed her to negotiate with a host of prospective buyers for the sale of the Gumaers' slaves. Perhaps the couple entrusted Ann with this transaction because she was a relative, or maybe Letty and William were in Ann's possession already and the Gumaers saw her as the most logical person to sell them. But if they did not believe that she could sell Letty and William, abide by their wishes, and obtain the best price possible, they certainly had other options. Still they chose to place this

task in Ann's hands instead. Without this case, Ann Young would have remained outside the parameters of the domestic slave trade. Yet, everything she did as the Gumaers' agent defined her as a slave dealer. They may not have wanted her to sell Letty and William to slave traders, but in hiring her to sell them, the Gumaers in effect authorized Ann to assume that title.

By conventional definitions, Ann Robertson was a slave trader and in many respects, she was engaged in the less gritty and grueling work of the slave marketplace. But women also handled one of the most arduous and unseemly aspects of the trade, slave driving. As North Carolina slave trader Richard Puryear arranged to transport a slave coffle further south he contemplated who would be the best candidates to carry out the task. One of his choices was nothing short of astonishing. In a letter to his slave trading partner Isaac Jarratt, Puryear spoke of hiring "jumping Jinny" and a man to guard the slave coffle as it made its way into the lower South. Puryear offered his partner unwavering reassurance that Jinny was more than qualified to perform the duties required of her. He told Jarratt that "...He has 12 fellows in the chain all of which jumping Jinny drives before her. She carried up the rear armed and equipped in a style which reduced it to a certainty that if life lasts[,] you will see her in Montgomery..."⁷⁰ By hiring Jinny to perform a duty that was one of the most dangerous aspects of the slave trading business, her employers entrusted her with their financial futures, and this suggests several things. White women's presence in the slave trade was not always frowned upon by those similarly involved. In fact, there seems to have been a demand for Jinny's services because another slave trader,

⁷⁰ Richard Puryear to Isaac Jarratt, March 3, 1834, *Jarratt/Puryear Papers*, Records of the Antebellum Southern Plantations on Microfilm (RASP) Series F, Duke University, Part 3, reel 11, 1834-1835 correspondence

Tyre Glen, attempted to hire her for several months prior to finally being able to do so.⁷¹ We might assume that Jarratt and Puryear employed Jinny to help transport this coffle because it was disproportionately female or comprised primarily of young adults and children, but this was not the case. The coffle of thirty slaves that Jinny drove before her was disproportionately male; 69% of the slaves were men and boys, and Jarratt and Puryear entrusted her to use force and violence against them if she deemed it necessary to do so.

Interestingly, Jarratt and Puryear remain silent about how they felt about Jinny punishing, disciplining, and possibly shooting the slaves in her possession. But the very idea that they would hire her to trek hundreds of miles with a drove of slaves fully armed and prepared to inflict violence is telling. Historians have yet to find any other mention of Jinny outside of Jarratt, Puryear, and Glen's correspondence so what does her invisibility mean? It could either suggest that she was in a class by herself or that she and women like her operated in a manner that contributes to their omission from the historical record. But without further exploration we will not be certain which of these possibilities explains Jinny's absence.

Picturing Women and the Slave Market

Travelers, white women, the slaves they owned and slave traders offer vivid examples of white women's presence in antebellum slave markets; and nineteenth century illustrators make it possible to literally see women in these spaces. One of the most well known and frequently used images of a slave auction, "Sale of Estates, Pictures and Slaves in the Rotunda, New Orleans"

⁷¹ Tyre Glen to Isaac Jarratt, January 9, 1834 and February 2, 1834, *Jarratt/Puryear Papers*, RASP, Series F, Duke University, Part 3, reel 11, 1834-1835 correspondence. We can only wonder why it took so long for him to secure her services. Was Jinny so busy that she could not take on additional work at the time? Or was there another reason?

appears in the first volume of James Silk Buckingham's *The Slave States of America* (Fig. 4.1).⁷² It is a brilliant artistic depiction of the St. Louis Rotunda and the business conducted therein, and it may also give us an idea of what John Theophilus Kramer and Theresa Pulsky saw when they attended slave auctions there. One of the most spectacular venues for the city's slave auctions, its marble columns and meticulous French architecture encircled the sunlit center and the platform upon which enslaved African Americans were bought and sold.

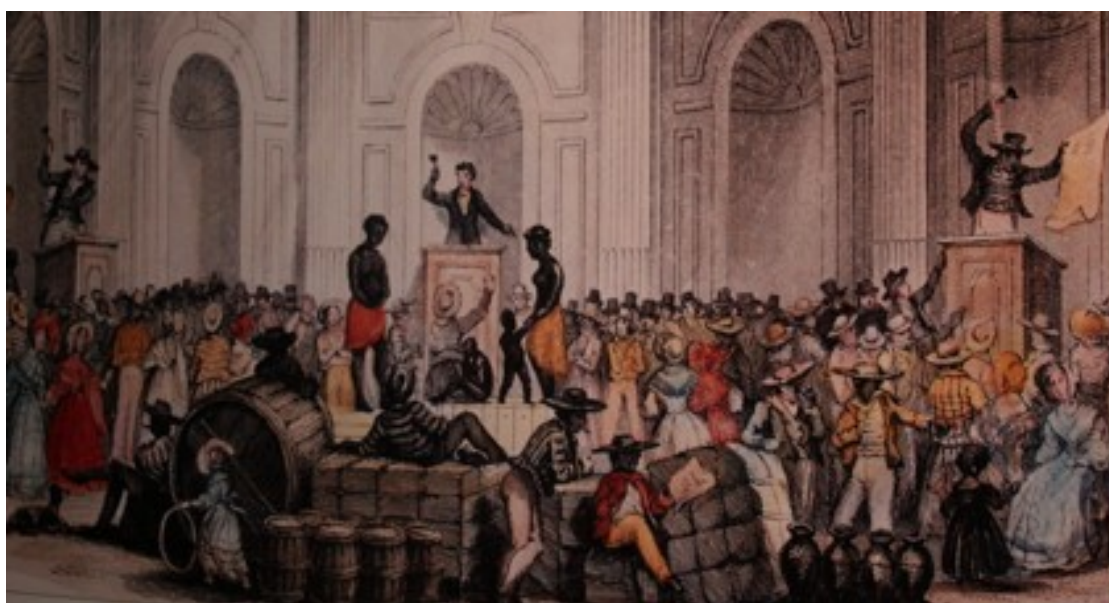


Figure 4.1. "Sale of Estates, Pictures and Slaves in the Rotunda, New Orleans" in James Silk Buckingham, *The slave states of America, Volume 1*, London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1842, 334-335.

According to Daniel E. Walker, "by the mid-1840s no venue engaged in the sale or trade of slaves in New Orleans rivaled the Rotunda of the St. Louis Hotel," and here we can see why

⁷² This image also appears in the following texts: Wilson Armistead, *A Tribute for the Negro: Being a Vindication of the Moral, Intellectual, and Religious Capabilities of the Colored Portion of Mankind; with Particular Reference to the African Race*. Manchester and London: W. Irwin, 1848; Della Pollock, *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998; Thadious M. Davis, *Games of Property: Law, Race, Gender, and Faulkner's Go Down, Moses*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003; Thomas C. Battle, *Legacy: Treasures of Black History*. Margate: National Geographic, 2006; Bliss Broyard, *One drop: My Father's Hidden Life--A Story of Race and Family Secrets*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2007 and Thomas Ruys Smith, *Southern Queen: New Orleans in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2011.

this may have been the case.⁷³ Large crowds surround the auctions that take place in the background, but a slave auction occurs in the center of the image. Standing, sitting, and chatting with one another, white women dot the crowd and they figure quite prominently in all of the market activities captured in the illustration. The women who attentively observe the sale of an enslaved man and woman who are wearing nothing more than pieces of cloth around their waists, and the two naked children by their sides, are startling too. There is also a significant presence of *white children* at this affair, who freely engage in play as the sale of estates, pictures and human beings commence.

In George Bourne's *Picture of slavery in the United States of America*, we find multiple women represented in the illustration he calls "*Auction at Richmond*" (Fig. 4.2). Here, we also find women peppering the crowd in their bonnets and dresses. Most of them have their backs to the viewer, but they are nevertheless visible as they stand side-by-side with white men and children. They are not on the margins or in the background; they are standing directly in front of the auctioneer as he calls off the bids for the enslaved person standing immediately in front of him. This event occurs outside, and directly in front of the location where slaves were exposed for sale.

⁷³ Daniel E. Walker, *No More, No More: Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans*. Minneapolis: London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, 36.



Figure 4.2. "Auction at Richmond." From: George Bourne, *Picture of slavery in the United States of America*. Middleton: Edwin Hunt, 1834, 111.

The illustrators' imaginings of apparently unescorted elite white women who ventured into the New Orleans slave market, some of whom were undoubtedly mothers who came with children in tow, to observe, inspect, and potentially buy slaves, challenges prevailing arguments about these women's economic relationships to southern slave markets. While the process of buying and selling slaves was generally consistent, the aesthetics of slave auctions sometimes differed according to the venue where they were held, and this may account for the sheer number of women depicted in these two images. Not all slave auctions featured scantily clad enslaved men and women. In fact, some slave traders invested heavily in the clothing their slaves wore on sale day, others even purchased gloves and jewelry for enslaved people to wear at auction.⁷⁴

David Walker also tells us that the kind of slave sale that took place in the St. Louis hotel was

⁷⁴ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 121.

“so sanitized that its true purpose at least externally, was hard to decipher.”⁷⁵ The men and women that traders slated for sale were dressed in fancy clothing—some men even wore top hats—and they paraded around the perimeter of the rotunda prior to the auction. (See *Fig. 4.3*).



Figure 4.3. “Slaves for Sale: A Scene in New Orleans.” From *The Illustrated London News*, Volume 38, 107.

With such striking aesthetic contrasts, it is quite possible that southerners considered certain types of slave auctions more appropriate for white women to attend than others. To be sure, these are abolitionist-leaning renderings of what these men claimed to see during their time in the New Orleans and Richmond slave markets and what they wanted to present to their readers and hence, we should be cautious about interpreting the possible implications of these images. Nevertheless, they are worthy of our contemplation.

Behind Every Slave Trading Man There was a Woman

Images such as those that appear in Buckingham and Bourne’s work literally draw white women into slave marketplaces, but they also seem to make a startling omission. They exclude the countless white female merchants who ostensibly profited from the slave trade. White female

⁷⁵ Daniel E. Walker, *No More, No More: Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans*. Minneapolis: London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, 36.

merchants and entrepreneurs provided the kinds of goods and services that might have been useful to slave traders in their daily business and they positioned themselves within the commercial hubs of southern city centers—spaces where slave traders and dealers also conducted their business. This made it quite feasible for slave traders and dealers to seek out and purchase the goods and services they offered, and in some cases, this is exactly what happened.

City and business directories, as well as censuses of merchants compiled by New Orleans city officials, show that the spatial configuration of commercial districts in nineteenth-century New Orleans made it difficult for many white women to avoid slave marketplaces or to evade the business and community that flourished within these spaces. The majority of the white women whose commercial and pecuniary worlds intersected with southern slave markets and slave traders did not document these connections; but enslaved people, city officials, and the slave traders they partnered with often did.

As Bethany Veney awaited her sale at auction, the jailer who oversaw her captivity ordered a man to escort her and another enslaved female to a local dressmaker so the woman could make them outfits for the occasion. She recalled that this dressmaker's "business...was to array such poor creatures as we in the gaudiest and most striking attire conceivable, that when placed upon the auction stand, we should attract the attention of all present, if not in one way, why, in another."⁷⁶ Some slave traders invested extensively in the clothing and accessories their slaves wore in preparation for sale, and thus, offering slave traders this service could be quite profitable.⁷⁷ It is conceivable that not all slave traders and dealers relied upon white female

⁷⁶ Bethany Veney, *The Narrative of Bethany Veney: A Slave Woman*, Worcester, Mass: [s.n.] ; Boston : Press of Geo. H. Ellis, 1889, 29-30.

⁷⁷ Slave traders purchased gold rings, top hats, etc for slaves to wear when exposed for sale. See Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 121.

dressmakers like the one Betheny Veney remembered to clothe the enslaved women they exposed for sale. But there were enough of these women operating in the same spaces where slave traders and dealers did their business to suggest that at least some might have partnered with white female merchants when it was advantageous to do so.

Slave trader Rice Ballard also employed local women to make clothing for slaves he purchased for re-sale.⁷⁸ For example, he paid “Mrs. Allen for Making Clothes \$13.00”, “Mrs Crow for Making 12 shirts \$2.00”, “Mrs. Richardsons [sic] bill for Making Clothes...52.05” and “...Paid Miss Mary Allen and Ms. Richardson for making [illegible]...13.00.” Additional entries for similar expenses appear in his account book. Whether these women were engaged in more extensive commercial activities or simply had the occasional foray into this work, they provided Rice Ballard with supplies he needed for his slave trading business and profited in the process.

Spatially, there was significant overlap between the establishments operated by slave traders, brokers, dealers, and auctioneers on the one hand, and female merchants on the other. In fact, both groups operated in the same commercial districts in the city, and many of them worked on the same blocks; some were only a few doors apart.⁷⁹ For example, Madame Harriet

⁷⁸ Archivists at the UNC-Chapel Hill Special collections presume that this was the purpose of these expenses. Folder 425 Volume 7: 1831-1835, December 1831, page 6

⁷⁹ See the *New Orleans (La.) Street Commissioner's Office Census of Merchants and Persons Following Professions Requiring Licenses, 1855-1856*. Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library (NOPL). I do not include the number of free women of color who also ran similar businesses and establishments because historians, particularly those whose work examines antebellum New Orleans, take the presence of free women of color as commonplace in this particular context. As a general rule, free women of color worked to sustain their families and to maintain their freedom and thus they were not a peculiar feature of southern centers of commerce. However, according to some scholars, white women, particularly of the middling and elite classes, were. Some scholars have challenged this argument. See for example Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992 and Delfino and Gillespie, *Neither Lady nor Slave: working women of the Old South*. Ed. Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. To be sure, white women worked when they had to. They assumed responsibility for family businesses when male kin died or were unable to run them. They established businesses to stave off insolvency when their husbands or male kin were financially inept. Others found ways to generate personal wealth because they sought some measure of independence in marriage or thereafter. And there were some women who were keenly

established her oyster restaurant on the corner of Gravier and Philippa Streets. Slave trader C.F. Hatcher was nearby on Gravier between Philippa and Baronne. Mrs. Mary Sweneua[?] (or Brzarenne) operated a retail fancy shop on Baronne, Gravier and Common Streets. Slave dealer Thomas Foster worked at 157 Common Street between Baronne and Carondelet and his fellow slave dealers Frisby and Lamarque's establishment was located at 156 Common Street between Baronne and Carondelet.

City directory publishers and officials also document white women's engagement in commercial activities in the slave trading districts. The Paxton's 1830 *New Orleans Directory* identifies one hundred and forty eight women engaged in business in the city. The Cohen's *New Orleans and Lafayette City Directory, including Carrollton, Freeport, Algiers, Gretna and M'Donogh for 1850* lists four hundred and twenty-seven female merchants or business women for the year 1849. If we factor in the women who were employed as teachers and principals, and who ran schools and seminaries, this number jumps to four hundred and sixty three.⁸⁰ Twenty self-identified (male) slave traders and dealers appear among them.⁸¹

interested in income-generating activities for the sake of building wealth. And this held true for women in a variety of socioeconomic positions. To think of white women who lived during the nineteenth century as disinterested in all things economic unless circumstances forced them to care, is illogical; white women wanted to buy things and they knew they needed money to get them. This very basic equation was enough to motivate some women to find ways to accumulate the funds necessary to purchase the things they desired, and many of them did not want to rely upon the men in their lives to give them what they wanted.

⁸⁰ John Adams Paxton, *The New-Orleans directory and register: containing the names, professions, & residences, of all the heads of families, and persons in business, of the city and suburbs; notes on New-Orleans; with other useful information*. New Orleans: Benj. Levy & Co., 1830. *Cohen's New Orleans and Lafayette City Directory, including Carrollton, Freeport, Algiers, Gretna and M'Donogh for 1850*. New Orleans: Printed at the Job Office of the Delta, 112 Poydras Sreet. 1849. (NOPL)

⁸¹ Individuals engaged in the sale and purchase of slaves often identified themselves as "planters," "commission merchants," "factors," "auctioneers" and "agents" because they often sold other commodities or conducted other types of business transactions alongside this commerce. And thus it is important to note that these individuals identified themselves as individuals engaged in the slave trade versus those that do not. The number of individuals engaged in the slave trade would be far higher if the directory made it possible to include those who did not identify themselves in this way.

In their day-to-day comings and goings, these women likely saw slaves transported to and from auction houses and other slave trading establishments. They might have heard slave traders discuss their business with each other and prospective buyers and sellers. Those same men and women may well have bought goods from these female merchants and approached them about hiring out the slaves they sought to sell. These were above all, businesswomen who sought to maximize their profits in as many ways as they could; and sometimes that meant engaging in commerce that intersected with the slave market.

According to the New Orleans Treasurer's Office's 1854 *Census of Merchants*, there were three hundred and thirty female merchants operating in the first, second and third districts of the city.⁸² Most of these women were centered in the first and second districts (one hundred and forty four female merchants in each). For the next two years the New Orleans Street Commissioner's Office compiled a census of individuals engaged in businesses that required licensure, and women appear quite frequently in these records as well. One hundred and ninety-seven women appear in the census taken for the second and third wards of the city.

These numbers do not represent the total number of women engaged in commercial activities because the city ordinance only mandated licensure for specific professions and thereby excluded women who were transient and those engaged in the most common occupations for women such as seamstresses, dressmakers, washerwomen, bakers, and confectioners.⁸³ Thus,

⁸² I do not include free women of color in these tabulations. *New Orleans (La.) Treasurer's Office. Census of Merchants, 1854, volumes, 1, 2, and 3, First, Second, and Third Districts*, (NOPL). In the 1860 *Census of Merchants*, one hundred and nineteen female merchants were operating in the city. The year when this census was recorded is questionable, as is the method of recording which differs markedly from the 1854 census. The recorders did not note the specific addresses of each merchant or attempt to pinpoint the districts where the census data was taken. Thus I use the 1860 census to offer a more general sense of women's commercial endeavors in the city and whether their businesses crossed paths with those of the slave trade.

⁸³ New Orleans (La.) Street Commissioner's Office. *Census of Merchants and Persons Following Professions Requiring Licenses, 1855-1856*, (NOPL). There are eleven women listed in this census who operated millinery

there were certainly more women engaged in commercial endeavors in New Orleans than the directories reveal.

With evidence of so many women operating as merchants in the city of New Orleans, the question of whether white women entered the slave market is moot. Clearly many of these women operated in the same spaces we traditionally associate with the slave market. Thus most female merchants in these neighborhoods could not have avoided the slave market just doors away or across the street. Some even shared the same commercial spaces with the slave trade's primary arbiters. Women engaged in midwifery, millinery work, dressmaking and fancy sewing. They operated dry good and retail groceries. They were potato and coal dealers, bakers, confectioners, shoemakers and victuallers. They operated soda and segar/cigar shops, beer and coffee houses, wood yards, intelligence offices and numerous boarding houses and hotels throughout the city's commercial districts. They also identified themselves as traders, brokers, ferrykeepers and undertakers. Their myriad entrepreneurial endeavors likely drew an economically diverse clientele of both men and women, some of which were undoubtedly engaged in the slave trade either as prospective buyers, sellers, proxies or otherwise.

Regendering Southern Slave Markets

White women like Mathilda Bushey, Catharine M. Hyams, Ann Robertson, Ann Young, jumping Jinny, the unnamed dressmaker who outfitted Betheny Veney for sale, and the women

stores and shops. It would seem that the census takers were concerned with more established merchants. In the opening pages of the census, a list of professions with corresponding licensure fees appears. Presumably this was a set of guidelines for them (the census included professions that were not included in the list) but the list is nonetheless telling, for it included only a few of the trades women engaged in, namely operating retail and grocery stores. The same could be said for the women listed in the city directories. These directories did not include all city residents and only those who chose to provide information about professions offered it to the compilers. The publishers of the *New Orleans and Lafayette Directory for 1850* placed an advertisement in the *Daily Picayune* asking residents who might have been absent from the city while information was being compiled to submit their information for inclusion. See "New Orleans and Lafayette Directory for 1850," *Daily Picayune*, December 25, 1849.

who made clothes for Rice Ballard's slaves were unique in some respects, especially in their decisions to engage in and with the slave trade in the manners in which they did. But engaging in slave market activities, especially the sale, purchase and hire of enslaved people was not exceptional. White women throughout the South frequently did so, and legal and court records support this contention.

When we take prevailing conceptualizations of the slave market and the slave trading community into consideration, the presence and slave market activities of these women and others who city officials counted in the censuses of merchants raise several questions. Did the presence of women in the commercial sphere of the slave market alter the behavior of the slave traders, dealers and speculators they met and worked with? If the business and the spaces in which traders ate, drank, slept and entertained themselves were masculine spaces, where did women engaged in the slave trade eat, sleep and seek entertainment? Furthermore, Jarratt, Puryear and Glen's letters suggest that they knew of Jinny through a network of other individuals engaged in the slave trade who told them about her services. If this was the case, is it possible that women like Jinny developed reputations among slave traders and secured work through this same network of communication? Although historians have not answered these questions, the travelers, slaves, and slave traders who saw white women in southern slave markets, witnessed them observing and bidding upon enslaved people, and facilitated those activities, suggest that their presence caused very little discomfort or dismay on the ground. Newspaper editors could pontificate about the sexual disorder of and dangers that slave marketplaces posed to white women, but these women's activities reveal that they paid very little attention to such warnings.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ According to Mary Ryan, the editor of the *Daily Picayune* attempted to invoke a sense of danger in his female readers about their presence at or near slave auctions. Ryan says that "[f]or ladies to promenade near slave sales

Most women do not verbally articulate their innermost feelings about the morality and justness of slavery in the records analyzed here. Yet their deeds tell a completely different story. Each time they chose to operate an establishment that served the slave trading community, to provide a slave trader with goods or services, or to buy or sell slaves from traders, dealers or otherwise, they belied sentimental and maternalist visions of white women's relationships with slaves. Regardless of how white southern women felt about the institution, their slave market activities brought them wealth that they would not otherwise have accumulated, helped to sustain the domestic slave trade, severed relationships between enslaved family members, and broke bonds that would never be mended. Numerous women moved in silence, yet many people, enslaved and free, observed their movements and remarked upon them, leaving us with yet another way to make visible the things that have heretofore remained obscure.

would expose them to scantily clad chattels, and leers of black men." Ryan's interpretation of the editor's words is interesting because the editor would have little need to express his view had women actually stayed out of the slave market. Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, 69.

CHAPTER FIVE

“These negroes are all the property she has”: The Pecuniary Destruction of Civil War

“I suppose you have learned,” Eva Jones wrote to her mother Mary, “even in the more secluded portions of the country that slavery is entirely abolished—a most unprecedented robbery, and most unwise policy... We have seen hope after hope fall blighted and withering about us, until our country is no more—merely a heap of ruins and ashes. A joyless future of probable ignominy, poverty, and want is all that spreads before us, and God alone knowing where any of us will end a life robbed of every blessing...”¹

As Eva contemplated the meaning of slavery's end, she defined it as nothing short of theft, a criminal act committed on such a grand scale that it would result in an impoverished, "joyless future" devoid of blessings for her and similarly situated people living in the South.

Throughout the countless letters that white southern women like Eva wrote to their friends and family members, and in their diaries, they reckoned with the psychological and ideological implications of black emancipation. But they did more than that. They had to do more than contemplate the possibility that they might have to take on the work of men and slaves during and after the war. As news of slavery's unraveling made its way throughout the South via newspapers, letters and hearsay, the foremost sentiments of white slaveowning women like Eva focused upon the pecuniary ramifications of the institution's demise. They grappled with the Civil War's economic impact upon their futures as white southern women whose very lives were predicated upon the personal ownership and control of enslaved African Americans.

¹ Eva Jones to Mary Jones, June 13, 1865, in *Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War*, ed. Robert Manson Myers, New Haven and London: The Yale University Press, 1972, 1273-1274.

Well before the Union defeated the Confederacy, rumors about full-scale black emancipation circulated through the South. The very idea of black freedom was a nightmare that no slaveowner wanted to live to see. But for slaveowning women, who owned disproportionately more slaves than land, such an initiative signified financial destruction, and the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation brought that horrid fantasy to life. Many slaveowning women lived all or most of their lives in households and communities profoundly shaped by the omnipresence of commodified human beings and their labor, and they cultivated identities intricately tied to their personal ownership of those individuals. For them, black freedom was difficult to bear not simply because they embraced ideas about enslaved people's inferiority or the Unionist oppression that would likely follow the Confederacy's loss of the war. It did not cause them dismay simply because their social status would diminish with the loss of their husband's wealth or financial standing in their respective communities. Emancipation, and the subsequent de-commodification of black people, robbed them of their primary source of wealth, placed many of them in positions of economic dependency, and forced them to establish restrictive relationships with those who had financial resources, just to survive.

For women who owned their own slaves, the Civil War was a personal battle, which they fought to ensure their financial autonomy and survival. The abolition of slavery jeopardized this objective because it signified their financial ruin. Abolition meant a reconfiguration of the economic relationships they had with the people they once owned. Emancipation had the potential to transform their marital and familial dynamics, which were often and necessarily configured by relations of property. Women who could command certain levels of respect and legal and economic autonomy as slaveowners within their households and wider communities

might not be able to do so once the federal government invalidated their rights to own human beings. Shouldering the burden of this knowledge, they wrestled with the implications and consequences of emancipation in a number of ways; the most important of these methods of reconciliation had tremendous and traumatic impacts upon African American lives.

Surrounded by thousands of bodies that would soon be free to exist in whatever way they chose, slaveowning women constantly encountered physical reminders of their impending economic strife and of the people who embodied their fiscal loss and defeat. Over the course of the war, they did whatever they could distance themselves from this reality, and by any means necessary. This chapter tells their stories. But it is a very different narrative than historians have told before.

Instead of focusing my attention primarily upon how the war transfigured the tenuous relationships between black and white women within southern households, and restructured labor relations and gendered power in these spaces, this chapter interrogates white slaveowning women's excursions into the more expansive wartime terrain. This terrain included Union encampments, tribunals and court rooms, and in these spaces they attempted to reclaim their human property and cling to the remnants of the peculiar institution amidst its daily fragmentation and dissolution. Thus white women denied black freedom were not only means as a means by which to reckon psychologically with the erosion of slavery and the ramifications of its dissolution, but also as a method of economic preservation. In the process, they often used the same strategies of economic preservation as their male counterparts. Thus, the military conflict between the Union and the Confederacy—far from sharpening gender roles—fostered a personal, pecuniary battle fought everyday by white slaveowning women and men who were determined

to preserve their individual investments in an economy and a way of life predicated upon the ownership of African American bodies and unfettered access to their labor.

A gendered reckoning with the economic historiography of the Civil War.

Scholars have examined the profound effect that the contingencies of battle had upon white southern women's lives in the Civil War era. They also interrogate white women's responses to the economic shifts brought about by the war and document their adaptations to these newfound pecuniary conditions. In the process, they have developed a narrative which has become fundamental to our prevailing understandings of the period.

Typically, the narrative's trajectory goes as follows: White southern women's menfolk became soldiers and left them behind to assume the roles that men once filled on plantation estates and in southern communities. Thrust into a realm of responsibility virtually or entirely unfamiliar to them, they grappled with these responsibilities in the best ways they could, and they often expressed the most dismay about assuming roles beyond their households and the new relationships of power their circumstances forced them to forge with enslaved people.² When discussing the shifting economic contours of white women's lives during the Civil War, scholars recognize that they were fiscally interested in slavery, but claim they maintained a mediated relationship to the institution. Historians also contend that the war provided white women with "unusual" and "unique" economic opportunities, especially those who were "left home to act in what were almost exclusively male spheres of influence and authority." Women often seized upon these moments of temporary economic empowerment by buying and selling slaves, but

² Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. Kirsten Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004, 159-191. Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 97-166.

they did so only with their menfolks' approval and with the sole intent of alleviating the burdens of household and domestic labor. They cared about the slave market economy then not because of their personal investments, but because of their menfolk's connections to the marketplace and the ways wartime changes affected those ties.³ While many white women's experiences conformed to this schematic, it does not consider how the war affected an entire strata of the slaveowning class—female slaveowners, especially married slaveowning women—and how they dealt with the pecuniary implications of the war. Our tendency to lump slaveowning and non-slaveowning women into a general category or to exclude white married slaveowning women from the economic histories of the war impoverishes Civil War history more broadly.

There is a logical reason why this historical narrative has such import within Civil War historiography, and why scholars continue to replicate it in some form or fashion in recent studies of the era. In seeking to understand how white women took advantage of the economic opportunities that the Civil War afforded them, and while evaluating their roles during and investments in the Civil War overall, historians tend to focus their attention on white women's actions within southern households.⁴ Many scholars recognize that “the household stood at the juncture between private and public life,” yet the very tendency to hone in on the metamorphosed relations of southern households restricts our understandings of the experiences that occurred beyond them, especially when it comes to white slaveowning women whose

³ Laura Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

⁴ John Inscoe, “The Civil War's Empowerment of an Appalachian Woman: The 1864 Slave Purchase of Mary Bell” in *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996, 61. Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 97-166.

disappearing human property frequently compelled them to reach outside their homes and even the plantation landscape to reclaim them.⁵

To hear formerly enslaved people tell it, many white slaveowning women were shattered by the economic losses that accompanied military defeat. White slaveowning women were propertied individuals who were economically invested in the institution of slavery. Those enslaved by them recalled how these women responded poorly and sometimes brutally to each Confederate loss, every ill-behaved slave, and to the outcome of the war. After emancipation, formerly enslaved people remembered that many of these women were sore losers who had trouble accepting the new economic order of the South not simply because they despised performing labor they associated with slaves or because they yearned for the comforts that an enslaved labor force provided. White women refused to embrace the new order of things in part because it robbed them of their primary source of wealth. Enslaved people and freemen and women reported slaveowning women's actions to Union Army officials and then to Freedmen's Bureau agents throughout the region. The correspondence thus produced conveyed what life was like for both female owner and the slaves they owned during the war, and how each groups lives

Take for example, what Laura Edwards has said about this: "From the outset...many elite white southern women saw the war in terms of their men's social, economic, and political position. By extension, their own place in the social hierarchy was also at issue, because these women's fortunes rose and fell with those of their menfolk" and they "merged their own interests with those of their husbands, fathers, and other male relatives." To be sure, Edwards admits that southern women were "a diverse group, who occupied very different positions in southern society, [and] had very different interests." Yet the economic picture she paints of elite white southern women is prototypical, in spite of the fact that we know that circumstances and situations varied even within socioeconomic strata. Here, they are constrained by patriarchy, southern laws and customs and are heavily dependent upon others, particularly men. She goes onto say that the "economic upheaval of war and the aftermath stripped many common white families of their property. With their land, livestock, and tools went these men's ability to maintain their own households and provide for dependents...These economic changes for white men meant changes for white women, who still derived their class status through that of their male relatives." Edwards' conflation of white family fortunes exclusively with male wealth not only pushes white slaveowning women back into the shadows, it negates whatever economic changes the war created for them and their economic interests in the war's outcome. See Laura Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, 72 and 4 respectively.

changed thereafter. We can piece fragments of these stories together when we move beyond white women's wartime letters and diaries and examine more deeply military officers' recollections and the remembrances of former slaves. In doing so it becomes clear that many white slaveowning women responded to the war the ways that they did because of their direct and unmediated economic relationships to slavery.

“By some hocus-pocus...”: Coming to terms with the Destruction of Slavery

When the nation was in the throes of civil war, white slaveowning women panicked just like everyone else; and they had plenty of reasons to do so. As historian Drew Gilpin Faust has established, many white southern women were ill-prepared for the changes wrought by the conflict. Their fathers, uncles, brothers, husbands and sons were fighting on the battlefield. As a consequence, women were often left without male protection, surrounded by a sea of seemingly restless slaves who thought the war was about them. They were forced to assume responsibility for the management and efficiency of their families' estates. For slaveowning women in particular, the fear that their slaves were right that the war would ultimately do away with the peculiar institution became all too real when the people they thought they knew so well became strangers and disappeared before their eyes.

Even if the war was not technically a battle over slavery, slaveowning women recognized that enslaved people were behaving in ways that signaled a catastrophic metamorphosis, one that could culminate in their financial ruin. All the money that was bound up in the bodies of

enslaved people would be lost; and they, not just their male kin, would be poor.⁶ For many of them, their worst fears materialized as they watched the war unfold, grieved the losses of so many men, struggled to feed and clothe their families and slaves in the absence of those men, and witnessed the destruction that came as a consequence of the Union's triumph. And for some, the havoc wreaked upon their personal wealth, particularly in slaves, added to the misery and trauma of the war. Seeing the writing on the wall, many slaveowning women refused to read it, but others devised a multitude of strategies to protect their financial interests.

As the Union forces occupied the South, they confronted a stark reality when they encountered slaveowning southerners; these propertyholders had immense trouble accepting the impending dissolution of slavery. Testifying before the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission Major George L. Stearns recalled, "Slaveholders of all classes,—the common farmer, the most aristocratic man and the most aristocratic lady—come into this room to talk with me about their slaves....Many of them give it up, but there is a lingering hope that by some hocus-pocus things will get back to the old state. So long as that continues, the master has not made up his mind to hire his slave, & the slave finds that it is very difficult to work for anybody who will pay him."⁷ White slaveowning women were not willing to leave their financial investments in slavery in the hands of the federal government, no matter how many times

⁶ For example Mary Boykin Chesnut related a conversation she had with a physician as they watched a Confederate regiment completing marching drills and their servants stood by. The doctor told Mary that he had "been counting them, making an estimate. There is \$16,000 - sixteen thousand dollars' worth of negro property which can go off on its own legs to the Yankees whenever it pleases." As a slaveowning woman, such estimations could not have been lost on Mary as she observed the behaviors of the enslaved people in her household and those owned by her friends and neighbors. August 23, 1861, *A Diary from Dixie, as Written by Mary Boykin Chesnut, Wife of James Chesnut, Jr., United States Senator From South Carolina, 1859-1861, and Afterward an Aide to Jefferson Davis and a Brigadier-General in the Confederate Army*, 109. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/chesnut/maryches.html> (accessed February 27, 2012)

⁷ Testimony of Major Geo. L. Stearns before the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, {23 Nov. 1863}, filed with O-328 1863, Letters Received, ser. 12, RG 94 {K-98}, in *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: Upper South*, eds. Ira Berlin, Steven F. Miller, Joseph p. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 415.

officials assured them that the institution would remain in tact; nor were they amenable to subjecting their well being to chance.

As slaveowning women observed the signs of slavery's destruction all around them, they employed tactics of economic preservation that ranged from passive to aggressive. At their best, slaveowning women freed their slaves and hired them to work their land for wages even before the Emancipation Proclamation. At their worst, they engaged in traumatic and brutal acts of violence against the people they kept in bondage. But no matter which tactics they chose to employ in the desperate attempt to preserve their economic ties to slavery, many of them resembled those used by white slaveowning men.

In between these two extremes lay a host of strategies that white women hoped would allow them to hold on to the institution and their human property for a little while longer. As the Union forces drew closer, slaveowning women packed up and moved themselves and their slaves out of its reach, a process referred to as "running" or "refugeeing." They imprisoned their slaves to prevent them from escaping and intensified their brutality against them. They sold them and pocketed the money. When their slaves escaped to Union lines, they went to military camps to claim and repossess them. Slaveowning women in loyalist states appealed to the federal government and high-ranking Union officials for compensation, protection, or for help in reclaiming their human property when inferior officers dismissed their demands. And when circumstances became bleak, they relinquished their property rights in people and forced their former slaves off of their lands.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, most former slaveowning women refused to tell their slaves about the Emancipation Proclamation. But even when former slaves were legally freed and the

institution dismantled, some of these women continued to demand their unpaid labor and obedience. This was particularly true for the children of enslaved parents who ran away or found themselves impressed by the Union military forces. Slaveowning women often kept the children left behind in a state of bondage; and after the war, they tried to maintain possession through the apprenticeship systems implemented throughout the region. By engaging in these practices, slaveowning women clung to a way of life that was all they knew. Still, they constantly faced opposition from formerly enslaved people, white community members and Union forces. Inevitably, they too had to come to terms with the financial significance of the war and emancipation and reconstruct their lives without slaves. But they did not let go without a fight.

Refugeeing and Imprisonment

Refugeeing was sometimes practiced out of fear of wartime destruction, but many slaveowning women engaged in this practice for one reason: to protect their investments in slavery. Mattie Lee's recollection of her mistress' actions succinctly described the practice and demonstrates that economic concerns lay behind many slaveowning women's decisions to refugee: "Mrs. Baker took us to Texas during de war 'cause she was afraid the Union soldiers would take her slaves away from her. After peace was declared de soldiers came and told de white people dat de slaves was free."⁸ Mattie's mistress was seemingly unafraid of what the Union soldiers would do to her physically; she was more concerned about the financial harm they would bring. Scores of women echoed these concerns and moved their slaves out of the Union's way. Ike Thomas recalled that "[d]uring the war, when they got word the Yankees were

⁸ Interview with Mattie Lee, Missouri Narratives, Volume X, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed December 24, 2009).

coming, Mrs. Thomas [his mistress] would hide her ‘little niggers’ sometimes in the wardrobe back of her clothes, sometimes between the mattresses, or sometimes in the cane brakes. After the Yankees left, she'd ring a bell and they would know they could come out of hiding.”⁹

As benign as this tactic might sound, white southern women’s decisions to flee from encroaching Union forces was traumatic for enslaved African Americans. Refugeeing brought about the same kind of familial and community separation as migration to the Deep South, inheritance practices and slave sales. Slaveowners often took their most valuable and able-bodied slaves with them and left the aged, infirm and very young behind. This left the enslaved people who were the least able to care for themselves in the worst circumstances possible for survival. Even more than this, white women often took their slaves away from the only homes they ever knew. Of course refugeeing was not about preserving familial ties; it was a strategy white women and men used to protect their human property.

Still refugeeing was a risky strategy for slaveowners and for the people they owned. Confederate soldiers could impress able-bodied men or unleash their wrath upon the travelers. The same held true for Union forces that took slaves to their encampments and left slaveowning women without their most productive workers. It was also tricky because Union officers knew about the practice and understood its purpose, and they sometimes stood in the way of white women’s plans. Some women like Henry Kirk Miller’s mistress learned firsthand how troublesome Union officers could be when they tried to relocate:

This woman what had me hired tried to run away and take all her slaves along. I don’t remember just how many, but a dozen or more. Lots of white folks tried to run away and hide their slaves until after the Yankee soldiers had been through the town searching for

⁹ Interview with Ike Thomas, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 4, in *Slave Narratives: a Folk History of Slavery in the United States*, Release Date: June 1, 2006 [EBook #18485]
http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=235821&pageno=14 (accessed July 13, 2009)

them what had not been set free. She was trying to get to the woods country. But she got nervous and scared and done the worst thing she could. She run right into a Yankee camp. Course they asked where we all belonged and sent us where we belonged...¹⁰

Staying put on a plantation, managing the affairs of the estate and overseeing cultivation and production all in the face of military conflict called for tremendous bravery on the part of these women. But packing and picking up, gathering their most valuable property and relocating to an uncharted territory where they had never been before required a different kind of courage entirely. White women engaged in the practice repeatedly, with and without a significant male presence, and when contemplating the dangers of their decision, they believed that preserving their financial well-being by hiding their slaves was more important.

The thought of losing the people who embodied their financial investments pushed some women to go beyond refugeeing to imprisonment. Colonel William Birney who acted as the superintendent of Maryland Black Recruitment wrote to the Headquarters of the Middle Department and 8th Army Corps to notify his superiors that the owners of twenty-four African American men who sought to enlist had imprisoned them in a local jail. The jail record noted the date of each prospective recruit's imprisonment, the length of time they were there, their alleged owners, the individuals they identified as their owners, and any other particulars that led to their captivity. Lewis Ayres was one of these men. Although the jailor identified Greenleaf Johnson of Somerset County, Maryland as his rightful owner, Lewis begged to differ. He claimed that "Mrs. Briscoe, a secessionist lady of Georgetown, D.C.," brought him to Maryland a little over a year before Birney questioned him and she did so "for fear he would be freed in the District." This

¹⁰ Interview with Henry Kirk Miller, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 5, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed July 22, 2010).

was not the first time she imprisoned him for the same reason. Lewis informed the superintendent that he had once been held in “Campbell’s Slave jail” and his mistress moved him to his current location because they charged her less to keep him.¹¹ Catherine Gardiner imprisoned her slave Augustus Baden in the same jail, because he was prone to run away, or as Augustus might see it, for trying to secure his freedom. Nancy Counter similarly imprisoned her slave William Sims in Camlin’s Slave Pen on Pratt Street in Baltimore, Maryland for seventeen months before Union forces set him free.¹²

White women did not always send their slaves to local jails; they also held them captive in their homes in hopes of accomplishing the same objective. After Fanny Nelson learned that she was free because of her husband’s enlistment in the Union army, she informed her owner’s grandchild of this fact and stated that she would have to be paid for her labor. The child in turn relayed this information to Fanny’s mistress who not only denied her liberty and refused to pay her, but also “commenced locking her up of nights to keep her from leaving.” Thankfully, Fanny found a way to escape in spite of her mistress’ desperate efforts to keep her enslaved.¹³ When Annie Davis’s mistress refused to grant her freedom and leave to see her relatives, she wrote directly to Abraham Lincoln in hopes that he would clarify whether she had a right to do so: “Mr president...It is my Desire to be free. To go to see my people on the eastern shore. My mistress wont let me...you will please let me know if we are free. And what I can do. I write to you for

¹¹ Colonel William Birney to Assistant Adj. General, 13 July 1863, B-434 1863, Letters Received, ser. 2343, Middle Dept. & 8th Army Corps, RG 393 Pt. 1 [C-4125] in *The Destruction of Slavery*. Eds. Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, London: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 372-376.

¹² Colonel William Birney to Lt. Col. Wm. H. Chesebrough, 27 July 1863, B-383 1863, Letters Received, ser. 2343, Middle Dept. & 8th Army Corps, RG 393 Pt. 1 {C-4127} in *The Black Military Experience*, Eds. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, London: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 198-199.

¹³ Affidavit of a Kentucky Freedwoman, Affidavit of Fanny Nelson, 12 Apr. 1867, Affidavits & Records Relating to Complaints, ser. 1218, Louisville KY Supt., RG 105 [A-4548] in *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: Upper South*, eds. Ira Berlin, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 710-712.

advice. please send me word this week. Or as soon as possible and oblige.”¹⁴ Although Annie does not make clear why her mistress denied her freedom and mobility, we can surmise that like other white slaveowning women in the South, Annie’s mistress observed the actions of her neighbors’ slaves, read and witnessed the gradual disappearance of their labor force, and faced with the prospect of that loss, refused to let their pecuniary fates become her own.

These women not only held their slaves captive because they were fearful of Union soldiers carting them off. Sometimes they engaged in this same practice to protect them from Confederate officers. Reflecting upon his mistress’ conduct during the war Milton Hammond said that “during this time Confederate soldiers were known to capture slaves and force them to dig ditches, known as breastworks. My mistress became frightened, and locked me in the closet until late in the evening.”¹⁵ For slaveowning women, holding their slaves captive, even for a short time, was a tactic of economic preservation, and as Milton’s recollections reflect, these women sometimes ignored political affiliations because fiscal threats to their property came from both sides.

While the war raged on, many slaveowning women could not always prevent enslaved adults from fleeing to the Union lines, but they could hold fast to the children they left behind, and this is exactly what they did. Mrs. Eveline Blair was one such woman. She owned Samuel Emery, his wife and their children. The Union Army impressed Samuel who subsequently began work on fortifications. Union officials brought his wife to the same place where he was working,

¹⁴ Annie Davis to Mr. president, 25 Aug. 1864, D-304 1864, Letters Received, ser. 360, Colored Troops Division, RG 94 [B-87], in *The Destruction of Slavery*. Eds. Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, London: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 384.

¹⁵ Interview with Milton Hammond, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed February 8, 2012).

but they left the children in Blair's possession. After both Samuel and his wife engaged in an "honest, industrious pursuit of a livelihood" they attempted to claim their children from their former mistress. She refused to give them back. When Union officer Urbain Ozanne went to investigate the Emerys' allegations in the spring of 1865, she "indignantly spurned their united supplication uttering the most opprobrious epithets against the federal government and declaring the children should never be granted their freedom thus evincing an utter disregard for the federal government and the earnest solicitations of the oppressed people."¹⁶ Eveline Blair had already lost part of her wealth when Samuel and his wife left; she had no intention of losing more by giving their children to them. She was resolute about keeping these children enslaved because their freedom meant her poverty.

When Colonel George H. Hanks testified before the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission in 1864, he told them about an African American soldier who confronted a similar problem when he attempted to reclaim his children from his mistress:

[A] negro soldier *demand*ed his children at my hands; I endeavored to test his affection for them, when he said: 'Lieut., I want to send them to school; my wife is not allowed to see them;' I said they had a good home; said he: 'I am in your service; I wear military clothes; I have been in three battles; I was in the assault at Port Hudson; *I want those children*; they are my flesh and blood;' I sent a soldier for the children, when the mistress refused to deliver them; she came with them to the office and acknowledged the facts; she affirmed her devotion to them, and denied that the mother cared for them; I told her even an aligatress would protect and nurse her young; she had bribed them to lie about their parents, but I delivered them up to the father.'¹⁷

¹⁶ Tennessee Brewer to the Governor of Tennessee, Urbain Ozanne to his Excellency William G. Brownlow, 10 Apr. 1865. Letters and Reports Received, ser. 2922, Dist. Of Middle TN, RG 393 Pt. 2 No. 184 [C-410], In *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: Upper South*, eds. Ira Berlin, Steven F. Miller, Joseph p. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, London: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 462-463.

¹⁷ Deposition of Colonel George H. Hanks before the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, February 2, 1864 in Ira Berlin, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South, Series I, Volume III*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 517-521.

This father had more luck than Samuel did, and from Hanks' letter, we learn just what kind of formidable odds freed parents faced and what lengths slaveowning women were willing to go to in order to maintain possession of their little ones. This slaveowning woman went beyond simply refusing to relinquish her emotional and economic claim to a soldier's children; she paid them to tell untruths about the care their parents gave them and she dismissed their mother's devotion while positioning herself as their natural caretaker. She almost convinced Colonel Hanks that she was right. Fortunately, their father was more convincing and Hanks came to sympathize with his plight and foiled her plans to keep his offspring.

Simply by their presence, African American children imbued both their parents and their female owners with a sense of hope. For the parents, their very existence offered the promise of a different kind of life, one that no longer bore the burden of slavery. Yet for the owners, hope lay in their continued enslavement. Their growing, laboring, and potentially childbearing bodies promised white slaveowning women economic stability and continued prosperity. When determined and devoted African American parents confronted recalcitrant mistresses about their children, the colliding vision for these young people involved more than conflicts over rights, authority or possession; they were battles over property, fought on one side to redefine its meaning, and on the other to preserve it.

They...seemed perfectly happy, until the soldiers persuaded them off

The precarious nature of military conflict and its impact upon daily life throughout the South almost made the Union's confiscation of property and land inevitable. Food and supply shortages encouraged Union soldiers to travel from plantation to plantation plundering and carting off all the property they could manage to carry. Enslaved people were enamored by, and

sometimes fearful of, these men. Some were drawn to their strange allure and the possibility that they might be the gatekeepers to a place that offered something more than the drudgery of slavery. Many of them decided to follow them to Union encampments and take their chances. But the white women who owned them saw their departures differently. These women did not fully believe that the slaves they owned would willingly leave them; they saw the Union officers took their silver, furniture, food and livestock as thieves who also absconded with their valuable slaves. It was one thing to take precious metals, food, furniture and animals. It was quite another to take human beings who were doubly, and sometimes triply, valuable, and whose bodies, production and reproduction paid dividends. So when these men allegedly robbed white slaveowning women of their slaves, they had a number of reasons to reclaim them, and they enlisted the help of well positioned friends and kin, the military and the government to make that happen.

Most commonly, white women wrote letters to local and federal authorities, as well as Union military officials regarding the confiscation of their slaves. On rare occasions, they sued these men as well. In white women's letters and the military queries, investigations, and reports that followed their requests, it becomes clear that far more women who owned their own slaves confronted the Union in this way than those whose husbands or other male relatives were the owners. Protesting women regularly identify themselves as owners and some declare their loyalty to the Union. In response, Union officials attempted to verify both assertions. Very few non-slaveowning women made similar appeals on behalf of their menfolk, and for good reason. White slaveowning women's pleas and demands held legitimacy because they were personally invested in the property they sought to reclaim. In addition to this, their loyalty could be verified

as well. On the contrary, if the slaves they hoped to repossess belonged to their husbands or male kin, and those men were absent at the time of these women's correspondence, Union and government officials could deny their requests based on their inability to confirm their menfolks' loyalty and property ownership. Therefore, white women's correspondence to military officials shows us that their personal investments in human property served as the impetus for this particular action and serves as a powerful testament to their economic objectives and their direct relationships to those they sought to repossess.

When the Union Army confiscated and impressed their slaves, or when they ran away, slaveowning women appealed to military officials for help. Sometimes they communicated with them directly and at other times they asked their male friends and kin, or the men they hired, to help them reclaim their slaves. Mrs. R. W. Thomas asked her son-in-law, who also happened to be a congressman, for help. He wrote a letter on her behalf: "Dear Sir...Mrs R.W. Thomas had two negro-boys—carried off by Col. Wright when his command left this place...these negroes are all the property she has...and they are her sole support...It is a great injustice and should at once be rectified and I trust it will be done."¹⁸ Faced with the loss of all her property and destitution, Mrs. Thomas could think of no other alternative but to try and get her slaves back. Or at least that is how she presented her plight to Confederate spokesman and the Union official to who he wrote.

¹⁸ P. B. Fouke to General. 30 Mar. 1862, enclosing Jas. M. Quarles to Major Genl. Grant, 27 Mar. 1862, Registered and Unregistered Letters & Reports Received, ser. 2732, Army & Dist. Of West TN, RG 393 Pt. 2 No. 171 [C-8003] in *The Destruction of Slavery*. Eds. Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, London: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 272-274.

Mrs. E. Stewart claimed to be in dire straits as well but she also had her two daughters to think about. In what seemed to be an act of desperation and last recourse, she directed her appeal for help to the President himself:

To the President of the U. States. I don't know what to do in present troubles but apply to your excellency for assistance, all the property I held consisted of seven negroes, who living with me, we were able to make comfortable support. My two men went with the soldiers, one with an Iowa regiment & the other is at Camp Edwards near the city—He say an Iowa Col. Gave him free papers & told him to stay within the lines of the camp. My two women & girls have left & gone to Chicago because they say that as the husband of one was in the army a year waiting on officers they are entitled to their freedom. I am now 50 years old & this takes from me & my two daughters our all, which we sadly need—The Provost Marshal here will attest to my loyalty at any time, as he knows me well & his wife is a relation of mine—I hope you will in your goodness Do something for our relief, either, have their value given to us or let us have them returned. They were well cared for & seemed perfectly happy, until the soldiers persuaded them off. Y^{rs} repy...M^{rs} E. Stewart¹⁹

As the owner of seven slaves, Mrs. Stewart was typical in owning ten slaves or less.²⁰ She was not a large-scale landowner; indeed we do not know if she owned land at all. For her, the value inscribed upon the bodies of the people she owned was her only means of survival; this was a matter of life and death. The moment that Union soldiers “persuaded off” her slaves marked the beginning of her financial destruction. By pleading with the president, she sought to stave off this bleak outcome.

White slaveowning women at the other end of the economic spectrum employed the same strategy when they experienced similar assaults upon their property. On October 27, 1864, Irene Smith wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Treasury, W. P. Fessenden.²¹ Declaring her

¹⁹ Mrs. E. Stewart to the President of the U. States, [Dec. 1863], S-340 1863, Letters Received, ser. 360, Colored Troops Division, RG 94 [B-12], in *The Destruction of Slavery*, eds. Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 476.

²⁰ Oakes, *Ibid.*

²¹ Irene Smith to Hon. W.P. Fessenden, 27 Oct. 1864, Letters Received by the Supervising Special Agent, 2nd Agency, RG 366 [Q-217]. “215: Mississippi Planter to the Secretary of the Treasury.” *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867. The Destruction of Slavery Series I, Volume 1*, eds. Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields,

unwavering loyalty to the Union, she clearly delineated the property and goods lost to the officers serving under several Union colonels and captains. She also noted each time she made a personal request for protection. In the last instance, she received protection from General Ulysses S. Grant. Eventually, it becomes clear why she so adamantly sought protection and compensation from the federal government. She and her husband Alexander C. Bullitt owned four plantations in Mississippi and *six hundred* slaves. Interestingly, her letter quotes a few of the orders of protection she received, and from these it seems that Irene owned separate property from Alexander, although she never makes clear how much of the property was hers. For example, Brigadier General H. T. Reed's order of protection stated that "[a]ll officers and soldiers will respect the person & property of Mrs. Irene Smith of Ky, Bend Mississippi She being a loyal woman and having already had much forage and other property taken from her plantation [sic]." General Grant worded his order similarly, but he made a clear distinction between Irene's property and Alexander's: "The stock, utensils & provisions will not be taken for military purposes from either of the three plantations of Mrs Smith, or from the plantations of Mr Bullitt..." So if General Grant was correct in his tabulations, Irene owned the majority of the land; three plantations to the one her husband owned. Irene gives us one final clue of her substantial property for which she sought government protection. She concluded her letter by informing the Secretary of the Treasury that "she has borrowed a large sum of money [in order to purchase supplies to sustain production on her plantations] & she is anxious to be permitted at the earliest day possible to ship her cotton & produce to market, and return with her winter

supplies, and pay all her outstanding Obligations.” She made no note of Alexander's needs or desires to do the same.

It is remarkable that Irene elected to write this letter and not her husband, and it behooves us to consider what her decision to do so might mean. The letter does not say that he was a military officer and thus was unable to witness the destruction to his property or write about it himself. It does not suggest that he was incapacitated in any way or illiterate either. While her reasoning for doing so is not readily apparent. It thus seems logical to suggest that her interest in protecting her personal property holdings, including her slaves, was the motivation. Her decision to articulate her personal expenditures and the need to market her cotton and produce indicates that she and Alexander may have established clear demarcations of property either brought into or acquired after they married. And more importantly, those around her, even military officials, knew that she owned property distinct from her husband's. In devising their orders of protection, someone had to define for them what property belonged to whom and it is telling that they distinguished between Irene's property on the one hand and Alexander's on the other.

Mary Duncan, who was also an elite absentee planter and slaveowner from Staten Island, New York, assumed a completely different tone in her correspondence. She harshly accused Union soldiers of forcibly removing and impressing both enslaved and freed men who labored on her plantations. She alleged that they had confiscated property on the estates and claimed that all of this was done without regard for the “strong ‘protection papers’” Generals Grant and McPherson issued to her. She also assumed the role of spokesperson for the slaveowning community when she claimed that troops ransacked Unionists' property without reservation and carried off her slaves, and those owned by her neighbors, against their will. Mary claimed that

her slaves were well treated and cared for and that prior to the Union officers' appearance, they were willing to remain on her estate and work for wages. Throughout the letter she questioned the authority of these men to take her property and she demanded swift rectification of the problem, something she saw as her right as a loyal citizen. When a Union official investigated Mary's claims and interviewed the slaves in question, her allegedly contented laborers disputed her charges. Contradicting her assertions, they told him that they were poorly treated, barely fed and hardly cared for. They said that they had in fact left willingly because they thought they would fare the same or better with the Union Army than they had with her.²²

In the border states and regions that remained loyal to the Union, some women's letters took the form of requests for compensation, and in these requests, they meticulously described their economic investments in slaves. One month after the District of Columbia passed its "Act for the release of certain persons held to service or labor in the District of Columbia," which authorized the government to compensate former slaveowners for newly freed slaves, Margaret C. Barber wrote to the federal government about the thirty-four slaves she owned. In her letter she included an itemized schedule that identified each slave by age, name, gender, color, height, whether they were slaves for life or for specified terms, and the type of labor they performed.²³ They ranged from 4 months to 65 years old and in color from "light mulatto" to "black" and they performed a variety of the tasks from curriers, laundresses, and shoemakers to cooks, house

²² Mary Duncan to General Thomas, 2 June 1863, enclosed in Adj. Gen. L. Thomas to Brig. Gen. J.P. Hawkins, 26 June 1863, T-3 1863 supplemental, Letters Received, ser. 1756, Dept. of the Gulf, RG 393 Pat. I [C-548] in *The Black Military Experience*. Eds. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 146-148.

²³ M.C. Barber to Jno A. Smith, Esq., [14 May 1862], claim of Margaret C. Barber, Emancipation Papers, ser. 33, Slavery Records, U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Columbia, RG 21 [MM-6] in *The Destruction of Slavery*. Eds. Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, London: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 179-181. See also "An Act for the Release of certain Persons held to Service or Labor in the District of Columbia" http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/dc_emancipation_act/transcription.html (Accessed September 24, 2011)

servants and farmhands. The government granted Margaret's request and paid her \$9,351.30 for all but one of them, though this was undoubtedly less than the value she ascribed to the slaves she had once owned.²⁴ Even so, Margaret could count herself among the most fortunate slaveowners since she did not reside in states that freed their slaves without compensating owners. She cut her losses and capitalized on the government's promise.

Such requests could also be found in loyalist southern states, especially from women whose male slaves enlisted in the Union military forces. The table below shows the number and percentage of female claimants whose former slaves enlisted in African American military units in Missouri.²⁵

Table 1: Female Claimants in the Civil War Slave Compensation Claims by Former Slave Owners' Names for the 4th, 7th, 18th, and 19th U.S. Colored Infantry, 18th U.S. Colored Infantry, 5th and 6th U.S. Colored Cavalry, and the 1st, 4th, 8th, 12th, and 13th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery

USCT Division	Total Claims	Female Claimants	Percentage
4th, 7th, 18th, and 19th U.S. Colored Infantry	1181	139	11.76%
18th U.S. Colored Infantry	352	42	11.93%
5th and 6th U.S. Colored Cavalry	336	37	11.01%
1st, 4th, 8th, 12th, and 13th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery	778	39	5.01%

²⁴ Eight of those slaves were under ten years old, thirteen fell between the ages of 10 and 30, seven were between the ages of 31 and 40, and six were over 40 years old. The majority of Margaret's slaves were in the prime of the working lives and would have been worth the most.

²⁵ Anthony F. Kardin and the Staff of the Special Collections Department at the St. Louis County Library, in St. Louis, Missouri have created indices of Civil War Slave Compensation Claims by Former Slave Owners' Names for the 4th, 7th, 18th, and 19th U.S. Colored Infantry, 18th U.S. Colored Infantry, 5th and 6th U.S. Colored Cavalry, and the 1st, 4th, 8th, 12th, and 13th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery. I analyzed these indices to determine whether white women were among the claimants. My analysis of these indices yielded the results compiled in the table. Many women submitted multiple claims for their slaves. I included individuals whose sex could not be determined (e.g. when initials were used instead of full names) in the number of total claims so the number of female claimants may be higher. Anthony F. Kardin, et. al., *Civil War Slave Compensation Claims In Compiled Military Service Records of U.S. Colored Troops (USCT)* <http://www.slcl.org/branches/hq/sc/jkh/slaveclaims/index-links.htm>

Women clearly did not constitute the majority of claimants and there may be multiple reasons for this. One of the most important may be the tendency for slaveowning parents to give their daughters female slaves. Claimants could only submit requests for enslaved people who enlisted, and since female slaves were barred from military service because of their sex, this would preclude many white slaveowning women from making compensation claims. Another reason might be the level of illiteracy among white female slaveowners. According to James Oakes, most slaveowning women were illiterate widows (although my preliminary analyses call this characterization into question) and bearing this in mind they would need to have someone else write and submit their claims. Clearly, this did not stop the women who successfully did so. But it is important to consider these factors nonetheless.

For some women, letter writing and requests for compensation did not go far enough. When their appeals fell upon deaf ears, they took matters into their own hands by personally traveling to Union encampments to find and repossess their slaves or by delegating the task to someone else, or by suing the men who refused to hand them over.

Brigadier General Thomas J. Wood wrote to his superior officer for clarification about what he should do with contraband slaves in his Union encampment. He was particularly perplexed about a case involving a slaveowning woman named Mrs. Rutledge whose husband was a soldier in the Confederate Army: "Mrs. Rutledge, a very-lady like person has called on me for permission for her overseer to reclaim the negro in camp or to have him driven out of camp that the overseer may arrest him outside. I told her I had doubt, under the late law, whether I had power to grant

her request.”²⁶ Mrs. Caroline Noland also attempted to take possession of a slave that fled to a Union camp, but she sent her sons instead. When they returned empty-handed, they accused Union officers of refusing them access to the camp to search for the absconded slave. But Colonel A. McD. McCook denied their allegations stating that officers had in fact granted Caroline’s sons permission to search the grounds for the missing slave but they had not found him. It was only after their fruitless search that they were escorted out of the camp. There was no indication as to whether Mrs. Rutledge or Mrs. Noland successfully reclaimed their slaves. But other slaveowning women certainly did.²⁷

In the last months of 1862, two enslaved women named Hannah and Becky ran away from their owner Mrs. Baker. Hannah fled to Nashville three months before Christmas and Becky left to complete an errand and never returned. Mrs. Baker eventually found them. To her dismay she caused a “humiliating spectacle” which caught the attention of Union officers. These men were so appalled by the manner in which she chose to transport the enslaved women home that they stopped her before she could get there. In addition, Major John W. Horner was so shocked to find that a Union officer granted her permission to take them back into slavery that he wrote to the provost marshal in Nashville to question the legitimacy of his orders:

While riding along Cedar St. in this city today on the way to my office I overtook a lady riding in a buggy with a Negro girl while behind the buggy with her arms securely tied behind her walked a negro woman with a man beside her apparently guarding her. This unusual spectacle attracted my attention and I at once accosted the man and demanded to know by what authority this woman was being conducted along the streets in this manner. He immediately produced a written permit or what purported to be such to one

²⁶ Brig. Genl. Th. J. Wood to Col. J.B. Fry, 4 Aug. 1862, W-146 1862, Letters Received, ser. 880, Dist. Of the OH, RG 393 Pt. 1 [C-2044], in *The Destruction of Slavery*. Eds. Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, London: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 288.

²⁷ Brig. Genl. Robt C. Schenck to Capt. Jas B. Fry, 6 July 1861, enclosing Col. A. McD. McCook to Capt. Donn Piatt, 5 July 1861, S-1789 1861, Letters Received, ser. 12, RG 94 [K-6010] in *The Destruction of Slavery*. Eds. Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, London: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 342-345.

Mrs. Baker to take the two Negro women to her home mentioned by name and forbidding any civil or military authority to interfere with her in so doing....In answer to my interrogations Mrs. Baker informed me that Hannah and Becky were both her servants...²⁸

Mrs. Baker, though not Hannah and Becky was quite fortunate because Horner allowed her to proceed. But in a number of cases, military officers did not abide by such orders.

Union officers frequently ignored slaveowning women's letters of appeal, protests, and demands, and on occasion, women sued the men who refused to give them their slaves. When Colonel Smith D. Atkins refused to allow Emily G. Hood to repossess her slave Henry from his camp, she brought a civil suit against him in the Fayette County Circuit Court in Kentucky. Colonel Atkins refused to attend to the case until after the war was over. While he claimed that he based his decision upon the urgency and contingencies of war, his letter to a friend made his underlying logic perfectly clear: "I cannot conscientiously force my boys to become slavehounds of Kentuckians & I am determined I will not....I will not make myself & my regiment a machine to enforce the slave laws of Kentucky & return slaves to rebel masters."²⁹ His superiors agreed with him and allowed him to attend to his military duties. Still it is significant here that Emily was determined to reclaim her slave even if it meant taking a military official to court in the middle of the Civil War.

²⁸ Major John W. Horner to Maj. W. R. Rowley, 27 Feb, 1863, vol. 239 DMT, pp, 92-94, Letters Sent by the Provost Marshal, ser. 1655, Nashville TN, Provost Marshal Field Organizations, RG 393 Pt. 4 [C-2003] in *The Destruction of Slavery*. Eds. Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, London: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 318-319.

²⁹ Clipping from an unidentified Cleveland, Ohio, newspaper, [Nov. ? 1862], enclosed in Brig. Genl. Q.A. Gillmore to Major Gen. Gordon Granger, 11 Dec. 1862, G-1321 1862, Letters Received Relating to Military Discipline & Control, ser. 22, RG 108 {S-47} and S.D. Atkins to Miller, 2. Nov. 1862, enclosed in James Miller to Hon. Abraham Lincoln, 10 Nov. 1862, M-2041 1862. Letters Received, RG 107 [L-19], in *The Destruction of Slavery*. Eds. Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, London: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 531-534 and 528-529 respectively.

“She sez dat she em gwine ter fight till she draps dead”

Although the circumstances of war created a context of frustration and rage which led some white women to commit impulsive acts of violence and cruelty towards their slaves, most women’s wartime violence can more aptly be described as a continuation and intensification of pre-wartime discipline and brutality.³⁰ Certainly, formerly enslaved people like George King linked their mistresses’ cruelty specifically to their rights of slaveownership. As George talked about his childhood under slavery, he described the following incident:

The old Master talked hard words, but the Mistress whipped. Lot’s of difference, and Uncle George ought to know. ‘cause he’s felt the lash layed on pretty heavy when he was no older than kindergarten children of today. The Mistress owned the slaves and they couldn’t be sold without her say-so. That’s the reason George was never sold, but the Master once tried to sell him ‘cause the beatings was breaking him down. Old Mistress said ‘No’, and used it for an excuse to whip his mammy...He saw the Mistress walk away laughing, while his Mammy screamed and groaned—the old Master standing there looking sad and wretched like he could feel the blows on Mammy’s bared back and legs as much as she. The Mistress was a great believer in punishment and Uncle George remembers the old log cabin jail built before the War, right on the plantation, where runaway slaves were stowed away ‘till they would promise to behave themselves. The old jail was full up during most of the War. Three runaway slaves were still chained to its floor when the Master gave word the Negroes were free.³¹

George’s master was part of the slaveholding class, and as several scholars contend, his masculinity was intrinsically linked to his power and authority to command obedience from subordinates and dependents within his own household.³² But even within a society that embraced such a gendered vision of power this planter could do nothing but stand by and watch as his wife meted out punishment upon a woman that she owned, a woman she beat simply

³⁰ See Faust and Wood. Thavolia Glymph sees the Civil War era as a period during which white women intensified their brutality against enslaved people. See Glymph, 115-116. However, some enslaved people linked white women’s propensity towards violence to the ownership of the bodies they brutalized.

³¹ Interview with George G. King, Oklahoma Narratives, Volume XIII, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>

³² Peter Winthrop Bardaglio. *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

because he tried to spare a child from further physiological trauma at her hands. At the core of her spontaneous brutality lay the fact that she owned George and his mother. She brutalized them not out of frustration or rage. She beat George and his mother because she owned their bodies and could do with them as she pleased.

Why did George's mistress choose to have her husband tell her slaves that they were free? Was the economic reality of emancipation too great for her to contend with? Why allow him to play this role in their lives now? These are all questions that we can only speculate about, but the fact that she relinquished authority over her slaves at the precise moment when she lost her pecuniary investment in their bodies does seem telling. Forcibly divested of her economic ties to slavery and to the people she once owned, she may have sought to distance herself from the institution and its living and breathing reminders.

Likewise, Mattie Curtis seemed to characterize her mistress' violence toward her slaves as a personal fight against the circumstances of war and the government that betrayed her and robbed of her of a son. Mattie remembered that:

Mis' Long has been bad enough fore den but atter her son is dead she sez dat she em gwine ter fight till she draps dead. De next day she sticks de shot gun in mammy's back an' sez she am gwine ter shoot her dead. Mammy smiles an' tells her dat she am ready ter go. Mis' Long turns on me an tells me ter go ter de peach tree an' cut her ten limbs 'bout a yard long, dis I does an' atter she ties dem in a bundle she wears dem out on me at a hundret licks. Lemmie tell you dar wus pieces of de peach tree switches stickin' all in my bloody back when she got through. After dat Mis' Long ain't done nothin' but whup us an' fight till she shore nuff wore out.³³

³³ Interview with Mattie Curtis, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed May 14, 2009).

Harriet Robinson's mistress also made clear that white southern women resented the fact that their fathers, husbands, and sons were losing their lives in a war that eventually led to the end of the world they knew. The slaves that they encountered everyday were constant reminders of this fact.

At the same time, over the course of the war years, white slaveowning women were prone to act violently toward their slaves out of rage or impulsivity just like other slaveowners did. But the context of war was not always the catalyst for their brutality; it did not suddenly make them all cruel mistresses. Some white slaveowning women who treated their slaves kindly before the war continued to do so during wartime and thereafter. Others who were cruel before secession often continued to be that way. Yet many of these slaveowning women had another way to confront the economic realities of war and the impending destruction of slavery. They could choose to sell and expel their slaves.

Wartime Sale and Forcible Removal of Enslaved People

There was a point at which many white slaveowning women concluded that no strategy could stave off the inevitable outcome of the war. They understood that they could no longer hide their slaves; they could not seek government compensation for them; they could not reclaim them from Union encampments; and they could not imprison and brutalize them anymore. They had arrived at a place where they had few options left. With their backs against the wall, some slaveowning women divested themselves of the institution by selling enslaved people and forcing them off of their lands. Enslaved men, women and children suffered greatly as a consequence.

Whether they owned a few slaves or a hundred, and no matter how precarious the future of slavery seemed to be, slaveowning women continued to see the people they owned as economic investments. But more importantly, they saw enslaved people as assets they could liquidate. This is exactly what Lucy Brooks' mistress Ann Garner did. She was an elite slaveowner who sold her slaves to the highest bidders as the war raged on around her. Lucy never says just how many slaves Garner owned before the war but she recalled that her mistress "had seventy-five left she hadn't sold when the war ended."³⁴ Henry Kirk Miller's mistress did the same thing. She sold his sister for fifteen bales of cotton. "I remember hearing them tell about the big price she brought." Henry recalled, "because cotton was so high. Old mistress got 15 bales of cotton for sister, and it as only a few days till freedom came and the man who had traded all them bales of cotton lost my sister, but old mistress kept the cotton. She was smart, wasn't she? She knew freedom was right there."³⁵ Henry's mistress was clearly keeping herself abreast of the progress of the war and knew she would be able to do more with cotton after the war than she could with a former slave soon to be free. She thus chose the more stable commodity. Ironically, the man who bought Henry's sister likely possessed the same knowledge about the war's impending end and the inevitable unraveling of slavery. But like many southerners who were hoping for a Confederate victory, he ignored this information and made a very different economic choice for which he paid dearly.

³⁴ Interview with Lucy Brooks, Maryland Narratives, Volume VIII, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed February 2, 2010).

³⁵ Interview with Henry Kirk Miller, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 5, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed July 22, 2010).

As the circumstances of war made it harder to care for their own families, slaveowning women could not help but see the once productive and highly valuable people they owned as liabilities and financial burdens, rather than financial investments. Many entered southern courtrooms and asked for permission to sell enslaved people so they could pocket their proceeds, or use them to buy more productive laborers. The terminology they used reveals their sense of resignation about the future of slavery. As early as 1862, Susan E. Dillard petitioned the Bibb County court in Macon, Georgia for permission to sell a sixty-eight year old enslaved man named Bob, who actually belonged to her three children (she was their guardian). She claimed that “his value will only depreciate in the future and she can now sell him for \$100 privately.” The court granted her request.³⁶ Similarly, Elizabeth R. Golson served as administratrix of her husband’s estate and she petitioned the Dallas County court in Macon, Alabama for permission to sell an enslaved family of five because they would “continue to be a hindrance and expense.” She planned to use the proceeds of the sale to buy other slaves that were “more suitable.”³⁷ Almost immediately after South Carolina seceded from the Union, North Carolinian heirs and heiresses began “cashing in” their slave inheritances. As joint owners, or “tenants in common,” of groups of enslaved people left to them by their deceased parents, white women joined with their brothers in petitions to North Carolina courts in which they sought to sell the slaves they owned and “distribute the proceeds” of those sales. While they do not always cite the war and the possible destruction of slavery as the underlying rationale for these requests, the increasing

³⁶ Records of the Inferior Court, Minutes 1852-1863, Bibb County Courthouse, Macon, Georgia, 477. Petitions to Southern County Courts (Cite)

³⁷ Records of the Probate Court, Estates, Dallas County Courthouse, Selma, Alabama, Document Number 57, Box: 19

number of petitions of this nature suggests that these circumstances influenced their thinking.³⁸

Whether it was for money or bales of cotton, white women (like men) sold the people they owned away from their families and communities. In some cases, these African American men, women and children never saw the people they loved ever again.

When white women could not sell their slaves, they simply got rid of them, particularly the enslaved women and children who were left behind by husbands and fathers fleeing to Union lines.³⁹ At the same time, women divested themselves of slavery in this way because like Henry Miller's mistress, they knew it was inevitable that slavery would end. And finally, some women "freed" these women and children because they could no longer afford to keep them.

Even in the dead of winter and amidst brutal weather conditions, white women forced enslaved people into a world unfamiliar to them. Freedmen's Bureau Assistant Superintendent John Seage recorded his observations about these enslaved women and their children in hopes that his superiors would help them:

My heart is made sad every day... Women with families are sent away without House Home Money Clothing or Friends... There are hundreds of women and Children who are destitute of underclothing & who have been driven away from their former homes who have no Husband or Father... the chilly air makes them feel the want of Clothing and shoes... these poor Creatures must starve this winter & are Suffering now...⁴⁰

³⁸ CITE 32 CASES, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Records of the County Court, Miscellaneous Records, Petitions to Sell or Divide Slaves 1810-1861, Records of the County Court, Slave Records 1781-1864, and Records of the County Court, Slaves and Free Persons of Color 1789-1869

³⁹ For an extensive discussion of the dire conditions faced by freedwomen and their children during this period see Jim Downs, "The Other Side of Freedom: Destitution, Disease, and Dependency among Freedwomen and Their Children during and after the Civil War" in *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War*. eds. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 78-103.

⁴⁰ John Seage to Brig Genl Fisk, 4 Oct. 1865, Registered Letters Received, ser3379, TN Asst. Comr, RG 105 [A-6197] in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, Series 3: Volume 1, Land and Labor, 1865, eds. Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008, 641.

Seage was clearly shocked by the tragic scenes of frostbitten, starving, improperly clothed freedwomen and children. Although he does not center the blame squarely on the shoulders of those responsible, Seage makes it clear that former owners placed them in these dire conditions. While those who drove them away from their former homes to freeze and starve remain nameless in Seage's letter, other Freedmen's Bureau agents explicitly counted former slaveowning women among the white southerners who left their former slaves in these straits.

Well before the war ended or emancipation was certain, white slaveowning women forced African Americans off their lands without as much as a goodbye, and they did not care what happened to them. They felt no compunction to provide for them after lifetimes of service. In fact, some even used the threat of violence to make sure that they would never set foot on their property again. These embittered women aligned themselves with the men who fought to preserve the institution that was so quickly crumbling around them.

Tennessee farmer James Arvent was so appalled by his female neighbor's treatment toward her former slave that he sent a letter to the Freedmen's Bureau about it. He stated that the woman had sold off all her former slave's children, and because the mother was elderly, feeble and unable to work, she was suffering in a state of poverty and destitution with no support. He further claimed that "[t]he old lady was *driven* from her former Mistresses premises by this christian mistress some time last February or march, without one particle of compensation for former services, out upon the cold charities of this unfeeling community to seek a home or shelter under which to cover her head."⁴¹ He, however, showed mercy by hiring her husband to work for him and paying him twenty dollars per month.

⁴¹ James Arvent to Brig. Gen. C.B. Fisk, 27 July 1865, Registered Letters Received, ser. 3379, TN Asst. Comr., RG 105 [A-6068] in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*, 1861-1867, Series 3: Volume 1, Land and

For some slaveowners like Georgian Sarah H. Maxwell, merely distancing themselves from those who would soon be free was not enough. As emancipation became a near certainty, Sarah wrote to the Mississippi Commander of the Calvary Corps with an unusual proposition. She stated that if the government agreed to buy her land she would transport all of her former slaves to Africa, accompany them there to make sure they got settled in, and would then establish herself in *another part of the world*. It does not appear as if she asked her slaves if they wanted to go. It is equally interesting that Sarah had no intention of coming back to the United States. Perhaps the idea of living in a country surrounded by her former slaves did not appeal to her.⁴²

Swallowing the Bitter Pill of Emancipation

Once emancipation was certain, white women refused to accept black freedom and they employed diverse tactics to keep freedpeople in a state of bondage. While their decisions to employ these strategies were undoubtedly influenced by their ideological and sentimental ties to the institution of slavery, they were also engaging in these processes of economic preservation. However, African Americans often resisted and sought out the assistance of federal authorities, who sometimes upheld their rights to liberty and justice. More profoundly, some former slaveowning women had no means of staving off the utter poverty that emancipation brought upon them, and they found themselves at the mercy of the people they once held in bondage; and this was the bitterest pill to swallow of all.

Labor, 1865, eds. Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008, 623-624.

⁴² Sarah H. Maxwell to Genl Wilson, 21 May, 1865, filed with A-15 1865, Letters Received, ser. 15, Washington Hdqrs., RG 105 [A-5814], in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, Series 3: Volume 1, Land and Labor, 1865, eds. Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008, 86.

Women joined other slaveholders in their resistance to the idea and reality of black freedom. Lieutenant Colonel Homer B. Sprague made no distinction between male and female slaveholders when he penned his observations regarding the general sentiments they held about the end of slavery:

To see their late slaves now free—those who were so lately completely subject to their will, now exalted into something like an equality of rights, and a sword held over their heads to protect them in their newly acquired rights, must be galling. I do not see how a sincere believer in the rightfulness of slavery can look with any complacency upon the freemen. They seem generally of the opinion that the United States, having wrongfully freed the negroes, ought now to take care of them. They wash their hands of all blame, and if they cannot have the negroes subject to them, wish to have nothing at all to do with them.⁴³

Former slaveowning women resisted the idea of black freedom for a number of reasons. Some believed that African Americans were incapable of being free people. Others felt themselves entitled to their labor and questioned the authority of the federal government to rob them of what they deemed to be rightfully theirs to claim. Following both of these streams of logic, white women sought out ways to hold on to the people they once owned, and sometimes time and the government were on their side.

One of the most common ways that white women avoided dealing with the reality of emancipation was by not telling their former slaves that they were free and continuing to demand their free labor, and this was a economic decision more than it was anything else. As Annie Griegg's recalled her former owner took this fact:

[D]idn't kno it was freedom till one day when I was about fourteen or fifteen years old—judging from my size and what I done. I went off to a spring to wash...A girl come to tell

⁴³ Lt. Col. H.B. Sprague to Brig General Davis Tillson, 10. Jan. 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, ser. 632, GA Asst. Comr, RG 105 [A-5457] in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series 3: Volume I, Land and Labor, 1865*, eds. Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008, 905.

me Mrs. Field had company and wanted me to come cook dinner. I didn't go but I told her I would be on and cook dinner soon as I could turn loose the washing... When I got there Mrs. Field Mathis had a handful of switches corded together to beat me. I picked up the pan of boiling water to scald the chickens in. She got scared of me, told me to put the pan down. I didn't do it. I wasn't aiming to hurt her... She sent to the store for her husband. He come and I told him how it was about the clothes... He got mad at her and said: 'Mary Agnes, she is as free as you are or I am, I'm not going to hurt her again and you better not'... That is the first time I ever hear about freedom.⁴⁴

In spite of all the signs that the institution of slavery was abolished, it was easier for women like Mrs. Mathis to pretend that African Americans were still enslaved than it was to acknowledge their freedom. In fact, many women outright rejected the idea of emancipation. As the battle at Mansfield unfolded and cannon fire could be heard in the distance Katie Darling's mistress told her:

'You li'l black wench, you niggers ain't gwine be free. You's made to work for white folks.' Bout that time she look up and see a Yankee sojer standin' in the door with a pistol. She say, 'Katie, I didn't say anythin', did I?' I say, 'I ain't tellin' no lie, you say niggers ain't gwine git free'... When Massa come home from the war he wants let us loose, but missy wouldn't do it. I stays on and works for them six years after the war and missy whip me after the war jist like she did 'fore.⁴⁵

Some women were so adamantly opposed to the idea of black freedom that their husbands had to demand that they relinquish their claim to the people they once owned. Delicia Patterson relayed the following conversation that occurred between her former master and mistress:

When freedom was declared Mr. Steele told me that I was as free as he was. He said I could leave them if I please, or could stay, that they wanted me and would be glad to have me if I would stay and his wife said, course she is our nigger. She is as much our

⁴⁴ Interview with Annie Griegg, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 3, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed February 2, 2010).

⁴⁵ Interview with Katie Darling, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed February 28, 2010).

nigger as she was the day you bought her 2 years ago and paid \$1500 for her. That made me so mad I left right then. Since she was so smart. Her husband told her, now Sue you might as well face it. There are no more slaves and won't ever be any more, regardless of how much we paid for them.⁴⁶

When white women were outside the purview of men, they were able to keep African Americans in a state of bondage without much interference. Albert Todd's mistress, who was likely an elderly widow, kept him enslaved for years after emancipation: I was a slave three year after the others was freed, 'cause I didn't know nothin' 'bout bein' free. A Mrs. Gibbs got holt of me and makes me her slave. She was a cruel old woman and she didn't have no mercy on me.⁴⁷ Mrs. Gibbs not only deprived him of the sustenance he needed to work the way she commanded, but she beat him unmercifully when he tried to supplement his deficient diet with food he stole from her. And she did all of this for *three years* after emancipation. We can only wonder how long she would have continued to treat him in this manner if his sisters had not found him and if she had not perished in a house fire.

After the Confederate surrender, some slaveowning women were willing to recognize the end of slavery, but they still could not grapple with the implications of free wage-earning laborers, particularly when those workers were freedchildren. Some of these women relied upon southern apprenticeship systems to retain possession of African American children they owned, even when their parents and kin were capable of caring for them. This was probably what Annie

⁴⁶ Interview with Delicia Patterson, Missouri Narratives, Volume X, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed February 2, 2010). Delicia does not say which member of this couple happened to be her owner but it is intriguing to see that a man, whose identity was allegedly more intricately tied to slavery had his wife, would have to convince her to let go.

⁴⁷ Interview with Albert Todd, Texas Narratives, Volume XVI, Part 4, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed October 20, 2011).

Huff's owner had in mind. Annie recalled that "[w]hen the war ended...Mrs. Huff returned from a trip to Macon and called all the children together to tell them that even though they were free, they would have to remain with her until they were twenty-one. Little Mary [Annie's daughter] exclaimed loudly—"I'm free! I won't stay here at all!"⁴⁸

Against the wishes of freedmen and women, and in spite of their ability to demonstrate their fitness to care for the children, Freedmen's Bureau agents and southern courts granted some former slaveowning women's requests. But at other times, southerners pleaded with officials "in the Name of Humanity" to stop what they considered to be white women's involuntary enslavement of African American children. Unionist southerner Tomas B. Davis wrote to the judge of the Baltimore Criminal Court to report the grave injustices he witnessed around him. Among them were the acts of a woman he referred to as "Yewel" who not only forced freedwomen off her land but sought to have their children bound to her despite her lack of means to care for them: "there is a woman down here By the name Yewel She is allso Demanding of the womin She has turned without a stitch of winters clothing all there children to be bound to her When she cannot get Bread for her Self."⁴⁹ Henry Walton remembered that "[a]fter the surrender, Mrs. Miller went to court and had me bound over to her until I was twenty-one. When Papa and Captain Clark [one of her many husbands] came home from the war, though this court order was nullified and I was free." There is another strikingly important but unquestioned factor that made his near apprenticeship possible in the first place. Henry's mistress murdered his

⁴⁸ Interview with Annie Huff, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed October 2, 2011).

⁴⁹ Thos. B. Davis to Hon. J. Lanox Bond, 6 Nov. 1864, filed with M-1932 1864, Letters Received, ser. 12, RG 94 [K-4] in Ira Berlin, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South, Series I, Volume III*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 512.

mother prior to the war.⁵⁰ Had it not been for his father's timely return, and his swift legal action to nullify the order, Mrs. Miller's plans to keep him in bondage for almost another decade (Henry was thirteen at the time of the surrender) would have been successful.

It was bad enough that women took part in the forcible sale and separation of enslaved parents and children, and created circumstances that allowed them to declare these young freedpeople "orphans" at the close of the war. But now, as African Americans throughout the South desperately tried to reconstitute their families, white women continued to focus on their financial concerns over all else and thus deny freedparents the basic right to love and care for their children by claiming those children's labor for decades after slavery's end. But no matter how strongly former slaveowning women held on to African American children after emancipation, their kin were equally unwavering in their efforts to reclaim them. Many parents appealed to the Freedmen's Bureau for help when their attempts to take possession of their children failed; but others chose to take matters into their own hands. Rebecca Jane Grant told the following story about how her uncle Jose stole her from her mistress and took her away in the dark of night:

I was fifteen years old when I left Beaufort, at de time freedom was declared. We were all reunited den. First, my mother and de young chillun, den I got back. My uncle, Jose Jenkins come to Beaufort and stole me by night from my Missus. He took me wid him to his home in Savannah. We had been done freed; but he stole me away from de house. When my father heard that I wasn't wid de others, he sent my grandfather, Isaac, to hunt me. When he find me at my uncle's house, he took me back. We walked all back—sixty-four miles....⁵¹

⁵⁰ Interview with Henry Walton.

⁵¹ Interview with Rebecca Jane Grant, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed May 22, 2010).

In a period when legal slavery was dead, some freedpeople still had to “steal” their children and loved ones from individuals who had no legitimate legal or economic claim to their bodies or their labor. But they did.

The white women who kept African Americans captive had to have means with which to care for them, at least in the most rudimentary ways. But with so much of their worth bound up in the bodies of enslaved people, the financial ramifications of slavery’s end brought many to their knees. Women who had once sat in their parlors and upon their piazzas surrounded by slaves who stood waiting to heed their beck and call, suddenly found themselves destitute, without property or any means of surviving. They confronted the reality of poverty, suddenly finding work and scraping by. Former slave John Smith remembered that “[s]ome of de missus had nigger servants to bathe’em, wash dere feet an’ fix dere hair. When one nigger would wash de missus feet dere would be another slave standin’ dere wid a towel to dry’em for her. Some of dese missus atter the war died poor. Before dey died dey went from place to place livin’ on de charity of dere friends.”⁵² Even for women who did not live this way, the loss of their economic investments in slaves would also pose significant financial problems and difficulties.

As many of these women faced poverty and destitution for the first time in their lives, they tried to recreate their past lives, they assumed that freedpeople would willingly serve them. They sought out black people’s labor with the same mentality they embraced before the war. They were sadly disappointed when they discovered that their former slaves were not as enthusiastic as they were about the plans they had for them. For example, one woman “came to

⁵² Interview with John Smith, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 2, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed October 20, 2011).

Beaufort” because “she thought some of her Ma’s niggers might come to wait on her.” Her mother’s former slaves had a different idea though; they refused to work for her, although they did give her “food, money, and clothes” instead. In the end, her circumstances compelled her to earn a living with her own hands and “she offered to become a dressmaker *for the negroes*.”⁵³

Sometimes life became so bad that former slaveowning women were reduced to beggary among the people they once owned. Two antebellum owners visited their father’s former slaves “pleading their poverty” and begging them for help. These freedpeople demonstrated their sympathy by giving them “grits or potatoes...plates and spoons...and money.” One enslaved woman “took the shoes *from her own feet* and gave them to her former mistresses.”⁵⁴ The tables had officially turned; former slaveowners found themselves at the mercy of those who had once been compelled to submit to their wills. After lifetimes of servitude and abuse, these freedpeople could have behaved in ways that legitimated white supremacist and slaveholders’ concerns about retaliatory, tyrannical “negro rule.” Instead, many of them demonstrated their humanity and sense of compassion for the people who held them in bondage by giving them what little they had.

Female Planters Confront Free Labor

When all signs pointed to slavery’s demise and the evolution and implementation of a free labor system in its stead, white women followed suit and behaved like other former slaveowners and landowners in the South; they entered into negotiations and contracts with their former slaves and agreed to pay them for their labor. Thavolia Glymph argues that white women

⁵³ Emphasis Added. W.E. Towne to Brvt. Major General Saxton, 17 Aug. 1865, T-6 1865 Registered Letters Received, ser. 2922, SC Asst. Comr., RG 105 [A-7086], in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series 3: Volume 1, Land and Labor, 1865*, eds. Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O’Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008, 159.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Emphasis Added.

were grossly unprepared for their roles as employers of free domestic laborers, particularly with negotiating terms of labor with freedpeople because “the antebellum market for slave hires to work in domestic capacities was small, so few white women would have gained experience in it even had the markets, as male dominated public spaces, not been off-limits to them.”⁵⁵ This was undoubtedly true for a cadre of white women throughout the South, but as shown throughout this project, it was not the case for all of them. Beyond merely buying, selling, and hiring slaves in the antebellum market, white women also negotiated with enslaved people who hoped to hire themselves out so that they might purchase their freedom.

These were complex transactions and were learning experiences for white slaveowning women and the people they owned. Moreover, non-slaveowning women frequently hired enslaved people to work for them prior to emancipation. Bearing this in mind, it seems safe to say that pre-war financial circumstances informed white women’s abilities to engage in advantageous labor negotiations with African Americans after the war. And just like male planters, they sometimes reneged on their promises. The great uncertainty which characterized the months leading up to and following the effective date of the Emancipation Proclamation made it difficult for Union military officials and Freedmen’s Bureau agents to investigate and resolve formerly enslaved people’s complaints against unscrupulous planters. The general confusion of the period actually helped white women keep African Americans in a state of pseudo-bondage and to avoid facing the fact that the people who worked for them were no longer their slaves. A freedwoman named Ellen came to Tennessee Freedmen’s Bureau Assistant Superintendent John Seage in the summer of 1865 to lodge her grievance against a landowner named Mrs. Hawkitt who refused to compensate her for a year’s labor. Seage was perplexed as

⁵⁵ Glymph, 139.

to which party was justified in their assertions and the timing of the complaint seemed to confuse him the most.⁵⁶ When he wrote to Mrs. Hawkitt and asked her to appear before him in order to address Ellen's allegations she refused his request and went before the tribunal established by General Clinton B. Fisk instead. Once before them, she rejected Ellen's claims to compensation for any of the labor she performed that year and stated that Ellen was actually a slave until February of 1865.⁵⁷

In June of 1865, a freedman lodged his complaint with Lieutenant H.G. Manning after his female employer, and former owner, Mrs. Adams refused to pay him. Manning sent her the following letter of clarification about this man's status and his right to wages:

Mrs. Adams...The General Comdg directs that I call your attention to the case of a colored man, Louis Jones, formerly your slave. He reports that you demand half of his wages, from this date as your right and that you have taken all the money earned by him during the past three years. He also states that you claim this money on the ground that he is not free. In order that you may no longer entertain such erroneous ideas, or again attempt to take or claim the wages of a man over whom you have no control, you are hereby informed that by the Proclamation of the President of the United States, the late Abram Lincoln, all the colored men, women, and children in this part of Louisiana were declared Free from the 1st day of January 1863...In regard to the money you have already taken from him, no action will be taken at present. But you will please understand that you have no right to his services or any other person without you pay them on equivalent of their labor...⁵⁸

On the one hand, some of these cases were legitimately and fairly adjudicated. Throughout the South white slaveowners were consistently faced with the shifting contours of slavery around them. Bodies of law slowly did away with slavery and during the institution's gradual undoing,

⁵⁶ John Seage to Lt. Col. R.W. Barnard, 1 Sept. 1865, S-58 1865, Registered Letters Received, ser. 3379, TN Asst. Comr., RG 105 [A-6052] in Ira Berlin, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South, Series I, Volume III*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 473-474.

⁵⁷ It remains unclear why Mrs. Hawkitt forwent the meeting with Seage but she clearly felt that Fisk's tribunal could more aptly handle the matter.

⁵⁸ Lt. E. G. Manning to Mrs. Adams, 23 June 1865, vol. 173 DG, pp. 259-60, Letters Sent, ser 2100, U.S. Forces Port Hudson LA, RG 393 Pt. 2 No. 118 [C-912], in *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South*. eds. Ira Berlin, Thavolia Glymph, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, and Julia Saville, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 618.

the federal government gave slaveowners an opportunity to adjust to what was coming.⁵⁹ What made these moments more perplexed was that this deconstruction process took place at different times in different areas throughout the South, White women like Mrs. Hawkitt made sure to know exactly when emancipation would affected her and her life as a slaveowning woman. Female slaveowners acted within their rights as such and they clearly possessed intimate knowledge about the legislation that was daily transforming their lives. They used this knowledge to justify their claims to the free labor of the African Americans they believed they still owned. But on the other hand, some of these women manipulated the uncertainty of the times and the confusion of Union officers and Freedmen's Bureau agents to extract as much labor and profit from African Americans as they could before clarity prevented them from doing so.

To be sure, white landowning women did eventually accept the demise of slavery, implemented free labor systems, and employed freedpeople to cultivate their lands. But they still used exploitive and coercive business practices to maximize their profits and deprive free African Americans of the wages they deserved. One of the most common tactics they used to do this was to devise exploitative contracts which essentially recreated slavery. Landowner Mary S. Blake attempted to bind freedpeople to work for her with a contract that was so exploitative that

⁵⁹ Susan O'Donovan explores the complexities and contingencies of slavery in southwest Georgia from settlement of the region in the 1820s to emancipation and Reconstruction. Although she is examining a very small, oft-neglected region of the cotton belt, she argues that the specificities of this region teach a broader lesson about the particularities of slavery and the multifarious meaning of freedom embraced by newly freed African Americans throughout the South. In the region she has chosen to study, freedom and political activism took on distinctive character for a number of reasons. First the Union army never entered the region until after the Civil War was over. Second, the Freedmen's Bureau did not establish itself in the area until well after it was firmly grounded in other Southern states and when it finally was established, the agents were few and they rarely assisted African Americans in labor and wage disputes with former slaveowners. Her study drives home the point that freedom unfolded in stages throughout the South. See Susan O'Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South*. Harvard University Press, 2007.

the Superintendent of Contrabands, Colonel Samuel Thomas, objected to it and refused to allow her to hire laborers under the terms specified therein. She complained to a family friend.

Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas, who then wrote to the Freedmen's Bureau on her behalf.

Placing all the blame on Colonel Samuel Thomas, Adjutant General Thomas stated that in spite of the Colonel's objections and refusal to approve Mrs. Blake's contract, the freedpeople were "perfectly satisfied and desire[d] to remain with her and...refuse[d] to go." The Colonel, the General asserted, was meddling and interfering with a perfectly amicable relationship between an employer and her employees.

Colonel Thomas' superior officer asked for his reply to the General's allegations and he told a remarkably different story than Mrs. Blake did. Colonel Thomas stated that,

The colored people on this plantation are *not* satisfied with the contract which Mrs. Blake required me to approve. They did not understand what Mrs. Blake had written yet signed it, when in truth the terms of the contract would not feed and clothe them. I presume it is not intended that I should approve contracts which secure to the Freedmen less than they received when slaves, even if they do agree to it, and in their ignorance sign the contract. The facts in this case are these. Mrs. Blake wished to retain her servants as she always had them, and will feed and clothe them, but does not wish to do more. In order to make herself secure in this, she wrote a contract that did not secure them even this, called up her negroes, had them sign it, and asked me to approve it, which I refused to do.⁶⁰

Mrs. Blake was not alone; countless women told untruths when trying to reclaim their property from government officials and exploiting freed laborers. Former Tennessee slaveowner Margaret Donaldson refugeeed to Florida during the war and left her property in the care of a friend. When she returned she was shocked to find all of her estate occupied by black and white strangers and in the hands of the Freedmen's Bureau agents who had transformed her property

⁶⁰ Emphasis in original. Adj. Genl L. Thomas to Major Genl O. O. Howard, 19 July 1865, filed as A-2 1865, Registered Letters Received, ser. 2052, MS Asst. Comr., RG 105 [A-9000], in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series 3: Volume 1, Land and Labor, 1865*, eds. Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008, 373-374.

into a contraband camp. Her husband happened to have been a close friend of President Andrew Johnson and she used this connection to appeal directly to him for help. Before anyone could act upon her request or return her estate to her, she and her son began telling people in the community that the order had already been issued and that they should not purchase any of the goods produced on her lands because they would be prosecuted. This seemed to be an effective strategy; community members very quickly exhibited their reluctance to buy from freedpeople or the Freedmen's Bureau agents residing and working on their neighbor's lands. Margaret Donelson did eventually reclaim her property, with President Andrew Johnson's assistance, and after doing so she sent the President a telegram in which she further fabricated allegations against African American soldiers. She claimed that they had entered her home, threatened the lives of her family, cursed her daughters and shot her dog. She further alleged that they threatened to do more violence later that night. Johnson demanded an investigation. Upon concluding his investigation, Brigadier General Clinton B. Fisk, who was the Freedmen's Bureau Assistant Commissioner for Kentucky, Tennessee and northern Alabama, discovered that none of her accusations were true. He told the President that "she has made me more trouble than all the other returned prodigals in Tennessee."⁶¹

Other women contracted with freedpeople to cultivate and harvest the crops on their lands, and after they completed this work, they forced them off without pay, claiming that they did not perform the duties required of them. For example, planter Sally V.B. Tabb requested

⁶¹ Margaret Donelson to his Excellency Andrew Johnson, 10 July 1865, Letters Received by President Andrew Johnson Relating to Bureau Affairs, ser. 17, Washington Hdqrs., RG 105 [A-6016] and Brig. General Clinton B. Fisk to his Excellency, Andrew Johnson, 3 Oct. 1865, filed as K—7 1865, Letters Received, ser. 15, Washington Hdqrs., RG 105 [A-6016] in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series 3: Volume 1, Land and Labor, 1865*, eds. Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 419-423.

government assistance in forcibly removing former slaves from her estate. She claimed that they refused to work and when they did, they refused to work hard, that they were insolent and gave her all kinds of trouble, and that under the circumstances she could no longer provide for them or pay them for their sub-par labor. Yet when W.H. Bergfels investigated the case he found that all of her allegations were false. Furthermore, he discovered that she did not provide these freedpeople with the implements necessary to work the land as she required. Even her overseer argued that the tools Sally expected them to use were “more than worn out 2 years ago yet with thes [sic] same tools she expected these poor people to accomplish wonders.” Bergfels concluded his report by saying that “as far as my observation goes she is the oppressor and not the oppressed as she would fain make it appear....”⁶²

The freedpeople who worked for these women did not accept the circumstances under which their female employers sought to place them. When African Americans were able, they repeatedly appealed to Freedmen’s Bureau agents and lodged their complaints in Freedmen’s courts. On August 20, 1865, Ms. Sealy Banks claimed that her employer Mrs. Estes, who was also her former owner, refused to give her “any payment, save victuals & clothes, and is not certain about giving her the clothing.” She further stated that she “[w]orked for Mrs. Estes all her life” and “has had no clothing for 3 years except one cotton dress, one yarn Dress, Shoes & stockings.” The Freedmen’s Court ruled in Sealy’s favor, summoned Mrs. Estes to appear before them to answer the complaint and demanded that she pay Sealy for her labor and provide her with summer clothes. On August 27, 1865, Alfred Goffney also filed a compliant against his

⁶² Miss. Sally V.B. Tabb to Major General Howard, 15 Aug. 1865 and W H Bergfels to Capt C. B Wilder, 7 Sept. 1865, filed under “War Department & Washington Headquarters,” Unregistered Letters & Telegrams Received, ser. 3799, VA Asst. Comr., RG105 [A-7484] in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series 3: Volume 1, Land and Labor, 1865*, eds. Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O’Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008, 517-521.

employer Mrs. Strange who refused to pay him for a month's labor and threatened to shoot him and "blow his brains out" if he did not leave her land. She later paid Alfred what she owed him. Daniel Baker, Frank Johnson, Lewis Wright and Timothy Terryl collectively filed a compliant against Mary Cowherd on August 28, 1865. She not only refused to pay them for their work, she demanded that they continue to work for her without any compensation but "their board & clothing" and "if they will not accept these terms they must leave the plantation & never return." Filing their complaint on August 29, 1865, Lucy Ann Johnson and Patsy Gordon alleged that their employer Widow Ham "whipped and otherwise abused" them so much so that they felt compelled to leave her residence. She was summoned to appear in court to answer their charges. No court official recorded the decision.⁶³

As slaveowner Kittey Diggs watched the Missouri she knew crumble around her, she held fast to her young slave Mary, extracting the value of her body and labor by hiring her out and collecting her wages. For Kittey, this was more than an act of economic preservation; she probably hoped that keeping Mary in a state of bondage would sustain her nostalgic fantasies about a time that was quickly passing. Mary likely personified the possibility that she could return to a time when her bondspeople behaved and knew their places, when the war had not yet robbed her of the wealth she accumulated in the bodies of her slaves. Holding on tightly to the fragments of her former life, Kittey could not reckon with the economic catastrophe brought upon her by the war. Yet Mary's father, former slave and Union Army Private Spotswood Rice, sought to make it abundantly clear that Kittey's days as a slaveowning woman were numbered;

⁶³ Pages from register of cases, 16 Aug.-13 Sept. 1865, vol. 246, Register of Proceedings of Freedmen's Court, ser. 4013, Gordonsville VA Supt., RG105 [A-8175] in *Freedom: A Documentary history of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series 3: Volume I, Land and Labor, 1865*, eds. Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O'Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, and Leslie S. Rowland, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

that the world she knew was indeed fast becoming strange and unfamiliar and would never be the same.

Armed with his literacy and emboldened by his military service, Spotswood shook Kittey's world with his words. Writing to her from Benton Barracks Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri, Spotswood told her in more ways than one that the days she yearned for were long gone: "I want you to understand kittey diggs that where ever you and I meets we are enmays to each orthere...the longor you keep my Child from me the longor you will have to burn in hell and the qwicer youll get their."⁶⁴ He then questioned Kittey's right to own Mary, he demanded possession of her, and warned Kittey about the impending fate she would meet if she did not return his daughter to him:

I offered once to pay you forty dollers for my own Child but I am glad now that you did not accept it ...Just hold on now as long as you can and the worse it will be for you...you never in you life before I came down hear did you give Children any thing not eny thing whatever not even a dollers worth of expencs...now you call my children your pro[per]ty...not so with me...my Children is my own...⁶⁵

With forceful language and meticulous detail, he further assaulted Kitty's property rights when he wrote to Mary and her sister Cariline.⁶⁶ He told them that: "Your Miss Kaitty [sic] said that I tried to steal you...But I'^{ll} let her know that God never intended for a man to steal his own flesh and blood...And as for her cristianantty I expect the Devil has such in hell...You tell her from

⁶⁴ Spotswood Rice to Kittey Diggs, September 3, 1864, in *Freedom's Soldiers: The Black Military Experience in the Civil War*. Ed. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 132-133.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Hannah Crasson remembered that she "wuz afraid of the Yankees because Missus had told us the Yankees were going to kill every nigger in the South." Interview with Hannah Crasson, North Carolina Narratives, Volume XI, Part 1, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (quote; accessed May 14, 2009).

me that She is the frist Christian that I ever hard say that aman could Steal his own child especially out of human bondage.”⁶⁷

At the core of Spotswood and Kitty’s dispute lay a question of ownership and the redefinition of property. Kitty attempted to reinscribe Mary’s body with a value which she could command in the slave market. Spotswood sought to sever Kitty’s economic connections to his daughter and by doing so, he contested the very notion that someone could ascribe monetary value to another human being, especially his daughter. Throughout the Civil War South, there were scores of women like Kittey who strove to protect their economic investments in the institution of slavery by any means necessary. To their chagrin, there were even more enslaved people like Spotswood, who challenged these women’s economic claims to them and those they loved, and struck repeated blows upon the institution they hoped to save.

As Kitty and Spotswood faced off in the midst of a war that eventually ended the institution of American slavery, so much was at stake for both of them. Both of their worlds were changing dramatically before their eyes, for the better for Spotswood and for Kitty much the worst. Standing in between them was Spotswood’s daughter Mary Rice, who signified and embodied freedom for both of them. As Kitty’s slave, she offered the promise of an economic, social and cultural life contingent upon the labor of an enslaved human being. As Spotswood’s daughter, her existence and the possibility that she could live the rest of her life as a freedperson meant that she would have opportunities that Spotswood never could. In this figurative but very real tug-of-war over little Mary Bell, Spotswood won and Kitty’s life as a slaveowner ended.

⁶⁷ [Private Spotswood Rice] to My Children, September 3, 1864, enclosed in F.W. Diggs to Genl Rosecrans, 10, Sept. 1864, D-296 1864, Letters Received ser. 2593, Dept. of the MO, RG 393 Pt. 1 [C-154], in *The Black Military Experience*. Eds. Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 689.

Seventy-three years later, Mary Rice Bell remembered her father, the love he had for her and her family, and the pain and suffering he endured to show them that love. She also spoke truth to her father's concerns about her mistress and the kind of life she experienced as her slave. Mary suffered a grueling childhood under the authority of her female owner: "[s]lavery was a mighty hard life. Kitty Diggs hired me out to a Presbyterian minister when I was seven years old, to take care of three children. I nursed in dat family one year. Den Miss Diggs hired me out to a baker named Henry Tillman to nurse three children. I nursed there for two years. Neither family was nice to me." The pain of being away from her family, being ill treated and robbed of her childhood as she cared for six other children must have led to despair. But Kitty cared little about Mary's pain because her financial stability rested upon the girl's labor, commodified body, and continued subjugation.

It is not clear whether Spotswood reclaimed Mary before freedom or after. But he did make good on his promise to reunite his family. Mary said that in freedom her father "was a nurse in Benton Barracks and my mother taken in washing and ironing." While her parents went about their work, Mary attended several schools; one in Benton Barracks, another at St. Paul Chapel, then 18th and Warren, and then 23rd and Morgan. And one could only imagine that Spotswood was instrumental in making this possible.⁶⁸ All of this mattered immensely to Mary who devoted five of the seven pages of her interview to her father's memory. Indeed, she summed up her interview by saying "I love army men, my father, brother, husband, and son were all army men. I love a man who will fight for his rights, and any person that wants to be

⁶⁸ As Heather Ann Williams has shown, African American Union soldiers were instrumental in the spread of literacy among freedpeople and in the development of freedmen's schools. Spotswood may very well have been one of them. Heather Ann Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005, 45-66.

something.” In the light of Spotswood’s courage, leadership and moral conviction, he changed his daughter’s life forever. And in its shadow, he destroyed the only life Kitty Diggs likely knew.

What became of women like Kitty who invested so much of themselves in the bodies and labor of the people they owned? Some of them fought the impending destruction of slavery with everything they had and used every strategy they could to preserve the institution. Others divested themselves of their human property by selling them and keeping the proceeds. Still more begged the people they once owned for help and in some cases they found those individuals willing to do so. There were some who feigned acquiescence to black freedom but used exploitative tactics in order to squeeze the life out of a dying system of bound labor. White slaveowning women fought their own pecuniary battles for the preservation of slavery. They constructed their own battlefields, spaces of conflict and violence that often overlaid their plantations and estates, but also moved beyond them, and were deeply affected by the assaults on the slave economy initiated by the war and gradual undoing of slavery. They took their fights to Union encampments, to contraband camps, and into southern courtrooms. Sometimes they won; but many times, they did not.

The women who owned more slaves than land, or who owned only slaves and no land at all, were the biggest losers. Human property that was worth thousands of dollars before the Emancipation Proclamation held absolutely no value after it was implemented. For them, the Confederate loss stung not simply because they lost family, friends, and a way of life; it deeply wounded because they lost the laboring bodies that made that life possible. As we think about the weeping southern belle, it is easy to sympathize with the pain they undoubtedly felt after suffering unparalleled human loss. But they shed tears because of another equally devastating

human loss that was also a pecuniary one. They lost their slaves—their most valuable property—and with it they lost a part of themselves that could never be replaced.

EPILOGUE

A Feminist Nightmare: Slaveowning Women and their Precarious Empowerment

In 1838, an unidentified man entered a Charlestown, Virginia church "to speak of slavery, and of the sin of slaveholding." During his visit, a female parishioner responded to his speech by telling him: "I am a slaveholder, and I *glory* in it."¹ Almost one hundred years later, another white southern woman denied the slave trade's existence in the downtown Augusta, Georgia marketplace. When the local paper broached the subject of whether slave sales had ever taken place in this commercial space, she claimed that it never happened. In those one hundred years, something affected white women's willingness to publicly exhibit pride about their slaveownership. Many were no longer boastful. It was no longer fashionable, it would seem, to glory in the legal ownership of other human beings.

We are far less accustomed to reading about white slaveowning women who derived pride, pleasure, amusement, and satisfaction from owning human beings than those who appeared to be reluctant participants in the American system of slavery. Yet there were many of them. Whether they owned one slave or one hundred, white southern women formed a sisterhood of slaveowners. They imagined themselves as part of the master class. They enacted mastery over the slaves they owned, and they did not express remorse or regret in doing so. They contributed to the perpetuation of the system by buying, selling, hiring, and bestowing slaves to each other and to kin and by keeping generations of African-Americans enslaved. They held on

¹ Testimony of Mr. Samuel Hall in Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*. New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839, 181.

to slavery until the very end, and after it was over, some of them did what they could to piece together a system of free labor that essentially re-created it.

For the women who denied the economic dimensions of the slave trade and their participation in the slave market economy, the history of the slave marketplace had to be rewritten and the rewards they reaped from its existence rendered invisible. It was not enough to diminish slavery's horrors and rewrite the past. Yet as slaveowning women attempted to render the terror of slavery invisible and absolve themselves of their moral and pecuniary sins, formerly enslaved people refused to allow them to scrub the historical record clean of their wrongdoings. They spoke truth to white slaveowning women's economic investments in the institution of slavery, and to their brutality and their contributions to their subjugation. And they passed these stories along to anyone who would listen.

The individuals who survived the horrors of the slave economy foiled white woman's attempts to erase the deeply traumatic events that unfolded in slave markets and similar spaces and the roles they played in enacting this trauma. Enslaved people consistently conveyed their knowledge of the troublesome commerce that took place there to WPA writers who interviewed them. Responding to the white woman who dismissed the slave market commerce in Augusta, Georgia, Laura Steward told her interviewer that "'Slaves were sold at the Augusta market, in spite of what white ladies say.' She stated that there was a long house with porches on Ellis between 7th and 8th, where a garage now stands. In this building slaves were herded for market. 'Dey would line 'em up like horses or cows,' said Laura, 'and look in de mouf at dey teef; den dey march 'em down togedder to market in crowds, first Tuesday sale day.'" Similarly, Eugene

Smith remembered that he “read in the papers where a lady said slaves were never sold here in Augusta at the old market,” but he told his interviewer that he “saw’em selling slaves myself.”²

Like Laura and Eugene, formerly enslaved men and women who had a chance to talk about their experiences in bondage spoke back to the women who denied their pain and who refused to acknowledge the roles they played in their continued bondage. But they did more than this. They spoke about white women’s actions, within and outside of slaveowning households that betray prevailing understandings of their economic relationships to slavery. They situated white women in commercial spaces where historians claim they were not supposed to be. They recalled white slaveowner marital relations in ways that challenge our assumptions about the patriarchal order of nineteenth-century households. With a simplicity that should not reduce the poignancy of their remembrances, enslaved people like B.E. Rogers’ formerly enslaved father tell us about the slave auctions they witnessed and the “half a dozen Negroes being sold, mostly to women.”³

It is in these recollections and statements that we begin to understand that white southern women actively participated in the cultivation of the American system of racial slavery, and that in doing so, they helped to construct a social and economic order premised upon white supremacy. Through buying, selling, hiring and bequeathing enslaved men, women and children, they bound themselves to a community of citizenship that was predicated upon the ownership of human beings. Their entry into this community began when they were little girls. Slaveowner

² Interviews with Laura Steward and Eugene Smith, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 4, 342-343, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, U.S. Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. See “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936-1938,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> (accessed August 7, 2009)

³ Interview with B.E. Rogers, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, Supplement Series I, North Carolina and South Carolina Narratives, Volume 11* ed. George P. Rawick, 55.

cum abolitionist Sarah Grimke appeared before the Boston Juvenile Anti-Slavery Society where she told the children in attendance that “when I was a little girl, I had a present. A little girl was bought out of a slave-ship and given to me for my slave.” She went onto tell them about an occasion when she “had seen twenty children chained together, and driven through the streets of Charleston to be sold in New Orleans, never more to see their parents—the driver whipping them with a whip.”⁴ Although Sarah rejected this community of slaveowners and became an enemy to the system it hoped to sustain, other white girls throughout the South had similar encounters with slavery that culminated in their embrace of slaveownership.

Time and again, with their slaves not far from view, white slaveowning women articulated their desires to remain invested in human property and to pass their legacies onto their children. They argued with menfolk and officials about their slaves, how much control they could exercise over them and who else had the privilege of doing so. On very rare occasions, they recount these confrontations in their diaries and personal correspondence. But far more often, it was the people they owned who told these stories. This is not to suggest that white slaveowning women had any qualms about conveying their thoughts in more public venues. Slave auctions, southern courtrooms and local newspapers provided literal and figurative platforms for white slaveowning women to make clear their profound relationships to slavery and the people they owned. In these spaces, and in others, they vocalized their commitments to the institution and they spoke of the injustices committed against them as property owners. They demanded that others be held accountable for their actions, and they made it abundantly clear that some of our ideas about how they lived are nothing short of fallacy.

⁴ H C Wright, “Boston Juvenile Anti-Slavery Society,” *The Liberator*; June 16, 1837; 7, 25; American Periodicals Series Online, 98. (Accessed January 5, 2010)

Formerly enslaved people were key to piecing this history of white slaveowning women together. As many scholars of African American history and American slavery have long established, slave narratives should be approached with caution for a number of reasons. The most frequently cited rationales for such caution are that many of the interviewees were only children and adolescents when enslaved, that the interviews often occurred in racially tense contexts in which southern whites, many of whom were descendants of slaveowners, served as the interviewers, and that so much time had elapsed between the events and circumstances described and the interviews themselves. Thereby formerly enslaved people's recollections should more aptly be described as partial truths. However, even as enslaved children and adolescents, they were subjected to sale, witnessed the sale of family and friends, and participated in discussions about this dimension of slavery with those who experienced it most personally. They saw the marks of punishment upon their parents' bodies, and they had their own marks too. And they remembered white slaveowning women's roles in leaving those scars upon them and shaping their lives in bondage. Their testimony offers insight into how pervasive the slave market was in the lives of enslaved African Americans who could not flee to the North and seek support from the abolitionist movement to tell their stories. We learn things about the slave market and its operation at the local and communal level from enslaved people's perspectives, something we rarely find elsewhere. And we understand that white southern women were far more than complicit in the perpetuation of American slavery; they were willing participants in its creation and its evolution.

What becomes clear from deeper and more extensive exploration of the archival documents examined in this project is that white women were fundamental to the economy of

slavery. They were in southern slave markets and they engaged in the slave trade. But we have generally overlooked them, explained their presence away, and defined their slave market activities differently than men's—even when they engaged in similar practices and processes—and this has come about precisely because of our particular ways of looking.⁵ Peering through lenses of patriarchy, constraint and powerlessness, white women's slave market activities do not make sense and thus they seemingly cannot be real. We are able to dismiss their economically motivated actions as something else, as exceptional, when in fact they demonstrate white southern women's normalcy.

Some might call this study a “feminist's nightmare.” It tells a history of female empowerment and autonomy that was predicated upon the oppression of an entire group of people. It sheds light upon an ugly history, one lived by a group of women who did not seem overly enthusiastic about its telling. But yet it is a necessary one to tell. Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner argue that there is a “[f]eminist reluctance to come squarely to grips with women's oppression of other women,” and I have found that this same reluctance characterizes our attempts to consider white women's subjugation and enslavement of African American

⁵ Walter Johnson offers the most extensive discussion of white women in the slave market. See Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, especially 89-102. Steven Deyle and Thomas Russell also describe white women who emerged in the records they examined for their studies, but they don't contemplate the larger significance of their presence in the market or the investments they may have had therein. See Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 110 and Thomas Russell, “Sale Day in Antebellum South Carolina: Slavery, Law, Economy, and Court-Supervised Sales” (PhD Dissertation, Stanford University, 1993), 103-104. While women sometimes appear in studies of southern slave markets and the slave trade, scholars tend to pay more attention to the slave trading men in their lives. They often talk about the men who bought and sold for them, who sued them or who represented them on both sides of the courtroom, and patriarchal dependency seems to define these relationships. Historians have also evaluated white women's economic choices and slave market activities using a set of gendered-biased criteria that has made it possible for them to interpret their behaviors in particular ways, even when these women conduct themselves and their business exactly as slaveholding men do. We need to rethink how gender shapes slave market experiences and how it does not, and this study is a step in that direction.

women, men and children.⁶ Coming to terms with women's oppression of other women is one thing, but grappling with their subjugation of an entire group of human beings constitutes a completely different type of reckoning that has yet to occur.

The starting point for such an endeavor must necessarily begin with the telling of histories belonging to seemingly exceptional and unnatural women, who we think of as stepping out of their places and misbehaving, even when this may not have been the case. We need to position these women as equally fundamental to the social, political, cultural, ideological and economic contexts that we subject to investigation. More importantly, we need to look at the women *within* social strata who transgress and we need to listen to the individuals who knew the most about their transgressions. Contending with our feminist nightmares may lead to a more expansive understanding of the machinations of power and how gender shapes, or does not shape, the operation and exercise of power. The objective of this project has been to do just that.

As historians Thavolia Glymph and William Foster have recently contended, white slaveowning women did not have to be white men's political and civic equals to wield power over enslaved people; or to exercise this power in brutal and sinister ways. But historians also envision that power in relationship to the greater or more expansive authority of white southern men. The tendency to understand white women's actions in this way necessarily renders their violence and power less innocuous and consequential for those subjected to it. Many enslaved people saw white women as equally violent and powerful figures with the authority to tragically transform their lives because *they owned their bodies and their labor*. According to them, and many others who bore witness to their treatment at the hands of female owners, white women did

⁶ "Introduction." In *Feminist Nightmares: Women at Odds: Feminism and the Problem of Sisterhood*. Ed. Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner, New York: New York University Press, 1994.

not develop “feminine” styles of ownership and management or engage in acts of “feminine violence.” They conducted themselves in the same ways as male slaveowners, and they had very little reason to do things any differently.

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